
Heaney and American Poetry: The California Narrative

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Abstract. This essay examines the body of critical material concerned with Seamus Heaney's relationship with American poetry and offers a new perspective from which to approach the Irish poet in relation to his claimed American influences of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly. Existing criticism maintains a narrative in which his 1970-1 Berkeley residency (and the Bay Area poetry he encountered there) liberated him from an antithetical, constraining poetics. My research contends the stylistic developments of *Wintering Out* (1972) and *Stations* (1975) were mostly facilitated by distance from Ireland rather than Bay Area poetry, and that the argument which emerges in the critical studies in the '80s and '90s largely follows a trail left by Heaney himself, who may have sought to redefine the Berkeley residency as a period of experimentation rather than hesitation, as it was originally understood in early reviews of *Wintering Out*.

Key Words. Irish Poetry, American Literature, Seamus Heaney.

Resumen. En este ensayo se examina la crítica existente con respecto a la relación de Seamus Heaney con la poesía estadounidense y ofrece una nueva perspectiva desde la cual abordar al poeta irlandés y las supuestas influencias de Gary Snyder y Robert Bly en su obra. La crítica mantiene mayoritariamente una narrativa según la cual su residencia de Berkeley en 1970-1 (y la poesía del Área de la Bahía que encontró allí) lo liberaron de una poética antitética y restrictiva. Mi investigación sostiene que los desarrollos estilísticos de *Wintering Out* (1972) y *Stations* (1975) fueron facilitados principalmente por la distancia de Irlanda en lugar de la poesía del Área de la Bahía, y que el razonamiento que impera en los estudios críticos sobre el tema en los años 80 y 90 sigue en gran medida un rastro dejado por el mismo Heaney, quien pudo haber intentado redefinir la residencia de Berkeley como un período de experimentación en lugar de vacilación, como se entendió originalmente en las primeras reseñas de *Wintering Out*.

Palabras Clave. Poesía irlandesa, literatura americana, Seamus Heaney.

In her 2012 study *In Gratitude for All Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe*, Magdalena Kay argues:

Heaney's critics insist on the American influence ... with a tenacity that is surprising given the lack of evidence for many such claims. The search for echoes of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly does not yield much fruit; the mention of Louis Simpson in 'Making Strange' hardly invites one to an influence study; Heaney's great admiration for William Carlos Williams is certainly worth mentioning, yet Williams's short lines sound nothing like Heaney's drill-like stanzas of the 1970s. (131)

Kay's observations highlight that, for too long, criticism has looked for the American element of Heaney's achievement in the wrong places, due in large part to the dominance of certain theories that remain widespread in Heaney criticism today. The arguments Kay notes regarding Heaney and America are rooted in assessments of his 1970-71 residency as visiting lecturer in the University of California, Berkeley. Existing criticism tends to argue the Californian residency functioned in two ways: to awaken the political impulse of Heaney's verse and to liberate him from constraining Anglo-Irish formalism. It thus assumes the 1970-71 sojourn was Heaney's first major confrontation with American writing, overlooking much of his reading and writing in the 1960s which shows a strong fondness for many US writers. Michael Parker's assertion that "Heaney's work during the period in which the poems of *Wintering Out* (1972) were being composed was deeply affected by political and literary experiences in the United States" (16) is in line with the arguments of Henry Hart, Michael Allen, and Jonathan Allison, all of whom published commentary on Heaney's Berkeley residency in the 1990s.

The poets most often credited as formal exemplars in California by these critics (and by Heaney himself) are Gary Snyder and Robert Bly, the latter of whom is usually invoked in discussions of the prose collection *Stations* (1975) which, like *Wintering Out* (1972), was begun in California but not published until four years later. Heaney has contributed to this narrative of awakening and influence. His willingness to commentate on this period has resulted in a critical argument that relies heavily on his interviews, a selective reading of the two collections, and a virtual blindness to the work of Snyder and Bly. When *Wintering Out* and *Stations* are considered in the broader picture of Heaney and American poetry, a counter-narrative emerges. Rather than embracing fresh examples, the Irish poet, already adept in American verse and a confident formalist, elides most of what he encounters in Berkeley; far from alleviating the pressures of the home crisis, the West Coast brings them into painful focus without offering solutions. While this essay does not have the scope necessary to demonstrate how, ironically, it is a sense of form gained in large part from American writers read in the 1960s that causes Heaney to resist the experimental examples he is rumoured to have been influenced by in Berkeley, it is possible to show how *unlike* the examples of Snyder and Bly Heaney's 1970s poetry is, and why he may have wanted to exaggerate their significance.

