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Writing a Bare Wire: *Station Island*

NEIL CORCORAN

There are some lines in poetry which are like wool in texture and some that are like bare wires. I was devoted to a Keatsian woolly line, textured stuff, but now I would like to be able to write a bare wire.
(Seamus Heaney to Fintan O'Toole, 1984)

Station Island, by far Seamus Heaney's longest book, is in three separate parts: an opening section of individual lyrics which take their occasions from the occurrences and the memories of the ordinary life; the central section, the title sequence itself which narrates, or dramatises, a number of encounters, in dream or in vision, with the dead; and a concluding sequence, 'Sweeney Redivivus', which is, as Heaney puts it in one of his notes to the volume, 'voiced for Sweeney', the seventh-century king transformed into a bird, whose story Heaney has translated from the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* as *Sweeney Astray*.

Despite its separate parts, the book also has a formal unity, however, signalled by the presence, in all three parts, of the Sweeney figure. He is there in the poem which ends Part One, 'The King of the Ditchbacks' (which is, partly, about the act of translation itself); then in the opening section of 'Station Island', in his manifestation as the unregenerate Simon Sweeney, one of a family of tinkers remembered from Heaney's childhood (the introduction to *Sweeney Astray* explicitly links this Sweeney with the legendary character); and finally, of course, in the 'Sweeney Redivivus' sequence itself. What 'The King of the Ditchbacks' calls Sweeney's

'dark morse' is therefore tapped throughout the volume; and what the code spells out is an extraordinarily rigorous scrutiny by Seamus Heaney of his own commitments and attachments to his people, and of his responsibilities as a poet. This self-scrutiny proceeds through all three parts of *Station Island* in different models. In Part One, it is pursued, sometimes implicitly, in separate lyrics originating in autobiographical experience; in 'Station Island', this contemporary self undergoes a penitential exercise in self-examination on a mythologised purgatorial pilgrimage; and in 'Sweeney Redivivus', the newly steadied self is released from its *Purgatorio* into the freedom of a kind of anti-self or parallel-self, as Heaney's voice is twinned with that of the character whose name rhymes with his own, 'Sweeney'.

The different voices of the volume – the lyric; the narrative and dramatic; the disguised or ventriloquial – are perhaps designed partly to offset the dangers of self-importance in this very self-involved book. They are, nevertheless, all chosen modalities of the voice of Seamus Heaney himself; and, in this sense, the shortest poem in *Station Island*, and one of its most perfect, 'Widgeon', may be read as an allegory of the book's procedure:

It had been badly shot.
While he was plucking it
he found, he says, the voice box –

like a flute stop
in the broken windpipe –

and blew upon it
unexpectedly
his own small widgeon cries.

This tiny anecdote about the shot wild duck is a story already told ('he says') – like the already much written-over pilgrimage to Station Island, like the *Buile Suibhne* – which Heaney now tells again, in his own words. The bird is 'badly shot', as some of the shades in 'Station Island' have been badly (wickedly, cruelly) shot, in Northern sectarian murders. 'He' in 'Widgeon' blows his own cries on the dead bird's voice box, just as Heaney briefly and poignantly returns a voice to the dead in the 'Station Island' sequence, a voice which remains, nevertheless, entirely his own voice too; and as, in 'Sweeney Redivivus', his own voice sounds through the 'voice box' of Sweeney, the bird-man.

In this dartingly implicit allegory of the way the individual poetic voice speaks through the real and the legendary dead – through biographical experience and through literary tradition – it is the word ‘unexpectedly’, given a line to itself, which carries the greatest charge of implication: the poet who would properly – without sentimentality, without self-importance – articulate his own small widgeon cries through encounters with the dead must seem uncalculatingly preoccupied with his subject or with the form of his own poem, having something of the intent self-forgetfulness of one who would, testingly and probingly, attempt to blow upon a dead bird’s voice box. The preoccupation may then release, ‘unexpectedly’, and almost distractedly, a genuine self-illumination or self-definition, just as ‘Widgeon’ releases allegorical implications most ‘unexpectedly’ too.

It is precisely this unexpectedness which makes the best work of *Station Island* so bracing. The scheme of the volume is an ambitious one, and, in my opinion, the book is not equally successful in all its parts. Nevertheless, *Station Island* gives notice that Heaney’s poetry, in its dissatisfied revision of earlier attitudes and presumptions, and in its exploratory inventiveness as it feels out new directions for itself, is now in the process of successfully negotiating what is, for any poet, the most difficult phase of a career – the transition from the modes and manners which have created the reputation, to the genuinely new and unexpected thing. It is a poetry, in *Station Island*, bristling with the risks and the dangers of such self-transformation but, at its high points, triumphantly self-vindicating too.

I want to spend most of the space available to me in this chapter discussing the two long sequences in *Station Island*, since they present particular difficulties which may be aided by sustained consideration. However, the individual lyrics of Part One also represent something new in Heaney’s poetic voice: they have a harsher, more astringent quality than the richly sensuous music of *Field Work*. This is impelled by the preoccupations which they share with the book’s sequences, as Heaney’s rueful self-scrutiny is pursued in poems in which the objects and occasions of the ordinary world (rather than, as in ‘Station Island’, the visitations of ghosts) insist their moral claims on the poet.

