

## **When West Meets East – Seamus Heaney’s Eastward Glance**

Péter Dolmányos

Seamus Heaney hardly needs introduction: as perhaps the best known of poets writing in the English language his poetry as well as his critical stance possess substantial authority. Whatever Heaney has to say about anything will be listened to, and as there is always the conviction that a poet’s criticism throws light on his own poetics, his essays are as widely read as his poetry. This authority is all the more significant if Heaney’s origins are considered – a poet coming from a Catholic farming family in an obscure corner of Northern Ireland would hardly classify as the mainstream representative of the tradition of poetry in English. The centre of gravity has shifted to a former periphery, the Irish tradition has carved out its place in the English-speaking universe and one of the contemporary agents of this process is Heaney himself.

Seamus Heaney’s prose works include a number of papers on poets from countries located behind the former Iron Curtain – notably pieces on Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, Miroslav Holub, and Osip Mandelstam. That a leading English-speaking poet should turn to such ‘exotic’ figures is an act interesting in itself, but given Heaney’s authority, the choice has an added emphasis as he can be certain of an audience which listens to what he says, thus, the poets he chooses to comment on will be discovered by many new readers exactly because Seamus Heaney has something to say about them. This is the consequence of what Peter McDonald observes as Heaney’s tendency in his criticism to “put emphasis on the personal validation of the elements of a poetic tradition or canon” (McDonald 176) – his own personal validation, in fact, based on his own poetic authority.

Not counting Iceland, Ireland is the westernmost country of Europe, and it is also an island. This specific location at the western periphery of Europe means, beyond isolation, that in the context of the continent everything lies east of Ireland, and any glance at the continent involves a one-way possibility, that of the eastward direction. That such a situation may pose a number of problems in terms of orientation is a fact, and it is not much of a help that the nearest point of reference, the only neighbour, is Britain, a political formation with a long history of power, political as well as cultural, over a large part of the world and also over Ireland in particular. The glance beyond Britain thus involves an effort, a necessary change of perspective in which the problem of distance will inevitably

face the challenger. Distance limits the resolution of the picture yet at the same time it provides an overall view, which is some sort of compensation for the lack of minute detail. The figure of Stephen Dedalus already laid down the foundation of a similar belief when he suggested that the Irish experience was best assessed from abroad (Heaney, 1990, 40).

The concept of the East, however, is far from being a simple matter in the context of Europe. As part of an old bipolar division, West and East refer to worlds apart – the West has long been a synonym of modernity and progress, of economic and political superiority, whereas the East has been seen as the backward part of the continent, the backyard which lags behind and is locked irredeemably in an earlier period. The political division of Europe in the wake of the Second World War solidified and perpetuated this picture, and even created the absurd distortion of Europe in terms of geographical categories – Greece was suddenly a western country though the borders of the continent were located at the borders of the Soviet Union. Geography was thus overwritten by politics and the Iron Curtain became a stronghold of ignorance from either direction.

What often passed in western discourse for the ‘East’ is more precisely described as Central and Eastern Europe. Taking the Ural Mountains as the eastern border of Europe, it is immediately visible that much of the oversized ‘East’ would qualify as Central Europe, a category which often requires further refinement due to its inherent diversity. The use of such a term as Central Europe, however, has gained currency only recently, and it would have found no space in the heavily politicised language of earlier decades, as it involves the idea of gradation and the potential of similarities and common features, and none of these fit the world of binary oppositions.

Heaney’s attention is directed beyond the Iron Curtain and comes to rest exclusively on Slavic-speaking poets. The choice of two Polish, one Czech and one Russian poet is certainly interesting, and the apropos of his choice is the publication of English translations of works by these poets. The time dimension is also important: the essays, with the exception of a Mandelstam review from 1974, date from the 1980s. That decade involved a number of new points of departures in Heaney’s own poetry and it was a watershed period for the Eastern countries as well – by that time the Eastern bloc already had a history: the periods of unrest in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the early 1980s in Poland all indicated certain rifts in the system and even the Soviet Union embarked on a course of profound changes. Few could have foretold, however, that by the end of the decade the Eastern bloc would fall apart, bringing down the Iron Curtain (and its more than symbolic constituent, the Berlin Wall) in the process.