Despite early assessments of *Wintering Out* as disappointing in its lack of risk-taking, later commentary was more favourable and praised Heaney's ability to draw on an expanding range of influences in an ambitious development. An early reviewer attacked *Wintering Out* as "unsatisfactory" and disappointingly "transitional" for failing to "tackle head on" the outbreak of political violence in Northern Ireland ("Semaphores of Hurt") while Seamus Deane, in a more mixed response, wrote that the poems of *Wintering Out* "express no politics" (203). This view of the collection as evasive – an accusation Heaney was vulnerable to due to his year spent abroad – is largely forgotten because of the reassessments of *Wintering Out* and *Stations* in the major studies of Heaney appearing in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the commentary

from this era cites the poet's own comments, such as the following made during a 1979 interview with James Randall:

The year 1970-71 I spent in Berkeley and that was also a releasing thing ... I became very conscious of the poetry of Gary Snyder. I saw Snyder; and Bly was living in Bolinas that year. He read a couple of times around the Bay Area. The whole atmosphere in Berkeley was politicized ... There was a strong sense of contemporary American poetry in the West with Robert Duncan and Bly and Gary Snyder rejecting the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry and going for the mythological ... that meshed with my own concerns for I could see a close connection between the political and cultural assertions being made at that time by the minority in the north of Ireland and the protests and consciousness-raising that were going on in the Bay Area. And the poets were a part of this and also, pre-eminently, part of the protest against the Vietnam war. So that was probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley, that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance. (20)

Although Heaney does not credit Snyder or Bly with formal influence explicitly, his description of “a releasing” function has led critics to understand the impact of West Coast poetry as a loosening effect on the verse line and stanza shape of *Wintering Out* and *Stations*. Heaney reinforced this in a 1988 interview with Randy Brandes, explaining the “venture to America was to encounter the other, to put the screws on my own aesthetic” (16-17). While the visual appearance of *Wintering Out* and *Stations* does indicate a stylistic shift, it is largely through a use of Heaney's commentary rather than the poetry itself that existing criticism has argued Bay Area poetry influenced his forms.

Heaney's self-analysis appears to have influenced responses to *Wintering Out* ever since. In his 1992 study, Henry Hart contends that Heaney was “inspired by the technical examples and ideological concerns of Bly and Snyder” (99-100), relying on the interview with Randall to stress the significance of the Berkeley residency. Jonathan Allison uses a quotation from the same interview with Randall as an epigraph for his 1996 article in which he too argues American poetry offered Heaney fresh solutions in the early 1970s, making the bold assertion that US poetry offered the Irish poet “a poetic energy and a radical political environment which could ... provide a bracing example for a young poet trying to find his or her own voice” (178), adding “American poetry represented for Heaney an invigorating alterity” (184) to English and Irish models. Parker adds that Heaney's early “attention to the parish and to traditional forms was a strength, but one in danger of becoming a shortcoming, especially when set alongside ... Derek Mahon's and Michael Longley's early work”, thus, the stylistic departure of *Wintering Out* “indicates a conscious effort on Heaney's part to enlarge the scope and scale of his poetic program” (25). Seen by many as the “poet Laureate of the [American] academy” (Fennell 7) in the 1990s when these assessments appeared, Heaney certainly would have approved of such an interpretation of his first US residency.

The argument for the significance of California remains in place today. In his 2013 study, Richard Rankin Russell applies the Californian theory to the later *North* (1975) where, he suggests, Heaney is still drawing on the American examples he was exposed to during his 1970-71 residency (164). More recently, Robert Tracy has exemplified the seductiveness of the narrative in his article “Westering: Seamus Heaney's Berkeley Year” where he reflects on the original title of the final poem in *Wintering Out* “Easy Rider: Westering”. Tracy compares Heaney's Californian sojourn to the 1969 film of the same name, passing through “the nineteen-sixties America of new styles, hair lengths, music, political activity, and sexual

behaviour” and argues that, despite the title change to simply “Westering”, “the free-wheeling spirit” (Tracy) of this idealised West Coast survives in the poetry of *Wintering Out*. Although there is some truth to the claim that the stylistic shift of *Wintering Out* is linked to Heaney’s time abroad, the critical argument still being made today is lacking in two ways. Firstly, Heaney’s American influences predate his Berkeley residency and are more deeply rooted in his form than existing commentary has recognised. Secondly, criticism has overestimated the influence of Snyder and Bly on Heaney’s poetic form and ignored the continuities of *Wintering Out* and *Stations* with his earlier volumes. The significance of the Berkeley residency can, in many ways, be better understood in terms of what Heaney resists – rather than the little he takes – from the contemporary US poetry he confronts.

