Seamus Heaney's 'Hermit Songs': An education in the nexus of identity and language

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Abstract
In this paper I am going to explore the theme of this ERL issue – language and identity, by focusing upon a sequence of poems by the Irish writer, Seamus Heaney, 'Hermit Songs' (2010). I will argue that, by telling the story of his own identity formation through his encounter with reading, writing and the learning of languages, Heaney offers his own portrait of the artist as a young man. The story is a dynamic and dramatic one. Drawing upon close analysis of the poems based on literary critical models such as Practical Criticism and Intertextual criticism, I will demonstrate how Heaney's identity as a poet emerges out of a playful and painful agon about art and nature, about the private and the public, about art and reality.

Keywords*: Heaney, practical criticism, education and identity, language and identity, postcolonialism*

Introduction

'Hermit Songs' is a sequence of poems which appears in Seamus Heaney's last published volume, *Human Chain* (2010). I will suggest in this paper that Heaney's poetic sequence offers us a very interesting autobiography which is posited centrally on the 'story' of how his identity is formed by language(s) and of how he, in turn, forms language. There are a number of internal '*agons*' or dramatized struggles within the poem, cruxes, which have to do with language and identity. There is also a subtle but salient tension between language as oral and language as written. As the personal 'coming of age' narrative unfolds, we begin to realize that identity and language are not just private matters, but, on the contrary, profoundly public and, indeed, political. The identity formed within the poem sequence also challenges the classical western literary dialectic between nature and art, proposing, implicitly, a different poetics, which has its origins in a much older, more telluric orientation in which nature and art form a nexus rather than an opposition.
Heaney (2010, p.74) prefaces the sequence with an epigraph:

Above the ruled quires of my book
I hear the wild birds jubilant.

What we have here is the association of a rigorous scholarship – conveyed by that phrase, 'ruled quires' and what seems – in a Classical Western habit of reading, opposite to this stringent literary endeavor – the jubilant song of the wild birds. The hermit is inside, 'at his books'; nature, free, joyful and glorious is outside, but the two are intimately connected. Indeed, it may be that Heaney is creating a pun here; the sound of 'quires' is the same as the sound of 'choirs' and, in a possible ironic intertextual reference to Shakespeare's famous lines from Sonnet 73; 'bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' (1609; 1975: 1203). Shakespeare also puns on 'choirs'; meaning both the sound of harmonic music and the upper branches of a tree. The hermit *hears* the birds, attends to nature and is ruled by nature. He is, also in playful and rueful irony, ruled by the quires (rule lines) of his book. The epigraph can be read as a kind of annunciation (and, indeed an enunciation) of the kind of poet the speaker wishes to appear to be. Now, of course this poetic avatar as hermit closely connected with wild nature, has also an ironic aspect to it, because by the time this volume was published, Heaney has become 'Famous

Seamus' and a public man, a Nobel Laureate no less. So, a hermetic life is all but impossible. However, Heaney suffered a stroke, and many poems in this, his last volume, *Human Chain*, attest not just to his frailty ('Had I Been Awake', p. 3) and more broadly, to the theme of ageing and physical decline ('The Butts', p. 12; 'In the Attic, pp. 83-84) and, hence, the need to become, again, rather more withdrawn and secluded.

Theoretical background

This paper derives its theoretical positioning from New Criticism and Practical Criticism. This approach argues that each literary work needs to be viewed as an internal world – an arrangement of words that is self-contained and produces its own meanings from that specific arrangement of words. This approach stretches back to Aristotle, but in the twentieth century is associated with Practical Criticism, pioneered by the English critic, I. A. Richards (1929) and by the New Criticism of John Crowe Ransom (1941). More recently, Julia Kristeva (1980: 36), drawing upon Jacques Derrida, developed a related approach known as 'intertextuality, arguing that every literary text is a permutation of texts . . . where several utterances, taken from other texts intersect'. But, importantly, according to Raj (2015), intertextuality implies that any text is at once literary and social, creative and cultural.

Methodology

The paper will apply the theories outlined above and, thus, will involve a close reading of Heaney's poem sequence, 'Hermit Songs'. This close reading offers a methodology to enable the workings of language to be seen at very close range. The intertextual character of the poem will also be revealed.

Results and discussion

The sequence begins with, in grammatical terms, an inverted sentence:

With cut-offs of black calico,
Remnants of old blackout blinds
Ironed, tacked with criss-cross threads,
We jacketed the issued books. (Heaney 2010: 74).

Rhetorically, the stanza is one sentence – creating a fluidity, a conversational quality. Sonically, we have the brisk efficiency of the task registered in the predominance of bracing 't' and 'd' alliteration, balanced against the softer 'b' and 'l' sounds. And the poem begins *in medias res* (in the middle of things), dramatizing the scene where a family fashions covers for schoolbooks. This is a living process, not a still-life.

