

Heaney and the neighbour: poetry between politics and ethics

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Carville, C. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3369-0522>
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Heaney and the Neighbour

In Section 2 of the poem “Ten Glosses” from the collection *Electric Light*, Seamus Heaney writes:

Q. and A. come back. They ‘formed my mind’.
‘Who is my neighbour?’ ‘My neighbour is all mankind.’¹

This quotation clearly refers to Luke 10:29 ‘Who is my neighbour’, itself an elaboration of Leviticus 19:18.: ‘love your neighbour as yourself’, the same injunction to which Paul reduces all the commandments in Romans 13. The poem evokes as a consequence a set of debates that have been central to western theology and philosophy for centuries. These debates reach one apogee in Kant’s ethics, where the injunction is universalized in the terms of the categorical imperative, so that the figure of the neighbour loses its connotations of a local, immediate presence and becomes an abstract, purely formal frame, devoid of the particularities and contingencies of sensibility, desire and emotion. As Kant puts it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: ‘The possibility of such a command as “Love God above all and they neighbour as yourself” ... requires attention to a law which orders love and does not leave it to arbitrary choice to make love the principle’.² A less forbiddingly austere conception of the neighbour has echoed too through Western literature in the work of poets such as George Herbert, John Clare, T.S. Eliot and finally W.H. Auden, whose ironic line ‘You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart’ carries some of the complexities with which, as we shall see, Seamus Heaney also imbues the word.³

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud considers the injunction to love the neighbour in rather more acerbic manner, and in doing so insists on the ‘pathological’

¹ S. Heaney, *Electric Light*.

² I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. L. W. Beck (New York, Macmillan, 1993), p. 86.

³ W. H. Auden

qualities that the Kantian moral law so rigorously excludes. Thus Freud asks: ‘Why would we do it? What good will it do us? But, above all, how shall we achieve it? How can it be possible?’, and goes on to describe human beings as:

creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness ... their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.⁴

Here Freud mordantly captures the sheer exorbitance of the injunction to love the neighbour. As we have seen in Kantian terms the call to neighbor-love is universalizable, both self and neighbour are delivered from the everyday contingencies of history and geography so that the relationship with the other is stripped of local determinations. As Kant puts it the encounter must ‘abstract from the personal differences of rational beings’.⁵ Freud provides us with the obverse of this formal approach, emphasizing the brute, material fact of the proximity of the neighbor, and the opportunities for violence and exploitation that this proximity affords. Here the relation to the neighbour is nothing if not local and contingent, the accident of geography and history confront us daily with a contingent material presence that exerts an arbitrary and potentially threatening claim on us.

As we shall see in the coming pages the Freudian sense of the neighbor as persecutor and killer is as common in Seamus Heaney’s work as the ethical Kantian one. More ambitiously, however, individual poems often combine both aspects, and with them the contending notions of abstract universality and the contingent particular that they enact. Rather than pitching the two versions of the neighbour against each other however, Heaney’s neighbour poems locate an access to the universal in and through the particular, even as that particular seems an exception to the universal rule, often being a

⁴ S. Freud,

⁵ I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 41.

threatening Freudian figure, or at least an uncanny one. The poems that we will consider thus ultimately describe the neighbour as a profoundly ambivalent figure, both the bearer of a universal claim and potential aggressor.

One major result of his recognition of the brute, sublunary, everyday presence of the neighbour is that Heaney does not grant this figure the kind of theological penumbra which is, as we shall see, a feature of its treatment in some other contexts. That is to say, whatever alterity the poems we will consider ascribe to the neighbour, they never lose sight of the material world of intersubjective relations and symbolic exchange, never lose sight, in other words, of history and politics. It is in this sense that the notion of the neighbour with which Heaney works differs from the various concepts of otherness, which have been prevalent until recently within continental philosophy. Before looking at Heaney's work in detail therefore, it is important to briefly consider these notions.

As with Freud, Immanuel Levinas challenges Kant by introducing the question of sensibility into ethics.⁶ Rather than the autonomous Enlightenment subject, whose relationship with the neighbour is guided by universalizable principles of reason and the duties these principles demand, for Levinas a primordial encounter with the other takes place at the pre-subjective level, and in doing so opens up the very possibility of the subject's comportment towards the world. Furthermore this encounter is traced through the body, and in particular the tremor of its response to the suffering of the neighbour. In this sense the foundational orientation to the other has a sacrificial quality to it. As Levinas puts it in *Otherwise than Being* it is 'a question of a risky uncovering of oneself ... the breaking up of inwardness and the abandonment of all shelters, exposures of traumas, vulnerability'.⁷

