“PUDDLING AT THE SOURCE”: SEAMUS HEANEY AND THE CLASSICAL TEXT

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At crucial stages in his career Seamus Heaney has relied upon translations of classical texts to open new perspectives for his poetics thus modifying and renewing his practices through the prism of exemplary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. The milestone for this undertaking occurs in *Field Work* which marks the beginning of the second stage of Heaney's work. Heaney has pursued this activity in other collections, notably *Seeing Things*, and in the full length translations of *Buile Suibhne*, *Beowulf* and *Philoctetes*. This article proposes to examine the development of this strain by briefly tracing the changes in his relationship with classical texts. ¹ It will then examine "Mycenae Lookout," Heaney's treatment of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and attempt to record and account for the changes in practice which mark this poem.

No element that should have carried weight
Out of the grievous distance would translate.
Our war stalled in the pre-articulate.

"Mycenae Lookout"

The earliest traces of Seamus Heaney's translation of classical texts can be found in the "groupsheets" produced by the poets of the Belfast
Group in the 1960s. One of these typewritten documents, which dates from April 1965, includes “To a Wine Jar,” his version of an ode by Horace. This initial engagement with translation was to be pursued and its practice intensified over the years. Indeed Heaney’s relationship with translation mirrors his development as a poetic subject and his later translations are marked by the twin preoccupations of public statement and private lyric moments typical of so much of his oeuvre.

A close reading of “Earning a Rhyme,” an essay which comments on his first major translation project, would seem to indicate that his conception of translation was transformed by his American experience. Energized by the radical atmosphere of the Berkeley campus and nourished by a variety of contacts, both textual and personal, he came to an awareness of the value of translation in areas which Mary Louise Pratt has called the “contact zone.” These are zones that have grown out of colonial domination and have been characterized by “conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt 6). Translation in this context becomes a means to redress the asymmetrical balance of power between the colonizer and the colonized. In “Earning a Rhyme” Heaney outlines his awareness of this dimension of translation in relation to translations from Irish into English:

> The translation of a text from the Irish language into English by an English-speaking Irish writer usually involves considerations other than the strictly literary. The additional contexts are historical, cultural and political, as when a Native American author turns to material in one of the original languages of the North American continent. In each case, a canonical literature in English creates the acoustic in which the translation is going to be heard; an overarching old colonial roof inscribed ‘The land was ours before we were the land’s’ is made to echo with some retort as “You don’t say!” (Heaney 2002, 59)

The Heaney translations of *Buile Suibhne* and *Philoctetes* (respectively entitled *Sweeney Astray* and *The Cure at Troy*) are written to set the old colonial roof echoing. It is significant that each text was a Field Day publication, forming part of a set of three which also includes the pamphlet *An Open Letter* and its much quoted (and frequently debated lines): “My passport’s green./ No glass of ours was ever raised/to toast The Queen” (1985, 23). Even a text like his more recent translation of *Beowulf* bears traces of the poet’s domesticating impulse, figured by the inclusion of dialect words or Hiberno-Irish idiom in his translation, thus enabling him to stake his claim to the Anglo-Saxon text as part of his “voice—right” (Heaney 1999, xxiii).

Yet, not all of his translations are to be contextualized in this manner. As well the longer translations referred to above, Heaney’s oeuvre is studded with shorter translations, notably extracts from the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Comedy*. This process can be traced back to *Field Work* and coincides with a desire on Heaney’s part to change style and orientation and to adopt a more personal lyric tone. He draws on the example of the great poets as models and inspiration for his creative
processes. His translations are forms of apprenticeship and devotion to his poetic masters and a means for him to establish a new literary relationship with the self.

While the impulse that informs these shorter translations may differ from the covertly political aspirations of *Sweeney Astray* and *The Cure at Troy*, all translations referred to thus far are characterized by a fidelity and respect for the original text. In fact the essay mentioned earlier tells of Heaney’s shelving of his first translation of *Buil Suibhne* because of a lack of attention to the Gaelic text. Each translation retains a diction and a style particular to Heaney, who makes certain distinctive poetic choices. Yet for all that the resulting texts are restrained and, on the whole, deferential versions of the original.

It is with considerable astonishment therefore that the Heaney reader comes to the poem “Mycenae Lookout.” This long poem occupies a central position in *The Spirit Level*, Heaney’s second-last collection dating from 1996. “Mycenae Lookout” is based on the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and its plot forms the backbone of the poem. However the poem itself can no longer be classified as a translation. It is remarkable for its rhythmic and formal modifications but, most of all, it sets itself apart from the Heaney canon because of the level of linguistic violence attained in the second section. I propose, in what follows, to examine Heaney’s approach to *Agamemnon* and to offer an explanation as to why the poet should abandon his previously respectful approaches to the classical texts in his transmogrification of the play.

