

The Replenishing Fountain: Hope and Renewal in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

This book began with a reading of Heaney's beautiful poem, *The Rain Stick*, and its celebration of sudden refreshment in the midst of the dry and desolate, its release of unexpected music from the unpromising; and its final image of the single drop of water, which becomes an invitation to enter heaven, have been paradigms throughout this book for the power of poetry to transfigure vision and for the insights into truth to which the imagination alone gives access. In this final chapter, we shall return to Heaney to look at some more of his poetry in greater detail, focusing particularly on the theme of renewed or transfigured vision.

Behind the achievement of *The Rain Stick*, with its apparently simple celebration of the marvelous and mysterious manifested in the ordinary, is a long history of the training of a poet's eye and the openness and exposure of his heart. We can trace something of that story even in the traces that a single image leaves. We first encounter the raindrop which, in *Rain Stick*, is to become the gate of heaven, in the poem *Exposure*, which concludes Heaney's 1975 collection, *North*, and is also the final poem in the sequence, *Singing School*.

6 Exposure

It is December in Wicklow:
Alders dripping, birches
Inheriting the last light,
The ash tree cold to look at.
A comet that was lost
Should be visible at sunset,
Those million tons of light
Like a glimmer of haws and rose-hips,
And I sometimes see a falling star.
If I could come on meteorite!
Instead I walk through damp leaves,
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,
Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the deperate.
How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'

Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me
As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?
Rain comes down through the alders,
Its low conducive voices
Mutter about let-downs and erosions
And yet each drop recalls
The diamond absolutes.
I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne
Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;
Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose.

Exposure is at one level an intensely personal poem about self-doubt in which Heaney exposes to the light of his own judgement - and ours - his fear of failing either his vocation as a poet who must be open to all truth and feel "every wind that blows", or his vocation to be one of his own people, to articulate the losses and longings of the tribe to which he belongs. He quotes almost the whole of this important poem in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, and sets out some of its background. He had moved out of Belfast and down into Eire, into Co. Wicklow, a move which had provoked both triumphant crowing from Protestant forces who wished good-riddance to a famous "papist", and vituperation from Republicans who wanted to hold Heaney captive as a kind of propagandist icon of struggle in the North. Heaney writes,

"Feeling puny in my predicaments as I read about the tragic logic of Osip Mandelstam's fate in the 1930's, feeling challenged yet steadfast in my non-combatant status when I heard, for example, that one particularly sweet-natured school friend had been

interned without trial because he was suspected of having been involved in a political killing. What I was longing for was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism, a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology.”

At another level, it is a poem about vision, using the word “exposure” almost in the sense of a camera’s exposure of a film to light. Ostensibly it is a poem about a vision or epiphany which has been missed: the poet is literally *exposed* to the dripping December weather of Wicklow, because he has gone out to see a comet, to expose the film of his soul to “those million tons of light”. And the poem appears to end with an admission of failure; the poet has “missed/ the once in a lifetime portent/ the comet’s pulsing rose”. But this missed epiphany is only on the surface; the poet missed what he intended to see but was exposed instead to something far more important which turns out to confirm his vocation. Consciously, he is longing for his doubts to be met with by some dazzling finality, a “million tons of light”. He indulges the fantasy of himself being able to blaze away, free from ambiguities and second thoughts: “if I could come on meteorite!” - but his honesty will not allow such escapism; we have not arrived at the eschaton, we have still to contend with our darkness and shifting perspectives. But does this mean that we have nothing to go by, no light for the interim, no standard by which to be judged, and so liberated? The real achievement of this poem is not only in its honest confession of the loss of that wished for fantasy light, but in the transfiguration of the image with which the poem opens, the cold rain dripping through the branches in Wicklow. At first this rain seems to be no more than the mood-music of failure:

It is December in Wicklow
alders dripping, birches
Inheriting the last light,
the ash tree cold to look at. . .
leaves
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,
Rain comes down through the alders
Its low conducive voices
Mutter about let-downs and erosions

But the key word, the hinge of the whole poem, as in so many of the great psalms, is the word, “yet”. The healing light to which Heaney needs to expose his self-doubts is not the far off most inviolate rose of the comet’s light, but the last light of the day in which he stands, the light which for all his doubts is still there, is inherited by the dripping alders, and is gathered, concentrated, in each glistening drop that falls from the trees around him. The precious diamond clarity which he seeks has been around him all the time, and is to be found in the very act of poetic faithfulness to his real situation, in the act, as he puts it, of “blowing up these sparks/ for their meager heat.”

Rain comes down through the alders
Its low conducive voices

Mutter about let-downs and erosions
And yet each drop recalls
The diamond absolutes.
I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne
Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;

In the act of confessing what he thinks is a failure of vision, Heaney's vision is renewed and he is recalled to the "diamond absolute" of his vocation as a truth-teller. The *symbol*, in the deepest sense in which Coleridge might have used that word, of this renewed vision and confirmed vocation, the "outward and visible sign" for Heaney and for us, the "word" in "that eternal language which thy God utters", is the light collected in a falling raindrop.

This drop of water seeded with the last light of a December evening, recalling for Heaney, the "diamond absolutes", has itself both a history and a future. In Heaney's poetic consciousness, and in the wider literary tradition in which he participates, the rounded drop of water containing as it does, a whole world reflected in the surface, concentrates experience as well as light. The experience for example, of Heaney as a small child, seeing "the shiny pouches of raindrops on the telegraph wires" along the railway crossing near his home, an experience he celebrates in the poem, *The Railway Children*:

When we climbed the slopes of the cutting
We were eye-level with the white cups
Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.
Like lovely freehand they curved for miles
East and miles west beyond us, sagging
Under their burden of swallows.
We were small and thought we knew nothing
Worth knowing. We thought words travelled the wires
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
Each one seeded full with the light
Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves
So infinitesimally scaled
We could stream through the eye of a needle.

Here the raindrops are imagined as not only seeded with light, but as bearers of meaning. they carry the words which the children have been told travel the wires of the telegraph. Heaney intimates that what an adult might mistake for ignorance in the children might really have been a kind of wisdom: “We were small and *thought* we knew nothing worth knowing”. The implication is that they did in fact know something worth knowing, something which adults in the grip of dry rationalism ceased to know. For a moment, the imaginative vision of these children, the vision of raindrops full of light and meaning, raindrops that somehow recapitulate the whole world, “the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves, so infinitesimally scaled”, is the vision vouchsafed once to Blake in the “auguries of innocence”:

To see a world in a grain of sand
and heaven in a wild flower,
hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
and eternity in an hour

It’s the same vision which led Coleridge even in his last years, writing a prose work like *The Statesman’s Manual*, to go back to the single vivid experience - perhaps as a child - of being, “struck with admiration at beholding the cope of heaven as imaged in a dew-drop”, and to say that if only we could think seriously about that, we would think our way to God. It is the vision which gave Dylan Thomas his beautiful glimpse of “the round Zion of the water bead”.

Heaney makes it clear that this imaginative vision of everything including themselves, “infinitesimally scaled” in a raindrop, had about it an *absolute* or sacramental quality by concluding the poem in a single line, given space to itself, with an allusion to the saying of Jesus in which the eye of a needle becomes the impossible point of entry into heaven made possible by God: “We could stream through the eye of a needle”. Small wonder then, that the falling drop glimpsed in the last light of December by the weary and self-doubting adult, is nevertheless able to recall the “diamond absolutes”. Small wonder too, that the vision in both these poems is revived and given even deeper clarity and resolution in *The Rain Stick*, a poem in which Heaney, having come through the crises and self-doubts chronicled in his earlier volumes, is able “gladly and freely to credit marvels”. In that poem, alluding again to the same saying of Christ, he dares to name the heaven into which the little boy in *The Railway Children* had imagined himself streaming; and he has no doubts about setting aside the dismissive rationalism that had made him think he “knew nothing worth knowing”:

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 rain drop. Listen now again.

Coleridge called on poets to remove the “film of the familiar”, to “awaken the mind’s attention”, to make us realize that we *have eyes yet see not*. The curved reflective surface of the drop, its dizzying changes of scale and perspective, have this effect of making it, as great poetry should be, at once a

mirror and a window. And very much as we saw in Chapter 1, not only Shakespeare's "mirror held up to nature", but also George Herbert's suddenly translucent window,

A man that looks on glass
on it may stay his eye
or if he pleaseth through it pass
and then the heavens espy.

As Heaney makes clear, not only in this poem but especially throughout the volume which preceded it, entitled *Seeing Things*, he is absolutely concerned with the nature and clarity of our vision.

The clarity and assurance of a poem like *Rain Stick* might give one the impression that Heaney was naturally or easily a celebrant of light and hope, or even suggest that his poems of hope and renewal were achieved by an aversion of the eyes from the themes of darkness, doubt and despair which have been so central to the literature of the 20th century. Nothing could be further from the truth. The celebrations of light, of music, and of renewed vision in Heaney's later poetry, have such great authority precisely because they arise from a lifetime of exposure to "every wind that blows". To use a favorite word of his, we may *credit* Heaney's glimpses of heaven because, like his master Dante, he has also looked closely into darkness and been the cartographer of hell.

Invoking the muse in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, Milton contrasts the ease with which he could "venture down the dark descent" with the real difficulty of trying to "reascend". In the end, the return to light cannot be a matter of human effort, but has to be heard as a calling and received as a gift, particularly in our own dark times when it seems such a paramount duty to bear witness to suffering. We almost need to be given permission, both as writers and readers, to bear witness to the light. So in his beautiful Nobel acceptance speech, *Crediting Poetry*, Heaney speaks first of the almost obligatory attention to darkness and suspicion of light which comes with our culture:

"As writers and readers, and sinners and citizens, our realism and our aesthetic sense makes us wary of crediting the positive note. The very gunfire braces us and the atrocious confers a worth upon the effort which it calls forth to confront it. . ."

