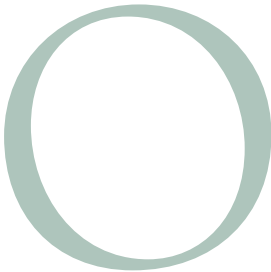


Seamus Heaney, Digging with the Pen

*On rhymes
and responsibilities*

by ADAM KIRSCH

 ONE OF THE MOST REVEALING QUESTIONS you can ask about any poet has to do with his sense of responsibility. To whom or what does he hold himself responsible in his writing? The poet who replies “Nothing”—who believes that the concept of responsibility is foreign to the totally free realm of art—is likely to be a bad poet. If there is nothing—no reader real or imaginary, no idea, value, or principle—with the right to hold the writer to account, then there is no way for her to know when she is writing better or worse, when she is getting closer to her ideal or straying from it.

That is why a genuine artist almost always wants to feel answerable to something. Not necessarily a person or a group, because any concrete audience is all too likely to constrict the imagination, to encourage flattery or evasion. But there is liberation in feeling responsible to an ideal reader—the best poets of the past, perhaps, or the unbiased readers of the future; or to an ethical principle—speaking truthfully, bearing witness, offering sympathy; or to an aesthetic ideal—the radiance of beauty, the genius of the language. Not until you

know what a poet feels responsible toward can you know how he wants and deserves to be read.

The strength and the challenge of Seamus Heaney’s poetry lie in its willingness to admit all these kinds of responsibility at once. To get a sense of Heaney’s temperament, just look at the titles of the major essays and lectures about poetry that he has produced over his long career: “The Government of the Tongue,”

“The Redress of Poetry,” and “Crediting Poetry,” the lecture he delivered in Stockholm after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. These are unapologetically ethical terms, and they suggest a poet deeply concerned with the correct use of his gifts. Indeed, few poets have ever interrogated themselves more strenuously than Heaney; again and again in his poetry, we find him confronting himself, or being confronted by a neighbor

or reader, with his responsibilities as a man and a poet.

“Digging,” the first poem of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), is quoted in almost every discussion of Heaney’s work for its prescient statement of the themes that would dominate his poetry: his sensual love of his native ground; his fascination with work and all kinds of tools; his vision of poetry as a traditional, laborious, and sustaining craft, like farming. The most important thing about “Digging,” however, is that it takes the form of a promise, a commitment from the poet to his father and grandfather, whose lives were spent literally digging the soil. Heaney acknowledges that he is not a farmer, and will not follow their vocation. But at the start of his career, he vows to translate their virtues into another kind of work:

The cold smell of potato mould, the
squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my
head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like
them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

