

## Door into the Dark: Images of Darkness and Light in Seamus Heaney's Writings

*The paper points to darkness and light as a classical dual pair, which figures prominently in Heaney's poetic vision. The two series of images are seen in a constant relationship of tension, secondary-primary positioning being undermined. We have explored darkness and light in relation to Heaney's ars poetica, the Irish troubles and the poet's self. The chapter concludes that the dualities of content and poetic strategies, discussed in the previous chapters, are reflected in the structuring of Heaney's poetic imagery as well. They may account for the undecidability of the self, for the so-called écriture féminine, to use H. Cixous's words to refer to the kind of writing that does not depend on sex but on the perception of the text by the reader because it operates at syntactic and semantic level; it is any kind of writing containing repressed or veiled elements, vocabulary leading to ambiguity and resisting direct access to unity, light and truth.*

**Key words:** *poetry, darkness, light, duality, Irish identity*

Darkness and light are generally described as a classic dual pair. Whether in relation to rituals of initiation, nature cycles or historical periods, darkness is followed by light. Only in this way, a dark stage comes to be appreciated traditionally. It is precisely within the decadence and decomposition of the darkness that some kind of beginning, a new phase is engendered due to the need for a sense of equilibrium.

The *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* by Ad de Vries assigns various connotations to darkness, such as, primeval chaos, the feminine principle, mystery, evil, death, the Great Void, terrible judgement, spiritual need and ignorance. Loosely speaking, there are positive and negative symbols; death, loss, evil, sorrow, nothingness, guilt, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the universal substance, the maternal principle and mystery. The dark has been traditionally associated with night, mother of good counsel and rest, which begins each day but also sets free the monsters of the unconscious. Also, the season of darkness is considered to be winter, which is a terminal phase of the cycle of nature but winter snow prepares the seeds that will sprout in spring. Darkness signifies both death and birth; it represents a desire to return to the fullness of the mother-earth, a desire for origin. The value of darkness may consist, with the poet-hermit, in the complete withdrawal in order to know nothing of the external world. The imaginative powers of the romantics stemmed from darkness, dear for its mystery, i.e. Keats's "embalmed darkness", Coleridge's "deep romantic chasm" and Shelley's "awful shadow of some unseen Power".

The dictionary mentioned above gives the counterpart of darkness, with various connotations. Thus, light is traditionally associated with purity and morality; intellect, knowledge and wisdom; evolution, the masculine principle, cosmic energy and creative force; optimism; belief, charity and Christianity; all in all, life and language. One of the most dominant sets of symbols related to light revolves around images of sunlight, just as earth revolves around the literal sun. Man is seen as light, as a conscious being, and what is beyond our consciousness is the dark, the unknown. The dark is set off against light; there is a permanent dialectic of light and dark, a balance of inner and outer, the two constantly intertwining.

If one writes from the perspective of a woman, for instance, images and light and darkness may acquire different meanings, still preserving their traditional connotations. Thus, images of light may burn while images of darkness may provide refuge from the dazzling rays of the sun. In terms of gender-related patterns, critics have established a hierarchical evolution of light and dark: light as masculine (vitality, life, order, God, good, language, activity) and darkness as feminine (death, chaos, evil, Satan, passivity). By looking at various cultural patterns in space and time, feminist critics have come to the conclusion that women have traditionally been excluded from the world of light, i.e. thought and language, since light has come to be associated with male power, pain, constraints, the repression of women energy in general. An interesting idea would be to see in Heaney's poetry to what extent such a feminine voice rises from darkness in an attempt to subvert a dominant masculine voice taking into account the large number of symbols of the dark present in his poems. Connecting light and darkness with types of journeys undertaken by the poet, from a gender-related perspective, one could establish the distinction between male heroes, who have traditionally accomplished mental journeys while travelling through real geographic spaces, whereas women have accomplished their spiritual journeys within the only borders they could claim as theirs, the interior borders of the self. Does Heaney explore both outer and inner borders? How?

