Research Article

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Close Reading and Irish Poetry: Antoine Ó Raifteirí, Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaigh and Seamus Heaney

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Abstract: This article explores the methodology of close reading in relation to Irish poetry, particularly focusing on the works of Seamus Heaney, Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaigh and Antoine Ó Raifteirí. It emphasizes the pedagogical value of close reading in an era of global literature, where translations often obscure cultural nuance. Through detailed analysis of Antoine Ó Raifteirí's 'Mise Raifteirí' and Seamus Heaney's 'Bann Valley Eclogue', the article demonstrates how close reading can unveil hidden layers of meaning. It also draws parallels between Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaig's 'Ochón! A Dhonncha' and ancient Greek and Chinese poetry on themes of loneliness, the moon, and death, highlighting universal motifs across cultures. By examining linguistic and contextual details, the author underscores the enduring relevance of close reading for both literary scholarship and a deeper appreciation of world literature.

Keywords: Irish poetry; Seamus Heaney; Antoine Ó Raifteirí; Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaigh; comparative literature; Pastoral Poetry

1 Introduction

Close reading is a method of interpretation or analysis of literary texts by focusing on one type of detail or another in order to uncover some deeper meaning, and is often regarded as a means to make one's own literary judgment appear more 'practical' (in I. A. Richards' terms) and less 'impressionistic', or at least make one's own

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impressions appear more objective, erudite and impressive.[1] Reading is, of course, always interactive and close reading impresses meaning onto literary works and minds of impressionable readers. Against the critics who had singled out the penultimate statement 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' from John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as silly, illogical or meaningless, we have Cleanth Brooks's canonical close reading of the poem, which shrewdly concludes that the line was not 'to be taken literally' (Brooks 1960, 151). There is a wonderful irony in Brooks's close reading of Keats's ode; that is, that one of the most famous acts of close readings in the recent history of literary criticism concludes with the assertion that literary critics had been taking Keats *too* literally, and had thereby mistaken a dramatic hyperbole for a factual proposition. Brooks tells readers to step back: to read closely but not blindly. To borrow an analogy from photography: greater detail is not simply achieved by being closer to one's subject, but by focusing on the details one wants to reveal. A good close reading is a focused reading: it presents details into view that would be otherwise missed. For example, William Empson, another master of close reading, exposes how Lewis Carroll's Alice books are obsessed with death, just by noting how many casual jokes in them relate to that subject (Empson 1938, 268). At its best, close reading is both enlightening as well as a form of intellectual play: one of the best illustrations of this is Derrida's extended, fantastic and fanatical analysis of the word 'yes' in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Derrida 1987), an act of close reading *in extremis*. The revelations of Empson and Derrida et al. change how we relate to literature. They seize upon Horatian injunction to instruct and delight (what Horace says about poetry often applies to other forms of writing, including literary criticism; note that in *Ars Poetica* Horace serves as both poet and literary critic). The pedagogical value of close reading has long been upheld, but close reading has a special importance in an age of world literature where it reveals details or connections between texts and is an anecdote to desultory reading. Literature, increasingly global, is often mediated through translations that sand down cultural and linguistic differences to create polished texts that facilitate easier reading. An overabundance of books is not a new problem but the discipline of reading literature makes it an acute one: how can we read widely and read carefully?[2] Close reading focuses attention on what readers would otherwise miss, not as a means to nitpick or fixate on dull and dry minutiae, but to expand our engagement with literature: to increase our understanding and our enjoyment.

1 There are many historical and methodology exegeses on close reading. For a good recent account, see (Ohrvik 2024).

2 Cf. 'Non refert quam multos sed quam bonos habeas: lectio certa prodest, uaria delectat.' 'It is not the quantity of books in your possession but their quality that matters: circumscribed reading has its uses, desultory reading is merely for amusement.' (Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae*, V.45.1). My translation.

2 The Letter ‘B’

Let us begin with a short and famous Irish poem ascribed to the wandering bard Raftery’s (Antoine Ó Raifteirí, 1784–1835) ‘Mise Raifteirí’:

> Mise Raifteirí, an file, lán dóchais is grá
>
> le súile gan solas, ciúineas gan crá,
>
> ag dul síos ar m’aistear le solas mo chroí,
>
> fann agus tuirseach go deireadh mo shlí;
>
> tá mé anois lem aghaidh ar Bhalla
>
> ag seinm cheoil do phócaí falamh’.
>
> (Ó Tuama 1985, 252)

In Ireland, at least, this a well-known poem: it is often taught in schools and the first 4 lines appeared on one version of the Irish five pound note. The anthology I took that version of the poem from (there are textual variations in circulation) provides an English translation by Thomas Kinsella:

> I am Raftery the poet, full of courage and love,
>
> my eyes without light, in calmness serene,
>
> taking my way by the light of my heart,
>
> feeble and tired to the end of my road:
>
> look at me now, my face toward Balla,
>
> performing music to empty pockets! (Ó Tuama 1985, 253).

