"Gleaning the Unsaid Off the Palpable": Seamus Heaney's Response to Sylvia Plath

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Although critics have noted allusions to Sylvia Plath's poetry in Seamus Heaney's important 1978 collection *North*, none has yet explored the nature of Heaney's relation to Plath which those allusions suggest. This relation merits attention. Like many readers, Heaney is challenged by Plath's stunningly original work. Tracing Heaney's developing awareness of Plath, as well as analyzing his criticism of her poetic achievement and his use of her images and vocabulary, can lead us to understand an ethical imperative in Heaney's work and to address the difficulty Plath continues to pose.

Seamus Heaney, Northern Irish Catholic born in rural County Derry in 1939, never met Sylvia Plath, of German decent born in Boston in 1932. When Plath committed suicide at age thirty, Heaney might not yet have heard of her, though she had published her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), and, under a pen name, her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Though Plath's poetry was being published, reviewed, and heard on the BBC in the early 1960s, she was not yet famous.

Heaney, Noble Laureate in 1995 and foremost Irish poet writing today, has remarked how little he knew of contemporary poets in the early 1960s as he completed his undergraduate studies at Queens University, Belfast, with first class honors in English language and literature. As a student, his focus had been on the past. He had especially liked the Jacobean dramas of John Webster, relishing the "dark brooding violence in the imagery, very physical, scalding and foul images" (Heaney qtd. in Randall 14), though his ear was trained by the "hammering" consonants and rhythms of Hopkins (13). Only as Heaney went on to graduate studies and teaching did he begin to immerse himself in contemporary poetry, and then it was not Plath's work that engaged him, but that of her husband, the English poet Ted Hughes, who became an important influence and friend. Hughes's imagination, nourished in the landscape of his native Yorkshire, found its emblems in a raw natural world, as in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, which won international acclaim in 1957. Heaney has said that, along with the work of

Northern Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, Hughes gave Heaney courage to trust his own early rural experiences as the richest source for his art. Heaney had attempted to address the seething sectarian strife in Northern Ireland that erupted in 1969 when Catholic student protests of discrimination by the Protestant British government were countered not only by the force of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but also by occupying British troops. As the conflict grew more and more violent, Heaney's endeavor, as he put it, "went underground" (qtd. in Andrews 17). Influenced by Hughes, Heaney gave voice to "the private County Derry childhood part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic male" (17). Heaney saw how Hughes' native dialect and landscape became a ground upon which Hughes founded his version of "survival and endurance" (Heaney, "Englands of the Mind" 90). Heaney may have owed his subject matter to Hughes, but Heaney's survival tactics would be his own.

Reading Hughes in the 1960s, Heaney could have encountered Plath's first volume, *The Colossus*, dedicated to her husband. More likely, Heaney first read Plath in her posthumously published collection *Ariel* (1965), poems that won her fame, such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy." A. Alvarez included these in his 1966 edition of the Penguin anthology *The New Poetry*. Hughes' poetry was there, too, but Alvarez placed Plath with the Americans John Berryman, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, the "confessional" poets who wrote unabashedly of private experience of emotional breakdowns and suicidal tendencies.

Of this group, Heaney came to admire Lowell and to separate him from the others. In Heaney's 1978 review for *The Irish Times* of Lowell's last collection, *Day by Day*, Heaney (by then renowned himself) wrote: "Lowell's bravery was different from the bravery of John Berryman or Sylvia Plath, with whom his name has often been joined. They swam away powerfully into the dark swirls of the unconscious and the drift towards death, but Lowell resisted that, held fast to conscience and pushed deliberately towards self-mastery" ("Full Face" 223).

Three years earlier Lowell had hailed Heaney's fourth collection of poems, titled *North*, as a "new kind of political poetry by the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats" (Lowell qtd. in Corcoran 35). Lowell did not observe, as Jonathan Hufstader has more recently, that "the true concern" of Heaney's poems which constitute *North* is "violence