In ‘An Aisling in the Burren’ there are, literally, sermons in stones – ‘That day the clatter of stones / as we climbed was a sermon / on

conscience and healing'; and in poem after poem Heaney listens to similar, if less explicit, sermons, as the natural world offers instances of the exemplary. Sloe gin, in the marvellous poem it gets to itself, is 'bitter / and dependable'; a lobster is 'the hampered one, out of water, / fortified and bewildered'; a granite chip from Joyce's Martello tower is 'a Calvin edge in my complaisant pith'; old pewter says that 'Glimmerings are what the soul's composed of'; the Pacific in Malibu is an instruction in how one is indissolubly wedded to the ascetic Atlantic; visiting Hardy's birthplace is an education in displacement; flying a kite is to know 'the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief'; listening in to 'the limbo of lost words' on a loaning is to hear how

At the click of a cell lock somewhere now
the interrogator steels his *introibo*,
the light-motes blaze, a blood-red cigarette
startles the shades, screeching and beseeching.

These instructive moralities make Part One of *Station Island* severe and self-admonitory, and the astringent lyric voice, if it is willing to be counselled, is also chastened, restrained and wearied. As a result, a number of these poems sustain a sad note of diminishment and loss, a sense of transience and of the perilous fragmentariness of memory. 'What guarantees things keeping / if a railway can be lifted / like a long briar out of ditch growth?', Heaney asks in 'Iron Spike'; and the pathos attaching to what has disappeared is one of the essential marks of these poems: they are, I think, Heaney's first real exercises in nostalgia. If the newly tart lyric manner is a departure of the kind recommended in 'Making Strange' by the voice of poetry itself – 'Go beyond what's reliable/in all that keeps pleading and pleading' – the departure is nevertheless fully conscious of how much must be left behind: 'The Loaning' confesses that 'When you are tired or terrified/your voice slips back into its old first place/and makes the sound your shades make there ...'

Despite the new departures of these lyrics, however, what nevertheless keeps pleading at some level in a number of them is the political reality of the North. In 'Sandstone Keepsake', another stone acts as the spur to a meditation in which Heaney paints a wry self-portrait of the artist as political outsider which is characteristic in its shrug of uneasy self-depreciation. The poem remembers how the

stone was 'lifted' from the beach at Inishowen. At the northern tip of Co. Donegal, Inishowen is at the opposite side of Lough Foyle from the Magilligan internment camp. Heaney is therefore prompted into mythologising the stone in the terms of a Dantean analogy, imagining it as 'A stone from Phlegethon,/bloodied on the bed of hell's hot river'; but he rejects the grandiose comparison in deflating embarrassment ('but not really'), before concluding the poem in the self-deflating contemplation of how he might appear to the Magilligan guards:

Anyhow, there I was with the wet red stone
 in my hand, staring across at the watch-towers
 from my free state of image and allusion,
 swooped on, then dropped by trained binoculars:

a silhouette not worth bothering about,
 out for the evening in scarf and waders
 and not about to set times wrong or right,
 stooping along, one of the venerators.

The incapacity for the political role is subtly rebuked in those lines by the pun which makes over the 'Irish Free State' into a phrase for the disengagement of poetry, and by the allusion itself which refuses the obligation Hamlet finds so overwhelming, to 'set right' the times that are 'out of joint'. 'Sandstone Keepsake' inherits, it may be, the guilt and anxiety of 'Exposure', but seems more ironically assured of the poet's peripheral status: the most the poem may aspire to is the 'veneration' of the political victim. This self-presentation, with its let-downs and erosions, casts its shadow far into *Station Island*.

'STATION ISLAND'

Station Island, or St Patrick's Purgatory, is a small rocky isle in the middle of Lough Derg in Co. Donegal which, since early medieval times, has been a place of pilgrimage for Irish Catholics. The three-day pilgrimage (which Seamus Heaney himself made three times in his youth) involves a self-punitive routine of prayer, fasting and barefoot walking around stone circles or 'beds', thought to be the remains of ancient monastic cells. From the very earliest times, Lough Derg has inspired popular legend and literature, in particular medieval accounts of miracles and visions, and historical narratives about the suppression of the pilgrimage in the eighteenth century,

under the anti-Catholic Penal Laws. As a result, 'Station Island' is the name for a nexus of Irish Catholic religious, historical and cultural affiliations.

Since the nineteenth century, it has also been the subject of more specifically literary treatments: William Carleton's mocking but fascinated prose account, 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim' (1828); Patrick Kavanagh's lengthy *Lough Derg: A Poem* (written in 1942, but only published posthumously in 1978); Denis Devlin's characteristically portentous and frenzied poem, *Lough Derg* (1946); and Sean O'Faolain's well-known short story, 'The Lovers of the Lake' (1958), a story about the uneasy coexistence of sexuality and the Irish Catholic conscience. In a published talk touching on 'Station Island', 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', Heaney says that it was partly the anxiety occasioned by these numerous earlier literary versions of the pilgrimage which turned him to Dante's meetings with ghosts in the *Purgatorio* as a model for his own poem: Dante showed him how to 'make an advantage of what could otherwise be regarded as a disadvantage'. Inheriting from *Field Work*'s interest in Dante, Heaney therefore makes his imaginary pilgrimage to the island a series of meetings with ghosts of the type Dante meets in the *Purgatorio* – friendly, sad, self-defining, exemplary, admonitory, rebuking.

