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**Heaney and the Photograph:
'Strange Fruit' in Manuscript and Published Form**

I

One of the most critically acclaimed poems from Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975), 'Strange Fruit' is indebted to a poem by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish man who had been 'haunted ... for days'¹ on seeing a photograph of a lynching in which the bodies of two black men hang from trees above a crowd of spectators. It was published in the mid-1930s and then put to music and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. With the iconography of the severed head, Heaney's poem owes potential debts to Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and John Montague,² but I want to argue that the poem's greatest debt is a visual rather than textual one. Like Meeropol, Heaney is haunted by a photograph – something that becomes clear by analyzing the process of composition discernible over ten pages of manuscript drafts of 'Strange Fruit'. From Meeropol and Holiday Heaney learns to see through the eyes of the Other in the very act of exposing the Other. This way of seeing is the poem's great achievement, in both aesthetic and ethical terms.

In his 1974 essay, 'Feeling Into Words', Heaney describes the profound influence of P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1969) on what would become his bogland poems and the poems of *North*. Glob's influence has been extensively documented in criticism of Heaney's poetry, but primarily as a textual rather than a visual one. Of the 116 pages in Glob's book, sixty four of them – over half – are photographs. These are high quality black and white reproductions on glossy paper with descriptive notes. In the first sentence of the text Glob quotes from a

Danish almanack of 1837: 'There is a strange power in bog water which prevents decay.'³ The visual equivalent to bog water, in Glob's book, is the photograph. While his narrative catalogues and mythologizes the discoveries made in Danish bogs in the 1950s, it is the photographic image that seems to best preserve the dead and prevent their decay in modern memory.⁴

Alongside Glob, Heaney highlights the formative influence of Celtic scholar, Anne Ross, quoting her work where she turns her attention to:

a symbol which, in its way, sums up the whole of Celtic pagan religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts. This is the symbol of the severed human head; in all its various modes of iconographic representation and verbal presentation, one may find the hard core of Celtic religion. It is indeed ... a kind of shorthand symbol for the entire religious outlook of the pagan Celts.⁵

Heaney notes that he read this passage in a chapter entitled 'The Religion of the Pagan Celts' and gives the source as *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (Routledge, 1967). The text he cites in fact comes from Ross's *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* (Batsford, 1970), under the chapter title Heaney provides. Ross's influence on the poems of *North* has gone largely unnoticed by critics of Heaney's work. This can perhaps be explained in part because Heaney references her work in the version of the essay published in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* but not in the version published in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*. Ross explores historical contexts for the severed head but does not elucidate the parallel she makes with the

Christian Cross. By drawing on her work, Heaney conflates pre-Christian and Christological contexts. These modes of signification, and the ways in which they overlap, are key to understanding the poems of *North* and, in particular, ‘Strange Fruit’, in which the speaker’s and reader’s gaze is focused on a beheaded girl. Manuscript drafts of the poem show Heaney working through these contexts as he imagines the severed head, examined in what follows. But the drafts also reveal Heaney’s evolving identification with the girl – an identification, I want to argue, enabled by his encounter with the photographic image, which leads him to understand subjectivity and Otherness with deepened sensitivity.

As Edna Longley observes with characteristic accuracy, many of Heaney’s comments on poetry ‘nudge it towards the visual arts ... “the verbal icon”; “a search for images and symbols”; “The poetry I love is some kind of image or visionary thing”; “a painter can lift anything and make an image of it”’.⁶ Famously, in ‘Feeling into Words’, Heaney represents poetry as divination and frames his poetic endeavour as ‘a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament’ as though already pre-formed, found rather than made. While this may sound painterly, Heaney is speaking about an encounter with photography: ‘the unforgettable photographs of these victims [in *The Bog People*] blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present’. Indeed, his memory of the elk skeleton found in the bog as a child is less a memory than a memory of a photograph:

Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbours had got their photographs in the

paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it.⁷

Little wonder then that ‘Bogland’ foregrounds photographic composition: ‘They’ve taken the skeleton / ... Out of the peat, set it up’.⁸ Heaney shows us the act of staging, the skeleton set up and lit for the photograph that will appear in the local paper. ‘Here is the girl’s head like an exhumed gourd.’⁹ The failed promise of ‘Strange Fruit’ – that impossible deictic – shows the poem in a similar kind of photographic set up, staging something impossibly true. In part photographic in its modes of signification, the poem stages an encounter with the dead in which the girl is made all the more present to us by Heaney’s self-conscious ‘exhibition’.

II

I found ten pages of manuscript drafts for ‘Strange Fruit’ in the Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Library at Emory University, detailed here in what seems to be the order of composition. A handwritten draft entitled ‘My reverence’ includes many scored out words, phrases, and whole lines, sometimes with substitutions.¹⁰ This is the first of the three handwritten pages I found, the last of which is dated ‘19/12/72’. It is not clear whether all three pages were composed on this date but all three seem to have been composed *by* this date, since the dated page features revisions from the first two, as well as the line:

‘Murdered, forgotten, nameless, ~~mortal~~ terrible’, with mortal scored through (hereafter indicated in the text). Following this is a typescript with handwritten alterations. Then a typescript of two pages entitled ‘TRICEPS’, a poem in three numbered sections, each composed of five squat quatrains. Following this, ‘RELIQUARY’, twenty-three typed lines in four longer line stanzas of six lines (apart from the third, which has five). Lastly, three typesheets each entitled ‘TETE COUPEE’, though the title on the second page has been scored out by hand and ‘STRANGE FRUIT’ written above it. On each is a poem of fourteen lines, with stanzas of four, four and six lines on the first two pages and as a square sonnet on the last.

