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Family, Childhood and Nature

A Reading of Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Gregory Dowling

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Marco Fazzini

Graduand

Matteo De Leo

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Introduction

This dissertation focuses on Seamus Heaney's first major publication, *Death of a Naturalist*. It focuses on the main topics contained in this collection of poetry: childhood, family, nature and love. The dissertation consists of an analysis of these themes and how they are related to each other and to Heaney's life. The first chapter of the dissertation works as an introduction for the whole thesis. It is a summary of the poet's life up to the publishing of the book: from his childhood spent in the family's farm to his university years, from the tragic death of his brother to the meeting with his future wife Marie Devlin. This first section is essential to understand the poems that make up the book. It is crucial to understand Heaney's literary influences, such as Yeats, Wordsworth, Kavanagh and Hughes among others. Moreover, it is fundamental to be aware of some of Heaney's biographical events and situations, since they will be a major inspiration for the book. The second and third chapter are linked together and consist of an ecocritical analysis of *Death of a Naturalist*. The importance and the role of nature in this collection are probably the major themes of the book and that's why I have decided to dedicate the biggest part of the dissertation to them. Every other theme it is connected to nature: it is used as a metaphor for love, childhood and the process of growing up, it is used as a setting for a poem, as a background, and it is, at least in the first half of the book, the main character of several poems. The second chapter begins with a short introduction about ecocriticism and then moves on talking about the idea of an Irish ecocriticism and about the importance of ecocriticism in analysing Heaney's work. The third chapter goes more deeply into the poems, highlighting the relevance of nature in Heaney's verses. To simplify the ecocritical analysis I have decided to talk about nature following the principles of the elemental ecopoetic, thanks to which it was possible to analyse nature by talking about the two main elements present in the book: earth and water. Heaney's nature is created and transformed in such a vivid entity thanks to the poet's incredible observational skills, that are discussed along with the use of the five senses, which are helping Heaney's mnemonic reconstruction of his childhood's landscape. Finally, the chapter ends with an analysis of Heaney's abject pastoralism, the poet's real view of nature,

which in the book is described as dangerous, following its own rules. A vision of nature that is more in line with ecocriticism and distant from the romanticized nature of poets of the past. The following chapter focuses on all the other subject of the book. All of them are strongly autobiographical and are related to nature too. Heaney's childhood and family are a constant theme and, alongside nature, the major subjects of the first half of the book. The setting of Heaney's childhood memory is the Irish countryside ruled by the idea of abject pastoralism. After going through the first couple of poems the reader gets the feeling of reading a coming of age novel put into verses, in which he sees the young poet facing his fears and maturing. Then the dissertation focuses on the topic of loss of innocence and death. Both subjects, strongly autobiographical, are linked to the idea of abject pastoralism, and highlights the idea of the book as a collection of coming of age poems. The chapter ends with an analysis of the love poems dedicated to Heaney's relationship with his lifelong partner Marie Devlin, with a focus on the poet's view on love. The theme of love is completely autobiographical too. The poem follows a real timeline and we, as readers, can see the relationship grow and mature. Love is also connected to nature, which is used as a metaphor for the couple's feelings. Finally, the last chapter targets Heaney's view on poetry that comes out of his verses. The title "Heaney's Helicon" is a reference to the closing poem of the book, "Personal Helicon", which contains an important poetical statement. This final part focuses on Heaney's poetical view and considerations about the role of the poet that are the main subject of poems like the already mentioned "Personal Helicon", or "The Diviner", but that are a constant presence in the whole book. Heaney's poetical statement will start with the opening poem "Digging", in which he states that he will dig with his pen, and ends with "Personal Helicon", in which he states: "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing".

Chapter 1

Early life and Influences

1.1. Childhood, Studies and Work up to *Death of a Naturalist*

Seamus Justin Heaney was born on 13 April 1939 at the family farm near Castledawson, County Derry, Northern Ireland. He was the eldest of nine children. His father, Patrick, was a farmer and also a famous cattle dealer in the area, who participated in several local fairs and markets. He was the eighth of ten children. Both his parents died when he was very young, and he grew up with his uncles, who were responsible for his passion in cattle dealing. His mother, Margaret, was a member of the McCann family of Castledawson. This family was known for working in the local Clark's linen factory, having worked there for several generations. She was raised catholic and in the Irish Nationalist tradition. Heaney himself commented several times on this in his family and on how this influenced his upbringing and his political, social and cultural views. His family consisted, in fact, of the Ireland of the cattle-herding Gaelic past on his father's side, and of modern Ulster of the Industrial Revolution on his mother's side. Even though politics and religion were never a part of daily conversations in his house, he still admits that they were part of a tension of some sort there. Heaney started his education at Anahorish Primary School, close to his family house. At the age of twelve he won a scholarship to St. Columbus College, a Roman Catholic Grammar boarding school in Derry. He excelled in English, Irish and Latin. After starting his studies there, his family moved to Bellaghy. He then spent a summer studying Irish in a Gaeltacht, which is a region of Ireland where Irish is recognized as being the first vernacular spoken language, in Donegal. When he was 14, while he was studying in Derry, one of his brothers, Christopher, died in a road accident, giving him his first early experience of death.

In 1957 he moved to Belfast to study English Language and Literature at Queen's University College. During his third year he began to write. His first poems

appeared in the Queen's literary magazines *Q* and *Gorgon*. When writing in these magazines he used the pen-name Incertus, representing the insecure stage of his writing career. He later wrote a poem by the same name, "Incertus", in which he said:

"I went disguised in it, pronouncing it with a soft
Church- latin c, tagging it under my efforts like a damp fuse."

Heaney stated that what made him start writing poetry was the finding of a copy of *Lupercal* by English poet Ted Hughes. He graduated in 1961. He started teacher training at St. Joseph's Teacher Training college in Belfast and after one year he went on a placement to St. Thomas Secondary Intermediate School. The school headmaster, Michael McLaverty, introduced Heaney to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh and became a mentor and a fatherly figure for him. While working at St. Thomas School Heaney had a great growing experience as a writer and a scholar. He had access to the world of English, Irish and American literature and became passionate about authors who created poetry out of their local and native backgrounds, such as Ted Hughes, Robert Frost and Patrick Kavanagh. At this point he started to get his poems more widely published. In 1963 he became a lecturer at St. Joseph's Training college. It was at this time that Philip Hobsbaum, an English lecturer at Queen's university, created the Belfast Group of local young poets. Hobsbaum read about Heaney in several articles and invited him to the club, thanks to which Heaney came into contact with other Belfast poets like Derek Mahon and Michael Longley.

In August 1965 he married with Marie Devlin, a teacher and a writer too. In November of the same year, his first book *Eleven Poems* was published, in occasion of the Queen's University Festival. In spring 1966 his first full volume, entitled *Death of a Naturalist*, was published by Faber and Faber.

1.2. Influences: Life Itself and W.B. Yeats

Seamus Heaney's work was heavily influenced by his personal life and experiences. *Death of a Naturalist* is no exception. The collection of poems seems perfectly fitting as the author's first major work since it's deeply rooted in his childhood, his family and his upbringing. Heaney's poetic sensibility seemed to emerge from his rural ancestry and community with a language that is intensely sensuous, evocative and musical, combined with rich and vivid imagery. But Heaney did not recognize the importance of his upbringing immediately. The pen-name that he chose when writing at Queen's university is symptomatic of this. The pseudonym *Incertus* is Latin and could have been intended by Heaney in two different ways: *incertus* is undefined, uncertain, meaning the poet was not sure about the direction of his poetry, what style to use, what topics to be concerned with; but *incertus* could also have been intended as hesitant, unsure, as if Heaney was not sure whether writing, and specifically poetry, was the right direction to take in his career. Heaney most likely intended it both ways, as up to this point he was insecure and shy about his work. Heaney once described himself in *The New York Times Book Review* as someone who "emerged from a hidden, a buried life and entered the realm of education" (Deane, "A Talk with Seamus Heaney"). Although he cited studying English at Queen's University of Belfast as a crucial experience, everything really changed while teaching at St. Thomas Secondary Intermediate School, when he came into contact with other poets and authors such as Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas, Norman MacCaig, John Montague and Patrick Kavanagh. "From them I learned that my local County Derry childhood experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to "the modern world", was to be trusted. They taught me that trust and helped me to articulate it" (Ibidem). After meeting all these poets, also thanks to the Belfast Group of local young poets, he shook off the insecurities and doubts and earned a new awareness about his personal experience that he was lacking until that moment. Patrick Kavanagh was the most important influence among them. His bare energy and bare speech, accompanied by the ability to turn an Ulster vernacular into verse are clearly visible in Heaney's first works. What is most relevant in analysing *Death of a Naturalist* is Kavanagh's poetry on rural life which goes back

towards the “pre-modern” worlds of William Wordsworth and John Clare. And then, of course, as every other Irish writer did and will probably continue to do, Heaney could not escape the confrontation with, the inspiration and the influence of William Butler Yeats. Even though Yeats’s poetry is not such an evident influence in *Death of a Naturalist*, an analysis of the relationship that Heaney had with what he himself called “All Ireland’s Bard” is relevant and can offer several ideas on the evolution of Heaney’s literary and political ideas. Yeats and Heaney shared a condition that is probably common to most Irish writers: being torn, divided inside because of their background and their country’s history. While in Seamus Heaney this struggle can seem easy to recognize (because of his parents’ different backgrounds), in Yeats this struggle seems more emphasised and, above all, more openly discussed in his works. Heaney wrote several essays about Yeats, but it is in one article for *The Atlantic* that he best described the poet inner divisions. Heaney starts the article, which is a review of *W.B. Yeats: A Life* by Robert Fitzroy Foster, by highlighting the contradiction between Yeats’s background and his evolution as a writer : “ Tied by birth to unionism, memorialist of the executed Nationalist rebels of 1916, W.B. Yeats mirrored Ireland’s divisions in his self-divisions – yet saw the island as a single cultural entity sprung from common roots in common myths” (Heaney, “All Ireland’s Bard). Yeats was brought up as a unionist, and in his family were ancestors who fought for William of Orange at the Battle of Boyne during the 17th century and a scholar who was a close friend of Robert Emmet, a revolutionary of the 19th century. Despite his family background, Yeats managed to commemorate and create an inclusive sense of Ireland, as Heaney later explained:

As a Yeats, he belonged to the respectable stratum of Protestant Irish society that owed its position and power to William of Orange's victory and its consequences -- the establishment of an Anglo-Irish ascendancy and the institution of penal laws against the Catholic population. So as a Yeats he might have been expected to support the cause of the union of Ireland with the other British nations under the English crown. But as an Irish poet who had written a manifesto aligning himself with Irish Nationalist precursors such as Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan, as the author of the early, inflammatory "rebel" play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, as the chief inventor

of the Celtic Twilight and a founding member of the Abbey Theatre, which claimed to be the country's national theatre, Yeats had long been creating a vision of Ireland as an independent cultural entity, a state of mind as much as a nation-state, one founded on indigenous myths and attitudes and beliefs that pre-dated not only William of Orange but even Saint Patrick himself.

