

Heaney's Poetic Mind and Practice: From "Feeling into Words" to "The Government of the Tongue" and "The Redress of Poetry"

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the noteworthy intellectual and artistic coherence apparent in the relationship between Seamus Heaney's poetic mind and his work, particularly as displayed in three of his prose writings belonging to distinct stages of his literary career. From there, the article moves on to consider broadly some aspects of Heaney's poetic corpus as artistic evidence of this coherence and to appraise Heaney's position within the realm of contemporary Irish poetry.

The intellectual and artistic career of Seamus Heaney (b. 1939), possibly the most universal of today's poets writing in English, clearly illustrates the motive force behind all artistic production: the relationship between the author and his work, between the author's poetic thought and his poetic practice, and how the latter is often a mere consequence of an ingrained intellectual coherence applied to the poetic event throughout almost 25 years of creative activity.

Heaney's poetic thought is spread over the fortunately abundant essays, interviews and reviews in which he devotes himself to commenting on his own or other poets' work. However, the progress of his thought appears in a more or less systematic fashion in two essays which I consider particularly meaningful in this respect, "Feeling into Words" (1974) and "The Government of the Tongue" (1986), and beautifully evoked in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1989, "The Redress of Poetry." In principle, these three texts reveal an essentially Romantic conception of the poetic product.

Heaney's approach to this matter is different in the two essays. "Feeling into Words" (henceforth FW) is in fact a kind of self-revelatory essay focusing on his individual experience as a poet five years after the publication of his first substantial volume of poetry (*Death of a Naturalist*, 1966). The second essay, "The Government of the Tongue"

(henceforth GT), contains a more abstract and complex approach, one which is, apparently, less individually concerned with the poetic phenomenon.

My assertions are based, firstly, on the different seminal stimuli evoked by the texts (Wordsworth in FW, and T.S. Eliot in GT) which trigger off Heaney's poetic reflection; and, secondly, on his treatment of the key concepts present in all processes of theorisation on the matter: the concepts of poetry, poet, and creative process. Yet the qualitative difference I have mentioned between the two essays does not prevent us from perceiving the singular intellectual and poetic coherence which they reveal.

This difference and this coherence are present even in the very titles of the texts. "Poetry" is in the earlier essay (FW) first and foremost, in the Wordsworthian manner, "feeling into words," and is then the expression of the visionary and self-revealing capacities of the poet as well as of the poet's privileged position as conveyor of culture, i.e., in Heaney's words, poetry is also "divination . . . revelation of the self to the self, restoration of the culture to itself" and the poems are "elements of continuity" (41). The second essay (GT) considers the same concept in Eliot's manner. "Poetry" is "the government of the tongue" and "tongue" an "objective correlative" (or a synecdoche) for several ideas: a) for the poet's general gift of utterance and the common devices of language; as such, according to Heaney, it "has been granted the right to govern" (92); b) for the power of poetic imagination (95); c) for the need to "hold" this gift of utterance ("Govern your tongue," 96), given that, in Heaney's view, some expressive ascetism or economy does not rule out the desirable epiphanic element which leads the poem to universality (101-07). The poem now "makes us feel" and, by so doing, "carries truth" (100). At the same time, these ideas converge, and qualify the poet's capacities we have mentioned.

The notion of poetry linking the essays is expressly stated in GT. Here Heaney asserts his view that "poetry" may be considered "useful" even in our agitated and chaotic modern world because it "verifies our singularity" (107) and functions not as a factor of distraction but of concentration for both poet and reader, so revealing again its "governing power" (108).

The notional proximity and formal distance between the texts in question appear again when we focus on the notion of "poet." In FW Heaney conceives of this figure in the Romantic fashion as a "vates," a seer and sage, a person who divines, reveals "the self to the self" and restores culture (41, 49), a person gifted with the ability to give form to the immaterial so that the latter may be perceived by the common reader. In GT Heaney, using the terminology of the Polish poet Anna Swir, provides the concept with more functional, modern and original names, viz. those of "antenna," or detector of the voices of the world, and "medium," mediator or bridge between his own subconscious and the collective subconscious (92; 107), whose power to a large extent depends on his ability to establish original relationships between the individual and reality (93).

Parallel to these different names and similar conceptualisations of "poet," FW proceeds to the idea of "poetic voice," which for Heaney, as well as for so many modern poets (and less modern, for instance G.M. Hopkins), must sound like "the poet's natural voice" because, in his opinion, "there is a connection between the core of a poet's speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice, between his original accent and his

discovered style" (43). In GT, on the other hand, Heaney enlarges on one of his favourite ideas, that of the never-to-be-relinquished necessity of ideological independence and freedom of speech on the poet's part (96-98), an idea also present in one of his latest prose works: "The truth is, the purer and more concentrated a poet's faculties and the more aligned within his sensibility the poles of politics and transcendence, then the simpler and more distinct will be something that we may call the poetic DNA pattern" ("The Redress of Poetry": 6).

