

HEANEY'S FIRSTS

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney's volumes of poetry demonstrate a carefully planned negotiation of the dual itineraries of continuity and exploration of new directions. Heaney's constant critical (re)assessment of his own poetic practice resulted in collections that would regularly resituate emphases and focuses yet at the same time they also demonstrate a solid and stable underlying matrix of values that sustains a consistent core of poetic sensibility. Heaney's whole oeuvre is a body of poetry that has its anchoring in a set of recurring concerns with an increasing range of approaches, motifs and themes as each volume resituates the poetic direction in a subtle way. While the structural organization of volumes differs in terms of division into sections, the arc of movement each collection displays give a prominent role to their respective opening poem. Heaney's choice of the first poem, on occasion dedicatory, on occasion simply placed as first without specific marking, yet involving anticipatory and epiphanic potential, provides an intriguing cue to his tactics not only in terms of the respective collection but his whole career as well. A more thorough consideration of these first poems, especially those of his late phase, can offer further insight into Heaney's view of poetry and his own poetics.

KEYWORDS

Heaney, poetic vocation, authority, poetics

While Seamus Heaney referred to his poem *Digging* as a “big coarse-grained navy of a poem”¹ in his essay “Feeling into Words”, he would also acknowledge it as a decisive first as “the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings had

¹ Seamus Heaney: *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968–78*. New York, The Noonday Press, 1980, 43.

got into words, or to put it more accurately, where I thought my *feel* had got into words”,² an example of “finding a voice”.³ The poem is cited as an example of a step in a personal process of discovery with a well-defined understanding of poetry as itself a discovery, “poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself”.⁴ As part of this, the personal process involves the finding and uncovering of the relation “between the core of the poet’s speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice, between his original accent and his discovered style”.⁵ This is eventually a fusion of what could be termed filiation and affiliation, and eventually forms the basis of what is best described as the authenticity of the poet. *Digging* is thus a poem that represents more than a moment of recognition, of forging an imaginative bond between his ancestry and himself despite the apparent discontinuity between agricultural and intellectual work which in effect became, and came to be regarded, as his poetic creed. Thus, the poem in hindsight is not only the opening piece of his first collection but a complete decisive first step of his entire poetic career.

Heaney’s piece of reflection is also emblematic and has its own significance that extends beyond its immediate concerns. “Feeling into Words” was originally a lecture the poet delivered in 1975, after a considerable period of well-established practice of publishing poetry, thus Heaney could rely on the benefit of retrospective reflection on his own writing. By that time his assessment of his own practice as well as his reading of other poets provided him with a solid poetic foundation that would equally serve the notion of stability and continuity as well as could facilitate the exploration of new concerns and directions for his own poetic practice. The essay testifies to Heaney’s honest practice of rigorous reflection on his own poetry, a concern with his sense of artistic responsibility that characterizes his whole career, which would practically turn him into his own first critic, as Declan Kiberd notes, “the worst that can be said against Heaney always turns out to have been said already of himself by the artist within the poems”.⁶ This self-aware and self-conscious element is observable in the thematic and structural organization of his volumes of poetry as well as in the relationships between those volumes.

Heaney’s practice of organizing his collections around certain concerns and suiting the internal architecture of the volumes accordingly is noted by several of his commentators. The poet himself provided clues for this in interviews and reflective prose pieces, in addition to his self-reflexive poetic practice in the volumes themselves. The initial focus of his early collections on his familiar

² Heaney: *Preoccupations*, 41.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶ Declan Kiberd: *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London, Vintage, 1996, 594–595.