⁶ This despite the explicit endorsement of Kantian ethics in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburg, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1997).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Yet despite Levinas' concern to substitute what he calls 'life' – the experience of the suffering, shuddering, sensate body – for an abstract subjectivity as a basis for ethics, his philosophy involves its own forms of abstraction.⁸ For the more that Levinas emphasizes the material, affective roots of ethical experience the more he correspondingly stresses the absolute alterity he sees such experiences attesting to. Despite the material traces it leaves the other endlessly withdraws, so that contrary to the implications of Levinas' talk of the importance **of what he calls the 'face-to-face'**, the relation between self and other is by no means a symmetrical one. In his philosophy the face of the neighbour glimmers with the pathos of the infinite rather than taking its place in a moment of dialogue or reciprocity.⁹ Once again it is a suspicion of the idea of relation that is determining here, and in particular Levinas' concern that otherness must never be reduced by the 'imperialism of the same'.¹⁰ Yet his solution, the complete extraction of the neighbour from the intersubjective network, so that 'the absolutely other ... maintains his transcendence in the midst of history' is as metaphysical as the ontology it seeks to supplant.¹¹

Such theoretical points will remain for the most part in the background for the remainder of this essay. They will, however, form the horizon against which I will elaborate a reading of Heaney's neighbour poems that will demonstrate their distance from the modes of otherness described above. Underpinning my argument is the contention that the specific conditions – economic, social and political – in which Heaney grew to maturity as a poet dictate a refusal to abstract the neighbour in the manner we have seen Levinas do. That is to say, if generations of sectarian conflict have meant that the neighbour in Northern Ireland is often apprehended as other, an abiding collective sense of the *longue durée* underpinning this sense of difference has served to ground it firmly in the mundane material realities of land-holding and labour. In this context the face of the other, even when encountered at a pre-subjective level, will always imply something more specific than the drama of an endlessly withdrawn

⁸ See I. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh), p. 56.

⁹ See for example, *ibid.*, pp. 198-213.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

interlocutor, or a relation without relation. On the contrary, in Heaney's neighbour poems otherwise ungraspable totalities are fleetingly instantiated in a particular face, gesture, phrase or affect, the truth of a situation becoming lodged in one of its contingent particulars. Thus in what follows I will be taking the term 'neighbour' somewhat more literally than a theologian or philosopher might, examining the many poems where Heaney describes and reflects on actual individuals he grew up amongst in rural county Derry. This focus in itself will dictate that our conception of the neighbour will from the outset be implicated in questions of politics, history and geography as much as in those of an ethical demand or responsibility to the other.

Heaney himself has remarked on the distinctive demographics of the area in which he was raised, most emphatically in section I of *Preoccupations*, where he describes the way in which his corner of County Derry was divided.¹² At the same time, however, his writing acknowledges that such sectarian divisions were never so hard and fast in rural areas as they would come to be elsewhere in Northern Ireland. In many cases generations of Catholic and Protestant families lived, precisely, as neighbours, their small farms abutting each other, the demographic template being that of the patchwork rather what we have learned to call the interface. Although the majority of Heaney's neighbour poems are set before the Troubles, in the 1940s and 50s, it is nevertheless true to say that these patterns of habitation remained fairly constant throughout the conflict. Indeed the particular horrors – what we shall see Heaney call the 'intimacy' – of sectarian killing in such areas was a function of their highly distinctive forms of settlement. Equally, however, this distribution means that the everyday dynamics of relations between the two religious groups in rural areas differed markedly from that in the towns and in particular the cities of Derry and Belfast. In the latter regular encounters with 'the other side' were limited for the most part to the middle class, with working class communities increasingly ghettoized due to intimidation. In places such as South Derry and mid-Armagh by contrast, the more variegated population, together with the specific demands of the rural economy, resulted in many more opportunities for contact if not cooperation.

¹² S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*.

It is testament to these facts that the figure of the neighbour of another faith occurs much more frequently in the work of Northern poets from rural as opposed to urban backgrounds. Although it is in Heaney's work that the figure occurs most insistently, we can also find examples in John Montague and Paul Muldoon, while in Derek Mahon and Ciaran Carson, for example, it is conspicuously absent.¹³ This is not of course to say that the question of relations between the religions is missing from the work of these poets. Michael Longley's well-known reference to 'The Catholics that we scarcely loved' carries some of the ambiguity we will find in the rural neighbour poems.¹⁴ Yet the relative segregation of the urban environment has clear consequences for the nature of any examination of confessional relations. It is significant that Carson, for example, has been singled out by critics for *Belfast Confetti's* dramatization of what some call 'telling'.¹⁵ The latter term refers to those procedures, nuances and sometimes seemingly pre-conscious intuitions through which a stranger's allegiances can be authoritatively established. Heaney himself famously described such strategies in *North*, writing that 'Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared to us:/ Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,/ Subtle discriminations by addresses.'¹⁶ 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', the poem from which these lines are taken, is explicitly set in Belfast, and more particularly in a literary milieu where the narrator can routinely encounter 'an English journalist' asking for his 'views on the Irish thing'. After listing several media clichés and euphemisms for the ongoing political and sectarian violence which forms the poem's backdrop, the close of stanza four switches to a more romantic mode: 'and yet I live here, I live here too, I sing'. It is difficult not to read this line as evoking the rich, authentic speech of poetry – 'I sing' – as against the impoverished lexicon of the 'media-men'. However as one continues over the carefully-judged stanza-break one sees that this poetic speech is compromised too, for the poet is in fact 'expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours', that is to say, trammelled by considerations of audience. The section goes on to end with another list, this time the 'sanctioned, old, elaborate

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¹⁴ M. Longley,

¹⁵ See David Lloyd *Irish Times* and Richard Kirkland, *Moments of Danger*. For more on telling see Passing the Time in and Feldman, Formations of Violence.

