

HORSEPOWER, PASS BY!

A Study of the Car in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney



Medbh McGuckian

In the symbolism of Renaissance art fate is sometimes represented as the wind blowing on the sails of a vessel, while man stands at the steering wheel and determines the direction as much it can be determined under the given conditions.

(PAUL TILlich, *The Courage to Be*).

In the mythic images of Orpheus and Narcissus, static triumphs over dynamic in such a way that pleasure is redeemed, death absorbed, death halted.

(DIANA HUME GEORGE, *Blake and Freud*).

The car has become as well as a fact of modern life a potent symbol for several Irish poets, and indeed for contemporary poetry in general. Aside from the appearance of Brendan Kennelly in television commercials for a particular make, some of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's tensest love-poems enact a pursuit, encounter or flight from the Muse in a car-odyssey. John Montague in 1970 put the relationship in a nutshell:

through late traffic
changing gears with
the same gesture as
eased your snowbound
heart and flesh ("Tides")

The accomplishment of having passed the driving test seems at times incompatible with the equally amphibian ability to get from A to B in water. Paul Muldoon, in addition to the political subtleties of his Volkswagens, cattle-trucks and roundabouts, is forever giving girls lifts up and down the length of the country, while boasting cheerfully that he has "never learned to swim". Whereas Paul Durcan, for most of his career neurotically obsessed with his incompetence behind a wheel (celebrating only in his latest collection, *Christmas Day*, his fledgling wings), has many of his erotic adventures in the pool, and if he fantasizes in the persona of a driver, it is usually a feminine one. He affectionately analyses Seamus's driving attitude in "A Spin in the Rain":

Which is to sit right down under the steering-wheel
And to maintain an upwards-peering posture

Treating the road as part of the sky,

A method which motoring-correspondents call
Horizontal-to-the-vertical.

For Seamus, I hope to prove, the car is not so much an occasionally suitable vehicle for poetic statement as a fifth element. He is fascinated by engines of all persuasions, "Trains and Boats and Planes", buses, lorries, tractors and bicycles. His narrative stance is so often that of a driver, even in his prose or interviews, that his artistic/sexual drive itself may be seen in places to fuel and animate a car-body which is a physical extension to him. The car can stretch from being a casual motif or prop to a virtual alter ego, a Yeatsian mask, a character in its own right.

No collection in the nine published so far is without a car reference, while some seem intentionally to highlight the mode. *Wintering Out* began with a frontispiece dedicated to two (Protestant) fellow poets about passing the new internment camp on the M1, reprinted in *North* as the culmination of the sequence "Whatever you say, say nothing". *Field Work* by contrast opens gently with a drive through the Burren to a consummation of a meal with friends. Much of the pilgrimage in *Station Island* is conducted by car, its final poem "On the Road" being an apotheosis soaring out of "the trance of driving" and anything but stationary. The title poem of *The Haw Lantern* is juxtaposed with "The Frontier of Writing", as central a meditation on the meaning of military occupation as "The Toome Road". The "Crossings" section in *Seeing Things* is a twelve-part essay on kinaesthetics, or the mathematics of movement, while his most recent volume, *The Spirit Level*, concludes with a dreamed-of break in a dreamed-of journey. For so self-conscious an artist this percentage, though not concentrated, can hardly be unintentional.

John Tytell's explanation of the young Ezra Pound's search for inspiration offers a relevant contrast here:

By travelling on foot (through Provence), Pound was participating in an old tradition for poets. The troubadours, of course, had been perpetual walkers; in a later era, Wordsworth and Coleridge walked through the Lake District of England. Going on foot was an expression of the Confucian adage that "slowness is beauty" that Binyon had communicated to Pound, but it was also a way to refute progress and the emphasis on speed that determined the culture.

