Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Departures

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Lorsqu'il a quitté l'Ulster pour la République d'Irlande en 1972, Seamus Heaney s'est défini lui-même comme "inner émigré". Plus qu'un déplacement géographique, c'était franchir un pas décisif vers la condition de poète conçue comme exil intérieur. La poésie qu'il a écrite après *North* est énoncée par une autre voix, à elle-même exilée. Dans *The Government of the Tongue* une image du déracinement et de l'espace vide vient illustrer ce qu'il en est d'une langue poétique qui tient son autorité de se soustraire volontairement au champ des discours idéologiques. Révision bloomienne de la poésie impure chez MacNeice, la poétique de Heaney n'est ni propagande ni évasion. Pourtant cette *via media* est précisément ce que lui reprochent ses détracteurs, qui voient dans sa soumission aux exigences esthétiques de l'institution littéraire une limitation consentie de l'impact politique et social que pourrait avoir cette "poésie de départs".

A poet is never really here and now. Rimbaud is commonly referred to as "l'homme aux semelles de vent." And in the imagery of his 1995 conference in Caen, "la frontière de l'écriture," this hermetic image of the man with windy soles translates into a portrait of the poet as surf-rider, whose board is the figure of Sweeney, the bird-man.[1] In the vocabulary of Seamus Heaney's poems, that is also the "Walk on air" of *The Spirit Level* (p. 40) — a ping-pong joke with Paul Muldoon, in *The Prince of the Quotidian* (1994) — or "The space walk of Manhattan," in the poem "The Flight Path" (p. 23). These airy metaphors contribute to building the paradigm of a paradoxical form of exile, which I argue is essential to Seamus Heaney's poetic attitude. The two-word quotation "inner émigré" is very well-known, and has already been used in the title of an article by Edna Longley.[2] When she writes "*North*: 'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?," Edna Longley is implicitly colliding the two parts of *North*, and reversing their order and progression, by quoting first from "Punishment" (pp. 30–31), and then from "Exposure" (pp. 66–67). And what I wish to assert, is that this could participate to generating a slight misunderstanding in criticism, in so far as there is a characteristic movement in Seamus Heaney's poetic career, and it has been a movement *away from* the positions of the first part of *North* and before, which Edna Longley, among others, has understandably been attacking.

Away from *North*

North is a fundamental collection, for it is a hinge or a bridge between two distinct phases, or moments in the poetic œuvre. Its time of composition roughly corresponds to Seamus Heaney's decision to move away from the North, to live in the Republic, away from Belfast,

[1] "L'écriture réelle impliquait un saut rapide dans le courant de la possibilité ; comme si la figure de Sweeney était une sorte de planche de surf imaginaire sur laquelle vous vous hasardiez à chevaucher le courant de l'association aussi loin qu'il pouvait aller" (Seamus Heaney, Jacqueline Genet et Elisabeth Hellegouarc'h, éds., *Seamus Heaney et la création poétique* (Caen : Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1995), p. 27).

[2] Tony Curtis, *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Bridgend: Seren, 1982), pp. 65–95; Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986), pp. 140–69 and 253–254; Michael Allen *Seamus Heaney* (London: Macmillan), pp. 30–63.

to Co. Wicklow. “Exposure,” the “inner émigré” poem, is the last text of *North*, and it is also the sixth and last item of a sequence entitled “Singing School,” placed under the double aegis of Wordsworth and Yeats, propped on double Romantico-Modernist, Irelando-English crutches. And beyond its themes, this is reflexive poetry, poetry about what poetry is and should be. “As I sit weighing and weighing / My responsible *tristia*” — this is precisely the moment when Seamus Heaney turns to the example of Osip Mandelstam, one of the models that loom large in his literary landscape. From Moscow to Voronej, Mandelstam is a foreigner and an exile par excellence. So is yet another of Heaney’s great poetic fathers, Il Dante Alighieri. So is James Joyce, who, towards the end of *Station Island* brings the advice to “Keep at a tangent.” So is Gerard Manley Hopkins, the early-acknowledged influence[3] for whom Ireland was a land of exile, and who, in the sonnet “To seem a stranger,” said “I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third / Remove.” The place, the locus which the poet recognizes as his at the end of *North* is an empty place, an absence. That has been no news since Plato, though, the poet *qua* poet is an exile in his own country.

