

## THE ELEGIAC HEANEY-- A reading of *Glanmore Sonnets* in conjunction with *Clearances*

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Reading through Seamus Heaney's *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* I was struck by the similarity between *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances*. Both appeared to be about loss and presented an exercise in coming to terms with it. With this as my starting point I turned to biographical material. Heaney, born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1939 moved in 1972 to Glanmore, a peaceful country retreat in Wicklow county in Southern Ireland. The minority Catholic community in Northern Ireland saw this as a betrayal of the land and people living under volatile conditions in Ulster. Heaney saw it likewise and registered his choice as a loss and betrayal of his birthplace, Belfast, Northern Ireland. The *Glanmore Sonnets*, which mark the high point of his collection *Field Work* (1979) sub text the emotive ingredient of an ostensibly quiet existence away from Belfast. Another kind of separation is dealt with in *Clearances* the high point of *Haw lantern* (1987) published after the death of the mother, Margaret Kathleen, in 1984. These sonnets movingly text a separation by death from the mother. Both the series of sonnets share in the pressure of responsibility to what has been left behind or lost and are underlined with guilt for not having honoured the deep bond which separation now

makes difficult to honour. Propelled by a desire for liberation the sonnets attempt to work this angst out in poetry. The tension between obligation and desire constitutes the angst the sonnets subtext.

Both the series of sonnets are elegies in that they tacitly acknowledge loss, one of place and the other of person. They acknowledge the contribution of birthplace and mother — also a birthplace — in his life, express his bond with them and use the separation by loss as a means of liberating the agent now capable of making explorations independently.

Throughout Heaney's poetic career soil and relatives and friends constitute the source and subject of poetry. When asked about his abiding interest in memorializing the people of his life, he replied, "The elegiac Heaney? There's nothing else"<sup>i</sup>. Loss and death however continue to find their place in the ongoing process of life. The human agent retains agency beyond devastating experiences of loss and is able to take account of things and move on. The poems are thus as much about getting started as they are about loss.

Getting started, keeping going, getting started again -- in art and in life, it seems to me this is the essential rhythm not only of achievement but of survival, the ground of convinced action, the basis of self-esteem and the guarantee of credibility in your lives, credibility to yourselves as well as others.<sup>ii</sup>

The starting afresh again and again — after leaving Belfast and after the death of the mother — affirms the redressing potential of art, a faith from which both the series of sonnets draw life. Their organic power is expressive of the creative

possibilities of life. They seek to dissolve the text-world dichotomy by selectively retrieving images from the past and incorporating them into fresh wholes such that the sutures of separation disappear. The images of intimate contact seek to surmount the guilt and fear that comes from separation. Heaney draws on memory to create the fiction of immediacy<sup>iii</sup> and continues it unobtrusively into the present such that present exploration becomes organic to past relations canceling out the possibility of interpreting departure as betrayal.

The subtext identifiable in the pattern of construction of the poems reflects the angst the poems seek to come to terms with. It urges Heaney to make a redemptive journey through each of the series of sonnets in order to achieve peace with his creative space<sup>iv</sup>. This space is both actual and metaphoric. The poems draw attention to this space by emptying it of its emotional content. Wicklow is a space of 'no sound' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) that the *Glanmore Sonnets* fill up with images, ghosts and memories of the violence stricken Ireland. Clearance is a space that Clearances fill with memories of mother and son. As the sonnets occupy artistic space they also create an awareness of the vacancy within art and artist which provides the room for creative activity which signifies a looking ahead rather than casting an elegiac look over relationships. These poems thus perform a customized rite of passage into Wicklow from Belfast and clearance from sharing space with the mother.

I have so far classified the *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* as elegies that hinge on the relation of the poet / son with what is betrayed/ lost. I have also stated that the poems perform an expiation of the guilt that springs from betrayal. This performative is achieved through images of intimate contact with both what is betrayed and what is exchanged for it.

This contact allows them to address separation as continuity so as to nullify betrayal before the poet can experience

Having said what these poems are and what they attempt to do I will move on to say *how* they do it. Image is the poet's material and structure his satisfaction. Belfast and Wicklow (*Glanmore Sonnets*) and mother and son (*Clearances*) are expressed in distinct images. This separation in imagery signifies betrayal and the guilt subsequent upon it. To counter it the poems employ images of contact which serve to bridge the separation and suggest continuity of experience. This recurring movement and counter movement held in the balance structures the poet's expiation in one and initiation in the other as it structures poetry.

Apart from the features that operate independently in the two series what brings them together is the age old metaphor of mother for mother land and the Irish ballad tradition in which Ireland is the heroine of the freedom fighter's romance as the mother (*Clearances*) is of the son's poems. These ties of mother-land with the mother allow for the *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* to constitute between them a hermeneutic code<sup>v</sup> which reveals its clues in the imagery of the two series.