By this account Seamus is, if not a modernist speed-merchant, at least a technological illusionist, in acknowledging that the first and most often quoted poem in his first book, "Digging", came to him while negotiating the sharp corner around Bellaghy Bawn. A case of motion, rather than emotion, recollected in tranquillity. The poem's progression of implements thus does not tell us how what was "Between finger and thumb" at the time of its conception was the actual wheel of the car, though it is the present "resting" pen that is remembering the past and pluperfect spades. The gun, whose plural is mirrored in the word "snug", is as yet only the possible ultimate future alternative, barely toyed with. The rasping was also that of the descending gear, the sinking that of the clutch, the boot and inside knee levering it in the exact firm nestling way the father and his father biblically dug potatoes and turf. The sinister threat of imminent corruption in "cold smell of... mould", "cuts through living roots", is rejected by the poet's declaration that the pen is the weapon he will stop at, that that action is the furthest he can go, and the intermediary car is somehow at the heart of this compromise.

It is a gradual mobilization of the spirit, even in the Shakespearean sense, over thirty years, tribal or collective as well as individual, that Seamus's work charts, from the publication of "Tractors" in *The Belfast Telegraph* of 24 November 1962 to the elegy for Joseph Brodsky published in the summer 1996 *Atlanta Review*. He celebrates the Russian for having gone over the top at the workplace of language, joyriding or on trench-manoeuvres at its front:

Nose in air, foot to the floor,
 Revving English like a car
 Hijacked when you robbed its bank
 (Russian was your reserve tank)

The energy and mastery appreciated here remind us of his earlier elegy for Robert Lowell, "welder of English", who "rode on the swaying tiller of (him)self":

our night ferry
 thudding in a big sea,

 the whole craft ringing
 with an armourer's music...

There is a pride, exultation and delight in the poet's role here that is

remote from, and yet developed out of, his original resentment and stubbornness, whereas the basic metaphor remains largely unaltered. Although he now finds himself “embarrassed” at the *Animal-Farm* “heaviness of being” in “Tractors”, this sore-thumb self and community portrait diagnoses the hapless flaccidity of rural, Catholic mid-century mid-Ulster, the disenfranchised gloom:

Grey as slugs,
Blue or red as lug-worms,
The tractors lumber in fields.
Their hopelessness hurts thought.

On roadways,
Broad-bottomed and embarrassed;
On land, impassive before
Ruthless, rooting ploughs or morose trailers.

They cannot sweat in summer
Though their bonnets burn. In winter
They ache across mud; or gargle
Sadly, astraddle unfolding furrows.

Do not ignore then
The melancholy spouts of tractors
That never have been broken in
And inspire no fear.

R.S.Thomas’s “Cyndyllan” asserts himself as a national warrior, compared to these unmanned larval machines, which lack the virility of horses, but smoulder with a preconscious untamability. They hardly seem to move at all or possess engines, the Saxon words exude depression and paralysis, while freebooting Brodsky is outside the law.

The car works for Seamus variously along this positive/negative continuum. On the plus side it is associated with intimations of immortality from nature, with the sacredness of travel, with creativity and healthy sexuality, with political autonomy, all of these fluidly interacting. On the dark side, it lends itself to many forms of death, to the anarchy of war, the body’s domination, and imperial subjugation, all similarly interweaving. It is the gratuitous cause of accidental death to the poet’s small brother, a blind mechanical force. The use of the word “clear” in the line “the bumper knocked him clear” (as in the later elegies for his mother, “Clearances”) consoles with its suggestion that the

intact substance has been transported. The exact numerals ten, two, six and four are no tactful journalism, but counters of order against the horror. With another premature child's death twenty years on, Rachel's, on a bicycle struck by a car, he alludes to the fatal "gash", but re-runs the collision like a bad take in a film:

The twisted spokes all straightened out,
The awful skid-marks gone

The unmentioned, perhaps unmentionable car behind these tragedies is chance-placed, annihilating, impersonal, driverless, a pawn of an indifferent *deus ex machina*, despite Seamus's redemptive refusals to mourn. The undwelt-on violence is subconsciously released in a nightmare about murder of finding a dead body while "digging" with a billhook:

Before I woke
I heard the steel stop
In the bone of the brow. ("Door into the Dark")

In an elegy in the same collection for a stillborn child, nonetheless, the numbness of the grief is confronted, its exorcism begun, driving beneath a circling rook:

On lonely journeys I think of it all...

