

The Subject of Poetry and the Subject of Theory

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Abstract

This essay looks at three poems by Seamus Heaney in the light of Jacques Lacan’s theories of the subject. The type of subjectivity that is revealed in the poems is analysed, looking at Heaney’s early poems ‘Digging’ and ‘Personal Helicon’ and a later one ‘Out of the Bag’.

I rhyme to see myself
to set the darkness echoing
—Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*

The Mirror stage as formative of the function of the ‘I’ —Jacques Lacan,
Écrits - A Selection

These two epigraphs suggest a performative connection between the work of Seamus Heaney and Jacques Lacan, and, at a broader level of abstraction, between the respective discourses of poetry and literary theory. Both quotations segue around the attempts to define and visualise the ‘I’, and this paper will suggest that both Heaney and Lacan, and at the broader level, poetry and theory, embody a teleological drive towards the achievement of a greater understanding of aspects of the human subject. I will examine the contexts from which the epigraphic texts have been drawn, showing how

Heaney's early poems 'Digging' and 'Personal Helicon' and a later one 'Out of the Bag' embody the Lacanian notion of the achievement of self-knowledge through language or discourse.

This is a crucial connection between lyric poetry, with its focus on an almost confessional style of writing about the self, and psychoanalytic theory which probes language for manifestations of the unconscious. Lacan has made the connection overt in his aphorism that: 'the unconscious is structured like a language',¹ and he has also stressed that language is first and foremost, directed at a listener, it is a communicative agent which permits the subject to attain recognition from the other.² Both lyric poetry and psychoanalytic theory stress the difficulty of attaining self knowledge and they both see the 'I' as composed of many layers, many of which are not readily accessible. For Lacan, while language is very much seminal in subjective knowledge, it is language as an intersubjective medium that is of interest to him.

For Lacan, the subject experiences the unconscious as 'the discourse of the Other',³ and it is this alterity that is also to be found, I would argue, in the polyvalent play of images in poetic discourse. Lacan outlines this in his schema L, where he has traced the interaction between the 'wall of language' of the imaginary, and the modes of communication between the subject and the discourse of the other. These algebraic schemata are notoriously difficult, but Dylan Evans has provided an intelligent account of what is being signified in schema L:

The main point of the schema is to demonstrate that the Symbolic relation (between the other and the subject) is always blocked to a certain extent, by the imaginary axis (between the ego and the specular image). Because it has to pass through the imaginary 'wall of language', the discourse of the other reaches the subject in an interrupted and inverted form.⁴

Hence the imaginary identification between self and image forms a barrier to any real communication between self and other. Any messages which disrupt the specular dyad are filtered out of the communicative pathway, or if not, they are so distorted as to give rise to aggressive responses.

Far from seeing language as transparent in terms of subjectivity, Lacan inverts the Saussurean diagrammatic representation of the concept [signified]/sound pattern [signifier] relationship,⁵ putting the signifier on top, with the signified under the bar, *S/s*. He argues that signifiers are combined in a signifying chain; meaning does not arise in the individual signifier, but in the connection between signifiers. Saussure had admitted that there can occur a shift or sliding (*glissement*) in the relationship between signifier and signified. Lacan argues that not only are the two realms never united, but that there is an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. In order to emphasise this separateness, Lacan introduced a cut (*coupure*) into the Saussurean sign, with a new emphasis on the bar as a formula of separateness. Hence, there is a requirement for a form of hermeneutic exploration of the relationship between language and subjectivity.

In a complex series of theorisations, to which this conspectus can do scant justice, Lacan sees the self as an interlocking and dynamic constellation, differentiating between the ego and the subject, the subject of speech and the subject of being, with the former being a fictive creation of the imaginary order, brought into being by the misrecognition of the self in the Mirror Stage, while the latter is part of the symbolic order.⁶ He sees both of these facets of the self operating within three orders: the Imaginary order of the mirror stage, the Symbolic order of language and law, and the Real order of drives, the somatic and instincts. These three orders are interconnected, and operate at an intersubjective level, providing different perspectives on events in the life of the self: 'it is in relation to the same actions, the same behaviour, that we can distinguish precisely the functions of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real'.⁷ Lacan also differentiates between full speech and empty speech: 'full speech is a speech full of meaning. Empty speech is a speech which has only

signification’,⁸ and goes on to associate full speech with the subject and empty speech with the ego. Speech in the field of the ego has the form of mediation while speech in the realm of the subject involves revelation.⁹ This revelation of full speech deals with reaching the truth of desire, ‘speech alone is the key to that truth’,¹⁰ and it is here that the connection between the epistemic drives of poetry and theory cohere. As Colette Soler puts it:

I would like to begin today with the idea that the unconscious is linked through symptoms through speech. Lacan set out to think psychoanalysis on the basis of this notion, and to understand it we must immediately specify what speech is [. . .] according to Lacan, speech – that is, full or true speech – is an act. An act is something that has a creative function; it brings something new into the world. The creative function of speech is the main thing you have to understand.¹¹

It is this sense of creativity that fuses the discourses of the aesthetic and the psychoanalytic. Soler goes on to say that any form of speech presupposes the Other, a particularly Lacanian conceit, referring to all of language, culture and signification systems that preceded the self, and through which the self is able to enunciate itself and be recognised.

For Lacan, meaning is endlessly deferred along the signifying chain of language: ‘it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning “insists” but that none of its elements “consists” in the signification of which it is at the moment capable’.¹² Consequently, language, the signifying chain, does not allow for a clear passage between signifier and signified; he postulates ‘an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier’,¹³ and the result is that language tends to ‘signify *something quite other* than what it says’.¹⁴ In terms of the subject, Lacan makes the core assertion that the definition of a signifier is that it ‘represents a subject not for another subject but for another signifier’.¹⁵ The importance of this seemingly gnomic phrase is that language, whether normal usage, psychoanalytic discourse or poetic language, presupposes a listener, an addressee, an ‘other’, before it ever begins to signify. The crucial

point about Lacanian notions of subjectivity is that they are extrinsic, they are derived from reflections, refractions and relationships with what he terms the 'Other'. In his work, Lacan differentiated between the 'other' and the 'Other'. The 'other' is another person, or possibly the image of the self in the mirror stage. As Easthope puts it: 'what Lacan designates as the *Other* [is] the rest of language',¹⁶ while Ragland-Sullivan agrees that this is the 'discourse of the mother, father, culture, and of language itself'.¹⁷ The importance of the Other in determining the difference between the field of the ego and that of the subject will be discussed in the final two poems to be examined in this paper; however, in the first poem, 'Digging', it is the difference between the empty speech of mediation and the full speech of revelation that will be examined.

The poem begins with a number of deictics, notably anaphoric possessive personal pronouns, which serve to locate it in terms of place and person:

Between *my* finger and *my* thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. *I* look down. [my italics]¹⁸

These deictics serve to locate the poem in terms of a single voice, and this voice is attempting to define itself in terms of familial members (father, grandfather) and home. In this sense, the poem coheres with aspects of contemporary literary theory which views the subject as 'a variable construct rather than something given'.¹⁹ Lacan sees one of the seminal stages of this 'construct' as the defining of the self in terms of a reflection; the self is defined in terms of a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of itself in the mirror.²⁰ According to this theory, the ego is constructed as the child struggles to achieve the specular image of wholeness that is observed in the mirror; an image that is accurate, stemming from the child's own body, and delusory, since the image prefigures a unity and

mastery that the child still lacks.²¹ For Lacan, this specular relationship initiates the Imaginary order where the self is dominated by an image of the other, and it seeks definition through reflected identifications. This is the realm of the ego, and of empty speech.

In ‘Digging’, the self is being defined in terms of the gaze as the ‘I’ of the poem sees itself as reflected in ‘my father’ and ‘my grandfather’, and in terms of their shared activity of ‘digging’. The rhetorical device used to bring this about is visual, *prosopopeia*, as defined by Paul de Man:

prosopon-poiein means to *give* a face and therefore implies that the original face can be missing or nonexistent. The trope which coins a name for a still unnamed entity, which gives face to the faceless is, of course, catachresis. That a catachresis can be a *prosopopeia*, in the etymological sense of ‘giving face’, is clear from such ordinary instances as the *face* of a mountain or the *eye* of a hurricane.²²