itself" (61). In Hufstader's reading, Heaney aims to free his unconscious from bankrupt mythologies operating there and to bring to consciousness his personal relation to the ideologies of violence (74). For Hufstader, *North* follows the poet-hero's search for essential knowledge in a psychic descent through a series of funeral rites to face the dead. Meditating on sacrificial human remains allows his return to the Irish political scene, unsettled and desiring a new political awareness (74). This brief summary does not do justice to Hufstader's close reading of the six poems which form the second stage of the poet's descent. These are the "bog poems" inspired by Heaney's reading Danish archeologist P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, a study (available in English by 1969) that provides stunning photographs and meticulous descriptions of sacrificed or executed men and women of the Northern European Iron Age whose preserved remains have been retrieved by chance from peat bogs. Heaney was moved, as Glob himself obviously was, by this evidence of Iron Age culture's violent tribal codes. Heaney responded with a series of poems, two with the same titles as chapters in Glob's book: "The Tollund Man," published in Heaney's collection *Wintering Out*, and "The Grauballe Man," in *North.* Other poems in *North* inspired by Glob's research focus on female bodies: "Bog Queen," "Punishment," and "Strange Fruit." Heaney so valued his "Bog Poems" that in 1975 he published them under that title as a separate volume. (His publisher: Ted Hughes' sister, Olywn, and her Rainbow Press.)

If, as Hufstader argues, the bog poems work in the collection *North* as an effective "series of unconscious, irrational positions" (74), then they are subversive acts of the imagination and they disturb Heaney sufficiently to free him from entrapment in unconscious ideologies of violence. Descending into meditations on the material remains of unspeakable human anguish, the poet himself is changed by the difficulties of this encounter. Submerging himself in the unknown and the intractable in the human past as well as in himself, he may, according to Hufstader, then face more honestly and realistically his relation to his contemporary violent world (74).

What does Heaney the poet learn? According to Helen Vendler's reading of *North*, he learns that the killings in his contemporary Northern Ireland may result less from political and the religious conflicts of interest than from a "generalized cultural approval of violence dating back many centuries" (51). Cultural sanctions of violence

run the gamut from glamorizing its energy to passively accepting its inevitability, extremes given form in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

"North," as the title poem of the collection, *North*, initiates the descent toward the dead and suggests Heaney's imaginative connection to Plath, the dead American woman poet. This link was, I believe, especially operative--even if submerged--as Heaney finally poetically engaged contemporary Irish sectarian strife through ancient peat bogs full of the history and pre-history of human desire, suffering, and slaughter.

Both Helen Vendler and Henry Hart note Plathian echoes in two of Heaney's poems in *North.* Vendler finds "Bog Queen" owing "something to Plath's "Lady Lazarus" as its speaker rises "from the dark/hack bone" (45) with the "objectivity of one who can see her own disintegration" (45). Jay Parini found the bog girl in Heaney's poem "Strange Fruit" a "poet of sorts, the voyeur of her own demise, the endlessly patient collector of evidence" and "the ideal model for a poet writing of Irish history, the persona of voyeur/accuser" (Parini in Bloom, 97-119). Parini does not connect her to Plath. Nor does Hart, but Hart hears in "North" an extended allusion to Plath: Hart notes that the closing stanza of Plath's "Blackberrying" is the starting point for Heaney's speaker in "North" as he strives to "purge the 'heroic' dross from the hard historical facts" of violent conquest (*Contrary Progression* 79).

There is another echo of Plath in "North" which Hart does not note as such: the archaic word "bleb" used in Heaney's simile: "Clear as the bleb of an icicle"[1] Hart links Heaney's desired poetic vision to Yeats' "cold eye" that resists sentimentality and to Frost's melting ice that flows into the "warmer lyrical impulses" which become the poem ("History, Myth" 391-392). Plath, however, uses the word "bleb" to signify a swelling hot with pain in her poem "The Swarm." Plath's *Ariel* manuscripts suggest she wanted to exclude this historically based lyric from her sequence of bee poems which use bee keeping as a metaphor for survival (Facsimile, *Ariel*). "The Swarm" is Plath's scalding critique of modern war as initiated by Napoleon whose emblem was the bee and whose

[1] All references to Heaney's poems are from Seamus Heaney, *Poems: 1965-1975* (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988) except for a reference to "The Harvest Bow" which is found in Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979).

exile to Elba did nothing to diminish his lust for empire: "Elba, Elba, bleb on the sea."[2] Plath's "bleb" suggests less a clear, cold eye than a distortion by a painful blister, a diseased vision. Plath's anagram suggests no exit for minds enclosed in visions of violent conquest that convert populations into war machines. When Plath wrote "The Swarm," she was obsessed with the human susceptibility to exalt violence with dehumanizing abstractions. As Robin Peel has argued in *Writing Back*, Plath's political consciousness became acute during her last two years in England when the nuclear arms race of the Cold War was escalating to insane proportions, especially in the autumn of 1962.

