

‘Any Catholics among you...?’: Seamus Heaney and the Real of Catholicism

Religion’s never mentioned here,’ of course.
‘You know them by their eyes,’ and hold your tongue.
‘One side’s as bad as the other,’ never worse.
Christ, it’s near time that some small leak was sprung
In the great dykes the Dutchman made
To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.
Yet for all this art and sedentary trade
I am incapable.¹

So begins section III of Seamus Heaney’s poem, ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, in *North*, and the dialectical relationship between the words ‘never mentioned,’ and the paradoxical title of the poem, which urges enunciation but cautions against enunciating anything specific, will be very much the locus of this particular chapter. I hope to analyse the ways in which Heaney is a Catholic poet; to understand the polysemic resonances of that proper adjective-common noun combination in this description; to probe the fluid epistemological status of the Catholicism in question and also, to unpack the ideological and hegemonic meanings that accrete to those terms. I will argue that the reason that religion is never mentioned in the ‘here’ of the Northern Ireland of the Troubles is because it constitutes the Lacanian real in its effect on people, and as such, it is only accessible through the glancing, anamorphic perspective of the language of poetry which looks awry at the language of society, culture and ideology in order to present the real of those constructions.

¹ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p.59.

The work of Seamus Heaney has long been associated with Catholicism. In 1972, when he took his family from the war-torn streets of Belfast to the rural solitude of Glanmore in County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, his decision was described by Ian Paisley's *Protestant Telegraph* newspaper in terms of a 'well-known papist propagandist', leaving the North for his 'spiritual home in the Republic'.² Similar associations have been made by other critics. Blake Morrison, speaking about the poems of the first section of *North*, wrote that it seems as if he is having these poems 'written for him' by his nationalist, Catholic psyche;³ Conor Cruise O'Brien felt that in *North*, Heaney was voicing the atavisms of Heaney's tribe: it was 'the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland';⁴ while Edna Longley felt that the book achieved its effect 'by concentrating on the Catholic psyche as bound to immolation, and within that immolation, to savage tribal loyalties'.⁵ Clearly the Catholicism in question here is a communal and ideological one. It is that version of religion cited by Eric Voegelin in his *Political Religions*, when he spoke of an ideology that could be called a 'Party-Church', which provided a 'surrogate affective community based on the terrible pathos and plangency of class, race or nation, in which the lonely individual could re-experience the warm fraternal flow of the world'. He also noted that central to this ideological position was the 'anti-idea', or the Satanic foe,⁶ which opposed the ideology of the group.

This, I would argue, is this communal sense of Catholicism with which Heaney has been linked throughout his career, and there is some justification for this. He told Dennis O'Driscoll that one of his earliest poems, in 1962, was about Loyalist emblems 'cut into the stone pier beside Carrickfergus Castle', and it is interesting that what he calls 'the sectarian

² Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p.120.

³ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.67.

⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A Slow North-East Wind', *The Listener* (September 25, 1975), pp.404-405, p.404.

⁵ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p.154.

⁶ Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p.120.

seam of Northern life' was such an important point of departure for his poetic development. This poem would have predated the troubles by some five years but as he notes, the 'B-Special Constabulary were on the roads at night', 'anti-Catholic speeches were still being delivered by Unionist leaders and 'the whole gerrymandered life of the place seemed set to continue.'⁷ This sense of awareness of the communality of Catholicism and the binary oppositional role of Protestantism has appeared through different poems. In Section VII of his 'Station Island' sequence, he writes about the murder of a shopkeeper, William Strathearne, who was killed late at night when answering his door to men in uniform. He tells Karl Miller that he worried about making the killers in the poem members of the RUC 'since it had been rogue members of the police force who had committed the actual murder. Policemen who were paramilitaries when off-duty, as it were'. Heaney goes on to explain that Strathearne was killed because he was an 'easy Catholic target, living in a largely Protestant village.'⁸ In the end, Heaney left the poem as politically neutral by not making the murderers members of the police force, and this in itself is an index of his more nuanced form of identification with Catholicism of the communal kind. Indeed I would argue that Heaney's own form of interaction with Catholicism is a very personal kind, one which attempts to grasp a personal 'real' of Catholicism, a notion which is far removed from the ideological and institutional church. I use the term 'real, in a sense that is specific to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan.