We are in a time just after World War 11. There is very little spare money in this rural community. The people recycle the stiff black material that had been used for blackout blinds during the war – which had a texture somewhere between thick paper and cloth. But there is nothing slapdash either; the jackets which are to encase and preserve the 'issued' books, are ironed and tacked with criss-cross threads. But why were they doing this anyhow? Well, the books are, we may note, 'issued' – a lovely pun for a poet who actually issues – brings forth, publishes, books. Now and again, the pupils or scholars as they were known, might get issued with a brand new book and, as the speaker says, at the end of the first poem, deploying the vocative 'you' to draw the reader into a world many would find unfamiliar, 'you' had to learn 'you were a keeper only'. You had to make a covert – a lair for the book in order to protect it. We may note the metaphor here – the book is like a precious animal, a little wild perhaps. It is part of Heaney's identity that nature is always contiguous to language; both reading and writing. The scholars have to be the keepers – gaolers of the wild book, but also, preservers of it. The speaker offers

a delightful little catalogue of the materials used to jacket books at this time, including wallpaper, brown paper, newsprint even:

Less durable if more desired
The mealy textured wallpaper:
Its brede of bosomed roses pressed
And flattened under smoothing irons. (Heaney 2010: 74).

How sensuous are the 'b' sounds and how intense are those hard edged 'd' sounds. And how accurate and sensuous is that description – for some wallpaper at that time did have a texture like the meal people used to feed cattle with or bake bread with. Its limitations are ruefully noted; its greater beauty acknowledged. But it is that word 'desired' that lifts the whole thing and allows Heaney to personify the paper as an attractive woman whose curves are pressed out, the better to make it bend to serviceability and away from young chaps and their adolescent fantasies. The pattern on the wallpaper – those 'bosomed roses' invokes roses that are fully blown, like the breasts of fantasy women. The lines hint, tenderly, ironically, at the drama of the speaker coming into his new sensual and sexual identity, but also, of course his sensory aesthetic awakening as a writer. We have intertextual echoes here of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); alerting us to the self-conscious artifice of the *Künstlerroman* – the making of the identity of the young artist hero, romantically imbricated and frustrated with bosomed roses pressed flat, while also, comically undermining, mocking all this hot love with the irony of irons.

And that word 'brede' – embroidery, but something stronger, more 'raised' in very sense (embossed, aroused and in Ulster dialect, vexed). There is, I think, some intertextuality here too; a quite specific verbal echo from the opening passage of *A Portrait* (Joyce 1916, 1969: 7):

O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.

He sang that song. That was his song.

Heaney may be alluding to that well known first paragraph of *A Portrait* to mock himself a little here – the adolescent fantasy here, as in Joyce is almost mawkishly Romantic. Significantly, though, for our topic, the lines from *A Portrait*, as Katherine Mullins (2016 unpaged), explains are, themselves, examples of subtly altered intertextuality:

The song he claims as 'his song', 'O, the wild rose blossoms / On the little green place' becomes changed to 'O, the green wothe botheth'. Significantly, the song Stephen sings has been altered from the original popular song, sung by a male mourner about his dead lover, 'poor lost Lilly Dale'. The chorus should be 'Oh, the wild rose blossoms / On the little green grave'. However, for a child, the song has been censored, the word 'grave' replaced with 'place'. This has the double effect of eliminating the song's 'unsuitable' topics of sexual desire, death and grief, and implying that the young artist is born into a culture where artistic expression will be repressed . . . Tellingly, Stephen changes 'wild rose' to 'green rose' – Ireland's national colour.

I cannot prove that Heaney was aware of all the elements here, but I think it is not improbable that he decides upon these full bosomed roses (among all the flowers available, golden daffodils included) because they echo that Dedalean nexus which seems to designate sexuality and nationalism as opposing yet ineluctably entangled forces. To follow the intertextual trail just a little further, when there is talk of roses, it is hard not to think of Yeats and also Blake. It would be easy and delightful to devote this entre paper to the word 'rose' but it is a symbol so very recursive that one would never manage to cover the vast constellations of intertextuality. Yet, I think Heaney deliberately chooses symbols which have this

sort of promise, but also he makes his choice because he is not a Naturalist, he is not interested in the rarity of a flower but rather, how common it is; how most people would know it and recognize it and also, concomitantly its symbolic propensities.

Thus, what the rose betokens here is both the tender sexual awakening of the young poet but also an awakening which is political, historical; an awakening of the poet's identity beyond the private sphere. As the last stanzas are to make clear, that call to a public, political identity is, to say the least, problematized. Identity in Ulster, in Ireland, is never allowed to be merely private. Identity is prescribed and proscribed within an historical and political nexus that can never escape being contentious. That is why, I think, he calls here, so obviously on Joyce in a kind of intertextual collaboration. Joyce is invoked to be both identified with as an authorial model who detached himself physically and, through some of his characters, detached himself from the nightmare of history. And Joyce's characters are often liminal, half inside, half outside their circumscribed world. As are certain Heaney avatars across his oeuvre, often eel-like, slippery, not quite reputable. That degree of self-criticism is not always commented upon but functioned, I think, as a necessary corrective to the increasing fame of the poet, as 'a smiling public man' as Yeats said of himself in 'Among Schoolchildren' (Yeats, 1928;1996, p.215). And, in a poem about the formation of literary and cultural identity, Yeats is not easily ignored. In deciding the rose as the motif of his book-wrapping wallpaper, Heaney perhaps pays homage to the rather overwrought symbolism of the young Yeats, and the ardency of his nationalism.

