‘The places I go back to’:¹ familiarisation and estrangement in Seamus Heaney’s later poetry

Joanna Cowper

It is possible to detect within Seamus Heaney’s poetry recurring patterns of alternating ‘familiarisation’ and ‘estrangement’. By poems of familiarisation I mean ones in which he strives towards an accurate portrayal of the places, events or individuals that his poems ‘st[an]d in for’,² overcoming ‘otherness’ with a diligent scrutiny. Cycles of estrangement invariably follow those of familiarisation, as Heaney seeks to recapture something of the ‘outsider’s’ perspective in order to revitalise the poetic energy that familiarity saps from the world around him. In lyrics that re-examine the familiar from a new perspective or re-imagine it in a new context, he re-invents his conditions and renews the world’s capacity to surprise. In his 1990 lecture, ‘Joy or Night’, Heaney declares that

it is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers should be transformative, more than just a print-out of the given circumstances of its time and place. . . . an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them.³

This is the agenda behind Heaney’s poetry of estrangement, in which he consciously strives to transform the quotidian into the fantastic. Such poetry can be subdivided into two groups, the first of which might be termed ‘artificial’, in that it achieves estrangement through the deliberate assumption on Heaney’s part of a stance or persona calculated to offer a new perspective. This type of estrangement is typical of Heaney’s earliest attempts to ‘make strange’. The second mode of estrangement is ‘organic’, in that a transformative new perspective is thrust upon the poet by events or changes in the world around him, so that his environment becomes estranged from itself without any deliberate effort on his part. Heaney’s most recent poetry of estrangement is predominantly organic in style, as it sees him re-examining familiar territories through

older eyes, discovering that the world itself has become a different, emptier place, at once identical to and light years away from that in which he had grown up. His later poetry therefore reflects a new-found alienation from places and objects once imbued with the comfort of the familiar.

His most recent volumes, *Electric Light* (2001) and *District and Circle* (2006), combine to present a complete cycle of organic familiarisation and estrangement. *Electric Light* witnesses a return to the mode of familiarisation. Prior to that volume, Heaney had spent three poetry collections and fourteen years perfecting a mode of writing originally developed in response to the experience of bereavement, a poetry whose energies derived from the potentialities of empty space. By 2001, the sense of loss with which he struggled in *The Haw Lantern*, and whose emotive impact he had harnessed so successfully in the estrangements of *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*, had grown familiar to him. His subsequent repositioning in *Electric Light* therefore reflects not a renunciation of the wisdom of *The Spirit Level*'s manifesto, but a recognition on the poet's part that he is entering a new phase of life. He declares in the opening poem of *Electric Light* that 'negative ions in the open air / Are poetry to me. As once before / The slime and silver of the fattened eel',⁴ and in so saying, closes his most recent cycle of estrangement by taking for granted that which had once seemed raw and shocking. These closing lines of 'At Toomebridge' place Heaney's two previous modes of poetry, that of physical proximity and that of reverberating emptiness, in the remembered past alongside the checkpoint and the hanged rebel boy.⁵ The sibilance and rattle of the final line, and the airy lightness of the declaration that precedes it, gesture towards Heaney's perfected ability to write in either mode. In this line he signals that both are now mastered arts, and that a new creative cycle must begin.

Electric Light leaves Heaney's preoccupation with loss behind, because loss has ceased to be his predominant sensation. The long-accustomed sense of emptiness is replaced by the comfort of homecoming, as *Electric Light* finds him rediscovering people and places familiar from his childhood, which are assimilated in the form of memories. Eugene O'Brien observes of *Electric Light* that it 'embraces the ordinary, endowing it with a significance of memory and hindsight'.⁶ This collection begins a new cycle of familiarisation as Heaney explores a new state of being, whereby 'home' is no longer located outside the self, but within it.

The concept of assimilation of place and experience into self is central to *Electric Light*, and it is the resultant concept that 'home' exists both as a physical location and as an interiorised state that enables Heaney

to travel in Greece, France, Spain and into the remembered past, without the need to dislocate himself from the landscape of his first world. In this collection, Heaney proposes that one's physical location is not one's only location, that each individual carries the memories of those places and events that have affected them, and it is in the security of these memories that the self can repose. The milker, John Dologhan, acquires an air of mystery on account of having been 'in Montana once', a transformative fact that sets him apart from those who have not travelled so far. By contrast 'the horse pistol', with its resonances of 'the Great North Road', Bob Cushley and Ned Kane, is a thing 'out of place' (*EL*, p. 17) in the Heaney household. Despite its physical presence in rural Ireland, its essence resonates with a sense of 'elsewhere'. In 'Ten Glosses', meanwhile, Heaney enumerates and evaluates the places, people, ideologies and literature that have influenced him and, in so doing, have combined to compose his own portable sense of self.