Also, in relation to the masculine and the feminine modes, Heaney compares and contrasts, in his essays, the styles of poets, such as Keats and Wordsworth, about whom he claim that their lines "release a flow", are "fecund", rich in texture, "a delivery of the dark embryo", whereas poets, such as Hopkins and Yeats's poems "stimulate the mind", being "a struggle toward maximum articulation" (*Preoccupations*, 75). For Heaney the two poetic modes are interrelated, being explored in his poetic arts imagining poetry as divination and design.

If we try to characterize the development of Heaney's volumes, from *Death of a Naturalist* (DN) to *District and Circle* (DC), comparing it to a diagram, the result could be a falling-rising-falling representation. More precisely, from *Death of a Naturalist* to *North* (N), we keep digging with the poet, removing layer after layer in the attempt to uncover some sort of primeval structures that would explain the present and the future. With *Field Work* (FW), Heaney rises and he keeps flying higher and higher till *The Spirit Level* (SL), which brings a downward flight, continued in *District and Circle*. Volume titles support this reading, first volumes pointing towards the dark, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (DD 1969), *Wintering Out* (WO 1972) and *North* (1975). *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (SI 1985) could be considered to have prepared the scene for a movement upward. Three of Heaney's volumes bear titles related to images of light, *The Haw Lantern* (HL 1987), *Seeing*

*Things* (ST 1991) and *Electric Light* (EL 2001). With *The Spirit Level* (SL 1996) and *District and Circle* (2006) the poet regains the balance between the two opposites, darkness and light.

What we will aim to prove is that metaphors of darkness function as the negative of a film in Heaney's texts. One has to go through the negative to arrive at the positive, similarly to the process taking place in the photographic art or similarly to a religious experience. A quotation we have often resorted to throughout the dissertation reads as follows: "My hope is that the poem will be vocables adequate to my whole experience" (*Preoccupations*, 37), says Heaney, referring to himself as an Irish Catholic poet, striving to heal the people and have them conceive of themselves beyond their limited condition. Thus, Heaney envisions poetry as an act that mediates between two worlds, an immanent and chaotic one – the darkness necessary - and a balanced, transcendent one – a world of light. Thus, the vision becomes informed by the dual pattern of images.

Certain images of darkness and light in Heaney's poems could be related to his poetic arts. The imagery of the dark is especially potent, especially starting with his second volume entitled *Door into the Dark*. Heaney's own observations point to the major role played by darkness in his vision. For instance, in an interview form *The Listener* in 1971, the poet states:

circumstances have changed and unity is usually born today out of the dark centre of the imagination ... I think this notion of the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insights and instincts, the hidden core of the self – this notion is the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet. (Garland "An Interview with Seamus Heaney", 16)

As this quotation argues, Heaney's view of his imagination is close to what psycho-analytical theoreticians have seen as the collective unconscious, i.e. the storehouse of insights and instincts, which is the self's hidden origin. Thus, the poet's search for identity, for a distinctive voice, for inspiration depends on this dark centre of imagination, just as Yeats depended on the voices of spirits for his themes when he wrote *A Vision*, with the difference that Heaney's poetic and mythological system is much more "homely" than Yeats's.

The poem "Personal Helicon", which closes Heaney's first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, offers an interpretation of images of the dark in relation to poetic creation:

I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells  
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.  
..... I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

("Personal Helicon" DN 44)

The "dark drop" acts as a medium for poetic inspiration, giving back a world of reflexivity and emphasising a sort of self-entrancement of poetry. The darkness of water mirrors the poem and the poet's soul, and looking into water prompts inward contemplation and self-awareness. Poetry is emphasized as an affair of inner searching within the deeper recesses of his identity. It represents a force driving the poet downwards at this stage in his quest. The

different forces associated with home, such as the water pump, fascinate the poet and push him to use them in order to locate the sources of his inspiration.