The *prosopopeia* which is used in describing the father and the ‘grandfather’ is governed by the verb ‘look’, and in terms of the Lacanian gaze (what one might term ‘the lyric eye’), both father and grandfather function as metaphorical mirrors, through which reflections and refractions create a scopic drive. Given Lacan’s use of the term ‘phantasy’, this poem could be termed a phantasy, in the psychoanalytical sense, as the required conditions are all fulfilled in *Digging*. Phantasy, as outlined by Anthony Easthope in *Poetry and Phantasy*,²³ specifies an imaginary scene or narrative (the specular captation of father and grandfather, both ‘digging’), in which the subject is present (‘I look down [. . .] we picked /loving their cool hardness in *our* hands [. . .] I carried him milk’). The scene must be altered or disguised (the *prosopopeia* which gives presence to two absent figures), and this alteration or disguise helps to fulfil a wish for the subject (the desire to be part of the familial syntagmatic chain ‘the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man’). Here, the desire of the ‘I’ of the poem to fuse with his family tradition is clear, a point resonantly made in the final line where spade and pen fuse:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it. (*DN* 13-14)

Here, the scopic drive has achieved a sense of imaginary familial belonging as two essentially disparate activities are fused in metaphor, giving the 'I' of the poem a security in the specular reflections of family and home. The scene, however, is redolent of empty speech, as digging with a pen is an activity that is unlikely to have any real effect – the metaphorical intent is undercut by the practical metonymic impossibility of the activity of digging with a pen.

Ironically, even as Heaney is attempting to build an imaginary connective bridge between his own activity of writing and the physical activity of digging, through the symbolic order of language, he is deconstructing the possibility of this occurrence, as his form of 'digging' will change the family tradition forever. In this sense, the image of the 'cut cuts of an edge' through 'living roots' which 'awaken' in the poet's head is highly significant as it is such cutting which will gradually separate the poet from his patriarchal line, while at the same time, at a broader level, this image anticipates Heaney's gradual breaking free of the broader nationalist family: 'braced and bound / Like brothers in a ring',²⁴ a process which is hinted at in these books, but more fully achieved in the later ones. The same point can be made of the initial simile 'snug as a gun' which has no contextual placement in the poem, or indeed, in the first three books. The image of latent violence is, I would suggest, an unconscious realization that he will break with his tradition, as identity involves individuation from the group in terms of a progression from an imaginary relationship to a symbolic one. In these examples of the cut (*coupure*) full speech is present and the imaginary figure of the ego is replaced with the subject, a subject who gains a momentary glimpse of the truth that his desire to write will sunder the imaginary connections and lay bare the reality of separation between the world of physical labour and that of academic creative life.

Ironically in the light of the role of the mother in the definition of the imaginary order, and in the attempt to define the self in terms of generations and familial structures, there is no mention of any maternal tradition in this poem. There is an eloquent silence here in terms of the genetic family connection which the poem seems on the surface to be validating. The comparisons are all based on the family connections between grandfather, father and son, as well as on the shared activity of digging. On closer inspection, the lack of any mention of the physical maternal connection would seem to undercut the familial link which, of necessity, requires women to give birth to succeeding generations. This deconstructs the familial connection, and puts more stress on the shared activity of digging as an imaginary bond. However, on inspection, that activity is, in fact, dissimilar as opposed to similar, a point underlined by the admission that 'I've no spade to follow men like them' (*DN* 14). Here again, is an index of the progression from the imaginary to the symbolic, as willed images of similarity are deconstructed by the very linguistic matrix through which they are expressed. The Other with which the I of the poem will define himself has changed radically from the rural context of his family, and the products of their labour, turf, potatoes and flowers, to the more lettered context of a poet, with his literary productions.

In 'Personal Helicon', the concluding poem from *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney develops the idea of the Other by speaking of poetry as a way of seeing the self: 'I rhyme to see myself / To set the darkness echoing'. This auto-scopic sense of reflected selfhood has strong analogies with the Lacanian notion of the Mirror Stage and the desire for a full relationship with a reflective validation of selfhood. Lacan's conception of the 'formation of the I '²⁵ has been hugely influential in terms of the theorization of the subject. It has also influenced the ideological formulation of the societal constituents of subjectivity put forward by Louis Althusser, who says that the 'structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects [. . .] is specular, i.e. a mirror-structure'.²⁶ For Althusser subjectivity is an ambiguous term:

(1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his (*sic*) submission.²⁷

The Lacanian mirror stage encompasses this oscillation between a position of seeming self-presence and a position where the subject is constituted by the Symbolic order, language and the unconscious. However, there is more to this poem than a recapitulation of the Mirror stage, as the sense of identification with the Other is seen as hugely formative of the I of the poem.

