
Converting to Things Foreknown: Heaney's Marvelous Imagination in "Station Island"

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Abstract. This essay explores Seamus Heaney's "Station Island" series in its procession of visions during a pilgrimage to the island of Lough Derg. I argue that Heaney works out in this series a picture of the meeting of worlds, of the worldliness of the present and the in-breaking of the otherworldly, and in this poem we see the "deep Catholicism" of Heaney's redemptive, cathartic poetry. This feature is important to understanding the significance of Heaney's marriage of the sacred and secular; these poems, examined in the context of Heaney's larger vision, show the evolution of Heaney's poetry and put forth the possibility of a poetry that can work as purgation.

Keywords. Seamus Heaney, Station Island, Pilgrimage, Catholicism, Sacred, Purgatory.

Resumen. Este ensayo explora la serie "Station Island" de Seamus Heaney con su procesión de visiones durante una peregrinación a la isla de Lough Derg. Se argumenta que en dicha serie Heaney ofrece una imagen del encuentro del mundanal presente y del mundo místico, y que el poema revela el "profundo catolicismo" de la poesía redentora y catártica de Heaney. Esta característica es importante para entender la importancia de la unión de lo sagrado y lo secular en Heaney; los poemas, examinados en el contexto de la visión más amplia del poeta, muestran la evolución de su poética y plantean la posibilidad de una poesía que funcione como purgación.

Palabras clave. Seamus Heaney, Station Island, peregrinación, catolicismo, sagrado, purgatorio.

Seamus Heaney says in his "The Murmur of Malvern", a review of Derek Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979) that "The best poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* are dream-visions; the high moments are hallucinatory, cathartic, redemptive even" (Heaney 1990: 25). It is also true to say that some of Heaney's own best poems are dream-visions, those which are hallucinatory, cathartic, and maybe even redemptive as well. "Station Island", Heaney's pilgrimage to Lough Derg turned to metaphysical exploration of influence and dream-vision, becomes a primary focus in seeing Heaney's dynamic insight between this

world and the spirit world – possibly even a poetic vision of redemption through secular and poetic means. History is transfused with religious significance, Sweeney with Heaney's local priest, and the procession of visionaries with whom he meets appears apparitional, several meetings with the saints who have not died and gone away. Instead, Heaney reimagines them to a life incorruptible on the page. They challenge both the static acceptance and rejection of his Catholic faith. Whatever the ultimate expression of Heaney's faith might be, "Station Island" shows the poet's miasmatic marriage of religion and violence, but also how the "decent thing" is so

hard to both do and escape.

In Seamus Heaney's forty-four years of publishing poetry, between *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Human Chain* (2010), *Station Island* (1984) is one of the middle two volumes in his large body of work. At the center of this volume in three parts is the title poem, "Station Island" a series of twelve poems occasioning the speaker's visit to the Lough Derg pilgrimage which also serves, as others have noticed, as a veritable modern-day imaginative incarnation of Dante's *Commedia*, a suitable theme for a poem which traverses the poet's pilgrimage to an island known as "St. Patrick's Purgatory". "Station Island", as this middle piece, holds in tension worldliness and otherworldliness, the earthly and the heavenly, the sensual and the spiritual. We can read it as a kind of poetic Purgatory, a temporal space where these revenential visions function to bring us to poetic purgation through Heaney's "worldliness" and "otherworldliness".

Heaney's poetic imagination is deeply Catholic: his poetic vision is imbued with a communion of saints, a notion that spiritual significance is realized in the physical. Though the most immediate source for the poem is likely Dante, we understand that Dante's vision is intimately tied up with the broader and deeper Catholic imagination. This aspect of Heaney is itself worthy a longer project, but "Station Island" deserves more exploration in its groundedness mixed with spiritual transcendence. In the sacramental view of the material world, grace always moves through earthly things. William Lynch explores the literary religious imagination in his seminal work *Christ and Apollo* (1960). Apollo symbolizes eternity, expansiveness, or "*art as dream*" (x), while Christ symbolizes God in the flesh, the finiteness of God as a person, Jesus Christ, and in this book Lynch "juxtaposes Christian definiteness to romantic mythologizing". Lynch's book is a defense of the Catholic – essentially Christic – imagination as it synthesizes the finite and the infinite, particularity and the ideal and how "when we want the unlimited and the dream, we also want the earth" (Lynch 1960: 25). The cognitive allies of the Holy Ghost, Lynch says, are the means by which the intellect pushes through the *exitus reditus* of being, the descent

into the real and shooting up into insight, that realize things in this world in the proper relation to things in the other:

The finite is not itself a generality, to be encompassed in one fell swoop. Rather, it contains many shapes and byways and cleverness and powers and diversities and persons, and we must not go too fast from the many to the one. We waste out time if we try to go around or above or under the definite; we must literally go through it. And in taking this narrow path directly, we shall bring our remembered experience of things seen and earned in a cumulative way, to create hope in the things that are not yet seen (1960: 16).

