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Poetic Maturity, Identity, and a Troublesome Future in "Personal Helicon"

Taylor Bitton

When he was 27 years old, Irish poet Seamus Heaney published his first volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, which was a huge career-building moment for the now world-renowned writer. He would later write several books of poetry, many of which were impactful commentaries about the political upheaval in Ireland during his lifetime. The publication of Heaney's first volume, which was written by an author who, for a long time, was hesitant about a future in poetry, launched this illustrious career. While writing poetry in college, Heaney admitted, "I couldn't say, of course, that I had found a voice but I had found a game. I knew the thing was only word-play, and I hadn't even the guts to put my name to it. I called myself Incertus, uncertain, a shy soul fretting and all that" ("Feeling into Words" 45). Along with his hesitations, Heaney also admitted that it took a long time for him to feel that he was writing poetry that adequately expressed who he was. It was not until he wrote his poem "Digging" that he "thought that [his] feelings had got into words, or more accurately, where [he] thought [his] *feel* had got into words" (41). Heaney's

poetic career took many years to develop, and he grew significantly as a poet throughout that time.

I argue that “Personal Helicon,” the final work in *Death of a Naturalist*, was another poem that was crucial in forming his self-identity as a poet. In this poem, Heaney writes of water wells and uses them as a metaphor for self-discovery, ending with a declaration of his own personal identity. Scholar Eugene O’Brien reflects that “in this poem is the mature self of the poet, who is capable of seeing his earlier self at a distance, both temporally and culturally” (46). Heaney, as a grown man, explores his younger self and past culture in “Personal Helicon,” connecting his past life to his current identity. In addition to exploring maturity and identity, this poem is laced with dark imagery and themes. Scholar Robert Welch attributes these dark themes to Heaney’s view of the future by saying that Heaney “chronicles the dying away of the conventional mind with its sets of attitudes. . . . The writing is looking for trouble, for difficulty; or rather, wishes, to acknowledge trouble and difficulty” (153). This acknowledgment of difficulty stemming from dying convention indicates Heaney takes an apprehensive approach to the future, that the future might be dark. While these themes of identity and darkness have been investigated, there are gaps in these studies that prompt further examination. First, labeling Heaney as a mature poet at the publication of “Personal Helicon” in *Death of a Naturalist* is inaccurate, as this was the first of many collections he would publish. Heaney also indicates that he is young and apprehensive in “Personal Helicon” itself, where its dark themes may indicate that Heaney is afraid of the future that awaits him, both politically and personally. However, his assertion of his identity in “Personal Helicon” was an intrinsic part of how his future transpired, a future much brighter than the darkness that his immature, younger self may have foreseen.

Much of the critical conversation surrounding “Personal Helicon” refers to Seamus Heaney as a “mature poet.” Scholar Michael Parker claimed that “‘Personal Helicon’ is a poem that . . . glances back at earlier experiences and poems of childhood, yet forward to a future of poetic maturity” (74). Though Heaney certainly is looking at his past self in this poem, he was hardly a mature poet at this point in his life. At twenty-seven, he was a grown man, but that is a young age in terms of almost any career, making it nearly impossible for him to feasibly be considered stylistically mature in his poetry. Only later in life did he grow into that maturity. Heaney later referred

to his poetic growth by describing the differences between his first and later volumes:

I tried very deliberately in *Field Work* to turn from a broody, phonetically self-relishing kind of writing to something closer to my own speaking voice. And I think that from *Field Work* onwards I have been following that direction. It's a very different kind of linguistic ambition now from what I was after in *Death of a Naturalist* or *Wintering Out* or *North*. Those books wanted to be texture, to be all consonants, vowels and voicings, they wanted the sheer materiality of words. (Cole, 105–106)

Heaney spent thirteen years and six volumes to develop the style of writing that he describes using in *Field Work*. *Death of a Naturalist* was not the poetry that canonized his name and place in the literary world; rather, Heaney worked for years to develop the talent shown in *Field Work*, a popular volume of poetry in its own right, and *North*, the volume in which Heaney's well-known bog body poetry was published.

In writing "Personal Helicon," Heaney would best be considered a young poet because it is not until this poem that he establishes a concrete poetic identity. He establishes this identity through a metaphor involving echoes inside wells. Heaney mentions several wells in this poem, and each represents a different stage of his life. He describes the echoes that resonated from the wells and "gave back your own call / with clean new music in it" ("Personal Helicon" 13–14). The echoes returning with "new music" represent new lessons he learns about himself by examining his past. Echoes are, in essence, a repetition of old information. Thus, the echoes with "new music" represent new information gained from re-examining something old, which is in this case Heaney's past and history. Heaney is learning more about himself by examining who he used to be. Heaney asserts his identity as a poet by describing how he sets off these metaphorical echoes. He writes, "I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing" (19–20). Heaney has come to learn about himself through "rhyming" or poetry. Heaney's method of self-discovery is his poetry, and stating this effectively establishes his identity as a poet. This identity is uniquely his own, completely separated from his culture and past, which he explored earlier in the poem and in *Death of a Naturalist*.