According to Heaney, poems in his second volume, *Door into the Dark*, are intended as

a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it. Words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning. And just as Wordsworth sensed a secret asking for release in the thorn, so in *Door into the Dark* there are a number of unnameable energies that, for me, hovered over certain bits of language and landscape. (*Preoccupations* 52)

There is, on the one hand, the creator's unconscious ("the buried life of feelings", "roots and associations"), pictured as formless matter, raw material, darkness and, on the other hand, the final product, the outcome, the poem ("a clarification of sense and meaning"), pictured in terms of illumination. Therefore, Heaney's allegory faces two directions: backward into the dark of origins and forward into the illuminating artistic realm.

Heaney's second volume (*Door into the Dark*) has been planned, with respect to imagery of the dark, "retrospectively", according to the poet's own words:

In the beginning there was a happy coincidence in that the last line of *Death of a Naturalist* (1996) was '... to set the darkness echoing'. And shortly after the book was published I did write this poem about the 'The Forge' and fortuitously the first line was, 'All I know is a door into the dark'. I thought to myself, 'a *Door into the Dark* – that's a good, romantic title ...'; and then, of course, later (I didn't immediately notice it), later I did notice the connection, that there could be a link through from the end of the first book to the title of the second. (Homem "On Elegies, Eclogues, Translations, Transfusion: an interview with Seamus Heaney 24)

What is surprising in the line that gives the title of Heaney's volume is the assertion "All I know" followed by "a door into the dark" because when we say "I know" we usually refer to some area of knowledge we are in control of, certainly, not to darkness, which could be associated with ignorance, confusion according to de Vries's dictionary entries. But once we open the door into the dark with Heaney, we discover a blacksmith-artist, an anvil-altar, shape and music, real iron-poems. Dark could be substituted here by inner or interior, as a figure for self-exploration.

In connection to symbols of the dark and light and self-exploration, the poem "In Gallarus Oratory" (*DD*) evokes another kind of experience. The poet places a group of monks in Gallarus Oratory (on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry- a tiny monastic chapel from medieval period) in an atmosphere of isolation and oppressiveness, a dark and almost Gothic background. It is more to this darkness than the mystic night preached by Christianity through St. John of the Cross, who advocated the necessity of the darkness before light - a state of the soul in which it attains union with God. In the oratory, there seems to be no penitential darkness, just prayers revealing some mysterious, concealed, universal beauty. According to Irish legends, the bards of professional poetry schools used to compose in their cubicles at night. Thus, Heaney seems to have taken over this claustrophobic element in composition. Actually, Heaney confesses in one of his conversations with Dennis O'Driscoll (2003) that literally he favours claustrophobic conditions for writing, whether that is the attic or a nineteenth century cottage with a latch. Thus, darkness acts here as a container of

positive images, as a space that provides safety and privacy. There is a world of darkness and pressure releasing one of light and dazzle. The invitation is for the reader to see the two as complementary not opposed. "This is a triumphant re-entry into a transfigured world of perceptions, rhetorical as a trumpet-call, but actually dependent on the initial withdrawal from the senses into the 'core of old dark'" (Tamplin 33). There is a leap towards the world perceived as light and illumination.

Inside, in the dark of the stone, it feels as if you are sustaining a great pressure, bowing under like the generations of monks who must have bowed in meditation and reparation on that floor. I felt the weight of Christianity, in all its rebunking aspects, its calls to self-denial and self-abnegation, its humbling of the proud flesh and insolent spirit. But coming out of the cold heart of the stone, into the sunlight and the dazzle of grass and sea, I felt a lift in my heart, a surge towards happiness that must have been experienced over and over again by these monks as they crossed that same threshold centuries ago. (*Preoccupations* 41-60)

If so far we have concentrated on the Christian implications of Heaney's poetic quest as an illumination once through the dark, the volume *North* contains two poetic arts departing from mythological figures symbolizing light and darkness. The poems "Antaeus" and "Antaeus and Hercules" oppose the two mythical heroes standing for darkness and light and, in Heaney's case, for different kinds of poetic sensibility. In connection to the two types of poets, Antaeus-like and Hercules-like, Heaney states the following: "Hercules represents the balanced rational light while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity" (in an interview by Deane "Unhappy and at Home" 66-67). Antaeus's strength is cradled in the dark; Hercules's in the light. One is instinctual, the other one is rational. The light that Heaney evokes as represented by Hercules is complementary to the dark imagery that is Antaeus and the poet himself as in many of his texts. Darkness underlies light as envisaged by Heaney. Any luminous stage seems to be defined in opposition to the previous dark one, as shown in the introductory chapter and earlier in this chapter, too. Thus, the confrontation between Antaeus and Hercules, which has already been discussed as an allegory of the Irish colonisation by the English and as an account of the genesis of Heaney's poetry itself, is rendered as a tension between the elements of this dual pair, darkness and light.