For Lacan, human interaction can best be understood in terms of 'those elementary registers ... known as the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real—a distinction never previously made in psychoanalysis'.⁹ Volumes have been written about these three orders, with the imaginary being the order of ideal dyadic connections and identifications; the

⁷ Dennis O'Driscoll and Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), p.65.

⁸ Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines Press, 2000), p.25.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), p.255.

symbolic order being the formal code of rules in any activity (for example language), and the real being that which is beyond expression. Perhaps the best explanation is given by Slavoj Žižek, in his *How to Read Lacan*, who uses the practical example of a game of chess. He explains that the rules of chess are the symbolic dimension, with each piece being differentially defined: the 'knight is defined only by the moves this figure can make'. The imaginary order here is the way in which: 'different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names (king, queen, knight)', as this is how they are identified, and the player becomes familiar with the shape and name and invests it with a specific meaning. Finally the real is 'the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player.'¹⁰

The idea of the real as 'the domain of that which subsists outside of symbolization',¹¹ means that acquiring knowledge of it is almost impossible. However, Lacan stresses that in every subject, the real 'is there, identical to his existence, a noise in which one can hear anything and everything, ready to submerge with its roar what the "reality principle" constructs there that goes by the name of the "outside world"'.¹² Žižek again provides some cogent examples of the meaning of the real. In his book on *Violence*, and speaking of the logic of capital, he notes that reality is the 'social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes', while the Real is the 'inexorable "abstract," spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality', and he goes on to exemplify this gap in terms of visiting a country that is in an economic shambles, and noting the misery and poverty to be found in the lived lives of people, but adding that this is not reflected in the 'economist's report that one reads afterwards informs us that the country's economic situation is "financially sound"'.¹³ – what matters here is the real of capital. He

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp.8-9.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p.324.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p.324.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Picador, 2008), p.13.

adds a parallel example when speaking of Kant and French Revolution. He makes the point that for Kant, in his *Conflict of Faculties* (1795), the Revolution's true significance does not reside in what actually went on in Paris but in the reaction outside France and to the spirit of revolution and freedom which ensued.

To translate this into Lacanian language, the real event, the very dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events in Paris, but in how this reality appeared to observers and in the hopes thus awakened in them. The reality of what went on in Paris belongs to the temporal dimension of empirical history; the 'sublime image that generated enthusiasm belongs to eternity.'¹⁴

For Lacan, 'whatever upheaval we subject it to', the real 'is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it'.¹⁵ In Heaney's case, parts of this real are the bred in the bone aspects of being a Catholic, and poetry, for him will be the best way of trying to examine what it is that is stuck to that metaphorical shoe.

I suggest that for Heaney, the real of Catholicism is not in its sociological conditioning, but rather in the images and underlying symbolic and linguistic core that it has created for him. He has spoken of his work as a 'slow obstinate Papish burn'¹⁶ as a motivating factor of his early work, but as he grows older, this sense of communal belonging becomes more nuanced and is gradually deconstructed by a sense of realisation of the other as a position of worth, as opposed to Voegelin's sense of the 'anti-idea'. In an interview with John Brown, in 2002, he referred specifically to the 'Papish burn' quote, and explained it and how much he has changed his position since then. He notes that the term 'Catholic' has become more of a 'sociological term than anything else', and goes on to discuss how:

'Papish burn', I'm sorry to say, caves in to that same old clichéd idiom. It doesn't help. It's not further language. Catholic is less conniving than Papish, but if you describe yourself as a Catholic in the North, it can still sound like a defiance or a provocation. In

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, pp.51-52

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p.17.

¹⁶ Seamus Deane, Seamus 'Unhappy and at Home: interview with Seamus Heaney', *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982), pp.66-72, p.67.

certain circles in the South, it might even be taken to mean that deep down you are unrepentant about child abuse by priests and not altogether against corporal punishment in orphanages. I exaggerate, I know, but only in order to emphasize the way the common mind tends to react when faced with the fact of religion and religious practice and religious value.¹⁷

So is this the Catholicism with which Heaney identifies and through which he is ideologically constructed? Is he a Northern Irish, Republican, Catholic and are those terms the limit conditions of his view on the world? Or is it part of his project to attempt to transform the constructed reality of these conditions through his work?

