

Stopping at Old, Familiar *Stations*: A Review of Seamus Heaney's 1975 Anthology

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Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.
(Heaney, 3)

Throughout his career, that spanned an overwhelming four decades, the Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, continued to do what he had begun his chequered journey with – digging into the collective psyche of Ireland. The Derry-born Catholic poet, through his remarkably geographical and archaeological approach to poetry, investigates unflinchingly into the dilemmas of both the private and the public, in work after work, charting his own evolution as a poet and a person in the process. *Stations*, Heaney's 1975 limited edition booklet published by Ulsterman is an anthology of poems which like his previous collections, such as *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) or *Door into the Dark* (1969), deals with the raw material provided by his childhood experiences. Heaney delves into his own roots and into the layers of Irish history even in this anthology, and digs up the past to present it to posterity.

Though the quest that Heaney had embarked on in 1966 continues in *Stations*, the collection is prominently different from its predecessors in two predominant ways – a) the style and the structure of the poems, and b) the poetic narrative voice recounting the past experiences to the readers. Heaney no longer looks at his childhood self with a mixture of simple, organic innocence and an adult's nostalgia at the death of that young naturalist. The homesickness prevails even in this collection as Heaney himself points out in the poem "The Stations of the West" – "I sat ... homesick for a speech I was to extirpate" (90) – but the adult narrator in this anthology has lost his former sentimentality. Heaney, for the first time, writes prose-poems in this collection. Verse paragraphs are curious amalgamations of prose and verse, lying in the liminal zone between the two. Suggestive of the to and fro movement from one form to the other, or the easy blending of the two forms, verse paragraphs help Heaney articulate thoughts which are complex enough to extend beyond the metrical scheme of a couple of lines, yet profound enough to merit a poetic rendering. While a prose poem does not use conventional rules of prosody, it still gives the writer the

liberty to employ the rhetorical style used in verses usually. A verse paragraph by using enjambments, on the one hand propel us to read on – lending a sense of urgency which might arguably have been lost if line breaks, or end-stopped lines had been used; on the other hand, paradoxically, the verse paragraph form help us to stay for a moment with the work and reflect on it; to enter the consciousness of the work, as it were, and converse with it. A prose poem or verse paragraph is a contradiction in itself, it controversially breaks rules of both prose and verse, yet the mood it upholds is poetic enough to make this form one of the most interesting modes of communication. Heaney makes marvelous use of this form in *Stations*. One must briefly pause at the etymology of the word “station” because Heaney was a master craftsman and for him the language that he employed to express his emotions was as important as the emotions themselves. A man of few words, his poems are precise, crisp and compact, with every word, every punctuation having earned its place in Heaney’s scheme of things. A station is a stopping place – a place where travelers halt before journeying on. The modern word station comes from the Middle English word ‘stacioun’, which was a derivative of the Anglo-Norman word ‘estation’ and the Latin word ‘statio’, which means to stand and stare. As someone who had translated the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, Heaney was evidently well versed in antiquity and aware of the history of the word station which had come to be used in its modern sense for the first time arguably in the fourteenth century¹. The title of this anthology of poems is therefore exceedingly significant, because all the poems in this collection are about pausing at and pondering over moments of his life. All these poems contain instances of revelation, the ordinary moments which brightened up suddenly into moments of profound epiphany. The title of the collection *Stations*, along with the poetic form that Heaney employs in this anthology, prepares us to engage with the author in his moments of deep realization. This review of Heaney’s fourth published anthology explores such few moments as stated in the text, “the sandmartins’ nests were loopholes of darkness in the riverbank. He could imagine his arm going in to the armpit ... but because he had once felt the cold prick of a dead robin’s claw ... he only gazed” (83).

The adult Heaney stops at different stations of his life as a child in Northern Ireland and gazes at those experiences objectively and critically. ‘Nesting-Ground’ is one of those stations. As a child he had peered into sandmartins’ nests – dark holes waiting to be explored. One such attempt at examination had gone awry. He had felt the cold touch of death. Yet another examination had

led to the discovery of warm, new life – “moist pink necks” amidst husk, chaff and cornstalks (83). Heaney powerfully juxtaposes images of death with those of life and Henry Hart opines that “new life seems just as grotesque as old” to the child’s eye, which leads him to respond with “fear and bewilderment as boys often do” (112). The adult voice situates itself on the perimeter of these experiences, as a spectator quietly listening and intently gazing. And as he stands “waiting” it occurs to him to put “his ear to one of the abandoned holes ... listening for the silence under the ground” (83). Heaney, the patriot, was digging into these holes, looking for traces of the Irish Republic Army that had perhaps gone under cover. Heaney the poet was perhaps trying to discover hidden truths of life and life’s mysteries through his creative pursuits.

