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**Representative Man:
Emersonian Perspectives
on Seamus Heaney's *Spirit Level***

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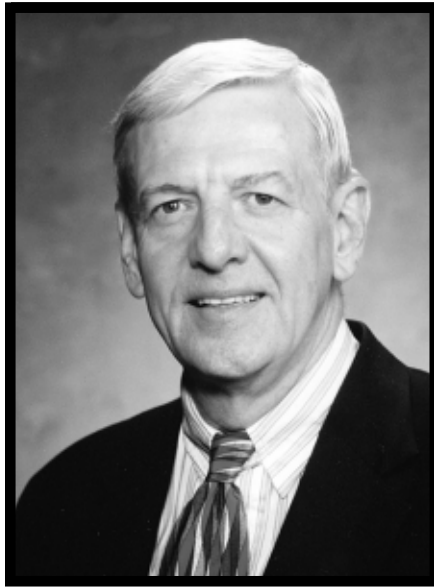
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THE TEXT

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John M. Teahan was a graduate of Manhattan College and earned the M.A. in English from Teachers College, Columbia University. He joined the faculty of Fairmont State College in 1967 and held the tenured rank of Associate Professor. During his distinguished career, Teahan initiated a Reader's Theatre Program for sophomore literature courses and helped to establish the College's Visiting Writer's Program. A long time member of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers, Teahan served as its president in 1989.

Beyond his teaching duties, Teahan was involved with community theatre and with promoting the cause of Irish culture. He appeared in twenty Fairmont State College Masquers and Town and Gown productions, including *Harvey*, *Annie*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Amadeus*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. He made presentations of Irish folk songs to various organizations in Marion County.

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John Teahan passed away on June 8, 1998, shortly after completing work on this study.

**Representative Man:
Emersonian Perspectives
On Seamus Heaney's *Spirit Level***

John M. Teahan

According to the conventional wisdom of current literary criticism, Seamus Heaney, in his recent poetry and critical prose, has markedly changed his thematic direction. He has become less involved with the aesthetic conflicts caused by the problems in Northern Ireland and more concerned with the poet's role in society and with poetry's special capacity to celebrate the miracle of the ordinary and to appeal to our more altruistic and more spiritual inclinations. In his recently published book, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Michael R. Molino observes that Heaney has "passe[d] through the frontier of his own writing—the social and political issues, the conflicts of dialect and tribe, he explored for years—in favor of a poetry that focuses upon the often-overlooked beauty of the quotidian . . ." (191-92).

The purpose of my paper is not to deny that these changes have taken place, but to suggest that they indicate a return to rather than a departure from the aesthetic territory Heaney explored at the outset of his career in such collections as *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, and *Wintering Out*. In this regard, I suggest that it is helpful to examine the poetry of Heaney's most recent volume, *The Spirit Level*, in light of the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly those expressed in his essay "The Poet." To be sure, Emerson's personal history and cultural tradition differ markedly from Heaney's, yet Emerson was a literary artist who seemed to be absorbed with the same concerns that Heaney is because he was writing out of the same post-colonial need: the need to assume the mantle of the bard, to write a poetry commensurate with his nation, and to create a unique and definitive ethos with which his fellow citizens could meaningfully identify.

In his 1844 lecture "The Poet," Emerson provides the most comprehensive treatment of these bardic themes as he focuses on "the consideration of the nature and functions of the poet . . . the means and materials he uses . . . and . . . the general aspect of art in the present time" (448). Emerson summons the American poet of his day to be more comprehensive in his perceptual range and more supernal in his aesthetic commitment. He demands that the American poet see the essential connection between the material world and the spiritual world and be in the company of "the highest minds of the world [who] have never ceased to explore the double . . . the

quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning of every sensuous fact” (447). What is behind this rush of hyperbole is, of course, transcendentalism, which posits the idea of a unifying numinous force that circulates through the universe and harmoniously interconnects physical reality to spiritual reality. Viewed in this way, the universe becomes a vast pathway by which mankind can gain access to the Divine.

