

SEAMUS HEANEY'S MANUAL IMPRESSIONS

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Arts  
in English

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Washington, DC  
April 26, 2010

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of Gene and Frances Dunleavy  
whose farm at Heart Mountain has always been my favorite place.

*Now a good life could be to cross a field  
And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe  
Of ploughs.*

Seamus Heaney  
*Glanmore Sonnet I*

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## Introduction

*Séamus, make me a side-arm to take on the earth*

*A suitable tool for digging and grubbing the ground.*

*Lightsome and pleasant to lean on or cut with or lift,*

*Tastily finished and trim and right for the hand.*

This detailed order begins “Poet to Blacksmith” a poem in Seamus Heaney’s most recently published collection, *District and Circle* (27). While he first conjures images of the mighty swords and deeds of the heroes of old the “side-arm” is soon recast as a tool—presumably a spade of some kind—intended for far more mundane tasks. In the alliteration of the second line, the unpretentious exertion of “tak[ing] on the earth” through cultivation, not conquest, comes to life. Rather than settling too comfortably into the rural scene for which Heaney is well-known, however, the last two lines persist in stipulating that the implement surpass any notion of bare functionality we might associate with the farm. Though not intended for extraordinary feats, the speaker nevertheless expects that the utmost care will be taken in crafting an object whose form harmonizes with both its intended use and future owner.

The final two stanzas continue to emphasize both these high expectations and the close relationship that exists between a tool, the blacksmith who forges it, and the worker who will wield it:

No trace of the hammer to show on the sheen of the blade

The thing to have purchase and spring and be fit for the strain,

The shaft to be socketed in dead true and dead straight,

And I'll work with the gang till I drop and never complain.

The plate and the edge of it not to be wrinkly or crooked—

I see it well shaped from the anvil and sharp from the file;

The grain of the wood and the line of shaft nicely fitted,

And best thing of all, the ring of it, sweet as a bell.

An explanatory subtitle reinforces the personal nature of the request, identifying by name both the speaker and the addressee: “Eoghan Rua Ó’Súilleabháin’s (1748-84) instructions to Séamus MacGearailt.” As the poem suggests, Heaney’s eighteenth-century predecessor, Ó’Súilleabháin, most well-known for his staunchly Jacobite *aisling* poetry, also spent time working as a *spailpín*, or itinerant worker (Harrison n.p.). Although identified as a “translation” from Ó’Súilleabháin’s Irish and, thus, not an entirely original work, “Poet to Blacksmith” reverberates with themes which might well be the translator’s own. Hence, it serves as an excellent and economical introduction to Seamus Heaney’s longstanding preoccupation with manual labor and, more particularly, to what has aptly been described as his “love of the well defined, useful well crafted object” (Hacker n.p.)

Characteristic of Heaney’s poetry, for example, is the speaker’s undeniable delight in the skill of the craftsman. In asking that the “dead straight” and “dead true” tool he imagines be made material, the poet reveals his faith in the blacksmith’s ability to at least approximate perfection. The poet also draws attention to the many small, precise actions inherent to the process of making the implement: it must be “finished,” and

“socketed,” “shaped” and “fitted.” Any overt “traces” of having been beaten between anvil and hammer must be subsumed by the shiny smoothness of the blade. The master craftsman works with, not against, the natural properties of his materials, allowing the “grain of the wood” to influence his shaping of the shaft. Eager expectation of the sensual pleasures of using the tool contrasts with a jarring reminder that labor anticipated might be, if we take seriously the speaker’s promise to work “till I drop,” literally backbreaking. In the final line, we see the value of the item again adjusted when the sound or “ring of it,” rather than usefulness in “digging and grubbing,” unexpectedly becomes “the best thing of all.”

Underlying all of the connections here which can be made to other Heaney poems, of course, is a fundamental choice to focus at length on a lowly farm implement. It is this characteristic focus which I seek to explore now in more detail. On the whole, Heaney criticism, whether of the academic or more mainstream variety, has been eager to leap from Heaney’s images of manual labor to the metaphorical application of the images, drawing nice comparisons between that labor and the creative process of writing a poem. A case in point is Marilyn Hacker’s review of *District and Circle* in which she connects “Poet and Blacksmith” back to the early poem, “Digging,” that seemingly ubiquitous darling of both critics and anthologists, wherein the speaker optimistically proposes to “dig” with a pen rather than with the spade of his forefathers. She detects in “Poet to Blacksmith” a “glint of self-mockery not present in the earnest early declaration.” Attempting to articulate a subtle difference in Heaney’s reconsideration of the metaphor, Hacker continues: “Here the forging of the tool is the act of writing poetry

itself, rather than the spade made equivalent to the pen” (Hacker n.p.). Certainly the sophistication of the more mature “Poet to Blacksmith” surpasses that of “Digging.” In discerning an implied equivalency of actions rather than a more heavy-handed equation of objects, however, Hacker herself still somewhat clumsily collapses what David Lloyd calls “the irreducible difference between physical and cultural labour” (95). Even if the dual professions of the speaker tempts us to focus on how easily the language of forging might be applied to the writing of poetry, the poem’s insistent sensuality should also bar us from forgetting that the final “ring,” however else it might resonate, is also the sound of real steel.

I propose, then, that readers would do well to pause over the very “physicality” of Heaney’s presentation of manual labor, noting carefully the particulars of each “well defined, useful well crafted object.” This approach does deny that the metaphors connect writing poetry to working the land, but rather considers carefully the ways in which Heaney presents the activities, persons and objects of manual labor as unique. Thus, I will explore why and how he so often anchors his reflections on the work and the people who perform it in the material objects associated with that work. Refraining for awhile from supposing that Heaney loves and translates an old poem about the forging of a spade only because it reminds him of his own expertise will, I posit, allow for better understanding of the crafts of both the poet and the “blacksmith,” an understanding which can ennoble both professions as it enriches our reading of Heaney’s poetry.

## Chapter One: “Buried in Obscurity”: Manual Labor’s Need for a Poet

In a typically aphoristic observation, Samuel Johnson once acknowledged that farmers are an underappreciated bunch:

If we estimate dignity by immediate usefulness, agriculture is undoubtedly the first and noblest science; yet we see the plow driven, the clod broken, the manure spread, the seed scattered, and the harvest reaped by men whom those that feed upon their industry will never be persuaded to admit into the same rank with heroes, or with sages; and who, after all must be content to fill up the lowest class of the commonwealth, to form the base of the pyramid of subordination, and lie buried in obscurity themselves, while they support all that is splendid, conspicuous, or exalted. (Johnson 229)

Dr. Johnson was not particularly troubled by this state of affairs, however, as he went on to justify the seeming neglect by positing a scale in which the dignity of a job is determined not by its “immediate usefulness” but by the quality of the thought necessary for its performance. Thus, farming and other forms of manual labor are “not of equal esteem” with other “tasks that exercise the intellectual powers, and require the active vigour of imagination, or the gradual and laborious investigations of reason” (229-230).

According to Matthew B. Crawford, the general public perception has been very little altered during two hundred fifty or so intervening years. Discussing his 2009 book *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, Crawford maintains that “People want to be ‘knowledge workers’ with college degrees who sit in cubicles,

looking down on the tradesmen who make the undergirdings of their lives possible.” Like Johnson, Crawford points out a failure on the part of those we now speak of as “white collar” to appreciate their “blue collar” counterparts who comprise the foundation of society. Unlike Johnson, however, Crawford actively attempts to burnish the image of manual labor, arguing, "There's this false dichotomy out there between intellectual work and manual work” (Neely 1). Crawford, who earned a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Chicago and spent a number of years as a so-called “knowledge worker” before opening a motorcycle repair shop, emphasizes the mental challenges involved in most manual trades (5-6). He touts the formidable problem-solving skills of the tradesman, praises the independence that comes with being self-employed, and draws attention to the potential for earning a salary at least as lucrative as those of many “white collar” jobs (20-21). At the most fundamental level, however, the book proclaims that manual labor is “meaningful because it is genuinely useful” (6). Challenging the longstanding American ideal that promotes a college degree leading to a white collar job as the best and most fulfilling path in life, Crawford offers an alternative with a claim for working with one’s hands as a highly satisfying way to earn a living, or, perhaps more accurately, to live a life. The book spent time last year on the *New York Times*’ bestseller list (Neely 1), suggesting that at least a few in the general public find his arguments about work to be intriguing, and, quite likely, somewhat novel.

I bring up Johnson and Crawford because they serve as helpful bookends for modernity’s perception of manual labor. In another discussion of Heaney’s early poem, “Follower,” John Lucas notes, “the difference between pen and spade is the difference

between mental and manual labour. In England this now seems ‘natural’. They began to be sharply defined forms at the end of the eighteenth century and then to make for recognizable and often tragic kinds of separations in the nineteenth” (123). One could, of course, cite a great number of writers who demonstrate ideas similar to Johnson, stretching back to classical works like Plato’s *Republic*, which designates farmers and other tradesmen as the supporters of heroic soldiers with silver souls and sage philosophers with gold ones (Jowett n.p.). Crawford has had his precursors as well, thinkers who have, for one reason or another, taken time to extol the virtues associated with physical work. Karl Marx, for one, comes to mind; so do certain strands of pastoral poetry, a subject that I will briefly address in my second chapter. Nevertheless, because differences between mental and intellectual labor do seem to have become polarized in the eighteenth-century,<sup>1</sup> and because the bias toward the latter clearly still prevails today, in the United States as well as England, Johnson and Crawford provide useful context for the examination of a contemporary poet’s treatment of manual labor.

As I will demonstrate in the following discussion, Heaney is well-aware of the widespread failure to acknowledge the unglamorous backbreaking work necessary to society. He is reluctant, like Johnson, to emphasize the intellectual aspects of physical work, but, like Crawford, aims to draw attention to the many admirable features of manual labor. Falling as he does somewhere between the two, Heaney becomes a fascinating participant in a contemporary but also long-running discussion about the dignity of working with one’s hands.

I hope to provide a sense of the trajectory of Heaney's treatment of manual labor as it emerges over the course of his twelve major collections, from his first, *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966, to 2006's *District and Circle*. I do not, however, intend to consider poems in a strictly chronological order; rather, I will sometimes juxtapose early poems with late ones and at other times note when two poems considered side-by-side derive from roughly the same point in Heaney's career. Neither do I intend to focus primarily on the differences among the various kinds of labor which appear in his poetry. Because the majority of his manual laborers work on a farm, my discussion accordingly tends toward a consideration of agricultural labor, but a few other trades will appear as well. My interest throughout lies in uncovering the common traits of physical work which Heaney identifies and admires.