He was asked this precise question by Karl Miller who sees Heaney as conveying in the interview a sense that there is a man in his poems who is 'to some degree an adherent of the Republican tradition, and still in some sense a Catholic. Are you that man? The answer is revealing:

Yes. That's clear. Except that, strictly speaking, I'd be better described as coming from the 'constitutional nationalist' tradition. Within Northern Ireland I would be perceived by the Unionist community, rightly, as someone with a Hiberno-centric view of the world, and therefore, as politically suspect, not to be encouraged. In order to have political effect, which I *am* interested in, you don't have to be writing 'political poetry'. Your presence as a poet, and your voice within the polis, is a political effect. The fact that there is someone called Seamus speaking into the polyphony is an effect, and you hold your own politically by doing a good job.¹⁸

It is clear from this that Heaney's Catholicism is a nuanced one and one which has taken into account the problems which the Catholic church has been having in contemporary Ireland. To be a Catholic poet in the North of Ireland in 1969 is a very different proposition to being a Catholic poet in Dublin in 2010.

It is almost a truism today to posit the inexorable march of secularization and the twilight of religion. In contemporary Ireland, with the various and well-documented scandals that have riven the foundations of the Catholic Church, the state of religious observation has

¹⁷ John Brown (ed.), *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from Northern Ireland* (Clare: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 83.

¹⁸ Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation*, pp.51-52.

never been more fragile, and the influence of the church has never been more tenuous. One could well agree with Jean Luc Nancy when he observes that:

The de-Christianization of the West is not a hollow phrase, but the more that process advances the more it becomes manifest, through the fate of immobilized churches and anemic theologies, that what still attaches us in many ways to the West is the nervation of Christianity itself.¹⁹

And in a specifically Irish context, this nervation of Catholicism is evidenced both in terms of its moral authority, and in terms of its structures of devotional observation. This has been a gradual process. As Eamon Maher has noted, the position of the Irish church was in decline prior to the papal visit in 1979, and I think he is correct in opining that the papal visit ‘rather than marking the apogee of Catholic practice in Ireland, was more like the last kick of a dying horse.’²⁰ In the Republic of Ireland, what Catholicism stands for has become increasingly nerved as the moral stance of the church on sexual matters, on crime, on homosexuality and on artificial contraception has made it an increasingly nebulous presence in the mindset of the ordinary people.

Part of the reason for this is structural. In, *Practical Reason*, Pierre Bourdieu makes the point that structures like law, ‘myth and religion’, achieve their power to a sense of shared agreement and belief:

Symbolic order rests on the imposition upon all agents of structuring structures that owe part of their consistency and resilience to the fact that they are coherent and systematic (at least in appearance) and that they are objectively in agreement with the objective structures of the social world.²¹

For Bourdieu, the effect of these agents of agreement is not overt or even epistemologically warranted by the individuals; instead there is a tacit, affective and emotive connection between structure and subject. There is not, as Weber had believed, any kind of ‘free act of

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.142.

²⁰ Andrew Auge, Louise Fuller, John Littleton, Eamon Maher, ‘After the Ryan and Murphy Reports: A Roundtable on the Irish Catholic Church’, *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 14, Number 1, 2010, pp.59-77, p.64.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 55

clear conscience' involved here but rather a 'prereflexive agreement between objective structures and embodied structures', which has a strong 'unconscious' dimension which is rooted in the 'immediate' experience of the individual.²² This view of the effect of religion would seem to be underwritten by the reaction of people in contemporary Ireland to the current situation in the Catholic Church.

The reaction to the clerical abuse scandals, the cover ups, the duplicity of high-profile priests like Bishop Eamon Casey and father Michael Cleary, along with the Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne reports, has not been one of violent rebellion. Instead, it has been to sideline the church and embrace a process of secularization. The term *a la carte* Catholicism would be an apt one as people tend to send their children to catholic schools, and to have then participate in the sacraments that are appropriate to children – baptism first communion and confirmation – but to see these as symbolic and maturational social markers as opposed to having any real investment in them.

