

THRESHOLD AND FLOOR



Seamus Heaney

Something that Thomas Hardy said makes more sense to me the older I get. A certain provinciality of feeling, he claimed, was useful to a poet. And something George Orwell said—again I cannot give chapter and verse—is like a corroboration of Hardy. A writer, according to Orwell, ought not to depart too far from his first style.

These down-to-earth propositions came to mind when the editor asked me to expand on something I wrote in the introduction to my translation of *Beowulf*. There I explained my original attraction to the task as follows: “While I had no great expertise in Old English, I had a strong desire to get back to the first stratum of the language and to ‘assay the hoard’. This was during the middle years of the 1980s, when I had begun a regular teaching job at Harvard and was opening my ear to the unmoored speech of some contemporary American poetry. Saying yes to the *Beowulf* commission would be (I argued with myself) a kind of aural antidote, a way of ensuring that my linguistic anchor would stay lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea-floor.”

That, as the man said, was a way of putting it. I had been aware of American poetry since before I started writing, but the poets I read at the start were more Anglo-eared and Euro-tuned than those I would read later on. Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur. “I pernoctated with the Oxford students once”, said Ransom, in “Philomel”, as donnishly as any don. “Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t”, cries the wife in Frost’s “Home Burial” with as much sound of sense as Lear’s “Never, never, never, never, never.” There was a performative edge to their verse. They were minding their language, speaking—however ironically—properly, because they were conscious of being the presence of tradition. Even Frost, for all his insistence on his own accent, cleared his throat, as if to remind English poetry that he had read his Virgil. As poets, in other words, they were aware of the poetic equivalent of R. P., that conventional standard which was once confidently designated in England as “Received Pronunciation.”

What I responded to, I think, was a slightly ventriloquistic element

in their work, their Joycean relish of being able to run a few rings round what had been done already. And yet with the exception of Frost—in a couple of monologues in women's voices in *Door into the Dark*—none of them influenced the sound or the gait of my own lines. What had put me in step with myself and tuned my performance was what I heard coming through in poems by Hopkins, Ted Hughes and Patrick Kavanagh, things spoken in a way I might have heard them spoken in my own *provincia* by people who would hardly so much as open a book. "One side of the potato pits was white with frost", said a Kavanagh line, and my natural impulse was to reply, "It was indeed." "A hoist up and I could lean over / The upper edge of the high half door, / My left foot ledged on the hinge, and look in", said Hughes in the "The Bull Moses". "I remember it well myself", my whole body replied, my ear half-aware of an alliterative line that came looping up through Langland and Hopkins, through the "lean over" in line one into that "left foot ledged on the hinge" and the "look in" in line three.

Charles Olson might have been able to claim space for American poetry and make a motto out of "Call me Ishmael", but "the voices of my education" kept me in thrall to time and tune, and I eventually came to realize that my own motto could be "Call me Caedmon." Or perhaps better to say (revising Stephen Dedalus) that I found the shortest way to Tara was via the monastery at Whitby. Along the way, however, there was a certain amount of *navigatio*, a number of *immrams* on western seas, both Atlantic and Pacific.

When I went to Berkeley in 1970, I had a vertical understanding of poetry. Eliot on "tradition and the individual talent", an awareness of language shift in Ireland from Irish to English (the tundish factor), six years of Latin at school, three years of Anglo-Saxon at university—a whole combination of historical, cultural and political factors predisposed me to a conservative understanding of what I—and it—was about. Call me the typical colonial subject, if you will, and I will agree, because when I set out from Belfast that August, one year before internment without trial was introduced, I was consciously hoping for liberation of some sort, I was lighting out for the territory of the Beats, of Projective verse and the variable foot, going to attend poetry readings by Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan, escaping from the tit-for-tattery of *New Lines* versus *The New Poetry*, the Movement versus the *macho*, Larkin versus Liverpool, and so and so on.

Imagine my chagrin, then, when my writing remained set in its aural ways. Admittedly, I was helped to trust my local accent through hearing Snyder linger and lengthen out his own mouth music as he read,

and got some assistance with the destabilizing of my quatrains from William Carlos Williams, but at home in the late sixties I had already begun to slacken those braces—and conditions in the Belfast I returned to would soon tighten them up again. Lines that were beginning to waver out like antennae in *Wintering Out* (1972) pulled back and curled themselves into the harder stanza-formations of the first part of *North* (1975). As I have often remarked, the battened-down, hunched-over, self-defensive position that people adopted to survive the early days of the Troubles is reflected in the stylistic clots and clinches of those particular poems.

Then, as an anti-coagulant, I prescribed myself a course of Marvell and middle Yeats. Translation of Dante. A plainer style. A step away from the province into opener pathways. And this move coincided with a new arrangement whereby I taught one semester at Harvard and spent the rest of the time in Dublin. The Harvard job involved me with the English Department and exposed me to the idiom of deconstruction and the challenges of theory, and even though much of what was coming in one ear would pass through the other, enough stayed between them to affect my way of thinking. My head did tell me that the safety of the language had been threatened, that there was an ontological crack in the foundations and a virtual space behind much of the strong phonetic façade. Gravity had been kicked, after all; even the word gravid, with all those associations of ponderous physicality on its umbilical leash, had been disconnected by the image of a floating astronaut, lolling weightlessly out there on the slack end of a cable.

So yes, the Ashbery whose *Tennis Court Oath* had meant little to me when I picked it up in Mo's bookshop on Telegraph Avenue fifteen years earlier now began to make far more poetic sense. I was readier to go with the flow of the pseudo-narrative and I also began to be fascinated by the way Ashbery's gift for sumptuous music co-existed with his need to do doodles and caricatures all over the score, and to feel the poignancy of a sensibility marooned from all its humanist guarantees, an imagination that could not let the word Dante pass without stretching a tripwire for it in the word Disney. In the gravity-free cabin of an Ashbery poem, snatches from different stories floated undismayed, the ictus went tipsy, the caesura flipped and somersaulted. It was all equal to the way life was turning out and turning in, but I could not, as they say, give myself permission to leave the realm of gravity. In order to believe my own ear, I had to keep my poetic feet in the equivalent of divers' boots.

Then, in the nick of time, a poem came to the rescue. It was the second of what would turn out to be a sequence of 48 twelve-liners (published in *Seeing Things*, 1991) and, as is the case with much work that is

crucial to the author, it brought me back and forward all at once:

Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in.
Drink out of tin. Know the scullery cold.
A latch, a door-bar, forged tongs and a grate.

Touch the crossbeam, drive iron in a wall,
Hang a line to verify the plumb
From lintel, coping-stone and chimney breast.

Relocate the bedrock in the threshold.
Take squarings from the recessed gable pane.
Make your study the unregarded floor.

Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure
The bastion of sensation. Do not waver
Into language. Do not waver in it.

ÚRLÁR



Seamus Heaney

for Liam O'Flynn

Hull and hawser. Fathom thrum. The rope
And anchor holding, mast-top
And boxed compass move with the gyroscope
Of the big music. Úrlár, meaning floor,
Steadies its foundation in the air.

Author's Note: "úrlár" is a term used in relation to the "floor" of sound in Scottish piping.