Just as there are several versions of this poem in print, there are various English translations. One commonly anthologized and quoted English translation is by the author of *The Crock of Gold,* James Stephens:

> I’m Raftery the poet,
>
> Full of hope and love,
>
> With eyes without sight,

My mind without torment.

Going west on my journey

By the light of my heart.

Weary and tired

To the end of my road.

Behold me now

With my back to the wall

Playing music

To empty pockets. (Greene 1954, 282)[3]

The differences between the two English versions are acute in the final stanza: and in fact the two translators were not likely translating the same text. Where Kinsella is reading 'aghaidh ar Bhalla', Stephens must have read 'mo dhroim le balla' or something similar. Overlooking whether Raftery's back or front is directional here, we note that in one version his back is to a wall and the other he is facing town Balla. In Irish the difference is between a capital and lower case letter: between *balla*, a wall or *Balla*, the town in County Mayo (note: Latin *vallum* is the root of both English *wall* and Irish *balla*); but what a difference a capital B makes! It is a matter of whether the poet was standing posterior to the wall, singing for an impoverished audience or pausing for a moment to sing before continuing on his trek to Balla. Elsewhere Kinsella contextualizes this poem as holding 'a special place in the tradition, completing the decline of poetry in Irish from a position of privilege – when poets dealt with princes – to that of outcast, a beggar singing to beggars' (1995, 46). It is easy to romanticize Raftery as representing the decline of Irish language and poetry. This national mythologizing is why the poem is well known in Ireland. It is not, however, merely a poetic artifact representing the decline of Irish as a literary language. The poem is full of dualism and contrasts: the poet's blindness and inner calmness, his tired feet and light heart; and finally the singer with an appreciative

3 This translation appears on, among other prominent websites, the Wikipedia page for Antoine Ó Raifteirí, which for better or worse makes it the version most likely to be encountered by contemporary readers online. https://web.archive.org/web/20240910002342/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_%C3%93_Raifteiri Last accessed: 20 September 2024.

but poor audience and an awaited respite back in Balla. Balla, where another of Raftery's poems (this one translated by Seamus Heaney) proclaims:

> Tiocfaidh an t-earrach is beidh an lá ag síneadh
>
> tar éis na Féil' Bríde agus ardód mo sheol,
>
> is ó chuir mé i mo cheann é ní chónóidh mé choíche,
>
> go seasfaidh mé thíos i lár Chontae Mhaigh Eo.
>
> I gClár Chlainne Mhuiris a bheas mé an chéad oíche,
>
> is i mBalla taobh thíos de is ea a thosós mé ag ól […]
>
> Now spring is arriving and evenings are stretching
>
> And after the feast of St Brigid I'll go
>
> For I've taken a notion and grown impatient
>
> To be back in the heart of the County Mayo.
>
> The town of Claremorris will be my first station,
>
> In Balla beyond it the strong drink will flow […]
>
> ('Raftery's Killeadan 1–6', (Heaney and Raftery 1996, 9; 11).

In the Stephens translation of 'Mise Raifteirí' the poet has turned near beggar, with his back against a wall, in Kinsella's account, he is on his way to Balla: a joyful and festive place. Reading the word with a capital letter affords the poem to end with another contrast: the poor audience on the road with the happy reception waiting the poet back in Balla, where he is now (here the poet's anatomical positioning comes into play) headed. The final image is not only one to cultural and linguistic decline but part of realization of a hopeful future: the poet is weary now but later he will rest his tired feet. Close reading does not only spring meaning into the cracks of translation. My interpretation prefers Kinsella's text and translation over Stephens's (and I believe it is objectively better in both accounts), but even in Kinsella's translation and reflection there is a trace of Stephens's image of Raftery with his back to the wall, even if Kinsella's version prepares him for his journey to a happier place and allows a space for optimism in the poet's future. Raftery is indeed an outcast rather than a court poet as were his Irish-language literary ancestors, but he is a hopeful one.