environment, observed and assessed in a broadening circle, would increasingly give way to a more communally informed enquiry into the context of the deteriorating conditions of the Northern situation, culminating in the effort of *North* for a synthesis. The special status of that volume was also acknowledged by Heaney in an interview as he admitted "I'm certain that, up to *North*, that that was one book, in a way it grows together and goes together".⁷ With the ambitious myth-informed frame not yielding a satisfactory result, Heaney employed a more personally oriented approach in *Field Work*, providing an intriguing contrapuntal structure through the contrast between the almost-pastoral of the *Glanmore Sonnets*, placed centrally in the volume, and the elegies responding to the loss of friends and relatives in the Troubles. A similar personal element is at work in *Station Island*, with an explicitly self-reflexive confessional dimension in the title sequence of the volume which also includes tentative readjustments of some concerns of the elegies of the previous volume. The collection *The Haw Lantern* is also structured by the dynamic contrast between the poet's elegiac sequence *Clearances* and the explicitly allegorical *From...* poems which seem to echo some of the earlier attempts of coming to terms with the Northern situation. From *Seeing Things*, in accord with the implications of the title, Heaney's attention is concentrated on apparently more quotidian elements that, on closer scrutiny, offer illuminating insight, 'marvels' that are at once relatable by virtue of their seeming ordinariness and still intimate transcendental dimensions. The final four volumes focus on such themes with varying degrees of reincorporating earlier motifs of Heaney's poetry and recontextualizing them.

The respective thematic and organizational concerns of the volumes differ but the first poems of most collections occupy a special position in Heaney's oeuvre. While they retain their own closed system as individual poems, they simultaneously set thematic or conceptual directions. The opening poem initiates the arc of movement that the collection follows, and some of them point beyond the concerns of the collection they introduce, marking more encompassing points of reference within Heaney's writing career. Whether explicitly marked as dedicatory or simply placed first without any specific marking, typographic or other distinction, opening poems tend to demonstrate anticipation, intimation of a new point of departure, even the potential of epiphany, facilitated by the poetic situation created within the text. In this way these first poems illuminate a broader range of concerns and issues than their immediate textual environment would imply.

The poem *Digging* has its own symbolic status by virtue of its position as the opening poem of Heaney's first volume, thus the first of the firsts, not only because of its self-conscious resolution of the spade vs. pen relation. The tactics

⁷ John Haffenden: *Viewpoints. Poets in Conversation*, London, Faber, 1981, 64.

that Heaney uses to create the structure of the poem are reflected in the broader organization of the volume as well. The opening image of the microcosm of the speaker's situation, located indoors, with the pen in his hand, prepared for action that stems from intellectual concentration is complemented by the sound from outside that seems at first a disruptive and disturbing one, yet the rhyme and the alliterations work against the tension that is intimated. The father's figure is identified without being seen, which suggests the familiarity of routine and familial intimacy. The speaker's ambiguous choice of the phrase "I look down"⁸ carries more than a simple reference to the perspective of the relative positioning of the window and the scene of digging as the sight is eventually a recollected memory of shared experience rather than the observation of the present moment. This, in turn, leads to another recollection even further back in time, encompassing the grandfather's figure, with the effect of losing sight of the current moment by the association. The memories connected with the two earlier generations ultimately blend into one common experience, also based in recollection, creating a harmonious-looking image – only to be contrasted with the sudden denial of the possibility of continuity due to the speaker's admission of his difference in terms of his vocation, expressed by the absence of the tool that links his ancestors. Yet the absence is quickly compensated for and is thus overcome by the resolution of the speaker of forging his own, self-defined link with his forebears, acknowledging at once continuity and difference and the act of embracing the experience that stems from this situation.

The resolution demonstrates a self-conscious state of preparedness to address the actual and to accept it as the setting in which to operate. This approach is reflected in the entire collection as Heaney explores his targeted field of familiar surroundings in a way in which the presumed affectionate relationship with the place of his upbringing is balanced and readjusted by the acknowledgement of the harsher aspects of farming life. This indicates a simultaneous presence of alignment and continuity with the tradition that he also revises and reconsiders, as the poems that focus on his experience of farm life demonstrate a carefully balanced use of pastoral and anti-pastoral elements. The poems of the collection eventually achieve their balance in the way the opening poem intimates, leading to an intriguing conclusion in the final *Personal Helicon*. The closing poem reassesses the passage from innocence to experience in the context of the speaker's own progress, with a testimony to the recognition of "adult dignity"⁹ that sees poetry as continuous with the child's actions of physical enquiry towards self-knowledge, in a suggestive parallel with the pen and spade analogy of the opening poem of the volume, which sets up *Digging* as an emblematic opening piece that governs the first collection not only

⁸ Seamus Heaney: *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber, 1966, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

on a thematic level, as a conceptual introduction, but in terms of structural organization as well.