(Ibidem)

Based on his family background, Yeats was supposed to have a loyalist ideology, but he did not have moderate or neutral views on politics; indeed, he actually ended up on the complete opposite side of the ideology. He greatly contributed to the creation and reinforcement of an idea of Irishness that has always been at the centre of political discussions and of everyday life in the island. The concept of Irishness was perfectly explained by Conor O' Brien, who stated: "Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language; it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation and usually of being mauled by it. On that definition Swift is more Irish than Goldsmith or Sheridan, although by the usual tests they are Irish, and he is pure English" (O'Brien, "Irishness"). Therefore, Yeats' position is not only defensible, but it is strengthened and totally understandable. For Heaney the idea of Irishness is more related to the Troubles, to the resistance against colonialism and a revival of the past, the myths and history. He realized how Irishness was expressed and understood through memory. Finding a sense of the term Irishness meant "for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past" (*Preoccupations*, 60). For him, finding Irishness was an excavation for both identity and history. Heaney was also concerned with an actual objectivity of the meaning of being Irish and acknowledged the existence of a "problem" of an Irish subjectivity. The small differences between the two poets' ideology is mostly due to the different historical period in which they lived. The political circumstances within which their art was created not only influenced their concepts of Irishness but also contributed to different ideas about poetry and the role of the poet. Yeats experienced the years of the Anglo-Irish war while Heaney lived through all the thirty years of the Troubles. The fact that they were living in different times but still experienced similar event

comes up as a sad realization of the existence of a sort of a cycle of violence linked to political engagement in Northern Ireland. The complex history of Ireland is involved in any attempt to enunciate a sense of Irishness. *Death of a Naturalist* was published two years before the Troubles started but the conflict revealed parts of Heaney's poetry that were already present, to a lesser extent, in his first collection of poems. Yeats had an idea of literature as something autonomous and ordered, something that is superior compared to the political chaos and disorder in which the political system is living. Nevertheless, he was poetical, artistically involved in politics and in the violence that was growing out of it. Heaney struggled with this. For him poetry was inclusive, and therefore could not be separated from any aspect of life, politics included. From this perspective on the role of poetry the two writers modelled the figure of the poet. Yeats managed to create a heroic role for the poet, and for the human being, who was able to overcome the routine of the world and its chaotic events. The role of the poet was to highlight and explain all the activities of which we, as mankind, are capable, and how to give them a sense of harmony and unity. This is probably the greatest influence that Heaney took from Yeats, the recognition of art, and poetry, as a true and independent entity that elevates itself from reality while still influencing it. Heaney stated that he felt that what he was making was distant and independent from real life, but then he came to the realization that through poetry he was making a difference in real life. Real life is influenced by and is prone to the deconstructive force of language. A complex definition of Irishness was only achievable through an inclusive and transformative language. Such a definition is complicated because of the complex history that is imbricated in any attempt to enunciate a sense of Irishness. With their use of language, both poets are constantly trying to find a balance: between the actual and the possible and between reality and the aesthetic apperception of that reality. For Yeats, language is a way of controlling reality and he tries to use it as a tool for transforming the surge of nationalistic feelings. For Heaney, language is a tool used to create a sense of difference and distance between the actuality of violence and the potentiality of writing. This would be more evident later on, when his work would focus on the Troubles as in *North*. What already stands out in *Death of a Naturalist* (but will be even more present in later, Trouble-related works) is

Heaney's aesthetic epistemology, which lies in the effort to make sense of pain and suffering, through some form of aesthetic experience, which is language. Through language Heaney managed to reach one of his highest artistic purposes: to encourage a complexity of response. There is a constant attempt to achieve a dialogue between the immanent and the transcendent. Both authors use the metaphor of a particular type of place as a symbol for this discourse. Heaney clarified his view about this discourse in *The Place of Writing*, where he made two points: "that the poetic imagination in its strongest manifestation imposes its vision upon a place rather than accepts a vision from it, and that this visionary imposition is never exempt from the imagination's antithetical ability to subvert its own creation". It is a notion of place that is under complete control of the poet and is ruled by the poet, who can extrapolate from it the meaning that best suits his purpose. It is a concept of place that clashes with the political realities of notions of place as divisive and potentially violent. This notion of place helps to create a sense of an imagined Ireland that is an important common trait of the two poets. The notion of place is fundamental to understand the notion of nature that is one of the main and surely the most clearly present theme in *Death of a Naturalist*. And the influence of Yeats on this topic is made clear in Heaney in article about the poet's tower. The tower is analysed as having two different notions of place: the real, physical one, and the poetical, literary one. The tower's physical place was a stone castle, the Thoor Ballyle Castle, in County Galway, built as a fortified tower house in the 15th century. It was bought, restored and used as a summer house by Yeats. Because of that it is today known as Yeats's Tower. Despite the idea of using it as a summer and holiday house Yeats ended up writing a lot during his stays in the house. The tower began "a dream of phonetic masonry, squared and plumbed and dominant" (Heaney, "A New and Surprising Yeats"). The tower underwent a transition and from a physical place shifted into a poetic and artistic space. This happened because Yeats transformed it into his own place of writing and by doing that he shifted the tower's locus into a psychological place. The tower also assumed the symbolic meaning of art as a fortress that can withstand a siege, meaning all the dangers that are thrown towards it and can put it in jeopardy, these dangers being either external forces or internal struggles of the artist. Despite the agreements

between Heaney and Yeats on the notion of place, the idea of nature that they have is completely different. For Yeats nature has a mental and idealistic attribute. Therefore, rural life is seen as poetic and pure, a form of existence that is ideal and brings nostalgic feelings to the poet. For Heaney rural life was a major part of his childhood. The natural world is seen as beautiful and poetic, bounteous but at the same time violent, hard and cruel. Rural life meant physical engagement and environmental concerns, concerns that are also related to the importance of local place for one's sense of identity. Such concerns are in some ways similar and linked to the contemporary debates on environmental responsibility at global levels.

The main influences on *Death of a Naturalist* are mostly autobiographical and linked to Heaney's studies, work, and every other event that happened during his childhood and young adulthood. Yeats' influences on Heaney are clear throughout his whole career. Even though most of these influences would bloom later, it is still clear how most of the seeds were already planted during the writing of *Death of a Naturalist*.

Chapter 2

Heaney's Ecopoetic

2.1. Ecocriticism

Analysing Seamus Heaney's first poetry volume means analysing the first part of his life that led to the publication of the book. Most of the sources for the poems are linked, or rather are a direct reference to Heaney's childhood. It's like reading a poetic autobiography or a coming-of-age story put into verses. Heaney spent most of his childhood in Mossbawn, a farm that belonged to his family. He spent his days in the typical Irish countryside, in what seems to be an idyllic landscape. Nature plays a huge role in *Death of a Naturalist* since it was such a big part of his childhood life. Moreover, his father worked as a farmer, which means that he had to spend a lot of time in close contact with Nature. It feels like it is almost necessary to subject the book to an ecocritical reading in order to fully understand it. Ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. The term is relatively new, being coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in the article "Literature and Ecology" in which he called for the creation of "an ecological poetics". Since the subject is so recent, it is constantly changing and developing, making it complicated to give a complete and thorough definition. In the beginning ecocriticism was used to describe the study of literary texts that were expounding and presenting environmental issues, such as pollution. Later, the term ecocriticism was also used to describe the study of literary texts in which nature has a dominant role. The focus was on the genre of nature writing. It was a way to challenge the anthropocentrism that seemed to be the fulcrum of modern literature. Today, the term ecocriticism involves both definitions. But since the constant growth and escalation of environmental issues and problems like global warming, climate change, pollution and overpopulation, ecocriticism has leaned more and more towards the definition of a study of environmental issues. The modernity of the topic makes it not only complicated to define but it also creates uncertainties and doubt among scholars, who are still not convinced and do not always agree on the

definition, the purpose, the methodology and the extent of ecocriticism. We could define ecocriticism today as the interdisciplinary study involving literature and the environment, with awareness of the issues related to nature and with the aim of finding a solution to these problems. In Britain the term “Green Studies” is more popular while in the USA the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), an association that every two years hosts a meeting for scholars who deal with environmental issues in literature, is vital for the developing of the subject, since it contributes to the spread of ideas, innovations and discussion about ecocritical studies. The difficulties in finding a correct definition of ecocriticism make it almost necessary to contextualise both the environment and the author when talking about the relationship between nature and a literary work. In the case of *Death of a Naturalist* we must talk about Irish ecocriticism and Seamus Heaney’s early views on nature and environmental issue.

2.2. Irish Ecocriticism and Heaney’s Nature

The Irish landscape and the way Heaney portrays nature in his work are following the same principles and deeply connected to each other. It seems as if Heaney was so deeply immersed in nature during his childhood years that he internalized it in his subconscious and it shows in his view of nature and its relationship with the human being. Apparently, Ireland seems to be one of the perfect places to use as a setting for a poem or a novel where nature is of great importance: no huge metropolitan cities, immense green grass fields, spectacular coastlines, sheep and cows grazing freely. Even from a cultural and sociological point of view the Ireland-nature pairing seems to be perfectly fitting since Irish people have lived for centuries on farming and pastoralism. But these strong human activities in the Irish landscape can make it difficult and can create obstacles when we talk about Irish ecocriticism.

In brief, anyone who looks at, studies, or depicts the natural world in Ireland must do so perforce through, or in spite of, thousands of years of human presence and therefore culture. The impact of humanity on Irish nature is of

such longevity and density that to refer to the Irish “countryside” is to imply human presence as North American reference to “the wilderness” or Australian reference to “the outback” does not...It is much harder in Ireland than in the United States to avoid, diminish, or sequester culture in one’s engagement with Nature, and in Ireland we have had to be increasingly modest in choosing what we term “natural” (or endemic or native) rather than cultural.

(Foster, John Wilson. “Challenges to an Irish Eco-Criticism”. *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, July 2013)

The Irish countryside makes it difficult to talk about a nature without mentioning the work of man and makes it almost impossible to talk about it with mentioning the cultural and social history of the country. The anthropic presence is so strong that it’s almost impossible to avoid the anthropocentric tendency typical of Romantic literature when talking about nature. This Romantic tendency can be easily found in several writings set in Ireland and can cause even more complications for an ecocritical reading. Such a tendency relies on an anthropocentric view of nature, which is not considered as an autonomous entity but exists only in function of the human being: either to help him grow food for himself or cattle or just to use, in a more Romantic way, as an escape from the chaos and anxiety of modern city life. For a complete understanding of nature and to study anything related to it is important to accept and comprehend that humanity is not above nature but just a part of it.

Seamus Heaney is probably the perfect author if we want to engage in an ecocritical reading of the work of an Irish writer. In Heaney’s work nature is never a mere background, a setting. It has an existence and importance of its own that is not subdued to human presence. Heaney does not romanticise nature and doesn’t think of it as an entity separated from humanity. His personal life experiences have pushed him towards a craving for a close relationship between human beings and nature, a close relationship that is perfectly fitting for Ireland’s rich farming history. In Heaney’s works nature is also not romanticised in the sense that it is not viewed as something unconditionally beautiful and good. On the contrary, nature is an entity in which good and evil, optimism and pessimism coexist in a chaotic

equilibrium. This is to be considered not as a pessimistic view of humanity but rather as a confirmation of nature as a living entity that exists on its own and has an intrinsic value. Heaney does a perfect job in describing nature's biodiversity. For him, nature is not just an idyllic space where the weather is always good, the landscape is perfect and uncontaminated, and animals are a friendly presence. Nature can be hostile to human beings, animals can be aggressive and violent, and the weather can be awful. His vivid descriptions of bogs, storms, upset animals are a perfect example. He fits perfectly the ecocritical assertion that says that "the romantic joy in the contemplation of nature must be combined with ecologically informed practices" (Gosh, 2203). Heaney's idea of the relationship between nature and man doesn't stop at the concept of man as a single being. The environment's relationship with man means that there is also a relationship between nature and the culture, history and society of a place. In all the works that followed *Death of a Naturalist* this may pose a difficulty since Heaney lived through (and was not silent about) the Troubles. For him the Irish landscape was deeply connected with a concept of country that some may see as a political statement. But then, it is almost impossible for any kind of artistic Irish work to escape some political commentary, especially a commentary of the political situation created in Northern Ireland in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. "Nature=nativeness=nation is a rich equation of sorts that was operative in the nineteenth century, and is a substratum of thought, feeling and imagery in Heaney today" (Foster, 10). It would be too far-fetched too politicise Heaney's work in such a way (especially *Death of a Naturalist*) but to some extent it would not be that far-fetched, especially when talking about publications such as *North*.

