

# THE RECORDER

Edited by Christopher Cahill

# District *and* Circle

Seamus Heaney

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

## Book Reviews

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*District and Circle: Poems.* Seamus Heaney. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. \$20.00. 78 pages

IN HIS 1995 NOBEL PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH "Crediting Poetry," Seamus Heaney reaches for a striking analogy to recount his acute sense of the physical and familial world which surrounded him growing up on a farm in rural Northern Ireland in the 1940's. He says, "we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water which stood in a bucket in our scullery every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of the water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence." The ripples provide a deft fusion of the pastoral and industrial force fields at play in that Northern Irish landscape, an agrarian world Heaney speaks of as being "A-historical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern." But, as the image also implies, the ripples from that innocent world of childhood would expand outward and onward not only into the adult world of sexuality but also into the violent world of Irish history and politics. In the speech the image finally provides Heaney with a metaphor for "crediting poetry," an acknowledgment of the moral and intellectual coherence which poetry can bestow upon an individual life: "poetry," he says, "can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago."<sup>1</sup> This image of ripples across the surface of water (which first appears in sonnet IV of his Glanmore sequence in *Field Work* (1979)) is one that Heaney returns to in a recent interview. In explaining his ongoing attraction to the central experience of his childhood on a farm in Derry, Heaney says, "As you grow, the ripples widen and widen out from that center . . . but the center remains the pulse of the thing. You get chronologically older, but you don't get any farther away from that first place. So you're kind of accordioning in and out of firstness and recentness."<sup>2</sup> With the publication of *District and Circle*, Heaney's twelfth volume of poems, together with the republication of his first, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), one can follow those ripples outward

from the Mossbawn and Bellaghy districts of Co. Derry now to encompass the twin towers of Lower Manhattan and the London Underground Tube. The political violence of Ireland that Heaney had addressed so powerfully if obliquely in *North* (1975) returns here as much a global as a national concern, with the terrorism of 9/11 in America and July 7 in England compelling Heaney to search his origins, both literary and biographical, for steadying images in the midst of what he has called our “new age of anxiety.”

As in his earlier work, Heaney again returns to the Derry farm to find in the agrarian folk-ways exemplary art forms for what he is about, and his short take on the traditional craft of hayroping, in terms of dexterity and verbal agility, is vintage Heaney. Here’s “Súgán”:

The fluster of that soft supply and feed –  
Hay being coaxed in handfuls from a ruck,  
Paid out to be taken in by furl and swivel,  
Turned and tightened, rickety-rick, to rope –

Though just as often at the other end  
I’d manipulate the hook,  
Walking backwards, winding for all I was worth  
By snag and by sag, the long and the short of it  
To make ends mesh –  
In my left hand  
The cored and threaded elderberry haft,  
In my right the fashioned wire,  
breeze on my back,  
Sun in my face, a power to bind and to loose  
Eked out and into each last tug and lap.

The traditional Irish farm chore of making rope from hay or straw, at least if one is using a thrashhook, is a two-person job, though Heaney imagines himself here at both ends of the metaphor, so to speak. And while the poem itself seems as straightforward as a user’s manual, one can only admire the unobtrusiveness of the pararhymes (“ruck”/“rope”; “hand”/“haft”), while the pairing of the hay strands is deftly echoed in the endlessly inventive verbal pairings which tug and lap the poem (“breeze on

my back”/“sun in my face”; “to bind”/“to loose”; “out”/“into”; and “tug”/“lap” in just the last three lines). On a purely aesthetic level, one may recall the verbal tapestry of Yeats’s “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,” but, in terms of the antithetical forces Heaney is out to bind and to loose in this volume, the poem may be seen as something of a methodological touchstone. As in his earlier volumes, these forces include the pastoral and the industrial, the archaic and the modern, and the individual and the community. In this volume, however, individual poems send out sound waves and images which find resonance in others, suggesting larger architectural patterns for the book as a whole.

