Études irlandaises

39-2 | 2014
Les religions en République d'Irlande depuis 1990

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revues.org

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Electronic version
URL: http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/3989
ISSN: 2259-8863

Printed version
Date of publication: 20 novembre 2014
Number of pages: 127-143
ISBN: 978-2-7535-3559-6
ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference
Eugene O'Brien, « "An Art that Knows its Mind": Prayer, Poetry and Post-Catholic Identity in Seamus Heaney's "Squarings" », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 39-2 | 2014, Online since 20 November 2016, connection on 20 November 2016. URL : http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/3989 ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3989

"An Art that Knows its Mind": Prayer, Poetry and Post-Catholic Identity in Seamus Heaney's "Squarings"

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney's "Squarings" sequence from his 1991 collection *Seeing Things* speaks of the "virtue of an art that knows its mind". This sequence attempts to know the mind in both its immanent and transcendent aspects, through the art of poetry. Heaney is writing in this sequence about issues of the spirit, about the numinous and the search for transcendence. The poems have what one could term a religious subtext and yet they are not religious – in terms of Jean-Luc Nancy's triadic formulation, they are more poetry and philosophy than prayer. And yet this article argues that they are prayer as well, but a prayer transformed – almost a new form of secular prayer which acknowledges that which is beyond the range of human experience but which does so on its own terms, without any overt reference to the rules and precepts of the Roman Catholic Church, but which channels religious symbolism as a type of cultural unconscious throughout the sequence.

Keywords: poetry, transcendence, open, the other, art philosophy

Résumé

La série de poèmes intitulée « Squarings » de Seamus Heaney, tirée de son recueil Seeing Things, parle de « la vertu d'un art qui connaît son esprit ». Cette série tente de découvrir l'esprit à la fois dans ses aspects immanents et transcendants par l'intermédiaire de l'art de la poésie. Dans cette série, Heaney écrit sur des questions relatives à l'esprit, sur le numineux et de la quête de transcendance. Les poèmes ont ce que l'on pourrait appeler une dimension religieuse sous-jacente et pourtant ils ne sont pas religieux. Si l'on reprend la formulation triadique de Jean-Luc Nancy, ils tiennent davantage de la poésie et de la philosophie que de la prière. Et pourtant cet article défend l'idée qu'ils sont également prière, mais une prière transformée – presque une nouvelle forme de prière séculière, qui reconnaît ce qui existe au-delà de l'expérience humaine, mais qui le fait à sa manière, sans aucune référence explicite aux règles et préceptes de l'Église catholique romaine, en véhiculant le symbolisme religieux comme une sorte d'insconscient culturel tout au long de la série de poèmes.

Mots clés : Poésie, transcendance, ouvert, l'autre, philosophie de l'art

> Let us maintain that philosophy and poetry together indicate something they name with this word prayer. Let us also maintain that what they mean to designate with this word is a modality of language, whose

> property is to exceed the resources, possibilities, and horizons of both poetry and philosophy[1].

In this conflation of philosophy, poetry and prayer, Jean-Luc Nancy, provides an intellectual framework through which Seamus Heaney's "Squarings" sequence from his 1991 collection *Seeing Things* can be productively examined. In this sequence he speaks of the "virtue of an art that knows its mind[2]", and this overdetermined phrase encapsulates the value of the sequence: it attempts to know the mind, in both its immanent and transcendent aspects, through the art of poetry. Heaney is writing in this sequence about issues of the spirit, of the numinous and of the search for transcendence. The poems have what one could term a religious subtext and yet, they are not religious – in terms of Nancy's triadic formulation, they are more poetry and philosophy than prayer. And yet, I would argue that they are prayer as well, but a prayer transformed – almost a new form of secular prayer which acknowledges that which is beyond the range of human experience but which does so on its own terms, without any overt reference to the rules and precepts of the Roman Catholic Church. And those rules and precepts are very much part of Seamus Heaney's *mentalité*.

He was born and brought up a Catholic, and went to a Catholic boarding school, Saint Columb's in Derry. He lived during a period of rapid change in Ireland, politically, economically and religiously. The Ireland into which he was born was hegemonically Roman Catholic, but over the last years of the 20th century, all of this changed:

> From being a model of orthodoxy, a society where the various institutions of the State were strongly influenced by Catholicism, where loyalty to Rome or deference to the dictates of bishops informed the behaviour of people in their public and private lives, Irish society reached the stage where religion was relegated to a private, personal concern. In addition, because of the clerical abuse scandals and the mismanagement of same by the Catholic hierarchy in the 1990s, the Church lost its moral standing, with the result that a strong advocate for the poor and marginalized was no longer capable of making its voice heard to the extent that it might have done in the past[3].