The first line of the ‘My reverence’ draft reads, ‘~~So~~ my reverence for her bog-stained head,’; beneath is ‘~~Is not unnatural.~~’ The deleted double negation shows something of Heaney’s attempt in this poem to get at the complex politics of the gaze and the ethics of looking. Perhaps something, too, of his state of mind: careful to show hesitance precisely. Heaney substitutes ‘head’ for ‘kernel’, trying the adjectives ‘embalmed’, ‘~~seasoned~~’, ‘stained’, and ‘elevated’ before describing it as ‘an after-image// Of Veronica’s napkin’. It is clear that Heaney first wrote ‘a negative after-image’ before scoring through ‘a negative’ and writing ‘an’ above it. This optical and iconic imagery shows Heaney’s central preoccupations in composing ‘Strange Fruit’. His reflection on ways of seeing is motivated not only by Glob’s textual description of the severed head, details of which Heaney includes in drafts and the published version of the poem, but also by the black and white photograph of ‘The decapitated girl from Roum’ included in Glob’s book. A negative after-image is easy to imagine when looking at the photograph because the head appears on a white background and already has

skeletal features, so would appear negatively as an X-ray film: a white cranium on a black background.

Veronica's napkin is the name for the cloth used to wipe Jesus' face at the time of the Crucifixion, into which his face was said to have been imprinted; a relic now housed in St Peter's in Rome. Veronica is a Latinisation of Berenice, and folk legend tells that it is formed of the Latin for 'true' and the Greek for 'image'. About the cloth *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* states, 'To distinguish at Rome the oldest and best known [authentic images of Christ] it was called *vera icon* (true image), which ordinary language soon made *veronica*.'¹¹ It may be the poet's reverence, in the form of the poem, or the severed head pictured in Glob's book, that constitutes the 'after-image// Of Veronica's Napkin'. The ambiguity shows Heaney's initial and partial ambition to make the poem a sacred symbol and true icon, but also his consciousness of the primary importance of the viewer's absorption in and of the image/poem so that it is retained and replayed in optical memory.

The 'My reverence' draft shows a line subsequently struck out: '~~Or I will nail my articles to door the door (sic)/-At Drogheda/ Of Oliver's church~~'. The speaker imitates Luther's revolutionary gesture before exchanging a Catholic context for a pre-Christian one: 'Or I will drive past Drogheda to where/ Cuchullain poled the heads of enemies'. In the chapter from *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* Heaney quotes in 'Feeling Into Words', Ross notes that Cú Chulainn brandished severed heads as signs of victory in the *Táin* – a text which had been revitalized in Irish literary and visual and culture with Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation. In his review of the book, Heaney praises Louis Le

Brocquy's illustrations and the overlapping of text and image in the publication.¹²

The next line, following various revisions, reads 'And nail my articles up in Armagh.' Working on the poem in December 1972 and before it, Heaney had left Belfast for Wicklow in July of that year, passing Drogheda en route to and from his old and new homes. Housed in St Peter's Church in Drogheda is the head of Oliver Plunkett, canonized in 1975, the year *North* was published. Siobhán Kilfeather observes that the relic's placement in Drogheda, site of one of the most notorious massacres by the English in Irish history, enabled it to become a nationalist emblem.¹³ But she also stresses that this signification is one among many, and that Plunkett's head is a complex object, producing multiple resonances. This is made visible in the title and tripartite structure of 'TRICEPS', which shows first the 'exhumed gourd', the beheaded girl recognisable from the published version of the poem, then the head of Oliver Plunkett, and finally a turnip scalped at Samhain. Both Christian and pre-Christian iconography inform Heaney's attempt to represent the girl's head in this poetic triptych and the point at which they intersect is itself an intersection: the place and moment in which the emblem or icon the viewer contemplates seems to return the gaze.

In 'A Northern Hoard' from *Wintering Out*, Heaney makes the turnip a perverse sort of icon whose 'lopped head / Blazes', and into whose 'unhallowed light' the speaker stares.¹⁴ But in the third section of 'TRICEPS' Heaney stages an encounter with the 'smile and stare' of the turnip that not only foregrounds artistic set-up, as in 'Bogland', but also the reciprocal gaze that makes the lantern-head Heaney's double:

Now over the intelligent light
I place the fontanel
and lift him,

raise him high again,
old moon-mouth, smelt-brain,
whose pupils gleam in mine
like sanctuary lamps.

Heaney uses syntax from the first and second sections of 'TRICEPS', but not from this third part, in the published version of 'Strange Fruit' – but that unseeing double that yet sees remains.

