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In 1991, with the publication of his collection *Seeing Things*, Seamus Heaney confirmed that the focus and diction of his poetic practice had shifted. The second part of this volume consists of forty-eight douzains forming a sequence titled 'Squarings' which can be seen as a most full and free expression of a tendency in Heaney's writing which first announced itself several years before in the collection *The Haw Lantern* (1987). Helen Vendler, closely following the poet's development throughout years and multiple volumes, formulates this progression of Heaney's later period as 'a shift from an artesian to an aerial imaginative structure'.¹ The sequence of 'Squarings' introduces a shimmering play of 'shifting brilliancies' as the light of various sources and angles constantly traverses its lines.² This prominent shift from Heaney's initial focus on the physical, earthy, suggestively palpable, and almost oppressively close-to-touch could not leave the grounds of critical response unsettled.

The body of criticism dealing with 'Squarings' is not voluminous, but it is substantial enough to allow a certain synopsis of the most prominent approaches and analytical currents within. In the light of such interpretative review, it becomes clear that a certain exegetical point has been missing from this discussion. In the following lines, I would like to redress this omission, arguing that it was Heaney's embrace of the three-fold morphology of human

¹ Eugene O'Brien, 'Introduction', in *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), pp. 1–26 (p. 5).

² Seamus Heaney, 'Squarings', in *Seeing Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), i. 1. References to particular lines in Heaney's sequence will be denoted by the number of the poem in Roman numbers (as used originally by Heaney), followed by the line(s) quoted. This footnote refers to the first line of the first poem of the sequence. All further references to 'Squarings' are taken from this edition.

nature — that remained with him as a legacy of his spiritual upbringing and the awareness of which was re-activated by a series of transforming biographical events — which inspired the particular poetic focus and diction in ‘Squarings’. This three-fold morphology which he subscribed to by inheritance and intuition emphatically invites spiritual expansiveness to inform our bodily existence. It allowed Heaney to articulate in this sequence a dynamic process of consciousness exploring its newly realised territory and order of expression as produced and structured by the mentioned synthesis of body and spirit. This territory explored and re-inhabited in the tentative geometry of ‘Squarings’ emerges, then, as a most powerful apology for poetry from an author seriously and continually concerned with its legitimacy in a society deeply divided by political agendas and pragmatic loyalties.

If we engage more closely with the critical work published on Heaney’s four-part sequence from *Seeing Things*, we can see that as the ‘poet of the earth earthy’, to use once again Vendler’s words, leaves the aesthetic sphere which had been delineated and established in his early collections,³ the public is practically in a state of ‘shock’, while critics seem to be wrestling with the impact and location of what would be best summed up as ‘the transcendental’ in the universe of Heaney’s poetry.⁴ The first common misinterpretation of Heaney’s move toward this more aerial matter has been the reproach that the poet abandoned the physical reality of his famous early pieces. As Steven Rizzo observes, ‘several of [his] critics have picked up on his new found freedom, but have misattributed it to a mere turning away from material reality’.⁵ Critical voices articulating this view have not been usually able to productively reconcile the simultaneous presence of the new sources of inspiration in Heaney’s poetry with those long-established ones. An anxiety of mutual exclusivity related to these territories has prevented a more generous reading of the poet’s later output.

³ Helen Vendler, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Invisibles’, *Harvard Review*, 10 (1996), 37–47 (p. 37).

⁴ Helen Vendler, ‘Squarings’, in *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Eugene O’Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), pp. 71–85 (p. 84).

⁵ Steven Rizzo, ‘The Paradox of Spiritual Matter and the Spiritual Matter of Paradox in Seamus Heaney and Robert Boyle’, *Literature and Theology*, 22.4 (2008), 458–74 (p. 462).