Briefly to come back to Edna Longley’s essay, it must be said for her that she has sensed the importance of the change which took place with *North*, even though she did not analyse it, but merely mentioned it by the way. She says “Heaney’s move South between *Wintering Out* and *North* must indeed have shifted the co-ordinates of his imagination: distanced some things, brought others closer.” That must be right. And the best proof of that is to be found in Heaney’s next volume of poetry, *Field Work*, which honestly gives the impression of having been written by an altogether different poet. In a 1979 interview with John Haffenden, Seamus Heaney himself has pointed out the self-containedness of a first phase of his poetry, declaring he was “certain that up to *North*, that’s one book; in a way it grows together and goes together.”[4] Now, when I first came to read this poetry in the 1980s, I admired the achievements of the first Heaney, like most people to this day, and with the superficiality of youth that some retain down to their old age, I was disappointed with the poems of *Field Work*, which I couldn’t help secretly considering as second-rate poetry, and merely a form of pastoral escapism, on a par with, say, Ted Hughes’s *Moortown Diary*. In fact, I remained blindfolded within a certain conditioned reader-response situation, which Helen Vendler has pinned down by saying that “Heaney is the sort of poet who, because he is so accomplished in each stage, is begrudged his new departures; we want more of what so pleased us earlier.”[5]

And it is not until later, when rereading *Field Work* as part of the whole work from *Death of a Naturalist* to *The Spirit Level*, that I realized something else was happening in these poems, which gave them primary significance. The feeling of disappointment spurted from their being a relaxing of the pressure, a letting out of steam from the strained mythologizings of the previous years. They are like the scales practice and exercises of a musician learning to play a new instrument. The poet had sloughed off the already used-up skin of what had hitherto been his style and his signature, and he was learning to sing with a new voice. Retrospectively, the second part of *North* can be heard as sung with a breaking voice. But what is characteristic of the new voice is something that Seamus Deane had sensed early, although without developing it. He said “the monologue of the self becomes a dialogue with others. The poems become filled with voices, questions, answers, guesses.”[6] In Bakhtinian terms, his voice was

[3] “One of the writers who influenced me in this way was Gerard Manley Hopkins. The result of reading Hopkins at school was the desire to write, and when I first put pen to paper at university, what flowed out was what had flowed in, the bumpy alliterating music, the reporting sounds and ricochetting consonants typical of Hopkins’s verse” (S. Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 44).

[4] John Haffenden, Interview with Seamus Heaney, “Meeting Seamus Heaney,” *London Magazine*, 19 (June 1979), pp. 5–28, pp. 15–16.

[5] Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens; Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 152.

[6] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals; Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880–1980* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 183.

dialogised, as his poetry was undergoing a form of novelisation. What has been happening in *Field Work* (1979) becomes clearer in the light of the two volumes which followed in the steps of these poems, for *Sweeney Astray* (1983) is a form of translation, and *Station Island* (1984) is an instance of polyglossia. According to Michael Parker (Liverpool IHE), this transition period of the late 1970s and early 1980s corresponds to an increased interest in translation — "Heaney's first task in his new home was to embark on his translation of *Buile Suibhne*, a major work from the canon of medieval Irish literature."[7]

So the repositioning of Seamus Heaney as a poet amounted to an inner exile in geographical terms, as he departed from Ulster, but was also a movement away from his previous style of writing, and went as far as to be a departure from his own voice, since the practice of translation would lead to an intimate exile from the poet's own authorial voice, to become, in the words of Yeats, "somebody who is spoken through."[8]

Uprootedness

That transformation of the idea of poetry, that redefinition of poetry as a departure, and of the locus of the poet's voice as an absence, was going to be theorized and conceptualized a few years later in *The Government of the Tongue* (1988). This was materialized in the form of an image, a little autobiographical myth which came to invade the theory, at the beginning of the book. Seamus Heaney said he had come to "identify [his] own life with the life of the chestnut tree" which "had been planted the year [he] was born," "in 1939, the year Patrick Kavanagh arrived in Dublin." After the Heaneys had moved away from the farm, that tree had happened to be felled by its following owners. Then, Seamus Heaney said, his old identification to this tree underwent a transformation, and shifted to an identification with the empty space where the tree had been:

> Then, all of a sudden, a couple of years ago, I began to think of the space where the tree had been or would have been. In my mind's eye I saw it as a kind of luminous emptiness, a warp and waver of light, and once again, in a way that I find hard to define, I began to identify with that space just as years before I had identified with the young tree. Except that this time it was not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife. The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place.[9]

