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Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral

IAIN TWIDDY

SEAMUS HEANEY begins his 2001 collection *Electric Light* with two poems of return and renewal. 'At Toomebridge' runs ideas of origin and aftermath together in the water which leaves Lough Neagh to become 'the continuous / Present of the Bann'.¹ Revisiting the territory of 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' and his early collections, Heaney takes poetic stock, celebrating 'As once before / The slime and silver of the fattened eel'. In evaluating his poetic inspiration, Heaney suggests that origin is indistinct from destination. In 'Perch', that inspiration flows out to a Heraclitean connectedness:

Perch we called 'grunts', little flood-slubs, runty and ready,
I saw and I see in the river's glorified body
That is passable through, but they're bluntly holding the
pass,
Under the water-roof, over the bottom, adoze,
Guzzling the current, against it, all muscle and slur
In the finland of perch, the fenland of alder, on air
That is water, on carpets of Bann stream, on hold
In the everything flows and steady go of the world.

(p. 4)

The language here is strongly reminiscent of the onomatopoeia and alliteration that characterise *Death of a Naturalist*, but it also signals a loosening of that style, in the playfulness of 'saw'/'see' and 'finland'/'fenland'. *Electric Light* is Heaney's first proper post-Nobel collection: 1996's *The Spirit Level*

contains poems dated before 1995. The poems that return to the bucolic spaces of his first collection, and *Electric Light's* three eclogues, a genre which traditionally announces the beginning of a poetic career, can be seen to reannounce an *ars poetica* while continuing its evolution.²

Drawing a lineage also points to what has passed. The cultural initiations of *Death of a Naturalist* placed poetry as consolation for the loss of an ancestral mode of existence. The poet will protract an agricultural way of life through writing poetry about it, but a specific type of natural interaction has gone. Heaney's pastoral model there is Virgilian: the *Georgics* offer validation of Heaney's link between poetry and agriculture, in providing an account of – and at times a practical guide to – life on the land. But following the Nobel Prize, a mark of the peak of literary achievement which may also suggest that the poet has reached his peak, it is rather to the *Eclogues* that Heaney turns in his renaissance collection.

In 1935 Empson described pastoral's way of 'putting the complex into the simple', but the pastoral, as he showed in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, is a flexible mode.³ Although pastoral literature has settled generic elements and seemingly offers a stable view of the world, its purposes and effects vary. For Edna Longley, pastoral is not 'synonymous with "escapism"'. Tensions between Nature and culture, Nature and agriculture, Nature and society, Nature and art, "bee-loud glade" and invasive history, have long defined the pastoral tradition'.⁴ These tensions recognise change. The eclogue in particular is concerned with things passing, whether lost love, the changing seasons, or dispossession and the loss or alteration of nature itself. In addition, the eclogue, and especially one of its forms, the pastoral elegy, show that things can be given up and that it is possible to be reconciled to substitutes. A new lover can be found, a new season will come, a new place may console for the loss of a former environment, or, in the case of the pastoral elegy, the dead can be established as a natural figure.

In this way, pastoral poetry may have practical aims and effects. In a review of Peter Fallon's 2004 translation of the *Georgics*, Heaney described his vision of the practical application of Virgil's poem. The *Georgics* were written in or

around 29 BC, two years after Octavian's victory at Actium, the decisive battle of the civil war, and, according to Heaney, the poem was 'Virgil's dream of how his hurt country might start to heal'.⁵ Heaney also points out that, before Fallon, the last translation of the *Georgics* by an Irish-born poet, Cecil Day Lewis, was in 1940, 'when people were being urged to "dig for victory"'. Like the *Georgics*, the *Eclogues* have a practical use and a political value. As with Michael Longley's pastoral elegies from *Gorse Fires* to *Snow Water*, which offer an alternative space to war, Heaney's recent work has examined the ability of the eclogue and the pastoral elegy to unlock cycles of violence and stalemate, and to advance the possibilities of integration. Pastoral shows a concern for aftermath, but with the liberating spaces afforded by pastoral comes an ethical responsibility, in that as much as the poet-translator seeks to clarify, the hope that he offers may also mislead or betray. In some cases, an eagerness to surmount longstanding political problems, whether at home or abroad, involves equivocating over, or perhaps even condoning, the use of force.