Heaney's third volume, *Wintering Out*, begins with an untitled dedicatory verse to David Hammond and Michael Longley. The poem is set in italicized type, and it is situated right after the title page, preceding the contents and separated from what constitutes the body of the volume, yet this act serves to foreground the poem as the de facto opening piece of the volume. This specific typeset and positioning already direct special attention to the poem, which is further increased when its form is considered. The poem focuses on the increasingly bleak Northern situation, with images of such landmarks as "the new camp for the internees",¹⁰ "machine-gun posts"¹¹ and the graffiti "Is there a life before death?",¹² the effect of which is a feeling of unsettledness and concurrent anxiety. The form appears as a mitigating force since the poem is written in quatrains using a neat pattern of alternating rhymes, which suggests a comforting arrangement. However, the prolific use of enjambment obscures the rhyme scheme and eventually leads to only half the lines having a line ending which is at once a syntactic pause as well, and the arrangement of these shows an intriguing pattern of one in the first stanza, two in the second and three in the final one, which ultimately reflects an attempt to impose order on what is felt to be defying such attempts. The result is a pattern that reflects the confusion the speaker experiences in the disintegrating fabric of everyday life in the province increasingly ruled by the conflict which eventually diminishes expectations regarding normality and alters the relative positions of individual and community.

The poem, similarly to *Digging*, is more potent than its modest designation of dedicatory verse would suggest. The thematic elements that are employed recur in the collection as a result of their increasing interference with the daily experience of life in the province, and their relation and what they induce as response from the observer are likewise elaborated on in the volume. The conclusion of the poem is seen by Michael Parker as a reference to the experience of the Catholic minority,¹³ yet in the image "we hug our little destiny again",¹⁴ it is possible to see a more encompassing context of the individual citizen in the face of events shaping the larger scheme of social reality. This orientation of individual experience as a possible stable point of reference in the midst of menacing public events marks a transition that defines the direction of the volume from the predominantly private individual experience of the earlier collections towards a position that is gradually more concerned with locating

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney: *Wintering Out*, London, Faber, 1972, pre-Contents.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cf. Michael Parker: *Seamus Heaney. The Making of the Poet*, Houndmills, Macmillan, 1993, 94.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney: *Wintering Out*, London, Faber, 1972, pre-Contents.

that individual in a community, reflected in the progress from the “I” to the “we” in the movement within the dedicatory poem.

Heaney’s next volume, *North*, opens with a pair of dedicatory poems entitled *Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication*. While the practice of separating the dedicatory section from the main body of the collection is retained from the preceding volume, neither of the poems bears a specific font type and they are immediately placed before Part One, which creates a special case in the light of the organization of the whole collection. Heaney wrote the poems of *North* after his move to the Republic, thus geographically distanced from life in the province, addressing the situation in a public, myth-oriented first group of poems and a set of more private pieces that would balance the collection in terms of viewpoint. The choice of a retrospective evocation of the childhood home of the poet – an apparent pastoral elsewhere both for the place of composition and the conflict-ridden present of the Northern province – is at once a doubling of the distancing and an attempt to dismiss the potential incongruity of addressing the Northern situation from the distant safety of the Republic. The poems eventually illuminate the essential pastoral contrast between peace and the threat of conflict, yet this becomes apparent only by the end of the collection as the Mossbawn poems focus on recalled moments of domestic ritual with a considerable degree of nostalgia, producing an image of what Parker terms “a past perfected”.¹⁵ As a result, the poems create a sense of lull, yet with an anticipation of disruption of that feeling, to be elaborated by the two parts of the main body of the collection, and to find a fitting conclusion in the explicitly antipastoral vision of the final section, *Exposure*, the closing poem of the volume. The dedicatory pair also anticipates the formal characteristics of the poems in the collection with their contrasting patterns. *Sunlight* uses the narrow and quickly moving, predominantly unrhymed “artesian stanza”,¹⁶ whereas *The Seed Cutters* is a sonnet, albeit with some concessions in line length and rhyme. In a corresponding manner, Part One is dominated by the short line form, while Part Two employs mainly leisurely moving longer lines and a more frequent use of rhyme.