Light, feeble or cold as it may be, striving to confront the Antaeus-like darkness, winter light, may signify exposure for the poet confronted with the others and what he considers the call of the community or of politics, such as in the poem "Exposure" (*N*). The state of vulnerability is induced both by the expectations of the community – that the poet should act on their behalf, as if he were their voice – and by the resentment of the opposite side, who may see his defense of the Catholics as bigoted. The light becomes more powerful, a real diamond light, with the possibility that such poetry should engender Coleridge's profound readers, who, the Romantic poet calls "Mogul diamonds" and who not only absorb poems but also reflect them in multiple facets. Yet, this poem, like "The Haw Lantern", which gives the title of a volume, also reflects through "a small light" feelings of despair of Ireland ("small people"):

The wintry haw is burning out of season,  
crab of the thorn, a small light for small people,

wanting no more from them but that they keep  
 the wick of self-respect from dying out,  
 not having to blind them with illumination.

(“The Haw Lantern” *HL* 7)

According to the critic Helen Vendler, the red berry or haw on the naked hawthorn branch is seen as “an almost apologetic flame, indirectly suggesting his own quelled hopes as a spokesman for his fellow men” (186). The haw, initially vital, burning out of season, keeps a low profile and does not bombard the Irish with light (“blind them with illumination”). Then, the flame of the fruit is changed into the lamp carried by Diogenes, the cynic of classical antiquity, looking for one just man. Can he find anyone with the help of this shining light that sees inside people and illuminates the soul?

The function of poetry, according to Randy Brandes (Tobin 229), is “to have a bigger blaze than that [offer a middle vision of poetry], but people should not expect more from themselves than adequacy. They should not confuse the action of poetry which is at its highest visionary action with the actuality of our lives, which at best are adequate to our smaller size. In the poem “The Haw Lantern” there is a sense of being tested and earning the right to proceed”. Flinching at the realization of all these truths, the poet may still retain his confidence in the power of poetry as way of clarifying and enlightening human destiny, as offering a vision.

However feeble these attempts at illumination may seem, Heaney’s poetry in the volumes *The Haw Lantern* (1987) and *Seeing Things* (1991) struggles “to absorb that rational Mediterranean light that Socrates and Horace purveyed” (Hart 184). And, when he writes about places now, they are luminous spaces within his mind. They have been evacuated of their status of background, documentary geography, witness to violence and exist instead “as transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force” (Murphy 86). “I remember I wrote to somebody and said that ‘I don’t want anymore doors into the dark: I want a door into the light’”, states Heaney in an interview with O’Driscoll (“In the Midcourse of His Life” 113). But as with the volume *Field Work* before, Heaney preserves a certain type of dark imagery, more sublimated perhaps, yet, forceful.

Programmatically, the volume *Seeing Things* aims at becoming a luminous book; Heaney claims that he is willing to open the door into the light by dissolving and lightening the heavy materiality and the darkness of early poetry. The poem “Fosterling” marks the transition towards the “Lightnings” sequence in the volume with an opulent lexicon of luminosity: “brilliances, radiance, blazing, dawning, brightness, illumination, flaring, seelight, glitter, shine, gleam, burnish, phosphorescence, beaming, shimmer, flashing, fireflies, starlight” (Corcoran 173-185). To all this, one could add, according to Corcoran, the Dantean inheritance, very dear to Heaney and which the poet seems to have taken over in these short pieces, i.e. a certain lucidity of words; the thought may be obscure but the word is translucent, plus Dante’s masterly use of light, in the form of certain types of mystical experience.

