

“IN STEP WITH WHAT ESCAPED ME”: MILLENNIAL REFLECTIONS ON
SEAMUS HEANEY’S *SEEING THINGS*

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The point of this paper is simple. The millenium is an invisible, arbitrary line drawn in time by those persons living in countries affected by the Christian dispensation; Seamus Heaney has, in the last ten years or so, become interested in such boundaries, in what lies beyond them, and in the relationship between what is on either side. Nowhere is this more intensely true than in the sequence of 48 poems at the end of his 1991 volume *Seeing Things*, a sequence he called “Squarings.” All I want to propose, after an examination of some of these “Squarings,” is that it might be fruitful for us to consider the passing of a century and a millenium with a comparable effort of imaginative insight.

The thirty-seventh poem of “Squarings” is a celebration of the verse of the Chinese poet Han Shan. Heaney quotes a couple of lines from Han Shan, then concludes his poem thus:

Talking about it isn’t good enough
But quoting from it at least demonstrates
The virtue of an art that knows its mind. (97)¹

I accept the rap on the knuckles. Only reading the poems over again for oneself will be “good enough,” and I hope that the remainder of this essay will at least provoke the audience to such a re-reading. But also I will take the hint. I intend to quote as much of Heaney as I can, and to keep my own voice down.

There are several poems in *Seeing Things* that might be seen as preparing readers for “Squarings,” encouraging us to be aware of invisible boundaries. The first part of “Markings” is one: Heaney recalls pick-up games of football on a patch of thistly ground. The touch- and goal-lines “were there like longitude and latitude,” invisible, but real “to be / Agreed about or disagreed about / When the time came.” And the games went on into the dusk; though it was dark “they kept on playing / Because by then they were playing in their heads.” He concludes:

Some limit had been passed,
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free. (8)

So, in a different way, the second section of the poem “Seeing Things” makes us discern invisible boundaries:

Claritas. The dry-eyed Latin word
 Is perfect for the carved stone of the water
 Where Jesus stands up to his unwet knees
 And John the Baptist pours out more water
 Over his head: all this in bright sunlight
 On the façade of a cathedral. Lines
 Hard and thin and sinuous represent
 The flowing river. Down between the lines
 Little antic fish are all go. Nothing else.
 And yet in that utter visibility
 The stone's alive with what's invisible:
 Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,
 The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.
 All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps
 And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered
 Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself. (17)

The active, recreative imagination of the poet is at work on the sculpture, as Yeats worked with a piece of lapis lazuli, his eye stimulated to cross from the seen to the unseen—which is nonetheless real.

In “Field of Vision,” a person, an old woman looking across a window, is herself a threshold:

Face to face with her was an education
 Of the sort you got across a well-braced gate—
 One of those lean, clean, iron, roadside ones
 Between two whitewashed pillars, where you could see

Deeper into the country than you expected
 And discovered that the field behind the hedge
 Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing
 Focused and drawn in by what barred the way. (22)

It is a matter of vision again, but when the object of the interpretive imagination is another person, then it will encounter a more substantial barrier. Moreover, you find that what you observe beyond the unclimbable gate of separate personality becomes, though more distinct, more strange, the more you look.

“Fosterling,” the sonnet that immediately precedes “Squarings,” provides the most detailed hints for the reader of the sequence. It begins with Heaney’s criticism of his own life and poetry as having been “sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.” Now a new dispensation is called for:

So long for air to brighten,
 Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten. (50)

Such are the excitements, Heaney proposes, that will offer themselves when we are fully open to what lies beyond “what happens.” The 48 twelve-line poems that follow explore air as space, air as attitude, air as music; brighten as transitive and intransitive; time as abstract and as our own time, as opportunity or room; dazzle as brilliance, dazzle as blinding, dazzle as wonder; the heart as one’s heart, heart as centre, heart as courage; lighten (and this is perhaps the most important of all the words) as in to *enlighten*, as in to *weigh less*, as in to *gain light*, as in to *illuminate*.

The poems, each twelve lines long, are divided into four groups of twelve. The first of these is sub-titled “Lightenings,” and the first poem (they are all untitled) begins “Shifting brilliancies,” which, as a phrase, is a keynote of sorts:

Shifting brilliancies. Then winter light
In a doorway, and on the stone doorstep
A beggar shivering in silhouette.

So the particular judgement might be set:
Bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into—
Bright puddle where the soul-free cloud-life roams.

And after the commanded journey, what?
Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown.
A gazing out from far away, alone.

And it is not particular at all,
Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round.
Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind. (55)

Three presences that come and go throughout the volume—Heaney’s father, recently dead, Yeats and Dante—push the reader into taking “Shifting brilliancies” as an imaginative perception of the moment of death, and the remainder of the poem as a vision of the world beyond that most fundamental of human boundaries—but the poem is also a metaphor for all transcendent visions, a metaphor which contains its own instructions for readers. There is nothing new (how can there be, since whatever we perceive or intuit is bounded by our selves?) but what there is will seem new, because of the different mode of perception: a new-born understanding of “old truth” in an environment of “unroofed scope.” It is impossible to miss in this phrase the sly placing of the idea of the poet, in the allusion to the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, the singer-poet whose range is about to be unroofed in these poems.