The above summary by Eamon Maher provides an accurate account of the way in which the Catholic Church has declined in power and influence over the last

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York, Fordham, University Press, 2008, p. 130.
2. Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 1991, p. 97.
3. Eamon Maher, "Crisis, what Crisis? The Catholic Church during the Celtic Tiger Years", in Eamon Maher & Eugene O'Brien (eds), *From Prosperity to Austerity: A Socio-Cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and its Aftermath*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014, p. 19-31, p. 20.

number of years. It is a truism that as Ireland became wealthier, religion decreased in systemic importance. There is a strong sense that "life in Ireland is no longer directed by religious values, and that the Irish Church is losing its power over the people's hearts and minds[4]". The process of secularisation which had been a feature of Western European, post-Enlightenment experience, had belatedly begun to take root in Ireland. Charles Taylor, who has written at length about secularization, describes this process in general terms. He sees the major influence of secularisation as being on public spaces which have been "emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality", because the various spheres of activity within which people operate, such as "economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational", do not refer overtly to God. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods in society, when Christian faith "laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains, such as the ban on usury, or the obligation to enforce orthodoxy[5]".

In an Irish context, this process was both belated and accelerated. Tom Inglis has traced the Irish experience, and noted that Ireland "was gradually transformed into a culture of self-realization and indulgence through a decline of the Catholic Church and the religious field, and their replacement by the media and the market[6]". Inglis encapsulate this process in terms of Celtic Tiger Ireland having moved from "Catholic capitalism to consumer capitalism[7]". Given Ireland's entry into the European Union, it would seem that secularization would have developed in Ireland in tandem with the pattern elsewhere in Europe, but the pace of that process was accelerated by revelations surrounding Bishop Eamon Casey and Fr. Michael Cleary in the early 1990s, when it was revealed that each had a son out of wedlock (with Cleary rumoured to have also fathered a second son). Much worse was to come in the exposure of clerical abuse scandals contained in the Ferns Report[8], the Ryan Report[9], the Murphy Report[10] and the Cloyne Report[11], which revealed an institutional mindset that bears all the hallmarks of "groupthink".

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4. William Crotty, "The Catholic Church in Ireland and Northern Ireland: Nationalism, Identity, and Opposition", in Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon & Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press. 2006, p. 117-130, p. 121.
5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 2.
6. Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference*. London, Routledge, 2008, p. 79.
7. Inglis, *Global Ireland*, p. 256.
8. Francis D. Murphy, Dr Helen Buckley, and Dr Laraine Joyce, *The Ferns Report presented by the Ferns Inquiry to the Minister for Health and Children*, 2005.
9. Sean Ryan, *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse report. Vol. I, Artane, Letterfrack, Tralee, Carriglea, Glin, Salthill, Cabra, Daingean, Marlborough House*. Dublin, Stationery Office, 2009.
10. Yvonne Murphy, *Commission of Investigation: Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, July 2009. Part 1*. Dublin, Stationery Office, 2009.
11. Yvonne Murphy, Ita Mangan & Hugh O'Neill, *Commission of Investigation Report in the Diocese of Cloyne*, Dublin, House of the Oireachtas, retrieved from [*http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2011/07/20/00013.asp#N17*], 2010. Accessed on March 25th 2014.

In Ireland, like the USA and the rest of the world, the response of the institutional church to the scandal of clerical paedophilia has been one of avoidance and denial. Rather than looking at the impact on victims, and on people of faith, the systemic church has closed ranks: "it serves the interests of a clerical culture too well[12]", and the result has been a loss of faith in the church, a decline in attendance at mass and religious services, and an ongoing sense of church embattlement in the Irish public sphere. What is interesting in the context of this article is that the work of Seamus Heaney has been written in the shade of this process of secularization, and the discovery of church scandals. This is the environment within which he worked and lived, as he explained to Rand Brandes in 1988: "I believe the condition into which I was born and into which my generation in Ireland was born involved the moment of transition from sacred to profane[13]." Interestingly, like Taylor, Heaney associates this process with space, both public and intellectual, stressing that his experience of the process was of moving from a condition where "the space of the world had a determined meaning and a sacred possibility", to a condition where "space was a neuter geometrical disposition without any emotional or inherited meaning[14]". He began with a strong grounding in the Catholic tradition "in my youth I was oversupplied" with religion[15], and he told Frank Kinahan that the "specifically Irish Catholic blueprint that was laid down when I was growing up has been laid there forever[16]". In this sense, Heaney is a synecdoche of the effect of this process of secularization, and of the changed reaction to the church as an influence on the lived life, and in this article, I will examine how he coped with this in his writing, especially in his "Squarings" sequence from *Seeing Things*.