Other critics, while not exactly unsettled over the disappearing physical emphasis in Heaney's lines, have still struggled with the possible mode of existence of these transcendental elements in relation to the worldly. In one of the reviews of *Seeing Things*, Elmer Andrews voices his worry that 'the ordinary conceptual structure of the world is deranged' in Heaney's recent vision and practice,⁶ while Michael Cavanagh sees his new poetry as 'not quite in, but above [...] the world' of his earlier poetry — 'not detached from that world, but floating on top of it'.⁷ A certain metaphysical naivety seems to mark these statements unable (or unwilling) to acknowledge the perfect fusion of both kinds of elements in terms of their poetic cohabitation in the later Heaney.

Beside the conflicted arguments regarding the weakening grip of Heaney's poetry upon the physical world, there has emerged another major critical current misinterpreting the original achievement of Heaney's later work in spiritual terms. These critics have claimed that Heaney abandoned religious tradition and that he was no longer a believer when drafting *Seeing Things*.⁸ While it is certainly true that, as Kieran Quinlan points out, his 'beliefs were something different from what we call explicit creedal faith',⁹ and that, during the 1990s, he was drafting his poems 'in the shade of [the] process of secularization' accelerating throughout Irish society,¹⁰ Heaney never completely abandoned his early religious formation, and his spiritual outlook 'inflected his poetry [...] at every stage'.¹¹

Naho Washizuka considers the poems collected in *Seeing Things* as post-Christian and claims that Heaney's stance is rather skeptical and ironic when confronting the final things

⁶ Elmer Andrews, 'Seeing Things by Seamus Heaney', *The Linen Hall Review*, 8.4 (1991), 27–29 (p. 27).

⁷ Michael Cavanagh, 'Seamus Heaney Returning,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 22.1 (1998), 117–29 (p. 120).

⁸ Rizzo, p. 462.

⁹ Kieran Quinlan, 'Catholicism', in *Seamus Heaney in Context*, ed. by Geraldine Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 211–20 (p. 219).

¹⁰ Eugene O'Brien, 'An Art that Knows its Mind: Prayer, Poetry and Post-Catholic Identity in Seamus Heaney's 'Squarings'', *Études Irlandaises*, 39.2 (2009), 127–43 (p. 129).

¹¹ Quinlan, p. 212.

and the ultimate crossing.¹² As doubt should be actually viewed as a necessary and fertilizing element of one's faith and, to quote the original title of one of Tomáš Halík's books of essays, 'nothing without shaking can be firm', Heaney's stance negotiated in 'Squarings' should be rather valued as neo-Christian in its creative combination of inherited elements and an intensive personal search.¹³ While for Washizuka the penultimate line of the first douzaine of the sequence, 'there is no next-time round' (i. 11), signals and confirms the loss of the author's faith in the spiritual dimension which would sustain the myth of the afterlife, I would like to offer a reading (which extends to the whole sequence of 'Squarings') challenging this interpretation. If we understand the underlying assumption regarding the individual's threefold morphology which Heaney inherited and reinhabited, it becomes clear that the statement of 'no next-time round' does not preclude an intuitively spiritual existence pointing most emphatically to the unique juncture of consciousness which I see as the true critical pivot of the sequence.

Unlike the critical voices which were given hearing in the lines above, I believe that when composing 'Squarings', Heaney did not commit any act of detectable refusal but much rather creatively reclaimed what had already been his. His poetics, as presented in this sequence, express his embrace of both the physical in its hard-hitting intensity and geo-chemical ubiquity, and the spiritual in its nearly blinding thrust and elusive rubric of universality. Neither does he leave his keen naturalist interest behind, nor does he push the pressing concerns of the soul away in an alibistic gesture of secular ease. In his collection of essays *Finders Keepers*, Heaney writes that 'a good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air simultaneously'.¹⁴ In 'Squarings', he achieves perfection in

¹² Naho Washizuka, 'After the commanded journey, what?' Seamus Heaney's *Seeing Things*', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 25 (2010), 48–58 (pp. 48–49).