In conclusion, Heaney's nature is perfectly fit to be analysed through an ecocritical reading not only for the way nature is presented and described in his work but also because of the metaphors, similes and parallels drawn with human life and experiences that the poet underwent in his life.

Chapter 3

An Ecocritical reading of *Death of a Naturalist*

Reading *Death of a Naturalist* with an ecocritical eye, with its focus on farming life, the Irish landscape and animals could pose a difficulty. Nature is ever-present in the whole book and it is almost necessary to divide the subject in sections, to make it more linear, clearer and easier to analyse. I will proceed to discuss it by splitting it into three major topics: two of the four natural elements (earth and water), the five senses, and the concept of abject pastoralism. All these topics contribute together to the creation of the Irish landscape and are connected to each other. The mixture of earth and water perfectly represents the bedrock of the Irish environment. The five senses are used by Heaney to create the environment, to recall it, and to help the reader to immerse himself in such environment. The abject pastoralism is the perfect definition for Heaney's nature, which creates a chaotic equilibrium in which both good and evil prosper and work together. Moreover, all these subjects are connected to the other topics of the book, like childhood, growing up, family and poetry. The strong connection is created by Heaney through a masterful usage of metaphors and similes, and the skilful ability to paint a vivid scenery and tell a story with an incredible choice of words.

3.1. Earth and Water

“To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or a train, possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our

wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated.” (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 19)

Heaney’s poetry is linked to nature and to a strong relationship with the four elements. It’s what is called Heaney’s “Elemental Ecopoetics”. Heaney creates a network, a strong connection and a system of relationships that unite all the four elements, earth, water, air and fire, in his poems. He uses the element to create, give shape to the nature that he’s creating into his verses. But he also uses them in a symbolic way and as a central idea, a theme that fills one his books, or even just a single poem. In Heaney’s first two volumes (*Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into Dark*) the two major elements are earth and water while from *Wintering out* (1972) on it started a shift, a poetic change that allowed air and fire to take the role of major elements, putting earth and water in the background. A peculiarity of the presence of earth and water in his work is that the two elements more often than not are mixed with each other. In Heaney’s first collection of poems there’s “a remarkably large vocabulary for earth, especially earth in a state of deliquescence, earth mixed with water” (Deane, “Powers of Earth and Visions of Air”, 275). This union is, of course, symbolic, but it also creates a typical natural setting of Ireland: the bog. The same environment that will find best expression in Heaney’s bog poems, included in *North* (1975).

Heaney’s first volume begins with a poem that is the perfect example for carrying on an analysis in this direction: “Digging”. The poem is a declaration of intent, a mission statement, expressed through a rich and vivid imagery of earth and earth related activity, that is farming. The title is already part of the “digging=writing” metaphor, that summarizes the whole poem. It is set during the 40s at Heaney’s home at “The Wood”, outside of Bellaghy. A young Heaney is sitting inside with a pen in his hand, probably doing his homework. He looks out of the window and sees his dad working tirelessly on the potato field. The potato drills are not chosen at random. Potatoes symbolically represent Ireland; they are a memory of the famine, part of the culture and of the social history of the country. The Irish soil is feminized, representing Mother Earth and Heaney’s father’s work, is what will allow the fruits of that relationship to be gathered. The rapport is described through his father’s action and is enhanced by the words referring to farming tools. His

father is digging into the field, “the spade sinks into gravelly ground”. His work is described intensely: he “bends low”, he is “stooping in rhythm”, “he rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep”. He was skilled with a spade and so was his father before him, who “cut more turf in a day/ Than any other man on Toner’s bog.” The work with the soil is a family activity, probably carried out for many generations. It is also a source of pride. Heaney recalls when he once saw his grandfather working as his father was doing, “nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods, / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging.” In the first stanza we find the first references to the element of water mixed with soil: the mould of the potatoes and the marshland where his grandfather was working. In the penultimate stanza he realises that he will never be like them, he will not have a close relationship with earth as his father and grandfather had. But in the last stanza he declares that his family relationship with earth will not be interrupted by himself. He will continue, metaphorically, to work with the land with his pen, he will “dig with it”. The accurate description of farming work of the poem represents Heaney’s abilities to create a setting in which readers can immerse and recognize themselves. It also emphasizes some cultural and social aspects of Ireland. Furthermore, it’s Heaney’s attempt in “finding a coherence between the subjective inner emotions and the objective outer world” (Ghosh, 2206).

He describes his outer world perfectly also in the next poem “Death of a Naturalist”, which gives the title to the whole collection. Another childhood memory, this time set in an environment where water has a dominant role: a pond. From the description of the pond emerges Heaney’s passion and enthusiasm for nature and an awareness and knowledge of biological matters. The poem is divided into two parts in which the mood is completely different. The poem is set during the celebration of an annual pond event, a part of the flax process. The pond is not a pleasant, idyllic place. It is full of swarming and buzzing insects: dragonflies, bluebottles, butterflies. The flax has rotted into the pond because of the sun. In the pond the young Heaney is attracted by frogspawn, which he used to collect and put into a jar every spring. The stanza ends with a simplistic explanation of the biology of the frogs and their reproduction with some myths about them derived from popular culture: “You could tell the weather by frogs too / For they were yellow in

the sun and brown / In rain”. This last sentence highlights how anthropocentrism works. The human being tries to make sense out of a feature of an animal in order to make it useful for himself. The frog also has an interesting role in the discourse of the elements. Being amphibious it embodies the mixture of earth and water typical of nature in Heaney’s poetry. An animal that lives both in water and on land and cannot survive if one of the two elements is absent. The second stanza contains a drastic change of mood and atmosphere that we will analyse later.

In the next poem “The Barn”, the setting is a close, “human” space, but the biology is still present with the rat imagery and the relationship to the land is represented by the presence of farming tools like the scythe, the spade and the pitch-fork.

The imagery of the rats will come back in the next poem “An Advancement of Learning”. The title is taken from a book published by Francis Bacon in 1605: *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human*. The water element has an important role in this poem. A river, described magnificently by Heaney, that “nosed past, / Pliable, oil-skinned, wearing // A transfer of gables and sky”, is acting both as a setting and as an obstacle that will involuntarily be the cause of the young poet’s misadventure.

In “Blackberry-Picking” the rat imagery returns. The poem is dedicated to Philip Hobsbaum, a lecturer at Queen’s University who invited him to join the Belfast Group of young poets that he had created. The protagonist of this poem is a fruit, a part of the man-earth relationship. But the blackberry is like a present offered by Mother Earth to humanity (and other animals). There is no farming work required, the only effort to make is to go out for a walk in the woods and pick them. Again, the biological aspects are evoked beautifully by Heaney when opening the poem by explaining the process of ripening of the fruit. The picking activity offers the possibility to describe the environment and, once again, the farm is the main part of the background, with its “Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills”. The water element appears timidly and quickly, as if at the corner of the eye, when the wet grass in which Heaney walks whitens his shoes.

The subsequent poem “Churning Day”, narrates the production of butter witnessed by a young Heaney. The hard work with earth is here substituted with work with an

animal, a work that is nevertheless physical and tiresome and is described with a knowledge of the technicalities of the process.

The next poem, “At a Potato Digging” is probably the book’s apex of the relationship between man and the earth element. The poem actually consists of four smaller poems. It is a reflection on the Irish condition via a reference to the Irish potato famines that took place between 1845 and 1848. The first poem describes the Irish dependency on the potato crop. The work required to cultivate potatoes is described as mechanical, brutal, intense and back-breaking. The industriousness of Irish farmers is compared to the that of bees. An image, which will come back later, compares people to birds. Farmers are “Like crows attacking crow-black fields”. The relationship between man and earth assumes religious connotations. Such connotations are not the ones typical of Irish Catholicism but are a reference to an old, lost pagan religion. Mother Earth is seen as a goddess because of its importance for the whole country’s survival. The farmers are bowing towards the soil in a way that symbolizes kneeling for a prayer. They assume postures of reverence towards Mother Earth. In the second poem famine hits. The ground that in the previous poem was the source of life now turns into a tomb. Irish people are dying, and they are buried in mass graves. The effects of the famine on the potato crop are explained in the third poem. “The new potato, sound as stone, / Putrefied when it had lain / Three days in the long clay pit.” The potato famine is a metaphor of the condition and history of Ireland as whole, including political events. It creates a sense of worthlessness that defeats any kind of aspiration. The bird imagery returns. Hunger takes the form of a predatory bird. In the last poem there’s a lightening of mood with a return to modern times. Religious themes return here, with host and wine of Holy Communion being replaced by a non-Christian equivalent: brown bread and tea. Symbols of victory over the sufferings of the past.

The next three poems are all about animals. They also have in common the style, a close observation of the events beautifully translated into verses. The first poem of the three is “Turkeys Observed”. It is an observation of turkeys being slaughtered for Christmas. It is a sad event with some religious connotations (“blood and flesh are not ignored”). What stands out from this poem, from an ecocritical point of view, is that Heaney makes an “intentional mistake”. He insists on

anthropomorphizing the turkeys. It is a choice that Heaney takes consciously but one that clashes with the idea of nature that he had expressed so far through his poetry. A nature that exists on its own, regardless of human presence and activity.

The next poem, “Cow in Calf”, is the first and only sonnet of the collection. The poem consists of an observation of the ever-recurring loop that characterizes a cow’s existence. The challenging description of a cow’s pregnancy is made easy by the combination of similes and metaphors. The biological accuracy is left behind in favour of poetic devices.

The third one is entitled “The Trout”. It is another close observation put masterfully into words in which the strength and movement of a fish are highlighted and used as a metaphor for military matters. Water is back as the main element, with the setting being probably a river or a stream close to Heaney’s childhood home.

The same element is the main subject of the poem that comes immediately after. “Waterfall” is the transposition of the turbulence and disorder of a waterfall into verses. The strength and movement of this natural element are linked to the that of the trout from the previous poem. The poet tries to freeze the impetus of the element by putting it into a poetic frame. What comes up as a result is a contradictory momentum that contrast with the confusion of the happening and with the sensorial stimulations that the observer is receiving. Water is not the calm, steady pond or the impure, contaminated by the land, bog. It evolved, its momentum intensified and grew first into a river and then developed into a tumultuous body of water like a waterfall.

Water and earth’s relationship with it return in the poem “Lovers on Aran”. But in this case, it’s not a physical, biological relationship that gives birth to a different environment like a bog, or a mixed element like mud. It is a metaphor for the relationship between Heaney and his wife, Marie Devlin. It represents the couple’s togetherness and their quest for mutual fulfilment. The couple are on holiday on the west coast of Ireland. The movement of the waves, water crashing into land, is a metaphor for the pursuing of physical possession. The whole poem is filled with the ideas of seduction and sensual communion of man and woman. The last stanza is probably one of the highest points in Heaney’s poetry from a romantic point of

view: “Did sea define the land or land the sea? / Each drew new meaning from the waves’ collision. / Sea broke on land to full identity”. It is not only a search for physical love but also of something higher, a quest for one own’s identity and of the identity as a couple. The elements are used, once again, with incredible craftsmanship by Heaney; they “are invoked to celebrate the unity and exhilaration of love and marriage...Heaney realises his new secular state of Grace picturing the eternal embrace of land and sea...Metaphors of light mingle with sexual images in a joyous swirl and swell of sound and rhythm” (Parker,72). He linked the land with the masculine while he “associated water with the feminine, the Gaelic, the Catholic, the creative elements of his nature” (Parker,73).