**Source**

*Agamemnon* is the first of the trilogy of plays known as the *Oresteia*, composed by Aeschylus in 458 BC. The plays are significant as they represent the only surviving complete Greek trilogy. They describe the vengeful murders perpetrated by the members of the House of Atreus on the return of the victorious Greeks after the end of the Trojan war. Heaney’s poem is based on the first play in the sequence. It tells of the return of the eponymous Agamemnon with his captive Cassandra. They are both slaughtered at the hands of Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra (with the complicity of her lover Aegisthus) in revenge for her husband’s sacrificial killing of their daughter, Iphigenia. The second play of the sequence, *The Libation Bearers*, recounts how Orestes, in order to avenge his father’s death, kills both his mother Clytemnestra and her lover. The final play, *Eumenides*, represents the trial of Orestes at Athens where, at the urging of the Eumenides, he is tried by Athena and acquitted. However at the end of the play the

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2. Heaney does not in fact read Greek and works from other translations of the Greek texts.
anger of the Furies is assuaged by the goddess and they become Spirits of Blessing rather than Spirits of Wrath.

The cryptic epigraph to the poem, “The ox is on my tongue,” is taken from the prologue to *Agamemnon*. The prologue consists of a speech given by the watchman who, after ten years of war, has been posted on the roof of the place at Argos by Clytemnestra to keep watch for the beacon fires that are to announce the capture of Troy. The line “The ox is on my tongue” is pronounced by the watchman at the end of the prologue. The expression, said to be “A proverbial expression (of uncertain origin) for enforced silence” (Aeschylus 8, n. 1), is used to explain the watchman’s silence to his master. The following extract, containing the line on which the epigraph is based, is taken from Herbert Weir Smith’s translation of the play in the Loeb Classical Library collection:

> Ah well, may the master of the house come home and may I clasp his welcome hand in mine! For the rest I’m dumb; a great ox stands upon my tongue—yet the house itself, could it but speak, might tell a tale full plain; since for my part, of my own choice I have words for such as know, and to those who know not I have lost my memory. (Aeschylus 9)

After this brief enigmatic appearance the watchman appears nowhere else in the play.

**Perspective**

In certain translations by Heaney the original text is a filter used to make a statement about the ongoing political situation in Northern Ireland. It is in this context that Heaney came to translate *Buile Suibhne*:

> The poets were needy for ways in which they could honestly express the realities of the local quarrel without turning that expression into yet another repetition of the aggressions and resentments which has been responsible for the quarrel in the first place. (Heaney 2002, 60)

There is no doubt but that this is his aim once again in his interaction with Aeschylus’ text. The reality in question is that of the ceasefire which came into operation in Northern Ireland in the autumn of 1994. In a prose text published in a Sunday newspaper at the time he gave his reaction to the ceasefire, underlining his anger at the happenings of the previous twenty-five years:

> But as well as feeling freed up, I felt angry also. The quarter century we have lived through was a terrible black hole, and the inestimable suffering inflicted and endured by every party to the conflict has only brought the situation to a point that is politically less promising than things were in 1968. (Heaney 2002, 45)

> “Mycenae Lookout” is a meditation on the twenty-five years of suffering, an equivalent in the Heaney canon to Yeats’ “Meditations in a Time of Civil War.” In voicing “Mycenae Lookout” for the watchman, Seamus Heaney has positioned himself in the equivalent of Yeats’
tower and has completely altered the perspective on the events of the play as they are now mediated through the liminal figure of the lookout. Our attention is thus drawn to one individual’s version of events, to his feelings with regard to all of the happenings in the play. The poem, like “Meditations in a Time of Civil War,” is in fact made up of a sequence of shorter poems. It is divided into five numbered and named sections:

1. The Watchman’s War
2. Cassandra
3. His Dawn Vision
4. The Nights
5. His Reverie of Water

Each section has a distinct metre and form. They move between meditation on the implications and consequences of the war, interior monologues on the watchman’s inaction and brief narrative inserts which relate the events that follow Agamemnon’s return home.

