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Death – A Source in Seamus Heaney’s Early Autobiographical Poetry

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney’s first poetry books teem with evocations of life on a farm. In the wake of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, the Irish poet traces turning points in his childhood – highly charged moments when he observed the cycle of life at work in the natural world around him and when he experienced and learned to master deep fears. How can the dawning sense of mortality perceptible in these early poems be related to his apprenticeship, to his access to the society of men but also to his poetic gift? The perception of death portrayed in the early poems is later revisited in “Clearances”, the series of sonnets he devotes to his mother where the otherworldly dimension of the world is associated with a field of force.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney; poetry; influences/intertextuality; autobiography

Résumé

Dans ses premiers recueils, Seamus Heaney se penche sur son enfance: il évoque les activités agricoles ponctuant les saisons et retrace les moments saillants de la vie à la ferme. S’inscrivant dans le sillage de Wordsworth, il se remémore son apprentissage à travers des saynètes de la vie quotidienne, et, plus particulièrement, lors de moments charnières durant lesquels, enfant, il a pu éprouver de grandes peurs, moments durant lesquels il a, aussi, pris conscience du cycle de la vie et de la mort perceptible dans la nature environnante. Comment s’articule cette prise de conscience de la mortalité avec son apprentissage, avec l’accès à la communauté des hommes, mais aussi avec l’accès à l’écriture? Plus tard dans sa carrière, dans « Clearances », le poète irlandais consacre plusieurs sonnets à mère; il revisite en quelque sorte la perception de la mort, esquissée dans les premiers poèmes, perception qui se renouvelle, s’enrichit et qui fait de l’au-delà un champ de force.

Mots clés : Seamus Heaney; poésie; influences/intertextualité; autobiographie

Death informs most of the evocations of daily life at Mossbawn, the farm where Seamus Heaney spent his early childhood. It is the poet’s “elixir”¹, the source of his inspiration which, as in Baudelaire’s poem “La mort des artistes”, “*planant comme un soleil nouveau, / Fera s’épanouir les fleurs de (son) cerveau*”².

1. Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, France, Gallimard, 1972, p. 165.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Death in its various guises – decay, loss, the sense of mortality – underlies Heaney's first autobiographical book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*³; but in what way is death central to Heaney's autobiographical preoccupations and to the relationship that, as a poet, he establishes with the rural community he grew up in? In the sequence of sonnets entitled "Clearances"⁴ which Heaney wrote much later, at the age of fifty, after the demise of his mother, death is portrayed very differently, as a field of force, a source of energy where the poet can be "renewed"⁵. Does the poet finally come to terms with a reality that cannot be expressed through language?

Heaney's autobiographical venture leads him to explore the very recesses of his community. The far-reaching influence of ancestors is suggested in "Ancestral Photograph" where the poet gazes at the photograph of a great-uncle on the wall; this photograph, which has to be removed and stored away in the attic, nonetheless leaves an imprint on the wall, a "faded patch"⁶. Does not this trace convey the long-lasting, yet after a while inconspicuous influence of his/our predecessors however far removed?

In the poem "At a Potato Digging", Heaney, himself the son of an Irish farmer, depicts the potato famine of 1845; and its horrific consequences on the rural population of Ireland at that time are presented in a bleak and uncompromising way: "Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on/wild higgledy skeletons/scoured the land in 'forty-five,/wolfed the blighted root and died"⁷. Here Heaney's portrayal of the living dead seems to draw on Baudelaire's "Le squelette laboureur"⁸, a poem that he translated later on in *North*⁹. The combining of antithetical words such as "live skulls" but also the irregular rhythmic pattern especially point to the withering and the brittleness of the human body when starved of food and suggest a contradictory state: these men and women, who, in desperation, *wolf* down the putrid roots, have shed their human identity and have, in a way, already endured their death.

Other poems deal with death within the rural community – the autobiographical Mossbawn poems teem with references to farmers, turf-cutters, ploughmen, hunters, fishermen, cattle dealers and local craftsmen such as blacksmiths, thatchers, diviners... However, here again, the poet is describing a dying world: he refers to these workers by their names in the first poems but, gradually, these

3. Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1966.

4. Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 24-32.

5. Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 201.

6. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p.13.

7. *Ibid.*, p.18.

8. Charles Baudelaire, p. 128 : "Ces mystérieuses horreurs [...] / Des écorchés et des Squelettes [...] Forçats arrachés au charnier."

