

Strong Enough To Help Spirituality in Séamus Heaney's Poetry

John Evans

What is one to make of the phenomenon of Séamus Heaney? Widely praised by academics and critics on both sides of the Atlantic, he has held chairs at Harvard and at Oxford, is the subject of an extraordinary number of theses and studies, and in 1996 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In addition, he has a huge and enthusiastic following among the general public, and his latest volume of poetry *The Spirit Level* was last year on the best-seller list for several weeks, and this year has won Whitbread awards not only in the poetry section but also as Book of the Year.

Heaney has many very obviously appealing qualities as a person. With his traditional Catholic upbringing in a large family, and his still surviving rural background in Co. Derry, he seems an enviably rooted man. Much of his poetry is direct and accessible, and in the lecture-hall or on the radio he is a relaxed and affable presence. Yet alongside the warmth and ease of manner lies a complex and at times agonised character who has searched deeply both into his vocation as a poet and into the function of poetry itself, and some of his own words about this quest may justify referring to it as a truly spiritual pilgrimage; for example, in an article written in 1978¹ he describes the poetic vocation as requiring 'a religious commitment to the ever-evolving disciplines of the art, which the poet has to credit as his form of sanctity', and it is one of Heaney's most disarming characteristics that he has not shirked from making known the pressures and tensions of his search. His doubts are laid bare with all the experience of one accustomed to the confessional, and the titles of some of his published collections hint at the stations of his own personal cross along his pilgrimage—from the childhood fears and early experiences of the adult world in *Death of a Naturalist*, through the hidden life of the feelings in *Door into the Dark* and the confrontations with political reality in *North*, to the visionary implications of *Seeing Things* and the suggestion of some degree of equilibrium in *The Spirit Level*. His whole oeuvre can be seen as a personal and professional apologia, and my thesis is that Heaney is a deeply spiritual writer, and that some of his unusual appeal may arise

from the answer he offers to the often unexpressed spiritual hunger of many people today.

I shall use the sequence of poems in Part 2 of *Station Island* to examine some of the inner tensions which have been such a powerful creative source for Heaney. *Station Island* itself, which lies in Lough Derg in County Donegal, has for centuries been associated with St. Patrick and the vision of Purgatory which he is said to have experienced there. It still remains a place of pilgrimage, and Heaney himself as a young student completed more than once its three-day ritual of penitence and prayer. In *Station Island* Heaney uses the setting of an imaginary pilgrimage to confront ghosts and memories of figures from his own past, or of writers known to him from their works.² Guilt and self-doubt characterise these conversations, in which Heaney explores both his relationship to the traditional beliefs of the community in which he grew up, and his agonised uncertainty about his role as a poet in the current political situation in Ireland.

One of the main themes—that of Heaney's attitude to the orthodox Catholicism of his upbringing—is introduced by the encounter with Simon Sweeney, the mysterious, and somewhat 'scary' woodland figure of his childhood, who can remember Heaney's 'First Communion face'. The ghost of Sweeney shouts at him to 'Stay clear of all processions!'—and Heaney's own changing inclinations might well have led him to do just that, but instead, in obedience to the church bell, he follows the 'drugged path' of the pilgrims—a 'crowd of shawled women' whose 'motion saddened the morning'. The poem is dotted with such hints of Heaney's disenchantment with the rituals and religious practices of his church.

Mere disenchantment, however, turns into disillusion in his encounter in Section IV with the priest Terry Keenan, whom Heaney had once known as a young, freshly-ordained priest, 'glossy as a blackbird' in his smart new clerical dress, but whose vocation had later evaporated in the hot and alien atmosphere of the rain-forests in the mission field, and who now appears as a sad failure. Heaney reflects on Keenan's demeaning role as a trainee priest in rural Ireland, 'doomed to do the decent thing ... visiting neighbours ... drinking tea ... arriving like some holy mascot.'

But then, using Keenan's voice, he turns the accusing finger on himself and asks:

'And you,' he faltered, 'what are you doing here
but the same thing? What possessed you?
I at least was young and unaware

that what I thought was chosen was convention.
But all this you were clear of you walked into
over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn.'

Keenan's ghost can find no reason for Heaney's presence on this pilgrimage unless' he says '... unless ...

Unless you are here taking the last look.'

This is not the only hint in the *Station Island* sequence of Heaney's disenchantment with the tradition of belief and piety in which he had been brought up, and which he now seems to regard as repressive and lifeless.

