Remember Everything: Things Past in *Station Island*

Joseph Brooker

> Nor can one readily say what decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist.
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> – W.G. Sebald[1]

> I travelled to a mystical time-zone
>
> – Morrissey[2]

"Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps,"' we are informed by "The First Kingdom," five poems into the third third of *Station Island* (1984).[3] The primary reference here is to the attitudes and habits of the country people among whom Seamus Heaney grew up in Derry;[4] and this vision of the past is characteristic of the newly cold eye evident in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of the book. The backward rote might even be a more general problem. R.F. Foster records a flight of fancy entertained by AE in 1914, in which a book of Irish history, steadily improving through the centuries, turns out to have been bound backwards.[5] At least that book was encouraging while it lasted. In a glummer view, what the past has to show is mourning and misery, defeat and betrayal, wrongs to be remembered, Stephen Dedalus's "tale like any other too often heard."[6] A good deal of Heaney's work entertains such a relation to the past, imagining it as dead weight, buried guilt or vice versa. In this essay, however, I want to explore some of the other figurations of the past in *Station Island*.

In *Station Island*, observes Neil Corcoran, the forty-five-year-old Heaney enters a changed relation with past time, sounding a note unheard in

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[1] W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998), 36.

[2] The Smiths, "A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours," *Strangeways Here We Come*, Warner Music LP 1987.

[3] Seamus Heaney, "The First Kingdom," in *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), 101. Subsequent references to this volume will be signalled in the text by *SI* followed by page number.

[4] At least, that is the reference that two critics attach to this perception. See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 206, and Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1986), 176.

[5] See R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 2001), 21-22.

[6] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 21.

all his previous investigations. Part One of the volume, he proposes, sustains "a sad note of diminishment and loss, a sense of transience and of the perilous fragmentariness of memory…. [T]he pathos attaching to what has disappeared is one of the essential marks of these poems: they are, I think, Heaney's first real exercises in nostalgia."[7] The uses of nostalgia in literature, let alone life, may be underestimated. The word has something of a bad name and few defenders; it connotes a degree of delusion. Nostalgia is the sweet flip of sour "false memory": less harmful, but still a falsification. Perhaps. But what Corcoran describes sounds more interesting than that, and not a condition to be shaken off too swiftly. The notion that *Station Island* entertains new feelings about, new representations of, the past – that it is a book of time and memory – will be a starting point in this essay, in which I want to isolate certain modes of retrospective imagination and the particular ways they become realized in the form of lyric poetry. Time is everywhere in the pages of *Station Island* – its first, retrospective words are "There we were" (*SI*, 13) – but it is not always a matter of mishaps.

To think about the past in *Station Island* is immediately to be drawn to its importance in the title poem. I will come to this relationship toward the end of the essay, but before doing so I wish to focus at length on certain lyrics from Part One that have received less sustained attention. They allow us to develop a more varied sense of the workings of memory in Heaney's writing. This context enhances the effect of the key conceits of "Station Island". The first two parts of the volume, I propose, form a breviary of memory, raids upon the articulate past undertaken with varying tools and effects. *Station Island* in this respect looks both ways, back and forward in respect to the rest of Heaney's career.

stream through the eye

Station Island commences in "The Underground", an environment which is for Heaney both mythically laden and intriguingly modern: "a draughty lamplit station / After the trains have gone" (*SI*, 13). No train passes, either, in the course of "The Railway Children," later in the volume (*SI*, 45). "The Underground" sets the volume's opening note of retrospection with a memory of the 1960s. "The Railway Children" takes us perhaps two decades

[7] Corcoran, 157.

further back, if we try to place it in autobiographical years, for we are indeed in a childhood world:

> When we climbed the slopes of the cutting
> We were eye-level with the white cups
> Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

