

SEAMUS HEANEY'S PATERNAL WELLSPRING: THE FATHER AS AESTHETIC SOURCE

By Sandra A. Nichols

From the very beginning of his writing career, Seamus Heaney has turned to his memories and impressions of his father as a source for poetic expression. Past readings of Seamus Heaney's poetry have missed this complex relationship between the poet's father and his imagination and creative expression. Critics limit their understanding of the father's place in Heaney's work because they approach Heaney's writing in ways that obscure the father's underlying role. Throughout the years Heaney's father has been a recurring poetic element. Heaney turns to his father again and again as source for creative image and creative inspiration, and uses the father image as both poetic object and subject. This recurring and varied use of the father points to the father's foundational role in Heaney's creative mindscape. A close examination of Heaney's use of the father image within his poetry further reveals the poet's conscious understanding of the father's central placement within his creative mind.

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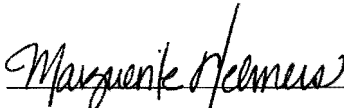
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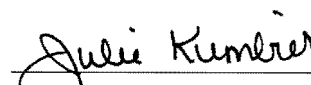
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To Paul, for all of his encouragement and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Seamus Heaney published his first collection of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966. His writing career spans the length of Catholic Northern Ireland's late twentieth century struggle, often violent, for representation and equality. Seamus Heaney's writing draws from the primordial world of the Irish countryside, a landscape of striking yet always partial beauties of fecund bogs, mysterious frog spawn, and rotting blackberries, where the stench of animals and the sweat of human labor mingle in necessity but unease. His poems of boyhood—of home and field and farm—are populated by figures from his rural community, his Irish history, and, of course, his family, most notably his father.

The relationship between Heaney's father and Heaney's poetry has received scant attention by critics for three reasons. First, much of the critical attention has taken a thematic approach, primarily focused on the political forum and Heaney's response to it. Second, when the father is discussed with respect to the poems, he is used to sketch a biography of the poet—a tendency that, third, leads inevitably to the use of the father and son within a psychoanalytical relationship. What all of these approaches leave undeveloped is the matter of how the father works as a poetic figure, as an aesthetic device.

In the first part of this thesis, I examine how three of Heaney's critics—Helen Vendler, Adrian Frazier, and Henry Hart—impose limitations on the relationship between Heaney's father and his poems. In the second part of this thesis, I analyze Heaney's 1979 poem "The Harvest Bow," the first of the father poems to focus on Heaney Sr.'s obdurate silence—the ground of personal and anesthetic anxiety for the poet in training. The third part of this thesis examines Heaney's use of the father image as a poetic element. The final

section of this thesis examines the father's central placement within the poet's consciousness and explains the difficulty Vendler's, Frazier's, and Hart's critical approaches have in recognizing the complex relationship between his father and his poetry.

CHAPTER I

THREE CRITICAL RECEPTIONS

Helen Vendler and a Thematic Approach to Heaney's Writing

Helen Vendler first encountered Heaney in 1975 while lecturing at the Yeats School in Sligo (Vendler 3). Since then, she has written numerous critiques of his work and in 1998 published *Seamus Heaney*, a critical analysis of the poet and his development from 1966 to 1996. Overall, Vendler recognizes the individuality of Heaney's poems and approaches his volumes as stepping stones on the poetic journey. "Each of his volumes ambitiously sets itself a different task from its predecessors; each takes up a new form of writing..." (3). However, Vendler misses Heaney's poetic relationship with his father, because while viewing each volume individually, she focuses primarily on two broad themes: Heaney's response to Northern Ireland's political violence and his search for identity.

In chapter one of *Seamus Heaney*, Vendler speculates on how the political climate of Northern Ireland would affect a young child. Vendler believes that Heaney would have had to learn how to negotiate within a world in which he and his family were second class citizens: "Those who grow up with an awareness of words very soon tabulate the anonymous group-names under which others dominate them – in Heaney's case, 'Catholics', 'farmers', 'Northern Irish'" (Vendler 14). Vendler recognizes that Heaney's poetic response to Northern Ireland's social inequities uses the father as visual representation for the anonymous groups. In "Trial Runs," a poem published during a period of high sectarian tension and written with the line, "My father jingled silver," Vendler points to the obvious:

“In this Joycean epiphany the stereotypes are still present – the half-military British dress of the neighbor, the hands-in-pocket stance of the farmer, the worn sectarian joking between them” (81). Yet, the repeated use of the father as poetic element in three poems from the 1996 collection *The Spirit Level* is ignored and focus is placed on poems and images that convey the poet’s personal and public response to violence. Vendler gives a great deal of attention to two poems in particular, Heaney’s long autobiographical poem, “Station Island” and “Mycenae Lookout,” a poem written by Heaney in response to Northern Ireland’s renewed violence in the early 1990’s. Vendler ends *Seamus Heaney* just as she had begun it, with a quote from “Mycenae Lookout” and a summary of the political climate in Northern Ireland: “the ladder of the future / and the past, besieger and besieged, / the treadmill of assault” followed by Vendler’s words, “A moment of political hope occurred in Northern Ireland in September 1994, when the IRA Provisionals and the Ulster Paramilitaries agreed to a truce” (155).

Heaney has always been a politically conscious individual and Northern Ireland a politically charged environment. These two facts alone lead critics and readers to focus on Heaney’s writing as a response to the political violence and tension that has engulfed Northern Ireland throughout his career. However, Heaney’s father as a poetic element becomes lost when readings focus exclusively on the political forum and Heaney’s response to it. The same holds true if readings focus primarily on the poet’s private struggle for identity. Heaney’s use of the father extends beyond his search for identity within a politically charged environment.

Ironically, it is Vendler's academic approach to critical readings that frees Heaney's father poems from the generalizing bias placed upon them by critics who would read the image of the father as a symbol for preordained emotions or relationships. "Each successful poem presents itself as a unique experience in language. The experiment of one can never be repeated in another" (7). Vendler breaks the notion that the father image in one poem conveys the same feelings and emotions in the next poem, that the father as a poetic element is a continuum from one poem to the next. When the father image is freed from a preconceived interpretation a complex relationship between Heaney, his poetic consciousness, and his father emerges

Adrian Frazier and the Autobiographical Reading

In the fall of 2001, Adrian Frazier published an article on Seamus Heaney entitled "Anger and Nostalgia: Seamus Heaney and the Ghost of the Father." The article examined Heaney's relationship with father figures and concluded that Heaney exhibits anger towards his father. Frazier based his analysis on biographical research, Seamus Heaney's interviews, and the poet's own autobiographical poems. Frazier proposes that Heaney's contentious relationship with his father is overlooked because a strong, positive public image of Heaney has influenced certain readings of his poems. He believes the public knows Heaney as a poet who is "warm, kindly, and humane" (¶21). Such a positive image, according to Frazier, leads to the ignoring or overlooking of negative imagery and invariably a misreading of the poems. Frazier analyzed the poem "Digging" to illustrate his argument.

“Digging” is from Heaney’s first collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). It is the earliest published father poem and considered by Frazier to be Heaney’s, “well head of his verse” (§17). The poem begins with a young speaker of the poem seated at a writing table beside an open window. A pen rests in his hand. From outside the window, he hears the sound of a shovel hitting gravel. The young man is Heaney, and the sound he hears is from his father’s spade as it is buried into the gravelly earth. The young poet looks out the window to see his father stooping over the flower beds. He recalls that same physical action performed by his father years ago in the potato fields. He focuses on his father’s relation to the spade: how the father steadied it against his body. Heaney connects the image of his father’s spade to a memory of his grandfather cutting peat with a spade out in the bogs. The act of digging becomes transferred to the young poet’s act of writing. In the poem the pen becomes a tool similar in some respects to his father’s and grandfather’s spade. As a writer the young speaker will continue the act of digging for the good stuff. The poem puts into words the “a ha” moment in which the young poet identifies himself as a writer.

What has puzzled readers, and is key to Frazier’s re-reading of “Digging,” are Heaney’s opening lines:

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Frazier accuses Vendler of allowing Heaney’s positive popular appeal to influence her reading of the poem. He cites her analysis of the gun image in Heaney’s poem “Digging” as proof positive. Frazier believes that Vendler provides a “characteristically clear and brilliant analysis” for the gun imagery (§21). Instead of two choices for the poet, physical labor or

intellectual labor, the poem lays out a third choice, Republican militarism (Vendler 29). But, he accuses her of ignoring language and imagery that harbor anger and negativity. Frazier believes the gun is part of “Digging”’s symbolic plane and should be prolonged throughout. He accuses Vendler of ignoring the disappearance of the gun image. The gun remains snug and never explored as a life choice in comparison to agricultural and intellectual pursuits: “The gun is still loaded, lying unfired when the poem ends” (§18).

Frazier contends that readers commit the same biased error as Vendler does. Readers ignore or misread the gun image because a gun is not something they associate with Heaney: “The gun does not harmonize with the public character of the poet – warm kindly, and humane” (§21). For Frazier, the gun points towards a darker side of Heaney and a troubling relationship with his father. Frazier believes the refusal of readers to identify underlying anger and rage in Heaney’s poetry has hidden the depth of conflict that existed between father and son. The critic claims the relationship was contentious and the gap was greater than previously suspected. Frazier proposes that father poems written after “Digging” are continued attempts by the poet to cross the expansive divide between father and son: “The poem had to be rewritten and the bridge reconstructed again and again fifteen and twenty and twenty-five and thirty years later” (§31).

Frazier believes the father’s silence is the defining feature of Heaney’s father / son relationship, and the father’s silence is a negative thing. He believes that the silence, first introduced in “Digging,” creates a gulf that the poet is compelled to bridge again and again. Frazier’s reading of “Digging” forces all other father poems to be read in relationship to this early one. By placing all father poems in relationship to “Digging” traps the poet into a fold

of time, an arrested development so to speak. Heaney acknowledges that “Digging” was written at a time when he was feeling distanced from his father, but it was a temporal distance: “In those early poems I dug in to get at the source [of their connection]. There was something being broached between us, and I suppose I was anxious that the broaching might lead to a breach” (Brown ¶2).

Henry Hart and the Psychoanalytical Reading

Critic Henry Hart is the author of, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*. Hart takes a psychoanalytical approach to Heaney’s writing and places the father poems within an oedipal framework. The oedipal framework locks the poet into a competitive and combative relationship with his biological father or authority structures represented by the father image. Hart believes Heaney’s father poems are part of the poet’s internal struggle to free himself from oppressive relationships. He illustrates this with a critical reading of Heaney’s 1979 poem “The Harvest Bow.” Hart views “The Harvest Bow” as a revised “Digging.” Within “The Harvest Bow,” Heaney discovers shared ground with his estranged father.

For Hart, “Digging” and “The Harvest Bow” are similar because he sees both poems as father / son relationship poems. In “Digging,” Heaney creates a connection between the physical digging done by his father and grandfather and the intellectual digging engaged in by the poet. In “The Harvest Bow,” Heaney comes to terms with what Hart refers to as his “patriarchal silences.” In these “patriarchal silences,” the poet recognizes his own appreciation for things unspoken. According to Hart’s analysis, both poems are attempts to

heal a conflict between father and son and echoes Frazier's statement that all father poems are a continuum. Hart claims this conflict is inevitable; it is part of the oedipal child's struggle to break free of both biological and cultural parents. Hart's oedipal framework rests on the Freudian concepts of the unconscious and internalization of hatred and guilt towards the father. These concepts by their very nature disempower the poet in the act of creating the poem. When posed within this oedipal framework, Heaney's relationship with his father will always be contentious. Father and son will never truly find complete reconciliation because once reconciled new divisions will always arise (Hart 4). In addition to this each time Heaney uses his father as the image within a poem, the oedipal framework preconceives the father image to be symbolic representation for underlying emotions of hatred and guilt. Furthermore, the subject of the poem becomes preconceived; it is either representing the struggle for separation or an examination of guilt. All are reasons why the oedipal analysis excludes Heaney's father from being the subject of any poem.