Heaney's own effort to confront the Troubles into which he was born and to speak humane truth in the midst of atrocity have been justly celebrated and have in their own sphere, been a contribution to the present hopes for peace. But he has not rested in the role of the poet either as a diarist of darkness or an elevated war-correspondent; rather he has chosen in the midst of that darkness as he puts it, "to make spacethe marvellous" as well as for the "murderous" in his vision of truth. As he goes on to say:

"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 to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for a meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. Attending insufficiently to the diamond absolutes, among which must be counted the sufficiency of

that which is absolutely imagined. 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 make space in my reckonong and imagining for the marvellous as well as the murderous.”

We will conclude this chapter with a reading of *Seeing Things*, the beautiful tryptich which is the fruit of Heaney’s mature “imagining [of] the marvellous”; but before that, it is worth tracing in his earlier poetry something of the journey, the Dantean pilgrimage which brought him to the glimpses of heaven which hallow his later work.

From the outset Heaney has been concerned with what might be termed a “double-vision”, with seeing things both in terms of their detailed particularities and as doorways or windows to something beyond themselves. The poems of his first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, are full of detailed, particular observations beautifully realized. Even thoe things in nature from which the eyes would like to withdraw are seen and rendered in loving detail.

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks.

But however minutely observed, he is never content to stay his eye on the surface of the image; rather he is continuously seeking to see through and beyond it even if that unknown beyond can be apprehended only as darkness. So in the final poem of that first volume, *Personal Helicon*, he moves from the beautiful, natural observation of particular wells around his childhood home, to something more, something which amounts to a *hearing* of his vocation, and the beginning of his *lifetime’s effort* as a poet. After describing wells in which he could see his own reflection, wells in which through darkness you nevertheless saw the sky, wells with echoes which “gave back your own call/ with a clean new music in it”, he concludes the poem and his first book with this quatrain:

Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

It is scarcely surprising that the title of his next volume is *Door Into the Dark*. It begins a lifetime’s attention to the too easily dismissable dark, a lifetime’s effort to “set it echoing” and to discern what unexpected glimmers it might contain. The title of the book comes from the first line of his beautiful sonnet, *The Forge*, one of many poems in which by celebrating a craftsman he also celebrates the craft of poetry. That poem begins with a line expressive of the wise humility which is at the core of Heaney’s

work: “all I know is a door into the dark”. But looking into that darkness, Heaney discerns in the shape and music of the blacksmith a kind of numinous and creative center to things, imaged in this poem as the anvil.

The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music.

Heaney’s choice of words like “altar”, and “unicorn” (a symbol of Christ), carrying with them a sense of the sacred and numinous, allow the anvil “somewhere in the centre” of his poem to be both the particular anvil in the dark workshop of an Irish blacksmith, and also an emblem for that unknowable centre in the darkness beyond our perceptions, where our Creator expends Himself in shape and music.

Also in that second volume, is a poem about the paradox of going into the dark in order to have vision restored, which turns out to be prophetic of Heaney’s entire *oeuvre*:

In Gallarus Oratory

You can still feel the community pack
This place: it’s like going into a turfstack,
A core of old dark walled up with stone
A yard thick. When you’re in it alone
You might have dropped, a reduced creature
To the heart of the globe. No worshipper
Would leap up to his God off this floor.
Founded there like heroes in a barrow
They sought themselves in the eye of their King
Under the black weight of their own breathing.
And how he smiled on them as out they came,
The sea a censor, and the grass a flame.

This poem is full of Heaney’s sense of what Eliot called, “the present moment of the past”. He enters the oratory alone, and is yet immediately aware of the community which called it into being still “packing the place”. In a sense, this poem develops the hints of *Door into the Dark*; that in order to enhance our vision we need to absent ourselves from the familiar lit surfaces of things, to walk through a door into the dark, to find what is there “somewhere in the centre”. Heaney journeys in his imagination with the Celtic Saints he has remembered into the “core of old dark”, which becomes also the “heart of the globe”; he describes these early Christians also in terms of their pagan past, as being “founded there like heroes in a barrow”, and dares with them to enter a darkness where there is nothing but the “black

weight of our own breathing”. But the end of this daring is not blindness, but vision: the Saints sought to see no longer with their own eyes, but with the “eye of their King”. And the real vision is bestowed on their return from the darkness of the oratory to the once-familiar world only to find that the veil of the ordinary has been removed, and they see the familiar transfigured with the flame of praise.

And how he smiled on them as out they came,
The sea a censer, and the grass a flame.

The tone and structure of this poem anticipate much of what Heaney was to write later. One might argue that his subsequent poetry from this volume until the moment in the penitential journey of *Station Island*, when he says, “my feet touched bottom,” is prefigured in the journey in this poem. He speaks of entering the oratory as being like going “into a turf stack”, a “core of old dark walled up with stone” which would be a good description of what he achieves in *Wintering Out* and *North*; and that likewise, the re-emergence in the final couplet, with its sudden discovery that the very creation itself is a numinous sacrament anticipates the vision Heaney has in *Seeing Things* and *Spirit Level*. In *North*, he would be going not simply into the turf stack, but beneath the turf into the bog itself, to explore in the core of its old dark, themes at the heart of the collective Irish mind as well as at the depth of his own self. The allusion to the heroic age and its links with the early Church to those monks entering their dark oratory as being “founded there like heroes in a barrow”, are also picked up in *North* where Heaney confirms his vocation as a poet in language which echoes both the monastic and the heroic age, as he hears his muse speak in the poem *North*:

It said, ‘Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.
Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.
Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.’

Heaney’s fidelity to this difficult vocation, this command to “compose in darkness”, to work without the comfort even of hope for a “cascade of light”; and yet to be a faithful witness to whatever gleams are there, is absolute and awe-inspiring, both in this poem and those that follow. Even in those poems whose dominant imagery is darkness, cold, and exposure, Heaney never loses this calling to clarity. The

poet's eye, and through the exercise of the imagination, the reader's eye, is kept "clear as the bleb of the icicle"; faithful through the darkness, and therefore clear enough to see when the icicle melts, the "diamond absolutes" caught in the falling raindrop it has become.

In *North*, the vocation to compose in darkness had been understood both in terms of the monastic vision of *Galarus Oratory*, and of the heroic age when the *fili*, the early Irish poets, were expected to go into darkness and retreat to compose. From *Field Work* onwards, though, Heaney begins to make explicit another model of his vocation which was perhaps always there but needed now to be made more formally a part of his work, and that was his relationship with the poet Dante. He had already and in various respects been in conversation with Dante, but Dante becomes more explicitly his companion in *Field Work*. In *The Strand at Lough Beg*, the first of many elegies for those killed in the Troubles, he quotes the *Purgatorio*, and imagines himself cleansing his murdered cousin to prepare his soul for the journey through Purgatory to Paradise, just as at the beginning of the *Purgatorio*, Virgil cleanses from Dante's face the grime and tears of Hell. For as both Dante and Heaney imply, this is one of the roles of poetry: to cleanse our memories and clarify our vision, ready for that journey. But although he imagines his cousin Colum as emerged already from the *Inferno*, cleansed and on the road he knows that he himself is not there yet, and the other Dantean references in this book are to the *Inferno*; to the 9th circle of Hell. In *An Afterwards*, where he imagines himself frozen and condemned for his own moral failings in a poem which is a direct rebuke to Yeats for his jaunty assumption that a poet is entitled to choose between "perfection of the work" and "perfection of the life". And finally in the devastatingly vivid translation of the Ugolino passages from *Inferno* 32 and 33, with which *Field Work* concludes, he offers a glimpse of Hell as a context for understanding the agony of the hunger strikers.

There are many reasons for the resonance between Dante and Heaney; Dante is very much a poet's poet, and there is of course a long tradition of relation to Dante by poets writing in English going back to Chaucer. Dante in the very structure of his poem models and encourages the notion of a poet from the past turning out also to be the contemporary of a present poet and walking with him on his journey, for this is what Vergil does for Dante. Further, in the *Purgatorio*, there is a particular series of encounters between poets living and dead, in which they discuss their craft, its impact on their own time, and its place in the wider scheme of things. This sense that Dante both models conversation between poets of different ages and languages, and invites us to such a conversation with him, was very much understood in our own century by Eliot and the other high-modernists, especially Joyce and Beckett.

Heaney simply by virtue of his deep reading, indeed his inhabiting of the European tradition, would have been intellectually engaged with Dante, and would have found in Eliot's prose and poetry as well as in Yeats, direct models for reimagining Dantean episodes in modern contexts. In a way, he had personally much deeper connections with Dante than his modernist predecessors; unlike Eliot, Heaney was born and nurtured, as Dante was, in Catholic Christendom. Like Dante, he reimagined the tradition and by giving it his individual voice, discerned a "clean, new music" in it. But also like Dante, he is able to stand over against the tradition and question it.

More specifically still, he shares with Dante both the curse and blessing of having been made the exile of a savagely divided city. Dante and Heaney were both forced to question their relationship to their own “tribe’s complicity” in violence. Both of them were under enormous pressure to write propaganda for their own side; a pressure which they both resisted. Rather than absolutize the immediate political crisis, they chose instead to be faithful both to the fierce passions of their contemporary political situation and at the same time to try and see these things as they might look in the light of eternity. Dante too, might have written, “I am neither internee nor informer”, an “inner émigré”. Both poets while dealing fully with the dark realities of “the murderous” and the *matter of the cities* that bred them, nevertheless felt called also to raise their eyes to another light and to “credit marvels”.

