A Stepping Stone Rather Than a Destination: Analyzing Seamus Heaney's Pastoral

Joshua David Thompson

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

Peter W. Graham, Chair
Fred D'Aguiar
Nancy A. Metz

March 30, 2015
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, pastoral, antipastoral, English pastoral, Irish pastoral

Copyright © 2015 by Joshua D. Thompson

A Stepping Stone Rather Than a Destination: Analyzing Seamus Heaney's Pastoral

Joshua David Thompson

ABSTRACT

As an Irish farm boy turned educated poet, Seamus Heaney navigates a liminal space between the world of agriculture and the world of letters. Many of his poems draw upon his rural childhood experiences, infusing them with firsthand accounts of life on an Irish farm. As a result, most scholars label Heaney's poetry as antipastoral, noting its failure to provide the idyllic look at the countryside that is characteristic of traditional pastorals. However, reconsiderations of the pastoral mode reveal a unique aspect to Heaney's poems that is derived from his liminal existence as both a rural Irishman and as an educated writer. This thesis aims to analyze Heaney's particular version of the mode, noticing not only specific characteristics of his pastoral but also charting his development as a pastoral poet throughout his career. Through close readings of select poems contextualized by events in Heaney's life, I demonstrate not only why Heaney should be considered a pastoral poet but also how he transforms the pastoral mode.

For the man who has had the greatest impact on my life—

I miss you, Pa.

Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks and gratitude go to my committee members whose generous feedback helped shape this thesis throughout the process. Fred D'Aguiar's knowledge of modern Irish poets assisted my efforts in situating Heaney amongst his contemporaries, namely Eavan Boland, and in contextualizing Heaney's work with events from his life. Fred's contagious enthusiasm also kept me energized throughout my time with this project. In addition, my writing would not be what it is if it were not for Nancy Metz whose sharp, critical eye and insightful comments made sure I was appealing to all readers, not just those familiar with Heaney's life and poetry. She kept me grounded, and I have enjoyed introducing her to one of my favorite poets.

My biggest thanks and deepest gratitude, however, are owed to Peter Graham who has seen this project from its inception. Any graduate student would be lucky to have a committee chair who provides a helpful hand, critical eye, and patient ear as Peter has for me. He introduced me to Heaney and has been with us ever since.

Thank you all.

Table of Contents

Being Set a Bit Apart 1

Shifting the Focus: Placing Heaney in the Irish Pastoral Tradition 6

Beyond the Irish Pastoral: An Exposition of Heaney's Pastoral Poetry 21

"I'll dig with it": Agricultural Anxieties and Metapoetic Tools Tilling *Opened Ground* 53

After *Opened Ground*: A Look at Heaney's Post-Nobel Career 73

Works Cited 86

Being Set a Bit Apart

Published in 2008, the Irish poet and essayist Dennis O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones* remains to be the best example of an autobiographical account of Seamus Heaney's life as an Irishman and poet. The book is a collection of sixteen interviews primarily conducted in written correspondence between Heaney and O'Driscoll. The interviews are grouped thematically, "allowing for a blend of contemporaneous commentary and retrospective recollection" in Heaney's responses (O'Driscoll ix). O'Driscoll notes that "[t]he adoption of a collection-based approach left [him] free at any stage to ask Heaney. . .about aspects of his growing up and his development as a writer" (ix).

Regarding his family's reaction to his developing poetic career, Heaney remarked, "It's probably fair to say that, from the morning I left our front street for St Columb's College in 1951, there was some understanding in the family that I was off to a different place" (O'Driscoll 99). Son of a farmer and cattle dealer, Heaney continued his education past primary school as a result of the United Kingdom's 1947 Education Act, "which significantly broadened access to secondary and university education, making it easier for students from less prosperous backgrounds to remain within the educational system for much longer than would traditionally have been the case" (Murphy 11). Heaney's secondary and post-secondary education started with that first step to St. Columb's College and led to his graduation with first-class honors from Queen's University Belfast and later completion of a diploma course in teaching at St. Joseph's College of Education in Belfast. As one might imagine, for Heaney's family, higher education was a new concept. He referred to his enrollment at St. Columb's as "a definitive moment" and noted that "[n]othing altogether prepared any one of us for what was happening" (O'Driscoll 32). Heaney's parents "were out of it," strangers in a strange land (O'Driscoll 32). This decision to

attend St. Columb's College, a move that sparked his journey through higher education that eventually led to his poetic career, was an obvious rift in his relationship with his family and its history. As Heaney notes in "Digging," his use of the pen differs from his father's and grandfather's uses of the potato-digging and turf-cutting spades.

As a poet, Heaney was odd man out in his family of farmers, diggers, and cattle dealers. As he commented, "Once I went to St Columb's I suppose there was a presumption all round that whatever I did at the end of my time there, I wouldn't be back on the farm. I was being 'educated,' and that meant being set a bit apart" (O'Driscoll 56). Granted, he's only "a bit" different; the separation didn't entail a complete turn away from his rural beginnings. Heaney worked on the farm during holiday periods, particularly by driving cattle, doing fieldwork, and making hay. In specific regard to the cattle business, Heaney mentioned that "it was terrific theatre" and he "didn't feel out of it," but he also "didn't have an ambition to grow up and do it" (O'Driscoll 56). Heaney still remained connected to his roots, and, in fact, many of his poetic subjects are associated with agriculture and life as an Irish farm boy. But this continued association with his rural roots coupled with his "being set a bit apart" put Heaney in a liminal space. He wasn't fully of his family's world, nor was he completely in the poetic realm. Unlike James Joyce who felt that Ireland stifled his writing career, Heaney never fled the country. While he did spend time in America teaching at Harvard and the University of California, Berkley, he always came home. This intimacy with rural life and his partial immersion in that agrarian space created a sometimes-strained relationship for Heaney. In another interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney addressed the doubts he had about pursuing a life of poetry:

> You could say that every poem I write—or that anybody else writes, for that matter—is a way of overcoming those doubts.

> Anybody serious about poetry knows how hard it is to achieve anything worthwhile in it. I used to think that, if you came from a background like mine, your approach to the muse was shyer than if you came from a more bookish or artistic family, but now I'm not so sure. (99)

Heaney's thoughts on another Irish writer, Patrick Kavanagh, are revealing in this regard: "Kavanagh's genius had achieved singlehandedly what I and my grammar-schooled, arts-degreed generation were badly in need of—a poetry which linked the small farm life which produced us with the slim-volume world we were now supposed to be fit for" ("Placeless Heaven" 9). Heaney sees Kavanagh's poetry as a link between farming and poetics, a connection that he desperately needed and eventually created for himself. Still, though, the two realms weren't completely homogenous in the beginning of his poetic career, and his work strives to bring these spaces together.

As Elmer Andrews notes in his introduction to *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "the desire to discover continuity" pervades "Heaney's work" (8). Andrews refers to Heaney's translating work, but the generalization also applies to his poetry. As translator, Heaney transforms a story from another culture so that it fits well with our modern culture. Likewise, as rural poet, Heaney mediates agri-culture and literary culture. Applying Andrews' comments to Heaney's poetry and rural upbringing positions the agricultural and pastoral influences in his poems as an attempt to "discover continuity" amidst the tension created by his liminal existence as a poet who maintained connections to his farm life.

This liminality informs my reading and understanding of Heaney's pastoral poetry, which differs from the general consensus in Heaney scholarship. Literary critics refer to Heaney's

poetry as antipastoral because he does not write from the gentlemanly remove of a traditional pastoral poet—but how could he? Having grown up on a farm with a family of agricultural tradesmen, Heaney knew the land, and he writes about rural life from a firsthand perspective. However, his pastorals differ from those of other rural poets. His education gave him experience in the world of letters and exposed him to more sophisticated language and literature than he ever would have received on the farm. But his agrarian childhood kept him grounded to the countryside in a way that prevented him from ever achieving the traditional pastoral stance. He's neither fully antipastoral nor completely pastoral—Heaney's poems are their own brand of the mode.

I aim to demonstrate this feature of Heaney's pastoral poetry in this thesis. My first chapter, "Shifting the Focus," considers the pastoral from a variety of angles, particularly its roots, the major conventions, and its function as a mode. In this section, I also examine two pastoral traditions that surround discussions of Heaney's poetry—the English and the Irish—to assert that his pastorals should be considered legitimate pastoral poems. Through analyses of poems from *Opened Ground*, his self-selection of poetry published during the first thirty years of his career (1966-1996), chapter 2, "Beyond the Irish Pastoral," complicates the dichotomy of the English and Irish pastoral conventions by showing how Heaney isn't entirely in the tradition of either. My third chapter, "'I'll dig with it,'" further examines distinctive features of Heaney's pastoral poems by analyzing the works centering on tools and other practical objects of country life. These discussions expand upon considerations in earlier chapters and highlight Heaney's unique version of the pastoral mode. Finally, the coda, "After *Opened Ground*," briefly considers Heaney's post-Nobel career—namely his final three collections, *Electric Light,*

District and Circle, and *Human Chain*—and speculates on the implications of being put on a world stage for a pastoral poet like Heaney.

Shifting the Focus: Placing Heaney in the Irish Pastoral Tradition

The roots of the pastoral can be traced back to the bucolics of Theocritus—or *boukolika* as he would have called them. For Theocritus, these poems were the exchange of song, predominantly singing contests, between herders of sheep, goat, oxen, and cows. He wrote this poetry during a time of increasing urbanization, and these poems reflect his yearning for a simpler rural life. He depicts the Sicily of his childhood against the civilization of the Alexandria of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, a move derived from earlier sources, as Donna L. Potts notes in *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition*: "Epicureanism and Cynicism both promoted the simple life, and Plato's *Phaedrus* establishes the countryside as the site of particular aesthetic pleasures as well as of performances about love" (1). She then turns to the words of Anthony Verity, a translator of Theocritus' *Idylls*: "the world of the bucolic poems is. . .the world which epic forgot" (1). Potts and Verity bring up an important point when considering the primary concerns of pastoral poetry. What Verity implies and what Potts explains is that epic poetry revolves around the lives of people of high social classes, the Odysseuses, Aeneases, and Beowulfs of the world. Pastoral poetry, on the other hand, focuses on the lowly lives of herders. The warriors' swords and shields of epic poetry become the shepherds' staffs and pipes in the realm of pastoral poetry. This concern for the simplistic rural existence of herders engenders some of pastoral's defining characteristics: idyllic landscapes, an atmosphere of leisure, and herdsmen and women as singers or poets (Alpers 22).

However, we cannot just credit pastoral to Theocritus. While we can trace the roots back to him, Virgil is the poet who solidified it. As Paul Alpers asserts in *What is Pastoral?*, it is the work of both poets: "[Virgil's] transformation of Theocritean bucolic is as much a matter of form as of theme and symbol: where Theocritus's pastorals are part of a larger collection of

poems, from which they are not easily differentiated, the Eclogues are a coherent book" (138). Writing the *Eclogues* as one book puts the collective focus on the pastoral. In doing so, Virgil makes "more explicit what was implicit in Theocritus's bucolic representations" (Alpers 138). However, as Alpers explains, ancient pastoral did not develop as linearly as this description might lead us to believe: "The Eclogues return to, realize, and transform Theocritean interests and practices. Virgil established pastoral as a genre by turning the Idylls into a book coherently conceived in both formal and representational senses—that is, in respect to both the arrangement of the poems and the consistency of the world depicted in them" (154). By rendering this more homogenous world, Virgil established the conventions of pastoral, of which the major ones are the depiction of "human relation to the natural world, [the emphasis of] the harmony between nature and human nature, the contrast between city and country, and the underlying tension between civilization and nature" (Potts 2).

These conventions, though, do not define one specific genre. A short story, poem, play, and many other genres could employ these characteristics. "If all these are pastoral," Alpers writes, "then we are certainly right to say that pastoral is not a genre. Rather, it seems to be one of the types of literature—like tragedy, comedy, novel, romance, satire, and elegy—which have generic-sounding names but which are more inclusive and general than genres proper. . . . [Pastoral] is not a genre, but a mode" (46). Alpers then draws from several theorists and literary critics in his discussion of mode versus genre. He begins by looking to Paul H. Fry's elaboration of "ode" as a poetic type: "The reason why the words 'elegy' and 'satire' seem more usefully to rope off poetic kinds than 'ode' does is that 'elegy' and 'satire' are *modal* terms that allow enormous flexibility of reference. They describe orientations but tend not to prescribe a set style, form, or occasion—or even, necessarily, a set theme" (Alpers 46). This notion of mode being

akin to an orientation of a text parallels others who equate it with an attitude. Alpers draws from David Halperin's survey of pastoral criticism *Before Pastoral: Theocritus and the Ancient Tradition of Bucolic Poetry* in which Halperin associates the distinction between mode and genre with René Welleck and Austin Warren's distinction between "outer form" and "inner form." Put simply, we classify genres based on their structure (outer form); mode is determined by the internal workings of a text (inner form).

But, as Alpers notes, mode and genre sometimes tend to be used interchangeably. Imagine for a moment calling a pastoral poem simply "a pastoral." This phrasing seems to (incorrectly) imply that pastoral is a genre, but very few people would challenge it. However, as I have already discussed, the conventions of pastoral cut across multiple genres; this description is misleading. So why do we switch between mode and genre when referring to the pastoral? Or, to rephrase, how is it that can we use these terms interchangeably? Alpers argues that "the term [mode] is preeminently one that connects, indeed treats as inseparable, 'inner form' and 'outer form'" (48). He turns to Helen Vendler and an analysis of Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to elaborate on this idea. He notes that, while Vendler has "psychological interests," she is mainly concerned "with qualities of diction, syntax, and rhythm. Moreover, she does not view these usages as *expressing* an attitude, but rather as somehow encoding it, as having an attitude implicit in them" (Alpers 48). In other words, mode is in some way connected to genre but independently influences a text and our understanding of it. In this regard, we can see why mode can so easily be interchanged with genre, despite the misconception. This shows, then, that pastoral is fluid; it is not one particular rigid structure but is instead a mode, an overarching sense of a text. The pastoral is malleable. While pastorals use many of the same

conventions, writers adapt the mode to suit their styles, needs, and aims, a point to which I will later return.

Having established pastoral as a mode, let's revisit the conventions mentioned earlier, namely the contrast pastoral exemplifies between the city and the countryside. Both Theocritus and Virgil used the country as an escape from the stresses of urbanization and civil war, respectively, just as countless other pastoral poets have turned to the countryside to sort through, escape from, and come to terms with events and hardships in their own lives. As Potts writes, "[t]he pastoral poet selects details from rural life, enhancing and reordering them 'to create a world of the imagination, invested with urban longing for an ideally simple life in nature.' All pastoral implies an 'awareness of two opposed worlds: country and city, simple and complex, imaginary and real'" (2). Given the flexibility of the mode, however, these oppositions can drastically differ from one writer to the next. For example, W. B. Yeats' countryside is not the same rural farmland of Heaney's poetry. Potts borrows from Anthony Bradley to assert that "Yeats, as a member of the class more likely to own the land than labor on it, tends to employ 'the simplest structure of pastoral,' which idealizes the Irish countryside and its people" (50). This version of pastoral is generally what we think of when we say that something is pastoral. It represents an idyllic landscape distant and distinct from the writers' (oftentimes stressful or worrisome) lives; this is the-country-as-escape that Theocritus and Virgil created. One example of this idyllic countryside from Yeats' poetry is "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" in which the colorful and peaceful Innisfree enchants and distracts the speaker from the dull gray pavements of the city. But Yeats, never working the land, does not realize that, among the "bee-loud glade," Innisfree has its hardships too ("Innisfree" 4).

Heaney, however, having grown up on a Northern Irish farm knew the land far better than Yeats, "and his eye-level description of rural life is therefore more realistic and attentive to regional detail" (Potts 50). His knowledge of and experience with farming and rural life is seen throughout his poetry and is a major component to this thesis, which will be discussed in detail later. Therefore, I will not give examples here. Like any pastoral poet, Heaney turns to the land to sort out the complexities of his life, but unlike many pastoral poets (Yeats included), Heaney does not merely idealize the countryside. He writes from personal experience; he knows that nature (and, by extension, human nature) has its idyllic moments as well as its hardships. Potts even compares the differences between Yeats' and Heaney's versions of pastoral to Virgil: "Whereas Yeats's model for pastoral seems to be Virgil's idealizing *Eclogues*, writers like Heaney. . .have tended to find their precedent in the more realistic, labor-oriented *Georgics*, the counterpart to the *Eclogues*" (51).

