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Introduction

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, the citation famously paid tribute to his combination of 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past'. This captures with remarkable economy not only Heaney's pre-eminent strengths, but also the two imperatives between which his own commentary and the criticism of him have fluctuated. In the Preface to *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* Heaney described the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic again, quoting from his Foreword to the prose collection *Preoccupations* in 1980: 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?' By quoting the earlier Foreword verbatim, Heaney was making it clear that his abiding concerns have remained unchanged.

The Nobel citation also summarises the issues that this book aims to account for. Heaney's most recent collection of poems *District and Circle* (2006) – and Heaney's titles are carefully considered, as Rand Brandes's essay here shows – marks a point, forty years on from his first full-length volume *Death of a Naturalist*, at which he circles back to the local district in which that highly localised volume was placed. In those forty years Heaney has published at least twelve major individual volumes of poems, three series of *Selected Poems*, several dramatic translations and a large body of critical prose. Not surprisingly, taking stock is not a simple matter: by now, in 2008, there is a very considerable bibliography on him to account for, as well as his own works, and several critical approaches of varying schools of thought and degrees of approval.

A comparison with Yeats is revealing (indeed it has been found hard to avoid): Heaney is now the age Yeats was in 1934, twelve years after he had won the Nobel Prize (it is thirteen years since Heaney's) and a year after the publication of *The Winding Stair*. At the corresponding stage Yeats too was a major international figure, and he still had a significant body of poetic work ahead of him. Yet there was no study of Yeats in existence, though a number

of important shorter discussions had appeared, such as in Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*. By now the number of specialising books on Heaney is too large to itemise because it is likely to be out of date as soon as it is published. For example there are at least sixteen books whose title is simply *Seamus Heaney*, as well as many others with titles in which the poet's name occurs. If it is suspected that this is merely a change in the times, and that there are simply more books published, this quickly proves not to be the explanation. No other current poet is nearly as much written about as Heaney has been, since the appearance of the first book devoted to him, Blake Morrison's in 1982, the same year in which the introduction to Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* saw the emergence of Heaney as one of the factors that made a new anthology timely.

In this introduction I will principally be tracing the poet's own poetic writings and his reception, in keeping with the emphasis of the book. In this connection another Yeats comparison might be made: Heaney has been a busy career-teacher of literature as well as writer, rather than 'a man of letters' in the way that Yeats was (the term is no longer current, nor is the lifestyle). While a large body of critical prose work survives from the 1880s at the very beginning of Yeats's writing life, nothing of comparable substance exists in Heaney's case, despite the fact that he is recognised as a major critic-practitioner nowadays (his distinctive gifts as a critic are established by David Wheatley in his chapter here; John Wilson Foster paid lavish tribute to those gifts too, calling Heaney's 'the best Irish literary criticism since Yeats'¹). But, while Heaney was a regular reviewer, especially for the *Listener* from 1966 onwards, it was the late 1970s before any more extensive critical writings appeared, culminating in the publication of *Preoccupations* in 1980.² And 1977 has significance as the year when he first published critical work of some length and when he first gave one of the many interviews which emerged over the years.

So, although Heaney's status as critic-practitioner is of undoubted significance, the emphasis in this book is on him as poet, and to a lesser extent as poet-translator engaging with other poets. Heaney was twenty-six when *Death of a Naturalist* appeared in 1965: young, but not prodigiously so. The reception of that book quickly established him as a major new talent, writing with brilliant linguistic fidelity and evocativeness, mostly about his country upbringing in County Derry. The next book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), confirmed this reputation, in some poems even enhancing it. From the first his gifts were recognised as being of a very specifically poetic kind, founded on an alert eye and linguistic precision. In his *New Statesman* review of *Death of a Naturalist*, Christopher Ricks said, 'the power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection *Death of a Naturalist* is

outstanding'. C. B. Cox in the *Spectator* said the poems give us 'the soil-reek of Ireland'. This tactile accuracy continued to be noted as Heaney's particular strength in reviews of the next book: sometimes the praise sounds a shade stereotyping, but the purport is clear. In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Douglas Dunn said of *Door into the Dark* (1969) in a much-quoted effusion that the poems were 'loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the stink of turned earth'. Ricks continued in his previous vein in the *New Statesman* by saying – perhaps with a glint of warning – that Heaney would 'have to reconcile himself to the fact that *Door into the Dark* will consolidate him as the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking'.

His gifts could be summarised in a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins, passed on to Heaney by the teacher-writer Michael McLaverty, of which he is fond: 'description is revelation' (N 71). And, while several commentators made even grander claims for *Wintering Out* in 1972 (Neil Corcoran calls it 'the seminal single volume of the post-1970 period of English poetry'³), Heaney's characteristic strengths were mostly seen as the same: exactness of description and evocation. In *Wintering Out* the descriptive precision was put to further purposes: to evoking the places of his upbringing, often through a semantic dismantling of their etymologies, in the 'placename poems' such as 'Broagh' and 'Anahorish'. But there is another perspective which always has to be considered in describing the development of any Northern Irish writer in the current era. The most significant departure from the previous volumes in *Wintering Out* was a more developed sense of a political context. The poet was writing in a fraught period of history in Northern Ireland. Having grown up as the young 'naturalist' on a farm in County Derry, in a world where the country poet might trace at leisure the Wordsworthian 'making of a poet's mind', Heaney had moved to Belfast as a gifted student of English at Queen's University in 1957. But the last third of the twentieth century, when Heaney's work attained major status, was the most violent period in Northern Irish history. He was a member of a remarkable poetic generation who lived it, at least to begin with, 'bomb by bomb', in Derek Mahon's famous phrase.⁴