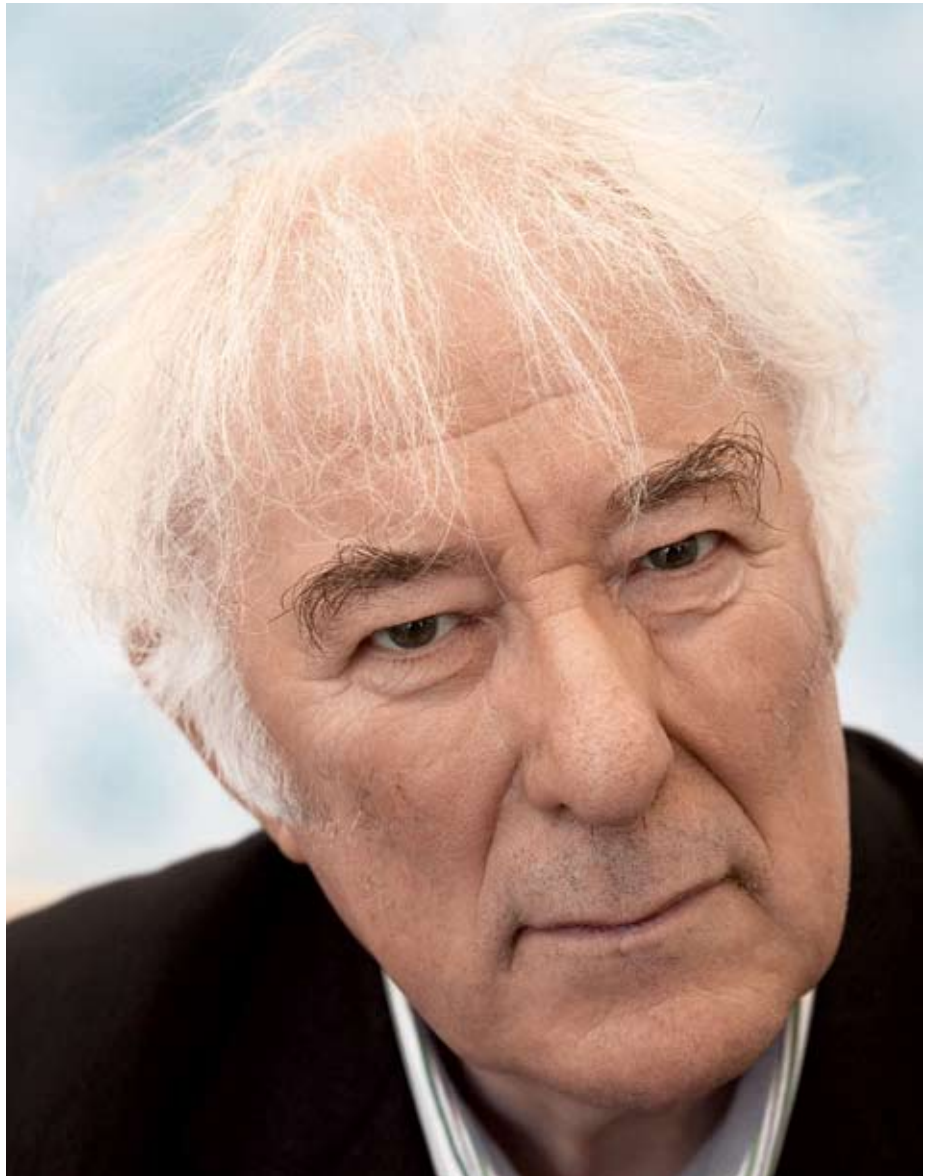
That is Heaney in his middle twenties, not too long removed from his childhood in Mossbawn, County Derry, in Northern Ireland. That is the rural world where Heaney was born in 1939, and grew up as the oldest of nine children on his family’s 50-acre farm. That world would remain at the heart of his poetry, even as he ventured far from his origins, geographically speaking. In 1972, he and his wife, Marie, moved to Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland, which has been his primary residence ever since. He spent decades as a university professor, at Queen’s University in Belfast, the University of California at Berkeley, Carysfort College in Dublin, and, of course, at Harvard, where he started teaching in 1982 and was named Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory in 1984.

Leading workshops in Cambridge every spring, Heaney became one of Harvard’s most recognizable citizens, the latest in a long line of major poets who have made the University their professional home. He retired from regular teaching in 1996 and was appointed Ralph Waldo Emerson poet in residence, an honor similar to those previously granted to Robert Frost and Robert Lowell. He continues to visit the campus for six weeks every other year.

Now, in 2006, Heaney has published his eleventh collection of poems, *District and Circle*. Forty years have passed since *Death of a Naturalist*, yet in a poem like “A Shiver,” we find Heaney still holding the stance he adopted in “Digging”:

The way you had to stand to swing the sledge,
Your two knees locked, your lower back shock-fast...
The way its iron head planted the sledge
Unyieldingly as a club-footed last;
The way you had to heft and then half-rest
Its gathered force like a long-nursed rage
About to be let fly...

The spade has been replaced by a sledgehammer, but Heaney is still the poet of labor, of contact with the earth. His father and grandfather are dead, but he has kept his promise to them.