Heaney’s choice possesses dangerous dimensions as it could easily be trapped by stereotypes, political discourse and certain commitments and allegiances. Heaney’s origins and background, however, offer a way out of these traps: the all-but-simple Northern situation enables Heaney to shape a more evenly balanced response from a more enlightened approach than would be

expected from a Western perspective. The general political atmosphere of the North demands a familiarity with official and non-official versions of reality, with propaganda and repressions, all of which provide a basis for a possible understanding of, even if perhaps not identification with, the situation from which these poets write.

Apart from the physical distance between the far West and the region in question there is another type of distance to be handled, that of language. Heaney's experience of the examined poets comes from translated works, thus, it is not first-hand experience but mediated, as if to provide a corresponding literary element to the Iron Curtain. Heaney repeatedly mentions this fact (cf. Heaney 1990, 38-39, 54-55) and its immediate consequence as well, namely, he cannot offer a commentary on the patterns and linguistic intricacies of the original. In addition, translation imposes further limits on the material as the translated poetic text emerges from contexts not fully known or not familiar at all, thus, there is a demand for exegesis, for extra-poetic material for a full(er) understanding of these works. Despite all these Heaney does not refrain from addressing the chosen poets and what they have to say, as if he were haunted by what could be referred to in a brutally simplified way as the 'content' of the poems. Even the title of the first essay devoted to the topic suggests this power: the impact of translation outlined in the essay of the same title proves a deep one as Heaney sets out to devote substantial space to these Eastern poets.

Critical writings by a poet are often regarded as enlightening from the point of view of his own poetry. In accordance with this stance Heaney's own anxieties, interests and dilemmas come to be reflected in these pieces. Among these the most pressing is perhaps that of confronting political situations which involve repression, apropos of the Northern conflict. The Northern situation provides such pressures for the poet, involving the dilemma of taking sides, of complying with expectations or insisting on the notion of artistic freedom, which in turn can be seen by some as betrayal. Heaney's own poetic and private responses to the Troubles and the different interpretations of these by others all indicate the weight of the question, consequently the act of reading other poets driven by similar concerns, and thus finding examples and parallels, helps to objectify Heaney's own considerations. The influence of these Eastern poets is most apparent in the explicitly allegorical poems of the volume *The Haw Lantern*; there, however, Heaney manages to outdo the Eastern poets in the degree of explicitness in his allegories.

Though these considerations have their importance, in "The impact of translation" Heaney provides a different explanation for his interest in the Eastern poets. He regards this turn to the East as a necessary act for "poets in English" (Heaney 1990, 38) as part of the process of recognition that "the locus of greatness is shifting away from their language" (ibid). "Contemporary English poetry has become aware of the insular and eccentric nature of English experience in all the literal and extended meanings of those adjectives" (Heaney 1990, 41), and there comes the corresponding recognition that these Eastern

poets represent something that is missing from the tradition of poetry in English, a complement to it; thus, poetry regains its universal dimension as Heaney broadens his horizons. There is something more than intriguing in this act, given Heaney's place in the English-speaking world: he is a universally acclaimed Irish poet and his refusal of being regarded British is a well-known moment of his career, though the Irish tradition cannot fully escape implications of insularity and eccentricity either.

This "road not taken in poetry in English" (Heaney 1990, 44) is seen as a "road not open to us" (*ibid*) in the conclusion to the essay. This is seen in a positive light, however, as the conditions which lead to the kind of poetry Heaney reads in translation would involve repressive political and social structures. This is again an interesting point since Heaney's own Northern Catholic background is embedded in a one-sided, if not one-party, system which included such ingredients as curtailed civil rights for the minority, gerrymandering, internment without trial and numerous other practices which stand in open conflict with democracy. For Heaney thus the proposed road was at least visible and observable, though he justly admits that the publishing industry of the West "is indifferent to the moral and ethical force of the poetry being distributed" (Heaney 1990, 40). Though explicit didacticism does not do too much good to poetry, seemingly innocent yet fully allegorical patterns are not the only means for getting access to an audience, at least in the Western world.

The first poet Heaney examines is Czeslaw Milosz, it is his poem in translation which provides the impulse for a closer consideration of Eastern poetry. Milosz is a long-time presence on Heaney's literary horizon as a Polish-American poet whom he admires for his "closeness" (cf. Heaney quoted in Corcoran 39). In the essay entitled "The impact of translation" (Heaney 1990, 36-44) Milosz's poem "Incantation" serves to awaken Heaney to an understanding of an alternative way of poetry, one which defies the nearly sacrosanct tenets of Modernism based in the English language. Milosz's poem is openly didactic, it employs abstractions and insists on the importance of its author – these would sufficiently classify the poem as one not worthy of attention in the system of Modernist poetic values. Heaney, however, finds it fascinating exactly for this radical difference, and magnifies the poem to a universal representative of poetry in translation – a different world altogether for a poet educated within the traditions of poetry in English.