"Personal Helicon" differs from the previous poems in *Death of a Naturalist*. While other poems in *Death of a Naturalist*, like "Digging" and

“Blackberry Picking” and others, focus largely on Heaney’s childhood and past, “Personal Helicon” examines the past in a different light and shifts the overall focus of the book by portraying a dark future. This is done through the poem’s tonal changes. Heaney uses a negative tone throughout “Personal Helicon,” and it differs slightly from the earlier poems in the volume. Critic Michael Parker observes that

Within “Personal Helicon” one can detect subtle shifts in Heaney’s style... Poet and reader relish together the melodramatic diction—“the dark drop,” “the rich crash” of the bucket which “Plummeted down”—and a child’s word “scareesome.” The rat’s presence reminds him that the stanza, however, speaks of transition, triumph, the growth of a poet’s mind. (75)

The tonal changes that this critic describes make “Personal Helicon” a much different poem from the earlier works in *Death of a Naturalist*. Unlike “Digging,” with its idealistic view of Heaney’s ancestors, “Personal Helicon” speaks of an uncertain past with its “melodramatic diction.” And unlike “Blackberry Picking” with its positive nature imagery, “Personal Helicon” employs “scareesome” images that portray a dark and uncertain future. There are numerous examples of poems in *Death of a Naturalist* that describe Heaney’s childhood and hometown, but “Personal Helicon” looks toward his future by describing the “growth of a poet’s mind,” and Heaney approaches the future with apprehension in this poem.

Heaney’s hesitant approach to the future is evident in the imagery he uses when describing the wells that he explores. He describes many different types of wells, and each one represents a different stage of his life. Heaney uses negative language in his description of each well from the past, employing words like “rotted” and “shallow” while speaking of “dry stone” and “trapped sky” (“Personal Helicon” 5, 9, 3). This imagery is reminiscent of death and stagnation, giving the reader a sense of disillusionment with that period by describing it as deteriorated. When describing the present, his journey of self-discovery, and his future, Heaney’s language becomes more assertively negative, talking about “a rat [that] slapped across my reflection,” “pry[ing] into roots, into finger slime” and calling it “scareesome” (“Personal Helicon” 16, 17, 15). These images used in describing his future indicate an uneasy tone, as they imply that he is unearthing things that should not be unearthed. This tone is much more fearful than the one Heaney employs in describing his past. This shows that while he is disillusioned with the

past, he finds the future even more hopeless. Heaney is writing in “Personal Helicon” that he has a lot of fear for the life ahead of him.

Analyzing the reflections that Heaney sees in each well in the poem shows the apprehension with which he approaches a poetic career. At the end of every stanza in this poem, Heaney writes about the reflection that he sees in the wells. One was “so deep you saw no reflection in it” (“Personal Helicon” 8). In another, he sees a “white face hover[ing] over the bottom,” and in yet another a “rat slapped across [his] reflection” (“Personal Helicon” 12, 16). The contents of each well portray Heaney’s reflection or lack thereof. This shows that he is looking at himself, or in other words, is involved in deep introspection. Heaney looking for his reflection is a metaphor for his trying to discover his identity. The well that was “so deep you saw no reflection” indicates a lack of progress because he is not finding anything. The “white face” that he sees is reminiscent of a corpse, which indicates Heaney has discovered something about himself that he should not have. The rat that disturbs his reflection indicates that outside factors are interfering with the discovery process. In all cases, nothing is as expected. It is not until the last stanza that Heaney finds success in this endeavor, when he realizes that “To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring / is beneath all adult dignity” (18–19). By comparing himself to Narcissus, a character often associated with idleness and selfishness, Heaney is stating that he is apprehensive about looking into his reflection, and so discovering himself, because he associates self-discovery with selfishness. Poetry is how Heaney has been able to discover himself, and describing this act as narcissistic and “beneath all adult dignity” shows that there are some negative qualities to it, and thus the art he is using to do it, indicating that he is apprehensive about not just the future broadly but especially a career in the poetic field.

Identity is intrinsically connected to personal life because the way we identify ourselves has a large impact on how we act and perceive the world. This applies to Seamus Heaney as well. Establishing his identity as a poet had a massive effect on his life because of the success that he saw in his career. One reviewer called him “the most skillful and profound poet writing in English today” after the publication of *Opened Ground*, a compilation of Heaney’s most famous poems spanning several volumes (Mendelson). Indeed, his poems about bog bodies, ancient bodies preserved in the Irish peat bogs, have been highly praised for their masterful parallels between ancient times and the political upheaval in Ireland in the 1970s. Though his

political poetry has become the most popular, Heaney has published many books of poetry, all of which are regarded as impressive and eloquent in their description of the human experience. A writer for the *New York Times Book Review* said Heaney “has created a remarkable series of poems that stay ‘true to the impact of external reality’ while at the same time remaining ‘sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being’” (Kakutani). Much of his poetry has had a widespread effect on the literary community, earning him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. Heaney himself said during his Nobel lecture that “When I first encountered the name of the city of Stockholm, I little thought that I would ever visit it, never mind end up being welcomed to it as a guest of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Foundation. At that particular time, such an outcome was not just beyond expectation: it was simply beyond conception” (“Crediting Poetry” 415). The success that he found from his career had become so grand and impressive that it was beyond the dark future he had imagined for himself as a young poet.

