

The Word Mistrusted: Rhetoric and Self-Irony in Some Modern Irish Poets

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Abstract

The bardic expectations instituted by long-standing stereotypes of 'the Irish poet' have persistently proved a source of unease for some post-Yeatsian Irish poets, generating different perspectives on the relationship between poet and audience—as well as on the power (?) of the poetic utterance. If with a poet like Paul Muldoon an avoidance of the bardic is at all times made evident (as part of the (self-)deflation entailed by the parodic strategies which have become a hallmark of his writing), in the case of several other poets evasion of the voice-as-authority may prove less obvious, and not devoid of contradictions. This paper will deal with different ways of representing the perplexities of the self as holder of poetic power, drawing mostly on poems by Thomas Kinsella, Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney.

The opening words of my title may seem strangely misplaced when applied to a reading of Irish poetry: surely a conspicuous and traditional mark of Irish writing, if not of Irish culture in general, is taken to be an inordinate *trust* in the word, and in the power it is supposed to wield. Countless references may spring to our mind as actual or supposed confirmation of a traditional Irish belief in the virtues of the word—beginning with accounts of the great respect, conjoined with fear of their literally blistering satires, due to the bards in the old Gaelic order, “second only to that of the king himself” (Leerssen 1996, 158). English reports on this early bardic prominence famously include Sidney’s acknowledgment in the *Defence* that poets in Ireland were “held in a devout reverence”, and believed to be able to inflict death by rhyming (Duncan-Jones 1994, 103, 142), and Spenser’s stern indictment of Irish bards for the political danger entailed by the “high regard and estimation” they enjoyed (Hadfield and Maley 1997, 75–77).

The survival of a deferential attitude to the poetic voice, understood as publicly relevant, and (in more general terms) the perplexities of the relationship between poetry and politics in Irish history have been amply traced and discussed, exempting me from the need to expand further on this issue, preliminary as it is to my argument. What I would like to posit at this point, though, is that a tradition which has ‘the bardic’ for one of its foundations (by which I simply mean, the expectation that the poetic voice will have public relevance) will exhibit a particularly close relationship between rhetoric and poetics—the two crafts of composition which, in the

determination of the ways and the ends of discourse in Western culture, have persistently related to each other in historically variable conformations (Barthes 1970, *passim*). "Our traditions are histrionic and oratorical" (Donoghue 1986, 184), says Denis Donoghue of the public status of the poetic voice in Ireland—and Joyce (who himself decried an easy trust in Irish 'eloquence') reported that Oscar Wilde once said to Yeats, "We Irishmen ... have done nothing, but we are the greatest talkers since the time of the Greeks" (Joyce 1959, 174).

This entails that an awareness of audience will, in varying degrees, intervene in determining the concerns of poets—for Dillon Johnston, "the poet's relation to his audience becomes a central concern which actually enters into poetry itself ... This poetic relationship of the speaker and auditor within the poem is an identifying characteristic of Irish poetry" (Johnston 1985, 53). Conversely, this intersection of the poetic and of a sense of public eloquence also means that the audience's awareness of the poet, and of his role, will likewise acquire a certain prominence; after all, as Aristotle made clear in his *Rhetoric* (a craft which he memorably defined as "the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever"), *ethos* (the audience's acknowledgment of "the moral character of the speaker") is, together with *logos* and *pathos*, one of the "kinds of proof"—in fact, "the most effective means of proof": "the orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence" (Aristotle 1959, 17).

The extent to which the poet in twentieth-century Ireland has effectively been acknowledged as holder of an authorized status is, of course, a vexed question, appraisals of the relationship between writers and audiences ranging from the ecstatic to the sceptical and disillusioned. We might find an instance of the latter in Francis Stuart's remark that "Ours is basically a peasant conservatism, one that is particularly anti-art" (Stuart 1979, 49). That *verbal* art might be an exception to such antagonism would seem to be the point of a testimony which significantly comes from someone with a conspicuous 'peasant' background—no less than Patrick Kavanagh, who in his later years, opposing denunciations of Irish indifference to books and writers, testified to what he saw as a virtual "hero worship for the writer" in Ireland (Kavanagh 1977, 31). An element of contradiction and of wishful thinking may have been present in Kavanagh's remark, the vicissitudes of whose life and literary career are well known. Such a statement may have been written from that deliberately anti-Yeatsian standpoint with which Kavanagh gave a decisive contribution to exorcising the great predecessor from too overbearing a position *vis-à-vis* his and the following poetic generations—the exorcism being in this case possibly directed at Yeats's famous exaltation of the virtues of an élite audience, and his corresponding excoriations of the Catholic masses for their supposed blindness to the aesthetic. But, if Yeats and Kavanagh (with the remark above) would

