

From the Visible to the Invisible: The Bottleneck in Heaney's Later Works

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Since the publication of his first anthology, *Death of a Naturalist*, Irish poet Seamus Heaney has published ten additional anthologies. It is only natural for the characteristics of a poet's work to evolve over the course of a forty-year career, but critics of Heaney's works note that a remarkable change took place between his earliest poems and his later works. While Heaney's earlier poems focus on Irish scenery, his later works describe invisible, visionary, "virtual" worlds (Vendler 113). Daniel Tobin describes the change from the concrete to the abstract using the metaphor "If earth and water were the presiding elements of his early work, in *The Haw Lantern* they are displaced by fire and air" (217). Neil Corcoran agrees with Tobin, writing that the absence plays a crucial role in Heaney's later poems (139). Heaney's focus on the invisible, a key concept for a thorough understanding of his considerable body of work, is particularly evident in his most recent anthology, *Electric Light*.

The transition from the visible to the invisible characterizes the "virtual" elements in Heaney's later poems. In his earlier works, Heaney describes invisible elements such as his memory of Great Hunger using visible imagery, such as Irish scenery. In his later poems, however, he places increasing emphasis on the invisible.

In his younger career, Heaney was in fact facing the difficulty of creating poetry during wartime. In "The Government of the Tongue" (107-108), He emphasizes the importance of the "cure of poetry," based on the interrelation between text and reader.

According to Heaney, excellent poems have two steps: first, they force readers to concentrate on the “break with the usual life” described in the poem. Second, they place the focus back on the readers themselves. As a result, readers can understand the problem posed by the poem on a deeper level, thereby liberating them. This liberation, however, can only be actualized when the reader approaches the poem actively. The use of the visible supports an active reading, helping readers to see the invisible via the visible symbol. If they cannot see the symbol, it becomes far more difficult to interpret. Therefore, usage of the invisible symbol hinders an active reading, threatening the cure of poetry that Heaney views as so invaluable. The following essay will examine Heaney’s increasing emphasis on the invisible, drawing attention to the multitude of problems that arise from this transition.

1

“Punishment,” one of the most important poems in the *North* anthology, clearly demonstrates how Heaney’s earlier works utilize visual symbols to offer readers the cure of poetry.

Heaney, in “The Government of the Tongue,” explains the function of poetry in wartime in the following manner:

Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they [poems] are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed. (107)

“[T]he writing in the sand” refers an episode in John’s Gospel when Jesus answers the scribes and Pharisees by saying nothing directly, but choosing instead to write in the sand about the girl’s sin. Heaney discusses

the importance of this episode in relation to his poetry:

The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, "Now a solution will take place," it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. (108)

Such concentration infuses poetry with "governing power," and both the writer and the reader "undergo in their different ways the experience of being at the same time summoned and released" (108). However, the poem releases the reader only when they actively read the poem. If the poem is indirect, and does not permit the reader's active interpretation, it has no power of release. Heaney's earlier poems allowed readers to approach them actively because the invisible, such as the conflict in Northern Ireland, was represented by visible symbols, such as images from the everyday world. This has the effect of releasing readers from the specific context of the poem, enabling them to recognize the invisible underpinnings and pursue their own interpretation of the work. Without active readings, such achievements cannot be realized.

An example of the usage of visible imagery to convey meaning is found in "Punishment." This poem deals with the IRA's lynchings of Irish girls who engaged sexual relationships with British soldiers. However, Heaney does not describe the lynch directly; instead, he focuses on a corpse dug out of a German bog and named the "Windeby Girl":

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

I can see her drowned
 body in the bog,
 the weighing stone,
 the floating rods and boughs. (1-8)

The first 28 lines of the poem describe the Windeby Girl, using the bog body to symbolize a “scapegoat” (28), or a victim of society. The narrator goes on to confess the complicated emotions that he feels towards the body:

My poor scapegoat,
 I almost love you
 but would have cast, I know,
 the stones of silence.
 [...]
 I who have stood dumb
 when your betraying sisters,
 cauled in tar,
 wept by the railings,
 who would connive
 in civilized outrage
 yet understand the exact
 and tribal, intimate revenge. (28-44)