9. Seamus Heaney, *North*, London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 17.

men are equated with their trade, their function within the community and then they seem to vanish altogether – such is the case of the servant boy and the mummer who leave behind them a “trail¹⁰” (“Servant Boy”) and “dark tracks¹¹” (“The Last Mummer”).

The poet also focuses on his own ancestors. In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney's grandfather is turned into a legendary figure – in the opening poem “Digging”, he proudly towers above all other turf-cutters: “My grandfather cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog¹²”; but mention is also made of the poet's great-uncle, a cattle dealer, in “Ancestral Photograph”: “Uncle and nephew, fifty years ago,/Heckled and herded through the fair days too¹³.” Both the great uncle and his nephew – that is to say Heaney's father – are presented as belonging and testifying to a carefree perhaps idealized golden age of prosperity and emotional bonding as the twofold meaning of the word “fair” and the possible play on the word “too” suggest. The more remote the past, the more powerful and thriving the paternal figure. In this particular light, the poet's relationship with the dead is very similar to the one that African tribes evolve with their own ancestors. A process of entropy is however at work in the poet's family: in “Ancestral Photograph”, Heaney acknowledges this fact and the photograph is seen as an “Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall¹⁴”; the decline affecting the poet's tribe is further emphasized when, later in the poem, the farmers' power is undermined – they are compared to housewives and the great uncle's stick, a phallic symbol of authority and know-how, is at last relinquished and “parked behind a door¹⁵”.

In “Mid-Term Break”, the poet remembers the death of his brother, Christopher, run over by a car. When the poem begins, the young boy has already received the terrible news which may explain why he focuses on sounds so much – crying, angry sighs, whispers, the baby's cooing –, sounds that are juxtaposed yet unrelated and jarring, just as his world has been disrupted. In the aftermath of the shock, the young boy is also deeply aware of the slow passage of time: “I sat all morning in the college sick bay,/Counting bells knelling classes to a close¹⁶.” The repetitions of the /k/ and of the /e/ sounds, together with the fairly regular trochaic rhythm do convey the oppressive atmosphere as the school bells ring out what amounts to a knell. The only emotion he acknowledges is embarrassment when old men stand up to shake his hand. And the reserve – or could it be the numbness – that follows the shock can also be explained by what Heaney, the

10. Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out*, London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1972, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 1.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13-14.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

eldest of the children, was told at the time: “Stop now. If you cry, all the others will too¹⁷.”

An interview dating back to 1979 gives the reader a few clues as to the reasons behind the omnipresence of death in Heaney’s early poems but also in much of his subsequent work. This is what the poet tells John Haffenden: “Very strange, but it’s very familiar, that face, I’ve seen it in coffins so often in my adolescence, I used to go to a lot of funerals [...] part of the ritual [...] going to wakes and kneeling beside the coffins at eye level with aged *rigor mortis* heads¹⁸.”

However, as the complex title *Death of a Naturalist* suggests, most of the autobiographical poems hinge on the author’s attempt at circumscribing and mastering the fear of a perilous danger to the self. In “The Barn” for instance, the young boy plays at being frightened as he scuttles in and out of the shed: at every try he ventures deeper, but he is fully aware that he may be trapped in this confined space which harbours danger and where his breathing is laboured: “the one door¹⁹” – and here the use of the article combined with the adjective “one” is telling – suggests that escape may not be easy; the farmyard tools are invested with a dangerous potency (“the armoury of farmyard implements²⁰”), and the prongs of the pitchfork and the blades of the scythe gleam menacingly in the dark. The daytime fears – the fear of being stifled, burnt, pricked and of disappearing into an abyss – culminate at night, in dreams in which the boy’s sense of space and of his own self is warped: he becomes “chaff/To be pecked up by birds”, and sacks come alive and attack him like “great blind rats”. In the poem “Death of a Naturalist”, the fear of death is expressed in a similar way: like the rats, the frogs have also grown to monstrous proportion (“The great slime kings/Were gathered there for vengeance²¹”); the child feels revulsion but is also clearly fascinated by the obscene creatures that stand for his repressed sensuality. This ambiguous relationship with primitive animals can be further explained if we turn to the definition Julia Kristeva gives of abjection in her essay *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*: “Un pôle d’appel et de répulsion [qui] met celui qui en est habité littéralement hors de lui²².” The frogs are invested with an aggressive sexual life force that is vital but also morbid for it disrupts the child’s world:

17. John Haffenden, “Meeting Seamus Heaney”, *London Magazine*, June 1979, p. 8.

18. Haffenden, p. 8.

19. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1980, p. 9.

*Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles*²³.

They are clearly deeply hostile and ready to wage war against the interloper who fears retribution: “Some sat/Poised like mud grenades²⁴” and the very complex last lines: “I knew/That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it²⁵” do testify to his fear of losing a limb, a member – but not of his family – as the fear of death applies to his own self.

In *Death of a Naturalist*, Nature regularly surges against the little boy in the shape of a bird (“The Barn”), a toad (“Death of a Naturalist”), or a rat (“The Barn”, “An Advancement in Learning”); what the boy fears is this uncontrollable, unpredictable force that is bodied forth in the hitherto familiar animals of the farm. Nature is invested with life and a dark, alien will of its own.

Throughout his early poems, Heaney evokes the process of decay and death within nature in order to circumscribe Loss: the loss of a rural way of life, the loss of loved ones. A poem like “Blackberry-Picking” symbolizes this unfruitful quest for something that will ultimately always evade his grasp; the little boy exclaims:

Once off the bush,
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not²⁶.

No amount of willpower will ever make the blackberries remain fresh and red. Each year the little boy can only resign himself to this law of Nature over which he has no control – and this conflict is aptly suggested by the twofold meaning of the modal “would”.

Ultimately, what evades the poet's grasp is the natural world, explicitly evoked once only at the very beginning of “Death of a Naturalist” The very sensuous portrayal of nature, the use of synaesthesia – “bluebottles/Wove a strong gauze of sound around smell²⁷” –, the stillness and the heat but also the heightened perception of the senses suggest that the child is totally attuned to Nature, deeply ensconced in this luxuriant organic world which offers a womb-like protection. In an essay on photography written after the demise of his mother, Barthes quotes

23. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

24. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 4.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Freud and stresses the close link welding together childhood landscapes and the mother's body:

Or Freud dit du corps maternel qu'il n'est point d'autre lieu dont on puisse dire avec autant de certitude qu'on y a déjà été. Telle serait l'essence du paysage (choisi par le désir) : heimlich, réveillant en moi la Mère (nullement inquiétante)²⁸.

The young poet's golden infancy within Nature comes to a brutal end; like a small animal suddenly turned away by its mother once it is ready to fend for itself, he is cast out of what amounts to an earthly state of paradise²⁹. Heaney's early poetry focuses on this transitional stage when one of Nature's laws is being enacted. And the title of the book *Death of a Naturalist* can also be read in an analytical way as the transitional phase when a small child dies to a first feminine world only to be integrated into the "society" of men, a world dominated by the figure of the father. Indeed in these early poems, as in much of Heaney's poetry, the land is feminine, it yields, and is worked by the farmers' masculine ploughing implements³⁰. One of the aims of these autobiographical poems is, precisely, to trace the hoped-for reconciliation with the "society" of the fathers.

Nonetheless, the poet's nostalgia for a pastoral Eden of sorts³¹ underlies his autobiographical poetry as if the other evocations of Mossbawn were only a poor reflection of the world that was before and is irrevocably denied to him... Or is it? Here and there the essence of this pastoral world is captured. Pleasant sounds, usually liquids (/kl/ and /sl/), but also the happy tinkling of the cans carried by the children in "Blackberry-Picking" fleetingly suggest this lost – perhaps imagined – world³² where the self was wholly integrated in Nature. The loss of the

28. Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1980, p. 68. "Chez Lacan, la perte est perte de rien, il n'y a pas d'expérience de satisfaction originale, et la Chose est un pur manque, à la différence de Freud et de Mélanie Klein qui construisent en ce lieu un mythe, soit le corps perdu de la mère." quoted in Martine Broda, *L'amour du nom*, Paris, José Corti, 1997, p. 33.

29. In the poem "Death of a Naturalist", the little boy's "fall" from paradise is presented as having been brought about by Nature; however the frogs are only the projection of his own repressed sensuality; so here again Kristeva's perceptive analysis of the abject could also be quoted: "L'abject nous confronte, d'autre part, et cette fois dans notre archéologie personnelle, à nos tentatives les plus anciennes de nous démarquer de l'entité maternelle avant même que d'ex-ister en dehors d'elle grâce à l'autonomie du langage." Kristeva, p. 20.

30. Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Bruxelles, Bordas, 1969, p. 179-180: "La sexualité mâle [...] est symbole du sentiment de puissance [...] C'est en ce sens que se rejoignent en une espèce de technologie sexuelle les armes tranchantes ou pointues et les outils aratoires [...] le même mot signifie phallus et bêche."

31. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupation: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, Boston : Faber and Faber, 1980, p. 175: "The Eden myth which, together with the classical dream of the Golden Age lies behind most versions of pastoral. Eden was a garden, an image of harmony between man and nature; it was a place where the owner of the land were the workers of the land, for whom the land itself worked."

32. As Martine Broda points out in her book, *L'amour du nom*, poets such as Nerval seem to have believed in paradise lost, and she goes on to quote a few lines from Aurélia : "Je me mis à pleurer à chaudes larmes, comme au souvenir d'un paradis perdu." Broda, p. 116.

“first world” and the subsequent yearning it gives rise to would account at least for images which evoke the warmth and the protection provided by the feminine/maternal body of the landscape and which crop up in his autobiographical essays and prose poems – the reference to the soothing effect that “wet corners [...] rushy bottoms³³” has on him, the memory of a ritual initiation in a “moss-hole³⁴” and also perhaps the reference to “a caul of shadows³⁵” which he uses to relate a founding experience he underwent as a young boy – a trance-like state which marked the receipt of his poetic gift.

Heaney's recollections thus prove to be ambiguous: the poet commemorates rural life on the farm but all the while contributes to its disappearance by immobilizing it through language, by setting it down in writing. His refusal to perpetuate the tradition, his wish to substitute “the pen” for “the spade³⁶” (“Digging”) are also the death warrants of the rural world that he describes in *Death of a Naturalist* and to a lesser extent in *Door into the Dark*³⁷, his second collection of poems. These autobiographical poems can be read as the poet's work of mourning. Paradoxically then, the very poems which celebrate his early childhood on the family farm, Mossbawn, stand for a betrayal or a casting off.

“They trip/To fall into themselves unknowingly³⁸.” These lines taken from “The Play Way”, a poem on Heaney's experience as a teacher, could also very well apply to his own learning process throughout *Death of a Naturalist* – the young poet's fall into mortality is the pivot of his learning process. The awareness of his mortality and the discovery of his self are concomitant. The word “to turn”, which is recurrent in both volumes and which can also apply to the on-going process inside the child, gradually “turning” into a young boy, combined with the use of the verb “to know”, marks this apprenticeship.

In the poem “Death of a Naturalist”, the frogs' anger is read as a sign of retribution by the child. The fear of losing his hand to the vengeful spawn is an expression of the fear of castration. It also expresses the return of the repressed, a kind of poetic justice since the young naturalist has sinned against life (through storing the spawn in jampots in order to observe it clinically) and against Nature's

33. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 19: “To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation [...] possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction.”

34. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 19: “Thirty years ago [...] another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened.”

35. Heaney, *Stations*, Belfast, Ulsterman Publications, 1975, p. 4: “Green air trawled over his arms and legs, the pods and stalks wore a fuzz of light. [...] Little tendrils unsprung, new veins lit in the shifting leaves, a caul of shadows stretched and netted round his head again.”

36. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 1-2.

37. Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark*, London/Boston, Faber and Faber, 1969.

38. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 43.

secrets (through his unhealthy, sanitized vision of sexuality greatly encouraged by a teacher called Miss Walls). The reference to the “dam³⁹” is also very telling in this respect. In “Blackberry-Picking”, the pleasure of the outing is sullied by guilt – fear of punishment lurks in the reference to the deadly Bluebeard; the young boy’s desire to control reality against his better judgement shows that he is still in thrall to childhood and his pride is punished at the end of the poem when the berries turn into a fungus that is *rat-grey*. In “The Early Purges” he is reluctant to accept death as necessary on “a well-run farm⁴⁰”, so that integration in the world of men – who, in this poem, are named – is a slow process. In “An Advancement of Learning” however, the young poet is finally able to overcome his fear of death as he wins the battle against his arch-enemy, the rat:

The tapered tail that followed him,
The raindrop eye, the old snout:
One by one I took all in.
He trained on me. I stared him out⁴¹.