# 1

Heaney believes, 'To know who you are you have to have a place to come from'.<sup>vi</sup> He begins both *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* with the semantic explorations of the location which has source value<sup>vii</sup> for him. This sense of place inaugurates both the series of sonnets. I begin my reading of

the *Glanmore Sonnets* with the poem that introduces *Clearances*.

She taught me what her uncle once taught her:  
How easily the biggest coal block split  
If you got the grain and hammer angled right.

The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,  
Its co-opted and obliterated echo,  
Taught me to hit taught me to loosen,

Taught me between the hammer and the block  
To face the music. Teach me now to listen,  
To strike it rich behind the linear black.

This poem voices the major themes of both *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances*.

The poem begins with a tacit acknowledgement of the instructing power of family elders. They have the ability to pass on an understanding of ordinary things, everyday activities that make up the business of life. As family wisdom teaches one to get 'the grain and hammer angled right' fears are dispelled and difficult tasks are made easy, 'relaxed' and 'alluring'. From there the learner learns from what he does. Activity itself emits sounds that tell on the medium in which it is conducted and guide the learner to become a sensitive and responsible acting agent. Heaney traces three instructors 'she', 'her uncle' and 'the sound' of activity. These together locate the fount of learning in history, the medium of activity and activity per se. The instruction imparted concerns identification of the medium to be explored and the instrument of exploration, precision

obligation only be an 'exonerating' stone and not one that accuses. The 'exonerating' and the 'exonerated' juxtaposed



and the opening up new mediums to understanding. This done, the last sentence of the poem effects a subtle shift of focus by absenting the grammatical subject. The instructor and the medium recede as the learner and teaching are foregrounded. Paradoxically, in doing so Heaney takes the presence of both the instructor and the medium of activity for granted and thus creates a fiction of immediacy<sup>viii</sup> which does not require him to mention the mother or the coal block. These become the givens and thus the essentials of exploration. What remains is the 'me' embarking on the journey of understanding which is to be had in the verb 'listen' and the qualified 'strike' that operate in the yet fully unexplored medium conceptualized as 'the linear black'.

Thus we have, sown into this poem, the major theme of *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* namely, the acknowledgement of the source that has instructed the poet to work precisely and sensitively into his medium so as to 'strike it rich' and make the medium emit meaningfully what it holds. The semantic value of the source is translated as the teaching agent with whom the poet has primal bonding. This bonding finds expression in activity sensitively and responsibly conducted. Source/space, activity, the responsible acting agent (the poet) and the medium in which he works thus constitute the building blocks of the poems. The medium here identified as the mysterious coal block becomes the Irish homeland in *Glanmore Sonnets* and the mother-son bond in *Clearances*. This is the ground Heaney has to strike rich with his 'squat pen'<sup>ix</sup> and into which he is to make his explorative journeys 'beyond the linear black'.

The introductory poem of the *Clearances* introduces the conceptual building blocks out of which both the series of sonnets are constructed. *Clearances* 1 supplies the angst that

connects the building blocks into self conscious but 'tentative art'. To what purpose the art is so I will attempt to show by lifting fragments (in order) from *Clearances* 1.

A cobble thrown a hundred years ago  
Keeps coming at me, .....

.....turncoat brow.  
.....

.....

.....

Running the gauntlet .....  
.....

.....

.....

Call her 'The Convert'.....

.....a genre piece

Inherited .....  
And mine to dispose with.....

.....

.....

The exonerating, the exonerated stone.

The art is tentative because it is ridden with responsibility. Hinged apparently on the angst emanating from the accusative stone *Clearances* 1 employs it as a sure method of dealing with 'turncoat brow' and 'running the gauntlet'. The homely 'cobble' makes benign the Biblical echo of casting the first stone. Heaney draws heavily on the idea that those giving the stone verdict<sup>xi</sup> were themselves sinners. The last line of the poem cleverly reverses the expected order of exoneration and secures neutral ground for the poet. The 'exonerated stone' becomes a synecdoche of sorts as it comes to stand for the (absent) those that accuse. The stone is exonerated i.e. those that cast are exonerated even though they are guilty. Thus forgiven, the stone that they cast can by obligation only be an 'exonerating' stone and not one that accuses. The 'exonerating' and the 'exonerated' juxtaposed

serve to invalidate blame. However the overwhelming presence of 'turncoat', 'running the gauntlet' and 'the convert' maintain culpability. Moreover the bonds expressed in relational words, 'great-grandmother', 'mother', 'my', 'mine' accept the inheritance of the 'genre piece' and the responsibility of disposing it off. The inheritance that comes to him is the blaming stone which he has chosen to perceive as the exonerating stone. Age old inheritance of betrayal and guilt, burden of legacy and the need for exculpation constitute the emotive content of *Clearances* 1. It is this content that provides the logic for the construction of both *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances*