3 The Moon and Loneliness

Close reading can flourish new opportunities for understanding. As a case study, here are three poems on the moon and loneliness. The first is another Irish poem, 'Ochón! A Dhonncha' ('My Sorrow, Donncha') by Pádraig Ó hÉigeartaigh (1871–1936). The poem was first published in 1906 and is a lament for the poet's five-year-old son Donncha who fell into a reservoir and drowned on his way home from school.[4] The poem has long been regarded as a masterpiece of Irish poetry and it is in fact a masterpiece of world literature. The poem is a traditional lament as well as a modern poem by an Irish emigrant to the US (Aiken 2016, 11). The poem begins:

> Ochón! a Dhonncha, mo mhíle cogarach, fén bhfód so sínte;
>
> fód an doichill 'na luí ar do cholainn bhig, mo loma-sceimhle!
>
> Da mbeadh an codladh so i gCill na Dromad ort nó in uaigh san Iarthar
>
> mo bhrón do bhogfadh, cé gur mhór mo dhochar, is ní bheinn id' dhiaidh air.
>
> My sorrow, Donncha, my thousand-cherished under this sod stretched,
>
> this mean sod lying on your little body – my utter fright….
>
> If this sleep were on you in Cill na Dromad or some grave in the West
>
> it would ease my sorrow, though great the affliction and I'd not complain. (1–4)
>
> (Greene 1954, 260–261).

The English translation is by Thomas Kinsella. The poem was also translated into English by the Irish nationalist Padraic H. Pearse. Here the poet laments for his son and grieves that his son was buried in a foreign land. Ó hÉigeartaigh's himself emigrated from Ireland to the US when he was 12 years old, and there became an active contributor to the Irish language (Aiken 2016, 3). The fourth stanza heightens the expression of a father's grief:

> Ta an ré go dorcha, ni fhéadaim codladh, do shéan gach so mé.
>
> Garbh doilbh liom an Ghaeilge oscailte – is olc an comhartha é.

4 For a detailed account of the author as well as the poem and its critical reception (especially in early 20th century Irish periodicals and later anthologies) and textual variations, see (Aiken 2016).

Fuath liom sealad i gcomhluadar carad, bíonn a ngreann dom' chiapadh.

Ón lá go bhfacasa go tláith ar an ngaineamh thú níor gheal an ghrian dom.

The moon is dark and I cannot sleep. All ease has left me.

The candid Gaelic seems harsh and gloomy – an evil omen.

I hate the time that I pass with friends, their wit torments me.

Since the day I saw you on the sands so lifeless no sun has shone. (13–16)

(Greene 1954, 262–263).

The rhythm of the Irish is slow and mournful, effected partially by the three caesuras in the first two lines and the longer assonant fourth line. *Tláith*, the word translated as 'lifeless', means 'wan' or 'soft': provides a raw physicality in a stanza full of imagery of lightness and darkness. There is much that could be said about this Irish lament, but one thing that draws the reader in is the confluence of images and feelings: the dark moon, insomnia and discomfort in a foreign abode. Here we will compare it with two ancient poems, which also reflect on sleeplessness, loneliness and lunar imagery. The point is to draw together common elements from unrelated traditions, which, if it does not hint at some deeper symbolic significance, at least hints at well springs of world poetry in human nature and shared experience. The first poem is sometimes left unattributed or regarded as a fragment of a folk song and sometimes attributed to Sappho, though whether the poem is complete or fragmentary, anonymous or Sapphic, will not detain us:

δέδυκε μὲν ἀ σελάνα

καὶ Πληΐαδες· μέσαι δὲ

νύκτες, παρὰ δ᾽ ἔρχεθ᾽ ὤρα·

ἐγὼ δὲ μόνα κατεύδω.

The moon and Pleiades

sink down, it is the middle

of the night, time passes,

and I sleep alone.

(Page 1962, 520 [Fragment 976]. My translation)

The second piece is the final poem in the anthology 19 Old Poems (古詩十九首), preserved in the Wen Xuan (文選, c. 520–530 AD), though it likely dates further back to the Han dynasty:

> 明月何皎皎。照我羅牀幃。
>
> 憂愁不能寐。攬衣起徘徊。
>
> 客行雖雲樂。不如早旋歸。
>
> 出户獨彷徨。愁思當告誰。
>
> 引領還入房。淚下沾裳衣。
>
> The white moon shines brightly, illuming the weaves of my bed-curtains.
>
> Sorrowful, I cannot sleep; taking my clothes, I rise up and walk.
>
> The guest's journey is said to be a good one, but it is not as happy as the return home.
>
> Alone and indecisive I leave the house, to whom can I relate my sadness?
>
> I look to the distance, but return to my room; falling tears moisten my robes. (先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 1983, I.334. My translation)