This is best illustrated by the possibly apocryphal tale of the parents whose child was not present at her own communion. The following day, the school photograph was being taken and the girl, resplendent in her white communion dress, duly took her place in the class grouping. Questioned by the teacher as to why the child had missed the ceremony itself, the mother replied that with all of the preparations for the big event, the tanning, the hairdressing, the preparation of the communion dress and the limousine, by the time it was all done the ceremony had nearly started so the family went straight to the hotel for the meal. Whether true or not, this story illustrates the empty shell that Catholicism has become in Ireland today. Mass attendance has fallen and people have taken on a very postmodern position of selecting their own codes of ethics, morals and behaviour. This attitude to religion underlines

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p.56.

Baudrillard's seemingly paradoxical notion that 'it is from the death of God that religions emerge',²³ and 'the phantom of religion floats over a world now long desacralized'.²⁴

In Northern Ireland, as we have seen, religion was far from a phantom; instead it was a classically defined ideological position which was part of what Jacques Lacan would term an inaugural knot, in the symbolic order, which is almost impossible to untie.²⁵ To be republican was to be nationalist and Catholic; to be unionist was to be loyalist and Protestant. And in a situation where religion and ideology were inextricably connected, and were in severe conflict, the adherence of people to their religion was extreme and not in any way nerved, in Nancy's sense. Thus to speak of the Catholicism of Seamus Heaney is very different to speaking of the Catholicism of writers from the Republic of Ireland.

He makes the point that his Catholic upbringing and education at Saint Columb's College in Derry had profound influences on him. These are highly contradictory and complex, and in this chapter I want to trace the different paths that comprise his complex and highly nuanced response to the many and diverse, conscious and unconscious, spiritual and socio-political influences of Catholicism on his work and on his being. At one level, he is all too aware of the nervation of Catholicism of which we spoke earlier, noting that 'mass-going has declined' and that 'the population is no longer in thrall to the man behind the grille in the confessional'. He has suggested that due to the sexual abuse scandals, and the church's reaction to them, that the 'mystery' of the Catholic church is now 'vitiating',²⁶ but in this chapter, it is the influence of the Catholic *mentalité* on Heaney that I wish to examine, and I will do this in terms of two influences of that term.

In socio-political terms, Catholicism was really a mark of identity which was imposed on Heaney as a given. Indeed, in *Preoccupations*, he identified the nascent conflict in

²³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.19.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, p.100.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p.87

²⁶ Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation*, p.36.

Northern Ireland in terms which placed the Catholic/Protestant binary as constituent of the violence. Referring back to a poem he had written about the 1798 Rebellion, he went on to add that he had not realised, on writing that poem, that the ‘original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published.’²⁷ In ‘Freedman’, in *North*, he writes about the subtle form of bondage which his Catholic tradition wrapped him: ‘my murex was the purple dye of lents / On calendars all fast and abstinence’.²⁸ He was, to quote himself ‘mired in attachment’²⁹ from a very early stage of his career and there was an expectation on him to speak for his tribe, and his people. This is also clear in ‘Exposure’, where he speaks of wishing that his gift of writing could be a ‘slingstone / whirled for the desperate’,³⁰ and where he talks of his ‘responsible *tristia*’, that sense of collective responsibility to his own socio-religious identity.

Interestingly, this image is revisited in *District and Circle* where, in ‘The Nod’, Heaney speaks about a sling again but now, his focus is on the weight and mass of the object contained in the sling. He is talking about waiting for meat in ‘Louden’s butcher’s shop and gets ‘rib-roast and shin’ wrapped in brown paper ‘but seeping blood’ and he speaks of the physical weight of that bloody burden – ‘like dead weight in a sling / Heavier far than I had been expecting’.³¹ Here the negative influences of the *tristia* of Catholic and nationalist identity weighs heavily on Heaney who has dealt with this almost tribal imperative towards speaking for his own side throughout his poetic career. The context of this underscores this reading as the nodding of the title is a description of how, on Saturday evenings the ‘local B-Men’ (B-Specials – members of an armed division of the Royal Ulster Constabulary who

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980), p.56

²⁸ Seamus Heaney, *North*, p.61.

²⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p.102.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, *North*, p.72.

³¹ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), p.33.

were widely perceived as being anti-Catholic), described as ‘neighbours with guns’ were in a different relationship with Heaney’s father as they wore their uniforms:

Neighbours with guns, parading up and down,
Some nodding at my father almost past him
As if deliberately they’d aimed and missed him
Or couldn’t seem to place him, not just then.³²

It is as if the neighbourly connections have been displaced and dislocated by the uniform; in their role as special constables, these neighbours no longer recognise Heaney’s father as a neighbour: he is now just another Catholic who may be a problematic presence to their state.

