Chapter 16: “The Door” Stands Open: Liminal Spaces in the Later Heaney

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In August 2004, Seamus Heaney was in Dublin, awaiting the news of the death of a poetic mentor, someone whom he held in very high regard, namely, Czesław Miłosz. His admiration for Miłosz is complex, as he speaks of valuing his ability to “to glorify things just because they are,” and notes approvingly Miłosz’s dictum that “the ideal life for a poet” is to contemplate the word “is” (Heaney 2004, 4). However, despite this location of Miłosz in the actual, it is to the aesthetic, and the world of visual art, that Heaney turns when he wishes to find images of the man and his work. In an ekphrastic dyad, he suggests that the life of his friend can best be encapsulated in two mimetic works of art, which have “a typically Miłoszian combination of solidity and spiritual force” (Heaney 2004, 4). The first is Jacques Louis David’s “The Death of Socrates,” which has the philosopher on his bed, expounding on the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The second is an Etruscan sarcophagus in the Louvre, “a mighty terracotta sculpture of a married couple, reclining on their elbows.” The woman is positioned on the man’s left side, “couched close and parallel, both of them at their ease and gazing intently ahead at something which by all the rules of perspective should be visible in the man’s outstretched right hand.” However, nothing can be seen, even though the couple’s gaze seems to be “full of realization” (Heaney 2004, 4). For Heaney, it is the attempt to express the invisible, the attempt to locate one’s gaze on the real world, while at the same time attempting to access the numinous and the transcendental that can be tangentially accessed from that world, which makes Miłosz such an important force in his life, because Heaney too shares these concerns, and in this chapter those concerns will be traced across his later work.

The key image in the Etruscan sculpture is the empty space at which the couple are gazing, as this symbolizes the sense that poetry can allow for access to dimensions of knowledge and experience which are not immediately accessible to the language of prose. In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney is asked the telling question: "what has poetry taught you?," and he answers that it has taught him that: "there's such a thing as truth and it can be told – slant" (*SS*, 467). This term is borrowed from Emily Dickenson's poem: "Tell the Truth but Tell it Slant" (Dickinson 1924, 506-507), and the fact that this term originates in such an oblique poet as Dickinson is interesting in itself, as the many dashes and ellipses in her writing can be seen as opening a space for the unconscious dimension of her thinking. It is as if she knows there are aspects of her thought and feeling which cannot be written, but the dashes provide a space, a Derridean *non-lieu*, which allows that space to become a site of signification, and a place of entry into the poem by the other, be that the unconscious, or the interaction of the reader. Speaking to Richard Kearney about philosophy, Derrida says that his "central question is from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner" (Derrida 1995, 159). In a parallel manner, poetry can create a similar space from which to access different realm of experience from the norm: it, too, can become a non-site of access, which allows space for that gaze of which Heaney spoke in the Etruscan sarcophagus.

Heaney speaks of how his own study in Strand Road has remained quite Spartan, and he explains that he wants it to be "a dis-place, if you like. Like most places of writing" (*SS*, 231), and one could see poetry as a similar "dis-place," or "non-site," a discourse where images and worlds oscillate and are glimpsed. In an essay on Dante, Giorgio Agamben notes that the poetic stanza "constitutes a threshold of passage between the metrical unity of *ars* and the higher semantic unity of *sententia*" [*italics original*] (Agamben & Heller-Roazen

1999, 36), and Heaney's idea of a "dis-place" reinforces this view of poetry as a discourse which allows for a different kind of thinking.

Hannah Arndt, in her introduction to *Illuminations*, makes the point that, in the work of Walter Benjamin, we are dealing "with something which may not be unique but is certainly extremely rare: the gift of thinking poetically" (Benjamin 1968, 50); I would contend that in the work of Seamus Heaney, we are dealing with a similar phenomenon. In his writing, as I will demonstrate, we see a nuanced attention to language and to how it achieves its aims both consciously and unconsciously. Heaney, like Martin Heidegger, forces us to recognize the "complicity between the matter and the manner of thinking as the presence of figurality itself, as the folding or thickening of the limits of language" (Allen 2007, 95). Language, while it can be logical, must also be necessarily more than logical as it enunciates, albeit in slanted form, the unconscious; for Heaney as well as Heidegger: "buried in all language is the rift between world and earth. Poetry reveals that rift. Revealing that rift poetry lets words speak" (Harries 2009, 116). What Heaney admires about the work of Miłosz is that he is able to grant the authenticity of both modes, and this complexity mirrors what Heaney has always seen as the epistemological force of poetry, which is that it should be "a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify" (*RP*, 8). Telling the truth slant, or seeing the world from a different perspective, as well as valuing that difference, is at the core of Heaney's aesthetic imperative. He has invoked Osip Mandelstam to criticise "the purveyors of ready-made meaning" (*GT*, 91) as for him, poetic truth constantly strives to reach beyond such ready-made meanings: like the Etruscan couple, it looks to the space. Heaney sees the literary as "one of the methods human beings have devised for getting at reality" (Heaney 2003, 3), and in a manner which recalls his idea of telling the truth slant, he adds that literature's diversions are not to be taken as "deceptions but as roads less traveled

by where the country we thought we knew is seen again in a new and revealing light" (Heaney 2003, 3).