¹³ Tomáš Halík, *Co je bez chvění, není pevné: labyrintem světa s vírou a pochybností* (Prague: Lidové Noviny, 2002). The translation of these lines into English is my own, as a published English translation is not yet available.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), pp. 48–49.

realizing this artistic creed. As I have suggested, even though this aesthetic formulation is published as he is about to enter the penultimate decade of his poetic work, the inspiring rationale behind it draws on sources and layers deep and intimately posited in the poet's inner tectonics. In one of his later interviews, Heaney characterizes his writing, when assessed in a diachronic perspective, as 'a process of continual going back in to what you have, changing it and coming out changed'.¹⁵ This productive act of aesthetic reclamation and recognition, enriching and shifting the polarities in the later Heaney, has been very perceptively described by John Wilson Foster as a 'rebroadcasting, as it were, [of] his earlier world and poetry in a broader-band frequency'.¹⁶ Heaney's inspired 'squaring' of the sources extant and inherently constitutive of his inner world should be followed in a two-step analysis which will ultimately allow us to see the very center of his self-positioning as presented and explored in 'Squarings'.

The impulse to shift the focus and diction dominating his poetry up to that point and to re-examine his inner terrain should be understood, first of all, in biographical terms. It was the death of both his parents within just two years in the 1980s which deeply affected the poet and made him seek form and imagery which could hold his unsettled sense of the human self and its precarious existence. As Vendler observes, in the final sequence of *Seeing Things* the impact of those deaths 'has deepened to redefine [the] son's world'.¹⁷ The key importance of this biographical background, which stimulates Heaney's aesthetic probing and questioning, is evident as the sequence opens with the vision of an abandoned house and a similar image of ruined masonry. Lost domesticity and compromised familiarity are reintroduced several times throughout the poem. Even though the narrative element is noticeably weakened and any attempt at linearly developed telling fragmented, the sheer impact of repeated visitation

¹⁵ Randy Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney: An Interview', *Salmagundi*, 185.6 (2015), 623–40 (p. 631).

¹⁶ John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 206–23 (p. 211).

¹⁷ Vendler, 'Squarings', p. 72.

and the cumulative weight of related details induce the impression of an affective and aesthetic starting point.

In the opening douzaine, revisiting the once intact structure sustaining a family life, the speaker meditates on ‘unroofed scope’ (i. 12). While deeply unsettled by the ruin of the familiar place, now faintly detected as ‘bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into’ (i. 5), he nevertheless begins to realize the previously unsuspected potential of a new perspective which this scene might be offering. The locus of lost and futile return might be actually a place of ultimately invigorating revisitation. In this light, ‘there is no next-time round’ need not be interpreted as a definite sign of apostasy but rather as the speaker’s (and poet’s own) self-admonishing reminder of the urgency to hold onto the vision meditatively and aesthetically. The ‘knowledge-freshening wind’ (i. 12) further emphasizes this need for transforming agency and gently announces the spirited insights of the coming sequence. As ‘nothing magnificent, nothing unknown’ (i. 8) seems to signal a potential dialogue with transcendence, we might be sure (with the poet) that the experiential circumference of his lines has been foreknown, that he has reached the authentic place from which to start.

In ‘Settings xiii’, the house reappears in a similarly suspended atemporal vision, as the douzaine lacks any verbs or temporal coordinates, to express a more enlivened (if still abandoned) vision. The shifting light has set the whole place ablaze and the heat is quite palpable with ‘hedges hot as chimneys’ (xiii. 4); the sea light on the doorstep is ‘athletic’ (xiii. 2) and desire feels satisfied and leisurely, ‘dozing at ease’ (xiii. 7) and ‘in tune with the big glitter’ (xiii. 9). Addressing himself as ‘the adult of solitude’ (xiii. 11), the speaker nevertheless regards himself, in a courageous coinage, as ‘the silence-forder’ and ‘the definite presence’ (xiii. 11–12), entering desirous and inquisitive into the scene. Having withdrawn ‘first time round’ (xiii. 12), he feels finally able and invited to assert his ‘presence’ (xiii. 12), oriented by the emerging awareness of his unique embodied condition which might indeed

echo the negative of the last line of the opening douzain but does not forbid the hope and joy of (re)inhabiting one's identity.