probably have been at odds concerning their assessment of the ability and willingness of Irish audiences in general to acknowledge the power of the poetic word, they converge to the extent that they are poets who do not *themselves* question *their* position as wielders of aesthetically empowered language.

As my title reveals, however, this article is to be concerned with poems in which 'the bardic', or (more broadly) the acknowledgment of the poet's authority, is questioned, or subject to irony. This purpose might promptly create the expectation that my major exemplar would be the arch ironist, the iconoclast major of recent Irish poetry, Paul Muldoon, he who will only for parody's sake don the bard's mantle; who so gleefully makes (mis)quotation a fundamental writerly strategy; who systematically dismantles any hierarchies of meaning in the networks of allusions and intertexts which his poems amount to. But Muldoon's writing might, in fact, prove an inadequate object for a study of how the poetic word can come to be 'mistrusted', for the rather obvious reason that the 'trust' which, conceptually, this would otherwise imply (in the sense I have been associating with 'the bardic') is never really a possibility with Muldoon—and this despite the way he rather surprisingly came to the rescue of the idea of 'the author' in his 1998 F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture: "Let the theorists get over themselves. Let Barthes claim that there is no 'father-author'. Let Derrida proclaim against 'phallogocentrism'. Let them try to get round the ungetroundable fact that the poet is the first person to read or, more importantly, to be read by, the poem" (Muldoon 1998, 120).

The poems I will be considering come from the work of poets who do not necessarily and wholesaley impugn 'the bardic', but may rather—for various reasons—feel the need, at certain points in their writing, to deflate the position from which they write. My point will also be that such instances of 'the word mistrusted', or denounced, are not restricted to lines of tradition whose historical, political and aesthetic orientation might bring them closer to a bardic or an anti-bardic understanding of the poet's role; but are rather to be found in the work of poets variously located in the contemporary Irish literary scene—my exemplars being, in this case, Thomas Kinsella, Derek Mahon, and Seamus Heaney. This choice also entails that a silent part of my argument will be to put in evidence the limitations for assessing the way poets relate to their craft and their audiences, as in so much else, of the dividing lines which have often been traced within the Irish poetic production of the past few decades—lines dividing (say) the 'Northern' Heaney and Mahon from a Kinsella very much opposed to the recognition of specific 'Northern Voices' (to borrow from Terence Brown's well-known title—Brown 1975); the always increasingly popular and cosmopolitan, but in many respects poetically 'conventional' Heaney, from the isolated and increasingly 'experimental' Kinsella; the 'atavistic' and (culturally) 'Catholic' Heaney from the sceptical rationalist and lapsed Protestant Mahon.

In the case of Thomas Kinsella, the tendency to ironise the poetic self, exposed at the point of yielding to the temptation of a facile eloquence, or to some other form of poetic or intellectual *hubris*, develops parallel to the process (initiated in the early 1970s) by which this poet gradually turned away from a poetic of lyrical elegance which, between the late fifties and the late sixties, had earned him a significant readership—even a degree of popularity—and initiated an exigent poetic of sparseness and ‘difficulty’ which, together with an inward-turning scope of reference, gave him the partly deserved reputation of an arcane ‘poets’ poet’, privately publishing his new work in ever slimmer volumes, years before it comes to the hands of a major publisher, and entertaining an Olympic indifference to the rituals of public celebration. This fundamental change has often been described—most recently in the three book-length studies of Kinsella’s poetry published in the past few years (Jackson 1995; Abbate Badin 1996; John 1996)—as well as commented on by Kinsella himself in terms which make clear his rejection of some of the more obvious conditions for ‘bardic’ success, as in a 1993 interview with Donatella Abbate Badin:

DAB: What is it you resent most about your early production?