If we understand Heaney's poetry in this way – and, more broadly, all poetry – moving from the definite seen things to the infinite unseen things, his imaginative movement as a poet, between *Death of a Naturalist* and *Seeing Things*, for instance, becomes more lucidly found in this deep Catholicism.

As John Desmond says, "Station Island" is one of a few key poems that "reveal his critical questioning and restiveness under the gravitational weight of the conventional Catholicism of his youth" (Desmond 2009: 9). He wants to express in new ways the mysterious transcendent dimensions of reality. He offers a metaphysical man positioned between the Incarnation and the Ascension (9). And right at the crux of this transformation of Heaney is "Station Island", a dream-vision which encloses lived experience by touching history, place, religion, and personal experience through these definite experiences with the secular saints he encounters. Henry Hart has noticed how in Heaney's recollections of victims in the atrocities of Northern Ireland the victims are rendered familiarly and in particularity, that "his ghosts are more particularized and more mundane than Eliot's [in 'Little Gidding']" (1988: 234). They are people he has known, and they come to him as such – Simon Sweeney, a priest and friend from town, his second cousin. In doing so, the infinite and limitless become present by analogy, through finite things and the two relevant objects of the literary imagination becomes the "real being outside of and the real self-identity inside the human person" (Desmond 2009: 6).

In “Crediting Poetry” Seamus Heaney contemplates this evolution over the years, one both surprising and fanciful, from poet of the troubles, of sackcloth and ashes, to a poet of the peace. It is a lengthy passage, but one of integrity and is worth quoting:

For years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rue to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for a meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. Attending sufficiently to the diamond absolutes, among which must be counted the sufficiency of that which is absolutely imagined. Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try and make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as for the murderous (Heaney 1999: 458).

This is a famous section of a famous essay, but it bears more full attention, for his no longer “forgetting faith” is a powerful upswing in his poetry. Heaney’s work as a poet exudes peace and control, so the vision he has of his early poetics is even a bit surprising when one reads “Digging” or any of his celebrations of the ordinary. In those poems he does not really come across as sackcloth and ashes as a poet of the local, however much he works against and with that locale.

It is the difference between “Digging” and “Lightenings” that Heaney makes up in “Station Island”. Consider “Digging” from *Death of a Naturalist* and its emphasis on the earthly, gritty side of poetry and life. The speaker imagines his father digging for potatoes, an analog for Heaney writing poetry, the “squat pen” snug between his finger and thumb like the spade of his father:

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

(Heaney 1988: 3)

The poem is full of earthy verbs, the “nicking and slicing” of potatoes and “squelch and slap/ of soggy peat”, and its roots are found much like the potatoes in Ireland, home to Heaney. These sounds feel exactly in step with the poem’s place, and you can hear the men at work. This poem is essentially grounded, worldly, and particular. Compare it to “Lightenings viii”, a poem famous for its negotiation between Heaney’s earthliness as it contemplates the marvelous. The poem’s power is rooted in the universal negotiation between the sensual and the spiritual, and its concerns for the otherworldly are obvious. Its mediation on history and religion are immediate, questioning and confirming what “The annals say” (Heaney 1993: 62). It begins with monks in prayer as they touch the supernatural ship that catches its anchor on the altar rails, the meeting of heaven and earth. Heaney inverts our pilgrim expectations, however, showing that this world, and not the other, is the marvelous. A shipman from the floating ship shinnies down: “‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown.’/ The abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So/ They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back/ Out of the marvelous as he had known it” (62). The poem suggests that prayer, or poems as prayer, make access to the other world possible, and it also suggests that both worlds are marvelous. That is not to say that “Digging” does not suggest the marvelousness of both worlds either, but it is clear that the earlier poems treat the particularities as such – as objects exactly as seen in this world. And how does the poet move from these earlier poems to the later? He sits in that in-between in “Station Island” more than he does in *Seeing Things*, wherein the supernatural is explicitly realized in terms of the natural. “Station Island” is a wrestling with the supernatural actively and arrestingly, much more than a pure renunciation of it that a superficial reading might suggest. But for Heaney the natural is never simply celebrated at a remove from an analogous reality. This essay is not to necessarily defend Heaney against these criticisms so much as it is to see how he arrives at the marvelous and how he finds from the

“in-betweenness” of this world and the other a fruitful tension, a pilgrim’s passion.

If Heaney’s poetry itself is an *exitus reditus* of the imagination, descending deep into the boggy of his conscience and of history, then “Station Island” is more of a return to the insight of the sacred rather than a run away from it. Earthiness is rendered in relation to the transcendent, though the transcendent does not necessarily feel so supernatural in the poem. Connections between this world and the other are surprisingly fluid and, at times, felicitous. Heaney presents a permeable barrier between the spirit world and this one.