Seamus Deane observes that, although 'political echoes are audible in *Death of a Naturalist* and in *Door into the Dark*, there is no consciousness of politics as such, and certainly no political consciousness until *Wintering Out* and *North*'.⁵ What soon came to be a matter of controversy was the use to which Heaney put – or should put – his undoubted gifts. The change from the descriptive bucolic in the relatively untroubled anti-pastoral of the early poems happens somewhere across the two volumes *Wintering Out* and *North*. The challenge now was to represent the wider public context as well as to evoke locality. Heaney found, to repeat a line of Yeats which Heaney has often drawn on himself, a 'befitting emblem of [the] adversity'⁶ in the

ripen Northern Irish community when he read in 1969 *The Bog People* by P. V. Glob, a study of what seem to be ritual killings in Iron Age Jutland. Glob's book was illustrated by dramatic photographs of the victims of the killings, whose bodies had been preserved in the bog water. The first Heaney poem to reflect on these images was 'The Tollund Man' in *Wintering Out*, in which he imagines visiting Aarhus where the bodies are kept. There, in 'the old man-killing parishes' of Jutland, the poet will recall recent brutal killings in Northern Ireland and he will feel 'lost, / Unhappy and at home' (WO 48).

This poem is a trailer for what is seen as the first substantial change in Heaney's poetic corpus, with *North* in 1975, at once his most admired and most controversial single volume. The dilemma for the Northern Irish writer has often been noted, by Michael Longley and others: if they wrote about the violence, they were accused of exploiting suffering for their artistic purposes; if they ignored it, they were guilty of ivory-tower indifference.⁷ Heaney said in his interview with John Haffenden, 'Up to *North*, that was one book' (*Viewpoints*, p. 64), in an attempt perhaps to escape the two-stranded stereotyping of the early work, from the bucolic to the symbolising of violence, by bracketing off together the four volumes that between them manifested the two stereotypes. Certainly the more or less unanimous chorus of critical praise becomes less certain after *North*. This sense of uncertainty extends to Heaney himself; several critics, including Seamus Deane and Terence Brown, see guilt as a major factor in the poet's self-characterisation from this point onwards. One of the reviews of *North*, by Ciaran Carson in the *Honest Ulsterman*, has been endlessly quoted as a representation of the case against 'the Bog Poems', as they were called from the first. According to Carson, Heaney had laid himself open to the charge (in fact Carson did not literally level it himself) of being 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing ... the world of megalithic doorways and charming noble barbarity'.

Other highly influential voices read *North* differently. Anthony Thwaite in *The Times Literary Supplement* saw it as a superior continuation of the linguistic and descriptive virtues in the earlier books, with 'all the sensuousness of Mr Heaney's earlier work, but refined and cut back to the bone'. Even more momentously, Robert Lowell, in the London *Observer*, called it 'a new kind of political poetry by the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats'. The parallel with Yeats (Clive James and John Wilson Foster had prophesied it in 1972) in fact applies equally to Carson's accusation and to Lowell's tribute. The case against *North* was primarily what has been called 'the aestheticisation of violence', a charge most famously made in Irish poetry against the conclusion of Yeats's 'Easter 1916', that, in the bloody fighting in Dublin, 'a terrible beauty is born'. And if the sentiment of guilt, seen in Heaney by Deane,

Brown, Heaney himself and others, seems like the inevitable confessional product of a Catholic upbringing, we might recall that Yeats, coming from a very different background, shared it in precisely this context, rendered sleepless (at least poetically) in old age by wondering ‘did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot’. In an admiring but dismayed review of *North* in the *Listener*, Conor Cruise O’Brien made the same charge against Heaney as he had made in a brilliant and influential essay against Yeats ten years earlier.⁸ Heaney, according to O’Brien, has used his exceptional capacity for exact description of ‘the thing itself’ to evoke in an unbalanced way the suffering of the Catholics of Northern Ireland: ‘there is no equivalent Protestant voice’. In each case the poet is being accused of using fraught public events to serve a personal cause.

By the late 1970s, when Heaney was a much more noticeable prose commentator and interviewee, the poet himself wished to change course, away from the political, or at least to be recognised as doing so. If ‘up to *North*, that was one book’, his new book *Field Work* was attempting a different kind of style and subject. Partly that book can be seen as a delayed accounting for a major change in Heaney’s life, his moving with his family to Wicklow in the Irish Republic in 1972. His departure from the North of Ireland had been pursued by insults from extremist opponents on the Unionist side (recalling for some readers the Citizen’s catcalls after the departing Bloom in the ‘Cyclops’ chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*), and even with some misgiving by his friends (a state of affairs lamented in the powerful poem ‘Exposure’ at the end of *North*: ‘my friends’ / Beautiful prismatic counselling / And the anvil brains of some who hate me’). The publication of *North*, three years after the move to Wicklow, meant he could hardly be accused of abandoning the issues of Northern Ireland. But by 1979, he wished to make a new beginning, one which he described in an interview with James Randall in formal terms but with the reminder that ‘a formal decision is never strictly formal’: ‘in the new book *Field Work*, I very deliberately set out to lengthen the line again because the narrow line was becoming habit ... I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out ... a return to an opener voice and to a more – I don’t want to say public – but a more social voice.’⁹ The antithesis then is not so much between public and private as between two kinds of public position: the political and what he calls the social.