The power and chaotic element of nature (and of the water element) returns in “Storm on the Island” and in “Synge on Aran”. In these two poems another element contributes to the strength of water: air. Strong winds are blowing and causing the ocean, and its waves, to crash against the land. In the first poem the metaphor is still focusing on the relationship between Heaney and Marie. The violence of the storm symbolizes the challenges and difficulties that they will go through while the island represents the stoic perseverance and the solidity that will help the couple’s survival. “Synge on Aran” is a reference to the poet Edmund John Millington Synge (1871-1909), who suffered from Hodgkin’s disease and who spent some time in exile on one of the Aran islands in 1900, in a vain attempt to recover from the illness. Wind, or air, is the main element of this poem. Its strength and erosive force is compared to the literary voice of Synge. On the Aran islands nature is powerful. It’s a nature that is not only affecting the landscape but also the islanders, who “too / Are for sculpting”. The human being is not above the environment, he is not on the same level of the environment, but he becomes another product of the environment.

The setting changes dramatically in the next poem, the last one with clear environmental connotations. We found ourselves in the calm after the storm. The landscape changes from a weather-beaten island off the western Irish coast to a mild, calm southern European setting. The poem is entitled “Saint Francis and the Birds” and it is a reference to an episode that happened to Saint Francis, in which he apparently stopped and started to talk with birds. Saint Francis is the Patron Saint

of all animals and represents the ideal harmony that should exist between man and nature. The mystical gift of communication that Saint Francis had is a metaphor, and a wish, for a man who might have a better understanding of nature and the environment that surrounds him, and consequently understand and treat himself better.

3.2. Heaney's Observation: The Five Senses

One of Heaney's greatest abilities as a poet that emerges from *Death of a Naturalist* is the skill of creating a real, vivid atmosphere that helps the reader enter his poems and become completely immersed in them. He does that by recreating his memories with a special attention to the details in the environment, especially in the smallest things. All five senses are necessary for Heaney to present to us these descriptions. In "Digging" we are invited and introduced into the poem, and into the book, by looking out of a window. Next to sight there appears, soon after, the sense of hearing as well, when Heaney hears "the squelch and slap of soggy peat", and the sense of smell, with the evocation of the potato mould. Through these three senses Heaney transmits into verse the landscape of his childhood. He also invites the reader to use his sense to find a musicality in the poem and to get more involved in it. He does that by using effective stylistic devices like onomatopoeia and alliteration. The same things can be said about the poem "Death of a Naturalist", in which in the first part the light mood of the pond is described visually and sonically, with a sense of harmony despite the frantic activity of the insect. In the second part of the poem the change of mood is emphasized especially by the sense of hearing, with which we hear the croaking, slapping, plopping and farting of the agitated frogs that are overwhelming the young Heaney.

In "The Barn" the sense of sight is narrowed down, focusing on an indoor space. What causes fear is also the decrease or the disappearance of one of the senses. Darkness and the difficulties of seeing everywhere in the barn are frightening. The unknown instils fear into the heart of the child.

“Advancement of Learning” seems to confirm a sensorial pattern of the book. Fear is often triggered by the sense of hearing. While Heaney is walking by the river and looking at the water he suddenly hears a squeaking and is startled. A passage of the poem is probably one of the peaks of Heaney’s ability to turn his observation skills into language:

“He clockworked aimlessly a while,
Stopped, back bunched and glistening,
Ears plastered down on his knobbed skull,
Insidiously listening.

The tapered tail that followed him,
The raindrop eye, the old snout:
One by one I took all in.”

Heaney uses synaesthesia, in this case the association of vision and sound, to create a repulsive effect and to explain the feeling of nausea, anxiety and disgust experienced by himself as a child. In “Blackberry Picking” the vision is exquisitely used to describe the trek through the woods and to depict the fruit and its purple, red, green colour.

In “Churning Day” and in “The Early Purges” Heaney is observing two opposite events: life and death. In both he’s just looking at them without acting. It feels like he is watching the event described through a screen. This absence of action seems to be more relevant in the second poem, because the child has a conscience and is expressing sympathies for the kittens but even though he is never an active contributor to the violence he also never acts to stop it.

In “Ancestral Photograph” sight is the main and only sense used to put the observation into words. The subject of the poem is an old family photo that is about to be removed because it’s consumed and beginning to fade. The picture depicts

Heaney's father's uncle. Once again, the poet helps us imagine vividly the photograph he's looking at, thanks to a meticulous description of the uncle.

In "Mid-Term Break" an unpleasant event is again enhanced more by the sense of hearing than anything else. But this time the emotion provoked by the observation is not fear, but sorrow. The poem tells us about Heaney's younger brother's death. He died when the poet was 14 years old, in 1953, as a result of a car accident. The sense of vision is fundamental to create the heart-breaking impact of a child laid in his coffin. But, as said, it's the sense of hearing that contributes to create the atmosphere. An atmosphere of sorrow, with the silence and solemnity typical of an Irish Catholic funeral. The only "loud" noise that Heaney recalls hearing was his youngest brother's laughter. Then, he manages to let us understand the silence that dominated in the house. People were whispering quietly so as not to make any noise and be respectful. His mother was sighing without shedding a single tear.

The four poems of "At a Potato Digging" are similar in the observation technique, achieved through the sense of vision. The images of the farmers at work in the first poem are very similar to the image of his father digging his own land. The unpleasantness of the second and third poem is not evoked by the sense of hearing this time but by visual images of death.

"Turkeys Observed" is the first of three consecutive poems in which the poet's observational skills are the key for carrying the messages of the words. Heaney uses the verb "observe" twice in the beginning: once in the title and once immediately after, as the second word of the poem. The visual that we get, as readers, creates a pitiful scene. The sense of hearing enhances the sadness of the scene in the second to last stanza, in which we hear the turkey gobbling, as if desperately crying for help.

In the second poem; "Cow in Calf", the visual observation of the scene is accompanied by the sense of touch of the second stanza. The young Heaney is an active character in this poem and he's helping to get the cow out of the byre by slapping her. He has to do that several times to convince the cow, and he does that so vigorously he hears "the blows plump like a depth-charge / far in her gut".

The third one is “Trout”, in which thanks to the sense of sight (and related military metaphors) the poet makes the reader visualise the strength and quickness of the fish.

Something similar happens in “Waterfall” where the tumultuous and chaotic force of water is described with a wide range of sense data, thanks to which Heaney manages to freeze the chaos, the confusion of textures, light and sounds, into a poetic frame.

“Dockers” and “Poor Women in a City Church” are two of the few poems that don’t have nature as the background of the poem or as one of the main characters. But still, Heaney manages to use his sense of sight to create a vivid portrait of the characters of these two poems. “The Dockers” was read to the Belfast Group in 1963. Thanks to the sense of sight, Heaney creates distinctly the figure of a dockworker in Belfast in the middle of the twentieth century. Heaney introduces to us a dockworker with an intimidating appearance: strong, with harsh features, an uncompromising attitude and an intransigent, bullying presence, that affects everyone close to him, both at home and at work.

“Poor Women in a City Church” represents the devotion of catholic women in a Belfast church. Through vision, Heaney paints a scene that looks almost like a classical painting. It is a scene lacks warmth, colour and substance. The light is weak, the women look ugly and unhealthy and the general atmosphere of the church is gloomy. Despite this, the women keep praying. All the darkness and poverty of the exterior world is hideous and in contrast with their spiritual richness.

In the section dedicated to love poems, observation is mainly used to describe scenes that will be used as metaphors for Heaney’s relationship with Marie, metaphors that are primarily connected with nature. In “Twice Shy” we are introduced to Marie with the image of her sensible and practical style, with “Her scarf à la Bardot, / In suede flats for a walk”. The next poem, “Valediction”, begins almost in an identical way, with a visual description of her dressing style, that is, once again, sensible but practical at the same time: “Lady with the frilled blouse / And simple tartan skirt”. The poet also lets us hear his lover’s voice, “the quiet sound / Of your flower-tender voice”.

“Lovers on Aran” is probably the pinnacle of Heaney’s observational skills used to create a metaphor. The metaphor is related to nature. The sea and the land represent the two lovers. Heaney describes visually and sonically the strong and chaotic impetus of the waves that crash into the land. They approach the land “dazzling around”, they “came glinting, sifting”. The land could also have approached the sea, taking advantage of the low tide and reaching him “with a soft crash”.

In “Honeymoon Flight”, sight and hearing are influenced by a machine, an aeroplane. The natural landscape is seen from a different perspective. It is seen from above and everything looks small and blurred. The sense of hearing is completely dominated by the noise of the plane’s engine.

“Storm on the Island” presents similar features to “Lovers on Aran”, with the chaos and force of nature being enhanced by threatening sounds. The sense of touch becomes relevant again in “Synge on Aran”. Heaney compares the voice of a poet to the wind. A wind that you can definitely hear, you can see it agitating the sea and moving the trees, and that you can hear on your face in all its strength and coldness.

Both senses finally find some peace in “Saint Francis and the Birds”. Francis’s mystical gift of communication is the centre of the poem. The calm, soothing, description of the little birds, flying around, dancing in the air, make us feel in contact with Saint Francis’s holiness and give us a sense of bliss.

In “In Small Townlands”, the sense of vision comes back to have a dominant, overwhelming role. The poem is dedicated to Colin Middleton, a surrealist painter, friend of Seamus Heaney. The painter is composing a landscape painting in his own style. Heaney’s vivid description makes us feel in the studio with the painter. The artist is creating a landscape that goes against the laws of nature. The poem is filled with vocabulary related to colour. In the second stanza the surrealist impulses of the painter explode: the spectrum bursts, a bright grenade, when he unlocks the safety catch on morning dew, on cloud, on rain”. Thanks to Heaney’s skill we can imagine the world that “cools out” of the painter’s head.

The sense of hearing takes control of the following poem, “The Folk Singers”, a poem focused on the topic of music. It’s a eulogy of a rural music genre, traditional

Irish music, that is being eclipsed by modernity. Heaney describes the beautiful harmony of the songs and the sweet sound of traditional instruments and how there seems to be no place in this world for them.

In “The Play Way” Heaney recalls when he was a young teacher and tells the story of when he had a lecture about creative writing. Heaney is going to stimulate the students by playing them Beethoven’s Concerto Number Five. The class react to the music and starts writing but is suddenly confused by the changing of music tempo and mood. The task proves too testing for the class and Heaney lets us know that by visualising an animated surrealism in the last two verses. Heaney’s ability to put his descriptions in verse is probably one of the most important features of the collection, and it’s what makes us feel close and immersed in the natural landscape that he masterfully creates. It is what makes the reader feel involved with the stories, and especially with the memories that Heaney depicts in his poems.

3.3. Heaney’s Abject Pastoralism

“We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush,
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.”
(“Blackberry-Picking”)

Seamus Heaney’s ability to put his observational skills into words and verses is a direct consequence of an observation, especially that of nature, that is true and biologically correct. He does not idealize the landscape he is describing. He does not depict a nature that is dominated by man but a nature that is independent and that follows its own laws. A nature that doesn’t exist in relation to human beings.