Stefan Hawlin has excellently presented evidence in his “Seamus Heaney’s ‘Station Island’: The Shaping of a Modern Purgatory” for each of the twelve “shades” in their relationship to Heaney, and these will help frame the identities of the unnamed visitors here. Hawlin argues that Heaney’s poetic muse for much of the poem – at least for its structure – is Dante, “a touchstone of poetic and religious sensibility, as a stay against a declining, secularizing culture” (Hawlin 1992: 36). Other scholars have commented on Heaney’s renewed vision of Purgatory, the Lough Derg Island where the pilgrimage takes place and where it was traditionally thought the entrance of Purgatory was, or even “St. Patrick’s Purgatory” because the saint is believed to have prayed and fasted there.

As Fred Arroyo (1996: 5) has pointed out, the twelve poems of “Station Island” also function as something like the twelve beads on a rosary decade, the ten “Hail Mary” prayers along with the beginning “Our Father” and ending “Blessed Be”. All these establish the background for Heaney’s encounters, and these metaphysical ties are not lost in the poem. And Michael Cavanaugh (1993:7) argues that all of *Station Island* coincides with Dante’s *Commedia*. Cavanaugh is skeptical of Heaney’s critique of Eliot’s Dante in “Envious and Identifications”, saying Heaney transfers on Eliot all he himself does not want to name in Dante, “namely his didacticism, and specifically his religious orthodoxy” (1993: 9). Cavanaugh reads also another Heaney essay into *Station Island*, “Treely and Rurally”, where he remarks that the poet is initially written by place, pervious its various climates

political and otherwise. In this way the poetry is feminine, and for Heaney this poetry took on some aspects of Irish nationalism including harsh to be followed by harsh reactions against it. Cavanaugh reads the middle section of *Station Island* as the turn for the Dantean poet where the poet “doesn’t accept a vision from places but imposes it” (1993: 11). Alisdair Macrae argues that Heaney writes “Station Island” as a rejection of previous voices, of tribe and of the poet within himself, and the poet is now making a particularly new voice heard. It is a poem about poetry, and “Likewise the joys and fulfillments experienced in ‘Station Island’ owe little to religious enlightenment or divine intervention” (Macrae 1985: 133).

But Macrae settles for a more definitive Heaney than we should read in the poem. The whole construct is religious, the muse of the poem as well as the imagination that creates these visitations. Heaney does not exclude from these cantos religious significance but suggests a purgatorial stance that touches the sacraments and story level alike. Macrae ends by saying, “He begins the sequence with questions; he does not end with answers” (1985: 135). But we can see how the dream-vision is a meeting place of sacred and ordinary. More properly, the ordinary becomes a kind of sacred. Consider Heaney’s conflation of religious imagery and violence of the Troubles when he meets with William Stratham. This scene arguably contains some of the most powerful renunciations – of past errors and of lionizing the “martyrs” of the Irish violence. While we are tempted to think of these dream-vision visitors as ghosts, certain aspects of Heaney’s meetings make the visitors more saintly apparitions than secular muses. The reverential relationship between Heaney as speaker and his interlocutor almost always brings Heaney to revelation and purgation, much like Dante in the *Commedia*, his ideal for the poem.

Heaney himself feels a similar pull between the earthly and spiritual, what he says is in an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, “The books stood open and the gates unbarred’: Harvard”, is between “Derry and Derrida”, a felt poesy and an abstract one (2008: 287). He writes about the difficulty in the forms of faith and

the loss of these forms and these faiths, how in a *Haw Lantern* (1987) poem he calls this “the melt of the real thing/ smarting into its absence”. And it is difficult to see what is left after the faith is gone; Heaney finds a countervailing impulse at work, “a refusal to discredit ‘the real thing’, however much it may be melting. There’s a contest going on between Derry and Derrida...The words in the word-hoard were in danger of being dematerialized and everything in me was protesting silently” (O’Driscoll 2008: 287). Heaney works against discrediting the real thing, and his poems counteract the theory-speak he finds so insubstantial. But he still does not fully affirm the call of religion over and against the call of the imagination.

Interestingly, in this interview with O’Driscoll, “The books stood open and the gates unbarred”, Heaney turns to another Catholic pilgrimage that informs the first section of “Station Island”, his visit to Lourdes as a young graduate of St. Columb. In a turn to the interview, Heaney responds to the deconstructionists with a vision from Lourdes. About theorists with theory-speak he says,

They’ve been sprung from the world of the awestruck gaze, where there was a belief in miracle, in the sun standing still and the sun changing colour – just as it was said to have done at Fatima: they have entered the world of media-speak and postmodernity....They have moved from a world where the young were once sent to serve as stretcher-bearers at the shrine of Lourdes to a world where the young have shares invested for them at birth by their Celtic Tigerish parents (2008: 288).