Critics examining Heaney’s American experiences overlook his exposure to American poetry as an undergraduate student at Queen’s University and his competency as a critic of American poetry in the 1960s. Several years prior to his Californian crossing, Heaney was publishing reviews of key influences Theodore Roethke and Robert Lowell as well as a lesser known 1965 commentary on the work of Edward Lucie-Smith, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Marianne Moore. In his analysis of *The Dream Songs*, Heaney praises Berryman’s portrayal of an American society “careering down the rails of materialism” while Moore, he argues, has written “good poetry since 1915” and he continues to be “impressed with the subtle playing off of line endings against the easy cadences of the American voice” (“Confessions and Histories” 23). Heaney’s confident generalisations reflect his less acknowledged experience as a teacher as well as a student of American writing in Belfast during the 1960s. Appointed to the Queen’s faculty in 1966, Heaney was given responsibility for “the First Arts poetry lectures, and taught Modern Literature seminars” (O’Driscoll 102); the set texts recorded for the First Arts module in Queen’s Calendar for the academic year 1966-67 include Faulkner, Eliot, and Frost alongside British and Irish writers as required reading (Queen’s Calendar). Heaney was also joined on the teaching faculty by Michael Allen who taught “American Literature at Queen’s university – a number of such posts having been created to promote American studies throughout Europe” (Longley 263). Edna Longley, herself a member of the Queen’s faculty at this time, characterises Allen as “an influential character in Belfast”, becoming a “friend and mentor of poets” while Heaney describes Allen affectionately as “the reader over my shoulder” (*Preoccupations* 14). It was during this period of teaching that Heaney also began his research into “the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness” (*Preoccupations* 55) that, in an oft-cited passage from “Feeling into Words”, he claims led him to an idea of the bog as an answering myth in “Bogland”.

It is surprising, then, that by 1970 when he was composing *Wintering Out*, Heaney should feel like American poetry was “other” (Brandes 16) since he had spent many years studying, teaching, and responding in verse to American writing. One possible summation may be that Heaney’s later depiction of himself across his prose and interviews as “consciously hoping for liberation” (“Threshold and Floor” 266) in the new, “antithetical” (Brandes 16) poetic climate was an attempt to manage the perception of his actions and verse. A conscientious uprooting to expand his sources and equip himself for the political fallout at home might have been considered more favourable than procrastination. He might also have wanted to install a more positive narrative in place of the statements he made in a *Listener* article in 1970 in which he complains of California’s “rip-off generation” and the “grotesquely violent rhetoric” (“Views” 903) of the Black Panthers, a sharp contrast to the image of Heaney in California preserved today.

Indeed, even two of the more experimental poems in *Wintering Out* – “Broagh” and “Gifts of Rain” – fail to provide strong evidence for the widely claimed influence of Gary Snyder. Despite their surface-level experimentalism, these poems do not push into new areas but develop the poetics of Heaney’s first two collections. Snyder rose to prominence in the

1950s among a diverse group of young artists in San Francisco and is noted as a significant presence around campus by W. J. Rorabaugh in his account of life at Berkeley in the 1960s, launching the Human Be-In in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in January 1967 by blowing on a conch shell (141). While at Berkeley in 1970-71, Heaney recalls he learnt "to hear and respect" Snyder by attending his readings, coming to see the "disposition of the verse on the page as a musical notation of sorts" (O'Driscoll 146), as well as attending parties organised by Tom Parkinson where Snyder and other writers gathered (141). In contrast to Heaney's catechistic poetics, however, Snyder's poetry takes inspiration from the Zen Buddhism in which he was formally trained (Rorabaugh 153) and is noted for its experimentation with metre and lineation, finding "solace in the breadth of the individual and the rhythms of natural processes" (Davidson 73) while it is also defined as ecologist, owing to its emphasis on the rugged landscapes where Snyder spent much of his working life. Contributing to the argument for influence, Heaney has claimed the American examples in Berkeley taught him "to trust the 'nature' aspect" (O'Driscoll 142) of his poetry. A new confidence is certainly illustrated by the poems "Fodder", "Anahorish", "Toome", and "Broagh" which he calls "Ulster myths of belonging" (125), in the manner he earlier defined "Bogland" as an "answering Irish myth" (*Preoccupations* 55) to the American Frontier. Critics have also noted the uniqueness of these poems in Heaney's oeuvre: Corcoran praises the "astoundingly inventive" (88) poems as "among the most original poems Heaney has written" (87) while O'Donoghue, recognising the "considerable cunning" (62) with which Heaney deploys his knowledge of linguistics, notes the etymological sequence was "a procedure that was short-lived in Heaney's poetry" (67), perhaps a result of Heaney's "one-off adventure" (O'Driscoll 136) during which they were conceived. The most discussed of these poems, "Broagh", however, when compared with the widely anthologised Snyder poem "Piute Creek", exposes the chasm between the two poets' thinking.