Take, for example, the poem, “Midnight Anvil,” which Heaney said at one point he thought of using as the title poem for the collection. The poem begins with a recollection of Barney Devlin, the local blacksmith, striking his anvil twelve times at midnight to ring in not just the new year but also the new millennium. Some thirty-five years earlier, Devlin had been the blacksmith model for “The Forge,” which contained the title phrase for Heaney’s 1969 *Door into the Dark*, but, in a deft doubling of the archaic and the contemporary, Devlin digitally shares the celebration with his nephew in Canada, “The cellular phone / Held high as a horse’s ear, / Barney smiling to himself.” Imagining that Barney might ask him for a poem for the occasion, the speaker first recalls a line from George Herbert’s “Prayer” (“*Church bells beyond the starres heard*”), then presents a quilt of quotes (in both middle and modern English) from the anonymous medieval poem, “The Smithes,” and finishes with an extended allusion to the 18th century Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin’s poetic request to the blacksmith Seamus MacGearailt to make him a handle for his shovel, a poem which Heaney, on the page preceding “Midnight Anvil,” translates from the Irish. One can think of a variety of counterbalances here – the anvil and the cellphone, the poet-to-blacksmith request from the earlier age as response to the blacksmith-to-poet request in the present, the spectrum of vernaculars translated across space and time. But in the midst of these affirmations, there remain some nuances of apprehension. Hammering on an anvil at midnight might be as much a signal for alarm as for celebration, and, curiously enough, Heaney’s version of the Irish poem (“make me a side-arm”) makes it sound more like a request for a weapon than a farm implement.

Of course, the contemporary world that Heaney confronts in this vol-

ume changed, perhaps changed utterly, in the first year of the new millennium, and many of the poems here record, albeit subtly, the aftershock and afterthought of the terrorism enacted first in New York, and then more recently in London. Heaney's free translation of Horace's ode (Book I. 34) makes the most specific reference to 9/11, "Anything can happen, the tallest towers / Be overturned, those in high places daunted, / Those overlooked regarded." "Anything Can Happen," originally published in the *Irish Times* two months after 9/11, was republished in 2004 by Amnesty International, with an essay and 23 translations paired into languages of conflict. As he says in the accompanying essay, "It is about *terra tremens*, the opposite of *terra firma*. About the tremor that runs down to the earth's foundation when thunder is heard and about the tremor of fear that shakes the very being of the individual who hears it."<sup>3</sup> As might be expected from a poet who has navigated thirty-five years of Irish sectarian violence, Heaney not only records the shock of those in high places, but also includes "those overlooked." In this volume, however, Heaney, as he made clear in a *Times* article last March, intends the poem to provide an antithetical note to the more affirmative "Midnight Anvil": "The blow struck on the anvil and the strike against the twin towers are the tuning forks for poems that appear in the early pages of the book that I would eventually call *District and Circle*."<sup>4</sup>

In this context, poems which, taken in isolation, might appear paeans to a Virgilian ethos of agrarian work take on a much more ominous and cautionary note. Here, for example, is the sonnet, "A Shiver," the second poem in the book:

The way you had to stand to swing the sledge,  
 Your two knees locked, your lower back shock-fast  
 As shields in a *testudo*, spine and waist  
 A pivot for the tight-braced, tilting rib-cage;  
 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: does it do you good  
 To have known it in your bones, directable,  
 Withholdable at will,

A first blow that could make air of a wall,  
 A last one so unavoidably landed  
 The staked earth quailed and shivered in the handle?

On the one hand, the poem is a verbal tour de force, enacting the sheer tactility of the heft and swing of the heavy metal sledge. On the other hand, it helps to know that a *testudo* was a Roman military formation, formed by overlapping shields held overhead by soldiers as they advance toward a position. The swing of the sledge suddenly takes on the aura of a massive imperial retaliation, and the question which ends this single-sentence sonnet ("does it do you good") seems directed, as it still is, at those who rained "shock and awe" down on Baghdad in ruthless and misguided retribution for the terror which struck lower Manhattan. The dismal fact that such pervasive and ongoing violence was indeed "directable, / Withholdable at will" transforms the description of manual labor into a dark, and still applicable, political parable. To make the staked earth quail and shiver in an unbridled exercise of imperial power sends its own countervailing shiver, this time a moral one, back up to the hand that holds the destructive tool.