In *Electric Light*, Heaney's translation of Virgil's ninth eclogue concerns the difficulty of healing the wounds inflicted by civil war. It concentrates on the use of the eclogue as political complaint, and reflects the tradition of pastoral lament in Ireland, a tradition which features prominently in the poems collected by Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella in *An Duanaire*.⁶ The poem concerns dispossession, and analyses the complexity of the suffering that affects both soldiers and civilians. Following Octavian's victory in the civil war, Virgil's family farm was confiscated. He went to Rome and appealed successfully against the confiscation, but following a change in governor in the Mantuan region the farm was given to a demobilised soldier and Virgil was forcibly evicted. Whether the poem refers directly to Virgil's experience, or to a fellow Mantuan farmer-poet's, a seemingly successful poetic appeal not to confiscate a farm has been made, but now the decision has been revoked. The poem itself may be a renewed attempt at appeal. In Heaney's translation, Lycidas says to Moeris, 'Shocking times. Our very music, our one consolation, / Confiscated, all but', suggesting that with the loss of this land comes the poet's inability to

write (p. 32). Dispossession causes pastoral poetry to change, moving from songs of plenitude and celebration to songs of exile, lament and the suffering or alteration of nature.

Pastoral poetry becomes the poetry of mourning, and in this way the damage done by the civil war is ongoing. The last lines of 'Virgil: Eclogue IX' gesture towards the failure of a new poetic appeal to the governor. Moeris says to Lycidas, 'That's enough of that, young fellow. We've a job to do. / When the real singer comes, we'll sing in earnest' (p. 34). The lines refer to the return of the master Menalcas, or to Varus, the governor who has renewed the decision to confiscate the farm. If Menalcas is Virgil, or another farmer-poet, he will be a kind of choirmaster in a new appeal to Varus, the connoisseur who will be so moved by the poetry that he reverses his decision. That such an appeal will fail – sharing the inefficacy of other protest poetry – is anticipated in Moeris's silencing of Lycidas: Lycidas wants to sing while he works, but Moeris urges a concentration on the task in hand, the necessity of getting his goat-kids to market, of earning a meagre living.

The poem is a pastoral elegy, a song of lament for a place, and that place can serve as the emblem of a land carved up by civil war. The inability to write songs of harmony between the farmer and the land may represent the loss of the republic and its ideals: Moeris's words on the bond between the land and poetry imply that celebratory poetry, the poetry of possession, can be written only in a time of peace. However, the poet, who celebrates the land and peace, may not be more important than the soldier, whose activity in fighting has secured that land and peace, and who now better deserves to own the farm.

Heaney's translation of this material may seem to suggest the necessary acceptance of the translated state, the new situation in Mantua and the new regime. However, the eclogue is an elegy which fails to offer consolation. Possible consolation lies outside the poem, in turning to Virgil's biography, and in applying the poem to that life. Through the patronage of the emperor, Virgil was able to celebrate the golden age while experiencing some of its benefits, in terms of personal and national security. 'Virgil: Eclogue IX' has the lines, 'But songs and tunes / Can no more hold out against brute force than

doves / When eagles swoop' (p. 31). Virgil's farm was lost to the greater interest of the empire, to the Roman eagle. Yet because of what he is, because of his skill in poetry, Virgil will acquire prosperity much greater than that which has been lost, and Augustus can use the poet to create monuments to his reign and the imperial peace, in the writing of the *Aeneid*.⁷ Moeris may say, 'An outsider lands and says he has the rights / To our bit of ground', but the power of poetry, of writing out history, is clear when he says 'All's changed'. This echo of Yeats's 'Easter, 1916' ('All changed, changed utterly'), is also an example of the historical moment as monument, where Yeats inscribes, 'I write it out in a verse - / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse'.⁸ The *Aeneid* plays out a search for origins in aftermath, and its use as the song of empire turns history into destiny. Poetry can indeed have a power which at least complements great historical change.

Virgil's life shows the lesson of giving up personal interest, accepting dispossession in choosing the national benefits that peace provides. Those benefits outweigh the value of holding on to the past, and although the pastoral song of lament may not realise political change or find consolation, the poem of war may celebrate peace, in demonstrating the cost of establishing that peace. Heaney's turning to the eclogue may stem from an exhaustion with violence, reprisal or war, just as Virgil's *Eclogues* were written in the midst of civil war, but Virgil's example shows that, although pain is deeply felt, it can be assuaged and made to progress into the song of consolation. Nevertheless, that consolation may also be seen as an apology for imperial war. The golden age may foster great art, but this art is in part the fruits of imperialism and virtual dictatorship. Songs of celebration are possible only when political security and strength have been assured, so movement away from the poem of loss towards accepting the new age is possible only when that future is able to sustain faith.

At the time of the *Eclogues*, and at the time of Heaney's translation, the poet must choose faith in the peace process, and give up the old intractable positions. The eclogue accepts change, and it does not matter how the peace is won. 'Bann Valley Eclogue', a loose reworking of Virgil's fourth eclogue, offers a vision of

that peace, and shows the consolation to which the song of mourning can lead. Virgil appears to the Poet and sets him the task of providing fitting words for certain concepts and the coming times, the task of writing, in effect, for the nation:

Poetry, order, the times,
The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth
And a flooding away of all the old miasma.

Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves . . .
But when the waters break
Bann's stream will overflow, the old markings
Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.
The valley will be washed like the new baby.

(p. 11)

Fixed notions of the domestic and of the tribe and the 'other' will be eroded in a clarifying stream of water, one which corrects by confusing, by symbolising interpenetration. There is a sense that the poet's work is instrumental in forming that open future, and that future and the role of poetry itself are increasingly international in prospect, which is evident in the gesture towards Israel in 'east bank from west'. This expansiveness, and the poem's hopeful, unlocking mood, is reflected in Heaney's relaxed, prosy hexameter. In Virgil's eclogue, the section containing the Latin words Heaney quotes, '*Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens*', announces the definite arrival of the new age, but in Heaney's version this remains in the distance. There is still a lot of work to be done, and dialogue to be established, to sort out these major categories, to establish accommodations and reconciliations. It is beyond the poem's scope to state explicitly what peace entails. The eclogue only opens up a different perspective, or as Ellen Zetzel Lambert puts it in her survey of pastoral elegy, 'a *setting* in which . . . questions may be posed, or better, "placed"'.⁹

'Eclogue IV' is Virgil's vision of the new golden age under Augustus, which is concentrated in the birth of a particular child. In Virgil that child is male, and has been connected with the birth of Christ, since the eclogues were circulated in or

around 37 BC. By reworking the child as female Heaney perhaps suggests a change from years of religious conflict. The Poet quotes the words '*Pacatum orbem*' from Virgil's poem, then alludes to a 'noon-eclipse' and 'millennial chill' (p. 12). The possibility of world peace is balanced with millennial anxiety, symbolised in the eclipse of 1999, and with the dark vision of Yeats's 'The Second Coming'. Rather than its 'rough beast' which 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born',¹⁰ Heaney hopes for the beneficence of a female golden child.

'The Second Coming' immediately precedes 'A Prayer for My Daughter' in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, and Yeats's 'Prayer' informs his eclogue. Indeed Edna Longley observes that 'In its constructive aspect "A Prayer for My Daughter" seems a version of Virgil's "messianic" Golden Age Eclogue IV'.¹¹ Just as Yeats's poem was written during the Anglo-Irish war, Heaney's offers the female child as a symbol of hope against, or as successor to, a period of national and international conflict or collapse: 'Eclipses won't be for this child. The cool she'll know / Will be the pram hood over her vestal head'. Heaney's poem also promises an abundant natural world, where 'Your pram waits in the corner. / Cows are let out. They're sluicing the milk-house floor'. This is a cornucopia gained, rather than the one lost, by 'the loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn', Maud Gonne, who loses this bounty because of 'An intellectual hatred', 'an opinionated mind'.¹² Heaney's golden child will be the emblem of an age where such entrenched political positions no longer exist: they have been washed away in the vision of the liberating stream of water. The coming age will fulfil the desires that Yeats expresses for his daughter and the next generation which will follow civil war.

The eclogue suggests that past problems can be overcome, past griefs assuaged by the uniting stream, and consolation concentrated in the natural figure, the child. The natural images bring mourning or aggrieved people together, in the way that Jon Silkin describes a traditional, unproblematic use of nature in some First World War poetry:

The sweetness of nature bestows itself upon the dead man,
no matter how terrible his death had been. Nature thus

joins with man as the principal mourner, and in such a way that, whether you hated your living enemy or not, you could respect his dead by bringing his and yours together in an elegiac image of nature.¹³

The natural brings warring factions together in an imaginative site that offers opportunity for reconciliation. In Heaney's eclogue, the natural provides an image of the gateway to that reconciliation, and an image of consolation, the harmonious future symbolised by the child. Pastoral can be used to offer a vision of a nation that insists upon essentialist notions of identity and belonging, to suggest that a sacred space should be held by a certain people; but here, rather than being a restricted or privileged space, pastoral works metaphorically to open up and to confuse categories.

Heaney's poem shows that after dispossession may come reconciliation. His version celebrates multiplicity, yet a crucial difference from Virgil's eclogue is Heaney's omission of a repetition of conflict. Virgil's poem tells of abundance in nature, of justice and peace, but also of war: 'a second warfare shall there be, and again a great Achilles be sent to Troy'.¹⁴ For Virgil, political and national stability will depend upon an imperial dictatorship. Peace requires the active maintenance of borders, relies on force. In addition, there can be peace without the integration that Heaney's stream of water represents. The poet perhaps takes the vision of a harmonious future too far, and the pastoral slips from anticipation into fantasy, imagining conditions removed from those in which people actually live.