The narrator of the Greek poem is a woman, indicated by the gender of the adjective μόνα ('alone'), a detail that eludes the reader until the penultimate word. In the Chinese poem, the gender of the speaker is ambiguous: men and women both might cry and even the clothing mentioned in the final line (裳, pronounced 'cháng' in modern Mandarin, sometimes translated 'skirt', was a lower garment worn in ancient China) was worn by both men and women. In another way the identity of the speaker is unclear: the lyric 'I' could refer either to the traveller or to the one who remains behind at home. All three poems address a common experience: being awake at night and feeling lonely. All three poetic voices turn to the moon, dark or bright or part of a calendrical and astronomical riddle with the Pleiades, to convey a sense of grief, insomnia, and homesickness. The anonymous Han poem draws on a rich contextual tradition of lunar imagery to conjure the mix of feelings. The Greek word for moon ('σελάνα') itself calls to mind the myth of Selene: the moon goddess was with her lover Endymion that night before she set down from the sky, while the speaker is alone. The romantic Greek myth conveys a sense of erotic loneliness. In the Irish lament, it is the absence of the moon that equates to loneliness: not for a distant home and lover but for a distant homeland and lost child. The Chinese poem uses a

common image of the bright moon and loneliness. For example, in the first four lines of Du Fu's 'Moonlight line' ('月夜'):

> 今夜鄜州月
>
> 閨中只獨看
>
> 遙憐小兒女
>
> 未解憶長安
>
> Tonight, moon over Fu-chou.
>
> My wife watches it alone there.
>
> I think of my children across such distance;
>
> They don't understand why I am in Ch'ang-an.
>
> (Yip 1997, 194. Translation by Wai-lim Lip).

The association with the moon and loneliness is not so strongly refined by tradition in 'Western' poetry but the same connection can be found over and again. Across time and place, poetry uses the moon as a cathartic image: to address feelings of loneliness and alienation. Close reading a wide range of poetry is means of understanding shared human experience. Shared and common experience is a starting point in world literature: comparative and close readings lead into the tangled complexity of literary allusion, language and poetic traditions.

4 Bann Valley[5]

Seamus Heaney's collection *Electric Light* (2001) contains three notable pastoral eclogues: "Bann Valley Eclogue," "Glanmore Eclogue" and the translation "Virgil: Eclogue IX." Bann Valley and Glanmore, both loci with a long history in both Heaney's poetic landscapes, here collide with Virgil's visions of Roman Italy. Contemporary politics, personal landscapes, Latin, English, Irish and other poetic traditions,

5 This section, though revised, is based on my treatment of the same poem in my 2008 University of Alberta Master's Thesis: *The Tradition of Virgilian Pastoral in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice, Robert Frost & Seamus Heaney*. Much has been written about this poem since then (see Twiddy 2006, 54–56 et passim; Davis 2007, 108–111; Harrison 2008 122–25; Putnam 2010, 13–15; Hickey 2019, 30–34; Pellicer 2022 140–42; Falconer 2022, 96–107, which the most illuminating interpretation of the poem so far, Duffy 2024, 152–62) but with a different focus.

millennial celebrations and prophesies, combine into an intricate web of poetry. In his lecture "Eclogues *in extremis*," Heaney also examined pastoral eclogues in the works of Michael Longley, Louis MacNeice, Czesław Miłosz and Miklós Radnóti, two Irish and two Eastern European poets. Drawing from in modern poetry, Heaney developed an argument for the pastoral as a powerful poetic mode and challenged its detractors' claims that pastoral is dead, is reduced to artificiality or merely an antiquated form for reactionary propaganda. The association of Virgil with Empire and Authoritarianism is a well-established one and not so easily rebuffed; many contemporaries of Robert Graves, who as schoolboys (and it was usually boys) were taught to read Caesar and Virgil alongside the supposed civilizing virtues of British imperialism, would have agreed with him when he wrote that "Whenever a golden age of stable government, full churches and expanding wealth dawns among the Western nations, Virgil always returns to supreme favour" (Graves 1962, 13). It is significant that both Heaney and the poets he mentions in his lecture turn to Virgil the pastoral poet, and not Virgil the epic poetor poet of Empire. Heaney argues that the pastoral eclogue is still a viable form of poetry which can provide an exceptional poetic model in its intricacies and form:

> Virgil's *Eclogues*, you could say, are a kind of Crystal Palace, beautifully structured and strong because of inner relationships and symmetries; the author in late Republican Rome, like the engineer in Victorian England, was fully aware that artificial conditions were being created, but he was also proud of his extraordinary ability to contrive the transparent tegument. (Heaney 2003 6–7)

That is, 'the author in late Republican Rome' not the imperial Augustan Rome that became synonymous with Virgil's poetry.

