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# 'A Pause for Po-Ethics': Seamus Heaney and the Ethics of Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I examine the connections between ethics and aesthetics in the writing of Seamus Heaney. Looking at Heaney's neologism of 'po-ethics', I move through his poetry and especially his translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*, and focus on his *Fourth Irish Human Rights Commission Annual Human Rights Lecture: Writer & Righter*, wherein he traces a number of strong connections between human rights workers and creative writers. The essay is written through a theoretical matrix of the ethical theories of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Simon Critchley. It looks at poems from Heaney himself, as well as work from Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Czeslaw Miłosz, and Primo Levi. It focuses on poetic language as a discourse that can act as a counterweight and as a form of redress on behalf of the dignity of the individual human being against the pressures of mass culture and society.

**Keywords:** Seamus Heaney; Jacques Derrida; Emmanuel Levinas; Seamus Heaney's *Human Rights Lecture*; po-ethics; ethics; aesthetics; the other; politics; redress; the individual; Shakespeare; Dante Alighieri; Simon Critchley; Czeslaw Miłosz; Primo Levi

## 1. Introduction: Po-Ethics

In the sequence 'Ten Glosses', from Seamus Heaney's 2001 collection, *Electric Light*, the seventh section is entitled 'W. H. Auden, 1907–73'. In this poem, writing of Auden's political and cultural influences, Heaney includes a single sentence: 'A pause for po-ethics' (Heaney 2001, p. 55). This neologism, while specific to the context of the poem, also has a broader resonance in Heaney's writing and in some broader thinking about poetry. It embodies, I will argue, Heaney's own strong imbrication of ethics and poetics in his work. For Heaney, poetry as a form of discourse is also a form of epistemology, in that it allows language to articulate aspects of the somatic, of the emotional, and of the unconscious that are not available to other more rational, normative forms of discourse. He sees ethics and aesthetics as inextricably bound up, because poetry allows for the creation of an alternative vision of how a fairer and more ethically driven world could be. Heaney has spoken of poetry as a 'moral and ethical force' (Heaney 1988, p. 40), and he has addressed issues concerning the role of poetry and the 'moral and ethical imperatives subsumed in it' (Heaney 1989, p. 37). In his writing, he is also acutely aware of the dangers of any over-simplistic conflation of the poetic and the politic, citing the words of Joseph Brodsky, who stated: 'If art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private' (Heaney 2010, p. 12); nevertheless, just as there is a defined relationship between the private and the public, so is there also a relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical realms and between the individual as an individual and the individual as a citizen.

The term 'poethics' has a history in academic discourse, though whether Heaney was aware of this or whether he coined the word independently is unclear (his use of the hyphen would seem to differentiate his use of the term from other uses of the term). What is clear, however, is that there is a serendipity of approach in the uses of the term, which is useful in the present context. Perhaps the

main proponent of this term is Joan Retallack in her book, *The Poethical Wager* (Retallack 2004), wherein she speaks of this concept as ‘a poetics of the swerve’. She sees swerves as ‘opportunities to usefully rethink habits of thought’ and goes on to cite ‘relativity theory, the quantum mechanical principles of complementarity and uncertainty’ as ‘major conceptual swerves with consequences in the culture at large, [and] ... Freud’s theory of the unconscious and, more recently, chaos theory’ (Retallack 2004, p. 1). For Retallack, poethics is a poetics of just such a swerve, of a movement away from the norm towards something new. She posits a particular connection with literature:

Literature (in contrast to journal writing) is an entry into public conversation. At its best it enacts, explores, comments on, further articulates, radically questions the ethos of the discourses from which it springs. Hence my use of the word *poethics*. Every poetics is a consequential form of life. Any making of forms out of language (*poesis*) is a practice with a discernible character (*ethos*). (Retallack 2004, p. 11)

For Heaney, poetry and ethics are similarly entwined, as he sees poetry as a genre wherein the truth can be told, arguing that ‘there’s such a thing as truth and it can be told—slant’ (Heaney and O’Driscoll 2008, p. 467). I would contend that his notion of po-ethics is just this—seeing poetry as a genre through which forms of truth can be accessed and expressed in a way that is not accessible to the more normative discourse of what Jacques Lacan would term the Symbolic Order. Po-ethics allows for a slanted perspective, a swerve, which looks at the ethical demands on life from just such a different perspective.

Heaney has spoken of poetry as a ‘moral and ethical force’ (Heaney 1988, p. 40), and he has addressed the role of poetry and the ‘moral and ethical imperatives subsumed in it’ (Heaney 1989, p. 37). Significantly, Lacan also sees the locus of the unconscious as ethical, as he makes the point that the ‘status of the unconscious, which, as I have shown, is so fragile on the ontic plane, is ethical’ (Lacan 1977, p. 33). To obtain a true sense of the ethical dimensions of knowledge, the unconscious must be involved in the mode of inquiry, and Heaney’s work, in poetry and prose, is predicated on such an involvement. Heaney interrogates the seeming truths of political essentialisms by positing intersubjective positions that are ‘all throughother’ (Heaney 1990, p. 48), to quote another of his neologisms, which is, again, interestingly, associated with ethical issues.

## 2. Derrida and Levinas on Ethics

In this paper, the term ‘ethics’ will be used in a sense that derives from the work of Emmanuel Levinas.