From this point onwards Heaney’s writing is increasingly linked to this kind of self-commentary. It is clear now that the public-local opposition interlocks with the political-aesthetic in a complicated way, and the critical discussion of him has centred on that since. But, if *Field Work* is seen, as the poet pleads here, as the start of a post-*North* era in the work, it is in significant ways a continuation of the established previous concerns too. Amongst the

most admired poems in *Field Work* – indeed in the whole corpus – are two great elegies for victims of the Northern violence, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ and ‘Casualty’. These are the poems which address with the greatest directness the questions of guilt and involvement raised in the most unflinching of the Bog Poems, such as ‘Punishment’ where the poet – ‘the artful voyeur’, in the poem’s terms – admits to understanding the ‘tribal, intimate revenge’ of the people who barbarically tarred and feathered Catholic girls who went out with British soldiers. ‘Casualty’ returns to that issue, or stays with it: was Louis O’Neill, the fisherman who was blown up by a bomb after he ignored the curfew imposed by the IRA after Bloody Sunday (seven years earlier than *Field Work*, it should be noted), guilty of some breach of local piety? ‘Puzzle me / The right answer to that one’ is what O’Neill’s voice in the poem says (*FW* 23).

The poems in *Field Work* that attempt a new beginning – a new bucolics, it seems, circling back to the home district of *Death of a Naturalist* – are outweighed by the public poems: something that the complex claims in the Randall interview seem to concede in the terms ‘public’ and ‘social’. We might remember too that as early as 1972, in his brief introduction to his anthology *Soundings ’72*,¹⁰ Heaney had made a strong bid for artistic freedom, three years before *North*:

I am tired of speculations about the relation of the poet’s work to the workings of the world he inhabits, and finally I disagree that ‘poetry makes nothing happen.’ It can eventually make new feelings, or feelings about feelings happen, and anybody can see that in this country for a long time to come a refinement of feelings will be more urgent than a reframing of policies or of constitutions.

There is something forced though about this inversion of the normal understanding of Auden’s phrase about Yeats, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, which is usually taken to mean that poetry cannot be politically effective. Heaney is saying ‘poetry can make something non-political happen’; but that is not an obvious sense of ‘nothing’ in this context. Clearly the urgency of policies and constitutions in Northern Ireland in 1972 could not be so easily dismissed, as we have seen. And the wish that *Field Work* in 1979 should mark the starting point of a similar new freedom was equally doomed. As it happened, the late 1970s, followed by the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, was one of the worst periods of the Northern Troubles: hardly a point at which a guilt-inclined and socially aware commentator like Heaney could avoid public attitudes, however much he wanted to escape the ‘responsible *tristia*’ weighed in ‘Exposure’. Unsurprisingly, Heaney’s next books, the linked works *Station Island* (1984) and *Sweeney Astray* (1983), are again deeply concerned with issues of public answerability and guilt. 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.

By this time too criticism of Heaney is not simply a matter of reviews of individual volumes, laudatory or disapproving as the case might be. There is now a more wide-ranging criticism of Heaney whose work is seen in more general terms, as the exemplary instance of the Yeatsian conflict between artistic freedom and public responsibility. Often the criticism in this area has been remarkably simple-minded: strikingly more so, it might be said, than the poet's own subtler, well-weighed deliberations. Heaney has often praised Yeats for his ability to live in doubt, between stark alternatives, and Heaney has himself been praised for the possession of this modernist virtue (by Ian Hamilton for instance, or in *The Sunday Times* by John Carey – one of Heaney's most consistent and most perceptive advocates). But Declan Kiberd argues in a crucial essay that a virtuous political standpoint is not simply a matter of claiming to be in doubt:¹¹ something we will hear Heaney claiming later on in *The Spirit Level* and *Electric Light*. Principally dealing with the poetry of this period, Neil Corcoran published an acute essay on this recognition of Heaney as the test case for such issues for poetry in English.¹² It becomes increasingly clear over the next decade that this responsibility – one, as we have seen, that he would have liked to evade from the first – weighed heavily on Heaney. The dialectical, dramatic framework of the 'Station Island' sequence is a useful medium for the discussion of this. Heaney returns to 'The Strand at Lough Beg' in a fiction in which Colum McCartney, the murdered cousin addressed in that poem, accuses the poet of a failure to take his social and familial pieties seriously enough, choosing rather to stay in Jerpoint 'with poets' while his 'own flesh and blood / was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews' (*SI* 82). Worse, the attempt to escape the Troubles had made him 'confuse evasion and artistic tact', whitewashing ugliness and drawing 'the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*' to saccharine McCartney's 'death with morning dew' in the great elegy. So, just as artistic freedom wishes for its own jurisdiction, social and familial responsibility claim their rights too.