Following this understanding of the *Georgics* as counterpart to the *Eclogues*, many view Heaney as antipastoral, opposite to the conventional understanding of pastoral as seen in Theocritus, Virgil, and, as mentioned here, Yeats.[1] However, pastoral is a mode and, therefore, flexible. Could it not be that, instead of an opposing form of pastoral, Heaney's version is merely a particular hue of the overall mode? Instead of referring to Yeats as pastoral and Heaney as antipastoral, we should think of their poetry as idealistic or aesthetic pastoral and realistic or pragmatic pastoral, respectively. Both use the pastoral to satisfy their individual needs and their own aims. If anything, poetry written by someone with direct and intimate

[1] Heaney himself even uses the term. In his introduction to John Barrell and John Bull's anthology *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, he uses the Garden of Eden metaphor to explain how a focus on the "persistent dream of paradise. . .also acknowledges the world outside the garden as a place of thorns which man enters in sorrow, to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow." This ultimately "beget[s] a form of anti-pastoral in which sweat and pain and deprivation are acknowledged" ("Country of Convention" 176).

connections with the land should be deemed a truer version of pastoral than one composed by a writer removed from the landscape about which he writes. In fact, Potts writes that, through his considerations of the ideal and darker elements of the countryside, Heaney "renders the traditional relation between nature and human nature with the specificity, precision, and complexity of vision that sentimental [aesthetic] pastoral often lacks" (54).

At this point, we should pause and consider an aspect of pastoral that is often overlooked, one that further shows just how much of the mode Heaney's pragmatic pastoral encompasses. A characteristic of Heaney's poetry that makes it uniquely his—and one that I've already mentioned—is his firsthand experience with rural life. He imbues his writing with an authentic awareness of the difficulties of the countryside, whereas so many pastoral poets merely romanticize it. This understanding that the pastoral can be a paradise but one in which suffering is still present echoes an oftentimes misquoted phrase, *Et in Arcadia ego*. In his essay "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," Erwin Panofsky traces the development and use of the phrase in both painting and literature. He explains how Arcady became synonymous with a pastoral paradise. Ironically, the actual country lacked most of the traits of a blissful landscape. As Panofsky writes, "Polybius, Arcady's most famous son, while doing justice to his homeland's simple piety and love of music, describes it as a poor, bare, rocky, chilly country, devoid of all the amenities of life and scarcely affording food for a few meager goats" (298). This is why Greek poets, like Theocritus, chose to place their pastorals elsewhere. It is Latin poetry that launched Arcady into its place in the pastoral tradition:

> Virgil, on the other hand, idealized it: not only did he emphasize the virtues that the real Arcady had (including the all-pervading sound of song and flutes not mentioned by Ovid); he also added

> charms which the real Arcady had never possessed: luxuriant vegetation, eternal spring, and inexhaustible leisure for love. In short, he transplanted the bucolics of Theocritus to what he decided to call Arcadia. (Panofsky 299)

However, this perfectly blissful landscape soon gave way to discrepancies "between the supernatural perfection of an imaginary environment and the natural limitations of human life as it is" (Panofsky 300). Panofsky is quick to note that this does not mean that Theocritus' *Idylls* were void of tragedy: "In Theocritus' real Sicily, the joys and sorrows of the human heart complement each other as naturally and inevitably as do rain and shine, day and night, in the life of nature" (300). Virgil also does not exclude the two tragedies of frustrated love and death from his poetry; "he deprives them, as it were, of their factuality. He projects tragedy either into the future or, preferably, into the past" (Panofsky 301). It is not until the Italian Renaissance and Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia* that the death in Arcadia theme first emerges. As Panofsky explains,

> Reflecting the feeling of a period that, for the first time, had realized that Pan was dead, Sannazaro wallows in those funeral hymns and ceremonies, yearning love songs and melancholy memories which occur in Virgil only occasionally. . . . It was through him that the elegiac feeling—present but, as it were, peripheral in Virgil's *Eclogues*—became the central quality of the Arcadian sphere. (304)

Then Panofsky turns to analyzing the first pictorial rendering of the death in Arcady theme: Giovanni Francesco Guercino's *Et in Arcadia ego* (also known as *The Arcadian Shepherds*). As Panofsky describes,

> In this painting two Arcadian shepherds are checked in their wanderings by the sudden sight, not of a funerary monument but of a huge human skull that lies on a moldering piece of masonry and receives the attentions of a fly and a mouse, popular symbols of decay and all-devouring time. Incised on the masonry are the words *Et in Arcadia ego*, and it is unquestionably by the skull that they are supposed to be pronounced. (307-8)

It is obvious that the shepherds are startled, even intrigued, by the presence of the skull. However, until we consider the phrase "Et in Arcadia ego," the skull might seem out of place.

Before analyzing the syntax of the Latin phrase, Panofsky acknowledges a common (albeit incorrect) translation of it: "I, too, was born, or lived, in Arcady" (306). This reading assumes that *et* means "too" and modifies *ego*, or "I." And it further assumes that the unexpressed verb is in the past tense. But, as Panofsky argues, "[a]ll these assumptions are incompatible with the rules of Latin grammar. The phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* is one of those elliptical sentences. . .in which the verb has to be supplied by the reader. This unexpressed verb must therefore be unequivocally suggested by the words given and. . .can never be preterite" (306). Panofsky goes on to explain that a subjunctive or future tense might apply—but never a past tense. "Even more important," he continues, "the adverbial *et* invariably refers to the noun or pronoun directly following it (as in *Et tu, Brute*), and this means that it belongs, in our case, not to *ego* but to *Arcadia*" (306). As he demonstrates, this translation misquotes *Et in Arcadia*

ego into *Et ego in Arcadia*. Panofsky finishes his syntactical analysis by asserting that "[t]he correct translation in its orthodox form is. . .'Even in Arcadia there am I,' from which we must conclude that the speaker is not a deceased Arcadian shepherd or shepherdess but Death in person" (307).

By highlighting the presence of death in Arcadia, Panofsky also illuminates an aspect of the pastoral that a more pragmatic version like Heaney's embodies. The idyllic pastoral of Yeats would never (and could never) achieve this because, as I've already discussed, Yeats had no practical knowledge of the land; his aims were to seek escape in a blissful paradise like Arcadia. Granted, this is not to say that Heaney's pastoral always includes death. It sometimes does, but it also references the other hardships he acknowledges in his poetry. *Et in Arcadia ego* explicitly refers to the presence of death in paradise, but it also implies a sense of suffering and difficulty in Arcadia as well.

Another potential and highly plausible cause of the pastoral-antipastoral classification is the perspective these critiques take; they view the poetry from the standpoint of the English pastoral tradition. Pastoral in Western literature extends from Theocritus by way of Virgil, but what we usually mean by "Western literature" is British literature. And since British literature is such a major part in Western literary tradition, it becomes the norm against which other literatures written in English—in this case, Irish literature—are judged. In her study of nostalgia and twentieth-century Irish literature *Irish Pastoral*, Oona Frawley argues that this focus on the English pastoral tradition clouds our understanding of Irish pastoral. She traces the roots and history of Irish pastoral and asserts that, due to Ireland's colonial status, nostalgia is a prominent figure in the literature. Frawley writes, "The land of Ireland becomes. . .a museum, a preserver of a past which might otherwise have been forgotten" (43). She adds that, "strangely, as a

preserver of history and culture, the landscape itself begins to personify nostalgia, the trait assigned to those medieval Irish figures who had existed in it" (43). Unlike the English who, so far removed from the Irish island, could write about the landscape from a distance, the Irish could not experience the same idealization. As Frawley explains, as a result of colonization and the legislation imposed by colonial rule, "[t]he land. . .became a signifier of enormous weight and power: the only way of surviving, the site of exploitative rents and land laws that favoured landlords even in their absence, and, since it could not be owned, a sign of all that was unjust about English colonial control" (44). When the land holds such negative representations, the Irish can't help but acknowledge the suffering inherent within it.

Another example of Ireland facing the difficulties of the landscape is the Famine. Death spread throughout Ireland, taking not only Irish lives but also livelihoods. Frawley notes that

> [i]t is a cruel irony that shortly after the height of Romanticism in England, Ireland was engaged in a fatal battle with nature. If the Irish had maintained a close relationship to the natural world through working the land, that relationship seemed severed by the events of the Famine. Nature could no longer be seen as a neutral force; instead, it was a force that betrayed arbitrarily, weighing life and death lightly. (45)

Post-Famine Ireland resembled a war-torn country. The land and the people were devastated. Forests were cut down for fuel, leaving the countryside barren, dotted with blackened fields and villages deserted due to death, starvation, and eviction, not to mention the hoards of people looking for food and shelter. England, being across the Irish Sea, did not experience the same destruction to themselves nor their appreciation of the countryside. However, as Frawley writes,

"the Famine was the literal failure of the pastoral" in Ireland (45). She then quotes Sean Lysaght who summarizes this argument well: "We can express the problem as a series of stereotypes: English culture has given prominence to a sentimental, pastoral view of nature and countryside based on continuity, belonging, and fruition; Irish experience has been marked by the opposites: discontinuity, exile, and sterility" (Frawley 46). Despite such a difficult association with the land, "[w]hat Seamus Heaney refers to as 'the sense of place' in Ireland has been preserved" through what Frawley argues is an Irish pastoral tradition (Frawley 136). Even though the countryside brings its hardships, the Irish maintain intimate connections with it.

Knowing the hardships of the land, bolstered by this history of a failed pastoral, gives the Irish pastoral a keen authentic perspective on the countryside. Frawley argues that "[n]ostalgia for landscape and natural beauty has consequently become focused, more often than not, on the *lost possibility* of the rural ideal" (136). But what is more interesting to me is her discussion of Heaney in light of the Irish pastoral tradition. From her comments, we begin to better understand the problem of reading Irish pastoral poetry from the perspective of the English pastoral tradition. Discussing the views of many critics, Frawley writes, "There is a general sense that Heaney operates outside of 'tradition'" (141). But his imagery and firsthand experiences of farm life exude this sense of pragmatic pastoral that follows the Irish pastoral tradition. So what tradition is she (commenting on other critics) referring to? The answer lies in the subsequent statement: "Sean Lysaght, for example, has argued that 'The luxuriant vocabulary of the pastoral genre, implying a fruitful, accommodating environment, is quite out of place in Heaney's sparse, rather comfortless landscape" (Frawley 141). Lysaght's inaccurate reference to the pastoral as a genre aside, this passage provides insight into the particular tradition with which the critics mentioned here are concerned. With the phrases "luxuriant vocabulary" and "a fruitful,

accommodating environment," there is little doubt that these are descriptions of the English pastoral tradition.

Frawley further expands upon this notion by looking at Sidney Burris's study, which analyzes Heaney's pastoral "within the framework of the English pastoral tradition" (Frawley 141). Burris refers to Heaney as an antipastoral poet to which Frawley notices that, in this study (and I would argue many others), "Heaney seems to function on the edge of the English pastoral tradition" (142). This critique places Heaney on the periphery of the English pastoral tradition because of the very fact that he is examined within that structure. If we are to see Heaney's poetry for the pragmatic pastoral that it is, we must shift our mindset from the English pastoral tradition to the Irish pastoral tradition to which he more rightfully belongs.

It is important that I acknowledge, however, that while Heaney is one of the most well known Irish poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and that he follows the Irish pastoral tradition, his is not the only version of Irish pastoral. As Frawley explains, "The Irish pastoral mode that has been under discussion here has been largely a male preserve, as, arguably, is the pastoral tradition in general. . . . it would appear that the tradition of Irish pastoral writing that stretches back to the middle ages has not been merely maintained, but has in fact reasserted itself, through Heaney's work" (148). To gain a better understanding of this complex tradition (albeit an overlooked complexity), we should look to Eavan Boland, a contemporary of Heaney's. As an Irish woman, she is doubly colonized, but she finds a way to create her own space: "In a 1970 *Irish Times* article 'The Future of Poetry,' Boland wrote about Joyce's city and Kavanagh's countryside, and posed a question: 'What new realities are there in Ireland to match these two equally rich realities pushing each other aside?'" (Frawley 149). And between the city and the country, she finds her domain, a third space: the suburbs.

Her disruption of this urban/rural divide is also a disruption of and challenge to the patriarchy of the Irish pastoral tradition. In "Suburban Woman," Boland portrays the creation of the suburbs as the result of a rape, which brings to mind Heaney's "Act of Union." But, as Frawley notes, Boland's poem goes further than that.

> Town and country at each other's throat—
> between a space of truce until one night
>
> walls began to multiply, to spawn
> like lewd whispers of the goings-on,
>
> the romperings, the rape on either side.
> The smile killing. That you were better dead
>
> than let them get you. But they came, armed
> with blades and ladders, with slimed
>
> knives, day after day, week by week—
> a proxy violation. She woke
>
> one morning to the usual story. Withdrawing
> neither side had gained, but there, dying,
>
> caught in the cross-fire, her past lay. Like a pride

of lions toiled for booty, tribal acres died

and her world with them. She saw their power to sever

with a scar. She is the sole survivor. (“Surburban Woman” 1-20)

Suburbia, here, is a feminine space, “the marginalized realm of the marginal within independent Ireland, housewives and mothers beyond the boundaries of the city, out of the reach of the countryside that governed so much of Irish ideology” (Frawley 151).

While this is a reconsideration of Irish pastoral and a challenge to the lineage to which Heaney belongs, Boland still maintains the spirit of the tradition discussed at length here. As we can see in “Suburban Woman” as well as in some of her other poems, as Frawley mentions, “Boland brings the reality of suburban existence into Irish poetry instead of retreating imaginatively into rurality” just like Heaney confronts the realities of his rural existence and rejects the idealized countryside of the aesthetic pastoral (152). Later, Frawley adds that “[i]n writing out Irish women’s experience, Boland has created a new form in her poetry that is at once realistic—in its insistence upon the inclusion of women’s daily experience—and imaginary—in its retrieval of experience outside of her own lifetime” (153). The inclusion of women’s daily experience parallels Heaney’s inclusion of daily farm life and rural realities. Similarly, both Boland and Heaney venture into the imaginary to retrieve “experience outside of [their] own lifetime[s].” As Frawley notes, Boland’s “project is thus on the one hand at odds with Irish tradition, and on the other very much aligned with it” (153). The differences between these two poets are significant[2]; they allow us to consider other viewpoints of and listen to other voices

[2] “Boland has become the counterpart voice to Heaney’s, the south to his north, the female to his male—but, pointedly, [as we have already seen,] not the city to his country” (Frawley 149).

in the Irish pastoral tradition. But their similarities show us that the Irish pastoral is a legitimate version of the overall pastoral mode.

Beyond the Irish Pastoral: An Exposition of Heaney's Pastoral Poetry

The Irish pastoral tradition, with its realistic portrayals of the land and its inhabitants, contradicts the idealizing English pastoral tradition. Whereas English pastorals romanticize the countryside, Irish pastorals reflect upon it as it is. In many ways, this difference stems from the British colonization of Ireland. For the Irish, the land was the palpable site of oppressive British colonial rule, the exploitation of the Irish people and resources, and the Irish people's overall lack of control over the situation. On the other hand, the British, so far removed from the harsh effects of colonization, could view the colonies as an idyllic site of escape from their more industrial, urbanized lives. The Irish, however, had no escape.

Additionally, the Famine only exacerbated the Irish's tense relationship with nature. The Great Famine or the Irish Potato Famine as it is also called was a period of mass starvation, disease, death, and emigration in Ireland. A large contributing factor to the Famine was the potato blight that wiped out the Irish people's main crop source. Between 1845 and 1852, roughly one million people died and nearly the same number emigrated from the island, causing Ireland's population to drop by 25%. Agriculture being their main source of sustenance, the Irish relied on the land, but the Famine showed that nature could be merciless. When the once supportive potato fields suddenly decided who lived and who died, the Irish's interaction with the land became quite complicated. This tension reminds us of James Joyce's declaration that Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow, though he was not referring to the land when he made this statement. With these colonial and potato blight influences, the Irish pastoral tradition eschews the ideal and embraces the real, pragmatic, and material.