Yet Heaney, arguably, distances himself from both Yeats and Joyce in the coolness of his later years. As many of his poems indicate, he never really ceases to interrogate his identity. At times, he questions his own lack of adequacy to be public spokesman, bard for his own people. At other times, he repudiates any such constraining role. Furthermore, there may be a disquiet about being recruited by the Establishment in Northern Ireland an in England, as the gracious, soft spoken, twinkle-eyed, not too controversial 'voice' of the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. Here the urge towards asserting his freedom as a poet, private, hermited, is strong. The drama of the last section of the poem sequence makes this abundantly clear.

Heaney courageously acknowledges that he cannot be a poet for whom identity is a simple and uncontroversial matter – as it might be for some English poets. His entire oeuvre is a kind of negotiation, an endless openness and gracious receptivity to what is publically expected, in balance with what he must, as a hermetic, quiet crafter of words, also strive for.

In *A Portrait*, the young Stephen is fascinated by language, including archaic, literary words. So here, we begin to see that the identity of the speaker is forming itself - or has retrospectively formed itself not just from the sensory and the sensuous , but also from language itself .'Brede' is a marginal word, a dialect word, an archaic word, spoken by the subaltern. Yet, here it is, keeping alliterative company with a very literary, written sort of English.

But, as the poem makes clear, these scholars, might prefer the beauty of rose embossed wallpaper, but must make do with whatever is at hand and what can be affordable - 'brown parcel paper . . . 'newsprint even'. The point starts to become clear – the point is to preserve the books' 'to make a covert for the newness'. And that is because no pupil actually owns the books, they are to be passed down, re-used; different pupils become, in turn 'keepers of the books', as Parker (2012, p.341) notes. Yet, the effort is to 'make a cover for the newness', to somehow preserve the newness of knowledge itself.

It is a subtle point; the covering of the books to preserve them, because they are in such short supply, evokes a collective, public identity. This is, as it were, a community effort. Nobody owns the books, the people are merely keepers of books. That reflects a reality; in marginal worlds, people have not the money to buy books for their own house in the 1940s. But that state of affairs might have its compensations. In terms of identity, the idea that *educational* identity is formed not just individually, privately, but as part of a public, commonly understood *nostrum* is perhaps implied. There is the chain

back to that collective 'backing' of books (a terrific pun) Not everybody can have access to education, but there is a sense in which, at some communal level, there is backing, support for books, for education, though there may also be skepticism about it, as we will see. This is no simple *lumpen proletariat*, some undifferentiated subaltern group – but a glimpse into a world that is at the margin of a margin, a remote part of Ulster, itself a remote part of the UK, always trouble, well before 'The Troubles'. The litotically named 'Troubles', were to erupt in the 1960s, as that oppressed minority began to campaign for Civil Rights.

In Heaney's young days, there was, for someone from a Catholic background, a capacious and insidious system of discrimination. A name (we come back to language again) like 'Seamus' telegraphs Heaney's religious identity as a Catholic, and since it is a conspicuously Irish Gaelic name, his identity as Irish, as Nationalist. In Northern Ireland, these markers of identity cast him as part of a minority, never quite to be trusted by the State. Yet, it is not a simple as this, because the artist scholar of the poem sequence has access to a grammar school education, unlike most of his contemporaries, whatever their allegiance.

I may note that the form of the poems complies with and challenges traditional English canonical forms. We have four-line stanzas, quatrains, common in English lyrical literary, written verse, but a form which harks back also to the oral ballad form. In addition, Heaney's quatrains are worked in pararhyme rather than full rhyme. In terms of meter, he uses a rather unusual three beat (feet) line, known as *trimeter* – though some lines are cast in the more conventional four feet (tetrameter). So Heaney's form is much looser and this is emphasized in the uneven distribution of accents or stresses; again rather more like conversational English than the marshalled regularity of canonical verse. As Tóibín (2010) comments, this adds a buoyancy, a refusal to close and conclude' to the whole collection. Heaney also augments orthodox English alliterative patterning with a key feature which is also prominent in Gaelic Irish poetry, assonance (repetition of the same vowel sound, internal rhyme).

In the second poem, the locale moves out from the home to the school as the 'scholars' begin to develop their education from more books. 'Scholars' was the word used right up into the 1960s for anybody who got to school at all! Most people who did not come from privileged backgrounds, did not get beyond elementary education. Heaney benefited from the 1947 Education Act, by which scholarships were awarded to Grammar Schools on the basis of merit. As Walker (2017) argues, this legislation was transformative for 'scholars' from marginal backgrounds, Catholics and Protestants both. Heaney won a scholarship and progressed from elementary education to the prestigious St Columb's College in Derry, named after St Colmcille, patron of the city and anchorite missionary.