His ways of getting at the reality of his dis-place of writing are illustrative of this, as they are full of the "revealing light" of the image, the symbol and the oneiric. He speaks of a welcoming dream which he had in the early stages of living in his new home in Strand Road which he took as a "good omen." In the dream, he opened a doorway to the attic and "down the stairwell there came this immense flood of crystal clear water full of green roses, washing over me but not in any way panicking or threatening to drown me" (*SS*, 31). Here there is a dual perspective as the real move into the new home is unconsciously sanctioned and valorised by the oneiric flow of water. That the opening of a door is the catalyst for this fusion of the conscious and unconscious is noteworthy. In "Clonmany to Ahascragh" in *Electric Light,* he speaks of this dream, and again it is framed by two doors:

> Be at the door
> I opened in the sleepwall when a green
> Hurl of flood overwhelmed me and poured out
> Lithe seaweed and a tumult of immense
> Green cabbage roses into the downstairs.
> No feeling of drowning panicked me, no let-up
> In the attic downpour happened, no
> Fullness could ever equal it, so flown
> And sealed I feared it would be lost
>
> If I put it into words.
> But with you there at the door

I can tell it and can weep. (*EL*, 75-76)

The sense of putting the experience of this other world, this sensation of fullness, into words is validated and enabled by the two doors in the poem. The new place is important because Heaney had been very happy in his former home, the “hedge school of Glanmore” (*FW*, 34), where he had been for “four years” (*FW*, 43) from 1972 to 1976. This was his first attempt at being a professional writer, and he found Glanmore to be “absolutely the right place for writing.” He again explains this sense of finding a new world and a change of pace by using the resonant metaphor of the door: “every time I lifted the latch on the door into our little scullery, the sound and slack fall of it passed through me like gratitude. Or certitude. Theseus had his thread, I had my latch and it opened for me. Or rather, it opened *me*” (*SS*, 227). The doors, in the case of both homes, both places of writing, were transformative of the person himself, and it is while he is in the garden of his home in Strand Road that he learns of the death of the death of Miłosz.

He recalls that he was in at home when the call came, and it was a summer’s day where the weather was “Californian”:

> Thanksgiving and admiration were in the air, and I could easily have repeated to myself the remark he once made to an interviewer, commenting upon his epigram, “He was thankful, so he couldn’t not believe in God.” Ultimately, Miłosz declared, “one can believe in God out of gratitude for all the gifts.” (Heaney 2004, 4)

Thus, when Heaney heard from Jerzy Jarniewicz about the death of Miłosz, he “wasn’t knocked askew. Instead, there was an expanding of grief into the everlasting reach of poetry,” as in the Dublin sunlight, the remembered figure of Miłosz in his hillside garden in San

Francisco, merged with the mythical image of "Oedipus toiling up the wooded slope at Colonus, only to disappear in the blink of an eye." Heaney develops this point by noting that when he looked, Miłosz was there "in all his human bulk and devotion, when I looked again he was not to be seen – and yet he was not entirely absent" (Heaney 2004, 4). The series of oscillations here between presence and absence; between Dublin and California; between Miłosz and Oedipus; between appearance and disappearance; and between the act of seeing and that of being seen, recalls the couple in the Etruscan sculpture staring at something which they can see but which is not revealed in the artwork, and Heaney goes on to quote the scene in the words of Sophocles' messenger, when he reports the incident which, while mysterious had the ring of common truth about it:

> He was gone from sight:
> That much I could see . . .
> No god had galloped
> His thunder chariot, no hurricane
> Had swept the hill. Call me mad, if you like,
> Or gullible, but that man surely went
> In step with a guide he trusted down to where
> Light has gone out but the door stands open. (Heaney 2004, 4)