I drive by remote control on this bare road

Much later, in "A Pillowed Head", he recreates the dawn drive with his wife to the maternity hospital, through Wicklow ground-mists, for the birth of their daughter. Here the exhilaration of being "first on the road", the sky's "slashed carmines" and "washed milky blues", prefigure the precious journey into life itself; his masculine participation in the mystery of the feminine is symbolised in the headlong windscreen's witnessing the huge spectacle of nature's midwifery.

This gradual "lightening" of mood in his work was present from the outset in equations or metaphors between natural potential and kinetic energy and its man-made equivalents. In "Saint Francis and the Birds", the creatures are listening to the poet-priest "throttle up", "wheel" and "whirr", as in "The Play Way" a class hearing music is "pumped up tight as a tyre". A more nauseous image is at the crux of the poem "Waterfall", whose downpour is like a car crashing into itself with "Simultaneous acceleration / And sudden braking". It "skids to a halt", a "glacier" that

has “reared into reverse”, the force of the “hurtling tons” is that of legal execution.

The natural environment is interpreted widely throughout the early work in imagery of militarism and mechanical force, as if debris from the second world war were strewn about his childhood, as indeed it was. Steam “funnels” from cows, snipes “rocket” and “catapult” on “reconnaissance”, a corncrake “challenge(s) unexpectedly like a hoarse sentry”. A conceiving bull is “an old steam-engine shunting”, “impassive as a tank”, a calving cow is struck repeatedly like “a depth-charge”, Christmas turkeys are a demobilized airforce:

I find him ranged with his cold squadrons:
The fuselage is bare, the proud wings snapped,
The tail-fan stripped down to a shameful rudder.

His own tongue he compares to a “hinge” and his being to a “harrow-pin”. This sense of metallic hard threat in the softness of flesh pervades British poetry from Hardy to Hughes, the post-industrial, post-imperial anxiety, but Heaney develops these metaphors into a backdrop for the violent experience of bombs, assassinations, martial law and burials, which was his and the country’s for a quarter century.

The last poem in *Wintering Out*, “Westering”, begins a cavalcade of sombre car-poems mourning public as opposed to private griefs, news-reported atrocities and reprisals. The whole book is a journey to this journey, a springboard for the despondent *North*. Paul Muldoon echoes this theme in “Good Friday, Driving Westwards”. From the “moon” of California the poet recalls his Good Friday departure from his tortured community as a kind of betrayal. He is insulated by his car and lifestyle from the funereal drawn blinds, “Cars stilled outside still churches”. It is a summary of the mood stirred already in “The Tollund Man”:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving (...)

Out there in Jutland

The car in both cases seems a necessary connective current between the poet and the executed victims. In “Funeral Rites” (from *North*) however he criticizes the indolent use of the car in modern death ceremonies. The cortège or “black glacier” following the hearse lacks the “customary rhythms” and “temperate footsteps” of old-time and pre-Christian processions escorting the coffin on foot. There is something complacent

and not quite honest in the “purring family cars” “nosing into line” like blinkered sheep:

the whole country tunes
to the muffled drumming

of ten thousand engines

The animated car-sounds are implicated in the sectarian marching: their collective hum contributes to the killing music, if it does not condone it. The winding vehicles form a depressingly limp snake-monster, and aesthetic catharsis is only achieved in a subsequent drive northwards past ancient Viking settlements.

At this stage the car starts to feature as the deliberate, rather than accidental, death-dealer, the “Troubles” revolving round hundreds of quick car getaways and car-bombs, in which ordinary civilian cars were conscripted and discarded. The operating face or gun is unseen, and the car itself behaves in a premeditating, not mindless way, in the savagery of tribal feuding between “neighbours”.