Moreover, Plath knew that she was capable of destructive acts fueled by rage, especially in 1962 as she suffered the betrayal of her husband, Ted Hughes, when he began his affair with Assia Wevill. Neither Vendler nor Hart explores, as I am attempting to do in this essay, the significance of what Heaney does in "North" with Plath's term "bleb" from "The Swarm" or with Plath's vision at the end of "Blackberrying." Both Hart and Vendler find Heaney more obviously influenced by Lowell.

Heaney came not only to admire Lowell's poetry, but also to know the elder poet personally, to feel affection for him, and to celebrate Lowell's refusing to drown in his own despair. Plath, who from Heaney's perspective did drown in hers, appears as mere foil in Heaney's praise of Lowell in his review of *Day by Day*. Heaney's reference there to Plath is, I believe, the only reference he made to her in critical writings over a span of about two decades, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, decades during which his own poetic career was developing with dazzling success. Plath was, I want to argue, nevertheless a provocative poetic presence for Heaney during this time.

His first book, *Eleven Poems,* appeared in 1965, the same year Hughes first published in Britain his edition of Plath's posthumous collection *Ariel.* The following year, 1966, Heaney's second collection *Death of a Naturalist* won wide acclaim while Plath's *Ariel* was published in America by Harper and Row—and with a foreword by Robert Lowell. These *Ariel* poems made Plath famous, as she had predicted. Heaney

[2] All references to Plath's poems are from *Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*, Ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

could not have missed them. By then, he knew well the work of other contemporaries, having been introduced to them by mentors and colleagues, especially by Philip Hobsbaum who admired Hughes. By then, Heaney had developed his own poetic stance. While Ted Hughes's poetry tended to evoke a violent natural world freed from cultural evil, Heaney's evoked a natural world inextricably twined with his Irish Catholic culture and his own human experience. Other successes quickly followed: *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972). Some readers, however, wanted Heaney less focused on his interior life and more engaged in the political exigencies of Northern Ireland. An academic year 1970-1971 at the University of California at Berkeley as a visiting lecturer immersed Heaney in liberal political thought. He read a number of American poets while there, apparently for the first time: Robert Bly, Robert Duncan, and Gary Synder. Heaney has said that he learned from them that poetry was "a mode of resistance" (qtd. in Randall 20).

In 1971, Hughes published Plath's second posthumous volume, *Crossing the Water*. Before leaving for Berkeley, Heaney and his wife visited Hughes in Devon in July of 1970 (Feinstein 176). Hughes must have then been editing that collection, so it is hard to see how Heaney could have ignored those Plath poems, either in America or back home. After Berkeley, Heaney returned to Northern Ireland, ready to give voice to the troubles, but also to put a distance between himself and the dangers of the conflict. In 1972, he moved with his wife and children to the Republic of Ireland, a move some regarded as betraying the Northern Catholic cause. In Heaney's view, however, dislocation helped him acknowledge more fully the Northern crisis. Although he did not know at that time know how to deal with the horrors of the conflict, he did know he would refuse to be "appropriated" by others who used violence for political ends (BBC 16 Sept.1998). Heaney's strategy freed him to face as a poet the plight of the Ulster Catholic minority from which he had come. *North* does that in poems dense with allusions to history, visual art, current events, and poetry, as Neil Corcoran has shown, though Corcoran does not mention Plath.

I want to argue that one of the actions the title poem of *North* performs is to engage Heaney's posthumous contemporary, Sylvia Plath, especially her voice in poems from *Crossing the Water*, and to oppose and ameliorate her bleak visionary stance.

As already noted, "North" begins by echoing the ending of Plath's "Blackberrying." That poem, from *Crossing the Water* (1971), was published in *The New Yorker* in September of 1962. If first encountered there, "Blackberrying" would, for any reader, resonate even more fully with dread and suffering when re-read in the context of Plath's 1963 suicide. Heaney knew the devastating effects on Hughes of his wife's death. He alludes to Hughes in "Bone Dreams," the poem in *North* that conjures a relation to the past. The last section begins, "One morning in Devon/ I found a dead mole/ with the dew still beading it" (*Poems* 185. VI). This image spurs a reader familiar with Plath's "Blue Moles," from *The Colossus*, to recall her speaker's finding two dead burrowers: "Blind twins bitten by bad nature" (*CP* 126. 9). Surprised to find the animal not plough-like, "a big-boned coulter," but a small flattened "chisel," Heaney in "Bone Dreams" hears his Devon companion direct him to "blow back the fur on his head" to see the "pin points" that "were the eyes" and to "feel the shoulders" (*Poems* 185. VI). Heaney does and reads by touch the palpable mole as emblem of a buried ancient Celtic world and his friend's desolation: "I touched the small distant Pennines, a pelt of grass and grain/running south" (VI). At the time of Heaney's visit to Devon, Hughes had suffered unspeakable losses: Plath's suicide, his lover's suicide and murder of their young daughter; his ill mother's death from shock and grief. Hughes dealt with this corpse-littered stage of his life by reading it as evidence of individual fates: characters doomed from childhood to tragic trajectories in a natural world of violent, conflicting desires.