¹⁶ S. Heaney, *North*, p. 132.

retorts' through which political violence is responded to and confrontation between these neighbours thereby avoided: "'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree.' / 'Where's it going to end?' 'Its getting worse'".

Rather than the street interrogations which Carson attends to in *Belfast Confetti*, where the object is to reveal the confessional identity of an unknown and arbitrarily encountered other, here Heaney explores the dissimulation necessary to maintain a semblance of civic life. In this context the religious affiliation of the 'civil neighbour' is already known and the object is to preserve a rather rarified common arena through the use of a shared language and a rigorous avoidance of confessional identification. The repetition of the word 'civil' in the line quoted above registers, through its derivation from *civilitas*, both the urban setting and the universalizing goal of the Enlightenment *polis*: an ethic of disinterested debate in a space divested of the accidents of class or creed. We are in a similar territory, in other words, to Kant's autonomous, self-policing, rational subject. What results from this divestment according to Heaney's poem, however, is a kind of non-subjective speech, a series of sound-bites equivalent to the reified journalese that the poem also cites.

If we now turn back to the two-line poem with which I began this essay, we can discern the lineaments of an alternative relation to the neighbour. Where 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' produces a numb parody of civil society by simply erasing the particular, Section 2 of 'Ten Glosses' stages a relationship between the particular and the universal that is rather more dialectical. As we have seen, the poem ends with the universalizing statement 'my neighbour is all mankind'. Yet it also bears the title 'Catechism' and uses the question and answer form typical of the instructional handbooks used in Catholic education. Furthermore, if we actually consult a catechism of the kind the poem refers to, we find that the 'Answer' with which Heaney ends the poem is a truncated version of a longer sentence which explicitly engages with questions of sectarianism. By removing the end of the sentence Heaney universalizes the statement. However the ghost of the missing phrase locates the poem in a specific milieu:

Q. Who is my neighbour? (Luke x. 29).

A. My neighbour is all mankind of every description, without any exception of persons – even those who injure us, or differ from us in religion.¹⁷

As a result the poem's final ethical injunction is one that is overtly rooted in a prior particular religious stance. Paradoxically then, the universalizing impulse is subsumed under, situated and contained by the more partial rubric: the abstract commandment to love all mankind as neighbours, no matter what their religion, is grounded in the contingent, local moment of an Irish Catholic schoolroom. The value of this move is the way it suggests that any universal imperative must necessarily be subjectivized in order to be acted upon; that the Idea must always retain a link with a singular historical moment. 'Catechism' thus refuses to excise the particular from its consideration of neighbour-love in the way that the 'civil neighbour' of 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' attempts to do. Instead it accepts that the particular, in the form of the Heaney's Catholic upbringing, is the only place from which the universal can be accessed. No totality without partiality. No ethics without politics. No Kant without Freud. It is thus in the interval between the infinite address of its final statement and the confessional title that names it that 'Catechism' dramatizes the oscillation between universal and particular, love and the impossibility of love, that the figure of the neighbour has often been marked by. In the rest of this essay I will examine the various ways in which Heaney has traced this movement throughout his career

The earliest neighbour-poems occur in *Wintering Out* (1972), with the most well-known being 'The Other Side'. As this is a poem that has been much-commented upon I won't devote much time to it, except to notice one thing: the poem is book-ended by two missed encounters.¹⁸ In Section I the child-narrator is in hiding, with the neighbour present to him only as a series of metonyms. In the final section, meanwhile, the mature narrator sees the neighbour, but only from behind: once again there is no direct encounter. The issue is left unresolved in the last lines of the poem: 'Should I slip

¹⁷ *The Catechism, Ordered by the National Synod of Maynooth and Approved of by The Cardinal, The Archbishops and the Bishops of Ireland For general Use throughout the Irish Church* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, Ltd., 1917), p. 39.

away, I wonder,/ or go up and touch his shoulder/ and talk about the weather// or the price of grass-seed?'.¹⁹

In Heaney's poetry the meeting with the neighbour often takes this form: a missed encounter, an encounter deferred or one left unresolved so that the poem ends in suspension. This is the case in 'Trial Runs', a short prose piece from *Stations* (1975), the first of many Heaney poems to specify the neighbour as having martial, military connotations: 'In a khaki shirt and brass-buckled belt, a demobbed neighbour leaned against our jamb'.²⁰ The positioning of the neighbour on the threshold here is significant, as is the way both participants are induced by the situation to transgress, one by revealing a set of rosary beads as his spoils of war, the other by imagining the same beads harnessing a donkey. There is a buoyancy to the banter, but it is borne up by an undertow of uneasiness. The very fact that the two men are broaching the subject of religion renders each vulnerable to the other. As Heaney puts at the end of the poem, the two parties are like 'big nervous birds dipping and lifting, making trial runs across a territory'.²¹ 'Trial' here being resonant with connotations of both arraignment and experiment.