Why These Readings Miss the Mark

Hart, Frazier, and Vendler are shortsighted in their reading of Heaney's father poems. Hart's "angry son" and Frazier's "silent father" frameworks allow no room for an exploration of the father within Heaney's poetry. Vendler's examination of Heaney's response to violence and his emotional development within an oppressive environment ignores most father poems all together. The three approaches jeopardize critical readings of the father poems. Frazier's bias is the most ironic. His accusation that readings of Heaney's father poems are influenced by Heaney's positive public persona does not validate imposing his

reading of “Digging” upon the twenty or more father poems written throughout Heaney’s career.

CHAPTER II

THE FOCUS IS ON THE FATHER

“The Harvest Bow”

“The Harvest Bow” was published in 1979 in *Field Work*, Heaney’s sixth collection. Heaney’s writing often includes words with multiple meaning, and the term field work is true to form. Field work is an agricultural term. It refers to agricultural work such as plowing the earth, sowing the seed, or reaping the harvest in the fields. Agricultural settings and images are found throughout Heaney’s work, but they provide the primary setting and imagery for his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*, in particular his two father poems, “Follower,” “The sod rolled over without breaking” (OG 10), and “Digging,” “He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep / To scatter new potatoes that we picked” (3). Field work is also a term found in archaeology. It refers to the practical archaeological work done on location. In *North*, Heaney’s fifth collection, the poet takes on an archaeologist persona. He holds this stance to explore the political violence engulfing Northern Ireland through the personification of mummified pre-historic victims. The well known poem, “Bog Queen,” presents images of a body unearthed: “I was barbered / and stripped / by a turf-cutter’s blade” (109). Another poem from this collection, “Kinship,” ties the violence of contemporary time to pre-Christian origins with the line, “Kinned by hieroglyphic / peat on a spreadfield / ... I step through origins” (115). But, the poems from *Field Work* reflect neither agricultural nor archaeological associations. Instead, they reflect an anthropological interpretation of the term: the on site study of human beings in all their dimensions including symbolic, socio-

cultural, and psychological. Anthropologist Nitin Maurya states that the quality of the results of any fieldwork depends on the ability of the field worker to see what others may miss: “The data generated in turn depends upon the field worker himself, his psyche, his level of involvement, and his ability to see and visualize things that any other person visiting the place often fails to see” (¶6).

“The Harvest Bow” tells the story of a person who studies an individual’s hand-crafted artifact in order to better understand that individual’s personality. The setting for “The Harvest Bow” is a kitchen interior. The poem is like a Dutch painting with its humble domestic scene. And just as the Dutch painter skillfully leads the eye towards the simple objects within, Heaney directs the gaze towards the small straw knot. “The Harvest Bow” is comprised of five sestet stanzas. Each stanza is arranged into three couplets, and each couplet contains half-rhyme and end-rhyme. The poem is an interior monologue in which the poet addresses his absent father. The opening couplet establishes that the harvest bow is an artifact made by the poet’s father, and because of this, Heaney is going to use the straw bow to uncover the father behind the silent man: “As you plaited the harvest bow / You implicated the mellowed silence in you” (OG 175).

Poetical vision has been described as the poet’s ability to combine objects, impressions, and experiences in ways that reveal their inner nature (Eron ¶2). Heaney is searching for the inner nature of his father, and to do this, the poet turns to objects associated with his father, impressions of his father, and experiences he has had with his father. He begins with a straw knot. Heaney visualizes his father creating the straw knot: “As you plaited the harvest bow” (OG 175). Heaney describes his father’s action in feminine terms.

Plaiting is another word for braiding, a form of weaving, and has a feminine connotations, soft, gentle, creative. The art of plaiting reflects the father's soft side. This is in contrast to the action Heaney described in the poem "Follower." In this earlier father poem, Heaney's father's physical presence and powerful actions are the dominant visual images:

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung,
Between the shafts and the furrow.

The horses strained to his clicking tongue. (OG 10).

Heaney maintains his anthropologist role throughout "The Harvest Bow": "I tell," "I spy," "I see" (175). This role does not exist in "Digging" and "Follower." In these earlier father poems, Heaney addresses his own emotions and actions in relation to the father image, and the poems express this "me" oriented focus in their phrasing: "Between my finger and my thumb," "I look down," "But I've no spade" (3), "I'll dig" (4), "I stumbled," "I wanted," "All I ever did," "I was a nuisance"(10). Both "Digging" and "Follower" focus on the father's physical being and the father's powerful actions and how they affect Heaney. The subject of these early poems is the poet's exploration of his own identity in relation to the surrounding cultural and literary societies. The father becomes part of the symbolic plane on which Heaney presents his topic. The subject of "The Harvest Bow" is Heaney's father's intimate being, the thoughts and feelings within the man. In "The Harvest Bow" the poet uses the image of the bow as an object through which he studies the father's silent nature. In "Digging" and "Follower" the poet uses the image of the father as an object on which he poses his personal struggle with identity.

Heaney's stance, looking inward at himself and his internal struggles as in "Digging" and "Follower," or looking outward at the father as in "The Harvest Bow," is a key difference between the "The Harvest Bow" and the two earlier father poems. Hart believes the "The Harvest Bow" expresses the poet's internal struggles: "The submerged oedipal quarrel with his father in 'The Harvest Bow' is fundamentally a quarrel with himself" (130). Because of this Hart views the straw knot in relationship to Heaney's inward stance: "The bow twisted out of what Keats once called 'the alien corn' is an emblem of their [father's and son's] alien status, of their social unease and political disenchantment, their indifference to vocal protest against and active participation in current events" (129). Hart's belief that the poem's subject is Heaney's submerged oedipal struggle leads him to the conclusion that the straw knot portrays manipulation. He describes the straw knot as "a seductive snare" (130).

Far from being a seductive snare, Heaney uses the straw knot as a key to unlock his father's intimate self. He focuses on the father's harvest bow and reflects on the actions and memories associated with it. The more Heaney studies the harvest bow in association to his father, the more the harvest bow shines the light of understanding onto the father's intimate self or inner nature. Heaney alludes to the straw knots ability to illuminate by saying that it "brightens" and by metaphorically changing the straw knot into an atmospheric light in the night time sky: "But brightens as it tightens twist by twist / Into a knowable corona" (175). What this light reveals is a father whose actions spring from his allegiance to Irish traditions and Irish Catholic values. These beliefs and values are expressed in the first two couplets of the second stanza:

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks

And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks
 Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
 Until your fingers moved somnambulant [...] (OG 175)

The ashplant is first referenced in connection with the father in “The Harvest Bow.” This association will be repeated in two latter poems, “The Stone Verdict,” and “Crossings xxvii.” An ash was one of three trees considered sacred by the Celts. In Irish folklore the ash is believed to offer protection and is used for divination (Austin, “The Wisdom of Trees in the Celtic Landscape,” ¶21). The father’s grip on the ashplant in “The Harvest Bow” acknowledges his embodiment of Irish folklore beliefs. In an interview after his father’s death Heaney described his father’s intuitive qualities as bordering on the supernatural: “There was a touch of the diviner about him, after all” (Brown ¶2). The symbolic nature of the ashplant and how this associates to Heaney’s father is ignored or overlooked by Vendler, Frazier, and Hart, because they misread the subject of “The Harvest Bow.”

Heaney also describes his father’s hands as holding cane sticks. Cane sticks are used to discipline children. Catholic teaching espouses that all should practice humility and equanimity. These beliefs are expressed in the Catholic prayer, “Passion of Christ, Strengthen Me!”: “Strengthen me that I may never swerve from You, Dear Christ, nor weaken through human respect, through a desire to be popular, through hope of social distinction” (Lichty 32). Irish Catholic teachings are part of Heaney’s father’s worldview. Because of this he would believe it necessary to reprimand children who became too self-confident and too ambitious. Heaney expresses his father’s negative response towards over-confident and over-ambitious young men when he records that his father “lapped the spurs on

a lifetime of gamecocks.” A gamecock is a male bird but it is also a slang term for young, brash, bold men. Lapped has the figurative meaning “lulled”, and spurs signifies “eagerness.” The father reins in the young lads within his care.

“The Harvest Bow” opens with the statements, “As you plaited,” which establishes the father as the artifact’s creator, and “You implicated,” which signals the relationship between the straw knot and the father’s values and beliefs. In the third stanza, the poet adds “And if I spy into its golden loops.” Here Heaney begins to draw on personal observations and memories. He begins to arrange impressions and experiences that have been unlocked by the “golden loops” of the harvest bow:

And if I spy into its golden loops
I see us walk between the railway slopes
Into an evening of long grass and midges
Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges
An auction notice on an outhouse wall
You with a harvest bow in your lapel [...] (OG 175)

The two walk together through a pastoral setting that is marred by images of difficult times, discarded household furniture, farm equipment, and an auction notice for a property. In contrast to these images, the father wears a harvest bow, signifying that he has finished harvesting his crops; it is an emblem of bounty brought forth through hard work (Haggerty ¶9). As a child, the poet was protected from the difficult world around him by his father, and now the grown son looks back longingly to this time when he felt safe and comforted:

Me with my fishing rod, already homesick

For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick
 Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes
 Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes
 Nothing: that original townland
 Still tongue-tied in the straw tied in your hand. (OG 175)

Heaney's reminiscing is marred not by the signs of hard times but by the realization that the revelations gleaned from the golden loops of the harvest bow are limited: "but flushes / Nothing" (OG 175). The memory of the father silently whacking the tips off of weeds and bushes as he walks beside his son reveals nothing of the father's inner thoughts. The poet realizes his father's silence is complex and is still an overall mystery.

The closing stanza begins: "*The end of art is peace.*" Heaney declares this as the motto for the harvest bow. Hart thought the use of this motto was ironic, stating that the phrase is taken from Yeats' "Samhain: 1905," and both Heaney and Yeats view peace as a momentary pause in the poetical dialog (Hart 130). There is no irony here. Heaney understands that peace would be the end of art and appropriately chooses "*The end of art is peace*" as the motto for his father's stoic silence. By associating the father's straw knot with the concept that art originates from some emotional struggle Heaney accepts the reality that he can never fully understand his father or his father's silence. The very silence becomes a mysterious entity, the "spirit of the corn," and as a mysterious entity it is by nature a catalyst for poetical vision. Heaney recognizes that with all mysteries revealed, all questions answered, the need for art would cease. The poet concludes "The Harvest Bow" with his personal validation of his father and the mystery of the father's silent nature. William Butler

Yeats had stated that poetry is out of the quarrel or conflict within oneself (Malone 279). The conflict for Heaney is his inability to reach the inner sanctum of his father's silence. He attempts through poetical exploration and expression to define the father, but the full picture remains out of reach.

Clarity into the father's transcendent self, the inner nature of the father, escapes from the harvest bow. Heaney's moment of total revelation is also lost. He is unable to illuminate all the dark areas of his father's inner self, but at the same time values the continued mystery.