As it is in all of his essays, then, Emerson’s commitment to transcendentalism is certainly alive and well in “The Poet.” More particularly, it is at the heart of his conception of the poet as being “representative” or being able to reflect in his work the essential truths of the universe, which all men are intuitively aware of but unable to capture in language. According to Emerson, to be “representative” as a poet is to serve as mankind’s oracle—its cognitive and expressive surrogate:

for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth but of the commonwealth. . . . the great majority of men seem to be . . . mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature. . . . Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, transverses the whole scale of experience and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart. . . .

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts . . . become the songs of the nations. (448-49)

Emerson’s qualification that the poet as Representative Man “apprises us not of his wealth but of the commonwealth” can certainly be seen as a hedge against artistic solipsism but one that does not preclude the importance of self-knowledge to the writing of poetry. Emerson declares that in order to assess the significance of the universe accurately, the poet must be able to recognize its

basic principle of operation. He must be aware that he stands “before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance and Unity into Variety” (453). In his harmonious metamorphosis and division of the spiritual into the physical and the one into the many, Emerson suggests that two laws are always at work in the universe: 1) the law of cosmic harmony or correspondence by which all things interconnect with each other to form the perfect whole and 2) the law of cosmic balance or compensation by which all things complement each other. Accordingly, Emerson contends that the poet must be able to recognize that a connection or correspondence exists between himself and the world around him because of the constant and pervasive presence of a harmonious, compensating spiritual force radiating through the perceiver and the objects perceived, that is to say, through the poet and his subject matter. As Emerson points out, to fail to see this connection is the error of conventional science and to see it is the triumph of poetry—what he calls “the science of the real” (452).

Our science is sensual, and therefore superficial. The earth, and the heavenly bodies, physics, and chemistry, we sensually treat, as if they were self-existent; but these are the retinue of that Being we have. “The mighty heaven,” said Proclus, “exhibits, in its transfigurations, clear images of the splendor of intellectual perceptions; being moved in conjunction with the unapparent periods of intellectual natures.” Therefore, science always goes abreast with the just elevation of the man, keeping step with religion and metaphysics; or, the state of science is an index of our self-knowledge. Since everything in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is that the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active. (453)

According to Emerson, then, those who abide by the dictates of conventional science perceive physical reality to be separate, centripetal, pluralistic, and polarized, but those who abide by “the science of the real” perceive it to be interconnected, centrifugal, holistic, and complementary. For Emerson, an enlightened vision of the universe necessarily implies an enlightened vision of oneself because one must first perceive himself to be the incarnation of the spiritual laws of correspondence and compensation in order to see the other physical entities around him as corresponding incarnations. To put it another way, the world is only dark when the perceiver himself is in the dark.

The prerequisite for the poet, then, in his capacity as mankind’s oracle, is a unique manner of perception which manifests itself in

terms of the vantage point from which it is developed and its two-fold method of operation. First of all, the poet's knowledge of external reality is a correlative of the extent to which he accurately knows and assesses himself. In other words, the search for the truth around him begins with the search for the truth within him. Second, he is always perceiving or seeing with his mind's eye as well as his body's eye. His vision is, therefore, always comprehensive—always concerned with linking the concrete to the conceptual, the practical to the ideal or spiritual. He sees the tree both as the source of lumber for the building of a house and as a sign for demonstrating the harmonious conjunction of the many with the one or the continuous flow of time from past to present to future. He is indeed Representative Man, for he reflects in his art the trait which defines all human beings regardless of what their interests, occupations, or life paths are. Like all mankind, he uses symbols:

for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration. I find that the fascination resides in the symbol. Who loves nature? Who does not? Is it only poets, and men of leisure and cultivation, who live with her? No; but also hunters, farmers, grooms and butchers, though they express their affection in their choice of life, and not in their choice of words. The writer wonders what the coachman or hunter values in riding, in horses, and dogs. It is not superficial qualities. When you talk with him, he holds these at as slight a rate as you. His worship is sympathetic; he has no definitions, but he is commanded in nature, by the living power which he feels there present. . . . he loves the earnest of the northwind, of rain, of stone, and wood, and iron. . . . It is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life, which he worships, with coarse, but sincere rites.