Through the title of the sequence, “Mycenae Lookout,” and that of the first section “The Watchman’s War,” the poem highlights the importance of personal vision. This is further underlined through the repetition of elements connected with sight (e.g. “the lookout,” “farsightedness,” “my frozen stare,” “And saw it coming”), with the watchman striking a Yeatsian pose “Up on my elbows, gazing.” Indeed the mist mentioned in the watchman’s vista (“... when the mist would start/To lift off fields and inlets”) could be that of Yeats’ poem: “I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone./A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all” (Yeats 231). But if the intertextual references to Yeats are strong, “Mycenae Lookout,” like so many of Heaney’s later poems, also involves self-referential elements. The link, in the opening section, is made through the following lines “... me the lookout/The queen’s command had posted and forgotten” (Heaney 1996, 29). This connects the poem to “Sweeney Redivivus,” a sequence of poems voiced for the Sweeney figure which were published as the third section of Station Island. While the Sweeney figure is loosely based on the figure of the king in the Buile Suibhne lay, the poet touches on that subject matter only in the opening poems before soaring off on various tangents. The fourth poem in the Sweeney sequence begins with the line “I was a lookout posted and forgotten” (Heaney 1984, 100) on which the line quoted above is clearly based. Thus, through intertextuality, Heaney inscribes “Mycenae Lookout” in the lineage of the Sweeney poems and reinforces any parallel the reader might have instinctively established between the figure of the lookout and that of the poet. In so doing he also gives us an indication of the direction he plans to take with his version of Agamemnon.

Just as the Sweeney figure in “Sweeney Redivivus” bears only a passing resemblance to the King of the same name, the watchman in “Mycenae Lookout” also differs significantly from the watchman in the play through the distance and breadth of vision with which Heaney
endows him. Aeschylus’ watchman has been in place for only a year but Heaney’s watchman has been on the roof for the entire duration of the war. The first section of the sequence underlines the length of time involved through repetition of expressions like “Year after year,” or “Day in, day out.” The following extract culminates with the number of years involved:

My sentry work was fate, a home to go to,
An in-between-times that I had to row through
Year after year: when the mist would start
To lift off fields and inlets, when the morning light
Would open like the grain of light being split,
Day in, day out, I’d come alive again, I’d come alive again
Silent and sunned as an esker on a plain,
Up on my elbows, gazing, biding time
In my outpost on the roof . . . What was to come
Out of that ten years’ wait that was the war
Flawed the black mirror of my frozen stare. (Heaney 1996, 30)

Heaney has also bestowed on his watchman the distance created by time, as he narrates the events retrospectively. Significantly, Heaney’s watchman falls asleep on several occasions: “Next thing I would waken at a loss” (Heaney 1996, 31), “I’d come to with the wind on my face/ Agog, alert again” (Heaney 1996, 33). In contrast, Aeschylus’ watchman underlines his vigilance in the following lines: “And whenever I make here my bed, restless and dank with dew and unvisited by dreams—for instead of sleep fear stands ever by my side, so that I cannot close my eyelids fast in sleep . . .” (Aeschylus 7).

What Heaney’s watchman lacks in vigilance is made up for in the visions and dreams that he is privy to. In a sense the poet conflates some of the characteristics of Cassandra with those of the watchman. His dreams are filled with blood and bodies: “I’d dream of blood in bright webs in a ford/ Of bodies raining down like tattered meat/ On top of me asleep” (Heaney 1996, 29) and he seems to be able to foresee the events, just as Cassandra was:

I balanced between destiny and dread
And saw it coming, clouds bloodshot with the red
Of victory fires, the raw wound of that dawn
Igniting and erupting, bearing down
Like lava on a fleeing population . . . (Heaney 1996, 30)

The blaze of the beacon fires which figures in the watchman’s speech in the original text: “All hail thou blaze that showest forth in the night a light as it were of day . . .” (Aeschylus 9) has engulfed the whole of the first section of “Mycenae Lookout” through a series of metaphors and similes dominated by the colour red (“like tattered meat,” “the raw wound” “Like lava”). The oscillating movement of the fire itself is also transformed in an image which unites victory and slaughter:
I would feel my tongue
Like the dropped gangplank of a cattle truck,
Trampled and rattled, running piss and muck,
All swimmy-trembly as the lick of fire,
A victory beacon in an abattoir ... (Heaney 1996, 29)

Far from the jubilation signalled in the original text by the blaze of the victory beacon, Heaney makes use of this same symbol in the very first section of his poem to herald the coming slaughter, thus making an oblique comment on the very ambiguous nature of victory in any war.