The first point to note is that Catholicism still retains a strong hold in the Irish imagination. Despite the distrust of the church, there is still that groundwork of which Heaney spoke which has not been eroded or swept away:

> While enjoying the nominal allegiance of the people, the Irish Church has been forced to redefine its role as the country's primary moral, political, and social force. In addition to the challenge posed by the modernized Irish state, the Church is also being transformed by confronting its past, specifically the sex abuse scandals perpetrated by Irish clergy in Church-operated schools, orphanages, and hospitals, some dating back a

12. Thomas P. Doyle, T. P. (2007). "Clericalism and Catholic Clergy Sexual Abuse", in Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, Virginia Goldner (eds.), *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims: The Sexual Abuse Crisis and the Catholic Church* p. 147-162, Mahwah, N.J., Analytic Press, 2007, 153.
13. Rand Brandes, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney", *Salmagundi*, 80, 1988, p. 4-21, p. 6.
14. *Ibid*. p. 6.
15. Seamus Heaney & Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. London, Faber, 2008, p. 318.
16. Frank Kinahan, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney", *Critical Inquiry,* 8 (3) (Spring), 1982, p. 405-414, p. 408.

> half century or more. Though still a force of consequence in Irish society, it has been difficult for a hierarchical, tradition-bound, and once supremely powerful Irish Church to adapt[17].

One of the most thought-provoking things about religion that has been lost in all of the murky details of abuse and cover up, and in an increasing sense of drift in term of its societal influence, is the idea of spirit. If religion can be said to have a core area of interest, it is surely in the area of spirit, that sense of the more than mortal that is seen as being intrinsic to our human being. The search for, and the voicing of, the transcendent is a part of religion that has been very much lost in all of the wrangling over abuse, monetary recompense, and the attenuation of the church's systemic power over areas of social policy such as health and education, and also the ongoing, but increasingly lost, cause of attempting to retain control over women's sexuality.

However, as suggested by the opening quotation from Nancy, issues of spirituality, transcendence and the numinous are far more prevalent in the related discourses of poetry and philosophy. Given that there is now contestation, as opposed to unqualified acceptance, with regards to the pre-existence of an afterlife or spirit world, debate on the very nature of transcendence has become a feature of intellectual and aesthetic discourse. Slavoj Žižek focused on this in a discussion of Christ's words on the cross by asking "When Christ says 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' is he bluffing or not?", and he goes on to explain that if the question is not rhetorical but serious, then "the implication is extremely radical[18]". The radical nature of this comes from the fact that in the Christian religion, Jesus is not a representative of God but rather: "He *is* God. This means that God is radically split. A part of God doesn't know what God is doing. There is a kind of inconsistency in divinity itself, which is I think the crucial insight of Christianity[19]." Žižek feels that the image of Christ in a moment of doubt about his own relation to transcendence is what is most radical about Christianity, but systemic religion has attenuated this radical insight about the paradoxical, aporetic, transient and problematic nature of our connection with the numinous and transcendent. Thus a systemic religion which offers the regularity of access to the transcendent at the consecration of the mass every single Sunday, is far removed from the radical doubt that Žižek sees as embodied in Christ's last cry.

So, in an Ireland where such systematic religion is already under severe scrutiny, it makes sense that the more cryptic and sporadic insights of poetry may be

17. Crotty, "Catholic Church in Ireland", p. 120.
18. Slavoj Žižek, "Meditation on Michelangelo's Christ on the Cross", in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, Creston Davis (eds.), *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Brazos Press, 2010, p. 169-181, p. 174.
19. *Ibid*. p. 175.

the discourse best-equipped to deal with this, because it is the discourse where thinking can go beyond its normal boundary: "the thinking essence of poetry and the poeticizing essence of thought[20]". Poetized thinking allows for a different perspective on the immanent so that glimpses of the transcendent can be captured. As Maurice Blanchot avers "in imaginary space things are *transformed* into that which cannot be grasped. Out of use, beyond wear, they are not in our possession but are the movement of dispossession which releases us both from them and from ourselves[21]". Seamus Heaney shares this perspective in seeing poetry as accessing the beyond: "a good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air simultaneously[22]". Heaney's sense of the emotional and intellectual heritage of Catholicism is generally speaking a positive one: "Catholicism gives you a set of precision instruments"; and he goes on to say that while a novelist might seem overwhelmed by the "authoritarian" or "repressive" nature of the worldview, for a lyric poet it offered a lot of possibilities. It allowed one to see:

> the whole cosmos ashimmer with God and to know you, a pinpoint of plasma, are part of It, He, whatever. There is a sense every volition that passes through you is registered. That you are accountable. That every action and secret thought is known out there on the rim of eternity. It's a wonderful thing. It's good for a young poet to have that sense of owning the whole space, the whole time, and being owned by it[23].