However, he will have to use words to attempt to express this scope, and so the poem ii begins and ends with the instructions: “Roof it again” and “Do not waver / Into language. Do not waver in it” (56). Let the words that do the construction be as solid and well-considered as the vision is immaterial and instinctual.

In the remainder of the section “Lightenings,” we are deliberately put through a course of enlightenment that will assist us to unravel what follows. The most explicit of all these illustrations is, in poem viii, the story from the Irish annals considering a ship from another dimension that caught its anchor in the altar-rails of the oratory at Clonmacnois. A

sailor tried to release it, but, the Abbot said, “This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,” so the monks freed the anchor, and, as the ship sailed on, “the man climbed back out of the marvellous as he had known it” (62). There is no comment on this experience, merely the assertion that the experience of crossing out of the ordinary is possible.

Poem x poses the same possibility, metaphorically, in the contrast between the materiality of rock (and of water in a quarry beneath) and the immateriality of the cloud-movement reflected in the water:

Rock-hob where you watched
All that cargoed brightness travelling

Above and beyond and sumptuously across
The water in its clear deep dangerous holes
On the quarry floor. (64)

And the poem goes on to ask: “could you reconcile / What was diaphanous there with what was massive?” The answer comes back, as so often in these poems, in the imperative: “Shield your eyes, look up and face the music.” Later, as we will see, Heaney faces the music literally.

The sequence, it is worth noting in passing, is full of clichés, like “face the music,” placed in a new context to give them fresh life, what Heaney calls, in the twenty-first poem, a “phrase dilating in new light.” This revisioning of the commonplace, envisioned in the first poem, as we have seen, is part of his lesson to himself and to us. There is another example in poem xi, which examines the role of the painter in assisting us to face the music, the painter who “scales the world at arm’s length, gives thumbs up” (65).

The second section of twelve poems in *Seeing Things* is called “Settings.” In poem xiv the narrator is standing on a railway line in early summer, when

Air spanned, passage waited, the balance rode,

Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store
Witnessed itself already taking place
In a time marked by assent and hiatus. (70)

This is the clearest reminder so far that Heaney is interested in mysteries of time as much as of space or sense or intuition. The parallels of the metal rails receding in either direction, the repetitive intermitted sounds of cuckoo, grasshopper, droning trainer plane, and the banks of daisies on either side combine to produce the sense—the illusion, though Heaney would not say so, of time compacted or suspended, in which present absence and future presence were simultaneously perceived—the coming train was already there, because its arriving rhythm was so vividly stimulated and involuntarily imagined. And like facing the music, this poem takes the reader to the end of the sequence, to the idea that “things in the offing, once they’re sensed, / Convert to things foreknown,” the idea that opens poem xlviii.

The last of these set pieces, poem xxiv, is at the heart of it all: a boundary poem in itself, both in the symmetrical structure of the sequence and in its signification. It brings together both setting and lightening, and it is designed as a threshold to the remainder:

Deserted harbour stillness. Every stone
Clarified and dormant under water,
The harbour wall a masonry of silence.

Fullness. Shimmer. Laden high Atlantic
The moorings barely stirred in, very slight
Clucking of the swell against boat boards.

Perfected vision: cockle minarets
Consigned down there with green-slicked bottle-glass,
Shell-debris and a reddened bud of sandstone.

Air and ocean known as antecedents
Of each other. In apposition with
Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim. (80)

It is a setting, the physicality of which is of a kind to lead the experiencer beyond the physical into a “perfected vision” in which he is enlightened—and lightened—by the effects of light, pure and refracted. And furthermore, it is a “crossing” (the title of the third section, which follows immediately). The vision, perfected by the unusual conditions, moves through the surface of the harbour-water to the cockle-minarets; and so thought moves across from the sensory silence and shimmer to the knowledge that the setting reveals, offered to us in a grammatical relation to abstractions of balance and fullness—which are all words can offer, as counters for the transcendent insight.

So, in “Crossings,” the twelve poems offer ways of seeing the world both physically and intuitively at the same time. The narrator crosses, for instance, into momentary but total apprehension of a feral other, through the eye of a fox surprised on the road in poem xxv. The point towards which the successive exempla tend, arrives at the beginning of poem xxvii. “Everything flows” (85). Nature (and thus man) is an Heraclitean fire. An ice-slide is (paradoxically) the perfect image for this:

The race-up, the free passage and return—
It followed on itself like a ring of light
We knew we’d come through and kept sailing towards. (86)

The final section is “Squarings,” which, as one remembers, is also the title of the whole piece. In poem iii Heaney had told us what “squarings” are—the multiple imaginings of possibilities and perfections, before they have to be transformed, or reduced, into the limited imperfection of action or creation. So these poems are attempts, necessarily crude with the crudeness of language, to pin down the mystery of whatever is beyond the boundaries of the expressible.