Though the clever and fortunate young Seamus gets his place in St Columb's, Heaney resists any temptation to present his younger self as a prodigy. The objective is not to set up his scholar as a hero, but as an ordinary boy who struggles with education and with the learning of languages. There is a keenness to connect with the reader not awe her/him. Yet, for all its difficulties, there is great excitement too in learning. Look how vivid and exhilarating Heaney makes this process of hesitant reading:

Open, settle, smell, begin. (Heaney 2010: 74).

Smell, for that is what you did and there was such a difference there was between the white smell of a new book and the musty flaccidity of an old, worn book. Learning is sensory as much as cerebral; a lesson Heaney may have learned from Joyce's *Portrait*. The bounce of the repeating 'e' assonance beautifully conveys the scholar's restlessness, fear and excitement.

And these scholars begin what is a time-honored journey and in their bookwork they are one with Fursa and Colmcille, 'the riddle-solving anchorites'. They too are hermits, part of a Great Tradition, albeit one that was very nearly lost, due to the coming of the English with their very different language,

customs, laws and the subsequent extirpation of respect for the culture and the corpus of illuminated manuscripts which had been created over centuries by 'scholars – clerics and poets. The scholarly activity has religious, moral and philosophical dimensions. The answering of riddles is central. Scholarship is about understanding character – another lovely pun, when we consider we are literally in the medium of language, of a slow, novitiate where the scholars must spell out the words, must trace the word with their finger. Education, learning, is literally embodied.

Macóige of Lismore is the riddling anchorite most favored by the young Heaney – but, also, it seems, preserved, endorsed also by the older Heaney, the one he ranks most highly. There is a lovely interplay, a kind of mirroring between the young scholar and the older poet scholar – identity it seems, has a kind of continuum. Heaney might well be offering a sly wink to the reader here, invoking in our imaginations, the famous dictum of the English poet, William Wordsworth – 'The child is the father of the man':

Steadiness, for it is best
When a man has set his hand to tasks
To persevere. I have never heard
fault found with that. (Heaney 2010: 75)

But it is hard advice too, the task before them is daunting, their words are 'tongue-tied' – whether in English or Irish or the Classics, they have to read the teacher's lips to get the right sound, they must then compare that with what is written down, trace with their finger, re-trace. And what have we here? Something absolutely at the heart of Irish literature; the intimate and often parlous connection between the oral and the written, the tension between writing and speaking. But, as we will see, that distance is not just private but communal and again, revolves around tricky questions of identity.

Though Heaney does not mention it, his Ulster and Irish readers will take it as' read' if I may proffer a pun', that people, especially from the less privileged classes and places, grew up speaking one language – a dialect, yet being taught to write in standard English. The spoken dialect is not the preserve of either Catholics or Protestant, it may be noted, but, it is, whether people wanted to acknowledge it or not, a mix of Gaelic (Irish and Scots), Elizabethan English and even some Norse words. This palimpsest reflects the history of 'settlement or invasion (depending on one's point of view), and contingently, it also reflects the co-existence of different linguistic identities. This dialect, then, is both a symbolic site of identity conflict and also a kind of resolution or hybridist synthesis of identities, borrowing here from Bhabha's concepts (1994).

This informal, unofficial spoken or oral form of language is then, if not in conflict with, at least in stark contrast to the written English taught through the National Schools (founded in the 1840s) and insisting on English as the medium, though many people in Island still spoke Irish – as well as dialect. Standard *written* English was considered by the policy makers and teachers, by and large, to be proper English, proper language and dialect was rather frowned upon. As Walsh (2016) points out, the culture and curriculum were essentially British and imperial.

In terms of identity, then, dialect is considered Irish or Northern Irish, whereas writing is English. This is a common state of affairs globally, acknowledged by terms like Englishes – Indian, African and other cultures inflect English, in its spoken form, with constructions and words from the native languages. Now Heaney does not concern himself with this at all, but rather, with typical obliqueness and delicacy, shifts the linguistic ground to the difficulty of learning languages, which are *not* English. But, of course, there is an irony here, because the young scholar is 'tongue-tied' trying to learn how to both speak and write what has become, because of this history of valorizing English, in effect, a foreign language, Irish. Historically, the language was outlawed by the English. Eventually, since here was evidently so little to be gained by holding on to what might be defined as 'the losing language'. And what Heaney is also eloquently silent about is that in 'State' Schools; that is the schools attended by people from Protestant

and Unionist majority, Irish language or history are not generally taught at all. After all, Northern Ireland was considered British by the ruling majority, so other forms of identity were not warmly encouraged. Yet, as Heaney suggests in another poem connecting language, identity and education, 'Alphabets' (Heaney 1987, 1998: 292-294) there is a paradox:

The new calligraphy [of Irish] felt like home (p. 293)
And there is also, the connection of this lost native language
with both cultivated and wild nature:
The letters of the alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches (p. 293).