A central passage from 'Envy and Identifications' illuminates the relationship between Heaney and Dante in the sequence:

What I first loved in the *Commedia* was the local intensity, the vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades, the way personalities and values were emotionally soldered together, the strong strain of what has been called personal realism in the celebration of bonds of friendship and bonds of enmity. The way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent, this too encouraged my attempt at a sequence of poems which would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country. The main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped that I could dramatise these strains by meeting shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to recognise those claims. They could probe the validity of one's commitment.

The shades Heaney meets in the poem, then, have all been ‘inhabitants of the actual Irish world’, whether personally known friends and acquaintances, or writers known from their work; and their conversations turn, in some way, on the living of a proper life or on the production of a proper work. The revenants are advisers, from beyond the grave, on the poet’s responsibilities in the realms of morality and of art.

In I, a prelude to the pilgrimage itself, the encounter, on a Sunday, is with the unregenerate ‘sabbath-breaker’, Simon Sweeney, a figure of fascination as well as fear, with his advice to ‘Stay clear of all processions’. The advice is set against the orthodox pieties of a crowd of women on their way to mass, in a scene which contains (in ‘the field was full/of half-remembered faces’) a sudden echo of the opening of the medieval poem of vision and pilgrimage, *Piers Plowman*, and its ‘field full of folk’ – a reminder that poetry in English, as well as in Italian, has its tradition of the dream-vision, and that ‘Station Island’ self-consciously inherits from it. In II, the ghost is William Carleton, encountered appropriately on the road to Lough Derg, and not on the island itself, since, after visiting Station Island in his youth, he subsequently renounced Catholicism and wrote ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’ as a denunciation of its barbarities and superstitions (hence the reference to ‘the old fork-tongued turncoat’). The ‘ghost’ of III is the inanimate ‘seaside trinket’ which, for Heaney as a child, had been redolent of the death of the girl who owned it (she was, in fact, Agnes, the sister of Heaney’s father, who died of TB in the 1920s).

In Section IV Heaney meets a priest who had died on the foreign missions shortly after his ordination. (This was a man called Terry Keenan, still a clerical student when Heaney knew him.) The section meditates on the ratifying role of the priesthood in Irish society, and its effect on the priest himself, ‘doomed to the decent thing’. V includes three separate encounters with teachers or mentors of Heaney’s, including his first teacher at Anahorish School, Barney Murphy, and – interestingly in this context – Patrick Kavanagh. VI recalls, with affectionate tenderness, a very early sexual experience and, after ‘long virgin/Fasts and thirsts’ under the dominion of Catholic doctrine on sexual morality, a later satisfying and fulfilling one. The ghost of VII is a man Heaney had played football with in his youth, the victim of a sectarian murder in Northern Ireland. (Heaney is remembering William Strathearn, killed by two off-duty policemen in a particularly notorious

incident in Co. Antrim.) The victim's description of the circumstances of his death impels Heaney into a confession of what he regards as his own evasive, uncommitted politics. VIII confronts Heaney with two further ghosts whose challenges provoke self-rebuke – Tom Delaney, an archaeologist friend who died tragically young at thirty-two, towards whom Heaney feels 'I had somehow broken/covenants, and failed an obligation', and Colum McCartney, the subject of 'The Strand at Lough Beg' in *Field Work*, who utters the most unrelenting accusation in the sequence, "for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew/the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*/and saccharined my death with morning dew".

Section IX gives a voice to one of the ten IRA hunger-strikers who died in Long Kesh between March and September 1981. (Heaney is actually thinking of the second of them to die, Francis Hughes, who came from his own district, Bellaghy, and whose family he knows.) The certitude which could lead to that kind of political suicide is juxtaposed with a dream of release and revival in which the extraordinary symbol of a 'strange polyp' ('My softly awash and blanching self-disgust') appears, to be supported and illuminated by a candle, and is followed by a further symbol of possibility, an 'old brass trumpet' remembered from childhood. X has another inanimate ghost, a drinking mug removed from Heaney's childhood home by actors for use in a play, and returned as Ronan's Psalter is miraculously returned from the lake by an otter at the opening of *Sweeney Astray* – a further symbol for the unexpected translations the known, ordinary and domestic may undergo.

In XI the ghost is a monk to whom Heaney once made his confession and who, suggesting that Heaney should 'Read poems as prayers', asked him to translate something by St John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, as a penance. Heaney responds now, belatedly, with his version of '*Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe*', the 'Song of the soul that is glad to know God by faith', a hymn to the 'fountain' of the Trinity to be discovered within the sacrament of the Eucharist, that sign of the believing Church in harmonious community. Finally, in the concluding section of the poem, Heaney, back on the mainland, meets the ghost of James Joyce, who recommends a course antithetical to that of orthodox Catholic pilgrimage, a striking-out on one's own in an isolation which, Joyce claims, is the only way the poet's proper work can be done.