Henry Hart suggests that "poetry replaces religion" in some of Seamus Heaney's work, and that "Heaney demystifies the divine Word by transforming it into the poetic word[24]", and I think he is correct in this, as much of Heaney's work attempts to locate the numinous and the spirit in words and in things. In Heaney's work, place and the locale are the keys to a major aspect of his poetic force. In "Gifts of Rain", he speaks of "bedding the locale in the utterance[25]", and in this phrase, one can see how the early certainties of a predefined and religiously-contextualised space becomes deconstructed. In "Squarings", the focus is more on the utterance as something which is material, in the letters and words of language, but which is also numinous in terms of concepts, ideas and imaginings. These cannot be traced back to referents in the real worlds because, like images

20. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*: *Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 33.
21. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 131.
22. Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, London, Faber, 2002, p. 48-49.
23. Nigel Farndale, "Interview with Seamus Heaney", *Sunday Telegraph,* April 1, 2001, p. 20-25, p. 24.
24. Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions*, Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1992, p. 4.
25. Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out*, London, Faber, 1972, p. 35.

of justice, love and God, they transcend our lived-experience by having a share in the beyond of that experience, even though they ultimately derive from that experience. Richard Kearney has made the telling point about Heaney's middle work (and I would contend that this is even more true of his later work), that this work, far from being a poetics of dwelling, is in fact one "of perpetual detour[26]", because his poems are "not in fact primarily about place at all; they are about transit[27]", and this sense of dialectical movement is made overt in "Squarings".

Heaney's earlier comment about the newly open nature of space is one which he addresses in "Squarings". In this sequence, each poem has the same shape: all are twelve lines long and divided into four verses of three lines each, a form which recalls the Dantean *terza rima*, without its interlinked rhyme scheme. The poems are written in a loose form of iambic pentameter:

> There are four shorter sequences within the larger one: "Lightenings", "Settings", "Crossings", and the concluding sequence "Squarings" itself. Each of these contains twelve poems: so that the shape of the sequence as a whole is a kind of geometrical "squaring": 4 x 12 x 12[28].

Hence, fluidity of structure and transformative perspectives are central to this sequence, as both structurally and thematically, it embodies the notion of a field of force as envisaged by Heaney. Tobin suggests that the ethical function of such a sequence is clear from its insistence that "the created order of any world exists meaningfully only in relation to the world of the other[29]", and it is this ongoing interfusion of differences that is at the core of this sequence, and indeed, of much of Heaney's later work. These poems are an example of his ability to "to dwell between the nitty-gritty and the visionary[30]", and that is what "Squarings" does. He writes about things and how they become more than things, by gesturing towards the transcendent and numinous that is to be found in the world. The poems trace a dialectic between the immanent and the transcendent, and are full of openings to the sky and to the air as ways of voicing that which is part of our diurnal experience, but at the same time, also beyond it.

Keeping in mind Žižek's comments about the crucifixion as a crucial site of the immanence/transcendence aporia, it is surely significant that the opening section of "Squarings" concludes with a poem based on the crucifixion itself. The

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26. Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, p. 112.
27. *Ibid*. p. 102.
28. Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, London, Faber, 1998, p. 174.
29. Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. 258.
30. Mike Murphy, "Seamus Heaney: interview by Mike Murphy", in Clíodhna Ní Anluain (ed), *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2000, p. 81-98, p. 91.

poem sets out to explain one of the meanings of the title of the section "Lightenings". Having dwelt on the senses of "alleviation / illumination" that are the normal meanings, he goes on to speak of a specific one:

> A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares
> With pure exhilaration before death –
> The good thief in us harking to the promise[31]!

Here the moment, or what he terms the "phenomenal instant" of transcendence, is embodied in the final word complete with exclamation mark (a grammatical signifier that is only used four times in "Squarings" and thirteen times in *Seeing Things* as a whole), and it is the promise which translates, and I use the word deliberately in its etymological sense of "carrying across", the agony into a form of ecstasy for the thief. The poem apostrophises the reader to "paint him at Christ's right hand", and the use of art as a medium for the transcendent is clear in this ekphrastic imperative, as the word-painting is to capture the pain of a man who, while "scanning empty space", is so:

> body-racked he seems
> Untranslatable into the bliss
> Ached for at the moon-rim of his forehead,
> By nail-craters on the dark side of his brain:
> *This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise* [*italics original*][32].

Here we are at the moment of which Žižek spoke – the moment where man and God meet in most unusual and singular circumstances, circumstances which are always in doubt, and never guaranteed. In the midst of pain and suffering and death, there is the promise, the *avenir*, the "to come", that sense of the beyond which is momentarily accessible, and which makes the present bearable because of the hope for the future beyond it. "Squarings" will focus on such moments, on such "phenomenal instant[s] when the spirit flares".