The burden of responsibility-laden inheritance and the poet's need for exoneration define the central tension of the two series of sonnets. Both *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* are elegies that are lovingly burdened with the deep bond that the poet has with what is lost — Belfast in *Glanmore Sonnets* and the mother in *Clearances*. His method is to take what's inherited and to work with it as if time and distance do not separate him from it. He thus creates a fiction of immediacy that allows him to deal with what is lost as if it is present. He makes contact with it and moves imperceptibly into the present such that what is lost and what is present serve to context a continuous experience. Such construction belies separation through images of contact. The building blocks of the poem — source, activity, the responsible acting agent (the poet) and the medium in which he works — are connected with the desire to dispose of the burden of inheritance in a way that exonerates the poet and enables him to come into a clearance. It is this desire that finds its objective correlative in the imagery of *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances*. The imagery conducts Heaney through rites of



passage to a 'respite' in *Glanmore Sonnets* and a 'clearance' in *Clearances*.

## 2

*Glanmore Sonnets* as *Clearances* begin with experiencing the source from a distance. In Wicklow Heaney is in the 'mildest February' that he has known 'in twenty years' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1)<sup>xii</sup>. Coming to the misty mildness of Wicklow has opened up the 'other' ground of Belfast which is Heaney's synecdoche for the Irish history of struggle and violence. Away from violence Heaney has the opportunity to chart for himself a fresh course but his 'lea is deeply tilled'. The 'deep no sound' of Wicklow is suitably distanced from Belfast to receive the sounds of 'distant gargling tractors'. Its furrows are receptive to 'old ploughsocks' glutted with layer on layer of meaning. Its mist is host to 'ghosts' that assert their claim on all Irish ground and all art that it nurtures. Ireland, the 'dark unblown rose', is Heaney's beloved in the *Glanmore Sonnets* as the mother is in *Clearances*. The two connect in the Irish ballad tradition that harks after its beloved, Ireland. The past of Ireland makes up the 'dream grain' that quickens Heaney with its redolence and contextualizes itself in the present. The Irish heritage, maternal like the nurse's song and the lull of the river Derwent in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, has sensitized the poet to the sounds of the land. The stirred up 'freakish Easter snows' thus become both a collective and a personal granary of the high points of the past: Easters of collective significance such as that of 1916 and those spent with the mother 'which were the high points of our sons and lovers phase' (*Clearances* 6) together with the communal ceremonies of the Holy week that belong to both. The sounds of the land are the memories of past heroes and

political events together with more personal memories. These are the 'vowels ploughed into other' ground which distance has opened to release a redolence that quickens Heaney to recompose his past in the present such that the distance he has attempted becomes a tribute to and not a betrayal of the past that articulates his paradigm.

Language is a sensory experience which takes shape within the soil. Into and out of this soil it dares its first sensuous probings. The 'hiding places' of memory hold the 'dream grain', the collective Irish subconscious which holds 'what the mallet taps to know'. It is as if the DNA of art is contained in the land and contact is the requisite that will bring forth form and structure. Coming from 'Belfast' to 'hedge-school of Glanmore' Heaney remains on the same soil. From the 'backs of ditches' he hopes to ferret out a yet caught voice 'that might continue, hold, dispel, appease' the haunting sounds of the land. *Glanmore Sonnets* 2 thus defines the conflict in the poet's mind and art between obligation and desire with Belfast signifying one and Wicklow the other.

These two sonnets, the first of the series are the most closely linked with *Clearances* 2 and 6. *Clearances* 2 has an octave of the mother's instructions to the son over matters of homely conduct delivered to us in free indirect speech. In the sestate that follows the mother is making a homecoming to her father beyond this world. The son, by implication, is left to manage on his own. This prompts him — through the series — to recall and recast in verse the value message encoded in the times spent with the mother that always contain the hindsight of the devastating experience of her death which nevertheless was also a liberating experience for both mother and son. The octave and the sestate here are hosted

by two worlds which correspond to the two worlds in *Glanmore Sonnets* 1. That ability of the two experiences and two times to exist harmoniously yet distinct in a sonnet reflects the capacity of the poet to contain them likewise retaining the significance of both. Being close to the mother is a fiction that he creates again and again as he creates the fiction of being placed in Belfast because the two continue to be effective and active presences in his life. The influence of these presences extends beyond the personal to social and communal experiences where they incorporate the 'Formal incensation / And the psalmist's cry' (*Clearances* 6), the voice of Oisín Kelly (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2), 'the boortree's trunk' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) and 'that winter/ Of nineteen forty-seven' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 6).