If Dante is supremely the poet of Paradise and the one through whose imagination glimpses and echoes of the unimaginable come most clearly into European literature, it is because he was also the pilgrim through Hell and Purgatory. In identifying with Dante, Heaney discovers the hidden hope that lay in that first command to “compose in darkness”; he is not to remain in the “core of old dark” forever, but like the monks in the *Gallarus Oratory*, having sought himself and found himself, and us, even under the “black weight of our own breathing”, he would be called eventually, to “straighten up”, “uncleanch”, and “emerge”, as the authoritative celebrant of light.

Between the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* must come the *Purgatorio*; if Hell is the place where suffering is simply itself and unredeemed, then Purgatory is the place where it is open to the possibility of transfiguration, the place where tears can cleanse. Heaney’s next volume of original poetry, as opposed to translation, *Station Island*, was to be in every sense, his *Purgatorio*, and the sequence *Station Island* itself, is Dante at his very best, reimaged and revoiced for our century and situation.

Station Island is a sequence of 12 poems in which the figure of the poet makes two journeys simultaneously. The first is an outward and visible journey around the beds, or *stations*, on *Station Island* in Lough Derg, also known as “St. Patrick’s Purgatory”, and still a place of pilgrimage. Heaney has made this pilgrimage three times; the name “Patrick’s Purgatory” may have suggested the link with Dante’s *Purgatorio*, which animates the poem. The second and inner journey, enabled by the outer and visible one, is a series of confessional and ultimately purgative encounters with significant people both in the poet’s personal past, and in the past of Irish and European literature. And here, the links with Dante’s *Purgatorio* and more widely with the whole *Comedia*, are crucial.

Dante makes the journey as one of the living; but in a series of harrowing encounters with the dead, he is forced to re-examine all he is and has been. He is purged both of his pride and of his uncertainty. He is rebuked for wasting life and talent, but is also enabled to resume his life and exert his talent with a new confidence and mastery of touch. In Dante’s journey through Hell and Purgatory, he is accompanied and guided by the poet Virgil, to whom he refers at the beginning of the *Comedia*, as “il miglior fabro”, *the greater master*. At the beginning, and for most of the journey through Hell, Dante’s dependance on Vergil is childlike, or childish, to the point of being almost pathetic. He lacks confidence and is continually looking to the master for advice and instruction. But throughout, Vergil, as he teaches and

guides Dante, is seeking to build his confidence and independence, because he knows the time will come at the end of the *Purgatorio*, when the disciple must dare to tread a road on which the master has never set foot, and to be the poet of mysteries which the pagan humanism of Vergil had not yet seen.

The significant moment comes at the end of the *Purgatorio* when after all they have been through together, Vergil says to Dante, “I crown and mitre thee over thyself”. The uncertain, and sometimes cringing Dante, referring always back to Vergil as “the master”, has at the end of the *Purgatorio*, been made a *master* himself. And paradoxically, it is Vergil the pagan who gives him the confidence to write in the *Paradiso* the Christian truths that Vergil had never glimpsed.

The journey in Dante is both the journey of a whole culture from paganism to Christendom, and the journey of a man from childhood through adolescence, to a mature mastery as well as psychologically and morally; the journey through unredeemed violence and darkness to the possibilities of redemptive suffering and finally of unassailable peace. So in Heaney’s own rereading and reimagining of the Dantean pilgrimage in *Station Island* there is a journey through his own life from the little boy in the first poem listening in the bedroom dark to wind and rain in the trees, to the mature poet given his mastery and confidence by Joyce the master, walking confidently out into the rain. But there is a journey also through the literature of Ireland, from the early nature poetry of Sweeney through the medieval monks and scribes, the sectarian prose of men like Carlton, to Joyce, and finally to Heaney himself. And likewise, and perhaps most profoundly, a journey down into the worst of the darkness and the discovery with Dante, with St. John of the Cross, and with Eliot, who quoted them both, that “the way down is the way up”. For in this poem, we are brought lower and lower through layers of history, but also through layers of self-accusation, self-doubt, and uncertainty, of loathing and disgust at the self-perpetuating chains of violence and complicity, until that point in his nightmare imagination of the dying hunger-striker, that Heaney says, “my feet touched bottom and my heart revived.”

And then we are brought up, again, into the possibilities of redemption; we are enabled to “credit marvels”, to see the “need and chance to salvage everything”. Finally, at the end of the poem, Heaney, like Dante before him, is sent out from his *Purgatorio*, genuinely purged and changed, given both the permission and the mastery he needs to be as faithful to the vision of light as he was in the past to the vision of darkness.

It would take a whole book to spell this process out in all its mastery, poem by poem; for the purposes of this chapter which is concerned with what makes Heaney’s *Paradiso* credible, we need only look at that point in the *Purgatorio* where his “feet touched bottom”, and then from there, in the remaining three poems of the sequence, the path of recovery.

The low point in *Station Island* is reached in poem ix; the poem begins with the spirit of an IRA soldier and hunger-striker who describes his own death in a way that invokes our empathy, and yet at the same time his willingness to kill and his memory of the bomb he has set in a way that horrifies us. His last words combine his own tragic suffering with that of a victim he has shot:

‘When the police yielded my coffin, I was light

As my head when I took aim.'

Heaney remembers his funeral and recognizes equally in him both the evil and the sacrifice.

Unquiet soul, they should have buried you

In the bog where you threw your first grenade,

Where only helicopters and curlews

Make their maimed music

In the history of Ireland, the poet feels he has been equally a part of both the music and the maiming.

His dream becomes a nightmare:

I dreamt and drifted. All seemed to run to waste

As down a swirl of mucky, glittering flood

Strange polyp floated like a huge corrupt

Magnolia bloom, surreal as a shed breast,

My softly awash and blanching self-disgust.

Here, even the images which have throughout been symbols of good in Heaney's work, light and flowing water, seem corrupt and destroyed, run to waste; the water is not cleansing but "mucky", running "to waste", carrying hideous debris. The light neither cleanses nor illumines, but merely glitters on the surface of the flood and reveals only the horror around it. Disgust and self-disgust, left to themselves, redeem nothing, until they can be transfigured by repentance. Are these dark waters to be *night waters* in the sense that they are like the rivers in Dante's Hell, crossed only once and carrying the damned forever down into hopelessness? Or *night waters*, in which the word *night* carries the implicit hope of day, and *waters* still hold their potential to cleanse? Might the word *awash*, which seems to carry nothing but drifting helplessness, be redeemed to mean, *washed, purged, cleansed* - are these to be the waters of Hell, or of Purgatory?

The change comes in the next line, where amidst the blanching waters of self-disgust, come the redeeming waters of human tears:

And I cried among night waters, 'I repent

My unweaned life that kept me competent

To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.'

"Connivance and mistrust", or even just the fear of these, seem to have dogged Heaney; his poetry up to this point is full of self-questioning and mistrust of himself, as though he had never quite lost that first tag he gave himself when he published his poetry under the name *Incertus*. Whatever truth there might or might not be in the charges he so publicly made against himself, they needed to be dealt with and purged if he was to be free to express and not to mistrust such light as might be given to him. So he repents. This is the moment to which the whole pilgrimage has been moving. And what comes next in the dream-sequence of the poem is the redemption of nightmare imagery; the strange polyp, with its

corrupt magnolia bloom drifting in mucky water forever down to nowhere, becomes instead first a lighted candle, and then a bright masted ship which retrieves its course and is “no more adrift”:

Then, like a pistil growing from the polyp,
A lighted candle rose and steadied up
Until the whole bright-masted thing retrieved
A course and the currents it had gone with
Were what it rode and showed. No more adrift,
My feet touched bottom and my heart revived.

The dream imagery changes again; he sees the “moon through rippled lough waters”, itself an image of the “molten inside sheen of an instrument” as yet undisclosed. And he wakes to the three images which are to inform his *Paradiso*: light, music, and flowing water; and to the one word which is to characterize his poetic vision of these things: clarity.

And then it was the clarity of waking
To sunlight and a bell and gushing taps
In the next cubicle.

It is in this morning light that the narrator, and through him the reader, suddenly realize what the something “round and clear”, the “shining instrument” was, at the end of his dream; and not only what it was, but what it means, and how it might be taken up. How it was miraculously, “still there for the taking”:

Still there for the taking!
The old brass trumpet with its valves and stops
I found once in loft thatch, a mystery
I shied from then for I thought such trove beyond me.

The hidden trumpet glimpsed by the child in loft thatch, which he both longed to play and also shied away from, becomes a symbol of the mystery of redemptive love which Heaney has hesitated to credit, has mistrusted himself to be able to express, from which, he has felt it to be almost his duty to abstain; it is the cascade of light he had thought his muse had taught him not to expect. And now at last, when he sees from the darkness of this nightmare how desperately it is needed, he discovers that it’s still there: it’s there for the taking. And that he, even he, purged of his own darkneses and uncertainties, might have the temerity to take it up and to blow upon it no uncertain note.

But there are three stations still to travel in the completion of Patrick’s Purgatory; and in these, now that his “feet have touched bottom”, he must learn to see and to trust the light, to become open to “the need and chance to salvage everything”. Station X acts almost as an overture to the explicit account of redemption in Station XI. It gives a prophetic image of redeeming transformation by telling as it were, two parables whose significance will only be understood in the light of the next poem. The first is the

story of an ordinary mug which Heaney lent to a group of actors, and how when he saw it lifted up into the imaginative space of the play, it was transfigured before him. The key words, almost imitating the whole movement of descent and ascent which is the structure of the *Comedia*, of the salvation story, and of course, baptism, are “dipped”, “glamoured” and “restored”.