There are a number of theories on the relationship between ethics and literature: one could redact these as the Levinasian–Derridean tradition and that of Martha Nussbaum. This reading will focus on the former rather than the latter mode of thinking, as it offers greater insight into the connection I am positing between ethics and a particular use of language, specifically poetic language. Nussbaum is seen as the voice of a traditional, liberal, universal humanitarian mode of ethics. Robert Eaglestone has characterised her critical style as ‘epi-reading’, where ‘ethical positions shine through like light through a perfect window’ (Eaglestone 1999, p. 93). According to him, Nussbaum offers ‘a reductive and over-simplified understanding of the act of reading’ (Eaglestone 1999, p. 46), and while this may oversimplify her position, my own approach here will focus very much on language: my perspective will view language less as a transparent window and more like a stained glass one, which filters and affects what can be seen through it.

My own perspective has affinities with the work of Derek Attridge, who, in *The Singularity of Literature*, claims that ‘literature, understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading) solves no problems and saves no souls’ but notes that it ‘is effective, even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral programme’ (Attridge 2004, p. 4). Unlike Nussbaum, whose understanding of the ethical in literature is underpinned by the system of Aristotelian ethics, Attridge is instead focussed much more on language and its inherent ambiguity

and undecidability. His style of responsible or responsive reading has strong affinities with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who speaks of a similar undecidability at work in the consciousness of the author—of the ‘possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author’ (Levinas 1981, pp. 148–49). For Levinas:

I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one’s-skin, having-the-other-in-one’s-skin. (Levinas 1981, pp. 114–15)

Attridge sees literature and the responsible reading of literature as a cultural process that ‘involves the irruption of *otherness* or *alterity* into the cultural field’ (Attridge 2004, p. 136). In this sense, his view differs from Nussbaum’s work, as she sees literature as being about empathy and identification, whereas he sees it as a way of disrupting our normal understanding. As Attridge has summarised elsewhere, ‘reading a work of literature entails opening oneself to the unpredictable, the future, the other, and thereby accepting the responsibility laid upon one by the work’s singularity and difference’ (Attridge 2005, p. 111). I would go further and see literature as a way of offering a new type of ethical epistemology, one that is embodied in synecdoche by the term ‘po-ethics’.

Such an ethics has been defined by Simon Critchley, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, as the ‘putting into question’ of the ego, the subject, the self-consciousness, or ‘what Levinas, following Plato, calls the Same (*le même, to auton*)’ (Critchley 1992, p. 4). For Levinas, the ethical ‘is the location of a point of alterity ... that cannot be reduced to the Same’ (Critchley 1992, p. 5). Levinasian ethics is the domain of the other and of an inbuilt responsibility to the other. Given Levinas’s view that the imperative to enter into some form of relation with alterity can turn poetry from an aesthetic discourse into an ethical one, which brings forth the necessity of critique (Levinas 1989, p. 147), literature as a genre can serve as a penetrating critique of the ethicity of socio-political discourses. Levinas sees the ‘ethical essence of language’, from which derives our sense of obligation as originating in ‘the sensibility of the skin of the Other’s face’ (Critchley 1992, p. 179). This image of the face is contemporary and present; it is grounded in a sensibility to the other, a sensibility that is situated ‘on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves’ (Levinas 1981, p. 15). The face, for Levinas, is the guarantee of the humanity of the other; it is definitely not some form of verbal construct, manufactured from the cultural psyche of sameness. As Simon Critchley puts it, ‘ethics is always already political, the relation to the face is always already a relation to humanity as a whole’ (Critchley 1992, p. 226). In Levinasian ethics, humanity is signified by this very otherness, as symbolised by the face, and literature is a mode of discourse that expresses this ‘relation with the other’ (Levinas 1989, p. 143).

A similar stress on the importance of the ‘other’ is also found in the work of Jacques Derrida, whose relation to alterity, involving his responsibility to the other, is also a ‘responsibility toward the future, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear’ and can hence ‘come to transform what we know or think we know’ (Derrida and Attridge 1992, p. 5). Here, one thinks of Levinas’s statement that ‘language is born in responsibility’ (Levinas 1989, p. 82), implying that the responsibility involved is to the other—other traditions, other ideas, but, most essentially, other people in the present and future. For Derrida, an ethical decision is one which must make an ‘undecidable leap’ beyond all prior preparation for that decision (Derrida 1995, p. 47); it is a ‘trial of undecidability’ (Derrida 1988, p. 210). Keeping in mind the sense of responsibility to the other and the fact that each decision will be singular and individual, the decision, ‘must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated’ (Derrida 1994, p. 37).

Both Levinas and Derrida see ethics as this combination of the need for a decision in the absence of any rulebook and the need to predicate such a decision on a respect for the other as a human being—as an entity to whom we have an *a priori* responsibility. Derrida makes the point that ethics is precisely what is required for these decisions:

There are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction, because there is no rule. There are ethics because I have to invent the rule; there would be no responsibility if I knew the rule. There is responsibility only because there are these two aporetic structures in which I have to respond to two injunctions, different and incompatible. That's where responsibility starts, when I don't know what to do. Ethics start when you don't know what to do, when there is this gap between knowledge and action, and you have to take responsibility for inventing this new rule which doesn't exist. An ethics which guarantees is not an ethics. (Derrida 2003, p. 32)

In much of his poetry, Heaney writes about just such an ethics, and he uses the aesthetic as a way of giving such ethics a voice and of probing just such ethical predicaments. I would argue that his neologism 'po-ethics' is indicative of this strain in his thinking. There has been very little written about this term in Heaney's writing, but Rubin Moi has focussed on both the poem and the term. He sees the term as suggestive of 'at once Italian rivers, theoretical torrents, multiple abbreviations and scatological humour' and goes on to suggest, perceptively in my view, that the term can also 'be read as a defence of the collection's recuperation of Italian art from Virgil to the Renaissance, as a humanist stay against the subjection of standard values to critical scrutiny' (Moi 2007, p. 177)—in other words, as a form of redress against the instrumentality of the contemporary world.