It is this newly acute consciousness of the composite nature of the self that leads Heaney to write of 'The very "there-you-are-and-where-are-you?" / Of poetry itself' (*EL*, pp. 80–1), and the duality of being suggested by his compound 'adjective' becomes one of the driving pre-occupations of *Electric Light*. Jonathan Bolton has observed that, in Heaney's later poetry, he

has come to view memory and the space–time continuum in terms of the relation between absence and presence, and he has come to acknowledge that certain things, presences that exist in the here and now, uncover or disclose absences that exist in past time.⁷

This link between current and remembered phenomena is keenly felt in *Electric Light*. Heaney's 'Sonnets from Hellas' look out not only onto a Greek landscape, but also onto Harvard and the Bellaghy GAA Club; his travels towards Piedras Blancas open up vistas of the 1950s Gaeltacht; his experience of Belgrade is decoded in the context of remembered images of Ireland in years gone by. In these poems, Heaney affirms that the ostensibly new is rendered familiar through its relationship to that which is already assimilated. By relating recent trips to Europe to experiences that belong to different places and times, he examines the extent to which one can be simultaneously 'here' and 'there', located in the 'now' and the 'then', and, once more, 'away', 'lost' from one's origins and 'at home'. 'The Gaeltacht' addresses the question central to these dualities, musing that 'it would be great too / If we could see ourselves, if the people we are now / Could hear what we were saying' (*EL*, p. 44).

This reverses the conventional conceit that wonders what the earlier self would think of the later. In challenging the presumption that 'the

people we are now' can in fact recall the concerns and experiences of the people we once were, Heaney hints at the unwitting falsification inherent in the differentiation between interiorised memory and historical fact. This concern does not preoccupy *Electric Light* to the same extent as it troubles *District and Circle*, as will be seen below, but this is the collection in which Heaney familiarises himself with the notion that life as it is remembered has the power to overwrite and ultimately even to obliterate life as it was lived. John Taylor has criticised *Electric Light*, saying that

The Irish poet's particular way of looking back merits attention. One wishes that he had produced a more unified collection devoted to recovering vanished objects from his past.⁸

What Taylor fails to acknowledge is that Heaney's 'way of looking back' in *Electric Light* deserves attention precisely because of the extent to which it questions the very possibility of 'recovering' anything intact from the past. In 'Known World', Heaney remembers how 'Caj Westerburg / A Finnish Hamlet in black corduroy / Sweated "on principle" (or was that my projection / Of a Northern tweed-wearer's contrariness?)' (*EL*, p. 19). The humorous aside prefigures a more serious address of the same issue, and later in the poem Heaney asks, 'How does the real get into the made-up?' and finds himself outpaced by the question, brushing it aside with 'Ask me an easier one' (*EL*, p. 21). His suspicion that the process of forging or 'making up' memories from the 'real' world may not be under the control of the remembering mind is a disconcerting one. Eugene O'Brien remarks that Heaney's most recent poetry recognises 'memory, in its fullest sense, [a]s the bringing to bear of complex influences that were never operative on the original scene',⁹ and in *Electric Light* Heaney is conscious that inherent in each of his 'double looks' is not only here and there, now and then, but also the real and the fabricated.

The publisher's blurb on the front flap of *Electric Light* speaks of 'the poet's calling to assign things their proper names', and Heaney's interest in doing so in this collection is driven by his increasingly acute sense of the tenuous nature of remembered identity; the concern that, if proper names and real-life identities are not firmly coupled, original identity may be lost and replaced by the mind's 'projections'. Whilst acknowledging the human compulsion to draw meaning from experience, comparing new with old and reorganising memories to achieve coherence, Heaney suggests in *Electric Light* that the first, simple 'look' at an experience might well be the most revealing. Remembering a mass celebrated in the mountains, Heaney recalls that 'I had been

there, I knew this, but was still / haunted by it as by an unread dream' (EL, p. 22). In likening the perplexity generated by this memory to that left by a troubling dream, he highlights the disquieting impact of those recollections to which 'meaning' cannot be attributed, and at the same time airs the possibility that experiences, like dreams, may be devoid of discernible argument or meaning.