These individual encounters find their basic structural shape in the nature of the pilgrimage itself – leaving the ordinary social world, crossing the waters of Lough Derg, and then returning to that world with some kind of refreshment and new clarity. The irony of ‘Station Island’, however, is that this pilgrimage leads to no confirmation in the religion and values of the tribe, but to something very like a renunciation of them. It is possible to read the sequence as a kind of reverse palinode, directed at some of the innate assumptions and attitudes of Heaney’s own earlier work – a palinode which actually rejects the orthodox communal doctrine and morality, rather than giving final assent to them. When Heaney does ‘repent’ in IX, it is the old tribal complicities which are imagined as immature and self-restricting: “I repent / My unweaned life that kept me competent/To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.” Heaney is tentative about his repentance, ironically aware of all the ways in which one must remain permanently ‘unweaned’ from such powerful formative influences and experiences, and the poem has, throughout, the poignancy of anxiety and misgiving. Nevertheless, ‘Station Island’ uses the metaphor of its Irish Catholic pilgrimage to define some of the constrictions which that religion and culture have imposed on one individual consciousness, and to suggest how, under alternative mentors, and through art, a newly enabling freedom might be gained.

It is possible to read out of the earlier parts of the poem a subtext of accusations against Catholicism: in I, where Heaney is set, behind the pious women, on a ‘drugged path’, that it acts as a mere opiate, numbing the obedient conscience with its claims of authority; in II, where the radical Ribbonmen of Carleton’s day have become, by the time of Heaney’s childhood, a drunken band who ‘played hymns to Mary’, that it keeps you patient and enduring, incapable of the anger of action; in III, where the child’s death, held in pious memory, is juxtaposed with the brute animal reality of a dog’s death, that, in attempting to account for death, it in fact refuses to face its reality, and sentimentalises it; and in IV, with its ‘doomed’ priest, that Irish clericalism thwarts the lives of those who represent it, and bolsters the platitudinous pieties of those it ‘serves’. In the latter sections of the poem, Catholicism is heavily implicated in Heaney’s adolescence of sexual dissatisfaction and guilt, and in his unease and regret about his lack of any firmer political commitment – the ‘timid circumspect involvement’ for which he begs forgiveness of Strathearn, and that confusion of ‘evasion and

artistic tact' of which McCartney accuses him. All of these charges generate the outburst of rejection in section IX – "I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming" – where knowing his place is both establishing an identity with a particular territory (celebrated as a virtue often enough in the earlier work) and also meekly accepting a servitude to the mores of a community (where to 'know your place' is to stay put).

Even though it quickly undercuts itself with rueful qualifications, the venom of that climactic attack makes it unsurprising that, despite appearances, no true pilgrimage is actually undertaken in the poem. In IV, Heaney is 'ready to say the dream words *I renounce ...*', the renunciation of worldliness which is the essential prelude to repentance, when he is interrupted by the priest wondering if Heaney is on Station Island only to take the 'last look', and suggesting that, for him, the pilgrimage is without its essential point – 'the god has, as they say, withdrawn'. No orthodox praying is done on the pilgrimage: when he kneels in III, it is only 'Habit's afterlife'; and the poem-prayer in XI could be thought to undermine its song of faith with its constant refrain, 'although it is the night'. In John of the Cross this is the 'dark night of the soul', in which the mystic feels himself temporarily abandoned by God; but, to a more secular consciousness, it could equally well be the sheer inability to believe.

Heaney is also sometimes in physical positions which dissociate him from the other pilgrims: in V, he is 'faced wrong way/into more pilgrims absorbed in this exercise', and in VI, the others 'Trailed up the steps as I went down them/Towards the bottle-green, still/Shade of an oak'. That same section goes so far as to appropriate, from the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, the moment when Dante is impelled on his journey by learning from Virgil of Beatrice's intercession, in order to describe Heaney's own sexual awakening after the enforced virginity of his Irish Catholic adolescence. The truant which Heaney is playing from the pilgrimage there turns the tradition of the vision-poem on its head, making sexual not divine love the object of the exercise; but it reminds us too that Dante's great poem of Christian quest discovers its images of heavenly bliss in a transfigured human woman.

At the centre of Heaney's pilgrimage, however, there is not presence but absence, figured frequently as a 'space'. It is 'a space utterly empty,/utterly a source, like the idea of sound' in III; 'A still-

ness far away, a space' in VI; 'the granite airy space/I was staring into' in VIII; and, in XII, after the pilgrimage. 'It was as if I had stepped free into a space/alone with nothing that I had not known/already'. This final linking of the blank space with freedom comes after Heaney has been counselled by Joyce; and the whole of 'Station Island' discovers its enabling and releasing alternative in its exemplary artist figures. Joyce is, implicitly, the repository of a new kind of personal and cultural health when Heaney takes his hand 'like a convalescent' and feels an 'alien comfort' in his company. In this sense, the pilgrimage to the island in the poem is a large parenthesis, the brackets of which are closed by William Carleton at one end, and by James Joyce at the other – artists offering, on the mainland, their alternatives to the orthodoxies of the island, alternatives which ironically echo the very first advice Heaney is given in the poem, the unregenerate Simon Sweeney's 'Stay clear of all processions'.