### 3. Heaney: Poetry and Ethics

Heaney makes a telling point about the fusion of ethics and aesthetics in poetry as a form of discourse:

Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, 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 which it is generated. *The Divine Comedy* is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfactory comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way. (Heaney 1995, pp. 7–8)

The sense of poetry as a counterweighting force against the lived actuality of normal existence is significant here, as is the idea that it must account for all of the complexities that are involved in the human condition. Clearly, Heaney sees poetry as having a force in the public sphere—perhaps a light and individual force but one that, nonetheless, has a power to offer a different kind of knowledge to us about ourselves and about the dilemmas and decisions that we are forced to confront. As a 'comeback' and a 'counterweight', he seems to be suggesting that the aesthetic is a way of looking differently at ethical issues, offering a swerving of perspective.

It is not that he sees the ethical and the aesthetic in dialogue *per se*, nor that he sees one as supervening over the other; rather, he sees poetry as a way of 'telling' ethical stories in a way that has the ability to reach parts of a reader's understanding that is not strictly available to the more rational syntax and structural expectations of prose, be that literary theory or philosophy: hence the need for the neologism 'po-ethics', which describes the imbrication and complexity of the action of poetry in the public and private spheres as he sees it. In Heaney's writing, the connections between signifier and signified—between word and idea being represented by that word—are foregrounded, as he tries to use connections of figural language (namely rhyme, neologisms, homonyms, and homophones) to foreground connections at the level of the word to create epistemological depth charges, which will explode in the underwater of the unconscious and create new perspectives on notions of ethics and aesthetics.

Po-ethics is one of these, and it echoes an aspect of the thinking of Martin Heidegger. Heaney, similar to Heidegger, forces us to recognise the ‘complicity between the matter and the manner of thinking as the presence of figurality itself, as the folding or thickening of the limits of language’ (Allen 2007, p. 95). Language, while it can be logical, must also necessarily be more than logical, as it enunciates, albeit in slanted form, the unconscious; for Heaney, as well as Heidegger, ‘buried in all language is the rift between world and earth. Poetry reveals that rift. Revealing that rift poetry lets words speak’ (Harries 2009, p. 116). Far from seeing poetry as a decorative addition to language, Heaney sees it as a substantial mode of inquiry into many aspects of our human being. Heaney, in looking at the descriptive and the hallucinatory, is attempting to signify aspects of the unconscious as a form of knowledge that can be accessed, albeit in an indirect form, through poetic discourse or slant, as has already been noted. This term is borrowed from Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘Tell the Truth but Tell It Slant’, poem number 1129 in her *Collected Poems* (Dickinson 1924, pp. 506–7), and the fact that this term is borrowed from such an oblique poet as Dickinson is interesting in itself, as the many dashes and ellipses in her writing can be seen as opening a space for the unconscious dimension of her thinking and as giving a form to the undecidable that is central to poetry. It is as if she knows that there are aspects of her thought and feeling that cannot be written: ‘the Truth must dazzle gradually’ (Dickinson 1924, p. 507).

Dickinson’s idea of truth being told in a circuitous manner suggests that a valid telling of truth will allow for a gradual unfolding of a new and different perspective that will upturn previous expectations, and the slant that Heaney uses will be the associative and phonetic aspects of language, as well as images, which upturn normative perceptions. An example of such linguistic swerves is found in the seventh poem in the ‘Lightenings’ sequence in his volume *Seeing Things*, which refers to a medieval legend that recounts the story of a magical event. When the monks of the monastery at Clonmacnoise were at prayer, a ‘ship appeared above them in the air’, the anchor lodged in the ‘altar rails’, and then a crewman ‘shinned and grappled with the rope/And struggled to release it’ (Heaney 1991, p. 63). The poem ends with an abiding synecdoche of poetic thinking as that complex counterweight to the actual of which Heaney spoke in the earlier quotation:

‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,  
The abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So  
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
Out of the marvellous as he had known it. (Heaney 1991, p. 63)

Poetry, the aesthetic, allows for an alternative definition of the marvellous and the mundane, for a revision of the normal perspective, and the po-ethic is that space where alternate notions of ethics can be trialled and embodied in a mode of language where the rhymes of the signifier can create non-syntactical attachments to the notions of the related signified. In this poem, the ‘marvellous’ is really a matter of perspective and context as opposed to anything magical, and poetry is the genre that allows for this altered perspective: the poem really is a working model of inclusive consciousness. Poetry offers a different, skewed relationship to the normal paradigms of society and culture. It definitely does not simplify.