Affirming too forcefully the possibilities that peace brings can distort our sense of the reality of that envisaged future. 'Glanmore Eclogue' is set in a country which has established peace and economic prosperity following a history of colonisation, a war of liberation, and civil war. The Republic offers a vision of stability that the new hope in the peace process in the 1990s seemed to be moving towards. The poem observes that certain territories and identities have been assured in a new political climate, but that such sacred spaces are in the course of opening out. The eclogue is such a distinctive space, but its lesson is of change. Dispossession is presented here negatively,

in favour of the multiculturalism or multi-ethnicity that forms the fabric of the contemporary state. Myles says to the Poet, 'Outsiders own / the country nowadays, but even so / I don't begrudge you', since the Poet is one such 'outsider' living in the country (p. 35). Poetry can guarantee certain customs and means of identity, but it can also venture beyond the given boundaries.

At the same time, the poem sets a limit on what can reasonably be expected from peace, and points out that peace brings its own problems. Those problems affect specifically a farmer and a poet here. Myles, the indigenous farmer, describes the difficulties and anxieties he faces in a changing world: 'But now with all this money coming in / And peace being talked up, the boot's on the other foot / . . . Small farmers here are priced out of the market' (pp. 35-6). The possibility of peace in the North has knock-on effects for the Republic, but the Republic itself offers a caveat for the North reminiscent of Yeats's 'Parnell', which addresses the 'cheering man': "Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone".¹⁵ Peace does not guarantee universal prosperity, but the poet has also been worrying throughout about his inspiration in peacetime, concerned that the anticipated creative watershed that conditions of peace may promise will not occur.

Heaney says that *Electric Light* is firmly conscious of 'mortalia', of 'people and things we must pass away from or that have had to pass away from us', and as much as these things have historical and political resonance, they also anticipate the poets who will succeed Heaney, and the type of poetry he and they will write.¹⁶ If eclogue is a statement on the times, it is also here a statement on Heaney's time as a poet. In 'Bann Valley Eclogue', he suggests that the poetry to come will have a greater freedom, because it will not be written against a backdrop of civil unrest. This does not mean that the poetry comes easily for him. The prospect of peace, and a settled position in history, brings creative anxiety, as Myles says to the Poet at the beginning of 'Glanmore Eclogue': 'A house and ground. And your own bay tree as well. / And time to yourself. You've landed on your feet. / If you can't write now, when will you ever write?' Heaney as the Nobel

laureate (the bay laurel) holds a dialogue with a figure whose name puns on Milesians or Milesius, the mythological ancestor of the Gaelic Irish race. So Heaney is answering to something atavistic, something present from the beginning. In a way, the poet has to answer to the man of the land, to continue to justify his profession, and the decision announced in his first collected poem, the decision to choose poetry in preference to the farm work of his father and ancestors.

Eclogue again shows its concern for origin and aftermath. The scale of Heaney's lineage and accountability is vast, and this weight, together with the pressure of finding new sources of inspiration, writing in and for a changing world while maintaining consistency, is great. In the poetry written before, and in the poetry to come, all the poet can do is provide a song for the present moment, a song of 'words that the rest of us / Can understand', to be sung 'here and now', as Myles requests. The poet does provide an idyllic song, of 'Summer, shimmer, perfect days', but the poetry only offers temporary relief from the financial difficulties the farmer is experiencing (p. 37). The farmer wants this escapist consolation, and the poet knows the limits of the pastoral. The pastoral song he offers betrays the reality of the conditions, as with the outline of peace in 'Bann Valley Eclogue'. Perhaps the poet's lack of inspiration is because of this knowledge that pastoral obscures, and so he would rather remain silent.

Pastoral can betray, but this is familiar territory for Heaney. His 1972 move from Belfast, in the midst of the Troubles, to Glanmore in County Wicklow, was perceived by some as a betrayal of artistic responsibility. The position of 'inner émigré' consisted of an oblique approach to political matters, while the pastoral of 'Glanmore Sonnets' of 1979 offered a luxuriant, peaceful vision, an alternative to war. Indeed Heaney wrote that 'I have occasionally talked of the countryside where we live in Wicklow as being pastoral rather than rural, trying to impose notions of a beautified landscape on the word, in order to keep "rural" for the unselfconscious face of rattle-taggle farmland'.¹⁷ Pastoral offers a sanitised view of a place. Heaney's engagement with pastoral can be criticised on two counts. First, in writing pastoral at all, he is not engaging with

political violence and death, the real conditions in which people are living, and the events which shape their lives. This is a betrayal of responsibilities, the charge of fiddling while Rome burns, and a problem which Heaney discusses in his essay 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', where he recalls how he and David Hammond felt unable to record a tape of songs against the immediate backdrop of explosions in Belfast one evening in 1972.¹⁸ Second, if the poet's pastoral is intended to reflect on war, in providing an alternative vision, invoking the conventions of pastoral can serve sectarian ideas. Pastoral may offer a vision of a luxuriant, unfallen and unpolluted world, and it is this vision for which people are prepared to die.