And clearly, this ideological weight of Catholicism has had its effect on Heaney. Indeed one could say that his own *ars poetica* is teleologically focused on finding some hermeneutic connection between himself and his religion – to use Bourdieu’s terms, he is trying to come to terms with the unconscious aspect of his Catholicism and to unpack the many and various engrained imprints of the particular brand of religion that is operative in Northern Ireland. As he puts it in *Preoccupations*, ‘from that moment’ (1969) the problems of poetry had now become intermeshed with his own socio-political persona and had moved from being ‘simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament’.³³ The personal pronoun, first person plural is highly significant here as the ‘murex’ of his own creed is expressed. In his thinking about poetry, Heaney is now looking for a symbolic code which will crack his own complex identifications. He is looking for a mode of discourse which will allow him to would be possible to encompass ‘the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity’.³⁴ That the intensity is religious is striking because this religious dimension has more often than not been elided from political discourse in Northern Ireland, Indeed, Heaney himself participates in

³² Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*, p.33.

³³ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 56.

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp.56-57.

such elision, a few sentences later, noting that he is not ‘not thinking simply of the sectarian division’ between Catholics and Protestants when he is using the term ‘religious’.³⁵ However, he is well aware of the religious dimension of the killings, in the struggle between ‘territorial piety and imperial power’, and stresses this in a significant quotation:

Now I realize that this idiom is remote from the agnostic world of economic interest whose iron hand operates in the velvet glove of ‘talks between elected representatives’, and remote from the political manoeuvres of power-sharing; but it is not remote from the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing, and not remote from the bankrupt psychology and mythologies implicit in the terms Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant. The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity.’³⁶

He is looking for that unconscious affective dimension of agreement of which Bourdieu spoke, and the best way of understanding what he is doing, and indeed why poetry is the most effective discourse in which to enact such critical hermeneutics, is via the work of Jacques Lacan and Martin Heidegger. We have already noted the Lacanian typology of imaginary, symbolic and real, so it is now time to look at the work of Martin Heidegger.

Poetry is the most embodied form of language, given its ability to embody language in somatic bursts of description, image and metaphor. For Martin Heidegger, poetry prioritises and performs ‘the physical element of language, its vocal and written character’,³⁷ and of all written modes, it is closest to the body given the modes of delivery which are both oral and written. In a sense, to read a poem aloud, to say a poem embodies the words in a way that is significantly different to reading it internally or even writing about it. In this sense the mouth is the point of contact where the thought of the poet touches the thought of the reader but also where the language of the poem touches the body of the sayer of the poem. A poem is very much a moment of Heideggerian presencing where ‘body and mouth are part of the

³⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p.57.

³⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p.57.

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper, 1971), p.98.

earth's flow and growth',³⁸ and where listening to a poem being read aloud, being made present, is how 'we hear the sound of language rising like the earth.'³⁹ So in poetry, aspects of the real are made known to us.

Given the fact that the Catholic experience is a seminal one in his work, it is interesting that the word 'Catholic' itself, appears only eight times in his work: in 'Docker' in *Death of a Naturalist*;⁴⁰ in 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' in *Field Work*;⁴¹ in a note describing William Carleton in *Station Island*;⁴² in 'The Settle Bed' in *Seeing Things*;⁴³ three times in 'Senior Infants' and one in 'Brancardier' in *District and Circle*.⁴⁴ This paucity of reference would seem to question the perception of Heaney as a 'Catholic' poet, but this is to overlook the enunciation of the real in his discourse and in his poetry, and a classic instance of the real is to be found in his Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*.

On January 5th 1976, near the village of Kingsmill in south Armagh, in Northern Ireland, a mini-bus carried sixteen textile workers home from work in Glenanne, to Bessbrook along the Whitecross to Bessbrook road. Five of these workers were Catholics and eleven were Protestants. Four of the Catholics got out at Whitecross, while the remainder continued on the road to Bessbrook.⁴⁵ Somewhere on this road, the coach was stopped by a group of approximately twelve armed men. Given the ongoing nature of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and the presence of British troops across the whole area, such checkpoints were almost normal. The men in the minibus would have assumed that they were being stopped and searched by a British Army or RUC checkpoint, and when ordered to line up beside the bus, they obeyed. However, at this point, the gunmen ordered

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p.98.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p.101.