Yet all this talk of obligations, of redress and government and credit, would be misleading if it suggested that Heaney is merely a didactic, moralizing poet. That the drama of the poet’s moral responsibilities is one of the major themes of his work cannot be denied, and a reader who is indifferent to it will not love Heaney—or Czeslaw Milosz, or Derek Walcott, or Joseph Brodsky, the poets who, with Heaney, have in our time done most to

define and defend the significance of poetry. But Heaney is also, and primarily, a poet of pleasure. If he is like Wordsworth in his love of nature and his wise seriousness, he has also written that “When it comes to poetic composition, one has to allow for the presence, even the pre-eminence, of what Wordsworth called ‘the grand elementary principle of pleasure,’ and that pleasure comes from the doing-in-language of certain things.” What makes Heaney a lovable poet, rather than just an admirable one, is that his sense of responsibility extends to pleasure itself. The poet, he knows, must delight and instruct; and without the delight, the instruction is worse than useless.

Ask anyone who reads Heaney what they enjoy in his poems, and the first answer will be his music—the dense, rich, consonant-heavy music that draws on the strong rhythms of Anglo-Saxon poetry and the vernacular of Northern Ireland to create an instantly recognizable style. (His verse translation of the Old English masterpiece *Beowulf* landed on the *New York Times* best-seller list in 1999—an achievement perhaps even more remarkable than winning the Nobel Prize.)

In his new book, *District and Circle*, we greet that music again on the first page like an old friend, in “The Turnip-Snedder”:

In an age of bare hands
and cast iron,

the clamp-on meat-mincer,
the double flywheeled water-pump,

it dug its heels in among wooden tubs
and troughs of slops,

hotter than body heat
in summertime, cold in winter

as winter’s body armour,
a barrel-chested breast-plate

standing guard
on four braced greaves.

The lip-smacking assonance of “clamp” and “pump”; the curdled vowels in “troughs” and “slops”; the ramming together of nouns into substantial compounds like “meat-mincer” and “breast-plate”—all of these are Heaney’s trademarks. (What other poet could have written a poem called “The Guttural Muse”?) The choice of subject matter is just as characteristic. Heaney has often written about farming implements, from early poems like “The Forge” and “Churning Day” to more recent works like “The Pitchfork” and “The Harrow-Pin.”

For readers who have never come closer to a farm than a school field trip—which is to say, for most American readers—poems like this offer the temptation of nostalgia, as though Heaney were simply the chronicler of a simpler, more traditional and concrete world. Certainly, among Irish poets of the generation after Heaney’s, there has been a deliberate turning away from this kind of rural subject matter—just look at the acrobatic poems of Paul Muldoon, saturated with American pop culture, or the urbane, disillusioned poems of Dennis O’Driscoll, set in offices and suburbs that could be in Detroit as easily as Dublin. (O’Driscoll and Heaney are cooperating on a book-length interview that will be the



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The Poet's Perspective

Adam Kirsch, in New York, interviewed Seamus Heaney, in Ireland, by fax in mid September.

KIRSCH: When I was a student in one of your workshops, about 10 years ago, you had the class translating fragments of *Beowulf*—which, I realize in retrospect, must have been the project you were working on at the time. This leads me to wonder about how close the connection is between your work as a teacher and your life as a writer.

HEANEY: Teaching and writing have tended to proceed on parallel lines, but there have been times when there was indeed carry-over from the classroom to the “creative” work. In the 1970s, for example, I found myself learning to relish the poetry of Andrew Marvell and Sir Thomas Wyatt, and getting a handle on poetry of plainer speech than I had dwelt with heretofore. Which led me into a new appreciation of middle Yeats, of the short three-beat line and forward-driving syntax, and that paid in, in turn, to a poem like “Casualty” in *Field Work*. The traffic, however, was usually the other way. My teaching was animated by what I was reading and being excited by as a poet. Early on, Ted Hughes. Very early on, [Gerard Manley] Hopkins.