Fragments

As well as altering the perspective and establishing a greater distance with the events, a cursory reading of the poem makes it clear that Heaney does not aim to translate the original text. However, as we have seen with the image of the beacon, he does make use of some fragments of the original, embedding and expanding them in his transmogrification of the play. Some shards are simply embedded in the text unmodified. For instance, the second-last verse of section two contains lines which are very close to the original “... if calamitous, the dash of a wet sponge blots out the drawing” (Aeschylus 119): “A wipe/of the sponge that’s it” (Heaney 1996, 33). However in general Heaney retains an image and redistributes it in the poem. Hence the image of the web which is so striking in the initial section (“I’d dream of blood in bright webs”) originates in a speech made by the Chorus in response to Agamemnon’s death near the end of the play: “Alas, alas, my King, my King, how shall I bewail thee? How voice my heartfelt love for thee? To lie in this spider’s web, breathing forth thy life in impious death” (Aeschylus 135).

Other images have a greater impact. Heaney uses them to set the tone for a whole section. In “Cassandra,” part 2 of Heaney’s poem, the image of a bird is used in reference to Cassandra. This image would seem to originate in two separate occurrences in the original. In the first instance Cassandra refers to herself as a nightingale: “Ah, fate of the tuneful nightingale! The gods clothed her in winged form and gave her a sweet life without tears” (Aeschylus 99). This image is developed in a line taken from Cassandra’s exchange with the chorus: “Alas, my friends, not with vain terror do I shrink, as a bird that misdoubteth bush” (Aeschylus 117). Heaney in turn uses a metaphor based on the image of a bird to describe Cassandra as having “[a] half-dropped wing” (Heaney 1996, 31). However the effect of the avian imagery does not cease with this one line. It seems to determine the whole tenor of the section. Agamemnon himself is referred to as “old King Cock/-of-the-Walk.” The line break, occurring as it does between “Cock” and “the Walk” leads us to anticipate another word in the sequence summoning “Cock Robin,” the bird killed in the children’s rhyme:

“Who killed Cock Robin?”
“I,” said the sparrow
“With my bow and arrow
I killed Cock Robin.”

And indeed it would seem that “Cock Robin” is a significant intertext for the second part of the poem as it chimes to the simple rhymes and illogical violence that characterize the nursery rhyme.

From the examples given above we can see that Heaney sifts through the original text and extracts what he believes to be important fragments. These elements are set off to great effect within the body of his own work. This sectioned and fragmented approach is mirrored in the divisions of the poem itself. For each part Heaney has adopted a distinct metre and form, rhyming iambic couplets in the first section, a form of terza rima in the third. It is clear that the dimeter and trimeter employed in the second section (“Cassandra”) set the incidents related to Agamemnon’s captive off from the other sections. Through the use of the thin stanza form Heaney is also acting again in a self-referential manner as they remind us of the skinny artesian stanzas of the “Bog Poems” in North, Heaney’s most controversial collection. The similarity is underlined by the intertextuality of the opening verse of the sequence:

No such thing
as innocent
by-standing. (Heaney 1996, 30)

This echoes the much decried verses from “Punishment”:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
caul'd in tar,
wept by the railings. (Heaney 1975, 38)

Yet the more skeletal forms of the stanzas and the violence of the language bring us closer to the shocking nature of events, far closer than the jagged quatrains of North ever permitted. Cassandra is described in graphic detail and her rape at the hands of Ajax is referred to, an incident that is not related in the play:

Her soiled vest,
her little breasts,
her clipped, devast-
ated, scabbed
punk headed,
the char-eyed

famine gawk—
she looked
camp-fucked

and simple. (Heaney 1996: 30-1)
As readers we reel at the impact of such violence which wreaks havoc at all levels of the text, both in terms of lexicon ("camp-fucked," "gawk") and in the ugly cuts and additions made to enforce a semblance of uniformity in the rhyming scheme. A further suggestion that the bystanders also want to rape Cassandra brings the linguistic violence to almost pornographic levels:

And the result-

ant shock desire
in bystanders
to do it to her

there and then.
Little rent

cunt of their guilt:
(Heaney 1996, 32)

We readers are also bystanders in this context and the explicit statement of the non-existence of the innocent bystander made at the beginning of part 2 ensures that we too are soiled by the lurid intensity of the language used. Reading the poem is thus equated with voyeurism and as a result becomes an illicit participatory act. The absence of the introspective “I” of the watchman from this section of the poem and his replacement by “People” (and by their collective “eye”) reinforces the generalized import of the verses.