But the sequence begins and ends with powerful pleas for artistic freedom. The opening poem meets another Sweeney, the old sabbath-breaking tinker Simon Sweeney, who memorably advises the poet to 'Stay clear of all processions!' (*SI* 63). The last encounter is with the ghost of James Joyce who also thinks this peasant pilgrimage is 'infantile', adding that 'you lose more than you redeem / doing the decent thing' and urging the poet to 'fill the

element / with signatures on your own frequency' (*SI* 93–4). Some critics (such as Michael Allen in the *Irish Review* and Denis Donoghue) have reacted to this in puzzlement, noting, reasonably enough, that this is what Heaney was doing anyway. A surprisingly large number of other critics have taken Joyce as having the last word here, indicating that Heaney will hereafter abjure 'the decent thing' and become the unanchored artist. This view ignores the well-balanced dialectic of the sequence: the Dantesque power and anger, for example, of the great narrative of William Strathearn who was treacherously gunned down in his shop ('Station Island', VII) – the most fully Dantesque piece Heaney has ever written. Joyce may have the last word, urging Heaney to forget about the 'decent thing'; but it is not the only word, or even, in my judgement, the most persuasive word. And of course, like the figure of Colum McCartney in 'The Strand at Lough Beg', this Joyce, we should remember, is Heaney's invention.¹³

The volume twinned with *Station Island* was the translation of the medieval Irish epic *Buile Suibhne*, the story of an Ulster poet who is exiled for sacrilege. The issues of poetic vocation, religious duty in the loosest sense, and public responsibility could hardly be more effectively staged; Heaney saw immediately that 'there was something here for me', as he said in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll in the Irish periodical *Hibernia* in 1983. Sweeney in the Irish poem achieves a kind of freedom, with a profound topographical knowledge of the whole of Ireland, but at the price of an increasing rootlessness; the need for a sense of place now usurps the sense of self, recalling the placename poems of *Wintering Out*. Successful as Heaney's version, *Sweeney Astray*, was mostly thought to be (there were a few dissenting voices), many commentators have felt that the best product of this encounter with the medieval text was the curiously personal and intricate series of poems called 'Sweeney Redivivus' – Sweeney reborn – which was section three of *Station Island*. We can take it that the revived Sweeney figure in that sequence was what Heaney himself described Sweeney as: 'a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance', adding that 'it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation'.¹⁴ In later volumes, Heaney replaces Sweeney with the Tollund Man as his alter ego, as we will see.

The Sweeney poems, then, have the same art theme as before, but from this point on there is a slightly different, more defiant emphasis. There is still the guilt, but the poet (through the figure of Sweeney) is getting impatient with the old accusations against him as 'a feeder off battlefields'. This impatience will be sounded most loudly in *The Spirit Level* in 1996. More generally, the 'Sweeney Redivivus' poems are a sustained reflection on writing itself, and its

relationship to the experiences (such as those of Heaney's childhood) on which it is founded; many review headings seized on the significant rhyme 'Heaney's Sweeney'. These poems also deal for the first time with a different idea of escape (another Yeatsian term): not into art but into a kind of liberating scepticism. In Neil Corcoran's words, in this section Sweeney 'becomes the opportunity for Heaney to voice contrary and hostile emotions of his own, emotions exhilaratedly free from what he appeared to value in much of his earlier work as his deepest attachments, obligations and responsibilities'.¹⁵

However, the following volume, *The Haw Lantern*, even if it is – as Michael Allen says – a continuation of what Heaney was doing already, does mark a move into a different area for his next 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (Heaney's version in his essay 'Feeling Into Words' of the Yeatsian 'befitting emblem of adversity', P 56–7). A contributory factor was Heaney's move to Harvard in 1984 which had brought him into contact with a wider contemporary literary community than the Irish or English milieu to which he had previously been largely attentive. In particular he became more intently aware of a world where the literary and public imperatives did seem to come together, and where it was respectable – even obligatory – to take sides: the Cold War world of repression and samizdat. This same awareness was prominent in the contemporary critical work *The Government of the Tongue*. In Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia, political poetry could be written and the writer could proudly claim to be an 'internal exile', a term which might seem extreme and over-glamorising in an Irish context without the validation of a wider political world. 'The Master' in 'Sweeney Redivivus' was the first major tribute to one of these exiled protest poets, Czesław Miłosz (described, just before the end of his life, by Heaney as the greatest living poet). Significantly, even as authoritative a Heaneyist as Neil Corcoran understandably 'presumed' that the subject of 'The Master' was Yeats; the literary ground was still assumed to be Ireland.¹⁶