The emphasis on vulnerability and attack from the involvement of cars appears a deliberate choice in the description, part of the situation’s horror: it is linked with a fellow poem in the same *Field Work* volume—“Casualty”, which is indirectly about the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry, where the “Slow consolation” of the hearse’s “dawdling engine” contrasts with the relaxed rhythm of a previous peaceful fishing expedition. The idea of penitential pilgrimage is also associated with car activity throughout the “Station Island” sequence. In the shop-keeper’s section the killers arrive by car, and he subsequently chaffs Seamus about the “big Austin” he used to borrow to court in. This ambivalence between life-enhancing and destructive elements which the car seems to embody equally is continued in the Hunger Strike section, where Francis Hughes is condemned as an “Unquiet soul” that should have been buried in the unconsecrated “bog where you threw your first grenade”. But there is nothing simple in this patronizing stance, since as well as conveying disgust through words like “mildew” and “woodworm”, the poet also describes the helicopters as “maimed”, and gives the “voice from blight / and hunger” the historical status of one of the bog victims he has elsewhere glorified:

My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach
Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked.

(...) I saw country

I knew from Glenshane down to Toome
And heard a car I could make out years away
With me in the back of it like a white-faced groom,
A hit-man on the brink, emptied and deadlly.

There is a similar conjunction between the loss of self in erotic tension and the fearful change of identity in violent death in “The Betrothal of Cavehill”:

The morning I drove out to bed me down
Among my love’s hideouts, her pods and brooms,
They fired above my car the ritual gun.

The first meeting with Carleton occurs when he is “parked on a high road”, with “wind blowing round the car”, like the air of a spirit piercing material armour. He is “challenged” by a figure in his driving mirror and the car door slams in the confrontation. McLaverty later advises him to “Give lifts to people, you’ll always learn something”, and finally he is interviewed by the irascible Joyce on the showery tarmac of a carpark.

Two poems in the most recent collection explicitly rework the dual nature of the theme. The sestina “Two Lorries” juxtaposes innocence with experience, romance with revolution, by comparing a flirtation between his mother and Agnew the coalman with the blowing up of Magherafelt bus station. One lorry is seductive, “half-stripped”, leaving poetic tyre-marks, the other “groans” with explosives, with Death like a Morality play character driving it “in a flurry / Of motes and engine-revs”. In “Keeping Going”, printed alongside this, no doubt to underline the point, a reservist is gunned down:

A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,
Crossed the diamond, slowed again and stopped
Level with him, although it was not his lift.

The stamina of the poet’s brother Hugh is an antidote to this, a salve, a defiant Cyndyllan revitalizing the gelded world of the initial “Tractors”:

Your big tractor
Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,
You shout and laugh above the revs, you keep
Old roads open by driving on the new ones.

This positive socializing, the opposite of subservient, visualizes the car as mediating between the private and public arenas, somehow bridging the gulf between love and death, freedom, especially the artist's creative autonomy, and the authority of war. The car provided his generation with access to a continuum which permitted an enlightened discovery of being at home in, belonging to, being master of his own country, yet one that might have to be paid for at a fatal price.

Its heightened vision or illusion of control, synonymous with that of the artist, is briefly suggested at the start of "A Winter's Tale". The narrative depicts a Rembrandtesque fantasy of headlights pinpointing in the voyeuristic manner of "Punishment" a local girl gone missing, Suzanna among the Elders. The intrusion of sophistication on the primitive is also the theme of "Last Look", where flourishing weeds on the verge "flail against" the car, and the old grocer's total integration with the landscape, like one of Wordsworth's peasants, is dramatized by the impasses between his horse-drawn cart and a Model Ford in a narrow lane. Roads themselves tend to be significant for being built to be driven upon as much as for the places they link. In "Navy", the poet/driver as so often is "waved down" by a workman "where the surface is weavy / And the camber tilts / in the slow lane." The tarmacadam "snakes over" bog where his bulldozer has sunk with more ancient artefacts, the thin veneer of civilisation which the road represents is a "welted, stretchmarked / curve" or wound that a word could reopen.

"The Toome Road" specifically names the site of Roddy McCorley's execution (as a United Irishman, in 1798) in the scene of a sinister new military invasion. The awkward tractor-owners here find a voice of protest and defence:

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them?