The image of the door is culturally significant. Paul Ricoeur suggests that "thresholds, doors, bridges, and narrow pathways" correspond to the "homologous kinds of passage which rites of initiation help us to cross over in the critical moments of our pilgrimage through life: moments such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death" (Ricoeur 1976, 62). Doors and thresholds symbolise a movement out of the present immanent state to somewhere else, so

that the climax of this quotation should involve a door is hardly surprising, as for much of his career, but especially so in the case of his later poetry, Heaney has been interested in the complexity of the interaction between the immanent and the transcendent, between the quotidian and the numinous, between the past and the present and between the conscious and the unconscious. In this chapter, I will trace his use of the door as symbolic trope which allows for the opening of each of these aspects to the other. Like the dashes in Dickinson's poetry, the doors in Heaney's later work stand open to allow access from this world to the next; from the seen to the unseen; from the conscious to the unconscious. I will also make connections between Heaney's ongoing and deepening use of the door as a trope, and similar connections made by European aesthetic thinkers Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. All of these writers question the borders between worlds and perspectives; as Derrida puts it: "we must leave these questions open, like doors" (Derrida 2007b, 85), as through these doors comes Heaney's "revealing light."

From an early stage in his career, doors were an important image for Heaney as a way of seeing different perspectives. Writing about his second collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969), he tells of wanting to "gesture towards this idea of poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it," and he goes on to say that "words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning" (*P*, 52). One could see Janus as a personal god for Heaney's work, because doors, as portals, limens, passageways and points of distinction and connection, have always been important to his worldview. He tells us that one of his early memories is of carrying "a can of fresh milk in the evenings from our house to the next house down the road from us." Heaney goes on to explain that his "journey from home to the back door of this house" was only a "couple of hundred yards," but in his "child's mind" he covered "a great distance every time, because

between the two doorsteps I crossed the border between the ecclesiastical diocese of Derry and the diocese – or more properly, the archdiocese – of Armagh" (*FK*, 53). The door is crucial to Heaney's sense of home, and in this he is allied to the ideas of Jacques Derrida, who similarly sees that in order to constitute "the space of a habitable house and a home, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world." He stresses that there is "no house or interior without a door or windows" (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000, 61). For Derrida, one's own identity, subjective or political, is differentially constituted, and thus some form of connection with, and separation from, the other, is necessary. The passage from selfhood to alterity, which is central to any sense of growth, is symbolised by this gap, which is the part of the house which "opens the door to the impossible possibility of what comes about *[arrive]* in its taking place" (Derrida 1987, 103). This sense of an openness to the other is crucial to both writers. As Heaney puts it, delivering the milk was "a genuine expedition into an elsewhere" (*FK*, 53), and this was the first step in a process that he would continue throughout his poetry, but especially so in the last five books.

In the second poem of his "Lightenings" sequence in *Seeing Things*, 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" (*ST*, 56). 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" (*ST*, 56). This is highly significant because the center 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 another European thinker, Martin 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" (Heidegger 1971, 201). 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 still with purchase on something earthier and more obscure" (SS, 320), and here again we see his desire to move from the immanent to the transcendent, or more precisely, to access the transcendent through the immanent.

This sense of penetration appears again and again in Heaney's later poetry. He locates himself deeply in language and in the immanent, but is simultaneously searching for a point of access to the transcendent. Thus in "The Golden Bough," Heaney's translation from Book Six of the *Aeneid* (lines 98-148), as Aeneas prays to the priestess to be given access to the underworld so that he can speak to his dead father, his plea is voiced in terms of a door to the underworld: "I pray for one look, one face-to-face meeting with my dear father. / Teach me the way and open the holy doors wide" (*ST*, 1). One of the ways he achieves this in his final books is to use the great sustaining myths of European culture, the Odyssey, the Aeneid and various other classical myths as ways of reframing contemporary experience in a transcendent manner. By the time he wrote this poem, his own father had died, and through poetic comparisons like this one, he is able to contextualize his personal sense of loss, and his hope for a future meeting within the emotions of the Latin poet all those centuries ago. It is a way of seeking he transcendent through poetry; it is a way of finding an "elsewhere" which allows, as Heidegger would have it, a penetration of an outside by an inside and vice versa.

Later in the same poem, the speaker is told that "day and night black Pluto's door stands open," so reaching the elsewhere is not as difficult as he might have first imagined.

However, in Heaney's case, the journey is never one-way. Like his recounting of the childhood delivery of milk, he moves between this sense of distance and elsewhere and home and back again. Each journey to the other place alters his perspective on the first place, and ultimately, he is transformed by such journeys: "But to retrace your steps and get back to upper air, / This is the real task and the real undertaking" (*ST*, 2). It is this journey through the door between the upper air and the underworld that is the significant trope here, as through this process, the inside becomes outside and this process is then reversed. Giorgio Agamben has also explored this idea, and makes the point that the "threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of *being-within* an *outside*" [*italics original*] (Agamben 1993, 68).