The visible symbol of the bog body represents the invisible, psychosocial problem of the scapegoat. Furthermore, the narrator’s confession reveals his belief that he cannot combat the invisible problem by himself. He sympathizes with the Windeby Girl, but cannot do anything but “connive [...] civilized outrage.” This stalemate forces readers to offer their own interpretations, and address their own beliefs on the topic. The metaphor “would have cast [...] the stones of silence” (30-31) plays a particularly important role, alluding to an episode in John’s Gospel that teaches that only the innocent can criticize others. Moreover, this metaphor reveals that connivance is as sinful as throwing real stones. Readers question their own tendencies to criticize the violent lynch, and are forced to confront the possibility that they

might have done the same thing were they in a similar situation. They also have difficulty criticizing the powerless narrator, for who is to say that they would have been able to stop the lynch had they been there themselves? Through visible imagery, Heaney asks readers to look deep inside themselves and confront their own weaknesses and prejudices.

The use of visible symbols is what gives "Punishment" its unique power. Had Heaney chosen to deal with the lynch directly, the poem might have had a far narrower meaning, intimately tied to its political context. The use of the Windeby Girl invests the poem with universality.

Since the Windeby Girl is thought to have lived some 2,000 years ago in Germany, it demonstrates Heaney's belief that the problem of scapegoat is in no way specific to 20th century Northern Ireland. The problem can be found anytime, anywhere, perhaps even amongst the readers themselves.

2

The use of visible symbols is absent in Heaney's anthology *The Hew Lantern*. The first work in this anthology, "Alphabets," is an autobiographical poem describing how the young Heaney changed his attitude towards the world. "Alphabets" shows many of the characteristics found in Heaney's later works (Vendler 113).

The mysterious letter "O," the first example of Heaney's use of the invisible symbol, plays an important role in this poem. A close examination of this symbol reveals the problems inherent in excessive dependence on the invisible symbol. Critics such as Helen Vendler, Neil Corcoran, and Daniel Tobin agree that "O" symbolizes Heaney's view of reality. For example, Vendler writes that "O" symbolizes the earth, representing universality: "the poet desires the matchlessly comprehensive vision of the astronaut beholding 'The risen, aqueous, singular lucent O' and [...] compares that grand extraterrestrial view to his own astonished realization of the miraculous fit between letters and meanings" (132). Corcoran writes that the higher reality is represented by the necromancer's globe: "there is a strong sense in this hermetic allusion [to the Renaissance neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino] that

this poem is rising rhetorically, and even Yeatsianly, to its occasion" (145). On the other hand, Tobin points out that the "O" symbolizes global vision, writing that Heaney "is driven to pursue a unified vision of the world. The hope of such global vision is embodied by the two exemplary figures that end the poem" (222).

The poem opens by describing Heaney as a child first learning the alphabet. In this stage of life, he recognizes letters by associating them with objects around him:

There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y.
This is writing. A swan's neck and swan's back
Make the 2 he can see now as well as say.
Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate
Are the letter some call ah, some call ay. (5-10)

Heaney's understanding of the invisible is based in the visible world around him; the letters form the foundation for the abstract world of education. Later in life, Heaney studies Ogham letters, which he describes as having a close relationship with trees. He also becomes "the scribe" (33) in a strict Protestant school. During this stage of his life, Heaney still associates the letters of the alphabet with familiar objects:

And he left the Latin forum for the shade
Of new calligraphy that felt like home.
The letters of this alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches
[...]
He learns this other writing. He is the scribe
Who drove a team of quills on his white field. (24-34)

The phrase "shade/Of new calligraphy" (24-25) describes Heaney's

ability to understand Ogham letters through their association with familiar objects. "Capitals" (27) are like "orchards in full bloom" (27); "the lines of script" (28) are "briars" (28); and the white pages are a "white field" (34). In this stage of learning, Heaney cannot comprehend the nature of letters unless he surrounds them with visual imagery. Similarly, Heaney cannot grasp Irish literature and culture unless he associates them with visible objects.