Heaney's collection *Electric Light*, "with a universal scope of place and time" (Moi 2007, 173), meditates on the higher themes of poetry, friends and fellow poets, love, life and death. The role of the pastoral eclogue in this collection is to hold together these themes in a "Crystal Palace" structured with the "inner relationships and symmetries" of Heaney's own poetics. Careful attention to these symmetries then illuminates the beauty and architectural integrity of these pastoral eclogues, as well as Heaney use of Virgil's *Bucolica* as a poetic model. "Bann Valley Eclogue," based on Virgil's messianic fourth eclogue is, in my opinion, the most highly developed of Heaney's three eclogues. Consisting of a dialogue between two speakers, Virgil and Poet, it was initially published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Heaney 1999) before the turn of the millennium as a 66-line poem but was cut-down to 42 lines for *Electric Light*. The most dramatic changes between the two versions are the deletion of four of Poet's stanzas. The poem begins:

POET: Bann Valley Muses, give us a song worth singing,

Something that rises like the curtain in

Those words *And it came to pass* or *In the beginning*.

Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil

And the child that's due. Maybe, heavens, sing

Better times for her and her generation. ("Bann Valley Eclogue" 1–6 b)[6]

The first line recalls the opening line of Virgil's fourth eclogue: "Sicelides Musae, paulo canamus" ("Sicilian Muse, let's sing a nobler song" (Verg. Ecl. IV.1),[7] which is quoted in the *Electric Light* version. Aside from adding an additional layer of allusion, Heaney translates the Theocritean and Virgilian pastoral into his own personal and poetic North Irish landscape.[8] Tone and meter are also similar to Louis MacNeice's "Eclogue for Christmas" and "Eclogue from Iceland". Yet this does more than transport Virgil's Arcadia and Theocritus' Sicily to the locality of Bann Valley; it connects the oracular nature of Virgil's eclogue with Heaney's poetic voice. It links the civil wars of ancient Roman and twentieth-century North Ireland, the treaty of Brundisium and the Good Friday Agreement. The alliterated "s" in the first also to create the effect of incantation in a phonetic homage to Virgil's poem.[9] The phrase, "And it came to pass," is markedly biblical, occurring hundreds of times in the King James Bible, and the phrase "In the beginning" from Genesis adds the role of Hebrew prophet to the poetic roles of bard, oracle and *vates*. Virgil is referred to as "my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil" intertwining the poet's role to the roles of prophet, teacher and upholder of tradition.[10] Hedge-schoolmasters were not only teachers and the guardians of traditions but often poets, whose wit was feared. As one scholar

6 The *TLS* version is cited as (a) and the *Electric Light* version as (b).

7 All translations of Virgil's *Bucolica* are by Paul Alpers (Alpers 1979).

8 Bann Valley appears as part of Heaney's poetic landscape most notably in "Bann Clay" in *Door into the Dark* (1969).

9 cf. "Bann Valley Mu***ses***, give ***us*** a ***so***ng worth ***si***nging,
Something that r***ises*** like the curtain in
Those words *And it came to p**ass*** or *In the beginning*." (1–3 b)
and
"***si*** cana***mus siluas***, ***si***luae ***sint*** con***su***le dignae" (Verg. *Ecl.* IV.3)

10 The 'hedge-schoolmaster' connected underground schools which taught math, classics and the Irish bardic traditions in Ireland after a law was passed in 1695 which forbade Catholics to teach in schools. The national school system led to their decline in the 1880s (McManus 2004, 100). Brian Friel also introduced the role of the hedge-schoolmaster to modern Irish literature in his 1981 play *Translations*.

noted, "The people feared the satire of the poet/hedge schoolmaster just as much as the priest's tirade from the pulpit (McManus 95)." Finally, there is the predicted birth of a child and the hope for "Better times for her and her generation" (6 b). These first lines aptly justify the comment that "Heaney's work is an unbroken voyage" (O'Brien 1995, 190). The Nobel-Prize-winning poet looks back to his own poetics and poetic traditions as well as to the future with a mix of hope and anxiety. "Bann Valley Eclogue" begins with an invocation for a rebirth, a renewal and a revision of both Heaney's own poetics and the poetic traditions he invokes. Virgil responds to his call:

> VIRGIL: Here are my words you'll have to find a place for:
>
> *Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens*.
>
> Their gist in your tongue and province should be clear
>
> Even at this stage. Poetry, order, the times,
>
> The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth
>
> And a flooding away of all the old miasma. (7–11 b)

All the elements pertaining to the messianic nature of the eclogue are highlighted: "*Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens*" and the "infant birth." The TLS version provides another line of Latin '*Ferrea, aurea, aetas, scelus, Lucina.*' (9 a), and 'then an infant birth /And a flooding away of all the old miasma.' then only read 'iron and gold' (12 a). In *Electric Light* version, alongside several other changes, Heaney deleted the three stanzas where the Poet speaks, which this last stanza. In the first of the deleted stanzas, the Poet addresses Virgil as if he was literally a hedge-schoolmaster or teacher:

> Poet: *Lucina*. Rhyming with Sheena. Vocative First
>
> Declension. Feminine gender. The Roman
>
> St. Anne. Who is *casta Lucina*, chaste
>
> Star of the birth-bed. And a secular star,
>
> Meaning star of the *saeculum*, brightness gathering
>
> Head great month by month now, waiting to fall. (13–18 a)

The presence of Lucina adds a layer of biographical detail: alluding (so Heaney later revealed) to pregnancy of his niece (O'Donoghue 2019, 152). The association of Lucina,

goddess of childbirth, with St. Anne, the mother of Mary, explains a puzzling element of the final version of the poem: the female gender of the prophesized child. These excised lines hint at the Virgin Mary's birth and Immaculate Conception. St. Anne is the "chaste / Star of the birth-bed" as she prepared the way for Mary's birth free from sin, which in turn prepared the way for the birth of Christ. The phrase "secular star" puns on *saeculum*, which can mean a race, generation, lifetime, spirit of the age, or a century. The exclusion of this stanza alongside other changes adds to the ambiguity of the poem, but at the expense of these expansive evocations. The other missing stanzas more explicitly invoke the troubles of ancient Rome and modern Ireland:

> You were raised on the land they drove your father off.
>
> You had this country accent and little to learn
>
> Of the facts of life when you read your first poems out
>
> To Octavian, feeling the length of the line
>
> As if you were dressing husks off a hank of tow
>
> Or measuring wheal for thatch. Holding your own
>
> In your own way. *Pietas* and stealth. If ex-servicemen
>
> Were cocks of the walk at home, hexameters
>
> Would rule the roost in Rome. You would understand us
>
> Latter-day scholarship boys and girls, on the cusp
>
> Between elocution and *duchas*. Faces that were japped
>
> With cowdung once now barefaced to camera, live. (19–30 a)

Latin *pietas* ('duty', 'piety' or even 'patriotism') and Irish *dúchas* ('heritage', 'instinct' or 'nature') are rich in meaning. The British soldiers in Northern Ireland are compared to the Roman veterans said to have seized Virgil's Mantuan estate from him (a biographical inference from Virgil's *Eclogues* 1 and 9). Perhaps the allusions here to Virgil were too obvious, but in any case, these stanzas were taken out of the final version, leaving a more cryptic but perhaps better poem.

In both versions Virgil speaks in the next stanza:

> Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves:
>
> Earth mark, birth mark, mould like the bloodied mould
>
> On Romulus's ditch-back. But when the waters break
>
> Bann's stream will overflow, the old markings
>
> Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.
>
> The valley will be washed like the new baby. (12–18 b)

Amidst the interweaving of myths of floods, Romulus, births, and renewals is a local legend and prophecy tied to the flooding of the Bann River:

> In it a tradition on both sides of the Bann that this river, as also Lough Neagh, was caused by the overflow of a well. A lady, as related, went out to draw water from a spring. During her absence a black pig jumped between the hooks of a pot on the fire. Excited by the severe scalding it received, the pig made off at a mad rate down the valley. Owing to this occurrence, the lady rushed from the well, forgetting to restore its stone cover, and immediately the water issued forth in great volume, forming the Lough and the Bann. From that day to this, according to the tale, the whole stretch of country through which the Bann flows has been called the Valley of the Black Pig.
>
> There is connected with this story an old prophecy, oft quoted, which informs us that when the black pig re-appears, in the same neighbourhood, there will be a great convulsion in the physical world, and the terrible revolution in the State, portending the end of the present dispensation. (Sibbett 1991, 20)

This legend tied to the flooding of the Bann gives local colour to the poem and affirms that in spite of its expansive and universalizing themes the poem is tied to a specific geographic and cultural locus. This locus, however, is also tied to the tradition of the messianic eclogue. As the poem vacillates between the past and the future, it expands and deflates its locality, grasping threads from several locations before pulling them together. The Poet, puzzled by the immensity of the themes before him, speaks:

> POET: *Pacatum orbem*: your words are too much nearly.
>
> Even "orb" by itself. What on earth could match it?
>
> And then, last month, at noon-eclipse, wind dropped.
>
> A millennial chill, birdless and dark, prepared.
>
> A firstness steadied, a lastness, a born awareness
>
> As name dawned into knowledge: I saw the orb. (19–24 b)