In so much of Heaney's later poetry, this experience of the threshold, and this passage through the door which stands open, and almost invites such a passage, is transformative. Thus in "markings," a poem about one of the most grounded of childhood experiences, the impromptu game of football in a field, the concrete quality of the experience is foregrounded. It opens by describing the physical scene, with a sense of "this-worldness" and "the dead-on and the head-on-ness" which Heaney saw and admired in Robert Frost (*SS*, 453): "We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts, / That was all," and the pitch itself is far from even: "the bumpy thistly ground" (*ST*, 8). However, once the structure of the pitch is marked out, and once the boys have "crossed the line our called names drew between us," a door is opened to an elsewhere of experience as another mode of experience is accessed:

> Some limit had been passed,
>
> There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
>
> In time that was extra, unforeseen and free. (*ST*, 8)

Here a door has been opened, and the perspective of the poem has moved from the adjective and noun-driven "bumpy thistly ground" into the abstractions of "fleetness, furtherance, untiredness." The alliteration of the first two words, allied to the pararhymes of all three words, connects them at the level of sound, and gives them an almost incantatory quality, thereby validating the passing of the limits from the physical into a realm that is "extra, unforeseen and free." Here we see Heaney embodying a point made by Roland Barthes about poetic language which "initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and over-nourishing signs," and which is opposed to the social function of language because "to have recourse to a discontinuous speech is to open the door to all that stands above Nature" (Barthes 1978, 48-49). In this case "description is revelation" (*N*, 71), because the description is non-utilitarian and attempts to access an unknown world of feeling, sense, intuition and the transcendent. The glimpses are occasional, through the chink of a door that stands open, as one stands on the threshold.

The idea of crossing the threshold as a transformative experience has a long history in European aesthetic thinking, and it is an idea with Heaney has engaged positively. He has noted that between what is "going to happen" and what we "would wish to happen," in other words between the actual and the wished-for, or the immanent and transcendent, 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"; and he goes on to voice this oscillation through the imagery of the door and the threshold: "poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly approached and constantly departed from, at which reader and writer undergo in their different ways the experience of being at the same time summoned and released" (*GT*, 108). This idea of poetry as a threshold, as a point of entry and exit into more than one dimension, is typical of Heaney's poetizing thought, and it also reflects the idea that identities and notions of place are more about modes of entry and exit, than they are

about actual topographical or physical locations. Such concentration on the self, and such a dynamic process of summoning and releasing, "does not limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two" (Agamben 1998, 19). Heaney similarly views the oscillation of being summoned and released, as transformative: "All these things entered you / As if they were both the door and what came through it" (*ST*, 9). Such transformation is imagined later in the poem in an image where two men sawing with a "cross-cut" saw, are described as keeping the saw "swimming" in the fallen beech tree so "that they seemed to row the steady earth" (*ST*, 9). The earth has been transformed by this activity, as has our conception of what "rowing" means as a verb, and it is this plural and transformative perspective that Heaney's poetry of the threshold can voice so evocatively.

Immanuel Kant often spoke of the idea of borders between different disciplines or modes of identity, and as Agamben has explained, in Kantian terms, what is in question in this bordering is "not a limit (*Schranke*) that knows no exteriority, but a threshold (*Grenze*), that is, a point of contact with an external" (Agamben 1993, 65). Agamben thematises the threshold in *The Coming Community*, where he talks about "the event of an outside" (Agamben 1993, 66). It is through this liminal border that the belonging of an entity to a set, or its identity, is determined. This limit does not, however, 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" (Agamben 1993, 66).

Poetry is just such a passage. It is a "point of contact with an external space that must remain empty" (Agamben 1993, 63), 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 releasing process, will allow new levels of meaning to be created through the crossing and re-crossing of this threshold. Agamben notes that notions of outside have been expressed in

terms of a door in many languages, and he cites the two seminal languages of the European intellectual tradition to reinforce his point, where "the notion of the 'outside"' is expressed by a word that means "at the door," as "*fores* in Latin is the door of the house," and "*thyrathen* in Greek literally means 'at the threshold"' (Agamben 1993, 66). For Agamben, both the outside space and the mode of access to it, are conveyed in the term "threshold" (Murray & Whyte 2011, 190). Thus when Heaney's father is running on the "afternoon of his own father's death / The open, black half of the half-door waits" (*ST*, 15), and again this is a symbol of that passage between worlds which poetry can access.