The symbolic "O" appears in the third part of the poem, when Heaney begins to use signs to construct his own reality:

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.
 He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.
 Time has bulldozed the school and school window.
 Balers drop bales like printouts where stoked sheaves
 Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
 And the delta face of each potato pit
 Was patted straight and moulded against frost.
 All gone, with the omega that kept
 Watch above each door, the good luck horse-shoe. (41-49)

Corcoran writes that the "wooden O" (41) refers to a large lecture hall, such as the Globe Theatre (145). Heaney has now become a scholar and poet, lecturing students about great writers such as William Shakespeare and Robert Graves. As time passes, Heaney begins to reverse his focus: instead of recognizing letters through their associations with familiar objects, Heaney now interprets objects through their associations with familiar letters. "Bales" (44) are "printouts" (44); "sheaves" (44) are like "lambdas" (45); a "potato pit" (46) is like a "delta face" (46), and a "good luck horse-shoe" (49) is referred to as an "omega" (48). Corcoran writes that Heaney's mode of thought has transformed: as a result of his changed position in life, he now understands objects by likening them to letters (143).

The inversion of letters and objects is expressed through the reversal of the visible and the invisible. As the letters are signifiers, this method of understanding objects through letters serves as a metaphor for creating reality

using signifiers. Eugene O'Brien writes that "the sign, or signifier, has become dominant over the referent" (83). Since signifiers are abstract and invisible, creating reality through signifiers means that the invisible covers the visible. Here, the inversion of the visible and the invisible appears for the first time; Heaney once understood the invisible through the visible, but now the process has been reversed.

This tendency becomes increasingly apparent over the course of the poem, until invisible symbols fully support the invisible concepts. This stage of Heaney's development first appears when the school is "bulldozed" (43), and "all gone" (48). The close relationship between the visible objects and the invisible world disappears, replaced by "shape-note language" (50). This "language" is mysterious and invisible, and yet represents vision. It has no close relationship with objects; it is "absolute on air" (50) and "can command him" (52). The verb "command" reveals that this invisible concept now dominates Heaney's viewpoint, an idea that is furthered using three metaphors:

Yet shape-note language, absolute on air
 As Constantine's sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO
 Can still command him; or the necromancer
 Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house
 A figure of the world with colours in it
 So that the figure of the universe
 And 'not just single things' would meet his sight
 When he walked abroad. As from his small window
 The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
 The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
 Like a magnified and buoyant ovum [...] (50-60)

As "IN HOC SIGNO" reveals, this shape-note language is visionary and transcendental, enabling Heaney to see "a figure of the world" behind "single things" (56). The "figure of the world" is, as the astronaut metaphor implies, representative of the earth itself. These metaphors reveal Heaney's new ability to support invisible concepts with invisible imagery.

Both the "shape-note language" and the world are invisible to readers, seen only by Heaney himself. Therefore, readers are unable to actively interpret this poem, and can only accept Heaney's perspective. Consequently, they cannot take part in the transcendental world described in the poem. In that sense, this transcendental invisible "O" can be thought of as "zero," denying the reader participation.

3

Poetic release, so prevalent in "Punishment," is entirely abandoned in Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout." Even though the two poems deal with the same theme, the appearance of the invisible in the latter prevents readers from interpreting the subject matter for themselves. As critics of Heaney's work have pointed out, both "Punishment" and "Mycenae Lookout" deal with the sins of bystanders, and overlap the present and the past. However, while "Punishment" uses visible symbols to describe the invisible, "Mycenae Lookout" supports the invisible perspective of the narrator.

Heaney wrote "Mycenae Lookout" in the 1996, during the Irish Peace Process. The Peace and Reconciliation Group (PRG) was secretly trying to establish a ceasefire, and in 1994 a provisional IRA was declared "a ceasefire without conditions" (Bell 654). This act was quickly copied by Royalist terrorists. Both the Irish and the British hoped desperately for peace. Bowyer Bell describes the atmosphere in 1994 Ireland: "The streets of West Belfast were suddenly filled with crowds, celebrating as if for a famous victory" (654). The peace process was the visible manifestation of the invisible desire for peace.