KIRSCH: Do you miss teaching now?

HEANEY: I don't miss teaching. I'm learning to take my time for myself. When I was teaching, I gave a lot of my mind and anxiety to it. There was always something clenched and anxious in me until the classes were over. Once I was “on the job,” once I had got started, I felt safe enough, but the anticipation made me tense.

KIRSCH: Teaching leads naturally to the subject of Harvard. Did you find the University a good environment for writing?

HEANEY: Harvard created wonderful conditions for me as a writer—but the writing was done, almost entirely, when I got home. The appointment gave me economic safety, writerly support, and intellectual self-respect—plus eight months to myself every year. From the beginning, and before the beginning, as it were, I felt welcome.

KIRSCH: Are there any especially important friendships you made there?

HEANEY: Even though Helen Vendler wasn't on the Harvard faculty when I came first in 1979, she was a guardian spirit; Robert Fitzgerald gave me the use of his study in Pusey Library. Monroe and Brenda Engel kept open house, Bob and Jana Kiely made me at home in Adams House. Then, too, in 1979, Frank Bidart, whom I'd met in Dublin after the death of Robert Lowell—he was over seeing Caroline Blackwood—Frank brought me into his circle of friends, including Robert Pinsky and Alan Williamson. And most amazingly of all, through Frank and Helen, Marie and I were often in the company of Elizabeth Bishop and Alice Methfessel.*

So Harvard meant a lot in my writing life from the beginning, even though I didn't actually do much composition on the spot. The poems I did write there include “Alphabets”—the 1984 Phi Beta Kappa poem—and “A Sofa in the Forties.” And, of course, the John Harvard poem for the 350th anniversary—“Villanelle for an Anniversary.”

KIRSCH: Do you find that American readers approach your work differently from Irish and English readers?

HEANEY: Irish readers, British readers, American readers: is it odd that I haven't a clue about how differently they react? Or better say, I cannot find the words to describe my hunch about them. Best to say that once a poem is finished I trust it to make its way, and I trust readers will find their way to it and through it, if the thing has got itself rightly expressed.

KIRSCH: In *District and Circle*, there are a number of poems where the shadow of the September 11 attacks can be felt. Am I also right to sense, in “The Aerodrome,” an implied censure of America's conduct in the world after September 11, or at least a statement of “Options, obstinacies, dug heels, and distance”?

HEANEY: I felt implicated in American affairs in a new way in the past five years. Outraged at the blatant lies about Iraq's involvement in al Qaeda, at the regime's arrogance and stupidity, Guantánamo Bay and all the rest of it. But the poems at the start of *District and Circle*—“Anahorish 1944,” “The Aerodrome”—aren't particularly aimed as criticism. On the contrary, there's a recognition of the big contribution to world order made in Europe during World War II.

“Anything Can Happen,” on the other hand, is not only about the atrociousness of the September 11 attack, it is also a premonition of the deadly retaliation that was bound to come. “Anything Can Happen” is also, incidentally, a poem that arose from teaching. I'd talked about the Horace Ode (I, 34) [on which the poem is based] in a lecture I gave at Harvard in the fall of 2000—entitled “Bright Bolts”—and remembered it after the Twin Towers attack.

KIRSCH: In “The Birch Grove,” you offer an idyllic vision of a poet in retirement, ending with the lines: “‘If art teaches us anything,’ he says, trumping life/With a quote, ‘it's that the human condition is private.’” The poem made me reflect on how many times you have written about the burden of the public, of the demands made on you by the communal and historical. Do you feel that being responsible, to an audience and a historical situation, has been a happy fate for you as a writer?

HEANEY: Yes, I suppose I did feel a certain “public” pressure always. One of the very first poems I wrote was “Docker”—“That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic”—and one of the sturdiest was “Requiem for the Croppies,” written 50 years after 1916 [the year of the Easter Rising]. “Being responsible” and what it means, what it demands, have indeed preoccupied me—maybe too much. But this is it, this is the thing, this is what you're up against.