In his 1995 Nobel Lecture, "Crediting Poetry," Heaney takes time to justify his focus during the speech on Irish stories, saying, "I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing—as we have learned to say—the local" (*Opened Ground* 425). I share to some degree his wariness of extrapolating too readily from particular instances to a general account. Heaney in the lecture also maintains, however, that a story's "trustworthiness and its travel-worthiness have to do with its local setting" (*OG* 424). He elsewhere points to the affinity that one blacksmith has for another, a solidarity or a recognition of similarity that transcends time and place: "Somehow, any one forge is all the forges" (O'Driscoll 91). Thus, by piecing together a selection of closely analyzed poems, I seek to uncover the particular view of a poet famous for focusing on the

particular rural scene of his own childhood. I also hope, however, that this view will usefully contribute to a wider discussion about the merits of manual labor.

The poetry, prose, and numerous interviews of Heaney's long career soon reveal that he understands the lack of recognition for manual labor as far from accidental. Rather, he characterizes both the workers and the work as inherently resistant to seeking outside attention. Many of Heaney's particular laborers arise out of the rural County Derry countryside where he was born in 1939. This scene in Northern Ireland, as he relates in the Nobel lecture, was not one where over-enthusiastic praise of anything was likely to flourish. "No place in the world prides itself more on its vigilance and realism," Heaney explains, "no place considers itself more qualified to censure any flourish of rhetoric or extravagance of aspiration" (*OG* 418). It was not a scene, then, for boasting about one's own accomplishments; likewise, it was not a place to aspire to a poetic language which, even at its most austere, cannot but aspire to outstrip workaday prose.

A great many of Heaney's workers are indeed notable for their reticence and their suspicion of rhetorical excess. The figure of his mother, for example, always appears competently but quietly completing each task. In the third sonnet of "Clearances," an elegiac sequence written after her death, the speaker recalls an occasion in his childhood when he stayed home with his mother and together they peeled potatoes in companionable silence (*The Haw Lantern* 27). In the absence of words, the sounds attendant to the activity itself draws attention to the other person: "Little pleasant splashes / From each other's work would bring us to our senses." In this memory, the communication and connection seems satisfactory to the speaker, as smooth motions

become a shared language in his account of “our fluent dipping knives.” Revealing the rarity of the moment, however, the wistful description of mother and son of the final line—“Never closer the whole rest of our lives”—foreshadows a subsequent rift between the two.

The next section of “Clearances” abruptly reveals that the break occurs as soon as they attempt to replace silent, communal work with other means of communication:

Fear of affectation made her affect  
Inadequacy whenever it came to  
Pronouncing words ‘beyond her’. *Bertold Brek*.  
She’d manage something hampered and askew  
Every time, as if she might betray  
The hampered and inadequate by too  
Well-adjusted a vocabulary.

Presumably recounting an event taking place sometime after that closeness has diminished, the speaker vents some frustration over his mother’s refusal to appear pretentious or over-educated in her conversation. He even implies that she on some level holds her son’s education against him: “With more challenge than pride, she’d tell me, ‘You / Know all them things.’”<sup>2</sup> In what is described ironically as “a genuinely well- / Adjusted adequate betrayal of what I knew better,” the son makes certain that he “decently,” returns to a more colloquial form of speech around his mother. While this accommodation might preserve the semblance of family harmony, the “adjustment” also signals growing disagreement over the proper uses of language. The uneasy dynamic

culminates in the paradox of the concluding phrase in which the two characters are both “allied and at bay” (*HL* 28).

If removed from the company of other sonnets in “Clearances” or from the context of Heaney’s work as a whole, one could read the tone as one of bitterness over a lack of authenticity on the part of the mother. Then again, her culpability is mitigated somewhat as we cannot tell whether she herself fully recognizes the hypocrisy in her actions; that disdain for affection easily morphs into another form of the same vice is a retrospective insight of a mature speaker. Furthermore, the tense undercurrent should not be attributed to family dynamics alone; this frustration over the phenomena of apparently deliberate ineloquence is far from particular to his relationship to his mother. Rather, direct conversations between the personas resembling Heaney and those who continue in the manual trades frequently sound strained; they are tinged by discrepancies in linguistic register or, more fundamentally, in the interests or convictions of the speakers.

While fully explicating Heaney’s treatment of his worker’s interior lives constitutes a fascinating task for another essay, our present discussion requires that we at least note the poet’s tendency to qualify his forays into the minds of his manual laborers. More often than not, Heaney takes pains to place his personas at some distance from the work and workers. Helen Vendler, commenting on the early poem “At Potato Digging,” (and, by extension, “Follower” and “Thatcher”) asserts,

Heaney is not uncritical of rural life. Potato diggers are followed as they pass by on a headland, gathering the crop as they go...and the characterization of the potato-diggers’ movement as a pre-ordained

‘processional’ liturgy, coupled with the critique of its ‘mindless’ recurrence, makes that poem too an elegiac one, representing a life which the poet does not want to follow, could not follow, but none the less recognizes as forever a part of his inner landscape.” (*Seamus Heaney* 21)

Vendler here touches upon a concern that remains salient, throughout its various incarnations, in all Heaney’s collections: the poetry often references the ostensible mindlessness of the work associated with the kind of life; he has also used the term “unreflective” (O’Driscoll 173) to describe it.

Vendler’s understated assessment of Heaney’s attitude as “not uncritical,” gracefully allowing for the possibility of nuance, deserves to be developed. In the first place, the poet refrains from definitively charging his workers with a universal lack of reflection on their own labors. In “The Forge,” another well-known early poem, the blacksmith takes a break from his labor to remember “a clatter / of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows.” The nostalgic “grunt” which follows is thus imbued with a hint of nostalgic realization that his is a dying art (*Door into the Dark* 19). We also observe the wielder of “The Pitchfork” considering the symbolic possibilities of his instrument (*OG* 20).

Similarly, “The Wife’s Tale” from *Wintering Out* (1972) voices the thoughts of a farmer’s spouse as she brings a meal to her husband and his fellow harvesters. It soon becomes apparent that the husband and wife do not comprehend the finer points of one another’s work: although grateful for her effort, he gently teases her for insisting upon the civilizing influence of a tablecloth during a meal in the open air; she, in turn, complies

with his request to “inspect” the grain but admits that she does not “know what to look for.” Significantly, her lack of direct knowledge and distance from the labor results in an imaginative rather than a literal interpretation: a thresher is given “jaws,” grain is likened to “shot,” and pitchforks are “stuck at angles in the ground / as javelins might mark lost battlefields.” Her husband, by contrast, contentedly focuses on the tangible results of the day’s work, declaring, “it’s good clean seed” and “there’s a good yield, / isn’t there?... / Enough for crushing and sowing both” (*Opened Ground* 25-26). A practical man, he looks forward to the stock he will be able to feed over the winter and toward next year’s crop; one suspects, however, that he might consign his wife’s unvoiced, more fanciful appraisal to the same category as her tablecloth. Thus, the speaker occupies a position as both insider and outsider, unable to enter fully into the harvesters’ understanding of what again appears to be a somewhat cult-like, ritualized activity.

By 1996, when he contemplates the figure of the “journeyman tailor” in *The Spirit Level*’s “At Banagher,” Heaney has further severed the relationship between outside persona and worker. The tailor, one of Heaney’s ancestors, passively repudiates all attempts at familiarity which might be gained through discourse in “keeping his counsel always, giving none.” Struggling for a way in, the next trio of adjectives attempts to grasp the craftsman’s character by listing what he is not rather than what he is. If he is “unopen” and lacks candor, he is also “unmendacious,” suggesting that his silence is neither selfish nor calculated. The slippery emphasis of “unilluminated” could attach to the tailor, suggesting a lack of inner enlightenment; the deficiency could also be attributed, however, to a poet who feels incapable of casting any clarifying light on his subject. This

uncertainty marks the entire poem as the tailor falls under the poet's "scrutiny in spite of years/ Of being inscrutable" (*SL 78*).

The "self-absenting" tailor, his expert attention to his sewing notwithstanding, clearly does not grant his full attention to the job at hand, but the nature of his cogitations remains a mystery. His interlocutor consequently finishes the poem with questions he knows will remain unanswered:

Does he ever question what it all amounts to  
Or ever will? Or care where he lays his head?  
My Lord Buddha of Banagher, the way  
Is opener for your being in it. (*SL 79*)

Given that the tailor elicits so much language of negation, the comparison to Buddha seems an apt one and the reverent apostrophe indicates respect for the "power" his meditative reserve. While the "way" may be more open to the tailor's descendent, however, there is no indication that he necessarily wishes to embark upon it himself. On the literal level, of course, it is true that years of toil on the part of Heaney's "antecedent[s]" in many ways laid the groundwork which finally allows a Catholic farm boy from Northern Ireland to choose an alternative occupation. In his sense of indebtedness, then, the speaker necessarily follows in the tailor's footsteps. Yet, because the tailor either cannot or refuses to share whatever wisdom he has acquired during his years as a wandering worker, following his mute way requires an act of faith that the poet is unwilling or unable to make.

Thus, Heaney's reservations about claiming to know the inner workings of manual laborers' minds results from his lack of access to their thoughts. While on occasion he might adopt the point of view of a tired farmwife ("Mother," *DD* 29) or make a foray into the thoughts of his brother, Hugh, the farmer ("Keeping Going," *SL* 13), Heaney largely avoids such moves. Although he has lived for many years alongside them, he must admit that the thoughts of the workers in his local scene—even those who are also members of his own family—remain for him somewhat enigmatic. Because the people who actually perform physical work so seldom reveal what occupies their thoughts as they plug away with the plough, the churn, or the needle, it is unsurprising that Heaney does not choose to underscore, as Crawford does, the ingenuity or intellectual curiosity that attends their labor. That is not to say that Heaney would necessarily disagree with Crawford, but rather to point out that he is less willing to elide the separation between doing physical work and writing poetry about physical work.

To return, finally, to "Clearances III," I believe that the tone is best read as one of resigned perplexity. Heaney, whether by temperament, education, or a combination of both, cannot fully understand why or how people like his mother so distrust talk about the importance of what they are doing. Observing over and over again this characteristic reserve, we realize already how unlikely is the possibility of finding in Heaney's poetry a laborer willing to record any permanent laudatory account of his profession. In order to have a chance of being immortalized in the same way as the heroes and sages, then, someone willing to traverse the boundaries of this cultural silence must take up the cause.