But Heaney is also keen to stress that life at St Columb's is not altogether glamorous: The scholars, wrote their exercises with a pencil, and not everybody might have an eraser or a rubber as it was called then. However, people were resourceful and took a little bit off a piece of bread and removed their mistake by rubbing the ball of bread over the errant word. And that is why satchels, always lost their nice new leathery smell and got musty. Again, we are always made aware of the sensory, the ordinary, in this august process of learning:

This was the age of lessons to be learnt. (Heaney 2010: 75).

The speaker, playfully conscious of speaking to young readers as well as older readers, explains like a benign schoolmaster:

Reader, ours were 'reading books'
And we were 'scholars', our good luck
To get such schooling in the first place. (Heaney 2010: 75).

So, the herdsman by the roadside, the sibyls of the chimney corner pronounced that the scholar is privileged. Most of the ordinary people had very little schooling and were pulled out of education to work on farms or serve their time in the shipyard or the factory or at the carpentry or the plastering. But many were left behind. The herdsman and the sibyl warn the young scholar not to waste the privilege of education. And thus, here is another kind of tension in identity; the gap between the scholar, out of his own community, a boarder at the lofty college in Derry city and the community he comes from. And, as we all know from Heaney's perhaps most famous first poem, 'Digging' (1966), that gap grows as the scholar turns into a poet. His identity is increasingly that of the outsider.

While the rigor and drudgery of the reading books and the rote learning and the painful acquisition of knowledge may have rankled, there were wonders too. In addition to the rubbing bread (food for thought or at least correction, but a far away from Proust's little cakes) there were:

Birds and butterflies in 'transfers':
Like stamps from Eden on a flyleaf. (Heaney 2010: 75).

And oh, those bright, gorgeous colors among all the 'serviceable' navy blue and brown and black that constituted the narrow range available to ordinary people. We may note that Heaney's simile offers us nature as Prelapsarian, as paradisiac, but markedly, exotic. These colors, of course, belong to the world of art, including perhaps, the once lucent world of the mediaeval manuscripts. Transfers were little blocks or stamps bearing a pattern, which you could imprint upon the flyleaf or front pages of a book.

Often the 'transfers' depicted birds or insects or flowers gain their inspiration from places far away – the bright Middle East where Eden was, supposed to be, geographically speaking. And even if the transfers depicted species more European or British, they were rendered in a very lush, idealized fashion – quite at odds with the reality of most people's experience of nature.

The transfers are on books and they symbolize also how what is inside the book – language – is transformative – enabling the scholar to transfer from the confining and dull classroom and the sometimes oppressive political and social order of Northern Ireland to a gorgeous, bright, world; an otherworld in dramatic contrast to the laborious world of the classroom.. The butterfly is well chosen as the transfer – it can fly and it is also in some cultures, including early Christianity – the era of the saints and scholars - a symbol of the soul (Antonakou & Triarhou 2017).

And, in the fourth poem in the sequence, further treasure is discovered:

The master's store an otherwhere:
Penshafts sheathed in black tin – was it?-
A metal wrap at any rate,
A tight nib-holding cuticle -
And nibs in packets by the gross
Powdered ink, bunched cedar pencils,
Jotters, exercise books, rulers
Stacked like grave goods on the shelves. (Heaney 2010: 76).

This is a word of immense plenitude, a land of Cockaigne for the scholar. An otherwhere you might be sent to as a great privilege, where you would see wonders you never even dreamed of. Striking here is the trope of the voyage, the *immram* to a terra incognita; just like the journeys undertaken by Colmcille and St Brendan, those earlier 'scholars' and anchorites, the young scholar of the poem is sent on his mission.

But with a quite beautifully ironic inadvertence, what he is most impressed with is the sheer massing of quantity, the sense of the store as a kind of imperial warehouse, full to the throat of exotic goods; *copia rerum* (copious amounts of things)rather than *copia verborum (copiousness in words)*. And, of course, the young scholar's wonder at an otherwhere that could hold such goods is poignantly appealing, for there was so little money in most homes for the stock of education – books, paper, pens.
The voyage of discovery the boy makes is complex – both into art and into a kind of imperial otherworld – as if, beneath the surface there was some connection between them. Heaney may be hinting here at the marketization of art, the way the writer must become famous and a good 'dealer' of his own art; he must give up the solitary, anchorite life so crucial to producing art – a kind of paradox. But also, perhaps, Heaney is hinting that the appeal of *copia rerum* is hard to resist.

In poem five of the sequence, we are drawn into more riddles and offered another angle on identity:

There are three right ways to spell *tu*.
Can you tell me how you write that down?
The herdsman asks. And when we can't,
'Ask the master if *he* can.' (Heaney 2010: 76).

The young scholar's encounter with the herdsman is also an encounter of identity. As noted earlier, the boy who gets to become a scholar in a boarding school is, as a consequence, somewhat separated from his own community. Heaney makes this estrangement even more plangent by using the very formal and very English Pastoral term, 'herdsman'. And Heaney , in an another ironic brace, dramatizes a situation which shows that the bookish scholar may not be a match for the ordinary farm laborer – he

might not be schooled but he is not without prowess in language. The riddle is, tellingly, linguistic and, indeed intralinguistic, crossing three languages at least. The riddle punningly 'plays' between oral, spoken language and written forms.