Kilfeather argues that revering emblematic bodies such as the severed head is a profound form of nostalgia, but that the preservation of the body is not necessarily 'political' and marks an attempt to live with the dead.¹⁵ Michael Longley's poem, 'Oliver Plunkett' (*The Echo Gate*, 1979), meditates on the strangeness of viewing the head. Longley describes the act of observation using paternal, scientific, and gothic lenses, culminating in the self-reflexive moment of the viewer seeing their own reflection in the glass.¹⁶ Offering the reader a mirror through which to see darkly, Longley's poem shatters the nostalgic gaze, while Heaney's poem undertakes the attempt to live with the dead by making visible his (and perhaps our) desire to revere, to adore, and to take pleasure in contemplation of the severed head.

In the chapter from *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* Heaney quotes in 'Feeling Into Words', Ross describes and includes photographs of three-faced

heads sculpted in Celtic countries in Roman times that highlight the belief in the sacred power of three, and Heaney clearly draws on Ross's work by conflating Christian and pagan contexts to form an image of the severed head in a tripartite draft. In 'TRICEPS', Plunkett is 'our martyr', who 'kept the faith for us', while in 'RELIQUARY', we read, 'I once knelt where the martyr's head reposes// On a side altar in Drogheda./ ... priests still celebrate his sacrifice/ Robed in the scarlet from his spouting trunk'. The head thus becomes the focus of ritualistic commemoration (of a rather phallic sort) after sacrificial violence. But the erasure of references to Plunkett, of explicitly Catholic imagery and of place names in the published version of the poem allows Heaney to examine the politics of 'exhibition' and, with the erasure of the personal pronoun, the practice of scapegoating that places responsibility for such exhibition with what 'They' do.

In P.V. Glob's description of the head of a young woman of about twenty found in Roud Fen in 1942, he notes that her face is 'very delicately preserved, and oval' and her teeth 'well preserved, but heavily worn'.¹⁷ Manuscript drafts show Glob's influence: the lines, 'It was a girl/ for it was beardless' on the second page of the 'My reverence' draft use Glob's observation that the absence of beard stubble helped to identify the head as a woman's. Also on this page, the sheepskin in which Glob notes the head had been wrapped: 'The spongy fleece/ of the lamb had stained/ and we unswaddled its heavy kernel'. The line was first 'The ~~swaddling~~ fleece', with the adjective subsequently exchanged for 'spongy'. That Heaney imagines the sheepskin as a lamb's fleece demonstrates the initial endeavour to represent the beheaded girl using Christ-like imagery. In the

proclamation of John the Baptist, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.¹⁸

Glob suggests the head was a sacrificial offering, but otherwise does not pay attention to the severed head.¹⁹ Like Ross, however, he reads Iron Age ritual practice in relation to Christian symbolism, but on different terms, describing the ‘brooch on the dress to warn off alien and hostile forces, just as the sign of the cross was worn in Christian times’.²⁰ Both Glob and Ross explicitly reference ‘the sign of the Cross’, but it is Ross’s reading of the symbolism that Heaney takes up and uses to explain both his poetic practice and personal pilgrimage. Quoting Chaucer’s Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, Heaney describes fulfilling a vow in visiting Jutland, “‘the holy blissful martyr for to seke””,²¹ before introducing Ross’s work. He moves between medieval Christian pilgrimage and pre-Christian Celticism. In ‘Strange Fruit’, we read ‘Diodorus Siculus confessed / His gradual ease among the likes of this’.²² Glob does not mention the Greek historian but Ross writes, in the same paragraph Heaney quotes from, ‘Diodorus Siculus comments on the custom of decapitating their enemies amongst the Gauls, and describes how they nailed them up on their houses or embalmed them in oil and regarded them as priceless treasures.’²³ Ross includes Siculus’s description of this practice earlier in the text.²⁴ Heaney’s reference to Siculus in the poem highlights the importance of pre-Christian Celtic ritual for his image. But on the second page of the ‘My reverence’ draft, the beheaded girl appears as Christ in the Mass:

This was her body.

This was her blood.

~~I elevate~~

This is a monstrance

for her exposition.

~~of her mystery~~

I have argued elsewhere that we might read in these lines the wish for the poem to be the place of Real Presence in a secular sense – monstrance; open receptacle for the Holy Other.²⁵ Looking more closely at the manuscript drafts, I think Heaney’s encounter with the photograph enables him to foreground and unsettle the politics of this desire and the wish to behold. Although Heaney erases the Christological and Eucharistic imagery from the final published version of the poem, he rewrites their importance in his introduction to the poem on BBC Radio Ulster in 1980, commenting as follows:

One of the pictures which was most reproduced about fifteen or twenty years ago from the surrealist movement, or at least from a surrealist painter, was Salvador Dali’s picture of the Crucifixion of Christ, hanging in a kind of foreshortened way above a globe of the world. And in a way, that image of a sacred symbol hung over a piece of earth is the way I would like to present this next poem. Its title is ‘Strange Fruit’. It’s about a, a skull, a head really, a girl’s head, that was dug up out of the bog, again in Jutland, and there was something very haunting about the photograph of it that I saw, something very violent about it, something strangely beautiful at the same time ... and if I had to say to myself what I was trying to do here, afterwards, I would say I was trying to hang this beheaded head over the place that I come from.²⁶