With the publication of *North* in 1975, such nuanced, uneasy yet open-ended tableaux of self and neighbour disappear as sectarian violence breaks out. Although the word is still present, it is now restricted to the oxymorons Heaney uses to capture the gruesome intimacy of sectarian killing. Hence 'Funeral Rites' tells us that 'Now as news comes in/ of each neighbourly murder/ we pine for ceremony' (97), while 'Trial Pieces' describes the Vikings as 'neighbourly, score-taking killers'.²²

Station Island (1984) marks the beginning of the particular strand of neighbour poem on which I want to concentrate for the moment, that of 'the neighbour with a gun'. Hence section II of the title poem finds the narrator 'face to face with an aggravated man':

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raving on about nights spent listening for
 gun butts to come cracking on the door,
 yeomen on the rampage, and his neighbour
 among them, hammering home the shape of things.²³

Heaney himself hammers his point home towards the end of the section when the narrator replies to the shade of William Carleton: ‘A lot of what you wrote’

I heard and did: this Lough Derg station,
 Flax-pullings, dances, fair-days, cross-roads chat

And the shaky local voice of education.
 All that. And always, Orange drums.
 And neighbours on the road at night with guns.²⁴

And yet these references to the aggressive, martial neighbour, whether nineteenth-century yeoman or twentieth-century B-Special, must surely be set against ‘An Ulster Twilight’, another poem in *Station Island*. Here we see a local carpenter, Eric Dawson, making and delivering a Christmas gift to the narrator’s mother. Heaney again alludes to the theme of the missed encounter when Dawson arrives saying ‘I suppose you thought I was never coming’. In addition the nuanced, negotiated space of ‘Trial Runs’ is again formally enacted in the poem’s ending:

And knew that if we met again
 In an Ulster twilight we would begin
 And end whatever we might say
 In a speech all toys and carpentry

A doorstep courtesy to shun

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Your father's uniform and gun
 But – now that I have said it out –
 Maybe none the worse for that.

The close of the poem seems initially to oppose an artificial speech, one that is 'all toys and carpentry', to the forthright, 'saying out' of poetry. In this sense the poem continues the examination of the 'civil neighbour' begun in 'Whatever You say, Say Nothing', considering the way in which sensitive political issues are carefully handled between neighbours of differing religions. However 'An Ulster Twilight' is more complex in its treatment of the issue, beginning with the way the reference to 'toys and carpentry' suggests the manner in which the two parties choose a suitably innocuous topic of conversation but also draws our attention to ideas of form and careful construction. Rather than the 'expert' platitudes of 'Whatever You Say' there is here a suggestion of a more decorous, refined, even ceremonious mode of circumlocution which reflects, I think, the shift in location from city to country. Another difference is the way the poem expressly opposes to these evasions the altogether more muscular idiom of the ballad. Where the narrator of the earlier poem regretted his own, and his poetry's, complicity with degraded forms of communication, here poetry is given a more positive role as speech uncomplicated by dissembling.

Or seems initially to be given such a role. Heaney's admission of the careful carpentry of conversation makes it all the more significant that there is a finely-balanced ambiguity in the last lines of the poem. For the modifying phrase 'Maybe none the worse for that', has two possible objects. It might refer to either the 'doorstep courtesies' of tact that enable relations between the two men, or to the poem's own blunt reference to uniform and gun. The poem thus registers an internal hesitation in its adjudication of which approach – discretion or valour – is the appropriate one. In this way the poem too partakes of 'carpentry', in the sense of a careful, skilful, if not to say casuistic construction.

Twenty-two years after *Station Island* was published, in the poem 'The Nod' from *District and Circle*, we find a familiar phrase:

Saturday evenings too the local B-Men,
 Unbuttoned but on duty, thronged the town,
 Neighbours with guns, parading up and down.
 Some nodding at my father almost past him
 As if deliberately they'd aimed and missed him
 Or couldn't seem to place him, not just then.²⁵

'The Nod' picks up again on the theme of neighbours with guns, and also, from its title on, marks the relationship with the neighbour as that of a missed or almost missed encounter. In doing so it charges this meeting with all of the ambiguity that I have traced in earlier poems. The neighbour's greeting to the narrator's father is withheld until the very last moment, and as such might be construed as a slight, particularly according to the elaborate social rituals of rural Ireland. On the other hand however, it could be accepted as discretion: for a B-Special – the overwhelmingly Protestant auxiliary police force of the period – to acknowledge his Catholic neighbour while on duty might have negative consequences for both. Similarly, the use of the metaphor of aiming and missing implies that in more adverse conditions, where the neighbour with the gun might be called upon to use it against the narrator, the former would also, as with his greeting in this case, force himself to 'miss'. Having said this, however, we must be careful to note that Heaney refuses to explicitly say that the neighbour would 'deliberately miss'. Rather he places the word 'deliberately' early in the line, ensuring that it applies to both 'aiming' and 'missing' equally. In this way 'The Nod's' sestet again addresses the injunction to love, or at least acknowledge responsibility for, the neighbour, but does so in a way that admits the force-field of contending tensions that surrounds such an act. The manner in which Heaney articulates a complex of such tensions around the most commonplace of gestures captures, albeit *in extremis*, the way in which the relationship with the neighbour is dependent upon an inextricable mixture of attraction and repulsion.