Electric Light, with its exploration of the differences between memory and fact, ultimately persuades Heaney to doubt the integrity of the compound self. If the accrued memories of which the self is constructed are inaccurate in their representation of the 'originals' upon which they are based, the self is revealed by implication to be unstably founded. This collection betrays Heaney's longstanding 'temperamental disposition towards an art that [is] earnest and devoted to things as they are',¹⁰ within which the highest approbation is reserved for things that simply 'are', ineffably themselves, like the goatherd whose simple life sets him 'beyond eclogue and translation' (EL, p. 38). In 'Real Names', Heaney maps a two-way process of assimilation between individuals and their histories, as Shakespeare's characters are taken on by a schoolboy cast. In their short hours on the stage, the boys become part of a literary tradition greater and more enduring than any of the individual actors or productions that have contributed to it, immersing their schoolboy selves in the service of Shakespeare's glorious character fabrications. Yet, even as he recalls the young actors in their borrowed identities, Heaney reminds himself of the ability of truth to trump fiction. In a double look that elevates the tangible reality of the boys' real lives above and beyond the scope of the roles they play, he diminishes the significance of the production, recasting it as one of many minor episodes that make up the boys' personal histories. Assuming new identities for the duration of the play, the young actors leave something of themselves imprinted on their audience's appreciation of the characters portrayed, whilst at the same time absorbing something of the characters into the complex medley that makes up their own projected identities.

In this preoccupation with processes of assimilation and change in people and things, Heaney in *Electric Light* is sending 'an early warning / From myself to be more myself' (EL, p. 40). Although he must assimilate experiences, he must nevertheless strive to remain unadulterated, unassimilated and with his integrity intact. 'Norman Simile', one of the 'Ten Glosses' placed at the centre of the collection, offers an imperative to Heaney in *Electric Light*, urging him to keep open to experience, regardless of the prevailing conditions, 'To be marvellously yourself like the river water / Gerald of Wales says runs in Arklow harbour / Even at high tide when you would expect salt water' (EL, p. 56).

The Haw Lantern, with its agenda of 'sift[ing] the sense of things from what's imagined',¹¹ saw Heaney coming to terms with an increasingly cerebral world in which the tangible commands no greater weight of reality than the ethereal. As such, it formed the foundation from which he could embark upon the imaginative flights of *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*. By 1998, Heaney was ready to acknowledge the possibility that 'the truth may be bounded by different *tearmanns*, that it has to take cognizance of opposing claims' (*HL*, p. 51), and it was this acceptance of multiple 'truths' that gave him the confidence that he needed to begin 'making strange' once again. *Electric Light* performs a similar role in preparing the ground for *District and Circle*, since it is a collection in which the poet familiarises a challenging new outlook, establishing the basis from which forays into the 'strange' can be conducted. The concept of the compound self is sustained throughout *District and Circle*, but where *Electric Light* was largely positive in its outlook, allowing the assimilation of experience to be equated with assurance and stability, this latest collection projects a darker mood in which assimilation is ever more strongly associated with worldly loss. As the poet finds himself confronted by the realities of life in a global community scarred by the events of 11 September 2001 and haunted by the personal tragedies of friends and family lost to death and illness, the joyful assurance that characterised Heaney's acts of assimilation in *Electric Light* is replaced by the fear that assimilation may have become a habit of self-deception designed to ward off despair. *District and Circle* sees Heaney beginning to suspect that there is no alternative but to interiorise and to cherish the past as the tangible world becomes ever more insecure and loveless in outlook, no longer offering the comfort and succour that it once promised. This shift in perspective triggers a new urgency in Heaney's interest in 'Real Names', and his new drive towards estrangement is concerned with the paring apart of memories, separating the real from the made-up in an attempt to restore the lines of differentiation between the qualities that are inherent in people, places and objects, and those that are ascribed to them by the remembering mind. Heaney's agenda of estrangement in this volume has as its focal point the restoration of original identity to the things of the world. He recognises his 'private mythology' for the partial fabrication that it is, and, without denying the human drive to attach personal meanings to memories of people, places and experiences, attempts to strip away the layers of memory to confront an empirical truth. This restoration of original 'otherness' necessarily leaves Heaney in a colder world than was portrayed in *Electric Light*, for where that collection placed the self at the centre of its universe, this confronts the possibility of

personal irrelevance as encroaching mortality becomes a haunting preoccupation.