Plath wrote "Blackberrying" in 1961 shortly after she and Hughes, with their two small children, had moved from their cramped London flat to the large rural Devon house they had purchased. Their reasons were various but prominent among them was the hope that with more space they could be equally productive as poets. "Blackberrying" enacts the speaker's struggle to follow a path that will free her to satisfy her desire for a vision beyond the brambles of an unsatisfactory, even repellent, world. Her poem begins:

> Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,
> Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,
> A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea
> Somewhere at the end of it, heaving…. (*CP* 168. 1-4)

In this first stanza, Plath's speaker moves into that passage, voicing disdain for the lush and easy offerings of the berry bushes lining her path. Her goal is the sea, traditional symbol for imaginative freedom. In the second stanza, disdain becomes unease under the ominous "choughs in black/ Cacophonous flocks" which "protest" her struggle forward against the wind. Though she doubts "the sea will appear at all," she pushes beyond the cloying sweetness of a blackberry bush covered with flies gorged into self-satisfaction. This she rejects in order to reach her exalted, lonely arrival in the third stanza:

> …A last hook brings me
> To the hill's northern face, and the face is orange rock
> That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
> Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
> Beating and beating at an intractable metal. (*CP* 169. 23-27)

The speaker seems dazed and daunted by the unexpected. This poem can be read as a "muse" poem, which Robert Graves defined in his 1961 Oxford University lectures:

> Muse poetry is composed at the back of the mind: an unaccountable product of a a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns surpalogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes. The effect on readers of Muse poetry, with its opposite poles of ecstasy and melancholia, is what the French call a *frisson.* ("Dedicated Poet" 20)

For Graves, poetry's only function is offering the experience of "exaltation and horror" that the presence of the Muse excites. Through Hughes, Plath had been introduced to Graves' theories; and, as Hughes made plain in 1998 with *Birthday Letters*, Plath had been for him an embodiment of Graves' White Goddess. By 1961, Plath was identifying herself as her own muse: compelling and annihilating. Graves wrote of this danger for a woman poet: "Since she is herself the Muse, a Goddess without an external power to guide or comfort her, …if she strays even a finger's breadth from the path of divine instinct, [she] must take violent self-vengeance" ("Juana de Asbaje" 190). For Graves, woman as true poet "is forbidden by her identity with the Goddess from worshipping or giving herself wholly" to the man who loves her (190). Thus, her fate is isolation and

sacrifice to her art. Plath's 1961 poetry of blankness and loneliness is brought to exquisite pitch not only in "Blackberrying" but also in other poems of that year, especially in "The Moon and the Yew Tree," which voices fear of her destiny. In the *Ariel* poems we hear Plath's sardonic outrage that her art, even the most sublime, can do little to alleviate anguish or to avoid self-immolation.

As already noted, Heaney had similar concerns in the early 1970s when fascinated with the violent deaths of Iron Age bog victims in Glob's study. Glob's visual and verbal images of people sacrificed to the earth goddess, or executed for crimes, were for Heaney a "revelation" that brought him "a new possibility of seriousness in the poetic enterprise" (Randall 17). As Heaney put it, "I tried, [although] not explicitly, to make connections between sacrificial, ritual, religious elements in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing in *The Bog People*" (qtd. in Randall 18).

Plath was, I believe, a kind of bog woman for Heaney.[3] In the late 1960s and early 1970s as she gained posthumous prominence, she was being read as a victim: woman poet as scapegoat, taking on evils of male dominated society in order to revise it, submerging herself in the dark bog of the most destructive emotions, becoming her own muse, voyeur of her own death, and preserving her suffering in poetry to stun readers, leaving them, as the last line of her poem "Crossing the Water" puts it, with the "silence of astounded souls" (*CP* 190. 12). Plath's voice from the grave was making a difference in sexual politics of the 1960s and 1970s as feminists protested injustice and violence against women. One of the questions Heaney addresses in *North* is this: What form of self-negation is required of a poet to have his poetry "do something" in the face of deeply rooted cultural violence?