Heaney refers to the nineteenth-century apparition of Mother Mary to a young girl, Bernadette, in a cave and several other apparitions in the surrounding area, which have come to be known as a particular veneration, Our Lady of Lourdes. The apparitional aspect in relation to “Station Island” is obvious, but Heaney connects the poem even more to this apparition and, derivatively, to the ability of religious forms and the “real thing” to shore against deconstructing the edifice:

I took it for granted [my visit to Lourdes]...I kind of foreknew it. At that time, the image of the grotto was omnipresent in Catholic houses and houses of worship: Bernadette kneeling with

her beads in her hand and her shawl on her head, Mary with her blue sash and her pale hands stretching out... I believed utterly in the good work, I believed that a cure was possible, although I had no trust in the inevitability of cure or in the necessarily divine cause of it... It was both routine and eerie, and I was susceptible, of course, to the surge of crowd emotions, the big choral responses to the rosary, the hymns, and the druggy fragrance of flowers and candles in the grotto itself. You could think of it as either ‘utterly empty’ or ‘utterly a source’ (2008: 289).

Heaney wavers in between belief and disbelief of the cure, and even whether or not these forms are a source of meaning or not. But his subtle incorporation of these images seems to posit a deep-down affirmation against any total rejection of the forms of language – and maybe faith. In this interview, Heaney refers to the third canto of “Station Island” where Heaney remembers – or rather flashes back in time to – the funeral of his aunt Agnes who died as a child. He is back at Lourdes in a way, the vision of “a toy grotto” sighted to match the unhealable invalid child. He can hear the clicks of rosary beads, the prayers of the Mass, and considers what it would be like to transcend like a soul out of body, “round/ and round a space utterly empty,/ utterly a source, like the idea of sound” (Heaney 1985: 68). This moment Heaney is rendered bodiless, the deconstructionist at the funeral, and he cannot help but get back to the powerful earthy – and morbid – images that empower the poem and the death of Agnes in comparing her smell to “the bad carcass and scraggs of hair/ of our dog that had disappeared weeks before”. Again, Heaney couches the metaphysical in terms of the physical, a death shrouded in the mystery of the Mass prayers considered in the image he knows immediately, the late dog dead.

These associations of the Fatima apparition, and the philosophical and linguistic difficulty of Derry and Derrida, appear in this first section of the poem, too. The visitor of the first section is Simon Sweeney, a tinker who would camp in the ditchbacks near the roadway to Heaney’s school. But Sweeney also refers to king Sweeney, a sixth-century Irish king who was turned into a bird-man by Saint Ronan after committing various unchristian acts (Hawlin 1992: 36). In this section, Heaney is

torn between the “lawlessness of creative imagination” and the “imperative call of religion” (Hawlin1992: 38) signified by the tolling bells. The poet does not yet, though, follow the creative imagination as he will by the final section.

Simon Sweeney’s visitation is rendered in terms of an apparition, and has flavors of the Marian apparition at Lourdes. The poem begins on a Sunday, and as an unsettling silence presides “a man had appeared/ at the side of the field/ with a bow-saw, held/ stiffly up like a lyre” (1985: 61). The repetition of “gaze” in lines thirteen and sixteen is like the “awestruck gaze” Heaney refers to, the one that believes in miracles, though with Sweeney it is relegated to nature as it remains on the hedge he saws, thus affirming Heaney’s worldiness. “Hazel” in the line fourteen summons his “The Diviner” from *Death of a Naturalist*. We find in both “Digging” and “The Diviner”, as well as many other poems, a similar evocation of the sacred through an immediate understanding of the natural. Particularly in “The Diviner” the common thing, a water diviner, becomes supernaturalized and transposed into a metaphorical plane. In so doing, Heaney pushes the poem into a higher synthesis, theologically orienting the poem into a marriage of nature and supernature.

Cut from the green hedge a forked hazel stick
That he held tight by the arms of the V:
Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck
Of water, nervous, but professionally

Unfussed. The pluck came as sharp as a sting.
The rod jerked with precise convulsions,
Spring water suddenly broadcasting
Through a green hazel its secret stations.

The bystanders would ask to have a try.
He handed them the rod without a word.
It lay dead in their grasp till, nonchalantly,
He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred.
(Heaney 1980: 26)

The sonnet poem obviously plays on a ritualistic Irish mysticism which blends with ritualistic Irish Catholicism, and in doing so the poem blends these metaphysical images with the actions of the poet-as-diviner. As such “The Diviner” imbues metaphysical significance through sacramental poetics.

“The Diviner” images the poetic craft as a calling and fuses the water diviner’s supernatural vocation with the poetic muse. The poem almost resists paraphrase as well as dissection, but a few images meld various meanings together – the “forked hazel stick” which is a kind of poet’s pen, the diviner “hunting the pluck ... nervous, but professionally” like the poet, too. “Spring water” becomes the symbol of hidden secrets, the playing of nature on men’s imagination and a kind of Aeolian harp in the poem. The image of the diviner’s hazel stick “hunting the pluck” is the key sign which moves this poem into the sacred. As a “common thing” concretely realized, readers understand that the image is an avenue to the sacred that is beyond that image. Much like the diviner believes in their own calling, the poet also has a gift that comes from nature, “cut from the green hedge”, and supernature alike. The thrice used “hazel” in “The Diviner” is brought back to Simon Sweeney to communicate a move of the divine through the natural, the man he knew in the land he knows.