Carleton's essential significance for the poem is clarified by Heaney's essay, 'A tale of two islands', where 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim', with its portrait of a culturally and materially deprived Ireland, is opposed to Synge's much better known account, in his plays and prose, of the Aran Islands – in Heaney's opinion, a glamorising of the reality in the interests of the Irish Literary Revival. The 'two islands', 'Station' and 'Aran', represent two different Irelands, realities put to virtually opposed literary and ideological uses. Carleton, in fact, is regarded very much as a nineteenth-century equivalent of Patrick Kavanagh – a teller of the true tale, from the inside, but also from a position of estrangement, of Irish rural life ('not ennobling but disabling'). In his appearance in 'Station Island', he counsels Heaney in a righteous anger (of which Heaney knows himself – it seems, shamefully – incapable) and also in the redemptive necessity, for the Irish writer, of a memory and sensibility schooled by politics as well as by the natural world: "We are earthworms of the earth, and all that/has gone through us is what will be our trace". The word associated with Carleton in 'Station Island' is 'hard'. Defining his 'turncoat' politics, Heaney has him say, "If times were hard, I could be hard too"; and when he departs in the final line, he 'headed up the road at the same hard pace'.

His hardness is matched by Joyce's 'straightness'. In XII, 'he walked straight as a rush/upon his ash plant, his eyes fixed straight ahead'; and when he departs, 'the downpour loosed its screens

'Station Island' is far from entirely successful. There are some excellent things in it. Section III, for instance, with its extraordinarily inward and intimate evocation of the way the young Heaney is almost erotically possessed by the child's death, is as good as anything he has written. And the poem's most Dantean moments – McCartney's rebuke, and the fading of some of the shades – have the kind of heartbreaking poignancy which shows the lessons learnt from the 'Ugolino' translation in *Field Work*.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the narrative and dramatic structure of the sequence is peculiarly inhibiting to Heaney's truest poetic gifts and touch. The encounters come to seem predictable and over-schematic. The dialogue is sometimes very heavy handed: 'Open up and see what you have got' and 'Not that it is any consolation, / but they were caught' are jaw-breakingly unlikely from people in any kind of passion. The symbols seem over-insistent, particularly when one remembers the great grace and delicacy with which the literal slips into the symbolic in some of the earlier work. There are moments of distinct bathos: when, in IX, after seeing the vision of the trumpet, Heaney tells us he 'pitched backwards in a headlong fall', and we are suddenly closer to slapstick than to symbolic reverie; and, more subtly perhaps, when the Joycean voice of XII seems so much more accommodating, concerned and hortatory than anything Joyce ever wrote himself – for the good reason, perhaps, that its marine imagery is much more Heaney-like than Joycean, much closer to 'Casualty' and 'Oysters' than to the *Portrait*. Finally, there are some uncertainties in the handling of verse form, particularly in Heaney's rather ragged variations on the Dantean *terza rima*. The form is notoriously difficult in English, but Heaney's variations on it are bound to summon much too closely for comfort Eliot's tremendous imitative approximation of it in the second section of 'Little Gidding', and Yeats's use of it in a poem Heaney admires in *Preoccupations*, 'Cuchulain Comforted'.

All of this is perhaps to say, in another way, that Seamus Heaney's true distinction as a poet is a lyric distinction, and that the successful larger forms he has so far found are forms which accommodate, even while they provoke and extend, his lyricism. While I cannot think that 'Station Island' with its narrative and dramatic exigencies, is such a form, it is clearly a necessary poem for Heaney to have written, one that defines a painful realignment between himself and his own culture, and brings him to that point of newly steadied illumination where it might be said of his work, as it is

said of its symbol, the polyp supported by a candle, that ‘the whole bright-masted thing retrieved/A course and the currents it had gone with/Were what it rode and showed.’

‘SWEENEY REDIVIVUS’

Seamus Heaney’s engagement with the figure of Sweeney from the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* lasted over ten years – from his earliest attempts at a translation in 1972 until its eventual publication, as *Sweeney Astray*, in 1983 in Ireland and in 1984 in England. Sweeney, in the poem, is a possibly real seventh-century Ulster king who offends the cleric St Ronan, and is punished by being cursed after the Battle of Moira in 637. Driven mad and transformed into a bird, he flies, exiled from family and tribe, over Ireland and as far as Scotland. The poem’s narrative is frequently interrupted by Sweeney’s poignant lyric expressions of his own misery, and by his equally sharp and tender celebrations of the Irish landscape, particularly its trees. Sweeney is therefore, as well as being a mad, exiled king, a lyric poet; and in Robert Graves’s account of *Buile Suibhne* in *The White Goddess* he describes it as ‘the most ruthless and bitter description in all European literature of an obsessed poet’s predicament’.

Heaney recognises in the poem a crucial point in the changeover from a pagan to a Christian culture in Ireland, and he is also interested in it for political and topographical reasons; but in the introduction to his version, he spells out too some of the implications of a recognition similar to Graves’s:

... insofar as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation.

A further aspect, in fact, of that ‘quarrel’ already evident in ‘Station Island’; and it is difficult to read far into Heaney’s version of *Buile Suibhne* without sensing some of the ways in which Sweeney’s voice is harmonised with, or subdued to, Heaney’s own. Sweeney uses a vocabulary familiar from Heaney’s own poems – ‘visitant’, ‘casualties’, ‘recitation’, ‘trust’, ‘philander’, ‘teems of rain’, ‘A sup of water. Watercress’, as well as employing the thin quatrain as his most frequent lyric form. At one point, indeed, the original is

‘translated’ in lines which are wryly self-referential: at the conclusion of section 67, Sweeney says:

I have deserved all this:
 night-vigils, terror,
 flittings across water,
 women’s cried-out eyes.