"Mycenae Lookout" approaches this invisible desire through invisible fiction. In "Punishment," the visible bog body reveals the invisible psychological factors that create scapegoats, but "Mycenae Lookout" contains no visible symbols, instead resting on the invisible fiction of Greek mythology. This vision can be interpreted as another manifestation of the "shape-note" language found in "Alphabets": Heaney does not see the concrete issue

itself, but rather functions in the realm of invisible, transcendental vision.

As in “Alphabets,” the visible concrete objects and the invisible signifier in “Mycenae Lookout” have little in common. “Punishment” refers to both the bog body and Irish girls, helping readers to grasp the symbolic meaning behind the poem. However, “Mycenae Lookout” contains no direct reference to the Irish Peace Process, leaving readers without a strong political background unable to interpret the symbolic meaning behind Heaney’s words.

The overlap between the past and the present highlights the problem in “Mycenae Lookout.” In this poem, Heaney uses the Greek tragedy of *Agamemnon* to clarify the situation in Northern Ireland. Unlike “Punishment,” this poem is based on fiction. In addition, Heaney changes the original setting. He creates his own invisible story, in which the watchman’s vision reveals Heaney’s own ambivalence about the peace process. Heaney overlaps his own beliefs with those of the watchman, creating a new version of the classic Greek tale. The watchman sees both the violence and the peace in the situation, revealing Heaney’s own ambivalence towards the peace process. Heaney himself is a kind of watchman over Northern Ireland, reluctant to offer any strong political opinions. Like the watchman in the poem, he does not personally engage with the subject, preferring detached observation. Corcoran writes:

The watchman becomes expositor, commentator, judge, confidant and visionary, in all of which roles he is both involved and detached, an accessory to the crimes and guilts he evokes who is also their articulator and interpreter. The poem finds thereby Heaney’s most unpredictable and original self-representation as a poet who has himself, throughout his career, been drawn to commentary on, and has withdrawn from propagandistic involvement in, a lengthy, ongoing, local internecine war. (200)

The watchman in the story of *Agamemnon* has been waiting for the fire which tells of the end of the Trojan War. At the same time, he has a

foreboding sense that the end of the war will not bring the end of suffering. Similarly, the watchman in Heaney's poem feels that more murders will take place even after the war ends. It is important to note Heaney's ambivalent attitude: he sees both visions of violence, and visions of peace.

In "Punishment," Heaney does not participate in the war, choosing instead the role of a bystander. In "Mycenae Lookout," however, Heaney can do nothing to prevent the IRA's murders of Irish women who engaged in sexual relations with British soldiers. Heaney expresses the belief that doing nothing can, at times, be just as bad as taking part in violent actions, using the phrase "cast [...] /stones of silence" (30-31). In the poem, even though the watchman knows of the conspiracy to slay the king, he chooses to do nothing, and in that manner becomes at least partially responsible for the tragic event. Indeed, he confesses his role in the murder in the fourth part of the poem "The Nights": "The king should have been told,/but who was there to tell him/if not myself?" (10-12).

In the Greek tale of *Agamemnon*, the members of the court are aware of the conspiracy to slay the king, but Heaney changes this aspect of the story. In the poem, it is only the narrator who can alert the king to his fate. This alteration emphasizes the sinful nature of the bystander, a theme underscored by the description of Cassandra, who appears in the second part of the poem. In the tale of *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is protected, treated as a precious prize of war. In Heaney's poem, however, he uses the phrase "camp-fucked" (12) to reveal the violent nature of the girl's fate: she is raped by soldiers. The violence is highlighted by the reader's awareness that the people watching the girl in the moments following the rape are filled with the desire to do the same thing to her:

And a result-
and shock desire
in bystanders
to do it to her (45-48)

This, as O'Brien writes, is a development of the theme found in "Punishment": the sins of bystanders (123). Heaney may have intended this change

to unite the past and the present by weaving the modern-day situation in Ireland into the framework of the Trojan War. A more likely possibility, however, is that this change was made to further emphasize the sins of bystanders. The watchman is a bystander whose sin is more grave than any, for it is only he who has the power to alter the king's destiny and prevent his murder.

Neither the watchman nor the poet is in the transcendental position of judge. On the contrary, they indirectly take part in the violence. Tobin, in fact, writes that "Neither he nor the poet is an 'unacknowledged legislator,' though his privileged position 'above' all the tragic scene may lead him, for a moment, to believe so" (288).