In *District and Circle* 'The Nod' comes immediately after a series of three other poems collected under the title 'Senior Infants', each one turning on a memory and a classmate

²⁵ S. Heaney, *District and Circle*, p. 33.

from primary school. Each also reflects on violence. In 'The Sally Rod' it is the violence of a beating inflicted by a primary school teacher. In 'Chow' sectarian violence is evoked when the poem describes a child's reaction to the taste of tobacco:

The roof of my mouth is thatch set fire to
At the burning out of a neighbour, I want to lick
Bran from a bucket, grit off the coping stone.
'You have to spit', says Robert, 'a chow's no good
Unless you spit like hell,' his ginger calf's lick
Like a scorch of flame, his quid-spurt fulgent.²⁶

In this rite-of passage poem, Heaney associates the aspiration to adult masculinity with the prosecution of violence against the neighbour. That the tobacco is named as 'Warhorse' is part of this equation, while that final reference to the 'fulgent' 'quid-spurt' introduces an element of phallic competition between the two young males. It is important to note, however, a distinction in the way the two children are positioned in relation to the poem's presiding image of fire. While one is afflicted by the burning sensation – 'The roof of my mouth is a thatch set fire to' – the other is identified with the flame and with hell-fire. The effect is to distribute the figure of the neighbour between the two characters: the blameless passive neighbour with whom the narrator identifies, and the violent, warlike neighbour that he hallucinates in the place of his schoolmate. Once again the double aspect of the neighbour is foregrounded, with the reference to a 'burning out' charging the split with sectarian tension.

Up until this point I have been concentrating on the relationship between neighbours of different faiths. However Heaney's account of the neighbourly encounter is by no means limited to such situations, and the logic I have been tracing can also be found in the attitude to Catholic neighbours. The most striking example can be found in the essay 'Frontiers of Writing', from *The Redress of Poetry*. Heaney is describing his feelings at a college dinner at Oxford in May 1981, on the same day that the hunger-striker Francis Hughes had died in prison in Northern Ireland:

The young man who had just died belonged to a neighbour's family in county Derry. Although I had never known him personally, our families had been friends for a couple of generations ... Even as I circulated with my glass of sherry, I could imagine the press of a very different crowd outside and inside the house in mid-Ulster.... What was in the eyes of the world at large the death of an IRA hunger striker was in the eyes of a smaller, denser world the death of a son and neighbour.²⁷

The essay goes on to consider the status of the wake as both 'domestic rite of mourning' and 'show of political solidarity'. Here the demand of neighbourliness poses a dilemma once more, one which again finds articulation in a movement between universal and particular terms. Thus on the one hand there is an opposition between the abstract, impersonal 'circulation' of the 'world at large' and the intimate 'press' of the 'smaller denser world' of neighbourhood. On the other there is the precise political and historical determination of 'IRA hunger striker' as opposed to the much more generic 'son and neighbour'. Heaney goes on to say that the demands of the scene are such that it becomes an 'imagined reality', a paradoxical term that figures abstraction and materiality together in a manner which is, as we shall see, paradigmatic for Heaney's neighbour poems. When he goes on to say that this is a space which is 'shadowing and questioning' him, he succinctly captures the way that the neighbour's enigmatic movement between abstraction and materiality, the universal and the particular, serves to address and interrogate the narrator's presence, both in terms of his attendance at the Oxford event and his own ontological consistency. We can now turn to several other examples of this process whereby the figure of the neighbour challenges the self-presence of the poem's speaker through such a movement.

The first of these comes once again from *Station Island*, where Heaney had already addressed the shade of the neighbour mentioned in 'Frontiers of Writing', and had also described the wake that was taking place while he was at Oxford:

²⁷ *The Redress of Poetry* p. 186-7. See also *Human Chain* 'The Wood Road', p. 23.

‘... a hit-man on the brink, emptied and deadly.
When the police yielded my coffin, I was light
As my head when I took aim.’

This voice from blight
And hunger died through the black dorm:
There he was, laid out with a drift of mass cards
At his shrouded feet. Then the firing party’s
Volley in the yard.²⁸

Once again, as in ‘The Nod’, the neighbour with a gun is described here in the act of aiming. The major difference in the representation of this, the Republican neighbour however, is the way in which a spectral imagery intervenes. Heaney has the dead man speak from beyond the grave, a pure desubstantialized voice that haunts the void of the ‘black dorm’. And yet this otherworldliness comes freighted with a strong sense of the material, as the voice describes its own body in terms reminiscent of the uncanny corpses of the Bog people from *North*: ‘My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked’. (**Compare**) As with those earlier poems the effect of this description is both real and unreal, the neighbour at once reduced to pure substance and yet etherialized into spirit, on the one hand a corpse and on the other ‘emptied’ and ‘light’.