How would the herdsman's riddle be solved? In English, of course there are three ways; 'to',' two' and 'to'. They all sound the same, but are written differently and have different meanings. But 'tu' is also a word in Irish meaning 'you' and 'tu' also means 'you' in French and in Latin. The herdsman both respects and teases the scholar. Why? Because he is a herdsman. He is not, we may note, a farmer, but a man who likely works for a farmer. His chances of becoming a scholar are extremely remote. So, he both acknowledges the value of education and at the same time, cannot resist pulling down the scholar. The humiliation of this young fellow; the setting of a problem that he cannot solve is a ludic defense mechanism, for the herdsman is asserting, however nonsensically, that he still knows more than the clever boy or even the Master. There is a paradoxical mixture of pride and contempt in this rural world for the scholar – he is perhaps able to rise above his station, but in doing so, he is both admirable and to be scorned. This is a people conditioned for centuries to servility, to being, like so many peoples, considered inferior. They must be educated, civilized. But other knowledge will out too, and the herdsman, perhaps relying on oral memory, knows, maybe as much about language as the young scholarship boy. That is Heaney's great humor and humility as a poet.

And then, Heaney turns, as he so often does, nimbly upon his heel. We have a little Latin tag, considerately translated for scholars of the contemporary age – Latin having largely disappeared from the curriculum in the United Kingdom:

Neque, Caesar says, fas esse
Existimant ea litteris
Mandare. 'Nor do they think it right
To commit the things they know to writing'. (Heaney 2010: 76).

The chasm between voice and text, between oral and written knowledge opens again. The oral poets and their audience, then, did not think it right to write. The herdsman offers some sardonic contempt for writing also. Or is it just, also, that he has not been taught to, or does Heaney want us to weigh carefully the hegemonic concept that writing is always right, superior? Heaney is perhaps subtly asserting that voice, that oral, vernacular culture must be offered greater respect – it might not be 'natural' to the privileged people of central London, but it is natural in the rural margins of Ulster. And, indeed, the point is not a narrow one – considering the position (or lack of position) of oral cultures in the modern era. Heaney comments on this very issue in an interview with John Brown (2002, p.76):

The Anahorish [the Primary School Heaney attended] schoolboy was learning big art language and being set on track to become the A-level candidate and the First Arts student. Linguistically upwardly mobile . . . I'm conscious, all the same, that some of the recent work I've done in in criticism and translation grows out of that old vernacular stuff that's always there.'

Heaney is not the only writer to see the problematics of language and identity, the competing claims of oral and written. I am reminded of a novel by the contemporary Irish writer, Colm McCann, *Zoli.* The Romani elders encourage Zoli to learn the old songs and perform them but disapprove of her desire to learn to read and write. It is as if the sacral, the inner knowing of a people will become profaned by their exposure to a wider world through writing. The elders, to use a colloquialism, 'make strange' with literacy. For it is not just the business of reading and writing itself; it is the inevitable threat of being overwhelmed by outside culture, with its beliefs and 'fashions' so inimical to the traditions and faith systems of an oral people.

In Heaney's version of Irish cultural history, the Latin tag holds true until one book transforms the situation. We may note the irony, for to be able to quote the Latin signals that Heaney is the scholar

who knows the written culture that came with the Clerics and their Latin, and of course, the irony behind that is the whole concern with physical books and the preservation of them and dissemination of 'scholarship' with which the poem begins.
So what is the book that causes a 'paradigm shift?

The psalm book, called in Irish, *cathach*,
Meaning 'battler', meaning victory
When borne three times round an army. (Heaney 2010: 77).

We may glimpse the jut of ritual, of older ways, in that 'three times' is fused or juxtaposed with the Christian trope of the Trinity. There was a battle about the Battle Book, but beneath this is, of course a kind of epigrammatic history of Irish history, including the manner in which they who had once, in reforming zeal, banned the Irish language and culture came to present its remnants to their academies a couple of centuries later. Yet, as wise Heaney ruefully recognizes, battle is exciting. Exhilarating, and not just for schoolboys, for it summons the old heroic past. The particular book would have been much enshrined too in the hearts of the teachers at St Columb's College in Derry, given its connection with the school's patron saint. And, as Parker (2012: 342) points out, the masculinity of the language here – and elsewhere in Heaney, right back to 'Digging' conveys ' the idea of texts as means of ideological struggle'. Thus in the next poem we are ushered into the high drama of that other world of warriors:

Sparks the Ulster warriors struck
Off wielded shields made Bricriu's hall
Blaze like the sun, according to
The Dun Cow scribe; (Heaney 2010: 77).

We may note that Heaney does not let us forget that this is part of *a story*, and a story written by a scribe, perhaps a cleric, but one also invested with the heroic values of a pre-Christian culture. The story ('Bricriu's Feast'), ends in betrayal, the hall becomes a slaughterhouse. We may note also that the cleric is described as the Dun Cow scribe, bringing us right back to the first poem in the sequence. The Book of the Dun Cow is so called because its *jacket*, its cover was made from the hide of a brown (dun) cow.