‘Personal Helicon’ is generally seen as a discussion about poetry, and about the creative process. There is strong unanimity among critics about the metalinguistic and metapoetic qualities of this poem. Roland Mathias sees the poem as an attempt to ‘*link* his childhood experience, compelling but “scare some” too, with the adult experience of writing poetry’.²⁸ Robert Buttel cites the poem’s dedicatee Michael Longley in seeing the poem as ‘both credo and manifesto’,²⁹ while Blake Morrison sees the ‘narcissistic self-consciousness’ that is clear from the closing stanza of the poem as an indication that ‘the business of writing is indeed a major theme of his work’.³⁰

Another aspect of this critical consensus is the unstated but assumed view of the subject of the poem, the speaking ‘I’ as a presence that exists anterior to the text, and that is fully in command of the text. Elmer Andrews, for instance, sees the final sentence of the poem as presenting ‘the poet as conscious, confident controller of his means’.³¹ Generally, studies of the poem take the status of the lyric ‘I’ for granted, and write about it in a manner analogous to that described by Jacques Derrida in his discussion of the assumption of centrality in discussions of structure. The poet, like the centre, is seen to be ‘a point of presence, a fixed origin’,³² who is ‘paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it’.³³ This view of the poet as anterior presence enables critics to speak of the poet as an entity.

For Lacan, the mirror stage deals with the ‘coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject’;³⁴ it is a process which takes issue with the Cartesian *a priori* subjective certainties. Malcolm Bowie has noted a paronomastic aspect to Lacan’s language which underscores the alterity of his subject creation myth in terms of Cartesian humanism. Bowie says that the mirror stage (*stade du miroir*) is not ‘a mere epoch in the history of the individual but a stadium (*stade*) in which the battle of the human subject is permanently being waged’.³⁵ In Lacanian terms, then, there is no way in which a subject can pre-exist language; there is no way in which the subject can be a ‘conscious creator’, standing outside language, and wielding it as one might wield a club. The Lacanian notion of subjectivity is a fluid one, with the subject constantly attempting to find Imaginary fullness, but being prevented from so doing by the Symbolic order, and it is here that the notion of the Other comes into play.

The title of Heaney’s poem brings what Roland Barthes would term a cultural code to bear on our reading of the poem. The complete text is framed by two proper nouns: ‘Helicon’ in the title, and ‘Narcissus’ in the final stanza. These proper nouns, both of Greek derivation, locate the poem in the abstract realm of myth, as opposed to the seemingly concrete world of Heaney’s childhood. Mount Helicon in Boeotia, was sacred to the Muses. On this mountain were two fountains, the Hippocrene and the Aganippe, and those who drank from their waters were inspired with the gift of poetry.³⁶ The myth of Narcissus and Echo is well known; Echo was punished by Juno for talking too much by being denied all speech, except the power to repeat the final word of a sentence. Having fallen in love with Narcissus, but being unable to communicate with him, she eventually faded away into rock, and all that was left of her was her voice, still having the last word.

Narcissus, seeing his own reflection in the waters of a fountain, immediately fell in love with it. At every attempt to make physical contact, the reflection disappeared; when Narcissus drew back, the reflection returned. He eventually faded away and died. These two myths form a cultural nexus

through which the poem may be read, as well as providing a broader range of reference for its thematic *dénouement*. Hence, the other image that is seen in ‘Digging’ is transformed into the Other of language and culture, a significant factor in the development of selfhood at the level of the subject and the ego.

Thus, there is a deictic oscillation between ‘you’ and ‘I’ in the poem, embodying the creative nature of language in terms of the identification of the self:

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep *you* saw no reflection in it. [my italics] (*DN 57*)

Here, there is a grammatical fracturing of the syntagmatic chain at a syntactical level. The plummeting bucket is modified by the phrase ‘so deep’, which one would expect to find in the same sentence. However, the full stop after ‘rope’ sets off the following sentence and destabilizes the description of the bucket. This shift is foregrounded by the use of the second person pronoun to refer to the subject of the enounced, previously referred to as ‘I’. What is then set in motion is an economy of subjectivity which permeates the rest of the poem.