The other painful area pointed at by Heaney's ghosts is that of his responsibilities as a poet in the political troubles of Ireland. In his reflections on the religion of his youth, his resentment is directed against Catholicism itself. But when he is faced with the ghosts of friends or relations who have died violent deaths in sectarian killings or in hunger strikes, it is his own self that he turns against. The first such encounter is in Section VII with the young rugby player William Strathern, 'the perfect clean unthinkable victim', whose simple generosity of spirit prompts Heaney to ask for forgiveness for his own 'timid circumspect involvement'. Far more painful is his meeting in Section VIII with the ghost of his cousin Colum McCartney, who had been shot down by Protestant gunmen. Heaney had earlier written about this killing in his poem 'The Strand at Lough Beg' in *Field Work*, in which he imagines himself washing his dead cousin's body in recollection of Virgil's ritual washing of Dante before he entered the realm of Purgatory. The voice of Colum recalls that occasion and bitterly upbraids him

'for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio
and saccharined my death with morning dew.'

The fullest expression of his remorse—as well as suggestions of acceptance and recovery—comes in Section IX, where his long reflection upon the death of one of the IRA hunger-strikers in Long Kesh during 1981 includes the bitter self-accusation:

I hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming

That Heaney is here painfully beginning to understand his vocation and to be coming to terms with some of its irreconcilable paradoxes seems clear not only from these poems, but also from some of his later writings, as for example his speech to the Nobel Foundation,³ where he quotes at length from Yeats' *Meditations in Time of Civil War* in

admiration of the way the poem 'satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at time of extreme crisis'.

In the *Station Island* sequence Heaney has sought to distance himself from the repressive elements in his Catholic past—a negative aspect of his religious attitude which may be shared by many thousands of people of similar age who now feel alienated from the religion of their upbringing. However, positive features appear in some of the poems, which hint at the future directions which Heaney's spiritual development might take. In Section III the musty atmosphere of the church recalls for him the darkness of the sideboard at home into which he would crawl to pay secret homage to a 'seaside trinket', a cherished relic of an aunt who had died as a child. The young Heaney's adoring awareness of her presence transformed for him this cheap souvenir into 'my house of gold, that housed the snowdrop weather of her death long ago', and this example of his capacity to be raised by ordinary objects to exalted levels of the imagination, or even to the experience of a kind of epiphany, is an important feature of his spirituality which becomes pre-eminent in *Seeing Things*.

A similar example occurs in Section X which concerns a not especially remarkable mug once taken from its shelf at his childhood home to be used as a prop in a play, which thereafter appeared 'glamoured' and 'restored', and, thus transfigured, led Heaney's imagination on to a vision of 'the dazzle of the impossible'. In Section VI he deliberately breaks away from the other pilgrims to languish under an oak tree, dreaming of (and perhaps envying?) Horace on his Sabine farm happily in communion with the local gods—a strong indication of Heaney's own growing determination not to allow any further repression of the pagan, and Celtic, side of his spirituality.⁴

A particularly significant indication of the future direction of his spirituality is given in Section XI which is based on two images; the first, recalled from long ago, is the face of a monk behind the grille of a confessional, and the second is the memory of a childhood incident in which Heaney had been given a toy kaleidoscope as a Christmas present, but soon lost all his delight in the gift through envy of a friend of his, whose present had been a fine model of a battleship, which was he was floating on a water-butt. In a fit of rage, Heaney plunged his own toy deep into its muddy waters. The priest's voice now again speaks of the need:

'to salvage everything, to re-envisage
the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift
mistakenly abased ...'

What came to nothing could always be replenished.
'Read poems as prayers,' he said,' and for your penance
Translate me something by Juan de la Cruz'.

The whole context is one of renewal and restoration; the priest has relieved Heaney of his guilt, making him feel—as he says in the poem that 'there was nothing to confess', and inspiring him to fulfil his penance by translating the poem of St. John of the Cross which describes the so-called 'dark night' which the soul must endure before reaching the refreshing water of the eternal fountain; Heaney's translation forms the latter part of this poem and the final verse reads:

I am repining for this living fountain
Within this bread of life I see it plain
although it is the night.

The act of translation enables Heaney to enter into this well-attested experience of the spiritual life without necessarily claiming it for himself. But the setting of the poem—so paradoxically full of images of light, brightness and escape from confusion and darkness (the toy kaleidoscope emerging from the muddied water)—suggests Heaney's relief at discovering a vital area of his spirituality left unexplored by the largely consolatory or sentimental piety so often characteristic not only of the rural Irish church but of much conventional Christianity in the west.

The poem 'On the Road' (which is not in the pilgrimage sequence but which occupies the significant final position in the *Station Island* volume) is full of highly complex imagery which can perhaps be regarded as summing up the results, as it were, of this pilgrimage. Here Heaney sees himself as the rich (talented?) young man in the gospel asking, 'What must I do to be saved'? The young man in the story responds to Jesus' severe demand by walking sadly away, but Heaney's own reaction in the poem is one of exuberant escape—he was 'up and away' in a tremendous surge of new-found energy. On the command to 'Follow me' he envisages himself migrating like a bird into the depths of some remote cave where he would meditate on the prehistoric painting of a deer trying to drink from 'a dried-up source...

until the long dumb-founded
spirit broke cover
to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion.'