In 'Crossings xxix', the latch might be cold to the thumb (xxix. 2), but its unmistakable sound inspires a 'music of binding and of loosing' (xxix. 4) once the 'touch [is] renewed' (xxix. 6). This douzaine expresses, in its auditory terms, the perfect return: 'once the latch pronounces, roof | is original again, threshold fatal' (xxix. 7–8). The speaker's step 'is already known' (xxix. 10) and re-entering unites the 'impulse with wilfulness' (xxix. 12) as memory and will, determination and inquisitiveness fuse into one. 'Crossings xxxiii' invites 'be[ing] literal a moment' (xxxiii. 1) in its challenge to 'what had been emptied out' (xxxiii. 2) and its concentration on hard and defined physical details of the building once so carefully planned by the speaker's father. Retracing his pain and loss in the details of the surging (or lamenting) nature assailing the house, he finds the structure standing 'firmer than ever for its own idea' (xxxiii. 11), a perfect act of reconstruction — 'like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body' (xxxiii. 12). This increasingly engaged and re-evaluative nostos comes to its most definite expression of self-identification in 'Squarings xl', where the memory of a little boy playing on the clay floor turns into a vision ultimately physical and eternal. Time is compromised ('I was four but I turned four hundred maybe,| [...] Maybe four thousand even' (xl. 4–6)), and the individual ontology collapses ('Ground of being. Body's deep obedience | to all its shifting tenses' (xl. 7–8)). The process of homecoming in aesthetic terms has been completed. This perfect identification as well as cognitive expansiveness due to the aesthetic recalibration of his domestic experience resonate in the speaker's mention of inheriting 'out of [this] earth house [...] memory-weights' (xl. 10–11), which are to 'load' him 'in the scale of things' (xl. 12). 'Squarings' becomes the ultimate working site of this intense and delicate balancing, expressive both of intimacy and grandeur of one's existence.

However, as I mentioned above, in order to detect and locate the center of the speaker's self-positioning in 'Squarings', we have to proceed through a two-fold movement of retrospection. The process of home-searching was organically accompanied by his return to the spiritual terrain and structures of his youth. At the time of composing the sequence, the memory of Heaney's immersion in the Catholic theology of his youth might have faded and the passion which once consumed every word of his very being (as expressed for instance in 'In Illo Tempore' — 'Intransitively we would assist,| confess, receive. The verbs| assumed us. We adored.')18 might have since waned, yet, as R. F. Foster reminds us, 'a Catholicism of the imagination would remain'.¹⁹ In his study of the poet's Catholicism, Quinlan quotes Heaney's own words when 'at the backend of his life, [Heaney] noted a renewed awareness of "something far more important for [his] mental formation than cultural nationalism or the British presence [...] namely, [his] early religious education"'.²⁰ In many respects, Heaney's spiritual development resembled Joyce's inner journey. While they both ultimately rejected any conventional pieties and aesthetic subordination to the politico-social dictate of such, they both remained respectful of and inspired by the coherence and comprehensiveness of the Catholic system and its world outlook. Reflecting upon the parallels between himself and his famous predecessor, Heaney said:

I suppose — like many Catholics, lapsed or not — I am of the Stephen Dedalus frame of mind: if you desert this system, you're deserting the best there is, and there's no point in exchanging one great coherence for some other ad hoc arrangement.²¹

Elaborating further on the decisive importance of his early religious upbringing, he reflected that 'I stopped practicing a long time ago, but some of it holds. If you have it as a child it gives you a structure of consciousness — the idea there is something more'.²²

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'In Illo Tempore', *Difficultere: Making Difficult*, <<https://difficultere.wordpress.com/2008/11/30/in-illo-tempore/>> [accessed 22 March 2021], ll. 4–6.

¹⁹ R. F. Foster, *On Seamus Heaney* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 12.

²⁰ Quinlan, p. 211.

²¹ R. F. Foster, pp. 138–39.