Slipped lately up by the spirit of the corn

Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm. (OG 175)

"The Harvest Bow" Differs from Previous Father Poems

"The Harvest Bow" differs from the father poems which came before it, and this difference is recognized by numerous critics. Michael Parker in his biographical work, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, believes "The Harvest Bow" is the most affectionate of all the father poems (Parker 173). Frazier and Hart have stated that "The Harvest Bow" is a poem reconciling past differences, yet at the same time they sense something more happening within it. Frazier attempts to put his finger on what that difference is in his article, "Anger and Nostalgia: Seamus Heaney and the Ghost of the Father." He writes that his initial reaction to the poem in comparison with earlier poems was that it seemed to be a change of direction for Heaney (§ 14). Frazier believes "The Harvest Bow" revealed writing that was mellower than before and a poet who seemed more certain of himself. Hart also senses a change in Heaney's writing in "The Harvest Bow" in comparison

to earlier writings. He illustrates this change by comparing “The Harvest Bow”: “I tell and finger it [the bow] like braille, / Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,” to the 1965 unpublished poem, “Boy Driving His Father to Confession.” In this unpublished poem a youthful Heaney writes, “what is going on / Under that thick grey skull” (129). Hart believes that Heaney in “The Harvest Bow” is beginning to identify with his father in artistic terms: “His father appears as his artistic shadow [...] an exemplary artistic patriarch” (129). Harold Bloom echoes the sentiment that Heaney’s writing reflects the growth of the poet. He believes that “The Harvest Bow” is written by a poet who has grown in maturity. In his introduction to *Blooms Seamus Heaney*, Bloom identifies the change in Heaney’s writing in “The Harvest Bow” as a change in technique and skill: “I verge upon saying that Heaney approaches the cunning stance of the strong poet, evasion...” (16). The fact that so many people notice a difference in “The Harvest Bow” from Heaney’s earlier father poems indicates some change occurred.

”The Harvest Bow” differs from the earlier father poems for several reasons, but the main reason is a change in Heaney’s intent. The father is now the ‘subject’ of the poem and not the ‘object’ of the poem. Because of this critical difference, Heaney must change how he creates the presence of the father so that the focus remains on his father’s inner nature, his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and does not stray to the physical man. In “The Harvest Bow” Heaney minimizes the father’s body, reducing him to hands and fingers: “Hands that aged round ashplants and canesticks [...] Until your fingers moved somnambulant.” The father’s physical body is not present in the poem. Compare this to “Digging,” where the poet observes the muscular action of the father as he digs the flower beds and potato field: “Till

his straining rump among the flower beds / Bends low” (OG 3) or the father’s physical presence in “Follower”: “His shoulders globed like a full sail strung” (11).

Heaney’s intent for the earlier father poems differs from his intent for “The Harvest Bow.” “Digging” establishes Heaney’s commitment to the intellectual pursuit of placing poetical vision within his family’s patriarchal agrarian framework. “By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man.” Poetical vision connects the physical act of digging with the intellectual act of writing. “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.” “Follower” uses the father’s physical presence in a similar manner. Heaney’s father’s physical prowess and skill becomes the symbolic plane on which he presents his topic: Heaney’s relationship to the poetic tradition. The poet must find his own voice within the writing tradition which, according to Eliot, requires a sense of continuity balanced with the development of poetical vision. In “Follower,” Heaney conveys his awakened understanding of the inter-relationship between poetic tradition and his own creative expression. “I stumbled in his hobnailed wake, / [...] Sometimes he rode me on his back / [...] But today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away.” Heaney’s father’s physicality is the concrete object by which Heaney defines his vocation as a poet and his place within Ireland’s poetic tradition.

Frazier and Hart’s Biased Reading

Both Hart and Frazier view the 1979 poem “The Harvest Bow” within the context of earlier father poems. They believe “The Harvest Bow” is a momentary reconciliation between father and son. Both critics view the momentary reconciliation as a continuation of a

father / son conflict that they believe was first expressed in Heaney's 1966 poem "Digging." This circular view of conflict and resolution, albeit based on differing premises creates problems for other father poem readings, especially those that come after "The Harvest Bow." Helen Vendler has stated that no one poem can contain the whole complex nature of a writer at any given moment. The poem is a single scene that reflects a temporal feeling: "Each poem says, 'viewed from this angle, at this moment, in this year, with this focus, the subject appears to me in this light, and my responses to it spring from this set of feelings'" (7). When a reader approaches a poem with a preconceived framework the temporal nature of the poem is lost. Furthermore, Hart and Frazier entrap Heaney in an emotional struggle. T.S. Eliot argued that poetry is an escape from emotion: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (809). Heaney cannot successfully place his father as the subject of a poem if he remains in an emotional struggle with his father.

Frazier's belief that Heaney's father's silence creates a gulf between the two and that the poet attempts to bridge this gulf again and again forces "The Harvest Bow" and all father / son poems to be read as an attempted bridge. In his autobiographical approach to Heaney's poems and "The Harvest Bow" in particular, Frazier acknowledges that the poem originally confused him: "But frankly I did not understand the context of this poem in 1979, not at all" (§14). Clarification came to Frazier through his discovery of some basic facts and information about the poet's personal life. He applies this information to satisfy questions he had concerning "The Harvest Bow": "Who is being addressed? Who made the harvest bow

[...]? Was it made recently or long ago?" This approach to "The Harvest Bow" causes Frazier to misread the subject of the poem, because he ignores most of the poem's imagery within the poem. Frazier's claim that readings of Heaney's father poems are influenced by a positive public persona does not validate imposing his reading of the conflict between father and son upon the numerous father poems written throughout Heaney's career without a basic understanding of the poems. By doing this Frazier is, in effect, making the same error that he criticized others of doing, of jeopardizing a critical reading of the poem because of a bias.

Hart's belief that the poet is in an oedipal struggle with the father, one in which any reconciliation would be mistrusted and become the grounds for renewed conflict, causes him to ignore the qualities of the straw knot and impose new ones upon it. Heaney describes the straw knot as made of "wheat that does not rust" and shaped into a "love-knot of straw." Hart describes the image of a shield, first in reference to the father's role in the poem: "Here Heaney's father is a shield for his son," next as an object representative of repressed silence: "the shield represents the hard, silent, repressed mask that conceals and reveals the violence of their instinctual energies" (128). To conclude that the straw knot forms or represents a shield ignores Heaney's descriptive language in reference to the harvest bow, "plaited the harvest bow," "wheat that does not rust," "tightens twist by twist," "A throwaway love-knot of straw," "its golden loops." Hart further imposes meaning when he describes the father as "overtly brutal" (128) based on the lines "And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks," (line 8) and "Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes" (line 22). He ignores the overall development of the poem and the individual stanzas from which these lines come.

CHAPTER III

THE FATHER AS POETIC ELEMENT

The Image of the Father

“The Harvest Bow” (1979) is the first of Heaney’s father poems to focus on his father as the subject of the poem. Prior to this Heaney’s father poems used the father as an object or image through which personal and cultural identity was defined. After “The Harvest Bow” Heaney will focus several times on his father as the subject of the poem and continue to use his father as an image within his writing. Over the years no other family member appears as both subject and image as many times as Heaney’s father. The fact that Heaney returns again and again to the image of his father as a means of poetic expression and draws upon the memory of his father within his mindscape as poetic source points to a deep connection between the father and Heaney’s poetic consciousness.

Michael Parker titled the opening chapter of his biography of Seamus Heaney: “A Good Anchor.” In this chapter Parker acknowledges the interrelationship between Heaney’s father and his writing: “Already in the earliest work of the young poet, his father had become an elegiac presence, a focus for his mourning of change [...] The images and allusions are evidence of love and admiration” (1). Yet Heaney turns to his father for more than an elegiac presence and this is evidenced when the father poems, poems that use the image or presence of the father, are gathered together. What emerges is an intriguing relationship between Heaney’s creative psyche and his father.

The Father as Poetic Subject

Crossings xxxiii

In 1991, Heaney turned to an exploration of the transcendental in his collection *Seeing Things*. Within the poems he explores the real-world phenomena from what seems like an out of body perspective. Heaney's focus on the transcendental, our perception of the dimensions of the mind outside of our earthly surroundings, is in no doubt influenced by the death of both of his parents. The concept of his father's third dimensional presence, the "something" that exist in life beyond the tangible body, is explored in "Crossings xxxiii" from the forty-eight poem sequence called "Squarings." In Dennis O'Driscoll's book, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, the poet explains that 'squarings' refers to the act of finding the right perspective, being willing to change places and positions to do so: "I felt the private meaning had to be explicated, so I did my best to describe how a player took 'squarings' when he positioned himself to shoot a marble in the schoolground. How the preparation involved 'anglings, aimings, feints and squints', 'test-outs and pull-backs, re-envisagings'" (321).

Heaney divides "Squarings" into four groupings of twelve poems each, and "Crossings xxxiii" is the ninth poem in the third grouping titled, "Crossings." All of the poems in this sequence are made up of twelve lines arranged in four tercet stanzas. Heaney moves "Crossings xxxiii" forward using enjambment and metrical rhythm. The metrical rhythm is created through the use of alliteration and repetition.

The poem is about an individual who visits the home of someone who has recently died. He comes to the home expecting to feel the presence of the dead person, after all, the

home is an extension of the individuals who occupy it. But, the home seems eerily different, and the visitor tries to figure out why. He tells himself to recollect. He is trying to recall the surroundings he experienced, the sights and sounds, on the morning of someone's death. He wants to remember what it was like leaving the house of someone who had died. He describes the tile floors and the windows. He remembers how the raindrops fell upon the pane and how the grass looked against the sky. But then he questions his memory. He leaves description aside and begins to list the qualities of the design: plain, big, straight, ordinary, feeling certain that the qualities of the home are a reflection of the owner's values and beliefs. In the end, what the visitor realizes is that what he seeks is not contained in the home.

‘Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know’,

A paradigm of rigour and correction,

Rebuke to fanciness and shrine to limit

Stood firmer than ever for its own idea

Like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body. (OG 352)

In “Crossings xxxiii,” Heaney reflects on his changed perspective brought about by his father's death. He attempts to use this new perspective, absence, to gain insight into his father's inner nature. Heaney tells himself to “Be literal a moment. Recollect” (OG 352) as he examines his memory for tangible evidence of the father's transcendental nature. Heaney attempts the same approach he conducted in “The Harvest Bow”; he diverts the gaze from the subject, his father, and focuses instead on an object closely associated with him. The material reality of his father's house, “[...] The house that he had planned,” should be a

physical extension of the inner man. The house becomes the symbolic plane by which the poet sketches the relationship between Patrick Heaney's physical existence and his transcendental nature.

What Heaney concludes is that the house, although reflective of some of his father's more obvious qualities, reveals nothing new. Heaney is left with physical confirmation of his father's stoic, stubborn, Spartan nature: "'Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know' / A paradigm of rigour and correction." The poetic journey, however, exposes that a very real "something" has changed. Heaney's emotional reality has been altered along with his perspective:

Be literal a moment. Recollect

Walking out on what had been emptied out

After he died, turning your back and leaving.

That morning tiles were harder, windows colder,

The raindrops on the pane more scourged, the grass

Barer to the sky, more wind-harrowed,

Or so it seemed. [...] (OG 352)

The poet comes to understand that, just as the straw knot in "The Harvest Bow," the father's home cannot reveal all of the inner man. Individuals give "life" to the inorganic objects that surround them. By itself without the father's presence, the house remains as concrete representation of the father's harsh criticisms: "Rebuke to fanciness and shrine to limit." What it cannot capture is the feelings and thoughts within the man. Heaney creates the

simile of the X-ray; the house stands “firmer than ever for its own idea / Like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body” (352). Just as the X-ray is a record of a person’s physical framework and not the energy that flows through a living body, so too the father’s house is a record of the existence of a man but not the man himself. What Heaney gains from examining his father through the object of the house is the reality that a “something” intangible has gone and its passing has changed Heaney’s world. The absence of his father has left Heaney’s world harder, colder, barer, which means the father had made Heaney’s world softer, warmer, and fuller through the existence of his transcendental self.