*Helen Vendler, now Porter University Professor, joined the Harvard faculty in 1981. The late Robert Fitzgerald was Heaney's predecessor as Boylston professor. Professors Monroe Engel and Robert Kiely were and are Heaney's departmental colleagues. Bidart, Pinsky, and Williamson are contemporary American poets. Caroline Blackwood was Robert Lowell's third wife. Alice Methfessel was Elizabeth Bishop's companion.

closest thing to an autobiography Heaney has produced.)

Yet if Heaney's readers may be tempted to idealize his world, the poet himself never does. For him, rural Ireland is not a pastoral idyll but the theater of wrenching moral dramas, a place where history intrudes into the personal and threatens to obliterate it. That is because Heaney, as a Catholic native of Northern Ireland, was born into one of the most intransigent ethnic and religious conflicts in the world, and in a generation that would see it flare up into the terrible violence known as the Troubles.

That violence moved to the center of Heaney's work in *North*, his fourth collection of poems, which appeared in 1975. These poems, written in the years of Bloody Sunday and the acceleration of the IRA bombing campaign, show Heaney transforming himself from the celebrant of his native ground into its interrogator and elegist. The famous lines from "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" capture this new poetic persona:

I am Hamlet the Dane,
skull-handler, parablister,
smeller of rot

in the state, infused
with its poisons,
pinioned by ghosts
and affections,

murders and pieties,
coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering

Heaney's most famous poetic symbol was born from this obsession. In a series of poems, from "Bogland" through "The Tollund Man," "Bog Queen," and "The Grauballe Man," down to the new sequence "The Tollund Man in Springtime" in *District and Circle*, Heaney made the bogs of Northern Europe into a metaphor with endless implications. For a poet who began his career writing about digging the soil, the bog is an uncanny challenge, a kind of ground which you can dig forever without ever reaching bottom: "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage./The wet centre is bottomless." In this, it resembles the history of Ireland itself, a permanently fluid and unsettled past:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.

And when Heaney writes of the Iron Age corpses that archaeologists have dug up from bogs, he finds an all-too-apt metaphor for the way that his own land is sown with death: "the actual weight/of each hooded victim,/slashed and dumped."

Yet even, or especially, in the bog poems, Heaney never allows the richness of his music, or the inventive precision of his images, to be silenced by the moral gravity of his subject. There is a Wordsworthian "pleasure," of a saturnine, macabre kind, in the way Heaney translates the corpse of "The Grauballe Man" into language:

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.

What was most crucial in Heaney's attitude toward the surrounding violence, however, was his refusal to be simply "pinioned by ghosts." He insisted on finding a moral and poetic vantage point on the Troubles, rather than being drawn into its savage binaries. This was an especially important achievement for a poet who, from the beginning, felt such a strong sense of belonging and obligation—to his family, his land, his community and the sounds of its speech. In his Nobel lecture, Heaney attested to his "love and trust in the good of the indigenous *per se*," with a forthrightness that probably few American poets would hazard. Yet at the same time, he warned against "elevating the cultural forms and conservatism of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems."

This carefully maintained balance—between belonging and autonomy, loyalty and judgment—became the major subject of Heaney's middle period, starting with *North* and extending through *The Haw Lantern* (1987). On the one hand, he writes frankly about the pressures and exclusions he knew as a Catholic in Northern Ireland. His very name, the Irish "Seamus" rather than the English "James," was a marker of identity in a divided land, as he suggests in a vignette from "The Ministry of Fear":

policemen
Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round
The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing
The muzzle of a Sten gun in my eye:
"What's your name, driver?"

"Seamus..."

Seamus?

