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The Art of Heaney's Sonnets

"I AM VERY FOND of the sonnet form," Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh once explained, "not merely because it has been the most popular vehicle for the expression of love but because its strict rules, which like other rules Shakespeare broke so wonderfully, forces [sic] the mind to moral activity but is not itself forced."¹ Obviously, Kavanagh too learned to break (or at least to bend) the rules of the form, as many of his most enduring poems—"Iniskeen Road: July Evening" and "Epic," the three-poem sequence which makes up the third section of *The Great Hunger* and the evocative six-poem narrative sequence "Temptation in Harvest," "Canal Bank Walk" and "Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal," "The Hospital" and "Come Dance with Kitty Stobling"—testify to his true mastery of a "verbal contraption" (to borrow from Auden)² that, for the poet, is as enticing as it is demanding.

As Ronald Marken observes in an essay published in *Éire-Ireland* in 1989, the sonnet seems to hold a particular appeal for Irish poets—in part as a subversive appropriation of a form associated so immediately with Wyatt and Surrey, Spenser and Shakespeare, Milton and Donne, Wordsworth and Keats: in short, with the British poetic tradition. According to Marken, Paul Muldoon may be the most subversive of all Irish sonneteers, as many of his poems go beyond simple appropriation of a formula to become

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, "Extracts from Ten Lectures Delivered at University College Dublin in 1956 Entitled 'Studies in the Technique of Poetry,'" *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971) 65.

² W. H. Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962) 50.

sophisticated deconstructions of the form. As Marken puts it: "They lay siege to convention, attack formal assumptions, explode the traditions, and seize and occupy new territories, a controversial and dangerous business if one were talking about geographical territory, but an action fraught with wit, irony, and even glee, when the territory is one of England's great contributions to poetic form and imagination."³ Recently, Ciaran Carson (like Muldoon a Northern Irish poet of Catholic nationalist stock) has staked a similar claim of mastery over this poetic territory, producing in his volume *The Twelfth of Never* a dazzling sequence of seventy-seven sonnets—mock-modestly exactly half the number of Shakespeare's famous output.⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, especially given his famous protest two decades ago about his work being included in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*—"be advised / My passport's green. / No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast *The Queen*"⁵—Seamus Heaney too has shown throughout his career a pronounced preference for and a remarkable command of the sonnet form that at least early in his career represented an overtly post-colonial gesture.⁶ In fact, even the six-poem sequence "Son-

³ Ronald Marken, "Paul Muldoon's 'Juggling a Red-Hot Half-Brick in an Old Sock': Poets in Ireland Renovate the English-Language Sonnet," *Eire-Ireland* 24.1 (Spring 1989): 85.

⁴ Ciaran Carson, *The Twelfth of Never* (Chapel Hill: Wake Forest UP, 1999).

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter*, Field Day Pamphlet 2 (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company Limited, 1983) 9.

⁶ Describing how in *An Open Letter* Heaney is "making appropriate anti-colonialist noises, but noises which are not only comfortless but also un-Heaney-like, poetically as well as politically," John Wilson Foster nonetheless notes: "Heaney knows how tangled are the literary as well as the political relations between Ireland and Britain and how unavailable they are to the simplicities of doggerel and pamphlets" (*The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* [Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995] 24). Foster is thus among the many commentators who would counter David Lloyd's provocative critique of Heaney's writing, "'Pap for the dispossessed': Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity" (*Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* [Durham: Duke UP, 1993]), which argues that "the elevation of a minor poet to a touchstone of contemporary taste" is, ironically, "profoundly symptomatic of the continuing meshing of Irish cultural nationalism with the imperial ideology which frames it" (37). In fact, Heaney has evinced from early in his career an awareness both of the complex symbiosis of politics and poetics and of the subtle ways in which a poet might formulate a text committed to what Declan Kiberb, in *Reinventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), refers to as "cultural resistance" (6). For example, as Bernard O'Donoghue

nets from Hellas" (the literal centrepiece of his most recent volume, *Electric Light*), recalling his travels in Greece in the days immediately preceding his being named winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, retains implicitly a trace of the explicit subversion of one of Heaney's earliest sonnets, "Requiem for the Croppies."