Heaney's commentary echoes Ross's conflation of Celtic paganism and Christianity in the sacred iconography of the severed head, and affirms the importance of the photograph over Glob's textual account. Given his comments about perspective and the globe, Heaney seems to have in mind Dali's *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1951) rather than *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)* (1954). In Heaney's explanation of the poem, the murdered girl is a Christ-figure; her exhumed head a 'sacred symbol' like Dali's Christ. In making the sign of the cross, Heaney perhaps presents this strange fruit as a sacrament in a violent time – strange but potentially redemptive. But the published version of the poem actively troubles 'What had begun to feel like reverence'.²⁷ The girl's way of seeing frustrates the viewer's wish to see her completely, in spite of the 'exhibition' to which she has been made subject.

Analysing perceptions of the face revealed in death, Kilfeather draws on Daniel Arasse's description of the guillotine, from the time of the French Terror, as a 'portrait machine'. Arasse expands on this idea using terms highly relevant to Heaney's 'Strange Fruit' drafts:

The guillotine portrait ... becomes a sort of revolutionary variation of the Holy Shroud, the veil of St. Veronica through which, miraculously, and without human agency, the true face of Christ was imprinted.²⁸

The manuscript drafts show something of Heaney's initial interest in the girl as Christ-figure and the poem as a 'true icon'; under the terms of Heaney's reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'a faithful imitation of Christ' or, like the guillotine

portrait, an image that seems to exist ‘miraculously, and without human agency’. But through comparison with the published text we witness the erasure of this ambition over time. The composition process witnessed in the manuscript drafts tells an important story about the formation of Heaney’s understanding of the power of the image, and of the photograph. Through this process, the reverential gaze first invoked is made subject to critique by the very subject of the poem / photograph who, though sightless, sees.

III

All of the photographs included in *The Bog People* are in black and white. Eighteen photographers are listed in the acknowledgements for the use of photographs, including Glob himself, but specific photographs are not credited to specific photographers. Short descriptions, rather than titles as such, appear beneath each photograph, the effect of which is to subsume the images into Glob’s narrative project and mythology. Without the intrusion of titles, names of photographers, years and place names beneath each image, the viewer is encouraged to gaze upon the image and interpret it in light of Glob’s textual interpretation (with its emphasis on the supernatural and sacrificial violence), rather than to see it as a reproduction of a historical artefact taken by a specific photographer in a specific place and time. We are asked to consider the photograph’s subject, rather than the picture itself. The photographs seem to serve an archival, documentary function, yet the photo of the severed head

actively resists this purpose. The nature of the photograph, then – its very strangeness – informs Heaney’s style of exhibition.

In six photographs of ‘The Tollund man’ the body lies on peat and, in a number of these, protective material and the wooden structure containing his remains are clearly visible. His noose, cap and belt are photographed separately, displayed on a white background that enables the viewer to see their outline, shape and texture more clearly. Wooden structures are also visible in the photographs of women and men from the Bore Fen, and the bog sites in which these remains were found are also shown. ‘The Grauballe man’ is shown embedded in peat, and there are radiographs of his head, hand, shoulder, knee and shin. In her reading of ‘The Grauballe Man’, Edna Longley writes, ‘[a]lmost too dutifully the poem venerates wrists, heel, instep, hips, spine, chin, throat, hair – inclining to rosary beads indeed’.²⁹ To rosary beads, but also to the image: photograph and radiograph.

The image of ‘The decapitated girl from Rourm’ is the most stylized of the 76 photographs included in *The Bog People*. The head seems to float, levitating in white space. It is leathered, ancient. It seems to offer itself as a portrait, but it also forecloses the possibility of being viewed in this way. It is a head, but not quite a face. Apart from a few wisps of hair, the image of the head does not touch the edges of the page. The plinth or table on which it must have been placed for the shot has been edited out of the photograph. It appears almost as an object, much more like the photographs of ‘The Huldre bog woman’s scarf and comb’ a few pages before it: two objects presented on a white background, relics of historical interest presented symmetrically. But it is more like an icon. The

bridge of the nose is at the exact centre of the page. Because of their central position, the eye sockets on either side seem to stare out at the viewer.

The photo exists not as record but as challenge and enticement. It doesn't seek to educate and document so much as to face, to stare, to invite an encounter, perhaps to haunt or even seduce. 'The bog man from Rendswühren' is another photograph in *The Bog People* in which bog body remains are presented in white space in this way, but part of his frame is covered and obscured by a blanket or clothing and the shadow cast by his calf and foot in the image draws attention to the moment of setting up and lighting his remains. The shadow takes us out of contemplation of the image as icon and into a reflection on the process of documenting these archaeological finds. Similarly, the attempt to isolate the head of 'The Tollund man' on a white background is awkwardly achieved because of the angle of the shot and the flat line showing the crop to the neck. The immediacy of the subject's condition is lost to display.