And yet, despite the happy future that awaited Heaney, the world was moving in the opposite direction. The apprehension he expresses in “Personal Helicon” indicates that as a young poet, Heaney was scared of the world ahead of him, perhaps not only personally but also politically. *Death of a Naturalist* was published in 1966, three years before the Irish Troubles officially began. The Troubles, a violent conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, affected the daily lives of many citizens with frequent bombings, street fights, and other forms of conflict. Of the violence in his hometown, Heaney wrote, “People keep asking what it’s like to be living in Belfast and I’ve found myself saying that things aren’t too bad in our part of the town: a throwaway consolation meaning that we don’t expect to be caught in crossfire if we step into the street” (“Belfast” 30). Though these Troubles did not come to pass until after “Personal Helicon” was written and published, no national conflict arose overnight, and there were certainly indications of the political upheaval the Troubles brought long before they officially began. It is possible that many of Heaney’s fearful and worrisome themes in “Personal Helicon” stem from this conflict; in any case, it is through the Troubles that these dark themes and fears were realized. The dark future that he anticipated did come to pass.

This begs the question, As a novice poet, could Heaney have conceived the future that awaited him? Could he have imagined the bright career that would be his, juxtaposed with the dark political turmoil that would affect

his hometown? Certainly, his apprehension about the future expressed in "Personal Helicon" indicates that he had some idea of the conflict that would affect him. Indeed, his later poetry, particularly his collections *North* and *Wintering Out*, reflected this darkness as he embraced the Troubles as inspiration for his writing. Some of Heaney's most famous poems were written in response to these issues. Yet, mirroring the wells and echoes in "Personal Helicon," Heaney grew in poetic maturity and understanding as his poetry grew darker, which in turn led to the bright future and success that became his. Heaney's identity as a poet is intrinsically connected to these light and dark themes. His poetry grew darker to reflect the happenings in the world but became brighter as he wrote his way into success. In these ways, his future was much more dynamic than he may have ever conceived.

Overall, Heaney's establishment of his poetic identity as exemplified in "Personal Helicon" was a major turning point towards the future that awaited him. The young poet at the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* who "wish[ed] to acknowledge trouble and difficulty" found success in his career by doing so (Welch 153). Using his poetic identity, he addressed this "trouble and difficulty" and conquered it. The very poetry that he wrote that helped him make sense of the political turmoil ahead of him was the poetry that made him well-known and famous. His career aided him in pushing forward through difficult times, through the Irish Troubles and the political upheaval that he saw, to a successful life.

Though he did not yet know the positive effect his poetic identity would have on his life, Heaney advocates finding personal identity in "Personal Helicon." This is done through the positive language he uses when describing his own journey of self-discovery. Examining wells in this poem is one of the ways Heaney discovers his personal identity, and it is the main metaphor he employs in describing this process. By writing about how "as a child, they could not keep me from the wells," showing that he loved them in his past, he is showing that self-discovery is something that he valued ("Personal Helicon" 1). Further in the poem, he writes about how he "loved" and "savoured" his experiences with the wells, giving more positive connotations and further advocating journeys of self-discovery (3, 6). Though Heaney is apprehensive about the narcissism involved in such an endeavor, he concludes that "I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing" (19-20). This declaration of his personal identity is also his way of advocating the process. "Set[ting] the darkness echoing" has positive connotations because

it indicates that what was previously unknown is becoming more accessible, less of a mystery, and less troublesome through the forced response of an echo (20). It shows that discovering personal identity is a good thing, something that has benefited him. Describing the positivity of discovering oneself advocates doing the same to the readers of the poem.

This is an applicable lesson for young people now looking to find their personal identity. The future is full of potential political upheaval. Turmoil surrounding issues like the refugee crisis and warring political ideologies creates confusion and fear for many. People on the front lines of these issues may have trouble establishing an identity for themselves. Beyond these concerns, there is much in the world today that gives people reason for fear. There is surely a possibility of a troublesome future ahead, just as there was for the young poet. Issues like these, among others, may not be solved on a political scale; however, they may be solved on a personal one. Heaney's poetry did not solve the problems facing the Irish people, but it did have a profound effect on those who read it. It drew on the common experiences and suffering of the people there and united them in their identity. In addition, Heaney's personal life was profoundly changed after he began writing his poetry. He found great success and gained his own understanding of the political issues that he witnessed during his poetic career. Establishing identity can help us find success and make sense of the turmoil that surrounds us despite a world steeped in entropy. Although success is not guaranteed upon finding one's personal identity, it is a pathway to helping people understand the world around them. By establishing his identity, as exhibited in "Personal Helicon," Heaney was able to find success, responsibility, and clarity as well.

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