Written in 1966 in oblique commemoration of the Easter Uprising of 1916, an event whose roots can be traced back to the seeds of insurrection sown in 1798, "Requiem for the Croppies" in effect celebrates republican nationalist spirit by recollecting how the grain that the rebels at "the fatal conclave" of Vinegar Hill carried in their pockets for food rose after their decimation as a poignant symbol of irrepressible Irish nationalist sentiment:

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley—
 No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—
 We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
 The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
 A people, hardly marching—on the hike—
 We found new tactics happening each day:
 We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
 And stampede cattle into infantry,
 Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.
 Until, on Vinegar hill, the fatal conclave.
 Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
 The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
 They buried us without shroud or coffin
 And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.⁷

Heaney himself has admitted that the "prophetic" vision of his poem did not encompass the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland which would erupt in the summer of 1969, several months after the poem's publication in *Door Into the Dark*.⁸ Still, written from the first-

shows in his chapter "English or Irish Lyric?" (*Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* [Herefordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994]), his early poetry in particular evinces Heaney's conscious "involvement with Irish-derived metrical schemes" (35).

⁷ Seamus Heaney, "Requiem for the Croppies," *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 23.

⁸ Seamus Heaney, "Feeling Into Words," *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980) 56.

person plural perspective, the poem seems to acknowledge Heaney's identification with his nationalist Catholic "tribe"; and as a Northern Irishman, he surely took special satisfaction in registering in the more-British-than-the-British fixed form of the sonnet⁹ the political symbolism of this strange-but-true natural phenomenon.

Technique or Craft?

Interestingly, in the relative casualness of their construction, in their loosely patterned rhyme schemes and the poet's seemingly knowing disregard of the relation of rhyme to rhetorical structure (all actually mimetically consistent with the marvel-filled serendipity—the "opulence and amen"¹⁰—which defined Heaney's unhurried and unworried tour of Greece), his "Sonnets from Hellas" recall as well an unintended stylistic feature of "Requiem for the Croppies." For in the overall context of Heaney's body of work, that early sonnet may be less interesting even for its distinction as a rather anomalous expression of overt nationalist sentiment by a fundamentally unpolemical poet than for its actual shakiness as a sonnet *per se*. In its rhyme scheme, the poem is transparently a hybrid of the two basic variations on the fourteen-line convention of the sonnet. Opening with the *abab-cdcd* rhymed quatrains of the English/Shakespearean sonnet, the poem closes with the *efefef* variant for the sestet of the Italian/Petrarchan sonnet. In itself, this cross between the two forms is not unprecedented (W. B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" is a notable instance of such a hybrid) and is thus not a fatal flaw except for sonnet purists; where the poem suffers—not just as a sonnet but as a formal poem generally—is in the lack of essential coincidence between the octave-sestet formal structure of the poem and the ultimate rhetorical structure of the poem.

As Paul Fussell explains so lucidly in his book *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, the sonnet functions on "the principle of imbal-

⁹ While identification of the sonnet with the British poetic tradition may seem to betray an Anglocentric bias with regard to the long, complex, and multi-lingual history of the form, modern Irish poetry written in English "writes back" most immediately against the culture and the conventions of Great Britain as the colonizing power. As Kiberd shows throughout *Reinventing Ireland*, Ireland's "cultural dependency" on Britain "remained palpable long after the formal withdrawal of the British military: it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory" (6).

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, "Into Arcadia," *Electric Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 45.

ance,"¹¹ the Italian sonnet resolving the thematic complexity of its octave in the more compact space of the sestet, the English sonnet usually resolving its twelve-line three-quatrain complexity in a mere rhymed couplet. Clearly, the "turn" upon which "Requiem for the Croppies" hinges occurs not after the eighth line—not between the octave and the sestet—but rather after the ninth line, announced by the word "Until" at the start of the tenth line. Formally, Heaney commits himself to an octave-sestet division in this sonnet; rhetorically, however, the poem operates on a nine-line/five-line imbalance which violates not only the letter but also the spirit of this defining convention of the sonnet.