What is key for Heaney is that poetry, while outlining a different and possibly better-imagined reality, should nevertheless be connected to our own reality and have some sense of responsibility to that reality. In this sense, Heaney’s ideas are in line with those of a number of other aesthetic thinkers, who have pondered and probed the role of poetry in the public sphere as a space wherein alternative ethical paradigms can be given face and voice. For Theodor Adorno, art is a force field encompassing ‘ethical, metaphysical and logical, as well as aesthetic in the immediately recognisable sense of that term’ (Wilson 2007, p. 44), while Lacan’s view of the locus of the unconscious as being ethical has already been noted. Heaney’s po-ethics can be seen as analogous to Simon Critchley’s views on the role of poetry with respect to philosophy and to reality:

Poetry is the imagination touching reality. Poetry allows us to see things *as they are*. It lets us see particulars being various. Nevertheless, and this is its peculiarity, poetry lets us see things as they are anew, under a new aspect, transfigured, subject to a felt variation. The poet sings a song that is both beyond us yet ourselves. Things change when the poet sings them, but they are still our things: recognizable, common, near, low. We hear the poet sing and press back against the pressure of reality. (Critchley 2005, p. 11)

Pressing back against reality is exactly what Heaney is describing in his above-cited notion of poetry as a counterweighting function against ‘the purveyors of ready-made meaning’ (Heaney 1988, p. 91). However, this can never be an overt declaration, a constative demand to be ethical, as this is not the affective domain of poetry. Instead, poetics signifies a type of language that is performative and that, through linguistic defamiliarisation, suggests new connections and a slanted perspective on truth, and one of these core po-ethic terms that he uses to explore the impact of poetry on ethical matters is the notion of redress.

This idea of poetry as a genre that offers access to, and expression of, a specific notion of ethics is at the core of this reading of Heaney. It is the genre, I would argue, that allows expression of ‘being-in-one’s-skin’, while at the same time ‘having-the-other-in-one’s-skin’ (Levinas 1981, pp. 114–15). As Critchley puts it:

Poetry allows us to see things as they are. It lets us see particulars being various. Nevertheless, and this is its peculiarity, poetry lets us see things as they are anew, under a new aspect, transfigured, subject to a felt variation. The poet sings a song that is both beyond us yet ourselves. Things change when the poet sings them, but they are still our things: recognizable, common, near, low. We hear the poet sing and press back against the pressure of reality. (Critchley 2005, p. 11)

I would agree with Critchley here that there is a level of knowledge that can only be expressed by poetry—by a specific discourse wherein the sound, shape, placement, and connections across sense and meaning are all valued signifiers of the complexity and scope of poetry as a mode of thinking. In poetry, ‘language does not simply efface itself in delivering us over to that of which it speaks, but rather the tonality of the word is brought to resonate’ (Sinclair 2006, p. 141), and this in itself is a different form of knowing about the world. It can be philosophical and epistemologically valid but in a different way: ‘all philosophical thinking, even the severest and most prosaic, is in itself poetic, yet never is poetry’ (Mugerauer 1990, p. ix). For both Heidegger and Heaney, poetry is a form of thinking, albeit thinking differently, that includes the other and the unconscious, the unknown and the other. It is a form of knowledge that involves thinking, feeling, and a response to the associative connections of words, sounds, and unconscious felt connections within language as connections between self and other.

#### 4. Poetry and Redress

In his 1995 collection, *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney probes the etymology of the term ‘redress’, demonstrating once again the centrality of the signifier, as he speaks of ‘fifteen separate meanings’ of the verb, noting that almost all of them are ‘obsolete’, before observing a single core meaning: ‘to set (a person or a thing) upright again’—to ‘restore, re-establish’ (Heaney 1995, p. 15). Having set up this quite social meaning of the word, a meaning replete with ethical overtones, pointing as it does to ‘poetry’s possible service to programmes of cultural and political realignment’, Heaney goes on to stress that he is not looking for poetry to exercise its force in ‘earnest, morally premeditated ways’; instead, he is professing ‘the surprise of poetry as well as its reliability’ and what he terms ‘its given, unforeseeable thereness, the way it enters our field of vision and animates our physical and intelligent being’ (Heaney 1995, p. 15), and he gives what might be termed a very po-ethic image to underline this aspect of the power of the poetic image, which he sees as having something of the same force as:

those bird-shapes stencilled on the transparent surfaces of glass walls or windows must suddenly enter the vision and change the direction of the real birds’ flight. In a flash, the shapes

register and transmit their unmistakable presence, so the birds veer off instinctively. An image of the living creatures has induced a totally salubrious swerve in the creatures themselves. (Heaney 1995, p. 15)

Here, the image has a real effect and impact on reality, but it always remains an image. It is this 'both/and' logic that Heaney sees as central to po-ethic thinking. It is connected to the real world, as Critchley has noted, while at the same time being of a different order. So, the images of the birds on the glass are linked with the real-world birds but are nevertheless qualitatively and ontologically different from them: they mimic nature but are different from nature and can have an effect on nature—an effect that is a swerve from the normal—and here, we return to Retallack's ideas of poethics and the swerve from the normal. It is as if art has a value *qua* art, but also has a value through its swerving slanting effect on the reality that it touches and, in some way, transforms.