The familiar image of the deer recalls not only the thirsting soul of Psalm 42, but also Augustine's idea of the *cor inquietum*, and George Herbert's imaginative reflection on the 'repining restlessness' of all

humankind in *The Pulley*, a poem much admired by Heaney.

Thus, at the end of this imagined pilgrimage, Heaney's pilgrim appears much changed from the figure at the outset, scared by the rebellious Simon Sweeney into reluctant obedience to the church bell. Freed now from the restrictions and religiosity of the Catholicism of his upbringing, he will follow his own intuitions and 'credit' his gift for imaginative transformation, trusting in his own psyche, including its pagan and most primitive aspects, as well as those intuitions which arose from his Celtic background, but nevertheless accepting the negative or ambivalent aspects both of his spirituality and of his vocation, resigned to the long search which alone will bring him to the 'font' of rebirth, to his true poetic self.

What kind of answer, then, does Heaney give to the largely unexpressed spiritual yearnings of his readers? It is not inappropriate to speak of an 'answer' with regard to Heaney's poetry, for in his Oxford lectures Heaney voices his strong approval of Robert Pinsky's claim that poetry must 'feel a need to answer, a promise to respond. The response may be a contradiction, it may be unwanted, it may go unheeded ... but it is owed.'⁵

I suggest that part of Heaney's 'answer' may lie in his capacity to resuscitate some traditional categories of spirituality which for many people have become either enfeebled from lack of use, or simply incomprehensible and irrelevant in a secular age from which 'the god has withdrawn'. I am far from suggesting that Heaney somehow restores the idea of 'god' in any conventional sense, but what is unquestionable is his ability to breathe new life into such basic spiritual categories as the sacred or the sacramental, and into such concepts as transfiguration and transcendence.

That Heaney's idea of the sacred is deeply rooted in the world of ordinary objects has already been demonstrated by examples from the *Station Island* sequence. He can become deeply aware of the inner essences of apparently unremarkable things—a granite chip, a bit of old pewter, an iron spike, or a patch of growing mint—perhaps by giving them that kind of degree of sheer 'attention' which Simone Weil (whom Heaney quotes twice in his Oxford lectures) regarded as a spiritual activity in itself, akin to 'praise' or 'worship' in the truly religious sense. Thus, objects can be 'sacred' inasmuch as they can serve as windows to a transcendent realm—as for George Herbert's 'man who looks on glass' in his poem *The Elixir*. Heaney's collection *Seeing Things* is almost an extended exercise in exploring this spiritual power which is immanent in everyday things.

Closely associated with awareness of the sacred is the sense of the

sacramental, which was one of the most positive legacies of Heaney's childhood. 'The landscape', he says, 'was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond visible realities'.⁶ Heaney is here in touch here with something of immense importance for any awareness of the spiritual. It is akin to what Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*,⁷ called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that strange power to describe which he coined the word 'numinous'. Otto emphasises that the sense of the numinous is something essentially primitive and mysterious, which lies at the very foundation of all spiritual feeling and all religion. It is, however, something which conventional religion finds it difficult to maintain—and often even to recognise—and it is a source of great spiritual impoverishment that this element is almost totally absent from the commonly held perceptions and general discourse about religion today. Few, however, could read much of Heaney's poetry without sensing his awareness of the numinous, and without being affected by this, and perhaps—at some deep level of their psyche—being nourished and restored.

For Heaney, the locus for some experience of transfiguration may—as in the case of the sacred—be quite mundane as, for example, the cornflower-patterned mug in the *Station Island* sequence; another example might be that in the last section of the title poem in *Seeing Things* where his father appears before him dishevelled, confused and 'scatter-eyed' after surviving an accident with the horse-sprayer on the riverbank near home; 'that afternoon' says Heaney in his poem 'I saw him face to face'—using a phrase reminiscent of St. Paul in I Corinthians, which appears twice in *Seeing Things*, hinting perhaps that Heaney's idea of transfiguration is not limited to mere exaltation of mood, but entails a distinct metaphysical dimension.