In this respect, "Requiem for the Croppies" may illuminate the differentiation Heaney makes between "craft" and "technique" in his essay "Feeling Into Words"—a differentiation that in turn helps to illuminate the true artistry behind his engagement with the sonnet over the next three decades or so of his career. Borrowing the available scaffolding of the sonnet, constructing a fourteen-liner which, when inspected according to the rigorous building codes of the form, does not stand quite plumb, Heaney seems more concerned in this poem with "craft"—with "the skill of making." In contradistinction, "Technique ... involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art."¹² Including perhaps another half-dozen sonnets—"The Forge," "The Seed-Cutters," "Strange Fruit" (an unrhymed variant), "Fire-side," "Act of Union" (a double sonnet)—in his volumes through *North* (published in 1975), Heaney obviously continued to think of the sonnet as an occasionally viable "formal ploy," though several of those sonnets also suffer from the same or related "defects."

A Dynamic of Thought and Feeling

At the same time, however, he began to incline decidedly toward the more "arterial" form described by Blake Morrison as "com-

¹¹ Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1979) 115.

¹² Heaney, "Feeling Into Words" 47.

pressed, mostly two-stress lines, unrhymed, arranged in slender quatrains, and having an extremely narrow appearance on the page": poems as "drills, wells, augers, capillaries, mine-shafts, bore-holes, plumb-lines."¹³ In light of this inclination, and specifically in light of Morrison's explanation of this inclination—"The rhyming quatrains and pentameters of his early work had forced him into a superficial rationalist mode" (45)—Heaney's return to the sonnet form in the ten-poem sequence "Glanmore Sonnets" at the centre of his volume *Field Work* (1979) seems especially deliberate, and his sonnets actually take on a more pronounced sense of formal calculation. Discussing "structural integrity, the sort of logical accommodation of statement to form, of elements to wholes" intrinsic to fixed forms like the sonnet, Paul Fussell explains:

Although successful poems do not always inhabit a world of logic, their forms do; and just as the world of logic is constructed from immutable propositions, so those elements of poems which belong to that world partake of immutability. Like the forms of geometry or music, the forms of poetry ... attach the art of poetry to a permanent world—that is, they effect this attachment if they are sufficiently logical, economical, and organic.¹⁴

Collectively, the "Glanmore Sonnets" give complex expression to Heaney's waxing and waning artistic self-doubt—one by-product of his retreating from strife-torn Belfast to pastoral County Wicklow in the Irish Republic in 1972. Individually, the poems explore that thematic complexity with a subtlety that reveals the poet's heightened awareness of the potential of the sonnet's very form to help him arrive at a "rational" resolution of his ambivalence about his artistic vocation.

In fact, distinguished by their logic, their economy and their organic unity, these sonnets—as well as many of the sonnets Heaney has written in the two decades since *Field Work*—at least approach the intermixture of structure and texture which first provoked and then entirely validated Helen Vendler's recent study, a virtually

¹³ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London, New York: Methuen, 1982) 45.

¹⁴ Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* 172.

exhaustive (if not exhausting) tome, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Reading not just Shakespeare's words, but also what lies behind and beyond those words within their fourteen-line stanza, Vendler identifies a standard of excellence by which any sonnet might be measured: "The fundamental act of a Shakespearean poem," she explains, "is to unfold itself in a dynamic of thought and feeling marked by a unifying play of mind and language."¹⁵ Of course, Heaney makes no attempt to replicate the awesome accomplishment of Shakespeare's 154-poem sequence; still, when put to the test, many of his sonnets engage the reader in much the same way that Shakespeare's do—by establishing a dramatic tension that demands some sort of satisfying (even if tentative) resolution.

The second of the "Glanmore Sonnets" may exemplify Heaney's mastery of the dynamic potential of the sonnet:

Sensings, mountings from the hiding places,
 Words entering almost the sense of touch
 Ferreting themselves out of their dark hutch—
 'These things are not secrets but mysteries,'
 Oisín Kelly told me years ago
 In Belfast, hankering after stone
 That connived with the chisel, as if the grain
 Remembered what the mallet tapped to know.
 Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore
 And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
 A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
 That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:
 Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
 Each verse returning like the plough turned round.¹⁶

Formally, the poem is more or less a Shakespearean sonnet, having three rhymed (or slant-rhymed) quatrains (the first two envelope-rhymed *abba-cddc*, the third *efef*) and a concluding rhymed couplet. Appropriately, this formal structure, in Paul Fussell's words, "accords with the number of divisions of action or intellection which the poem undertakes" (155). Thus, recording the poet/speaker—

¹⁵ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 5.