TK: Pointless elegance. Let it earn its place as elegance, or beauty, or whatever, but let the thing talk straight. The poems of my own that I am most embarrassed by are the ones that have been most enjoyed for their rhyme and rhythm and beauty. (Abbate Badin 1996, 195)

It also becomes obvious, however, that for some of his readers the supersession of the “virtuoso verbalism” (Jackson 1995, 15) of Kinsella’s early mode by the increasingly spare exploration of the self inaugurated with his 1972 *Notes From the Land of the Dead* is not devoid of a potential *hubris*, that of a laconic ponderousness, an oracular pretension. This, together with his increasing personal isolation, has occasionally earned Kinsella remarks like John Montague’s, commenting on their early acquaintance in Dublin and opposing a *then* to a *now* in terms that left no doubts as to his preferences: “if Tom now looks like an Assyrian king, then he was devastatingly funny, hard-working but hilarious, sharing my distaste for those who had prematurely baptized themselves as poets, ‘the knowingness’ of them” (Montague 1989, 8). It is revealing, and ironical, that Kinsella’s change of public *persona* is here bound up with a reference to what would have been his dislike of bardic pretentiousness: the obvious suggestion is that the ability to experience that dislike has been lost, together with the capacity for being “hilarious” even if “hardworking”; in other words, that what Kinsella sees as a greater seriousness of purpose, and as an understanding that his art is incompatible with the methods of an entertainer and the pose

of a socialite, can be (and indeed *is*) read as potentially another form of 'the bardic'.

Kinsella is apparently aware of this—Brian John points out that "[he] regularly applies ... deflationary irony against himself, deflecting criticism of portentousness and excessive grimness" (John 1996, 137)—and some passages from his work since the mid-1980s, in which Kinsella rehearses and rejects portentous verbal gestures before his reader, may confirm it. A significant instance appears in the last of the thirteen "Songs of the Psyche", first published in 1985, a sequence which seems to revisit emphases characteristic of a lot of Kinsella's work since the previous decade. Those include the difficult and painful way towards self-knowledge, and the inward exploration it requires, as well as the obsessive representation of darkness as the site of the dialectic opposites regulating all things (see Broder 1979a; Broder 1979b)—the nexus of life and death in their indefinite frontiers, the organic links of decomposition and growth, the opposition and interdependence of flesh and spirit—for all of which Kinsella owed a lot to his interest in C. G. Jung, in particular in the archetypal complex of the Great Mother (whose study was famously developed by Jung's disciple Erich Neumann (Neumann 1963)).

When the reader of "Songs of the Psyche" arrives at the thirteenth song, he or she has been enough reminded of these familiar Kinsella *topoi* to recognise the conflated representations of the institution of the self and of uterine regression which open the poem, in the form of two italicised tercets—each of which is promptly dismissed:

*I woke suffocating,
slipped through a fault
into total dark.*

No.

*I came to myself
in the middle of a dark wood,
electric with hope.*

Please ... (Kinsella 1988, 31)

The use of italics, except for the dismissive monosyllables, highlights the different textual status of these lines as an expression of the poet's pre-textual musings, as an intertext or quotation, or as an instance of self-quotation—in this case, a parody of the poet's own voice, all the more easily identified as such since similar representations had previously been set by Kinsella in italics (as in the "Prologue" to his 1976 "A Technical Supplement", "*We were slumped there in the dark, like lead*"—Kinsella 1979, 75). The

ironised words of the poem's opening—"Yet is *is* / a matter of / negative release: / ... / organic darkness, / *in potentia* all things" (Kinsella 1988, 31). This means that the dismissive "No" and "Please ..." are aimed at forms of verbal representation felt to be *clichéd* and therefore unconvincing, at a mode which may have become rhetorically jaded, rather than at the philosophical and existential perspective it is meant to convey.