This poses some difficulties for the categorization of the book's genre. Heaney's work, particularly his first publications, has often been described as pastoral poetry. Heaney himself had accepted that labelling since he didn't consider pastoralism as a definition for a form of literature or art that is strictly connected to the past but rather as a truly vital genre in the present, and one that will still be relevant in the future. But the classic idea of pastoralism is deeply in contrast with the way Heaney presents nature in *Death of a Naturalist*. The definition of pastoralism is still connected with ancient Greek and Latin writers that made the genre famous. A perfect example is Virgil's *Eclogues*, a work in which nature is depicted following what we could call standards. Such standards closely follow the previous bucolic tradition (both written and oral) in which nature was seen as a mere idyllic background, a calm, benevolent setting in which man could relax and take some time for himself, away from the stresses of the life of the city. That nature is pure, innocent, and harmless and it exists almost entirely to serve human beings. It's a description of nature that does not fit Heaney's work, not even for a single poem. Heaney's work presents what we can call anti-pastoralism. It's a pastoralism that presents nature that is somehow more "realistic" or even darker, more pessimistic, and dangerous than it actually is. The ideas of an idyllic nature look distant: they have disappeared over the horizon and they "have been tinged with something darker, more malignant, more frightening, than the typical bucolic odes to country living that are generally associated with pastoral writing" (Krassenstein, 20).

Heaney's nature presents a contradiction in its relationship with humanity. It is not an anthropocentric nature, but it's still a nature, the Irish countryside, that was and is heavily influenced by that presence. Because of the historical link between Irish people and farming, it is as if Ireland does not present (excluding mountains) a nature that can be uncontaminated. Irish nature consists of a landscape that underwent numerous changes in order to adapt to human needs. Nevertheless, it's still a nature that keeps its strength, its individuality and its dangers. Instead of presenting a nature that has been subjugated by man, "Heaney presents an abject pastoralism in which the purity of country life is always endangered, always encroached upon" (Krassenstein, 20).

“Multiple examples in Heaney’s oeuvre, particularly in his early collections, illustrate that his relationship to the pastoral, and the fertile, life-affirming gifts that the genre typically celebrates, is frequently tinged with images of death, of rot, of decay, of frightening and monstrous sexuality (moments in which queer/ed reproductions take the place of the “good” and “natural” cycles of life). These moments that appear in Heaney’s poems of place ultimately indicate a lingering ghost of the abject haunting the patriarchal and colonial landscape of pastoral tradition – one that is sometimes overlooked in favour of a reading of Heaney that is less complicated, more earthy and “pure”

(Krassenstein, 23)

Heaney’s work must be read, especially from an ecocritical standpoint, with full awareness of these features of his work. A work in which a feminized, hostile nature, is the starting point for a discussion that involves all the themes of the book: from colonialism to childhood, from nature itself to death. The old definition of pastoral cannot be accepted anymore, because it involves idealizing nature by going back to precolonial times. It is a definition that Heaney can’t accept anymore, because of the involvement of his country, and consequently of his country’s landscape, with colonialism. It is a definition that involves seeing nature through a child’s eyes. Heaney can’t accept this definition either, because when remembering his childhood he also remembers episodes in which nature revealed its true, harsh self. It is a nature that, in the eyes of the poet, seems to go against its own rules. A nature that a young Heaney realizes as cruel, dark and that is therefore represented in his poems as infected, with grimy, unpleasant imagery. A nature that will ultimately put Heaney to test and that will contribute to his education and forge him into the man and poet that he became.

When describing his father’s and grandfather’s work in “Digging”, Heaney lets us know about the hardship that working in a farm presents. Both his father and grandfather are working hard, bending their backs “among the flowerbeds”, “Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods”, “going down and down / For the good turf”. The Irish countryside is not dominated by man, neither there is an equal relationship. The man must struggle and work hard to obtain the fruits of the land,

which are not guaranteed anyway. The reward from such backbreaking work could be destroyed by nature itself, by a parasite, or a climatic event like an excessively cold winter, or a storm.

All the characteristics and ideas of the pastoral genre are destroyed and transformed into anti-pastoral, or rather abject pastoralism, in “Death of a Naturalist”. The title of the poem may be read as the death of that old, classic view of pastoralism. Pastoralism that is aligned with the views and ideas of a child, who is enthusiastic towards nature. The first hints of an abject pastoralism are presented at the beginning of the poem. The pond is full of rotting flax. An unpleasant view accompanied by the awful smell that emanates. The child does not seem to be bothered by the nastiness of the rotting flax or by the presence of swarming insects. It is almost as if he does not see, hear, smell all that. In his eyes that landscape may appear as a beautiful as a pond drawn by Monet.

The first half of the poem also presents the wrong idea, typical of the pastoral, that nature is dominated by man and the typical postcolonial thought that sees nature as a tool in the hands of man. This situation is metaphorically represented by the child’s actions: he picks up frogspawn and puts it in a jar, without thinking of the consequences that he could cause on the frog’s population and on the ecosystem. It’s a gentle, almost sensual evocation of the violation of nature accomplished by humanity. The hand of the child is like humanity exploiting natural resources without thinking about the damages caused. The first part end with Heaney’s teacher lecture about frogs:

“Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog,
And how he croaked, and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.”

These words show us how a simplistic and incorrect idea about nature is widespread and even taught to young students. It is a conception of nature linked to popular beliefs, like the one stating that you can tell the weather by looking at the colour of a frog, and completely disconnected from any scientific or biological law. A frog exists only in relationship to the help that it can offer to man, like predicting the weather in this case.

After twenty-one lines the poem stops. It is an interruption that metaphorically represents the line that separates the child's innocent view of nature from what will become a nightmarish vision. It is the line that separates the pastoral from the anti-pastoral. There begins a completely different poem that reveals the dark side of nature. A group of loud, agitated frogs has invaded the pond. The boy is scared and hides behind a hedge. The fact that the frogs are scary coincides with a more accurate and detailed description of them and their gross bellies and throbbing necks. War imagery is used to describe the frog, which are sitting "Poised like mud grenades". The boy eventually runs away. The last sentence highlights the reason why the boy was so afraid: he immediately connected the state of agitation of the frogs to an implicit threat towards himself. The reason for such a threat was the boy's previous actions. He recognizes that he has committed a crime when picking up the frogspawn and is convinced that frogs have come to seek vengeance. It is the awakening of a natural awareness. The boy understands that nature is not a toy, subjugated by his will, but rather a living entity, that needs respect, and will fight back if attacked.

This realization doesn't come directly from nature, since the frogs were most likely not going to attack Heaney but were probably agitated for other reasons. The young Heaney simply has a moment of epiphany, in which he understands the threat as a punishment for his actions and because of that he finds out what he already knew, which is that his actions were not innocent and respectful towards nature.

Abject pastoralism is present in almost identical ways in "The Barn". A familiar place like the family barn turns into another nightmarish place. In this poem there is no reason for the boy to be afraid. He panics out of nothing. The place that he knows so well as benign and harmless during the day becomes suddenly threatening

at night. Night creates darkness and for the kid darkness means not being able to see what's there. It is a fear of the unknown. Such fear is also linked to the terror of being imprisoned in that barn. All of these are irrational fears, which are fed by the young poet's vivid imagination. The imagery of war returns, as Heaney describes the farming tools as "an armoury / Of farmyard implements". Inanimate objects in the poem undergo a metamorphosis by coming to life thanks to the boy's imagination. The imagery of the rat appears at the end of this poem for the first time when "The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats".

The image of the rodent will become a leitmotif of the collection, always used to symbolize fear. This is what happens in the following "An Advancement of Learning". Young Heaney is walking along a river bank when his path is interrupted by a rat. In this poem the protagonist is forced to fight his fears. He needs to make a stand and take control of his life, by fighting against nature and against his own nature, being a fearful, anxious and timid boy. He is forced to fight because the danger offered by nature is not imaginary, like that of "The Barn" and does not allow him to run away, as in "Death of a Naturalist", since as soon as he tries to run away, another rat appears and blocks him. Nature's less attractive face is shown once again but the boy, having experienced it already, reacts differently in the end and finds the courage to fight.

"Blackberry-Picking" presents the anti-pastoral genre in a different way because this poem does not involve the presence of a threat or a danger that the boy has to face. It is "a reminiscence of childhood summers spent traipsing out to pick berries" that "ultimately end with the narrator mourning the transience of the sweet fruit, the creeping rot that overtakes them before they can be eaten" (Krassenstein, 24). The poem is a celebration of life. The fruit is presented as a treasure. It is not something that man had to work hard to obtain as would be the case of a potato. In the eyes of the child the berries are an offering, a gift from Mother Earth to humanity. They are a symbol of nature's generosity and fertility. Heaney is aware of the process of ripening of the fruit that is completed in "Late August, given heavy rain and sun / For a full week". The fruit is described almost as a living entity with reference to its flesh and blood (probably an anticipation of what is about to come). Picking the berries is not such an easy activity as the poet had imagined. It still requires some

work, even if it is not comparable to what is required for farming. The berries are not just a gift from Mother Earth. In fact, Heaney's hands are "peppered / With thorns of pricks".

The following simile involving Bluebeard is rather interesting. It is a reference to a French fairy-tale about a man that keeps killing his wives. It is a strong image, used to indicate the passage from a pastoral atmosphere to another dark, rotten, infested pastoral. After collecting the berries in the byre, they find out that that a fungus has infected the fruit and is quickly consuming it. There returns the image of the rat, used here to describe the colour of the parasite. "The simple, natural joy of the berries is always short-lived, little more than a dream, as the very thing that makes the berries ripe and possible, the fecundity of nature, is also the thing that ruins them, turning them too quickly over to rot" (Krassenstein, 25). Heaney comes to term with the natural biological process. Nature is not always good not is it invincible or everlasting. His desires end with disappointment even though he comes to terms with it he still hopes every year that something different will happen and the berries will not rot.

The concept of fertility of nature and its controversial nature returns in "The Early Purges". But in this poem "death is not the inevitable and natural end to a cycle but something far more frightening for its purposefulness" (Krassenstein, 30). It depicts a cruel aspect of farm life, which is the killing of kittens. It is a necessity created by reality. The boy is a spectator, he has a conscience and sympathies and he feels guilty in a way, even if he is never an active contributor to violence. The young poet makes a comparison to when they kill other animals like rats (again, a constant presence in the book), rabbit or crows. But at least these are killed to prevent the spreading of disease, to save to crops or the feed the family. While with kittens, the young Heaney does not seem to find an explanation, a valid excuse for such a horrible and violent act. Such purges are a perfect example for the harshness and cruelty that are a part of everyday life in a rural context. The kitten's overpopulation would mean too many mouths to feed and that is probably not affordable for a farmer. It is still a natural process even if perpetrated by man, who is acting as a natural agent. In the end, the child comes to terms with it and accepts it as a natural process. But he realizes how this law of nature won't be understood in an urban

context: “‘Prevention of cruelty’ talk cuts ice in town / Where they consider death unnatural, / But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.”

The idea of abject pastoralism is moved from the description of a small, single episode, to a bigger picture in “At a Potato Digging”. In the four poems that make up the bigger poem, abject pastoralism is seen almost as a cultural, historical and social condition connected to Ireland. The poems give the impression that Ireland is not that idealized and romanticized fairy-tale land with emerald green fields of grass, pristine water streams, pouring rain and magnificent scenery created by cliffs and mountains. It is, actually, a land in which man has struggled to survive and in which nature has been cruel and hostile towards him, at least in recent history. There is not an idyllic atmosphere in the verses, not even in the first poem, before the famine has hit. There returns the idea of a relationship that needs a lot of effort to survive. It requires intense work that is mechanical and brutal, the same backbreaking work that Heaney saw his father and grandfather doing. “Labourers swarm in behind”, they are compared to bees because of the hard work they have to endure but there is nothing else that recalls the frantic activity of the insects. The presence of machinery creates a distance between man and nature, creating a cold relationship. Such a distance is amplified by the way the farmers see nature. Mother Earth is seen as a deity because of its importance. The activity of the farmers is a metaphor that recalls the same movements that people in a church may have:

“Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the
black
Mother. Processional stooping through the turf
Recur mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.”