Interestingly for Heaney, the poet of the door into the dark, poetry becomes a “daylight art”. In the poem entitled “A Daylight Art” (*HL*), the poet gives the floor to Socrates as a

persona, who, before dying recounts a recurrent dream containing the following instructions:

Happy the man, therefore, with a natural gift  
For practicing the right one from the start –  
Poetry, say, or fishing; whose nights are dreamless;  
Whose deep-sunk panoramas rise and pass  
Like daylight through the rod's eye or the nib's eye.

(“A Daylight Art” *HL* 9)

The poem becomes a hymn to the one who has the gift of practicing the art the suits them, whether poetry or fishing.

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The darkness and the light metaphors illustrating the Irish Troubles in Heaney's poems cover both past and present. The poem “Bogland” (*DD*) celebrates the potential darkness within the Irish landscape, the bog as treasure holder and generous yielder of layers of history more recent or mythical; it is the darkness of memory and history:

The ground itself is kind, black butter  
Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.

Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards  
Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.  
The wet centre is bottomless.

(“Bogland” *DD* 41)

Reading the poem, we witness a miracle. The richly layered bog opens inwards in a series of endless possibilities. The black butter acquires the significance of primeval matter, the universal substance of Chaos waiting to be shaped by the skillful hands of the god-poet-craftsman. There is at least a threefold sense of possibility and freedom within the symbol of the bog: of land and the past past, of self and collective consciousness and of language and poetry. Heaney redefines the myth he finds in his homeground drawing attention to the

inconclusiveness of memory and Irish history and to the self-searching of the poet and of his nation (Edna Longley in Allen 34). The text enacts a sort of descent through bog layers with the full consciousness of the mission the poet has undertaken, that is to reactivate what might have been lost or forgotten for “millions of years”. On the other hand, the bog - preserver of the identity - proves to be a swallower of it at the same time since the skeleton of the Irish Elk is described as merely “an astounding crate full of air”, a huge dark emptiness. “The actual geography, the weather-climate and the climate of the mind – a dark and somber, fated climate – all that was deliberately woven into *North*” (Heaney in an interview with Homem 28).

In the poem “Casualty” (*FW*), the fisherman drinks alone, in the pub, in silence, and then he is engulfed by the dark symbolizing violence and death. The text is both an elegy for the fisherman Louis O’Neill - a regular customer of Heaney’s father-in-law’s pub in county Tyrone - and a meditation on the complex loyalties of a Northern Catholic. O’Neill would not observe the curfew imposed on the Catholics after the Bloody Sunday and died in an IRA bombing carried in a Protestant pub. He seems to have been drawn there like a fish to a poacher’s lure at night. Anticipatory image, the shadow points to the imminent death of the fisherman as a transient human being. He may be one more figure “of the unsaid” (O’Donoghue 84), of the oppressed that the poet gives voice and pays tribute to. Also, images of the dark may stand for the shadow of the Catholic loyalties haunting not only O’Neill but also the speaker.

The description of the Bloody Sunday victims’ funerals contribute to a numbing and suffocating effect – the darkened climate of the mind – springing from violence:

Raw silence, wind-blown  
 Coffin after coffin  
 The common funeral  
 Unrolled its swaddling band  
 (“Casualty” *FW* 22)

The people attending the funeral are creating a rhythm, only this time it lacks the will to life of the drums pounding; they look more like Dante’s shadows heading the Inferno, united but nevertheless dead, just like the fisherman. “Whatever black flags waxed”. Neither the fisherman nor the poet would be constrained by tribe bonds; they are beyond such community constraints although they face the black flag put on the memory of the Bloody Sunday victims.

And if there are lights here, they are just flames in the Inferno, frightening the poet’s second cousin in whose memory the poem “The Strand at Lough Beg” (*FW*) has been written:

Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,  
 Goat-beards and dogs’ eyes in a demon pack  
 Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.



What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?

The red lamp swung .....