The opening poem of *Station Island* is another example of an intriguing piece that sets the direction of the entire collection in a subtle manner. Entitled *The Underground*, the poem offers a rich texture of different registers and allusions, with an ambiguous conclusion that conflates mythological reference with personal self-reflection. The event described is a personal memory of the poet’s honeymoon,¹⁷ enriched by allusive evocations of Pan, the Hansel and Gretel story and Orpheus, which results in a quickly moving narrative that is full

¹⁵ Parker: *Seamus Heaney*, 126.

¹⁶ Bernard O’Donoghue: *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, 6.

¹⁷ Cf. Parker: *Seamus Heaney*, 184.

of instances of metamorphosis which are fed by the speaker's act of recollection. By virtue of the nature of the account as a recollected experience, reflection is actively involved, with an apparently self-conscious set of associations that build on varying degrees of kinship with mythological and literary precedents. The concluding image of "damned if I look back"¹⁸ makes the risk of reflection explicit, and the allusion itself is the device that broadens the scope of the phrase into a metaphor of general reference in terms of Heaney's practice of reflection on his own poetry. Several poems of the collection involve this self-reflection and looking back despite the indicated risk; yet such moments also include the act of confirmation of the rightness of his artistic position, in Heaney's own estimate, that is embodied in his self-imposed requirement of authenticity.

The choice of the title *The Underground* is also indicative of Heaney's analogue for his reflexive inquiry. The central sequence of the volume is informed by a strong thematic influence of Dante, as Heaney himself admitted in his essay "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet",¹⁹ with an observable linguistic influence also at work.²⁰ The subterranean experience, recalled and recontextualized in a nearly visionary manner through the richly allusive and associative texture of the poem, anticipates the more ambitious venture of the poet in the title sequence, where Heaney performs a reassessment of his position in relation to his community by reflecting on his responses to specific earlier events.²¹ On the stylistic level, the tendency towards swift metamorphosis in the imaginative extravaganza of the opening poem is handled with more control and care in *Station Island*, but the broadly informal style of *The Underground* encourages a confessional approach that is employed in the title sequence.

The allegorising tendency discernible in a great number of poems in *The Haw Lantern* is introduced in the first poem of the collection. In contrast with the tripartite division of the previous volume, this collection does not contain sections, and *Alphabets* is placed first without any marking of specific placement or hint at an explicit structural organizing principle for the volume as a whole. Yet, as Helen Vendler notes, "*The Haw Lantern* is Heaney's first book of the virtual",²² a realm that would engage the poet's attention in his later volumes in varying manners and to varying extents. The poem is accordingly a definitive opening piece, Heaney's own concise "growth of a poet's mind", traced through the concept of language, more precisely written language, with its abstract graphic representation as its governing motif. This foreshadows the

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney: *Station Island*, London, Faber, 1984, 13.

¹⁹ Cf. Heaney, Seamus. "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review*, Spring, 1985, Vol. 15, No. 1. (Spring 1985), 18–19.

²⁰ Cf. O'Donoghue: *Seamus Heaney*, 94.

²¹ Cf. Andrew Murphy: *Seamus Heaney*, 3rd edition, Tavistock, Northcote House Publishers, 2009, 64.

²² Helen Vendler: *Seamus Heaney*, London, Fontana Press, 1999, 113.

preference for allegorical discourse in the collection and the shift towards an explicitly abstracting approach in the treatment of subject matter. The poem also points backwards in terms of its concentration on written language to some sections of “Station Island” with its reflections on writing, as well as to the pen and spade analogy of *Digging*, yet the abstracting tendency inherent in allegory and parable marks an underlying principle that represents an eventually new direction for the poet.