Viewing Heaney's poetry from the Irish pastoral tradition allows us to examine the rural aspects of his work as they relate to his life and career as a poet and to gain a closer look at his

work than the distance we put ourselves at when we think of his poetry as only antipastoral. Reclaiming him from the English pastoral tradition puts Heaney back in the realm of pastoral poetry, a move that I'm certain he would approve of.[3] In doing so, we are not judging him in the negative (prompted by the prefix "anti-"), which gives us a chance to consider his poetry as part of the mode and look at how he uses the pastoral in his work.

But we should pause and consider the pastoral further. Pastoral poetry encompasses many types of poetry—there's nature poetry, poetry of one's native land, personal poetry of a pastoral person, poetry with pastoral settings, and poetry with pastoral figures to name a few. All exemplify elements of the overall mode. It is precisely this function of the pastoral as a mode that complicates an analysis of pastoral texts. A study of pastoral works that does not account for the multiple facets of the mode is limiting. For example, focusing on how a poem is an Irish pastoral can be problematic because said poem may be an amalgamation of several shades of the mode. This notion is especially important when analyzing Heaney's poetry. Just as considerations of Heaney as antipastoral are too one-dimensional for a poet of his diverse literary talents, only thinking of him in the realm of the Irish pastoral tradition limits the analysis.

Heaney does not write traditional English pastorals, nor does he write traditional Irish pastorals. His pastorals fall somewhere in between—though they tend to be closer to Irish pastorals than the English ones. One of the geniuses of his writing is his ability to do both without ever positioning himself definitively in the convention of either. This characteristic of his writing is something we also see and hear in his use and manipulation of sounds, words, and form. Heaney is not one to assign himself to strict guidelines. He is not an English pastoralist.

---

[3] In 1983, as an objection to being included in *The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary British Poetry* edited by Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison, Heaney published *An Open Letter* as Field Day Pamphlet #2. The poem read, "Be advised my passport's green. / No glass of ours was ever raised / to toast the Queen" (Murphy xi; Vendler xiv-xv).

He is not an Irish pastoralist. He writes Seamus Heaney pastorals. They partake of the Irish pastoral tradition because he's an Irishman, and they partake of the English pastoral tradition because he's a cultured, cosmopolitan poet of the world, experiences that began early in his life due to the United Kingdom's 1947 Education Act that broadened access to higher education for students like Heaney. But his pastorals are also uniquely him, drawn from his family, his background, and his experiences.

I am tempted to coin a term at this point, a portmanteau of Heaney and pastorals, because this in-between nature of Heaney's pastoral poetry reminds me of another of his works that accomplishes a similar liminality, his 1999 translation of *Beowulf*. Many critics refer to this translation not as Heaney's translation but more simply and rather cleverly as *Heaneywulf*. This term plays on the creative liberties that Heaney takes in his translation. In the introduction to the text, Heaney recalls a sense of excitement and acknowledgement when he encountered familiar words in the glossary to his student edition of the poem, like the verb *þolian* ("to suffer"), which "older and less educated people would have used in the country where [he] grew up" (Heaney, *Beowulf* xxv). "Thole," written with the modern "th-" instead of the Old English thorn, became a symbol for Heaney's approach to the translation. He saw it as "part of [his] voice-right," and his writing reflects this claim (Heaney, *Beowulf* xxiv).

As Alison Finaly notes in "Putting a Bawn into *Beowulf*," the appearance of "thole" on the first page of his translation—"He knew what they had tholed" (line 14)—"amounts to an assertion of cultural identity" (Finlay 136). The title of her essay references another creative liberty Heaney takes in this translation. He uses the word "bawn" to refer to Heorot, Hrothgar's hall. As Heaney writes in the introduction, "In Elizabethan England, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings which the English planters

built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay, so it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches" (xxx). Yet another aspect of Heaney's translation, arguably the most interesting, is the very beginning of the poem. Instead of the strong, declarative *Hwæt*, Heaney starts his translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic with "So." As Heaney details in the introduction, this utterance reminds him of his Ulster relatives, the "big-voiced scullions," as he calls them, "in whose idiom 'so' operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention" (Finlay 137).

These examples—along with the characterization and imagery Heaney uses in his translation—demonstrate how his version is as much Anglo-Saxon as it is Seamus Heaney while never being completely one or the other, making the term *Heaneywulf* all the more appropriate. And it is this analysis of *Heaneywulf* that informs my understanding of Heaney's uses of the pastoral. Finlay's final comments regarding Heaney's translation speak just as much to *Heaneywulf* as they do to his use of the pastoral: "He respects, even celebrates the antique and alien in *Beowulf*, but infuses it with a life drawn from the concerns of his own time and the idiosyncrasies of his own cultural background, as the Anglo-Saxons represented the soul inhabiting the 'bone-house' of the human body" (152).

Before analyzing Heaney's pre-Nobel career, though, we should examine one representative English pastoral poem ("The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by W. B. Yeats) and one representative Irish pastoral poem ("Having to Live in the Country" by Patrick Kavanagh) in order to give us context for our considerations of Seamus Heaney pastorals. While Yeats is Irish, he spent his life in the city and did not know the rural realities that people like Heaney knew. Therefore, Yeats writes the idealizing English pastorals, like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In this

poem, Yeats is in the city and imagines the scene at Innisfree. The lake isle is an escape for him amidst the urbanity as noted in the final two lines: "While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey, / I hear it [the sound of the lake waters lapping against the shore] in the deep heart's core" (11-12). Because he is so far removed from the countryside, he can only write about what he thinks it is or will be. With the distance comes the idealization. He paints an idyllic scene of Innisfree, describing how he will "go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there. . . / Nine bean-rows will [he] have there, a hive for the honey-bee, / And live alone in the bee-loud glade" (1-4). The solo journey to the countryside is a common trope of the pastoral as is the peace received from this venture that Yeats writes about in the second stanza:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings. (5-8)

Not only does this stanza conjure peace, but it does so through descriptions of nature. Like many pastorals, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" roots a sense of the place into the land itself. In this case, the place is an ideal where peace drops slowly from morning to night and the only sounds are those of singing crickets, the buzz of bees' and linnets' wings, and the "lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore" (10).

Contrary to the idyllic lake isle scene is the reality of country life present in Kavanagh's "Having to Live in the Country." Kavanagh was an Irish poet and novelist born in rural Inniskeen in County Monaghan. Therefore, like Heaney, he grew up knowing the realities of country life, a sentiment that he captures in his literary career. In fact, it was Kavanagh who showed Heaney that he could incorporate his rural upbringing into this poetry. In "Having to

Live in the Country," Kavanagh returns to County Monaghan, which he describes as wild and wet, and writes that he is "Exiled from thought and feeling" (2). This initial description portrays the rural Monaghan as an unappealing place; Kavanagh positions it as a prison of sorts. And in this punitive locale, "A mean brutality reigns" (3). Already, the countryside depicted in Kavanagh's poem opposes idyllic Innisfree. Kavanagh goes on to "equate [himself] with Dante / And all who have lived outside civilization" (5-6). This description adds a level of desolation to the prison image. But Kavanagh notes that these feelings are more a question of people rather than place. He explains this statement by writing,

> Wordsworth and Coleridge lived apart from the common man,
>
> Their friends called on them regularly.
>
> Swift is in a somewhat different category
>
> He was a genuine exile and his heavy heart
>
> Weighed him down in Dublin.
>
> Yet even he had compensations for in the Deanery
>
> He received many interesting friends
>
> And it was the eighteenth century. (8-15)

Even though these men, like Kavanagh, were separated from civilization (either physically or emotionally as seen with the Jonathan Swift reference), they still had contact with people. Despite their exile-like state, they weren't lonely.

But it's not like County Monaghan is unpopulated. Therefore, Kavanagh must be referring to something else. He addresses this question in the second stanza:

> I suppose that having to live
>
> Among men whose rages

Are for small wet hills full of stones

When one man buys a patch and pays a high price for it

That is not the end of his paying.

“Go home and have another bastard” shout the children,

Cousin of the underbidder, to the young wife of the purchaser.

(16-22)

While the syntax can be confusing, the “that” in line 16 is not a preposition but is instead a demonstrative pronoun referring to the statements made in the first stanza. From these descriptions, we gather that Kavanagh’s sense of loneliness stems from his condescending considerations of the citizens of Monaghan, an understanding further supported by a later phrase “Desperate people, desperate animals” (24). While this statement follows his descriptions of the people of Monaghan, we can’t be quite sure if he refers separately to the desperate people and the desperate animals or if he calls the people animals. Either way, both options do not describe an idealized version of country life. Kavanagh concludes the poem and continues this sense of desolation by wondering about the “poor priest / Somewhat educated who has to believe that these people have souls / As bright as a poet’s”—though he is quick to add that he does not “speak for [himself]” (25-7). Granted, Kavanagh’s poem may very well be situated in a negative context. He did, after all, move to the city because he felt that it would be a better environment for him as a writer. Therefore, having to be back again in County Monaghan would surely be a moment of consternation for him. But this does not detract from Kavanagh’s representations of country life; he wrote about rural subjects with rural images throughout his career.

These two representatives of English and Irish pastorals highlight the distinctions between the two traditions, namely the ideal versus the actual. Whereas “The Lake Isle of

Innisfree" imagines an idyllic scene, "Having to Live in the Country" portrays a more realistic image of life in the countryside. Both poems represent two ends of a spectrum, one on which Heaney's poems fall somewhere in between. While his poems present real scenes of his life in rural Ireland, they are occasionally tempered with a mindset closer to that of the English pastorals. However, Heaney never writes completely idealizing pastoral poems.

With this frame of reference established, we should now look at a selection of Heaney's poems exemplifying pastoral and natural qualities of his work. The specific poems discussed in this chapter are "Death of a Naturalist," "The Barn," "Blackberry-Picking," and "Mid-Term Break," from his collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966); "Requiem for the Croppies" from *Door into the Dark* (1969); "Clearances" from *The Haw Lantern* (1987); and "Glanmore Sonnets" from *Field Work* (1979), in that order.[4] These poems from the pre-Nobel stage of his career are particularly useful for introducing the various aspects of how Heaney fits into the Irish pastoral tradition.

Granted, not all of Heaney's poetry is pastoral, nor are all of his pastorals the same. Being a mode, the pastoral is fluid and nuanced, an attribute that a skilled poet like Heaney uses to his advantage. Analyzing these specific poems provides an exposition of the richness of Heaney's pastoral, a look at his talent but most importantly how the Irish pastoral tradition manifests itself in his writing. In particular, these poems show how Heaney's use of the Irish pastoral criticizes the English pastoral tradition, fulfills generic conventions, and helps Heaney grapple with anxieties in his life.

One of the first and most illuminating examples of the pastoral in Heaney's oeuvre is "Death of a Naturalist." Heaney opens *Opened Ground* and his poetic career with "Digging,"

---

[4] While these poems were originally published in separate collections, I use and refer to his 1998 self-selection of pre-Nobel poems, *Opened Ground*.

but he follows it up with “Death of a Naturalist,” the eponymous poem of his first collection. In this manner, if “Digging” becomes somewhat of a manifesto for his approach to poetry, “Death of a Naturalist” sets the tone for Heaney’s pastoral, an assertion reinforced by the eponym. In fact, “Death of a Naturalist” could very well be retitled “Death of an English Pastoralist.” The poem begins with an image of the flax-dam:

> All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
> Of the townland; green and heavy-headed
> Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
> Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
> Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
> Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
> There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,
> But best of all was the warm thick slobber
> Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
> In the shade of the banks. (1-10)

Already Heaney lets us know that we are not reading an idealizing pastoral. We are in the flaxdam, and the fact that we know it is a flaxdam already positions us away from an idealizing point of view. An idyllic pastoral might be set on a hill overlooking the scene or set in the mind’s eye as a person walks the gray streets of some busy city remembering a past journey to the countryside. Whatever the context, the writer in these types of pastorals would imagine what he or she sees or saw, not what it actually is or was. In these idealizing pastorals, the writer is removed from the scene. Heaney, on the other hand, is right in the thick of the flaxdam.

But Heaney is not the aware adult in the first stanza. He is a child interacting with nature, "fill[ing] jampotfuls of the jellied / Specks [of frogspawn] to range on window-sills at home, / On shelves at school, and wait[ing] and watch[ing] until / The fattening dots burst into nimble- / Swimming tadpoles" (10-5). The childhood innocence continues throughout the first stanza as Miss Walls, Heaney's teacher, tells the students "how / The daddy frog was called a bullfrog / And how he croaked and how the mammy frog / Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was / Frogspawn" (15-9). But her sterilized version of the mating habits of frogs is to be short-lived in the poem.

In the second stanza, young Heaney leaves the classroom and returns to the fields; except this time, the landscape is now likened to a warzone. Heaney writes that "the angry frogs / Invaded the flax-dam" (23-4). This is a scene that, like the "coarse croaking that [he] had not heard / Before," is new to young Heaney (25-6). The pleasant descriptions of the flax-dam in the first stanza are replaced with "gross-bellied frogs" (27), the "obscene threats" of the "slap and plop" of the frogs' hopping (29), and the frogs "Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting" (30). The interactions, too, that young Heaney has with nature in this stanza are drastically different. Instead of excitedly filling jam pots with frogspawn, he now "sickened, turned, and ran" for he knows that "The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance and [he] knew / That if [he] dipped [his] hand the spawn would clutch it" (31-3). The sharp contrast between these two stanzas underscores young Heaney's changed understanding of nature.

The images Heaney creates are particularly important to this analysis. The poem begins with the second stanza always already prefigured. The images of the festering flax-dam and "heavy-headed / Flax" rotting, "weighted down by huge sods," builds up a great deal of potential

energy. Instead of unleashing it in the first stanza, though, Heaney shifts to describing Miss Walls' diluted lecture. This energy sits, like the flax, waiting for the release in the second stanza—the opening "Then" that brings the frogs hopping, croaking, and mating in the scene created for them in the first stanza. The opening of the poem is an ulterior move for Heaney's overall critique of the English pastoral in "Death of a Naturalist."

Juxtaposing the frog mating described by Miss Walls in the first stanza with the scene young Heaney sees in the second stanza highlights the loss of innocence and the death of the naturalist in young Heaney. The nuances of the poem, particularly the way in which Heaney writes Miss Walls' lecture, demonstrate his thoughts on his more pragmatic pastoral in relation to the aesthetic pastoral. Donna L. Potts notes that "Heaney loads her lecture with dramatic irony, and in his recording of the poem at Harvard, there is mild mockery in his voice as he reads these lines" (53). The sarcasm with which Heaney the poet reads (and most likely writes) Miss Walls' lesson contrasted with the shock young Heaney has in the flax-dam are "a tacit critique of the whole idealizing tradition of nature writing," an element of the English pastoral tradition (Potts 53). Accordingly, the real depiction of the frogs' mating habits in the second stanza represent the truer, more pragmatic Irish pastoral tradition. Quite significant is the fact that nature is a better teacher than Miss Walls. She inadequately prepares young Heaney. Adult Heaney seems to say that we can't avoid the darker, cruder, less ideal aspects of the world. These are the realities, and this is a strength of the Irish pastoral.

However, most important is the prefiguration of the second stanza. It lies in waiting, but young Heaney—representing a more idealized view of nature—does not notice it. Here, Heaney the poet highlights the shortcomings of the idealizing tradition of English pastorals. Because the sweltering flax is just as an inherent part of the flax-dam as the more idyllic delicate bubbles,

bluebottles, and butterflies, an idealizing approach is not only ineffective, but it's also selective. Heaney's pastoral does not choose only those parts that create an artificial view. It reflects on nature as it really is and provides the most authentic representation.