Sweeney’s call to Heaney to “Stay clear of all processions!” then, is held in contrast to the pilgrim’s procession the speaker is currently moving in. Heaney turns the Fatima apparition into a Sabbath-breaker’s call to stay clear of such group-think. But Heaney’s description of the hordes at Lourdes, the “surge of crowd emotions, the big choral responses to the rosary, the hymns, and the druggy fragrance of flowers and candles in the grotto itself”, all feels tenderly treaded on in the poem’s end as the poet falls back into place; he hears Sweeney’s call, “but the murmur of the crowd/ and their feet slushing through/ the tender, bladed growth/ opened a drugged path/ I was set upon” (Heaney1985: 63). Undoubtedly the speaker is critical of the drugged path, and the passive language of the poet being “set upon” the road instead of choosing it is meant to ridicule blindly following the tribe. This section and the last when Heaney encounters the apparition of James Joyce work well in pondering the poet’s call to leave the formation (not simply the tribe) that they grew in. For now, we can say that the speaker appears tenderly torn between Sweeney, the man of nature supernaturally appearing to him, and the

promise of supernatural grace he encounters through the form of the pilgrimage, where prayer is still simply prayer. Michael Cavanaugh reads like many others Sweeney's warning to "Stay clear of all processions" as Heaney's own dictum, and that Sweeney's curmudgeonly advice reveals how "in many respects Station Island is an angry poem" (1993: 14). But if this section is read in light of Heaney's pilgrimage to Lourdes, and more broadly about the religion that has formed but also troubled him, then we read Heaney in this poem as somewhat sympathetic to these processions. His recreation of the pilgrimage in the poem does not appear to be an all-out rejection of what they mean to communicate, for it is here in the pilgrimage that Heaney finds his poetic if not prophetic muses in the apparitions of his secular saints.

In the second canto, Heaney realizes that he cannot simply leave his faith, the pilgrimage he is on, but he needs to learn how to filter the natural for what can be gleaned as the spiritual. William Carleton (1794-1869), whose father was a Gaelic-speaking, Catholic peasant, and who himself converted to the dominant Protestantism, appears at once as an anti-Heaney who has betrayed his home but one who has learned to have a singular vision. In this, Carleton's example to Heaney to be an outsider is offered but not accepted. Carleton also becomes an apparition, as he "came to life in the driving mirror" (1985: 64). Heaney's static faith makes him "the challenged one", and Carleton becomes angry at Heaney's do-nothing poesy. Heaney confronts the apparition in showing that he will not become a political zealot using poetry as a means, holding his own post as the poet who has "no mettle for the angry role" in comparison with a textual ghost that haunts the poem, Carleton's critical *Lough Derg Pilgrim*. A few critics do seem to read in the poem an affirmation of some forms of the faith, too, such as Catherine Malloy: "In effect, the visitations with the shades, while they may discourage retelling the poet's latent religious ferment (for example, his encounter with Sweeney), they may encourage – as they do in his discussion with Carleton, for example – the traditions of which he is a part" (1992: 24). She argues that the poet is refreshed and encouraged by the visitations, which replace

the stations his is supposed to have pilgrimmed to.

So Heaney does finally learn from Carleton: it is not to renege on his past but rather to "remember everything and keep your head" (Heaney1985: 66). With this interruption from his interlocutor, Heaney responds with a litany of earthy images, noticeably images from his earlier poetry: "'The alders in the hedge,' I said, 'mushrooms,/ dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dinged,/ the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open...". Carleton's response focuses Heaney's earthly call in a way that gears it to the spiritual, that it must be filtered by the poet to make it last, to give the feeling words: "'All this is like a trout kept in a spring/ or maggots sown in wounds--/ another life that cleans our element" (Heaney1985: 66). This is a characteristic blending of Heaney's worldliness and otherworldliness, how he takes the apparitional figure who has come to life in order to touch the two worlds. While Carleton's "our element" may mean the element of life in totality, it also includes the ways in which writing about the particular things Heaney names cleans Carleton's element, of the spiritual marvelous.

In canto four Heaney meets a priest he knew as a young man, then both young man and the father only a seminarian. It is Heaney's subversion of the "I renounce" from the baptismal rite into a renunciation of the Church; he has come "taking the last look" (Heaney1985: 71) in his elegizing the corpse of the Catholic Church. The speaker turns on its head the words of baptism, making "I renounce" not a charge levelled at the devil but one backfiring at his faith, an ironic inversion of the fourth station of the cross, Peter's denial of Christ. This renunciation is prefigured in the three bell tolls of the first canto, and this section clearly denotes a change in Heaney's dogmatic confession. But is it a wholesale rejection? Poetry still ties intimately to the forms of the religious call, and Heaney's "vocation" as a poet is rendered in terms almost entirely religious as a counter to the priest from this section. However, Heaney does not do this to simply criticize the priest but rather show an incontrovertible witness of the other side of spiritual life, how poems give access to the holy in ways the priest would not.