"Piute Creek" is typical of Snyder's naturism and yet, in both form and sentiment, it diverges from the poetics Heaney is developing in "Broagh":

One granite ridge
 A tree, would be enough
 Or even a rock, a small creek,
 A bark shred in a pool.
 ...
 Words and books
 Like a small creek off a high ledge
 Gone in the dry air. (13)

The communion being forged with nature is without introspection or a sense of deliberate poetic craft, attributes which lead Colin Falck to read "Piute Creek" as "pure Beat-1950s-speak" (142). The abandonment of art in favour of this barer nature is consistent with Snyder's belief that "sensitivity and awareness are not limited to educated people", and that inspiration can be derived not just from "the books I've read" but "the jobs I've done" (*Earth House Hold* 211). Following the demands of its content intuitively towards broken syntax and repetitive description, Snyder rejects the cluttering effects of "Words and books" and "All the junk that goes with being human". Reflecting on this section, Lars Nordström reasons "Piute Creek" "affirms the supremacy of the wilderness in its encounter with the insignificant 'words and books' of the personal self ... the wilderness setting 'truly seen' through the poetic form takes on the 'meaning,' not anything else" (110). Bending to nature rather staying against it – a phrase

Heaney borrows from Frost often – Snyder in “Piute Creek” appears wedded to a poetics sharply at odds with Heaney’s. Essentially, the American poet’s example lacks the faith in poetry’s dualistic relationship with the world that for Heaney is axiomatic, making it an unlikely source for even the most experimental verses of *Wintering Out*.¹

In contrast to Snyder’s efforts, “Broagh” impresses a shape upon experience through poetic form. In the sophistication of its linguistic ploys and emphasis on human history, “Broagh” is in tension with “Piute Creek” in many other significant ways. Rather than eschewing civilisation in preference for “the world of pre- or sub-human nature” (Falck 135) as Snyder does, Heaney accesses nature through etymology and re-enshrines the word as the original symbol. Through “the black *O*” and “low tattoo” of “*Broagh*” (27), Heaney gains access to an entire landscape. Unlike the varied stanzas and eleven sentences of “Piute Creek”, Heaney’s compact quatrains are comprised of only two; far from rejecting “Words and books”, words are both the means and the subject matter of “Broagh”, a poem which savours its own aural qualities as it progresses. Etymology and sound provide the layers of signification that enable the speaker to access “the windy boortrees / and rhubarb-blades”, thus the power of words to “mean” and *not* to “be” is the tension out of which “Broagh” springs.

O’Donoghue, who gives extensive attention to the place name sequence of *Wintering Out*, notes that “Broagh” embodies “the full Northern Irish linguistic complex” (63). Building on Paulin’s analysis, O’Donoghue corrects Foster’s early misreading of “Broagh” in which he argues that a mistaken Heaney believes the velar fricative *gh* is “a native Irish rather than English sound”; rather:

Heaney’s point is precisely that for the native Irish sound (as at the end of ‘Lough’), familiar locally ‘to Protestant and Catholic alike’, the Old English spelling system can offer only an approximation from within the resources of its own orthography. This is the now-obsolete Germanic velar fricative, as in Chaucer’s ‘knight’ [/knixt/], which of course has no historic relation to the sound at the end of the Gaelic word *bruach*, ‘riverbank’. The supplying of this non-native orthographic form is to help with the re-creation of the pronunciation to which spelling, in its clumsy way, aspires. (64)

Lacking any signs of the loosening California spirit, then, “Broagh” instead resembles a technical exercise, drawing on the conscientious study of the English Language that Heaney’s undergraduate notebooks reveal – hardly “Beat-speak”. Holding “Words and books” tightly, “Broagh” could not share in Snyder’s easy dismissal of “the junk that goes with being human” either, since the *gh* being plumbed is significant precisely because it reveals the word as “pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, *as symptom of human history, memory and attachments*” (*Preoccupations* 150; emphasis added). Snyder’s effort to strip language bare of its humanness to access a purer experience of nature is therefore, in Heaney’s thinking, doomed by its very method. The closing phrases of each poem distil the clash of sensibilities: while Snyder’s speaker is ready to “rise and go” freely into nature, Heaney’s phrase “hard to manage” reads as a reflexive commentary on what has been an ambitious undertaking. Although “Broagh” does make use of a shorter line and more flexible rhythm than earlier poems, this alone cannot substantiate the claim for Snyder’s influence. It should be remembered that the poems of *Wintering Out* were some of the first to be written outside of Hobsbaum’s Belfast Group environment where rougher textures and tighter rhythms were encouraged. The stylistic shift of *Wintering Out* may be better understood, then, as a natural refinement.