I find it remarkable that, in his second book of theory, which was to the second period of his poetic career what *Preoccupations* had been to the first, Seamus Heaney should have acknowledged a displacement in his own idea of himself as a man and a poet, which is really a translation from presence to absence, from plenitude to emptiness, and from geographical rootedness to dis-located uprootedness. This can be seen as a blatant figure of "inner emigration." At roughly the same time, the same image was reused in *The Haw Lantern*, for "Clearances" (pp. 24–32), this impressive elegy in memoriam Mary Kathleen Heaney, where the "placeless heaven" of decentring is mimetically spirited away into the blank of the page between sections 7 and 8:

> The space we stood around had been emptied
> Into us to keep, it penetrated
> Clearances that suddenly stood open.
> High cries were felled and a pure change happened
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[7] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney; the Making of a Poet* (Londres: Macmillan, 1993), p. 120.
[8] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 149.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Were the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above wallflowers.
[…]

It is remarkable, too, that "Clearances" is the poem in which the notion of "the goverment of the tongue" appears — "So I governed my tongue / In front of her" (p. 28). Seamus Heaney's thesis is that the tongue gains poetic authority, or government, precisely through being governed. Heaney's poetic tongue holds its power from its being kept under check. This lends retrospective depth to the motto, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing" (*North*, pp. 51–54). It is something which he overtly derives from "Hopkins's 'Habit of Perfection,' with its command to the eyes to be 'shelled,' the ears to attend to silence and the tongue to know its place,"[10] with this particularity that Heaney's poetic tongue is placeless, in exile. To put things squarely, let us come back to "Exposure" — to know its place, for Heaney's tongue, is to be "neither internee nor informer," to place itself nowhere in the ideological field of force. It is a decision not to be "a well-known papist propagandist," as the Paisleyite *Protestant Telegraph* wrote, to welcome his departure in 1972. The government of the tongue is a voluntary exile from discourse.

Now, this is a point where it would be very easy to misconstrue and misunderstand Heaney's poetic agenda as just another form of escapist aestheticism. For, if poetry locates itself outside the province of ideological discourse, it runs the risk of being merely a dandy's pursuit of the well-made poem as *poésie pure*, or yet another opium of the people. Now, if this is what Seamus Heaney's poetry boils down to, it is, I think, against his better judgement. For what he has called the "Redress of Poetry" is precisely a definition of poetry as "being instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world, poetry as an intended intervention into the goings-on of society."[11] In defining this position of his, Seamus Heaney turns to W. H. Auden, another exile, for whom poetry was not "a matter of proffered argument and edifying content, but [as] a matter of angelic potential, a motion of the soul." Yet even more than Auden, the tutelary figure behind this is that of another Irishman, Louis MacNeice, whose "Carrickfergus Castle" holds a place of eminence in Heaney's sketching of the Irish tradition in terms of five towers [12] — (1) "prior Irelandness," (2) "Anglicization," (3) W. B. Yeats, (4) James Joyce and (5) Louis MacNeice — or M.A.Y.J.I. (MacNeice, Anglicization, Yeats, Joyce, Irelandness). (The star is Seamus Heaney himself). And the insistance on MacNeice and his poetic heritage makes for a hope that poetry can play an influential part in the ideological debate, by speaking from outside the arena of political contention. "It may be that there is not yet a political structure to reflect this poetic diagram, but the admission of MacNeice in this way within the symbolic ordering of Ireland also admits a hope for the evolution of a political order."[13]

That is why I suggest that Seamus Heaney's poetics, in this respect, is partly a Bloomian revision of what for Louis MacNeice was "impure poetry, that is, [for] poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him," which "should steer a middle course between pure entertainment ('escape poetry') and propaganda."[14] And what I have described as Heaney's poetry of departures is closely related to and can be seen as a literary offspring of, an ideal of poetry which MacNeice called "poésie de départs," and which he explained in a poem entitled "Letter to Graham and Anna," written from Reykjavik, on August 16th, 1936:

And there are some who scorn this poésie de départs
And say "Escape by staying where you are;
A man is what he thinks he is and can

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[11] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1995), pp. 192–193.
[12] *Ibid.* pp. 199–200.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Louis MacNeice, *Modern poetry, A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), "Preface".