Heaney's frustration with or confusion over the culture from which he derives should not, however, obscure his ceaseless and often joyful admiration for it. I will take up some specific features of this admiration in my third chapter. For now, however, it is most pertinent that his oft-noted anxiety over his decision to forego a life of "digging" derives in large part from a realization that the work of a poet results in productions far less tangible than the no-nonsense solidity of the fruits of manual labor.

In other words, the importance of talk greatly diminishes when one can expect to the work to "speak" on one's behalf. We can hear direct echoes of the early poems like "Follower" and "Digging" in Crawford's astute summary of this inverse relationship between the need for discourse and the concreteness of the work:

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on. Boasting is what a boy does, because he has no real effect in the world. But the tradesman must reckon with the infallible judgment of reality, where one's failures or shortcomings cannot be interpreted away. (15)

In many ways, these manifestations stand as a silent rebuke to poets, a rebuke that they have long felt impelled to counter. Heaney reiterates an age-old rebuttal when he argues, "The world is different after it has been read by a Shakespeare or an Emily Dickinson or a Samuel Beckett because it has been augmented by their reading of it" (*The Redress of*

*Poetry* 159). Heaney, like his fellow apologists for poetry, employs words like “augmented” to suggest that the poets’ labors contribute something constructive to the world. At the same time, however, he can appreciate the lens of (to use Johnson’s words) “immediate usefulness” through which poetry might indeed appear to be only another “boast” or “chattering interpretation” when observed alongside the concrete shelter provided by a building or the life-giving abundance of a harvested crop.

An example of this concrete manifestation occurs in “Squarings xxxiii” when the speaker, forcing himself to “Be literal a moment,” returns from his father’s funeral to an emptied house:

The house he had planned  
‘Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know’,  
A paradigm of rigour and correction,  
  
Rebuke to fanciness and shrine to limit,  
Stood firmer than ever for its own idea  
  
Like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body. (*OG* 352)

This image concludes a sonnet that catalogs the changes that “seem” to wash over a familiar scene after the death of a loved one: “the morning tiles were harder, windows colder, / the raindrops on the pane more scourged, the grass / Barer to the sky, more wind-harrowed.” The acutely-felt meditation on absence in the poem’s first half crystallizes in the brilliant concluding simile where flesh and blood literally are missing from the x-ray image. The house, likewise, paints an incomplete picture of Heaney’s

father. At the same time, however, the comparison invokes the X-rays revelatory nature. The building brings into focus the framework of belief that informed everything his father did, functioning as economical symbol from which can be derived (from the father's point of view, at least, which we assume to be voiced in the poem's quotation) all that is really essential to his character. Hence, even an emptied, hardened house offers some consolation, albeit a terribly insufficient one, to a grieving son. In addition to practicality the capacity to signify the values a man embodied during his lifetime, the house in a way trumps the wholly immaterial insight offered by a poem.

Again, Crawford extends helpful commentary on the solace found in concrete productions, this time in a quote from Hannah Ardent: "The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors" (qtd. in Crawford 16). While Heaney cannot comply fully with his initial self-injunction to "be literal," the sonnet does anchor itself in the reality and durability of the one thing that stands "firmer than ever."

Manual activity, however, does not always result in a production as permanent as a house, and herein, I think, lies the impetus for Heaney's persistent focus on the particulars of physical work. He does not share, in other words, the prevailing confidence on the part of the workers that their work in itself says enough. Early on, the shadow of futility attendant to "Blackberry-picking" stains a poem of the same name. After the eager anticipation of watching the berries ripen, the heavenly taste of "that first one," and many "pricks" and "scratch[es]", the intrepid berry-pickers empty their cans

into a tub in the byre only to discover that a “rat-grey fungus” quickly infects their “cache.” Recalling a child-like distress over the calamity, the speaker ruefully concludes, “It wasn’t fair / That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot. / Each year, I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” (*Death of a Naturalist* 20). Anticipation of this injustice—this disparity between the hope, effort, and care with which the berries are gathered and the inevitable uselessness to which they are reduced—does not much aid in acceptance of that reality.

While this may be an extreme case due to the extremely perishable nature of berries, similar problems arise in the search for lasting, tangible evidence that other kinds of manual labor have been performed. Consider again the backdrop of “The Wife’s Tale.” The furrows of plowed fields (and the springtime hours spent plowing) soon become at least partially obscured by growing grain. Harvest-time may offer, for a moment, (and barring any unforeseen natural disasters such as fire or mold), bags of grain as a reward for all the cultivation and reaping of the previous months; the bounty soon diffuses, however, as that grain is fed to animals or planted again in newly turned-up fields. Those productions which are the concrete goals of manual labor often are destined to disappear precisely *because* of their utility. Although all this might seem to make an obvious point, namely, that agricultural work is highly cyclical in nature, Heaney it finds one of those old truths worth stopping to contemplate in more detail.

In “The Seed Cutters,” one of two dedicatory poems in *North* (1975), Heaney begins by addressing the Dutch artist Brueghel, asking whether the speaker’s reading of the artist’s paintings is a “true” one. Although the speaker first claims that the workers in

the piece “seem hundreds of years away,” he has little trouble navigating that distance, augmenting the scene with details born of his own firsthand knowledge of another common farm activity. Naming the workers as “seed-cutters,” he claims to know what he cannot see: “the tuck and frill / of the leaf-sprout...on the seed potatoes / Buried under that straw.” Proceeding with more subtle detail, he animates the workers by offering tactile information about their unhurried, repetitive task: as the sharp knife splits each potato, it “falls apart / in the palm of the hand: a milky gleam / and at the centre, a dark watermark.” One suspects that the workers “have time to kill” because the work is a timeless activity which unites the individual instance of it to other workers in other times and places. The speaker ends by wishing, however, not for perpetual motion but for an image of animation which has been suspended: “Oh, calendar customs! Under the broom / Yellowing over them, compose the frieze / With all of us there, our anonymities” (*OG* 94). Acutely aware of the ongoing process of “yellowing,” time’s inevitable effect, the speaker turns to art as a way of fixing and recording the obscure, season-bound motions of farm-workers.

Obscurity attaches for a number of reasons even to physical work which does manage to leave a semi-permanent, visible mark on the world. It is quite reasonable to expect that most people, on passing by, could derive from something as noticeable as a house a general, and probably not inaccurate, impression of the man who designed it. We can ask how many people would stop to consider the thousands of tiny actions that went in to constructing it. How many would be astounded by the number of nails which had to be pounded or would appreciate all the work done during years spent saving money up to

build up? How many would imagine the myriad of stitches sewn by an itinerant tailor whose hard life prepared a way for subsequent generations? If we subscribe to Heaney's and Crawford's points of view, the implied answers here are fairly clear: "very few, even fewer, and hardly anyone." Perhaps, then, Johnson was wrong in his assertion that "we see the plow driven, the clod broken, the manure spread, the seed scattered, and the harvest reaped" as the transience of those repeated actions hardly commands attention.

In "Clearances v," which directly follows the uneasy linguistic truce between mother and son, we observe one of Heaney's attempts at countering our frequent oversight of the intricacies involved in everyday activities. Apart from the "dried-out undulating thwack" of the line-dried bed linens, silence again envelops the mother and son engaged in the act of folding:

So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand  
For a split second as if nothing had happened  
For nothing had that had not always happened  
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,  
Coming close again by holding back  
In moves where I was X and she was O  
Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.  
(OG 29)

This is, I think, the most beautiful sonnet of the sequence because it succeeds so well in depicting both the closeness and the reserve of the relationship. "Moves" which could appear stylized should in fact convince anyone who has ever joined another person in

folding sheets of their verisimilitude. The speaker's disappointment over the elusiveness of that which "had always happened" bespeaks an unspoken knowledge that the seeming "nothing" turned out to be something after all, slippery, difficult to describe though it may be. The sad reality that the familiar something will never again take place lends much poignancy to the elegy.

I would like to draw attention to the final description of the mother and son in which both are "inscribed in sheets." Here, as in "Squarings xxxiii," Heaney seeks to anchor the poem in a material object. Similar to the speaker in "the Seed-Cutters," Heaney again wishes to preserve a series of deliberate moves involved in the performance of an unexceptional chore. Instead of calling for a painting to perform this preservation, however, he chooses to fix the past motion and the interaction of two people in the very sheets they once folded. Rather than simply ending with the inscribed motion of both figures, Heaney furthers the meaning of those sheets by summoning a series of even earlier work associated with them. They are homemade, sewn at one point by his mother out of flour sacks that themselves needed to be "ripped-out" and converted to a use other than their original one. In six simple words Heaney manages to tell us a great deal about the industry and the (probably) enforced frugality of a woman belonging to an earlier, war-battered, less prosperous generation. The son's loving but unassuming tribute seems as if it might even meet with the quiet approval of the person it seeks to honor.

Sheets fall into the category of those productions of manual labor that are far less obvious than a house. Even if we do stop to consider the lowly bed sheet, those who did

not see it being made likely lack the knowledge or the motivation to fully unpack all the labor that has contributed to the current pastiche creation. Whether because we do not feel the need to stop and take notice, or because we do not know what to notice, or because we do not understand the meaning of what we have in fact noticed, we likely are surprised by the insight Heaney has provided. Having considered the ephemeral nature of the handiwork's history, we arrive with Heaney (and Crawford) at a rather surprising conclusion: manual labor, the most obviously practical and constructive use of man's time, needs an apologist who can remind us of all instances in which it has augmented the world in some meaningful way. Heaney responds to this need by uncovering in material objects the faint traces of work—and the love that takes the form of work—which might otherwise remain “buried in obscurity.”

The situation does not have to be a funereal one for Heaney to employ this technique; rather, he does so in many and varied ways throughout his career. I am, in fact, a little afraid I may have spent too much time talking about a mourning Heaney, a Heaney bothered by his inability to understand the minds of the workers, disturbed by the ugly transience of rotting berries, and estranged from the world of his childhood as I set out to examine his awareness of manual labor's need of a poet. I certainly would not wish to stop there, for to do so might paint an unfair portrait of a Heaney as a broody, melancholic poet.