The inwardness, and mystery, of this attachment, drives men of every class to the use of emblems. The schools of poets, and philosophers, are not more intoxicated with their symbols than the populace with theirs. In our political parties, compute the power of badges and emblems. . . . The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics! (453-54)

In establishing the bond that exists between the poet and the so-called common person, Emerson then focuses on what makes the poet different or unique. It is his awareness of the artistic possibilities available in the use of symbols:

Beyond this universality of the symbolic language, we are apprised of the divineness of this superior use of things, whereby the

world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity, in this, that there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol. Thought makes every thing fit for use. (454)

What Emerson is suggesting here is the conception of poetry as a heterocosm or other world which parallels the world of nature but one in which the process of creation is reversed. If an infinite, divine entity can create a reciprocal universe in which "Being passes into Appearance and Unity into Variety," the poet, as an incarnation of that entity can create a universe in which Appearance passes into Being and Variety into Unity. For Emerson, then, this heterocosm of poetry can be seen as a vast communications system in which, to quote those seminal lines from his essay "Nature," "1) Words are signs of natural facts. 2) Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3) Nature is the symbol of spirit" (20).

To summarize, then, Emerson, in presenting his concept of the poet as Representative Man, takes the traditional view of the poet as bard or singer of his nation and blends it with the democracy and spirituality of transcendentalism. Emerson's Representative Man sings of the ordinary rather than the extraordinary individual and celebrates not the performance of heroic exploits by exceptional, quasi-divine figures, but rather the inclination which all people have toward a heroic, divine vision of life. In this respect, the poet serves not only as mankind's oracle but as its emancipator or "liberating god" who frees mankind from the prison of its perceptual restrictiveness by offering it the gift of imaginative transformation (461). As Emerson notes:

The fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snow-storm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door, is an emblem of the state of man. . . . Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene. (463)

To paraphrase Whitman, who most certainly understood what Emerson was about, the poet as Representative Man celebrates and sings himself so that what he "assume[s] you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to [him] as good belongs to you" (Whitman 28).

To be sure, the Seamus Heaney who writes *Death of a Naturalist* is far less pontifical in his tone and far more modest in his aesthetic objectives than either Emerson or Whitman at the beginning of their careers. However, he is no less transcendentalist in his inclinations. Like Emerson, he regards self-examination as the requisite point of departure for substantial poetry, and he stresses the eventual connection between self-identity and communal identity. For Heaney, poetry is important because it helps unearth the emotional substrata which underlie a person's conscious use of language. Because of its connotative resonance, poetic language is the shaft which leads the creative individual to the Helicon or well-spring of his unconscious and therefore uncomprehended memories. To use Heaney's expression from the poem "Personal Helicon," it allows him "to set the darkness echoing" and subsequently to discover the truth about himself and his community (*Poems* 40).

A poem which certainly examines the ramifications of setting the darkness echoing is the lyric "Digging." The scenario of the poem is quite explicit: while he is writing, the poet-persona hears his elderly father digging out a flower bed beneath his window, and as he watches him, he recalls earlier childhood scenes of his father digging up potatoes and his grandfather cutting peat. The title itself points the way. Grammatically, it is both gerund and participle—substantive and verb. Ontologically, it is both entity and action, something fixed and something fluid, something that involves both tradition and innovation—both old and new, past and present. The pivotal word here is *both*. For Heaney's approach in this poem is to focus not on the dichotomous but rather on the conjunctive and compensatory aspects of time. To be sure, the poet-persona admits of the essential difference between his aesthetic and intellectual preoccupations and the physical labors of his father and grandfather—or, to use Neil Corcoran's phrase, of "the discontinuity between spade and pen" (51). Because of the integrative power of the artistic imagination, however, time becomes a unifying rather than disruptive force since it results in a bridging rather than a separation of the generations. Though the father and grandfather may not see the point, the poet-son and grandson does: the purpose of posterity is to connect rather than to disjoin. As P.R. King points out:

The poet recognizes that, although he has seemingly abandoned the family farm, he does "dig" on with his pen, trying to cut down into the soil of a shared existence and throw up a connection between them all. The poem is itself a discovery and a recognition of his past and an honouring of the family tradition of craftsmanship. The qualities of that tradition—its physical and sensuous pleasures in life lived natu-

rally and in touch with the land—are the qualities that Heaney seeks to preserve in his poems. (79)