References to Mother Nature are also indirect references to postcolonialism: for example the concept of Mother Nature could be the one that comes from the

Peruvian “Pachamama”, a term that was probably brought to Europe, and England, by the conquistadores, and was introduced to Ireland by English people. The anti-pastoralism explodes in the second poem where the life-sustaining potato suddenly evokes images of death and decay, of human bodies found in mass graves. The potato becomes “the emblem of a nation’s suffering” (Parker, 69). The second stanza of the second poem and the whole third poem are the moment in which abject pastoralism reaches its peak in the whole book.

“Good smells exude from crumbled earth.

The rough bark of humus erupts

knots of potatoes (a clean birth)

whose solid feel, whose wet insides

promise taste of ground and root.

To be piled in pits; live skulls, blind eyed.”

The violent change of mood that this stanza cause is in contrast with the imagery connected to birth. Once again, fecundity could assume a negative definition and have negative implications. Like the excessive fertility in “The Early Purges”, fecundity here does not have positive connotations and a pleasant outcome. It is a fecundity of something that is rotten and decayed.

The third poem follows this mood, with images of death and putrescence. Hunger is metaphorically seen as a predatory bird:

“Mouths tightened in, eyes died, hard,

faces chilled to a plucked bird.

In a million wicker huts,

beaks of famine snipped at guts.”

The last poem presents another change of mood. It is set in the present, in a calm atmosphere and with a lightening of mood that is disorientating for the reader. The pagan references of the first poem are here substituted with non-Christian

equivalents of wine and host, like brown bread and tea. It feels like a challenge towards any kind of religious belief that allowed such past sufferings.

Man is subjugated by nature but there are instances in which the roles are reversed, and man takes control again. It is the case of “Turkeys Observed” and “Cow in Calf”. In the first one there are many similitudes with “The Early Purges”. Like the kittens, turkeys are killed by the merciless hand of a human being. The pitiful scene is described intensely, without sparing us the images of blood and violence. The turkey “cowers in death”. There is no dignity in its killing. To enhance the dominion of man over nature we can notice an insistent anthropomorphism in the description of the bird. The main difference with “The Early Purges” is that here the young Heaney does not stop one second to think about the killing of the animal and the reasons behind it. He knows that they will eat the turkey for Christmas. In “Cow and Calf”, the concept of fertility appears once again. The true nature of the sonnet is revealed in the last two verses: “Her cud and her milk, her heats and her calves, / keep coming and going”. The abundance of fertility is not a cause of troubles and it’s actually welcomed by man. A new calf means more food for the family or the source of an income anyway. Fertility becomes another instrument in the hand of man, who uses it for his own good.

A feature typical of the pastoral genre is the idea of nature as a calm, soothing entity. Man can go out into nature to relax and take a break from his work and urban lifestyle. The abject pastoralism destroys this feature too. From the poem “Trout” on, all the poems that will involve nature will deal with its most agitated, violent side. In “Trout” the whole poem gives a sense of perpetual motion, of a never-ending effort. We get the idea of the fish as a tireless and vigorous animal. This idea is augmented by the military, and specifically sniper related, imagery. The fish is like a firearm, a bullet that fights, and wins, against the current.

Nature is portrayed in all its majestic power in “Waterfall”. A poem that rather than being an anti-pastoral, appears as a celebration of the force of nature, being therefore closer to the pastoral genre, to a certain degree. The forces of nature assume anti-pastoral connotations in “Storm on the Island” and “Synge on Aran”. In the first poem the storm of the title, described in the verses, is a metaphor for the

adversities that a couple may have to face throughout their love relationship. When facing a powerful natural event like a storm, man is never safe, no matter how great his efforts. Nature itself cannot offer any efficient shelter, “there are no trees, no natural shelter”. The romanticised image of the sea, emblematic of the pastoral genre, does not exist, it is a lie:

“You might think that the sea is company,
Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs,
But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits
The very windows, spits like a tame cat
Turned savage”.

In “Synge on the Aran” nature is so powerful that man needs to reach another level of adaptation. The archipelago portrayed in the poem is famous for its weather and wild storms. Such is the strength and vitality of the weather that man has to bend to the will of nature.

Nature will be depicted in the next poem in the most pastoral way possible. In “Saint Francis and the Birds” the atmosphere changes completely from the two previous poems. The mood of the scene is calm, perfectly idyllic. The birds are joyfully dancing in the air. Saint Francis is portrayed as the man that has reached the perfect relationship with nature and lives in harmony with it. It seems like he is the exception. He reached that balance with the environment but why did he deserve it? What is the difference between himself and the poor Irish farmer who had to struggle and who died because of the struggle? What have the kittens done to deserve their horrible fate? Why do the turkeys seem to exist only in relation to the fact that they are food? The answer may be found in the revelations that Heaney has found during his childhood. Nature has its own laws that are different from human laws. The only time that man can understand such laws is when he is forced to face them and to respect them. The abject pastoralism may simply be a method used by Heaney to make the reader understand what the real pastoral is about: a situation in which nature and man are coexisting together in harmony without the latter feeling the need to impose his will over the environment that surrounds him.

Abject pastoralism is not only the realization that nature is not something that we can control, that we can dominate, but also the realization that it is not an entity separated from ourselves, that we are a part of it.

Chapter 4

Beyond Ecocriticism: Childhood, Family, Love and Death

Nature is the main subject and the central idea that connects all the poems. But it is not the only one. What makes the book even more interesting is Heaney's recollection of his childhood, his memories of his upbringing on a farm. The concept of abject pastoralism returns and is instrumental for Heaney's education and evolution as a man and as a poet. All the adversities that he had to face were fundamental and necessary rites of passage that would help him to grow up. In addition to that, the final part of *Death of a Naturalist* contains seven poems that have his relationship with Marie Devlin as a central topic. It is a relationship that goes hand in hand with the theme of nature, which is often used as a metaphor for it. It is the same love that will help Heaney to complete his growing process and will ultimately turn him into a man.

4.1. Childhood and Family: Coming of Age poems

Death of a Naturalist is (almost) entirely narrated as a childhood memory if we exclude the love poems. This peculiarity of the collection gives readers the impression that they are reading a coming of age story put into verses. Such an impression is created by the strong autobiographical themes of the book but also by the way that Heaney puts his story into words. The adversities, the challenges and obstacles that the child must face and the way he grows up in order to overcome them are perfectly in line with the style of a coming of age novel. The childhood memories are, obviously, connected with memories involving his father and his family. "Everything he himself written about his childhood reinforces the sense of intimate domestic warmth and affection as its prevailing atmosphere" (Corcoran, 235). The descriptions of his family environment give us the idea that Heaney grew up in a serene and peaceful family. It feels like the ideas of pastoral and idyll that

are missing from his descriptions of nature are a big part of his family-related memories. Marie Devlin commented about the household in which Heaney grew up, stating that “his family life was utterly together, like an egg contained within the shell, without any quality of otherness, without the sense of loss that this otherness brings” (Corcoran, 235). The otherness that invaded Heaney’s childhood was not related to his family but can be connected to nature. All the unpleasant events (except one, probably the most important one) that Heaney recalls have nature as a setting and have an opponent, as the source of the challenge. Throughout the first half of the book we can sense the young Heaney evolving, changing his view on the world and meeting the reality from which his ideals and dreams are so far away. Heaney himself described childhood as a preparation for disappointment.

What stands out in *Death of a Naturalist* is the relationship with his family as whole, and with his father, which symbolizes Heaney’s male ancestry. In “Digging”, a young Heaney sees his father as an inspiration, an example to follow. His skills are impressive, and Heaney knows that he is not first the one of the family: “By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man.” The child is already aware of the fact that he does not have what is necessary to follow his father’s footsteps, he lacks that physical prowess and, most of all, he does not aspire to become a farmer, he has “no spade to follow men like them”. He knows that he has broken the family blood-line of agricultural related work, but he will take their example of hard work and will put the same effort into using his pen.

In the following poems Heaney’s childish enthusiasm will be destroyed and turned into a nightmare. Poems like “Death of a Naturalist” reveal the dark aspects of childhood. The poem is perfectly in line with Heaney’s discourse about childhood and disappointment. In the first part of the poem the child is enthusiastic while enjoying the celebration of an annual pond event. He is excited by the biological process. In the second part, his excitement and enthusiasm turn into fear. The child realizes that nature can be dangerous and intimidating, it is “a fall from innocence into experience” (Parker, 65). It is the first adversity that allows to child to grow and to learn a lesson. “A code of ethics stirs within a youngster; the poem ends with an explicit statement of new knowledge acquired during the incidents described” (Corcoran, 6). The boy is able to extract a moral from the event. He learns that he

must respect nature and all the creatures and that nothing happens without a consequence: "I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it". He also comes to the realization that something terrible can happen even from something apparently harmless like the pond.

The threat that the boy has to face is not clear, and actually not even real in "The Barn". Once again, a familiar and harmless setting becomes suddenly dangerous. But in this case the situation is strange and inexplicable. The boy panics out of nothing and is the victim of his own fervid imagination. He is terrified of being trapped inside the barn but there is no apparent reason for that to happen. His imagination makes inanimate objects come to life.

In "An Advancement of Learning" the child will have to make a stand and face his fears. The process of excitement and fear here is reversed. The boy is relaxed and clueless at the beginning but then he is scared by the appearance of a rat and then a second one. But in the end, he finds courage and gets excited when he realizes that he is not scared anymore and that this allows him to win the confrontation against the rats.

It is interesting to notice the symbolism behind the bridge that Heaney has to cross. It is an emotional bridge that represent a stage in Heaney's life that he must take if he wants to grow up. He avoids it, trying to go around it, but that only causes him more troubles. Crossing that bridge is another rite of passage in Heaney's childhood. In the end, the boy becomes courageous and crosses it. The "incident" represented by the encounter with the two rats is instrumental for the growth and personal development of the young boy.

Heaney recalls marvellously how he first met the concept of mortality which fills nature in "Blackberry-Picking". He understands that he must accept the laws of mutability that dominate nature. There returns once again the concept of disappointment. The excitement of the boy, who can't wait to eat the berries, is ruined by the fungus that is infecting the fruit and quickly consuming it. Heaney's choice of figures of speech is never accidental, like the choice of comparing the kid's hands, coloured red because of the juice of the berries, with the hands of Bluebeard. The bearded man is the main character of a French folktale. He is a rich

and violent man who marries several times and kills his wife every time. The boy's hands are compared to hands that are drenched in blood. The tale has often been considered a fairy-tale and therefore has always been told to children. But the violent aspects of the story have sparked many debates whether it is suitable for children or not. It is a fairy-tale that puts the child in contact with cruel facets of life that sooner or later he will have to face directly in his life. The same purpose that the rotting berry has for Heaney. He needs to understand that everything changes and eventually dies and that some things won't go his way despite his efforts.

Following the concept of the fairy-tale meeting with Bluebeard we encounter a fairy-tale atmosphere in "Churning Day". The process of making butter is mechanical but when we see it through the eyes of a child it turns into a magical transformation. Filtered through the boy's eyes, the atmosphere assumes fabulous and enchanted connotations.

The mood is abruptly interrupted by the reality check of "The Early Purges". The boy was only six years old at the time he witnessed the drowning of kittens. They are killed by a man named Dan Taggart who is like an agent of a totalitarian police-force, which eliminates the weak and useless kittens for a greater good. The kittens are treated without any kind of compassion at all. The man curses them, calling them "the scraggy wee shits". The boy has his ideals, he is full of compassion and is saddened and scared by the inhuman act but despite that, he doesn't do anything about it:

"Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung

Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains

Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung."