It is, however, in Heaney's accounts of the power and purpose of poetry that this metaphysical and transcendental dimension of his spirituality receives its most positive expression. In *The Government of the Tongue* he talks of 'the order of art' intimating a 'possible order beyond itself', and in his Oxford lectures he talks at length of how poetry can 'redress' the balance of our limited everyday perception by 'tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium'. It is in this context that he approvingly quotes George Seferis' comment on poetry that it is 'strong enough to help'⁸, and talks of poetry as 'another truth to which we can have recourse'.⁹

If such aspects of spirituality as I have suggested do indeed pervade the poetry of Heaney, might they possibly be a factor in the unusually wide and powerful appeal which he exerts? Most people brought up in the post-war years have rejected religion as an irrelevant fantasy,

unworthy of serious thought. It is Heaney's great gift to be able to use his imaginative and linguistic powers to salvage and recycle the dead categories and images of his own religious upbringing, to transform them, and so revitalise both for himself and for many others those rich and complex structures of imagery, mythology and story so that they can still 'function as bearers of value'.¹⁰

Thus, in his poem 'The Biretta'¹¹ Heaney can take the tight, black and somewhat awesome 'shipshape pill box' worn by the priests of his youth, which, as he says, 'put the wind up me and my generation' and 'turn it upside down', making it into a boat—perhaps just a 'paper' one, or else, on the other hand, a priceless treasure of a boat, a creation of marvellously imagined beauty, 'refined beyond the dross into sheer image'. Such can be the re-creative power of poetry.

Some of Heaney's recent work seems almost a celebration of his new-found confidence in the power of poetry and the arts to extend the range of our visionary capacity, and 'to make space.... for imagining the marvellous'.¹² Yet there is no hint of triumphalism. Heaney's self-confessed love of 'contrariness', as he calls it, enables him to comprehend the essentially paradoxical logic of the spiritual. He may hope to see 'face to face' but knows, nevertheless, that 'glimmerings are what the soul's composed of'.¹³ He sees poetry as intimating 'a possible order beyond itself', but at the same time accepts that, in the words of Robert Frost, its illumination comes not in a 'great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.'¹⁴

More important, however, unlike so many of those public figures, lay and clerical, who pronounce on behalf of institutional religion, he is free from any evasiveness or conventional trivialisation about the wholly negative aspects of human life. He is tough-minded, and talks of the contradictory needs of poetry '... the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand, the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust'.¹⁵ And it is not only birettas that Heaney ventures to turn upside down, but even gospel (and dominical at that) injunctions, thus pointing, creatively if painfully, beyond their consoling familiarity to the uncompromising realities of the moral world....

To refuse the other cheek. To cast the stone.
Not to do so some time, not to break with
The obedient one you hurt yourself into
Is to fail the hurt, the self, the ingrown rule.¹⁶

Much religious discourse today—at least in the public domain—is

often reminiscent of that of the political rostrum. It tends to use language which is either strident or bland, seeking either to win converts or to avoid offence. It aims mainly to inspire conviction and certainty, to give assurance and to console, tending to cling to the literal and familiar, allowing little room for flexibility or subtlety—let alone for the use of creative imagination. Spirituality as the basis of religion (as opposed to ethical conduct, emotional experience, or the consoling certainties of conviction-belief) gets scarcely any significant consideration in such discourse. Thus divorced from its roots, religion dies, and is rejected by those thousands who, like Philip Larkin, have come to see it only as:

That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die.¹⁷

My suggestion is that Heaney's invaluable genius—and surely part of his immense appeal—is his capacity to put people creatively in touch with their own spiritual awareness, a part of them long-starved and half-forgotten, but resuscitated by Heaney's gift. It is in this sense that Heaney's works are indeed 'strong enough to help'—if only by 'manifesting that order of poetry where we can at last grow up to that which we stored as we grew'.¹⁸

- 1 The Poet as Christian (*The Furrow*, October 1978, Vol. 29 No.10)
- 2 For the purposes of this article I generally refer to the subject of this sequence as if it were Heaney himself, although Heaney has stated that the subject is not himself but 'a writer'.
- 3 See *Crediting Poetry* pp.25–27 (Gallery Press 1995)
- 4 See, for example, his essay A Sense of Place in *Preoccupations* (1980)
- 5 *The Redress of Poetry* (Faber 1995) pp. 11–12
- 6 In his essay A Sense of Place (see above) pp.132–3
- 7 Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige* (1917). Translated by J.W. Harvey (O.U.P.Paperback 1958)
- 8 *The Redress of Poetry* p.191
- 9 Op.cit. p.8
- 10 *Crediting Poetry* (see above) p. 22
- 11 *Seeing Things* (1991) p.26
- 12 *Crediting Poetry* (see above) p. 20
- 13 From Old Pewter in Part 1 of *Station Island*
- 14 From his essay The Government of the Tongue in the collection of that name (Faber 1988)
- 15 *Crediting Poetry* (see above) pp. 26–27
- 16 From Weighing In in *The Spirit Level* (1966) p.17
- 17 From the poem *Aubade* by Philip Larkin
- 18 *Crediting Poetry* (see above) p. 21