“The Harrow-Pin”

In the poem “The Harrow-Pin,” Heaney focuses once again on his father as the subject of the poem. And as he had done in “The Harvest Bow” twenty-seven years earlier, Heaney sets out to explore his father’s inner self, the source of his actions and beliefs, by focusing on an inanimate object associated with the man. The poem reads like a free flowing conversation. It begins with a speaker recounting a time from his childhood when he and his siblings believed in the magic of Christmas. He remembers how, as kids, he and his siblings would hang up stockings in the hope that by morning they would be filled with treats. He tells how they would be warned by his father to behave or else stockings would be filled with old dried cabbages instead of treats. This bit of reminiscing leads the story teller to remember his father’s worst threat of all – the harrow-pin. This hand-forged spike would be used not only as an object for their instruction; his father would want to use it in place of picture hooks and wire nails for shelving. Talk of the harrow-pin leads to stories of working the fields and the horses. Their tackle would hang in the barn. But the Christmas story and the

father's use of the harrow-pin for everything from threats, to hanging pictures, to working the fields are all part of a long ago harder time. The father, however, was never able to let those hard times go. Throughout the years he still judged everyone by their ability to make do and tough it out.

"The Harrow-Pin" was published in Heaney's 2006 collection, *District and Circle*. The poem is comprised of 24 lines arranged into eight three-lined heterometric stanzas. Heaney moves the poem forward by iambic meter and enjambment. The rhyme is created using assonance and alliteration. The primary object in the poem is a harrow-pin. This is a forged metal spike, part of an agricultural tool. These spikes are pounded, a dozen or so at a time, through a piece of wood which is dragged spike side down behind a horse to break up clods of dirt in the plowed fields. Heaney associates the use and qualities of the harrow-pin with his father's world view. The harrow-pin becomes the symbolic plane for his father's inner self.

Heaney is the speaker in "The Harrow-Pin." His recollections flow as a stream of consciousness. He begins the poem by recalling what his father used to tell him when he was a child:

We'd be told, "If you don't behave
There'll be nothing in your Christmas stocking for you
But an old kale stalk." And we would believe him. (District 25)

The telling of the Christmas stocking story reminds Heaney that as a child he believed in whatever his father told him, even something as fantastical as stockings being magically filled by some unseen someone who was able to know if we were bad or good. He doesn't

recall finding an old cabbage in his stocking, just being threatened that it would be put there if he didn't behave. Once this correlation is established, Heaney introduces his father's most outrageous threat: the harrow-pin. In the mind of a child the harrow-pin takes on frightening possibilities and monstrous anamorphic design: "Head-banged spike, forged fang, a true dead ringer." But, from Heaney's adult perspective, the forged pin loses these menacing qualities. In 2008 Heaney described the family discipline when he was a child: "No punishments were administered. She [Heaney's mother] never raised a hand to one of us. What loomed, when the situation was grave, was the authority of my father, although this was never exercised as corporal punishment" (O'Driscoll 311). The adult Heaney is able to describe the harrow-pin's physical aspects and its associations, an approach he had taken for the harvest bow twenty-seven years earlier. The harrow-pin comes from an era when times were tough, people worked hard to make ends meet, and made do with what they had:

Out of a harder time, it was a stake
 He'd drive through aspiration and pretence
 For our instruction. (District 25)

"He'd drive through aspiration and pretence / for our instruction," echoes values first expressed in "The Harvest Bow": "Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks / And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks" (OG 175). What wasn't obvious to the poet twenty-seven years earlier was the long term impact the hard times had on his father. In "The Harvest Bow," the middle aged poet recalls seeing evidence of difficulty but was sheltered from the struggles by the presence of his father:

I see us walk between the railway slopes
 Into an evening of long grass and midges,
 Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,
 An auction notice on an outhouse wall—
 You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick
 For the big lift of these evenings [...] (175)

Age and circumstances have changed Heaney's perspective. In his mind, the harrow-pin drives home the difficult times that shaped his father's worldview. The father's association to the harrow-pin is extended to include the farm horses that Heaney once described in "The Follower": "My father worked with a horse-plough [...] The horses strained at his clicking tongue [...] the sweating team turned round" (OG 10). Age and insight open Heaney's eyes; the romance of the ploughman gives way to the harsh reality of field work. The harrow-pins, used to hang the horse tackle, personify this harsh reality:

Brute-forced, rusted, haphazard set pins
 From harrow wrecked by horse-power over stones
 Lodged in the stable wall and on them hung

 Horses' collars lined with sweat-veined ticking,
 Old cobwebbed reins and hames and eye-patched winkers,
 The tackle of the mighty, simple dead. (District 25)

Heaney's stream of consciousness has moved forward from an association between the harrow-pin and his father to an association between the work horses and his father. Heaney forces us to ask, "Who are the mighty simple dead? The long dead horses? Heaney's deceased father?" The final two stanzas morph the horses, the harrow pin, and his father into one:

Out there, in musts of bedding cut with piss
 He put all to the test. Inside, in the house,
 Ungulled, irreconcilable.

And horse-sensed as the traveled Gulliver,
 What virtue he approved (and would assay)
 Was hammered in iron (District 26)

Heaney's father's stern criticism of the world around him and his desire for a Spartan existence, expressed seven years earlier in "xxxiii" from "Squarings," "'Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know', / A paradigm of rigour and correction" (OG 352) takes its toll. In his father's later years Heaney sees a father who is increasingly cynical. The poet compares him to the traveled Gulliver. Gulliver held unrealistic expectations for human behavior and because of this the world of humans became a disappointment to him (Dyson 682). The father judges all by the standards of a world that is not a human world. It is the world of his draft horses, tough, hard, physical, and, like Gulliver who leaves the land of Houyhnhnms, the father's world is gone and cannot be revisited. The father's horses have been replaced by modern machinery: "From harrows wrecked by horse-power over stones," their rusted and

stained tackle hanging as testament to a by gone era. In the end, what the father's high ideals lead him to is unemotional pure reason and practicality. What emerges in this poem is a complex picture of a man who, like Swift's Gulliver, holds himself and his fellow man to such high ideals that it can only lead to self alienation.

"The Stone Verdict"

"The Haw Lantern" (1987) is the first collection of poems published after Seamus Heaney's parents' deaths. In a 1991 interview with Blake Morrison, Heaney commented on the magnitude of this loss: "'The most important thing that has happened to me in the last ten years [...] is being at two death beds.' The deaths of his mother in the autumn of 1984 and of his father in October of 1986 left a colossal space, and one which he has struggled to fill with poetry" (Parker 211). Heaney's initial poetic response to his father's death is "The Stone Verdict."

"The Stone Verdict" tells the story of two final judgements, the first for an anonymous man, and the second for the Greek god Hermes. The setting for the first judgement is the Christian heaven. One lone man stands silently before the unseen judge. The man wears his work clothes which include a hat planted firmly on his head. He feels a mix of uncertainty concerning his situation and expectation that the judgement will be acted out swiftly.

In the second scene the setting changes from the Christian heaven to Mount Olympus. The Greek gods surround Hermes. He is on trial and stands waiting for the gods of Olympus to pass judgement on him. The Greek gods begin to cast their stones at his feet. These are the

stones of innocence, and there are so many that they pile up around Hermes, half-burying him.

“The Stone Verdict” was published in 1987, one year after Patrick Heaney’s death. It is a fifteen line poem divided into two stanzas, a seven and an eight line stanza respectively. Heaney moves the poem forward using enjambment, internal rhyme, and alliteration. The poem focuses on Patrick Heaney’s beliefs and inner nature. But, compared to the poet’s anthropologist stance in “The Harvest Bow” where the father’s silent nature is examined for clues, in “The Stone Verdict,” the poet poses as attorney, defending his father against the critical perspective of the Irish Christian society.

The opening stanza introduces a visual portrait of the father’s beliefs and inner nature. Heaney’s father is stubborn and prideful:

When he stands in the judgement place
With his stick in his hand and the broad hat
Still on his head, maimed by self-doubt
And an old disdain of sweet talk and excuses (OG 280)

This man stubbornly refuses to let go of his stick even though this artifact from his physical life will no longer be needed in death. He stands in the presence of his judge with his hat firmly placed on his head. This is a sign of pride; a humble man would have removed his hat to show deference. He is a skeptical man, doubting the very scene he is engaged in. He has his own ideas of how things should happen and will not waver from them:

It will be no justice if the sentence is blabbed out.
He will expect more than words in the ultimate court

He relied on through a lifetime's speechlessness. (280)

The dilemma appears in the opening stanza. The setting is "the judgement place." Ireland is a Christian country, and all Christians believe that the day of judgement happens before God in heaven: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corin.5:10). Heaney's father's beliefs and inner nature conflict with the Irish Catholic Christian demand for humility, "a man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor" (Prov. 29:23). The church teaches that an unwavering faith in God and all the doctrine of the church are needed in order to obtain eternal salvation. Heaney's father is a prideful man: "and the broad hat / Still on his head." He is, at times, filled with doubt: "maimed by self-doubt." Pride and a questioning nature are negative qualities in the Irish Catholic Christian doctrine.

Another dilemma delineated by Heaney is the manner in which his father's judgement is executed: "It will be no judgement if the sentence is blabbed out." Yet, Christian judgement is handed down through the word of God. Heaney knows his father was a man of few words, a trait held by the rural Irish district in which he grew up. Michael Parker quotes a fellow Northern Irish poet and friend of Seamus Heaney in his description of how the Northern Irish tight-lipped nature is common to Northern Catholics and Protestants: "'Some of the qualities that I recognize as typical of the Ulsterman,' writes the poet, Michael Longley, 'are a down-to-earth realism, a dislike of unnecessary frills, a distrust of verbiage. He doesn't speak for the sake of decoration, but prefers to search for the facts at the core of the matter'" (2). The Christian framework sees the father's beliefs and inner nature in a

negative light. Heaney is uncomfortable knowing that his father is judged by such a set of standards.

The second stanza sets things right. The problem for Heaney's father is the Christian framework which places judgement upon him. Heaney solves this problem by placing his father in a pre-Christian Greek mythological framework. Heaney's command of recognizable objects and impressions, the man, his hat, the stick, a judgement, along with imaginative settings, the Christian heaven and Greek Mount Olympus, brings to light a new perspective on his father. The ancient Greeks valued the very traits which Christian society criticizes. Hermes takes the place of the poet's father. He becomes the symbolic plane through which Heaney removes his father from the Christian value system. Just like Heaney's father, Hermes is associated with cattle and commerce. Hermes is prideful. Compared to Christian society's negative view of pride the Greek society considered pride in a positive light, associating it with one's reputation within the community (Shutt 38).

Let it be like the judgement of Hermes,
 God of the stone heap, where the stones were verdicts
 Cast solidly at his feet, piling up around him
 Until he stood waist-deep in the cairn (OG 280)

Hermes' trial by stones, a judgement of action, replaces the Christian judgement by the word. Hermes is associated with cairns, stone burial mounds found throughout Ireland. Just as Hermes travels between the Underworld and our world, the cairn is a type of threshold. Heaney's use of the cairn image re-establishes his father's ancestral heritage by connecting the father to Ireland's pre-Christian beginnings:

Of his own absolution: maybe a gate-pillar
 Or a tumbled wallstead where hogweed earths the silence
 Somebody will break at last to say, 'Here
 His spirit lingers,' and will have said too much (OG 280)

Anthropologist Tok Thompson described the difference between the pre-Christian Irish culture, which created the cairns, and the Irish Christian culture as a difference in worldviews: "Unlike the Christian conceptions with the afterlife as 'up there' and on inherently lineal time [...] this earlier cosmology appears to have been embedded, circular, and co-spatial" (362). Heaney settles on this Celtic Irish understanding of life and death. His father lingers; his presence marked by the land. These images, trial by action, Hermes, and cairns remove his father from the Christian framework and return Heaney's father to a state of dignity and tradition.