The third line of each of the first two tercets wraps up its stanza of memory more briskly than the more characteristic Heaney quatrains of "The Underground"; the tetrameter imposes a rhythm more relentless than the running pentameter of that poem. The formal difference signals a shift in the mode of memory, from narrative to observation, from the movement and return of "The Underground" to a more static and compressed rendering of the past. For where "The Underground" opens the volume with hurtling urgency – "in the vaulted tunnel running," "Honeymooning, moonlighting, late for the Proms" – "The Railway Children" is less a poem of action than it first appears; its first three words give us as much dynamism as we will get from this poem's narrator. It is telling that "When" should be the inaugural word in this memory piece. This poem establishes no particular past; rather it gestures in the broadest possible four-letter term at pastness, at … that time. "When" means "Then." "We" is likewise unspecific, recalling Helen Vendler's account of the prominence of anonymity in Heaney's poetry.[8] The subject of the poem ("we") is not Seamus Heaney, but "The Railway Children". "When we climbed" also implies that what is recorded here is a recurrent act, not a one-off. "When we had climbed the slopes of the cutting…" – the pluperfect formula would describe a singular occasion, the moment when the fruits of climbing became apparent. "When we climbed," though, denotes a general condition, a habitual affair – or better, perhaps, an open-ended action, a sense that juvenile adventures are not over but still alive. The poem lives in such a coexistence of now and then. "We" are gone – "children," after all, and no child wrote this poem – but "we" are also the only human subjects of this text.

"The Railway Children" describes not action but observation. Its energy is spent on the work of looking and of thinking. One aspect of this poem is seeing as a child sees:

> We were eye-level with the white cups

[8] Helen Vendler, *Heaney* (London: Fontana, 1999), ch 1.

Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

"Eye-level" looks like an adjustment to a child's point of view, but perhaps it would apply to anyone, scrambled up to the top of a railway cutting. The "sizzling wires," though, register the buzz of a young perception: when they sizzle, we may imagine, so in a way does their observer – something Michael Parker notes. He also understands the "white cups" as instances of the "child-like images and diction" through which the poem "recreates beautifully a child's eye of the world."[9] More surprisingly, he places in the same category the next image:

Like lovely freehand they curved for miles
East and miles west beyond us, sagging
Under their burden of swallows.

"Lovely" has its childishness – it is too voluptuous a word to gain regular admittance to an adult poetic vocabulary. But "lovely freehand" is more refined and is indeed a metaliterary image – the latest in a long train of them from Heaney, for whom poetry has often talked about writing while talking about other things. There is a level of artfulness to this second tercet that transcends the voice of its purported subjects. The enjambment of "curved for miles / East and miles west" is as powerful an effect as anything in the text. The first line heads in one direction, landing on "miles," its final stress. But both rhythm and sense are surprised with the next line, indeed the next syllable:

/ x / / x / x / x
East and miles west beyond us, sagging.

The shift in rhythm brings a brief sense that we have reversed direction: and the meaning of the words, too, is playfully shifting from the expectations with which the previous line ended. "[T]hey curved for miles" seemed like a self-contained statement, but is now revealed as the uncompleted portion that the stanza's second line fleshes out with its compass points. This momentary stumble, set up for the reader's benefit, just about manages to correspond to

[9] Parker, 190-1.

the swing of attention from East to West, the suddenly redirected gaze sending that initial "lovely freehand" spiralling off in the opposite direction.

The poem's sense of youthful freedom is thus an intricately constructed matter. And this duplicity applies to the intellectual content that enters in subsequent stanzas:

> We were small and thought we knew nothing
> Worth knowing. We thought words travelled the wires
> In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
>
> Each one seeded full with the light
> Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves
> So infinitesimally scaled
>
> We could stream through the eye of a needle.

Lovely free hand, indeed. There is no mistaking Heaney's deployment of his lyric abilities here, as he redescribes raindrops as "shiny pouches," "seeded" with the expansive light that carries across the run-on-line to the list of its sources. Strictly, though, something appears awry in these lines. "We were small" looks like an adult's view of a child's size. "[A]nd thought we knew nothing / Worth knowing." These railway children are modest folk. Perhaps a child can know a few things (they know how to get to, and get up, the cutting; they know where the telegraph wires go, and seem to know that they are a means of communication), but not think them worth knowing. Perhaps they know, or suspect, that what's worth knowing is yet to come. But then, what about the following lines? –

> We thought words travelled the wires
> In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
>
> Each one seeded full with the light –