The poem sets up an oscillatory process between the ‘I’ who is looking at the reflection (subject of the enunciation) (subject), and the ‘you’ who is being reflected (subject of the enounced) (ego). This dialectic symbolises the subjective economy which structures all actions, namely the movement between Imaginary and Symbolic as full meanings are intended but are constantly determined by the Other of language, the absent syntagmatic and paradigmatic chains.

Lacan’s mirror stage can be traced back to the Freudian notion of the ‘narcissistic ego’.³⁷ As Grosz notes, the narcissistic ego depends on the subject’s relations with the other, the other as image in the

mirror stage. Thus the subject that takes itself as its own object is ‘fundamentally *split*, as a subject and an object’. For Grosz, Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage is an attempt to ‘fill in the genesis of the narcissistic ego’.³⁸ In *Personal Helicon*, the linking of the subject of the enounced with Narcissus further symbolizes the split nature of subjectivity. The subject is now represented in the syntagmatic chain by ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’, ‘myself’, ‘you’, ‘your’ and ‘Narcissus’. The unfolding of the syntagmatic chain is a process of deconstruction where the subject is supplanted by an economy of deictics which are constituted by language.

The closing lines of the poem are frequently seen as a climactic and resonant statement of poetic intent, which looks forward to the next volume, *Door into the Dark*:³⁹ ‘I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing (*DN 57*). In this line, ‘*I rhyme / To see myself*’, the speaking subject is attempting, through ‘rhyme’, to fuse the subject of the enunciation with the subject of the enounced, to fuse signifier with signified, to create, through the mystification of poetic language,⁴⁰ a transcendental signifier which will provide access to a transcendental signified. However, the two can never be united, as indicated by Lacan in his question:

Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier concentric or excentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified? – that is the question. It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak.⁴¹

Anthony Easthope, in a discussion of this Lacanian theorem of subjectivity, provides a definitive answer to Lacan’s question observing that the subject of the enounced and the subject of the enunciation are necessarily different positions for the speaking subject: ‘The “I” speaking and the “I” spoken about can never be the same’.⁴² Ironically, it is in discourse that the speaking subject is split, so the very language used to announce the merging of the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced deconstructs this merging. As Lacan notes ‘the S and the s of the Saussurean

algorithm are not on the same level, and man (*sic*) only deludes himself when he believes his true place is at their axis, which is nowhere'.⁴³ The very splitting of the subject: 'I' and 'myself' enacts the failure of any attempt to achieve full self-present identity, and at the same time, enacts the ongoing desire for such perfect self-reflection. In the full speech of the subject, there are glimpses of self-knowledge. Instead of an imaginary relationship with images of his own family, he has now developed into an identification with a broader cultural Other.

In this sense, the idea of setting 'the darkness echoing' is both desire and a statement of the impossibility of the achievement of that desire. Through language, one reveals the self, but it is also through language that notions of selfhood become fractured. Here, the gaze's attempt to achieve some form of visual closure in terms of the self is deconstructed by the change of register that is contained in the reflection: after seeing the self, the qualifying clause is phrased in auditory as opposed to visual imagery 'echoing', and this can never be any new sound as an echo, by definition, is the terminal phonemes of a previous utterance. This desire for wholeness, constantly undercut by the medium through which that desire is expressed, is also to be found in his poetry which deals with a more communal and historical sense of identity.