It is a long way, of course, from 'Glanmore Sonnets' to political violence, but the caveat in the use of pastoral must be considered. There is not such a great distance between pastoral and conflict in other poems that Heaney has written. The two criticisms above condemn the poet for writing pastoral at all, both for its perceived relevance and irrelevance to war: these are the arguments that surrounded Heaney's seeming sanitisation of violent death in 'The Strand at Lough Beg'. The poem restores Heaney's cousin Colum McCartney from 'Where you weren't known and far from what you knew' to a place of origin.¹⁹ In an imagined scene the poet walks with his cousin across the strand, 'through squeaking sedge / Drowning in dew':

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
 Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
 With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
 Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
 And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
 To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
 Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
 I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
 With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
 Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.²⁰

The lustration is performed with the delicacy of 'dab', 'drizzle' and 'low cloud', of 'lift', 'lay' and 'flat', as the body is

absorbed back into the environment. The earlier pastoral description has shown the land itself to be mourning, 'drowning in dew', with 'brimming grass' and the 'moss / Fine as the drizzle'. The pastoral earlier threatened with pollution by the murder, where the 'spent cartridges' of duck shooters become retroactively the bullets of the murder scene, is set in another condition of fall here in the dew, which will be the means of restoration. The condition of fall continues until the finality and exhaustion of 'flat', which is cognate with the humility that the Dantean rushes symbolise.

Heaney half-rhymes through the first six lines above (*aaabab*, or *aabbab*), towards the clarity of the fuller rhymes 'flat' and 'plait', 'cloud' and 'shroud'. The muddiness of the half-rhymes gradually clears towards purity, while the resounding 'flat/plait' rhyme moves from aftermath and exhaustion to the fertility of restoration. Violation by the murder and the continual weeping of mourning are changed in the space between 'flat' and 'plait' to the upward thrust of the rushes, as the land recovers the body. The *abba* scheme of the last four lines wraps up the body: the *b* couplet stitches the middle two lines together, while the *a* rhyme is plaited around them, sewing up the four lines in this way. Furthermore, the long vowel sound of the final enclosing word 'shroud', together with the repeated 'r' sounds of the last line, extend to wrap around the poem, referring back to and uniting with the initial 'All round' of the epigraph. The purpose of the imagined scene and the plaiting of rushes to lay on the dead body is like that of the flowers in 'Lycidas', which 'strew the laureate hearse', and its imagining of a resurrected figure: 'For so to interpose a little ease, / Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise'.²¹

The use of pastoral has enabled the poet to mourn. However, although the poet seals off the dead, the poem is not isolated, since it can be seen in aggressive terms. The Dantean and pastoral setting enables a marking of territory, both real and religious. The lustrating dew points to the Mass for the Dead, where in the collect the priest appeals to God to 'pour upon' the dead body 'the everlasting dew of Thy mercy'. The shooting rushes echo the barley which 'grew up out of the grave' in 'Requiem for the Croppies', and the sprouting oak of Heaney's Bloody

Sunday poem, 'The Road to Derry', written in 1972 but published in a revised form in the *Derry Journal* on 31 January 1997:

And in the dirt lay justice like an acorn in the winter
Till its oak would sprout in Derry
where the thirteen men lay dead.²²

Peter McDonald suggests that in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' the reader can 'see the poet . . . making the atrocity somehow bearable',²³ and the point is made by the poet himself in section VIII of 'Station Island'. But the reason for going over this old ground is to suggest that the death is made bearable not so much because it 'saccharine[s]' death by aestheticising it, but because that pastoral sweetening posits an entrenchment.²⁴ The man belongs essentially and immovably to a place. The poem refuses to give way, to have its territory altered, and the land itself is the only thing that can provide redemption. Using the natural to mourn makes violent death seem natural to the land, or violent death natural to Northern Ireland. The clarifying washing performed in the poem marks rigid boundaries, rather than the clarifying confusion of the stream of water in 'Bann Valley Eclogue'.

Pastoral can thus insist upon itself as a sacred or aggressively guarded space, instead of opening up its borders, which is the pattern of the eclogues. The challenge of pastoral in the circumstances of 'The Strand at Lough Beg' is to mourn without betraying an allegiance to the dead, but to mourn and establish a personal or wider sense of peace without creating a call for continued conflict. Pastoral must achieve the 'ease', the distracting consolation of 'Lycidas', but that illusion must not go so far that it becomes a vision of reality. There must be a limit to the scope of pastoral to effect redress.