Picking up the idea of my argument introduced in the opening paragraph, I believe that in articulating the key impact which Catholicism had on the structuring of his consciousness, Heaney offers us the most definite guiding (we might say exegetical) insight into the sequence of 'Squarings'. If we are to credit the traditional Catholic threefold morphology of the self (representing, in a way, a triunity on the human plane), we quickly begin to understand why so many critical attempts at locating the spiritual in 'Squarings' have failed. In this structural interpretation of the individual human existence, the physical body is temporarily united and infused with spirit (forming the individual soul). The dynamic and unique juncture which is thus created is represented by the individual consciousness. This morphology also clearly explains why there cannot be any 'next-time round' and why this claim does not run contrary to the speaker's spirituality. While the realm of the physical body and the realm of the spiritual element might extend beyond its circumference and comprehension, it is nevertheless this consciousness which effectively mediates between the two poles or orders and, serving as a point of contact between their particular impulses, communicates the sense of wholeness of the human existence. It is this consciousness, re-emerging in the awareness of its potential and intuitively in touch with its immanent spirituality, which finds its expression and aesthetic terrain in 'Squarings'.

As I have shown and analysed, there has been a lively critical polemic engaging with Heaney's spirituality in this sequence, but its intrinsic presence within the 'inner lining of the self' has been ignored so far as a factor which radically transforms our understanding of the poem.²³ As we may see, adjusting to this religious squaring of the sequence, Heaney is not primarily concerned with pursuing the transcendental, the immortal, or the intangible here. Instead, finding comfort and a bolstering impulse in the constitutive spirituality of human consciousness, he sets out to explore in aesthetic terms the territory which this comprehensive

²² R. F. Foster, p. 194.

²³ Brandes, p. 625. Here the author quotes Heaney's own words.

consciousness registers and the various configurations of phenomena both physical and spiritual which it draws upon when coming to its own. Heaney introduces an illuminating self-referential paradox when he writes in ‘Crediting Poetry’:

[F]or years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for a meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining toward good works.²⁴

Finally, ‘straighten[ing] up’ and abandoning his position of duty and striving in practice, he wakes up to the new intensity of his inherent (constitutive) spirituality, being finally able to ‘attend [...] to the diamond absolutes’.²⁵

The fascinating process of Heaney’s growing awareness of the comprehensive circumference of his consciousness sparked by the intensity of his double retrospection which we have been tracing might be detected in poems preceding ‘Squarings’. Placed immediately before this sequence in *Seeing Things* is ‘Fosterling’, a poem inspired by John Montague’s lines heavily indebted to the physical memories of a childhood in rural Ireland and haunted by the specter of the ‘horizon rigged’ with industrial machinery instilling a hereditary and, in its relentless rhythm, inescapable ‘in-placeness’ in the poet’s imagination.²⁶ This geologically conditioned inscription is reflected in ‘lowlands of the mind’ (l. 8) and results in the ‘heaviness of being’ (l. 9) experienced by the speaker for many years of his young adulthood. When he finally finds himself breaking with this oppressive artistic habitus and turning his attention to the marvelous, he might not yet be consciously and confidently introspective. The perfect rhyme joining the final couplet still shows a slight touch of the previously mentioned striving. Yet the title of the poem shows a curious split of

²⁴ Rizzo, p. 462.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, ‘Fosterling’, in *Seeing Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), l. 2, 3. All further references to ‘Fosterling’ will be taken from this edition.

consciousness announcing the coming strategies and returns of ‘Squarings’. While ‘Fosterling’ might be referring to the described act of abandoning the imagery and inspiration weighing down the speaker’s mind and leaving the local artistic genealogy, it might also refer to the act of coming back to one’s own original sensitivity before the sense of its various tones and spheres was lost during the period of being fostered in the self-alienating care presented by fame, the public, and its expectations.