I do hope, however, that we can keep these various pressures in mind as we examine the ways in which Heaney navigates through and pushes against them in order to display the vitality and joy present in barely noticeable or invisible work and workers. In

the two chapters that follow, I will endeavor to show how Heaney's persistent focus on the traces of work left in material objects—particularly tools—allows him to negotiate several concerns readily apparent to a poet who comes to his profession after spending his early years on a farm in Northern Ireland. Charting a course alternative to Crawford's, Heaney's approach resists the urge to confound what he sees as real differences between physical and intellectual labor, preserving the space necessary for both of praise of those attributes which mark his manual laborers as unique and for the recognition that a poet plays an essential role in celebrating those qualities. He also subtly argues his case that manual labor, even the archaic kind, is an activity worth ennobling by considerable expenditure of a poet's creative gift. Finally, Heaney's sensitivity to faint or even invisible "manual impressions" allows him to sincerely praise physical work while maintaining a respectful understanding of the innately unpretentious qualities of that human activity.

## Chapter Two: “What Guarantees Things Keeping”: Preservation, Excavation, Translation

If, in the literary world, there is one scene more immediately synonymous with Seamus Heaney than “the Ulster farm,” I think it surely must be “the bog.” Upon the publication of *North* in 1975, the arresting bog poems which made up the volume’s first half solidified his hold on the territory and immediately generated intense critical debate.<sup>3</sup> Laying aside the questions of politics and even ethics that frequently attend discussions of the bog poems, I submit that Heaney’s interest in bogs is also indicative of his longstanding admiration of the ability to preserve people and objects past their natural duration.

*North* was preceded, for example, by an earlier appreciation, in “Relic of Memory” of “the lough waters” capacity to “petrify wood” and to “incarcerate ghosts / of sap and season.” Similarly, the bog is conceived of as an

earth pantry, bone-vault,

sun-bank, embalmer

of votive goods

and sabred fugitives.

.....

Sword-swallower,

Casket, midden, floe of history. (*DD* 37)

In this list, the speaker configures and reconfigures the bog with a bewildering rapidity: it can perform the seemingly impossible, like the “sword-swallower,” capturing rays from the sun, yet it executes as well the more common duty of the “embalmer,” laying out the

dead; it is a place of the utmost security (a “bank” and “vault”) for the exotic (“votive goods and sabred fugitives”) but it is also a common household room (“pantry”) and even a catch-all refuse heap (“midden”). This fascination with preservation, in both its mundane and more extraordinary forms, intersects with Heaney’s own attempts to “fix” physical work and workers, extending their efforts past the immediate and, often, beyond their lifetime.

The middle section of Heaney’s career exhibits a concomitant concentration on archeology, one of the professions evoked by the title of *Field Work*, the collection published four years after *North*. This theme too often materializes in Heaney’s treatment of manual labor as he repeatedly uncovers old implements, both of the ancient and more recent variety. Heaney is also well known for turning his pen toward translation, working with poems such as the Old English epic *Beowulf*, the Irish legend *Sweeney Astray*, and several of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, among others. This facet of his poetic skill, too, can be seen as resonating with Heaney’s efforts to help a general readership understand a world of work which can appear either unintelligible or uninteresting.

Thus, as we continue an investigation into Heaney’s treatment of manual labor, I would like to keep in mind Heaney the preservationist, Heaney the excavator, and Heaney the translator. To that end, I will engage with his understanding of the importance of preservation as I examine his methods of “preserving” work through particular poetic and linguistic forms. I will also consider the related (and sometimes nearly indistinguishable) processes by which he uncovers lost or invisible work and tools.

To conclude this chapter, I will explore some reasons for Heaney's particular aptitude at interpreting the meanings of objects associated with physical work.

Before delving into the particulars of Heaney's methods of poetic preservation, however, it is helpful to frame the discussion in terms of a two criticisms that have been leveled at him over the years so that, in seeking to pin down *how* Heaney preserves certain forms of manual labor through poetry, we can simultaneously construct an understanding of *why* he believes they warrant preservation in the first place. We can inquire, for instance, why Heaney insists upon remembering the disappearing crafts of thatchers and itinerant tailors, why blacksmiths and their tools make appearances in his first and last volumes of poetry, and why, (even more than the bog) the farm continues to be the backdrop of a substantial number of poems throughout his considerable corpus. Does Heaney view his work as valuable primarily for documentary reasons? Is his often elegiac tone only intended to lament the passing of older and better ways? Despite his own choice to pursue a different career, does Heaney yet present the manual labor of the past as somehow better than a more modern or urban career?

James Simmons, who used to "meet [Edna] Longley, [Derek] Mahon and Heaney" in Belfast during the 60s, bluntly contends in "The Trouble with Seamus" that "a man and poet in his life and philosophy Heaney is not geared to progress and reform. He wants to wallow and look back" (48). A second angle of attack has been to accuse Heaney of an overly idealistic presentation of manual labor. Simmons again complains that "[b]y 1960 there should be some irony in romanticizing the labourer's task" (41). Even Elmer Andrews, one of Heaney's well-known critics who generally champions his

work, notes that the early Heaney, “asked us to believe in...the old world, the old farm — an idealized sort of farm life” (2). In Simmons’ case, his problems with Heaney seem to stem mostly from underlying disappointment over Heaney’s treatment of political (50). Nevertheless, the criticisms are still worth considering, especially since I began by proposing that we could look to Heaney for one poet’s perspective on the modern view of blue collar labor. While “wallowing” clearly veers into hyperbole, the point remains that a poet stuck too firmly in the past or interested primarily in some kind of pastoral vision of manual labor might offer limited insight into the present day situation of the worker.

Amid old accusations of a proclivity for an overly romantic view, or, of an intrinsically backward-looking outlook, *The Haw Lantern’s* “Alphabets,” proves an interesting site for examination of Heaney’s attitude toward the changing nature of physical work in Northern Ireland. In this intellectual/artistic biography (a nod to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*, it appears, despite the more detached third person voice that predominates in the poem), something about the “wooden O” of the lecture hall returns the poet-turned-teacher-of-poetry to the scene from his own student days where “a globe in the window tilt[ed] like a coloured O” (*HL* 1-2) Although geographically separated from that earlier place, the subject knows that “Time has bulldozed the school and school window.” The area surrounding the school also attests to the “progress” ushered in by passing years:

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 the frost. (*HL* 2-3)

Here, Heaney's rhetorical figures and the sound of the words dramatically illustrate the contrast between present day and more archaic methods of harvest. The clipped, crisp alliteration of "*Baler's drop bales like printouts*" mimics the machine's efficiency, while the polyptoton provides a visual demonstration of the generation, or "printing" off of uniform units of hay. "Where" signals a turn, however, as the repeated consonants markedly soften and words such as "sheaves" and "lambdas" and "moulded" slow the rhythm. This shift in atmosphere, which continues over the enjambed break to end of the stanza, corresponds well to the protective "patting" and "moulding," movements which sound both gentler and more creative than "dropping." The older productions also appear more differentiated and individualized than the modern-day one: "each potato pit" was finished individually, by hand, as opposed to the collectively produced and considered "bales" which remain unmodified in both a grammatical and literal sense. Furthermore, the switch from simple simile to more complex metaphor, particularly to one employing the letters of the alphabet that comprise the poem's scaffolding, would seem to mark the older form of work as more meaningful than that performed with the baler. "Stoked sheaves made" a recognizable ancient character; potato pits, too, were marked by letters.

We might draw from the feeling of this particular juxtaposition the quick and easy conclusion that Heaney has an aversion to new fangled farm equipment and longs for the return of the lost skills required to harvest in the old manner. Certainly, he makes it easier for us to intuit human agency in the old-fashioned way (who but people could pat

and mould?). He also occludes completely the fact that the baler must, in fact, be operated by a person as well, darkening, as it were, any windows into the machine. Here as elsewhere, Heaney wishes to preserve the memory of years of toil performed in his ancestral homeland.

Because the speaker has learned from long practice to read into productions like sheaves which he saw every day as a child, it is not surprising that he finds deciphering the particular actions which go into constructing a shock of hay easier than deriving meaning from baler's stolid movement. Yet, to deem this acknowledgement—a recognition that one understands certain “alphabets” better than others—equivocal to privileging absolutely the old over the new seems to me a highly unsound move. The entire poem, after all, chronicles the *evolution* of the experience of learning to read and write. A look at the final images should sufficiently convince us that the point of view here is the opposite of one inflexibly bound to past ways:

from his small window

The astronaut sees all that he has sprung from,

The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O

Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare

All agog at the plasterer on his ladder

Skimming our gable and writing our name there

With his towel point, letter by strange letter. (*HL* 3)

Finally claiming the experiences as the speaker's own, the poem's conclusion does circle back on itself, ending where it began, with memory of a time before reading and writing were second nature, when the plaster's skill at inscribing seemed a wondrously exotic one. Significantly, however, this vantage point has been likened to the wonder experienced by none other than an astronaut in a flight, a person who looks through the window of a spacecraft which resulted, like the baler, from advances in technology and engineering. In the climax of the poem, the point where vision is the clearest, the vantage point of space offers for a moment the opportunity to see both the past, or "all he has sprung from," and the possibilities of the future, as encapsulated in a world which still appears like a "buoyant ovum."

Granted, then, "Alphabets" does describe a lost agricultural landscape with a tone more than a little wistful, and the poem's retrospective circularity brings the speaker back yet again to a long-ago laborer meticulously taking the time to personalize his work on the Heaney's house. Nevertheless, the earthbound and nostalgic notes are subtle and balanced against a vision that extends far beyond the local or idyllic. The advent of the baler signals the need to learn a new language of making hay. Heaney's poetry, taken as the whole of which this autobiographical poem is a microcosm, does incline toward the past. (This inclination, I might add, is sure to appear even more exaggerated here, in a discussion about recovering lost or hitherto invisible work.) It is also true that Heaney sometimes, though certainly not always, resists modernization in his *images* of manual labor, favoring the work of an older, rural Northern Ireland over all other.

Neil Corcoran correctly identifies, I think, a temptation toward a rather unproductive nostalgia in *Door in the Dark*'s "The Forge," faulting it for "facile opposites" as it pits the blacksmith's memory of a street filled with hooves to be shod directly against the modern "flashing" traffic (Corcoran 14). Nonetheless, the critic also draws attention toward another early urge, apparent in the same collection that seeks to integrate the old and the new. According to Corcoran, "The Peninsula" "marks a move towards a more realistic reconciliation between the rural and the industrial or mechanical" (23). In that poem, driving through the country in a car does not seem out of place; in fact, the apparently aimless wandering allows for an encounter with the natural world of fields, farmhouses and sea; the speaker's experience has been close enough to allow him to "uncode all landscapes" (*DD* 21). Clarity and poetic inspiration can be achieved in the midst and with the help of modern inventions such as the automobile, or, as we have seen, the spacecraft. Thus, if certain poems lament the loss of what must fall away in order to make way for the new, others acknowledge that the hope traditional craftsmanship and ways of working will "keep" (in the sense of remaining the predominant practice) is, like the boy's wish for the preservation of his blackberries, irrational.