The caesura in the very middle of the last line confirms this upheaval. Indeed the battle is won when the boy is finally able to outstare the rat and the association of the eye – as in vision –, the I – as in the self – and death is a recurrent feature in the telling of the young poet’s apprenticeship, as if the self (the I) were imperilled by the young boy’s distorted perception of his surroundings – in fact a projection of his own fears on Nature. Another instance of this interplay occurs in “The Barn” where the reference to the “bright eyes” that “stare⁴²” at the boy is followed by the personification of the two sacks, which move in for the kill.

Death of a Naturalist and *Door into the Dark* are autobiographical pieces in which the poet’s childhood is reconstructed. However, the representations of death are too smoothly worked out and prove both paradoxical and misleading. Paradoxical because the crises during which the young boy is confronted with a sense of mortality are literary constructs, attempts by the poet to control death by representing it to the reader... and the young poet’s main lesson has been precisely that of his own limits in the face of death. Misleading because the poet’s grappling with death is probably located elsewhere. Indeed the figure of death never appears in *Death of a Naturalist* – neither does the word itself. In “Storm on the Island”, the very last line could also be applied to the young poet’s disproport-

39. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 7. This image which is at the crux of the young boy’s apprenticeship will be taken up again in *North* p. 32 when the poet addresses the “Strange Fruit”, a girl’s head exhumed from the Jutland bog and displayed in a museum: “Beheaded girl, outstaring axe/And beatification, outstaring/What had begun to feel like reverence.” The girl’s stare challenges the poet and his aesthetic and morbid interest in her – so he turns away.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

tionate fear of death and to the technique of the poet, grown older, who is able to make something out of nothing through language, through thematization: "It is a huge nothing that we fear⁴³." The ultimate reality cannot be represented but the poet's conception of death, of its attributes and characteristics, can perhaps be inferred from the poetic language. As Nathalie Barberger explains very perceptively in her book on the French poet, Michel Leiris:

Gagner sur des terres inhabitables, conquérir un espace inconnu, éclairer ce qui est caché, telle serait l'exigence de l'autobiographe [...]. Le lieu véritable du sujet n'est pas la maison d'enfance qu'il suffirait de donner à voir par un effort de mémoire, il n'est pas le paysage autorisé, le panorama de surface, mais ce qui est derrière, au loin, ou au fond⁴⁴.

When the boy experiences a sense of mortality, he usually becomes aware of noise: in "Death of a Naturalist" for instance, the emergence of time and the "bass chorus" are juxtaposed: "I ducked through hedges/To a coarse croaking that I had not heard/Before⁴⁵." In "The Early Purges", he mentions the "tiny din"⁴⁶ the kittens make before they are slung under the snout of the pump. These three themes – the fall into mortality, noise and the passing of time – are gathered in "Follower" where the young boy describes himself thus: "I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,/Yapping always. But today it is my father who keeps stumbling/Behind me and will not go away⁴⁷." The son grows up to take his father's place and this basic law of nature marks the father's decline. The word "nuisance" refers to the boy's awkwardness, but the paronomasia "nuisance"/"noise" is particularly striking.

Death is often associated with disorder in Nature and opposed to the child's futile attempts at control: "I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied/Specks to range on window-sills at home⁴⁸." In this sentence, the use of the modal "would" which testifies to the would-be naturalist's methodical care is opposed to the wrath of Nature and, stylistically, to the staccato rhythm at the end of the poem, the fragmentation of the sentences and even the fragmentation of the poetical line: "Gross-bellied frogs were cocked/On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped⁴⁹." Indeed if the break between an idyllic existence within Nature with no hint of death and a new mode of being within time is often suggested by recurrent adverbs, such as "Before", or "Then", or again conjunctions

43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

44. Nathalie Barberger, *Michel Leiris, L'écriture du deuil*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998, p. 125.

45. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 3.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

(“until”/“until”), death mostly makes its presence felt in the blanks of the page: in the dashes (“Ancestral Photograph”/“The Barn”), the pauses (“Death of a Naturalist”/“Blackberry-Picking”). We could quote and slightly modify Martine Broda’s analysis of a fairly common stylistic sleight: “*Le vide de la page vient figurer le vide de la (mort)*⁵⁰, auquel il se substitue [...]”⁵¹.”