Heaney's technique of analyzing the psychology of bystanders can be seen in *North*, but in this poem Heaney not only reveals the hidden desires of the bystanders, but also sees visions. Like Yeats in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," Heaney sees two contradictory visions. The first, described in "His Dawn Moon," is fairly ominous:

Down on myself, I saw cities of grass,
 [...]
 Small crowds of people watching as a man
 Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran
 Amoriously, it seemed, to strike him down. (20-24)

This description reveals the unity of Eros and Thanatos: the merging of sexual desire with violent desire. This vision demonstrates Heaney's belief that the end of the war will not bring the end of violence. As long as the poet and the watchman remain intermingled, the war is simultaneously the Trojan War and the Irish Civil War. The two situations are similar because in both, the bystanders fail to intervene in order to prevent violence. As Vendler writes, this reveals Heaney's uncertainty about whether the Irish will be able to maintain the peace (142).

The theme of unity between Eros and Thanatos is furthered in the fourth section of "The Nights." The conspiracy hatched by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, disappears into sexual imagery symbolized by a bed: "from

the beginning/ (a child could have hardly missed it)/their real life was the bed" (7-9). The description of the Trojan War unites the blood image with the sexual image:

in the end Troy's mothers
 bore their brunt in alley,
 bloodied cot and bed.
 The war put all men mad,
 horned, horsed or roof-posted,
 the boasting and the bested. (43-48)

Although the line "Troy's mothers/bore their brunt in alley" (43-44) indicates that the Trojan women were killed, this phrase also implies that they were raped. The blood in the line "bloodied cot and bed" (45) may be the consequence of both murder and rape. We have seen before that the watchman has the desire to kill and rape; as a bystander, he is not above the violence, but indirectly partakes in it.

The end of this "Mycenae Lookout" predicts the coming of a peaceful era, as the watchman sees an image of fresh water:

At Troy, at Athens, what I most clearly
 see and nearly smell
 is the fresh water.
 A filled bath, still unentered
 and unstained, waiting behind housewalls
 that the far cries of the butchered on the plain
 keep dying into, until the hero comes
 [...]
 And the well at Athens too.
 Or rather that old lifeline leading up
 and down from the Acropolis
 to the well itself, a set of timber steps. (1-15)

Fresh water is intended as a positive symbol of the creation of new life:

“old lifeline leading up/and down from the Acropolis” (14–15). However, even this image contains an element of irony. The water is “still unentered/and unstained” but this positive force is going to be stained with Agamemnon’s blood. This image is ambivalent, in that it contains both positive and negative symbolism.

The image of fresh water later develops into the image of a well — an object that Heaney has repeatedly used as a symbol of poetic imagination over the course of his career.

And then this ladder of our own that ran
 deep into a well-shaft being sunk
 in broad daylight, men puddling at the source
 through tawny mud, then coming back up
 deeper in themselves for having been there, (28–32)

The ladder used to attack the castle is changed to a metaphorical ladder leading “deeper in themselves” (32). This image implies that human desire, symbolized by the ladder, is the “source” of human mentality. Taken in tandem with Heaney’s other poems, we may conclude that water and well imagery are intended to symbolize poetic inspiration. Corcoran concurs, writing that Heaney utilizes images of wells and water to symbolize inspiration:

[H] ere its fiction of watchman and Argos becomes virtually transparent to this poet and his own writing, since the alternative is figured in an imagery of water, wells and pumps which Heaney’s work has made its own, and frequently made into a symbol for the source of poetic inspiration. (202)

Examples of water imagery serving as a symbol for inspiration can be found in both “The Diviner” and “Personal Helicon,” when the poet attempts to peer into his heart as though it were a well. The fact that this poem describes deep-rooted human desires such as the unity of Eros and Thanatos and the sins of bystanders reveals that peace can be attained if

poems can force readers to confront their own hidden psychological tendencies.

The problem in "Mycenae Lookout" is twofold. First, the poem prevents readers from actively interpreting the work. Although they might want to criticize the powerless narrator, they cannot easily do so. While "Punishment" forces readers to consider the problem on their own, readers of "Mycenae Lookout" does not. Readers are confronted with the watchman's vision, from which they can only infer Heaney's thoughts about the peace process. The interpretation stops here; unlike in "Punishment" the focus does not return to the readers themselves.