Pacatum orbem is taken from the fourth eclogue where the prophesized child is seen: "pacatumque reget patriis uirtutibus orbem." ("Ruling the world calmed by his father's hand" Verg. *Ecl.* IV.17). 'Itself' in line 19 was capitalized in the TLS version, though the change is minimal; while 'at noon-eclipse' replaces the broader 'mid-morning' (39 b). The "noon-eclipse" refers to the 11 August 1999 total solar eclipse.[11] "A millennial chill" was first "An Avernus chill" (40 a) in the *TLS* version, a change which adds emphasis on the chiliadic aspects of the poem at the expense of an allusion to the entrance to the underworld. When the Sun's photosphere is completely covered by the Moon, it is truly a miraculous sight, to which the Poet simply responds: "I saw the orb." Along with the 1999 eclipse, Heaney draws fully together the various prophetic and poetic threads he invoked, creating tension between expansive historical, political and poetic allusions and the construction of the pastoral simplicity of pre-millennial Bann Valley pastoral. One scholar writing on Heaney's early works referred to him as "a simple straightforward, readily accessible writer […]. A backwater all to himself, he is seen as lying outside the main currents of contemporary European and Anglo-American intellectual life; a throwback to an earlier age, he is admired precisely for not being a 'modern'" (Morrison 1982, 11–12).[12] Underlying "Bann Valley Eclogue" is the earthy pastoral of his first collections, but with a rich soil of literary allusions. As closely as this poem looks to the future, it focalises on the past and waters Heaney's own personal and poetic roots. As the poem moves along, it further interweaves the poetics and locality of Heaney's Bann Valley with Virgil's Arcadia:

> VIRGIL: Eclipses won't be for this child. The cool she'll know
>
> Will be the pram hood over her vestal head.
>
> Big dog daisies will get fanked up in the spokes.
>
> She'll lie on summer evenings listening to
>
> A chug and slug going on in the milking parlour.
>
> Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions. (25–30 b)

There are some echoes of the boy-child in Virgil's eclogue. The image of the child shaded by the hood of a pram carriage, near or in a milking parlour, echoes the stock image of the shepherd relaxing in the shade. "Fanked" is a rustic-sounding word and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* means "To put (sheep) in a fank; to pen up"

11 Coincidentally the area of darkness under an eclipse is the *umbra*, a word which takes us back to Virgil's first eclogue sitting under the shade of a beech tree.

12 Morrison's work covered only up to Heaney's *Field Work* (1979).

("fank, v." OED). This adds another twist to the pastoral image, firstly because the ruin of the flowers in the wheel is put into pastoral terms and secondly because the daisies, a symbol of innocence, are portrayed as being uprooted to provide a comfortable place for the child. Celtic myth note daisies as symbols of birth and renewal:

> The first origin tale [of daisies] is Celtic and is, apparently to be found in the poems of Ossian. Every child who dies unborn, the story goes, returns to earth as a new flower. Thus, a woman named Malvina, who mourned the death of her baby, was consoled by the Maidens of King Morven, who told her that the child had been turned into a flower with a golden disk surrounded by silvery petals. It looked like an infant playing in a field; and it became, therefore, the very symbol of the innocence of a newborn baby. (Kell 1956, 42)

This symbolism of innocence and rebirth of this stanza is tied with hopes for the child to live free from "close gunfire or explosions"; a not so oblique reference to the ceasefire talks in North Ireland in the 1990s. As the voice of the poem shifts back to the Poet, the pastoral scene moves from the child to the poet's own pastoral and childhood imagery:

> POET: Why do I remember St. Patrick's mornings,
>
> Being sent by my mother to the railway line
>
> For the little trefoil, untouchable almost, the shamrock
>
> With its twining, binding, creepery, tough, thin roots
>
> All over the place, in the stones between the sleepers.
>
> Dew-scales shook off the leaves. Tear-ducts asperging. (31–36 b)

The image of a child gathering shamrocks near the railway is reminiscent of world of Heaney's early poetry, particularly the poems from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The shamrock, a symbol of Ireland, the Holy Trinity and good luck is represented as "tough," but with "thin roots," existing in a duality of strength and vulnerability, hardy but easily uprooted. The "sleepers" are the timbers which support the rails, but the word also refers to spies or saboteurs who wait inactive for a period of time before commencing their activities. The lines also allude to Louis MacNeice's "Eclogue by a five-barred gate," where Death speaks:

> D. I thought he was a poet and could quote the prices
>
> Of significant living and decent dying, could lay the rails level
>
> on the sleepers. (MacNeice 1967: 30–32)