In ‘Squarings’, Heaney seems to be too consumed and comfortable exploring the freshened territory of his consciousness to dwell on his poetic proceeding too much, but I believe that we may still detect several passages in the sequence where the *modus operandi* is revealed. In the opening poem of the sequence, the speaker pictures himself as a ‘shivering silhouette’ (i. 3). This particular choice of the opening image expresses the joint figuration of the physical and the airy, of the solid and the flitting, of the dark and the shimmering, as the silhouette derives its presence only from the interplay between these. In a similar way, the registering consciousness is conditioned and brought to presence by the joint operation of the physical and the spiritual. Such tight and telling interdependence is also explored in ‘Lightenings viii’, which relates an arguably apocryphal story of monks in Clonmacnoise interrupted during their prayers by a ship intervening from above. The discussion of the credibility of this wondrous legend should not let us ignore the key tenor of its lines as presented in the poem. The two experiential poles, the two orders of things, revealingly meet and are fastened to each other as the ship’s anchor ‘hook[s] itself into the altar rails’ (viii. 5). It is a consciousness alert to multiple stimuli of various orders which in fact realizes this encounter. Similar to ‘the annals’ (viii. 1), the consciousness becomes a unifying and reifying authority.

The process of consciousness coming to its force and creatively expanding is also explored in ‘Lightenings vi’, where Thomas Hardy is introduced as a child ‘out in a field of

sheep' (vi. 1). He is seen laying down and experimenting with 'infinity' (vi. 5) as he exposes 'his small cool brow like an anvil' (vi. 6) to be worked upon by the sky and made to sing 'the perfect pitch' (vi. 7). The 'ripple' (vi. 10) and 'stir' (vi. 8) of this occasion will 'travel eighty years| Outward from there' (vi. 10–11), as the mind will carry on this impulse of joining impact, 'to be the same ripple| Inside him at its last circumference' (vi. 11–12), while the identity and coherence of the consciousness holds. A similar inclusiveness expressed as longing can be detected in 'Settings xxiii', where the speaker wants 'a poem of utter evening' (xxiii. 7) instead of an incomplete experience presented by a poetic thrill. 'A frisson' (xxiii. 5) is remembered but not any words as the consciousness has not been fully engaged and activated, which would have helped the transcription. Instead, a scene lit up by the Icelandic midnight sun is presented within a triplet as a perfect reflection of the mentioned triunity of the human existence:

[Snorri] Sturluson [w]ho has come out to bathe in a hot spring
 And sit through the stillness after milking time,
 Laved and ensconced in the throne-room of his mind (xxiii. 10–12).

The opening poem of 'Crossings' tells of an early morning encounter with a fox on a country road. The 'astonished eye' (xxv. 8) of the animal is 'flared into' (xxv. 9) by the light of the speaker's car. The act of rebirth, a conscious re-experiencing through retelling, cannot come 'through water' (xxv. 10) nor 'through crawling backwards across clinic floors' (xxv. 11), but only through the synthesizing process asking the speaker to 'cross back through that startled iris' (xxv. 12). The cited passages represent just several pieces of more explicit textual evidence documenting the structuring background of Heaney's poetics as developed in 'Squarings'. I would like to close this metatextual part of my analysis by turning to one more passage which, in my reading and understanding, summarizes the poet's effort in the sequence and reflects his conscious re-evaluation of former experience and its inner morphology. In the very last poem of 'Squarings', he writes:

Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
 Convert to things foreknown;
 And how what's come upon is manifest

Only in light of what has been gone through. (xlvi. 1–4)

In terms of method and inspiration, the poet's words could not be more telling and transparent.

In 'Squarings', Heaney does not by any means forward what we could term an explicitly religious poetry, yet the sequence can be understood as an act of religious understanding. Etymologically considered, the word 'religion' has its roots in Latin verb 'religare' which means 'to bind' or, more accurately, 'to re-bind'. It is this original meaning of the word which gets activated in all the sections of the poem and which becomes the main aesthetic force behind its lines. We have already explored the structural proposition of the sequence; let us now turn our attention to the mastery of its content binding together challenging oppositions of aspects both material and spiritual.