The military metaphors, as it happens, cut in more than one way in these poems. "Helmet," Heaney's meditation on a fire helmet given to him some twenty years earlier, also turns on an image of a collective shield, this time drawn from Anglo-Saxon rather than Roman lore. Only now, the collective wall is that of the firefighters collectively pitting themselves against the destruction of a collapsing building:

As if I were up to it, as if I had  
 Served time under it, his fire-thane's shield,  
 His shoulder-awning, while shattering glass

And rubble-bolts out of a burning roof  
 Hailed down on every hatchet man and hose man there  
 Till the hard-reared shield-wall broke.

In questioning his own adequacy to have received such a gift in the wake of 9/11, Heaney provides an unironic, dry-eyed, and fittingly public elegy for the 343 firefighters who died at the World Trade Center.



In this volume and in this age, even farm implements take on the burden of protection of the hearth. "The Turnip-Snedder," the volume's first poem and one keyed to a photograph reproduced on the book jacket, sets the tone for the book which follows. The image – that of a young man from early 20th century Ireland standing next to his machine for crushing root crops in his Sunday best clothes – was discovered by the Irish painter Hughie O'Donoghue at a car boot sale outside of Kilkenny, and became the stimulus for *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, a series of paintings. Heaney, who dedicates the poem to O'Donoghue, turns his attention from the young man to some deeper agrarian ethos embodied in the turnip-snedder itself:

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.

"This is the way that God sees life,"  
it said, "from seedling-braird to snedder,"

as the handle turned  
and turnip-heads were let fall and fed

to the juiced-up inner blades,  
"This is the turnip-cycle,"

as it dropped its raw sliced mess,  
bucketful by glistening bucketful.

As with a number of the poems in this volume, the description of the farm implement with its "body armour," "breast-plate," and "four braced greaves" seems as much concerned with military defense ("standing guard") as provision of nutritional sustenance. In more wide-ranging terms, it's also tempting to draw a parallel with this initial poem and "Digging," which famously opened Heaney's first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, forty years earlier. In the midst of an interview about the republication of *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney illustrated the way he is drawn to the deep memories of his Co. Derry childhood by referring to his more recent visceral reaction to the turnip-snedder photograph: "I could feel the cold of the handle in my hand and listen to the scobing [gnawing] of the turnip in the blades inside." (This, by the way, is exactly the language Heaney uses in "Punishment" [ "I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape/ of her neck. . . . I can see her drowned / body in the bog"], an earlier poem from *North* (1975) responding in sensory identification to photographs of Iron Age sacrificial victims in P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*.) Both "Digging" and "The Turnip-Snedder" firmly ground the volume which follows in an embrace of agrarian values, one which pulses outward to embrace the community in Co. Derry in the first, and which shimmers more globally afield here. That said, there are limits to such parallels. In "Digging," the speaker is at pains to link his activity with the pen to the digging of his father and grandfather and the community at large. In contrast, this poem is starkly impersonal, with the shift from the anthropomorphic description of the machine to a Hardy-esque divine perspective neatly eliding the human community in between. As Heaney also says in the interview, "It's not just the old things; it's the new awareness that one surrounds them with that's important."<sup>5</sup>

If the initial poems in this volume address the apprehension that permeates the post 9/11 world, the latter half of the book counterbalances that anxiety with steadying poems much closer to home. Acting as a transition between these poles of unease and affirmation are two extended poetic sequences, one recording a descent into a site of the unleashed violence, the other an ascent back into the contemporary world. "District and Circle," the five-part poem which gives the volume its title, refers of

course to two of the Tube lines of the London Underground, and, as such, has prompted most readers to see, especially in the closing lines, specific allusion to the July 7 bombings. As it happens, Heaney has noted that the poem originated in memories he had of underground travel during a summer of vacation work in London, commuting morning and evening between Earls Court and St James's Park. He named the poem for the green and yellow lines which serve those stations, even as he expanded his original meditation in the wake of the bombings. Given the interwoven and intertextual nature of the volume as a whole, the title signaled, as Heaney says, "an inclination to favour a chosen region and keep coming back to it."<sup>6</sup>