Find happiness within." How nice to be born a man.
The tourist in space and time, emotion or sensation,
Meets many guides but none have the proper orientation.
We are not changing ground to escape from facts
But rather to find them. This complex world exacts
Hard work of simplifying; to get its focus
You have to stand outside the crowd and causus.[15]

Metaphorical foreclosure

Yet this very middle-of-the-road position is also what those who are most critical of his poetry reproach him with. For, to begin with, it can be argued that this is no longer a very contemporary debate, and that what used to be some breakthrough for the poets of the thirties is perhaps not so progressive any more today. Yet, more seriously, some critics do adopt a position which consists in doing to Heaney's theoretical poetics what Marx did to Hegel's dialectics, by saying, as it were, that this poetry of departures fails to be a poetry of arrivals. In other words, still, it is possible to argue that the aesthetical requirements of this poetry neutralize its societal and political impact. This is what David Lloyd, of the University of Berkeley, calls the "metaphorical foreclosure of issues,"[16] by which the questions raised by the poems, their ideological subject-matters, are always brought forward together with their metaphorical treatments, so that issues are raised, but very quickly departed from, into the fabrication of dazzling metaphorical representations. And thus, Lloyd sees this poetic undertaking as essentially consisting in setting cautious limits round potentially disruptive issues. In a word, this amounts to blaming the poetry of Seamus Heaney for its cathartic quality.

Roughly the same citicism is waged by Richard Kirkland, of the University of Keele, who states that, "unwilling or unable to reconcile liberal individuation to social assimilation, much of Heaney's poetry can only find resolution of the contradiction within the notional closure offered by the well-made poem."[17] And this is, I think, an opinion which sometimes crops up within the text of Seamus Heaney's poems themselves, as for instance in "Sandstone Keepsake," where the poet portays himself as walking on the strand in Inishowen, looking across the estuary of the Foyle at the lights of the camp on Magilligan Point. He picks up a dantesque blood-red stone and says:

Anyhow, there I was with the wet red stone
in my hand, staring across at the watch-towers
from my free state of images and allusion,
swooped on, then dropped by trained binoculars:
a silhouette not worth bothering about,
out for the evening in scarf and waders
and not about to set times wrong or right,
stooping along, one of the venerators.[18]

Yes, poetry makes nothing happen, as Auden said. But this last word, "venerator," is an inkling that, sometimes, poetry may contribute to consolidating a status quo which it could just as well stand up against. And Kirkland rereads the poem "From the Frontier of Writing," which the word "From" singles out as the exemplum of the poetry of departures. But he rereads it in reverse, underlining the words "arraigned yet freed," as indicative of a consciousness that poetic freedom is bought with absolute implication in "the literary critical institution." In short, it may well be that the less-deceived among Seamus Heaney's readers reproach him with not departing enough from the mainstream British literary tradition.

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[15] L. MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1987 (1st ed. 1966)), p. 62.
[16] David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: 1993), pp. 13–40.
[17] Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1968: Moments of Danger* (London: 1996), pp. 149–160.
[18] Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 20.

I wish to have shown how Seamus Heaney's moving away from Belfast in 1972 initiated the practice, and the theory, of a poetry of departures, which, at the end of *North*, the phrase "inner émigré" acknowledged as a form of inner exile. This position of the inside outsider enables him to speak in a manner that he would not be allowed to, if he spoke from anywhere else. In that sense, the poet may romantically take the prophetic role of an initiator of new ideas and attitudes for the future, like a Paraclete, a notion which G. M. Hopkins explained in his sermons thanks to a playful football game metaphor. Father Hopkins said that the Paraclete is like the man who, in a football match, stands outside the field, and does not play the game, but encourages the players by shouting "Come on, Come on!"[19] Yet there is this difference, that Heaney is trying to redress the rules. So I intend to join the camp neither of the hagiographers nor of the detractors, by arguing that Seamus Heaney's *de facto* definition of the poet makes him neither an ideologist nor an escapist. Aesthetically, I take him to be neither a benighted Romantic, nor a no less belated Modernist. In a poem entitled "The School Bag,"[20] there is a quotation from Dante's *Inferno* — "Poet, you were *nel mezzo del cammin*" — which is translated and revised into "And in the middle of the road to school." This exemplifies how Seamus Heaney's "poésie de départs" is a "middle voice," and a poetical "third way."

[19] G. M. Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Christopher Delvin (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 70.
[20] Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 30.