'Photography', writes Stephen Shore, 'is inherently an analytical discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture.'³⁰ What is noticeable in the photograph of 'The decapitated girl from Roum' is how the composition aspires to the condition of painting and of portraiture. As though trying to escape its own medium, the photograph reads oddly because the messy world has been erased. Yet by editing out of the image the surface on which the head must have rested, while leaving visible the shadowing that shows the head has been lit from the left side, the photographer ends up exhibiting the set-up. The square of Heaney's sonnet reproduces some of this oddness – the second in *North*, after the second Mossbawn poem, 'The Seed Cutters'. The full rhymes of

the first sonnet (true/through; frill/kill;) brilliantly abrade by the end of the poem and the final couplet ('frieze/anonymities').³¹ Full rhyme wastes away entirely in 'Strange Fruit', as though the 'sharp knife ... / Lazily halving each root that falls apart' in the first has already done its work to correspondences of sound in the second – this in contrast to the full AABB rhymes of the lyrics from which the poem takes its title. The only other appearance of the sonnet in *North* is in 'Act of Union', but the double sonnet makes a rectangle of two fourteen line squares and this mirroring allows for acts of accommodation. 'Strange Fruit' is a square in a sea of longish-length poems in short-lined enjambed quatrains. There is something obstinate about its shape.

Something obstinate too, about its subject's way of seeing: 'outstaring ... outstaring'.³² Heaney's interest in poetry's powers of *ostranenie* or making strange, as in the poem of the same title, extends to the photograph as the already made strange and poetry that aspires to this condition in visual as well as oral and aural terms. In 'Making Strange', defamiliarisation is achieved through dialect and recitation, but as Roland Barthes explains, the strangeness of the photograph arises from our habit, as viewers, of seeing the photograph *as* its referent and only secondarily grasping photography's paradoxical condition: that it 'reproduces to infinity [what] has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially'. Barthes writes 'By nature, the Photograph ... has something tautological about it Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.'³³ It is perhaps for this reason that the blind subject has proved so popular for photographers such as Paul Strand, Lewis Hine, and Garry Winogrand. As Geoff Dyer observes in his study of photography, 'The blind

subject is the objective corollary of the photographer's longed-for invisibility';³⁴ it shows the photographer's ideal relationship to his or her subject: being invisible in the attempt to become the Other's eyes.

'Her eyeholes blank as pools', the blind subject of 'Strange Fruit' prefigures Heaney's portrait of Rosie Keenan in 'At the Wellhead', her eyes 'full / Of open darkness and a watery shine'.³⁵ In both poems, water conveys visionary blindness. The first a sonnet, the second a double sonnet, both are love poems of a sort, if seen with, in Ciaran Carson's phrase, 'a squint of the imagination'.³⁶ The blind musician whose voice is 'Night water glittering in the light of day'³⁷ perhaps ghosts the crone-like figure of 'Electric Light', her nail 'glit-glittery'. Framed in dim candlelight and 'blackout', the old woman could well be blind, 'her fur-lined felt slippers unzipped', her knitting needles keeping time.³⁸ Though Mary Heaney works to 'the tick of two clocks' with 'whitened nails' in the first Mossbawn poem,³⁹ the crone of 'Electric Light' is a stranger and more remote figure to the speaker as a child, in part because he sees her in different conditions of light. While the crone is associated with speech and the Derry ground, Mary Heaney works as 'water honeyed // in the slung bucket', Rosie Keenan's music sounds as 'hoisted water' and the girl of 'Strange Fruit' is wrinkled and wet-haired. Vision and water, or water as vision.

Patricia Coughlan's brilliant essay, "Bog Queens" highlights the conspicuous absence of speaking female subjects in Heaney's poetry, and the representative trope of 'a woman who dooms, destroys, puzzles and encompasses the man, but also assists him to his self-discovery: the mother stereotype, but merged intriguingly with the spouse'.⁴⁰ As important as Coughlan's feminist critique undoubtedly is, it has been hard to get out from under its terms in order

to see Heaney's women since – particularly women who are mute, blind, or staring. But Heaney's poetry consistently represents encounters with women whose way of seeing is, from one view 'impaired', and from his, transformational. In 'Field of Vision', the speaker recalls a woman sitting in a wheelchair and staring straight ahead: 'Face to face with her was an education / ... where you could see // Deeper into the country than you expected / ... Focused and drawn in by what barred the way.'⁴¹ The title describes the area seen from a fixed perspective and the visionary *ostranenie* in which 'the field behind the hedge / Grew more distinctly strange'. The speaker is both focused on and by what bars the way – seeing and seen in a reciprocal optical relationship with the woman and changed utterly by the encounter.