(“The Strand at Lough Beg” *FW* 17)

If we move from the present to the past of the Irish troubles, we notice that Heaney’s poems evoke dark episodes that left permanent scars on the history of Ireland. The poem “At a Potato Digging” (*DN*), for instance, is an elegy for the victims of the Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century. Sinister images of famine victims alternate with hellish descriptions of the lost crops of potatoes and the of black mother earth:

Native

To the black hutch of clay

Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on

wild higgledy skeletons,

wolfed the blighted root and died

and where potato diggers are

you still smell the running sore.

(“At a Potato Digging” *DN* 19)

The last two lines quoted establish the connection with present day workers seen like “crows attacking crow-black field”, bending to the “black Mother” demythologized as the “faithless ground”. Far from the good, plentiful ground receiving the seed and giving the crop, the darkened land stands now for all miseries that afflict mankind - poverty, sickness, infernal pain, suffering and death. Still, the diggers bring libation to the dark goddess in an attempt to cause her not to repeat the tragic experience.

Similarly to the family house with the enduring blackened roof-beam, the Irish bog has preserved sacrificial victims like “The Tollund Man” (*N*). The contemplation of this victim from two thousand years ago seems now to trigger veneration more easily than the examination of plastic bagged dead body of a barman killed when carrying out a bomb, this being the reason for which the poet resorts to their presentation to refer to the darkness of the present-day. The Tollund Man was presumably sacrificed to Nerthus, the fertility goddess in the North European pantheon, to secure good crop, “the mild pods of his eye-lids” and “His last gruel of winter seeds” hinting at the potentiality of germination. The sacrificial ritual, the killing (“dark juices working”) and the burial are seen as a kind of violent love-making between the man and the goddess:

Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him  
And opened her fen  
Those dark juices working  
Him to a saint's kept body.

(“The Tollund Man” *N* 36)

Little by little, the description acquires a reverential tone; the sacrifice has conferred immortality to the Tollund Man. Thus, although a pagan victim, he is asked to intercede for Ireland so that the atrocious crimes of present day (“the ambushed”, “stockinged corpses”) might in some miraculous way result in the renewal of the territory.

The decapitated head of another bog girl, in “The Strange Fruit” (*N*), is compared to a fruit and viewed like a mirror to the landscape, more precisely to the Irish landscape (the black nose like a turf clod). Victims of the black goddess or of sectarian killing, the bog people seem to have borrowed the darkness (physical decay and emotional violence) of the earth that nursed them.

The feeble lights that could be associated with the Irish conflict are most likely to be candle lights, blue flames flickering against the dark background of the shawls of old Irish women:

The small wax candles melt to light,  
Flicker in marble, reflect bright  
Asterisks on brass candlesticks:  
At the Virgin's altar on the right,  
Blue flames are jerking on wicks.  
Old dough-faced women with black shawls.

(“Poor Women in a City Church” *DN* 29)

Or there are candles and funeral lights for sectarian conflicts victims and ancient heroes alike, such as the ones mentioned in “Funeral Rites” (*N*):

as wax melted down  
and veined the candles,  
the flames hovering  
to the women hovering  
before me.

.....

and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber.

("Funeral Rites" N 6)

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The darkness and the light patterns related to the personal self are trying to add new connotations to the previous ones (poetic and Irish self), enriching the symbols of darkness and light discussed so far with other dimensions. It is a more personal and more universal darkness-light game since we will try to capture the shadows, mystery and illuminations within the spirit of the child-adolescent-lover-husband-father-son Heaney, which are very personal, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, they represent stages in anyone's life. We shall try to prove how the symbols of the dark and light are representative of states and feelings of profoundly universal human concerns: fear, the awareness of evil and death, guilt or happiness and fulfillment, sexual life, love, the trials of marriage, death of parents, being a father.