Heaney has spoken of his sense of the poems being written quickly and easily, saying that what he loved about the poems was "the old sense of a sprint", and the "air of devil-may-careness, abandon, a certain hurtle[33]". The sequence has a source in the death of Heaney's parents, his father dying from cancer while his mother had a stroke. The whole family were gathered around the bedsides, and the experience allowed him to "use words like *soul* and *spirit*", words which he "had become unduly shy of, a literary shyness, I suppose[34]". When asked by Dennis

31. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 66.
32. *Ibid*. p. 66.
33. Henri Cole, "The Art of Poetry No. 75 Interview with Seamus Heaney", *The Paris Review,* 144, 1997, p. 89-138, p. 107.
34. *Ibid*. p. 109.

O'Driscoll if "Squarings" was related to his Catholic belief, Heaney's response was "undoubtedly[35]", but it is a Catholicism that has been filtered through his poetic thinking, which allows it to "exceed the resources, possibilities, and horizons" of this discourse. The opening poem of the sequence makes this clear:

> And after the commanded journey, what?
> Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown.
> A gazing out from far away, alone.
> And it is not particular at all,
> Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round.
> Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind[36].

Here there is a flatly secular statement that there is "no next-time round", that the conventional idea of an afterlife is not open to the speaker of the poem, and that this realisation is an "old truth". One could see these lines as a poetic restatement of his earlier comments about the differences between his childhood sense of a predetermined space and the more neuter spatial construction of his adult life. Here, the "knowledge-freshening wind" is the significant signpost, as in an "unroofed" mental space, where the old dispensation no longer holds away, it is up to the individual to plot his or her own path to transcendence. Like Žižek's idea of a God in self-doubt, so the poet here is making his way through such self-doubt in a radical way. An interchange with O'Driscoll about this very poem makes this clear:

> O'Driscoll: Even if the very first poem is firm in its conviction that there is no afterlife?
>
> Heaney: But it's also firmly grounded in a sensation of "scope", of a human relation to the "shifting brilliancies" and the roaming "cloud-life". It's still susceptible to the numinous[37].

The focus is on the human and his/her search for the numinous as opposed to the human as following a pre-ordained, systemic set of rules: a type of religious snakes and ladders game where there are clear signs on the road. In Heaney's thinking, this is not the case.

There is an original religious impact, in the sense of seeking the transcendent, in these poems, an impact that can be traced back to the Christian idea that in the person of Jesus, the immanent is the gateway to the transcendent; in Catholic communion: "God did not only make himself flesh for us once, every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and

35. Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 319.
36. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 55.
37. Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 319.

to be consumed by him[38]." The human body, and the things associated with that body, are seen as gateways or doorways to the transcendent. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it: "open and exposed, fragile and vulnerable, body and its fleshly mantle of skin grant space to what remains *avenir*", and this perspective is one shared by Heaney in "Squarings", as both writers see in the body and in the immanent, what Nancy terms "the *infinity proper to finitude*" [*italics original*][39]. The human experience of being-in-the-world, the *Dasein* as Martin Heidegger would have it, is a liminal one where there is access to the question of the transcendent. This idea of the body as a form of border or threshold is one which Heaney shares with Derrida, who has noted that we "have to cross the border but not to destroy the border[40]", and for him, as for Heaney, language and translation of a particular type is crucial in this crossing of borders of all sorts. He speaks of a "procession of one language into another", and the resulting movement of this procession "over the border of another language, into the language of the other[41]".

In the second poem of his "Lightenings" sequence, Heaney makes this very clear. He is speaking about shelter and the making of a solid shelter: "Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in" and the minimalistic, and largely monosyllabic, instructions in the imperative mood stress the basic and almost elemental nature of this shelter which is being constructed: "Touch the cross-beam, drive iron in a wall[42]." Significantly in this solidly constructed and carefully-drawn ("verify the plumb […] Take squarings from the recessed gable"), Heaney stresses the need to "Relocate the bedrock in the threshold[43]". This is highly significant because the centre of the home, for Heaney, is based in the doorway which is the point of access and egress to and from the home. For Heaney, like Derrida, the border is the signifier of the bounds of one's own identity, as well as the point of contact with the other, who may develop and change that identity, and this is an idea that is shared with Heidegger, who also speaks of its symbolic importance: "The threshold is the ground-beam that bears the doorway as a whole. It sustains the middle in which the two, the outside and the inside, penetrate each other. The threshold bears the between[44]." For Heidegger, within the present is always located

38. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 34.
39. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 122.
40. Jacques Derrida, "On Responsibility: interview with Jonathan Dronsfield, Nick Midgley and Adrian Wilding", in Jonathan Dronsfield & Nick Midgley (eds.), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction: PLI--Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 6, 1997, p. 19-36, p. 33.
41. Jacques Derrida, "Living on: Borderlines", in Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller (eds.), *Deconstruction and Criticism*, New York, Continuum Press, 1987, p. 75-176, p. 77.
42. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 56.
43. *Ibid*. p. 56.
44. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 201.

conditions of possibility, of a beyond of that present: "it is primarily Being-possible. *Dasein* is in every case what it can be, and in the way in which it is its possibility[45]", and for him, the possibility is always more important than just the existence: "higher than actuality stands possibility[46]", a possibility which is a form of transcendence of that present. For Heidegger, our being in the world is about attempting to access and actualise this sense of possibility by looking for a "passage across[47]" between the two, and he sees art and poetry as core forms of this crossing.

Similarly, in *Seeing Things*, "borders are there to be crossed rather than to be contested[48]", and this crossing is very much part of the process: "you are neither here nor there,/A hurry through which known and strange things pass[49]". It is as if gusts of transcendence can appear in an immanence that is open to them. As Heaney puts it: "We go beyond our normal cognitive bounds and sense a new element where we are not alien but liberated[50]." This limit does not, according to Giorgio Agamben, open on to another determinate space: "the outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access[51]". Poetry is just such a passage. It is a "point of contact with an external space that must remain empty[52]", and for both Agamben and Heaney, it is the emptiness of the space that is important, as the interaction of points of contact, and the summoning and summoning and releasing process will animate the space, so that new that new layers and levels of meaning may be created through the crossing and re-crossing of this space.

This is very much the case in "Lightenings i", where the door is very much standing open, and new ideas and sensations are flowing in and out through it:

> Shifting brilliancies. Then winter light
> In a doorway, and on the stone doorstep
> A beggar shivering in silhouette[53].

45. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 183.
46. *Ibid*. p. 63.
47. *Ibid*. p. 167.
48. Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, p. 56.
49. Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, London, Faber, 1996, p. 70.
50. Seamus Heaney, *Among Schoolchildren*: *A Lecture Dedicated to the Memory of John Malone*, Belfast, John Malone Memorial Committee, 1983, p. 16.
51. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 66.
52. *Ibid*., p. 63.
53. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 55.

The shifting light, a revealing light, in the doorway is a portal to a new knowledge: "Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind[54]." As well as the light on the doorstep, the structure of the house is unroofed and so is open to the sky, and what this brings to mind is a sense of the immediacy and the mortality of life. This is something which we rationally and cognitively know, but which attains a deeper truth when it becomes felt, when the "bastion of sensation" has been secured[55]. Heaney tells of how the term lightening can mean the "flaring of the spirit before death", but also notes the attendant meanings "of being unburdened and being illuminated[56]", and it is this sense of light, and openness and air that is used to symbolise the transcendent in these poems. In the absence of the predefined sacred, they offer a threshold where the numinous can be accessed. In the un-predetermined space of a secularized Ireland, this threshold or border in these poems offers access to some form of the spirit. This comes through a different view of things, a perspective which allows for the religious to be seen in them. Thus thresholds, doors and beggars can provide access to a form of the spirit in these secular prayer-poems.

The style of these poems is paratactic in that there are few subordinated clauses or sentences. Instead, they are connected by "and" or by a comma. As a stylistic device, parataxis pervades the sequence as a whole as each poem is connected to the next one through the number at the top with no title or with no subordinated or embedded structures. The reader moves from one poem to the other, and from one verse and sentence to the other, by traversing this gap between them:

> Paratax thus connotes the abyss of Not-Being which opens between phrases, it stresses the surprise that something begins when what is said is said. *And* is the conjunction that most allows the constitutive discontinuity (or oblivion) of time to threaten, while defying it through its equally constitutive continuity (or retention)[57].

Thematically, the form fits with the dialectic from the immanent to gusts of the transcendent which pervade the sequence. Images of process and movement are omnipresent, as the speaker of the poems attempts to access the space wherein may be found those glimmerings of transcendence.

The sequence is full of those moments of attention to process and movement which can defamiliarise the quotidian so fully that it become the stuff of vision

54. *Ibid*., p. 55.
55. *Ibid*., p. 56.
56. Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 321.
57. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 66.

and change. In the opening section, "Lightenings", he speaks of "Shifting brilliancies[58]"; of "Test-outs and pull-backs, re-envisagings[59]", of the "music of the arbitrary[60]"; of Thomas Hardy's imagining "himself a ghost", and of how he "circulated with that new perspective[61]". He poses the question, redolent of so much of this sequence, about whether one could "reconcile/What was diaphanous there with what was massive[62]?"