The Poet calls upon themes from Heaney's early poetry and interweaves them with the uncertainties, ambiguities and mystifications of Virgil's fourth eclogue. "Tear-

ducts asperging" is a mystifying phrase. "Asperges" usually refers to the Roman Catholic rite where the priest sprinkles the congregation with holy water before the Pre-Vatican II Tridentine Mass of Seamus Heaney's childhood. The word in this context comes from the Latin Vulgate version of Psalm 50 (51): "Asperges me hyssopo, et mundabor;/Lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor." ("Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;/Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" *Psalms* 50:9).[13] The religious imagery and diction are never allowed to become dominant or dogmatic, but works to draw in another thread of meaning. Signs of faith function as signs of hope, which if anything is the key thematic element of the element. Hope is neither secure nor infallible, but flutters around the poem and is tied to the prophetic functions of both speakers, Virgil and the Poet. The final stanza of the poem is closely connected with the final lines of Virgil's fourth eclogue:

> Child on the way, it won't be long until
>
> You land among us. Your mother's showing signs,
>
> Out for her sunset walk among big round bales.
>
> Planet earth like a teething ring suspended
>
> Hangs by its world-chain. Your pram waits in the corner.
>
> Cows are let out. They're sluicing the milk-house floor. (37–42 b)

The pram and milk-house await the child and the "planet earth" hangs in suspense, but the child's birth does not take place in the poem. The birth of the child remains as a symbol of hope. In a final stanza, present in the *TLS* version of the poem, the birth of the child was more explicitly connected with the ending lines of Virgil's fourth eclogue: "We, know, little one you have to start with a cry / But smile soon too, a big one for your mother" (61–62 a). The deletion of these lines makes the allusion implicit. Recalling Virgil's final lines, however, do not disambiguate the ending of Heaney's poem:

> Incipe, parue puer, risu cognoscere matrem
>
> (matri longa decem tulerunt fastidia menses)
>
> incipe, parue puer: qui non risere parenti,
>
> nec deus hunc mensa, dea nec dignata cubili est.

13 My translation. The numbering (50:9) is that of the Vulgate.

> Come now, sweet boy, with smiling greet your mother
>
> (She carried you ten long and tedious months)
>
> Come now, sweet boy: who smiles not on a parent,
>
> Graces no god's carouse nor goddess' bed. (Verg. *Ecl.* IV.60–63)

The final line is reminiscent of descriptions of Hercules (Clausen 1994, 145) and points to the heroic nature of the child. Virgil's child must smile at his mother in gratitude for carrying him through a long pregnancy in order to receive the grace of the gods.[14] Heaney's poem, like Ó Raifteirí's, ends with the promise of hope. The newborn child, the new millennium, the eclipse of 1999, peace treaties and ceasefires, and other signs of a new beginning come together in a state of flux. Virgil's poem commemorating the peace at Brundisium gave way to civil wars, which reminds us that peace is uncertain. Embedded in the ideal of the pastoral is the reality of constant change, growth and decay. The renewed cycle of ages present in Virgil's fourth eclogue translates into changes in life and poetry. Its calls to us re-examine the past, but also to look towards the future. "Bann Valley Eclogue" is a political and social poem, in that it is embedded in social and political realities, but it is not a partisan poem. It draws on these realities, but pulls them into a poetic landscape rooted in the pastoral tradition and Heaney's early poetry. Its technique is rooted in Virgil, but it also partially indebted to the allegorical and parabolic styles that poets, such as Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz in their own pastoral poetry, used to defy communist censors. Consider a comment Heaney wrote regarding North Irish poetry:

> The only reliable release for the poet was the appeasement of the achieved poem. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion, when the timeless formal pleasure comes to its fullness and exhaustion, in those moments of self-justification and self-obliteration the poet makes contact with the plane of consciousness where he is at once intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments. It is this deeper psychological compulsion which lies behind the typical concern of Northern Irish poets with style, with formal finish, with linguistic relish and play.
>
> (Heaney 1985, 7)

"Bann Valley Eclogue," true to the form of the Virgilian pastoral eclogue, ends on a moment of "buoyant completion." But it also possesses a psychological depth and underneath its "formal finish" and linguistic game-play is a serious meditation on peace, hope and renewal. The TLS version concludes with one more stanza that was deleted in *Electric Light*:

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14 Some contrary interpretations argue that line 62 should read, "Recognize the mother by *her* smile" (Postgate 1902, 36) (Williams 1976, 121).

We know, little one, you have a start with a cry

But smile soon too, a big one for your mother.

Unsmiling life has had it in for people

For far too long. But now you have it in you

Not to be wrong-footed but to first-foot us

And, muse of my valley, give us a song worth singing. (61–66 a)

In an age of global literature we have greater to access to more poetry, in quantity and variety than ever before. Close reading is ancillary to reading world literature as it allows the reader to pierce the veils translation and cultural and historical differences. Without it, comes the risk of superficial reading and consequent indifference to the richness of poetic traditions. Songs worth singing are worth close reading.

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