¹⁶ Heaney, *Opened Ground* 157.

Heaney himself, self-described in an earlier poem as an “inner émigré”¹⁷ from the troubles in his native Northern Ireland—trying to coax elusive words out of “hiding,” hoping somehow to gain access to their inherent “mysteries,” the first two quatrains enjamb to constitute, in effect, a Petrarchan-like octave. Words have an almost tactile quality for Heaney, and he recalls that the sculptor Oisín Kelly once explained to him how a work of art is *intrinsic* to the artist’s medium—how the artist needs (in Kelly’s case *literally*) to *tap into* that medium to liberate the work by separating it from its raw material.

Then, with the word “Then” in the ninth line (the start of the third quatrain), the reader experiences what is known as the “turn” in a sonnet—the point where the principle of imbalance comes into play: the point where the poet attempts to resolve in the final *six* lines (in this case) the complex scenario that he has established in the opening *eight* lines. The first part of that resolution involves the complication of Heaney’s recognizing that his retreat to the bucolic hinterland of Glanmore in County Wicklow is akin to enrolling himself in a “hedge school,” one of the squalid centres of rural local learning in nineteenth-century Ireland. Here, in the shelter of a metaphoric ditchback (in a later poem he will identify himself ambiguously with the legendary Mad Sweeney as “The King of the Ditchbacks”),¹⁸ he hopes indeed to tap into those aforementioned words. For Heaney, though, constantly aware of the demands being placed on him as a writer on an island divided and subdivided unto itself along both political lines (nationalist vs. unionist) and ideological lines (militant vs. romantic), the words he seeks reside—or resound—somewhere between “slug-horn and slow chanter.” Heaney’s choice of the word “slug-horn” (a kind of trumpet) is especially telling, as it derives from the same source, in Irish, as the word *slogan*: from *shuagh* (army) plus *gairm* (yell). Apparently, he hopes to “raise” his own voice somewhere between that militantly triumphal voice and the mournfully melodic voice of the uilleann pipes.

The poem’s ultimate resolution takes place in the couplet, which glances back affirmatively not only to the self-doubting anxiety of the first of the “Glanmore Sonnets” but also to the origin of

¹⁷ Heaney, “Exposure,” *Opened Ground* 135.

¹⁸ Heaney, “The King of the Ditchbacks,” *Opened Ground* 221–23.

the word “verse” in the Latin word *versus*, which, as Heaney glosses in his essay “The Makings of a Music,” “could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of a field as he finished one furrow and headed back into another.”¹⁹ With renewed faith in poetry’s capacity to “continue, hold, dispel, appease,” Heaney has his vowels plough into each other, opening fertile ground—his repeating as the penultimate line of sonnet II the opening line of sonnet I representing at least a temporary restoration of the equilibrium for both his art and his life that he had sought in relocating from the North to the Republic.

Feelings Felt and Thoughts Thought

As sonnet II illustrates, the quintessentially lyric nature of the sonnet may yet embody an essentially dramatic impulse, confirming Vendler’s observation that “The true ‘actors’ in lyric are words, not ‘dramatic persons’; and the drama of any lyric is constituted by successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements (grammatical, syntactical, phonetic) which are visibly in conflict with previous arrangements used with reference to the ‘same’ situation.”²⁰ For Heaney, however, as evidenced by sections VI and IX of “Station Island” (the twelve-part title poem of his volume published in 1984), the dramatic can also be extended to assume a narrative nature. To Heaney’s immense credit, each of the sonnets in these multiple-sonnet units has—like wheels within wheels—both rhetorical and structural integrity as he registers stage-by-stage his slow but certain release from sexual guilt in the first instance²¹ and his at-first hesitant but finally confident affirmation of the artistic enterprise in the second. As Vendler notes of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the shifts (topical or syntactical) within a sonnet “are among the strategies which—because they mimic changes of mind—constitute vivid drama within the lyric genre” (3).