In canto five Barney Murphy, Heaney's old schoolteacher, meets his pupil at the station of the cross; Heaney, after recalling hard lessons from the Latin, hears instead the voice of Hopkins, "another master": "For what is the great/ moving power and spring of verse? Feeling, and/ in particular, love" (Heaney 1985: 73). Jiong Liu has argued that even at his earliest Heaney felt the intrinsic, even sacramental, relationship between the "body" of language and the natural stemming from his deep reading and even imitating of Hopkins.

Hopkins believes that divine significance impresses, imprints, and informs every individual object, imparting meaning to it. What is stressed in his poetry is the sacramental embodiment of God's truth; its instress is God's entering into and charging nature. The charged nature always bears the form of a certain inner pattern, carries a certain design. This inscape, the design or pattern, is a masculine, restraining force, opposite to the free-flowing, oozing ease of spontaneous, feminine poetic grace. Heaney is keen to observe this deeper dimension of Hopkins's masculinity (Liu 2010: 272).

Liu is somewhat critical of Heaney's later loss of the Hopkinsesque, Heaney's move towards that marvelous that he says loses the immanent sacramental qualities that the earthy language brings. Liu relates another critic's comment: "The shift from dark to light, from inward to outward, was construed by critics, using one of Heaney's favorite tropes, as 'the allegorical victory of the 'sky-born' Hercules over native, earth-grubbing Antaeus'" (Liu 2010: 277). Hopkins becomes the other master here not because religion is fully tarnished but because the religion of Master Murphy lacks poetic trust. Heaney believes that his time in the Anahorish school of grammar with Murphy is stations enough. The speaker is now more prepared through the Murphian apparition's call to "step out on the water", the sea of the poetic vocation, that will be asked of him in the seventh stanza.

The seventh section follows a visit from William Stratham, a Catholic shopkeeper assassinated in random violence. The seventh station of the fourteen stations of the cross is the meditation on Jesus' taking up the cross, and therefore the section moves the speaker from his wavering in the poetic vocation to

taking up of the real thing.

I had come to the edge of the water,
Soothed by just looking, idling over it
As if it were a clear barometer

Or a mirror, when his reflection
did not appear but I sensed a presence
entering into my concentration

on not being concentrated as he spoke
my name. And though I was reluctant
I turned to meet his face and the shock

is still in me at what I saw. His brow
was blown open above the eye and blood
had dried on his neck and cheek...

(Heaney 1985: 77)

We see that the speaker was wavering here at the "edge" of the water, just "idling" there as he was in his poetic calling. The poet stands next to the water, be it baptismal or the sea, and he will not step out on it. Instead, the water is for contemplation, *literal reflection*. And therein lies its power as a receptacle for the otherworldly. The speaker is sitting there without concentration, simply contemplating.

In this passive attitude, rather than forceful prayer or fixed attention, the speaker thinks at first Christ comes to him in the reflection: "'Easy now,'/ he said, 'it's only me'" (Heaney 1985: 77). But even William Stratham comes to him like a battered Christ, image of the innocent sufferer. Following Christ's scourging and crowning with the crown of thorns in the sixth station of the cross, we encounter here a bruised Christ-type, "His brow/ was blown open above the eye and blood had dried above the eye and cheek". The speaker, too, is relieved it is only Stratham and not God, and the reluctance to meet God face to face is a theme that persists throughout *Station Island* as well as the later Heaney poems. Instead, he meets ordinary folk that have come to him extraordinarily. Stratham consoles Heaney after his shocking appearance, and the ellipsis on the fourteenth line – that ends the proper counting of the stations – brings the extraordinary apparition into ordinary storytelling. He explains the murder, and the events are expounded with quotidian clarity. He knows the two "shites" who did it, recognizes their faces for those who thought themselves the "be-all and the end-all", the judges of the

beginning and the end. These murderers have made themselves into Gods, and the poem resists the same temptation. When Heaney mentions that the men were caught and imprisoned, moving the topic to the big ideas of justice, Stratham smiles and brings it back to the ordinary saying, “You’ve put on weight/ since you did your courting in that big Austin you got the loan of on a Sunday night” (Heaney 1985: 79).

Stratham’s forgiveness – or, more simply, forgetfulness – of the murderers’ crime positions Heaney’s poetic crimes similarly, and his penance I washed over like a fulfillment of the water in which his contemplation opens this canto. We further see how Stratham’s Christic allusions focus the section on forgiving Heaney in his own eyes for not making peace through his poetry.

Through life and death he had hardly aged.
There always was an athlete’s cleanliness
shining off him and except for the ravaged

forehead and the blood, he was still that same
rangy midfielder in a blue jersey
and starched pants, the one stylist on the team,

the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim.
‘Forgive the way I have lived indifferent –
forgive my timid circumspect involvement,’

I surprised myself by saying, ‘Forgive
my eye,’ he said, ‘all that’s above my head.’
And then a stun of pain seemed to go through him
and he trembled like a heatwave and faded.