Similar conflicts arise when Snyder's "Riprap" is compared to "Gifts of Rain", despite Heaney's sparser lines and fragmented lineation. "Riprap", the title poem of Snyder's 1959 collection, is named after an innovated pathway Snyder describes as "a cobble of stones laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in mountains" (*Riprap*, epigraph). Snyder uses lineation to mimic such a footfall:

Lay down these words
 Before your mind like rocks.
 placed solid, by hands
 In choice of place, set
 Before the body of the mind
 in space and time:
 Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
 riprap of things (29)

Visibly, Snyder's "rocks" and "words" and "thoughts" and "things" are synthesised in an imitative form in which poetic lines are locked in place like the stone path itself. Such a form recalls Olson's assertion that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (330) in his highly influential "Projective Verse", an essay Heaney read and which appeared in William Carlos Williams's *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1967), a writer he also claimed he was "coming to grips with" (20) in his 1979 interview with James Randall. Indeed, Williams's famous phrase "no ideas / but in things" (55) from A "Sort of Song" is reworked in the final lines of "Riprap":

Granite: ingrained
 with torment of fire and weight
 Crystal and sediment linked hot
 all change, in thoughts,
 As well as things.

Not only, then, do "thoughts" begin in "things", for Snyder the two enter a fluid relationship in which they are mutually defined. Heaney has, in fact, indicated his aversion to precisely this kind of verse, claiming that despite dedicating himself to Olson's "Projective Verse" – where such a form is propounded – he found it "a toil ... I could see what I ought to feel but I couldn't really feel it" (Brandes 17).

One should be wary, therefore, of making bold claims for the significance of the stanza formation adopted by "Gifts of Rain". Written during his year in Berkeley where he began to understand the "disposition of the verse on the page as a musical notation of sorts" (O'Driscoll 146) through hearing Snyder read, "Gifts of Rain" resembles, at least superficially, many of the American poet's verses:

Cloudburst and steady downpour now
 for days.
 Still mammal,
 straw-footed on the mud,

he begins to sense weather
by his skin.

...

He fords

his life by sounding.

Soundings. (23)

The first of the poem's four sections shares internal characteristics with Snyder's naturism as well. The voice, hovering on the page, is associative, while the wet "mammal" is the undefined center of a blank space without human presence. In Harold Bloom's 1986 collection of essays on Heaney's poetry – in which he describes Heaney as deserving "the same attention as his strongest American contemporaries" (10) – P. R. King praises "Gifts of Rain" in terms which strongly echo those applied to contemporary US verse of the era. King notes "the loose-limbed stanza pattern" employed is "more open than Heaney's previous style" and, through this "freer" style, he is "beginning to transpose description by exposition into a truly metaphorical, symbolic level of meaning where the meaning cannot exist apart from its image in the poem" (90).

Yet, in the following three sections (all of which are longer) Heaney returns to traditional verse patterns, moving through a series of couplets, quatrains, and eventually tercets in which his descriptions cohere. In the second section, a human actor appears "wading lost fields" with his "spade", while, in the third, a wider human presence emerges where the "I" of the poet considers a local "antediluvian" past until, in the final section, Heaney maps the etymological paths to history. Eventually, the "guttural water/spells itself" for the poet, becoming its "own score and consort" in which "the locale" is "bedded" in one's very "utterance". The first section's experimentalism, therefore, is not the discovery of new possibilities beyond traditional stanza patterns it appeared to be; rather, the fragmented lines and vague description serve to heighten the impact and clarity of the formal stanzas which, concluding the poem, stand victorious over the former. The later sections of "Gifts of Rain" also trouble King's assertion that the poems of *Wintering Out* "will not mean, but be" (90), since, like "Broagh", these lines savour rather than purge the signifying power of words. Neither "Gifts of Rain" nor "Broagh" perform the regression Snyder's poems do to a pre-human nature, they are tokens of local value that function to take pride in heritage. Indeed, Gray's observation that "Riprap" is "remarkable" for what it "omits ... elaborate figures ... close-woven argument ... irony or introspection" (297) highlights the chasm between Snyder and Heaney, since these are chief characteristics in the latter's burgeoning political forms which more clearly emerge in *Stations* and *North*. On closer analysis, then, the nature poems of *Wintering Out* are incompatible with Snyder's.