The sonnet thus operates as an especially effective form to record the poet’s response to various internal stimuli within the twelve-part poem’s phantasmagoric superstructure of the pilgrimage to Lough Derg. In section IX, for example, Heaney can move from sympathetic disdain for a terrorist hunger-striker through “self-

¹⁹ Heaney, “The Makings of a Music,” *Preoccupations* 65.

²⁰ Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* 3.

²¹ Heaney, *Opened Ground* 233–34.

disgust” with his own somnambulant response to worldly demands to a recognition—induced by the involuntary memory of “The old brass trumpet with its valves and stops / I found once in a loft thatch”—that he might yet seize the moment to further self-doubt that is ultimately assuaged by voluntary memory: “Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail / For they keep dancing till they sight the deer.”²²

Generally, however, Heaney tends to think of the sonnet not as a vehicle for carrying a narrative but in its more traditional aspect, as free-standing lyric expression. From the evidence of two additional sonnet sequences—“Clearances,” composed in memory of his mother and published in the volume *The Haw Lantern* in 1987, and “Glanmore Revisited,” published in *Seeing Things* in 1991—he would surely concur with Vendler’s estimation of lyric poems (sonnets in particular) as “aesthetically convincing representations of feelings felt and thoughts thought” (16). Indeed, the third poem in “Clearances” testifies directly to Vendler’s assertion that in the well-wrought sonnet “Form is content-as-arranged; content is form-as-deployed” (14). Petrarchan in overall structure, sonnet III yet captures through closed slant-rhymed couplets (as opposed to more conventional Italian or Sicilian quatrains) in the octave the utterly unselfconscious simplicity of mother and son peeling potatoes:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron....²³

Obviously, this strategy contrasts with the breathless one-sentence utterance (not even punctuated until the end of the fourth line) that constitutes the sestet. Appropriately, too, the muted falling of the potatoes finds its opposition in the “hammer and tongs” praying of the priest, and the metaphorical “weeping” in the octave is replaced by the literal “crying” of distraught family members around the mother’s deathbed. The poet/speaker/Heaney, however, remains composed in the face of his mother’s imminent death by recalling

²² Heaney, *Opened Ground* 239–41.

²³ Heaney, *Opened Ground* 285.

those quiet domestic moments—"things to share"—of a less turbulent time until, even in recollection, the intermingling of their breath and the "fluent" working of their knives become part of a larger order and rhythm of life that, once linking mother and child, now afford "cold comforts" for the surviving son. A relatively simple poem of remembering, the structural and rhetorical integrity of sonnet III affirms Vendler's belief that "The ethics of lyric writing lies in the accuracy of its representation of inner life, and in that alone" (17).

A Sufficient Form and a Self-Given Music

Moreover, recording the process of consolation, the poem no doubt provides further consolation of the sort Heaney himself acknowledges in *The Place of Writing*: "One of the first functions of a poem, after all, is to satisfy a need in the poet. The achievement of a sufficient form and the release of a self-given music have a justifying effect within his life."²⁴ Or as he puts it in "Crediting Poetry," his Nobel address delivered in Stockholm in 1995: "Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body." He concludes:

The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry's power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, is so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.²⁵

Certainly such assumptions underlie Heaney's next sonnet sequence, "Glanmore Revisited," a series of deceptively uncomplicated musings on home ownership. As Vendler notes so pointedly, "The appeal of lyric lies elsewhere than in its paraphrasable statement" (14), and a poem like the seventh and concluding sonnet, "The Skylight"—a poem recording the installation of a skylight in Heaney's getaway cottage in pastoral County Wicklow—perhaps begins to

²⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press) 25.

²⁵ Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," *Opened Ground* 430.

answer her equally pointed question: "Where, then, does the charm of lyric lie?"