Given this context of the poem, we should now return to the title. If Heaney is not a naturalist, if the naturalist has died, then what is he? Considering the historical definition of "naturalist" may help answer this question. Historically, a naturalist is the precursor to a scientist, the former's amateur status giving way to the professional approach of the latter in the mid-19th century. Because young Heaney fills the jam pots with frogspawn without taking in the surrounding flax-damn but instead taking Miss Walls' lecture as fact, he is like a naturalist in the first stanza, an amateur who doesn't notice the festering, rotting prefigurations of the second stanza. However, the change young Heaney experiences in the second stanza—realizing the actual mating habits of frogs and his reactions to it—suggests that he is no longer this amateur who assumes that nature is idyllic. Like the scientist, he is more experienced and becomes the pastoralist who acknowledges the true qualities of nature. This is not to say that the second stanza is particularly scientific, though. But it does lend itself to this critique of the idealizing tradition of nature writing. While the experience gained in the second stanza is situated in the context of a childhood memory, it speaks to the larger implications of what is missed in idyllic pastorals.

Heaney's pastorals rely on the darker, more realistic aspects of the Irish pastoral in portraying a loss of innocence and education in other poems as well. This theme continues throughout the 1966 collection *Death of a Naturalist*, particularly the two poems immediately following "Death of a Naturalist" in *Opened Ground*, "The Barn" and "Blackberry-Picking."

Examining these two poems separately as well as considering them alongside "Death of a Naturalist" demonstrates Heaney's nuanced critique of the idealizing English pastoral tradition.

"The Barn" opens slowly as Heaney describes the building. He rather cinematically allows the barn to materialize as he shows us pieces of the scene:

> Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory
> Or solid as cement in two-lugged sacks.
> The musky dark hoarded an armoury
> Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.
>
> The floor was mouse-grey, smooth, chilly concrete.
> There were no windows, just two narrow shafts
> Of gilded motes, crossing, from air-holes slit
> High in each gable. The one door meant no draughts
>
> All summer when the zinc burned like an oven. (1-9)

There is a slight mystery to the writing. We only know what we are told, and as the poem continues, we not only receive an image of the barn but also the grim realities of it, a primary feature of the Irish pastoral tradition. In the first quatrain, there is a threat in the description of the "armoury / Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks" (3-4). The word "armoury" connotes a potential for violence or harm. There is a level of discomfort to the barn as well. Because "The one door meant no draughts / All summer when the zinc burned like an oven," not even going inside the barn offers an escape from the heat during the time when some of the

hardest work on a farm is done (8-9). This is a harsh reality that would not be expressed in an aesthetic pastoral.

Then the poem takes a turn toward the terrifying. Through literal darkness, Heaney invites darker aspects of the pastoral into the poem:

> And into nights when bats were on the wing
> Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared
> From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking.
>
> The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff
> To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.
> I lay face-down to shun the fear above.
> The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats. (14-20)

These images give the barn a monstrous quality. The fierce, unblinking bright eyes and the engulfing darkness horrify young Heaney so much so that he fears being snatched up by the birds, but in protecting himself from the birds, he makes himself vulnerable to the "great blind rats" that move toward his prostrate body. Here, the barn carries out the threat of violence expressed in the first stanza. The ghastly descriptions put "The Barn" closer to the Irish pastoral tradition. In a typical English pastoral, the child might sit in the hayloft of the barn and play a tune on a pipe or lie with lambs. But here, in Heaney's pastoral, the barn lacks any of these idealistic, aesthetic qualities. These gothic qualities resemble the reality of tough farm work. The child's point of view highlights this darker side to life in the countryside. Even the bright objects that slowly manifest themselves upon entering the barn are the sharp edges of the scythe and spade and the points of the pitchfork's prongs—no children's toys.

In addition to elucidating an aspect of Heaney's pastoral, "The Barn" also serves to place a part of Heaney's poetry into the realm of agriculture. The images created show that Heaney knows farm life. His descriptions are realistic, aided by his inclusion of such senses as "the zinc burn[ing] like an oven" (9) and "cobwebs clogging up your lungs" (12). The autobiographical nature of the poem, too, lends to his credibility. It reads like (and very well could be) a retelling of a childhood memory of his family's barn. Being the third poem in *Opened Ground*, "The Barn" quickly lets us know that Heaney's pastoral is in some way connected to his knowledge of agriculture and his agrarian childhood. But its placement between "Death of a Naturalist" and "Blackberry-Picking," two poems that are not set on a farm, indicates that Heaney's pastorals encompass more than just farming.

Granted, "Blackberry-Picking" does occur on the periphery of the farm as shown in the line "Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills" (11). This poem opens in a landscape quite similar to aesthetic pastorals with sensual, picturesque imagery; tranquility; and children interacting with nature:

> Late August, given heavy rain and sun
>
> For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
>
> At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
>
> Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
>
> You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
>
> Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
>
> Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
>
> Picking. (1-8)

This “lust for / Picking” sends the children out into the blackberry patches with “milk cans, pea tins, [and] jam pots” (9). Then the poem begins to turn away from the idyllic and toward the pragmatic. Heaney writes that “the tinkling bottom [of the cans, tins, and pots] had been covered / With green ones [berries], and on top big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes” (13-5). The grotesque image here is a subtle shift in tone. However, the final lines of the first stanza quickly move us to the bitter images of the second stanza and take us to the Irish pastoral elements of the poem: “Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard’s” (15-6). The sticky berry juice becomes the blood of murdered wives, the children the killer. This powerful metaphor eliminates any sense of the aesthetic pastoral.

Like Bluebeard’s key, the blackberries are soon stained, not with blood but with “a fur,/ A rat-grey fungus, glutting on [the] cache” (18-9). The speaker’s melodramatic reaction to this infection reminds us that the poem is from a child’s perspective: “I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair / That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot. / Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” (22-3). Here, Heaney introduces mortality into the poem. The fermenting fruit reminds us of *Et in Arcadia ego* and Panofsky’s assertion that even in the pastoral (and especially in the Irish pastoral), there is death. This acknowledgement is echoed in “Mid-Term Break,” another poem in *Death of a Naturalist*. It is an occasional poem written on the death of Heaney’s younger brother Christopher who died in a roadside accident at the age of four. Perhaps Christopher’s death, along with the Irish’s troublesome relationship with the land, is why Heaney can’t help but embrace a more pragmatic pastoral.

Analyzing both “Blackberry-Picking” and “Mid-Term Break,” Michael Parker in *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* writes that each poem “presents early intimations of mortality,

and the incomprehension of a child confronted by injustice and grief' (67). In reference to "Blackberry-Picking," Parker notes,

> Whereas the first sixteen lines rejoice in "what Nature is willing to give"[5] of her abundance, the final eight articulate the child's unhappy recognition of the laws of mutability. Change and loss arrive in the shape of a "rat-grey" fungus, and the missing fifth sense, smell, makes its appearance ("The juice was stinking too.") The poem concludes on a cruel rhyme ("not"/"rot"), anticipating the longings and disappointments of adult life. (67-8)

This "unhappy recognition" reminds us of young Heaney's shock and terror at the true mating habits of frogs in "Death of a Naturalist." Once again, Heaney employs the juxtaposition of innocent expectation with real experience—granted, real experience as shown through contextualized perceptions of a child—to highlight the shortcomings of the idealizing English pastoral and assert his use of elements of the Irish pastoral.

However, death in Heaney's pastoral is not always a critique of the English tradition. He treats it in his poetry in other ways as well. Two poems—technically, one sonnet and one sonnet sequence—that showcase the multiple approaches to death in Heaney's pastoral are "Requiem for the Croppies" from his collection *Door into the Dark* (1969) and "Clearances" from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), as mentioned earlier. While both poems exemplify how Heaney's pastoral fulfills generic conventions, "Clearances" also shows Heaney grappling with the anxiety of death.

---

[5] This is a reference to Robert Frost's poem "Blueberries." Parker's quoting Frost is a smart move as Heaney and Frost are often compared and read alongside one another.

In his sonnet "Requiem for the Croppies," Heaney uses nature to provide rest for the souls of the Croppies. This poem is particularly useful in outlining the in-between nature of Seamus Heaney pastorals because it uses a traditional English poetic form, the sonnet, to discuss the Irish Croppies. This name was given to Irish rebels during the Irish Rebellion of 1798. The rebellion was led by the United Irishmen who were influenced by the American and French revolutions. "Croppy" refers to their closely cropped hairstyle, which was associated with the French revolutionaries. Being of the colony, the Croppies were not as well equipped as the British forces were. The Croppies lived and fought off the land. They had home field advantage, so to speak, as we see in Heaney's poem:

> The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley—
> No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—
> We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
> The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
> A people, hardly marching—on the hike—
> We found new tactics happening each day:
> We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
> And stampede cattle into infantry,
> Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown. (1-9)

From this scene, we can tell that the Croppies know the land well. Arguably, the land is also a Croppy, in that it fights for them. But this advantage cannot sustain them for the entire rebellion, even though it seems as if Heaney may have wished it could. The *volta* is not initiated in the ninth line as it traditionally is in the sonnet form. Heaney postpones the turn until line 10. Granted, this decision may just be for design and metapoetic purposes, allowing the line "Then

retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown" (and subsequently the first part of the sonnet) to invade the space of the volta. Or perhaps the delayed turn is just one more poem in the trend of Heaney playing with form. Regardless, the Croppies receive one line more than they would have in a traditional sonnet.

It is the volta, this prolonged turn—"Until"—that sends the poem to its tragic yet peaceful end, a conclusion that makes this an Irish pastoral sonnet (10). Heaney writes that "Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon" (11), which, like "No kitchens on the run, no striking camp" (2), is another representation of the inadequacy of the Irish rebels in comparison to the British artillery. And just as the land seems to fight for the Croppies earlier in the sonnet, it also experiences the casualty: "The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave" (12). Literally, the hillside blushes from the bloodshed, but figuratively, the land absorbs the Croppies' deaths. The hillside also literally takes in the Croppies when "They buried [them] without shroud or coffin" (13). But Heaney, not one to leave the Croppies without a proper burial, pushes the pathetic fallacy further: "And in August the barley grew up out of the grave" (14). This barley is the same that filled "The pockets of [their] greatcoats" (1). The Croppies were buried with this barley on their persons, and, since they were given no shrouds or coffins, the grain took root and sprouted. The rebirth imagery is obvious: Croppies to crops. But what Heaney also does here is fulfill the conventions of the requiem genre. His pastoral provides the dead repose.

The other example of death in Heaney's pastoral, "Clearances," also finds him attempting to find peace with a death. The elegiac sonnet sequence is written in memory of his mother, Margaret Kathleen Heaney, who died in 1984. While the pastoral is not explicit until the final sonnet in the sequence, the other sonnets lead up to this end; therefore, it is important to consider

them as well. An examination of their development is also an analysis of the Irish pastoral in the sonnet sequence.

In his essay "Leaving Home: Seamus Heaney's Parental Elegies," Iain Twiddy explains one of the primary functions of an elegy and how this sonnet sequence accomplishes this task:

> The poet must separate from the dead, achieving the clear distance of consolation; but he also needs to clear himself from the guilt produced in the relationship and the guilt created in withdrawing from the dead. In his psychoanalytic account of elegy, Peter Sacks observes that "One of the dangers besetting a mourner is the imprisonment of his affective energies, the locking up within himself of impulses previously directed toward or attached to the deceased," and that "few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living." (105)

Given this challenge, Heaney devotes the preface to preparation for this distancing. The poem reads like a call to a muse, presumably his mother. Heaney writes that "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" (1-3). This image of the coal block is the grief that Heaney must chisel away at like a sculptor chipping down a block of stone. He describes what "The sound of that relaxed alluring blow" taught him: "Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen, // Taught me between the hammer and the block / To face the music" (6-8). He seems to be reminding himself of what he can do, telling himself that, while this elegy will be difficult to write and while the grieving process will be painful to endure, he possesses the skills to complete them

both. But there is one lesson that he has not learned yet, the call to the muse in the final lines: "Teach me now to listen, / To strike it rich behind the linear black" (8-9). The reference to "linear black" suggests that he hopes the proceeding sonnets will achieve their goal.

Distancing himself from his mother is also a distancing from his family roots—the lessons he learns from his mother are ones that "her uncle once taught her." As Twiddy notes, "the accusing voices involved in that withdrawal are immediately present in the first sonnet, where Heaney recalls a cobble-stone thrown at his 'turncoat' great-grandmother a hundred years earlier" (106). This recalls his great-grandmother's conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism. Heaney imagines the scene of his great-grandparents' first trip to Mass through a hostile crowd and then "assesses the family legacy: 'Call her 'The Convert'. 'The Exogamous Bride'" (Twiddy 106). He then, in a rather blasé tone, shifts the sonnet to the task of achieving distance: "*Anyhow*, it is a genre piece / Inherited on my mother's side / And mine to dispose with now she's gone" (10-2, my emphasis). As Twiddy writes, "Heaney asserts the pragmatic value of elegy. In elegizing, he will modify or reject certain aspects of his heritage as he sees fit. . . . Although elegy. . .may pay tribute to the dead, its purpose is primarily selfish: it must yield some kind of relief for the mourner" (106-7).

Having announced his desire to "dispose with" the grief, Heaney reminds us of the process' challenges in the second sonnet. He remembers an afternoon at his grandparents' house; the descriptions of the environment and the uncomfortable restrictions "[suggest] the lack of emotional and psychological freedom that grief creates" (Twiddy 107):

> Polished linoleum shone there. Brass taps shone.
>
> The china cups were very white and big—
>
> An unchipped set with sugar bowl and jug.

The kettle whistled. Sandwich and tea scone
Were present and correct. In case it run,
The butter must be kept out of the sun.
And don't be dropping crumbs. Don't tilt your chair.
Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise when you stir. (1-8)

The limitation and decorum are present in the images created; however, Heaney achieves a similar quality with punctuation. The many caesuras force the reader to stop, similar to how young Heaney was stopped from walking on the polished linoleum or tilting his chair. The octave reflects the scene as well as "Heaney's feelings of constraint by the emotional demands of mourning and the generic expectations of elegy" (Twiddy 107).

His mother's instructions also convey part of their relationship, a problematic one that Heaney spends the next three sonnets examining more thoroughly. Sonnets 3 and 5 imagine mostly quiet, tranquil scenes between mother and son. Sonnet 3 remembers a morning when the rest of the family was away at Mass, leaving Heaney and his mother to peel potatoes. It describes the peacefulness of their work as they peeled in silence, the intermittent splashes of potato hitting the bucket of water the only sounds in the room. The quiet octave is a refuge for Heaney amidst the "hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying" in the deathbed-side scene in the sestet (10). Amid the noise of crying, Heaney remembers "her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives— / Never closer the rest of our lives" (12-4).

Similarly, sonnet 5 finds Heaney and his mother taking sheets off the clothesline. The detailed movements make the folding ritual seem like a choreographed dance. These tranquil first seven lines, like the quiet of the potato peeling, are only interrupted by the "dried-out

undulating thwack" of the flapped sheet. The last seven lines of sonnet 5 extend this sheet-folding scene and provide commentary on Heaney's relationship with his mother:

> So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand
>
> For a split second as if nothing had happened
>
> For nothing had that had not always happened
>
> Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
>
> Coming close again by holding back
>
> In moves where I was X and she was O
>
> Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks. (8-14)

The lines suggest a sense of tension between the two, perhaps even competition given the "moves where [Heaney] was X and she was O." But there is also equality. Folding a sheet properly requires both people to make the same moves, grabbing the right corners, coming together to make a fold and moving back out to prepare for another. The poem itself is also symmetrical. The final word "sacks" rhymes with the "thwack" that ends the first seven lines. The competitive X and O image, though, disrupts this symmetry and prevents the poem from being truly equal. It provides tension and reflects the uneasy mother-son relationship.

This tension is full-out conflict in sonnet 4. The dispute is over linguistic negotiations. Heaney's decision to go away for his education represents this separation from familial roots, a move that Heaney's mother doesn't seem to wholeheartedly approve of. He does not open the sonnet with this, though. He instead describes his mother's "Fear of affectation" that manifests itself in her speech; it "made her affect / Inadequacy whenever it came to / Pronouncing words 'beyond her'" (1-3). Heaney writes that

> She'd manage something hampered and askew

Every time, as if she might betray
The hampered and inadequate by too
Well-adjusted a vocabulary. (4-7)

So when Heaney separated himself from his roots (no matter how partially), she would remind him "With more challenge than pride. . .'You / Know all them things'" (8-9). This remark, of course, is about more than just linguistic difference, as Twiddy also mentions: "The mother accuses the son of intellectualism; he accuses her of inverted snobbery, concealing her real level of knowledge in order to induce guilt and allegiance" (108). Heaney's mother's remark that he knows "all them things" is deliberately grammatically incorrect (according to Standard English) and serves to bring him back to her:

So I governed my tongue
In front of her, a genuinely well-
Adjusted adequate betrayal
Of what I knew better. I'd *naw* and *aye*
And decently relapse into the wrong
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay. (9-14)

The same tense equation is in this sonnet as well. Both Heaney and his mother adopt a dialect that betrays what they know better, making them allies. But the intellectual tension is still present, keeping them "at bay."