(Heaney 1985: 79-80)

The closing stanzas bear upon the poem the redemptive action from Stratham, and the Messianic vision is heightened. His cleanliness is twice highlighted, particularly how it “shines” off him, the “unthinkable victim” and scapegoat for troubles he had no part in perpetuating. His confession to Stratham prepares his later confession in the next canto to Colum McCartney, whose death he had made into art. But his confession also shows Heaney’s complicity through passivity, how his idling did nothing to stop the violence, though the question remains as to whether he could ever do so anyways. Like the crown of thorns or a judge who is not he, Stratham says that Heaney’s confessional judgment is “all above my head”.

Thus over and over again Heaney the speaker attempts to elevate the discourse to the supernatural – visions of Christ, justice, and absolution. But Stratham arrives as a secular saint and makes Heaney come to terms with these large questions through the ordinary, people of his past, the communion of saints he has always known. Gail McConnel provides a hearty purview of Heaney’s incorporation of Catholic iconography and ultimately sees these Christian images subverted solely for poetic purposes. “He is less concerned with addressing a god outside the perimeters of the lyric poem”, McConnel (2012: 10) argues, “as with the constitution of the lyric poem itself”. This irresolvable paradox finally “seems to render his Catholic borrowings secular (11). Heaney makes sacred the secular in this in-betweenness; in having the worlds of heaven and earth touch Heaney is obviously affirming the power of poetry, but he does this in extending our ideas of icons to secular saints in sacred places. Heaney upsets static notions of “otherworldliness” long before the celebrated move to the marvelous.

Such saintly apparitions also purify the poet from his literary sins of this world. Colum McCartney, Heaney’s cousin who animates “Strand at Lough Beg”, shows up as accuser to Heaney in canto eight: “The Protestant who shot me through the head/ I accuse directly, but indirectly, you/ who now atone perhaps upon this bed/...and saccharined my death with morning dew” (Heaney 1985: 83). But the saints also function as living witnesses he cannot escape such as the visitation of his second cousin who shows the speaker’s complicity in the challenge of faith and poetry, how we all “confuse evasion and artistic tact”. While there is little space to discuss this section or the following, in short we can say that these are preparatory movements in the poem through particular and historical persons Heaney has known, filtered through associations with holy texts, stories, or images. Cantos nine and ten focus rather on images: a victim of the Troubles speaking his peace, and then Saint Ronan serves as a testament to the enduring pilgrimage.

In canto eleven, Heaney meets a priest who encourages his poetic vocation instead of a religious one. The poet remembers back to a

time when he plunged a kaleidoscope into muddy water, how the prisms “surfaced like a marvellous lightship” (1985: 89). The lightship bears upon it a monk, and this scene is reminiscent of the marvelous ship in “Lightenings viii” from *Seeing Things*, and in this scene, like his later one, Heaney focuses on poetry as a union of the sacred and secular. The monk talks about the need to “replenish everything, to re-envisage/ the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift/ mistakenly abased...”:

‘Read poems as prayers,’ he said, ‘and for your
penance
translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.’

Returned from Spain to our chapped wilderness,
his consonants aspirate, his forehead shining,
he had made me feel there was nothing to confess.
(Heaney 1985: 89)

The poem does begin to read as a prayer, with the refrain of “although it is the night” reverberating through the poet’s meditations on the “eternal fountain” and “living bread” that become translated from purely religious significance to poetic purposes. The monk calls on him to translate St. John of the Cross, who held out his hand to God in all that dark, an act which Heaney must also do as a poet. Having been made clean throughout the poem, he must participate his will in the poetic vocation.

More famously, Heaney’s meeting with James Joyce in the last section is a reaffirmation of that poetic vocation: “Now strike your note” (Heaney 1985: 93). We can read Heaney’s relationship with Joyce in the poem like Darcy O’Brien, who argues that Heaney is not to be read as a perfect allegorically to Joyce, to “strike his note” in the angry iconoclastic fashion flying by the various nets. Heaney’s ties to the land, to his place, and to his early spiritual formation, are too strong for him to simply strike a note without the chorus of others he has known and tried to bring to life in the poem. Michael Patrick Gillespie shows a controlled understanding of Joyce in relation to Heaney, that “works of both authors outline – sometimes hesitantly and sometimes with great authority – strategies for embracing multiplicity within one’s surroundings” (Gillespie 1996: 121). His connections between

Joyce, Heaney, and their literary, religious, and historical atmospheres provide a helpful understanding of Heaney’s works, particularly the last section of “Station Island”.