The volume *Seeing Things* is now acknowledged as marking a decidedly new direction in Heaney’s poetry, suggesting a new phase in his poetic career. Bernard O’Donoghue uses the term “late middle Heaney”²³ as a tentative reference to it, whereas Kieran Quinlan employs the designation “‘transcendentalist’ period”²⁴ for the final decades of Heaney’s career which is introduced by the volume. Heaney’s own admission in the poem *Fosterling* of having come “To credit marvels”²⁵ has a similar effect on approaches to his poetry as his earlier comments in *Feeling into Words*, and the second section of the volume is seen as testimony to the poet’s self-reflexive comment. The virtual realm which Heaney began exploring in the preceding volume is made a more palpable presence in *Seeing Things*, and the framing of the volume by two translated pieces neatly aligns with the internal organization of the collection. A translation of the section on the golden bough from *The Aeneid* provides a thematic key to the poems dealing with the marvelous, intimated through the motif of the specific enabling power of the golden bough. The closing section of the passage also suggests a means of testing the status of the hero through the image of being singled out by fate to be able to cut down the bough, which may be taken as a tentative analogy for the poet being suited to the task of dealing with the targeted subjects. The poem also shows a marked formal contrast with earlier poems with its long lines, prompted by the source text, and the predominant line length of the rest of the collection is the pentameter, suggesting an overall move towards a more spacious metrical field.

While *Seeing Things* is seen as a new departure, it is Heaney’s final four volumes that appear to mark a systematically constructed poetics that would link the more recent poems with the earlier concerns underlying his poetry. The first of these final volumes was *The Spirit Level*, the first collection to be published after Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize, with expectations towards it corresponding to the consensual weight of the award. Heaney’s choice of the first poem of the collection is emblematic in a similar way to the status of *Digging* as indicative of a poetic creed. *The Rain Stick* is a poem that

²³ Bernard O’Donoghue: *Late Heaney and Expectation*, Budapest, Széchenyi Irodalmi és Művészeti Akadémia, 2023, 19.

²⁴ Kieran Quinlan: “Catholicism”, in G. Higgins (ed.), *Seamus Heaney in Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 218.

²⁵ Seamus Heaney: *Seeing Things*, London, Faber, 1991, 50.

also shows stylistic kinship with *The Underground* in its register favoring the colloquial and informal, personal discourse while retaining richly evocative imagery. By focusing on an instrument with a rather peculiar sound that is closer to noise than music there is a suggestion of a self-legitimizing poetics, a claim for the relevance of internal structuring and organization that is regarded more important than the pleasure of superficial eloquence by virtue of being true to its own nature, by being consistent from within. This argument is in line with Heaney's "commitment to the authority of art as a jurisdiction at least as strong as the public or the religious world".²⁶ While the sound of the rain stick may be only "Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash",²⁷ the effect is that of the metamorphosis of the player as "You stand there like a pipe / Being played by water"²⁸ with an increasing set of imaginative associations facilitated by the produced sound. The suggestive and transformative power of the instrument is further elaborated on by the repeated action of making sound with it, with further reflection on the sound and reflection on the act of repetition itself:

Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once,
Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven
Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.²⁹

The principal emphasis is on the "undiminished" nature of the effect of the experience, which eventually suggests the uniqueness of each instance with an emphasis on essence regardless of surface, since it is the essence that facilitates the reception of the marvelous, a possibility even in such an apparently simple device as the rain stick. As the action required to 'play' the rain stick is an indication of its being a closed system, the marvel lies in its capability of what the speaker suggests is still an endless variety, an apparent paradox that by analogy turns the poem itself, and by metaphoric extension all poems, into the same system. The repeated action of upending the stick carries, in a similarly paradoxical manner, the potential of endless variety, with the resulting promise of new experience on each occasion the action is performed. This repeated (and

²⁶ O'Donoghue: *Late Heaney and Expectation*, 25.

²⁷ Seamus Heaney: *The Spirit Level*, London, Faber, 1996, 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

repeatable) action intimates the idea of seeing the same experience with a fresh eye, a variation of the Wordsworthian attempt, since, as the poem suggests, the imagination is at work during listening.

The Rain Stick is an instance of illumination, the possibility of praising the simple and the everyday. The idea of repetition is seen not as an attempt to ritualize the exercise but on the contrary, the potential recognition of the uniqueness of each occasion, the momentary condition of the receiving consciousness with its active powers to effect and even constituting the received experience. The register of the poem remains embedded in the colloquial and the informal with its use of “you”, which is neatly balanced with such expressions as “glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air”³⁰ that evoke the usual richly sensuous language of Heaney. With this approach the poem is a definitive opening piece that governs the collection, and similarly to the framing of *Seeing Things*, it also aligns with the closing poem of the collection, *Postscript*, a poem that includes echoes of the earlier *The Peninsula* and resituates its potential visionary opportunity in a similar manner as *The Rain Stick* deals with its motif of repetition.