In working towards this position, Heaney draws distinctions between what is lasting in the face of history, and what is lasting in the remembering mind. Looking at 'Wordsworth's Skates', he is most acutely aware not of the 'bootless runners', poor, lifeless objects gathering dust in a display case, but of 'the reel of them on frozen Windermere'.¹² This sharper vision is one that Heaney himself has never witnessed, but he recognises here that it has informed his perception and memory of the skates more profoundly than the actual 'perished bindings' and dust, which he explicitly excludes from his appreciation of them. The echo of 'real' in their imagined 'reel' highlights the distinction drawn between that which was experienced, and that which is remembered. The same preoccupation is present in the twin forge poems, 'Midnight Anvil', described by Heaney as one of the 'tuning forks for the poems that appear in the early pages'¹³ of *District and Circle*, and 'Poet to Blacksmith'. These poems look back to 'Digging', the poem in Heaney's first collection in which the poet's 'labour' was likened to that of the farmer, and to 'The Forge' in *Door into the Dark*. Where the earlier poem established reality as the standard against which poetry should be judged, approving the act of writing only insofar as it could be compared to that of digging the earth, these poems reverse the argument of 'Digging' to assert that the poet's celebration of his world is in fact not concerned with the actual, but with his own transformative vision of it. The poet in the translation 'Poet to Blacksmith' concludes that the 'best thing of all' about a well-made spade is 'the ring of it, sweet as a bell' (*DC*, p. 25) – not the tangible product of the blacksmith's labour, but the quality of the spade that comes closest to spoken poetry. 'Midnight Anvil' reverses the scenario of 'Poet to Blacksmith'. Where the first poem told the story of a poet commissioning a spade from Seamus MacGearailt, the blacksmith, the second imagines blacksmith Barry Devlin asking the poet Seamus to 'make' him a poem. In both cases, the quality most highly esteemed by the commissioner is very different from – even at odds with – the criteria on which the maker's skill is traditionally judged. The original poet, ambassador of a world of concept and simile, wants a practical, physical object not for its conventional purpose of digging the earth, but to fulfil his desire for a true note more commonly sought in the church or the concert hall. The modern blacksmith, embodiment of tangible reality, wants poetry that is both accountable and factual, equal to the given conditions and capable of recording them with the faithful accuracy of photography. 'Midnight Anvil', the poem that Heaney distils

from these disparities, responds to the modern blacksmith's imagined request with the story of the long-ago poet and blacksmith. In this masterful circularity, Heaney shows that poetry is born not out of history, but out of the interpretative machinations of the poet's remembering mind. None of the 'subjects' of the poem he creates – the millennial chimes, Devlin's request for a poem and the earlier request for a spade 'sweet as a bell' – are drawn from Heaney's first-hand history: they are all stories that he has experienced only in imagination. His poetry therefore transcends his situation, and instead of recording a physical, factual world, transforms an imagined world of folklore and stories into something fresh and new.

The differential between the bare facts that constitute the conditions of life, and the temptation of the interpreting consciousness to transform given conditions into something 'more', is addressed again in 'Saw Music', with the observation that oil painting 'is a paltry thing / Compared with what cries out to be expressed' (DC, p. 51).

The double-look that sees oil painting reduced to lifeless daubs and simultaneously recognised as the attempted expression of the ineffable essence of the world it depicts is typical of *District and Circle*. The epigraph to 'Saw Music' quotes a response sequence from the Catechism, 'Q. Do you renounce the world? / A. I do renounce it', but the poem itself concludes that art and music, 'however paltry' (DC, pp. 50–1), defy renunciation. Heaney's struggle to separate 'the real' from 'the made-up' stems from the recognition that even when the real world is cold and uncaring, the constructions of art and memory have power to transform objective experience and to offer the irresistible promise of meaning. As such, the poet cherishes them above the inconstant world they immortalise.

In his efforts to differentiate between the 'thing' and the emotive constructions that surround it, Heaney apprentices himself to the art of Rilke. The German poet is a new presence in Heaney's work, and the inclusion of translations of two of his poems in *District and Circle* reflects Heaney's growing interest in the concept of the 'einfache Schae' (childlike simplicity of vision) propounded in Rilke's *Der Neuen Gedichte*. The elegant simplicity of these two translations helps Heaney to clarify his growing sense of the difference between 'feeling and . . . feeling recollected' (DC, p. 68), and it is to some extent thanks to the example of Rilke's 'The Apple Orchard' that Heaney, by the end of *District and Circle*, comes to accept the separation of memory from experience, identifying and celebrating the attempt to compose sense from life as the means by which mankind learns to accept the inevitability of death. This sense of acceptance is characteristic of the

last poems in the collection, but comes only at the conclusion of a painful cycle of estrangement and reconciliation with worldly loss. Heaney's other translation of Rilke, 'After the Fire', is placed much earlier in the collection and recounts how a young boy is changed in the eyes of his peers by the loss of his childhood home:

For now that it was gone, it all seemed
Far stranger: more fantastical than Pharaoh.
And he was changed: a foreigner among them. (DC, p. 16)

In the boy's position Heaney parallels with his own. *Electric Light* saw the poet define himself in relation to the people and places that populated his memory: *District and Circle* takes a closer look at the more challenging question of how the self continues, when the people and places that once helped define it are gone. Heaney questions the validity of a personal identity premised upon things that no longer exist.