As Magdalene Kay has said, “‘Extreme individualism’ does not strike Heaney’s note; the imagined shade of James Joyce needs to remind him that he *may* strike out on his own in ‘Station Island’” (Heaney 1985: 69). It is finally difficult to satisfyingly read his last section of the poem and say exactly what it means. Joyce seems to have won the day, and Heaney will go on to “fill the element/ with signatures of your own frequency” (1985: 94). And the poet has been essentially washed up from sea as he reaches for Joyce’s hand, and is now put on stable ground. At the end of the poem a “cloud-burst” follows Joyce’s exit, and these water images along with the *terzarima* that satisfies the section suggest a belief in Joyce as master – or at least *a* master. But even Joyce is presented dangerously, much like the crowds with whom he has prayed the stations. He has “a voice like a prosecutor’s or a singer’s,/ cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite” (1985: 92). Joyce has helped him out of the sea of what, of faith, of doubt? Does Heaney doubt also Joyce’s voice? The Joyce we get, rather than a lofty prophetic vision, is actually a much normalized apparition who keeps the poet grounded like so many of the other visitors. He urges Heaney to “get back in the harness. The main thing is to write/ for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust/ that imagines its haven like your hands at night/ dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast” (Heaney 1985: 93). Joyce warns against an abstract poetic vocation, one guided towards politics or a “profession”, and his hard words bring Heaney back down to earth. We see this in the contrasted rhetoric between the two:

‘Old father, mother’s son,
there is a moment in Stephen’s diary
for April the thirteenth, a revelation

set among my stars – that one entry
has been a sort of password in my ears,
the collect of a new epiphany,

the Feast of Holy Tundish.’ ‘Who cares,’
he jeered, ‘any more? The English language
belongs to us.

(Heaney 1985: 93)

Heaney's lofty ideal is sobered in Joyce here, and whereas Heaney is reading in the stars Joyce wants him to look again at language and what epiphanies can be found therein. In this, he does not seem to invert all religious form, offering a Feast of Holy Tundish to trump the Feast of the Blessed Mother, but Heaney gives us something more various, more profound than the all-out rejection of faith that he has tried before in the poem. He offers a synthesis of vision through the people he has known intimately, in life or in letters. In this last canto where Heaney "stepped on ground", he is sure to remain here in order that he might make the marvelous appear on earth, praying the poem of stations to the people he knows.

In all of these visitations, the dead come to life and the past becomes present. An imaginative thread, then, branches these dissociate realms. The question remains: is Heaney's "Station Island" redemptive? Philosopher Jacques Maritain says in his *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry* (1962) that when we talk about Christian art – a concern here – we are talking about redemptive art:

It is the art of redeemed humanity... Everything belongs to it, the sacred as well as the profane. It is at home wherever the ingenuity and joy of man extend...It is difficult, doubly difficult – fourfold difficult, because it is difficult to be an artist and very difficult to be a Christian, and because the total difficulty is not simply the sum but the product of these two difficulties multiplied by one another: for it is a question of harmonizing two absolutes (Maritain 1962: 65).

Heaney's dream-visions celebrate the sacred through symbols of the ordinary in these apparitions of the saints he has known before. His grammar is Catholic, and intrinsic in this vision is a fulfilment of all things catholic – universal – even his honest renouncement of his faith for the poetic vocation. This is not to say that Heaney is a Christian poet. A label like this gives us nothing by which to understand his good work better. But this understanding of an imagination that holds two absolutes together – earthly experience with metaphysical visions of the marvelous – does offer us ways of affirming the extraordinary uses of the ordinary that we find in Heaney.

Heaney's sacramental imagination looks to words as an evocation of reality which does not totalize that reality. Sacramental poetics insist on the material world and the symbols used to describe it as analogical to a higher reality; in this, the approach is akin to Heaney's idea about the bog as symbol: "*there was no bottom*" (2002: 25). Allen Tate, poet of the New Critics and of which Heaney was thoroughly schooled, argues in his "The Symbolic Imagination" that Catholic poets – and poets in general – need to find something like the "concrete realization" that Heaney writes about:

Catholic poets have lost, along with their heretical friends, the power to start with the "common thing": they have lost the gift for concrete experience. The abstraction of the modern mind has obscured their way into the natural order. Nature offers to the symbolic poet clearly denotable objects in depth and in the round, which yield the analogies to the higher syntheses. The modern poet rejects the higher synthesis, or tosses it in a vacuum of abstraction (Tate 1968: 430).

Tate would, like Heaney, push for feeling into words as a poetic embodiment of ranging abstract truths. What Heaney seems to mean by realizing the concrete is to find a symbol for which there is no bottom. Heaney's visions come to the reader through the poet's theological imagination, a communion with the saints secular and sacred. Ultimately, this literary and theological imagination is an underlying technique that gathers together both poetic craft and a-temporal community and, in doing so, pushes what is earthly into a possible eternal. Heaney's "Station Island" grasps at all the earthiness he has loved before and strains with it toward the spiritual marvelous. In his apparitions he takes the infinite and gives it form in the finite, and he finds in the finite flavors of what is to come. Heaney's "Station Island" finds the marvelous in-between these two worlds, pointing forward to his "Squarings xlviii" from *Seeing Things*, where the infinite meets the finitude of memory, the people he has met along the island of Purgatory who have made earth his home:

Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
Convert to things foreknown;
And what's come upon is manifest

Only in light of what has been gone through.
 Seventh heaven may be
 The whole truth of a sixth sense come to pass...
 Out in the mid-channel between the painted poles,
 That day I'll be in step with what escaped me.
 (Heaney 1991: 102)

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