This is another version of a sentence which concludes ‘The wanderer’, one of the prose-poems in *Stations*, which mythologises Heaney’s departure from his first school – ‘That day I was a rich young man, who could tell you now of flittings, night-vigils, let-downs, women’s cried-out eyes.’

That ‘rich young man’ reappears in the final poem of the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ sequence, ‘On the Road’. In the gospel narrative of Matthew XIX, the man asks Christ what he must do to be saved, and the answer is the uncompromisingly absolute one which Heaney repeats in his poem, ‘Sell all you have and give to the poor and follow me.’ The demand, whether it is made in the realm of religion or of art, and whether a response to it is a real possibility or a chimera, is one that haunts the sequence, and in a sense encloses it, since ‘The King of the Ditchbacks’ in Part One ends in lines which bind Heaney, Sweeney and the rich young man together. That poem has brilliantly evoked the mesmerised and obsessive process of poetic translation (‘He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase Small dreamself in the branches’) before its final section effects this further ‘translation’ which carries Heaney over, in an imagined magical rite, into Sweeney:

And I saw myself
 rising to move in that dissimulation,
 top-knotted, masked in sheaves, noting
 the fall of birds: a rich young man
 leaving everything he had
 for a migrant solitude.

Heaney translates himself into Sweeney, then, in the context of a biblical allusion which summons to the metamorphosis notions of urgent demand, of striking out on one’s own, of exile, of attempting to go beyond what is recognised and known. They make it clear why Heaney told Seamus Deane in 1977 that he thought he had discovered in Sweeney ‘a presence, a fable which could

lead to the discovery of feelings in myself which I could not otherwise find words for, and which would cast a dream or possibility or myth across the swirl of private feelings: an objective correlative’.

It is clear that this ‘migrant solitude’ is akin to the ‘tangent’ recommended by Joyce at the end of ‘Station Island’, and the actual form of the poems of ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ seems to bear some relation to Heaney’s description of Joyce’s voice, ‘definite/as a steel nib’s downstroke’ (in *Ulysses*, Stephen refers to ‘the cold steelpen’ of his art). There is a definiteness, a hard edge, a sense of the thing suddenly and speedily, but finally, articulated in Heaney’s free forms in these poems. They have something of the quick cut and sharpness of a trial piece, compared to what seems to me the worked over and occasionally congealed finish of ‘Station Island’. In this, their forms clearly also inherit from Heaney’s view of medieval Irish lyric, as he expresses it in ‘The God in the Tree’ in *Preoccupations*. In that essay, he compliments Flann O’Brien (who had made his own use of Sweeney in his novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*) for his characterisation of the ‘steel-pen exactness’ of Irish lyric; and he also describes such lyric himself in terms appropriate to his own sequence – its ‘little jabs of delight in the elemental’, its combination of ‘suddenness and richness’, and its revelation of the writer as ‘hermit’ as much as ‘scribe’ (‘Sweeney Redivivus’ includes poems called ‘The Hermit’ and ‘The Scribes’).

I think it is worth adducing this larger context for ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, a context in which a hard and sharp kind of Irish literature puts its pressure on Heaney, since the Sweeney of *Buile Suibhne* is really only one chord of Heaney’s voice in the sequence; and, despite the description, in a note, of the poems as ‘glosses’ on the original story, there are in fact remarkably few obvious points of correspondence. ‘Sweeney’ in ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ is the name for a personality, a different self, a congruence of impulses, a mask antithetical to much that the name ‘Seamus Heaney’ has meant in his previous books. In ‘Envy and Identifications’, Heaney defines the Yeatsian mask in terms which seem relevant to ‘Sweeney’:

Energy is discharged, reality is revealed and enforced when the artist strains to attain the mask of his opposite; in the act of summoning and achieving that image, he does his proper work and leaves us with the art itself, which is a kind of trace element of the inner struggle of opposites, a graph of the effort of transcendence.

Yeats himself is, I presume, 'The Master' in the poem of that title in the sequence, which could be written almost as an allegory of what the critic Harold Bloom has called the 'anxiety of influence': the 'master' as the precursor, the poet against whom Heaney's own art must struggle in order properly to define and articulate itself. Heaney imagines Yeats as a 'rook' in the 'tower' of, presumably, his art and of his Protestant Ascendancy culture (just as Yeats did live in a tower, and entitled one of his major books *The Tower*); and the gradual coming to terms with him is the discovery that 'his book of withholding/... was nothing/arcane, just the old rules/we all had inscribed on our slates', the discovery that Yeats's notoriously private mythology conceals an apprehensible human and political meaning and relevance. Heaney's measuring of himself against this magisterial authority, which has sounded the Sweeney note of enterprising, wily self-assertion, is also, however, combined with an envious humility –

How flimsy I felt climbing down
the unrailed stairs on the wall,
hearing the purpose and venture
in a wingflap above me.

– and the poem is the trace not so much of a struggle, as of a bold but wary inspection, a revelation of how to be unafraid which is the measure of one's own authority.