Early in the collection, Heaney recalls one day by the old aerodrome when 'Wherever the world was, we were somewhere else' (DC, p. 11): a physical impossibility that introduces a growing interest in the separation of modes of 'being' from bodily presence. This is a theme that persists and develops throughout *District and Circle*. In the same poem, Heaney recalls that when the aerodrome itself was knocked down and repurposed he found that the memories he had associated with it had grown independent of the need for physical verification, and that its presence or absence no longer played a part in what it 'meant' for him:

Hangars, runways, bomb stores, Nissen huts,
The perimeter barbed wire, forgotten and gone (DC, p. 11)

In a recent interview, Heaney asserted, 'I want a hand-to-hand engagement with myself – self-forgetfulness rather than self-consciousness',¹⁴ and, in order to attain this new perspective, in *District and Circle* he seeks 'a bird's eye view of [him]self' (DC, p. 76). The self is no longer centre stage, as was the case in *Electric Light*. Instead, it is reduced to a small repository of memory amidst a plethora of larger external forces. Michael Parker has identified in Heaney's mature poetry an uncertainty

as to whether his whole perception of 'the first kingdom' from which he had derived his sense of himself, was merely the product of a wild and flawed imagination¹⁵

This uncertainty is probed more exhaustively than ever before in *District and Circle*. In order to see himself afresh in relation to his origins, Heaney strips away layers of memory in poems whose acts of

de-familiarising renunciation stand directly opposed to the possessive urge that drove the young naturalist-poet. In *The Spirit Level*, Heaney prophesied that his 'last things [would] be first things slipping from [him]',¹⁶ and *District and Circle* can be viewed as the beginning of just such a process of letting go, stripping the comfort of familiarity from early memories. Where Heaney's first poetry presented a rural mindscape composed of acts of 'making' – thatching, forging iron, churning butter – *District and Circle* looks back on the same formative period and physical locus through a darker lens, with the focus on reduction and even death: we see a barber cutting hair, a butcher parcelling meat, a 'turnip snedder' pulping vegetables and a group of locals slaughtering pigs. The theme of 'whole' things being acted upon in such a way as to become less than the original sum of their parts preoccupies Heaney in *District and Circle*, as the accepted notion of a 'cycle' of life gives way to a new vision of existence inevitably compelled to end in an emptying-out of energy into nothingness.

Within the context of this collection the attempt to read meaning into fate is foiled from the outset. 'A Shiver', the second poem in the collection, likens the destructive force behind a contemplated sledgehammer blow to 'a long nursed rage' (DC, p. 5). The comparison exemplifies the human tendency to comprehend devastation in relation to attributed emotional motivation, and simultaneously exposes a complete absence of rancour from the action described, setting it in a new and chilling context of simple fact. 'Anything Can Happen', the translation from Horace that Heaney identifies as one of the two 'tuning forks' of the first part of *District and Circle*,¹⁷ is explicit in its depiction of a universe in which destruction and violence are without motive, neither preventable nor foreseeable.

District and Circle's blunt refusal to indulge the human desire to read 'meaning' into inconsequential fate was prefigured in *Station Island*, in the resignation with which Heaney concludes his bitter tirade against 'everything / that made me biddable and unforthcoming'.¹⁸ This new-found resignation leads Heaney to reflect upon the pride and futility of 'the tribe whose dances never fail / For they keep dancing till they sight the deer' (SI, p. 86). The tribal belief system that attempts to impose causality upon the relationship between human action and human fate becomes the emblem for all that is self-deceiving and hopeless, yet at the same time as using their behaviour as the metaphor for a futile wish of his own, Heaney identifies the particular absurdity of attributing meaning where none is inherent as the practice of uneducated others, stopping short of relating it to his own life. That he does so is unsurprising, as the concept of an existence bounded by unassailable and 'unreadable'

absolutes – glimpsed in the heartbeats of his dying friend that ‘scared me the way they stripped things naked’ (*SI*, p. 81), and lurking beneath the accusations of his murdered cousin, ‘you saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact’ (*SI*, p. 83), is the terror from which Heaney finds himself constantly shying away in this poem. ‘Station Island’ makes the tacit acknowledgement that perhaps neither poetry nor the human perception of reality can hold its own in the face of incontrovertible historical ‘fact’, but makes no attempt to explore or to confront the implications of this possibility. Rather than face up to his un-looked-for glimpse of ‘naked’ reality, the Heaney of *Station Island* attempts to re-clothe it in banter before retreating, unreconciled. In *District and Circle*, he finally acknowledges this force of cold reality around him and begins his exploration of a strange new world that has been ‘hosed-down’, ‘cleaned-up’ (*DC*, p. 69) and denuded of all that experience and imagination had appended to it.