Heaney has always made it one of his central responsibilities to affirm his membership in a group subjected to this kind of discrimination. "My passport's green./No glass of ours was ever raised/To toast *The Queen*," he wrote in 1983, demurring from his inclusion in an anthology of British poets. Yet he has also maintained, with a firmness not untouched by humor, his right to be critical of his own group—that first principle of all genuine artists. No poet has been less tempted to write propagandistically, to submit to what Heaney has called "the surge of disruptive feelings which [spring] too readily in the collective life."

That is why, of all the elegies Heaney has written for friends and acquaintances murdered in the Troubles, the most revealing of his own position is "Casualty," from his 1979 collection *Field Work*. A casualty is not a hero or a martyr, but a bystander—in this case, a drunkard who was killed by his fellow Catholics when he violated an IRA curfew to go out to a bar. "How culpable was he/That last night when he broke/Our tribe's complicity?" Heaney asks, and gives his indirect answer in the poem's final stanza, when he remembers going fishing with the dead man:

I tasted freedom with him.
To get out early, haul

Steadily off the bottom,
Dispraise the catch, and smile
As you find a rhythm
Working you, slow mile by mile,
Into your proper haunt
Somewhere, well out, beyond...

Heaney's longing for that haunt of freedom, that sublime irresponsibility, became more vocal in his work in the 1980s. "Station Island," the visionary sequence that was the title poem of his 1984 volume, uses the idiom of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to stage a confrontation with all the claims Heaney was yearning to escape. Using a modified version of Dante's verse form, *terza rima*, Heaney imagines himself accosted, like Dante in Hell, by a series of ghosts, each representing a kind of obligation: a priest he knew as a child, a teacher, a cousin who was murdered by Protestant terrorists. Yet after allowing each of these voices to state its claims on his loyalty, Heaney concludes the sequence with a vision of James Joyce, the Irish writer who famously escaped his country, taking refuge in "silence, exile, and cunning." Joyce, clearly identified though never actually named, leaves the poet with an exhortation to freedom:



“My passport’s green./No glass of ours was ever raised/
To toast *The Queen*,” he wrote in 1983, demurring from his
inclusion in an anthology of British poets.

“Take off from here. And don’t be so earnest,
so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget.
You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note.”

This message of liberation, which the poet delivers to himself through the medium of Joyce—“nothing that I had not known/already,” Heaney admits—did not mark a sudden, radical break in his work. But it represents the planting of new seeds, whose crop would be harvested in his work during the next 20 years.

This change of direction was not an abdication of Heaney’s earlier moral concerns in favor of some pure aestheticism. He remained devoted to truth-telling, and to the translation of truth into beauty through the alchemy of language. Instead, as was becoming for this deeply responsible poet, it meant a change in Heaney’s understanding of his responsibility, of the subjects and listeners to whom he would hold himself answerable. Above all, it meant a willingness to turn from the local and political to the spiritual and universal. It was a turn that, Heaney declared in his Nobel lecture, felt like a liberation: “Then finally and happily,

and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as the murderous.”

Heaney’s most extended exploration of the marvelous is the long sequence called “Squarings,” from his 1991 volume, *Seeing Things*. The title “Squarings” gestures at the form of the poems, which are truncated sonnets, 12 lines each, that look like segmented squares on the page. But it is also a word drawn, like so many before it in Heaney’s work, from the vocabulary of his childhood: “Squarings? In the game of marbles, squarings/Were all those anglings, aimings, feints and squints/You were allowed before you’d shoot....” This is exactly the way, Heaney suggests, that he will approach matters of faith and doubt: not dogmatically but pragmatically, always willing to take a new look or try a new angle. The very form of the sequence enforces a kind of tentativeness: each of the 48 poems represents an opportunity for the poet to start over.

This pragmatism is what allows “Squarings” to be one of the most convincing spiritual poems of our time. It is convincing, above all, in its refusal to be convinced, and its unconcern with

arguing the reader into agreement with any dogma. The sequence moves back and forth between metaphysical intuitions and the self-doubts that are inseparable from them in our age, which is not an age of faith. Heaney knows moments when the world seems to fall away, allowing the spirit its freedom:

Air spanned, passage waited, the balance rode,

Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store
Witnessed itself already taking place
In a time marked by assent and by hiatus.