The second problem in "Mycenae Lookout" is that the use of visions prevents readers from engaging in active interpretation. Only Heaney can see these visions; readers do not see them, and so cannot interpret the images for themselves. "Punishment" rests on the visible image of the Windeby Girl, giving readers the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about the cause of the girl's death. Readers can therefore decide whether or not to accept Heaney's message. However, "Mycenae Lookout," in contrast, is founded on invisible fiction, leaving readers unable to interpret the vision presented by Heaney.

4

Heaney's latest anthology, *Electric Light*, published in 2000, contains a great deal of ambivalent vision and emphasizes the invisible more strongly than any previous work. This tendency is exemplified by the poem "Out of the Bag," which describes the illusions that Heaney entertained as a child. While "Mycenae Lookout" is based on the Greek tragedy of *Agamemnon*, "Out of the Bag" rest on Heaney's own memories, far more private, and thus more invisible, to readers. The poem has often been interpreted as a memory of Heaney's childhood, but this poem can, in fact, be interpreted as a meta-poem. In other words, this poem metaphorically describes the process of writing poetry. First, the poem describes an imagined event in which a doctor literally "creates" the body of a baby. This "creation" reminds Heaney

of the poet's power to cure:

Two peepholes to the locked room I saw into
 Every time his name was mentioned, skimmed
 Milk and ice, swabbed porcelain, the white
 And chill of tiles, steel hooks, chrome surgery tools
 And blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened
 At the foot of each cold wall. And overhead
 The little, pendent, tear-hued infant parts
 Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling
 A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock
 A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole. (28-37)

Heaney, lacking the knowledge of how babies are created at such a young age, imagines that the doctor literally “creates” the baby from these spare parts using “steel hooks, chrome surgery tools” (31). The poem creates a bizarre, gothic atmosphere, much like a horror movie: the “blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened/At the foot of each cold wall” (32-33). This grotesque imagery is furthered by the description of the doctor as a witch.

The “creation” of the baby is described again in the second section of this poem, when the adult Heaney experiences an epiphany. In “Lourdes in '56” (15), when Heaney “nearly fainted from the heat and fumes” (16), he comes to a significant realization:

Doctor Kerlin at the steamed-up glass
 Of our scullery window, starting in to draw
 With his large pink index finger dot-faced men
 With button-spots in a straight line down their fronts
 And women with dot breasts, giving them all
 A set of droopy sausage-arms and legs
 That soon began to run. And then as he dipped and laved
 In the generous suds again, miraculum:
 The baby bits all came together swimming

Into his soapy big hygienic hands (19-28)

This vision, where the doctor creates a human body, is the key to the poetic cure presented in this section. This section reveals Heaney's belief that sanctuaries, shrines, and the poetic cure are the equivalent of hospitals, and links Heaney's epiphany to the power of poetry:

Poeta doctus Peter Levi says
Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called asclepiions)
Were the equivalent of hospitals
In ancient Greece. Or of shrines like Lourdes,
Say poeta doctus Graves. Or of the cure
By poetry that cannot be coerced,
Say I, who realized at Epidaurus
That the whole place was a sanatorium
With theatre and gymnasium and baths,
A site of incubation, where "incubation"
Was technical and ritual, meaning sleep
When epiphany occurred and you met the god (1-12)

Heaney's epiphany is inspired by the relationship between the "creation" of a baby and writing. During the creation of a baby, several body parts are united into a coherent whole: a clear metaphor for the manner in which a poem merges distinct words into a single work of art.