For much of *District and Circle*, Heaney is held uncomfortably in thrall to the empty chill of his de-humanised world. ‘The Turnip Snedder’ opens the collection in a Mossbawn location that will be familiar to readers of Heaney’s earlier poetry, but offers an estranging new view by adopting the perspective of the snedder itself, which declares that “‘This is the way that God sees life”’ (*DC*, p. 3). Regardless of any argument as to whether Heaney intends the voice of the snedder to echo his own, the positioning of this statement at the beginning of the collection necessarily influences our reading of the poems that follow, and the notion of an impervious, unreasoning God whose vision of death leaves no scope for resurrection haunts the early poems in *District and Circle*.

This collection sees Heaney’s old horrors – fears of malignant energies in the natural world, manifested in suspected presences in the barn, at the flax dam and amidst the pea drills – replaced by the more rational, adult dread that the world may be free from malice simply by virtue of being free from motive. A creeping, glacial coldness threatens to paralyse Heaney: ‘cold smooth creeping’ (*DC*, p. 34) steel, ‘dawn stone-circle chill’ (*DC*, p. 54), ‘frozen shore’ and ‘rimed horizon’ (*DC*, p. 44) contribute towards an atmosphere of impervious frigidity within which warmth is dismissed as ‘unseasonable’ (*DC*, p. 15). ‘Höfn’ imagines an apocalypse of ice, setting cold in opposition to life and poetry as the glacier threatens to ‘deepfreeze . . . every warm, mouthwatering word of mouth’ (*DC*, p. 53). This vision is sustained throughout ‘On the Spot’, where Heaney’s ‘adoring’ of nature is arrested by the shock of finding coldness where warmth should have been, and the positioning of this poem immediately after ‘Höfn’ makes a compelling case

to suggest that the same unappeasable, unreasoning nothingness is 'what conspired to addle / Matter in its planetary stand-off' (*DC*, p. 54). The sinister construction, 'of what conspired', is prefigured in the earlier poem 'Polish Sleepers', where no hint is given as to what the conspiring forces may be. By repeating it in 'On the Spot', Heaney retrospectively embeds the inevitability of future cold into the childhood memory, sapping the summer heat of the earlier poem as he estranges his memory from itself to bring it in line with a new agenda of anaesthetised deep freeze.

Had *District and Circle* closed with 'On the Spot', its outlook could have appeared very bleak indeed. Just as the donkey portrayed in 'Out of Shot' wanders free at the end of the poem, unmoved by the events in which it has played a part and now 'lost to its owner, lost for its sunlit hills' (*DC*, p. 15), so the places and objects that had been assimilated into Heaney's life are restored to their original states of otherness until the poet stands alone. All that had once seemed comforting and familiar is rendered strange through the bold attempt to recapture the unassimilated essence of things, and the poet is left staring into a future of godless emptiness. Yet amidst this newly hostile world, Heaney begins to formalise a personal creed of regeneration, drawing upon the lexicon of conventional religion that has been latent in his poetry for many years. In 'Like everybody else . . .' Heaney refers explicitly to his long-standing attachment to the language of his Catholic upbringing, admitting meaning has been drained from the concepts it once embraced, leaving behind nothing more than a shell of long-cherished words: 'The loss occurred off-stage. And yet I cannot / disavow words like "thanksgiving" or "host" / or communion bread' (*DC*, p. 47). Just as it has become more difficult for Heaney to renounce the fictions of art than the indifferent reality of the world that inspired them, so the poet finds that the power of the words that once signified the core values of his religion have outlived that of their meanings. He says of these words that 'they have an undying / tremor and draw, like well water far down' (*DC*, p. 47), and in so saying he detaches – estranges – them from their original connotations, repurposing them as he binds them to a new pseudo-religion of nature. Within the context of *District and Circle*, warmth, germination and flowing water are set on the side of life, whilst all that is frozen, hard or unimpressible sides with death. The regenerative potential that Heaney has always recognised in the act of 'making strange' redeems him at the point when it had seemed bound to betray him into hopelessness, as the Tollund Man, a figure long dislocated from his native place and time, reappears to assume a position at the centre of a new world order.