The attempt to locate a significant trace of Bly in *Stations* faces similar problems. As in the case of *Wintering Out*, the critical discussion around the collection has evolved alongside the publication of interviews in which Heaney stresses the significance of American poetry, virtually overwriting an earlier narrative. In the chapbook's introduction, Heaney admits the "delay" in publication was partly due to the arrival of Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971), a work of "complete authority" in the form "new" (3) to him. His insecurity with the material is also reflected by the choice to publish in the chapbook form and to collect only seven of the twenty-one poems in *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (1990) and eleven in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (1998). Although Bly is not cited in the introduction to *Stations*, Heaney's mention of Bly in his well-known interview with Randall has shaped responses to the volume ever since. In his 1986 study, Neil Corcoran cites Bly as an influence during this period (29), a claim he repeats in an updated study published in 1998. Thomas C. Foster directly compares

Stations with the prose poetry of Hill and Bly in his 1989 study (47) while Henry Hart discusses Heaney's debt to Bly in his 1992 study (100), and, in 1993, Bly is underscored by Michael Parker's *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (93) and in his 1998 article on Heaney's American influences. Heaney's remark in *Stepping Stones*, then, that it was "under the influence of Bly's prose poems that [he] experimented with [his] own" (O'Driscoll 141), merely reinforced the narrative. On closer analysis, Heaney appears to have taken little more than the *idea* of writing in the prose form from Bly, since *Stations* diverges from the American's example in critical ways.

In his long discussion of *Stations*, Hart argues the poems were written during a "critical juncture in [Heaney's] career, when he was allowing his formalist training to absorb the Whitmanesque spirit of the sixties" and that the prose form itself "depends on the kind of freedom Heaney must have felt in California" (100). Although Hart emphasises Heaney's multiple sources and some of the significant differences between Heaney's prose poetry and Bly's, grasping the significance of these divergences and their implications for Heaney's navigation of the American tradition is a task that remains to be undertaken. Stephen Fredman's delineation of the prose poem in an American context is useful here:

Rather than endeavouring to master reality, the American poet who writes in prose more properly confronts the times by a heroic accommodation – a scrupulous surrender to language and to the world ... the American poet uses prose not to give evidence of genius and the ability to impose order but instead to create, through attentive receptivity, a space of permission in which the world is allowed to appear through language. In this context the eschewal of verse can be seen as a conscious abnegation of the tremendous "disciplinary" force within verse ... the language is writing the poet, instead of the other way around. (8)

This is certainly the tradition into which Bly's prose poetry steps or, rather, in Bly's word, leaps, since it is designed to "leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again" in order to increase "the speed of association" (*Leaping Poetry* 2). *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (a volume to which Heaney contributes an essay on Lowell) describes Bly as an "important figure" for this exploration of the unconscious, adding "because of Bly's efforts ... America has had a poetry of the 'deep image' – an image that comes from the unconscious mind and that communicates a meaning that is not logical" (Stitt 58). Bly's prose poetry, to return to Fredman's terms, surrenders "to language and to the world", finding in the prose form the freedom necessary to communicate thoughts in a way that would be impossible in traditional verse. Heaney's *Stations* could not be characterised in these terms.

Stations shares many concerns with *Wintering Out* and *North*, taking up the themes of a rural childhood, the maturation of the artist, split loyalties in a divided society, and the collision of personal experience and political history. The collection, therefore, does not communicate anything that Heaney has not said already in other volumes. The critical difference is that Bly's concept of prose poetry is predicated, as Fredman goes on to explain, on a suspicion of poetic form as constraining. Heaney does not share this feeling. The result is a prose very similar to his formal poetry, inviting scansion due to its abundance of traditional features that suggest a reluctance to embrace the new mode. Indeed, other than a section in the career-summarising *District and Circle* (2006), Heaney would not return to the prose poem form and would ultimately pursue formal polish in his subsequent collections. In his later discussion of American poetry with Brandes, Heaney even admits that his "prejudice" is for

formal poetry that “practices force within a confined area” (17) and thus he understands the aims of a verse such as Elizabeth Bishop’s, an antithetical achievement to Bly’s. Despite its prose form, *Stations* betrays this “prejudice” in its insistence on an overarching structure, shaping what ought to be left unshaped by virtue of the form itself. The use of a well-worn biblical narrative as an organising tool is something to which Bly and Snyder would object while the choice also indicates the more likely and proximate influence of Joyce, evident in the volume’s movement through images of a Catholic childhood. As with his commentary on *Wintering Out*, Heaney may have been managing the reaction to *Stations* by emphasising an American influence to differentiate *Stations* from *Mercian Hymns*.