It is crucial to note that the doctor in the first section is described using the image of a spaniel: the inside of his bag is "the colour of a spaniel's inside lug" (6), and his collar is "spaniel-coloured" (15). Spaniels are used to hunt water birds; they swim after and fetch the hunted birds. The doctor is again linked to the image of water, when he drinks water in the moments following the birth. The narrator describes how he prepares water for the doctor:

Getting the water ready, that was next
Not plumping hot, and not lukewarm, but soft,

Sud-luscious, saved for him from the rain-butt
 And savoured by him afterwards, all thanks
 Denied as he towelled hard and fast,
 Then held his arms out suddenly behind him (19-24)

During Heaney's epiphany, he washes his hands, thereby extending the theme of water. Given the fact that water plays an important role in poetic inspiration, the link between the doctor and water reinforces the tie between the doctor's creative powers and the poet's ability to compose artistic works. The imagery of the spaniel is intended to imply that the poet struggles to retrieve words for his poetry much as a doctor tries to "obtain" a baby.

The doctor is, furthermore, likened to a medieval alchemist, "scientifically" creating a human being from the body parts hanging from the ceiling. In the poem, he is described as "Hyperborean, beyond-the-north-wind blue" (27). In the context of mythical symbolism, "north" is an unfamiliar realm. The protagonist of the mythology builds his identity as a hero by journeying to the forbidding north. The doctor is described using mysterious, transcendental imagery, overlapping with the traditional image of the poet as prophet.

"Out of the Bag" reveals Heaney's attitude towards the act of writing poetry. In "Out of the Bag," the poem is described as having the power of cure. Poems, Heaney appears to believe, can create new life or revive the dead, much like Doctor Kerlin can create new life from a collection of dead body parts. It is vital to note, however, that the poetic cure is described as something that "cannot be coerced" (6). Unlike medicine, poetry's curative powers are neither automatic nor guaranteed. Poems can offer restoration to readers only when they actively read the poem with the aid of imagination.

The poet is invested with the power to create new life through an epiphany: when the narrator refers to "the cure/By poetry" (5-6), he says that "the whole place was [...] a site of incubation" (8-10). Here, incubation does not just mean "to hatch eggs," but is "technical and ritual, meaning sleep/When epiphany occurred and you met the god" (11-12). Furthermore, the line "whole place was a sanatorium" (8), leads readers to

the conclusion that such epiphanies can be found almost anywhere.

There are two important problems in this poem that merit consideration: first, the poetic cure described in "Out of the Bag" stems from an epiphany in the desert. However, the epiphany itself is based on a childhood fantasy that Heaney had about Doctor Kerlin. Second, the narrator experiences his epiphany in the "Sanctuaries of Asclepius" (2), suggesting that there is a relationship between Asclepius's cure and the cure of poetry. However, the myth of Asclepius is ineffective, and some diseases prove fatal in spite of all medical efforts. In fact, this poem suggests that the power of disease may prevail: "Bits of the grass [in the sanctuaries] I pulled I posted off/To one going into chemotherapy/And one who had come through" (1-3). Chemotherapy, used to treat cancer, can be effective in some cases, but the image of "chemotherapy" is strongly negative because of its relationship with death. This negative image is strong enough to destroy the positive implications of Asclepius's cure. In our modern age, the myth of Asclepius loses its effectiveness, and stands as yet another example of Heaney's ambivalence: the poetic cure does, indeed, appear to exist, but its existence is based on a mythological illusion, and is thus very weak.

In "Out of the Bag," as in "Mycenae Lookout" and "Alphabets," invisible symbolism supports invisible concepts. The invisible illusion of Heaney as a child and the subsequent invisible vision support the equally invisible cure of poetry. In "Out of the Bag," however, the invisible becomes more self-referent. While "Mycenae Lookout" is based on a well-known Greek tragedy, "Out of the Bag" is founded on a personal vision that can only be seen by Heaney. This again brings to mind the invisible "shape-note language" described in "Alphabets": a deeply personal concept that hardly invites readers to make their own interpretations.

"At Toombridge" shows the problem of the invisible "shape-note language" more clearly:

Where the flat water
Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh
As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth
And fallen shining to the continuous

Present of the Bann.
 Where the checkpoint used to be.
 Where the rebel boy was hanged in '98.
 Where negative ions in the open air
 Are poetry to me. As once before
 The slime and silver of the fattened eel. (1-10)

The use of the past tense clearly indicates that this poem deals with past events. Most of the objects or actions described here are invisible now. This scene lacks any concrete visible objects: "Flat water" (1), "bann" (5), "checkpoint" (6), and "rebel boy" (7) are all elements of the past; only "negative ions in the open air" (8) exist in the present, and are accessible to the reader.