However, the poet's intellectual references, and the enabling analogies he may seek in other forms of artistic expression, can also be acknowledged as *hubris*, and duly exposed. That is the case of Kinsella's probably best-known instance of self-deflation, in the "*Coda*" to his sequence "Her Vertical Smile". The sequence is taken up with the experience of listening to the music of Gustav Mahler, to which (as recalled in the epigraph, taken from Kinsella's notes to his earlier sequence "Vertical Man") he was introduced by Sean O'Riada, and it is organized in sections styled after movements in a musical composition—"Overture", "Intermezzo", "Coda". Besides this trans-artistic drive, it comes to be, however, a meditation on historical violence, couched in at times rather obvious sexual imagery—reminiscent of the closing remark of "Songs of the Psyche, XIII", "Unless the thing were to be based / on sexuality / or power" (Kinsella 1988, 32), a remark which, after the overall Jungian bent of the sequence, added a final reference to the two Austrians, Freud and Alfred Adler (see Lernout 1989, 275). It is also "at the heart of old Vienna" that Mahler is evoked conducting a symphony, his artistic authority—"the left hand dangling tyrannical" (Kinsella 1988, 44)—represented in terms that allow Kinsella to retrieve his recurrent concern with the plight and the responsibility of artists and intellectuals in the face of a historical drift towards violence. The scene is set for World War I ("And it's off to the muttonchop slaughter"—Kinsella 1988, 45), and the "Intermezzo" section versifies a letter in which Thomas Mann, soon after the beginning of the war, confesses his sense of "inadequacy and shame" on knowing that the addressee (unlike himself) has "marched away", Mann therefore declaring: "I have set my mind now / —since I can offer nothing else— / to the service of the German cause. / ... / All hail and victory" (Kinsella 1988, 50). This emphasis combines disturbingly with the already mentioned sexual representation of Mahler's masterful direction ("the ivory baton ... driven deep", "his baton explores / her core of peace"—Kinsella 1988, 44), ultimately making for Kinsella's self-mocking "Coda". This consists of six lines in which, as if to combat the pretension inherent in the implicit associations with major artists in the previous pages, as well as his apparent infatuation with the representation of artistic assertiveness as sexual prowess, the poet promotes "Luck" to the foremost position in determining success, and represents his *hubris* as a lifting and commanding motion which is promptly cancelled by a farcical "fall"—the impotence of the braggart, the shaming of the presumptuous bard:

lifting and commanding motion which is promptly cancelled by a farcical "fall"—the impotence of the braggart, the shaming of the presumptuous bard:

Nine are the enabling elements
in the higher crafts
and the greatest of these is Luck.

I lift my
baton and my
trousers fall. (Kinsella 1988, 56)

Kinsella may also admit, however, to a contrary *hubris*, that of false or excess modesty, an abasement of the poetic self which may belie his actual abilities and amount to blasphemy and profanation. It is that which, in a half-ironical register, he brings to his readers in a passage of his 1999 Peppercanister pamphlet *Godhead* in which the poetic self, having confronted the Father and been given miraculous and Revelational proof of His powers, exclaims, in the tones of a self-doubting Thomas (Kinsella):

O my Father,
Thou hast spoken to Thy servant!
But I am slow of speech—they will not believe me. (Kinsella 1999, n.p.)

—a fear of rhetorical incompetence which is promptly rebuked:

And his anger was kindled against me.
And he said:
Who hath made thy mouth? (Kinsella 1999, n.p.)

This is both a doubt and a question to which a very different poet, Derek Mahon, would hardly provide a less than secular answer, should he prove true to the quality of 'scepticism' which has often been identified as one of the hallmarks of his voice. Concurrently, and despite the fact that he has long alienated his personal origins in Belfast and in the Protestant community, he comes from a cultural tradition strange to what Edna Longley calls "the persistent Irish belief that within one tribe, one nation, the poet's organic bardic function can still be performed" (Longley 1985, 27). Indeed, the most frequent conformation of 'the bardic' in Irish culture (as viewed both in Ireland and from abroad) can prove vexing to the contemporary urban Protestant poet—as Gerald Dawe admitted years ago when he related how, being interviewed abroad, he perceived a sudden break in the interviewer's interest as soon as he mentioned his Protestant, Belfast origins: that was clearly not the identity which the interviewer regarded as most exciting for