In his essay “Englands of the Mind”, first delivered as a lecture in Berkeley in May 1976, Heaney reflects on Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* in a manner highly revealing of his own insecurities. His commentary on Hill is marked by the contradictory desire to both identify with and differentiate himself from his English contemporary. Although he does not mention his own prose collection published one year prior, Heaney praises *Mercian Hymns* for the “double-focus” of “a child’s-eye view” and “the historian’s and scholar’s eye” (159) that it shares with *Stations*. Heaney is also at pains, however, to stress Hill’s “territory” as his “own West Midlands”, a “medieval England” (*Preoccupations* 159-160) facing “the Celtic mysteries of Wales” and brought to life in an “English Romanesque” style of “verbal architecture” (*Preoccupations* 160). There is a sense throughout “Englands of the Mind” of Heaney dealing with a dangerous and proximate Other in Hill, one who is an uncomfortable mixture of sameness and difference: different because of his pedigree and *Englishness* and similar in his deployment of a Joycean “hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations”. The shared debt to what Heaney calls “the Joycean precedent set in *Ulysses* of confounding modern autobiographical material with literary and historic matter” may be his most regretted vulnerability, since *Stations* relies so heavily on “the Joycean epiphany” he admires. In an obvious debt to Joyce, *Stations* maps the poet’s growing consciousness of language in tandem with the blossoming of an Irish consciousness, exemplified by “Cloistered” where the “duty priest” is testing “his diction against pillar and plaster” while the student mortifies his “elbows on the hard bevel” (20) and “The Stations of the West” where a forlorn Heaney sits “on a twilit bedside listening through the wall to fluent Irish, homesick for a speech I was to extirpate” (22). However successful Heaney felt these verses to be when they were being explored in California, upon discovery of *Mercian Hymns* he claims to have felt dominated by Hill’s “authority” (*Stations* 3), “weighty elegance” (*Preoccupations* 160) and “command” (*Preoccupations* 163), complaints that recall Stephen Dedalus’s objection to his own English Other: “[t]he language in which we are speaking is his before mine” (205). Throughout the discussion of Hill Heaney betrays his wish to sidestep a powerful adversary and this could be, ultimately, why he invokes Bly in later conversations about *Stations*. In emphasising the American poet he heard read in California, Heaney can limit comparison with the English one and survive by seeking refuge, in Hart’s striking description of the prose form, in “the border” area, “disguising” himself through “blending” (100) origins.

Whatever the reason, the divergences between Heaney’s and Bly’s efforts in form become apparent when Heaney’s “Nesting-ground” is compared to Bly’s early prose poem “Sunset at a Lake”, collected in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962):

The sun is sinking. Here on the pine-haunted bank, the mosquitoes fly around drowsily, and moss stands out as if it wanted to speak. Calm falls on the lake, which now seems heavier and inhospitable. Far out, rafts of ducks drift like closed eyes, and a thin line of silver caused by something invisible slowly moves toward shore in the viscous darkness under the southern bank. Only a few birds, the troubled ones, speak

to the darkening roof of earth; small weeds stand abandoned, the clay is sending her gifts back to the center of the earth. (15)

Bly's unrestrained embrace of the prose form is evidenced by the striking variance in sentence length, with the first comprised of just four words and the fourth 31, as the reader follows the "thin line" out "toward the shore" of the blank page itself. The spatial and temporal indicators "Here" and "now" create an immediate and authentic representation of the scene; with no human presence cluttering the picture, the sense is of the poet as a canvas on which nature will be tabulated through a co-operative rather than interpretative language. In the "inhospitable", "pine-haunted", "vicious darkness" and the arrival of "troubled" birds on the "darkening roof" there is a sense of the ominous about Bly's portrait, yet we are denied insight into what this might mean for a human observer, the vital element of Heaney's pastoral.

The fourth poem in *Stations*, "Nesting-Ground", is in this sense typical of Heaney's early lyrics. Like the earlier treatment of a rural childhood in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), the influence of American poets Frost and Roethke is more obvious than Bly's despite the new prose form. The opening image of the "sandmartins' nests" (7) is evocative of Frost's "The Exposed Nest", an important poem Heaney much more directly references in the later sonnet "On the Spot", while the imagined "arm going in" recalls Roethke's meddling speaker in "Moss-Gathering", a poem which, again, provided a direct model for Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist" where "the spawn" can "clutch" the child's "hand" (15). The "rat's nest" among "chaff" and "powdered cornstalks" of "Nesting-Ground" also echoes the experience of the child in "The Barn", who is "chaff" among the "great blind rats" (17), while the final image in which the boy puts "his ear" to "the ground" repeats the conclusion of "Land" from *Wintering Out*. Because it is so typical of Heaney's earlier verses and noted influences, "Nesting-Ground" has the appearance of a rough draft before the usual formal pressures had been applied. Even in this condition, however, "Nesting-Ground" makes use of the traditional formal devices Bly's "Sunset at a Lake" rejects, even indenting new lines to impose shape. Sibilance is deployed effectively throughout, with the first use in "sandmartins' nests" being reinforced a line later by the isolated "sleeved and straightened". Heaney's characteristic fondness of aural contrast is also exploited, with the harsh consonants in "cold prick" working against the soft, drawn-out vowel sounds of "claw" and "gazed", bookending the internally rhymed "surprising density or its tiny beak". The onomatopoeic "cheeping" of the birds before the cluster of assonance created by "he stood sentry, gazing, waiting" also makes "Nesting-Ground" feel like a more traditional prose poem than Bly's. The most significant contrast, however, is Heaney's insistence on a Joycean child-artist who is developed through the short poem from a mere observer who "only gazed" and "only listened" to the suggestive final image of him "listening for the silence", a silence which anticipates the discovery of the poet's voice in nature. As most of Heaney's pastoral to this stage has been (and how most of his political poetry in *North* will be), "Nesting-Ground" is ultimately a drama of the self, contrasting sharply with Bly's bare portrait in "Sunset at a Lake".