Dealing with the tension that arise from competing urges to idealize the past, capture the reality of the present and look toward the future proves to be highly productive for Heaney. Wes Davis' discussion of Heaney's "Ambivalent Pastoralism" sheds helpful light on the evolution of Heaney's efforts to ground his poetry in real agricultural labor while avoiding the constraints that arise from too strict an adherence to

it. Davis claims the 2001's *Electric Light* represents a departure from Heaney's previous work:

while Heaney has embraced traditional poetic forms, ... he has [before *Electric Light*] kept up a more or less constant thematic resistance to the pastoral as a genre that discloses the merely literary nature of the rural poem's relationship to agricultural life ... At the same time, however, his turn from farming to language ... serves as a reminder that agrarian language is the field on which the facts of rural life and the poetry of the pastoral tradition converge with the enterprise of a contemporary poet like Heaney who maintains a deep interest in rural matters." (100-101)

Davis explains that Heaney's use of the "actual" of rural language, which follows in the footsteps of Patrick Kavanagh, provides him with a way to ground his poetry in the world of real physical labor. This practice contrasts sharply with pastoral poetry's focus on "the literary resonance of its language," a type of stylization which often has the effect of separating the poetry nearly entirely from the realities of the world it claims to evoke.

Davis draws attention to a development in Heaney's view of the dichotomy in "The Loose Box," noting a surprising statement: "the actual soil / almost doesn't matter." The next lines willingly consider what it might mean to let go of a previous reliance on real ground in favor of the landscape of word and thought:

the main thing is an inner restitution, a purchase come by  
By pacing it in words that make you feel  
You've found your feet in what "surefooted" means

And in the ground of your own understanding. (*Electric Light* 15)

This thought experiment, according to Davis, finds a parallel in Heaney's explanations of his admiration for the poet-farmer, Robert Frost. Davis maintains that "it is not Frost's documentary impulse, but his lyrical transfiguring of fact that holds Heaney's attention beyond the initial attraction." (105) This transfiguration requires that in some sense the real ground must be left behind by the poet intent on creating a "dream," or poem, that goes beyond the literal facts of a scene of manual labor.

Davis goes on to detail Heaney's engagement with traditionally pastoral Virgilian eclogues, arguing that, while Heaney's wrestling with the genre sometimes produces uneven poetry in *Electric Light*, the fruit of the struggle there really emerges in Heaney's next collection, *District and Circle* (Davis 114). Given the intensity of Heaney's involvement, Davis' decision to deem the poet's attitude "ambivalent" strikes me as odd as it might misleadingly imply a distant uncertainty about the pastoral. Nonetheless, Davis convincingly demonstrates his main points: Heaney sometimes does delight in the pleasing, freeing "lyrical excess" of the pastoral vision;<sup>4</sup> he also realizes, however, that the pure pastoral is an insufficient response to modern realities where "small farmers are priced out of markets" (Heaney's "Poet to Farmer" qtd. in Davis 112); thus, Heaney continues to correct the pastoral's "misstep[s]" by his frequent reinsertion of the "actual" (Davis 7).

We can connect Davis' discussion back to the one regarding Heaney's reasons for preserving the traces of labor and his attitude toward the past in several ways, recognizing that the struggle that take place openly there has been going on less overtly

for a long time. First, Davis makes it clear that a purely documentary account of manual labor clearly does not satisfy Heaney. It is not enough simply to preserve past actions by rendering accurate depictions of them. While he may admire Frost for his aptitude for doing just that, and while he himself also strives for precision and accuracy, Heaney, like Frost, also chooses to make poems about farm work because he finds the subject ripe for poetic “transfiguration.” Hence, Heaney’s position, which I discussed at length in my first chapter, as an apologist for manual labor is not completely altruistic on his part; rather the relationship is a reciprocal one wherein his longtime faithfulness to the particulars of the manual labor eventually becomes a means of moving beyond a purely actual account of the work, achieving the poet’s aim of a “dream” that is more than the sum of those particulars.

Second, Davis extends our perspective on Heaney’s process of maturation that began to emerge in comparing “The Forge” or “The Peninsula” with the later “Alphabets.” By the time of *Electric Light*, we see that Heaney “has broadened his early focus on the concrete reality of its landscape to include something that might be called the feeling of the place, the sensations of a place that exist in but also beyond its thingly details” (Davis 108) In other words, Heaney eventually reaches a point where he can play with the idea of abandoning the literal fields surrounding his childhood school without too much fear of losing contact with his roots, a shift that should dispel any lingering accusations about “wallowing” in the past.

Third, Davis’ acknowledgment that the details of the “actual” always remain a tether for Heaney corresponds nicely to a view that included both the earthbound and

visionary in the earlier “Alphabets.” In a similar vein, Davis’ readings also identify in the poetry of *Electric Light* notes of nostalgia mixed with the knowledge that bringing back the past is not feasible or even desirable (112), a tension which observed in more nascent forms in preceding collections.

I realize that this talk of “lyrical transfiguration” and the non-literal “sensations of a place” lead easily and naturally back to the metaphorical connection of physical labor to creative or “cultural” labor, a connection from which I have been trying to distance my readings thus far. Although I will eventually return in my third chapter to the links between poets and workers, I want to forestall that conversation a little longer, remaining with those earthy aspects of manual labor which always remain important points of balance for Heaney’s forays into the metaphysical. A more in-depth understanding of the function and versatility of the “thingly details” will, I maintain, enrich the reading of the metaphors. Because of the poet’s imaginative sensitivity to the nuances of unobtrusive or disappearing work, he over and over again reveals that even the productions and tools of manual which appear simple can resist cursory interpretation. Both by presenting unfamiliar objects for inspection and by re-presenting familiar ones in surprising ways, then, Heaney adds intriguing layers which increase the weight of the “actual” in his poetry.<sup>5</sup>

I have already indicated one of the major ways in which Heaney adds complexity to objects when I spoke about the uncovering of past work in his mother’s bed sheets and his father’s house. I will now examine two variations of this technique in poems which helpfully make explicit arguments that usually present themselves more subtly. To begin,

the voice of “The Stone Grinder,” from *The Haw Lantern*, opens with an oblique comparison between his work and that of Penelope, the figure in Homer’s *Odyssey* who fends off her many suitors by unweaving during the night her previous day’s work on a shroud to forestall the day when she had promised to choose a new husband . Pointing out that she at least “worked with some guarantee of a plot,” the speaker indicates that he lacks Penelope’s autonomy and the satisfaction which comes with understanding how one’s daily work contributes to a larger objective: “Me, I ground the same stones for fifty years / And what I undid was never the thing I had done. / I was unrewarded as darkness at a mirror” (*HL* 8). In the description of his labor as “coming full circle” connotations of fulfillment compete with a realization that work well done means arriving again at the point of departure with no apparent progress having been made.

The second and third stanzas struggle against the intrinsically unrewarding nature of his occupation, setting up a binary between “me” and “them,” those who utilized his smooth surfaces to make a permanent mark. He seeks to reconfigure the comparison between the two kinds of work by describing his efforts as *more* lasting—“I prepared my surface to survive what came over it”— than the work of “lining and inking.” The stone grinder also counters the creative potential in the “clean slate” of possibility with which the others get to work by congratulating himself on arriving at a moment, however fleeting, of perfection. Seeking to close the gap between himself and the “cartographers” and “printmakers,” he undermines their professional prestige with the surprising use of “haruspicated” to describe their activities. The diction demonstrates how the passage of time can diminish the perceived importance of a particular career. Although the ancient

practice of divining the future by the examination of a bird's entrails might have appeared an important function to the seers' contemporaries, historians or archeologists of subsequent centuries likely value the work of the "haruspicators" for different reasons; instead of crediting their recorded predictions as prophetic, the interest lies in the insight those records provide into a previous culture. Likewise, he implies, we should not view old maps and pictures with complete credulity; more importantly, their surface markings should not be considered a wholly sufficient record.

In asking a future audience to remember that the value of an activity can be unstable, the stone grinder creates space for the imperatives of the final stanza: "So. To commemorate me. Imagine the faces / stripped off the face of a quarry" (*HL* 8). He wants the reader to halt a natural tendency to begin immediate analysis of visible marks and to consider instead the necessary preparatory work performed by an *invisible* worker whose job required him to leave no mark behind. "The Stone Grinder" thus functions as a didactic poem which strives to teach the reader a new way of considering a cultural object, searching not only for its known creators but also for the undocumented workers who must have contributed to its current state.

Heaney's poetry abounds with evidence of his dedication to reading objects in just this way, but his ways of encouraging the reader to join him usually does not take the form of a direct command or plea. *Seeing Things*' "The Pitchfork" demonstrates how effectively Heaney can compress the process of uncovering lost work, reducing it to a series of adjectives and nouns:

Riveted steel, turned timber, burnish, grain,

Smoothness, straightness, roundness, length and sheen,

Sweat-cured, sharpened, balanced, tested, fitted. (*OG* 320)

The description begins with materials which have been overtly fashioned, “riveted steel” and “turned timber.” The next two nouns and all those which comprise the middle line are far more abstract; piling up these abstractions powerfully reinforces the premise in the first lines of the poem: “Of all the implements, the pitchfork was the one / That came near to an imagined perfection” (*OG* 320). The return to the adjectives in the third line, however, dismisses illusions of a sort of Platonic form of “Pitchfork” by insisting on the human activities which brought the implement to its current form. In flanking the appearance of perfection with a series of past participles invoking manual labor, this poem, like “The Stone Grinder” neatly encourages us to credit the invisible worker(s) who sharpened, turned, riveted, etc.

“The Pitchfork” frequently catches the attention of critics, cropping up in numerous reviews of *Seeing Things*. Sue Standing, for example, writes, “I doubt that a pitchfork has ever before been so lovingly and exactly described” and draws attention to that same descriptive passage at the center of the poem (75). What the heavy asyndeton makes so noticeable here, however, is actually a technique that Heaney employs regularly, both before and after *Seeing Things*. From “Handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw” (“The Thatcher,” *DD* 20) to “Opened ground” (“Glanmore Sonnet I,” *Field Work* 25) to “the cored and threaded elderberry haft,” (“Súgán,” *DC* 30), Heaney has a distinctive habit of using these past participles to describe the objects associated with

physical work. I believe, however, that criticism of Heaney to date has underestimated the power or simply overlooked his numerous “working” past participles.