This is a finely negative description of transcendence; it follows the medieval theological tradition of the *via negativa*, which defined God only by negatives. A moment when “nothing prevailed” is, to a poet who has seen all too much of the human need to dominate, a blessed moment. Yet this negative space, which makes room for a positive presence, cannot establish itself with the reliability of religious belief. “What’s the use of a held note or held line/That cannot be assailed for reassurance?” Heaney asks himself.

A moment when “nothing prevailed” is, to a poet who has seen all too much of the human need to dominate, a blessed moment.

In the end, like many people, what Heaney can look to for reassurance is art itself. “In order that human beings bring about the most radiant conditions for themselves to inhabit,” he wrote in the essay “Joy or Night,” “it is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place.” The kind of transformation poetry offers cannot create another world; but in going beyond this world, through surprising perception and powerful language, it holds open the possibility of transcendence. This is the secular miracle that Heaney describes in “The Rain-Stick,” the first poem in his 1996 collection, *The Spirit Level*. The rain-stick is “a cactus stalk,” a product of the desert, but when it is upended it releases a sound of “Down-pour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash....” It is not the kind of water you can actually drink, Heaney acknowledges, but while it lasts it offers a kind of refreshment:

Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven
Through the ear of a raindrop.

This vision of heaven is the fitting counterpart to the vision of earth that Heaney offered in his early poems. The way he allows that consolation to hover between metaphor and metaphysics becomes especially moving in the poems of *District and Circle*, where the poet, now 67 years old, is increasingly occupied with last things. In “Quitting Time,” he once again likens the work of poetry to physical labor, inviting the reader to see his portrait of an aging farmer as a veiled self-portrait:

a home-based man at home
In the end with little. Except this same
Night after nightness, redding up the work,
The song of a tubular steel gate in the dark
As he pulls it to and starts his uphill trek.

District and Circle often puts the reader in mind of that gate swinging closed, with its “redding up” of themes Heaney has explored for a lifetime. This is the autumnal effect of poems like “Anahorish 1944” and “Polish Sleepers,” which look back to the poet’s earliest memories from the World War II years; and still more of the addresses to friends and poets recently deceased, such as “Stern,” dedicated to Ted Hughes, and the moving sequence “Out of This World,” subtitled “in memory of Czeslaw Milosz.”

But the last word in Heaney’s new book is, characteristically, affirmative—the kind of genuine affirmation only available to a man who has taken full account of the world’s negative. In “The Blackbird of Glanmore,” Heaney looks back to one of his best early poems, “Mid-Term Break” from *Death of a Naturalist*, which hauntingly described the coffin of his young brother: “A four-foot

box, a foot for every year.” Now, a lifetime later, he remembers “a neighbour’s words/Long after the accident,” who claimed to have seen a blackbird near the Heaneys’ farm before the boy’s death—a folk omen. Seeing another blackbird now, “On the grass when I arrive,” he and the reader are forced to wonder if it is a harbinger of another death. Yet Heaney responds to it with defiant gladness:

Hedge-hop, I am absolute
For you, your ready talkback,
Your each stand-offish comeback,
Your picky, nervy goldbeak—
On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave.

Heaney wants us to hear the echo, in these lines, of the famous speech from act III of *Measure for Measure*, in which the Duke advises the condemned Claudio: “Be absolute for death; either death or life/Shall thereby be the sweeter.” And Heaney’s delighted re-echoing of the blackbird’s song, in this tattoo of clicking “k” sounds, shows that he has proved Shakespeare right: by embracing the bird and all it represents, he has infused a new sweetness into his own verse. It is just the latest, and surely not the last, of the reconciliations Seamus Heaney has spent almost half a century effecting—between public and private, history and spirit, art and life. ▽

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