Dipped and glamoured from this translation,
it was restored

The second is the story of St. Ronan and the Otter.

as the otter surfaced once with Ronan’s psalter
miraculously unharmed, that had been lost

a day and a night under lough water

And so the saint praised God on the lough shore.

The dazzle of the impossible suddenly

blazed across the threshold, a sun-glare

to put out the small hearths of constancy.

In this first version of this poem, in the edition of *Station Island* itself, Heaney speaks of this miracle as the “dazzle of the impossible” suddenly blazing; but lest he should be misunderstood as suggesting that he was still the unpurged “Incertus”, too reticent to “credit” such a sudden blaze, he rewords this verse when it is reprinted in *Opened Ground*, and consciously echoes the poetic credo he had set out in *Crediting Poetry*, where “credit” has become a key verb, as poetry enables us to credit, and so to see, realities we would otherwise miss. The revised verse finishes not with the saint on the lough shore in the past, but with the poet standing, blinking in the present light at the door of the hostel, his vision as purged and renewed as the vision of the monks in *Gallarus Oratory* had been, “as out they came,/ The sea a censer, and the grass a flame.”

And so the saint praised God on the lough shore

for that dazzle of impossibility

I credited again in the sun-filled door,

so absolutely light it could put out fire.

But if the poet in *Station Island* purged by his long, dark journey has been enabled to credit again the dazzle of impossibility in the sun-filled door, it does not mean that he is not still making,, with the rest of us, in the land of the living, a journey in the dark. These are glimpses given in the context of this present darkness, and he must return to the great task of clarifying vision and witnessing honestly in the here-and-now. In the last two poems of *Station Island*, he resumes his calling. In ix, he had cried out in repentance in the midst of a nightmare; in x, he wakes in sunlight and is encouraged by the memory of two stories of redemption and restoration. And so in xi, he makes confession, and in xii, is restored to mastery of himself, and sent out freshly into the world.

The whole sequence *Station Island*, is a masterpiece; but xi is the jewel in its crown, containing as it does not only a beautiful emblem of sin and redemption, but also a powerful new translation of perhaps the greatest of the poems of St. John of the Cross. The poem opens with the poet's memory of having ruined a kaleidoscope he had been given as a child, by plunging it "in a butt of muddied water", in his desire, even then, to see into the dark. This gift, "mistakenly abased", becomes an emblem for all that is ruined and "run to waste" in us. It harks back to the mucky, glittering flood of the nightmare station ix, and supremely it represents the problem of our failed vision with which this entire book has been concerned. We have all been given a kalaidoscope; We have all been given in our God-breathed minds, in our imaginations, a kaleidoscope, an instrument in which we may see refracted through the creation, the glories of God's light. And we have all in our fallenness, but especially in the fall into narrow rationalism, ironically called the "Enlightenment", plunged this kaleidoscope into muddied water. The world we see habitually is not the true world at all, because it is seen through the sludge with which the kaleidoscope is encrusted, a sludge which Coleridge so charitably called, "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude". The question is, is the gift ruined forever? Can the kaleidoscope surface again? Can it ever again become the "marvelous lightship", the window into heaven? In this poem, Heaney dares to seize the trumpet of a mystery he had once thought beyond him, and sound an unambiguous, YES. "What came to nothing could always be replenished", and the replenishment, the restoration of vision, like the resurfacing of the kaleidoscope, is precisely the business of poetry:

xi

As if the prisms of the kaleidoscope
I plunged once in a butt of muddied water
surfaced like a marvelous lightship
and out of its silted crystals a monk's face
that had spoken years ago from behind a grille
spoke again about the need and chance
to salvage everything, to re-envisage
the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift
mistakenly abased. . .

What came to nothing could always be repenished.

The monk to whom Heaney has made confession understands this absolutely; he understands that Heaney's vocation as a poet comes from the same source as his own vocation to be a monk, and is therefore able to say, "Read poems as prayers". It is not that Heaney is asked to, or would be prepared to sloganize for the Catholic Church, but rather that his cleansing of the instruments of our vision by the power of his imagination as a poet, is part of that whole restoration even in our darkness, of the vision of Truth which is the work of the whole Holy and undivided Trinity, but especially in us of the Logos, the Word who is also the Light. This becomes abundantly clear in the poem Heaney goes on to translate, in

which at last, after all his journeyings, he arrives at and dares to name the Source of that river which Milton named, "Siloam's brook", and Coleridge called, "Alph, the sacred river".

'Read poems as prayers,' he said, 'and for your penance translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.'

Returned from Spain to our chapped wilderness,
his consonants aspirate, his forehead shining,
he had made me feel there was nothing to confess.

Now his sandalled passage stirred me on to this:
How well I know that fountain, filling, running,

although it is the night.

But not its source because it does not have one,
which is all sources' source and origin

although it is the night.

No other thing can be so beautiful.
Here the earth and heaven drink their fill

although it is the night.

So pellucid it never can be muddied,
and I know that all light radiates from it

although it is the night.

I know no sounding-line can find its bottom,
nobody ford or plumb its deepest fathom

although it is the night.

And its current so in flood it overflows
to water hell and heaven and all peoples

although it is the night.

And the current that is generated there,
as far as it wills to, it can flow that far

although it is the night.

And from these two a third current proceeds
which neither of these two, I know, precedes

although it is the night.

This eternal fountain hides and splashes

within this living bread that is life to us

although it is the night.

Hear it calling out to every creature.

And they drink these waters, although it is dark here

because it is the night.

I am repining for this living fountain.

Within this bread of life I see it plain

although it is the night.

Clearly there are many poems by Juan de la Cruz that Heaney could have translated here; but this one has a special resonance not only with the structure and imagery of the *Station Island* sequence in which it is placed, but with the whole of Heaney's *oeuvre*. Not only the poems in earlier volumes, but also those in more recent works which continue to echo the themes of this poem. St. John titled this poem *Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe* ("the song of the soul which delights to know God by faith"); the significance is in the phrase about "knowing God by faith". St. Paul contrasts faith and sight, ("we walk by faith, and not by sight"); to know God by faith is to dare even in the present darkness to see beyond it, to see paradoxically what cannot be seen. For as Hebrews says, "faith is the evidence of things *not* seen". To know God by faith is both to acknowledge His palpable absence from the world of the visible and yet at the same time to dare to see Him "through a glass, darkly". This paradox of finding that the visible may also be alive with what's invisible, is at the heart of Heaney's vocation as a poet.

Secondly, the two key images of this poem, that of the fountain whose deepest fathom nobody can plumb, and of the light which is both beautiful and invisible, have been key images in Heaney's work since his first volume, and continue to inform even his most recent work. So when he translates that first line, "How well I know that fountain, filling, running", we hear at this point, both Heaney's own voice, for we are still in the midst of one of *his* poems, and at the same time, we hear the voice of St. John of the Cross, for we have begun one of his. They are both saying how well I know that *fountain, filling, running*. . . St. John's voice carries with it his knowledge of that fountain and all the sources in his soul and in his world from which it flows; it carries his knowledge and love of the *Song of Songs*, and its archetypal image of the fountain sealed, the garden enclosed, his deep meditation on the story in John 4, of the woman at the well and Christ's promise to her of a founting welling up in her to eternal life, it carries his participation in the Spanish mystical tradition in which the fountain plays a key role, and his reading of the chivalric romances in which the knights on their mystic quests are granted a vision of the hidden, magical fountain. All these *sources* flow together as St. John in the midst of the *dark night* of his own soul dares still to affirm that he "knows that fountain".

Had this translation been published on its own, in a collection of Spanish mystical verse, it would be John's voice alone that we hear; but because the translation is set in the midst of Heaney's poem, and at a crucial point in this sequence, we hear Heaney's voice also and *his* distinct knowledge of that fountain.

When Heaney says “how well I know that fountain”, he is speaking not just as John does of Scripture and mystical or literary fountains, but of his own *Personal Helicon*, the *Wellhead* in the farmyard of his childhood, the “untopped *omphalos*” which was at once the outward and visible source of the “water of life” to Heaney and his kith and kin, and also in the eternal language of symbol, the inward and spiritual source of his imagination and his entire inspiration.

As he writes in *Personal Helicon*:

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

And in his autobiographical prose of the late ‘70s, he makes it even more abundantly clear how deeply linked to the heart of his work were these almost numinous childhood encounters with wells and water:

“To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or a train, possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated.”

He describes vividly how the “shaft was sunk for the pump at the wellhead”, which came to symbolize so much for him:

“I remember, too, men coming to sink the shaft of the pump and digging through that seam of sand down into the bronze riches of the gravel, that soon began to puddle with the spring water. That pump marked an original descent into earth, sand, gravel, water. It centered and staked the imagination made its foundation of the *omphalos* itself.”

This wellhead while remaining mostly a hidden source for so much of Heaney’s poetry is made visible in occasional glimpses always bringing a deep sense of rootedness and reassurance at various key points in his poetry. In the first of the dedicatory poems of *North*, significantly entitled, *Sunlight*, it’s almost as though he needs to look at this well again and associate its water with light and love, before he dares to go down into the dark of that volume.

There was a sunlit absence.

The helmeted pump in the yard,
heated its iron,

water honeyed
in the slung bucket

It is there again in *Field Work*, the hidden source which the “armored cars” of the invaders can never touch. In *The Toome Road*,

O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

It is there in the beautiful poem, *A Drink of Water*, where a cup of water from that well is transfigured in Coleridgean moonlight, and Heaney confesses his need to “dip, to drink again”, and hints at the hidden source of all this refreshment:

Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable
It fell back through her window and would lie
Into the water set out on the table.