I want to suggest that the figure of the blind woman in Heaney's poetic landscape is also the blind double. In an exchange between Heaney and Jorge Luis Borges, the two discuss the sighted man's blind doppelgänger, and the blind man's sighted Other.⁴² Given Heaney's sensitivity to the double – from 'the old man ... / Just like his old man' ('Digging') and the 'rat slapped across my reflection' ('Personal Helicon') to 'my undrowned father' seen 'face to face' and 'nothing between us' ('Seeing Things')⁴³ – I want to argue that his representation of the girl's head in 'Strange Fruit' is an act of identification as well as self-conscious Othering and wooing, and that his encounter with the photograph of 'The decapitated girl from Roum' is what enables this strange act of identification. In Roland Barthes's memorable analysis, 'the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.' We have repressed, he writes, 'the profound madness of Photography', briefly felt 'when I look at "myself" on a piece of paper', since Death is the *eidos*

of the Photograph.⁴⁴

‘Tete Coupee 3’, a typed poem of fourteen lines, seems to have been produced after the draft in which ‘Strange Fruit’ has been handwritten as a title. It is identical to the published sonnet except for the title and the following details. In the sixth line ‘perishable jewel’ appears instead of the published ‘perishable treasure’, which makes a ten-syllable line. There is no colon after ‘this’ in the tenth line (though a colon appears here in ‘Tete Coupee 2’). In line eight, the eyeholes are described as ‘black as pools’ – this becomes ‘blank as pools’ in the published text. The change from ‘black’ to ‘blank’ changes everything. Indeed, this represents a change of colour, given that ‘blank’ comes from Old French ‘blanc’ meaning ‘white’. With ‘black’ eyeholes, we look at the girl, who cannot see, but with ‘blank’ eyeholes the girl cannot look but sees. The ‘blank’ aspect of her ‘outstaring’ signals at once emptiness, virginity, a lack of comprehension, and the surface or document before adornment by a frieze.

‘RELIQUARY’ concludes with these lines: ‘Her sockets’ unreflecting blackness / Outstares axe and beatification.’ In Heaney’s transformation of this draft, no longer are her eyes unreflecting, no longer black. The present continuous tense of the verb ‘outstare’ in the published version intensifies her powers of witnessing and perception, even while the repetition threatens to dissolve them. Heaney does not give us the animal otherness of Ted Hughes’s ‘The Bull Moses’: ‘Blackness is depth / Beyond star’.⁴⁵ That sense of otherness lingers in drafts of the poem, but as Heaney works through the process of composition, his identification with the girl intensifies.

‘Strange Fruit’ has been read as one of *North*’s more authentic icons, signalled by various critics, including Ciaran Carson, as one of the most

‘successful’ poems within the volume as a whole. Praise centres on the final four lines, and the triumph of ‘outstaring’ over ‘reverence’, challenging the viewer to acknowledge the voyeurism involved in reading the volume. Blake Morrison writes that the girl ‘rebukingly outstares ‘What had begun to feel like reverence’’.⁴⁶ Scott Brewster echoes this view.⁴⁷ Edna Longley writes that *North* is ‘a book of martyrs rather than of tragic protagonists. Only ‘Strange Fruit’ questions its own attitude, challenges inevitability’.⁴⁸ Jonathan Hufstader, indebted to Longley’s assessment though in disagreement with her emphasis on *North*’s Catholic forms of observation, similarly praises the poem as a rebuke to the voyeurism practiced by speaker, executioner, and pious observer alike. Discussing the poem, Hufstader writes, ‘Like the mythical Gunnar in “Funeral Rites”, the real woman of the Roum fen has open eyes, a symbolic embodiment of consciousness.’⁴⁹ There are a number of problems with this reading, in particular, the way Hufstader moves from ‘the mythical’ to ‘the real’ to ‘symbolic embodiment’ without theorising the relationship between them. Here ‘the real woman of the Roum fen’ is a surrogate for the severed head of Heaney’s poem – the two become one. Deeply problematic is the way Hufstader reads the poem as ‘the real woman’, while his praise for the poem is haunted by ‘mythical’ and ‘symbolic’ elements. By reading the poetic image of the severed head as ‘the real woman’, Hufstader is crediting Heaney as maker of the true image when what Heaney does instead, like the strange photograph of the head, is to reveal the modes of composition that make his art impossibly true.⁵⁰

In the manuscript drafts a cluster of significations attach to the image – the head appears as Veronica’s napkin, one of Cuchullain’s beheaded enemies, a Samhain turnip, Oliver Plunkett, and Christ. Heaney works through these

symbolic meanings but gradually edits them out of the poem, so that the final published version enables the reader to see this ‘Strange Fruit’, absorb it and experience after-images and impressions without comparative guidance. From the negated double negative that subjects Heaney’s attempt at reverence to complex critique (~~‘So my reverence [...] ‘Is not unnatural.’~~), to the consciously failed promise, ‘Here is’, ‘Strange Fruit’ does not so much reveal Heaney as exemplary iconographer as it bears (and bares) our desire for the fulfilment of that promise. Heaney’s ‘Here is’ learns from the way the speaker of Ted Hughes’s ‘Ravens’ self-consciously directs the reader’s gaze ‘Over there’ and ‘Over here’ and makes a ‘display’ of a dead lamb’s remains.⁵¹ There is a tour guide quality to ‘Strange Fruit’’s first sentence and ‘exhibition’, a form of detachment indebted to Hughes. But when considered as an echo of *North*’s first poems, this ‘Here is’ also does something radically different, opening up a space for identification. It even opens the possibility of love and the reciprocal gaze.