Less obvious are the differences between the two essays concerning Heaney's way of understanding the process of poetic creation, which are rather a consequence of secondary issues. First of all, Heaney states a similar, though differently formulated, conception of the origin of the poetic event and in both texts he reverts to the same authoritative voice to support his thesis, that of the poet Robert Frost (1874-1963).

In FW Heaney places the primeval source of one of his favourite early poems, "Digging," in the poet's subconscious, or "structure at the back of my mind" (42); whereas in GT this origin is associated by Heaney to his (and Anna Swir's) concept of poetic "inspiration" as a basically "psychosomatic phenomenon," not intellectual or rational, which only achieves its rationality after becoming a verbal entity, after finding its poetic *form* (92-94). That is, Heaney admits keeping in mind Frost's well-known definition of the "true poem" in his essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" (1939, the year of Heaney's birth): "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life . . . in a momentary stay against confusion" (Barry: 126). By the way, this origin is lyrically simplified in his "Redress of Poetry": "Indeed I am still enough of a humanist to believe that poetry arises from the same source as that ideal future which Derek Mahon, in his poem 'The Sea in Winter,' envisages as follows: 'The ideal future/Shines out of our better nature'" (10).

Somewhat later on in GT Heaney leads us briefly to the question of poetic "intention" (99-100), whereas the development of his thought in FW enters into the realm of the method of materialising the poet's subconscious, or, rather, into the realm of what he calls poetic "technique" (47-51). As to his notion of authorial intention, Heaney is absolutely clear. Above all else, poetry "makes us feel," i.e. it must meet the requisites of Horace's "dulce" and Frost's "delight"; thus, poetry "carries truth" (GT: 99) and in so doing it combines the qualities that make it "utile" and enable to convey "wisdom" respectively. That is, for Heaney the concept of authorial intention in poetry blends feeling and truth, a view which he admits having taken from the Romantics (GT: 100); as Alan Robinson has said, "Heaney finds exemplary those poets who vindicate the *utile* . . . without betraying the *dulce*" (124).

Moving on to the next idea, in Heaney's view the materialisation of the poet's subconscious requires his mastery of what he calls "technique" (FW: 47). This mastery is not only the original, but also the material source of every poetic event (48). In this context Heaney looks back again to Frost, for whom every poem develops along the axis emotion-intellect-verbalization: "a poem begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a love-sickness. It finds the thought and the thought finds the words" (49), and he devotes

a lengthy fragment in the same essay to explain to the reader his vast and many-sided concept of “technique,” the clarity of which requires no further comment on my part:

Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art.” (FW: 47)

Heaney’s concept of poetic “technique” transcends the merely stylistic level to which the term usually refers in practical criticism, to include also the notion of “Weltanschauung” as well as his skill in associating original emotion and poetic product:

Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind’s and body’s resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form. (FW: 47)

Consequently, as I have said before in different terms, for Heaney the poet’s technical mastery (with the many-sided implications we have mentioned) turns out ultimately to be detonator, cause, and instrument of the poetic work.

Earlier on I referred to the noteworthy intellectual coherence in poetic matters between the two essays. I come back now to this point in order to highlight a new and recent piece of evidence of such coherence on Heaney’s part that will allow me to approach schematically a considerable portion of his poetic output. The publication in 1990 of Heaney’s latest poetic anthology, *New Selected Poems: 1966-1987*, prompted the author to write a review, in which the anthology, which is made up of poems selected by the author from the nine volumes embodying his poetic corpus up to that date, is considered “a poetic coming of age” (*P.B.S. Bulletin*: 7), given the 21 years which have elapsed between the first and last volumes of poetry included in the anthology. The review appeared in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* for the summer of 1990 (no. 145) and in it Heaney literally evokes the idea of “poetry” contained in FW, the earlier of the essays which I am dealing with here. As we have seen, poetry is for Heaney in this essay “feeling into words . . . the revelation of the self to the self . . . the restoration of the culture to itself” (41), and he seems to be of the same opinion in 1990. In this recent review Heaney expresses “what has gone through the consciousness of the author of the poems” in such a way that, eventually, he practically repeats his previously formulated concept of poetry: “a rural Ulster childhood, a post-1947 Education Act . . . typical upwardly mobile transition from farmland to library-land, *a consequent effort to preserve the feel of things in their names . . . an exercise of memory in the attempt to ‘recover a past and prefigure a future’*” (7, my italics).

That is, in 1990 Heaney sticks to his Romantic idea of the poetic event (“feeling into words,” “the feel of things in their names”) as well as to his belief in the poet’s

self-revealing faculty and ability to pass on memory and culture to others. Some of Heaney's poetic output can be broadly, if superficially, explained in terms of these permanent poetic ideals. In the first place, out of his concept of poetry as a means of revealing the poet's individual nature (GT: 107), as "revelation of the self to the self" (FW: 41), arises the greater part of the themes of his poetry, including those topics concerning the author's processes of growing psychological maturity as an individual and as a poet embodied in his personal roots, i.e. those of family, home, and religion, and his experience in the rural sphere in close contact with nature. Both these topics crop up quite regularly in the different volumes which constitute Heaney's poetic corpus up to *The Haw Lantern* (1987), which has been considered "his most sophisticated quest for origins" (Robinson: 194).