The use of pastoral in these conditions goes beyond Northern Ireland, and Heaney's recent 'translation' of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 'Mycenae Lookout', takes up the idea of whether pastoral can achieve a realistic peace in a cycle of internecine war. The *Oresteia* analyses the length to which vengeance is carried out in order to right real or perceived wrongs, to repay

a debt or honour the dead. It assesses to what degree vengeance is tied up with justice when that justice is administered unequally, how atrocity should be discussed in aftermath, and how to open up mutual dialogue in order to heal.

As with the liberating stream of water in 'Bann Valley Eclogue' and the purifying dew of 'The Strand at Lough Beg', the use of water is central to some of the events of 'Mycenae Lookout' and its metaphors. The poem's first section, 'The Watchman's War', begins with the watchman recording that 'Some people wept, and not for sorrow – joy / That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy'.²⁵ In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra kills the king upon his return from war: Agamemnon must wash off the blood of those he has killed in battle, and it is this purification scene that provides Clytemnestra with the opportunity for murder. Water flows on Agamemnon's departure for war, blood on his return. The inversions here, of crying for joy when someone goes away to war and for sorrow upon his return, and of blood flowing not at war but at home, mean that the poem must seek to correct such dislocations.

Heaney's symbol of a seemingly hopeful future is of discharged soldiers working together to dig a well in the poem's final section. But the pastoral, harmonious vision may wash away injustices as much as it drives forward to establishing justice and mutual healing. It can mislead, in the way that Agamemnon is tricked by Clytemnestra: the queen's invitation to come inside and bathe fulfils the twin purposes of reconciliation between the two, and the king's need for ritual purification. Those things which should establish peace create further bloodshed. The watchman's use of the word 'abattoir' in the opening section brings us to Heaney's words in his Nobel lecture of 1995: 'It is difficult to repress the thought at times that history is about as instructive as an abattoir; that Tacitus was right and that peace is merely the desolation left behind after the decisive operations of merciless power'.²⁶

According to Neil Corcoran, the symbol of the well in 'Mycenae Lookout' offers 'a vision of an alternative to war'; but the vision may equally be a picture of the 'font of exhaustion'.²⁷ A cycle of bloodshed and reprisal is urged towards the

linear motion of water in the poem's final three stanzas, where a descent accesses an upward thrust:

And then this ladder of our own that ran
 deep into a well-shaft being sunk
 in broad daylight, men puddling at the source
 through tawny mud, then coming back up
 deeper in themselves for having been there,
 like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground,
 finders, keepers, seers of fresh water
 in the bountiful round mouths of iron pumps
 and gushing taps.²⁸

Only after descending into the mire of aftermath and working hard to establish proper dialogue, whatever that might be, can any aspiration towards peace be sustained. An open debate involves laying down arms, mutual prejudices and preconceptions, so people can come to be like 'discharged soldiers', and it is this which creates the clear, potent and cleansing jet of water.

The hopeful energy of the poem increases when reading its water imagery in reference to the words Heaney has the Chorus say near the end of *The Cure at Troy*, where

once in a lifetime
 The longed-for tidal wave
 Of justice can rise up,
 And hope and history rhyme.²⁹

In language that anticipates that of 'Bann Valley Eclogue', the Chorus urges the spectators to 'Believe in miracles / And cures and healing wells', and in the possibility of 'The outcry and the birth-outcry / Of new life at its term'.³⁰ Indeed, the well may be a symbol of Heaney's faith in the power of poetry to perform redress, to further mutual understanding, since the well in *Death of a Naturalist* was the poet's 'Personal Helicon'.

However, the water cannot wash away all traces of difficulty. The word 'discharged' in 'discharged soldiers' works on many levels: it suggests the relief of demobilisation and a concentration on establishing and sustaining peace in the aftermath of war, but

since a gun can also be 'discharged', it hints at possible future conflict. The difficulty of converting the energy of weapons to the cleansing water shooting from taps is great, particularly in such devastated conditions, where people are themselves devastated, where they are the waste or discharge of a bloody conflict. In addition, the contact with the earth may be an Antaeus-like restoration of force, and the civilisation being built may simply conceal or indeed foster discord, if people from opposing sides are forced to live together. The speaker tries to purify the blood of Agamemnon spilled in the bath, to bring it towards the water gushing from the taps, but the water may remain contaminated by the blood. Furthermore, the water may not be able to separate itself from the water of those weeping for joy upon the start of the war at the beginning of the poem.

Yet the intention towards peace, towards building civilisation from the ruins of war, exists none the less. Building a well is an example of manipulating natural forces, and this reflects the poet's use of pastoral, the form concerned with nature, in order to heal the wounds of civilisation. In this case, the control of the natural is a symbol of civilisation growing up from the natural, primitive condition of war. The poem may thus affirm a move away from nature, yet the hint of future conflict presents a continuous circular system, of civilisations collapsing, falling towards a natural state, and being rebuilt. In this way, art may offer only qualified consolation. There is a limit to the redress that pastoral and natural imagery can achieve.