Here we have quite a thought, a better one than many railway adults could manage faced with a row of telegraph poles. Heaney operates a double bluff here. The children's notion of the telegraph is naïvely flawed ("words travelled the wires" in raindrops, indeed), but then again, it is (that word again, whether theirs then or his now) lovely; and maybe their explanation is not so naïve. Certainly words are travelling the wires, and we do not have many better images for them than do the railway children. What does not quite buzz true, though, is the children's initial disavowal of knowledge; if they have such elaborate notions of words, water, and light, it is strange to lay claim to "nothing / Worth knowing." Those words protest a little too much for selves who think of themselves as "So infinitesimally scaled." Perhaps Heaney has given "The Railway Children" one too many different layers of consciousness, making innocence and experience, childishness and eloquence coexist a tad too closely in the poem's tight tercets. The poet of remembrance is caught between the ideal of enacting the past in its own terms and the opportunity to reflect on it in the language of the present.

a sleigh of the mind

Certain other lyrics in *Station Island* are more explicit than "The Railway Children" about the difficulties of memory. "An Ulster Twilight" (*SI*, 38-39) is a notable instance. It begins in the present tense:

> The bare bulb, a scatter of nails,
> Shelved timber, glinting chisels:
> In a shed of corrugated iron
> Eric Dawson stoops to his plane
>
> At five o'clock on a Christmas Eve.

The first half of the first quatrain is a matter of scene-setting, proceeding via carefully defined details. Each of the first four objects noted in that first couplet possesses its own adjective or qualifying description ("scatter"). The line "Fretsaw, auger, rasp and awl" suggests a parallel between the rhythmic regularities of work and poem. The sense is of a present scene crowded with things and motion. Yet in the third quatrain the tense shifts:

> A mile away it was taking shape,
> The hulk of a toy battleship,
> As waterbuckets iced and frost
> Hardened the quiet on roof and post.

“A mile away” is a relative term: away from where? Presumably from where we came in, that “shed of corrugated iron.” But this reading does not adequately get at Heaney’s meaning. As the poem proceeds, it emerges that the “toy battleship” is the object and product of Eric Dawson’s craft, which is handed over to “a peering woman” (the narrator’s mother, we may assume) in a “parcel” in the fifth stanza. As a result, not only does the third stanza witness a change in tense, but also it becomes a spatial switch-point, the scene of an unannounced shift in the location of the poem’s voice. What was, implicitly, “here” now becomes “there.” This shift adds ironic substance to the question that interrupts the narrative at the start of the fourth stanza:

> Where is he now?
> There were fifteen years between us two
> That night I strained to hear the bells
> Of a sleigh of the mind and heard him pedal
>
> Into our lane

At this point, beyond the local detail of the poem’s narration, different times and perceptions meet. The significance of the first line is flagged by its curtailed character: it is only two stresses, half a line, and properly demands a pause before the reader proceeds to Heaney’s further reflections. “Where” – the sense of place – is, as we have just seen, already afloat in this poem. But the question opens onto a still larger sense of disorientation, a loss of the ability to locate with any certainty this figure from memory. The question is rhetorical, almost instinctive (almost, in fact, a cliché), not answerable within the scope of this poem. But “An Ulster Twilight” still wants to establish a kind of “where,” even if it is the where of *then* rather than *now*. We plunge immediately back, then, into the past, to “That night.” The steadily accumulating details of the following stanza, recording Dawson’s actions in precise sequence (“Into our lane, get off at the gable, / Steady his Raleigh bicycle”), read like an exercise of memory, a mnemonic labor seeking to benefit from the poem’s steady meter and recognizable rhymes. The pendulum of poetic form is here an *aide-memoire*.

In the middle of the sixth stanza, however, the poet's voice breaks through again, speaking in a time different from that of the remembered events:

> Eric, tonight I saw it all
> Like shadows on your workshop wall,
>
> Smelled wood shavings under the bench,
> Weighed the cold steel monkey-wrench
> In my soft hand, then stood at the road
> To watch your wavering tail-light fade[.]

For the first time in the poem, past and present are brought together in these lines: the past is envisaged within the metalinguistic frame of the present. We move from the past as "given" to memory as action – as a series of actions, in fact, a sequence of sensory relations that the narrator establishes to the object world of the past. Not only smell but touch figures as a major trigger of memory; to "weigh" in hand the monkey-wrench is to take the weight of the past, to cop hold of the scene. But still the privileged sense, at start and finish, is vision: "I saw it all". The seventh stanza carries a powerful sense of entry into the past, with the poet figuring as a kind of interloper into the carpenter's shed, a latecomer who picks over its traces as in an interactive museum.