That this poem is an allegory is typical of the sequence, in which allegory and parable, the puzzling and the hermetic, are the constant modes. In fact, one of Heaney's major derivations from the original source is – as the master-as-rook suggests – a series of ornithological correspondences. 'The First Flight', for instance, views Heaney's move from Belfast to Glanmore as a bird's migration; 'Drifting Off', a version of a medieval 'Boast' poem, ascribes different human (or poetic) qualities to birds; 'A Waking Dream' imagines poetic composition as the attempt to catch a bird by throwing salt on its tail (as the popular recommendation has it), but in fact being transported into flight oneself; and 'On the Road' actually locates the moment when Heaney, previously behind the wheel of a car, is lofted into flight ('I was up and away'). Apart from this system of analogy, what the original story offers 'Sweeney Redivivus' is little more than a medieval-anchorite colouring in some poems, and a tolerant hospitality to others which could just as

easily have appeared without its support-system – ‘In the Beech’, for instance, which imagines the young Heaney in a tree, and the brilliant ‘Holly’. Indeed, three poems which appear towards the end of the sequence – ‘An Artist’ (on Cézanne), ‘The Old Icons’ (on republican politics) and ‘In Illo Tempore’ (on the loss of religious faith) seem written more straightforwardly in Heaney’s own voice, though by now clearly schooled into a ‘Sweeney’ scepticism and distrust.

Although the mask, then, is not worn consistently in the sequence, ‘The Master’ suggests its usefulness to Heaney. There it allows him the opportunity to articulate in a parable what would otherwise be virtually impossible without pretension or overweening vanity, the measuring of himself against Yeats. Elsewhere, it allows him a similar pride in his own achievement, and a tangential, dubious, sideways-on inspection of some matters already handled more straightforwardly in his earlier work. This is why ‘The First Gloss’ steps from its ‘justified line/into the margin’ only after recalling, in the metaphor, ‘the shaft of the pen’, the first poem in Heaney’s first collection, ‘Digging’. And it is why, in the poem, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, and in ‘Unwinding’, Heaney pursues the metaphor of his head as ‘a ball of wet twine/dense with soakage, but beginning/to unwind’. The ‘twine’ – the string made by joining together, ‘twinning’, two separate strands – is both Heaney and Sweeney. Its ‘unwinding’ is Heaney’s studied attempt to dry out the ‘soakage’ of his heritage and, perhaps, of his more acceptable, pliable social self.

The sequence as a whole may be thought to define different stages in this process of unwinding as, in a newly suspicious perspective, Heaney reviews his life and reputation. ‘In the Beech’ and ‘The First Kingdom’ suggest how selective his earliest accounts of his first world were. ‘In the Beech’ sets the young Heaney in a ‘boundary tree’ between the old rural ways and modern military industrialism (he is thinking, I presume, of the British airforce bases in Northern Ireland during the Second World War): the latter, of course, made no appearance in *Death of a Naturalist*. ‘The First Kingdom’ takes a more jaundiced view of the inhabitants of that world than one would have believed possible from the author of Heaney’s first book: ‘And seed, breed and generation still/they are holding on, every bit/as pious and exacting and demeaned’ – where ‘exacting’ perhaps looks back rebukingly to the ‘exact’ revenge of ‘Punishment’.

Similarly, 'The First Flight', 'Drifting Off' and 'The Scribes' imply a more unapologetic confidence in his own work than is apparent in anything Heaney has previously written. 'The First Flight' celebrates, with a Joycean disdain, his outwitting of adverse criticism ('they began to pronounce me/a feeder off battlefields' leaps out of the parable into contemporary literary battlefields for anyone who remembers some Northern accounts of *North*); 'Drifting Off' ends with Heaney not as the Joycean 'hawklike man', but as the hawk himself, 'unwieldy/and brimming,/my spurs at the ready'; and 'The Scribes' is an almost contemptuous jousting with, again, his critics (or his peers?), which culminates when Heaney/Sweeney throws this poem itself in their faces: 'Let them remember this not inconsiderable/contribution to their jealous art.' That 'not inconsiderable' is finely judged, keeping its temper along with its *hauteur*, utterly certain that it is 'considerable'; and the poem has something of that insolence Heaney once admired in Nadezhda Mandelstam's treatment of the Soviets, 'the unthinking authority of somebody brushing a fly from her food'. This is the reverse of accommodating, it is dangerous, and one would not like to get on the wrong side of it; but its tone allies Heaney with an Irish tradition to which he has not previously given great allegiance, one that includes eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry and Austin Clarke, for instance, as well as Joyce. Heaney has chosen – temporarily, perhaps – to call this tradition 'Sweeney'; but, under whatever name, it is a salutary guard against certain kinds of sweetness and lushness which have whispered at the edge of earshot in some of his styles.

These asperities of tone are softened by a certain regretfulness in those poems in the sequence which once again review Heaney's attitude to religion and to politics. 'The Cleric', on Catholicism, seems to acknowledge, ruefully, at its close that, having once placed faith in all of that, any future sense of freedom from it will be defined by it – the familiar enough double-bind of the devout lapsed Catholic, but phrased here, in the tones of the still-pagan Sweeney reflecting on St Ronan, in a way which gives genuinely new life to the old song:

Give him his due, in the end

he opened my path to a kingdom
 of such scope and neuter allegiance
 my emptiness reigns at its whim.