The first part of ‘TRICEPS’ presents the girl as Christ – her body and blood liturgically revered – and yet also Christ’s spouse:

We have uncarpeted
her sanctuary,
let air consume
her censers of pressed flowers.

Her tabernacle is unroofed,
her veil pulled off.

This is a monstrance

for her leathery beauty,

the broken nose dark

as a turf clod,

the eye-holes black as pools

in the old workings.

The beheaded girl appears not only as Christ, but as the Church which is the Bride of Christ – but a bride who has suffered exposure and sexual violation. The negative prefixes perform a strip-tease, while ‘leathery’ is suggestive of the sadomasochistic gaze as well as the effects of peat preservation. As sanctuary and tabernacle, the girl is the dwelling-place of the divine. But her eyes, in this draft, are black – detecting no light and offering none back. Read in relation to the photograph of the Roum girl, Heaney’s ‘We’ here aligns poet and photographer. ‘We’ are guilty of unroofing and unveiling her; ‘we’ have exposed her and turned her into an object of seduction. But Heaney’s alternative to such symbolic violation in the published version of the poem is identification with the Other in the present moment.

The published version of ‘Strange Fruit’ begins with the present tense expression borrowed from Holiday’s song: ‘Here is’. And this, in turn, calls back to the first ‘Mossbawn’ poem.⁵²

And here is love

like a tinsmith’s scoop

sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

Mary Heaney we see in glimpses and through flashes of action: 'her hands scuffled' as she baked in a floury apron and 'Now', in the present tense, 'she dusts the board' and we see her 'broad-lapped' middle, 'whitened nails' and 'measling shins'. A scone is 'rising / to the tick of two clocks'. Against the double ticking, the rising scone – sign of her art and labour – opens up a different frame of reference for measuring time: the *kairos* time of pregnant pause displaces chronological time; ritualistic action replaces sequential action. There are two directions given by the speaker: 'here is a space / again'; 'And here is love'. If imagined under the spell of Catholic Eucharistic theology, the time frame of the poem – this 'here', this 'space / again' – is 'love'. In clearing another space at the start of 'Strange Fruit', with a 'Here is', Heaney calls back to the loving 'here' of the first 'Mossbawn' poem, just as the sonnet shape and reflection on composition and anonymity call back to the second.

Glob's description of the decapitated girl says nothing about her eyes. It is the photograph that prompts Heaney's attention to her eyes or the space where her eyes once were. If Diane Arbus is right, 'the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture'⁵³ Heaney shows us the subject through attention to the picture, exhibiting its modes of composition. But thinking about form throws up a new anxiety: how to love, which is not reverence but its opposite, since 'reverence' comes from the Latin *vereri*, 'to fear'. And the attempt at reverence is precisely what the girl outstares. In exhibiting the blind subject, like

Strand and Winnograd, Heaney exposes the Other to the public gaze, holding this girl's head out as though presenting courtroom evidence for dark atrocity or placing a jewel on a museum plinth. In the act of doing so, however, he makes a self-portrait – not the severed head of bardic power, but the sighted poet yet unseeing. Heaney offers us another 'Here is' in 'The Government of the Tongue':

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless.⁵⁴

Delivered in 1986, Heaney's lecture is a prescient retreat from neoliberal logics of production and consumption: poetry 'does not propose to be instrumental or effective', he insists; it is 'practically useless', almost without function, and yet concerned with action. That action is, quite simply, the reciprocal gaze of viewer/ photograph, reader/poem since poetry functions 'as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves'.⁵⁵ By scapegoating 'them', by admitting his own 'gradual ease' on seeing violated bodies, by confessing his attempt at reverence, Heaney shows all he is blind to.⁵⁶ By concentrating on the Other, 'Her eyeholes blank as pools', he sees himself at last.

¹ Quoted in Elizabeth Blair, 'The Strange Story of the Man behind "Strange Fruit"'. National Public Radio, 5 September 2012.

<<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>> . Accessed 29 January 2015.

² In Yeats's short story, 'The Binding of the Hair', illustrated and published in *The Savoy* in 1896, the Bard Aodh is poised to sing to queen Dectira when he is interrupted by the outbreak of violence. He is beheaded and tied up by the hair, and the severed head sings from a tree. W.B. Yeats, 'The Binding of the Hair', *The Savoy* 1 (1896), 135-139. I am grateful to Clare Gill for bringing this text to my attention in conversation about this essay. Yeats published Aodh's song as 'He Gives his Beloved Certain Rhymes' in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) and adopts the device of a song sung by severed head in two late plays: *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) and *A Full Moon in March* (1935). In a note to the first play, Yeats compares Aodh's fate to that of John the Baptist in Wilde's *Salome*, reading the motif as 'part of the old ritual of the year: the mother goddess and the slain god'. W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russell King Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1957), p.1010. In Oscar Wilde's play, Salome likens Iokanaan's severed head to 'a ripe fruit' (thus meeting, perversely, Herod's earlier demand for 'ripe fruits'). Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act*, (Elkin Mathews & John Lane; Copeland & Day: London; Boston, 1894), p.64; p.32. In Part IV of John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972), 'A Severed Head' mourns the 'lost/ syllables of an old order' in the aftermath of The Flight of the Earls. Montague uses the image to represent the traumatic speechlessness of the native Gaelic population, and also as an image of bardic power. John Montague, *The Rough Field*, 5th edn. (Bloodaxe: Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1990), p.39.