After his reference to Plath in his 1978 review of Lowell's *Day by Day*, Heaney would remain silent on Plath in critical writing for another eight years, though he probably discussed her when he first taught at Harvard University in 1979 as a replacement for Lowell who had died suddenly. Heaney would have known that Plath attended Lowell's poetry classes at Boston University in 1959. He could not ignore

[3] I am indebted to the poet Diann Blakely for suggesting that I think of Plath as a kind of bog woman for Seamus Heaney.

Plath in Boston as her fame grew through more publications: Aurelia Plath's *Letters Home* (1975), selections of her daughter's correspondence; Edward Butscher's *Method and Madness* (1977), the first major biography of Plath; Hughes' edition of Johnny *Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1979), Plath's prose; and Hughes' edition of Plath's *Collected Poems (1981),* followed by his edition of Plath's *Journals.* By 1982, Heaney had a professorship at Harvard. That same year, Plath's *Collected Poems* won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. Also that year appeared the *The Rattle Bag*, an anthology edited by Heaney and Hughes which included six of Plath's poems.

Early in 1985, in his second year as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, Heaney included Plath in his course on modern poetry as he formulated his critical assessment of her work. When invited to give the 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent, Heaney chose to conclude his addresses with a critique of Plath. Published in his collection of essays, *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney's address, "The 'Indefatigable Hoof-taps': Sylvia Plath," results from his long association with Plath's poetry. His essay is important because it gives a sense of how Heaney defines his own poetic stance as he delineates hers. As Sidney Burris notes, "Heaney's assessment of Sylvia Plath's development posed the question that has haunted him throughout his career" (Burris x). Heaney put that question at the heart of his lecture on Plath when he asks, "To what extent should the tongue's hedonism and frolic be in the control of the noble rider of socially responsible intellect, ethics, and morals?" ("Hoof-taps" 166). Heaney answers that poetry "as a category of human consciousness" requires putting " poetic considerations first—expressive considerations, that is, based on its own genetic laws which spring into operation at the moment of lyric conception" (166). Heaney, warily, offered Czełsaw Miłozs's "Ars Poetica?" as an antidote to excess: "…poems should be written rarely and reluctantly/ under unbearable duress and only with the hope/ that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument" (166). Plath certainly wrote under duress. Heaney believed she hoped good spirits animated her art, but his critique of her work is severe.

Heaney traces three stages in Plath's development as a poet: first mastering the poetic craft of making a structure of sound and sense, as shown *The Colossus;* then going deeper creatively to tap the shared life of social relation using what Eliot called "the

mythic method" in such transitional poems as "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "Blackberrying"; and finally becoming an oracle in the *Ariel* poems that come as absolute "fiats" of poetic knowledge. Heaney describes the final phase as

> a degree of imaginative access where we feel the poem as a gift arising or descending beyond the poet's control, where direct contact is established with the image-cellar, the dream bank, the world-hoard, the truth cave—whatever place from which a true oracular poem emerges. ("Hoof-taps" 163)

Except in such late poems as "Edge" and "Ariel," Plath did not, Heaney asserts, attain either the "self-forgetfulness" or the "fullness of self-possession" of great art. For Heaney, grounded in the tradition of the symbolic imagination of Dante's *Commedia* (Desmond 117), the poem as fiat must transcend the poet. As Shane Weller has observed, Heaney finds "the greatest poetry" an event in which "the figurative masters the literal" through self-negation which resists death as "life's limit" (52-53). Heaney found Plath, in spite of all her gifts, so fixed on a personal agenda, so much an instrument of self-glamorization that she wrote powerful poetry of transgression not transcendence. What for Heaney is a failing is from Weller's perspective valid, post-modern elegiac esthetics: Plath substitutes metaphor for metaphor in an endless chain that "begins to break down the distinction between figurative and literal, between poetry and factuality" (Weller 67).