All sonnets of the *Glanmore* series are cast in a consciousness of time and distance that serve to separate Heaney from his source. He composes in and over time and distance. The sonnets ostensibly located in the present (*Glanmore Sonnets* 3, 4, 7 and 8) are attempts to raise a voice that would 'continue, hold, dispel, appease' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2) the redolence that quickens him. The tension thus emanates from the fact that his angst is his inspiration.<sup>xiii</sup> This tension weaves locations and experiences separated by time and distance into the fabric of the poem such that the evidence of separation is concealed in its pattern.

The sonnets apparently located exclusively in the present manage to ensconce evidence of the past in images of the present. *Glanmore Sonnets* 3 utters the resolve, "'I wont relapse/ From this strange loneliness I've brought us to/ Dorothy and William\_\_'". This works as a dual reminder. One operating with reference to the poet who uses 'from' to suggest the place he could 'relapse' to. The other working the power of allusion over the present to talk of *Tintern Abbey*

which helps the poet go far back into his childhood, trace his youth and voice back to his primal bond with nature. The two together convey a backward pull, hindsight and resolve to stay where he is — a resolve strengthened by the refreshing breeze<sup>xiv</sup> and the coming to a mellifluous close of all sounds 'crepuscular and iambic' into reassuring 'cadences'.

*Glanmore Sonnets* 4 is centered on images reflecting sound, meeting and excitement. It listens 'an ear to the line' to sounds of activity on the land. The sounds are 'Lifted over the woods' like the 'distant gargling tractors' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1). The images the eye awaits likewise come from a distance as the ripples shake 'Two fields back'. Things 'vanished into where they start', the poem adds parenthetically, 'are shaking now across my heart'. Time and distance is bridged as the ear and eye anticipate and the heart tremors. Like the images in *Glanmore Sonnets* 4, *Glanmore Sonnets* 7 describes the magnificence of the pageant of ships drawing into Wicklow harbour. Like the images in *Glanmore Sonnets* 4 the 'gale-warning voice', the 'sirens of tundra' and the 'wind-compounded keen' both make up and collapse the distance of 'the sky/ Elsewhere' from Wicklow.

*Glanmore Sonnets* 8 operates on a different principle. It depicts Wicklow landscape superimposed with the omens of imminent violence and evidences — 'armour and carrion' — of bloodshed in Northern Ireland. This leads Heaney to anticipate violence in his immediate surroundings of 'peaceful absences' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) and he wonders, 'What would I meet blood-boltered on the road?'. This sonnet casts Wicklow in terms of the Irish history of violence. It thus forms the culmination of the technique

adopted in *Glanmore Sonnets* 3, 4 and 7 where the past is incorporated unobtrusively.

These sonnets are constructed on the principal that the past sounds itself in the present and manifests itself seamless into the Wicklow landscape. In that these sonnets are closely patterned on the poem introducing *Clearances* where the past devices for Heaney a way into the mysteries of experience. 'Who reads into distances reads/ beyond us' says Heaney. Both the series of sonnets attempt to read into distances. They seek to give meaning to the place in time from where the experience is conducted by making contact with what is 'beyond us' the place that is the source of the experiencing agent.

These sonnets share their method of construction with *Clearances* 4, 5 and 6 that recount experiences with the mother without acknowledging death, the fact of their separation. These experiences provide the method of construction for these *Clearances* poems as well as for those of the *Glanmore Sonnets* mentioned above.

.....'So I governed my tongue  
In front of her, a genuinely well-

adjusted betrayal  
 Of what I knew better. i'd *naw* and *aye*  
 And decently relapse into the wrong  
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay

*Clearances* 4

Separation not mentioned in these sonnets is accommodated in the use of the past tense and concealed in the pain and the fondness that prompts its recording. Thus Heaney works a 'genuinely well-/ adjusted betrayal' of what he knows better:



records the experience in such a way that the sutures of time that allow him to be allied also keep him at bay. Given the fact of loss this becomes his wrong grammar which nevertheless enables him assert an elegiac bond with the mother as imperceptible switches into the past permitted him to acknowledge his bond with the Violent history of Ireland.

*Clearances* 5 contains the shared activity of linen folding with its exciting moments of ending up 'hand to hand' that replicated in touch the bond that had 'always happened/ before hand'. Experiences in which Heaney had been 'allied and at bay' (*Clearances* 4) with the mother were those that held them 'day by day, just touch and go,/ Coming close again by holding back'. These experiences are brief, exciting and still shivering like those in *Glanmore Sonnets* 4 that 'are shaking now across my heart' like the joy of the 'our *Sons and Lovers* phase' that provides the opportunity to be 'Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next/ to each other' in the 'packed church' (*Clearances* 6). In linen folding (*Clearances* 7) the fleeting, exciting, touch is made possible because of the cloth that holds one with the other like the fetal cord. The contact arrives at the epiphany, 'In moves where I was x and she was o', that makes *Clearances* 5 the emotional core of both the series of sonnets. We have here the image of the fetus moving in the 'o' of the amnion taking form there as the 'x' that the mother inscribes<sup>xv</sup>, the notorious algebraic variable taking its code from the source that conceives it.