Up to this, the examples have all looked at one of the most seminal passages between worlds – that between mortality and death, but the door and threshold imagery refers to other passages between worlds or states. In "Lustral Sonnet," he tells us that his "first impulse was never / To double-bar a door or lock a gate" (*ST*, 35), because he was always looking to probe that further shore of experience, even if the consequences could be problematic. In "A Retrospect," he speaks of an old road which was "lover country" where each parked car "played possum in the twilight," as lovers had illicit sex in this out of the way place: "And there they were, / Astray in the hill-fort of all pleasures / Where air was other breath." This sense of breaking a boundary and of flouting convention left the lovers feeling "empowered but still somehow constrained." This transgressive love is a thing of the past to the:

> Young marrieds, used now to the licit within doors,
>
> They fell short of the sweetness that had lured them.
>
> No nest in rushes, the heather bells unbruised,
>
> The love-drink of the mountain streams untasted. (*ST*, 43)

Here, the door serves as a border-limit which is closed, as habit has dulled the tingling excitement of love on the “old road” and the use of the unusual positive of illicit, “licit,” underlines through litotes the habitual humdrum nature of the sexual relations between the young marrieds. What is interesting is the grammatical voicing of the door in this poem, as the term used is “within doors,” which closes off the passage to new experience and to a different world. The final word in the poem “untasted,” enacts the attenuation of experience that results from doors not standing open but remaining closed, and allowing a different world to come into being only in retrospect.

This is very much not 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. (*ST*, 55)

The shifting light, a revealing light, in the doorway is a portal to a new knowledge: “Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round. / Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind” (*ST*, 55). 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 (*ST*, 56). 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” (*SS*, 321), and indeed, the poem’s genesis was just such an illumination, as it was after working in the national library on an introduction to a selection of poems by Yeats that the first lines “came”

to him (Cole 1997, 108). The genesis of the poem is how the unconscious can see something from a slanted perspective, which casts new light on the normative one. Such an altered perspective is often not comfortable: “knowledge-freshening wind” does not sound like a balmy summer breeze; however, it does bring new clarity and this is at the core of his openness to the new and the different in these poems.

Through the door of perception comes the experiential intuition of mortality, and in “Settings xii,” we see a parallel process, as the door becomes a portal through which new knowledge can be accessed. Through the shimmer of “Athletic sealight on the doorstep slab,” the speaker of the poem is now able to acknowledge the “presence” which he “sensed withdrawing first time round” (*ST*, 69). This oscillation between presence and absence allows those slanted glimpses of a knowledge that is not rational but rather intuitive, and the knowledge is to be found in the space, the threshold, between them: “the minute the question concerning the essence counts as settled, a door is opened to unessence” (Heidegger 2009, 19). Indeed, the conflation of “sea” and “light” achieves the same effect, as it is as if the sea is a source of light, while also suggesting metonymically that the light is personified with the liveliness of a seal, as it shimmers on the doorstep, transformed, with the single “l” being made to do the work of two.

A parallel transformation can be in “Settings xv,” as the speaker attempts to preserve a childhood memory in an ekphrastic “Rembrandt-gleam” (*ST*, 71), as he conjures an image of his father thrusting his hand into a barrel filled with salt as he tries to find the bacon contained therein to inspect it. For the child who is watching, the scene is one of biblical splendor “that night I owned the piled grain of Egypt,” as he is privy to his father’s careful hoarding and saving of food: “I watched the sentry’s torchlight on the hoard. / I stood in the door, unseen and blazed upon” (*ST*, 71). Here his threshold-dwelling eye sees both the reality of the need to salt away the bacon for the winter, but also that his father is very much the

hearth-keeper. This vision of his father, or rather this revision of him, is the dis-place, or Agamben's empty space; it is that space at which the two figures in the earlier image of the Etruscan sarcophagus were gazing. It is an image of the numinous in the immanent. Of course, it is also a site of transfiguration as the eye of the poet will be recalled by the mature poet, the I, who will gradually bed his own "locale / in the utterance" (*WO*, 25), but an utterance that is transformed and hugely influenced by the locutions and locations of classical Greece, and once again, it is a door that allows these two worlds to interact.

We have already noted the symbolic significance of one journey from his own back door to a crossing of a border into a new dispensation, and also the fact that it was the repeated crossing of this border from the self and the *Heimlich* to the other and the *Unheimlich* that was retrospectively important to him. In the opening passage of *Preoccupations*, he describes another movement between different perspectives on his own home and locutions:

> I would begin with the Greek word, *omphalos,* meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos,* until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is Co. Derry in the early 1940s. (*P*, 17)

What is happening here is that opening out to a new world in the same place as locution has transformed location, and the door of memory has connected the physical place with the center of the classical Greek world. Appropriately, for a poetic mode of thinking, this is done through adequations of sound, as the sound of the pump's plunger going up and down is merged with the sound of the Greek word in an onomatopoeic fusion. The location of this pump is significant: "it stood immediately outside the back door" (*SS*, 8). This retrospective

image is also connected with the travelling between the back door and the place of the other which has already been cited, and in both journeys, what is happening is that the *Heimlich* of home is being contrasted with the *Unheimlich* aspects of home. In an essay published in 1919, Sigmund Freud probed the intersections of signification that took place in the play of the words *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. He attempted to explore, and ultimately break down the opposition between the *Heimlich*, the "intimate" or "domestic," and the *Unheimlich*, the strange or "uncanny." He begins by stating the seemingly obvious binary opposition that exists in language between the two terms, but a careful etymological excursus leads him to conclude that "among its different shades of meaning the word '*Heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*Unheimlich*'. What is *Heimlich* thus comes to be *Unheimlich*" (Freud 1955, 224).

