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Taking Possession of "Extraterritorial" Poetics: Seamus Heaney and Eastern European Poetry in English Translation

Most of Heaney's prose deals with the dichotomy between "life" and "art;" this chapter briefly looks at how the poet nuances and attempts to solve this dichotomy through his reading of Eastern European work.[1] Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert appear prominently in Heaney's prose written during the 1980s. Additionally, the Irish poet wrote dedicatory poems to each of them. Heaney presents his critical work as a form of autobiography, saying that the poets he discusses have become part of his memory.[2] In particular, he sees his relationship with the poets he writes about as a form of immersion, where their work, over time, comes to bear on his poetics.[3] Another metaphor for this form of influence emerges from Heaney's discussion of his translation practices. He speaks of two motives: the "Raid" occurs when the poet looks for something specific in the foreign text and ends up with a "booty" called "*Imitations*." This is a more superficial appropriation of the text. The "Settlement approach" happens when the poet "enter[s] an oeuvre, colonize[s] it, take[s] it over" (changing it) and remains with the text, allowing himself to be changed by it in return.[4] I argue that

with [his] reading."[9] One major aspect of Heaney's Irish poetic inheritance is rooted in early nature poetry, which he characterises as a "surge towards praise," a "sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination:" in other words, it is poetry of celebration.[10] This inherited celebration in poetry is something that Heaney would question deeply before confirming it as right. But along with nature poetry he inherited

Heaney felt a strong sense of exile and aggressively assimilated Sweeney's image into his own. This is also when, driven by historical duress, Heaney's habits of reading poetry (as opposed to translating *Sweeney Astray*) became a bit more aggressive, turning into a series of raids and settlements. In other words, Heaney was scouring poetry for the confirmation he needed himself.

The appeal of Eastern bloc poetry

In 1972 Heaney met Joseph Brodsky at *Poetry International* in London. He had already read the transcript of Brodsky's famous trial in 1964, where the Moscow judge charged him with "parasitism" for writing non-conformist poetry. Heaney had been familiar with the work of Milosz since 1965, Herbert's since 1968, and was about to read Mandelstam's poetry, having already read Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*[16] in 1971. These poets' individual historical experiences, indelibly linked to their contemporary political situation, led to a fusion between their historical and artistic identities, raising questions of aesthetic responsibilities. And on the basis of Heaney's search for adequate images to express his own situation, he had begun his involvement with their work. His needs in relation to East European poetry were not linguistic—his language is well nourished by the local English dialect, Irish, and just as importantly, English poetry, particularly the Romantic tradition; he accessed the East European poems on the level of the pattern of attitudes which came through in translation.

It would be a gross oversimplification to lump these four Eastern European poets together and diagnose the influence their biographies and work had on Seamus Heaney over the years. Their presence in his work isn't apparent until the 1980s when he had finished translating *Sweeney Astray* (1983), completed his poetic and spiritual journey on

Station Island (1984), scrutinised himself through Diogenes' *Haw Lantern* (1987), and written self-reflexively on each of these poets. The second and most important shift in his poetics is marked by the transition between his books of essays *Preoccupations* (1980), where he is more concerned with celebration, and *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), where worries about "responsibilities that come with delighted utterance"[17] and the move towards "crediting poetry" take centre stage. In this context it is important to note that Heaney's relationships with the Eastern bloc poets reflect more of his poetic needs than the actual work of the poets themselves. Thus it is helpful to think of the Eastern Europeans discussed here as "Heaney's Mandelstam," "Heaney's Brodsky," and so on. Consequently, this chapter touches on the points of intersection between Heaney and these poets.

Poetics of exile

Heaney's reading of East European poets created in his work what I call a "poetics of exile." Such a poetics reflects in essence a "stance towards life" or, more precisely, a stance towards writing. Though he always advocates the value of lyric pleasure, Heaney does so only after he performs his "stations" during times of self-consciousness and reflection. The poetics of exile is an aesthetic distance gained by actively escaping what Milosz calls the "captivity" that historical realities exercise on the imagination. Influenced by East European poetry, Heaney distances himself from the local situation: in one poem he speaks about St. Kevin who, in a gesture of altruism, sits still to allow a blackbird to nest in his palm; in a set of poems he speaks "from" parabolic places; in another poem yet he weighs his "responsible *tristia*." And yet, as he makes his arguments

for the necessity to "credit marvels," the Irish poet burdens the lyric utterance with a social responsibility.

The Heaney-Mandelstam relationship is based on the organic process of writing poetry. In this sense it can be placed squarely in the English Romantic tradition, particularly Coleridge's notion of the form which "shapes and develops itself from within."[18] The poem, according to Mandelstam, generates itself out of the poet's inner

But keeping away from politics is an act of self-restraint which may be seen as the element of distance in Heaney's poetics of exile. Joseph Brodsky discovered the poetics of deliberate "self-restraint"[25] in W. H. Auden's poetry. In his essay, "To Please a Shadow" (1983), he describes Auden's influence on his poetics as the treatment which Auden gives to sentiment: "quiet, unemphatic, without any pedal, almost *en passant*."[26] Brodsky's Auden is a poet whose "sentiments inevitably subordinate themselves to the linear and unrecoiling progression of art."[27] The poetics of exile through the Brodsky-Heaney relationship is best seen as a form of "detachment from one's emotions," a concept Heaney describes in his essay "Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from

salvation. As a result of his own self-questioning, Heaney looks to Milosz for the confirmation of his own be

> responsibilities towards the genius of more constricted national traditions and sensibilities.[41]

When Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort founded the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 1965, their ambition was to "amplify those contemporary voices (especially East European) that seemed" to them to "demand a hearing in English."[42] English poets and critics supported Hughes's and Weissbort's enterprise. W. L. Webb, John Bayley, Donald Davie and Neil Ascherson, for example, pointed out (in one way or another) that translations from the continent and especially from Eastern Europe brought a "fresh wind of poetic energy… across the British Isles."[43]

Ted Hughes acknowledged two levels of interest in these translations. There was an urge "to find humanity on the level of the heart" and then there was "the political role of poetry in Russia" and elsewhere, which galvanised the translation business into a political gesture.[44] It is quite clear that the relationships between poetry and politics, history and lyric pleasure, were the new seriousness missing in English poetry[45] and blowing fresh from the sea. Of course, Socialist Realism aesthetics and the governments enforcing them were the misfortune of Eastern European poets alone and that made the poets *and* their work compelling. The issue of translation was brilliantly settled by Hughes as follows: "Whatever the verbal texture of the originals might be, evidently, their [the poems'] real centre of gravity was in something else, within the images and the pattern of ideas and attitudes."[46]

Hughes' ambitions in publishing the ensuing Penguin Modern European Series "weren't beyond the hope of influencing [the British] writers in a productive way," even though that influence might only help to "confirm home-grown virtues."[47]

[30] Czeslaw Milosz, speaking at a panel with Central European and Russian Writers, *The Lisbon Conference On Literature*. See proceedings published in *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture* no. 9, Ann Arbor, MI, 1990), 79.
[31] Heaney, "Station Island,"