The second section, "Settings" is equally full of such defamiliarising visions of the ordinary, expressed in terms of process, journey and dialectic:

> […] whatever was in store
> Witnessed itself already taking place
> In a time marked by assent and by hiatus[63].

This encompassing poetic continues: "I stood in the door, unseen and blazed upon[64]", stresses his ability to inhabit different aspects of an opposition through the process of moving freely between them. In an *homage* to Yeats's "What Then", he poses the core question: "Where does spirit live? Inside or outside/ Things remembered, made things, things unmade[65]?", while the second section concludes with a poem that harks back to "Lovers on Aran" in *Death of a Naturalist*, where "Sea broke on land to full identity[66]", as he writes of "Air and Ocean" as "antecedents" of each other", going on to define this relationship as "omnipresence" and "equilibrium[67]". The connections between the spirit and things is one already signalled by Blanchot, who sees poetry as the space where things become seen in their numinous aspect as things are transformed into "that which cannot be grasped".

In "Crossings", the third section, this theme of process and dialectic is further developed, as "Everything flows[68]", and moments of clarity are found wherein a "pitch" is reached beyond "our usual hold upon ourselves[69]". He talks of a "music of binding and of loosing[70]", and exemplifies this through speaking of "a meaning made of trees./Or not exactly trees[71]", while in the final section, he invokes poems

58. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 55.
59. *Ibid*. p. 57.
60. *Ibid*., p. 59.
61. *Ibid*., p. 61.
62. *Ibid*., p. 64.
63. *Ibid*., p. 70.
64. *Ibid*., p. 71.
65. *Ibid*., p. 78.
66. Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber, 1966, p. 47.
67. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 80.
68. *Ibid*., p. 85.
69. *Ibid*., p. 86.
70. *Ibid*., p. 87.
71. *Ibid*., p. 98.

by "the sage Han Shan", who is able to write about a place "Cold Mountain", and refer, at the same time to:

> […] a place that can also mean
> A state of mind. Or different states of mind
> At different times[72].

Here place and mind are interfused, and the connection is made strongly that our sense of place is always motivated by language and by ideology and that an openness to difference is possibly the first stage in accessing the numinous. Thus "All these things entered you/As if they were both the door and what came through it[73]", demonstrates how a thing can become a portal or a mode of access, and other things, sounds made in the world, can also be a point of access to forms of existence beyond that world:

> Was music once a proof of God's existence? As long as it admits
> things beyond measure,
> That supposition stands[74].

Thus "things" become "no-things" as they offer us a sense of the "beyond measure", and this is achieved through sensation and feeling as much as through rational thinking. Here we are at the core of a poetized form of thinking as it is a mode of thought which includes sensation, feeling and the unconscious. Heaney's use of words like "sensing" and "feeling" are significant here.

Throughout the sequence, he speaks about the significance of feelings, about securing "the bastion of sensation[75]", and about being aware of the "presence you sensed withdrawing first time round[76]". He speaks of how, having fired a .22 rifle, he now had a "whole new quickened sense of what rifle meant[77]", suggesting that an achieved knowledge needs to be felt as well as being a matter of intellection. In this sequence, sensation and feeling are modes of access to the processes and glimmerings of the numinous "a sense/Of running through and under without let"[78]. A receptivity to these processes is what is being voiced in these poems "life all trace and skim … sensitive to the millionth of a flicker[79]". Just as the good thief needed to be alert to the promise of transcendence, so "Squarings" urges us to be equally alert to possibilities in the everyday world. Thus, sitting on the

72. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
79. *Ibid.*

basalt throne of "the 'wishing chair' at Giant's causeway" (an area of some 40,000 basalt columns occurring naturally in County Antrim, in Northern Ireland): "The small of your back made very solid sense[80]." It is from this solidity of sense, just as it was from the very physical pain suffered by the good thief, that access to the transcendent becomes available, as the wishing chair was seen to be "freshening your outlook/Beyond the range you thought you'd settled for[81]". The senses, our way of interacting with the things of the world, are central as modes of access to pathways of knowledge beyond that world:

> Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
> Convert to things foreknown;
> And how what's come upon is manifest
> Only in light of what has been gone through[82].

In his valuation of the senses and sensation as modes of knowledge, Heaney is echoing the thinking of Martin Heidegger. In speaking about reality and the "thing", Heidegger notes that feeling must be taken as part of the equation if we are to come to any complete assessment of reality:

> But in defining the nature of the thing, what is the use of a feeling, however certain, if thought alone has the right to speak here? Perhaps however what we call feeling or mood, here and in similar instances, is more reasonable – that is, more intelligently perceptive – because more open to Being than all that reason which, having meanwhile become ratio, was misinterpreted as being rational[83].