Combining elements tangible and solid with lightweight, airy ones, Heaney reaches a fascinating level of their experiential confrontation and a certain kind of shifting intimacy. This intensity and interaction are introduced in the very first lines of the sequence as the winter light falls 'in a doorway, and on the stone doorstep' (i. 2) entering, as it were, the solidities of the poem's terrain. Heaney himself commented on the emphatic domesticity and mnemonic composition resulting in such intuitive dialectic: 'My starlight came in over the half-door of a house with a clay floor, not over the dome of a Byzantine palace; and, in a hollowed-out part of the floor, there was a cat licking up the starlit milk'.²⁷ In the quarry scene in 'Squarings x', we watch the 'cargoes of brightness travelling' (x. 3) as the clouded sky

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Dennis O'Driscoll (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 318.

and puddled water tease out their (un)fathomable elements reflecting each other. A series of queries comes echoing up:

[C]ould you reconcile

What was diaphanous there with what was massive?

Were you equal to or were you opposite

To build-ups so promiscuous and weightless' (x. 8–11).

The poetic consciousness shares without conflict the fundamentals of both. In a similarly intuitive orchestration of elements, 'Crossings xxxii', the stepping stones of a 'causey' become 'stations of the soul' (xxxii. 3–4), and the clothes left by the turf cutters on one side of the 'burn' (xxxii. 11) might have been cast off by the crossing souls. This scene, rife with liminalities and precarious balances at the water's edge is actually cherished by the speaker who claims that 'It steadies me to tell these things' (xxxii. 7). In 'Squarings xxxix', the 'wishing chair at Giant's Causeway' (xxxix. 2) invites emotional and spiritual engagement in the scene which is curiously subverted ('If you stretched your hand forth, things might turn to stone' (xxxix. 6)) and relativised ('The rocks and wonder of the world were only| Lava crystallized, salts of the earth'(xxxix. 8–9)), yet ultimately confirmed as the very solidity of the place is 'freshening your outlook| beyond the range you thought you'd settled for' (xxxix. 11–12). The pleasure projected into the physical world accompanying language acquisition in 'Squarings xli' ('Sand-bed, they said. And gravel-bed' (xli. 1)), which in later life is translated into 'memory currents' (xli. 7) and 'the banks of self at evening' (xli. 10) turns into an almost perfect epistemology of identification between the world solid and psychological. This earthly spirituality comes to the most poignant expression in 'Squarings xlv' as the hypothesized location of the eternal rest remains immanent to nature and bound to physical elements:

They will re-enter

Dryness that was heaven on earth to them,

Happy to eat the scones baked out of clay. (xlv. 4–6)

Even the judge will come ‘in a pillar of radiant house-dust’ (xlv. 12), re-asserting an ultimate familiarity in the beholding mind.

Beyond the constantly conversing ontologies of the two orders, it is also the aspect of their differing chronology, or their way of existing in or out of time, which is being continually reflected and processed within the circumference of the registering consciousness in the poem. While the physical order of the material force is necessarily involved in time being constantly worked upon by it and marked by its passing, the spiritual order bent towards the meditative, still and constant defies the time’s processes transcending their dictate in its ultimate atemporality. The consciousness rippling throughout ‘Squarings’ communicates (with) both impulses.

The sequence as a whole seems to be a lively mediation between these two chronologic qualities. While douzains of narrative character appear in all four sections of the sequence, mostly bound to the speaker’s memories, this temporal linearity and binding principle never reach out toward other poems to create a sequence. The narrative element is present yet notably fragmented and deflected as it ricochets against the moments of solid meditation and virtually unmoving stillness of intervening douzains. For instance, the opening poem in which the beggar’s silhouette is only slightly shivering is a perfect example of a visionary piece locked in time (or out of time), and it sets an atemporal modality which becomes strongly resonant throughout the first half of the section including ‘Lightenings iii’ and ‘v’, which are fully inflected by this still quality while describing the squarings during the game of marbles. Only the closing section of ‘v’ comes alive in agency (‘Improvise. Make free’ (v. 8)) to introduce the narrative and working of memory in the following pieces on Hardy. The section as a whole ends on a meditative note once again as time is pierced in its extremity in the scene of the cross (‘Lightenings xii’) and when the spirit ‘flares in a phenomenal instant|