Heaney recalls how ‘this Iron Age revenant was . . . “discovered” in a new setting’, and

In a new start that was both unexpected and exhilarating, I returned to a figure who had given me rare poetic strength more than 30 years earlier . . . the convention is to call such a figure a ‘persona’, but in this case he felt more like a transfusion, and I found myself writing poems about glacier melt and river flow, crab apples and fiddlehead ferns, birch groves and alder trees.¹⁹

‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ brings the first hint that the winter of *District and Circle* may not prove endless, representing a renewal of hope. This renewal does not undermine the agenda of estrangement that runs throughout the collection, for the Tollund Man remains unassailably ‘strange’ in his otherness. His power lies in the fact that he has remained unchanged throughout the cycles of life around him; his physical endurance has grown into a kind of spiritual strength. Outlasting his long-ago death, he is ‘neither god nor ghost / Not at odds or at one, but simply lost / To you and yours’ (DC, p. 55). He stands against the threat of cold emptiness simply by continuing to exist, representing an unfailing constancy that outstrips his transportation out of context and out of time. Equally indifferent to the demands of his one-time peers as to the significations that history has thrust upon him, he acknowledges ‘Faith placed in me, me faithless as a stone / The harrow turned up when the crop was sown’ (DC, p. 56).

Within *District and Circle*, the Tollund Man stands for transcendence of individual mortality, and through him Heaney finds the faith and inspiration that enables him to translate his empty world into a series of concentric life cycles. Heaney’s success in restoring ‘otherness’ to the objects in his world gave him the power to separate ‘actual’ people and places from the weight of meaning appended to them in memory, and in doing so he came close to dislocating himself from all that he held dear. Through the Tollund Man, he reminds himself that the ‘actual’ and its appended meaning are not necessarily bound to the same life cycle. Just as the ‘reel’ of Wordsworth’s skates outlasts their perished bindings whilst the bindings themselves outlive their wearer, so the Tollund Man’s existence and significance outlasts his lifespan, transcending death and offering a modern, godless image of immortality through ‘self-forgetfulness’.

This discovery enables Heaney to overcome his sense of growing chill, and he affirms with the Tollund Man, “‘The soul exceeds its circumstances’. Yes’ (DC, p. 56). In this bold acknowledgement and in the eloquent certainty of that ‘Yes’, Heaney asserts that the unassailable

facts of history, which dictate that human life is short, death is forever and well-loved places may not last, does not necessarily outweigh the vision of immortality achieved through memory, art, literature or simple love. This conviction spurs him on into a final, triumphant act of defamiliarisation as he defies the coldness of fact and history, turning instead towards a new world of possibility in which the past can once more be re-imagined and reshaped to fit the demands of the present. He remarked in a recent interview that, within *District and Circle*, 'the Tollund Man releases me into pleasure . . . more personal stuff . . . more spontaneous',²⁰ and the poems that follow 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', whilst retaining the preoccupation with mortality that characterises the collection, are newly optimistic in their outlook. In the closing poems of *District and Circle*, Heaney dares to carve out a new, as-yet-unfamiliar place in which to live and write that lies 'Between what happened and was meant to be' (DC, p. 56), that relies neither upon unforgiving history nor the now-discredited notion of an interested God to endorse or underwrite its reality.

In 1991, embarking upon his post-*Haw-Lantern* cycle of estrangement in *Seeing Things*, Heaney recognised that 'The places I go back to have not failed / But will not last' (ST, p. 101). *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*, in their acts of re-imagining those places, and *Electric Light*, with its assimilation of place into self, are preoccupied with a search for ways in which well-loved people and places can be made to 'last'. Throughout these collections, Heaney's allegiance moves increasingly away from the places of the world and towards the places of the heart. *District and Circle*, with its agenda of recovering the original essence of the world itself, estranging Heaney from the matter of his own memories by looking afresh at the raw material out of they were composed, represents the beginnings of a repositioning on Heaney's part in relation to the places he has known. With a new-found acceptance of inevitability, Heaney faces up to the changing, and even the loss, of people and places that remain important to him, looking afresh at external reality and no longer focusing exclusively upon his construction of the world.