Here, we see Heaney embodying a point made by Roland Barthes about poetic language, which 'initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and over-nourishing signs' and which is opposed to the social function of language, because 'to have recourse to a discontinuous speech is to open the door to all that stands above Nature' (Barthes 1978, pp. 48–49). Poetic language has an ability to express and access aspects of experience that are silenced in normal discourse, as it belongs, as Maurice Blanchot observes, 'neither to the day nor to the night but always is spoken between night and day and one single time speaks the truth and leaves it unspoken' (Blanchot 1982, p. t276). In his final discussion of the polysemic meanings of the word 'redress', Heaney cites a hunting context, where the word can mean 'to bring back (the hounds or deer) to the proper course', and sees this meaning as significant in that 'there is no hint of ethical obligation; it is more a matter of finding a course for the breakaway of innate capacity, a course where something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep ahead into its full potential' (Heaney 1995, p. 15). It is here that his sense of the po-ethic can be seen at its fullest: it is not that 'redress' means one or the other; it is, rather, that 'redress' means an imbrication of all of these different senses of the term. It is another example of an undecidable. So, while poetry may not have a *de jure* claim to instruct others to act ethically, it can, *de facto*, by embodying ethical stances in its own language, have an ethical affect and effect on its readers, just as the stencilled bird-shapes can have an effect on the real birds with whom they come into contact.

Of course, there is a poetry that verges on the role of public prophecy or what Heaney has termed 'the solitary role of the witness' (Heaney 1995, p. 4), and here, the ethical warrant is clear on the words on the page. However, there is what might be called an undermusic to poetry, and here, too, ethical messages are held and sometimes voiced gently so that their effect is not sudden but gradual. Citing a review by Eavan Boland of the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Heaney notes approvingly Boland's views on poetic tone. For Boland, tone is far more than the surface voice through which the poem is uttered; instead, 'its roots go deep into the history and sociology of the craft', and for Boland, 'tone is not a matter of the aesthetic of any one poem. It grows more surely, and more painfully, from the ethics of the art. Its origins must always be in a suffered world rather than a conscious craft' (Heaney 1995, p. 134). Heaney has quoted this comment, as it segues very much with his own views on the embedded nature of the ethical perspective in the very genre of poetry: 'this last sentence is a wonderful formulation of what we seek from any poet's undermusic' (Heaney 1995, p. 134). In a deep sense, the very heart of poetry can be seen as ethical, as it is written about the suffering in the world and can be a way of transcending such suffering—of aestheticising such suffering and turning it into a cathartic form of beauty—or else a way of universalising such suffering, giving rise to empathy. Po-ethics allows for the centrality of ethics within the aesthetic, and in the *Fourth Irish Human Rights Commission Annual Human Rights Lecture*, which Heaney delivered on 9 December 2009, he teases out the intrinsic textual and subtextual connections between poetry and ethics.

## 5. Writer & Righter

The title of this lecture is po-ethic in its imbrication of the ethical and the aesthetic. It is entitled 'Writer & Righter', as through the homophones involved, it focuses attention on the chiming of the

signifiers, which then leads us to look for a deeper connection at the level of the signifieds. It is a classic example of what Roman Jakobson has termed ‘the poetic function’, where the principle of equivalence is projected from ‘the axis of selection onto the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence’ (Jakobson 1971, p. 704). In this sense, the connections between words are no longer purely syntactically connected but are also driven by associative, aleatory types of relationships at the level of phonetic association—relationships that are redolent of the unconscious: in a sense, signifier and signified are throughother in such cases. Poetry as a discourse, through sonic connections such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and para-rhyme, sets up different paradigms of connection between words at the level of sound—connections that can also liberate other meanings from these words. For Lacan, the ‘unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language’ (Lacan 2006, p. 737), with imagination touching reality, and it is through the full range and power of language that aspects of the unconscious can be expressed and accessed. Thus, the structure of poetry, which posits connections at the level of the signifier, the word, as well as at the rational level of the signified, the meaning, enables the different levels of connection to reinforce each other and complicate the meaning, thus allowing for an ethical undermusic to reach the reader in an unusual and counterweighting manner. I would suggest that these connections at the level of sight, sound, and rhyme are all signifiers of the unconscious charges that surround words and sentences. Meaning both coheres and inheres, and poetic language, through its associative and imagistic dimensions, is highly attuned to this aspect of signification.

In the lecture, Heaney begins by quoting the *United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, specifically the first article: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood’ (Heaney 2010, p. 7). This declaration is not poetic or po-ethic; it is a constative statement that sets out a truth that is shared between the members of the United Nations. However, Heaney gradually weaves a po-ethic strand into the essay as he points to connections between the focus on human dignity in this article and the echoes of what he terms ‘many of the great foundational texts of western civilization’, such as those from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Christ’s *Sermon on the Mount*, the *American Declaration of Independence*, and the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man*, which can be heard in the imaginative hinterland of the declaration (Heaney 2010, p. 7). Rightly, he sees these as foundational public texts, whose remit is to persuade and inspire large groups of people, and identifies an ethical connection between such texts and the *United Nations Declaration*. However, Heaney also speaks of how ‘the imaginative work of individual creative writers has been equally influential and ameliorating in the formation of human consciousness’, citing Lear on the heath as he feels empathy with other ‘poor naked wretches’ (Heaney 2010, p. 7).

In this speech, Lear, abandoned by his daughters, bereft of all his retainers and the trappings of wealth, comes to a moment of catharsis and anagnorisis as he realises the nature of humanity:

Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just. (Shakespeare 2009, III. 4, pp. 28–36)

This is a powerful poetic statement of the need to ensure human dignity, and it offers a counterweight to, and a redressal of, the previous behaviour of Lear when he was insulated from storms, both physical and emotional, by his wealth and power: ‘Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;/Robes and furred gowns hide all’ (Shakespeare 2009, IV, 6. pp. 64–65). It is interesting that this moment of anagnorisis comes when Lear has no actual power so that the change is an individual one, as Lear no

longer has the authority to initiate any broader societal change; thus, here, the swerve in attitude is personal as opposed to social. However, generations of readers have been influenced by the ringing tones of this speech and by the core appeal for human dignity across all social classes and barriers: it is a po-ethic swerve from his previous perspective, which focuses on responsibility to the other.