Where I have dipped to drink again, to be
Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
Remember the Giver, fading off the lip.

It is a continued presence even to his most recent volume, *The Spirit Level*, where in the wonderful poem *At the Wellhead*, a poem which consciously recapitulates Juan de la Cruz’s themes of music, water, and hidden vision in the midst of darkness. Here he compares the piano playing of a blind neighbor to the sound of water:

Her notes came out to us like hoisted water
Ravelling off a bucket at the wellhead
Where next thing we’d be listening hushed and awkward

That poem is addressed to a singer, and the wellhead becomes a symbol for the source of music itself; so Heaney says, “sing yourself to where the singing comes from.”

It is a bucket of water from this well, stood in the scullery in Heaney’s childhood, which becomes a symbol in his Nobel acceptance speech, both of the poetic imagination and of the soul of humankind:

“Ahistorical, presexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern,
we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood
in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake,
the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter
silence.”

He returns to the image of this water in the great three-part credo, each part beginning, “I credit poetry”, about the heart of what poetry as a redemptive reordering of the human imagination, can do.

“I credit it ultimately because poetry can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner 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. An order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew. An order which satisfies all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections. I credit poetry, in other words, both for being itself and for being a help, for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind’s centre and its circumference. . . .”

Here the water from that well has become a symbol for his own mind.

All these fountains literal, literary and symbolic, are part of the knowledge, part of the word, “know”, as Juan de la Cruz and Heaney blend their voices to say “how well I know that fountain, filling, running, although it is the night.”

But the fountain of which they speak, although it has to be imagined through the memory of all these other fountains, is not itself any of these deep sources, but is a source beyond them. So comes that astonishing second phrase, “but not its source because it does not have one, which is all sources’ source and origin”. By choosing to translate this poem in this way, in this context, Heaney is saying that even this deepest source of his, this *personal Helicon*, has a source beyond itself: and that source is the Eternal Fountain, deep in the heart of the Godhead, which this poem celebrates. The fountain which is the Origin of the origin of the world, our imagination grasps, which is the Source of the source of imagination itself, which is the “Light which makes the light which makes the day.” The pellucid light, which unlike the damaged kaleidoscope of our fallen minds, “never can be muddied”. All light radiates from it, even the light gathered in that falling December raindrop, which reminded Heaney of his “diamond absolutes”. This source of light can be found even in darkness. In all of Heaney’s poetry there has to have been a digging down, a stripping away of layers, an attraction to unplumbable depth. In the first of the bog poems, he says in awe, “the wet centre is bottomless”; and yet in the unplumbable depths he is looking also for a centre that can hold, and here he finds it, and finds in it a perpetual source of radiant and refreshing energy:

I know no sounding-line can find its bottom,
nobody ford or plumb its deepest fathom

although it is the night.

And its current so in flood it overspills
to water hell and heaven and all peoples

although it is the night.

And the current that is generated there,
as far as it wills to, it can flow that far

although it is the night.

Heaney's translation avails itself of a secondary meaning in current, unavailable to the original poet, and yet in its promise to the energy of light, entirely in keeping with its purpose. St. John of the Cross goes on and Heaney in his translation follows him, to locate this source of all sources, and origin of all origins, in the life of God the Holy Trinity.

And from these two a third current proceeds
which neither of these two, I know, precedes

although it is the night.

Here we have a beautiful resolution in the symbol of mingling currents, which can be "distinguished but not divided", as Coleridge would say, of that perplexity which reason encounters at the brink of mystery, and with which Milton was so evidently struggling in his own invocation of the fountain of holy light.
[Milton quote]

Milton hesitates before the technicalities of his own theology, unsure whether this first and original Light is an essence or an overflowing, a first-born of creation or an intrinsic part of the Godhead. St. John's more fluent theology, informed by the poet's mystical experience, finds in the image of the mingled streams in the river, as Coleridge was later to do, an expression of the plurality and oneness which is the mystery both of the Godhead and of human consciousness.

But St. John, although he gives us this verse sounding the heart of a Trinitarian understanding of God, returns us at the end of his poem, to our actual experience of the world now, and of the central paradox that we are called to see the invisible and to hear in its music, the call of our Creator. The poem concludes with the place in which the mystery, the source of time and space, of light and of imagination, is made manifest in the midst of time and space, but apprehended only by imagination: and that is, of course, the Sacrament.

This eternal fountain hides and splashes
within this living bread that is life to us

although it is the night.

Hear it calling out to every creature.
And they drink these waters, although it is dark here

because it is the night.

I am repining for this living fountain.
Within this bread of life I see it plain

although it is the night.

As we hear Juan de la Cruz's voice speaking these verses, we understand them very clearly in terms of the defined and covenanted Sacraments of the Church, especially the Sacrament of the Eucharist; but as we hear Heaney's verse speaking the same words, and in the context of the sequence, *Station Island*, and with the knowledge of the poetry which precedes it and which is to follow, the call to "see it plain", to

hear it calling, is broadened, and we see Heaney in a secular and post-modernist world, taking up the task of helping us in the midst of utter visibility to be alive to what is invisible, helping us in the midst of meaningless or murderous noise, to hear a “music we would never have known to listen for”, and to “enter heaven through the ear of a raindrop”. The real source and theological root, not only of the title but of the whole achievement of his volume, *Seeing Things*, is here in this poem.

There is of course one remaining poem to conclude the sequence of *Station Island*; it is all very well for Heaney the pilgrim narrator of the sequence to have come in his own soul to a point of personal repentance and renewal, and to have had his Catholic vision clarified by the genius of St. John of the Cross, but he also remains Heaney the modern poet and the inheritor, justly, of the great achievements of Joyce, Yeats and Beckett. If his vision is to have validity both for himself and for the fractured and sceptical world to which his poems are addressed, then it must be consonant with all he and we have learned from these great masters just as Dante’s *Paradiso* was being a uniquely and distinctively Christian vision has an extra conviction and authority because it carries with it Virgil’s *imprimatur* and the fruit of his encounter with philosophical reason, which is what Virgil represents. So Heaney’s later work has an authority which could not simply be achieved by translating or even reinterpreting the great work of Catholic mystics and Saints of the past; it has to be achieved by bringing their insights fully into contact with all the fractured tragedy and doubt of our own age, which was the special *metier* of the modernist masters. Before Heaney can really “straighten up” from the “prie-dieu”, credit marvels, and help us, too, to “see things”, he needs the *imprimatur* of his master, Joyce; and this is what he is given in the final poem of the *Station Island* sequence.

The first eleven poems of *Station Island* are all set on St. Patrick’s Purgatory itself; but the final encounter is set back on the mainland. Heaney has finished his pilgrimage, exorcized his demons, and is purged and prepared to take up his vocation as a poet with newly cleansed vision. The hand that reaches down from the jetty to lift him back up into the resumption of his life is that of James Joyce. It’s appropriate enough that Joyce disdains to appear on the Island itself, to be part of what he dismisses as an “infantile, peasant pilgrimage”. And yet, although Heaney acknowledges his great debt to Joyce, an acknowledgment which takes the form in the allegory of Joyce helping him up, he also makes it clear that as with Dante and Virgil, Joyce can no longer be unambiguously his guide, but that Heaney himself may have, as it were, not simply to guard the Joycean heritage but to guide it towards visions that Joyce himself could not see. All this is very delicately put in this moment of exchanged handgrip and by the allusion to Joyce’s blindness, with its reservation in the word, “seemed”:

Like a convalescent, I took the hand
stretched down from the jetty, sensed again
an alien comfort as I stepped on ground
to find the helping hand still gripping mine,
fish-cold and boney, but whether to guide
or to be guided I could not be certain

for the tall man in step at my side
seemed blind. . .

Though Heaney is about to step out with Joyce's blessing on roads Joyce never travelled, he nevertheless pays tribute to all the gifts he and the rest of us have received from Joyce's genius. The "straight walk", the "eyes fixed straight ahead", the clarity of the singer's voice, cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite as a steel nib's downstroke, quick and clean

In the original version of this poem, there is a middle passage in which Heaney tells Joyce that a passage from Stephen's diary had become for him "a revelationpassword in my ears, the collect of a new epiphany". He omits this passage of tribute in the revision for *Opened Ground*, preferring to go directly to Joyce's final admonition as Heaney takes up again his vocation:

'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.'

Heaney receives these words as the gift of freedom and possibility, and the revelation is accompanied by the icon of the raindrop.

It was as if I had stepped free into space
alone with nothing that I had not known
already. Raindrops blew in my face. . .

Joyce sets him free *from* the burden of rehearsing again and again the Troubles of his own people:
are raking at dead fires,
rehearsing the old whinges at your age.

That subject people stuff is a cod's game.

- and free *to* "strike his own note", to find the light where it is least expected; to find what Joyce called, "elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea."

's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements,
elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'

From the end of *Station Island* onward, Heaney is free in a new way to "strike his own note". In the next two volumes, he experiments both with translation and essays in different genres such as allegory and the careful construction of emblems, in an attempt to discern what the signature of his own frequency

might be. More and more it becomes clear that he is called so to celebrate the visible as to make it alive with the invisible, to make such music with the audible words of his verse that it catches an echo of Keats' unheard melodies. The great achievements of this new style come in his two most recent volumes, *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*. On the way towards them in *The Haw Lantern*, he writes some telling verses that indicate the effects he is trying to achieve, and the means by which he hopes to achieve them.