Such a going back to the beginning is sensuously celebrated in *Glanmore Sonnets* 2 and 5. Heaney visits early experiences to trace language back to its 'vowels' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) where words 'enter almost the sense of touch' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2). He meets the 'snapping memory' from 'boortree'



to 'elderberry' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5). Back to the beginning he goes, the 'etymologist of roots and graftings' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) licking into the 'soft corrugations in the boortree's trunk'. Like earliest childhood making tactile explorations, 'touching tongues' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) he feels his way through the 'dark hutch' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2). Exploring, he says 'I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5). This tree corresponds with 'my coeval/Chestnut' (*Clearances* 8) which is the Metaphor Clearances adopt for the mother, 'I thought of her as the wishing tree that died'<sup>xvi</sup>. The tree is the organic metaphor the darkness of whose trunk is Heaney's 'tree-house' to which he falls back and 'would crouch' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) as in the womb. It constitutes the 'coal block' (Introduction to *Clearances*) which contains all sound and hence the primal relationships<sup>xvii</sup> which are the roots to which the etymologist goes back to and onto which he grafts his art. Born in Northern Ireland, born to the mother Heaney resides in the tree planted in the turmoil redolent soil 'deeply tilled' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1).

It is thus in metaphor that the *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* converge into a unifying theme of going back to the beginnings. I will leave this here to look at the attempt the poems make beyond metaphor towards articulation of a paradigm 'new from the lath' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1).

Heaney (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2) hopes to raise a voice 'That might continue, hold, dispel, appease' the sounds of the past. The *Glanmore Sonnets* that I have so far read in conjunction with *Clearances* sonnets accommodate the past, almost imperceptibly, in the present. Thus they serve to 'hold' and 'continue' the 'vowels ploughed into' the ground that has been opened into *Glanmore Sonnets* with the arrival in Wicklow and into *clearances* with the death of the mother.

Those of the *Glanmore Sonnets* that juxtapose Belfast and Wicklow as distinct experiences and those of the Clearances sonnets that record the mother's death acknowledge the angst of separation and attempt to translate and thus 'dispel' and 'appease' the troubling images of the past.

*Glanmore Sonnets* 2 goes back 'years ago' from Wicklow to Belfast to explore with language the mysteries of the land. He puts into practice lessons learnt from Oisín Kelly's art that took its shape from the stone in which he worked. The image of Oisín Kelly's chisel connives with Heaney's slow chanter to find its value in 'the subsoil of each sense' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1). Heaney identifies himself as 'etymologist of roots and graftings' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5). His concern is as much with history as with progress. His art is an attempt to graft onto the 'vowels' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) of history the harbours that are 'haven' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 7) so as to move forward and not back to the 'verse returning' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2) from the deeply tilled lea.

*Glanmore Sonnets* 6 visits the winter of nineteen-forty-seven to recast and adopt someone else's resolve, "I will break through", he said, "what I glazed over/ With perfect mist and peaceful absences...". The perfect mist is of repressed memory which Heaney unearths in poetry. Peaceful absences are afforded by achieving a peaceful distance from violence. Poetry thus becomes an act of breaking through to what's painful. This act of daring finds its image in riding a bike on thin ice recalled from hearsay. Things are thus brought to the precarious moment where 'things might crystallize or founder'. Stories from the past stimulate but summon the 'white goose/ after dark' like the Albatross to the Mariner.<sup>xviii</sup>

The past thus continues to introduce into art a backward pull along with the urge to move forward. Sensitive to the ever surfacing images of the past Heaney is sometimes guilty for the government of the tongue effecting a 'genuinely well-/adjusted adequate betrayal' (*Clearances* 4) to maintain an amiable relationship with what is now absent. At other times he is haunted by the ghosts of the past with whom he actively seeks a harmonious existence, decently relapsing into the wrong grammar (*Clearances* 4), such that they remain 'allied and at bay' (*Clearances* 4). To dispel the troubling memory of having deserted Northern Ireland (*Glanmore Sonnets*) and having lost the mother with whom he only connected in episodes in the past (*Clearances*) Heaney imposes an order on his verse that redresses the two irks. He records what haunts and summons from memory more to assert a bonding, exorcise and to pay tribute. This method of construction implicit in *Glanmore Sonnets* explains itself in *Clearances* 2, 3 and 7.