Heaney does not see value in this strategy, which is Plath's most distinctive. For Heaney, the mystery of transcendence through the figural is beyond Plath's poetic reach, except, perhaps, in her poem "Ariel," which Heaney admired. But her poem, races toward a concluding image as painful and as dissolving as an acid bath. If, as Plath asserted shortly before her suicide, her poems were meant to be spoken and heard, we can experience "Ariel" aurally as brilliant vacancy: the read ("red") subject/I ("eye") signifies nothing but its own erasure, a cause for mourning ("morning"). That Plath's metaphors become metonymies opening onto nothing is the mark of her post-modern art: the poet is subsumed by artifice knowing there is nothing metaphysically redeeming or consoling in what she has made. We can experience her poems as exquisite fossils that witness to the fact of extinction.

Nearing his own death, Hughes tried to conjure Plath in *Birthday Letters* (1998), his collection of poems telling of their marriage from Freudian and Gravesian perspectives. In Hughes' account, Plath animated his creativity but endangered him with her pathological animus against her dead father. Devotion and obedience to a perceived muse may be, as Lucasta Miller has suggested, a way for poets such as Graves and Hughes to deal with their archaic sense that both art and life are engendered in violence (280). Graves' fatalistic myth, adopted by Hughes, offered only this comfort: "We did what poetry told us to do" ("Flounders," *Birthday Letters* 66).

Heaney's muse shares the Celtic ethnicity of Graves' fantasy elaborated in *The White Goddess*, but Heaney's muse is Ireland, specifically the earth of Ireland: its watery core, its hills, valleys, streams and bogs, and its "indigenous territorial numen" that inspires filial piety for the land and its people ("Feeling into Words" 26). Love for, not fear of, his muse led Heaney to confront the consequences of Ireland's brutal colonizers as well as the Celtic indigenous culture of violence. Poets with a political grievance, such as Heaney in *North* or a personal grievance such as Plath in *Arie*l, may be tempted to serve their grievance, not the mystery of existence. Heaney rebuked Plath in his Eliot Lectures for not serving the mystery. Submerging in psychic depths to find adequate images for complex human experience is necessary for poetry, Heaney asserts, but what goes on before, between, and after the plunge is critical:

> The act remains free, self-governing, self-seeking, but the worth of the booty it brings back from its raid upon the inarticulate will depend upon the emotional capacity, intellectual resource and general civilization which the articulate poet maintains between the raids. (170)

Heaney alludes to T.S. Eliot's definition of poetry but emphasizes creativity's rapacious force. Submerging the mind in irrational depths in search of images for the truth is, Heaney asserts, worth the risk for the poet who lives rightly between the raids—which, in his view, Plath did not. For Heaney, Plath's poetic results not only from emotional and intellectual limitations, including emotional illness, but also from a lack of "general civilization" (170).

This shockingly harsh judgment emerges from Heaney's reading Plath's poetry for at least twenty years, from 1966 to 1986, as one among many of his influences. She

is not a "precursor," in Harold Bloom's sense: the powerful poet Heaney would have to repress in order to overcome the dominance of the precursor's expressive force and to establish his own original voice. Bloom in 1986 did not think Heaney had yet become a "strong poet" and would not until he engaged his most formidable precursor, Yeats, in an Oedipal *agon* (Bloom 1-10). There are other ways to discuss poetic influence besides Bloom's "Oedipal metaphors of murderous 'originality' set out as literary paradigms", such as collaborative narrative in which one poet writes in the missing parts of another's story (Showalter 174). Heaney's poetic strategy in "North," suggests this understanding of creativity. He had said he wanted to write poetry that touched the sources of "silence" and "suffering," poetry that "dramatizes the bipartisan argument" (Hart, *Contrary Progressions* 8). Strong poetry for Heaney has the energy of argument without claims to the whole truth. As he told Seamus Deane, "…major poetry will always burst that corseted and decorous truthfulness [of the well made poem]…in so doing, it may be an unfair poetry; it will almost certainly be one-sided" (qtd. in Longley in Curtis, 92). Speaking one's own vision while acknowledging others' contributions to the human tale is an ethical and an aesthetic act for Heaney. As he manages allusion without emulation or parody, he claims only the passion of his individual vision--limited, flawed, admittedly at times imperiously male—which takes in his natural and cultural landscape with the desire to render its complexity in forms that are beautiful yet true to the anguish of his times.