So for example, in *The Spoonbait*, he constructs a formal emblem of the invisible soul by means of the known visibility of a spoonbait in a child's pencil case. The poem begins with an almost awkward formality:

So a new similitude is given us

And we say: The soul may be compared

Unto a spoonbait that a child discovers

Beneath the sliding lid of a pencil case

But then takes off with an insight into the power of imagination to help us see and understand more than we could ever catch in the first glimpse of anything. The spoonbait is "glimpsed once, and imagined for a lifetime". In some ways, the role of Heaney's new poetry will be to give us the insights of a lifetime's imagination which will help us truly to *see things* we had so far only glimpsed once. The spoonbait itself is then compared to a host of other things; a shooting star, the polished helmet of a hero, but most characteristically and powerfully, in the context, to a single drop of water. And since this poem was written after his translation of the Juan de la Cruz, which locates the "source" of all these numinous drops of light that fall through Heaney's poetry in the Trinity, we can say with certainty that his characteristic reversal of the story of Dives and Lazarus, his retelling of it, so that even for Dives the drop of water *can* fall through the gulf and reach him, is rooted in John of the Cross' powerful word that, the hidden fountain waters heaven, *hell*, and all people. So for a moment, the drop that recalled the "diamond absolutes" for Heaney in the hell of his self-doubt, becomes in this poem:

Like the single drop that Dives implored

falling and falling into a great gulf

Heaney has come to understand that the deepest music in his poetry is the "music of what happens" not on the surface of his images, but in and through the echoes of other images that they recall, and so in the beautiful poetic preface to *Clearances*, the wonderful sonnet sequence in memory of his mother, he celebrates what she has already taught him about his craft, and implores her directly, through the communion of the Saints, to teach him more:

She taught me what her uncle once taught her:

How easily the biggest coal block split

If you got the grain and hammer angled right.

*The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,
Its co-opted and obliterated echo,
Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen,*

*Taught me between the hammer and the block
To face the music. Teach me now to listen,
To strike it rich behind the linear black.*

In his next volume, *Seeing Things*, Heaney was indeed to “strike it rich behind the linear black.” The whole volume is full of those deft strokes that split open the apparently known and take us straight to the heart of what was invisibly behind it. It is the book which most clearly celebrates his power to “straighten up” from the *prie-dieu* and “credit marvels”. This is made explicit in a sonnet like *Fosterling*. In the octet he relives his early poems which delved into the heaviness of silted land, and what he called, “my silting hope, my lowlands of the mind”; what he called in an ironic reference to film of the opposite name, “the heaviness of being”. But in the sestet, he turns all these things around, and declares the change that have happened in him, finishing his poem on the lifting sounds of brighten and lighten:

And poetry

Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty

To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans

The tinkers made. So long for the air to brighten,

Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.

The first part of the beautiful sequence *Squarings* which forms the second half of the book is itself called *Lightenings*, and celebrates a sequence of moments of vision and encounters with the marvellous. The last of these *Lightening* poems celebrates transfiguration; but not as convention might dictate, the transfiguration of Christ on Tabor, but rather the transfiguration of the thief on the cross, in and through the transfiguration of Christ on the cross beside him. It is about the discovery, in the midst of the dreadful and unpromising, of the promise of redemption. The pain that “seems untranslatable into bliss” is nevertheless translated by the power of the poet in Christ the Logos who enters into the pain precisely so as to transfigure and translate him into His paradise. But this poem celebrates more than the particular historical moment of the dying thief, hearing the unexpected music of Christ’s promise, “this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise” - it also celebrates what Heaney wonderfully calls the “good thief in us”, harking to the same promise:

xii

And lightening? One meaning of that

Beyond the usual sense of alleviation,

Illumination, and so on, is this:
A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares
With pure exhilaration before death -
The good thief in us harking to the promise!
So paint him on Christ's right hand, on a promontory
Scanning empty space, so body-racked he seems
Untranslatable into the bliss
Ached for at the moon-rim of his forehead,
By nail-craters on the dark side of his brain:
This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.

Brilliant as they are, these and many of the other individual poems in this volume in which we see an apparently familiar picture and then see it again in a new light, are only, as it were, lightening sketches for the great masterpiece which is at the centre of this volume and the poem from which it takes its title. *Seeing Things* forms a tryptich altar-piece at the heart of this volume through which the rest of the poems can be understood and appreciated. As with many tryptich paintings, the poem consists of a central panel portraying a moment in the life of Christ which is of universal significance, flanked by two side panels containing so-called "secular" imagery; in which the universal significance of the "sacred" event is worked out. None of these pictures can be seen except in the light of the other. In the central panel of a typical tryptich we might see the crucifixion and be tempted to locate it either only in distant Palestine at a distant time, or only in some "sacred" and isolated theological world; but in the panels beside it we see kneeling alongside the sacred figures of the Saints, perhaps the Holy Virgin or St. John, the patron or the artist himself in contemporary clothing. They are simultaneously present to and participating in the central event of the sacred panel and present to and sharing with us our own so-called, "ordinary world". We can no longer say "that was then, this is now". We cannot say as we look at the central panel that we are witnessing a past event. We find ourselves standing at the foot of the Cross, not surrounded by plaster saints and stained-glass images, but in the midst of our contemporaries. The central event may turn up anywhere and compel us to reinterpret all the other events to which it is suddenly juxtaposed.

I
Inishboffin on a Sunday morning.
Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel.
One by one we were being handed down
Into a boat that dipped and shilly-shallied
Scaresomely every time. We sat tight
On short cross-benches, in nervous twos and threes,

Obedient, newly close, nobody speaking
Except the boatmen, as the gunwhales sank
And seemed they might ship water any minute.
The sea was very calm but even so,
When the engine kicked and our ferryman
Swayed for balance, reaching for the tiller,
I panicked at the shiftiness and the heft
Of the craft itself. What guaranteed us -
That quick response and buoyancy and swim -
Kept me in agony. All the time
As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.

II

Claritas. The dry-eyed Latin word
Is perfect for the carved stone of the water
Where Jesus stands up to his unwet knees
And John the Baptist pours out more water
Over his head: all this in bright sunlight
On the façade of a cathedral. Lines
Hard and thin and sinuous represent
The flowing river. Down between the lines
Little antic fish are all go. Nothing else.
And yet in that utter visibility
the stone's alive with what's invisible:
Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,
The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.
All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps
And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered

Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.

III

Once upon a time my undrowned father
Walked into our yard. He had gone to spray
Potatoes in a field on the riverbank
And wouldn't bring me with him. The horse-sprayer
Was too big and new-fangled, bluestone might
Burn me in the eyes, the horse was fresh, I
Might scare the horse, and so on. I threw stones
At a bird on the shed roof, as much for
The clatter of the stones as anything,
But when he came back, I was inside the house
And saw him out the window, scatter-eyed
And daunted, strange without his hat,
His step unguided, his ghosthood immanent.
When he was turning on the riverbank,
The horse had rusted and reared up and pitched
Cart and sprayer and everything off balance
So the whole rig went over into a deep
Whirlpool, hoofs, chains, shafts, cartwheels, barrel
And tackle, all tumbling off the world,
And the hat already merrily swept along
The quieter reaches. That afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
and there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.

In the case of Heaney's tryptich, the central event is not the crucifixion but the baptism of Christ. And in it his most vital images of water and light and of a search for the source of life itself find their natural home. But in it too, his deep concern for the experience of suffering, for the sense of overwhelming and drowning sorrow, also have their place. For baptism is, of course, a mimesis of death by drowning; but also of resurrection and new birth. And so Heaney chooses to flank his central panel portraying the baptism of Christ with two "secular" panels portraying episodes in his own life strongly connected with

the fear of drowning. They are episodes in which there is at once a full understanding of our tragic mortality and yet an intimation of a hope beyond it. That intimation almost invisible in the side panels is made utterly visible in the central panel. The dynamic of this poem achieves in a far more complete way the transformation hinted at in Hill's sonnet sequence *Lachrymae*, where he begins with a dream of drowning, and finishes not drowned but *bathed* in promise and remorse. (see chap.8 pp:)

There are many other subtle links between the central and side panels of this poem; in the central panel, Christ "sees" and "is seen"; we see Him as He sees us. But also we see Him seen by His Father in heaven. The side panels are equally concerned with father-son relationships, and with the assurance of being seen. In the first, Heaney, the fearful child in a boat, imagines himself seen from above, and in the third, he is able in the extremity of his father's near death, at last to see him face-to-face. But all these renewals of vision are governed by the central renewal of the way we see things which is given in Heaney's depiction in the central panel, of the experience of seeing a work of art, a sculpture representing the baptism of Christ, in such a way as to see not only the event itself, but its true meaning as a source of life and light in his life and ours. The visual paradigm of the tryptich is essential for this poem because although the poems which form the sequence are numbered in latin numerals, and have at the first reading to be read linearly; necessarily we read them in that order *I, II III*. It is vital that this order does not dominate our subsequent readings. We must learn "to strike it rich behind the linear black", and to read the central poem, *II*, back into *I* and forward into *III*. This process is itself a mimesis of the Church's understanding of the Christ-event which occurs at the fullness of time; which is to say that all times, both before and after, find their fulfillment there. So in this reading of the poems we will begin with *II* the central panel

Claritas. The dry-eyed Latin word

Claritas. The opening word of this central poem might stand for the whole of Heaney's achievement in this volume, which is to engage our imaginations so that, if only for a moment, we see the once-opaque world with a new and luminous *clarity*. His choice in *claritas* of what he calls a "dry-eyed Latin word" also locates him, as does much of the other poetry in this volume, as a poet who is working right from the heart of both the Classical and the Catholic European traditions. The poem itself is ostensibly about a work of art in that tradition – the carved façade of a cathedral. And we are given a clarified and penetrating vision in the very medium of the poem itself; for the poem is one work of art, through which we are invited to see another work of art, the façade on the cathedral. This second work of art is, of course, and declares itself to be, a façade. It is intended to be something which by definition is only a surface, something which beckons us to that which is behind it. It stands above a door through which we are being invited to enter into the sacred space; within that space will be celebrated the liturgy, which is itself an invitation to "enter heaven".