The difficulty Heaney faced in writing this poem had to do with introducing his father visually into the poem while at the same time keeping the focus on the father as subject. Prior to "The Stone Verdict" Heaney's poetry had introduced his father and his father's silent nature as the subject of the poem in "The Harvest Bow." "The Harvest Bow" maintained the focus on the father by diverting the gaze away from the father image, the "my father", "his father", and "he" of other father poems, to an inanimate object associated with the father. Whenever the father appeared as the object or image in a poem his physical body was present. There are numerous examples of this: "In the porch I met my father crying—," ("Mid-term Break," OG 11); "My father," ("Digging," 3); "My father worked with a horse-plough," ("Follower," 10); "[...] and my father / was

making tillage returns / In acres, roods, and perches,” (“A Constable Calls,” 129); “A shadow his father makes with joined hands,” (“Alphabets,” 269), and “In the last minutes he said more to her / Almost than in all their life together,” (“Clearances VII,” 289). In “The Stone Verdict,” Heaney begins with “When he stands.” Because Heaney does not look at his father through an inanimate object he must find a way to avoid the having his father become an object in the poem. Heaney maintains the focus of the poem on the father through a masterful use of simile. He avoids the father image entrapment by replacing his father with the Greek god Hermes. Hermes is neither Irish nor a father. He further distances his father from communal Irish imagery and any of its pre-conceived interpretations by changing the framework or setting of the final judgement from Irish Christian to ancient Greek.

The Father as Poetic Object: A Varied use of the Father Image

“Digging” and “Follower”

The majority of Heaney’s father poems use the father as poetic object or image. In this manner the father is often concrete representation of an abstract idea or concept. Heaney’s father is used in both subtle and overt ways, his image returning again and again throughout the years, proof of his central place in Heaney’s creative mindscape and the interrelationship between the father and Heaney’s creative process. The poem “Digging,” from *Death of a Naturalist*, uses the father as physical representation of Irish agrarian heritage. Heaney presents his personal dilemma within the poem, the need to remain connected to inherited culture while at the same time striking out on his own. Helen

Vendler's reading of the father image in "Digging" ignores the fact that the father image is maintained throughout the poem by direct description—"My father digging," "The coarse boot nestled on the lug," "By God, the old man could handle a spade"—or by inference—"a clean rasping sound," "The cold smell of potato mould" (3). Vendler focuses primarily on Heaney's use of the gun image which occurs only once in the second line of the poem.

Focusing on the gun creates a political framework for the poem and reduces the father image to a side-note: "'Choose,' said two opposing voices from his culture: 'Inherit the farm,' said agricultural tradition; 'Take up arms,' said Republican militarism" (Vendler 29). Hart and Frazier, however, maintain that the father image in all of Heaney's father poems is a constant emotional father/son conflict established in "Digging." This concept is inaccurate.

Heaney uses the father image in numerous poems in a myriad of roles for varied purposes. The father's physical presence in "Digging" portrays the agrarian roots of Northern Ireland and his title as Heaney's father: "My father" declares that he is the generational link to the grandfather: "his old man." The emphasis in the poem is on the action of the father: "he was digging" and grandfather: "Nicking and slicing," as well as the result of the action: "To scatter new potatoes," "going down and down / For the good turf" (OG 3). The father image in "Follower" is similar to "Digging" in that the father is a farmer, but the father image in "Follower" differs from the father image in "Digging" in the type of action and the poet's purpose. The father is ploughing in "Follower": "My father worked with a horse-plough" (OG 10). The emphasis is on the expertise of the work and not the work itself: "An expert," "The sod rolled over without breaking," "Mapping the furrow exactly." Compared to the meditative stance in "Digging" whereby the poet has sensory experiences: "I look," "The

cold smell,” “the squelch and slap,” that trigger mental activity: “awaken in my head” (OG 3), the poet becomes physically involved in the action of the poem in “Follower”: “I stumbled,” “Fell sometimes,” “Sometimes he rode me on his back,” “tripping, falling” (OG 10).

Other critics have misread the father image in “Follower” and as an outcome misread Heaney’s intent. Helen Vendler views the father in “Follower” as an “anonymity,” a symbolic figure representing passing rural occupations and lifestyles: “In Heaney’s early work ‘symbolic figures’ [...] stand for the poet’s recognition of the immemorial nature of the work done on the family farm, which he is intent on perpetuating in language” (11). She categorizes “Follower” with “Thatcher.” In this poem and others like it the poet speaks in the third person past tense: “The early ‘poems of anonymity’ are always elegiac: Heaney will not write from ‘inside’ or from a present-tense perspective” (18). But, Vendler’s own definition of “poems of anonymity” does not fit “Follower.” Heaney opens with a very inclusive statement: “My father,” and maintains a presence throughout the poem: “I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,” “I wanted to grow up and plough,” “All I ever did was follow” (OG 10). Furthermore, Heaney moves from the past-tense to the present-tense in the closing stanza:

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away. (10)

Henry Hart, in his book *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, mentions “Follower” one time as an example of the poet killing off the paternal lineage of naturalists in

order to gain artistic freedom: “His natural father and mother, as poems as different as ‘Follower’ and ‘Clearances’ attest, are superseded; in their place Heaney erects the memorials that are his poems” (14). Hart’s oedipal framework is limited in its scope and analysis.

The father figure in “Follower” has a personal relationship to the poet: “My father,” but as a poetic object is representing a concept beyond Heaney’s biological father. The action of the poem introduces the expertise of the father image: “His eye / Narrowed and angled at the ground, / Mapping the furrow exactly” (OG 10). Heaney’s role within the poem is that of a young person admiring the work done by the father and wanting to do it as well: “I wanted to grow up and plough.” The interaction between the two occurs in the fourth stanza: “Sometimes he rode me on his back / dipping and rising to his plod.” The conclusion, a sense of role reversal or taking over, is in the present-tense: “But today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me and will not go away.”

It is significant that “Follower” was written at a time when Heaney’s career as a poet was beginning to take off. These events along with poetic influences around the time “Follower” was written lead to a better understanding of the father image and what it represents within the poem. Heaney’s big break came in January of 1965 when Charles Monteith of Faber & Faber sent a letter to Heaney requesting a manuscript (Parker 58). When asked about this moment in the 2006 interview with Dennis O’Driscoll Heaney described Faber & Faber as “an unenterable empyrean” for writers (80). This description indicates the stature and importance of this publishing house. Up until this moment Heaney’s writing had been receiving growing attention within Ireland. Faber & Faber’s request was confirmation

to the young poet that his writing had merit. The significance of this moment as it relates to “Follower” is that “Follower” was written in response to Monteith’s letter requesting a manuscript (81). Michael Parker records that Heaney wrote a great deal in between the time of the request and when he submitted his manuscript: “In the subsequent four months Heaney ‘wrote a hell of a lot’” (58). Heaney acknowledges the influence of Monteith’s letter on his writing in those four months: “‘Charles Monteith’s letter picked out “Death of a Naturalist” and “Digging” as poems that took his fancy, so that encouraged me to concentrate on subjects and settings around Mossbawn’” (O’Driscoll 82).

Heaney’s growing confidence in his writing ability and feelings of confirmation are reflected in “Follower.” Parker points out the influence of Daniel Corkery’s book *The Hidden Ireland*, a book that contains the writings of eighteenth century Irish poets, on Heaney’s poem “Digging.”: “He [Heaney] had been introduced to *The Hidden Ireland* while at St. Columb’s, but he re-read it in the early sixties, and gave a brief lecture on Corkery as part of the Belfast Festival of 1965” (39). Parker points to the influence of the eighteenth century poem, “An Scolaire,” or “The Scholar,” on “Diggings” key images of the spade and the pen:

Great the harvest of his plough
 Coming in the front of Spring
 And the yoke of his plough team,
 A handful of pens (41)

Yet, the association between ploughing and writing relates more to the imagery in “Follower” than to “Digging.” The action in “The Follower” is centered around ploughing:

My father worked with a horse-plough,

His shoulders globed like a full sail strung

Between the shafts and the furrow.

The horses strained at his clicking tongue (OG 10)

The act of ploughing for a harvest and the visual of a plough team in control of the driver is echoes “The Scholar,” Heaney would have been familiar with this poem and its association between the yoke of the plough team and the writer’s pen sheds. “the Scholar” sheds light on Heaney’s use of the father image. Heaney’s literary association of ploughing with writing is confirmed in another Heaney poem, “Glanmore Sonnets” from *Field Work*: “Vowels ploughed into other [...] Old plough-socks gorge the subsoil of each sense” (OG 156).

It is highly probable that Heaney was pointing back to “The Scholar” and its clear association of ploughing with writing when he wrote “Follower.” Added to this is the fact that Heaney wrote “Follower” at a time of great advancements in his career. Together this sheds light on the father image in “Follower.” In “Follower,” the father represents the literary canon, a literary father so to speak, “an expert” whose work in the field created the “polished sod” that Heaney stumbles on. The poet’s early writings: “I wanted to grow up and plow,” which seemed at times like “yapping” have brought him to “today,” a time of confidence. T.S. Eliot in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” argued that a writer’s work holds a sense of the presence of the past in the current (Eliot 806). Heaney expresses an understanding of this historical sense in the “Follower”: “But today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away” (OG 10).

“A Constable Calls” and “Trial Runs”

Heaney does not limit the father image to scenes of physical exertion or expertise. Nor does the poet disassociate his father from political commentary. Two poems in particular, “A Constable Calls” and “Trial Runs,” use the father as representation of Northern Ireland’s Irish Catholic minority. The poems were written during a period of mounting tensions in Northern Ireland. The Catholic civil rights marches in 1968 led way to escalating violence including government internments and sectarian bombings. “A Constable Calls” and “Trial Runs” are part of Heaney’s response to what has since become known as “The Troubles.” The father image within each of these poems becomes a poetic hologram of Heaney’s stance against the onslaught of oppression and polarization.

“A Constable Calls” tells the story of farmer who is visited by a local government official. It is tax time and the farmer must account for all of the crops that he has planted. The two sit at the kitchen table, the government official with his official ledger and the farmer with his numbers, recording the harvested crop information and the tally of crops still in the field. The farmer’s son observes the whole scene and is startled when he overhears his father telling a lie to the government official.

Published in 1975, “A Constable Calls” is from Heaney’s fourth collection *North*. The poem is part of *North*’s final sequence titled “Singing School.” The sequence is comprised of six poems, and all six are autobiographical and express the poet’s struggle to come to terms with Northern Ireland’s sectarian violence: “In a sequence like ‘Singing School’ I’d been working out a position or stance in relation to the place and times we were inhabiting” (O’Driscoll 193).

“A Constable Calls” has thirty-six lines and is arranged into nine quatrain stanzas, but unlike “Follower,” Heaney’s father image does not enter the scene until the fourth stanza.

“Follower” opens with the words “My father” and goes on to create a visual of the champion farmer: “His shoulders globed like a full sail strung” (OG 10). The father’s physical traits in “A Constable Calls” are never revealed. Instead, the physical presence in the poem belongs to the government visitor’s inanimate objects while the official himself remains anonymous: “His bicycle stood at the window-sill [...] His cap was upside down” (OG 129).