But in truth this recovery of the past is slightly overweening. The narrator does not merely receive a flashback to a perspective like his own (watching the bicycle light recede), but spreads into Eric Dawson's too, taking unproblematic command of the vanished scene. The line "Like shadows on your workshop wall" suggests an interestingly partial vision, a projection that only approximates the real, a shadow-play of memory not to be mistaken for Dawson's substance. Yet this note of qualification is overridden by "I saw it all," as the visionary poet reconstitutes the past. This return of the past is arguably too little blemished by memory's gaps and absences. "To remember," writes Peter Nicholls, "is … not simply to restore a forgotten link or moment of experience, nor is it unproblematically to 'repossess' or re-enact what has been lost."[10] Against this, "An Ulster Twilight" shows an excessive

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[10] Peter Nicholls, "The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison," in Sue Vice, ed. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 53.

optimism about the work of memory. The “sleigh of the mind,” advancing too emphatically, may also be a sleight of the hand.

Heaney’s poem is a kind of thanksgiving for the carpenter’s lonely work on the toy, and it ends on a delicate note. Should poet and carpenter meet again, he reflects, their conversation will be deliberately uncontroversial, “all toys and carpentry,” rather than risking the problematic matter of “Your father’s uniform and gun.” The poem reflects on the personal and the political, and how one may seek to tiptoe around the other; the retrospective frame of reference, unlike the “backward rote” bemoaned in “The First Kingdom,” offers less treacherous ground than the contemporary. In that sense, as well as in the wistful act of remembrance at its center, “An Ulster Twilight” is nostalgic: it calls to mind and conversation a time that is less problematic than the present. The poet is unashamed, though, of the recourse to innocence:

> But – now that I have said it out –
> Maybe none the worse for that.

“It” is the most indeterminate word here. The formula in which it appears has something of the same quality – albeit murmuringly private rather than resoundingly public – as Yeats’s “I write it out in a verse.”[11] The act of enunication is significant in itself, and leaves speaker and auditor in a different place. Does “it” mean the delicacy that Heaney has just described (“now that I have admitted to the reason for our nostalgic small talk, I’m not sure it’s such a bad thing”); or does it refer to the whole business of the poem (“Now that I have recalled in full the night you made me the toy, I think it not such small talk after all”)? There is a final ambiguity here apt enough to the twilight in which the conversation occurs – not that it does, for like the rest of this poem, it is a conjuring, an act of projection. The tender care with which Heaney brings the poem to a close surpasses the incautious flights of memory it has witnessed.

where I’d imagined I might be

By way of contrast, something more complex is afoot in “Remembering Malibu” (*SI*, 30-31). Here memory explicitly collides with the imagination it has supplanted:

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[11] W.B. Yeats, “Easter 1916,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1990), 178.

> The Pacific at your door was wilder and colder
> Than my notion of the Pacific
>
> and that was perfect, for I would have rotted
> beside the luke-warm ocean I imagined.

Heaney here holds two memories in mind at once: his memory of Malibu and his quite different memory of how he expected Malibu to be. "Wilder and colder" than a false expectation, though, remains an imprecise description. Heaney twists his way into further nuance:

> Yet no way was its cold ascetic
> as our monk-fished, snowed-into Atlantic;
>
> no beehive hut for you
> on the abstract sands of Malibu –
>
> it was early Mondrian and his dunes
> misting towards the ideal forms. . . .

A two-pronged process is at work here. On one hand, the Heaney of "Remembering Malibu" is an epistemological realist, who holds to a truth of Malibu: a reality all the more insistent for the way it defied his expectations of it. Part of the impulse of the poem is toward a faithful rendering of the place. Yet Heaney approaches this via analogy and allusion. The "beehive hut" is perhaps meant to recall the destination of the speaker of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," who plans to build "a hive for the honey bee" alongside his "small cabin … of clay and wattles made."[12] But in any case, Brian Moore did *not* occupy that hut; no, "it was early Mondrian and his dunes," an artistic reference point, followed apparently by a Platonic one in those "ideal forms." It is impossible, writes Nicola King, "to imagine or formulate memory and its operations without the use of metaphor."[13] It is also impossible, at this point, for Heaney to describe his memory of the Malibu shore without the use of allusion, the suggestion of similitude between the real (and the unreal, the way Malibu turned out *not* to be) and some other work of art.