Art is a medium which asks both to be seen and to be seen through; and the element which best represents it is water, at once life-giving and transparent for a light beyond itself. From his opening

word *claritas*, Heaney directs our attention to an art which is representing water, and representing water at the very sacred moment when the water itself is made representative of something else. The first paradox of the poem comes in the imaginative transformation of dry, opaque stone, into clear water.

Claritas. The dry-eyed Latin word

Is perfect for the carved stone of the water

Where Jesus stands up to his unwet knees

In the syntax and phrasing of the poem, the presence of the water is mediated and suggested by the carving of the stone, and presented to us in the past tense, the “carved” stone. But the presence of Jesus is absolute and unmediated. In reading the lines at first we have the sense not of a previously carved representation of Jesus, but for a moment, of Jesus Himself, life Himself, standing, “Jesus stands”. Having seen and then *seen* through the water to see Jesus, our view widens to take in the larger scene, and we see St. John the Baptist, pouring out more water over His head; and this time we have already moved beyond the second line, past the temporary surface of the artist’s work, the carved stone, towards the thing he is representing, the water itself. Half way through this fifth line, we step further back, and see an even wider picture: now we see the sunlight, falling on the face of the cathedral. We become aware of the great contrast between the dry, bright heat wavering on the steps through the afternoon, and the beautiful refreshing water that is represented to us through the wavering heat-haze. Heaney chooses to describe the sculpting of the water in lines that could equally describe the “lines” of his own poetry; indeed, he repeats the word *lines* to make the connection clear.

Lines

Hard and thin and sinuous represent

The flowing river. Down between the lines

Little antic fish are all go. Nothing else.

Heaney’s own lines, sometimes hard and sometimes sinuous, have indeed been able to represent “the flowing river” to his readers. The river that flowed from his personal Helicon, and as we have seen, continues to flow throughout his work; the river whose “source” he dared to intimate in translating John of the Cross. Now he comes in this poem to clarify our vision by sharing his own vision of another artist’s work, another artist’s attempt to represent through the representation of water, “the Source which is all sources source and origin”. As with *The Rain Stick*, where he exults in the fact that something as sparse and simple as the “fall of grit and dry seeds through a cactus stalk”, can release such cleansing waters, so here he delights that so much can be presented alive to the imagination in just a few hard, thin, sinuous lines. And he invites us to see with him, what he sees, as he beautifully puts it, “between the lines”, just as surely as his poetry invites us to read between *his* lines. In sharing his imagination of the Jordan in which Christ stands, he changes register to the easy colloquialisms of his childhood, with phrases like, “all go”, and surely the imagined river made *sacred* by the presence of Christ, is not the Jordan, but some clear-flowing little stream in Derry that the child Heaney had paddled in.

Then comes the phrase, all to itself and ending a line, “Nothing else.” How are we to read this? There is something almost teasing, perhaps in a distinctively Irish way, about the placement of these words. Is there the hidden ghost of an ironic question: “Nothing else? Is that it? Is this carving all there is to seeare you prepared to look again with me, and find yourself, as they say, *seeing things...*” *Nothing else* might be taken as a shorthand for the foreclosing finality of glib reductivism. We are “just a bundle of neuronsense.” The cosmos is a chance concatenation of atoms: nothing else. The music of the rainstick is the fall of grit and dry seeds. Nothing else. In which case, the next line’s defiant, “And yet”, swings in with the power of all those great reversals in the psalms, “Nevertheless, I am always with Thee”; it is as though Heaney is saying to the materialists, I can concede you everything about our irreducible materiality. . . *and yet*, I will always see something more. The phrase “Nothing else” I think also carries Heaney’s admiration for the economy with which the sculptor has transfigured stone. He has used “just a few lines, hard and thin and sinuous” to represent water – nothing elseyet those few lines so absolutely engage our imagination that we see between them with utter clarity the “shadowy, unshadowed streams” of our own childhood.

If there is to be grace in our life, and any vision and crediting of marvels, then such grace and vision has to come, not when we are already on the spiritual heights, but at the point of bleakness, at the point where we feel we’ve run into the brick wall, the point at which we say, “there is nothing else”. And so it is after that apparent finality, “nothing else”, that he chooses to make the explicit disclosure of what the art of this sculpture, and his own art, is all about. And that is, allowing us to see the invisible:

And yet in that utter visibility

the stone’s alive with what’s invisible:

The juxtaposition there of the words “visibility” and “invisible”, carefully chosen with their Latin root, carry a conscious echo of the Nicene creed which would be chanted within that cathedral: *Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium*. These lapidary, dry-eyed Latin words would have sounded and resounded throughout Heaney’s childhood. And what do they say? They say first that God is also a *maker*, a poet; He is the *factorum*, the Maker of all things; and like any good artist, only part of what He makes is visible. He is also the Maker of all things *invisible*. He is the Maker of both *caeli et terrae*, the heavens and the earth. For us now, it is the smaller part of His creation, the *terrae*, that is visible; but even the *terrae* is charged and alive with the possibilities of the invisible *caeli*. As another Catholic poet whom Heaney deeply admired put it, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God; it will flame out like shining from shook foil”. When a poet uses his art as Heaney does, to bring us *claritas*, then at any moment and in any place the visible may become alive with what’s invisible, and we may glimpse the gateway between earth and heaven through which even a rich man is invited to enter.

And so here, for Heaney, and for us as we read his poetry, the dry, stone façade of the cathedral upon which the hot afternoon sun is beating, is suddenly “alive with what’s invisible”. What are the invisible things that we and Heaney are now seeing?

Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,
The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.

None of these things are carved there, and yet we see them clearly; and through them we see something more: for what are we to make of this “shadowy, unshadowed stream itself”? Of course, it is a visible, remembered stream from Derry. Perhaps the place of that “betrothal” that Heaney spoke of, that numinous experience in childhood that was a baptism by any other name. The outward and visible stream is shadowed, literally, by the trees along its bank, and more profoundly in the way that all things in this world, where we “see through a glass, darkly”, are shadowed; but the stream Heaney sees between the lines on the cathedral façade is both “shadowy” *and* “unshadowed”. Through the shadowy stream also runs, invisibly, the unshadowed stream. And what is that? The unshadowed stream is the Eternal fountain, hidden away, “so pellucid it never can be muddiedlight radiates from it.” It is the stream that arises and flows “down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” (Jam 1:17) By the end of this poem, we are indeed seeing things. We see the most real and yet the most invisible of all things. We see the true Life, the One in whom is Life, and whose “life is the light of humankind”. By the end of the poem all this making, all this art, and even the water the art represents, and the wavering air through which the represented water is seen, have all become signs that point beyond themselves, become, “the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.”

What we have to do now is to let the light of the invisible, unshadowed stream flow from its place at the heart of the centerpiece here, into the scenes depicted in the two side-panels, so that they too may become “alive with what’s invisible”. The first of the two side-panels in this tryptich, the “left-hand panel” as it were, shows us a scene of embarkation. The poet is a small child being “handed down” into a ferry, and he relives both the vividness of everything he saw and also his vivid fear. But the poem closes with a sudden shift of perspective: in what might almost be an “out-of-body experience”, the poet looks down upon himself and his companions, and sees them, as we shall see, not merely through his own eyes. The poem starts clearly and vividly in the world of the visible. A specific location, a particular time. And all the enumerated things that a small child might see.

Inishboffin on a Sunday morning.

Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel.

In the second line, Heaney invokes and enumerates all these good things, one by one, “sunlight, turfsmoke. . .” almost as a background litany to the way in which the numbered children are handed down one by one into the boat. This careful enumeration both of what the children see and of the children themselves adds to the sense which grows on us in the poem of every precious thing, the whole of life, shipped into the one precarious, riskily faring boat. We enumerate these things, partly out of the very fear of losing them, and all this with the movement from phrases like “one by one” to “twos and threes” prepares us for the power of the poem’s final image, looking down upon our “numbered heads”, with its half-echo of Christ’s words that the very hairs on our heads are numbered. On the visible surface of the poem we see only a *vignette* of children being ferried on a calm dayelse?

But all the time we see the surface of the is poem, we are being invited to “see things” in and through it, just as surely as the poet looked over the side of the boat, down through the water and mysteriously from above, down at himself:

All the time

As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat

What do we see when we begin to see through the surfaces of these images? We find that they are not only very specific, a particular ferry on a particular Sunday morning, but also archetypal and universal. When Heaney says, “our ferryman swayed for balance, reaching for the tiller”, we can be sure that this ferryman is also Charon, and through Charon, the archetypal *psychopomp*, the guide of souls, the one who appears on the threshold, when we have to cross it. And lest we should miss this, Heaney includes in this volume under the title, *The Crossing*, his own translation of *Inferno*, Canto 3, 18-129, in which Charon ferries the poets. Just as, to make the Dante-Virgil axis quite clear, he opens the book with a translation of *Aeneid* VI, in which Vergil prepares to fare forth from the visible world of the living to the invisible world of the dead, and is counselled by the Sybil to exercise the the gift of clarified vision, to “look up and search deep”.