There were other major events in Heaney's life to be taken into account: in the early 1980s he joined the board of Field Day, the theatre company founded by the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. Field Day was a very successful venture, designed to take dramatic performances on tour throughout Ireland; involvement in it was seen as a move into a more public artistic arena, one whose aspirations were linked to notions of republicanism in various senses (the 'sweet equal republic', imagined by Tom Paulin in the long poem 'The Book of Juniper' at the end of *Liberty Tree*).¹⁷ Involvement in the theatre, particularly in prompting two major Sophocles translations, *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*,¹⁸ has an important place in Heaney's life thereafter, even if it did not distract him from his primary poetic purpose in the way that Yeats complained that his engagement

with 'theatre business, management of men' did.¹⁹ Still with his major concern, the publication in 1988 of *The Government of the Tongue*, his most concentrated critical book, offered a sustained exploration of the rights and obligations of the writer, whether in the East or the West. The celebrated prefaced essay begins with an anecdote that dramatises the artistic/social choice with tact and precision: in 1972 Heaney and his friend David Hammond were on their way to a recording studio in Belfast to make a tape of songs and poems when a series of exploding bombs filled the air with noise and sirens. Hammond could not sing, 'the very notion of beginning to sing at that moment when others were beginning to suffer seemed like an offence against their suffering ... and we both drove off into the destroyed evening' (GT xi).

Generally speaking, the volume from the year before this political book of essays, *The Haw Lantern*, was (apart from 'Clearances', the wonderfully lucid sequence of elegies for Heaney's recently dead mother) less enthusiastically received than any other single Heaney volume up to that point. Before, critics had sometimes agonised about Heaney's place as poet: whether he ought to take a more or less committed stance towards Irish politics. The question was how his gift ought to be used; the gift itself was unquestioned. John Bayley had declared the poems in *Station Island* (a volume whose politics have sometimes been questioned) to be 'as beautiful as anything he has written, and wider in breadth'; Paul Muldoon, a reader who has sometimes been readier than most to scrutinise Heaney's achievement with a degree of friendly scepticism, called *Sweeney Astray* 'a masterful act of repossession'. But the reaction to *The Haw Lantern* seems to be questioning in a new way. Michael Allen, in the review I have mentioned already, assumes a tone of exasperation: 'What has happened to Heaney? It is as though James Joyce let him off the hook when he told him at the end of *Station Island* "to fill the elements with signatures of your own frequency".' J. D. McClatchy has an odd explanation, in an oddly militaristic metaphor, for his impression that this book is 'something of a disappointment': that the poet (like the Arthurian Lancelot) is doing badly on purpose: 'I would say that it had been written with damp powder, except for my lingering suspicion that the poet himself may deliberately have wanted at that point in his career, by means of this rather slight book of mostly occasional poems, to defuse again the megaton reputation many had made for him' – in marked contrast to Muldoon's acerbic scolding in a review of *Station Island*: Heaney 'should resist more firmly the idea that he must be the best Irish poet since Yeats'.

McClatchy's view can hardly be the explanation, since the occasional poems were the most admired in the book. But the new questioning does seem to be linked to an overall view of what might be called 'the Heaney

project': what the poet saw his whole vocation to be. Reviewing *The Haw Lantern*, Ian Hamilton (who had been less impressed than most by *Death of a Naturalist*: 'a strange, featureless first collection') saw Heaney's cautious scepticism about vocation as a strength, the great modernist virtue of doubt: 'there is always a touch of "Why me?"' But in his next book *Seeing Things* in 1991, Heaney took one of the most decisive positions he has ever assumed. Already in *The Haw Lantern* there was some claim for artistic freedom, as there had been in 'Sweeney Redivivus' and at many points throughout Heaney's career, as we have seen. But in *Seeing Things* this bid for freedom does not go outside experience; it suddenly sees it as having been implicit in experience from the first.

The claim is most famously made in 'Fosterling', a poem in which Heaney returns to the model of Wordsworth, displacing Dante and the East Europeans whose allegories had dominated Heaney's poetry – and prose – in the 1980s. Various stages of his career have been seen as decisive points of change: Heaney's own observation that 'up to *North* that was one book'; Foster's suggestion that the poetry takes a different course after 1980. But the clearest declaration of change comes in 'Fosterling': 'me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels' (*ST* 50). In fact Heaney has been a great appreciator of marvels throughout his career, presenting the marvellous in the ordinary, captured in the much-quoted phrase from the medieval Fenian legends 'the music of what happens'. In 'Fosterling' he characterises his previous understanding as having been 'the doldrums of what happens', declaring that it is now 'time to be dazzled' and for the 'heart to lighten'. Once again, we are tempted to say with Michael Allen that this is what Heaney has always done, ever since the visionary artisan-poems of the early volumes where the family marvelled, for example, at the 'Midas touch' of the thatcher who turned the roof to gold (*DD* 20). But Heaney's declarations of artistic purpose are always a matter of emphasis, a balance of preferences between various imperatives: 'two buckets were easier carried than one'. This principle of balance was the central concern of his Oxford lectures, delivered as Professor of Poetry between 1989 and 1994, and published as *The Redress of Poetry*.