This notion of the spectral neighbour is repeated in *District and Circle*, where a small constellation of neighbour poems balances the grouping of which ‘The Nod’ forms a part. These poems leave behind the association of the neighbour with political or sectarian violence, and instead emphasize its supernatural qualities. Thus ‘The Lagans Road’, first in a series of three prose poems entitled ‘Found Prose’, strangely conflates the memory of a first day at school, a Native American account of entry into the underworld and local folklore: ‘on the first morning that I went to school it was as if the queen of elfland were leading me away. The McNicholls were neighbors and Philomena McNicholl had been put in charge of me during those first days. Ginger hair, freckled

²⁸ Heaney, p. 84.

face, green gymfrock – a fey, if ever there was one’.²⁹ Similarly, the very last poem in the book, ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’ returns to a subject Heaney has considered before, the death of his younger brother, killed in a car accident:

And I think of one gone to him,
A little stillness dancer –
Haunter-son, lost brother –
Cavorting through the yard,
So glad to see me home,
My homesick first term over.

And think of a neighbour’s words
Long after the accident:
‘Yon bird on the shed roof,
Up on the ridge for weeks –
I said nothing at the time

But I never liked yon bird’.

In both of these poems, although the association with weapons and conflict has disappeared, the neighbour is still affiliated with death. Likewise the neighbour figure retains a sense of a movement between the abstract and the material, appearing as a kind of psychopomp, an intermediary between one world and the next but partaking of both. If our previous avatars of the neighbour were politicized through confessional identifications, these two poems avoid such connotations. And yet the fundamental enigma of the neighbour remains, and is characterised once again by a movement between a local, everyday existence and a more rarified realm.

The title poem of *Seeing Things* (1991) is perhaps the most nuanced example of the issues at stake here. Although it does not deal explicitly with the figure of the neighbour, it describes an encounter with alterity in terms which resonate strongly with the poems I

²⁹ S. Heaney, *Stepping Stones*.

have considered already. What is more, its evocation of a 'face-to-face' relationship enables us to return to Levinas' understanding of the relationship with the other, if only to take the measure of Heaney's distance from this understanding. Thus the voice of the poem describes meeting with his father shortly after the latter has narrowly escaped drowning. In the first instance the boy sees the man as one of those spectral neighbours we have just now been examining, an emissary from the otherworld: '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'.³⁰ This paradox of an immanent ghosthood clearly articulates the material and the spectral, the abstract and the contingent in a manner which should by now be familiar. The poem ends:

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.³¹

Justin Quinn comments: 'the penultimate line shows the absence that is often at the centre of even the most intimate human relations, and the final line carefully places an optative statement against that very emptiness'.³² Although this is true, it is possible to go further and say that these lines also mount a complex exchange between what Wallace Stevens called 'the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' (**and we will be returning to Stevens later**).³³ That is to say, the 'nothing...between us' here, while evanescent, is also somehow substantial in that it becomes constitutive of a new relationship between the Father and son. To return to the idea of vulnerability broached in relation to 'Trial Runs', we might consider the 'nothing' with which this poem ends as a kind of nakedness or exposure, a dissolving of the tensions, conventions and inhibitions of the family romance. And yet, as the poem makes manifest, that

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³² J. Quinn

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exposure is clearly mediated through a set of prior negative affects: both the Father's traumatized reaction to the frightening experience he has just had, and the son's simultaneous recognition of that trauma in his apprehension of the Father as spectral, undead, posthumous.

The lesson of the end of this poem, I suggest, is that the salutary emptiness of the new face-to-face relation that the poem describes must be balanced against the fullness, or excessiveness of the event that has triggered it. It is this imbrication of absence and presence, the material and the immaterial, traumatic affect and unaffected love that situates this poem in close proximity to the neighbour-poems that I have been examining. As with the latter the access to a truly mutual recognition comes not through a transcendence of powerful and unsettling affects of trauma, anxiety, suspicion or hostility but in and through these affects.

I want to turn now to a poem that brings together many of the themes with which we have been concerned so far. 'Field of Vision' is also from *Seeing Things*, following two pages after the title poem, and describes an invalid 'who sat for years / In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead / Out the window at sycamore trees unleafing'. Here are the last two stanzas:

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.³⁴

As with the meeting with the Father in 'Seeing Things', the poem uses the term face to

face approvingly to describe a particular mode of relation to the other. However this poem again helps us take the measure of the distance between such a rapport and Levinas' use of the same phrase. The end of the poem sets out a relationship between openness and impediment, but does so in a more direct way than in 'Seeing Things'. Part of this clarity derives from its insistence on the materiality of the obstruction, through both its lengthy description of the 'well-braced gate' and in its emphasis on 'what barred the way' in the closing phrase. That is to say, where 'Seeing Things' suggested the existence of an ambiguous, insistent 'nothing' that facilitates a new relationship with the Father, here the comparison with the gate suggests a much more substantial, embodied entity. This sense of materiality is anticipated earlier in the poem by the way in which the woman is compared with two objects – the window she looks out of and the chrome of her wheelchair. Like the gate, both these items are part of the poem's more general concern with vision and obstruction: the window figuring absolute transparency while the chrome implies the total opacity of its reflective surface. Yet the end of the poem sublates these two previous elements in its final depiction of a threshold that is closed and yet allows us access, indeed demands it