⁴⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966), p.41.

⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), p.59.

⁴² Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p.122.

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p.28.

⁴⁴ Seamus Heaney *District and Circle*, pp.29-32; 48.

⁴⁵ Toby Harnden, *Bandit Country* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), p.134.

the only Catholic, Richard Hughes, to step forward. Hughes' workmates thought then that the armed men were loyalists, come to kill Hughes and tried to stop him from identifying himself, however, when he stepped forward, he was told, 'Get down the road and don't look back'.⁴⁶ The remaining eleven men were shot, with Armalite rifles, SLRs, a 9mm pistol and an M1 carbine, a total of 136 rounds were fired in less than a minute. Ten men died at the scene, and one, Alan Black, survived despite having eighteen gunshot wounds. A police officer who came upon the scene, and who was, presumably, habituated to such sights, spoke of an 'indescribable scene of carnage'.⁴⁷

This horrific scene is one which stands out against the backdrop of the thirty-year conflict in Northern Ireland. Indeed it gained renewed fame when it was re-narrated by Seamus Heaney in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm, on December 7, 1995. Entitled *Crediting Poetry*, this lecture spoke of Heaney's growth as a writer and of his developing intersection with the world around him. It is interesting to note that, despite being seen as a Catholic writer by a lot of critics and commentators, Heaney's first mention of the Catholic aspect of his poetic environment comes, not in connection with his early life, nor in connection with any form of spiritual context, but in his retelling of the Kingsmill massacre. He outlines how the minibus was stopped and how the men were lined up and then asked: 'any Catholics among you, step out here'.⁴⁸ He goes on to note that the presumption must have been that the catholic among them was about to be murdered in a sectarian killing. He goes on to outline the next stage of the story:

It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness, but he did make a motion to step forward. Then, the story goes, in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we'll not

⁴⁶ Toby Harnden, *Bandit Country*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died Through the Northern Ireland Troubles*, third edition (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2004), p.611.

⁴⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Dublin Gallery Press, 1995), p.17.

betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong to. All in vain, however, for the man stepped out of the line; but instead of finding a gun at his temple, he was thrown backward and away as the gunmen opened fire on those remaining in the line, for these were not Protestant terrorists, but members, presumably, of the Provisional IRA.⁴⁹

Some 3,600 people were killed in the conflict in Northern Ireland and one might well ask why Heaney chose to discuss this particular atrocity in his Nobel lecture. I would suggest two reasons for this: firstly, because in this particular case, what we might call the Lacanian real of the Northern Irish situation found expression, in the haptic nature of the contact (both destructive and constructive) between Catholic and Protestant that is to be found in this encounter, because for Heaney, the real that is to be found here is in that poetic language which allows the body to speak and which faces death and disaster with some gesture towards the transcendent, with some reaching towards the transcendent and towards the other.

He makes the point that this interaction, voiced under the name Catholic, is one which is part of the context of the politico-religious conflict in Northern Ireland. He remembers thinking of a friend who was imprisoned on suspicion of involvement in a politically motivated murder, and wondering if, by such an act his friend might be 'helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential in the only way that worked, that is to say the violent way – which therefore became, by extension, the right way.'⁵⁰ However it is in the next point that the real of Heaney's Catholicism, a real with influences his poetry in its reaching towards the transcendent in the other, is to be found. He notes that the 'real' hope for the future in this incident is surely in the 'contraction which that terrified Catholic felt on the roadside when another hand gripped his hand, not in the gunfire that followed, so absolute and so desolate, if also so much a part of the music of what happens.'⁵¹ Here the touch of the other is the real of the experience, a reaching out to another human being and a sense of shared identity in the face of death. In this Heaney's sense of the

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p.18.

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p.18.