Vendler’s analysis of the grammatical markers of Heaney’s various poetic styles proves a useful starting place for examination of these trademark descriptors which subtly ensure that the *motions* of manual labor are preserved. She differentiates between his early, heavily adjectival, “Keatsian” poetry which uses the adjectival words and phrases to add tactile texture, giving the poetry a highly “sensuous” feel, and his more mature poetry which employs “deliberate adjectives” to push back against the “denotative in language” (*The Breaking of Style* 52).

Choosing as a model of Heaney’s mature adjectival style *North*’s “The Grauballe Man,” she describes the poem as “a defense of poetry as it resorts...to the adjectival sublime, which incites the imagination to its utmost stretch” (*The Breaking of Style* 53). In her reading of the poem, she details a process similar to the one I outlined in “The Seed Cutters:” in the course of the poem, Heaney “reanimates” the murdered body, in large part through his use of adjectives, before “casting” the “corpse in the bronze of art.” After working to resurrect the body, she argues, the poem ends in a suspension between two states of inertia: the artistic rendering (on the shield that is a symbol of the poem), on the one hand, and the unmoving corpse which grimly testifies to “social atrocity uninterpreted by art,” on the other (57-58). The final image aspires to be “unpoetic” as possible, returning the corpse to the ground with a heavy, horrifying thump: “each hooded victim / slashed and dumped” (58).

The past participles with which we are interested, those which are attached to Heaney's spades, pitchforks, and helmets, both partake in and modify somewhat both of the uses of the adjectival which Vendler describes. The initial urge, however, may well be to categorize them as firmly within the early style alone. Whereas in the first style, Heaney finds the adjectives "as useful for wells and windlasses as for thatch and butterpats" (52) the second, especially in the example Vendler chooses, deals with "a central baffling subject" (59), far more complex and, often, disturbing than a naturally inanimate item. Clearly, the tools and household items belong to the first, more mundane list of themes. In addition, the past participles do lend a great deal of vivid texture to the items under consideration. This, I think, is how critics usually understand them, as adding heft and realism to the objects by their detail. Sue Standing, again commenting on *Seeing Things*, observes that "the tools also seem to create a ballast for the spirit world with the heaviness and earthiness of physical labor" (75), an observation that echoes Davis' distinction between the language of the "actual" and the pastoral. Viewing the precisely described tools as counterbalances for more metaphysical considerations paints them as familiar, solid, and comforting in their integrity and simplicity.

After observing Heaney's preoccupation with uncovering ephemeral or invisible labor, however, we should also consider that this attention to detail also derives from the awareness that even a "simple" tool belies appearances of simple, enduring existence. While "slashed and dumped," the corpse's modifiers in "The Graballe Man," Vendler deems "past participles of alien agency" (58), placing "fashioned" before "wire" recalls a similarly obscured, though unthreatening, agency. If each working past participle is a

nod to the imaginative flexibility that stone grinder implored of his audience, the sum of Heaney's many uses of these modifiers can be viewed as a sustained effort to "commemorate" and reanimate unacknowledged laborers. For a sensitive reader, then, the working past participles do add pleasing texture to a pump or butterpat but they can also, by alluding to instances of physical labor tied up with spades and pitchforks, disrupt momentarily a rush to arrive at the world of the spirit, encouraging the imagination to stretch along the way its view of the unremarkable. If Heaney's use of these words does not necessarily push back against the "denotative" in language, the sustained poetic tactic at least rescues them from effects of routine usage. We have heard "cast iron" so many times that it likely sounds like an integrated unit with connotations of sturdy, lasting substantiality; literally, however, the two words mean that the metal actually has been *cast* by someone and this realization somewhat disrupts the solidity of the material.

Because Heaney realizes that actually seeing labor being performed makes one far more likely to attend to its traces, he takes care to explain or "translate" the artifacts with which he is particularly familiar. Thus, he makes good use of the insider/outsider status that arises from his status as a farmer's child turned poet and of a lifetime that witnessed fairly radical change in the rural landscape. Addressing his young daughter, the father who speaks in *Station Island's* "Changes" emphasizes the importance of passing along his firsthand knowledge, in this case of the work that once surrounded a farmyard pump now rendered defunct, presumably due to the advent of modern indoor plumbing:

As you came with me in silence

To the pump in the long grass

I heard much that you could not hear:

The bite of the spade that sank it,

The slithering and grumble

as the mason mixed his mortar,

and women coming with white buckets

like flashes on their ruffled wings (*OG* 211).

The simile foreshadows the discovery in the second half of the poem that the apparently unused pump now serves a new purpose. The father, upon lifting the “cast-iron rims of the lid” discovers a bird nesting beneath it. When his daughter arrives on the scene, she too “unroof[s]” the nest but is greeted with a slightly different sight: “There was a single egg pebbly white, / and in the rusted bend of the spout / tail feathers splayed and sat tight.” The poem concludes with a father’s injunction:

So tender, I said, ‘Remember this.

It will be good for you to retrace this path

When you have grown away and stand at last

At the very centre of the empty city.’ (*OG* 211-212)

If we focus only on the first half of the poem and the final couplet, we might be tempted again to read it as privileging a romanticized version of a bygone rural life over a less

meaningful modern one. Heaney reveals a nagging sensitivity to such charges in one of his published lectures as he speaks of his admiration for Kavanagh, maintaining, “I am not affirming here the superiority of the rural over the urban/suburban as a subject for poetry, nor am I out to sponsor deprivation at the expense of cultivation. I am not insinuating that one domain of experience is more intrinsically poetical or more ethically desirable than another” (*The Government of the Tongue* 8).

Within the context of this poem, however, describing the city as “empty” does not amount to reproaching it for sterility. The pump, too, is empty, void of the life-giving water that once flowed through it. This very space, however, allows for the possibility of building a new kind of life. Strongly reminiscent of Yeats’ famous refrain in “Meditations in the Time of Civil War” which urged the honeybees to “come build in the empty house of stare” (Yeats 90), Heaney’s poem mixes genuine optimism with the natural sadness of a parent who realizes that their children inevitably will grow up and go “away.” Hence, he has his daughter join in an act of discovery which uncovers the new kind of work for which the pump is put to use so that, when she too finds herself in the midst of a new and perhaps overwhelming space, she can remember that it can be made into a home.

Thus, in the memories of the first half of “Changes,” the father follows his own advice, recalling what kinds of work used to surround the pump in the time of his childhood when, as another poem, “The Cot,” relates, the edge of the farmyard marked the horizon of his consciousness: “the whole world eked and crowed” (*OG* 323). This knowledge of the past adds meaning to and sheds light on its current state by reminding

us that we are neither the first nor the last to construct (or renovate) literal and metaphorical homes. Here, I think, we arrive at the simple, final reason for Heaney's insistence on preserving, uncovering, and explaining old rural labor: there is much in it that is good, and, as such, it is good to remember. It is not necessarily better than a modern or urban kind of work, but it can provide a grounding for and shed light on those other activities.

This meditation on the continuity of and connection among different types of labor appears in the title of another of *Station Island's* poems, "Shelf Life." In the fourth section, "Iron Spike" the speaker uses the work with which he is familiar to decode the object he discovers:

So like a harrow pin  
I hear harness creaks and the click  
of stones in a ploughed up field.  
But it was the age of steam

At eagle Pond, New Hampshire  
when this rusted spike I found there  
was aimed and driven in  
to fix a cog in the line.

What guarantees things keeping  
if a railway can be lifted

like a long briar out of ditch growth?

I felt I had come on myself

in the grassy silent path

where I drew the iron like a thorn

or a word I had thought my own

out of a stranger's mouth. (*SI* 23)

Although the building of railroads is not as well-known to the speaker as the work of the farm, the way of looking at labor which he has learned by close observation of agricultural activity serves him in good stead as he contemplates the left-over evidence of another kind of construction. He knows that the iron spike is only one of many materials and tools which must have been utilized; he perceives as well that the driving of the spike participated in a collaborative building of the railroad. Instinctively, he looks around for other testaments to the effort:

And the sledge-head that sank it

with a last opaque report

deep into the creosoted

Sleeper, where is that?

And the sweat-cured haft?

Ask the ones on the buggy,

Inaudible and upright

And sped along without shadows. (*SI* 23-24)

Those actions which aimed at permanence—the finality of a well-sunk spike and the application of creosote to make the railroad tie resistant to rot—have all failed to achieve their goal. Even the riders of the train that once travelled along the track, those who might have seen during their lives the assembly of the railroad, are now ghosts incapable of speech. It is left to the poet who makes poetry upon discovering an iron spike, a poet who excavates, interprets and preserves, to “guarantee things keeping.”

### **Chapter Three: “Fit for the Task”: Workers, Tools, Poets**

I considered in the first chapter the reasons that the manual labor of Heaney’s poetry requires a poet to speak on its behalf. I then examined in the second some of the primary poetic techniques Heaney employs in negotiating between a belief in the importance of remembering past physical work and the realization that such work should not be overly idealized. As I have already mentioned and many of Heaney’s critics have noted before me, the relationship between manual labor and poetry in his work often emerges as a very close, almost interchangeable one, even when somewhat strained by doubts, in terms of intellectual and practical value, resulting from differences between the two types of work. Thus, this final chapter will examine further his admiration, as a poet, of the connection between the worker and his tool, looking more closely at some of the processes of physical work to which he draws our attention, both in the crafting of the tool and in the use of it. I will consider, finally, why physical labor—work whose appearance often strives to mask the strenuous effort it requires—works so well as a metaphor for the poetic process.

As I think is fitting for a project that, while not keeping to strict chronological order, has attempted to impart some sense of what has developed and what has remained constant over Heaney’s many years of writing poetry about manual labor, I will consider in particular a number of poems from his most recent collection, *District and Circle*. By weighting (though not confining) the last chapter of my discussion in favor of these latest poems, I think we can both appreciate the distance Heaney has travelled and review the ground he has covered.