Again I must pass over important metaphors (like that of the “sky-dipped willows” of poem xli, with their roots fed by the stream, their leaves trailing in it) in order to get to the climax of the sequence in the last three poems. Earlier, Heaney had demanded that he,

and we, face the music of the mystery. In lxvi he faces unmetaphorical, or literal, music—fiddle-music played in a farmhouse somewhere in the west of Ireland:

Mountain air from the mountain up behind;
Out front, the end-of-summer, stone-walled fields;
And in a slated house the fiddle going

Like a flat stone skimmed at sunset
Or the irrevocable slipstream of flat earth
Still fleeing behind space.

Was music once a proof of God's existence?
As long as it admits things beyond measure,
That supposition stands.

So let the ear attend like a farmhouse window
In placid light, where the extravagant
Passed once under full sail into the longed-for. (106)

The inventive variations of an Irish fiddler on a traditional dance tune, going beyond the measure, and beyond measure, wherever his genius takes him, is as good an example as a late Beethoven quartet of how the route music takes into the inexpressible is much more direct than that possible by poor words. Here is extravagance of invention, passing “under full sail” in a jig-rigged, reel-keeled ship, like the one observed by the monks at Clonmacnois, into whatever it is we all unconsciously or consciously desire: into perfection, into mystery.

Or, perhaps, into the offing. Poem lxvii takes up this sailing image, and Heaney finds another physical, mundane metaphor for what he wishes us to understand:

The visible sea at a distance from the shore
Or beyond the anchoring grounds
Was called the offing.

The emptier it stood, the more compelled
The eye that scanned it.
But once you turned your back on it, your back

Was suddenly all eyes like Argus's.
Then, when you'd look again, the offing felt
Untrespasped still, and yet somehow vacated

As if a lambent troop that exercised
On the borders of your vision had withdrawn
Behind the skyline to manoeuvre and regroup. (107)

The offing is beyond the anchoring-grounds, where one lies anchored by one's materiality.²

The lambent troop is any group of ideas or images or insights fleetingly sensed, at the furthest reach of our comprehension, but shining sufficiently with an inner light of power or beauty to signal their presence and their simultaneous absence. They will return, though, which leads directly to the last poem:

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

Only in the light of what has been gone through.
 Seventh heaven may be
 The whole truth of a sixth sense come to pass. (107)

So, once we sense the lambent troops, they become not the future but the past, brought round again as the first poem had predicted. Or, perhaps, they become what we had expected them to be—because we are limited by our senses and by words and because, once we pin them down with a name, an image, or a metaphor, they cease to be unfamiliar and become known in the light of what our experience and knowledge allows us. Thus, as we are at present, we cannot learn anything or intuit anything that we do not immediately place in context with our whole past and transform, as it were, by contamination with the sum of our past. Thus (again freshly activating clichés), Heaney speculates that the greatest ecstasy that humans might reach in the future, by some stretch of the imagination, would come from the intensification and perfection of our vestigial sixth sense so that the lambent troop of immaterialities would become as vividly present to us on their own terms as water or earth are to us now.

Moreover, there is the final, delighted attempt to express this possibility, in terms of the sequence's ruling metaphors of water and light:

At any rate, when light breaks over me
 The way it did on the road beyond Coleraine
 Where wind got saltier, the sky more hurried

And silver lamé shivered on the Bann
 Out in mid-channel between the painted poles,
 That day I'll be in step with what escaped me. (108)

The sixth sense that will come to pass will not be the product of reason, or of the other five senses, but of sudden flarings of light external to us—flarings that we will gradually be able to retain and that will change us through the force of our revelation of them. Then all those lambent troops marshalling behind the horizon will become clear presences; and we will be in step with what escaped us.

Until evolution does its slow work, though, we must be satisfied with metaphors, analogies, sensings at the extremities of vision; but, above all, Heaney says throughout the sequence that we can help evolution by training, by practicing, by taking squarings all the time, by being open, by acknowledging that there are such boundaries to be crossed every

day in our everyday lives, and by attempting to urge our consciousness to or across them.

Here and there, there are people in the world—mystics, perhaps, or poets—who are accustomed to seeing and understanding the immaterialities in the world about them and to facing them. But the majority of us are too deeply material to notice. It is, then, not entirely factitious, in the context of the present conference, to go one step beyond Heaney's argument, and say that the inevitable crossing of the millennial boundary our culture has drawn in time is a significant opportunity for experiment. Though most of us expect the other side of the millenium to offer no cosmic revelation, the moment of transition could, if we wished, act as a personal trigger for a conscious change in the way we relate to the world.³

NOTES

1. All quotations are from *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991). Page numbers are in parentheses after the quotation.
2. Heaney has taken the definition of "offing" almost word-for-word from the *OED*.
3. It seems probable that an investigation of *Seeing Things* by the light of Lacan's theory of sight and gaze might be revealing. His understanding (I paraphrase very loosely) that both men and women are castrated when they leave the purely organic world of infancy to search for meaning in symbolic world of language, and that whatever they fix their willed sight upon (to write a poem, say) returns to them a gaze which tells them that they have sacrificed unity, or totality of being, for words that symbolise that experience. What Heaney wants, possibly, is wordless communion with that organic world "which has escaped him."