*Clearance* 2 juxtaposes a sestate of mother's voice with an octate of the mother being welcomed by her father beyond the grave. *Clearances* 3 composes mother and son in potatoe peeling where he is 'all hers' while 'all the others were away at Mass'. This closeness and the silence in which the activity is conducted gives both mother and son the quite to lapse into reverie out of which the splashes in the bucket shake them. The following sestate defies the separation that the mother and son maintained in joint activity. Heaney describes the time of the mother's death when they were 'never closer the whole rest of our lives'. The knives working their separate tasks in potatoe peeling are cast as the confluent breath of mother and son, her head bent towards my head'. Thus *Clearances* 3 records the experience of the mother's approaching death. *Clearances* 7 records the death itself.

The space we stood around had been emptied  
 Into us to keep, it penetrated  
 Clearances that suddenly stood open.  
 High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

*Glanmore Sonnets* 7 is the only of the series located entirely in Wicklow. It marvels in the magnificence of Wicklow harbour and interprets it as 'haven'. The 'clearing' that this 'haven' leads him to experience comes from the weight of association with Belfast from which it offers a release. It marks for Heaney a universalizing moment connecting him to distant ports under the sky that forms a clearing to correspond with the lightness experienced. Such a clearing is a breaking free and is momentary as the next two sonnets in the series show. The 'Clearances' attained after the mother's death however effect a 'pure change'. These clearances are both emptying and filling. They locate the experiencing agent on the periphery of emptiness while they locate experience, relationship, in short the 'other'<sup>xix</sup> within them.

Heaney has remarked that since the death of his parents, he feels as if "the roof has blown off" his life. We are inevitably released from the weight and shield of our ancestors. This lightening, when we are finally exposed to the elements, to the cosmos, is both freeing and frightening----- Joe Pellgrino

It is the perception of the paradoxical nature of one's earliest bonds that structures the *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances*. In some sonnets Heaney weaves the past into the present to present life's forward journey as a continuation and

containment of these bonds. In others he juxtaposes images of the past with images of the present to reveal the fact that the liberating movement forward is troubled by the call of the past but the two stand distinct. In yet others Heaney suspends his desire to move on, acknowledges the backward pull of responsibility, and translates it into poetry whose imagery composes the objective correlative of the clearings he has managed to arrive into. The concluding sonnets (*Glanmore Sonnets* 9, 7, 10 and *Clearances* 8) of both the series fall under this category.

In *Glanmore Sonnets* 9 the ordinary and expected in the landscape is charged with omen and decay<sup>xx</sup> as the 'raindrops' in *Glanmore Sonnets* 8. The peaceful Wicklow landscape is perceived in terms of the memory of violence in Northern Ireland. This leads the poem to question Heaney's decision to move away from the turbulence of Northern Ireland, 'Did we come to the wilderness for this?' The 'infected fruit', 'reek of silage', blood on ... pitch-fork,...chaff and hay' and 'Rats speared' are examples of the ordinary ascribed an emotional content not intrinsic to it. Yet the utterance, 'I'm not/ imagining things' launches a plea to be taken seriously. This polarizing of present experience with emotions experienced elsewhere justifies the 'haunts' and 'tangle' that Heaney has put his companion into. He has drawn another, presumably the friendly (*Glanmore Sonnets* 3), welcomed (*Glanmore Sonnets* 4), and fear allaying companion (*Glanmore Sonnets* 8) mentioned earlier into the questionable rewards of his decision. This expands Heaney's sense of responsibility beyond the personal and leads him to question, 'What is my apology for poetry?'. The question gains poignancy from the fact that poetry itself expresses it making it a question about existence.

Having thus focused his concern over art Heaney recalls a



dream in *Glanmore Sonnets* 10. Reluctant to exonerate himself for his decision to move away from Northern Ireland Heaney translates the experience twice in art: dream and poetry. The logic of dream and the logic of desire become his apology for poetry. Lorenzo and Jessica cast out of their warm Venetian climate are nature-blessed, asperged and laid for sacrifice on raised ground. Heaney draws on the folkloric sympathy for runaway lovers to illicit a similar response for himself who has followed the course of desire to 'art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1). He continues to narrate the same dream which extended into a personal experience of awakening of the senses 'towards the lovely and painful/ Covenants of the flesh'. The lover's 'deliberate kiss' is an expression of fresh kindlings that expand the possibilities of experience. Separateness from land (Venice) and lover becomes both the impetus and justification for arrival into new experiences. The desire that prompts this separation sees it as crucial for the survival of love and bonding. Also separation is not an act of betrayal but an act of upholding the value of fidelity and the means of keeping dreams alive.