He tries to forget it, but it does not work. He is constantly reminded of that by the killings of other animals. Eventually, he realizes that the only thing to do is to accept it.

"Still, living displaces false sentiments

And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown,

I just shrug, “Bloody pups”.”

He is never an active contributor to the violence but by accepting it, he becomes a part of that violence, which is necessary in order to grant the survival of others.

Heaney’s relationship with his father returns beautifully in “Follower”. The title is a declaration of intent. What Heaney wants to do is to follow his father’s example, not necessarily by working as a farmer, and to become a man like him. In the poem a strong sense of respect and love emerges from the lines. Heaney’s father is a rural man, strong and quiet when he is at work. The poet describes his dad’s skills, the way he handles the spade and digs. The father looks like a hero to his son. Heaney also portrays his paternal skills: “sometimes he rode me on his back”.

“I wanted to grow up and plough,

To close one eye, stiffen my arm.

All I ever did was follow

In his broad shadow round the farm.”

He was dreaming of following in his footsteps but gave up when he realized that farm life was not for him. This could have been a source of misery for the young Heaney since he could have been thinking that by not following his father’s footsteps but only his “shadow” he would have become a disappointment for his dad and family. But he knows that is not true and that he will show that he has learnt his lessons from his father and that he will put the same effort into his own work.

The poem ends with an ironic quartet. A reflection on aging and, once again, on the laws of mutability of nature that also humanity has to endure:

“I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,

Yapping always. But today

It is my father who keeps stumbling

Behind me. And will not go away.”

Heaney grew up, his father got older, and the roles are now reversed. His dad is not the hero that he used to be for the young boy. Today, it is Heaney who has to take care of his father.

Fatherhood and family are the subjects of the next poem, entitled "Ancestral Photograph". The photograph is an old faded portrait of Heaney's great uncle that is about to be removed from the wall it is hanging on. The picture metaphorically represents three generations of Heaney's family. Its removal symbolizes the closing of a chapter in family history. The photo portrays a strong and proud Irishman who used to work as a cattle dealer, which had become a family business. But that was Heaney's father's and uncle's past, because they have abandoned that activity nowadays, substituting it with farming. The latter is seen as more mechanical, somewhat less entertaining than the fairs they used to attend to sell the cattle.

"Closing this chapter of our chronicle,

I take your uncle's portrait to the attic"

The growing process, alongside with the coming of age style of the poem's narration, will end with "Mid-Term Break".

4.2. The Loss of innocence

In "Mid-Term Break" the young Heaney will finally face death. He is not hit out of nothing by the idea of death but comes to meet it at the end of his growing up process, which was filled with many other experiences that contained the concept of mortality. Death goes hand in hand with the theme of abject pastoralism that runs throughout the book. It is a necessary biological element of the environment. A necessary feature of that nature that reveals its true self, far away from the idyllic place typical of the pastoral genre. A genre in which death had no space. The child meets different kind of "deaths" in the poems that precede this one. The death in "Death of a Naturalist" is a symbolic one. It is the death of a baby and the birth of a man. It is the death of that childish innocence, of some of the ideals and dreams

typical of someone's childhood. The division of the poem in two stanzas seems to draw a line between innocence and that loss of innocence (or at least the beginning of the process of loss). The change of mood between the two stanzas is unexpected and immediate. Likewise, the kid's realization of reality, of life and nature is quick, chaotic and violent.

The nightmarish, spooky atmosphere of "The Barn" is part of the process. The boy still does not distinguish a rational threat from an irrational one. To distinguish a real problem, and to learn not to worry about ones that are generated by his imagination, is an important task for the child: dangers of this kind cannot be faced like the attack of a group of frogs, they need to be eliminated from his mind since they do not actually exist. The rotting of the berries in "Blackberry-Picking" fits perfectly as the first stage that will lead him to face and accept death. It is the death of something natural, that does not touch Heaney too closely. But it is still the death of something that he had a "relationship" with, something that he worked hard to obtain. The fungus offers a cause of death but does not offer an explanation for what happened. Heaney does not understand completely the laws of nature but at least he is not delusional: "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not".

After coming to term with biological laws, he needs to come to term with human law in "The Early Purges". In this poem the reality of life hits the child harder. Kittens are dying in this case, and not just some berries. In the child's understanding of the world, the kittens are more important, they have more dignity and deserve more love and respect than a fruit. Previously he was sad because he could not eat the berries anymore. But now, he is sad and feels sorry for the innocent kittens. He sympathises for them. He knows even better the cause of their departure. It is another human being, Dan Taggart, that is killing them. He adds unnecessary violence and pain to their death. He finds it hard to understand such a terrible act until he realizes how the killing of the kittens is necessary to grant the survival of the rest of the inhabitants of the farm.

These stories feel like a preparation for what is about to come in Heaney's life. In "Mid-Term Break" Heaney recalls what happened when his younger brother died. It is the emotional apex of the whole book. Heaney was fourteen, no longer a child,

and away at school when the tragic event happened. The title refers to a school holiday, but it is also a metaphor for the young boy passing and for the breaking of the last ideals of childhood.

As said, Heaney was away from home, studying in Derry, when his brother Christopher was killed as a result of a car accident in February 1953. The poem opens with the boy sitting in the school's room for sick students. He is brought home by his neighbours. When he arrives home he sees his father crying, an unprecedented event, since "he had always taken funerals in his stride". "The familiarity and predictability of home is immediately violated" (Parker, 67). The only person that doesn't change his attitude and greets him as if nothing has happened is his youngest brother. He is just a baby, therefore has no idea of what's going on and laughs and murmurs when he recognizes his brother.

Heaney is uncomfortable with the whole Irish catholic funeral ritual. He is embarrassed by "old men standing up to shake my hand", giving him condolences and telling him in with the conventional Ulster expression that they were "sorry for his troubles". He hears people whispering about the fact that he is the eldest and meets his mom, who is silently sighing. Up to this point he is responding impassively to the tragedy, as if he had not realized yet. By comparing Heaney's reaction to that of his father and his mother the poet gives us a depiction that explains to us, readers, how everybody reacts differently to grief.

The ambulance arrives only late at night, bringing the body of his brother cleaned from the blood and with the injuries bandaged. The following morning, he goes into the room and sees his little brother for the first time. The visual impact of a corpse laid in its coffin is depicted with incredible sensibility. The room's atmosphere symbolizes the child's beauty and innocence: "Snowdrops / And candles soothed the bedside". He is pale and "wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple". The red poppy was the British emblem of remembrance for those who were killed in action during wars after 1914. The body of the young boy was clean and that gives Heaney a sense of serenity that makes him think that his brother looked as if he were sleeping. The sense of the irreversibility of his brother's death hits Heaney slowly

and he reacts by expressing his pain the only way he knows, like a schoolboy, with a mathematical form that comes out as incredibly and emotionally strong:

“A four foot box, a foot for every year”

The process of loss of innocence is complete. The three poems depict perfectly, through Heaney’s incredibly skilful spirit of observation, the growth of the young boy from an innocent child to a boy through his experiences with death, with “early intimations of mortality and the incomprehension of a child confronted with injustice and grief” (Parker, 67). It is a process that happens gradually, from an almost insignificant berry, towards innocent kittens, to someone so dear, so young, so pure for Heaney. The gradualness of the experience may have helped Heaney to deal more efficiently with that terrible final phase, or, at least, may have offered the opportunity to not face it completely unprepared.

4.3. The Love Poems

The section of *Death of a Naturalist* dedicated to love poems seems to be a little separated from the rest of the book. The main theme clashes with the themes of the other poems. But the style is in line with the rest of the book, including Heaney’s fantastic observational skills and the rich use of metaphors and similes. Therefore, the love poems have in the nature-related metaphors the point of contact with the rest of the collection. Nature, natural phenomena are constantly used as a metaphor for the poet’s love relationship. The relationship portrayed in the love poems is the one between Heaney and his lifelong partner, Marie Devlin, to whom the book is dedicated.

The section consists of seven consecutive poems, preceded by another one that works as an introduction entitled “Gravities”. The poem is a masterclass about the use of metaphors and imagery. The poem, as said, works as a foreword for the part of the book dedicated to love. The verses contain a reflection on the force that draws things together, hence the title, and the whole natural force is a metaphor for two

lover's attraction for one another. In the first stanza, the poet explains how even if things can appear free, they are not, and they are controlled by a higher force:

“High-riding kites appear to range quite freely,
Though reined by strings, strict and invisible.
The pigeon that deserts you suddenly
Is heading home, instinctively faithful.”

The second stanza describes how similar this process is for a couple. Two lovers may go through tough times during their relationship, they may argue, but in the end, they will be dragged back together by an inexplicable force, and, by apologizing, they will “Re-enter the native port of their embrace”.

The final stanza depicts how this force is similar to the sense of home sickness that fills the mind of some famous Irish exiles, like James Joyce. For Heaney this force that inexorably attracts things, works in the same way as love does, with its constant movement of pull and resistance, its sense of freedom and restriction and its way of alternating peaceful and carefree moments with harsh and serious times.

The first poem dedicated to his relationship with Marie, “Twice Shy”, describes what is probably one of the first walks that they had together. She is attractive for Heaney with “her scarf à la Bardot” but also appears to be a practical girl, being “in suede flats for the walk”. They “crossed the quiet river” and “took the embankment walk”. This image reprises the main topic of “An Advancement of Learning”, in which the young Heaney “took the embankment path” and tried to avoid the bridge. That same, emotional, bridge is now crossed with ease and he is now walking with his lover on the embankment.

There is a strong sense of suspense in the whole poem. In the third stanza the image of a predatory bird that had been previously used as a metaphor for hunger during the potato blight becomes a metaphor for their love and the way they hold their composure in front of the anxiety caused by their feelings:

“A vacuum of need
Collapsed each hunting heart
But tremulously we held
As hawk and prey apart”.

The fourth stanza explains the title: “Twice Shy” is a reference to the saying “once bitten, twice shy”, which means that somebody is afraid of doing something because he had an unpleasant experience before. The two lovers may have been hurt in previous relationships, therefore they act cautiously in this new one. The sense of suspense and the shyness of the two lovers is also caused by the repressive, inhibiting sexual principles of the time. As with the childhood poems, the love poems are positioned in the book in a linear order following the growth of Heaney’s relationship.

In “Valediction” the two lovers are living together. The title is an archaic form that mean “to bid someone farewell”. The style of the poem brings to mind the “lay”, a short lyrical song that was sung by troubadours. “The instress of their love communicates itself through sea images and by reference to art and landscape” (Parker, 72). The nature imagery alongside the maritime metaphors will be a constant of the poems dedicated to Heaney’s relationship. The style and appeal of Marie are introduced once again in the first two lines, in which the poet calls her “Lady with the frilled blouse / And simple tartan skirt”. She left temporarily but the poet is afraid of what might happen if she leaves for ever. The house feels empty without her. He reflects on how they are happy together when she’s home and how terrible it is when they separate:

“In your presence
Time rode easy, anchored
On a smile; but absence rocked love’s balance, unmoored
The days.”

The images of the sea, alongside the metaphor of her voice, as soft as a flower, confers a touch of medieval courtly love on the mood of these verses.

The love-nature metaphor returns and grows in “Lovers on Aran”. The content of the poem is beautifully described by Michael Parker:

“All four elements are invoked to celebrate the unity and exhilaration of love and marriage. Heaney realises his new secular state of grace picturing the eternal embrace of land and sea...Metaphors of light mingle with sexual images in a joyous swirl and swell of sound and rhythm...Heaney has associated water with the feminine, the Gaelic, the Catholic, the creative elements in his nature.” (72-73)

The sea-land relationship is used as a metaphor of the couple’s togetherness and mutual fulfilment. The lovers are on holiday off the Irish west coast. The waves’ crashing into the rocks appear to the poet as if they are pursuing physical possession of the land. At the same time, a bay may look like the land’s attempt to embrace the sea. The last stanza contains a love statement:

“Did sea define the land or land the sea?