They may be "charioteers", as he mocks them, but the real seed-sowers and "erectors" are the rural populace, based and unmoving, whose sleeping is vibrant despite the "dormant" guns. The "green" note of politics he allows himself to sound here is echoed in "The Gravel Walks", in which childhood play is clouded by "the engines of the world" preparing for war, and the river is polluted by cement mixers. The original "rasping" of the "Digging" poem is transmuted into the "plain, champ-

ing song” of gravel against shovel, evoking its own aristocracy, of faith or race.

Wintering Out is heralded by another morning drive, again through “that white mist you get on a low ground”, the “dewy motorway” contrasting in its beauty with “the new camp for the internees”, a semi-pejorative rhyming with the volume title. That he has chosen this for his framework illustrates a highly conscientious involvement with the deteriorating security situation and a concern for those imprisoned without trial. At the same time his being at one remove at least in his car gives the horror a quality of “*déjà vu*, some film made / of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound”. The comparison with Stalin’s rule leaves his condemnation unequivocal: if there is a bomb-crater, it is the machine-gun posts that seem responsible. The driving metaphor, if it can be called that, allows Heaney the necessary stance of objectivity and distance to be fair, rational and yet compassionate, to be in the mess but not of it, and therefore to assess and judge, which he must have felt he was required to do.

The third collection closes with three travel poems, the first of which, “Dawn”, repeats the sense of unreality in the frontispiece. The “mint of green leaves” “pitching and tossing” in the window where a blind has been lifted is a symbol for national if not republican struggle which recurs in the poem “Mint” in *The Spirit Level*. Disapproving intellectuals after a night of discussion drive “at five miles an hour”, “slipping” to the sea. There is an air of surveillance and paralysis. The final image (“Unable to move without crunching / Acres of their crisp delicate turrets”), while it refers to the sea-shells, things of beauty, is also the word he chooses for the British tanks. The drive is one of dilemma and claustrophobia, a choking sensation where humanity has a Gulliver’s illness-at-case.

The final poem in *Station Island*, “On the Road”, completes the whole exercise of journeying in that penitential book and intersects with the Sweeney poems. The road “reeling in” ahead of the driver is the political or spiritual future, an image from fishing which also suggests the hypnotic onslaught of newsreels. The “empty round” of the steering wheel is a “wrested trophy” but could also be a bulletless chamber. All roads dissolve into a single runway from which he takes wing into the exaltation of a migratory bird, with biblical implications. “The Frontier of Writing” in the next collection further examines the loosening into creativity in association with driving. The first four quatrains evoke the inner and outer shock of being interrogated at an army road block, a particular judgement akin to that in “The Haw Lantern” next to it. The

car's make and number give information about its occupant. All one's motion is wholly regulated by the rifle, one is literally "under arrest", the nothingness around has entered him. The same self-questioning is necessary for the artistic drive, which is an equally life or death situation. The bird hovering above here is one of prey. The road's "black current" is reminiscent of the Grauballe Man's "black river of himself", one of self-pity or suffering, but the army vehicles appear stagnant in the "polished windscreen" of the escaped soul, gliding in cleansed catharsis.

Much of the second half of *Seeing Things*, "Squarings" and the subdivision "Crossings", compares stillness with speed in a series of epiphanic memories. The first "Crossing" is in the tradition of meeting a live or dead animal on a journey, a mythic image for confronting one's own animality through the animal in nature. In "Badgers" Seamus condemns the murderers, along with the condoner in himself, the "houseboy" as opposed to the "servant boy", steeped now in blood:

to read even by carcasses
the badgers have come back.
One that grew notorious
lay untouched in the roadside.
Last night one had me braking
but more in fear than in honour.

In this case "Travelling south at dawn, going full-out / Through high-up stone-wall country", he meets a fox "stock-still" in the middle of the road. They change places; as he stops and the fox wheels away, his "wildness" tears through him. The flaring blue of his Volkswagen is in a morning equation with the fox's iris; like Hughes's "Thought-Fox" it is a path-crossing which is at once an illumination about the process of writing and an intimation of death, more fully explored in the book's final translation from the *Inferno*.