Although applying different approaches in the analysis of *Death of a Naturalist*, both critics Henry Hart and Tony Curtis agree that a "poems of childhood" direction can be detached within the volume. Similarly to his action of digging the soil or delving into the bogs, into the language or into the Irish collective subconscious, the poet is digging now into the child's psyche, into a darker zone between the consciousness and the unconscious that will reveal the emerging world of the self. What darkens the innocent child's inner world? Curtis starts from the similar theme he detects in Ted Hughes' and in Seamus Heaney's poetry: the darkness of instinct, a kind of primary power that threatens the identity. Hughes seems not only to accept but also to be fascinated by the intricacies of the violent struggle for survival, whereas the child-speaker in Heaney's poem is completely horrified by the army of frogs on the flax dam in "Death of a Naturalist" (*DN*). The centre of Heaney's poetry is, as already mentioned above, profoundly human, the emphasis being on the boy's imagination, and his fear is not based on the innate hostility of nature, like in "The Barn" (*DN*):

The musty dark hoarded in armoury

Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.

**And into nights when bats were on the wing**

**Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared**

From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking.

The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff

To be pecked up when birds shot through air-slits.

I lay face-down to shun the fear above.

The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.

(“The Barn” *DN* 5)

Heaney shares thus with Hughes the subject-matter but not its interpretation because the engulfing darkness and the giant rats, for instance, are only projections of the speaker’s haunted conscience, waiting to be enlightened, cleared (Curtis 15). Through the encounter of child with place, the volume *Death of a Naturalist* opens an unsuspected darkness before the boy, threatening to engulf him. It is “an uncontrollable fecundity, a pullulation of alien, secret, absorbing life - rats, frog spawn” (Curtis 29). Somehow, as Heaney himself admits, his muse thrives on fear or as Andrews puts it “in fear and darkness the growth of a poet’s mind begins” (24-25).

Heaney’s quest for self definition through poetry is illustrated through an allegory of the life cycle of the eel in the Atlantic standing for the journey of the self moving through death and then rebirth as in the sequence “A Lough Neagh Sequence” (*DD*). The poems, dedicated to “the fishermen” suggest a sympathetic agreement, according to Corcoran (*The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 67), with the Catholic fishermen, whose poaching was in conflict with the British company which had the rights to eel fishing in Lough Neagh. But the sequence is also a life embracing “time and the timeless, the known and that which transcends knowledge, the terribly physical and the numinous, the light and the dark” (Corcoran *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 50). The second poem in the sequence, “Beyond Sargasso” (*DD*) recounts the metamorphosis of the male eel during his journey across the Atlantic to the lake. The eel is lured by the deep dark until he reaches the Bann estuary:

Dark

delivers him hungering

down at each undulation.

(“Beyond Sargasso” *DD* 27)

The eel’s night journey is imagined as a correlative of the poet’s self. Like the eel, or the soul in Celtic iconography, the self makes its way back to the dark place of origin. This process is pictured in the poem “The Return” (*DD*), in which the female eel leaves the lake to reach the ocean to lay the spawn that will resume the dark cycle. If all the poet knows is “a door into the dark”, similarly, the female eel embarks upon the final descent towards that deep darkness.

With the volume *Field Work*, the critic Henry Hart notices “a shift in trust: a learning to trust melody, to trust art as reality, to trust artfulness as an affirmation and not to go into the self-punishment so much. I distrust that attitude too, of course”, says Heaney (Hart 121). As a result we have wonderful marriage poems, such as “The Skunk” and “Field Work II and IV” (*FW*) using imagery of the dark. In “The Skunk” (*FW*) the poet cherishes his wife, from whom he was separated during the year he spent in California. The relationship between husband and wife must have been more than affectionate since the poet risked such a simile,

wife/ skunk, in the dark. Erotic separation and expectancy are interwoven with marital proximity and fulfilment in this simile.

Up, black, striped and damasked like chasuble

At a funeral mass, the skunk's tail

Paraded the skunk.

It all came back to me last night, stirred

By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,

Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer

For the black plunge-line dress.