A similar structure appears in 'At the Wellhead' from *The Spirit Level*, although here the bodily nature of the obstruction is spelt out, and the neighbour is explicitly evoked:

That blind-from birth, sweet-voiced, withdrawn musician
 Was like a silver vein in heavy clay,
 Night water glittering in the light of day.
 But also just our neighbour, Rosie Keenan.
 She touched our cheeks. She let us touch her braille
 In books like books wallpaper patterns came in.
 Her hands were active and her eyes were full
 Of open darkness and a watery shine.³⁵

Here it is the blindness of the other that bars the way, inhibiting the speaker's access to her yet also somehow consolidating it. Once this is understood the nature of the

previous poem's use of vision as a presiding term becomes clear. As with 'Field of Vision', in 'At the Wellhead' the key movement between access and obstruction is figured in terms of clarity and occlusion. And again the two poems share a common fund of oxymorons. Thus for example 'Field of Vision' speaks of the 'distinctly strange' view beyond the gate. Note how the phrase's two component terms are not strictly antagonistic: a given strangeness might indeed be distinct, as in immediately apparent, or particularly vivid. But at the same time it seems more natural to associate strangeness with a sense of obscurity or vagueness that has clarity as its antithesis, lending Heaney's choice of words some of that counter-intuitive *frisson* which paradox can supply. In 'At the Wellhead' too Rosie Keenan is compared to 'night water' that glitters in the 'day'. This night/day opposition is then subtly modulated into the evocation of an 'open darkness', a phrase which initially seems to be a clear binary, but which closer inspection reveals to be something rather different. For once again the paired terms open/darkness, unlike, say, open/closed or lightness/darkness, are not antonyms. Thus in each poem phrases occur which seem to couple and uncouple their constituent parts, the syntax hovering between disjunction and the standard adjectival modification of a noun. As such they figure precisely the relationship with the neighbour being enacted in the poems, a coincidence of self and other that is also perched precariously between opposition and interaction.

The connotations of terms like darkness and strangeness in 'At the Wellhead' and 'Field of Vision' take us back to the violent neighbours of *North*, *Station Island* and 'The Nod', to the ghosts and familiars of 'Found Prose' and 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' and finally to the traumatic encounter at the heart of 'Seeing Things'. In all these cases Heaney perceives an element of threat in the neighbour, something that disturbs. Yet the significance of the two poems we have just examined lies elsewhere, in the way strangeness is situated much more precisely than in the other examples. These two poems achieve such precision by locating strangeness in a determinate physical attribute of the other, in the 'open darkness and watery shine' of Rosie Keenan's eyes for example, and by extension in the mystery of her disability itself. It is to this radically embodied otherness that both poems respond, and their centrality to my argument derives from the way that, in doing so, they foreground how Heaney's notion of the neighbour as a whole turns on a highly immanent, material sense of difference. That is

to say, where Levinas insists on the vulnerability in the face of the other as the ‘trace of a trace’ of the infinite, with corporeal fragility attesting to an overpowering yet curiously abstract ethical demand, in Heaney the emphasis is not so much on vulnerability as on the ontological fact of the body itself. One major corollary of this emphasis is a marked lack of the high drama that typifies Levinas’ sense of the relation to the other. Hence the woman in ‘Field of Vision’ is said to have ‘... never / Carried a spare ounce of emotional weight’: such placidity is a far cry from the Levinasian notion of a suffering face opening onto absolute difference. Instead of an exit into alterity the body’s afflictions intensify its materiality, and through this deepening and intensification render it strange. This distinction becomes particularly important when we set this concern with the body alongside Heaney’s parallel investigations of religious difference and territorial anxieties in the neighbour poems. Where Levinas replaces ontology with ethics so that the relationship with the other is anterior to and grounds the very possibility of history and politics, for Heaney the ethical relation is founded upon a constitutive impediment that is always seen as material and historical, grounded in the material world of bodies, psychic economies and territorial imperatives. As a result the neighbour poems are political and ontological in their concerns rather as much as they are ethical.