Plath is part of this complexity. Yet as we have seen, Heaney judges her poetry severely for not going beyond her own suffering. His sympathy for her suffering, however, is clear in his poetic response to her. Heaney allows some of Plath's anguish to occupy "North" as he begins where her poem "Blackberrying" ends. He incorporates words and images not only from "Blackberrying" but also from at least two other Plath poems: "The Swarm" and "Last Words." Connecting with Plath via the word-hoard, Heaney finds the limits of her expression and just where she turns mute--"looking out on nothing"-- but palpable, he writes what for him is the missing part of her story.

What is missing is this: the intimate, trusting relation of spirit and body, mind and matter, culture and nature that relies on the symbolic tradition. Heaney was nurtured on that trust. Plath was not. As a young woman American poet, schooled in Emersonian

aesthetics and finding her voice in doom-haunted 1950s, Plath was appalled by the persisting culture of war in her century and Cold War paranoia that extended to fear of powerful women. A polarized culture of domination and submission, which fuels war, was the essential dynamic in Graves' myth of poetic creation. The obverse of fear was submission: total obedience to the Muse. Plath was encouraged to believe she had both love and power as long as she channeled "the White Goddess" for Hughes. No longer his muse, Plath became her own oracle of awful truth. She forged ahead to "look out on nothing" in hopes of a transcendent vision that would make the intractable world fall away. Hers remained, from Heaney's perspective, godless and comfortless, but her poems as fiats made the emotional void tolerable as long as she could produce them.

When Heaney faced Irish sufferings in *North*, he attempted to deal with them without a victim's rage and despair. The title poem "North," which begins his descent into meditations on bog victims, is not an escape from Ireland's difficulties, but a return "…to a long strand, /the hammered shod of the bay" where the speaker finds "only the secular powers/ of the Atlantic thundering" (*Poems* 174.1-4). Heaney's speaker in "North" finds less in that vista than Plath's speaker had found in "Blackberrying." She had arrived at the "northern face" of "orange rock" to look out on shimmering lights far above a pounding sea. Heaney's speaker is himself a northern face, a Northern Irishman. He may be tempted to look away from the distress around him, as Plath's speaker does. He may seek some liberating blankness where, isolated, he could affirm his own poetic will, but he does not. Heaney could no more become an Emersonian transparent eyeball than he could wear orange. Plath's "northern face" is-- like the transcendent soul in Emerson--"raised over passion", beholding only itself as "vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean…time, years, centuries are of no account," as Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance." As Heaney writes in the silence Plath leaves at the end of her poem "Blackberrying," Heaney takes away the authority of the blank, orange face and the solitary self with its aura of dominance.

Looking north, Heaney keeps Plath's smithy metaphor in play but takes it down from the air to sea level, from precious metal to iron. The thundering Heaney hears —not of distant, otherworldly artisans—is a proximate, visible and completely secular power of his first stanza. Even the smith metaphor is too decorative, for in stanza two Heaney's

speaker literalizes his view as an Irish visage looking north. He faces, that is, accepts, the existence of other islands besides his own. Iceland exists and provokes contemplation of that fact: "unmagical invitations." While Plath's "white and pewter lights" and "invisible silversmiths" shimmer and sound in an abeyance at the end of "Blackberrying," her speaker makes no claim that magic is a satisfying substitute for trusting the actual world of other people to be responsive to human desires. Part of her excitement, however, comes from danger in the attractions of the magical for a mind desperate for power over intolerable conditions. Heaney's speaker in "North" shuns magic as he accepts Iceland as geographical and historical fact. With unseen Iceland stripped of glamour, he can then contemplate further regions: "the pathetic colonies of Greenland." The ring of contemptuous pity echoes Plath's alienating tone, but Heaney's words "colonies" and "Greenland" applied to his own northern turf make it strange enough to be freshly apprehended. That possibility releases the visionary Heaney's speaker had sought to avoid: the image of the Vikings as "fabulous raiders" among the plunderers of his own green land. The violent Norsemen left their bones and weapons on the island of Orkney, which he also faces, and far to the south in Dublin, behind his back. Thus, by stanza three of "North," Heaney's speaker is surrounded by his sense of a violent north, whose history is his own.

The Vikings' rapacity is part of his heritage. They speak to him "in violence and epiphany," out of their longships, their graves, now part of Ireland's earth. The "hindsight" which informs the speaker's understanding is his contemporary historical perspective that will attach no glory to imperialism. Thor's hammer is a better metaphor for history in this poem than for art. Greed, lust, betrayal, violence, revenge—down to present day —have forged the "pathetic" and appalling sectarian strife which Heaney faces in "North." Having de-mythologized the past and felt the nausea of the actual, he does not turn away from his world and its troubles, but he resists being pulled along Plath's path toward some visionary sublime in "Blackberrying."