The prevalence of the Other of culture as an index of the transformations brought about by the symbolic order is the theme of a later poem, 'Alphabets', in *The Haw Lantern*, where once again, the scopic drive gradually moves from the imaginary to the symbolic. In this poem, the development of the I of the poem is seen to develop in direct correlation to the broadening of the Other, as signified by increasingly diverse systems of signification. In this poem, he begins by describing how the unfamiliar is initially seen in terms of the familiar: as the imaginary strives to retain familiarity in terms of identity. Hence, he is able to discuss the steps from reality to writing, as he traces how initially, the letters of the alphabet were recognised through their similarity to shapes with which his childhood self would have been familiar. Speaking of himself in the third person he tells of how his

initial contact with images was a shadow his father makes with joined hands, and goes on to describe his initial contact with letter and number through familiar metaphors: ‘the forked stick that they call Y’ and the Swan’s neck and back that make ‘the 2’, while two ‘rafters and a cross-tie on the slate’ represent the letter ‘some call *ah*, some call *a*’, and a globe ‘in the window tilts like a coloured O’.⁴⁴

In this poem about signs, he traces his development through different levels of writing and language. He moves on to the different names for the activity, first ‘copying out’ and then ‘English’, but he is still in the realm of connecting this activity with the physical givens of his early environment, as his work is marked ‘correct with a little leaning hoe’ (*HL* 1). We are back in the world of ‘Digging’ where the scopic drive sought similarity and attempted to impose connections with the familiar in an attempt to forge a form of identity through familial reflection. In this poem, the unfamiliar is initially seen through the reflections of familiar shapes and activities; in this poem, the empty speech of the ego, as it attempts to maintain, in the face of real life evidence, an imaginary bond with the ego-ideals of father and grandfather in terms of shared activity, is replaced by the full speech of a subject who is aware of the growth of the Other, an Other which will progress the development of the subject himself. In this poem the movement is from ego to subject; from empty to full speech, from imaginary to symbolic, a progress mimetically enacted by the different ‘o’s in the poem:

A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O [. . .]
The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O,
He alludes to Shakespeare, he alludes to Graves [. . . .]
The astronaut sees has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O (*HL* 1-3)

The growth of the Other is paralleled by a growth in understanding of the self of the poem. It is through this dynamic interaction with other signs and symbols that growth and understanding of the self is possible.

Heaney's development from the imaginary to the symbolic is charted through different notions of language. In a rhetorical swerve that is reminiscent of 'Kinship', Latin is seen as a central element in this process; it is another, broader example of the Other. His introduction to, and gradual familiarity with, 'Book One of *Elementa Latina*' is charted, and interestingly, the language 'marbled and minatory' becomes part of his sense of selfhood as it 'rose up in him' (*HL* 1). It is as if the different sign-system has made its mark on his sense of self, by changing the focus and direction of that sense of self.

He goes on to explain how another dimension of the symbolic order, another sign-system, was to become internalised, as he 'left the Latin forum' for a new 'calligraphy which felt like home', and again, the letters are compared to the natural world: 'The capitals were orchards in full bloom / The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches' (*HL* 2). Once again, the initially unfamiliar is seen in terms of familiarity, and once again, in a manner redolent of *North*, the Irish language is seen in *prosopopeia*:

Here in her snooded garment and bare feet,
All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes. (*HL* 2)

What we see in this poem is that progression from the referent, the thing in the world, to the sign, the linguistic or poetic symbol of that physicality which Lacan deems the progression from the imaginary to the symbolic. Here, as the strangeness of a different language begins to affect the subject of the poem, that strangeness is familiarised by the prosopopeic description of this language as a woman. It is through such linguistic systems, the Lacanian symbolic, that selfhood and identity become socialised and eventually translate the world for the individual.

This development into the symbolic is clear from a later image in this poem where the scopic field of the subject is now mitigated by the structures of language as the physical world of home, of the familiarity of bales of hay, is now described through the cultural code of the Greek alphabet:

Balers drop bales like printouts where stooked sheaves
Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
And the delta face of each potato pit
Was patted straight. (*HL* 2-3)

Here, language is mediating his vision of reality: the sign or signifier has become dominant over the referent, as Lacan has noted: ‘it is the world of words which creates the world of things’.⁴⁵ This is echoed by Heaney’s capitalised exclamation: ‘IN HOC SIGNO’ (*HL* 3).

Hence, the self, and the movement from ego to subject, is defined in terms of the development and increasing complexity of the Other, a process which has been a familiar Heaney trope in both poetry and prose. One need only recall the beginning of *Preoccupations*:

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.⁴⁶

Far from repossessing his home place, as Harmon has suggested, or from establishing it as a ‘frame of reference from which he can map the Catholic past and present’,⁴⁷ from the very outset Heaney is opening up his home place to the wideness of the world, and defining his own subjectivity with respect to a broad culturally polyvalent sense of the Other. The seemingly constative sentence that places Mossbawn at the centre of the world is, in fact, in need of some conceptual unpacking. The homely image of ‘our back door’ is contrasted with the mythological force of the Greek notion of ‘the

centre of the world', and with the phonetic and semantic strangeness of the repeated signifier 'omphalos'.