Heaney also cites Dante's 'mighty affirmation of the privileges and elevated destiny of our species' in the in the 36th Canto of *The Inferno* (Heaney 2010, p. 7):

*Considerate la vostra semenza:  
fatte non foste a vivere come bruti  
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza. (Inferno, XXVI 118–120)*

Remember who you are, what you were made for;  
Not to live like brutes, but for the quest  
Of knowledge and the good. (Alighieri 2002, p. 184)

In this canto, Ulysses is asking his crew to sail into unknown waters and into unknown territory, and thus, they become symbols of the human desire and ability to 'transcend the boundaries of pettiness and self-interest' (Heaney 2010, p. 7). The idea that the goal of humanity is a search—an ongoing search—for 'knowledge and the good' is profoundly ethical, and again, in an imaginative piece of writing, this phrase, while not capable of changing a society or a culture, does, in the words of Critchley, touch reality and, to some extent, transform it for the reader of the canto. An imaginative scene can often have a very insightful effect on reality, and just like the stencilled birds, the words of Shakespeare and Dante have deeply influenced what we see as core human qualities and abilities. They exemplify the role of literature as a critique of the actual. As such, these literary texts fuse the personal with the societal and the aesthetic with the ethical, offering guidelines through imagined example. In short, they are po-ethic. Both Shakespeare and Dante, while creating works of imaginative beauty, also express a responsibility to other humans, to the dignity of the human condition, and to the intrinsic value of the other.

## 6. The Cure at Troy

Heaney shows the same quality in his translation of Sophocles' drama *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*. In this play, the Greeks come looking for the wounded Philoctetes with the mission of stealing his bow, without which Troy cannot be taken. They attempt to do this by deceit; as Odysseus puts it, they were 'Greeks with a job to do' (Heaney 1990, p. 3), and ethical considerations were very much secondary to the aim of getting the bow and bringing it back to Troy. Odysseus can rationalise almost anything, telling Philoctetes that his 'aim has always been to get things done/By being adaptable' (Heaney 1990, p. 57), and this adaptability is grounded in his tribal loyalty. In answer to the ethical question about the lies that have been told, he gives the classic response of political pragmatism: 'But it worked! It worked, so what about it?' (Heaney 1990, p. 65). The repetition here underlines the performative aspect of the sentence. For Odysseus, the end does justify the means, and the repetition serves to underline his confidence in this mode of action: his responsibility is to the same '*le même, to auton*', in this case, the Greeks as opposed to the other.

In the climactic confrontation of the play, Neoptolemus, who had shared this perspective earlier—'I'm under orders' (Heaney 1990, p. 51)—and who had lied to Philoctetes in order to obtain his bow, realises the error of his ways and becomes a more complex character through the introduction of an ethical strand to his *persona*. In a colloquy with Odysseus, the gradual opposition between pragmatic tribal politics and a more open humanistic ethics is unveiled. In response to Neoptolemus's statement that 'I did a wrong thing and I have to right it' (Heaney 1990, p. 52) and to his further remark that he is going to 'redress the balance' and cause the 'scales to even out' (Heaney 1990, p. 65) by handing back the bow, Odysseus replies in clichés: 'Act your age. Be reasonable. Use your head.' Neoptolemus' reply demonstrates the gulf that exists between the two: 'Since when did the use of

reason rule out truth?' (Heaney 1990, p. 66)—a comment that echoes Dante's view of the human need to find knowledge and truth.

For Odysseus, 'rightness' and 'justice' are values that are immanent in the ideological perspective of the tribe or community. There is no critical distance between his notions of myth and history. He sees no sense of any transcendental or intersubjective form of justice in what Neoptolemus is attempting: for him, the dignity of the individual is fine, as long as that individual is a Greek. When Neoptolemus speaks of 'doing the right thing', he is answered by the voice of the tribe: 'What's so right about/Reneging on your Greek commission?' Their subsequent interchange deserves to be quoted in full, as it is a *locus classicus* of the conflict between ethics and politics—between a view of self and other as connected and mutually responsible, as opposed to that of self and other as opposed and in conflict:

ODYSSEUS

You're under my command here. Don't you forget it.

NEOPTOLEMUS

The commands that I am hearing overrule

You and all you stand for.

ODYSSEUS

And what about

The Greeks? Have they no jurisdiction left?

NEOPTOLEMUS

The jurisdiction I am under here

Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek.

ODYSSEUS

You've turned yourself into a Trojan, lad. (Heaney 1990, p. 67)

In this exchange, the critical distance already spoken of is evident in the value-ethic of Neoptolemus. The view of Odysseus is binary—one is either Greek or Trojan; there is no other alternative. In a ringing assertion earlier in the play, as Neoptolemus begins to have some form of sympathy with Philoctetes, he says 'I'm all throughother. This isn't me. I'm sorry' (Heaney 1990, p. 48).