Of all Heaney's poetry from this era, "A Northern Hoard" in *Wintering Out* most encapsulates the counter-Californian narrative and anticipates the style of *North*. The sequence, which has never been reproduced in full in any of Heaney's collected poems editions, develops the guilty introspection and sparser form that would be central to the bog body sequence of the later volume. "A Northern Hoard" is also significant for referencing Heaney's real feelings of exile in California during the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, making its omission from later collections particularly noteworthy. The sequence is marked by self-examination throughout, with Heaney anticipating his decision to "uproot" from the site of "gunshot, siren and clucking gas" to Wicklow in 1972 and his painful "crawl" from America to Belfast to

“confront” the “lumpy dead” he has “deserted” and, though “abroad”, he insists he is “a black stump of home” (39-43). Not drawing on contemporary US poetry, the first section “Roots” establishes an apocalyptic tone through a conspicuous invocation of Yeats’s “The Second Coming”. Heaney is “turning” from the “din” where “the fault is opening” and envisions, much like Yeats, a part-human monster against whom we are “helpless in our old Gomorrah.” The word “dream” appears twice in the five quatrains of “Roots”, foreshadowing the second section, “No Man’s Land”, which dramatizes “a dream” Heaney remembers having “in California” in which he “glimpsed in the mirror a wounded man falling towards me with his bloodied hands lifted to tear at me or implore” (*Preoccupations* 33). In the poem, Heaney excoriates himself for how he has “shut out / their wounds’ fierce awning, those palms like streaking webs” and asks, “why do I unceasingly arrive / late to condone / infected sutures / and ill-knit bone?”, a phrase that betrays a political self-awareness in spite of its surreal imagery. The final section “Tinder” turns its focus inward to poetry itself in a manoeuvre that would become typical of Heaney’s political verse. Lamenting an earlier stage of his developmentⁱⁱ where “We picked” Shakespearean “flints” while “Huddled at dusk in a ring”, Heaney imagines the Frostian “cave-mouth” from where he first “sparked a weak-flame-pollen”. Recalling how the effort often “failed, our knuckle joints / Striking as often as the flints”, Heaney contrasts the lower stakes of the past with the higher ones of the present. In another ploy that would have met Hobsbaum’s New Critical standards, Heaney approximates the margin between success and failure to the aural difference of “tinder” and “cinder”, flame and ash divided by a single letter. Despite these pressures, “Tinder” concludes “A Northern Hoard” on a measured note of possibility, squarely facing “new history” with its “iron, / cast-offs, scraps, nail, canine” to suggest, for the Northern poet, bomb shrapnel must become the means as well as the subject matter of an adequate poetry.

Ultimately, then, California is a largely invisible non-site in *Wintering Out* and *Stations* where Heaney’s feelings of guilt and anxiety over the worsening Troubles are intensified. Far from absorbing radically new methods, much of Heaney’s poetry written in California examines Ireland and the first lessons of his poetic apprenticeship at the Belfast Group with the suggestion that progression will now require a return, not a departure. Indeed, the American poets who became extremely important to him in later phases – Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop – were first discovered in the 1960s like Frost and Roethke, years before the physical journey to America began. The discovery of Snyder and Bly – and the California residency more generally – is thus something of a red herring in the search for traces of American influence on Heaney’s writing, with the critical argument relying perilously on the poet’s own retrospective assessments of the period during phases when he may have had other reasons for reinventing the past or, simply, when the negative feelings expressed in “Views” or “A Northern Hoard” had subsided. Whatever the case, critics would do well to remember Jung’s caveat when reviewing this significant period of Heaney’s career: “what a poet has to say about his work is far from being the most illuminating word on the subject” (224).

Notes

ⁱ Ironically, it is the deeply lodged Frostian concept of the poem as “a momentary stay against confusion” (Frost 132) – what John Dennison has recently termed Heaney’s view of poetry as “an ameliorative and restorative response to – adequation of – the inimical reality of life” (4) – that pulls Heaney away from the examples of Snyder and Bly and guides him towards more formal American poets in later decades.

ⁱⁱ The phrase “igneous days” probably references Michael Longley’s metaphor in relation to the poetry of Northern Ireland being either “igneous” or “sedimentary”. Heaney quotes this phrase of Longley’s in “Lowell’s Command” (*The Government of the Tongue* 129).

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