Finally, the recurrent use of the word “turn” is particularly interesting since it links the turning points of the young boy’s inner growth to the effects of death: for instance the physical transformation of the kittens whose bodies “Turn mealy and crisp⁵²”. Death is a transforming process which “goes on”; and the nature of this reality is well conveyed in “An Advancement of Learning” where the rat which the little boy believes is threatening him “clockworks aimless⁵³”. The mechanical otherness of death in Heaney’s early poetry could again be associated with Baudelaire’s description of the blind in “Les aveugles”:

ils sont vraiment affreux
Pareils aux mannequins; vaguement ridicules;
*Terribles, singuliers comme les somnambules*⁵⁴

Life and death, *eros* and *thanatos* are also closely intertwined in one particularly striking line from the poem “The Early Purges”: “Still, living displaces false sentiments⁵⁵.” Life requires that one not brood over the necessary putting down of “pests” – that is kittens – on “well-run farms”; however if one were to read this sentence without the comma (and after all poetry is meant to be read out loud): “Still living displaces false sentiments”, the phrase “still living” could in fact apply to the unaccountable process of death in the face of which our emotions, our own sense of self can only be heightened.

What strikes the reader is also the repetitiveness of these autobiographical poems – the recurrence of words, the variations on the same types of encounters with a repulsive animal, etc. The repetitive nature of the poetic text can be read as a sign of unresolved tension, a sign of anxiety in the face of death but also as a sign that the poet is “working-through⁵⁶” this same anxiety. Indeed, the literary constructions are meaningful and testify to an aesthetic effort to counteract the deleterious effect of death on the self but also on language, by binding words

50. The word used by Martine de Broda is “la Chose”.

51. Broda, p. 97.

52. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 11.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

54. Baudelaire, p. 126. There are several references to eyes in *Death of a Naturalist*: in “The Barn”, p. 5, the rats are blind; in “Blackberry-Picking” the blobs are also compared to “a plate of eyes”, p. 8.

55. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 11.

56. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through”, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958, p. 147.

in such a way as to confer added meaning to them. Thus the last lines usually provide a coda to the event depicted in the poem, as for instance in “Death of a Naturalist”. In “The Barn” however, the enigmatic comparison “The dark gulfed like a roof-space⁵⁷” makes more sense if we consider that the other meaning of the word “gulf” refers to the motion a bird makes when it swoops down on a prey. In *Death of a Naturalist*, language conveys the unease generated by death while trying to circumscribe this very unease.

When the young naturalist dies, he is born again as a writer, which, in turn, tears him away from his tribe. Heaney's early autobiographical poetry rests upon the following contradiction: the young poet's access to language marks his entrance into society, as he relinquishes an idyllic relationship with a feminine nature, but the access to the world of his forefathers is ultimately closed to him as a poet. The poet can pay his debt to his community by being its “story-teller” and making it live through his poetry. Heaney's autobiographical poems do stem from a “dream of loss and origins⁵⁸” (“Hercules and Antaeus”), the loss of a rural community already on the wane, the loss of Eden... and yet the “Clearances⁵⁹” sonnets provide him with the opportunity of bridging the divide through language.

In *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney dedicates a sequence of sonnets, “Clearances”, to his deceased mother. The figure of the mother rarely appears in Heaney's poetry but in “Churning Day” (*Death of a Naturalist*), she is the alchemist, able to deal in the mysteries of creation, gestation as she transforms milk into butter; she is also the one who “sets up the rhythm⁶⁰” and creates order. As opposed to the tepid Miss Walls⁶¹, she is a true initiator – indeed the poet's perception of death is shaped and rendered vivid through his mother's death. In “Clearances II”, Heaney pictures his mother's soul's “homing⁶²” journey – always a sound impulse in Heaney's poetry – back to a “rich space, brimming with light⁶³”, where her own smiling father stands up to greet her and which seems to be an inverted image of a real-life kitchen, possibly that of Mossbawn. She is actually settling in her new and last abode: “Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead⁶⁴”. The divide between the land of the living and that of the dead is clearly embedded in the blank space in-between the two stanzas. Gaps are often present when Heaney portrays death: an expanse of water, a canal or a blank space here. Could not the poet's topographical rendering of death be connected to his cultural background since the Celts

57. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 5.

58. Heaney, *North*, p. 46.

59. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 24-32.

60. Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 9.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

62. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 26.