In "At Toombridge," the invisible ions (8) represents the invisible, abstract concept of poetry. Unlike "Alphabets," "Mycenae Lookout," and "Out of the Bag," the objects described in "At Toombridge" are visually unclear. Furthermore, as Toh Hsien Min writes, Heaney does not explain why these "negative ions" are "poetry" to him. Min concludes that this is "aesthetics of trickery." Whether Min's negative evaluation is valid or not merits further discussion, but this poem clearly presents a closed space that rejects the reader's attempts at participation.

5

Heaney's earlier works, such as "Punishment," use the visible to express the invisible. In "Alphabets," he first began to toy with the notion of representing invisible concepts through invisible imagery. This approach became more and more self-referent, until Heaney began to completely deny readers the opportunity to reach their own conclusions about the ideas being presented.

This closed poetic world threatens Heaney's poetic abilities, as can be seen in "Government of the Tongue." The power of poetic release can be effective only if the poem is read actively, a technique that is stymied by the

usage of invisible symbolism.

Heaney's recent works are particularly problematic. His latest anthology, *Electric Light*, deals with more international, universal material than his earlier works. However, visual imagery is entirely absent, replaced by Greek tragedy. Heaney appears to be groping for a handhold in his new position as an international poet, causing a bottleneck amongst readers and critics alike.

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Synopsis

From the Visible to the Invisible:
The Bottleneck in Heaney's Later Works
Shigeru Ozawa

Since the publication of his first work, *Death of a Naturalist*, Irish poet Seamus Heaney has published ten additional anthologies. It is only natural for the characteristics of a poet's work to evolve over the course of a forty-year career, but critics of Heaney's works note that a remarkable change took place between his earliest poems and his later works. While Heaney's earlier poems focus on naturalism and Irish scenery, his later works describe invisible, visionary, "virtual" worlds.

In Heaney's earlier poems, the use of the visible supports an active reading, helping readers to see the invisible via the visible symbol. If they cannot see the symbol, it becomes far more difficult to interpret. Therefore, usage of the invisible symbol hinders an active reading, threatening the cure of poetry that Heaney views as so invaluable. This essay examines Heaney's increasing emphasis on the invisible, drawing attention to the multitude of problems that arise from this transition.

The use of visible symbols is what gives his earlier poem "Punishment" its unique power. The use of the ancient Windeby Girl as a visible symbol invests the poem with universality. The problem can be found anytime, anywhere, perhaps even amongst the readers themselves.

The use of visible symbols is absent in Heaney's anthology *The Hew Lantern*. In the first work in this anthology, "Alphabets," both the symbol and the world are invisible to readers, seen only by Heaney himself. Therefore, readers are unable to actively interpret this poem, and can only accept Heaney's perspective.

Poetic release, so prevalent in "Punishment," is entirely abandoned in Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout." Even though the two poems deal with the same theme, the appearance of the invisible in the latter prevents readers

from interpreting the subject matter for themselves.

Heaney's latest anthology, *Electric Light*, published in 2000, contains a great deal of ambivalent vision and emphasizes the invisible more strongly than any previous work. This tendency is exemplified by the poem "Out of the Bag," which describes the illusions that Heaney entertained as a child.

In "Out of the Bag", as in "Mycenae Lookout" and "Alphabets", invisible symbolism supports invisible concepts. The invisible illusion of Heaney as a child and the subsequent invisible vision support the equally invisible cure of poetry. In "Out of the Bag," however, the invisible becomes more self-referent. While "Mycenae Lookout" is based on a well-known Greek tragedy, "Out of the Bag" is founded on a personal vision that can only be seen by Heaney. This again brings to mind the invisible "shape-note language" described in "Alphabets": a deeply personal concept that hardly invites readers to make their own interpretations.

Heaney's recent works are particularly problematic. His latest anthology, *Electric Light*, deals with more international, universal material than his earlier works. However, visual imagery is entirely absent, replaced by Greek tragedy. Heaney appears to be groping for a handhold in his new position as an international poet, causing a bottleneck amongst readers and critics alike.