Writing history

As indicated earlier, “Mycenae Lookout” is to be placed in the perspective of post-ceasefire history, in the “Afterwards” referred to by Helen Vendler (Vendler 157). While the Yeats of “Meditations in a Time of Civil War” is able to name some of the protagonists in the Civil War of 1922 (“An affable Irregular,” “A brown Lieutenant and his men, Half dressed in national uniform”) and relate some of the events which occur (“A man is killed, or a house burned” Yeats 229-30), Heaney refuses to make any reference to the happenings during the twenty-five years of the Troubles. It is this refusal that the epigraph to the poem makes reference to in a very vivid physical metaphor. The poet feels physically incapable of narrating the events, to do so would soil his tongue. The image he uses to indicate his revulsion is a very powerful one:

And then the ox would lurch against the gong
And deaden it and I would feel my tongue
Like the dropped gangplank of a cattle truck,
Trampled and rattled, running piss and muck (Heaney 1996, 29)

The metaphor of the gong resounds within him in the opening lines of the poem (“But inside me like struck sound in a gong/That killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong/It brought to pass, still augured and..."
endured”). This gong which is dampened in the above quotation (Heaney opts for the use of the more metaphorical term “deaden”) represents the silence of the poet. The powerful image of the defiled tongue with, as Neil Corcoran has suggested (201), the proximity of image of the livestock trains used in the deportations during the Second World War, explains his silence. And although scenes of great violence are hinted at in the poem, they are not, as I have pointed out previously, voiced by the watchman. He does not describe what happens to Cassandra. The killing of Agamemnon is referred to in the fourth section: “his bonus was a rope-net and a blood-bath” (Heaney 1996: 36). However, after the scene is set for the murder, the narration of the event is omitted through a change of focus made possible by the imagery connected to water and the well enabling the poet to go beyond the events of past and focus on the future:

the ladder of the future  
and the past, besieger and besieged,  
the treadmill of assault

turned waterwheel, . . . (Heaney 1996, 37)

Heaney’s non-translation of Agamemnon is to be understood in this context of silence and omission, in the “temptation of silence” that George Steiner suggests is always present for a poet (Steiner 58) who is fully aware of the power of the word. Indeed Heaney has inscribed his refusal or his inability to translate within the text itself in the lines that I have quoted as an epigraph to this article:

No element that should have carried weight  
Out of the grievous distance would translate.  
Our war stalled in the pre-articulate. (Heaney 1996, 33)

In Yeatsian terms, Heaney has searched for “befitting emblems of adversity” (Yeats 227) and found them in the Oresteia trilogy: tragedies of great violence where the ambiguity of victory is made eminently clear. But having found the symbol, it is impossible for him to translate it for it is impossible to translate the events of the Troubles into language, any language. Transmogrification is the only solution available to him. And in the distance, the fragmentation, the embedded quotations, the shifting, changing nature of each section, Heaney reflects on the very impossible nature of the act of writing history itself. His poem is a cipher for the task of the modern historiographer as outlined by Michel de Certeau in L’Écriture de l’histoire. Through the liminal figure of the watchman Heaney includes himself in the murmur and the hum of those who exist in the space between tragic historic events and the discourse produced in time by the professional historian:

Elle [l’histoire moderne occidentale] fait parler le corps qui se tait. Elle suppose un décalage entre l’opacité silencieuse de la “réalité” qu’elle cherche à dire, et la place où elle produit du discours, protégée par une mise à distance de son ob-jet (Gegen-stand). La violence du corps n’ar-
A respectful well-mannered translation was not adequate to such a task. The absence of translation is replaced by the presence of the text generated by the watchman witness, who is weighed down by the horror of what he has seen. “Mycenae Lookout” manages to convey that some events are outside language, beyond its borders, that there are moments when the poet, as Steiner has suggested in his evocation of Dante, “seeks refuge in muteness” (Steiner 59). The classical text provides the prism that enables the poet to comment on his inability to record tragic historical events in poetry. And in lines where the only contemporary reference occurs, the poem itself pays tribute, in its closing verses, to the redemptive force of such texts, enabling men to emerge renewed by such contact: “then coming back up/deeper in themselves for having been there/like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground” (Heaney 1996, 37).

“Mycenae Lookout” is a significant text in the Heaney canon. The issue of the role of the poet, which has been one of his constant preoccupations, is viewed through another angle at a moment of closure in the history of Ireland. From the perspective of Heaney’s activity as a translator it marks another turning point in his relationship with the original text. The experience of transmogrification would seem to have been a liberating one for the poet as Heaney continues to have recourse to the classical texts in his latest collection. However his engagement with the original text allows for more experimentation than in the pre-Spirit Level era. A recurring form in Electric Light, Heaney’s latest collection, is the eclogue. Side by side with his translation of Virgil’s ninth eclogue (Heaney 2001, 31-34) we have variations on the form. The new eclogues “Bann Valley Eclogue” and “Glanmore Eclogue,” where Virgil is referred to as “my hedge-school master” (Heaney 2001, 11), allow the poet scope to re-examine events in this renewed and revivifying form.

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