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[12] Yeats, "The Lake of Isle of Innisfree," in *Collected Poems*, 35.
[13] Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 25.

The more pressing contrast in the poem, though, is between the American and Irish coasts:

> I was there in the flesh
> where I'd imagined I might be
>
> and underwent the bluster of the day:
> but why would it not come home to me?

At this point the poem discovers its ultimate theme: the frustrating relation between the remembered shore of California and the familiar one of Ireland. Heaney once again asserts uncompromisingly the reality of the past – "I was there in the flesh" – even with its tricky accompaniment of imagination, "where I'd imagined I might be." (So far in this poem, reality has diverged from, rather than confirmed, imagination.) Yet the crux lies in the equivocal line "but why would it not come home to me?" In one sense the line suggests "why would it not come home *with* me?" Why, the futile question runs, can I not bring "the bluster of the day" from Malibu back to Ireland, where "Atlantic storms have flensed the cells on the Great Skelling"? The line thus bemoans a pain of separation: to repeat Corcoran's phrase, "the pathos attaching to what has disappeared."[14] But the line also subtly asks, "Why did it not hit home in me?" The absence is not only in the world, but in the speaker, who has been slightly less transformed by Malibu than he would wish:

>   the steps cut in the rock
>
> I never climbed
> between the graveyard and the boatslip
>
> are welted solid to my instep.

There are, it turns out, three tenses in the poem: the past (Malibu) and the pluperfect (the prior imagination of Malibu "where I'd imagined I might be"), but also, for the first time, the present ("are welted solid"). This line is tricky: through its repeated enjambments it turns out to comprise a single statement,

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[14] Corcoran, 157.

making the reader stumble back after sense. And it is difficult: there is apparent perversity in the assertion that the steps the speaker *never climbed* are "welted solid" to him. But the overall meaning is that the Irish coastal scene, not the American, is imprinted on the poet's body. The enduring depth of local influence is a characteristic Heaney theme, one to be alternately celebrated, cursed, and accepted in the unreeling ambivalence of his poetic career. The speaker of "Station Island" itself will broach the grouse: "'I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming'" (*SI*, 85), and the Sweeney of "The First Kingdom" offers his own brand of disdain for the land of his upbringing (*SI*, 101). The poet of "Remembering Malibu" is less vociferous, but his sentiment is related. He wants to forget the foot's existing imprint:

> But to rear and kick and cast that shoe –
>
> beside that other western sea
> far from the Skellings, and far, far
>
> from the suck of puddled, wintry ground,
> our footsteps filled with blowing sand.

The present, far from offering a superior vantage on memory, is stuck in the envious "suck" of Irish ground. Freedom is located in the past. Ireland's shore reminds the narrator of California's, but also of the gap between the two. And there is thus an irony about Corcoran's notion of nostalgia, if applied to "Remembering Malibu." Nostalgia's etymology implies an ache for home, a familiar and safe world glimpsed in the past and set against a troubling present. But the poet of "Remembering Malibu" aches *from* home, for a surfeit of the homely, the "suck" of the overfamiliar. His nostalgia would lead him away from home.[15]

[15] Heaney had given "home" a melancholy new resonance over a decade before, in the often cited close of "Tollund Man": "I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home." (Heaney, *Wintering*

undead grains

In reading these poems from Part One of *Station Island*, we have encountered a range of strategies for the representation of the past, and observed the difficulties that Heaney encounters in rendering memory's action. But the volume also offers two other major approaches to the past that deserve recognition in this context. One, heavily characteristic of Heaney, may be called the archaeological. Its definitive application, as Bernard O'Donoghue among others has noted, is in *North*.[16] The motifs here are of drilling, descent, the recovery of figures from a buried past – and of, in Declan Kiberd's loose words, a "sense of poetry as a dig, and of the poem as something lifted out of a boggy consciousness."[17] This figuration is virtually an *idée récue* of Heaney's project, as exemplified in poems from "Digging" onward. But it finds new instances in *Station Island*.[18]