Born to a Catholic family in Northern Ireland just prior to World War II, Heaney lived through the contradiction and the horror of the War. The poet revisits this experience in the next couple of poems of this anthology, “England’s Difficulty” and “Visitant”. The title “England’s Difficulty” is evidently a euphemism for Irish difficulty, and the Irish insurrection. The young self of the poetic persona would move “like a double agent among big concepts”, big concepts such as enmity, friendship, rivalry, right doing and wrong doing, making choices, taking a stand (85). The innocence of childhood, the blissful state of ignorance, still untouched by the Blakian concept of experience, gives the young boy the freedom to not take sides, unlike the adults who were forced to choose between friend and foe. He could therefore imagine the word “enemy” in actual, physical terms (85). He has a semiotic response to the word, picturing it as a large “mowing machine” (85). He cannot fathom the abstract concept of enmity. The poet too, like the young boy, refuses to take sides and his poetic sensibilities prevent him from participating in such sectarianism. For a poet in search of truth, taking sides is crippling. To find real solutions to a problem the poet will have to live with every aspect of the problem and not be blinded by a parochial approach to it. Heaney, therefore like his young self acts like a “double agent” saying “I lodged with ‘the enemies of Ulster’” (85). The poet, like the boy, occupies an ambivalent position as he is not unequivocally happy at the defeat of the enemy when the Germans bombed Belfast and the Protestant occupied “Orange parts were hit the worst” (85). Both exist in this liminal space with their ephemeral notion of antagonism, hostility and enmity. The young boy moved almost like a spy through enemy camps – “I crossed the lines with carefully enunciated passwords, manned every speech with checkpoints and reported back to nobody” (85). In a world where drawing lines is an art almost forgotten,

and controlling one's speech a lost etiquette, Heaney's sensibilities inform him otherwise. He can draw lines. He can man his speech. And as a poet, he does not need to report to anybody; that would make him merely a spokesperson, a propagandist with an agenda. In the young boy's psyche, friends and foes lose their conventional distinction. Heaney reflects in this poem on such "big concepts" (Heaney 85) and his being an artist confirms "his freedom to scout and judge all positions" (Hart 114).

In "Visitant" too, Heaney mocks "the convenient stereotype that reduces opponents to straw figures" (Hart 114). The visitant in the poem is a German bomber pilot who parachutes to safety near the young Heaney's home in Northern Ireland. The boy suspends all sense of judgement in order to see the man as he really is – "He walked back into the refining lick of the grass, behind the particular judgements of captor and harbourer. As he walks yet, feeling our eyes on his back, treading the air of the image he achieved, released to his fatigues" (Heaney 86). Hart points out how Heaney's eyes transform him from "a stock image of war propaganda into a more complete image of flesh and blood" (114).

However, Heaney succumbs to his judgements at least once in this anthology and his neutral poetic sensibilities are overpowered by his dislike for what the Orange Order Parade, usually held on or around July 12th every year in Northern Ireland, stood for. In "July" Heaney, while talking about the carnivalesque parade, does not fail to mention the incipient violence associated with this march. The parade only intensified the archaic sectarian division that had been plaguing Ireland for centuries – "The drumming didn't murmur, rather hammered ... Through red seas of July the Orange drummers led a chosen people through their dream ... policemen flanking them like anthracite" (84). The Orange Order was the largest Protestant organization in Ireland and their call always was, "No Pope" (139). The undertones of prevailing violence associated with a parade of this kind, betrayed by Heaney in this poem, are later expressed more explicitly by him in "Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966" where he blatantly caricatures the Protestants leading this parade in his attempt to show how such marches only lead to further fragmentation and division. Heaney captures better than any statistical data the bitterness and hatred fuelled by such parades,

The lambeg balloons at his belly, weighs
Him back on his haunches, lodging thunder
Grossly there between his chin and his knees.

He is raised up by what he buckles under.

Each arm extended by a seasoned rod,
He parades behind it. And though the drummers
Are granted passage through the nodding crowd,
It is the drums preside, like giant tumours.