'All throughother' is a neologism that captures the imbrication of self and other in an ethically driven aesthetic of identity. The term 'throughother' itself, though, has a poetic history—one of which Heaney may have been aware. In Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', the title refers to the Cumaean Sibyl, who wrote prophecies on oak leaves arranged inside the entrance of her cave, but if the wind blew and scattered them, she would not reassemble the leaves. Therefore, the poem speaks to a form of knowledge that needs to be interpreted without any transcendental validation or guidance. It is a knowledge that is 'throughother':

For earth her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end, astray  
or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; self ín self steedèd and páshed—quíte  
Disremembering, dísmémbering áll now. (Hopkins 2014, p. 72)

One can see that Heaney would be attracted to this notion of a genre-specific knowledge that is dependent on the relationship between the now randomly arranged oak leaves. There are numerous permutations, but no absolute redeemable meaning. Moreover, these notions of alterity have permeated the self, and the singular has become more plural and more complex.

The word also appears in the poetry of Robert Burns, in his poem 'Halloween'. Here, Burns is writing about prophecy and occult knowledge that are seen as central to this festival:

Then, straught or crooked, yird or nane,  
They roar an' cry a' throu'ther;  
The vera wee-things, toddlin, rin,  
Wi' stocks out owre their shouther. (Burns 2013, p. 163)

Mortal and immortal; self and other—once again, the term has an ethical origin. Heaney has written about both poets, and while it might seem like special pleading on the part of my argument, the two poets from whom this term originates are among the most linguistically defamiliarised in the poetic spectrum; thus, the word can be seen as a synecdoche of a sense of ethics that can be voiced by poetic language and expressed in poetic thinking.

In his poem 'A Birl for Burns', Heaney praises the poet's ability to go beyond poetic norms:

For Rabbie's free and Rabbie's big,  
His stanza may be tight and trig  
But once he gets the sail and rig  
Away he goes. (Burns 2008, p. viii)

As so many philosophical systems have probed and problematised that difference between self and other, this neologism is po-ethic in its ability to take a new signifier to create new signifieds of identity and selfhood. In both the writing of Hopkins and Burns, this process is furthered, and in terms of language and of the Levinasian sense of the skin of self and other, only poetry or po-ethic thinking can fuse selfhood and alterity in such an ethical construct. It is worth noting that, above, Neoptolemus is talking about himself and is not trying to persuade anyone else. It is a poetic statement of an imagined sense of identity that does not exist but that could. It speaks to the dignity of the relationship between human beings—between self and other—and it is allowed by the swerve of po-ethic language.

By speaking about an alternative sense of identity to that espoused by Odysseus, Neoptolemus does not set out to proclaim the need for change; instead, he plants a counterweight—something alternative, a differential choice—in the minds of others. However, the important thing here is that change—po-ethic change brought about through a defamiliarisation of language—has occurred in the individual. In *Writer & Righter*, Heaney sees this achievement of change as a trope that connects writers and human rights workers: 'that need for justification which writers feel when faced with a world of pain and troubles and how the need gets fulfilled' (Heaney 2010, p. 8). He goes on to cite the importance of how the aesthetic engages with the ethical by citing a term coined by the Italian Modernist poet Eugenio Montale, 'the second life of art', which Montale equates with art's 'obscure pilgrimage through the conscience and memory . . . Its entire flowing back into the very life from which it took its first nourishment' and its emergence into 'the life of everyday circulation' (Montale 1982, p. 22).

For Heaney, the second life of art's pilgrimage is fuelled by po-ethics, by a broadening of language so as to stretch the imagination and the realm of meaning into new dimensions. As already noted, he uses a po-ethic device here by looking at the homophonic connections between the artist and the activist:

However, I begin also with that old familiar unease which I always feel before an audience that includes the doers rather than the discourses, people more active on a daily basis in the courts of law than in the courts of poetry, people who would incline to spell the word writer with the letters r-i-g-h-t-e-r rather than the letters w-r-i-t-e-r. My concern, therefore, is with the serious question posed by that bit of wordplay: the question whether it is 'right on', in the faded old idiom of the Sixties Californian counter culture, whether it is 'right on' to write on, as the term is usually understood by an author, to write on for the sheer joy of it in face of the miseries of the world. Whether, to put it another way, ethical obligation shadows the aesthetical vocation. (Heaney 2010, p. 9)

This is po-ethic in the extreme, as the image of the ethical shadowing the aesthetic and vice versa, is one that cuts to the core of Heaney's lecture. He is looking very much at the individual writer and reader and how change and development in the writerly sphere are generally individual as opposed to group centred. As he did in *The Government of the Tongue*, in this lecture, Heaney looks to writers from totalitarian regimes and those from post-war Europe as test cases of how poetry can be both true to itself as well as being ethically valid in times of stress.

## 7. Miłosz, Levi, and Camus

Here, as elsewhere, the figure of Czesław Miłosz is significant. Having survived the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, he went on to write some highly significant poetry, and for Heaney, his status is due, in no small way, to his posing of the following question with respect to the interplay of the ethical and the aesthetic:

What is poetry that does not save  
Nations or peoples?  
A connivance with official lies.  
The song of drunkards whose throats are about to be cut. (Miłosz 2001, p. 77)

For Heaney, it is Miłosz's awareness of 'poetry's frailty in the face of the atrocious' that makes him a strong voice, both ethically and aesthetically. The fact that poetry as a discourse has no real societal effect makes its raising of its voice all the more ethically valuable. Heaney goes on to look at a poem by the survivor of Auschwitz, Primo Levi, called 'Shema' and sees it as being of value in terms of the connection between ethics and aesthetics:

You who live secure  
In your warm houses,  
Who return at evening to find  
Hot food and friendly faces:  
  
Consider whether this be a man,  
Who labours in the mud  
Who knows no peace  
Who fights for a crust of bread  
Who dies at a yes or a no.  
Consider whether this is a woman,  
Without hair or name . . . .  
  