Nevertheless, *Seeing Things* was seen as biased towards the celebration of the marvellous by invoking artistic licence, to an extent that caused it to be regarded with some suspicion by those who were anxious that Heaney should remain the exemplary voice of the conflict between public duty and artistic freedom. What was hard to resist was the quality of the poems in the book as it explored the visionary ('seeing') capacity of the poet. Many critics and readers (for example, Helen Vendler in her brief, suggestive 1998 study of Heaney) have seen the most perfect representation of this visionary

perspective in Number viii in the sequence of forty-eight twelve-line poems called ‘Squarings’ which make up the last section of *Seeing Things* (before its inspired conclusion with the Charon episode of Dante’s *Inferno* III).²⁰ This beautiful parable recounts the story of a vision by medieval monks in Clonmacnoise in which they see a ship sailing above them in the air. The anchor gets snagged in the altar rails; one of the crewmen climbs down but fails to release it, so the monks free it. The ship moves on and the crewman climbs back up ‘out of the marvellous as he had known it’ (*ST* 62).

The story represents with wonderful aptness the capacity of two cultures and worlds, however unlike, to collaborate. This remarkably positive turn in Heaney’s poetic position must be seen in the context of an improvement in the political situation in Northern Ireland, culminating in the 1994 IRA ceasefire. The context is important because it shows that in *Seeing Things* Heaney was not turning his back on public issues (as is evident from Poem xxxvi in ‘Squarings’ about fear on a civil rights march); he was taking a positive view, one which is encapsulated in one of his most quoted lines, from *The Cure at Troy* whose title and theme of course are very significant. Perhaps the time is coming at last ‘when hope and history rhyme’: a line which was quoted at significant moments by Bill Clinton and Mary Robinson amongst others.

The heart does not simply ‘lighten’ though. The recurrent image in *Seeing Things* is of a false sense of security, or a false sense of insecurity. The car in the civil rights poem ‘gave when we got in / Like Charon’s boat under the faring poets’ (*Squarings* xxxvi; *ST* 94), echoing the insight about boats in the book’s title-poem:

What guaranteed us –
That quick response and buoyancy and swim –
Kept me in agony. (*ST* 16)

Modernist doubt is not to be so lightly dispelled. Charon, in Dante’s version from *Inferno* III, is the last boatman in this book of passages over (he will implicitly become significant again in *District and Circle*). And sure enough, the next book *The Spirit Level* (1996) allows itself to express considerable pessimism, even an uncharacteristic spleen. Since *Seeing Things* indeed, Heaney has become increasingly pessimistic, often in relation to politics and especially, since the start of the new millennium, in the international arena. What varies is the temper with which the pessimism is expressed, from rueful to angry. *Electric Light* in 2001 is dominated by the pastoral genre; but it is pastoral seen as a grim politics, as I argue in my chapter here (and, more significantly, as Heaney himself argues in his Irish Academy lecture).²¹ So, when *District and Circle* is dominated by the chthonic and the transition to

the afterlife (yet again, we find ourselves noting: Heaney has always been concerned with this), this is not so much in relation to his own ageing – though that of course gives the theme an increasing poignancy – as to what he sees as the gloom of the world of the early twenty-first century, dominated by an increasingly world-dominant but also rudderless imperial West. In the 1980s Heaney’s international politics looked eastward; in ‘Known World’ in *Electric Light*, Heaney tells us that when he visited Belgrade what he found sinister was the ‘west-in-east’. In the later poetry, the West, one might conclude, will take on some of the oppressive role of the totalitarian East of the 1980s writings.

The power of some of the poems in *The Spirit Level*, especially ‘Mycenae Lookout’ with the echoes of ‘Punishment’ in its fierce ‘Cassandra’ section, has tended to dominate discussion of the volume. But the book has notably positive qualities too. It manages to integrate the domestic and local within the public in a new way, especially in the volume’s finest poem ‘Keeping Going’, in tribute to the poet’s brother Hugh. Two tragic events, understated as they are, dominate the poem: the accidental death of Hugh’s daughter (uncannily reminiscent of the death in ‘Mid-Term Break’), and the killing of a Royal Ulster Constabulary reservist on his way to work, witnessed by Hugh. But the poem’s title, and its conclusion, manages to win an optimistic message from the tragedy, with implications for the possibility of public peace. Like those in Mahon’s poem who lived through adversity ‘bomb by bomb’, this exemplary figure has ‘kept going’, and the poem pays tribute to his ‘stamina’ and his achievement in being able to ‘stay on where it happens’ (SL 12). This celebration of quiet, stoical endurance occurs at other places in the book – for example in the beautiful poem about the blind neighbour, ‘At the Wellhead’, or the great poem of friendship ‘A Call’. But in this book of balances – noted already as the dominant theme of *The Redress of Poetry* – these tributes to the ordinary are set against a series of poems of defiance and self-justification, like ‘Mycenae Lookout’ and ‘Weighing In’. The balancing of artistic freedom with ethical responsibility has shifted its ground, perhaps because the poet no longer feels the necessity to make a case for the adequacy of art to our predicament. *Seeing Things* has suggested that artistic vision is an end in itself, no longer required to make its case.