For Heidegger, thought must be accompanied by feeling, and language must express both if there is to be any real expression of the reality in which we live. Thought and feeling, very like Heaney's view of technique as the "whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources" needed to "bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form[84]", are fused together, and for Heidegger, poetic language is the vehicle through which this can be achieved. "Squarings" makes this clear: "Where does spirit live? Inside or outside/Things remembered, made things, things unmade[85]?" This is reminiscent of Blanchot's ideas about things becoming "out of use" and "beyond wear", and Nancy's ideas of exceeding "the resources, possibilities, and horizons of both poetry and philosophy".

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80. *Ibid*., p. 99.
81. *Ibid*.
82. *Ibid*., p. 108.
83. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 24-25.
84. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*, London, Faber, 1980, p. 47.
85. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 77.

Philosophically expressed, all poetry is idealistic, at least in ambition. But the *materia poetica*, the raw stuff out of which poetry makes its radiant atmospheres, is the real, real particulars, actual stuff, the incorrigible plurality of things. Poetry is the imagination touching reality:

> Poetry allows us to see things *as* they are. It lets us see particulars being various. But, and this is its peculiarity, poetry lets us see things as they are anew, under a new aspect, transfigured, subject to a felt variation. The poet sings a song that is both beyond us yet ourselves. Things change when the poet sings them, but they are still our things: recognizable, common, near, low. We hear the poet sing and press back against the pressure of reality[86].

It is language that steadies the poet in 'Crossings xxxii': "It steadies me to tell these things[87]." In all of these examples, we see language taking the things of the world and endowing them with different connotations of spirit. The things now become more-than-things in their telling – they have been dematerialised in language, but in a special poetised language which offers a transcendental perspective on them; it allows us to see the thingness of things. Heaney's poems are very much secular prayers, taking into account poetry and philosophy in their context. They are pathways and border-crossings from this word to the beyond of this world: "Running and readying and letting go/Into a sheerness that was its own reward[88]"; the "Ultimate/Fathomableness" of water and the "ultimate/Stony up – againstness[89]" of the rock of the quarry where the scene is set. A question is asked: "Were you equal to or were you opposite/To build-ups so promiscuous and weightless[90]?", and the answer is both and neither, as physical and material blend and fuse into each other. In a similar manner, he wonders if:

> the original
>
> Of a ripple that would travel eighty years
> Outward from there, to be the same ripple
> Inside him at its last circumference[91].

The final poem which I will examine can be seen as a synecdoche of the sequence as a whole. Heaney has said that one could think of "every poem in 'Squarings' as the peg at the end of a tent-rope reaching up into the airy structure, but

86. Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 11.
87. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 90.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

still with purchase on something earthier and more obscure[92]". In "Lightenings viii", he recalls a story from the annals of the monks of Clonmacnoise telling how, as they were at prayer, saw a ship appearing above them, whose anchor was "hooked … into the altar rails". One of the sailors tried to come down a rope to release it but in vain. The abbot realised the "This man can't bear our life here and will drown":

> So
>
> They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
> Out of the marvellous as he had known it[93].

Here, *in parvo*, is the thrust of the mixture of prayer, poetry and philosophy that is "Squarings". The transcendent is that which is beyond our normative perspective – for the sailors, it is the world of the monks; for the monks it is the world of the sailors. Heaney sees this poem in particular, which represents the sequence as a whole, as embodying the notion that "for your wholeness you need to inhabit both worlds", and he goes on to explain that by this he means being "quite close to the two places at the one time, on the ground with the fatherly earthiness, but also keeping your mind open and being able to go up with the kite, on the magic carpet too, and live in the world of fantasy[94]".

The transcendent is available to us in our everyday life, Heaney avers. By looking for glimpses, glimmerings, sightings, feelings and sensings, shards of the numinous in the ordinary world, Heaney offers insights into our life that are not readily available. In a country where the systemic and organised church rituals no longer seem to have traction with people, these poems, fusing as they do prayer, poetry and philosophy, offer a possible supplement in terms of accessing the transcendent. I would finish as I began, with Nancy, who has suggested that:

> Elevation is transcendence. Prayer does not rise toward a height, an altitude, or toward a summit (sovereign, *ens summum*), but is transcendence, or (and this is less noted) the very act of *transcending*. It is passing-to-the-outside, and passing-to-the-other[95].

In an art that knows its mind, "Squarings" is just this – an enunciation of aspects of the transcendent which is achieved through poetic thinking and a language that is alert to the different forms of "knowing" involved – a knowledge of the senses and of emotions. It is a language of flux which access the beyond by squinting "out from a skylight of the world"[96] to achieve a new perspective, a transcendent one.

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92. Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 320.
93. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 62.
94. Murphy, "Interview with Seamus Heaney", p. 90.
95. Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, p. 138.
96. Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 57.