Two other topics in this context give rise to the conflict between art and commitment with which, to a wide extent, Heaney's poetry is imbued: the poetic, i.e. his concern to find his own poetic voice, and the political, or his "public" voice. The poetic theme offers two possibilities in Heaney. Either it is dealt with as an expression of the conflict between art and commitment, as happens, occasionally, in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), in the second half of *North* (1975, "Exposure"), in *Sweeney Astray* (1984) and *Station Island* (1984) ("Station Island," "Sweeney Redivivus," "In the Beech," "An Artist"), as well as in the "parables" of *The Haw Lantern* ("From the Frontier of Writing," "Parable Island"); or the theme recurs as an issue in his poetic ideas (which I have broken down into the concepts of "poetry," "poet," and "creative process") as happens in the volumes *Death of a Naturalist* ("Digging," "Follower"), *Field Work* (1979) ("Glanmore Sonnets"), *Sweeney Astray* ("Sweeney in Connacht"), *Station Island*, and *The Haw Lantern* ("Alphabets," "The Haw Lantern," "Hailstones").

The political theme is also considered by Heaney from the point of view of the tension between art and commitment, with the poet oppressed by the idea of having neglected his aesthetic commitment in favour of the political, as well as by a certain feeling of isolation from his countrymen. These ideas recur, to some extent, in *Wintering Out* (1972) ("Bye-Child"), *North* ("Exposure"), *Field Work* ("Oysters," "Glanmore Sonnets"), and in *Station Island* (in the title-sequence, "Station Island"). Remembering the poet's self-revelation, we should also include in this first thematic group the occasional presence of the love-theme (the reciprocal kind), in *Death of a Naturalist* ("Honeymoon Flight") or in his famous "marriage sonnets" (nos. IV, VII, VIII, IX, and X of the "Glanmore Sonnets").

On the other hand, out of his view of poetry as a factor of cultural identity and continuity, past and future, ("restoration of the culture to itself" [FW: 41]; the "exercise of memory in the attempt to recover a past and pre-figure a future" [PBS Bulletin: 7]) arise other no less relevant topics in Heaney's poetic universe: a) the anthropological-cultural theme, often associated with processes of recuperation or transmission of the Irish national identity, and present in *Door into the Dark* ("Bogland"), *Wintering Out* ("Bog Oak," "Anahorish," "The Tollund Man"), *North* ("Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man"), *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island*; b) again, the political theme, no longer, as we have seen, as a determining element of the poet's inner conflict, but in its committed and public dimension, as the author's stance towards the harsh Ulster question evident, almost

monographically, in *North*, and, occasionally, in *Door into the Dark* (“Requiem for the Croppies”), *Wintering Out* (“Bye-Child”), in the almost activist elegies of *Field Work* (“The Toome Road,” “The Strand at Lough Beg,” “Casualty”), as well as in *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern* (“From the Canton of Expectation,” “The Mud Vision”).

My reflections throughout these pages allow me to remind the reader of Heaney’s position as a kind of bridge figure between what we might call traditional and breakaway trends in recent Irish poetry. The traditional trend in Heaney’s poetry is evident in the private, tribal, even rough element, the legacy of figures such as Joyce or Kavanagh, as well as in other aspects which reveal the apparently indelible spell of Yeats, such as the anthropological-cultural theme (bog-poems, poems of place, the Sweeney character), the romantic element present in Heaney’s treatment of Nature, the love-theme (which from alien traditions Heaney inherits also from Wordsworth and Frost), and his occasional need of aesthetic distancing, his use of a “persona” or poetic psyche, for instance in the sequence “Station Island.” A last traditional trait in Heaney’s poetry is his permanent awareness of being part of a kind of universal literary history, evident in his frequent allusion to other authors (English, Irish, European, and American) in his poems and essays.

The breakaway side in Heaney has a lot to do with a favourite idea of the modern-day Irish poet, radically expressed by Eavan Boland: “Let us be rid at last of any longing for cultural unity in a country whose most precious contribution may be precisely its *insight into the anguish of disunity*” (Vance 217, my italics). This “anguish of disunity,” the harsh awareness of being part of a divided social-cultural environment (Irish/British) represents Heaney’s inner conflict as a man of letters, manifest in his emphasis, both in his poetry and in his prose, on the art/commitment dilemma. Although we know that after his move to the Republic in 1972 (or after *Field Work*) Heaney inclines expressly towards his *aesthetic* commitment, we also know that he has not abandoned the political, which time and again comes to the surface in his “public” poetry and prose (“The Redress of Poetry”: 8, 10). The same conflict appears in his repeated dealing with the question of the poet’s social isolation (*Wintering Out*, “Bye-Child,” the figure of Sweeney).

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