In common with *Electric Light*, *District and Circle* seems at first glance to show Heaney deserting well-known places in favour of more distant territory. The title poem looks towards London and the tube bombings of 7 July 2005, whilst others conjure images of New York's fallen towers, war in Afghanistan and global warming. Tobias Hill, reviewing the collection for the *Observer*, observed that Heaney has now 'gone global'.²¹ A closer reading, however, will reveal that these far-flung settings do not represent a change of focus on Heaney's part. The poet

himself suggested that ‘On second thoughts, a reader might realise, “Ah, yes, in spite of the London poem, in most of the others, he’s circling his own district”’,²² adding that the title ‘had the virtue of unexpectedness . . . At the same time, it signalled an inclination to favour a chosen region and keep coming back to it’.²³

Critics of *District and Circle*, in common with critics of the collections that preceded it, charge Heaney with a failure to ‘move on’. Clive Wilmer dismissed the new collection as the work of one ‘cornered by his own genius: writing too many poems that emulate past successes, and shutting off routes to discovery’,²⁴ whilst Stephen Knight finds that Heaney ‘replaces surprise with deliberation’ in a collection that suffers from ‘a lack of edge . . . [and is] nothing like as immediate as his earlier work’.²⁵ These critics fail to appreciate that, in Heaney’s most significant poetry, we should look not for new and unfamiliar places and preoccupations, but for regenerative new ways of estranging the familiar, ‘freshening your outlook, beyond the range you thought you’d settled for’ (*ST*, p. 99). In a feature in *The Times* at the time of publication of *District and Circle*, Heaney betrayed his awareness of the tendency to find fault with his practice of returning to old ground in retorting to an unspoken criticism with the protestation, ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with revisiting earlier themes and settings’. He went on to explain, ‘such a return can produce a wonderful re-creative charge’.²⁶

It is just such a ‘re-creative charge’ that transforms ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’ from a simple revisiting of a known environment and a known theme – Glanmore Cottage, and the subject of ‘Mid Term Break’ – into something unfamiliar and new. The estranging influence in this poem is provided by Heaney’s own changed perspective, as he looks towards a new phase of life and writing. In an interview, Heaney named ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’ as his favourite poem in *District and Circle*, explaining ‘the reason I like the last poem . . . [is that] it’s a kind of different stage in life. You’re beginning to be aware of the underground journey a bit more’.²⁷ With reference to poetic composition in general, and *District and Circle* in particular, he observes that ‘you have to surprise yourself, if possible’, saying that he finds himself perpetually ‘either surprised, or obsessed. There’s no halfway house’.²⁸ ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’, in common with much of Heaney’s later poetry of estrangement, draws together the qualities of surprise and obsession. Well-known sites are compulsively, ‘obsessively’ revisited, either in their remembered states, as is predominantly the case in *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*, or in their current, physical states as in *District and Circle*, and each return revives ‘surprise’ as Heaney continues to

discover thoughts and approaches that are new in settings that have long been familiar.

Notes

- 1 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 101. Hereafter given in the text as *ST*.
- 2 Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1995), p. 12.
- 3 Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 159.
- 4 Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 3.
- 5 A reference to Roddy McCorley, executed in Toome on Good Friday 1799 for his involvement in the 1798 Rising.
- 6 Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002), p. 159.
- 7 Jonathan Bolton, "'Customary rhythms": Seamus Heaney and the Rite of Poetry', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 37: 2 (spring 2001), pp. 205–22.
- 8 John Taylor, review of *Electric Light*, *Poetry*, 179: 5 (February 2002), pp. 296–8.
- 9 O'Brien, p. 128.
- 10 Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p. 12.
- 11 Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 51.
- 12 Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 22.
- 13 Seamus Heaney, 'One Poet in Search of a Title', *The Times* (Books Supplement), 25 March 2006, p. 7.
- 14 Ben Naparstek, 'Notes from the Underground', *The Times* (Books Supplement), 25 March 2006, p. 6.
- 15 Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 205–6.
- 16 Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 6.
- 17 Heaney, 'One Poet in Search of a Title'.
- 18 Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 86.
- 19 Heaney, 'One Poet in Search of a Title'.
- 20 Sam Leith, 'Return of the Naturalist', *Daily Telegraph* (Telegraph Magazine), 2 April 2006, www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2006/04/02/boheaney.xml (accessed 6 October 2008).
- 21 Tobias Hill, 'Arms around the World', *Observer* (Review), 2 April 2006, p. 21.
- 22 Naparstek, p. 6.
- 23 Heaney, 'One Poet in Search of a Title'.
- 24 Clive Wilmer, 'Down to Earth', *New Statesman*, 17 April 2006, pp. 48–9.

- 25 Stephen Knight, 'District and Circle: The bog man cometh (again)', *Independent*, 9 April 2006, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/district-and-circle-by-seamus-heaney-473470.html (accessed 6 October 2008).
- 26 Heaney, 'One Poet in Search of a Title'.
- 27 Leith, 'Return of the Naturalist', np.
- 28 Robert McCrum, 'From Cattle to Battle', *Observer* (Review), 2 April 2006, p. 21.