An entire section of the *Squarings* sequence of this volume, is called *Crossings*, and celebrates the fact that outward and visible journeys may also be stations of the soul; the poems are full of the numinous qualities of water:

xxxii

Running water never disappointed.
Crossing water always furthered something.
Stepping stones were stations of the soul.

Likewise, the figure of the *psychopomp* is particularly invoked by the notion that in any ordinary and literal situation an ordinary person might turn out to be the soul guide for the soul’s journey.

xxvii

Everything flows. Even a solid man,
A pillar to himself and to his trade,
All yellow boots and stick and soft felt hat,
Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet
As the god of fair days, stone posts, roads and cross-roads,
Guardian of traveller and psychopomp.
‘Look for a man with an ashplant on the boat’,
My father told his sister setting out

For London, 'and stay near him all night
And you'll be safe.' Flow on, flow on
The journey of the soul with its soul guide
And the mysteries of dealing-men with sticks!

And so as we look at these children "handed down" into the ferry on a Sunday morning, we find ourselves "seeing things". We see the beginning of our own "faring forth" through life, we remember with Heaney whatever our first glimpses were of life's vulnerability, its precious fragility, as Heaney panics at the shiftiness and heft of the craft itself. But we learn with him, too, to know the paradox expressed in his fear of the very thing that "guarantees" him, the quick heft and shiftiness of the boat. The very water that he fears will drown him and sink the boat, is the same water that buoys him up.

As the journey itself begins, we share with him this growing awareness of being seen as well as seeing, and the boy's imagined vision of himself from above, becomes an emblem both of our consciousness in life and of the intuitive faith that we exist because there is One who beholds us. The source of Heaney's imagined "other boat, sailing through air" is in an old Irish story which he retells in vii of *Lightenings*, a story whose entire purpose is to vindicate the imagination and to rekindle our sense of the marvellous:

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A sheip appeared above them in the air.
The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,
A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'
The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.
So Heaney looks down "out of the marvellous" *into* the marvellous, and sees both the riskiness of life,
and the love it evokes. Both he and we can:

see

How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.

What are we to make of the words, *in vain*? For all the panic of the little boy in the boat, the sea was very calm. The journey clearly came to a good end, or he would never have grown up to write the poem;

and yet somehow, he glimpses even through this little, and, (as it turned out) safe journey, the deep tragedy of our mortality. Indeed, this poem really marks the child's first intimation of mortality. His glimpse of the truth with which Milton prefaced, *Lycidas*, the lament for a friend who had drowned: "if we see rightly, shipwreck is everywhere" But this intimation of mortality, this looking down on those who seem so certain to be lost, is countered by the other intimation of immortality, carried implicitly as we have seen, in the penultimate word, "numbered". He has his first glimpse of our shared, human tragedy of loving in vain, of the shocks and griefs of parting and bereavement. But in the sudden shift of perspective in looking down, there is implied at least the vision of One whose love for us is not in vain, but whose love has the power to bring us at the end of an invisible journey, if we choose it, to fulfillment.

Taken by itself, one might find the weight in the balance of this poem, dipping as the boat itself dips down towards gunwales in the water, down towards the side of mortality, "risky and in vain"; but of course it is set beside the centerpiece, which is the true point of balance in this triptych. What light does that centerpiece shed on the things we see in this first panel? There, the water which Heaney fears, and fears will close over his head, is redeemed. For there, "John the Baptist pours out more water" over the head of Christ; and the water is not the sea of troubles or the sign of mortality, but the "zig-zag hieroglyph of life itself".

On the right-hand side of the triptych stands another picture: in this picture, the child Heaney sees his father walking back from the river near their house, having nearly drowned, and having nearly taken Heaney with him. For a moment, father and son meet absolutely in the intimacy of their shared mortality, face to face at last. The nearness of death strips away all the veils, and they really see each other. Heaney tells it quite consciously as a fairy-story, beginning with the words, "Once upon a time", and finishing with the words, "happily ever after." He does this both to evoke his childhood, but also to celebrate the renewed childlike vision of the adult poet who had waited till he was "nearly fifty, to credit marvels". It is the riskiness of our faring, the nearness of our mortality, the immanence of our ghosthood, that brings out in each of us the love we have for one-another. After this nearly fatal accident, Heaney's father returned, as it were from the dead: it's no longer simply "my father", but "my undrowned father".

Once upon a time my undrowned father

Walked into our yard.

As a little boy on that day, Heaney had wanted to go with his father driving the horse-drawn tackle that sprayed the potatoes on the field near a riverbank. But he "wouldn't bring me with him". His father comes back from the riverside, and Heaney sees him through a window and suddenly sees the soul in the man:

I was inside the house

And saw him out the window, scatter-eyed

And daunted, strange without his hat,

His step unguided, his ghosthood immanent.

There are echoes here of what Heaney observes in the poem on the Good Thief we've already quoted, as, "a phenomenal instant when the spirit flares with pure exhilaration before death"; and also of the poem in *Crossings* where he sees the young man on his way to Vietnam, and suddenly sees through the flesh to the soul: "

Yeats said, *To those who see spirits, huan skin*
For a long time afterwards appears most course.

The face I see that all falls short of since
Passes down an aisle: I share the bus. . .

Vietnam-bound,

He could have been one of the newly dead come back. . .

Having to bear his farmboy self again,
His shaving cuts, his otherworldly brow.

He sees at once the visible and the invisible; the utter visibility of the flesh, but flesh alive with what's invisible, precisely because of the nearness of death. His father tells him how the horse had reared up, how the whole rig had been swept over into the deep. And for Heaney, this acknowledgement of their shared vulnerability and of the unexpected gift of life after such a near-miss, becomes a station of the soul, a marking point in the relation of father and son. For a moment, they see each other as God sees them both, face to face.

I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
and there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.

The language here is clearly echoing the passage in St. Paul which in some ways underlines the whole effort of *Seeing Things*: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." (1Co 13:12) Like the picture on the first panel, this vignette from Heaney's life is also concerned with the fear of drowning, with the sense that the very water that sustains life also threatens it. But like that first panel, it is hinged upon and balanced by the centerpiece of the triptych, the baptism of Christ; what light does that central picture cast on this one?

There are a number of deliberate echoes in the language, especially the language of paradox. In the right-hand picture, Heaney meets his "undrowned father"; in the central picture, Jesus stands up to His "unwet knees". But the deepest parallels are the figurative ones; in the right-hand picture, we have a vivid portrayal of the relation between father and son, a relationship of love which has been clarified and renewed in the face of death. But we view this moment in the light of that central icon of the timeless relationship of God the Father and God the Son, in and through the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit,

which is shown forth in the baptism of Christ; for in the Baptism of Christ, the whole of the Holy and Undivided Trinity is present: there indeed, on the very point of contact between earth and heaven. The heavens are opened, St. John the Baptist saw the heavens opened and the Spirit come down in the shape of a dove, and the Father eternally affirm His love of the Son: “this is My Son, in whom I am well-pleased”. The Holy Spirit is poured upon Him in the form of the water, the Son absolutely receives and returns the love of the Father. But the river in which He stands, the river of this flowing relationship of love in the eternal life of the Father and the Son, is not confined to the picture; it flows out from the picture to water “heaven, hell and all peoples”. It flows in the first instance, out from the central poem into those two moments in Heaney’s childhood with which the baptism of Christ is flanked; it flows beyond them in an illumination of his vision as a poet throughout his work. Most of the time, it is implicit and invisible, but here in *Seeing Things*, Heaney allows us to see visibly the central icon which invisibly animates the imaginative truth of his poetic vision.

CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this book both to celebrate the moments of transfigured awareness in poetry, and also to discern the source of that truth which transfigured vision sees, that unexpected music which the imagination hears. In an age of faith, poets from the anonymous poet of *The Dream of the Rood*, who saw the Cross transfigured in light, to Milton invoking holy light, it was possible to find the Source of transfigured vision with direct simplicity in Christ the light of the world, and the light which “enlightens everyone who comes into the world”. From the mid-17th century onward, things could not be so simple again: as poets and philosophers alike faced the challenge of a reductive science that pulled down shutters over the windows of vision, bearing the bleak inscription, “nothing else”, we have seen how poets, to whom the clarification of our vision had been entrusted, fought a rear-guard action, and especially how Coleridge did this not simply by writing poetry full of clarified, imaginative vision, but also by undertaking the hard, philosophical work necessary to reinstate the imagination as an instrument with which we grasp reality rather than evade it. We have seen that in order to make sense of the actual experience of the writing and reading of poetry, he was compelled to rediscover the mystery of God as Holy Trinity. For Coleridge, and for all who have understood and followed him, poetry is not a fanciful compensation for the irreducible bleakness of things; it is part of the evidence that all things are at least potentially luminous with the light of God. Coleridge was a prophet sent more for our own age than for his; he foresaw the inadequacy of the whole Cartesian/Newtonian model with its foreclosed rigidities and its too-easy submission to what he called the “despotism of the eye”. Now, we live in an age when that rigid system, against which Coleridge was a lone protesting voice, has been overthrown. Those blinding shutters inscribed “nothing else” are being drawn up; but shall we see anything through the dusty windows behind them?

Who can cleanse the glass or train our vision? I have hoped in writing this book to suggest that a renewed and detailed re-reading of our great poets might help us to redress the imbalances of the modernist age which is passing, to renew our vision in the coming age; and in that renewal of our vision even of the visible to bring us back again to the Source of all things in the invisible life of God, Father,

Son and Holy Spirit, to whom be glory as is most just, now and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

There is a distinction ofcourse between Heaney the voice of the pilgrim poet in this sequence, and Heaney the public figure let alone Heaney the private man. In what follows I am refering to Heaney the voice of the pilgrim poet in this sequence.

1

2