However, the tension soon dissipates as we enter sonnet 7. This is the death scene that remembers Heaney's father in his mother's last minutes saying "more to her / Almost than in all their life together" (1-2). His head is also "bent down to her propped-up head," reminding us of

young Heaney's head bent toward hers as they peel potatoes (6). The release of tension occurs when his mother dies:

> Then she was dead,
>
> The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned
>
> And we all knew one thing by being there.
>
> The space we stood around had been emptied
>
> Into us to keep, it penetrated
>
> Clearances that suddenly stood open.
>
> High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (8-14)

Paradoxically, though, the tension of the mother-son relationship, of two people kept "at bay," occurs when the space rushes into him through "Clearances that suddenly stood open." While this paradox may have resulted in a "pure change," the elegy has not fulfilled his generic conventions, as Twiddy asserts:

> The end of the poem is the moment when the real becomes metaphysical, memorial and inspirational. The description of these "Clearances" suddenly opening, and the cries of grief becoming suddenly silent, do not convey immediate consolation in this new relationship, rather clarity that the mother and the real relationship are definitely gone, along with the anxiety that accompanied this birth. (111)

This consolation is reached in the final sonnet in the sequence; this poem is also where Heaney turns to the pastoral to help him achieve this distance. The poem never directly mentions his mother, though. Instead, Heaney writes about returning to a former home where his

aunt once planted a chestnut tree that was then later cut down, "a space / Utterly empty, utterly a source" (1-2). The nostalgia is palpable. The emptiness of the space where the tree once stood echoes the emptiness left by his mother's death and relates the two figures. In an essay on Patrick Kavanagh, "The Placeless Heaven," Heaney explains how he began to identify with the chestnut tree. It was planted the year he was born, and he felt as if he had grown up with it, especially since "the chestnut was the one significant thing that grew as [he] grew. The rest of the trees and hedges round the house were all mature and appeared therefore like given features of the world" ("Placeless Heaven" 3). He then describes how he identified with the space left by the loss of the tree rather than the tree itself. He writes that "it was not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife" ("Placeless Heaven" 4).

Heaney's changing focus on the physical chestnut tree to the metaphysical tree is reflected in the shift in the poem. Two types of clearances are at play here: the clearance that suddenly opens at his mother's death and the clearing of the tree that allows him to achieve this distance and consolation. As Twiddy writes, "[A]s [Heaney] becomes distanced from real contact, he is achieving closer contact with the mother's imaginary presence; a figure can diminish in prominence, but a nothingness can remain as a plentitude of silent inspiration and imaginative possibility, its weight 'a bright nowhere / A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for'" (112). This attachment to the void that Twiddy mentions allows Heaney to chisel away at the last pieces of the coal block of grief: "Heaney is no longer lamenting the loss of his rooted connection with his mother, no longer listening out for her not being there" (112). As the pastoral fulfills the conventions of the genre in "Requiem for the

Croppies," turning to the chestnut tree helps Heaney achieve his distance from his mother and carries out the conventions of the elegy as well.

In addition to grappling with the death of his mother, Heaney turns to the Irish pastoral to work through other anxieties. My next chapter examines at length Heaney's anxieties about becoming a poet and his use of metapoetic tools as a means of coping with them. However, metapoetic tools are not the only function of the pastoral as resolution. In "Glanmore Sonnets," another sonnet sequence, one from Heaney's 1979 collection *Field Work*, he questions his decision to move his family from Northern Ireland to Glanmore Cottage in County Wicklow in 1972. The move was made to avoid the increasing violence in Northern Ireland and so that Heaney could fully devote himself to his poetic career. But he wonders if this was the right decision—"What is my apology for poetry?" he asks in sonnet 9 (11).

This particular sonnet sequence is not only another look at the Irish pastoral as resolution; it more importantly highlights Heaney's talent in subtlety. Unlike some of the more explicit uses of Irish pastoral, "Glanmore Sonnets" blends the aesthetic and the pragmatic in such a way that the elements of the Irish pastoral are, at times, rather indirect and sophisticated. Like "The Barn," many of the sonnets in the sequence are agriculturally focused. Heaney opens the first sonnet by fusing his writing and farm work: "Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground" (1). Here, the many Os are an aural and linguistic representation of the opened ground. This connection of poetry to countryside is a theme of the sonnet sequence. Heaney seems to make this his poetic calling in writing that "the good life could be to cross a field / And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / Of ploughs" (6-8). Now that he is at Glanmore Cottage, he can embrace the "good life" and "art a paradigm of earth," suggesting an organic quality to his

poetry. The use of “art” as verb here strengthens the statement, putting the momentum and focus of the phrase on his poetry.

The majority of the sonnet reads like an aesthetic pastoral, especially with the focus on the mist bands over the plowed fields. However, Heaney describes “a deep no sound / Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors” (3-4). The absence of tractors in the foreground implies a distance from the farm and its harsh realities and suggests a shift closer to the English pastoral tradition. But this “deep no sound” is vulnerable to the “distant gargling tractors,” meaning that the idealized countryside is not as idyllic as at first glance. The subtle shift to troublesome imagery comes into the poem in the last lines: “Breasting the mist, in sowers’ aprons, / My ghosts come striding into their spring stations. / The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows” (12-4). These ghosts “striding into their spring stations” remind us of “Station Island,” another poem in which Heaney grapples with guilt over becoming a poet. Their presence as ghosts and the reference to “freakish Easter snows” are not intense images. They are supernatural and give an eerie ending to the sonnet. In comparison to more violent images like “mud grenades,” “our palms sticky as Bluebeard’s,” and “The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave,” the ghosts and freakish snows are more moderate. Unlike in the previous poems, the Irish pastoral is more muted here.

This same subtle Irish pastoral carries on into the second sonnet. Heaney writes that he

> landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore
> And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
> A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
> That might continue, hold, dispel, appease. (9-12)

Referring to Glanmore as a hedge-school is particularly Irish and carries sentiments of British colonization. Additionally, the voice that Heaney hopes to raise by going to Glanmore introduces a subtle element of Irish pastoral. Once again, the landscape is not as idyllic as it seems. Because Heaney "*hoped* to raise / A voice. . . / That *might* continue, hold, dispel, appease," there is the possibility for failure, something that idealizing pastorals do not allow. The pastoral is present, too, in the concluding couplet: "Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round" (13-4). These lines also connect poetry and farming. Line 13 repeats the opening line of sonnet 1 and reflects the physical act of the plow turning around in a field. Additionally, "verse" is from the Latin *versus*, meaning to turn, "like the plough turned round." As Potts notes, it is also an allusion "to the ancient Greek writing style, boustrophedon, with lines alternately written left to right and right to left, as well as to the ancient Greek pastoral motif of rural labor as an analogy for poetic labor" (62). This move to the countryside positions Heaney as a pastoral shepherd, but this final couplet shows that he is no shepherd. He is a farmer.

Sonnet 3 strengthens this connection of poetry to the land. Heaney describes "the cuckoo and the corncrake" (1) that "consorted at twilight" (2) as "iambic" (3). Additionally, he writes, "Outside a rustling and twig-combing breeze / Refreshes and relents. Is cadences" (13-4). These images show not only how the poems are using elements of nature but how nature is also taking on qualities of the poetry. In an interview with O'Driscoll, Heaney spoke to this quality of the sonnets: "Glanmore was the first place where my immediate experience got into my work. Almost all the poems before that had arisen from memories of older haunts; but after a couple of years in the cottage, it changed from being just living quarters to a locus that was being written into poems" (198).

This connection between the poetry and the locus is also an element of the Irish pastoral. For example, the conversation between the cuckoo and the corncrake resembles a singing contest, a common trope of Classical pastoral. However, the particular birds Heaney chooses align it with the Irish pastoral tradition; the corncrake's harsh cry is appropriate for the Irish pastoral (Potts 62). We also see this lack of idealizing pastoral in the conversation between Heaney and his wife Marie:

> I had said earlier, "I won't relapse
>
> From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.
>
> Dorothy and William—" She interrupts:
>
> "You're not going to compare us two. . .?" (9-12)

Couples in aesthetic pastorals have peaceful relationships, but the Heaneys' interaction is anything but harmonious. Perhaps the cuckoo and the corncrake were deliberate poetic choices intended to represent the couple's earlier conversation. The tension in their marriage returns and is darker in sonnet 9. The poem opens with Marie telling Heaney that she sees "a black rat / Sway[ing] on the briar like infected fruit" (1-2). Already these images place the poem in the Irish pastoral tradition, which continues throughout the sonnet with descriptions of "Blood on a pitchfork, blood on chaff and hay, / Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing" (9-10). When Heaney heads down to the briar, it is empty and swishing, the rat just having ran away. But "inside, [Marie's] face / Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass" (13-4). This description alludes to tension in their marriage but also suggests an eerie almost demonic aspect to Marie's actions.

The strongest assertion of the connection between poetry and nature occurs in sonnet 4. The poem opens remembering when Heaney "used to lie with an ear to the line / For that way,

they said, there should come a sound / Escaping ahead, an iron tune / Of flange and piston pitched along the ground" (1-4). But this method of listening for what is presumably a train doesn't work. He "hears" the sound by other means:

> Always, instead,
> Struck couplings and shuntings two miles away
> Lifted over the woods. The head
> Of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey
> Turnover of haunch and mane, and I'd look
> Up to the cutting where she'd soon appear.
> Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
> Silently across our drinking water
> (As they are shaking now across my heart)
> And vanished into where they seemed to start. (5-14)

Heaney notices the train coming through the effects it has on other things, such as the turning of the horse's head and the vibrations across the water. The ground isn't enough. Heaney requires other elements of nature as a mediator for his poetry, the sounds and the vibrations across his heart. He relies on the pastoral to fulfill this poetic need.

As we can see, Heaney's use of the pastoral is multifaceted and utilizes but also goes beyond the Irish pastoral. Sometimes critique, sometimes generic fulfillment, sometimes resolution, the Irish pastoral tradition is an aspect of Heaney's poetry that he employs masterfully. However, Heaney also accomplishes these tasks in his other poetry, just through different avenues. For example, his poem "Act of Union" is a postcolonial critique of the British colonization of Ireland but would not be considered pastoral. And his "Station Island," while

having occasional pastoral figures like a crowd of shawled women wading in a cornfield, is an extended confessional poem in which Heaney works toward resolution for and absolution of his anxieties about his writing, but I would not consider this poem to be very pastoral. What these considerations of Heaney's pastorals show, then, is that we miss something when we think of him as only antipastoral. We don't see just how much of his pastoral is true to the mode. Other pastoral poets—ones that are deemed legitimately pastoral—write for reasons similar to Heaney's. But when we blindly separate him from this cadre of writers, we ignore a particular richness of his poetry. Additionally, examining his poetry in this way provides a more authentic look at the rural and agrarian influences of his work. However, most importantly, by thinking of him as a pastoral poet, we open ourselves up to an analysis of and appreciation for the genius of his writing. If we just put him in the category of other writers deemed antipastoral, we fail to notice not only how pastoral he truly is but also how unique his pastorals truly are.

"I'll dig with it": Agricultural Anxieties and Metapoetic Tools Tilling *Opened Ground*

As we've seen, a common feature of the pastoral mode in its traditional use is the writer's artificial stance. Pastoral poets, especially those working in the English pastoral tradition, generally watch and write about their bucolic subjects from a gentlemanly remove—even when they're actually in the countryside. The Irish pastoral, as demonstrated earlier in this discussion, melds history and politics into the tradition. But even here, in a literary heritage noted for its proximity to country matters, a gap remains fixed between the pastoral poet and his or her subject. This gap doesn't exist in the same way for Heaney, though, whose childhood spent on a farm and whose adulthood in the world of letters create a unique platform of experiences from which he writes. Heaney's pastoral is a hybrid, grounded in his rural upbringing and written from the experiences of his educated life—it defies categorization.

However, nowhere are the distinctive elements of Heaney's pastoral poems more clearly evident than in the works focusing on tools and other practical objects of rural existence. In Heaney's poems, the tools of a countryman's or a countrywoman's daily life aren't the ornamental accessories of pastoral art; they're real objects, sometimes highly specific ones that furnished Heaney's childhood world. In typical idealizing pastorals, for instance, a shepherd might hold his staff while singing about the beauty of the countryside, and a shovel might lean against a barn in an urban person's daydream about life in nature. These tools serve no practical function. But in Heaney's pastorals, tools recollected from his country childhood are at once actual and metaphysical. They are subject for his poems, but however specifically and palpably evoked, they also serve a metapoetic purpose. The tools Heaney meditates upon are his own means of digging, shaping, crafting, and polishing.

Analyzing this literary use of tools in Heaney's poetry uncovers an element of his pastoral that highlights a particular autobiographical strain present in *Opened Ground*, namely in "Digging" and "The Diviner" from his 1966 collection *Death of a Naturalist*; "The Forge" and "Thatcher" from his 1969 collection *Door into the Dark*; "Old Smoothing Iron," a part of his "Shelf Life" sequence in his 1984 collection *Station Island*; "Alphabets" from his 1987 collection *Haw Lantern*; and "The Pitchfork" from his 1991 collection *Seeing Things*. Before examining these poems, though, we should consider aspects of Heaney's life that relate to the autobiographical elements in this selection of poetry.

I want to recall our attention to where we started in this engagement with Heaney's pastorals. Being from an agricultural background, Heaney felt what most of his peers felt as a result of the 1947 Education Act: anxiety, uncertainty, a lack of self-confidence. We are reminded that Heaney acknowledged a level of anxiety about his life as a farm boy: "I used to think that, if you came from a background like mine, your approach to the muse was shyer than if you came from a more bookish or artistic family, but now I'm not so sure" (O'Driscoll 99). He was shy around the muse, most likely because he felt inadequate. However, he also notes that, at the time of the interview, he's "not so sure." But not so sure about what? His personal anxiety about being a rural poet? Or the idea that any person who is not from "a more bookish or artistic family" is inherently lacking any sort of literary or creative skills? I think it's a bit of both. In the same interview response, Heaney cites Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Patrick Kavanagh, and Fernando Pessoa, successful and talented writers who were not from artistic or literary families. And in doing so, I believe he's also talking about himself and his personal anxieties. What this comment illustrates, then, is a change in Heaney's perceptions of himself as a rural poet, a development that we can see in the tool poems in *Opened Ground*.

The agriculture-metapoetry connection is an easy one for a writer like Heaney to make. Both farming and poetry require planning, patience, resilience, cultivation, and good old-fashioned hard work. For Heaney—for whom agriculture and poetry were both important parts of his life—the connection was likely quite self-evident. And poetry was the obvious outlet for the tension between these two spheres. In his Nobel Prize lecture "Crediting Poetry," Heaney discusses what it was like to be a poet during The Troubles, but the comments regarding politics are analogous to his agricultural anxieties. As Heaney says, a poet during The Troubles was torn between "ongoing political violence" and a public expectation "not of poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups" ("Crediting Poetry" 418). He goes on to describe consciousness as "the site of variously contending discourses," referencing, of course, the competing discourses of political violence and public expectation. These particular tensions led him to write the poem "Exposure" in which he works through these competing elements (Burris 66). Heaney turns to poetry here because, as he writes in "The Government of the Tongue," "poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves" (*Government* 108). Heaney's poetry as a reflection of the poet becomes one of these "site[s] of variously contending discourses." As Helen Vendler writes in *Seamus Heaney*, "Heaney's emphasis here is that of lyric. . . . Lyric is not narrative or drama; it is not primarily concerned to relate events, or to reify contesting issues. Rather, its act is to present adequately and truthfully, through the means of temporally prolonged symbolic form, the private mind and heart caught in the changing events of a geographical place and a historical epoch" (12). These considerations of Heaney's poetry position them as a space for Heaney to reflect upon his "private mind and heart caught in the changing events" of "variously contending discourses," which, as we see

through this examination of his metapoetic tools, are the two forces creating his agricultural anxieties: his rural upbringing and his life as a poet.