Consider that this has been:  
I commend these words to you.  
Engrave them on your hearts  
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,  
When you go to bed, when you rise.  
Repeat them to your children.  
Or may your house crumble,  
Disease render you powerless,  
Your offspring avert their faces from the sun. (Levi 1988, p. 9)

What is most interesting about this poem is the fact that it focuses, not on the society or the countries that are expected to deal with such atrocities and such barbarous treatment of people, but rather on the ordinary people who live in houses and whose context is that of the familial as opposed to the political or cultural. Heaney's attraction to the poem is precisely because its language is so different from the *Declaration of Human Rights*, whose force is political and moral; here the force of the language, what might be termed its po-ethic force, is rhetorical and personal. It may have the same theme as the *Declaration*, but the po-ethic force is different. Heaney notes the 'mighty rhetorical and emotional power' of the structure of the poem, 'beginning with a note of implied accusation and ending with a potential curse, commanding attention because of its repeated imperatives—'consider, consider, consider, engrave, repeat'—but commanding also because of its agonized awareness of human cruelty and human suffering' (Heaney 2010, p. 11). The fact that it is written by someone who we know has survived one of the most horrendous regimes in history also adds depth to the words and to the feelings and emotions that are signified in these words.

What is also po-ethically significant is the role of the family and the home in the poem. The addressees are seen as people with homes, children, and friendly faces—people who ‘live secure’. These people are asked to ‘consider’ the plight of those who are bereft of these human connections, but it is more than this. The core question is whether, without these conditions, one is still human at all, and the poem asks the reader to consider and weigh this. The poem asks us to consider whether one is still a man when one knows no peace, works in mud, fights for food, and dies on command. In a way, it is the same question as the one posed by Lear on the blasted heath, where he notes that each person, regardless of social condition, has a dignity and a common humanity. Indeed, there is an echo in these lines of the ‘houseless heads and unfed sides’ and the ‘looped and windowed raggedness’ of the wretches who are exposed (Shakespeare 2009, III. 4, pp. 30–31), as both poets look to value another who seems almost valueless. The tone here of this poem is very much redolent of Boland’s idea of the suffered world. The language used to decide on life or death has no notion of considering or weighing ideas; it is monosyllabic and declarative: ‘dies at a yes or a no’. Such imperative declaratives are probably the polar opposite of poetry—a form of counterweight or redress where language is used to probe the edges of the existing paradigms. Instead, the language here is cut and dry. The question of whether a woman can be a woman without hair or a name develops the interrogation of the ontology of humanity, but as is typical with poetic language, further questions float in the poem’s undermusic: if the victims of a regime that denudes them of seminal aspects of humanity are having their humanity questioned, surely further questions can be asked about the people who are exercising the power of life and death over these victims and of the people in houses with families who do nothing to stop this. The poem ends with a demand for a common humanity, where, again, language is used to underscore this demand, as the words are commended and the readers are enjoined to ‘engrave them on your hearts’ and to ‘repeat them to your children’. For Heaney, in this poem, ‘the etymological relationship between the words ‘author’ and ‘authority’ is more than usually intimate and fortifying’ (Heaney 2010, p. 11).

Heaney also invokes Brodsky in his reading of this poem and in his discussion of the po-ethic work of poetry. Brodsky ‘believed steadfastly in poetry’s ability to work to good emotional and spiritual effect within each individual’, and once again, it is on the individual that poetry works best:

Poetry, however, was not in the business of mass education. It was not there to brainwash people. Instead, Joseph equated it with that which is heard at a profound level on the individual’s inner ear, that which is truly h-e-a-r-d as opposed to that which is a mass produced message directed at the h-e-r-d. (Heaney 2010, p. 12)

Once again, the defamiliarisation of language works very well to outline the connections between listening to an inner voice and listening to the official lies of which Miłosz spoke. Poetry is often the voice of the human without a name or without a voice, and Heaney quotes the work of Albert Camus, from his Nobel Address, who notes that the silence of an unknown prisoner is enough to provoke the writer when ‘he manages not to forget that [prisoner’s] silence, and to transmit it in order to make it resound by means of his art’ (Camus 1957). The writer attempts to make the silence of the prisoner h-e-a-r-d even though that voice has been drowned out by the voices, or the official lies, of the h-e-r-d.

So, the notion of a pause for po-ethics is one that, while central to this reading of the ethical and aesthetic imbrications that are to be found in the writing of Seamus Heaney, is also something that inhabits a lot of poetic language. Poetry as a space wherein the individual can be restored to him or herself is a given of such work, and poetry as a genre allows for that self-reflective space. When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, the citation mentioned his poetry’s ‘combination of lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past’. Bernard O’Donoghue has made the telling point that ‘this summary is impressively comprehensive, not least in emphasizing the “combination” of the lyricism and the ethics. The two cannot easily be untangled in Heaney’s work’ (O’Donoghue 2016, p. 219). I hope this essay has demonstrated that this is the case: for Heaney, po-ethics is at the very centre of his poetic thinking, and to paraphrase the poet himself, it does not simplify.

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