Each drew new meaning from the waves’ collision.

Sea broke on land to full identity.”

The poet is unsure about the nature of the relationship, he does not know who is in charge and who is reaching out to whom. The only thing he knows is that they both find themselves in that relationship.

In “Poem”, Heaney reveals a part of his nature. He addresses his wife and tells her about his will to change and to be changed in order to be successful. In the second stanza he is almost apologizing for not being about to make anything out of farming. He points at and accuses himself, recognizing his own faults, limits and imperfections. His wife is the force that will guide him through important moments in his life (like writing his first collection of poems, their marriage or becoming a father). The self-deprecation and humility of the poem are a part of Heaney’s nature but are also in line with the style of “Valediction”, those being some of the characteristics of the medieval courtly-lover.

The uncertainties and doubts of the couple are what make the main subject of “Honeymoon Flight”. A metaphor is used to create a connection between the act of flying on a plane and being married. Getting married is compared to exploring a remote place or moving towards unexplored territory. The first-person plural is used to indicate the couple’s togetherness. They are moving away from what is familiar to them, like passengers on a plane that has lifted off and is going higher and higher. Their love is launching them “right off the earth by force of fire”. Their love is like the engine of an aeroplane. They cannot explain how but they are floating on air. The force of the engine also symbolizes the couple’s optimism while the fact that they can’t explain how a plane flies may symbolize their uncertainties and the mysteries that concern the subject of love. In the last stanza, the plane is preparing for landing and “Travellers, at this point, can only trust”. Likewise, a couple of newly-weds, must have faith in each other even if they do not know what they will have to face in the future.

In “Scaffolding” Heaney assumes a more serious tone. He compares the building of a house to the building of a relationship. The two lovers are like two masons; they have to be sure that their relationship is built upon a solid foundation. The safest way to build their relationship, their marriage, is to pay attention to details, and to take care of the maintenance aspect of the marriage by using, metaphorically, “scaffoldings”. They will have to come off one day, but they will still help them getting through threats coming from the past, “Old bridges breaking between you and me”. The serious tone of the poem is accompanied by one that is almost didactic. Sometimes it feels as if Heaney is reciting a sermon or lecturing his students. The choice of words, the use of couplets, and the insistent use of monosyllables reveal the poet’s clumsiness in expressing his male emotions.

Heaney addresses the potential dangers depicted in the two previous poems in “Storm on the Island”. The island of the title represents the couple’s marriage while the incoming storm symbolizes a threat for their relationship. The first word of the poem is “we”, again representing the couple’s togetherness. Heaney starts the poem by portraying how solid their house is. Despite this, he counsels his wife not to underestimate the storm:

“You might think that the sea is company,
Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs,
But no”.

The threat that may seem so far away is actually getting closer and will hit their house too. But she does not need to be scared. The couple must trust with stoic perseverance the solid foundation that they built together and that will grant their survival, no matter how hard and challenging the threats are that they will have to face. Heaney’s vision of love is in line with his visions of nature and childhood. It is not something intrinsically good or bad. It is not something that should give the human being only pleasure and happiness. But it is something that necessitates a struggle and a good deal of effort if we want it to survive. It is, ultimately, something that is worth fighting for.

Chapter 5

Heaney's Helicon

"I can't think of a case where poems changed the world, but what they do is they change people's understanding of what's going on in the world"

(Heaney, *This Week Magazine*, April 15, 2004)

A final aspect that needs to be analysed and discussed about "*Death of a Naturalist*" is Heaney's early views on poetry and the role of the poet. Heaney's observational skills, one of the most poignant and significant aspects of the collection, is not merely an academic exercise, but goes beyond its stylistic aspects, as Heaney said in his Nobel speech: "I wanted that truth to life to possess a concrete reliability, and rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an upfront representation of the world it stood in for or stood up for or stood its ground against" (Heaney, "Crediting Poetry"). Such a definition may sound like a contradiction when we think that, for example, a big part of the environment that we see in *Death of a Naturalist* is either described and filtered by the memories and the views of a child or is used as a metaphor for another situation. But the way Heaney describes the setting of his poems, the events of his childhood and the landscapes that will be used as a metaphor, perfectly fit his definition of a poem as something that must tell truth in some way. The quest for truth, for reality and the accuracy in his description, is what makes his poems so vivid.

Heaney opens the book with a poem, "Digging", that is also a poetical statement and a declaration of his intents as a poet. He puts poetry on the same level of farming and by doing that, he does not lower the importance of poetry. On the contrary, he elevates the role of poetry by insisting on the fact that, like digging, it requires a lot of effort and hard work. His poetry will still be connected with his family's working environment. Heaney uses the metaphor of his ancestors digging the land to describe how it is necessary for poetry to "dig deep" to go beyond the material word and the aesthetical aspects of a poem, as he stated: "Yet there are times when a

deeper need enters, when we want the poem to be not only pleurably right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a re-tuning of the world itself” (Ibidem). It is necessary to keep this in mind when reading and discussing Heaney’s poems, particularly the ones that strike us as more descriptive.

Heaney portrays the figure of the poet metaphorically as a magician in “The Diviner”. A diviner is a figure that is endowed with talents that are typical of the Irish folkloristic tradition. He is someone who is apparently gifted with supernatural powers and is seen as someone able to perform miracles. It is a figure connected to pagan traditions. The dowser is depicted as calm and professional. He is not showing off in front of others, he is modest. He has been called to locate a source of underground water. Heaney connects “the poetic gift and the (dowser’s) quest for “what lies hidden”” (Parker, 73). The poet manages to find the water with a process that looks like an ancient ritual., with a stick that looks possessed. When people ask him to try it, the stick would “lay dead in their grasp”. The diviner represents the ideal poet. A “poet as intimately involved with his own community, serving it with words and forms as the diviner serves it with water” (Corcoran,8). The poet needs to be integrated in his community and once he is, his work will be as necessary as water for the community.

Heaney closes his first poetry collection with “Personal Helicon”. The subject of the poem gives the book a sense of circularity: from the declaration of intent of “Digging” to another poetical statement at the end of this poem. This poem is dedicated to Michael Longley, one of the members of Hobsbaum Belfast’s poetry group during the sixties. The “Helicon” of the title is a reference to Mount Helicon, a mountain located in Greece. In Greek mythology, the mountain was believed to be sacred. Two water springs located on the mountain were believed to be consecrated to two Muses, Aganippe and Hippocrene. These two fountains were considered to be source of poetic inspiration and drinking from it could give the gift of poetry. Heaney locates his personal Mount Helicon underground. His source of poetic inspiration is a well. He keeps his Helicon close to his origins and tightly connected to the land, to the ground. Heaney remembers how he has always been

attracted to wells, which were a constant presence in the Irish countryside he grew up in.

“I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells

Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.”

Wells are connected to bogs and to that mix of land and water typical of the Irish landscape. The poet proceeds to describe wells that he recalls from his childhood, “One, in a brickyard”, “A shallow one under a dry stone ditch”. What fascinates the young Heaney about the well is the sense of mystery created by the darkness of their inside, the reflection that the water creates at the bottom of them, and the echoes caused by their shape and depth. Heaney is at the same time attracted to and afraid of them. In the last stanza there is a transition from the poet’s childhood to the present time. The poet knows that the fascination with wells is immature, not fit for an adult. He compares himself looking into the wells as a child to Narcissus, another reference to the mount Helicon, which, according to Greek mythology, is the place where Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection by looking into a spring. The last sentence contains Heaney’s final poetic statement: “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing”. He will write poetry to know himself better, to see himself better as if he was seeing his own reflection at the bottom. He will also try to find a meaning for the unknown and for the frightening through his poetic voice, which will be the thing that “set[s] the darkness echoing”. The declaration of intent, made in his first collection of poetry, will return, will “echo”, in all of Heaney’s poetic work, and will be recognized by Heaney once again in his Nobel speech:

“The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry’s power to do the thing which always is and will be to poetry’s credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.”

(Heaney, “Crediting Poetry”)

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on a reading of *Death of a Naturalist*, the first poetry volume published by Seamus Heaney. The main objective was to give an analysis of the major topics of the collection with a strong attention to the nature-related themes. The first part of the dissertation has been fundamental to contextualize Heaney's work. The biographical information given in the beginning make up the topic of almost all the poems of *Death of a Naturalist*. Heaney's childhood experiences are vividly put into verse by the poet. The same thing can be said for his relationship with Marie Devlin, romantically portrayed in a group of seven poems contained in the volume. Heaney's early influences and academic career were also mentioned, since all of them are clearly displayed in the book: from his classical studies to the meeting with other poets like Philip Hobsbaum or Michael Longley during his studies at Queen's University Belfast. This first part worked as an introduction and was essential to explain historical and biographical circumstances behind the publication and to point the clearest influences. Then, I've decided to structure the work by following the major themes of the collection. The first theme tackled (and then one that I went more in depth with) was nature. After a short introduction about ecocriticism I have moved to talk in detail about the relationship between the poet, his poems, and nature. Heaney's nature is Ireland's nature. It's the landscape of the poet's childhood. A landscape that consist of farms, wetlands and moorlands. In the dissertation it is highlighted how Heaney's nature is strongly connected to two natural elements: earth and water. This was the poet's arbitrary choice. He focuses his attention on these two elements because they are the elements that make up the Irish landscape. A landscape that he is able to recall and describe so intensely that the readers feels immersed in it. Heaney's observational skills are already the ones of an experienced writer and are enhanced by the fact that he only needs few verses to put into words the nature that he is remembering. Heaney memories are connected to his senses. The way he describes things visually and sonically almost create a sensorial memory of nature. A lot of stress has also been made to clarify how Heaney's nature is the completely opposite

of that romanticised nature typical of poets like William Wordsworth, who still had a great influence on Heaney's view of nature. The nature in *Death of a Naturalist* follows the rules of abject pastoralism. A form of pastoralism in which nature and all living beings are not sweet, calm, peaceful and useful for the human being, but instead they are dangerous, life-threatening and hostile. Nature constantly creates obstacles that the young Heaney has to overcome. After focusing on nature, I have dedicated a whole chapter to all the other themes of the book. Heaney's childhood and family are the centre of the first half of the volume, in which I have stressed on how the poems appear linearly, almost like if they are following a realistic timeline. I have also focused on how this linearity helps to create the same atmosphere of a coming of age novel. The child is growing up in each poem, maturing, and finding out the hard way that nature and life are hard and unfair. Finally, I have decided to analyse the love poems, dedicated to different stages in Heaney's relationship with his wife. I have highlighted the things that this section of the volume has in common with the rest of the book, especially Heaney's observational skills, that he uses in this case to describe Marie Devlin, and the connection between love and nature, which are often linked to together with metaphors. In the last chapter of the dissertation I have discussed Heaney's poetical statements that are a crucial part of the book: from his decision to become a writer in "Digging" through the role of the poet in his community in "The Diviner", to finding his poetic voice in the closing "Personal Helicon". The reading of *Death of a Naturalist* offered many foods for thought, with its large variety of subjects. While working on the dissertation I found myself drawn greatly to the ecocritical reading, probably because it is a less explored theme (at least compared to the other main topics of the volume). A further, more detailed, extended and in depth ecocritical reading of this volume and in general of all of Heaney's work could be the best way to analyse Heaney under a different light and to fully understand his poetical message, being the topic so deeply related to every other subject dealt by the Northern Irish poet, from his autobiographical work, to the one connected with the Troubles.

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