Viewed from this harmonious, compensatory perspective of the contribution each sensuous fact makes to the overall scheme of things, Heaney's use of concrete process description in this poem and many others is quite appropriate. For one who subscribes to the cosmic laws of correspondence and compensation, it makes perfect sense to stress the contribution each part and step make to the composition and operation of the whole. More than anything else, then, this poem is a transcendentalist paean to mankind's innate aesthetic and spiritual instincts. In his vow to dig on with his pen, the poet pays the ultimate tribute to his father and grandfather who so grandly demonstrate that in their own day they, too, had "the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration"; that they, too, were "commanded in nature, by the living power which [they felt] there present"; that they, too, "love[d] the earnest of the northwind, of rain, of stone, and wood, and iron."

Heaney's recent decision, then, to focus on "the often-overlooked beauty of the quotidian" is not as radical an action as it might first appear to be. It is more a matter of old thematic wine in the new bottles of a more deliberate, more precise, and more explicitly lyrical style. This renewed focus is particularly apparent in *The Spirit Level*. The farmer-brother of "Keeping Going," the mason of "Damson," the tailor of "At Banagher"—all have their predecessors in such earlier creations as the father and grandfather of "Digging," the mother of "Churning Day," the waterwitch of "The Diviner," the blacksmith of "The Forge," and the roofer of "Thatcher."

In a 1974 lecture entitled "Feeling into Words," in which he reflected on the thematic import of his first three volumes of poetry, Heaney stated that he viewed the poet's need for self-exploration as something that was not incompatible with the inclination to be historically and culturally exploratory. He declared that he saw poetry as both the "revelation of the self to the self" and the "restoration of the culture to itself" (*Preoccupations* 41).

In the same lecture, Heaney discussed his short poem "The Diviner" as a compressed allegory celebrating the poet's ability to discover the spiritually rich perceptual waters that lie hidden in the subsoil of memory and, in turn, share them with the members of his community. As he notes, both the poet and the waterwitch or diviner possess "a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released" (47-48).

This mutual relationship between self-excavation and social

excavation eroded, however, as Heaney turned his attention to the troubles in Northern Ireland, agonizing over his poetic right to “set the darkness echoing” through self-examination and his poetic obligation to bear witness to the horrible events taking place around him. Heaney’s awareness of this conflict between a poet’s rights and a poet’s obligations left him to consider the presence of other conflicts which he described so tellingly in his second volume of critical prose, *The Government of the Tongue*, and in his poetry—from the latter part of *Wintering Out* to *Station Island*—the conflicts between art and life, song and suffering, beauty and truth.

With the publication of *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*, and his third volume of critical prose, *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney indicated that he had resolved these conflicts by consciously adopting the bardic and heterocosmic view of poetry he intuitively expressed at the outset of his career in *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark* and the first part of *Wintering Out*. In his essay “Frontiers of Writing,” he refers to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s conception of the work of the poet as “a vehicle for world harmony” in which the poet reflects his concern with the doings of his “fellow men, among whom he lives and whose fate he shares” (*Redress* 193). In his title essay, “The Redress of Poetry,” he defines poetry as “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” and speaks of its capacity for “counterweighting,” for “tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium” (1, 3).

In his 1995 Nobel Prize Lecture, “Crediting Poetry,” Heaney disclosed the price he paid as a poet in bearing witness to the atrocities committed in Northern Ireland. He revealed that what he witnessed in Northern Ireland made him “wary of crediting the positive note,” the very note, as I have suggested, that is present in those early poems praising the moral and spiritual substance of the craftsmen and laborers of his Edenic boyhood (30). But what he once did instinctively, Heaney now does deliberately as he permits himself “the luxury of walking on air . . . ‘against [my] better judgment,’” of pursuing through poetry “an order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew,” of transcending the sad truth “that the documents of civilization have been written in blood and tears,” of making a space in his “reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as for the murderous” (28, 30).