⁵¹ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p.19.

real of Catholicism comes close to the views of Maurice Blanchot when he notes that ‘a poem is not without date, but despite its date it is always to come (*à venir*), it speaks itself in a ‘present’ that does not answer to historical markers. It is foreboding (*pressentiment*), and designates itself as that which is not yet, demanding of the reader the same foreboding to make an existence for it that has not yet come’.⁵² There is also a resonance of Heidegger’s view of the special relationship of the poetic with what we would term the Lacanian real, as he speaks of the ‘essential relation between death and language flashes up, but is still unthought. It can however give a hint of the manner in which the essence of language draws us into its concern and so relates to itself’.⁵³

The upshot of his *Crediting Poetry* lecture is the ability to see the real of the ‘marvellous as well as the murderous’ that can come out of the religious polarities of his life. The hands that pull the trigger are motivated by a sense of Catholicism as a symbolic and ideological position, but so is the hand that reached out to the other. Interestingly, for Heaney, the use of the term Catholic is always haunted by its binary opposite, and in *Seeing Things* we again find the binary relationship enacted in ‘The Settle Bed’: where he speaks about the ‘bedtime anthems of Ulster’, and goes on to see these as:

Protestant, Catholic, the Bible, the beads,
Long talks at gables by moonlight, boots on the
Hearth.⁵⁴

Here there is that polyphony of which he spoke earlier and there is an intersubjective dialogue at work and I would suggest that this is the real of his Catholic experience that has become an important part of the work of Seamus Heaney. Catholicism for Heaney comes as an inheritance, and this is something that has existed in the past but which is capable of transformation in the present and in the future:

⁵² Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), originally published as *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.112.

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p.107.

⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London; Faber, 1991), p.28.

And now this is 'an inheritance' —
Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked
In the long ago, yet willable forward
Again and again and again, cargoed with
Its own dumb, tongue-and-groove worthiness
And un-get-roundable weight.⁵⁵

This weight is the same as that of which he spoke of in 'The Nod'; it is an aspect of the real that can only be seen in the presencing language of poetry. The weight is still a factor but it can be born and can be transformed as he moves from past to future, towards, what he terms in 'Lupins, in *Electric Light*, 'an erotics of the future,'⁵⁶ in which 'whatever is given/can always be reimagined'.⁵⁷ It is this project of reimagining the historical, cultural, linguistic and societal givens that I see as central to his understanding of the real of Catholicism.

It could be seen as the deconstruction of an imaginary identification with religion by a heightened sense of the real, and this conflict is enunciated in a later poem 'Flight Path' in *The Spirit Level*, where he is asked by an interlocutor: 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/Something for us?', and the response is: 'If I do write something/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself'.⁵⁸ And here again is what I would see as his embrace of the real of Catholicism, as he notes in an interview that for him, 'poetry has as much to do with *numen* as hegemony,'⁵⁹ and Heaney's sense of religion is just this – a presence (the English meaning of *numen*) that is felt in objects and places – could there be a better description of the real? Interestingly, etymologically the word meant 'nodding', and we are again brought back to that poem of the same title, where so much is signified by that bodily gesture – a signification that I would see as a presencing of the real. And it is found in the language of his Catholic childhood and in the cultural and symbolic capital that is expressed in this language.

⁵⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p.28.

⁵⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), p.5.

⁵⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p.29.

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), p.25.

⁵⁹ Karl Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p.32.

So in conclusion, is he a Catholic poet? The answer is yes, but with qualifications. His identification with his religion is through the real, the nod, the numen, the reaching out to the other. It is an identification that is based on language, image and symbol. He has observed that his notion of poetry as 'grace' derives from his 'early religious education' and adds that ultimately this may be far more important in his 'mental formation than cultural nationalism or the British presence or any of that stuff:'. It is that ability to sense the numinous that has been a driving force in his *ars poetica*, that desire to sense the real in events and in ideological motivations.⁶⁰ He speaks of the given Catholic universe as a 'light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being',⁶¹ and he adds:

But, in maturity, the myths of the classical world and Dante's *Commedia* (where my Irish Catholic subculture received high cultural ratification) and the myths of other cultures matched and mixed and provided a cosmology that corresponded well enough to the original: you learned that, from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region — not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life.⁶²

This is what he found in the Kingsmill massacre, that sense of a hand which could reach out to, or destroy, the other. This is the real of Seamus Heaney's numinous sense of Catholicism

⁶⁰ Karl Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p.32.

⁶¹ Karl Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p.36.

⁶² Dennis O'Driscoll and Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p.471.