In subsequent "Crossings" he drives up behind "Canvas-coloured trucks / Full of soldiers", who seem like "phantoms" in the "body-heat-metal". In the central poem he is driving through a quarter-mile of bogland lined with trees in County Antrim. It is a pale reflection of Dante's mid-life dark wood or Hobemma's "Avenue". The trees give a galvanic shock possibly because Ireland is so deforested. There is an intense electrical charge between the "running" of the road and the "running" of the driver, the "quarter-mile" measure become a "millionth" in the geometric progression of raised receptivity. The sexual element in this, where the car has some of the properties of the male principle drowned in female nature, recurs in the description of lovers' cars

watched by adolescent boarders as themselves “eager-backed and silent”: while the parked car the civil rights demonstrators return to is “Charon’s boat”, sinking untrustworthily under them. It appears often that these visitations are peculiar to the Northern Ireland landscape, as when a sudden alteration of light on the Bann beyond Coleraine makes him feel in synch or realize he is not in synch. “The Flight Path” discusses at length the politics of travel, the bird image this time a dove, spanning the themes from emigration to jet-setting. In section four he enjoys a train journey home: “The trip north taking sweet hold like a chain / On every bodily sprocket”.

He falls in with a Republican schoolfellow with the red eyes of Joyce’s peasant, whom he dreamt about previously stopping him in his car and asking him to deliver a bomb himself in a van to a border customs post. Thus he brings fully to light his subconscious compromise between action and poetry, recalling his compassion for the hunger strikers in the “Ugolino” passage at the end of *Field Work*, which does not impress Ciaran Nugent. The snapping policeman at the roadblock makes him feel even less welcome, and the poem turns to crows and a lizard with “the jointed front struts of a moonvehicle” before the dove reappears.

A commentator on two paintings by Cézanne of a male bather points out: “They are in fact about two distinctly different things: animation versus stability, fast versus slow... exposure versus closure... openness versus containment”. In summing up, Seamus’s use of cars or engines has a similar stretching or elastic capacity. Often the car is a place of privacy, self-renewal, growth, psychological recovery from personal or political trauma, where the individual retreats into a protective shell or outer body to rebuild himself. It features in many poems about love or marriage as pilgrimage. In “Honeymoon Flight”, where the sky is a “geyser”, the shift from one life to another is managed on “trust”; earth is lifted into air by fire above water, the same energy that “fires the guns and bombs causes this miraculous suspension, both fearful and furthering. It is akin to the power in “The Forge” which beats out shoes for horses to travel on, replaced now by “traffic flashing in rows”.

At the end of “The Ministry of Fear”, the Austin 16 parked at the gable with its engine left running is a potent register of tautened youthful “coming to life”. In a passage cinematic as a black and white film, the borrowed car offers secrecy, respite, relief from the general social, religious and political surveillance on the intimate, a short-lived freedom mocked by the sten-gun pressed into the eye, which moments ago was being kissed, and by the curt address as “Driver” with its insinuations of wrongdoing.

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tion to live life to the full, and cherishes his wife for the equal valiance of her voice, in tune with his own:

Your songs, when you sing them with your two eyes closed
As you always do, are like a local road
We've known every turn of in the past—
That midge-veiled, high-hedged side-road where you stood
Looking and listening until a car
Would come and go and leave you lonelier
Than you had been to begin with.

The beautiful, rich, young, rhythmically heart-breaking delicacy of touch in this is closed by the lovely last poem, whose last word however is "open". In a just slightly extended sonnet he replays many threads I have been at such pains to unravel. You could dissect its music by counting the letter *r*'s, or the balancing act of the pronouns, the effect of beginning with "And", the repeated sounds in different-meaning words, the dust of *fs* and *ss*. What even now astounds me is the ease with which the word "car" almost unnoticeably is acknowledged alongside all the ancient indispensables, its softness echoing that of "Clare", "Shore", "More", "here nor there", "heart" and "guard", in the same way words like "big" or "things" co exist with "cresting". This car is also part of an explosion, but is not be blown up, but rather blown open, like a rose. It is as if the real beating heart had no protecting flesh but the car-body, which affords only glimpses of eternity and visions of arrested flight which we must maintain our progress and onward movement to appreciate.

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