With pure exhilaration before death' (xii. 4–5)). The narrative parts of the sequence are usually only very vaguely positioned in time ('One afternoon [...] heat wavered' (xiv. 1, 5); 'On winter evenings [...] windfalls freezing' (xvi. 11–12)) which compromises their in-time authority. Furthermore, these narrative pieces do not fully own their meaning within the time of their occurrence and only the mediating consciousness might catch glimpses of it in the meditative rifts in time. Thus, for instance, the speaker in his infancy is 'cradled in an elbow like a secret| Open now as the eye of heaven was then' (ix. 9–10), or later, when in college, he feels 'the absolute river| Between us and it all' trying to 'flit [the] light on what we could not have' (xxxv. 7–10). This is the chronologically based dialectics which binds the alternating experiential orders within the sequence.

This alternation is in fact remarkably tight as it frequently operates within the space of an individual poem. The memory of sliding on ice in 'Crossings xxviii' works itself into the constant re-entering of the repeated process ('the race-up, the free passage and return' (xxviii. 10)) until its bodily mechanics 'followed on itself like a ring of light' (xxviii. 11). In 'Crossings xxx', the ritual on St. Brigid's Day connects the physical memory of jumping through 'the girdle of straw rope' (xxx. 3) with the atemporal promise of 'the new life' (xxx. 1). In the following poem, the process of driving a car is seen accelerating to the point that a 'fanned nape' becomes 'sensitive to the millionth of a flicker' (xxx. 11–12), thus virtually annihilating time into infinite fragments. Furthermore, on the level of individual words, time is negotiated in imperatives or questions, bearing often the construction of whole douzains (ii; xiii, or xxii). Nominalizations proliferate ('The shake-the-heart, the dew-hammer, the far-eyed' (xliii. 12); 'full sail into the longed-for' (xlvi. 12)) as the transcribing consciousness mediates between experience marked by 'assent' to time and that being in 'hiatus' (xiv. 12) with it.

Through a series of close textual confrontations, we have explored the physical order of the body moving in time and the spiritual order of the soul moving between atemporal coordinates. The synthesizing and transcribing force of the consciousness born(e) upon their juncture is evidently of its own order — material as well as abstract, linear as well as synchronously associative. In ‘Squarings’, Heaney proves beyond doubt that it is the order of language and, more specifically, the language and domain of poetry which present the perfect medium for the synthesizing challenge which the spiritually inflected consciousness poses and demands. In ‘Squarings’, he does not ‘waver’ (ii. 12) in his language. He calls on the like-minded spirits of Yeats, Hardy, or Pasternak for possible inspiration and support, yet his own voice comes across clear, non-derivative, ‘unfussy and believable’ (xxxvii. 9).

As Daniela Panzera observes, ‘such linguistic freedom could possibly reflect Heaney’s spiritual freedom’.²⁸ In ‘Squarings’, the re-discovered model of human consciousness liberates the poet’s expression, and the poetic reflection of its synthetic territory signals a new creative space which he could finally enter without the ‘guilt and anxiety characteristic of [his] previous works’.²⁹ In the words of Michael Cavanagh, ‘no poet-critic of the late twentieth century has worried as much as Heaney about the legitimacy of poetry’ and about the space where it ‘may be at home, without being confined by literal place or by political or parochial ideology’.³⁰ The spiritual morphology informing the sequence of ‘Squarings’ opened and secured such space for him, fully legitimizing his creative effort. In ‘The Redress of Poetry’, Heaney states that:

Poetry [...] has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of

²⁸ Daniela Panzera, ‘Heaney’s Journey into the Self: Towards a Dantean Light’, *Nordic Irish Studies*, 15.2 (2016), 1–20 (p. 14).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰ Cavanagh, p. 127.

which it is generated [...] It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.³¹

In 'Squarings' he has realized this spiritual and aesthetic deliverance.

³¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 7–8.

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