Through the doors of retrospection, Heaney conflates two words: his home place and the ancient center of the classical world. This allows him to offer parallel readings of Ireland though the lens of classical myth which provides aesthetic distance through which he can speak of atrocities and pain that are too close to him. Thus in *Burial at Thebes*, Heaney foregrounds the sense of humanity that requires the burial of the dead in a proper manner, regardless of their crimes against the Polis: "You have forbidden burial of one dead, / One who belongs by right to the gods below" (*BT*, 46). For Antigone, there is a deeper law, beyond that of politics, and its visible system of reward and punishments. She speaks of "Justice, justice dwelling deep / Among the gods of the dead" (*BT*, 21). The use of the rhetorical device of epizeuxis means that the repeated term "justice" is foregrounded, though it is an elusive concept as it dwells among the dead. Later in the same passage, Antigone will further refine her sense of the location of justice: "Unwritten, original, god-given laws" (*BT*, 21), and the fact that such laws dwell among the dead is stressed when, later in the play, the chorus sees her return to this place of death in terms that are now familiar to us:

> Steadfast Antigone,
>
> Never before did Death
>
> Open his stone door
>
> To one so radiant.
>
> You would not live a lie. (*BT*, 37)

The sense of seeking that further space beyond the practical, political and pragmatic fudges that are part and parcel of daily life has been an ongoing factor in Heaney's later work. He seeks that apace, that dis-place, that *non-lieu*, where truth can be glimpsed from that slant perspective which he is so skilled at providing. The notion of the right to a burial, to be remembered in a place and for that place to have a special significance for one's loved ones is at the core of Antigone, and even more so of Heaney's translation. This common humanity transcends the political and ideological aspects of conflict, as Heaney would see it.

There has been much debate on whether Heaney has been too political, or not sufficiently political, in his career. To me this is very much to miss the point: he is a poet and his role is to inhabit the aesthetic, something symbolised by that space on which the Etruscan couple gaze, and this space can provide a different perspective on the real world in which we live. In "Route 101 IX," this becomes very clear, as this poem refers to two people who died in the troubles, both of whom were known to Heaney. In the aftermath of the peace process, there has been a tendency to avoid speaking about individual deaths, as a political narrative is set out which sees everyone as casualties of a war, with no, or few, actions deemed more culpable than others. The actuality of the deaths has been occluded in their numerical recounting – to speak of some 3,600 deaths is to avoid the space which sees each death as

involving family, relatives, neighbors, friends, all connected in a web of loss and lamentation. In this poem two individuals are called to mind, and the truth of their death is set out clearly:

> And what in the end was there left to bury
> Of Mr Lavery, blown up in his own pub
> As he bore the primed device and bears it still
> Mid-morning towards the sun-admitting door
> Of Ashley House? Or of Louis O'Neill
> In the wrong place the Wednesday they buried
> Thirteen who'd been shot in Derry? Or of bodies
> Unglorified, accounted for and bagged
> Behind the grief cordons: not to be laid
> In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot
> Fired over on anniversaries
> By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled. (*HC*, 56)

Significantly, the two men singled out and commemorated in the poem were murdered by bombs planted by paramilitaries. Michael Parker has explained how both were also personally known to Heaney and died at a critical juncture in his and the province's history. Respectfully referred to as "Mr Lavery," John F. Lavery was a "sixty-year-old Catholic, who owned a pub on a junction of the Lisburn Road in south Belfast, a mere twenty yards or so from the Heaneys' house at 16 Ashley Avenue." He died in 1971, "while trying to remove from the premises a 20lb bomb which had been deposited there in all probability by the Provisional IRA" (Parker 2012, 237). One year later, a friend of Heaney's, Louis O'Neill, "who had initiated the poet into eel-fishing," and who had been "drinking in the Imperial Bar

in Stewartstown, Co. Tyrone," in the week following Bloody Sunday, was blown to pieces by the "blast from a 151b bomb, planted by loyalist paramilitaries" (Parker 2012, 327).