In "'Inscribed in Sheets': Seamus Heaney's Scribal Matrix," Rand Brandes analyzes Heaney's metapoetics and relates them to his idea of the scribal, which focuses on "his fascination with the physicality of the writing process, the materials of the trade, and the inscribed word or the word as *word*" (47). For Brandes, Heaney resembles "the ancient monastic scribes of Ireland" (47). I want to focus more narrowly on Heaney's agricultural metapoetics considering in particular how "his fascination with the physicality of the writing process" and "the materials of the trade" allude to agricultural processes and tools.

Heaney begins *Opened Ground* with the poem that previously began his first volume *Death of a Naturalist*, "Digging." The multilayered aspects of this choice demand attention. The start of Heaney's poetic career is couched in this agricultural metapoetry. Taking its place at the head of Heaney's ouvre, "Digging" becomes somewhat of a manifesto. Heaney opens the poem with an image of a "squat pen" (2) resting "Between [his] finger and [his] thumb" (1). He then quickly moves to images of his father and his grandfather[6] digging potatoes and cutting turf, respectively. His descriptions of his father and grandfather show how connected Heaney still is to his rural upbringing. Images of "a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground," (3-4) "The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft / Against the inside knee. . .levered firmly," (10-1) and the "cool hardness" of newly dug potatoes "in our hands" (14) paint an overall accurate picture of his father digging potatoes. Likewise, Heaney's descriptions of his grandfather's work on Toner's bog creates a similarly well-developed image:

> Once I carried him milk in a bottle

[6] Heaney's grandfather is actually based on his great-uncle Hughie (O'Driscoll 25).

Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up

To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods

Over his shoulder, going down and down

For the good turf. Digging. (19-24)

The poem then rather smoothly begins to transition into metapoetry and conveys Heaney's initial anxieties. As he writes this poem, the images of "The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat, [and] the curt cuts of an edge / Through living roots" seem to charge a feeling that had lain dormant within him (25-7). He realizes that he has "no spade to follow men like them" (28). This statement is Heaney's acknowledgement of his "being set a bit apart" from his family. In the poem, he is also physically set apart from his father and grandfather. In the poem, Heaney writes from a heightened position: "Under my window, a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father, digging" (3-5). He is not down on the ground with his father but is, instead, writing in an upper-story room. Perhaps he feels inadequate, since he has no spade, and seeks the comfort of a space in which he feels more included. Or perhaps he chooses to stay inside and write instead of going outside and digging. Either way, he is definitely not following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps.

Heaney ends the poem by echoing its beginning: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (29-31). This resolve to dig with his pen immediately follows his expression of anxiety. No mediator exists between them. We cannot be sure what happens in the space between these two stanzas. We can't see if Heaney hesitates to take his stand as digger poet or if he makes his response rather quickly. What we do see, though, is an

equation of his writing utensil with an implement of agriculture. Heaney's pen becomes his father's and grandfather's spades, his poetry their potatoes and peat moss. With the metapoetic pen-spade image, Heaney goes forth in his poetic career to work like his predecessors, digging for creation. He has found a connection between agriculture and literary culture, but the anxiety is not, by any means, gone. Being somewhat of a manifesto, "Digging" gives Heaney his first metapoetic tool to use as he works through this association of farm life to poetic life.

Following his proclamation in "Digging," we see Heaney working through the initial stages of his anxiety in "The Diviner," another poem from *Death of a Naturalist*. The poem's subject is a diviner, a man who uses a hazel stick to locate underground water. Divining (also called "dowsing") is a method by which people can locate underground sources of water, minerals, oil, and, as some claim, buried bodies. While divining is not a scientifically proven practice, many still maintain that it is an effective way of finding water. The primary divination tools are a forked stick from a tree or bush (usually hazel, which Heaney's diviner uses) or two L-shaped metal rods. When held by a diviner, these tools are supposed to react when placed over a source of water—the hazel stick points downward, while the divination rods usually cross or face away from each other, showing the orientation of the flow of water.

In the first stanza, we are presented not only with the image of the diviner "Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck / Of water" but also an image of the diviner's hazel stick manifested in the V on the page. Brandes notes this V as an important example of Heaney the scribe, one that correlates to Heaney the farmer: "The image of the V is actualized in the letter's transformation into a stick and the stick's transformation into a letter. The letter's visual appearance on the page, the V, draws attention to the poem's self-conscious construction in print. The scribe transcribes the world into letters and letters into the world" (52). This imprinting of the literary

onto the agricultural and vice-versa signifies deeper connections Heaney is making between the two realms. However, a stronger connection and one created via a metapoetic tool occurs in the third and final stanza of the poem.

People watch the diviner walk in circles around the field, and, eventually, they "ask to have a try" (9). The diviner hands them the stick, but nothing happens. It is not until he grabs their wrists that the hazel moves. Unskilled hands cannot work the machinery of divination. It is only the diviner who has the power to do so. This image has direct connections to Heaney's agricultural anxieties. The diviner is an artist; his craft is locating water. With this in mind, we can see the diviner as a representation of the poet. Reading "The Diviner" with this lens offers an interesting perspective on Heaney's anxieties. Heaney obviously thinks highly of the rural artist. Granted, the diviner seems to have some level of anxiety himself, since he is "nervous" as he circles the field (4), "*but*," as Heaney writes, he is "professionally / Unfussed" (4-5, my emphasis). The nervous yet unfazed professional diviner parallels Heaney as poet. By describing the diviner in this manner, Heaney also allows himself a level of anxiety, if only temporarily.

This professionally unfazed demeanor returns in the last stanza when the diviner grasps the bystanders' wrists. Heaney writes that the hazel stick "lay dead in their [the bystanders'] grasp till, *nonchalantly*, / He [the diviner] gripped expectant wrists" (11-2, my emphasis). The diviner is nonchalant; he is comfortable with his art. But just two stanzas ago, he was nervous (albeit while maintaining a professionally calm appearance). What happened? I argue that the nervousness goes away as he finds himself in his art. Earlier in the poem, he searches for the water, but the performance makes him unconcerned. Reading the diviner as poet, we understand the search for water to be a search for poetic inspiration or motivation to write. The poet hasn't

found the poem yet, which creates a reasonable level of unease. But once the poet begins writing, the nervousness leaves him, if only for a moment. As I've already mentioned, Heaney uses his poems to reflect and work through his anxieties. He is very much like the diviner in this regard.

But there's another element to this poem, one that adds another layer to these metapoetic musings. The bystanders are unable to make the hazel stir; only the diviner can cause the stick to point to water. This ability sets the diviner above the rest; he is a professional. But Heaney doesn't write this scene condescendingly; therefore, the diviner's higher status shouldn't be viewed in a negative way. He just has a power that few (or no one else, as is the case in the poem) have. With these parallels between the diviner and the poet, we can't help but see Heaney writing about himself. He, like the diviner, has a talent that few have. Heaney's writing is an important profession. In the face of the agricultural anxieties, "The Diviner" is, to some degree, a confidence boost for Heaney. Others (including him) may question his choice to pursue a life of poetry, but none can deny his ability to make the hazel stir. It should be noted, though, that the poem is a sketch of a diviner, a man whom Heaney has no direct contact with. He is separated from the poet and could very well be someone else Heaney watches from his window as he does with father and grandfather. Heaney still is not on level with these representatives of agriculture.

We encounter other rural artists in selections from Heaney's next collection of poetry, *Door into the Dark*. "The Forge" and "Thatcher," along with "The Diviner," show us Heaney's search for others like him in his rural world. The blacksmith in "The Forge" is a solitary man, or at least that is how Heaney describes him. Much of the poem (lines 2-8) is speculation. The only thing about the blacksmith or his forge that Heaney "know[s] is a door into the dark" (1),

but he assumes that "The anvil must be somewhere in the centre" of the forge (6). However, he obviously wanted to write about him, despite his lack of knowledge. Therefore, he spends the first section of the poem imagining the blacksmith and his work. He is an artist, a musician, to be more precise, whose "hammered anvil" emits "short-pitched rings" (3). Heaney's descriptions parallel those of Barney Devlin on whom the blacksmith is based. Heaney recalls how Devlin once showed him "two different anvils and played them for their two different musics: a sweet and carrying note. . .and an abrupt unmelodious dint" (O'Driscoll 91). Obviously, blacksmiths—or at least Barney Devlin—are artists to Heaney. But it's more than just the artistry. The blacksmith's anvil is his "altar" (8). This comparison carries serious significance. The anvil as altar elevates the blacksmith to a certain degree, in very much the same way as Heaney praises the diviner. He has reverence for the blacksmith.

The musicianship returns in the next line. The blacksmith "expends himself in shape and music" (9). He puts himself into his work—so much so that his only interaction with the world outside his forge is the occasional recollection of "a clatter / Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows" (11-2) before he "grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick / To beat real iron out, to work the bellows" (13-4). The work is his life. It is quite personal, as is the same for other artistic endeavors, especially poetry and especially poetry with such personal connections as Heaney's. Granted, Heaney does not directly compare himself to the blacksmith. That sense is never portrayed in the poem. In fact, as the opening line signifies, "The Forge" is structured so that Heaney is writing about the blacksmith, about what he sees or imagines. Again, he is distanced from the blacksmith in much the same way in which he is distanced from his father and grandfather and the diviner.

The other rural artist, the thatcher, appears in the next poem in *Opened Ground*. The pairing of "The Forge" and "Thatcher" side-by-side in the selection and their similar rural artist subjects suggest that the poems should be read as complements to one another. In fact, we see much of the same metapoetic connections and reverence for rural artistry in "Thatcher." Whereas "The Forge" presents the artist in performance, "Thatcher" gives us the artist in preparation, performance, and public recognition. The thatcher is meticulous in his work, "eye[ing] the old rigging, pok[ing] at the eaves, / Open[ing] and handl[ing] sheaves of lashed wheat-straw" (4-5). He also takes care to test his materials, flicking and twisting the hazel and willow "in case they'd snap" (7). The care with which he readies himself and his equipment for his work resembles a poet sitting down to write, thinking through the images and sounds in his or her head, testing out drafts, "warming up" for the poem (8). The thatcher thatching, too, parallels a poet. He "sharpen[s] ends of rods / That, bent in two, [make] a white-pronged staple / For pinning down his world" (10-2) in much the same way that a poet like Heaney puts his world into words and words into his world (Brandes 52).

But the greater connection to "The Diviner" and "The Forge" comes when the thatcher receives public recognition for his work. After days spent roofing, he finishes the job and "[leaves] them gaping at his Midas touch" (16). The gaping "them," here, echoes the bystanders in "The Diviner," except in "Thatcher" they don't try to reproduce the artist's work. They instead are in awe at it. Alluding to King Midas also plays in to this reverent description. Literally, the thatcher is like King Midas because the straw he uses is golden-colored, "a sloped honeycomb," as Heaney writes (15). Figuratively, the thatcher's Midas touch refers to the power of his work; he is able to turn an "old rigging," "sheaves of lashed wheat-straw," and "bundled

rods" into golden art. The bystanders recognize his talent, and, like the diviner and blacksmith, the thatcher achieves a heightened status through his art.

In these three rural artist poems, Heaney draws a parallel between rural work and art. This comparison is born out of his agricultural anxieties. He is in a liminal space between the farm and poetry. They seem mutually exclusive and, in bridging the gap between the two spheres, Heaney looks to the diviner, the blacksmith, and the thatcher. These men also occupy the space between rural life and art—but theirs are considered legitimate trades. Before reading his translation of "Colum Cille Cecinit" at Villanova University on April 20, 2010, Heaney commented on the illegitimate status of literature as work: "The culture I grew up in was mostly agriculture country. And work was thought of as physical work. If you're upstairs reading a book, you couldn't say, 'But I'm working.' So there was always deep down somewhere in myself a need to defend the activity." Therefore, it makes sense that, in his defense of poetry, Heaney turns to divination, forging, and thatching. These are all considered work, but, as Heaney shows, they are also considered art. As we've seen, he has a particular reverence for these trades, but he remains at a distance, never putting himself in the poem beside the rural artists. Perhaps he feels inferior to them. Or maybe it's not an inferiority complex. Perhaps he just doesn't feel like he can quite yet take his place beside them. Regardless, Heaney still has anxieties to work through.

The next metapoetic tool does not come until much later in *Opened Ground*. The selections from *Wintering Out*, *Stations*, *North*, *Field Work*, and *Sweeney Astray* focus on events from Heaney's life, memories of his childhood, Heaney's political thoughts, and his translation of the medieval Irish work *Buile Suibhne* (in *Sweeney Astray*). No metapoetic tools appear until selections from *Station Island*, particularly "Old Smoothing Iron," selected from a sequence of

poems titled “Shelf Life.” The sequence features items one might pick up and keep, like an old smoothing iron that once belonged in Heaney’s childhood home (O’Driscoll 445). The poem is a collective memory of times Heaney watched his mother ironing clothes. Like “Thatcher,” “Old Smoothing Iron” shows preparation, performance, and recognition of the work. Heaney describes how his mother would take the iron from the stove and test its heat by spitting “in its iron face” (6) or holding it near her cheek “to divine the stored danger” (8). His mother’s divination practice connects her to another rural artist from Heaney’s early poetic career, the diviner. The description, too, of “Soft thumps on the ironing board” relate Heaney’s mother to yet another rural artist, the ironing board a domestic anvil, the soft thumps the blacksmith’s “short-pitched rings” (“The Forge” 3).

Heaney’s mother, then, is an amalgam of the three rural artists he respects earlier in *Opened Ground*. Here, though, he is not distanced from the action; he is in the poem watching his mother. Being close to the rural scene allows Heaney to confront his anxieties and begin to bring his farm life and poetic life together. He ends the poem with an observation of his mother’s work:

> To work, her dumb lunge says,
> is to move a certain mass
>
> through a certain distance,
> is to pull your weight and feel
> exact and equal to it.
> Feel dragged upon. And buoyant. (15-20)

His mother's "dumb lunge"—the repetitive lunging motion as she irons—describes what work is. The explanation is specifically related to his mother's ironing. She "move[s] a certain mass," the iron, "through a certain distance" across clothes. To work, as the poem continues, is to do one's fair share, "to pull your weight," so to speak. And by doing so, a person achieves precise balance, feeling "exact and equal to it [the work]." However, this description does not mean that the work is always easy. It comes with its burdens that make one "Feel dragged upon," but Heaney ends the poem by acknowledging the other side: work can also ease life's burdens and make one feel "buoyant."

This explanation of what work is echoes an earlier discussion of the perception of writing and literature as not work (Villanova). However, if we apply the definition of "work" presented in "Old Smoothing Iron," we see what Heaney knew all along: writing is work. The "certain mass / through a certain distance" could be a literal pushing of the pen across the page. But it also refers to taking an idea or an image, the "certain mass," and writing a poem from it, "through a certain distance." Like any other form of work, poetry requires the writer to do his or her fair share in producing a poem, to "feel exact and equal to it." Poetry also is not always (or, for some, hardly ever) simple and easy. Writer's block, fear of rejection, difficulty in finding the right word, and concerns of even writing in the first place make a poet "Feel dragged upon." However, writing, like other forms of work, is also uplifting. A good poem or even just the perfect sound can make a poet feel buoyant. The metapoetic iron helps Heaney reach this conclusion. If he were at a distance as he is with his father and grandfather, he most likely would never have received this lesson. But the proximity to the iron gives him what he needs. Heaney is beginning to reconcile the liminal space between rural life and poetry.

However, we should note that "Old Smoothing Iron," while a metapoetic tool poem, differs from the other tool poems. For one, an iron isn't a specifically rural or agricultural tool. A Dubliner—or any urban person, for that matter—irons in much the same way as Heaney's mother. But this poem isn't focused on just any person ironing. It is a meditation on Mary Kathleen Heaney; the iron is the iron of his childhood. To him, it is a rural tool.