(“The Skunk” *FW* 48)

The light shed by the desk lamp only draws attention to the mysteriousness outside and of the animal. Everything becomes sharply defined in the dark. The woman's posture, ridiculous as it may seem to be remembered, triggers the comparison with the skunk but also accounts for the unconscious erotic invitation. Another of the mysteries of marriage is illustrated by the husband being stirred by an ordinary gesture of the wife – i.e. letting clothes fall to the bedroom floor at bedtime. It is like a revelation of “the night self [the wife's and his own], the night part in everybody, the scuttling secret parts of life” (Hart 121). That explains the rendering sacred of the profane, the erotic, intimate moment seen as religious ceremony and also the oxymoronic attributes of the wife/ skunk. The ordinary seems to be refreshed by the mysteriousness of the wife-skunk in the dark. Domestic affection, less often sung in poetry, is certainly given weight by Heaney through the Glanmore sequence.

The poem “Glanmore Revisited 7 The Skylight” (*ST*) features the poet as claustrophobic, lover of darkness, “nest-up-in-the-roof”, whereas his wife is “the one for skylights”. The “Squarings” (*ST*) sequence brings about the breaking down of physical barriers along with the construction of openings to the light. Metaphorically, roofs are coming off and light is coming in now in Heaney's poems.

The “shifting brilliances” of “Lightenings I” (*ST*) in the “winter light” (a stone doorstep, a shivering beggar, and abandoned house with its hearth rained into) ending in the cumulative image “Bright puddle where a soul-free cloud roams” seems to offer a peculiar kind of “lightening”, the inexistence of soul, life after death. “Lightenings XII” (*ST*) offers the same “alleviation, / Illumination”. Lightening is described as:

A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares

With pure exhilaration before death –

The good thief in us harking to the promise!

(“Lightenings XII” ST 66)

Only that the good thief in us is pictured “scanning empty space”; the promise remains unfulfilled. The feeling is one of loss, similar to the capture by the sequence of the “Clearances” in the volume *The Haw Lantern*.

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Dark imagery is of crucial importance in Heaney’s poems as it can be associated with a state of disequilibrium, of decay of all laws and rules and, consequently, a state of freedom and infinite possibilities. And as already stated, it is its dual pair, light, emerging out of this richness that gives value to darkness and vice versa.

Throughout his volumes, Heaney, makes trips into his speaker’s unconscious. Darkness and light intertwine. The child is haunted by fear of sexual awakening, loss of innocence, passage of time and death. The couple is troubled by guilt, repression, fear, sadness and jealousy and there is a certain feeling of frailty and vulnerability about the two lovers. But there is also passion and love and a degree of intimacy brought about living together and sharing things for a long time. Looking for the good thief in us does not seem to bring enough light to the soul that ultimately experiences a loss. Darkness and light enrich with new meanings: the poet’s unconscious and its role in poetic creation, the mystery of the creative process and of the world it releases, words themselves seen as primeval matter before being shaped by the poet, the poet’s wisdom given by withdrawal and contemplation, exposure, perfection. The darkness of violence and death sometimes accompanies the process of poetic creation. Blindness is also rightly associated with visionary powers and poetic creation.

Irrespective of the subtopic dealt with, such as, Irish present, past, mythology, archaic patterns and landscape, darkness remains a constant image with Heaney acquiring different connotations. Sickness, poverty, transience, violence, ghosts, chaos and death permeate little by little the speaker’s unconscious, turning into anguish, guilt, sorrow, doubt and evil, all related to a fear of some “other” whose prototype may be Englishness or Protestantism. Yet, associated with the ideas of fertility, germination, exploration, mystery, freedom and infinite possibilities, dark imagery comprises a sense of hope for the future of Ireland. This idea also contains the seeds for an opening to light.

Beyond the darkness of Irish history – violence, death, sorrow, guilt- we catch a glimpse of a two-forked future: periods of freedom and rebirth followed by constant outbursts of anger and pessimism. Scrutinizing the darkness of the self, we may come across states of disequilibrium or loss and a silent, guilty, frail and repressed self. Love and tenderness within family life follow in the pattern restoring the equilibrium. The darkness of poetry revealing or rather hiding the mysterious process of poetic creation betrays the poet’s quest for roots and patterns. With every downward look, with every poem digging into the darkness, poet and reader, discover the essence of life, the traces left by the flock of birds of the fifteenth century Irish poem showing a flock of feathers “digging” a white field in the sky to leave traces for other birds following them.

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