If at times – not least in "The Railway Children" – the volume seems to look forward to the poet's late preoccupation with an imagery of light and air, at others it retains a still characteristic terrain of earth and stone. "Sandstone Keepsake" is one case in point, finding a poet turning in his hand the "chalky russet / solidified gourd, sedimentary / and so reliably dense and bricky," lifted from "a shingle beach at Inishowen" (*SI*, 20). So, more emphatically, is the sequence that immediately follows, "Shelf Life." Here a whole miniature library of objects is catalogued, and each one turns out to cathect a distinctive set of experiences. The model of time here is indeed "sedimentary." Whereas the lyrics we have looked at enact memory as a transient action from the present, the archaeological Heaney gives the impression that the past is stored up in things, quietly embedded and embodied in fragments of matter. Thus the "Old Smoothing Iron" seems to contain five stanzas' worth of domestic history, returning on command in a kind of short documentary film (*SI*, 21-2), and the "Granite Chip" (*SI*, 21) has a spiky political history, in Michael

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Out [London: Faber and Faber, 1972], 48.) "Remembering Malibu", we might say, represents an unsuccessful yearning to escape rather than embrace this condition.

16 Bernard O'Donoghue, "Seamus Heaney: *North*," in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 526.

17 Declan Kiberd, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* vol. 3, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1992), 1315, quoted in Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 70.

18 Even the title of the opening lyric, "The Underground", echoes Heaney's geological model of time, though the poem's model of memory is closer to the evanescence of the other lyrics

Parker's phrase, "petrified within it."[19] "The Sandpit" exemplifies a like principle of matter's retention of history:

> a spadeful of sand, a handful of gravel
> are bonded and set to register
> whatever beams and throbs into the wall.
> Like undead grains in a stranded cockle shell. (*SI*, 54)

Matter's "registration" of event here resembles the fate of the brick in the final poem of "The Sandpit," in which a workman's transient feelings and situation at one moment of the building process are magically transmitted to the stuff he works on, "sent... // into the brick forever" (*SI*, 55). "What The Brick Keeps," Bernard O'Donoghue aptly observes, is "overground archaeology."[20] Other substances also figure as transmitters of memory in *Station Island*. Among the objects of "Shelf Life" (*SI*, 21-24) is the "Iron Spike," a fragment of American railroad that inflicts Heaney with especial poignancy:

> What guarantees things keeping
> if a railway can be lifted
> like a long briar out of ditch growth?
> I felt I had come on myself
>
> in the grassy silent path
> where I drew the iron like a thorn
> or a word I had thought my own
> out of a stranger's mouth.

Here is *Station Island*'s most plaintive cry at transience, and the experience drives Heaney's language upward to a Yeatsian rhetorical question. The poet is then immediately driven to make a strange identification between himself and the spike: "I felt I had come on myself." This feeling of correspondence is partly based on his sense of threat at the sheer scale of the alteration: if a *railway* can be obliterated, then what chance of endurance has the human subject? The fate of the spike also seems to teach Heaney something of the fate

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discussed in this essay. Its greatest interest lies in the urban modernity of its setting, so uncharacteristic of this instinctively rural writer.

[19] Parker, 187.

of the self. The latter turns out to be less clear than he thinks, much more open to misappropriation – like the "word I had thought my own" that can be discovered in a stranger's mouth. Time becomes a field of alterity, a process of hitherto unsuspected obliviousness to human projects, liable to lead them to unintended consequences. The spike is in this sense a *memento mori*.

Intriguingly, the registration of the past in the railway spike is not so much a given as Heaney's work would often have it appear. He introduces the object to us with the thought that it is

> So like a harrow pin
> I hear harness creaks and the click
> of stones in a ploughed-up field.