Pastoral informs artistic responsibility in Heaney's most recent work on the subject. 'Known World', from *Electric Light*, assesses the implosion of the Balkans in the 1990s. As well as commemorating the dead, it examines the way in which countries secede from a union through a nationalist drive for self-determination. Nationalism in this case is driven by the need to establish a particular vision of a country, one which insists upon ethnic singularity, and which differentiates between those deemed 'natural' citizens, and those deemed 'unnatural' or 'alien'.

The pastoral vision is one of an artificial view of nature, of real conditions, and in 'Known World' it is present in the nationalist desire to make an artificial vision of a country real. The desire to

make real the disturbing illusion of ethnic or blood purity in order to establish freedom, prosperity and harmony involves genocide. 'Known World' remembers the 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

The open door, the jambs, the worn saddle
And actual granite of the doorstep slab.
Now enter another angel, fit as ever,
Past each house with a doorstep daubed 'Serb house'.

*

How does the real get into the made-up?
Ask me an easier one.

(p. 21)

Heaney's question is multi-layered. He asks how the perceived real events in Egypt make it into a story in the Bible, a supposedly 'real' or true book, and how those real or fictional events eventually reappear in conditions of actual massacres, massacres which are stimulated by the desire to make real an artificial view of a country. That idea of purity will always be illusory, yet it is really felt by some all the same. People are prepared to kill and be killed for it.

The Israelites were instructed to use a lamb's blood as the identifying mark, and this version of pastoral is clearly a long way from the idea of shepherds battenning their flocks.³¹ But pastoral is based upon instability, a vision of an alternative way of life more or less desirable than the one presently experienced. Since pastoral frequently serves the purpose of personal or national mourning, it offers a pattern of change and difference, relief and consolation. Consolation involves choosing that consolation over what has been lost, choosing that changed vision of the dead over pain or grief, or the continued attachment to the dead or a former way of life. However, consolation is not always an absolute salve. If it takes the form of vengeance, consolation can involve death. It can call for murder, and in this way also endanger the lives of those seeking vengeance. In *Placing Sorrow*, Ellen Zetzel Lambert insists that pastoral 'offers us a vision of life stripped not of pain but of complexity'.³²

The vision of 'ethnic cleansing', with its call to suffering and death, is consistent with the idea of redemption, and that redemption is found in achieving the pastoral, Edenic or unfallen state.

The type of belief that drives 'ethnic cleansing' is one that chooses the artificial over the real, and this is equivalent to declaring the real to be artificial. One reality is rejected in favour of a fabrication, another vision. The instability of the pastoral vision is due to both its allegorical capacity, as with its ideas of inside and outside, purity and impurity, and its artificiality. Fictions can be felt as 'real', and the real, or the current situation, unacknowledged or refused in favour of fiction. Pastoral offers a vision of 'cleansing' but is itself specious. Faced with a form of political idealism, the poet assesses the role of cultural forms such as poetry in affecting people's actions. The idealism of poetry to heal, to bring peace, may be hard to distinguish from the pastoral idealism that inspires people to kill, and the poet asks himself further questions, bewildered:

Were we not made for summer, shade and coolness
And gazing through an open door at sunlight?
For paradise lost? Is that what I was taught?

(p. 20)

The poem worries about the effects of allegory, and how allegory serves the instability of the pastoral vision. From a Bosnian Serb viewpoint, Passover may offer an allegorical reading of their exile and suffering within Bosnia-Herzegovina and reflect the desire to be delivered from such suffering by necessary acts of violence, but the two things are not the same. There is no equivalence between the situations. The pastoral aim here is to justify ethnic civil war, an aim which insists on singularity, but which is underpinned by artifice and duplicity.

Furthermore, the instability of pastoral allegory affects both aggressors and those wishing to help, clarify, or simply commentate on events. Pastoral's instability is served by the instability of its metaphorical application. For example, Michael Ignatieff records an insidious incident from the war in Bosnia. In 1992

concentration camps for Bosnian Muslims had been established in Manjaca, near Banja Luka in northern Bosnia. Radovan Karadzic allowed an ITN crew to film disturbing images of the emaciated men standing behind barbed wire. The footage recalled similar images of Nazi concentration camps, and Ignatieff writes that

For the Red Cross delegates on the scene, the moral equation between ethnic cleansing and the Holocaust was highly dubious. It soon became evident to them that the Serbs, in inviting the world's press, were cynically exploiting the West's Holocaust memories and inveigling Western governments into taking in Muslim refugees and thus abetting the ethnic cleansing of central Bosnia. The Serbs even managed to enlist the I.C.R.C. in that project: by Christmas of 1992, the I.C.R.C. had overseen the closing of all the camps in northern Bosnia and transferred most of their inmates to transit camps in Croatia and elsewhere in Europe.³³