The penultimate poem of *The Spirit Level*, *Tollund* brings back a prominent motif by the geographical marker of the title, suggesting an explicit imaginative link with an earlier concern in Heaney’s poetry and thus regarding the earlier body of poems as a significant basis of reference for the later poems. The volume *Electric Light* begins with a similar tactical move as the opening poem evokes a reference to the place-name poems of *Wintering Out*. Toome was already revisited in the volume *Field Work* as part of a Troubles episode, with the poem representing a position defying intrusion and the persistent status of Heaney’s favored image of the omphalos. The poem *At Toomebridge* resituates the interpretative context of the place in its conclusion but its full itinerary involves various stages of Heaney’s preoccupations with a whole range of earlier topics and concerns. This is what is partly referred to by Ruben Moi in the assessment of the poem as a “poetic parasite on Nationalist ground, historical events and Heaney’s own poetry”,³¹ yet such a reading is a rather narrow one that loses sight of the current significance of the collage of earlier items. The past tense used to describe the place in the first half of the poem indicates the firm placing of the location as a memory for the speaker, an apparently familiar personal experience that is sufficient for the speaker to evoke the setting. The location acquires communal significance by its former position of hosting the checkpoint and the even more distant historical association of the place of execution for a rebel boy. The present importance of the place,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ruben Moi: “‘The cure by poetry that cannot be coerced’: Text, Canon and Context in Seamus Heaney’s *Electric Light*”, in A.B. Crowder – J.D. Hall (eds.): *Seamus Heaney. Poet, Critic, Translator*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 174.

however, is personal as the speaker connects inspiration with it, switching to the present tense for its description: "Where negative ions in the open air / Are poetry to me."³² This is brought into contrast with a similar potential in the same place by lure of "The slime and silver of the fattened eel",³³ making an intertextual reference to *A Lough Neagh Sequence* in *Door into the Dark*. This closing reference endows the place with the potential of sustaining inspiration, yet at the same time it indicates a massive shift in sensibility. The physically observable visual appeal of the local fauna is replaced by an intangible presence whose knowledge is of a different origin and therefore of different nature than the immediately available sensory experience of the sight of the fish. This shift is accompanied by a degree of ambiguity as well since the exclusivity of what constitutes the effect for the speaker remains unspecified. Nevertheless, the poem functions as a vivid snapshot, a still image in spite of the several elements that involve or intimate a temporal element constitutive of the experience, and thus it acknowledges both the abstracting elements at work in *Seeing Things* and the more concrete imagery of *The Spirit Level*.

In *District and Circle* Heaney's opening piece is *The Turnip-Snedder*. The title refers to a farm device of older times and thus it appears to connect with Heaney's earliest memories and poetic universe, evoking the rural world of Mossbawn. The description of the device, however, involves several military images, linking the machine to war and violence, which is in a way a subtle backward look and evocation of Heaney's own earlier concern with violence in connection with the Northern situation. The poem thus embodies a form of return, with a different approach compared to the initial poem of the previous volume, but with a similar potential for linking up with Heaney's earlier work. Several poems in the collection likewise return to earlier themes and poems, entering into dialogue with them, which provides an explanation for the title of the collection itself. Although the words of the title of the collection refer to lines in the London underground system, the metaphoric appeal of the phrase is broader and apparently more applicable to an expanded pattern of revisiting earlier concerns and motifs. The self-reflexive element of the title of the volume and its instances of actual revisiting of Heaney's own earlier motifs eventually move well beyond the scope of the opening poem, setting up a wider trajectory for the collection than that of the preceding volume.

The opening poem of Heaney's final collection *Human Chain* shows a close connection with the *Squarings* section of *Seeing Things* as well as points back to *Exposure* through its evocation of a specific moment in which vision is possible. The ability to experience that particular moment and receiving that vision, however, depends on several conditions, with being prepared for it

³² Seamus Heaney: *Electric Light*, London, Faber, 2001, 3.