As *Glanmore Sonnets* 10 translates the emotive content of experience into a dream *Clearances* 8 transmutes it into the apotheosis of the tree that the earlier sonnets of both the series have together evolved as the metaphor for the mother. *Clearances* 8 begins with the space that *Clearances* 7 forms with the mother's death. The concepts of empty and filled work together to give 'space' a paradoxical value. For the poet it opens up existing clearances to effect a 'pure change'. Heaney thus collapses the separateness from the mother into a union as the mother loses form and substance. *Clearances* 8 employs sexual imagery to evoke a union with the mother now described in terms of the space that has emptied itself



into after the mother's death. This space is source. The 'etymologist of roots and graftings' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) continues life unbroken from the source through the 'soul ramifying and forever/ Silent'. The tree is 'coeval' with its new branches that continue to grow beyond the apparent collapse of the source. I will illustrate the grafting through sexual union with the tree in quotes from the poem:

.....jumped and jumped and skited high  
 .....the hatchet's differentiated  
 Accurate cut , the crack, the sigh  
And collapse

This collapse apparently of the tree is of what 'luxuriated/ Through the collapse' i.e. those into whom the space has been emptied. The tree itself continues 'ramifying' as it is apotheosized and 'Silent, beyond silence listened for'. The 'heft' and 'hush' of its existence is relocated in 'a bright nowhere'. Although about death and accommodation the sonnet's domestic imagery keeps it from being a sad poem. Heaney only thinks of walking 'round and round' the space but does not circumscribe himself in it. Instead the ramifying soul offers a potential for creativity and marks a forward movement. The tree is 'long gone' but its being 'deep planted' and assimilated as in 'jam jar from a hole' gives it lasting location in life and gives the poet the silences to listen into. This takes us back to all the listening that has willy nilly engaged him. He operates in the 'deep no sound' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) emptied into him and is thus receptive to sounds 'of distant garling tractors' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) or 'couplings and shuntings two miles away' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 4).at one level the opening provided him with the death of the mother who initiated him into activity, sound and sensitivity becomes Heaney's 'apology for poetry'.

environments and prosper in natural clearances. Art itself is

## 3

I conclude my study of the *Glanmore Sonnets* in conjunction with *Clearances* with *The Wishing tree*<sup>xxi</sup> which, composed on the pattern of the poem introducing *Clearances*, acts as an epilogue to the series.

I thought of her as the wishing tree that died  
And saw it lifted, root and branch, to heaven,  
Trailing a shower of all that had been driven

Need by need by need into its hale  
Sap-wood and bark: coin and pin and nail  
Came streaming from it like a comet tail

New-minted and dissolved. I had a vision  
Of an airy branch-head rising through a cloud,  
Of turned up faces where the tree had stood.

The space that was created with the mother's death is filled up with the experience of the tree's apotheosis. The trailing shower of what 'need' had 'driven' in is reminiscent of the 'trailing clouds of glory we come' from Wordsworth's *Ode to Intimation of Immortality*. The expression takes value from the concept of heavenly connection that the ode describes but employs it in reverse process. The wishing tree where all wishes were cast surrenders them as it rises leaving wishes unsheltered and nowhere to place them. The connection of need is cast off as the 'airy branch-head rises' leaving the 'turned-up' faces unable to place their wishes in the mother's sheltering protection.. Heaney's conception of mother as the 'wishing tree' accommodates both the 'boortree' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 5) which was his 'tree-house' of protection and tactile

exploration and the 'chestnut' (*Clearances* 8) in which he luxuriated and with which he sought an oedipal union which marks the beginning of all separations. The sonnets of both *Glanmore* and *Clearances* series are, by implication, the 'coin and pin and nail' of the rising 'branch head' that sheds all that has been grafted onto it by 'need'. The poems of both the series are grafts of need from which the source rises 'root and branch' liberating itself and simultaneously liberating the 'turned up faces'. The Wishing Tree articulates the separation as release and presents the clearing as a clearance of what occupied it. What attains this for the poet is his 'vision' that translates the 'coeval' (*Clearances* 8) to the stars. The 'clearance' (*Clearances* 8) is not something Heaney has sought but something that has been left to him by the mother who has found herself a home away from him in New Row with her father or in the stars glorified.

A relocation of what's lost liberates the poet to locate himself as he chooses. The organic metaphor of the tree facilitates life of another sort.. In the mother's death he is betrayed, in moving to Wicklow he has betrayed. In writing he encrypts both his guilt and his desire in pertinent questions that place the text within the world. If the 'dream grain' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) is to haunt 'peaceful absences' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1) what has he gone to the wilderness for and what is to be his apology for poetry? The two series of sonnets constitute between them the hermeneutic code of exoneration in expressing the continuous immediacy of what is apparently and surely lost. One places the mother beyond this world the other places Heaney outside Belfast. Art, like the runaway lovers, Lorenzo and Jessica, (*Glanmore Sonnets* 10) is with desire and for life. It is both an admission and an assertion of love. It tacitly acknowledges and celebrates love's organic nature and its propensity to engraft itself onto new environments and prosper in natural clearances. Art itself is

its justification when it is not unmindful of the relationships that have made it possible. The performative of expiation cast by the *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Clearances* thus simultaneously becomes a somber acknowledgement of the possibilities that the responsibilities of love bonds introduce into life and art.