Included in the volume *Seeing Things*—a volume centrally reflecting the poet's abashed recognition of his "waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels"²⁶—"The Skylight" in fact records the installation and its effect in such a way that not only the poet but also the reader experiences the marvel of "extravagant / Sky" suddenly entering the house:

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.²⁷

A Petrarchan sonnet (though with a variant rhyme scheme), the poem achieves this result essentially by way of its rhetorical structure which establishes in the octave a plausible skepticism about the entire enterprise of installing a skylight. Then, in the sestet, the crude deed having been done, Heaney invites the reader to perceive in the familiar Gospel story of Christ curing the paralytic—"We have seen strange things today," the scribes and the Pharisees admit (Luke 5:17-26)—an apt analogy for the wonderment that the poet himself felt beneath the newly observable firmament. A remarkable agreement of rhetorical and formal structure—a "perfect, trunk-lid fit" of octave and sestet (like "the complete coincidence

²⁶ Heaney, "Fosterling," *Opened Ground* 331.

²⁷ Heaney, *Opened Ground* 325.

between period and stanza" which Heaney so admires in Yeats's poems written in *ottava rima*)²⁸—"The Skylight" ultimately affords a satisfaction that is both mimetic and aesthetic.

The Music of What Happens

Clearly, as Seamus Heaney has evolved as a poet, his mastery of the sonnet has evolved correspondingly—to the degree that a poem like "Requiem for the Croppies" now reads almost as a piece of juvenilia. Still that poem commands attention as the reliable (if off-plumb) structure that provided Heaney with the blueprint for the more fully realized sonnets from *Field Work* onward. The early appeal of the sonnet form which that poem represents is surely reflected even in Heaney's sonnets published in *The Spirit Level* three decades later. A pair of double sonnets, actually, they reveal Heaney at his complete ease with the form, bending and breaking the rules with absolute awareness of the effects of doing so. (The unrhymed stanzas of the "The Walk," for example, probably owe as much to Robert Lowell's American subversion of the traditional form as they do to the British tradition itself.) "At the Wellhead" may even speak to the larger appeal of the sonnet—for reader as much as for writer—identified by both Paul Fussell and Helen Vendler. Fussell explains:

When we want to speculate why certain stanzaic forms have become fixed while others, which may resemble them very closely, have not, we should probably inquire less into any abstract aesthetic or mathematical theory than into the psychological *données* of human nature. Certain stanzaic forms have attained the eminence of fixity, less perhaps because poets have liked to work in them than because readers have found themselves gratified in them. No amount of brilliance on the part of the performer will serve to make permanent a poetic form which strikes the reader somehow as an unsatisfactory or insufficiently universal emblem of the shape of general psychic experience. (128)

²⁸ Heaney, *The Place of Writing* 29.

For Vendler, a crucial attraction of the sonnet-as-lyric involves the extent to which the “voice” within the poem rings with authenticity. “The act of the lyric is to offer its reader a script to say,” she proposes, adding that lyric poems are like the Psalms or like prayers printed in prayer books: “One is to utter them as one’s own words, not as the words of another. . . . It is indispensable, then, if we are to be made to want to enter the lyric script, that the voice offered for our use be ‘believable’ to us, resembling a ‘real voice’ coming from a ‘real mind’ like our own” (18). Reconstructing in “At the Wellhead” the internal drama of a childhood memory evoked by a friend’s singing, and doing so with distinct yet unobtrusive slant-rhyme in the variously configured octaves and sestets of the double sonnet’s Petrarchan structure, Heaney composes neither more nor less than a parable for how art—any art—engages and affects the listener, the viewer, the reader.

Crucially, he presents this parable in terms that are altogether “agreeable” to the reader as, once again, the “drama” of the lyric gets played out within the gratifyingly imbalanced structure of the sonnet. Celebrating how the artist makes even the strange familiar—“like a local road / We’ve known every turn of in the past”—by tapping into “where the singing comes from” (“the wellhead,” a source “like a silver vein in heavy clay”), Heaney moves by association from his friend the singer to Rosie Keenan, the blind piano player of his boyhood. From there, from his appreciation of her playing being “like a cure / you didn’t notice happening,” he records her reciprocal appreciation of his art’s power to “cure” her blindness:

When I read
A poem with Keenan’s well in it, she said,
I can see the sky at the bottom of it now.²⁹

Indeed, that is the powerful potential of lyric poetry that Heaney’s art of the sonnet testifies to, especially from the subtly dramatic “Glanmore Sonnets” onwards: at its best, the sonnet captures not just (as Heaney has put it famously) “the music of what happens” (173) but the very form of what happens as well.

²⁹ Heaney, *Opened Ground* 408.