The ways in which the neighbour poems stage a relationship between ontology and ethics, and the role of poetry itself in this relationship, are central to the final poem I’ll consider, ‘One Christmas Day in the Morning’, which can be found framed in *District and Circle* by ‘Chow’ and ‘The Nod’. What distinguishes it from both, however, is its status as Heaney’s only rural neighbour poem explicitly set during the Troubles. More than this, it is unusual in depicting a moment when the subtle and civil negotiations between Catholic and Protestant seem to go radically, and dangerously awry. ‘My father balked at a word like Catholic being used in company’ we are told. Yet the poem uses this word three times in short succession. In this way its lexis exhibits the blundering indiscretion that is its subject:

‘I was blabbing on about guns, how they weren’t a Catholic thing, how the sight of the one in his house had always scared me, how our very toys at

Christmas proved my point – when his eye upon me narrowed.³⁶

At this point the poem makes its move into the past, veering onto childhood terrain. When ‘Tommy’s eye upon me narrowed’, the voice of the poem is reminded of his neighbour as a boy, presumably on the Christmas day of the title (a detail which links the poem back to ‘An Ulster Twilight’), with a new air-gun, ‘dancing with his eye on the sights’. The poem ends as follows:

‘The Evans’ chicken-coop was the shape of a sentry box, walls and gable of weathered tongue and groove, the roofing-felt plied tight and tacked to the eaves. And there above the neat-hinged door, balanced on the very tip of the apex, was Tommy’s target: the chrome lid of the bell of his Father’s bike. Whose little zings fairly brought me to my senses.’³⁷

There is a double-edged quality to this moment in the poem which involves in both cases the suspension or supercession of one scene by another. It is a moment which itself turns on our reading of the phrase ‘fairly brought me to my senses’. On one level the description of Tommy with his air-gun is part of a series of references to militarism, arming and aiming that look forward to ‘The Nod’ and back to *Station Island*. The narrator is thus ‘fairly brought to his senses’ in that he moves from the inner world of the mind back to the physical and material. The ‘zings’ of the pellets on the target snap him out of his reverie of a simpler, more innocent past and release him into the reality of the present, newly aware of the tense situation which he has created. ‘Being brought to one’s senses’ in this context is an apt description of the way in which in Heaney the encounter with the other involves the recognition of an ontological reality that is attested to through bodily affect. It is this aspect which I have been terming political. However, as mentioned above, there is also a second reading. The noise of pellets hitting their target ‘brings the narrator to his senses’ in that it reminds him of a shared childhood memory and, in the implicit equation between the bell above the coop and the nativity star above the stable, a common religious inheritance at odds with the

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³⁷ 31-32.

kind of cultural differences he has been suggesting. He is thus ‘brought to his senses’ in that he attains a more objective and reasonable view of his relationship with the neighbour. Here then is the ethical lesson of the poem. Thus once again the end of the poem exhibits an ambiguity: it is equally possible that the narrator returns to the moment newly reconciled to alliance and affinity with the neighbour, and that he comes back with a heightened sense of difference from the martial other. One achievement of the poem is to imply that a situation such as the one described will inevitably involve both emotions. Another more complex implication is that its abstract ethical dimension is inseparable from its material, political one.

There is one detail of the poem that I want to consider in conclusion. Heaney speaks of the ‘zings’ of the pellets hitting the bell. These break the narrator’s day-dream and bring him back to the everyday world. In order to do this however the zings must be somehow in excess of the memory they form part of, outside or beyond it. We are, after all, usually returned to our senses by an external stimulus. These tiny zings have an ambiguous status, then: they do not fully belong to the memory, yet they are outside the present, for it is clear that the narrator is the only one who ‘hears’ them. In *The Redress of Poetry* Heaney envisages a poetry that is ‘imagined but which nevertheless has a weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual’.³⁸ It is worth emphasizing the way this definition delicately balances the actual and the imagined. The ambivalent status of the tiny chimes, the way they hesitate between the material and the real, the actual and the virtual, seems to me an exact portrayal of the relationship between the ethical and the political in Heaney’s work as I have been describing it. They are beyond our senses yet they bring us to our senses. They also capture the way the end of the poem moves between an acknowledgment and acceptance of the actual conditions of the moment, the local tensions the narrator has exposed himself to, and an appeal to an alternative space, to the possible suspension of those conditions.

In other words these zings are a figure for poetry itself, for what Heaney calls: ‘the imagination *pressing back* against the *pressures* of reality’.³⁹ One must accord the two

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³⁹ *Redress*, p. 1.

terms 'press' and 'pressing' their true weight and mutual antagonism here, noting the element of tension between the ideal and the material. The imagination comes first in this formulation, but its priority is immediately qualified by its description as a response to the always already asserted pressures of the ontological. Similarly in the neighbour poems the moment of ethical rapport is only achieved in the wake of, or at least alongside, an experience of the tensions of the political. Heaney's notion that poetry, while imagined, always takes place in a space that is 'within the gravitational pull of the actual' further captures the way the ethical aspects of his work are grounded deeply in the material continuum which runs from the body's affective responses, through the antagonisms of cultural difference to broader territorial tensions and rivalries. To put this another way, where Levinas' ethics, despite their attention to sensibility and affect, quickly translate these into an incommensurable otherness Heaney's poems, although equally attentive to such questions, always fold their gaze back into the world. In this sense when the poems speak of the face-to-face, they are describing a relation that is asymmetrical, as it is for Levinas, but in a wholly different manner. Rather than being overwhelmed by the infinity of the absolute other the voice of these subtle, demanding poems is again and again drawn back down into the materiality of history and politics by the creaturely finitude of the neighbour's body.