The Spirit Level is Heaney’s most explicit demonstration to date of his attempt to credit the positive note and to make a space for the marvelous. Denotatively, the title suggests the ultimate direction that language takes in the heterocosm that he has created. It is a direction driven by the transcendental law of correspondence where words point to particular natural facts which in turn point to par-

ticular spiritual facts and where the whole of Nature is emblematic of the world of the Spirit. Heaney proclaims this correspondence in “The First Words,” as he translates a verse of the Romanian poet Marin Sorescu, “Let everything flow / Up to the four elements, / Up to water and earth and fire and air” (*Spirit* 47). Connotatively, the title calls to mind the image of the carpenter’s level, a device used to determine whether a surface is perfectly horizontal or vertical. Therefore, as Richard Tillinghast has observed, many of the poems in this collection have much to say about the transcendental law of compensation—“about balance, equilibrium and karma” (6).

The first poem in *The Spirit Level*, “The Rain Stick,” is, of course, a celebration of water as it flows through a cactus stalk and then through the particular piece of earth which surrounds it, permeating all of the various types of vegetation present there. As such, it follows the law of correspondence and makes its unique contribution to cosmic harmony. Heaney’s persona-speaker observes that as water moves through the stalk

. . . diminuendo runs through all its scales
 Like a gutter stopping trickling. And now here comes
 A sprinkle of drops out of the freshened leaves
 Then subtle little wets off grass and daisies;
 Then glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air. (3)

Aside from this observation of the law of correspondence at work, however, there is another important theme present in this poem. It is that of the transforming power of the poetic imagination, which raises the physical and the ordinary to the level of the spiritual and extraordinary. At the end of the poem, the persona-speaker poses the question, “Who cares if all the music that transpires / Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?” (3). The important point is that the person, who imaginatively changes his or her mode of perception and sees not a cactus stalk but a water forecaster’s rain stick, will “stand there like a pipe / Being played by water. . .” and become “like a rich man entering heaven / Through the ear of a raindrop” (3). This transformation is the very same point that Emerson makes when he praises Emanuel Swedenborg as the eminent “translator of nature into thought” (464). Emerson contends, “The figs become grapes while he eats them. . . . The noise which at a distance appeared like gnashing and thumping, on coming nearer was found to be the voice of disputants” (464).

This emphasis on the transmutational as well as the demonstrative function of metaphor is apparent in several other poems in *The Spirit Level*, and it seems to have the same results of “crediting

the positive note” and converting the ordinary into the extraordinary or the banal and prosaic into the marvelous. In “St. Kevin and the Blackbird,” the persona-narrator tells the story of St. Kevin’s performing a routine religious exercise in his monastic cell in Glendalough, County Wicklow. In imitation of Christ,

The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is so narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest. (24)

As the narrator informs us, St. Kevin’s reaction is not to regard the blackbird as an interloper, but rather to accept its apparent act of mistaken identity as a justifiable transmutation of physical reality. This response, in turn, gives him the opportunity to experience directly the grand cosmic flow in which “Being passes into Appearance, Unity into Variety” and vice versa:

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: Now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown. (24)

As he does in “The Rainstick,” Heaney ends the poem by having his persona pose a question and then answer it:

And since the whole thing’s imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love’s deep river,
‘To labor and not to seek reward,’ he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
 For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
 And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. (24-25)

The last two lines encapsulate Heaney's understanding of transformation and are reminiscent of Emerson's ecstatic description of his sojourn in the woods in "Nature": "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. . . . I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (10).

Several other poems in *The Spirit Level* also emphasize the transmutational function of metaphor; of these, the most memorable is "Keeping Going." In this poem the rather dull and laborious task of whitewashing becomes the occasion for a family party as the persona's brother converts a kitchen chair into a set of bagpipes and the whitewash brush into a piper's sporran or waistband purse:

The piper coming from far away is you
 With a whitewash brush for a sporran
 Wobbling around you, a kitchen chair
 Upside down on your shoulder, your right arm
 Pretending to tuck the bag beneath your elbow,
 Your pop-eyes and big cheeks nearly bursting
 With laughter, but keeping the drone going on
 Interminably, between catches of breath. (13)