The poem opens with the speaker entering the Underground with a nod to the street musician who has set up shop with his cap and tin whistle at the gate to the station, an acknowledgment that serves as the price, or test, of admission. One thinks of the many checkpoints and self-testings that Heaney has generated in his earlier poems, as he unsparingly interrogates the role and responsibility of the poet in a world of civil strife. In this sequence, the speaker moves from his own individual adequacy ("Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?") to a sense of "the safety of numbers" being "half strung / Like a human chain." The descent into the Underground quickly takes on the weight and moral reckoning of a descent into the Underworld, with the speaker being reminded, as he recognizes his "father's glazed face in my own waning / And craning," of the common vulnerability and common destination of humanity:

And so by night and day to be transported  
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict  
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,  
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed  
By blasted weeping rock-walls.  
Flicker-lit.

While the "blasted weeping rock-walls" seem a clear allusion to the July 7 bombings, the concluding note of anxiety and self-deflation, presumably in anticipation of an expected judgment, has as much spiritual as political implication.

In contrast to this sequence, "The Tollund Man in Springtime" is very

much one of energy, renewal, and affirmation. As this title suggests, Heaney is coming back to a favored region and subject he has addressed in earlier poems. "The Tollund Man," published in *Wintering Out* (1972), was the first of the poems reacting to P. V. Glob's photographs in *The Bog People*, drawing parallels between the religious motives for human sacrifice in the Iron Age and the political motives for sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. His sense of deep identification with the sacrificial subject stemmed from what seemed a familial kinship. As Heaney said in an interview, the victim "seemed like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside."<sup>8</sup> Heaney returns to the subject in "Tollund," a poem he dates September 1994, that is, at the time of the ceasefire in Northern Ireland. The despair and disorientation which closed the first poem ("I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home") are replaced by hope and the possibility that one could "make a new beginning / And make a go of it, alive and sinning, / Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad." In this six-sonnet sequence, the Tollund Man himself is given voice, and he speaks as an Iron Age revenant brought back by some "sixth-sense threat" to the contemporary world. This revenant, unlike the ones encountered by Heaney in *Station Island* (1984) who questioned the poet's vocation, provides inspiration and affirmation. As he says, "In the end I gathered / From the display-case peat my staying powers," and articulates a song of springtime renewal in the face of contemporary anxiety: "Late as it was, / The early bird still sang, the meadow hay / Still buttercupped and daisied, sky was new." Heaney himself suggests that circling back to this earlier icon has released a new sense of creativity in dealing with contemporary issues: "The convention is to call such a figure a 'persona' but in this case he felt more like a transfusion, and I found myself writing poems about glacier melt, and river flow, crab apples, and fiddle-head ferns."<sup>9</sup>

Despite this encouragement, or direction, on Heaney's part, a more compelling tipping poem in this structurally symmetrical volume is the elegy for Czeslaw Milosz which occurs midway between the two poetic sequences. As with Heaney's last book, *Electric Light* (2001), this volume contains numerous elegies dedicated to and about Heaney's poetic exemplars: Ted Hughes, W. H. Auden, Wordsworth (both William and Dorothy), George Seferis, Edward Thomas, Pablo Neruda, C. P. Cavafy, in