And, in this glittering vision, or *aisling*, invoked by Heaney, Cuchulain, warrior of warriors:

Entertained the embroidery women
By flinging needles in the air
So as they fell the point of one
Partnered with the eye of the next
To form a glittering reeling chain – (Heaney 2010: 77).

Now, the reference to embroidery, calls back the colloquial and archaic 'brede' of the first poem, so that the different parts of the poem form a kind of invisible chain, connecting people across time and space. And then there is the fantastic metaphor of the glittering, reeling chain formed by the needles falling into connection.
But Heaney, turns this exquisite image up and out, while chaining it back to a previous poem in the sequence:

As in my dream a gross of nibs
Spills off the shelf, airlifts and links
Into a giddy gilt corona. (Heaney 2010: 77).

A corona – a circle of light, often a kind of nimbus around the sun or moon, formed by droplets of water. As Parker (2012: 343) points out, the astounding effect is replicated in the soundscape of the poem with its chain of assonance and alliteration.
And this summons the next poem in Heaney's Shakespearian chain of thought, his aisling:

A vision of the school the school
Won't understand, nor I quite:
My hand in the cold of a running stream
Suspended, a glass beaker dipped
And filling in the flow. (Heaney 2010: 78).

This is both metaphor and observed reality. The water droplets, which have had to form the corona, now alchemically run together as the flow of water in a cold stream. So we are back down again, physically speaking, the young scholar is by a stream, collecting water in a beaker. He is in touch, quite literally, with nature, even though he is a scholar.

And then there is 'glass beaker' with its connotations of science on one hand and ancient Irish oral culture – there would have been beakers full of treacherous drink at Bricriu's Feast. And there is the extraordinarily paradoxical image of the beaker filling in the flow. Absolutely scientifically accurate, but yet mysterious; nature and science part of one another, yet separate. Why does the scholar fill his beaker? He has been sent for water; 'the privileged one' (a good scholar, and also, a country boy whose dream is to escape outside). And what is the water for? To turn ink powder into ink: the chain continues. But there is something else about getting outside:

Out in the open, the land and the sky
And playground silent, a singing class
I've been excused from going on,
Coming out through opened windows
Yet still and all a world away. (Heaney 2010: 78).

Silence and music. We cannot but think of late Yeats and that phrase, 'the singing masters of my soul' and of his poem, 'Among Schoolchildren' (1928). For here is Heaney, over 70 himself, back among the schoolchildren of his youth, but with a difference, there is no Yeatsian detachment and loftiness here. Heaney is both the child and the older man. And this double perspective of past and present, and of the change that has come into the world, is the 'turn' or *volta* in the next poem. And there is a faint Yeatsian echo here too, 'all changed, changed utterly' (1919), but for Heaney, no terrible beauty has been born He challenges, intertextually, the attitude of Yeats. There is no scorn in his voice for the present, however adulterated and estranged the world has become. Indeed, Heaney simply refuses this dialectic, steering his poem back to the ancient past:

'Inkwell' now as robbed of sense
As 'inkhorn': a dun cow's perhaps,
Stuck upside down at dipping distance
In the floor of the cell. (Heaney 2010: 78).

Again, what is important is the intimacy of the association between the ordinary world and the scholar's world. The cleric dips his pen into a crude vessel, an inkhorn made from the horn of, maybe, a

dun cow. The very medium – the ink – is held by a thing out of nature and specifically out of a life of farming. We cannot but think back to the herdsman on the road.
The thought turns again:

Hence Colmcile's
Extempore when a loudmouth lands
Breaking the Iona silence:
The harbour shouter, it roughly goes,
Staff in hand, he will come along

Inclined to kiss the kiss of peace,
He will blunder in,
His toe will catch and overturn
My little inkhorn, spill my ink. (Heaney 2010: 78-79).

It is clear that there is some sort of maybe even slightly Yeatsian rage here at those who do not admire the finer things, who disturb the writer, clumsily loudly. But what of that 'kiss of peace'? there could be a number of meanings- perhaps the harbor shouter is a kind of Judas figure, ready to betray the writer with his loudmouth blunderings. Maybe this is Heaney uncoupling himself from politicians and maybe also, popular culture– that famous moment on the stage where the popular rock musician. Bono, insists on raising the hands of David Trimble and John Hume, for succeeding in forging an agreement to end the 'heroics' of the violence of The Troubles. Heaney's quiet words from his play, *The Cure at Troy* (1990) about hope and history rhyming are megaphoned, sloganized; as if peace were so easy, especially in a warrior culture. Heaney makes very clear that the rhyming of hope and history is implausible – a once in a lifetime possibility. And, of course, a linguistic transgression, a rhyming miracle since ,even, for a poet so tuned as Heaney, 'the words 'hope' and history' do not rhyme, except, perhaps as an alliterative chime. Ó Séaghdha (2020) explains the historical context more fully. But certainly, Heaney's words were vatic, as well as sanguine. Significantly, Heaney, quoted, has become, as it were, the public voice. That he was ambiguous all his life about the role of the poet – torn between hermetic dedication to his craft, in tune with nature, an essentially private 'scribe' and his role as an increasingly public and famous figure, and, the expectation among some, that he would be the public Bard , representing his people, speaking for them and from them. But to speak only for his people was a sentence he often resisted, for it would have meant being conscripted to speaking for one side of the conflict only. And, in turn, that would have diminished his work to the local, the partisan even, where he wanted to be a poet of both district and circle – of the local and the universal, oral and literary.