Throughout the poem, there is this definitive contrast between reality and imagination as the persona speaker and his brother move through their lives—from boyhood to adulthood—always offsetting both the dullness and tragedy they experience with their playful sense of juvenile whimsy. The most gripping part of the poem is the description of the apparent political assassination of a mutual friend or relative (perhaps even the brother's son):

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood
 In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot
 Where his head had been, other stains subsumed
 In the parched wall he leant his back against
 That morning like any other morning,
 Part-time reservist, toting his lunch box.
 A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,
 Crossed the Diamond, slowed again and stopped
 Level with him, although it was not his lift.

And then he saw an ordinary face
 For what it was and a gun in his own face
 His right leg was hooked back, his sole and heel
 Against the wall, his right knee propped up steady,
 So he never moved, just pushed with all his might
 Against himself, then fell past the tarred strip,
 Feeding the gutter with his copious blood. (15)

The poem ends with the persona's moving tribute to his brother for his ability to transcend the darkness of his life with his buoyant good humor and imagination:

My dear brother, you have good stamina.
 You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor
 Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,
 You shout and laugh about the revs, you keep
 Old roads open by driving on the new ones.
 You called the piper's sporrans whitewash brushes
 And then dressed up and marched us through the kitchen,
 But you cannot make the dead walk or right wrong.
 I see you at the end of your tether sometimes,
 In the milking parlour, holding yourself up
 Between two cows until your turn goes past,
 Then coming to in the smell of dung again
 And wondering, is this all? As it was
 In the beginning, is now and shall be?
 Then rubbing your eyes and seeing our old brush
 Up on the byre door, and keeping going. (16)

It is interesting to consider "Keeping Going" in the light of several poems written in those anxious days of the 1970s and '80s when Heaney felt himself trapped between his rights and privileges as a poet and his social responsibility to bear witness to the terrible events taking place in Northern Ireland. I am thinking of such poems as "Exposure," "Oysters," and "Away From It All." To read these earlier poems is to see the definite split in Heaney's psyche between art and life, beauty and truth, song and suffering. To read "Keeping Going" is to see Heaney "tilting the scales . . . towards some transcendent equilibrium"—counterweighting rather than confronting art with life, beauty with truth, song with suffering. Richard Tillinghast is quite correct: many of the poems in *The Spirit Level* have much to say about the transcendental law of compensation (6).

Heaney's interpretation of the law of compensation, however, is different from Emerson's because it is tempered by a consider-

ation of the darker strains of reality and is, therefore, less naively optimistic. To be sure, in *The Spirit Level*, Seamus Heaney presents himself as a poet who subscribes to the Emersonian dictum that “mountain tall and ocean deep / Trembling balance duly keep,” but in this volume he also shows himself to be a poet who does not subscribe to Emerson’s notion that “there’s no God dare wrong a worm” (283, 284). In “The Poplar,” the person-speaker is not content to catch that moment of ideal beauty when “wind shakes the big poplar, quicksilvering / The whole tree in a single sweep” (Heaney, *Spirit* 61). He is also compelled to raise the question, “What bright scale fell and left this needle quivering? / What loaded balances have come to grief?” (61) It is this interplay between the limited, fallible world of physical reality and the limitless, perfect world of spiritual reality that so pervades so many of the poems in *The Spirit Level*.