While Czeslaw Milosz is admired for his bravery in openly opposing canonical Modernist tenets about poetry, Miroslav Holub receives praise for his daring employment of intelligence and irony. Both poets direct attention to the limitations of the tradition of poetry in English, a tradition which is still under the spell of Romantic precedents. While not forsaking the lyric dimension, Holub adds his approach of a scientist to the poetry he writes and the final combination is one that can sit comfortably with a wide audience which is not necessarily literary-minded. Holub becomes the *par excellence* representative of the poet in the Eastern bloc through his creation of the figure of Zito, a

combination of the artist and the scientist, with a corresponding combination of internal freedom and external constraints. The coexistence of these contraries provides Heaney's conclusion: "annihilation is certain and therefore all human endeavour is futile – annihilation is certain and therefore all human endeavour is victorious" (Heaney 1990, 53). This in turn is a verdict on the political conditions from which Holub's poetry emerges – either way the actualities are transcended, and a universal human dimension is intimated.

Zbigniew Herbert is another Polish poet who Heaney focuses on. Though he is seen as a "kindred spirit" (Heaney 1990, 56) of Milosz, the direction is somewhat different as Herbert comes to be celebrated for his universal appeal and is seen increasingly independent of his Polish background. Heaney sees Herbert as someone who comes close to producing, within the confines of Yeatsian choices, "an ideal poetry of reality" (Heaney 1990, 54) and who at the same time creates what "resemble[s] what a twentieth-century poetic version of the examined life might be" (ibid). This is all the more flattering if one considers Herbert's position as a poet from the 'Eastern bloc'. In addition, another Yeatsian dimension is suggested in relation to Herbert, that of simultaneously existing contraries: on occasion his response is humane and tender as well as he is capable of contemplating experience with "the conscious avoidance of anything 'tender-minded'" (Heaney 1990, 64), a feature that at the same time links him to his fellow poet Milosz.

The last essay dealing with Eastern poets in the volume *The Government of the Tongue* is simply entitled "Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam." The title suggests a different approach from those of the previous pieces –it is made up of only two names, and there are no metaphors or descriptive phrases employed. Heaney's subject is broader this time as the essay is written in response to a fairly large number of publications, and there is more space devoted to the introduction of the circumstances in which those pieces, poems as well as prose works, were conceived. The foundations were already laid down in a 1974 review of the translation of Mandelstam's *Selected Poems* – there Heaney establishes Mandelstam as the example of the poet in resistance to oppressive forces of any kind. On revisiting the topic Heaney provides abundant detail on the hardships of the Russian poet and thus uncovers the horrors of totalitarian systems for the (supposedly) Western audience, while the commentary on Mandelstam's poetry is observably less both in terms of volume and depth. What Heaney seeks to trace is Mandelstam's progress during which he awakens to the realities of the totalitarian machinery and his inner freedom leads him to confront external constraints embodied by that machinery. The outcome of the clash is necessarily tragic, and thus elevating and exemplary, and the latter concept has a long history of significance in Heaney's artistic stance.

Mandelstam had earned proper respect by the time Heaney wrote his essay on the Russian poet (1981, cf. Corcoran 183). As a result Mandelstam is part of the highly prestigious group of exemplary figures for Heaney, with Dante and Yeats for his companions. Dante is the undisputed point of reference when it

comes to political pressures and exile, and the exemplary handling of these by the Italian poet also makes him a guiding figure. Strong external pressures and the need for an adequately strong power to respond to them, either by exile or by open resistance, bring Mandelstam and Milosz into a relation with Dante, and they may accordingly be considered the recent representatives of the tradition of the poet in historic conflict with his circumstances.