'In Illo Tempore' – its title taken from the words which introduced the reading of the gospel in the old Latin mass – is perhaps Heaney's most straightforward and personal rehearsal of the theme (released, it may be, by the Sweeney mask, but not much indebted to it). Imagining Catholicism as a language one has lost the ability to speak, consigning it to '*illo tempore*', 'that time', the poem is sadly resigned rather than gratefully released; and in this it is at one, perhaps, with the reverence still felt, at some level, for the outgrown republican images in 'The Old Icons' – 'Why, when it was all over, did I hold on to them?' In these poems, which are among the best in 'Sweeney Redivivus', resolve and regret merge to create a peculiarly chastened tone, which is also peculiarly honest.

The poem which closes 'Sweeney Redivivus', and the whole of *Station Island*, 'On the Road', may be read as a kind of summary of Heaney's career to date, and the statement of an intention for the future, as it inherits and brings to fulfilment the volume's imagery of journeying, pilgrimage, quest and migration. The poem opens with that figure common in the earlier work, Heaney-as-driver, but now with the driver behind the steering wheel's 'empty round'. This is an emptiness, a space suddenly filled with the rich young man's question about salvation. Christ's invitation, accompanied by the sudden 'visitation' of the last bird in *Station Island*, provokes a response in which Heaney is translated out of that early figure and its present emptiness, into Heaney-as-Sweeney. The flight which follows, with its swooping and dipping rhythms, seems similarly to translate Christ's injunction out of the realm of religion – Heaney/Sweeney migrating from 'chapel gable' and 'churchyard wall' – into the realm of art, as it ends inside a 'high cave mouth' beside the prehistoric cave drawing of a 'drinking deer'. This is presumably related to that 'deer of poetry .../in pools of lucent sound' which appears in 'A Migration' in Part One; but in 'On the Road', its nostril is 'flared // at a dried-up source'. It is a source, nevertheless, which provides Heaney with at least the possibility of some arid renewal:

For my book of changes
 I would meditate
 that stone-faced vigil
 until the long dumbfounded
 spirit broke cover
 to raise a dust
 in the font of exhaustion.

The 'font' in a church usually contains holy water, used to make the sign of the cross; but this dry 'font of exhaustion' is perhaps Seamus Heaney's equivalent of Yeats's 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart' at the end of 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', that point of desolation from which, alone, the new inspiration may rise. In that poem, Yeats reviews the stages of his career in some detail, and in 'On the Road', Heaney may be thought to review his own, more glancingly, in little verbal echoes of his earlier work. The road 'reeling in' remembers the roads that 'unreeled, unreeled' in that other poem of flight, 'Westering', at the end of *Wintering Out*; 'soft-nubbed' and 'incised outline' recall the archaeological diction of *North*, as the poem's chain of optatives ('I would roost ...', 'I would migrate ...', 'I would meditate ...') make again one of the characteristic grammatical figures of *North*; the 'undulant, tenor/black-letter latin' recalls the 'sweet tenor latin' of 'Leavings', and the phrase 'broke cover' recalls the badger that 'broke cover in me' in 'The Badgers', both in *Field Work*. This unobtrusive self-allusiveness makes it plain how much in Heaney's earlier 'source' is now 'dried-up', and how much directed energy and effort must go into the construction of any new 'book of changes'.

This is the final stage of self-knowledge and self-declaration to which the Sweeney mask has brought Heaney; and I find the sequence of exceptional originality and authority. Sweeney has been a more subtle, responsive and intimate means of self-dramatisation than the sometimes creaking machinery and over-earnestness of 'Station Island'. The mask has provided the opportunity for a new kind of autobiographical poetry – not 'confessionally' flat and presumptuous, not as edgily invisible as the Eliotic *personae*, not risking the sometimes histrionic grandiloquence of Yeats. Sweeney is, above all, the name for a restless dissatisfaction with the work already done, a fear of repetition, an anxiety about too casual an assimilation and acclaim, a deep suspicion of one's own reputation and excellence. He is, therefore, also an instruction to the critic, ending his account of a poet still in mid-career, against too definitive a conclusion. As Sweeney's creator and *alter ego* reminded John Haffenden, 'the tune isn't called for the poet, he calls the tune'.

From Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (Faber Student Guides, London, 1986), pp. 153–80.

NOTES

[Taken from one of the two most useful and influential ‘introductory’ studies of Heaney (Blake Morrison’s [London, 1982; new edition 1993] is the other one), it is in the nature of this essay largely to explain itself as it goes along. It is essentially another piece of New Criticism seeking to present Heaney as a major poet and to emphasise his authority as a significant living writer. Other writers (Dante, Carleton, Joyce, Denis Devlin, Sean O’Faolain, Austin Clarke) and works (*Buile Suibhne*, *Piers Plowman*, Graves’s *White Goddess*) tend to be here for their intertextual significance for Heaney rather than as touchstones in evaluating his poetry. Only Eliot and Yeats are used in this latter way. *Stations* (p. 121) was a pamphlet published in Belfast in 1975. ‘Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’ (pp. 112–13) appeared in the *Irish University Review* (15:1, Spring 1985, 5–19); ‘A tale of two islands: reflections on the Irish Literary Revival’ (p. 117) in P.J. Drudy (ed.), *Irish Studies*, 1 (Cambridge, 1980), 1–20. For the interviews with Heaney by Deane (pp. 121–2) and Haffenden (p. 128) see Further Reading, p. 267 below. Ed.]