But this is a misreading, an error resulting from interpreting the world too much in one's own established frame of reference. There is almost a note of self-parody in the way that Heaney's first response to a shard of American railway is to think for the umpteenth time of the kind of rural Irish scene in which he grew up. In fact, the momentary misconstrual illustrates Heaney's own subsequent observation of the past's liability to misappropriation, to winding up in "a stranger's mouth." The link between time and object in "Iron Spike" is not quite the process of automatic storage and release sometimes intimated by Heaney. It involves interpretation, and the poem ends by seeking to fill hermeneutic gaps: where are the "sledge-head" and the "sweat-cured haft" of the spike's primal scene? The poet desires to read time in a handful of iron, to reconstruct like Sherlock Holmes a vanished context around the fragment of evidence available. But answers seem elusive. "Ask the ones on the buggy," he advises himself, but they are the last people who can be asked. The past's residue suggests a shadowy world ("like shadows on your workshop wall") that will not speak. It is in "Station Island" itself that this shadowy world adopts a voice.

like a heatwave

Fragments of material culture from the past also surface in the title poem. In section III the narrator envisions an object from family history, emerging from the "active, wind-stilled hush" that has enveloped him:

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[20] O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney*, 106.

A seaside trinket floated then and idled
in vision, like phosphorescent weed,
a toy grotto with seedling mussel shells
and cockles glued in patterns over it,

pearls condensed from a child invalid's breath
into a shimmering ark, my house of gold
that housed the snowdrop weather of her death
long ago. (*SI*, 67)

The return of the grotto bears an echo of "The Sandpit": "undead grains in a stranded cockle shell" (*SI* 54). The grotto, too, is dead – not only lost in the past, but intimately associated with death – yet somehow "undead," possessed of an unlikely life. In its "seedling mussel shells / and cockles," and more clearly in the "pearls condensed from a child invalid's breath," the living has been frozen, solidified into an object of memory. This process is also implied in the way the grotto "housed the snowdrop weather of her death." Weather is a figure for the organic, the quick and changing (for the temporal, indeed, *le temps*), but it has been "housed," given roof and location. The object has offered Heaney a home, a site of storage, for the atmosphere of his relative's death; he remembers, as a child, "stowing away" and "foraging" for its precious emotional contents.

Yet we should also remember the evanescence of this object, which remains, in "Station Island," a thing of recollection. It is never quite solid: it "floated then and idled / in vision, like phosphorescent weed," a shimmering keepsake rather than "reliably dense and bricky" sandstone (*SI*, 20). Where in the earlier lyrics Heaney conjures the past by gripping a solid object in his hand, in this poem the object is itself a conjuration, emerging into the memorial frame that the pilgrim has just established for it: "an active, wind-stilled hush, as if / in a shell the listened-for ocean stopped" (*SI*, 67). The relic, like the memory it prompts, is not only temporal but temporary. In "Station Island" the archaeological object becomes the *virtual* object. And this encounter with the virtual is, in the end, the most distinctive of *Station Island*'s modes of memory.

In its interest in ghosts, *Station Island* was prescient. Ten years on, spectres would come to the forefront of academic discussion, as one of the privileged cultural metaphors of the 1990s. Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994) was the premier text pushing this revival of interest, with its insistence on the inherence of spectrality in the seemingly solid world. Several commentators took Derrida's cue and developed new theories of the unsuspected importance of ghostliness in areas like science, philosophy, literature – or indeed memory.[21] By 2003 Andreas Huyssen, a leading theorist of memory and the museal, could look back and observe that the "master-signifiers of the 1990s" had been "the abject and the uncanny... which have to do with repression, specters, and a present repetitively haunted by the past."[22] One of Derrida's more salutary reminders is of the temporal indeterminacy of ghosts, their ability to come from future as well as past in order to shake and shape the present. The ghosts of *Station Island* exemplify this with odd precision: if they feel like visitants into the intellectual milieu of the next decade, they are also, of course, revenants from the literary past. The poet's encounters with the dead are inspired by Dante's in the *Divine Comedy*, and the term most often applied to Heaney's ghosts, though absent from "Station Island" itself, is the Dantesque "shade." Heaney himself has called them "shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world."[23] Each of the shades has its own specific meaning and context – personal, political, or both. I want finally to reflect on the alternative relation to the past that the title poem offers the volume.