In fact, the *omphalos* is not evoked by any process of reification which equates the stone with the pump, rather it is brought about by the voice, specifically by the voice speaking to itself, and repeating the word 'omphalos' like a mantra. The conical stone, located in the temple of Apollo at Delphi, was a physical sign of centrality. However, for Heaney, it is the phonetic properties of the signifier as spoken by the voice, properties which dissolve on the moment of translation, which evoke his notion of centrality and home. Instead of grounding his sense of definition in his early home, he begins this discussion of his preoccupations by opening out his experience of home to the signifiers and signifieds of difference and alterity. He is revisioning the simple diurnal act of pumping drinking water through the sound of the Greek word, standing in synecdoche, for the Greek origins of Western European culture. Writing at a remove from the actual experience, many years later, he is transforming the simple pieties of home through his use of the foreign signifier of centrality; it is as if he is gesturing towards the point that different cultures have different centres, and it is only through interaction and dialogue that the tribal dirt of which he spoke can be loosened from the roots of his identity. The imaginary empty speech of 'Digging' has been replaced with the symbolically-driven full speech of Mossbawn

In 'Out of the Bag' in *Electric Light*, we see the same process repeated, specifically in the imagery of birth. In a recent interview, discussing this poem Heaney examines this trend of a dual perspective on his poetic origins:

I was saying to somebody the other day that I'm at the cud-chewing stage, or you could put it more stylishly and say that it's a ruminant stage where you begin to get a new perspective. You see what has happened to yourself and you try to put some shape on it. I think I'm going back to the very beginnings of consciousness, almost, in my writing. One of the mysteries in our

house, and indeed in any house, was where babies came from. In our house they always came in Dr Kerlin's bag, and I found myself writing a poem recently about Dr Kerlin's bag.⁴⁸

The opening section of the poem describes the amazement of the children in the Heaney household when Doctor Kerlin arrived with his bag 'the colour of a spaniel's inside lug' (*HL* 6). The imagery is homely and colloquial as the past is remembered. However, the more mature perspective, which is revisionist in tenor, is also present in the metonymy 'a Dutch interior gleam / Of waistcoat satin and highlights on the forceps' (*HL* 6), as here it is the mature Heaney, familiar with aesthetic practices, who is ruminating on his past. In the following sections of the poem, this revisioning of the memory is foregrounded as names of literary figures Peter Levi and Robert Graves, as well as figures from classical mythology 'Asclepius' and 'Hygeia, his daughter' (*HL* 9) appear in the meditation on birth, death, illness and cure that the poem becomes. Through the mention of the Greek god of health, and through the conduit of '*Poeta doctus* [learned poet] Peter Levi' and '*poeta doctus* Graves', Heaney compares 'Sanctuaries of Asclepius' to 'hospitals', 'shrines like Lourdes' or to:

the cure
By poetry that cannot be coerced
Say I, who realized at Epidaurus
That the whole place was a sanatorium [. . .]

When epiphany occurred and you met the god. (*HL* 8)

Here, the temporal duality introduces a complexity to the memory that deepens the layers of meaning of the past, and I would further suggest that the notion of poetry as a cure is connected with this very broadening of selfhood that poetry, with its focus on levels of culture which are not identical to themselves. Interestingly, whereas the initial 'I' of the poem seems to be that of the child, by the end of the poem, Heaney places himself as part of the mature world of art and learning: he too is a *poeta doctus*.

Here, poetry is seen as a vehicle in the search for truth of the subject: it is a discourse which, like that of Lacan, probes the meanings of language and subjectivity. The 'I' of poetry and the 'I' of Lacanian discourse are coeval in that they are both complex, multi-faceted and deeply influenced by, and influential on, their socio-cultural contexts. Both discourses realise the complexity and opacity of the subject, and while realising that full knowledge is probably impossible, through their disparate but parallel hermeneutic processes, they both develop the cultural conversation of humanity.

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