

Seamus Heaney: *District and Circle*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006, pp. 76

1995 Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, author of numerous collections of poetry – first published in 1966, *Death of a Naturalist* – as well as of criticism and translations, is regarded as the greatest Irish poet since Yeats; so has Heaney been described by the American poet Robert Lowell.

Seamus Heaney's latest collection, *District and Circle* 2006, begins "in an age of bare hands/ and cast iron" ("The Turnip-Snedder" 3) – evoking an era of good tools, hard work and memories of the poet's childhood in rural Derry – and ends when "the automatic lock/ Clunks shut, the bird's panic/ Is shortlived" ("The Blackbird of Glanmore" 76) – emphasizing a state of menace, pervading the entire volume and the twenty-first century. In this respect, the title of the collection could be read as a maker of continuity with the Irish poet's previous volumes. However far the poet may be traveling, he stays closely connected to home and familiar things and themes, circling the same old district. Both (poet) figures and creative experiences ("Poet to Blacksmith" 25, "Midnight Anvil" 26, "The Tollund Man in Spring" 55-58) and place-names ("Anahorish 1944" 7, "Moyulla" 58-59, "The Blackbird of Glanmore" 75) are revisited throughout Heaney's new collection with more conviction in the power of everyday renewals.

Also, as previously mentioned, the volume seems pervaded with a sense of threat, typical of contemporary world, as if the poet wished to stress the idea of violence not any longer within Northern Ireland but gone global, because "Anything can happen, the tallest towers/ Be overturned" ("Anything Can Happen" 13). Hence, an anti-war sequence: "Anhorish 1944" 7, "To Mick Joyce in Heaven" 8, "Out of Shot" 15, "The Aerodrome" 11-12).

"District and Circle" 17-19, the title poem, brings about a journey underground:

And so by night and day to be transported
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
By blasted weeping rock-walls.
Flicker-lit.

Heaney confesses that it is primarily a memory of 1962, when he had a summer job in London and he used to ride either the District or the Circle line every day to work. Secondly, within the poetic tradition, which Heaney has embraced in his poetry, the underground journey has been assimilated to the archetype of travelling to the land of the dead. Thirdly, one more level of awareness could be added to these layers of meaning after the bombings of the London tube train in July 2005: that of a shadow of menace tingling in an otherwise monotonous environment. Thus, the poet circles the same district his readers have got used to, a multiple-layered one, concerned with poetry writing, suffering and ordinary experiences at the same time.

Finally, *District and Circle*, may come as a wonderful revisitation of Seamus Heaney's duality of poetic vision in general. Namely, since Heaney's approach to history and cosmogony is cyclical, this image being superimposed on that of the circularity of the soul in Celtic iconography and on the circular journey of the eels in Irish lakes, the metaphor of the circle has been recurrent with the poet. And it may stand for a whole, unified and perfected vision, whether artistic, social, historical or domestic (in *Wintering Out* 1972, *The Haw Lantern* 1987, *Field Work* 1979). On the other hand, the circles of the Inferno may bind the poet, who is limited either by thorough devotion to his craft or by the requirements of his troubled home (in *North* 1975, *Station Island* 1984). The theme of circularity is valid at the level of the technique as well, making use of self-interwoven similes, such as in "The Aerodrome" 12, where images of the self and of love selve, to use G. M. Hopkins's terms, or turn upon themselves, similarly to W. B. Yeats's gyres:

If self is a location, so is love:
Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,
Options, obstinacies, dug heels and distance,
Here and there and now and then, a stance.