The possible parallels between their own fate and that of Dante are also articulated by these poets themselves. Heaney mentions Mandelstam's radical revision of Dante's art in relation to earlier beliefs, and in his reading Mandelstam comes to regard Dante as "an exemplar of the purely creative, intimate, experimental act of poetry itself" (Heaney 1990, 96). This recognition encourages Mandelstam to live his role as a poet, and in turn he gains (or perhaps more precisely, recovers) his freedom though only at the fatal cost of falling out with the political system. Milosz's choice of exile from Poland also evokes parallels with Dante, but there is a rather explicit recognition of common experience when Milosz himself refers to his memories of twentieth-century Poland in the matrix of Dante's *Inferno* (quoted in O'Brien 242). Milosz's destination in exile (France at first, the United States later, with subsequent American citizenship) would perhaps raise doubts as to the nature of his parallel experience with Dante, yet a life among more comfortable circumstances does not automatically equal a more comfortable life altogether – this is partly proven by Milosz's return to Poland in his later years, after the collapse of the one-party system.

In a much later piece Heaney returns to Czeslaw Milosz, yet the occasion, and accordingly the tone, is altogether very different. The piece is an article written on the death of the poet, remembering Milosz rather than introducing him. The assessment of the deceased poet is done with profound respect and Heaney has a full and finished oeuvre to contemplate. Praise is generously provided for a wide range of Milosz's achievements: the poet's faith in the power of his art, his credibility in this belief, and the simultaneous presence of contrary convictions in relation to the position of poetry as well as the ability to be able to be simultaneously tender and resolute towards reality – all these turn Milosz into an exemplary figure, taking his place next to Yeats, Dante and Mandelstam.

When Heaney introduces his enterprise in the volume *The Government of the Tongue*, he provides a number of clues for the reader as to the nature of his interest in the Eastern poets:

In the course of this book, Mandelstam and other poets from Eastern bloc countries are often invoked. I keep returning to them because there is something in their situation that makes them attractive to a reader whose formative experience has been largely Irish. There is an unsettled aspect to the different worlds they inhabit, and one of the challenges they face is to survive amphibiously, in the realm of 'the

times' and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect, a challenge immediately recognisable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland's history over the last couple of decades. (Heaney 1990, xx.)

Paradoxically there are, side by side, the dimensions of familiarity and difference, of similar conditions and totally different ones, and the friction of these irreconcilable parties generates a profound response. The suggested autobiographical parallels in relation to politics may indeed be problematic (cf. McDonald 186, referring also to Edna Longley's argument), but Heaney's stance is artistically oriented rather than politically directed, though the latter cannot fully be neglected either.

However distant these Eastern poets may seem, there is a claiming of kinship with their experience. The recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of poetry in English in relation to facing complex and challenging situations forces Heaney to take up something of a partisan stance towards that tradition – Heaney's origins and background compel him to forge his way of response to a situation which the English tradition is unable to handle, and it is a moment of relief and confirmation to discover exemplary figures in this respect. Heaney has repeatedly reflected in his poems on what he considers the source and nature of his poetry, and the early programmatic pieces ("Digging", "Personal Helicon") suggest the inward direction and the need for reflexive agents for self-examination. By the act of reading these Eastern poets Heaney broadens the circle of the possible reflexive agents and finds valuable points of reference in their examples and exemplary stance.

Heaney's eastward glance brings into focus poets who function as guides, and the glance becomes a gaze, fixed steadily upon these figures. From the perspective of Ireland they form a coherent group of poets in the distance, and they embody a possible other beyond the tradition of poetry in English. With this shift from the insular English tradition to the universal dimension of poetry the political element becomes only a circumstance: it is an important, though in the final analysis, not a decisive one – the chosen poets prove that intelligence and ingenuity overcome censorship and repression, and the inner freedom of the artist is preserved or regained along the way. The imaginative bridging of the two parts of the divided continent is thus made well before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and this is paradoxically achieved by an act that emphasises the essential singularity of the human being, an act that is essentially directed at the discovery and exploration of the self – always individual, always free and untouchable for repressive external machineries (cf. Heaney 1990, 143).

**Bibliography**

- Corcoran, N. *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber, 1986.
- Docherty, T. "The Sign of the Cross: review of *The Government of the Tongue*." Allen, M. (ed.) *Seamus Heaney*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, 147–154.
- Heaney, S. *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978–1987*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- . "In gratitude for all the gifts. Czeslaw Milosz 1911–2004." *Guardian*, September 11, 2004.
- . *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968–78*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1980.
- McDonald, P. "Seamus Heaney as a critic." Kenneally, M. (ed.) *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 1995, 174–189.
- O'Brien, P. "Heaney and Milosz. Striving Toward Being." *Writing Lough Derg. From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006, 232–257.