Heaney's stance, a revision of Plath's, may also owe something to her poem "Last Words," another poem from *Crossing the Water*. There, Plath's speaker imagines finding death a restful escape from the demands of the spirit which "escapes like steam/ In dreams, through mouth-hole or eye-hole. I can't stop it" (*CP* 172. 14-15). Lying in

her sarcophagus, she finds comfort in material things treasured in life, "Warmed by much handling…the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar" (18-26). Heaney's speaker also lies down, not to evade poetry's demands, but to respond to the imperatives of his history: he reclines in the "word-hord," language, the treasure left by all the dead in his land. Trusting words as his richest legacy, he risks descent toward the dark underworld, the fecund bog of the creative mind. An early draft of "North" read, "lie down/in the word hoard, follow/the worm of your thought/ into the mound" ("Manuscript Drafts" in Curtis 53-65). This graveyard image of the mind feeding on the dead becomes in the final draft a burrowing in the speaker's own comprehension. Thus, morbidity becomes fertility in "the coil and gleam of a furrowed brain." The clarification that Plath's speaker struggled unsuccessfully to achieve in "Blackberrying," Heaney finds in his repose. His vision remains bound to intractable, painful facts of nature and history, but also to what is malleable—language, culture, what can be worked in a spirit of patience and trust. The treasures that comfort Heaney in "North" include what he can touch: the "nubbed treasure your hands have known." Rather than the worked metal of sword and armor, Heaney's treasure is more likely the pen's power to subvert myths that sanction violence. Culture and cultural consciousness may change when their silences are so deeply felt as to spur action. In "North," Heaney begins that poetic enterprise he would call "Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable," when, in a later poem, "A Harvest Bow," he honored his father's skillful, reverent working of nature's gifts within his culture (*Field Work* 58). I believe that for Heaney human relations are among those nubbed treasures in "North," especially sexual relations between man and woman. Patricia Coughlan finds Heaney "mythologizing" in the feminine in ways that perpetuate male dominance: man possesses woman for his own sense of self with no "acknowledgment of the existence of an autonomous subjectivity in others, a structure common to sexism and racism" (Coughlan 200); but Coughlan also notes that Heaney's Bog Poems were not at first in his mind political at all, but merely "offerings" that were "emblems of states of feeling" (Heaney qtd. in Coughlan n. 204). The feeling in "North" is more compassionate than combative. Heaney thus subverts myths of political power pretending to hold "a monopoly on truth and justice" (Hart, *Contrary,* 7). His claim is

that no single perspective can encompass the whole truth, but the singular imagination can give form to its embodied desire for what is, nevertheless, true.

Refusing in "North" the agon of Bloom's prophetic bard, Heaney chooses a traditional, even medieval repose. He lies down to be open to dream visions. Descending into vision, he makes his own din aware that others have been there before him and forges his understanding in complicated relations to them. He could understand Plath as colonized by seductive and brutal male myth, turning her into a terror not a treasure. He could feel the sorrow and the pity of that. Beginning "North" where Plath's "Blackberrying" ends, Heaney radically revises Plath's stance without negating her power as "Muse poet." If, as Graves believed, poetry has only one function, to offer a truthful experience of "exaltation and horror," Plath achieved greatness. The *frisson* in her poems, however, comes from her powerful negation of the transcendent efficacy of the figural. This is what makes her a challenge for readers like Heaney who continue to affirm the symbolic imagination of the Western Christian tradition aesthetically and ethically. Plath provoked Heaney into a revision of her radical stance, a stance others have found a break-through into post-modern aesthetics. Paul Mitchell, for example, using theories of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, finds Plath "transgressing language's borders" to create her late poems as modes of action without signification within the logocentric/phallocentric order. Such fierce negation by Plath of her cultural constraints takes our breath away. Her greatest poems do not comfort, as Heaney's do. They astound.

We can conclude, however, that contextualizing Plath within any theoretical frame—Christian, Freudian, Gravesian, Lacanian—reveals more about the reader than about Plath. While Heaney from his cultural perspective may not have valued Plath's distinctive power, what he gleaned from Plath's poetic remains affirms her palpable presence in his imagination. Plath's troubling, memorable vestige is for Heaney a rebuke to any imperious vision—his or hers or ours—that would be oblivious to human suffering. And on this point, the two poets--ethically--come together.

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