³ P.V. Glob, *The Bog People* (London: Paladin, 1972), p.17.

⁴ I am grateful to Tim Millen for conversations about Glob's photographs and the paintings of Hughie O'Donoghue that have prompted new thought, and for the loan of books and catalogues. My thanks to Colin Graham for our ongoing conversation about photography and poetry, and to two readers whose anonymous reports on an earlier draft of this essay were extremely helpful.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p.59.

⁶ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986), p.156.

⁷ Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', p.54.

⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Bogland', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998), p.41.

⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Strange Fruit', *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p.32.

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, 'Strange Fruit' manuscripts, Seamus Heaney Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. All further references to manuscript drafts refer to these materials.

¹¹ Antoine Déger, 'St. Veronica' in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), XV,

<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15362a.htm>> Accessed 26 April 2012.

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'King Conchobor and his Knights', *The Listener*, 26 March 1970, p.179. Le Brocquy's interest in severed heads and Celtic symbolism would develop significantly in subsequent decades, in part as a means of representing the Northern Irish conflict, though it is the paintings of Hughie O'Donoghue, in particular *Corp: Paintings and Drawings of the Human Body 1984-1998*, that

resonate more profoundly with Heaney's poetic bogland, and also take inspiration from Glob's text to consider the relationship of figure/ ground.

¹³ Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Oliver Plunkett's Head', *Textual Practice* 16.2 (2002), 229-248 (p.239).

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'A Northern Hoard', *Wintering Out*, p.32.

¹⁵ Kilfeather, pp.244-5.

¹⁶ The tripartite structure of Longley's poem invites analysis in relation to the practice and politics of quartering the saint. Kilfeather asks, 'Is it fanciful to suppose that quartering developed a particular symbolic resonance in Britain because of the four component nations of the British Isles, and the need to subdue in each the very imagination of rebellion?' (p.234).

¹⁷ Glob, p.74.

¹⁸ John 1.29

¹⁹ Glob, pp.99-100.

²⁰ Glob, p.117.

²¹ Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', p.59.

²² Heaney, *North*, p.32.

²³ Anne Ross, *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* (London: Batsford, 1970), p.155.

²⁴ Ross, p.73.

²⁵ Gail McConnell, 'Catholic Art and Culture: Clarke to Heaney', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 437-455 (p.455).

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, Radio Archive Disc 1, Track 3 (Aired 9 November, 1980), in *Flying Fox: A Catalogue of Television and Radio Programmes*, Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, Queen's University Belfast.

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- ²⁷ Heaney, *North*, p.32.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Kilfeather, p.235.
- ²⁹ Longley, p.152.
- ³⁰ Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs* (New York: Phaidon, 2007), p.37.
- ³¹ Heaney, *North*, p.xi.
- ³² Heaney, *North*, p.32.
- ³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 4; pp.5-6.
- ³⁴ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), p.16.
- ³⁵ Heaney, *North*, p.32; *Opened Ground*, p.439.
- ³⁶ Ciaran Carson, 'Introduction', *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (London: Granta, 2004), p.xi
- ³⁷ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.439.
- ³⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London, Faber, 1998), pp.80-1.
- ³⁹ Heaney, *North*, p.ix-x.
- ⁴⁰ Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens": The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. by Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.99.
- ⁴¹ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.343.
- ⁴² Heaney's questions show him to be principally interested in blindness, imagined traditions, dreams and the Catholic imagination. Seamus Heaney, Richard Kearney and Jorge Luis Borges, 'Borges and the World of Fiction: An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges', *The Crane Bag* 6.2 (1982), 71-78 (p.73).
- ⁴³ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.3; p.15; pp.340-1.
- ⁴⁴ Barthes, p.12; p.13; p.15.

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- ⁴⁵ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 2003), p.74.
- ⁴⁶ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.62.
- ⁴⁷ Scott Brewster, 'Rites of Defilement: Abjection and the Body Politic in Northern Irish Poetry', *Irish University Review* 35.2 (2005), 304-19 (p.311).
- ⁴⁸ Longley, p.155.
- ⁴⁹ Jonathan Hufstader, "'Coming to Consciousness by Jumping in Graves": Heaney's Bog Poems and the Politics of *North*', *Irish University Review* 26.1 (1996), 61-74 (p.70).
- ⁵⁰ Indeed, literally, by making the 'Strange Fruit' drafts freely available for consultation in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library when written permission is required to view almost all of the rest of Heaney's papers.
- ⁵¹ Hughes, p.517.
- ⁵² Heaney, *North*, pp.ix-x.
- ⁵³ Quoted in Dyer, p.123.
- ⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of The Tongue* (London: Faber, 1986), p.107.
- ⁵⁵ Heaney, *The Government of The Tongue*, p.108.
- ⁵⁶ Heaney, *North*, p.32.