addition to two versions of Rilke's poems. Even in the congested midst of such distinction, Milosz stands out as a central shaping force in the latter part of Heaney's poetic career. In a 1990 lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Heaney set the later poetry of Philip Larkin against that of W. B. Yeats and, in a move unusual for Heaney, enlisted the assistance of Milosz (in the form of Milosz's extended commentary on Larkin's "Aubade") to come down squarely on the side of Yeats. Considering the admiration Heaney had expressed in earlier essays for Larkin's poetry, this deference to the Polish poet seems to mark something of a tidal shift in Heaney's own spectrum of poetic values.<sup>10</sup> More recently, in an introduction to the selection of Milosz's poems gathered after his death, Heaney sees Milosz as the champion of human value in the face of modern secular and political nihilism: "he developed a fierce conviction about the holy force of his art, how poetry was called upon to combat death and nothingness, to be 'A tireless messenger who runs and runs / Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies, / And calls out, protests, screams' ('Meaning'). With Milosz gone, the world has lost a credible witness to this immemorial belief in the saving power of poetry."<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, "Out of This World," the three-poem sequence dedicated to Milosz, provides an illuminating entry into Heaney's own conflicted conflation of poetry and religious belief. The first poem of the sequence, "Like everybody else . . ." is entirely within quotation marks, suggesting, on the one hand, it is in the voice of Milosz. On the other, this speaker assumes, as the title indicates, that his experience as a devoutly religious child was widely shared within the Catholic community. Despite the acknowledgment of an oblique loss of faith ("There was never a scene / when I had it out with myself or another. / The loss occurred off stage"), this speaker feels unable to "disavow words like 'thanksgiving' or 'host' or 'communion bread.'" The second poem, "Brancardier," is much more autobiographical, with Heaney recollecting a pilgrimage he made to Lourdes as an adolescent, with his special designation as a brancardier, or stretcher-bearer, whose duties were to "lift and lay / The sick on stretchers in precincts of the shrine."<sup>12</sup> The speaker's attitude in this poem, however, seems to shift in the retelling of the pilgrimage. What begins as a casual self-address ("You're off, a pilgrim, in the age of steam") in which the wide-eyed and teetotaling speaker earnestly practices his French on a Parisian waiter ("*Non, pas de vin, merci.*

*Mais oui, du thé*") takes on a different note by poem's end. The speaker, who now directly recalls the experience in the first-person, lists the things he carried home: a plastic canteen on a shoulder strap, holding a liter of holy water, a glass snow-flake dome enclosing statues of Bernadette and the Virgin, and a certificate for his stretcher-bearing work. But when he parenthetically describes the canteen as "*très chic*," the French now resonates with a distancing irony, placing this speaker at a somewhat further remove from the beliefs recorded by the much younger speaker of the first poem.

The culminating poem, "Saw Music," sees the reappearance of a street musician in the midst of a meditation on the brushwork of the Irish painter Barrie Cooke. The epigraph, moreover, "Q. *Do you renounce the world? / A. I do renounce it*," lets us know exactly how high the stakes are in this poem. This catechistic exchange is one of the ritual requirements of the pilgrims who make the penitential journey to St. Patrick's Purgatory, one which Heaney the pilgrim found himself unable to complete in his imagined reenactment of the pilgrimage in *Station Island* (1984). In an attempt to clarify imagistically what Cooke has called "godbeams" in the scrim and scumble of his brushwork, the speaker, indistinguishable from Heaney himself, recalls the music made by a Belfast street musician drawing a bow across an oiled saw one wet Christmastime night. The difference between the high art of oil painting and the low vernacular of the saw music, with its "Flop-wobble grace note or high banshee whine," is erased with a quotation from and a closing meditation on Milosz:

"The art of oil painting –  
Daubs fixed on canvas – is a paltry thing  
Compared with what cries out to be expressed,"

The poet said, who lies this god-beamed day  
Coffined in Kraków, as out of this world now  
As the untranscendent music of the saw  
He might have heard in Vilnius or Warsaw

And would not have renounced, however paltry.

The Polish poet, like the Irish one, refuses to renounce the things of this world, not out of a *non serviam* arrogance, but out of humility. This

refusal, as the language indicates, is paradoxical: to be “out of this world,” which from one perspective is a definition of the transcendental, is equated with the “untranscendental music” of the street musician. To affirm the value of the paltry, one must reject the eschatological version of Catholicism within which Heaney and presumably Milosz were raised. From another perspective, though, the phrase could mean something simply aesthetically pleasing (without any religious implication) or even something now absent or extinct. As with earlier volume titles, such as *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney prefers to graft rather than distinguish the secular and the spiritual. That said, the final line of the poem firmly invokes the imprimatur of the Polish poet to trump the authority of the ecclesiastical epigraph.