Henry Hart's review of the book, which derives its title, "Seamus Heaney: Circling Back" from Heaney's own explanation of the title *District and Circle*, offers justification for my choice. Hart writes,

Heaney claimed that he chose *District and Circle* because it combined surprise with a sense of familiarity: 'It had the virtue of unexpectedness....At the same time, it signaled an inclination to favor a chosen region and keep coming back to it.' The region he circles back to is the region he has returned to in most of his other books: the farmlands of County Derry west of Belfast where he grew up. What is surprising in his new book is the way he juxtaposes the pastoral activities of his hard-working, down-to-earth countrymen with a keen sense of what he calls 'the mood of the new age of anxiety.'" (457, ellipses are Hart's)

Hart's use of "juxtapose" points toward jarring images like the one of the "donkey.... / loosed from a cart that had loosed five mortar shells" (*DC* 15). In light of this kind of violent appropriation of the manual laborer's rightful possessions, Heaney moves in this collection to shore up the defenses of the workers' world, literally arming it with "shield[s]" (*DC* 14) and "greaves" (*DC* 3). The position of Heaney's latest laborers, however, should not be construed as a wholly defensive one. Rather, as Hart notes, "if he [Heaney] stands for one thing in his new book, it's what Yeats called "unity of being" and what Eliot called "Incarnation....Heaney stands for circling the differences, for bringing contraries together into a creative union" (459). As this chapter will

demonstrate, Heaney understands and has long understood this creative activity as a collective effort in which the manual laborer plays an essential role.

To begin, I will point to one of the most common of Heaney's working past participles attached to tools, one which has already surfaced several times in passages previously examined in my discussion. Both the "haft" of the absent but imagined sledgehammer in "Shelf Life, 4. Iron Spike" (*SI* 28) and the extensively modified implement in "The Pitchfork" have been "sweat-cured" (*OG* 329). This same concept also crops up in other places, expressed in various grammatical constructions: "Horses' collars lined with sweat veined ticking," for example, contain physical evidence of hard use ("The Harrow Pin," *DC* 25). Akin to but far more visceral than the "idea" that informs the house of Heaney's father, the sweat of a laborer allows him literally to deposit something of himself into a material object; as a consequence, the object bears an imprint or trace, barely visible though it may be, of the laborer's efforts. The sweat of the horses that has become part of the collars imbues them with a latent vigor which the speaker imagines to somehow still circulate through the ticking even though the sweat must have long since dried on the old "cobwebbed" equipment hanging unused in a barn. Likewise, he locates the effort involved in swinging a sledgehammer at the contact point between tool and hand, fusing the sweat of human endeavor with implement's haft.

Heaney's admiration of the concentrated physical effort for which the sweat serves as a symbol manifests itself both his poems and his prose explanations of those poems. He recounts how, in drafting "Follower," he first used a local idiom for the activity he watched and admired so intently as a child:

Originally, I had written

My father *wrought* with a horse-plough,

because until relatively recently that verb was the common one in the speech of mid-Ulster. Country people used the word ‘wrought’ naturally and almost exclusively when they talked about a person laboring with certain tools or animals, and it always carried a sense of wholehearted commitment to the task. You wrought with horses or with a scythe or with a plough; and you might also have wrought at hay or at flax or at bricklaying. (*The Redress of Poetry* 63)

Although Heaney goes on to relate that his revision, in which he replaced “wrought” with “worked,” resulted from second thoughts about using “local language” (*RP* 63), the father’s intense commitment remains palpably intact even the more standard usage of the published version. “Follower,” from *Death of a Naturalist*, remains one of the most commonly quoted and cited of Heaney’s *oeuvre*. The speaker describes the man as fully-integrated into the apparatus which makes plowing possible: “His shoulders globed like a full sail strung / Between the shafts and the furrow.” At the same time, the worker’s body, stretched to full capacity but not appearing unduly strained, becomes the essential link in the interchange between machine and land, the director of the smoothly coordinated motion of tilling. Noting the father’s precise “mapping of the furrow,” the speaker uses a sentence fragment (conspicuously placed at the beginning of the second stanza) to unequivocally declare his father’s status as “An expert.” The confidence of the worker in this poem resonates with Crawford’s observation that “it is a characteristic of

the spirited man that he take an expansive view of the boundary of his own stuff—he tends to act as though any of material things he uses are in some sense properly his, while he is using them” (55). Remembering how he himself worked in the hay during breaks at home during boarding school, Heaney recounts his own experience of feeling that tools properly belonged to him: “There was a terrific rightness and lightness about the forks and rakes, a wonderful sense of the hand and the tool being made for each other” (O’Driscoll 55).

In Heaney’s view, the expert worker makes a material thing “properly his” not only for the time he uses it but for a long while after he stops, particularly if the thing in question happens, as did that iron spike, to come into Heaney’s charge. *District and Circle*’s “Helmet” considers the identifying markers of another of Heaney’s possessions, an object which once belonged to an American worker:

Bobby Breen’s. His Boston fireman’s gift

With BREEN in scarlet letters on its spread

Fantailing brim

Tinctures of sweat and hair oil

In the withered sponge and shock-absorbing webs

Beneath the crown— (14)

These opening stanzas poise the written evidence that the helmet belonged to Bobby Breen alongside the unmistakable proof that it has been worn many times by the fireman while he battled fires. The sweat and hair oil, at least as much as the last name, testify to

the rightness of calling it “Bobby Breen’s.” The speaker then recounts how the helmet came into his possession twenty years before:

‘the headgear  
Of the tribe’ as O’Grady called it  
  
In right heroic mood that afternoon  
When the fireman-poet presented it to me  
  
As ‘the visiting fireman’—

O’Grady asserts that a similarity exists between the speaker and the fireman, that their lineage and professions are easily linked, but the speaker immediately brings up old nagging doubts, replaying those of “Follower”: “As if I were up to it, as if I had / Served time under it.” In this much later instance, the doubts are strong enough to prevent an easy analogy from being made. The final lines reiterate that only the genuinely heroic work which Bobby Breen performed, amid the “shattering glass and rubble-bolts” of collapsing buildings, gives one the right to truly possess his helmet (*DC* 14). Thus, in his refusal to fully claim the helmet as his own, Heaney reveals continued dedication to presenting manual labor as a unique form of work.

“Helmet” relies on synecdoche, as the headgear stands in for the man who never actually appears as a subject in the poem. While a fireman’s helmet has a fairly obvious status as a cultural icon outside the poem, Heaney, as we have seen, frequently uses more mundane or even obscure things in a similar fashion. Having explored how transferring the labor to a material object allows him to acknowledge unsung laborers while avoiding

extravagance and idealization, we see that metonymy and synecdoche work especially well for the manual laborer because Heaney recognizes a blurred or highly-permeable boundary between worker and tool. Hence, Heaney's poetry may, with some regularity, send his urban readers in search of definitions for words like "turnip-snedder"; rarely, however, do the poems leave doubt about the *significance* of these objects even when their denotative meaning or the technicalities of their function remain obscure. In a way, then, the poetry reveals the "definition" of a particular object by guiding the reader toward consideration of the kind of people whose exertions, in making these objects properly their own, impart much of the tool's meaning within the poem.

Even in poems where human agency seems to be obscured, severely limited rather than emphasized, people define the objects rather than *vice versa*. The machine in "The Turnip-Snedder," given its own voice, speaks reductively and even callously: "This is the way that God sees life," / it said, "from seedling-braird to snedder." It also seems to act of its own accord, leaving a "raw, sliced mess" in its wake. The entire poem has been framed, however, by defining the era out of which the turnip-snedder comes as "an age of bare hands and cast iron." Thus, we see that many anonymous laborers have set the machine in motion. As its creators, they are not so subject to the snedder's insatiable demands as the passive sentence construction—"the turnip heads were let fall and fed"—might suggest (*DC* 3). Although death is inevitable and the life that precedes it appears in this poem to be quite harsh, the unseen workers yet engage fully in that life, entering the lists, as it were, with "bare hands." Thus, Heaney's decision to center the poem

almost entirely on the machine almost counter-intuitively brings the tough “whole-hearted commitment” of the obliquely referenced people into sharp focus.

Heaney’s mention of “bare hands” also speaks to the simplicity of the worker’s relationship to his work, a simplicity that also marks activities performed in atmospheres less urgently focused on survival. In “Helping Sarah” the woman’s endeavors are summed up as efficient and straightforward: “all things well sped; / her open and closed relations with earth’s work” (*DC* 68). This sense that the work escapes potentially overwhelming complication also finds an expression in poems where each small action gives the worker (and often the observer of the work) the satisfaction that comes with viewing a job as a series of concrete, competently completed actions. For example, the weeding man in “A Call” is “touching, inspecting, separating /... pleased to feel each little weed-root break” (*SL* 64).

In “Damson,” the finite, repeated motions of the bricklayer, another of Heaney’s expert workers, look similarly pleasing:

Over and over, the slur, the scrape, and mix  
As he trowelled and retrowelled and laid down  
Courses of glum mortar. Then the bricks  
Jiggled and settled, tocked and tapped in line.  
I loved especially the trowel’s shine,  
Its edge and apex always coming clean  
And brightening itself by mucking in. (*SL* 19)

As in the “Turnip-Snedder” the work proceeds with a mesmerizing regularity. Here, however, the steady progress of work does not seem threatening as the bricklayer retains far more control of the work which appears intricate but not terribly taxing. Whereas “The Turnip-Snedder” focuses on the portion of “the turnip cycle” that involves the destructive chopping of the vegetables instead of their cultivation, the ongoing process of building the wall in this portion of “Damson” immediately appears constructive, allowing the reader the leisure to marvel at the display of skill.

Unlike experts such as the “Thatcher,” however, whose illusion of a “Midas Touch” remains undisturbed throughout the poem (*DD* 20), the bricklayer does escape the speaker’s inquiry into the way that the *tromp l’œil* of easy perfection functions. Again positioning himself as an outsider, the speaker characteristically focuses on a tool, in this case the bricklayer’s trowel, to grant further insight into the work:

It looked light but felt heavy as a weapon,

Yet when he lifted it there was no strain.

It was all point and skin and glisten. (*SL* 19)

The bricklayer’s ability to make a heavy thing look light amazes a clumsy onlooker who might try for a moment to pick up and use the tool in a manner similar to that of its rightful owner. The same conceit of effortless effort can be found in the fourth section of “To Mick Joyce in Heaven” when the speaker describes his “surprise” over the heaviness of a trowel he sees the bricklayer “twirl.../ Fondly and lightly” (*DC* 9-10).

“Damson,” in fact, goes beyond the unskilled onlooker’s intervention in the quest to disturb the illusion of seamlessness between the trowel and worker. Beginning

*in media res*, the poem first chronicles a moment when the bricklayer pauses to inspect a wound on his knuckles resulting from a mistimed movement with the sharp trowel. Pointing out when the tool and hand do not fit well together or capturing some motion that goes awry in a moment of violence disrupts the viewer's complacent view of the work, effectively increasing an onlooker's appreciation for the difficulty of achieving that previous appearance of effortlessness.