Loss is 'respite' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 10) as one is laid out like 'effigies' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 10) 'asperged' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 10) in waiting. Loss when it is irrevocable as in *Clearances* is 'emptied into' (*Clearances* 8) its survivors and becomes a means of permanent unification with what is lost. The emptiness subsequent upon loss contains the experience of losing. This experience when sounded echoes the 'genre piece' (*Clearances* 1) that the 'exonerated' stone taps into an exoneration 'as if the grain/ Remembered what the mallet tapped to know' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 2). With this carving of elegy guilt, loss and separation are accommodated in a genre piece that has completed its expiation in *Clearances* after having achieved a respite in *Glanmore Sonnets*. 'big-eyed Narcissus' has stared into the 'spring, seen into himself, his 'subsoil' (*Glanmore Sonnets* 1), and has 'set the darkness echoing' with images of the source that have shaped him<sup>xxii</sup>. These images, at times metaphoric in their capacity to sensuously explore and describe art and artist alike, attain for both an exoneration, in and through art.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> SEAMUS HEANEY: *Biography*, Britannica CD Version 98.

<sup>ii</sup> Further down Heaney continues, "... Unless that underground level of the self is preserved as a verified and a verifying element in your make-up, you are in danger of settling into whatever profile the world prepares for you. You'll be in danger of molding yourself in accordance with the laws of growth other than those of your intuitive being. "Seamus Heaney's Remarks, Commencement Ceremony at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, May12,1996.

<sup>iii</sup> Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995.p31.

<sup>iv</sup> Seamus Heaney in *Harvest Bow* says, 'The end of art is peace'.

<sup>v</sup>. The notion introduced by Roland Barthes is quoted by Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royale in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Prentice Hall /Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996. pp 171-172.

<sup>vi</sup>. Seamus Heaney quoting Carson McCullers in *The Sense of Place*, Smith,19 . pp 227

<sup>vii</sup>. In his exploration of the source Heaney is careful not to mention the connecting word *from* which would signify the otherness of location. He moves from one place/ person to the other maintaining the fiction of immediacy for the place/person he is separated from.

<sup>viii</sup>. The poem's 'fiction of immediacy' (the sense that the speaker is addressing someone or something that is present and that the action of the poem takes place in 'real time') becomes fully apparent at this point when the speaker, with the words, 'teach me now', urges this someone or something



to act.

I owe my understanding of the concept of 'fiction of immediacy' to Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory—Key Concepts*, Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995. p. 31

ix. Seamus Heaney, *Digging, Death of A Naturalist*, 1966.

x. Seamus Heaney, *Casualty, Field Work*, 1979.

xi. Seamus Heaney, *The Stone Verdict, The Haw Lantern*, 1987.

xii. This paragraph deals with *Glanmore Sonnets* 1. Quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from there.

xiii. This might appear to be a truism which it may well be for its applicability to a host of writers, Kafka, to say the least, but the obvious is the most neglected category and sometimes urges reiteration.

xiv. After the mention of Wordsworth all breeze is the inspirational breeze of *The Prelude* a poem about 'beginnings' that holds significant for sonnets that attempt to acknowledge the source in experiences of adulthood.

xv. The male child in the domain of biology is born with sex determining chromosome combination XY of which the X is inherited from the mother.

xvi. Seamus Heaney, *The Wishing Tree, Haw Lantern*, 1987.

xvii. I use the sounds held in the 'linear black' in the poem introducing *Clearances* and Heaney's reference to Wordsworth in *Glanmore Sonnets*, No. 3 to interpret primal bonds in terms of sound which corresponds to the lull of river Derwent, the first inspirational music in Wordsworth's life as recorded in *The Prelude*, Book 1.

xviii. S.T. Coleridge, *The Rhyme of The Ancient Mariner*

xix. The use of the other is fully appreciated with reference to the meaning it holds in *Glanmore Sonnets* 1 and 2, *Field Work*, 1979.

xx. Refer to 'carrion', *Glanmore sonnets*, No. 8, *Field Work*, 1979.



- xxi. Seamus Heaney, *The Wishing Tree, Haw Lantern*, 1987.  
 xxii. Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
 To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
 Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
 To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.  
 Seamus Heaney, *Personal Helicon, Death of A Naturalist*,  
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