This confirmation and this permission seem to be at the core of the many poetic affirmations made in the latter part of the volume. Some like “Planting the Alder” (another title Heaney considered for the volume as a whole) are both pastoral and universal; others like “To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff” specifically evoke childhood memories, with a jar of crab apple jelly acting as a Proustian madeleine for the speaker to gain entry into the district of rejuvenation: “I was back in an old / rutted cart road, making / the rounds of the district.” But, as has been the case with Heaney from the outset of his career, the poems that touch on family call forth the clearest and deepest emotions. An unembarrassed recounting of long sexual love (“Tate’s Avenue”) is placed next to a brief cry of love’s vulnerability triggered by the sound of splitting firewood (“A Haggling Match”). The simple virtue of an epileptic brother stoically keeping to his chores on the farm (“Quitting Time”) balances another family task, that of carrying the homebound and chairbound aunt up to her room each night (“Chairing Mary”). Even more, the elegy (“The Lift”) for that same Aunt Mary – to whom “Sunlight,” the opening poem of *North*, was dedicated thirty-one years earlier – will surely take its place in contemporary Irish letters next to John Montague’s dry-eyed and heartrending poems on his Aunt Brigid. But the capstone of the volume is the one that appropriately concludes it, and the one Heaney has identified as his favorite of the book. Here’s “The Blackbird of Glanmore”:

On the grass when I arrive,  
Filling the stillness with life,

But ready to scare off  
At the very first wrong move.  
In the ivy when I leave.

It’s you, blackbird, I love.

I park, pause, take heed.  
Breathe. Just breathe and sit  
And lines I once translated  
Come back: “I want away  
To the house of death, to my father

Under the low clay roof.”

And I think of one gone to him,  
A little stillness dancer –  
Haunter-son, lost brother –  
Cavorting through the yard,  
So glad to see me home,

My homesick first term over.

And think of a neighbor’s words  
Long after the accident:  
“Yon bird on the shed roof,  
Up on the ridge for weeks –  
I said nothing at the time

But I never liked yon bird.”

The automatic lock  
Clunks shut, the blackbird’s panic  
Is shortlived, for a second  
I’ve a bird’s eye view of myself,  
A shadow on raked gravel

In front of my house of life.

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.

There are many ways in which the poem, which is ultimately a self-elegy, circles back on Heaney's life and career. The death and wake of his four-year-old brother Christopher in a car accident is the subject of "Mid-Term Break," one of the first poems Heaney had accepted for publication, which Heaney remembers as a confirming experience in his poetic novitiate.<sup>13</sup> Here, rather than memorializing his little brother in the coffin ("A four-foot box, a foot for every year"), the speaker remembers a more gleeful moment, as the "stillness dancer" cavorts through the yard in joy to welcome his big brother back from boarding school.

The blackbird, too, has its own specific history in the Heaney canon. "St. Kevin and the Blackbird," included in *The Spirit Level* (1996), presents a rich re-imagining of the legend of the Irish saint of Glendalough. In Heaney's version, St. Kevin is in his narrow monastic cell with one of his arms stretched out the window when a blackbird, mistaking his arm for the branch of a tree, lays a clutch of eggs in his upturned palm and nests on his hand. For Heaney, Kevin's willingness to remain in this arms-outstretched posture of prayer to assure that the eggs will safely hatch and fledge is exemplary, not only in terms of a stoic affirmation of the natural processes of life, but also as a model for the poetic vocation. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Heaney first sums up the regimen that led him to the award: "for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience of his rule to repeat the effort and the posture." He then characterizes "St. Kevin and the Blackbird" as "a story about another monk holding himself up valiantly in the posture of endurance," one which manifests an order of poetry "where we can at last grow up to that which we have stored up as we grew."<sup>14</sup> In the broader sweep of Irish poetry, the image of the blackbird appears as early as the

ninth century in the margin of an ecclesiastical text thought to have been written by a scribe in the monastery of Bangor. This short poem, known as "The Blackbird of Belfast Lough," has been translated by an array of modern Irish poets, including Heaney himself. More to the point, the image of the blackbird is now the logo of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry which was established at Queens University Belfast in 2003.<sup>15</sup>