The poet, in providing images of suffering and offering metaphorical parallels, shares an ethical responsibility in dealing with such complex issues. The international community that is forced to get involved in these events is mirrored by the poem's recollection of the international community of poets that gathered for the 1978 Struga Poetry Festival in Macedonia. That community's difficulty in assessing the political situation is clear in Heaney's unanswered questions. Indeed, the questions about pastoral and allegory may be unanswerable. But the ethical clarification comes from a *deus ex machina*, as the poem ends with the anticipation of the NATO air strikes on Kosovo. The last words look backwards, to the voice of the pilot bringing the poet home safely, and forwards to the voice of the pilot of a NATO bomber: 'All systems go' (p. 23). The 'systems' of pastoral and allegory result in real changes, real bloodshed. However successful or correct this course of action may be is again beyond the scope of the poem.

The need for an external agent to set boundaries and to decide right and wrong recalls how the cycles of violence are ended in

the *Oresteia*. In the *Eumenides*, Orestes is freed from the curse of blood vengeance of the house of Atreus by Athene. She turns the Furies into the Kindly Ones, and they bless Athens and the land, having accepted the new law, the perpetual constitution of the court of the Areopagus. For Heaney, however, the questions raised about allegory and the pastoral vision are too complex to be satisfied by a simple act of clarification. Pastoral's instability and its flexibility, at times the agent of peace and consolation, at others the instrument of dissatisfaction, lament or aggression, ensure its prominence in his poetry. The stylistic relaxation in *Electric Light* perhaps reflects the confidence drawn from a thirty-five-year career, and the award of the Nobel Prize. This confident energy runs through Heaney's assessment of his work and poetic inspiration in pastoral poems like 'At Toomebridge' and 'Glanmore Eclogue'. But there is also a more uncertain energy in the collection, one which is directed once more to the question of the poet's ethical responsibility, and this is an issue which Heaney has not so far managed to settle to his satisfaction. The peace outlined in the prophetic vision of 'Bann Valley Eclogue', for instance, is both a national and a personal artistic harmony, and it is a tranquillity advanced more in hope than in certainty.

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NOTES

¹ *Electric Light* (2001), p. 3. Unless otherwise stated all subsequent page references are to this collection.

² For the eclogue as initiatory mode, see Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1985), p. 14.

³ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1950), p. 23.

⁴ Edna Longley, 'Pastoral Theologies', in *Poetry and Posterity* (Newcastle, 2000), p. 90.

⁵ 'Glory Be to the World', review of *The Georgics of Virgil* translated by Peter Fallon, *Irish Times*, 23 Oct. 2004.

⁶ Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella (eds.), *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin, 2002);

E. V. Rieu translated 'Eclogue IX' as 'The Dispossessed', in Virgil, *The Pastoral Poems* (1972).

⁷ The *Eclogues* were circulated in or around 37 BC; the *Aeneid* was circulated after Virgil's death in 19 BC.

⁸ W. B. Yeats, 'Easter, 1916', in *A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford, 1997), pp. 85, 87.

⁹ Ellen Zetzel Lambert, *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton* (Chapel Hill, 1976), p. xiii.

¹⁰ 'The Second Coming', *Works*, p. 92.

¹¹ Longley, 'Pastoral Theologies', p. 93.

¹² 'A Prayer for My Daughter', *Works*, p. 189.

¹³ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (1972), p. 72.

¹⁴ Virgil, 'Eclogue IV', *Eclogues*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (1935), p. 31.

¹⁵ 'Parnell', *Works*, p. 162.

¹⁶ 'Lux Perpetua', *Guardian*, 16 June 2001.

¹⁷ 'In the Country of Convention: English Pastoral Verse', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (1980), p. 173.

¹⁸ In *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988), pp. xi-xxiii.

¹⁹ 'The Strand at Lough Beg', in *Field Work* (1979), p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²¹ John Milton, 'Lycidas', in *The Complete English Poems* (1992), p. 54.

²² 'Requiem for the Croppies', in *Door into the Dark* (1969), p. 24; 'The Road to Derry', *Derry Journal*, 31 Jan. 1997.

²³ Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1997), p. 63.

²⁴ 'Station Island', Section VIII, in *Station Island* (1984), p. 83.

²⁵ 'Mycenae Lookout', in *The Spirit Level* (1996), p. 29.

²⁶ 'Crediting Poetry', in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (1998), p. 456.

²⁷ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (1998), p. 202; Heaney, 'On the Road', in *Station Island*, p. 121.

²⁸ *The Spirit Level*, p. 37.

²⁹ *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (1990), p. 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-8.

³¹ Exodus 12: 1-10.

³² Lambert, *Placing Sorrow*, p. xv.

³³ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (1998), pp. 136-7.