The constable’s bicycle takes on a sinister presence: “rubber cowl,” “fat black handle grips,” “the ‘spud’ / Of the dynamo gleaming and cocked back” (129). Once in the home the official’s weapons, his ledger and gun, strike fear into the young poet: “He had untapped / The heavy ledger [...] I sat staring at the polished holster” (129). The poet’s fear remains as the official takes his leave: “Closed the doomsday book [...] And looked at me as he said goodbye” (130). The closing stanza announces the inevitable eruption of violence and the collapse of this oppressive system of order. Heaney describes a shadow entering the scene as the official straps his ledger onto his bicycle, and the bicycle together with the man and the “doomsday book” become the catalyst for a ticking time bomb:

A shadow bobbed in the window/
He was snapping the carrier spring
Over the ledger. His boot pushed off
And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked. (130)

What becomes significant in this poem is the forgotten father figure. Heaney’s memory of this event and the role his father plays is key to Heaney “working out a position

or stance in relation to the place and times” (O’Driscoll 193). The fear in the poem is within the poet as a young boy and finds expression in his fixation for the tools of oppression: the bicycle “heating in the sunlight, the ‘spud’ / Of the dynamo gleaming and cocked back,” the officials dress “boot of the law” and “the polished holster / With its buttoned flap, braid cord / Looped into the revolver butt” (OG 129). The father holds no fear, so there is no fear to describe, no trembling hands, averted gaze, cowering figure. Furthermore, the father does not exhibit hatred, no clenched fists, defiant eyes, tense muscles. The father enters into the poem in the fourth stanza with the words “and my father” (129) and maintains a quiet presence with his action: “making the tillage returns / In acres, roods, and perches,” and the one word he speaks in stanza six: “No” (129).

The father’s “no” is in response to the official’s questioning. Heaney witnesses his father’s straightforward response to the question “Any other root crops?” (129) and is alarmed by the answer. The young boy knows that there are turnips planted out “where the seed ran out” (129). His young imagination fears the father’s answer could bring punishment down on them: “I assumed / Small guilts and sat / Imagining the black hole in the barracks” (129). But what the father recognizes and the young boy does not is the unreasonable demand on the part of the officer to record even the smallest amount planted: “But was there not a line / Of turnips” (129). The father’s “no” is calm vocalization of defiance in the presence of excessive control, symbolized by the ledger and gun, and reason in an unreasonable situation, the invasion of the home and questioning. The “no” comes as a quiet voice free of hysteria, fear, and hatred.

The poet draws on another childhood memory of his father in the political poem “Trial Runs.” “Trial Runs” tells the story of a man’s visit from a neighbor who has just returned from military service in World War II. The soldier, a Protestant, brings a gift of rosary beads that he had gotten while in Italy. Together the two men laugh and joke with each other as they stand in the doorway of the home.

“Trial Runs” was published in 1975 in a short booklet titled *Stations*. This short booklet was begun while Heaney was guest lecturer in America from the fall semester of 1970 to September of 1971 but not completed and published until after *North* (Parker 92). The style of the poems are markedly different from his usually verse and reflect Heaney’s time in the United States. “Trial Runs” along with the rest of the poems in the booklet are written in prose style and reflect Northern Ireland’s Troubles. Heaney discussed the political nature of the poems in an interview published in 2006: “I believe it was after I handed in the manuscript of *North* that I took them up again and at the stage I went from dealing with the pre-reflective life of Mossbawn to pieces backlit by awareness of the historical moment or the political circumstances” (O’Driscoll 180).

Heaney’s search for a response to the sectarian divisiveness leads him to a particular memory of his father and the impression his mind held surrounding his father’s relationship with the Protestant neighbors, a relationship the poet describes in positive terms: “But we were on very good terms with all of these people. Respectable neighbors, you know, part of something settled” (O’Driscoll 18). This idea of a cohesive community is expressed in “Trial Runs.” The opening sentence of the poem welcomes home returning troops: “WELCOME HOME YE LADS OF THE EIGHTH ARMY” (OG 85). The Eighth Army refers to the

British Eighth Army which fought in North Africa and Italy throughout most of World War II. The banner is painted over sectarian slogans: “a banner headline over the old news of REMEMBER 1690 and NO SURRENDER” (85). The next line begins: “There had to be some defiance in because it was painted along the demesne wall” (85). The concept of “home” in “WELCOME HOME” is markedly different from the word “demesne” which the poet uses to identify the wall where the slogans were written: “it was painted along the demesne wall” (85). “Demesne” is a legal term referring to ownership of property or a possession (“Demesne,” def. 1). “Home” is not a possession, it is a place of the heart, “a place of one’s dwelling or nurturing” (“Home,” def. 3). The soldiers, mostly Irish Protestants, are returning to their place of the heart. The banner replaces old prejudices and biases. Heaney is laying out a shift in perspective, a “stance” that breaks down the polarizing framework which created the original slogans. The poet as a young boy declares his need to share the message in the line: “a great wingspan of lettering I hurried under with the messages” (OG 85).

As he had done in “The Constable Calls,” Heaney draws on a memory of his father, in this case a visit between his father and a returning neighbor, to help him work out his position or stance in response to Northern Ireland’s destructive sectarian forces. The Protestant neighbor is in military uniform: “khaki shirt and brass-buckled belt,” but he is no longer the member of an invading army, he is “a demobbed neighbor” (85). The father nervously greets the neighbor, “My father jingled silver deep in both pockets and laughed” (85). The father’s nervous laughter in response to the neighbor’s gift of rosary beads is accompanied by playful banter between the two men:

‘Did they make a Papish of you over there?’

‘Oh damn the fear! I stole them for you, Paddy, off the

Pope’s dresser when his back was turned.’

‘You could harness a donkey with them.’ (OG 85)

In contrast to the father’s situation: the father at home, pockets filled with silver, friendly Protestant neighbors, respect for the Catholic faith symbolized by the gift of rosary beads, is the memorialized fate of Irish Catholics in Heaney’s poem, “Requiem for the Croppies,” from the 1969 collection *Door into the Dark*. In this poem Heaney recalls the tragic end of the Irish Catholics fighting against Protestant rule in the rebellion of 1798: “The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley-- / No kitchens on the run [...] Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave. / Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon” (OG 23). The memorialized image of Catholic Ireland, ever defiant, tragic, downtrodden, is replaced with the father’s image in “Trial Runs.” The poet’s memory of his father’s interaction with the Protestant neighbor replaces the destructive events of the past and becomes illustration for an abstract concept of a new Ireland. The curative nature of his father’s experience breaks the cyclical violence perpetuated in “Requiem for the Croppies” with its final image of barley rising up out of the ground: “And in August the barley grew up out of the grave” (23).

Heaney uses his memory of his father as the image of Catholic Ireland thereby replacing the memory of tragic dislocation as a poetical motif for Ireland. The father image assists Heaney in working out his position in relation to the political times that he is experiencing. Drawing on the memories of his father the poet is able to locate a stance that breaks through “the old news” and makes peace attainable: “Their laughter sailed above my

head, a hoarse clamour, / two big nervous birds dipping and lifting, making trial runs / across a territory” (OG 85).

“Man and Boy”, “Seeing Things”, and “Crossings xxvii”

Patrick Heaney died in 1986. His death along with the death of Heaney’s mother two years earlier would take away the poet’s foundational physical link to childhood memories and experiences: Michael Parker sees a direct connection between the poet’s parents and the development of his mindscape: “The ‘sure and steadfast anchor’ of the poet’s soul was forged by both parents” (4). The loss of his formative parents would have profound impact on the poet’s worldview and would manifest into poetic expression. “Clearances” from the 1987 collection *The Haw Lantern* is a series of poems written “in memoriam” of the poet’s mother: “She taught me what her uncle once taught her / How easily the biggest coal block split / If you got the grain and hammer angled right” (OG 282). But even though the poet feels deeply the loss of his mother: “I remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine” (285), it is the father who appears throughout Heaney’s later life poetry.

Coinciding with the death of his parents was Heaney turning the milestone age of fifty in 1989. Fifty years of age is the time of life when individuals begin to recognize their own mortality. For the poet, writing poetry is divided into three phases, and the later years of a writer’s life are made up of this pattern of cyclical renewal: “I believe the three phases turn out to be cyclic, that there are renewed surges of endeavor in your life and art, and that, in

every case, the movement involves a pattern of getting started, keeping going and getting started again” (O’Driscoll 323-24).

The experience with death brings about a heightened perception of what has gone by, a cognizant awareness of personal mortality, and a sensibility of our place within the pattern of life and death. Heaney’s repeated use of the father in his poetical exploration into the natural experience of death points to a profound relationship between the father and Heaney’s poetic consciousness. The poet reaches into this consciousness and draws on the memory and image of his father to give expression to his new perspective brought about by the death of his parents and his entry into his fifties. The poem “Man and Boy” illustrates this point.

“Man and Boy” from Heaney’s 1991 collection *Seeing Things* articulates the experience of loss and the accompanying reflection that triggers shifting emotions of sadness, anxiety, and acceptance. “Man and Boy” tells the story about a son reflecting on the memories of his father. The son recalls jokes his father told, time spent with his father, and lessons his father had tried to instill in him. The son recalls that his father experienced the loss of his own father when he was just a young boy.

Heaney divides “Man and Boy” into two contrastive parts. The first part is in open form and arranged into three stanzas of varying length. In this part, Heaney creates rhythm and moves the poem forward through the use of dialog in the first stanza, assonance and alliteration in the second stanza, and a combination of the two coupled with repetition in the third stanza. The second part shifts to a more formal arrangement, elegiac in tone. It is

comprised of six tercet stanzas that utilize traditional blank verse throughout and a combination of dialog and assonance to create tension and rhythm.

The poem opens with the retelling of an old fishing joke: “‘Catch the old one first, [...]’Then the young ones / Will all follow, and Bob’s your uncle” (OG 314). The fishing theme continues in the second stanza: “On slow bright river evenings,” and is completed in the third stanza: “[...] but now and then / Could make a splash like the salmon” (314). Fishing is a figurative expression meaning “to search.” But search for what? The title “Man and Boy” points towards the relationship between maturity and youth. Two insights into this relationship are contained within the opening quote: “Catch the old one first, [...]’Then the young ones will all follow.” First, there is a natural sense of order for life, increasing age brings one naturally closer to death. Such a sense of order is confirmed by the poet’s interjection following: “My father’s joke was old, and heavy / And predictable” (314). Second, the interjection states that the father’s joke was “heavy.” Heaviness is a term associated with loss as in “heavy heart.” The cyclical nature of life and death is predictable, and so is the emotional weight of grief or heavy heart which accompanies loss.

The father’s lighthearted words contain a serious side. He is pointing towards the inevitable encounter between the physical cycle and the transcendent cycle of life and death. This frightening concept is followed by the father’s closing words “and Bob’s your uncle.” It is as though the father is giving Heaney a personal message. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the phrase “Bob’s your uncle” as a slang expression that means “everything is all right.” The gives his son verbal reassurance, a figurative pat on the shoulder signifying all will be well.

The father's joke, which ends on an earnest note, sets the pattern for the poet's other memories of time spent with the father:

On slow bright river evenings, the sweet time
 Made him afraid we'd take too much for granted
 And our spirits must be lightly checked (OG 314)

But knowledge alters perspective, and Heaney's experience with loss and his advancing years alter his understanding of his childhood memories. The father's unwillingness to give in to the care free moment takes on new meaning when seen from the poet's experienced vantage point. An awareness of the fleeting nature of human connections creates a sense of the serious.

The father's death is an emotional baptism for Heaney. He now sees the father's words and past actions when he would "lightly check" the poet's spirit in a new light. This new perspective gained from seeing the world through loss becomes a gift from the father. Heaney alludes to the father's gift of insight in the third stanza when he compares the father to a salmon: "but now and then / Could make a splash like the salmon" (OG 314). To Heaney the father is like the salmon of knowledge that gifts the hero of the Ossianic tales, the warrior poet Fionn Mac Cumhaill, with insight, magic, and the power of words (Stories, Myths & Legends).