Additionally, "Old Smoothing Iron" features domestic work, which, for Heaney's family, is in the feminine space. Unlike the manly tasks of digging, divining, thatching, and blacksmithing, ironing is woman's work. It makes sense that Heaney is partial to the traditional womanly tasks. In an interview with O'Driscoll, Heaney mentions that "[w]omen's work was never done" (12). We hear an echo of this comment in the poem; Heaney acknowledges that his mother's labor is considered "real work," a distinction he struggles with in terms of his own work as a poet. But his mother's work does not often get the recognition it deserves. His mother's lunge is a dumb one; it cannot speak. It does its work diligently, never saying a word. However, Heaney's poem gives the lunge a voice. By devoting the poem to his mother's ironing, Heaney elevates the chore, making it crucial to his reconciliation of his anxieties, putting it on the same level as the manly, more legitimated work of his father and grandfather.

The reconciliation of the "variously contending discourses" continues through *Opened Ground* and is especially focused in "Alphabets." The poem details Heaney's education in regards to writing, specifically how he matures from a young toddler to an older poet. It begins with an orthography of shadow puppets, but once the poem moves to Heaney at school, he begins to learn letters and numbers. His writing education is intricately connected with his agricultural life. Letters are compared to similarly-shaped rural objects. There is "the forked stick that they call a Y," which makes us think back to the hazel stick V from "The Diviner" (6).

The number two is “A swan’s neck and swan’s back” (7) and “Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate” make the letter A (9). Then we are shown the pen again, which hasn’t appeared since its original debut in “Digging”: “there is a right / Way to hold the pen and a wrong way” (11-2). In this instance, young Heaney learns how to use the tool. The next stanza continues this agriculture-writing education: “First it is ‘copying out,’ and then ‘English,’ / Marked correct with a little leaning hoe” (13-4). The progression of courses—which continue into Part II with the movement from *Elementa Latina* to calligraphy—represent levels of mastery that Heaney must complete as he moves through his education. As Brandes writes, “The moral development of the young writer, his sense of right and wrong, corresponds to the mastering of his tools. The right and wrong way to ‘hold the pen’ or ‘to write’ suggests the possibility of transgression or punishment. Thus, the young writer must develop control and discipline if his work is to be ‘Marked correct with a little leaning hoe’” (62).

The connection between farm life and writing continues into Part II as he moves from primary education to a “new calligraphy that felt like home,” the writing of ancient Irish texts. In these illuminated manuscripts, Heaney sees his agricultural life “rendered not in the wisdom and beauty of the narrative or lyric, but in the texts’ actual graphic splendor” (Brandes 63): “The letters of this alphabet were trees. / The capitals were orchards in full bloom. / The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches” (26-8). In learning and eventually translating these texts, Heaney “is the scribe / Who drove a team of quills on his white field” (33-4). Here, we see Heaney doing what he sets out to do in “Digging,” plowing a team of quills, digging with his pen.

Part III introduces a permanent passage of time. “The globe has spun” (41); Heaney has matured even more as a poet, “allud[ing] to Shakespeare” and “to Graves” (42). The school and school window he used to look out of have been bulldozed by time; the “sheaves,” “harvest,” and

"potato pit" are no more. The past is gone, but Heaney can still access it through memory and reflection, a concept introduced in the final two stanzas of the poem. Heaney compares his "own wide pre-reflective stare" (61) to an astronaut who looks out the small window in his spaceship and "sees all that he has sprung from, / The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O" of the Earth (58-9). Just as the astronaut looks back on where he came from, through "Alphabets," Heaney looks back on his writing education and reflects on the steps that led to his poetic career, returning to himself as a child "All agog at the plasterer on his ladder / Skimming [his family's] gable and writing [their] name there / With his trowel point, letter by strange letter" (62-4). The "O," too, charts this growth. It is a metapoetic symbol of Heaney's development throughout the poem, starting from the globe in the windowsill of his primary school classroom and transitioning to Shakespeare's Globe and then the Earth from which the astronaut launched. The "O" fully matures from a miniaturized version of the Earth to the Earth itself, paralleling Heaney's maturation from a young boy drawing sticks and swans to the poet looking back on his growth like the astronaut looks back on Earth.

The metapoetic tools in "Alphabets" allow Heaney this moment of reflection. However, if the two realms of agriculture and poetry weren't as intimately connected as they are, Heaney wouldn't have the same experience. The type of reflection he does in "Alphabets" can only come once he no longer feels self-conscious about his pursuit of a life of poetry. He's no longer shy around the muse. The lesson learned in "Old Smoothing Iron" becomes a lifelong endeavor as Heaney traces the development of his writing education. Unlike the other metapoetic tool poems, "Alphabets" is focused solely on Heaney. His father, the woman "ringleted in assonance and woodnotes," and the plasterer play minor roles (30). Like the reflective stance, this focus on the poet can only come after he works through his anxieties. The need of a legitimization of

writing as work seems to be the primary source of his tension. In "Digging," he makes the stand that he will follow in his father's and grandfather's steps and dig with his pen, but what he lacks is an acknowledgement from others that writing is work in the understood sense of his "agriculture country" (Villanova). Once he receives this acknowledgement in "Old Smoothing Iron," he can reconcile (or come as close as possible to reconciling) the "variously contending discourses" of agriculture and poetry.

Free from the tension of his agricultural anxieties, Heaney is able to focus more on himself as a poet, incorporating his rural upbringing rather than focusing on reconciling the differences between the two. Such a focus occurs in "The Pitchfork," what is perhaps the most important metapoetic tool poem. Heaney opens the poem with the image of a man holding a pitchfork, getting a feel for it, and tells how the man loves using this particular tool. From his descriptions in stanza three, Heaney is obviously still connected with his rural roots even in such a late collection as *Seeing Things*. But it's not until stanzas four and five that "The Pitchfork" becomes a metapoem. Heaney writes how "when he [the man] thought of probes that reached the farthest, / He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past / Evenly, imperturbably through space" (13-5). This image is an ideal, what the man *thinks*. It is not reality. The coordinating conjunction "but" at the beginning of stanza five shows this contradiction:

> But [he] has learned at last to follow that simple lead
>
> Past its own aim, out to an other side
>
> Where perfection—or nearness to it—is imagined
>
> Not in the aiming but the opening hand. (17-20)

By following the lead “Past its own aim,” Heaney takes the focus, as the final line shows, “Not in the aiming but the opening hand.” The target does not matter. What does matter is where the pitchfork lands.

Reading these stanzas through a metapoetic lens reveals insightful poetic commentary. The idealized version of the pitchfork sailing through space contains obvious rocket imagery, suggesting that in order to discover the farthest reach, one must aim high or “reach for the stars,” to borrow the cliché. However, what the realistic final stanza shows is that aiming is not important (or at least most important). Poets may set high goals for themselves in an effort to reach perfection, but no such perfection exists in “The Pitchfork”—it’s all “imagined” (2). Therefore, since poetry must follow “that simple lead / Past its own aim,” the goal is not with the writer but the reader and his or her “opening hand” (20). As Andrews notes in “The Spirit’s Protest,” “‘The Pitchfork’ concentrates on the moment of abandonment of the rational control of ‘aiming,’ on the moment of vision itself, which is a sudden ‘opening,’ a giving, a trusting of oneself to the unknown” (221). What Heaney acknowledges here is that it doesn’t really matter what poets do in their writing, in other words, where they aim. A poem really depends on the generosity of the reader, the “trusting of oneself to the unknown.” “The Pitchfork” suggests that poets should look for the success of their work in their readers, not in themselves, because “perfection—or nearness to it—is imagined / Not in the aiming but the opening hand” (19-20).

This realization is significant, considering Heaney’s previous anxieties about being a rural poet. In the beginning of *Opened Ground*, a large part of his focus is on navigating those tensions and aiming in such a way that reconciles the “variously contending discourses.” However, now that he has reached a harmony (“or nearness to it”) between agriculture and poetic culture, Heaney can focus on those opening hands awaiting his poems. This point does not

negate the earlier metapoetic tool poems (or any of Heaney's earlier poems, for that matter). "The Pitchfork" is not contradicting them. In fact, if it weren't for the other poems, Heaney most likely wouldn't come to the realization that he does in "The Pitchfork." He acknowledges this trust of the unknown only after he has worked through his anxieties. The earlier poems are important stepping-stones on his journey to "The Pitchfork."

One of the most important aspects of this poem is the tool itself. Heaney comes to the realization through the use of the metapoetic pitchfork. It is a tool from his childhood. (Quite frankly, this could be the same pitchfork hanging in "The Barn" from *Death of a Naturalist*.) Heaney does not make this acknowledgement through other means; he does not put the poetic insight in another place. He keeps it where he himself started: a farm in the Irish countryside. This poetic choice is a powerful example of the reconciliation of Heaney's anxieties. The two spheres of agriculture and poetic culture come together in the pitchfork—a tool of both realms—and help Heaney better understand his poetic trade.

To return to the O'Driscoll interview, this examination of metapoetic tools is an elaboration upon the phrase "not so sure." Heaney's metapoetic tool poems exemplify the change he expresses. He used to be shy around the muse and question his place as a rural poet, but as the tool poems show, Heaney works through these agricultural anxieties and develops into a poet who is comfortable with who he is. Bringing the two contending discourses together becomes a source of poetic inspiration and education for Heaney. He looks at his agrarian life with a more critical eye and learns from it. Agriculture and poetry and the convergence of the two teach Heaney more about himself and his trade than either would have alone. Having tilled *Opened Ground*, Heaney stands ready to sow his crop and continue his poetic career. No longer

tense, no longer anxious, he is able to pull from both spheres of his life—the agri-culture and the poetic culture—and dig for the good turf, for the good poems.

The development of his identity through these tool poems draws our attention to the their correlation to events in his life. Reading this selection of Heaney's poems in this manner positions him as a self-aware and self-confident poet, one ready to accept the notoriety, publicity, and pressure of a Nobel Prize in Literature, which he received in 1995, three years before *Opened Ground* was published. Calling the reason behind the publication into question is mere speculation, but a poet unsure about his talent the way Heaney was in the beginning of his career would not compile a collection like *Opened Ground*. It's only after he works through these anxieties that Heaney selects poems for this publication. While the development I've charted through the poems analyzed in this chapter isn't the sole motivation behind *Opened Ground*, it does correlate to a watershed moment in Heaney's career and further highlights the strong autobiographical connections to his poetry.

After *Opened Ground*: A Look at Heaney's Post-Nobel Career

Our examinations of Heaney's pastoral up until this point—while giving us significant insight into his unique use of the mode—haven't painted a complete picture of him as a pastoral poet. At this stage in our engagement with his work, we have only considered Heaney's pre-Nobel career and have only seen him writing as an Irish poet mostly from and about Ireland. What happens when Heaney suddenly feels the pressure of the Nobel Prize? What happens to a pastoral poet when he's launched onto the world stage? In order to explore these questions, I will give a brief, highly selective look at the last three collections of Heaney's poetic career, *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010), and the ways in which he negotiates the global status of a Nobel-Prize-winning poet with his identity as a rural Irish poet.

Despite the global implications of a Nobel Prize, Heaney begins his post-Nobel career in the Irish countryside

> Where the flat water
>
> Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh
>
> As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth
>
> And fallen shining to the continuous
>
> Present of the Bann.
>
> Where the checkpoint used to be.
>
> Where the rebel boy was hanged in '98.
>
> Where negative ions in the open air
>
> Are poetry to me. As once before
>
> The slime and silver of the fattened eel. ("At Toomebridge" 1-10)

"At Toomebridge," "Perch," and "Lupins"—the first three poems in *Electric Light*—are all set in Heaney's rural Ireland. With images of the perch hanging "on their water-perch. . .in the clear Bann River" (1); "bluntly holding the pass" (5); "Guzzling the current, against it" (7); and "on hold / In the everything flows and steady go of the world" (8-9), Heaney injects potential energy into "Perch." A similar sentiment is found in "Lupins" with the flowers "Just by standing. / In waiting. Unavailable. But there / For sure. Sure and unbending" (1-3). Heaney is intentional in the return to "Toomebridge," gathering energy in his native countryside from the perch and the lupins as he readies himself to step onto the world stage. As Meg Tyler notes in *A Singing Contest*, water imagery provides a continuous flow to "At Toomebridge," which she finds in the elision from line 4 to line 5, "the continuous / Present": "'Continuous' gives us a sense of the poem's expansiveness, in fact, of poetry's expansiveness and this open-voiced 'continuous' drops into the terrific pool of the 'Present.' There is a pun, also, in Heaney's mention of the 'continuous present,' or present progressive tense, an action ongoing, pouring" (Tyler 139). Analyzing later lines in the poem, Tyler writes, "The line break after 'open air' recalls the work of 'continuous' in the poem, opening up room to encompass all things as poetry's concern, no lines dividing workable subject matter from unworkable" (139). This expansiveness is stimulated and solidified by the images in "Perch" and "Lupins."

Heaney's meditations in these initial poems are understandable. As expressed in the eclogues of *Electric Light*—"Bann Valley Eclogue," "Virgil: Eclogue XI," and "Glanmore Eclogue"—Heaney has anxieties about this new stage of his career. He starts "Bann Valley Eclogue," the first in the collection, with a call to the "Bann Valley Muses" to "give us a song worth singing, / Something that rises like the curtain in / Those words *And it came to pass* or *In the beginning*," hoping that they will "Help [him] to please [his] hedge-schoolmaster Virgil /

And the child that's due" (1-5). Heaney's reference to a curtain call is especially appropriate for his first post-Nobel collection, which raises the curtain on the new stage of his career represented in "the child that's due." All three eclogues, in fact, speak of preparation and a forthcoming change—or, rather, one that is always already happening in the collection (once again reminding us of "the continuous / Present").

The choice of eclogues is equally felicitous, as Tyler notes: "The pastoral eclogue, as Peter Sacks remarks in *The English Elegy*, 'traditionally stood at the *point of entry* to a poetic career, hence in some ways replaying an entry into language'. . . . Heaney inverts this entry by introducing the eclogue into his own poetry late in his career, suggesting a re-entry into a renewal of language" (15). The eclogue, in addition to being a statement of Heaney's "re-entry into a renewal of language" prompted by his receipt of the Nobel Prize, also marks the pastoral elements present in his post-Nobel career, a comfortable yet powerful space within which to begin the monumental task of writing after the Nobel.

"Glanmore Eclogue" is a particularly relevant poem. The title is a significant choice. Glanmore is the name of the cottage in County Wicklow to which Heaney and his family moved in 1976. The purpose of this relocation was Heaney's renewed focus on his poetry; the family moved to escape the violence in Northern Ireland so that Heaney could fully dedicate himself to his work. The same apprehension Heaney felt at Glanmore tinges the eclogue with anxiety. The dialogue is between two voices, Myles and the Poet. Myles reads as the poet's conscience, while the Poet represents Heaney. Myles begins the poem reminding the Poet of what he has: "A house and ground. And your own bay tree as well / And time to yourself. You've landed on your feet. / If you can't write now, when will you ever write?" (1-3). Myles questions the Poet's anxiety by reminding him of his solid foundation of "A house and ground" and the Poet's "own

bay tree." Later, Myles again reassures the Poet that he is capable of accomplishing this task: "Book-learning is the thing. You're a lucky man. / No stock to feed, no milking times, no tillage / Nor blisters on your hand nor weather-worries" (33-35). While these comments are meant to encourage the Poet, they instead sound like harsh critiques of the Poet's work, reminding us of Heaney's initial anxieties in "Digging" that his work is not perceived as the same type of work as his father and grandfather's digging, that Heaney "has no spade to follow men like them." Therefore, the Poet responds by saying, "Meliboeus would have called me 'Mr Honey'" (36). Again, the Poet is insecure, the image of "Mr. Honey" suggesting a softness or feebleness to his work. But Myles reminds the Poet of his ability:

> Our old language that Meliboeus learnt
> Has lovely songs. What about putting words
> On one of them, words that the rest of us
> Can understand, and singing it here and now? (37-40)

We can obviously see Heaney talking to himself in these lines and reminding himself that he has a legacy of rural imagery to draw from for his post-Nobel writing, represented in the Poet's singing of a "summer song for the glen and" Myles that concludes the eclogue, showing what we already see in the publication of *Electric Light*: that the Poet can produce songs, or poems, despite his apprehension.