We come to the final poem of the sequence. Here, it seems, the poet speaks, writes back to the world and, maybe specifically, to those who have interpreted his own work. In so doing, he offers us an insight into his own Poetic. Heaney dismisses the quest for meaning – so common and often anguished a search in the post-modern world. 'Meaning' come loose, as it were from its moorings, runs through space like a word screaming and protesting. It is altogether too shrill, too self-conscious even. Perhaps the great one here is T S Eliot or Yeats or Czeslaw Milosz? Or maybe, just the idea of poets being canonized, lionized?

Another great one puts faith in 'Poet's imaginings
And memories of love' (Heaney 2010: 79).

That, I suspect, would be Yeats. That too is renounced by Heaney as too grandiose and also too indulgent; harking back only to an unduly personal domain containing memories of love, and repudiating the world of nature itself.

The speaker, if not Heaney himself, puts his faith, 'for now' –a nice hedging of bets, but also a wonderful irony, for the reader knows that Heaney's 'for now' has meant 60 years effort, in 'steady-handedness. He has taken his cue from Macóige (poem 2), and maybe too, from his own people, where steadiness was the prime farming virtue, and of course, steady-handedness chains back to his early efforts at copying, tracing and re-tracing, back at school. The steady-handedness is maintained in books against the vanishing of faith itself. And we may note the exquisite choice of 'maintained' here, with its subtle pun on the French 'hand' (main), emphasizing the idea of books issuing slowly and painstakingly from hand writing, the use of ink, and always, the link back to nature itself.

So, while Heaney does not define this 'faith' in any religious sense, indeed faith is transposed from religion to art in a gesture reminiscent of Joyce's Dedalus, or even the Yeatsian proclamation – 'words alone are certain good' (minus flounce). The books he cites, his authorities, as it were, the books he copies are the products of a glittering encounter between the oral and written, between Paganism and Christianity – whatever tensions between 'self' and other' between a culture nearly rubbed out under the power of another:

Books of Lismore, Kells, Armagh,
Of Lecan, its great Yellow Book, (Heaney 2010: 79).

The Yellow Book of Lecan was put together in the seventeenth century, not by an Irish man but by Edward Lhuyd, born on the English Welsh border and a scholar of Celtic literatures. We may note the incantation of place names ('me in the place, the place in me' – to borrow from another poem in this volume, 'A Herbal' (2010: 43). The place names are part of that oral culture, they form the palimpsest of histories on the island of Ireland.

In the final two lines, we return to the *Cathach*. I suspect, that here Heaney almost declares his hand, images himself as a poet who has had to be, for all his mildness of manner and steady-handedness, the battler. Any sense of a personal annunciation here is swiftly replaced by a shift towards books themselves. Modest, as always. But also, I think, suggesting that battles are not always glittering and heroes are not always warriors. Of course, the vertical take-off of the final section – the leap into imagination, the alchemical rise of the poem suggests, playfully, that there is quite another side to this poet. He has earned his flight of fancy.

Conclusion

Many might view Heaney's own oeuvre as 'berry browned' and enshrined. Though, doubtless, he would give a smudge of a smile at that, even though he knows his own work is now enshrined among the Great Ones, there on the School Curriculum of my grand-nephew, a scholar of this time, tracing and re-tracing his way through Heaney's own work. But, of course, his canonization, if I may so term it, does not, ironically do him justice. For how many people think beyond that apprentice poem, 'Digging'? 'Hermit Songs' offers a marvelously vivid and touching account of how a poet from a marginal background forms himself through language, slowly, hesitantly. By the end of the poem, this steady-handed craftsman scribe has become a soaring artist, a visionary, but, in the end, on his own terms. In that sense, the poem traces the trajectory of Heaney's own progression as a poet. As O'Brien (2018: 5) rightly notes; 'Perhaps the most overt break in style, to use Helen Vendler's term (Vendler 1995) is a movement from an artesian to an aerial imaginative structure.' He repudiates the attempt to conscript him into any role as Bard, commenting on the present, satirizing and cursing his enemies in the old propogandist tradition. He repudiates also any calling to become a poet of the privatized emotions like

so many poets of the twentieth century. He is devoted to language, he is a fan of Practical Criticism we might say, but he is also a fan of locating poetry within the historical conditions, which produced it. Acutely aware that he is now on the curriculum and thus embedded in education, he graciously chooses to suggest that a poem is itself an education, leading in to the self, but also, as the root of the word 'education' suggests, leading out. These are songs, which make us want to sing.

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