In the second part the father and the salmon of knowledge become one and the same: "In earshot of the pool where the salmon jumped / Back through its own unheard concentric soundwaves" (OG 314). The second part takes on dreamlike qualities melding time and space into imagery and emotion. The poet who in his younger years had turned a deaf ear to his

father's words now stands "In earshot of the pool." The pool of water is symbolic for an "otherworld." Ancient Celts and other cultures identified water as an elemental force and believed bodies of water and water sources were portals between the known human world and the unknown realm outside of human conception (Faull). Heaney now hears the father's message at a time when the father cannot hear himself: "Back through its own concentric soundwaves."

The father's emotional journey acts as a guide, but to tap into it requires a reconceptualization of time. In the book *The Making of a Poem* co-author Mark Strand describes how the poem provides the place for this experience: "A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be" (Strand xxiv). The poet imagines what his father felt at a young age when he experienced the death of his own father:

My father is a barefoot boy with news
Running at eye-level with weeds and stooks
On the afternoon of his own father's death.

The open, black half of the half-door waits.
I feel much heat and hurry in the air.

I feel his legs and quick heels far away (314-315)

The poem contains multiple circular imagery: "'Catch the old one first,' [...] 'Then the young ones / Will all follow'," "Back through its own unheard concentric soundwaves," "He has mown himself to the centre of the field / And stands in a perfect ring," "'Go tell your

father,' the mower says / (He said it to my father who told me)." These circular images express a connection between the poet and his father. Heaney uses his father memories and poetical imagination to make sense of his own impending mortality, a realization that often times becomes a paralyzing moment for individuals. The cyclic paradigm is a new perspective, one that saves the poet from the paralysis of the fear of death and offers a sense of renewal:

And strange as my own---when he will piggyback me
At a great height, light-headed and thin-boned,
Like a witless elder rescued from the fire. (315)

In the end the father carries the son, a visual echoe from "Follower": "Sometimes he rode me on his back" (OG 11). But unlike the young man in "Follower" who sees his father stumbling behind him, the aging poet now sees the father as a continuing presence. In this manner the father is part of Heaney's poetic consciousness and becomes a source for understanding.

In *Seeing Things* Heaney's exploration of life lived in relation to death leads the poet back to memories of his father and his personal experience dealing with his father's death. Just as Heaney had done in "Man and Boy," he melds memories of his father with his poetic imagination in the title poem from *Seeing Things* as well as "Crossings xxvii" from the "Squarings" series. All three of these poems associate the father with the Celtic belief in water as a portal to an "otherworld." Water becomes symbolic for entry to a world outside of the literal world.

"Seeing Things" tells the story of a man's fear of death and the crippling affect this can have on life. To accomplish this Heaney draws on his memory of his father's own near

death experience when Heaney was just a young boy. The poem is divided into three contrastive sections, and each section is an undivided grouping of lines of varying length that utilize enjamb and assonance to move the poem forward.

The opening line for part one declares the location and the time: “Inishbofin on a Sunday morning” (OG 316). The setting is Inishbofin, a sea-side town. The poet as the speaker retells his experience as the passenger on a boat. He describes what he saw, “Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel,” and what he experienced, “One by one we were being handed down / Into a boat [...] We sat tight” (OG 316). Despite the calm waters, “The sea was very calm but even so,” Heaney is filled with fear and apprehension:

I panicked at the shiftiness and heft / of the craft itself. What guaranteed us---
That quick response and buoyancy and swim---
Kept me in agony. [...] (OG 316)

The boat becomes symbolic for our lives, the space and time we occupy; the ancient Celtic belief that bodies of water are a portal to the “otherworld” is represented by the sea water. Heaney’s fear comes from his perspective; he is keenly aware of the “otherworld” beyond the time and place we occupy. The beauty of his boating experience is lost due to the poet’s crippling fear of capsizing and drowning:

Kept me in agony. All the time
As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see

How riskily we fared into the morning

And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads. (OG 316)

Heaney's emotional state, his fear of death, and his imagination place himself in another boat, "It was as if I looked from another boat / Sailing through air, far up, and could see" (316). Heaney's sailing boat in the air references his Clonmacnoise poem from the "Squarings" sequence. In this poem he retells the Clonmacnoise story, that of ship sailing through the air and accidentally catching its anchor on the altar rails of a church. The monks of the church assist one of the crew members in unhooking the anchor lest the celestial ship's crew drown in the atmosphere of the known world. The celestial ship pulls the monks' gaze upward, transcending their world of preparation for the afterlife. The Clonmacnoise poem contains the dual concepts of a life lived focused on impending mortality represented by the monks and a life enriched by expanded vision and heightened perception. "And there were also the attendant meanings of being unburdened and being illuminated" (O'Driscoll 321). The poet's imaginative atmospheric trip in the sailing boat allows him the opportunity to see at the same moment impending mortality and eyes closed to the wonderment of the world around: "[...]and could see / How riskily we fared into the morning / And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads."

The second part of "Seeing Things" opens with the Latin word "claritas," which means to see things clearly. The poet stands in front of the carved stone, low relief scene of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the river. The scene, carved figures, lines representing water, images of fish, comes alive through the power of imagination: "And yet in that utter visibility / The stone's alive with what's invisible" (317). People attach emotions and beliefs

to what is in reality stone and lines and curves. Heaney “sees” his imagination is creating the fear which keeps him from experiencing the world around him.

In part three Heaney tells the story of his father’s near death experience. He frames his story in traditional story-telling phrases beginning with “Once upon a time” and ending with the words, “happily ever after.” What happens in between is the story of the circumstances that led to the poet’s father’s near drowning and the father’s return home afterwards. The story is seen through the eyes of a young Heaney who wanted to go along with his father to spray the potatoes but was told “no” because the father believed the job too dangerous for the young boy:

And he wouldn’t bring me with him. The horse-sprayer
Was too big and new-fangled, bluestone might
Burn in the eyes, the horse was fresh, I
Might scare the horse, or so on [...] (OG 317)

The father leaves his son behind, and this makes the boy angry: “[...] I threw stones / At a bird on the shed roof [...]” (317). The father believes he is in control of things, his equipment, his horse, his son’s safety, but an accident changes everything as horse, cart, equipment, and man fall into the deep part of the river:

When he was turning on the riverbank,
The horse had rusted and reared up and pitched
Cart and sprayer and everything off balance
So the whole rig went over into a deep
Whirlpool [...] (317)

The father enters the “otherworld,” represented by his tumble into the river. When he comes out of the river he is a changed man:

But when he came back, I was inside the house
 And saw him out the window, scatter-eyed
 And daunted, strange without his hat,
 His step unguided, his ghosthood immanent. (317)

The father is not physically injured by his brush with death. He can still walk, but his step is “unguided.” He can still see, but his sight is “scatter-eyed.” The apparent disabilities are created by his mental state. His fear of immanent “ghosthood” causes him to lose focus. The father’s confidence and purpose in life disappears; he is now “daunted” and “his step unguided.”

That Heaney framed his father’s near-drowning in story language sends the message that his tale contains something useful. Every real story contains something useful, either a moral message or some type of advice (Benjamin 79). Heaney’s “undrowned” father is himself mentally crippled by the fear of death. The father’s mental state sends Heaney the advice: accept mortality and get on with life. Heaney takes the advice and faces his fear through the image of his father:

[...]That afternoon
 I saw him face to face, he came to me
 With his damp footprints out of the river,
 And there was nothing between us there
 That might not still be happily ever after. (OG 317)

The father image in “Seeing Things” becomes an alter-ego for Heaney; the father as representation of Heaney’s fear of death helps the poet come to terms with his mortality and frees him from the crippling affect this knowledge can have on an individual’s psyche.

“Crossings xxvii” is from the “Squarings” series, the forty-eight poem sequence written in a spontaneous period of creativity. Heaney has described the whole series as seeing the world through eyes aware of the mysteries of life forces: “But it’s also firmly grounded in a sensation of ‘scope’, of a human relation to the ‘shifting brilliancies’ and the roaming ‘cloud-life’. It’s still susceptible to the numinous” (O’Driscoll 319). The poem is arranged into four tercet stanzas; the poet creates rhythm through his use of iambic pentameter, the repetition of words, and the use of alliteration and assonance, in particular the repetition of the fricative “s” and the vowel sound “o”. This rhythm along with enjambment moves the poem forward.

“Crossings xxvii” is about a successful man who dies. The opening line announces “Everything flows. Even a solid man” (OG 348). All solid form becomes like water; this analogy references the Celtic belief in the supernatural nature of water: “Mediating between sky, earth and underworld, water carried the communications of the Otherworld” (Austin, *Veneration* ¶6). Heaney creates the association between the man alive, “a solid man,” and the mutability and supernatural nature of water, “Everything flows.”

Everything flows. Even a solid man,

A pillar to himself and to his trade,

All yellow boots and stick and soft felt hat (OG 348)

That the “man” in “Crossings xxvii” is Heaney’s father is evidenced by comparing past writings about the father. In 1993 Michael Parker described Heaney’s father in terms similar to the poet’s own words: “A yeoman farmer, who served as a member of the rural council, Patrick Heaney embodied solidity” (1). The second line of “Crossings xxvii” describes Heaney’s father as “All yellow boots and stick and soft felt hat.” This metaphorical portrait echoes lines from “Ancestral Photograph,” one of Heaney’s earliest father poems: “Until my father won at arguing / His own price on a crowd of cattlemen” (lines 15-16), “[...] Your stick / Was parked behind the door and stands there still” (lines 27-28). But where “Ancestral Photograph” is an elegy for a lost culture and the father image encompasses the communal sense of rural Ireland “Closing this chapter of our chronicle” (line 29), the father image in “Crossings xxvii” becomes a tangible object through which the soul’s relationship between the “otherworld” and the concrete world can be understood, “Everything flows. Even a solid man” (OG 348).

The second stanza from “Crossings xxvii” continues the association between Heaney’s deceased father and the “otherworld.” Heaney’s father, the “solid man” metamorphoses into the Greek god Hermes, a god who mediates between the underworld and known world.

Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet
As the god of fair days, stone posts, roads and crossroads,
Guardian of travelers and psychopomp. (348)

Here the poet consciously creates a relationship between the transcendent nature of the soul

and the image of his father as the father sprouts wings and becomes like Hermes. Heaney had first drawn a correlation between his father and the Greek god Hermes in the 1987 poem “The Stone Verdict.” But, where the association between Hermes and the father in “The Stone Verdict” is situational, “Let is be like the judgement of Hermes” (OG 280), the association between the father and Hermes in “Crossings xxvii” links Hermes’ powers of divination directly to the father. The father becomes like Hermes as he offers guiding words to his sister:

‘Look for a man with an ashplant on the boat,’

My father told his sister heading out

For London, ‘and stay near him all night (348)

The father guides his sister as she crosses the water. He tells her to search out the man with the ashplant, a folkloric reference. The ashplant was believed by Celtic peoples to protect against drowning (Austin, *Wisdom of Trees* ¶24). But the passage across water is a poetic reference to death and the ash is the Celtic tree of rebirth (¶21). Heaney’s father has become like Hermes, an entity that embodies a framework for conceptualizing the soul outside of the body. Heaney describes the framework, the myths man creates, as an outcome of poetic imagination: “You learned that, from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region – not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life” (O’Driscoll 472). By framing the father within Greek and Celtic mythology, Heaney consciously incorporates his father into his poetic imagination. The father becomes the poet’s guide as he contemplates the transcendent nature of human life.