The shades of "Station Island" are a peculiar combination of the firm and the fugacious. In one sense they, like the grotto of section III, are evanescent figures. The murder victim of VII arrives as "a presence / entering into my concentration // on not being concentrated," and after he has spoken "he trembled like a heatwave and faded" (*SI*, 77, 80). The priest of section IV emerges from "Blurred swimmings as I faced the sun" (*SI*, 69). These figures appear suddenly, say their piece, and vanish. But in another sense, during their apparitions, they are also insistently solid, down to the priest's finickily described "purple stole and cord / or cincture tied loosely, his polished shoes / unexpectedly secular beneath a pleated, lace-hemmed alb of linen cloth" (*SI*, 69). There are differences among the shades in this respect – William Carleton,

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[21] An exemplary text here is Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, eds. *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). See also *Radical Philosophy*'s special issue "Spectres of Derrida," (January/February 1996).
[22] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.
[23] Heaney, "Envies and Identifications," quoted in Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, 160.

even if he seems unable to see Heaney's car,[24] is more continually solid than several of the figures on the island itself – but all of them represent a kind of impossible presence, a manifestation of the absent. We might say that in this book of memory they literalize memory, transforming it from a fraught process of recollection to a startlingly complete recovery. For the "archaeological" Heaney, the past is coded in fragments of matter, to be read back from its residues; for the "spectral" Heaney, the past is with us at a stroke, startlingly rematerialized in all its colors and accents. "Station Island" thus represents a hyperbolic version of the book's insistent interest in the past: it posits a land of the dead in which the past is, in effect, alive.

In this sense, the tension between past and present that characterizes the other lyrics has dissipated. The memorial effort of "The Underground" ("Retracing the path back, lifting the buttons"), "An Ulster Twilight" ("Where is he now?") or "Iron Spike" is no longer necessary: the past is coming back of its own accord. But by the same token, in another sense, there is more tension than ever. In "Remembering Malibu," remembering is a problem because of its difficulty ("why would it not come home to me?"). In "Station Island," remembering is a problem because it is unavoidable: the past is unquiet. Where the poet of "The Railway Children" casts a line back into childhood, the pilgrim of "Station Island" is pulled back into the past – into several pasts, some of them his own, some distant. The poet is afflicted by a systematic bout of involuntary memory – or better, *involuntary history*, an eruption of anamnesis from the political unconscious as well as the personal word-hoard. On Station Island the time, in one of Derrida's favoured phrases, is out of joint; the present is accosted by a past it has not chosen to summon. "Remember everything," says Carleton (*SI*, 66). The instruction is redundant.

echo soundings

Remember everything? The poem's last advice is different in emphasis: "Let go, let fly, forget" (*SI*, 93). Structurally and emotionally, Heaney needs his spectral Joyce to point, not back to 1904, but forward to a future of "echo

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[24] *SI*, 64. It is easy to neglect the strangeness of this encounter, in which a man born in 1794 is glimpsed in the driving mirror of a car in the early 1980s. Heaney spares us the scene that ought logically to ensue, in which Carleton asks Heaney what on earth the contraption is; it is as though he can see the pilgrim but not his vehicle. Or do the shades possess a posthumous omniscience? One of the nicer collisions of past and present comes when Joyce, "out there on the tarmac among the cars," "hit a litter basket / with his stick" (*SI*, 92).

soundings, searches, probes, allurements, / elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea" (*SI*, 94). "Station Island" thus closes on a note of flight and future promise, which indeed flaps forward to the airborne scorn of *Sweeney Redivivus*. Yet *Station Island* as a whole is unmistakably preoccupied with the past, in the different ways we have observed here; and this preoccupation is resumed in Heaney's later work. To take one example, *Seeing Things* (1991), a book full of reminiscence, may be said to enlarge the spectral perspective of "Station Island," in a manner suggested in its recollection of Hardy, "at parties in renowned old age / When sometimes he imagined himself a ghost / And circulated with that new perspective."[25] The poem that opens its first part, "The Journey Back," is in part a journey back to the hauntology of "Station Island": "Larkin's shade surprised me. He quoted Dante. . . ."[26] There is surely comedy in this line. "Larkin's shade surprised me": well, yes ... it *would*. But then, perhaps the surprise really springs from hearing Larkin quote Dante: from the incongruity of the action, rather than the presence of the shade? ("Heaney's shade surprised me. He quoted Bowie.") The author of "Station Island," we may reflect, is not one to be surprised by a shade. And the author of *Station Island* is not one to forget.

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[25] Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 61.
[26] Ibid., 7.