Like Antigone and her brother Polyneices, Heaney is unwilling to allow conflict to desecrate the memory of the dead. While both Lavery and O'Neil were buried, they were not buried whole as "what in the end was there left to bury / Of Mr Lavery …. Or of Louis O'Neill" (*HC*, 56). The irony that the killers of these men would be buried with paramilitary honors:

> In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot
>
> Fired over on anniversaries
>
> By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled. (*HC*, 56)

However, in the dis-place of writing, these bodies have a memorial – a grave of sorts, a place of memory, a space wherein they are honoured, remembered and where their humanity and their human being is remembered. Far more than the "volunteers" and para-militaries who have volleys fired over them, we will remember Mr Lavery (note the honorific title – he is not given a first name but the formal title) and Louise O'Neill, that "dole-kept bread winner" of Field Work. They, like steadfast Antigone, have found their memorial, not in a physical space, or a in a political space, but in the space of writing, the space of literature, which is accessed, as are many others, by a "sun-admitting door" (*HC*, 56).

This bright and illumined space, while unable to act directly in the political realm, was nevertheless able to offer another type of memorial to these victims, and by keeping this door open, it allowed them to achieve some form of transcendence with respect to the violence in Northern Ireland. While each side of the para-military divide was keen to memorialize their own dead, very often, the innocent victims, people who happened to be in

the wrong place at the wrong time, remained anonymous. They appear in lists of victims, but just as names in a list. In this poem, Heaney memorializes two people very much as people, as human beings who lived, and then died brutally. That their deaths were caused by the strong identification of two different traditions with two very different ideologies of place is important, as the repositioning and resignification of place has been an ongoing trope in Heaney's work from the very beginning. His early poems of home, dealing with his childhood, have always been written in terms of a poetic relocation of that place by being written in the context of Greek myth. From the connections between the sound of the pumping of water with the voicing of the Greek word Omphalos, to "Personal Helicon" (*DN*, 57), where the wells of his own townland were written in the context of the rivers of Mount Helicon, home of the muses, and in this context, the poet is compared to "big-eyed Narcissus" (*DN*, 57). The achievement of this dual perspective on place is to conflate the writing of place with the place of writing. As he puts it: "if one perceptible function of poetry is to write place into existence, another of its functions is to unwrite it" (*PW*, 47), and this unwriting is part of his creation of that space into which the figures gazed in the Etruscan sculpture.

Maurice Blanchot sees this as one of the seminal functions of literature and the aesthetic. For Blanchot, it is the transformative potential of art that brings this about. He points out that while in the real world, things are viewed as objects in order to be grasped and classified and categorized, 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" (Blanchot 1982, 131). In Blanchot's mind, literature is primarily an interrogative discourse which poses questions of the political and ideological "literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question" (Blanchot 1981, 21).

In his Nobel lecture Heaney spoke about his own poetic "first place," Mossbawn. (*P*, 18), but again in a way that opened it up to a different reading. He questioned the solidity of that place by recalling how the memory of place is interpenetrated by notions of space. The "air around and above us was alive and signalling too," as the wind stirred an "aerial wire attached to the topmost branch of the chestnut tree" (*CP*, 9). The wire came into their kitchen and into the radio where the voice of a "BBC newsreader" spoke "out of the unexpected like a *deus ex machina*" (*CP*, 10):

> I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This in turn became 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. (*CP*, 11)

At this point, Heaney is very close to Blanchot and his sense of *The Space of Literature*, where literature is seen as a point of nullity: "if literature coincides with nothing, for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist" (Blanchot 1982: 22). The "short bursts of foreign languages," and his encounter with the "gutturals and sibilants of European speech," are important signifiers of this widening of Mossbawn as a place and space of poetic and philosophical origin, for as Agamben says, there is an experience of language "for which we have no words, which doesn't pretend, like grammatical language, to be there before being," and he terms this "the language of poetry" (Agamben 1995: 48). It is an experience of language as other, as a form of communication which we cannot understand, even though we know it is signifying on some level. It is an alternative understanding of language, a feeling, a sensation, of difference through language; it is a conceptual displacement from any claim that our own language is the only way in which to speak or say

the world. Poetic language has an ability to express and access aspects of experience that are silenced in normal discourse, as it belongs "neither to the day nor to the night but always is spoken between night and day and one single time speaks the truth and leaves it unspoken" (Blanchot 1982: 276). Writing about the spaces that are part of the stepping stones, Heaney makes the point that poetic language has allowed him to uproot from the appetites of gravity and the next line in *Crediting Poetry*, after the piece quoted above, validates this point: "I credit poetry for making this space-walk possible" (*CP*, 11). The foreign words are the spaces between the stepping stones which access the transcendent.