The site of this poem has also been intimately and continuously linked to Heaney's formation and sustenance as a poet. In 1972, in what turned out to be one of the most significant relocations in his life, Heaney moved his family from strife-torn Belfast to Glanmore, a cottage on the Synge estate in Co. Wicklow. Resigning his lectureship at Queens University Belfast for the more risky self-sufficiency of a freelance writer, Heaney wrote the poems to be included in *North* (1975), the volume which catapulted him to international recognition. In 1987, he bought the cottage from Ann Saddlemyer, from whom he had originally rented it and to whom *District and Circle* is dedicated, and since then the cottage has become something of a creative retreat, the place – or more appropriately, the district – of writing for Heaney. The sequence, "Glanmore Sonnets," anchors *Field Work* (1979) and marks a decided shift in Heaney's work from the grim, deterministic poems of *North* (1975) to poems affirming his social relations as husband, son, and friend. The initial circling back to this district occurs in "Glanmore Revisited," in *Seeing Things* (1991). In the seven-sonnet sequence, Heaney records the shift in his own thinking that occurs as he and his wife become "Tenants no longer, but in full possession / Of an emptied house and whatever keeps between us." More intimately, as he reads Homer's rendition of Odysseus and Penelope at last awakening in the same bed, this speaker imagines the deep, connubial privacy of his and his wife's married life: "One bedpost of the bed / Is the living trunk of an old olive tree / And is their secret. / As ours could have been ivy, / Evergreen, atremble, and unsaid."

There is an intertwining of the blackbird which, so many years ago, augured the death of the little brother and the one which now prompts in the speaker an anticipatory overview of his life ("I've a bird's eye view of myself, / A shadow on raked gravel // In front of my house of life."). The final salutation, both playful and "absolute," to this simultaneously exalted and humbling muse, brings the poem and the poet full circle. In terms of the volume as a whole, Heaney ends on a note of lyric self-

exploration and self-affirmation, much as he ended his first volume with "Personal Helicon" forty years earlier ("I rhyme / to see myself, to set the darkness echoing."). But this time there is a lifetime of effort and achievement to be implied, modestly placed and displaced in the space between the grass and the ivy. In this sense, this is a volume integrated cover to cover. The young man dressed in his finery in the turnip-snedder photograph on the book jacket could have been anyone from the anonymous agrarian world generating this exemplary ethos of work and pride. But it would take this poet to embrace and evoke that ethos and that anonymity as both origin and destination, centering pulse and peripheral shimmer. What happens in between is a lifetime ordered, enriched, and elevated by an act of faith, a crediting of poetry.

Kevin Murphy

## NOTES

1. "Crediting Poetry," in *Opened Ground*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998, 415–17.
2. Interview with Anne-Marie Muir, BBC Ulster, 17 April 2006.
3. *Anything Can Happen*. Dublin: Town House, 2004, 15.
4. *The Times*, "One Poet in Search of a Title," 26 March 2006.
5. Muir interview, 17 April 2006.
6. *The Times*, 25 March 2006.
7. A few poems later, Heaney will have this same gesture ("The Nod") embody the ambiguity inherent in the Catholic-Protestant tensions growing up in sectarian Co. Derry, as the child witnesses "Neighbors with guns, parading up and down" nodding in acknowledgment – or judgment – of his father.
8. Interview with James Randall, *Ploughshares*, vol. 5 no. 3 (1979), 7–22.
9. *The Times*, 25 March 2006.
10. "Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin," in *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 157–58.
11. Czeslaw Milosz, *Selected Poems, 1931–2004*, Selected by Robert Hass with a Foreward by Seamus Heaney (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), xiv. Peggy O'Brien has also examined at length Heaney's increasing debt to Milosz in *Writing Lough Derg: From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

12. This designation again intertextually recalls one of the poems earlier in the volume. "To Mick Joyce in Heaven" is dedicated to another artisan exemplar, a relative who had served as a stretcher-bearer in World War II and who returned to Derry to share stories with the young speaker about the war and sex in the midst of demonstrating the craft of masonry.

13. Cf. Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 243–244.

14. "Crediting Poetry," in *Opened Ground*, 423–4.

15. Heaney's version of the poem appears on the Poetry Centre webpage:

The small bird  
Chirp-chirruped:  
yellow neb,  
a note-spurt.  
Blackbird over  
Lagan water.  
Clumps of yellow  
whin-burst!