63. Seamus Deane, “The Famous Seamus”, *The New Yorker*, March 20, 2000, p. 66.

64. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 26.

believed in a netherworld that souls reached after crossing a sea and from which they would depart again? The presence of light could in turn be linked to Heaney's Catholic upbringing and the belief in an afterlife that he describes in these terms: "There's a sense of profoundness, a sense that the universe can be ashimmer with something, and Catholicism – even if I don't like sentimentalizing it – was the backdrop to that whole thing. The world I grew up in offered me a sense that I was a citizen of the empyrean – the crystalline elsewhere of the world⁶⁵."

However the poet's mother's precious gift to her son is an insight into death, death as a source of energy. In "Clearances VII", the family gathers round her bed and the poet tells us:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open
High cries were felled and a pure change happened⁶⁶.

A transfer of energy occurs from one to the other: the mother's gift also brings about life since a new, unsuspected space opens up in all those who welcome the incoming energy, a space which corresponds to Heidegger's definition of the word "raum":

Un espace (raum) est quelque chose qui est « ménagé », rendu libre, à savoir l'intérieur d'une limite [...] La limite n'est pas ce où quelque chose cesse, mais bien comme les Grecs l'avaient observé, ce à partir de quoi quelque chose commence à être⁶⁷.

The word "clearances" refers to a circular space in a forest, an emptied space it also evokes light, brightness. So can this experiencing of death through another be what Heidegger calls the *ekphanestaton* – "cet éclat éblouissant où se marque aussi, selon Lacan, le rapport de l'homme à sa propre mort⁶⁸"?

This experience is the starting point of the poet's quest for what he calls "some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife⁶⁹", an energizing field of force, a quest which leads him to probe other objects since, as Theodore Roethke reminds us in his poem, "The Far Field", "all finite things reveal infinitude⁷⁰". In "Clearances VIII", the poet focuses on the chestnut tree planted at Mossbawn when he was born and then cut down by the following owners. However, the poet is able to perceive the

65. Patricia Harty talks to Seamus Heaney. Online.

66. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 31.

67. Martin Heidegger, *Essais et conférences*, trans. André Préau, Paris, Gallimard, 1958, p. 183.

68. Broda, p. 12.

69. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, London/Boston, Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 4.

70. Roethke, p. 201.

presence of the tree, his organic alter ego (“my coeval/Chestnut⁷¹”) even if it is no longer living: “A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for⁷²”. The use of the “-ing” and the soft alliteration of the /h/sound in the following lines: “Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere” tend to suggest that the tree palpitates still. In *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney goes on to explain that with time: “I began to think of the space where the tree had been or would have been. In my mind’s eye I saw it as a kind of luminous emptiness, a warp and waver of light⁷³.” Intense brightness, energy, a sacral presence hardly felt or heard that persists, such are the characteristics of the “otherworld”, an intangible world both perceptible and yet invisible, a presence and an absence.

“A writer cannot dwell completely in origin – Origin is almost Eden, you know. You have to leave Eden and get the division: the loss of Eden, the memory, is one of the ways writing occurs⁷⁴.” “Origin” – “Eden” – “Death” are perhaps one and the same – not the beginning and the end of a chronological sequence but a sacral space that is revealed to the poet. “Human kind cannot bear very much reality⁷⁵”; the poet can only yearn to recreate this fleeting vision of reality “glimpsed once and imagined for a lifetime⁷⁶” – through language.

In his article drawn from the book, *Lacan avec les philosophes*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe defines art and the effect of art in these terms:

L'art serait la katharsis de l'objet, son épuration, d'où s'indiquerait, dans le battement de la présentification et de l'absentification, dans l'éclair éblouissant de l'éclat, la Chose en son cerne⁷⁷.

Presence, absence, the circling⁷⁸ of the Object, the real that cannot be symbolized but only approached, such are the characteristics of the “Clearances” sonnets, cathartic in many ways. In Heaney’s autobiographical poems, death – and ultimately life – stem from separation: separation from the living body of nature – a possible substitute for the maternal body. The reality of death echoes the reality of the M/Other. However what remains in “Clearances” is not a mere trace as in the early poems but a vivid, stronger link, because the real has been so closely approached and because the memory of the experience is an enduring one.

71. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 32.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

73. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 3.

74. Quoted in Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, Dublin, O'Brien Press, 1989, p. 139.

75. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1944, p. 14.

76. Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 21.

77. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Lacan avec les philosophes*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1991, p. 34.

78. “I thought of walking round and round a space/Utterly empty, utterly a source.” (“Clearances VIII”) Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, p. 32.

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