This trope is carried on in his last book, in the sequence entitled "Loughanure." In this ekphrastic poem, which begins by looking at a picture sold to the poet by the dedicatee of the sequence, Colin Middleton, and his "painting of Loughanure" which he had sold to the Heaneys for "thirty guineas / Forty-odd years ago" (*HC*, 61), and the poem tells how Middleton, who died in 1983, often looked at the poem when he came to the Heaneys' house. The second section of the poem goes on to equate this piece of art with a form of afterlife for Middleton:

> So this is what an afterlife can come to?
>
> A cloud-boil of grey weather on the wall
>
> Like murky crystal, a remembered stare – (*HC*, 62)

He proceeds to look at two other writers who discuss transcendence, Dante ("This for an answer to Alighieri") who wrote about the afterlife in his *Divine Comedy*, and Plato, who concluded *The Republic*:

> And Plato's Er? Who watched immortal souls

> Choose lives to come according as they were
>
> Fulfilled or repelled by existences they'd known
>
> Or suffered first time round. (*HC*, 62)

This story about Er, a soldier who dies in battle, but whose body remains undecomposed some ten days later, gives credence to the idea that there is a beyond, an open, some form of space, which transcends this world. Whether that is a place, or a space is what is being questioned by Heaney here, just as his memory of Mossbawn was of both a place and the sounds that came from the surrounding space through the aerial. In his introduction to the Cambridge edition of *The Republic*, G. R. F. Ferrari explains that:

> the myth of Er, describing the rewards and penalties that await us after death (614a). The souls of the dead meet on a meadow to discuss their experiences of reward and punishment (614c); they travel to a place from which they can view the whole cosmos (6t6b); they choose their next lives (617d); they are reincarnated (62oc). (Plato 2000, xlvii)

In other words, Heaney is thinking about the aesthetic as a form of afterlife, as a mode of access to a form of transcendence, to that becoming space of which he spoke in his commentary on the Etruscan sculpture. Our access to such ideas is, of course, through literature and philosophy, both symbolised in this poem by Dante and Plato respectively. In literature, the real and the imaginary, the immanent and the transcendent, appear together, and interestingly, given that this poetic sequence concluded with a car journey: "As I drive unhomesick, unbelieving, through / A grant-aided, renovated scene" (*HC*, 65), the path to such a reborn life, in *The Republic*, is also imaged in terms of a "journey from here to there

and back again," and this journey, according to Er, "will be along the smooth, heavenly road, not the rough, terrestrial one" (Plato 2000, 343, 619e). The anaphoric parallelism of "Er" and "Errigal" adds to the associative narrative train that is set up in the poem.

The fusion of terrestrial and heavenly journeys comes to fruition in the next lines of the poem where Heaney is in his car, looking at "Mount Errigal / On the skyline" as the "one constant thing," and he speaks of:

> trying
> To remember the Greek word signifying
> A world restored completely… . (*HC*, 65)

The word in question, I would suggest, is *apokatastasis*, a doctrine propounded by Origen of Alexandria which means the final restitution of all things, a restoration to a primordial condition, and refers to a time when, at the appearance of the Messiah the kingdom of God shall be extended over the whole earth—an idea extended by Origen to imply the final conversion and salvation of all created beings, the devil and his angels not excepted. It is a suggestion that ultimately the transcendent and immanent will fuse completely and the latter will shine through the former. One could see much of Heaney's later poetry as attempting to describe e and create such moment, in an ephemeral condition. It has currency in philosophy and theology, and interestingly is used by Heaney's great friend and mentor, and the person with whom this chapter began, namely Czesław Miłosz. In the final section of his long poem, *Bells in Winter*, Miłosz proclaims:

> Yet I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis.*
> That word promises reverse movement,

> Not the one that was set in *katastasis,*
>
> And appears in the Acts, 3, 21.
>
> It means: restoration. So believed: St. Gregory of Nyssa,
>
> Johannes Scotus Erigena, Ruysbroeck and William Blake.
>
> For me, therefore, everything has a double existence.
>
> Both in time and when time shall be no more. (Miłosz 1978, 69)

In the list of avatars, we see the discourses of mystical religion, philosophy, and poetry, all of which promise such a reinstatement of a sense of place which is brimful of imagery of space and the transcendent. All of these writers speak of a return to a heightened form of life, and in his later poetry, as we have seen, Heaney captures instances of such plenitude. This double existence is what Heaney has prized in Miłosz's work, and for each aspect of existence to interinanimate the other, there needs to be a form of access and egress between them both – and there needs to be a form of openness:

> between the vocation of poet and the behaviour of a reasonable man, between the call to open the doors of one's life to the daimonic and prophetic soul and have one's destiny changed by it, between that choice and the temptation to keep the doors closed and the self securely under social and domestic lock and key. (*FK*, 360)

For Heaney, as we have seen, those doors always stand open.