However, if we consider Heaney's pre-Nobel pastoral, we discover that he's been writing poems that conform to the conventions of the eclogue genre all along. So why does Heaney wait until *Electric Light* to label them as eclogues? Tyler's reading of Sacks' comments on eclogues in *The English Elegy* suggests that Heaney's eclogues mark his restatement of himself as a poet, his reentry into language, to borrow Tyler's words. But the eclogues offer more to our

understanding of Heaney's post-Nobel career than Tyler suggests. The most famous eclogues are of course Virgil's. References to Augusta in "Glanmore Eclogue" also provide Virgilian connections. Virgil wrote during the Augustan period, named for Emperor Augustus, the first ruler of Rome. "Augusta" is the feminine form of "Augustus," which provides significant context to the lines about Augusta in the eclogue:

> Call her Augusta
> Because we arrived in August, and from now on
> This month's baled hay and blackberries and combines
> Will spell Augusta's bounty.

Heaney writing for Augusta closely resembles Virgil's relationship with Augustus, and the etymological connection only adds to the association. Additionally, the bay tree mentioned in "Glanmore Eclogue" has similar Classical connections. Bay, or laurel, leaves were used to make wreaths for Classical poets. By writing that he has his own bay tree, Heaney gives himself access to the same wreath that Virgil would have worn.

Are we to then see Heaney positioning himself as the Irish Virgil? Is this what happens to a pastoral poet when he steps onto the world stage? Does he don a Virgilian laurel wreath? Partially, yes. The Classical connections are so frequent that we cannot ignore them; these choices are deliberate ones for Heaney. In fact, "Glanmore Eclogue" provides another layer of Virgilian details: the Poet's remarks that "Meliboeus would have called me 'Mr Honey'" (36). "Mr. Honey" sounds like "Mr. Heaney," and Meliboeus is the name of a character in one of Virgil's pastoral poems, "Tityrus and Meliboeus." Additionally, the "meli" in "Meliboeus" is Latin for "honey," subtly linking Heaney to a character in Virgil's poem. However, I don't think that the only way for a pastoral poet to succeed on the world stage is to become the next Virgil.

And I'm not quite sure if Heaney sets out to declare himself as the Irish Virgil. What we can see, though, is Heaney making obvious connections between himself and the Classical poet, an intriguing relationship that poses significant questions about Heaney's identity as both a pastoral poet and as a world poet.

Returning to Heaney's post-Nobel work, we discover that, woven throughout these pastoral scenes and genres, global elements widen the focus of Heaney's poetry. *Electric Light* reaches outside of Ireland with a few poems, like the recounting of a visit to Macedonia for the Struga Poetry Festival in 1978 in "Known World," recollections of a journey through a northwestern Spanish community in "The Little Canticles of Asturias," and meditations on a trip to Greece in "Sonnets from Hellas."[7] However, of the three final collections, none is more global than *District and Circle*. Foremost, the title of the collection takes us out of Ireland and into London with a reference to two service routes of the London Underground. The title also reminds us of the eponymous poem and highlights the worldview of this particular collection. "District and Circle," with its subtly violent foreshadowing and allusions to death and the Underworld, can be read as a response to the July 7, 2005 suicide bombing attacks that occurred on the London Underground system, the title referring not to both of the service routes on which the bombs were detonated but instead to two of the most well-known routes.[8] Similarly, "Anything Can Happen" is written in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, as is "Helmet," the poem following it in the collection. Other global poems include "In Iowa," "Fiddleheads," and "To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff."

---

[7] Granted, Heaney writes about Greece throughout his pre-Nobel career. However, the appearance of this short sonnet sequence in *Electric Light* already figures it into a more globalized structure. Additionally, several sonnets, particularly sonnet 6 "Desfina," directly link Greece to Ireland, a feature of Heaney's more global collections.

[8] The bombing attacks occurred on the Circle and Piccadilly service routes.

However, the movement of Heaney's career from *Electric Light* to *District and Circle* does more than just expand the global scale of his poetry. The epigraph to *District and Circle* is taken from "Glanmore Eclogue":

Call her Augusta

Because we arrived in August, and from now on

This month's baled hay and blackberries and combines

Will spell Augusta's bounty.

This connection to *Electric Light* refers back to the anxieties the Poet feels in the eclogue, reminding us of the start of Heaney's post-Nobel career and suggesting that *District and Circle* shows that Heaney has remembered his foundation of "A house and ground. And [his] own bay tree as well," producing this collection with less apprehension. The dedication of *Distrct and Circle* to Ann Saddlemyer, too, reminds us of Glanmore Cottage. The Heaneys rented and later bought the house from Saddlemyer. By opening this collection with these references to his past, Heaney recalls for us the beginnings of his full dedication to his poetry, drawing parallels between the two stages of his career and revealing to us that he writes with Glanmore ever on his mind.

The nods to Glanmore also show that, even though he is on the world stage, Heaney hasn't lost touch with his pastoral roots. In fact, *District and Circle*, like *Electric Light*, begins in the country, on a farm to be exact. "The Turnip-Snedder," with its material descriptions and violent, unforgiving outlook on life, has a true essence of the palpable Irish pastoral. (We also note that it is another of Heaney's tool poems.) The opening of the poem—"In an age of bare hands / and cast iron"—situates it in an ambiguous time and space but one that we know is a nostalgic time of rural life driven by iron and manual labor (1-2). The image of "the clamp-on

meat-mincer" adds to this material world and establishes the cyclical metaphor of the poem's end. The third set of couplets shifts the poem's focus to personifying the turnip-snedder. The descriptions of it being "hotter than body heat / in summertime, cold in winter / as winter's body armour" ground the poem in corporality, a characteristic of Heaney's pastoral (7-9). Then the poem changes course again with the realization of the cyclical metaphor prefigured earlier: "'This is the way that God sees life,' / it said, 'from seedling-braird to snedder,'" (13-14) adding later that "'This is the turnip-cycle'" (18). The comparison of the turnip cycle to a human's life cycle reminds us of something that the Irish pastoral tradition knows all too well: that reality can be merciless, like the God who watches us in the turnip-snedder dropping "bucketful by glistering bucketful" (20), an image that sets up a theme of mortality present throughout the collection.

Other elements of palpable pastoral in the collection include the image of swinging a sledgehammer in "A Shiver"; a look at how a boy's life changed after his house burned down in "Rilke: After the Fire"; scenes of blacksmiths in "Poet to Blacksmith" and "Midnight Anvil"; a revisit to the bog characters from Heaney's pre-Nobel career in "The Tollund Man in Springtime"; and an emotional tribute to Heaney's brother Christopher who died at the age of four in "The Blackbird of Glanmore." As we can see, Heaney hasn't given up his pastoral for the global status of the Nobel Prize. Instead, he expands upon it, infusing his world-stage collections with his rural experiences.

Heaney's poetry, though, does not remain global throughout his career. His final collection, *Human Chain*, returns to scenes and images from his childhood. Considering events in Heaney's life surrounding the publication of this collection provides significant context for the pulling back of his poetic sphere. In 2006, Heaney suffered a stroke, an event that he notes

reverted him back to his childhood: "Yes, I cried. I cried, and I wanted my Daddy, funnily enough. I did. I felt babyish" (McDonald). The stroke reverberates throughout *Human Chain*, prompting Heaney's return to the personal images of his family and childhood. The first poem in the collection, "'Had I not been awake,'" signals the presence and effects of the stroke. The mystery of the poem is found in the transience of the event. Heaney repeats the phrase "Had I not been awake I would have missed it" throughout the poem, which at once refers to the stroke and simultaneously (because it's Heaney) comments on the creative process. A stroke can be medical, but it can also be the stroke of a pen, one that, had Heaney not been awake, would have missed the spark of creative inspiration.

The collection then moves away from the stroke, revisiting the images and scenes that mark his earlier poems. However, unlike the childhood, family, and rural Irish scenes depicted in Heaney's pre-Nobel career, many poems in *Human Chain* have a sense of mortality. So while the stroke is not explicitly the predominant figure of the collection, its effects can be felt throughout. "Album" reads like a family photo album, each of the five sections offering a snapshot of Heaney's relationship with his parents. A sense of melancholy and possible regret provides seriousness to the poem's nostalgia, especially in the motif of the complicated father-son relationship that pervades Heaney's career. As Thomas McCarthy notes in "Master of Memory," a review of *Human Chain*, "Album" "is a poem of regret and remembrance; a rueful memory of the Irishman's reluctance to be too showy in affection, especially in the affections between men."

The gravity is echoed later in "Uncoupled," another poem focusing on Heaney's parents. However, as the title suggests, Heaney focuses on each parent individually. Both sections of the poem describe Heaney's parents as ghosts. The images of his mother "Walking tall, as if in a

procession, . . . Unwavering, keeping her burden horizontal still, // Hands in a tight, sore grip round the metal knob" dignify her ordinary task of emptying out the firebox (2, 9-10). Unlike these descriptions of his mother, though, the section devoted to Heaney's father actually focuses on Heaney himself. It begins with an image of his father walking through the cattle pen, calling to Heaney who is "perched / On top of a shaky gate" (17-8). However, Heaney can't hear his father over the noises of the cows and the other cattleworkers. Instead, the poem focuses on Heaney's father's eyes as he suddenly looks away from his son. Heaney writes that seeing his father's eyes leave his lets him "know / The pain of loss before [he knows] the term" (23-4). These final lines recall previous meditations on Heaney's relationship with his father, particularly the pain and guilt he feels for the divide between them, and echoes the complex display of affection between men that McCarthy notes in "Album." This sentiment also offers another suggestion for the title. Not only does it refer to the uncoupling of his parents in the examinations of the poem, but it also indicates the rift in Heaney's relationship with his father. However, further adding to the complexity of the poem is the fact that the section devoted to Heaney's father directly involves him as well. While he may feel uncoupled, he really can't in the structure of the poem.

Other scenes of memory, pain, and mortality run throughout the collection, like the recollections of Heaney's courting his wife Mary in "Eelworks"; the many memories attached to a road in "The Wood Road"; pastoral meditations on plants, human relationships, and death in "A Herbal"; the plotting of the descent into the Underworld in the *Aeneid* against Heaney's path in life in "Route 110"; and the grief and loss felt walking into the empty house of a recently dead friend in "'The door was open and the house was dark.'" These poems and every other poem in the collection function as part of the metaphor of the human chain. The eponymous poem of the

collection develops an understanding of this concept. Heaney recalls how news coverage of aid workers passing out "bags of meal" reminds him of throwing sacks of grain onto trailers during his time of the farm (1). Both the aid workers' and Heaney's tasks require "The eye-to-eye, one-two, one-two upswing / . . . then the scoop and drag and drain / Of the next lift" (7-9). This continuous stream of work marks Heaney's admiration for the aid workers' efforts:

> Nothing surpassed
>
> That quick unburdening, backbreak's truest payback,
> A letting go which will not come again.
> Or it will, once. And for all. (9-12)

Heaney sees the act of letting go, "That quick unburdening," as the truest reward of a person's labor. The focus on work in the poem is on the aid workers and Heaney's childhood; however, the sentiment of "backbreak's truest payback" is universal. The literal human chains of aid workers passing bags to one another and of Heaney and his family heaving bags of grain onto a trailer represent Heaney's metaphorical human chain, one in which letting go or unburdening oneself is an act of love in the service of others. This reward, as Heaney notes, is only given back once and for all. The finality of this description, especially in the context of the themes of mortality in the collection, suggests that death will return this reward of letting go.

This metaphor of the human chain plays itself out in the descriptions of Heaney's relationship to his family in this collection. But the idea of the human chain runs throughout Heaney's entire poetic career. Discussing a poet's last words is always subjective—unless explicitly stated, we have no way of knowing if they truly were intended to be the final works or not—however, given that these thoughts come in Heaney's final collection, we can read the

central idea of *Human Chain* as not only a product of Heaney confronting his own mortality but also as a comment on his career as a poet. Just as Heaney literally lets go of the grain sacks, his unburdening himself of his anxieties about poetry is ultimately rewarded in his satisfaction with his work. The return to rural Ireland in this collection is significant to this metaphor as well. Heaney develops this concept of the human chain not on the world stage but back on the farm, highlighting the importance of the personal and the pastoral to his career.

As we can see from the poems in his final three collections, Heaney never lost his pastoral. He did not trade it in for the Nobel Prize. Instead, he carried it with him onto the world stage. The expansion of his pastoral to the global scale is made more important when we consider the shift in Heaney's poetic focus in *Human Chain*. He does not end his career globally; he completes it back where he started, drawing inspiration from his family and his agricultural roots. For Heaney, the reward of "backbreak's truest payback" is couched in the pastoral.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which he calls "Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture," Heaney describes his poetic career as "a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival—whether in one's poetry or one's life—turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination" (416). Later in the speech, he describes how he never quite grew out of the young Irish farm boy that he was. Heaney comments on this connection, saying that it is "[a]s if the ripple at its widest desired to be verified by a reformation of itself, to be drawn in and drawn out through its point of origin" (430). We see Heaney enacting this desire to receive verification from the point of origin in *Human Chain*. But we also see it throughout his poetic career. We find this return to the center in his pastoral. This connection to his rural roots exemplifies part of the power of poetry that Heaney mentions in his Nobel Prize

lecture: “the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being” (430). For Heaney, this power of poetry is felt in many ways but perhaps most intimately in his pastoral. The palpable connection to Ireland keeps him grounded as he ventures into the world of letters and onto the world stage and as he confronts himself as a son, father, and husband, all the while negotiating his complex identity as a pastoral poet.

Works Cited

Alpers, Paul. *What is Pastoral?* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.

Andrews, Elmer. "Introduction." *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Elmer Andrews. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. Print.

---. "The Spirit's Protest." *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Elmer Andrews. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. Print.

Boland, Eavan. "Suburban Woman." *The War Horse*. London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son, Ltd., 1975. Print.

Brandes, Rand. "'Inscribed in Sheets': Seamus Heaney's Scribal Matrix." *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*. Eds. Catharine Malloy and Phyllis Carey. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996. Print.

Burris, Sidney. "Reading Heaney Reading." *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*. Eds. Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Finlay, Alison. "Putting a Bawn into *Beowulf*." *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*. Eds. Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Frawley, Oona. *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005. Print.

Heaney, Seamus. "Alphabets." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "At Toomebridge." *Electric Light*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 2001. Print.

---. "Bann Valley Eclogue." *Electric Light*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 2001. Print.

---. "The Barn." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Blackberry-Picking." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Clearances." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Crediting Poetry." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Death of a Naturalist." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Digging." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "The Diviner." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "The Forge." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Glanmore Eclogue." *Electric Light*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 2001. Print.

---. "Glanmore Sonnets." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "The Government of the Tongue." *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988. Print.

---. "Human Chain." *Human Chain*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. Print.

---. "In the Country of Convention: English Pastoral Verse." *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*. Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980. Print.

---. "Introduction." *Beowulf*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000. Print.

---. "Lupins." *Electric Light*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 2001. Print.

---. "Mid-Term Break." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Old Smoothing Iron." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Perch." *Electric Light*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 2001. Print.

---. "The Pitchfork." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh." *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988. Print.

---. "Requiem for the Croppies." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "Thatcher." *Opened Ground*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Print.

---. "The Turnip-Snedder." *District and Circle*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.

---. "Uncoupled." *Human Chain*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. Print.

---. Villanova University. Villanova, PA. Reading. 20 Apr 2010.

Kavanagh, Patrick. "Having to Live in the Country." *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling and Other Poems*. London, Longmans: 1960. Print.

McCarthy, Thomas. "Master of memory." *Irish Examiner* 04 Sept 2010. Print.

McDonald, Henry. "Heaney tells of his stroke ordeal." *The Observer* 18 Jul 2009. Print.

Murphy, Andrew. *Seamus Heaney*. Plymouth, UK: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1996. Print.

O'Driscoll, Dennis. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955. Print.

Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993. Print.

Potts, Donna L. *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011. Print.

Twiddy, Iain. *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012. Print.

Tyler, Meg. *A Singing Contest: Conventions of Sound in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Vendler, Helen. *Seamus Heaney*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print.

Yeats, W. B. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996. Print.