In the poem “Weighing In,” this interplay assumes psychological and ethical dimensions as Heaney considers “the subtle reciprocal economies that make our lives workable and bearable” (Tillinghast 6). The poem begins in the imperfect world of human interaction as the persona-speaker engages in the act of self-debate and refers to a fifty-six-pound weight to explain the psychological motivation for enduring the offensive behavior of others. On first appearance, the weight is “squared-off and harmless-looking,” but once one tries to lift it, it becomes a “socket-ripping, / Life-belittling force” (Heaney, *Spirit* 21). When this unbearable weight is balanced against another “on a well-adjusted, freshly greased weighbridge,” however, it becomes manageable (21). The application is quite clear. The only way to act rationally in dealing with the errant behavior of mankind is to “balance the intolerable in others / Against our own” (21). The argument is raised to an even higher moral plane when the persona-speaker cites the behavior of blind-folded Jesus before Herod’s soldiers—he who demonstrated “the power / Of power not exercised, of hope inferred / By the powerless forever” (22). As the poem moves toward its conclusion, however, the persona-speaker turns away from the voices of reason and conscience as he considers the idea that to resist the casting of the stone “is to fail the hurt, the self, the ingrown rule” (22). He realizes that there are “two sides to every question, yes, yes, yes . . . / But every now and then, just weighing in / Is what it must come down to, and without / Any self-exculpation or self-pity,” for sometimes “only foul play cleans the slate” (23). What we have here, then, in the hard, spare language of this poem is the age-old discussion of the justification of reason or passion in responding to the insults and offenses of others. *Discussion* is the appropriate word here, for Heaney presents this theme

not in terms of an epic confrontation with a definite winner and loser, but rather in terms of the constant ebb and flow of head and heart. To read this poem is to understand why there is no easy answer to the problems in Northern Ireland. Yet it is also to realize that there must be an answer and that answer lies in the act of moral transcendence, in the manifestation of “the power of power not exercised.” It is interesting in this regard to note that the poem which immediately follows “Weighing In” is the poem about the story of St. Kevin—the story that Heaney cites in “Crediting Poetry” as a paradigm for peace in Northern Ireland.

To reiterate and expand upon a point made earlier in this paper, in *The Spirit Level* Seamus Heaney presents himself as a poet who serves old transcendentalist wine in the new bottles of a more hortatory tone and a more precise lyricism. This combination of old and new can best be seen in poems such as “At Banagher”—poems which celebrate the work of craftsmen and so-called blue-collar types and, as I have also mentioned previously, poems which have had their predecessors in such earlier volumes as *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*. As befits his bardic role of Representative Man, Heaney has always associated himself with those who are close to the earth, who work directly with one or more of the four elements, who, to repeat Emerson’s phrase, “love the earnest of the northwind, of rain, of stone, and wood, and iron,” and who, part by part and step by step, offer their labor as a poem. This love of nature fosters in both poet and laborer a reverence for order and harmony in the world. Their mutual commitment to order and harmony is at the center of “At Banagher,” Heaney’s tribute to an itinerant tailor in Banagher, a town in County Offaly in the Republic of Ireland:

Then all of a sudden there appears to me
The journeyman tailor who was my antecedent:
Up on a table, cross-legged, ripping out

A garment he must recut or resew,
His lips tight back, a thread between his teeth,

.

He holds the needle just off centre, squinting,
And licks the thread and licks and sweeps it through,

Then takes his time to draw both ends out even,
Plucking them sharply twice. Then back to stitching. (78-79)

As Richard Tillinghast duly notes, the poem is “reminiscent of ‘Adam’s Curse,’ by Yeats, where the writing of poetry is called ‘our stitching and unstitching’” (6). But there is another passage that comes to mind. It is Emerson’s description of the poet as a meta-physical tailor who, through the heterocosm of art, uses his pen as a needle, then takes the thread of language to stitch together the sundry pieces of the physical world (both natural and artificial) so that they form the single garment of the Divine:

For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole—re-attaching even artificial things,. . . —disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these . . . but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider’s geometrical web. (455)

In conclusion, it is indeed difficult to imagine what direction Heaney’s future poetry will take, so precisely has he set forth in *The Spirit Level* the boundaries of his art and so completely has he defined the poet’s mission as Representative Man. That mission is to be both healer and teacher. In Emerson’s words, it is to be “the true and only Doctor . . . the only teller of News” (450). What Heaney says of the tailor of Banagher may also be said of himself: “My Lord Buddha . . . the way / Is opener for your being in it” (79).

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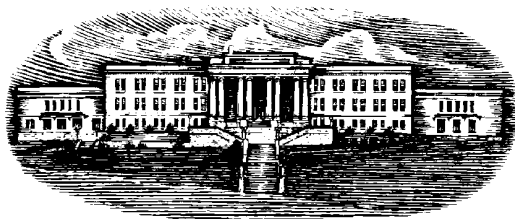
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