But *Electric Light* reminds us, once again, that responsibility is not so lightly discarded, just as it wasn’t despite the advice of Heaney’s Joyce in *Station Island*. Some poems make the bid for freedom, notably ‘Known World’ with its recalled conference of light-headed poets, beginning ‘*Nema problema!*’ and ending ‘*Nema problema! Ja!* All systems go.’ But in between there is a problem, and the poem admits, in lines that summarise the dilemma of ‘Keeping Going’, that

That old sense of a tragedy going on
Uncomprehended, at the very edge
Of the usual, it never left me once ... (EL 21)

‘In Belgrade’ the poet, as I have said, has found his ‘west-in-east’, just as many years before the northern world of Glob’s Bog People had made Heaney feel ‘lost, / Unhappy and at home’. *Electric Light* is again dominated by tragedy, not with the anger of *The Spirit Level* but in despair: the murder of Sean Brown, heard about in Greece, makes us think of an early prophetic line of Heaney’s ‘that kind of thing could start again’ (DN 41). It is a book too of eclogues (a forum for political debate as well as the bucolic) and elegies: elegies for Heaney’s poetic friends – Ted Hughes, Joseph Brodsky and Zbigniew Herbert – and relatives, in the beautiful, distanced title-poem about his grandmother and another poem about his father, ‘anoointed and all’, recalling Hopkins’s ‘Felix Randal’. For the first time the ‘real names’ can be used without qualification because all of Heaney’s interests come together, as he walks in the shadow of death.

There is of course a major poetic work of Heaney which bears the same relation to *Electric Light* as *Sweeney Astray* does to *Station Island*. Translated works have often interrelated with new poems (if translation is not ‘new’) in Heaney, and his version of *Beowulf* in 1999 was one of his most acclaimed successes.²² There are major infiltrations from *Beowulf* in *Electric Light*, especially the optimistic and spiritual Song of Creation, drawn on in ‘The Fragment’ (EL 57), and more tellingly the desolate story of Hrethel whose son accidentally kills his elder brother.²³ The melancholy of *Beowulf* fits grimly well into much of the spirit of *Electric Light*, even if it is limiting to speak of Heaney in terms of content only: as from the first, his formal powers of description and evocation remain unrivalled – for example in the simile of the burning newspapers in ‘The Little Canticles of Asturias’ in *Electric Light*: ‘breaking off and away / In flame-posies, small airborne fire-ships’ (EL 24).

District and Circle reinforces the death-shadowed theme, with much of the book taking place in the Underground or afterlife. Charon, who lurked as a threat in the artistic paradise of *Seeing Things*, is now a dominant presence in this book of crossings over. But here too the descriptive power is undimmed, as in the title-poem’s description of ‘strap-hanging’ in the Tube in lines which bring together an astonishing number of Heaney’s themes and techniques:

I reached to grab
The stubby black roof-wort and take my stand
From planted ball of heel to heel of hand
As sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me. (DC 18)

There is the buoyancy of the boat in ‘Seeing Things’, or of Charon’s boat – kept in agony by what guarantees us; the repetition of the heel; the sense of weight; and the powerful physical evocation of the ‘roof-wort’ – a neologism that could not apply to anything else, except perhaps to the ‘old kale stalk’ in ‘The Harrow-Pin’ in the same book. The poem invites comparison with Rilke’s ‘Orpheus’, in the way that worldly experience translates without strain into the transcendental, ‘transported / Through galleried earth with them, the only relict / Of all that I belonged to’ (DC 19).

Just as earlier changes of emphasis in Heaney’s poetry were prompted by political events, such as the intensification of the Troubles in the early 1970s or the ceasefire in 1994, one major international event affected the temper of *District and Circle*, the 9/11 attacks in New York. The poem which most reflects this, both in its pre-published form and in the book itself, was the version of Horace’s Ode 1.34, ‘Anything Can Happen’, in which Jupiter ‘galloped his thunder cart and his horses / Across a clear blue sky’ (DC 13).²⁴ As in the other volumes since *Seeing Things*, art is not asked to make its case. But the balance between the private and public perspectives ends in this book with the earthly defeat of the private, in the recurrence of poems set in the underworld (with Seferis, Cavafy and the tinwhistle-playing Charon in the title-poem), recalling Yeats’s late revenant poems such as ‘Cuchulainn Comforted’, the poem Heaney would choose to represent Yeats at his best.²⁵ There are more encouraging and durable things too: the Horatian metal (an unlaboured *aere perennius*) of the implements in the translation from Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and in the hopeful millennial anvil linked to it. But once again the book ends on a note of foreboding that tilts the balance towards the tragic: ‘I said nothing at the time / But I never liked yon bird’ (DC 75–6). The tragedy at the edge of the usual is still not leaving the poet.

But *District and Circle* is only the latest Heaney, and already not the last. To keep in step with Yeats, there are still the volumes after *The Winding Stair* to come: the period of which F. R. Leavis questioned whether it was ‘Late Yeats and Greatest?’