³³ Ibid.

as an essential element. This state is referred to, with the term of Simon B. Kress, as “receptive expectancy”³⁴ and it forms the central motif of the poem *Had I not been awake*. The sureness of the first line, “Had I not been awake I would have missed it”³⁵ identifies the necessary condition for the observed phenomenon as well as expresses the privileged nature of the speaker in the moment of the facilitated vision for meeting that condition to receive it. The sudden arrival of wind becomes observable as sight and sound, both mediated through the movement of leaves that produces an agitated state in the speaker as he becomes “Alive and ticking like an electric fence.”³⁶ The repetition of the opening conditional sentence creates an emphatic sense of the experience, akin to a replay of the scene, with added emphasis on its unexpected nature which in turn makes it appear even more of an unusual occurrence, further underlined by the conclusion of the poem: “But not ever / After. And not now.”³⁷

The form of *Had I not been awake* is basically identical with the one used in *Squarings*, twelve pentameter lines organized into four tercets, with only the closing line departing from that pattern by its 5-syllable length. The return to the form of the earlier sequence indicates the relation of similarity in terms of approach to experience and the nature of the experience itself, as the recalled instance aligns with the marvels dealt with in *Squarings* in terms of its emotional and intellectual appeal. Yet there is a subtle shift in the assessment as the primary emphasis is put on the receptive propensity of the observer, the (pre)condition of reception itself, and in this way the poem anticipates the underlying concern of the whole collection that results in what is described as “an intently remembered present”.³⁸ The poems of the collection, “economical but powerfully substantial”,³⁹ depend on this state of openness to receive experience, partly realized through a conscious effort of being ready to observe and partly acknowledging the circumstantial necessities for it, as it happens in the opening poem. The opening and later repeated conditional sentence, made more emphatic by the inversion in its structure, is a powerful rhetorical device to express the precariousness of situational benefits – moments that facilitate and eventually make possible such instances of experience as the one Heaney admitted to in connection with *Digging* in his “Feeling into Words”.

In the essay Heaney makes a proper distinction between what he terms “craft” and “technique”. “Craft is the skill of making”,⁴⁰ “[i]t knows how to keep up

³⁴ Simon B. Kress: “Music”, in G. Higgins (ed.), *Seamus Heaney in Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 163.

³⁵ Seamus Heaney: *Human Chain*, London, Faber, 2010, 3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ O'Donoghue: *Late Heaney and Expectation*, 30.

³⁹ Roy F. Foster: *On Seamus Heaney*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2020, ch. 7. par., 19.

⁴⁰ Heaney: *Preoccupations*, 47.

a capable verbal athletic display".⁴¹ Technique, however, is a bolder and more encompassing, and as a consequence, a more challenging dimension of poetry as it points beyond the purely technical associations of verse. Technique "involves also a definition of [the poet's] stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art."⁴² The term thus incorporates the personal effort and insists on the essential role of the subjective intelligence in shaping experience into an artefact, for the authority of art and the authenticity and responsibility of the poet. As revealed in the course of Heaney's poetic career, technique is not a constant and once discovered and perfected faculty or feature of the poet but a facilitating potential that keeps evolving in the wake of its own operation.

Heaney's lifelong preoccupation with this self-conscious sense of vocation underlies the thematic and structural organization of his volumes, both in terms of their internal relations and their connections with one another across his whole oeuvre. His technique is closely intertwined with his understanding of the question of vocation. The first poems of individual collections set expectations and suggest directions along which the poetry can be read, to be elaborated on and tested in the collections themselves, with a frequent complementary element of self-reflexive comments in his prose writings. The self-critical aspect of Heaney's poetic practice is an apparent consequence of his consideration of self-contained authority as a first requirement for art, which turns him into his own first critic, and that creed eventually endows the first poems with a specific position of authority. This authority, however, involves an essentially paradoxical element as the first poem of the collection is encountered first but its full potential is realized only after the final poem of the respective volume has been read, which in turn invites repeated readings, as suggested in *The Rain Stick*, especially with its concluding sentence "Listen now again."⁴³

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⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Heaney: *The Spirit Level*, 1.

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