Despite the benefit of heightened appreciation, however, Heaney never seeks very eagerly to shatter illusions that manual work proceeds in a harmonious and deeply satisfying manner even when, as in "The Shiver," it involves great force (*DC* 5). In the end, Heaney's workers—even those who experience momentary setbacks—all tend to be expert craftsmen. The bricklayer's surprise in "Damson" as he "marvel[s]" at his wound and the parenthetical qualification in the observation that "big bright trowel / In his left hand (for once) was pointing down" speak to the rarity of an event which can halt the laborer's momentum in the middle of his task (*DC* 19).

Pausing myself for a moment to recap the previous discussion of workers and tools, I maintain that Heaney, especially in the latter part of his career, masterfully maintains a tension in his view of manual labor, acknowledging its difficulty and recognizing that it can yet be highly satisfactory way of life. He repeatedly champions an ideal: wholehearted effort leads to the worker's close relationship with his well-fitted tools whose use leads in turn to useful, attractive productions. Heaney knows, however, that the realities of this particular "age of anxiety" preclude, as did the realities of previous ages, the attainment of the ideal; consequently, one cannot really accuse him of

sentimental or “idealized” presentation. Nevertheless, Heaney insists upon presenting workers whose competence assures the onlooker that they will at least try to complete as perfectly as possible the processes of work in which they are engaged. This striving against known limitation seems to me a very human activity; it also seems to me one of major the reasons why a poet might finds the manual laborer’s efforts so congenial to his own efforts with the pen.

Continuing an examination of the contact points between physical and poetic endeavor, I will now turn to some rare but revealing moments of workers’ inaction in Heaney’s poetry, when a pause allows them to join in on his contemplation on past labor and reflect for a time on the image of their own achievement. “Man and Boy” captures a mower in this moment of repose:

He has mown himself to the centre of the field  
And stands in a final perfect ring  
Of sunlit stubble.

‘Go and tell your father,’ the mower says  
(he said it to my father who told me),

‘I have it mowed as clean as a new sixpence.’ (*OG* 314)

This long-ago worker not only admires his work but, surprisingly, even brags about his skill, taking care that the brag is an indirect one, conveyed by the eager child sent on a somewhat fanciful errand.

The anonymous farmer in *District and Circle*'s "Quitting Time," by contrast, finds a solitary reflection on his competence to be enough:

The hosed-down chamfered concrete pleases him.  
He'll wait a while before he kills the light  
On the cleaned-up yard, its pails and farrowing cart,  
And the cast-iron pump immobile as a herm  
Upstanding elsewhere, in another time.  
More and more this last look at the wet  
Shine of the place is what means most to him. (*DC* 71)

The sun has already set on a long day by the time the farmer imposes a fleeting order and cleanliness that no one else will ever see. Tomorrow the pails will be dirtied again by slop for the animals, and the farrowing cart could be required in the messiness of a sow giving birth. This day of backbreaking effort, which brings him to the point of utter exhaustion, leaves the worker,

A home-based man at home  
In the end with little. Except this same  
Night after nightness, redding up the work,  
The song of a tubular steel gate in the dark  
As he pulls it to and starts his uphill trek. (*DC* 71)

The Northern Irish word "redding," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "arranging, tidying or clearing up," fits nicely alongside Heaney's explanation of the term "wrought." "Redding" seems a fitting finish for tasks given "wholehearted attention";

one could hardly expect them to be left partially undone. After the muck of hard labor has been washed away, the yard is left with “shine” and a “song.” The image the man leaves in his wake, like the sturdy wall of bricklayer’s or thatcher’s roof, manages to be simultaneously a slightly deceptive and a true account of his work. If it obscures some of the farm’s harsher realities, the act of erasure also arises from the worker’s genuine pride in a job well done.

Purposeful self-effacement on the part of a laborer; an avoidance of “any extravagance of aspiration”; a willingness to let work “speak for itself”: however we described this move, it ultimately aims to draw attention to what is produced while minimizing awareness of the effort involved. Heaney the poet appreciates this impulse. In an essay about Robert Frost, Heaney explains the difference in poetry between “a flourish of craft” and a “feat of technique” (“Above the Brim” 281). The metaphor in Frost’s poem “The Ax Helve” stipulates that masterful shaping should appear roughly imposed on the material being shaped:

the lines of a good helve

Were native to the grain before the knife

Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves

Put on it without. (qtd. in “Above the Brim” 279)

Likewise, the wielder of “The Pitchfork” in Heaney’s own poem focuses on the inherent loveliness of the wood: “He loved its grain of tapering, dark-flecked ash / Grown satiny from its own natural polish.” While both poems subtly acknowledge that the human

subject participated intimately in the drawing out of that fine finish, they also understand how pleasing the illusion of naturalness can be.

In *The Government of the Tongue*'s title lecture, Heaney gives another, complementary account of poetic work at its finest. He quotes and then expands upon a line from Yeats in articulating how a poem achieves a satisfying rightness: "Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The Body is not bruised to pleasure soul' And just as the poem, in the process of its own genesis, exemplifies a congruence between impulse and right action, so in its repose the poem gives us a premonition of harmonies desired and not inexpensively achieved" (93-94). The Yeatsian metaphor posits an paradoxical truth: "labour," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines first as the "exertion of the faculties of the body or mind, esp. when painful or compulsory," can be redefined in poetry as partaking in the beautiful artlessness of a flower's opening or in the joyful movement of a dance; in Hart's words, the poet brings "contraries together into a creative union." Having spent time with Heaney searching for traces of labor in the "repose" of material object, we know just how expensive the achievement of repose can be for the manual laborer. That same moment of repose, however, offers the reassurance that, while the body of the worker may very well be bruised and his knuckles gouged, his soul can still be pleased and his tiredness does not prevent him from hearing a "song" in the clang of a utilitarian gate.

In the same lecture, Heaney chooses as well a quote from Richard Ellmann to speak to the kind of reality that informs a poet's work. Discussing Yeats'

uncompromising belief in the power of art to resist, overcome and even transform the circumstances external to its creation, Ellman explains,

He wishes to show how brute force may be transmogrified, how we can sacrifice ourselves...to our 'imagined' selves which offer far higher standards than anything offered by social convention. If we must suffer, it is better to create the world in which we suffer, and this is what heroes do spontaneously, artists do consciously, and all men do in their degree."

*(Government of the Tongue 100-101, ellipsis is Heaney's)*

Thus, we again come upon the brave heroes and men known for their intellectual prowess, the ranks of which Dr. Johnson said would never suffer to be infiltrated by lowly agricultural laborers. Yeats and Ellman, however, in recognizing that suffering and hard work come to everyone, admit as well that everyone can work toward an ideal that surpasses what they know to be possible. Following their lead, Heaney throughout his career has made poetry that pays tribute to the many ways, both visible and invisible, in which manual laborers not only support but actively create the world.

## **Conclusion: Final Impressions**

I originally intended to begin and end with a reading of “Poet to Blacksmith,” “redding” up my own work by a neat return to familiar territory. Upon further consideration, however, I think I need not comment at length on the many ways that the poem dovetails with a belief that both poetry and manual labor can, at moments, transform force—whether of language or of muscle—into something whose beautiful surface denies that anyone ever had to hammer away at it, or, that it will face hard use in the future as it is employed in shaping the world. It is my hope that time spent hammering out Heaney’s view of manual labor *as manual labor* has already heightened awareness of the nuance, depth and richness of the poet-worker’s request for a “side-arm.” Rather than revisiting a specific poem, then, I will instead follow Heaney’s example by concluding with a brief explanation my choice of “Seamus Heaney’s Manual Impressions” as the title for this critical study.

The impressions of manual labor here are Heaney’s own in the sense that they are highly personal. His early life in rural Northern Ireland and later, his residence at Glanmore Cottage in the Republic (Corcoran 253), impressed upon him an enduring appreciation for the work of those locales—and by extension, taught him to notice physical work in general.

“Impressions” also refers, however, to the marks and traces left behind by workers on the materials with which they work. Heaney surprises us by noticing everywhere these quiet, often ephemeral testaments to labor in his butter-pats, water pumps, horse collars and pitchforks.

The literary theorist Bill Brown gives a slightly tongue-in-cheek commentary on the recognition of our widespread tendency to overlook the things that surround us: “To declare that the character of things as things has been extinguished, or that objects have been struck dumb, or that the idea of respecting things no longer makes sense because they are vanishing—this is to find in the fate of things a symptom of a pathological condition most familiarly known as modernity” (10). Crawford builds upon this concept with his personal but also philosophical argument that performing manual labor is a particularly effective way to make a person more attentive to the “stuff” of daily life. As a poet, Seamus Heaney offers no systematic “cure” for the modern condition; he does, however, offer a series of impressions created by poetic technique which encourages increased attention to the details of everyday stuff and things; this exercise is not intended as an end in itself but rather as a step toward the grateful acknowledgement of the workers who contributed to their existence. By looking at carefully at things, Heaney teaches, we also redirect our attention toward the people who make them.

## Notes

1. For a fascinating discussion of the eighteenth-century origins of the dichotomy between mental and manual labor see Siskin.

2. To reiterate a well-known story, Heaney left the family farm at age eleven to attend St. Columb's boarding school. He was a beneficiary of a scholarship resulting from the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act that made education available to bright students from Northern Ireland's working class; previous generations of farmers such as the Heaneys would likely never have been able to afford to send a child to such a school (Corcoran 239).

3. See Corcoran's chapter on North (53-82) for more on the controversy surrounding the bog poems. See also Andrews.

4. For a more in-depth examination of the relationship between Frost and Heaney that focuses on a shared delight in physical labor, see Mason

5. Here my discussion, propelled by close attention to the formal properties of Heaney's poetry, comes into contact with the recent emphasis in literary criticism on the study of material culture, and more particularly, with "thing theory." For an overview of the emerging theory as explained by its leading proponent, see Brown. I do not in the remainder of this paper insist upon Brown's distinction between "things" and "objects" because I find that documenting in the poems all the subtle shifts between these two concepts proves overly time-consuming; it also seems, ultimately, to detract from my primary intention of offering a more comprehensive account of Heaney's poetic push toward recognizing the *workers* who perform manual labor. It is worth observing, however, that according to my reading, "The Stone Grinder" might well be described as Heaney's own pitch for a kind of "thing theory," wherein people move from viewing cultural artifacts as self-contained "objects" toward a far more expansive consideration of them as "things." I should also note that I see much potential in scholarship that applies thing theory to Heaney's work.

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