In a poet who has been as much written on as Heaney, the representation of criticism in a book like this must inevitably be partial. It may be that the theme I have given most prominence to in this introduction – the Yeatsian concern with art and life – is unduly over-represented in the essays too. I have not been concerned to give a balanced introduction to all the periods of the poet’s work, since the work up to 1990 has been very fully accounted for in the existing criticism, as is evident in the bibliography. Thus, an essay is devoted by John Wilson Foster to the work of Heaney’s middle age, from *Seeing Things* to *Electric Light*. Heaney’s standing as a poet-practitioner in the tradition from Coleridge to Eliot is widely recognised, so David Wheatley’s essay on his

criticism is of the first importance. Similarly, the influences from Wordsworth and Yeats are given centrality as, I would suggest, the guides of whom Heaney is most aware; the influence of Dante might have been addressed more particularly, but that too has been given a good deal of attention. The general emphasis here is probably on Heaney in Irish traditions, both literary and historical. Within the literary tradition, Andrew Murphy casts his net backwards while Dillon Johnston looks at Heaney amongst his poetic contemporaries, giving particular prominence to themes shared with his southern contemporaries such as Thomas Kinsella. In the public context Patrick Crotty looks at the wider critical reception of Heaney, first amongst his Irish poetic predecessors and contemporaries, and then in his own right; Dennis O'Driscoll adds to this the poet's own contributions to the debate about his reception. Similarly privileged information is provided by Rand Brandes's exploration of titles that Heaney toyed with and changed. Beyond an Irish tradition, discussions of Greek, Eastern European and Germanic influences are clearly indispensable. Fran Brearton's essay ventures into an area of gendered imagery where Heaney's practice (like that of several of his Northern Irish contemporaries) has been scrutinised. Guinn Batten's essay serves in some ways as a rejoinder to this, seeing an idea of feminine nourishment derived from Wordsworth as a prompt to the poetic imagination. Throughout though, whether the poet is negotiating with the ancient Classics, the Northern Past, or the international present, or with the English and Irish literary traditions, the distinctive strength and emphasis of this writer is indeed to show how 'lyrical beauty' is the vehicle for 'ethical depth'.

NOTES

1. John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: Lilliput Press 1995), p. 2.
2. For Heaney's miscellaneous earlier prose writings, up to 1991, see 'Uncollected Articles and Reviews, etc.', in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan 1992), pp. 257–9. Exceptions to my perhaps over-generalising view about the paucity of early extended criticism are the brilliant British Academy Chatterton lecture on Hopkins in 1974, 'The Fire in the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins' (reprinted in *P* 79–97), a discussion which gives a good foretaste of what Heaney's distinctive critical strengths will be; and the considered review of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse in The Times Literary Supplement* (see my chapter on 'Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic' here).
3. Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p. 182.
4. Derek Mahon, 'Afterlives, for James Simmons', in *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press 1999), p. 59.

5. Seamus Deane, 'Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold', in *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 175.
6. *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. N. Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 310. The famous line comes at the end of Section II of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', Yeats's most effective political poem. For Glob's book, see p. 205 n. 5.
7. See Frank Ormsby, *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. xvii (quoting Michael Longley from the *Radio Times*, 20–26 October 1979).
8. Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats', in *In Excited Reverie*, ed. A. N. Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (London: Macmillan 1965), pp. 207–78; reprinted in *Passion and Cunning and Other Essays* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1990).
9. 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney' (James Randall), *Ploughshares* 5: 3 (1979), p. 21.
10. *Soundings '72: An Annual Anthology of New Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press 1972), n.p.
11. See Declan Kiberd, 'Multiculturalism and Artistic Freedom: The Strange Death of Liberal Europe' (1993), in *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 250–68.
12. Neil Corcoran, 'Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary', *Yearbook of English Studies* 17 (1987), pp. 117–27; incorporated into a longer chapter 'Examples of Heaney', in *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 137–55.
13. It has not, I think, been sufficiently noted that Joyce's closing words to Heaney in this section are closely modelled on Virgil's last words to Dante at the end of *Purgatorio* Canto 27.
14. Michael Allen, 'Writing a Bare Wire: *Station Island*', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen, Macmillan Casebook Series (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 120.
15. Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, p. 108.
16. Allen, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 123.
17. Tom Paulin, 'The Book of Juniper' (1981), collected in *Liberty Tree* (London: Faber and Faber 1983), p. 27.
18. Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' 'Philoctetes'* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1990); *The Burial at Thebes. Sophocles' 'Antigone'* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
19. W. B. Yeats, 'The Fascination of What's Difficult', *Yeats's Poems*, ed. Jeffares, p. 188.
20. Heaney tells us that at one point he hoped to complete twelve groups of twelve, making 144 poems in all. He has not commented whether stopping at 48 had Bach's 'Well-tempered Klavier' in mind (like Eliot's *Four Quartets* perhaps). If the suggestion is not too fanciful, the adjective 'well-tempered' might describe the spirit of the sequence well.
21. Seamus Heaney, 'Elogues *in extremis*: On the Staying Power of Pastoral', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 103C:1 (2003), pp. 1–12.
22. *Beowulf* shares with *The Spirit Level* the unusual accolade of winning the Whitbread Book of the Year award: one rarely given to poetry.
23. It is striking how Heaney adjusts in small ways the wording of his translation in *Beowulf* for the section which he reproduces substantially in 'On His Work in the

English Tongue' in *Electric Light*, as if he believes a different register of language is appropriate for the translation of epic from lyric.

24. Published as a separate pamphlet in various translations: *Anything Can Happen: A Poem and Essay by Seamus Heaney with Translations in Support of Art for Amnesty* (Dublin: TownHouse, 2004). The linking of a public event with art is noticeably foregrounded in this full title.
25. Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?' (1978), reprinted in *P* 98–114.