And you’ll be safe.’ Flow on, flow on

The journey of the soul with its soul guide

And the mysteries of dealing-men with sticks! (OG 348)

CHAPTER IV

THE FATHER'S ROLE IN HEANEY'S POETRY

Throughout the years Heaney has written twenty poems that use the father as an image or the subject of the poem. An uncollected father poem "A Boy Driving his Father to Confession" was first read aloud by Heaney in 1965 (Parker 56). The following year Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, was published, and it contained three father poems: "Digging," "Follower," and "Ancestral Photograph." In 1975 Heaney published the father poem "Trial Runs" as part of his short collection *Stations*. Heaney's first poem to treat his father as the subject, "The Harvest Bow," came out in 1979. The period of time from 1979 to 2006 would see the release of fourteen more father poems, and the majority of these were written after Patrick Heaney's death. The number and variety of these father poems point to the father's central placement within the poet's creative consciousness.

"Digging" has garnered the most attention of all the father poems. Heaney knew from the very beginning the importance of "Digging": "It was the first poem in the manuscript I sent to Dolmen and, from the moment I wrote it in August of 1964, I knew it was a strength-giver" (O'Driscoll 82). But, however important "Digging" is to Heaney's identity as a poet, it is important that readers recognize this association between the father image and the poem is not a constant. Heaney's intent for the father image will change for each father poem depending on the subject or focus of the poem. Each poem combines the father image with other images and feelings to form what T.S. Eliot described as a "new compound" (809).

The Father as Ancestral and Cultural Past

The father image is an expression of Heaney's imagination and is used for various reasons. In the poet's consciousness Heaney's real life father becomes a tangible link to an ancestral and cultural past, "he said it to my father who told me" (OG 314). The poet's ancestral and cultural past is a complex body containing Celtic, rural Catholic Irish, and mythic roots. The father's association with each of these elements is found in one form or another in numerous father poems. Heaney's poetry transforms the successful farmer of years past into the Titan figure in "Follower," "His shoulders globed like a full sail strung [...]" Sometimes he rode me on his back / Dipping and rising to his plod" (OG 11). In "Crossings xxvii," Patrick Heaney becomes Hermes, the Greek messenger god associated with cattle and the "otherworld", "Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet" (OG 348). The father becomes Celtic past and present in "The Stone Verdict." His body disappears leaving his spirit to inhabit the ancient cairn, "Until he stood waist-deep in the cairn / Of his own absolution: maybe a gate-pillar / Or a tumbled wallstead where hogweed earths the silence" (OG 280). At times the father becomes representative of Ireland itself, a male personification of Ireland's Kathleen ni Houlihan, as in the poem "Making Strange":

I stood between them,
the one with his traveled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,

and another, unshorn and bewildered

in the tubs of his wellingtons,
 smiling at me for help,
 faced with this stranger I'd brought him. (OG 208)

The Father as Phenomenon

In the father poems written after Patrick Heaney's death, Heaney increasingly associates his father with water and fluidness, "Everything flows. Even a solid man" (OG 348). This occurs at a time when Heaney's writing takes on a feeling described by the poet as "airiness" (Parker 212). Heaney's attempt to view the world from an out of world perspective uses the deceased father as tangible representation for phenomenon. An example of this is found in "Crossings xxxii":

I cannot mention keshes or the ford
 Without my father's shade appearing to me

 On a path towards sunset, eyeing spades and clothes
 That turf cutters stowed perhaps or souls cast off
 Before they crossed the log that spans the burn. (OG 351)

The father enters the poem as a spirit connected to the bogs and waterways. He infuses the scene with a sense of timelessness as he eyes the turf cutters' spades, objects that point back to "Digging." The father's "shade" melds the Celtic mythological veneration of water, the historic bog's of Ireland, and the ancestral ties first expressed in "Digging,"

“Nicking and slicing [...] going down and down / For the good turf” (OG 3), into a timeless presence.

The Father as Foundational Presence

Heaney acknowledges the father’s presence in his poetic consciousness in the 1996 poem “Poet’s Chair.” “Poet’s Chair” is an open form poem divided into three numbered stanzas plus a short opening. The opening paraphrases the words of the artist Leonardo da Vinci: “Next, a female sculptor begins to create a piece of art. You can see her looking at the material, planning how she will carve it. She circles around the piece, viewing the work from all angles. The sculptor gazes lovingly at the material, seeing in it all of its potential” (OG 398). Heaney creates an association between a sculptor’s physical and intellectual involvement with their art and a poet’s physical and intellectual involvement with the poem. This correlation between the visual arts and literary art together with the idea that art can raise man’s consciousness to a higher level was expressed much earlier by Yeats in part IV of “Under Ben Bulbin”: “Poet and sculptor do the work, / [...] Bring the soul of man to God” (Yeats 200).

Part I and II of the poem introduce the “poet’s chair.” In part I it sits in the center of a city courtyard. The chair has a fantastic design. Each foot of the chair has a different zoomorphic shape; the back is straight, and bronze, leafy saplings grow out of each rising stile. All the locals, the men, women, lovers, drinkers, old women, and gossips take turns sitting on the chair, and when they sit on it the experience is magical. The people sprout wings and leave their earthly place. In part II the chair is located in ancient Greece in a sunlit

prison. Socrates is seated on the chair. He has just drunk the poisonous hemlock and is calmly listening as the jailor describes the stages of numbness.

With the chair Heaney creates a visual for poetry as a place where images and impressions synthesize. The chair is the symbolic plane through which Heaney presents poetry's self explorative nature: "Angling shadows of itself" and poetry's transformative power: "The way a graft has seized their shoulderblades / That makes them happy". The 'Poet's Chair' is a material object, and Heaney uses its physical qualities and associations as representation for poetry's abstract nature. The chair has life: "Its straight back sprouts two bronze and leafy saplings" and a sense of timelessness: "[...] Socrates / At the center of the city and the day / Has proved the soul immortal (399). It is the imaginative expression of the poet's impressions and experiences: "On the qui vive all the time, its four legs land / On their feet – cat's-foot, goat-foot, big soft splay-foot too" (398).

Heaney turns the poem back on himself in part III. In the final stanza he is like the sculptor moving around her next work: "[...] I sit all seeing" (399). The chair turns into the landscape Heaney sits upon, and the first object Heaney sees is his father. He begins part III with the words, "My father is ploughing one, two, three, four sides." This is reminiscent of the opening line from Heaney's 1966 poem "Follower": "My father worked with a horse plough" (OG 10). It also calls to mind the lines from the 1979 poem "Glanmore Sonnets II": "Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round" (157). Heaney combines the image of the father and the action of the plough to create a visual expression for his poetic consciousness:

My father is ploughing one, two, three, four sides

Of the lea ground where I sit all-seeing
 At centre field, my back to the thorn tree
 They never cut [...] (399)

The poem's images, the father, the plough, and thorn tree are part of Heaney's mindscape. The father is associated with the plough, the poet's symbolic reference to creative consciousness. He becomes an alter-ego for Heaney as he plows the fertile ground: "[...] I am all foreknowledge. / Of the poem as a ploughshare that turns time" (399). At the same time the father's ancestral presence provides foundational support for the poet: "my back to the thorn tree / They never cut" (399). The solitary thorn tree is symbolic of Irish cultural roots. For the pre-Celts and Celts, these trees possessed magical associations: "Typically, fairy thorns are those that are 'conspicuously alone', whether in the middle of a field or in a hedgerow" (Devereux 8). The poet sees his father as a Jungian archetype, providing layers of association: personal, tribal, universal. The father as ancestral presence gifts to Heaney the thorn tree which in the poet's imagination becomes the "fairy thorn", a plant associated not only with fairies but sometimes with spirits of the dead (8). In this manner the father and the fairy thorn become one in the same, and together they are embodied within Heaney's poetic consciousness:

[...]I am all foreknowledge.
 Of the poem as a ploughshare that turns time
 Up and over. Of the chair in leaf
 The fairy thorn is entering for the future.
 Of being here for good in every sense (OG 399)

Helen Vendler identified “Mycenae Lookout” as the emotional centerpiece of *The Spirit Level*, Heaney’s 1996 collection which contains “Poet’s Chair.” Based on the Greek drama Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, “Mycenae Lookout” tells the story of the aftermath of the Trojan War through the eyes of the Watchman, “a helpless bystander at the murder of the returned Agamemnon” (Vendler 156). It reflects the position of ordinary citizens caught in “the crossfire of civil atrocity” (156). Such a helpless position can lead to despair or can foster a search for renewed purpose. Vendler’s focus is on the former. For her, the other poems of *The Spirit Level* are chiefly concerned with stoic endurance: “This can mean the resuming of ordinary activity after social catastrophe, or merely enduring what Hopkins called, speaking of his own middle age, ‘the jading and jar of the cart, / Time’s tasking’ (157).

By framing *The Spirit Level* in a numbing cycle of violence and stoic “keeping going,” it is not surprising for Vendler to read the death of Socrates in part II of “Poet’s Chair” as the central focus of the poem. She states that “the undeniable centerpiece of ‘Poet’s Chair’ is Socrates’ exemplary and stoical death” (168). Part III becomes a scene of “restoration by ‘keeping going’ afterwards” (168). The opening vision of the artist sculptor is ignored along with the poet’s chair as the primary image. Because of this part III with the opening image, “My father is ploughing one, two, three, four sides / Of the lea ground where I sit all-seeing” (OG 399) is overlooked. *The Spirit Level* contains two more father poems, “The Errand” and “The Strand,” neither of which is mentioned in Vendler’s book *Seamus Heaney*. She ignores them because she does not value the private poetry. What she seeks out are images that fit two themes: response to Northern Ireland’s political violence and search

for identity. Because of this Vendler misses the picture Heaney creates in “Poet’s Chair,” a complex picture of the father’s role as an alter-ego for Heaney and his poetic consciousness in.

Frazier and Hart limit Heaney’s father poetry by encapsulating it within a one-dimensional framework. All of the father poems become differing angles of the same struggle if we accept their father / son conflict as the definitive word. The father as alter-ego, Jungian archetype, or spirit-like phenomenon can not exist within their conflict design. Frazier’s and Hart’s critical reading of Heaney’s father image miss the real imagined presence the father maintains within Heaney’s poetic consciousness.

Hart dedicates several pages to a discussion of how Heaney has struggled from the very beginning to portray “the artist’s painful self-consciousness” (164), Hart’s expression for poetic consciousness. He never associates the father image with this preoccupation. Yet, Heaney has articulated a conscious connection between his poetic consciousness and the father from early on. This connection is reaffirmed in the 1996 short three line poem “The Strand”:

The dotted line my father’s ashplant made
On Sandymount Strand
Is something else the tide won’t wash away. (OG 406)

The physical father is gone; what remains is his imprint. Just as in “Poet’s Chair”: “[...] Of the chair in leaf / The fairy thorn is entering for the future. / Of being here for good in every sense,” time cannot “wash away” the father’s presence within Heaney’s mindscape. In a 2002 interview with John Brown Heaney described a connection with his father that

went beyond the temporal relationship they had at the time “Digging” and “Follower” were written: “There was an underground cable between us and whatever messages were exchanged were usually sent through it rather than through any talk we might have had. Whatever influence my father has had on the poetry comes from tapping into the cable” (SalmonPoetry.com). The protective presence of the father as the sentry in “Crossings xv”: “That night I owned the piled grain of Egypt. / I watched the sentry’s torchlight n the hoard. / I stood in the door, unseen and blazed upon” (OG 344), the warm glow of fatherly pride in “The Errand”: “But still he was glad, I know, when I stood my ground” (404) co-exist within the Heaney’s poetic consciousness. All together the father continues as an unending complex presence in Heaney’s mindscape.

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