To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,
His battered signature subscribes 'No Pope'.
The goatskin's sometimes plastered with his blood.
The air is pounding like a stethoscope. (139)

Heaney continues this exploration of the self and the Other in "Trial Runs" as well. In this poem we are presented with a 'station' close to the end of the World War II. A Protestant Irish soldier returns home and his welcome is splashed on fading walls over old graffiti – "Welcome home ye lads of the Eighth Army" (87) over dated banners reminding people of the Catholic suppression in Northern Ireland, such as "Remember 1690 and No Surrender" (87). The historical allusion is to the Catholic uprising of 1690. Heaney problematizes the notion of home right at the beginning of this poem. Could a Catholic born boy ever feel fully at home in the Nationalist, Protestant Northern Ireland? However, the Protestant soldier returns home, still clad in his "khaki shirt and brass-buckled belt" now demobilized (87). He drops by Heaney's house (drops by but does not enter) with a present for his Catholic neighbor, Patrick Heaney – a rosary. They attempt at friendly banter,

Did they make a Papish of you over there?
Oh damn the fear! I stole them for you, Paddy, off the Pope's
dresser when his back was turned.
You could harness a donkey with them (87)

Apparently neither minds the jokes but the latent hostility brewing underneath is almost tangible; "behind the 'crack' and wisecracks sectarian tension whispers" (qtd. in Parker 6). In his moment of epiphany the young boy realizes that despite the attempt to ease the situation by cracking jokes on one's own identity, his father and his neighbor were like two birds testing the field; not confident of each other, since prejudice encrusts every layer of a person's behavior in such conflict zones, "Their laughter sailed above my head, a hoarse clamour, two big nervous birds dipping and lifting, making trial runs across a

territory” (87). The joke evaporates and the sense of alienation pervades. Henry Hart opines, “Their friendly two-faced masks are donned for the sake of peace” (115). One can, of course, recall to mind the Protestant priest from Heaney’s previous collection *Wintering Out* trying to understand his Catholic neighbors and betraying a sense of restrained reverence when he lingers by their door choosing not to disturb them when they were reading the rosary,

we would hear his step round the gable
 though not until after the litany
 would the knock come to the door ...
 he might say, ‘I was dandering by
 and says I, I might as well call.’ (Heaney 60)

Helen Hennessy Vendler sees the poems in *Stations* as a development of the notion put forth by Heaney in “The Other Side” – “a far more confident vignette, treating the uneasiness of even cordial relations between the two ‘sides’ is offered among Heaney’s poems-in-prose that make up [this] sequence” (qtd. in Vendler 80). She also points out with reference to “Trial Runs” how in this “Joycean epiphany the stereotypes are still present – the half-military British dress of the neighbour, the hands-in-pockets stance of the farmer, the worn sectarian joking exchanged between them” (80). Furthermore, what is also noteworthy in this poem is the implicit suggestion that despite the deep seated aggression the Protestant soldier had for his Catholic neighbor when he was away at war, he brought Heaney’s father a gift of not something which he himself would like, but something which he knew the recipient would appreciate – a rosary, and a generously big one at that. Vendler suggests, “the two men will not be able to go farther into amiability than their awkward joking but the son hails it none the less as the marking out of an intermediate territory where Catholic and Protestant might feel neighbourly good will for each other rather than enmity” (80).

In an interview with his fellow Irish poet, Dennis O’Driscoll, when asked whether he identified with Wordsworth and his attempt to describe throughout his poetical career the intense experiences of his early life, Heaney said,

The early-in-life experience has been central to me all right. But I’d say you aren’t so much trying to describe it as trying to locate it. The amount of sensory material stored up or stored down in the brain’s and the body’s system is inestimable. It’s like a culture at the bottom of a jar, although it doesn’t grow, I think, or help anything else to

grow unless you find a way to reach it and touch it. But once you do, it's like putting your hand into a nest and finding something beginning to hatch out in your head. (O'Driscoll, Heaney, n.p.)

Heaney considers a poem to be a “truth-telling arena” (O'Driscoll, Heaney, n.p.). *Stations*, Heaney's 1975 anthology of prose-poems, is an attempt to locate some of those inestimable moments which helped shape his life and literature and revisit them in this “truth-telling arena”; an attempt at reliving, creatively, memories buried deep inside “loopholes of darkness” (83) which when scratched with the pen that rests “snug as a gun” (3) become the nesting ground for new ideas and new poetic sensibilities.

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