the stock character of the 'Irish poet', desirably atavistic, rural, garrulous and Catholic (Dawe 1990, 58). A tradition of public eloquence *is* available in Protestant Ulster, but, rather than finding a culturally sanctioned vehicle in poetry, it has more typically taken the shape of "the religious sermon, the pamphlet, the political speech"—the "characteristic forms of cultural production" of Protestant Ulster, as Tom Paulin has convincingly argued (Paulin 1996, 94). For the scrupulous, wishfully non-sectarian poet, that rhetoric can hardly be a respected and useful influence, tainted as it is by the "urgent, declamatory, polemical anger" (Paulin 1996, 88) it usually serves. Ultimately, this contributes rather to making the eloquent voice that *against which* poetry is written.

Derek Mahon's sense of audience, and its consequence for the fashioning of his poetic voice, is doubly informed by (on the one hand) the indelible formative impression of his Ulster origins, and (on the other hand) the uprootedness of the sceptical humanist, at odds with a background many of whose values he resents and rejects. His use of a poetic language which, though never abandoning discursiveness for fragmentation, is averse to verbal profusion, can thus be related both to personal and cultural circumstances—that "tight-lipped quality" which James Liddy (1979, 123) saw as characteristic of the "Protestant muse", combined with a pessimistic view on reality and experience which puts in evidence "the limitations of language with regard to what it tries to represent". As Catriona Clutterbuck puts it, "language is in danger of becoming redundant of meaning ... Poetry itself will become the victim of the redundancy of the word" (1994, 11, 22–3). As a consequence, *irony* becomes a fundamental word in the lexicon of Mahon criticism, as does also *bleakness*—even if "checked" and qualified by a not always critically acknowledged sense of humour (Donnelly 1994, 4).

The bluntness of some of Derek Mahon's moments of self-denunciation, when the issue is the power of the poetic word, could in fact be described as hardly compatible with an ironical authorial stance. A famous instance appears in a passage of "Afterlives" which Mahon bowdlerized for his 1991 *Selected Poems*; the poet's self-disgust, couched in a first person plural which also hubristically makes him the spokesperson for hopeful *soixante-huitards* like himself, closes a first section of the poem which very explicitly moves from a reference to verbal and actual violence, to the enunciation of the humanist's dream of peace and pluralistic respect—only to conclude in sceptical dismissiveness and self-invective:

The orators yap, and guns
Go off in a back-street;
But the faith does not die

That in our time these things

Will amaze the literate children
In their non-sectarian schools
And the dark places be
Ablaze with love and poetry
When the power of good prevails.

What middle-class cunts we are / What middle-class twits we are *
To imagine for one second
That our privileged ideals
Are divine wisdom, and the dim
Forms that kneel at noon
In the city not ourselves. (Mahon 1979, 57; *Mahon 1991, 50)

It is, however, a meta-scepticism—in the sense that the poetic self doubts the possibility of truly acknowledging in himself a detached, enlightened, secular, non-sectarian identity. In this poem (which in its second section will take the poetic subject back to his native city, only to acknowledge a failure to “grow up” and really know the meaning of “home”) doubt is, in fact, aimed at a not necessarily verbalised form of (dis)belief. However, in another famous Mahon poem, “Ecclesiastes”, the issue is the recognition that the addressee—a “God- / chosen purist little puritan”, a generic “you” which in this context the reader cannot but identify as also another word for the poetic self—could easily feel tempted to demean his verbal skills on behalf of a sectarian cause, probably to produce what was described above (courtesy of Paulin) as an “urgent, declamatory, polemical anger”:

Your people await you, their heavy washing
flaps for you in the housing estates—
a credulous people. God, you could do it, God
help you, stand on a corner stiff
with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun. (Mahon 1979, 31)

Mahon’s perception of the poetic word as inadequate or tainted, as well as his delvings into the implications of his scepticism, are not, however, confined to poems exhibiting a rather obvious consequence of Northern Irish politics. In “Ovid in Tomis”, the assumption of the classical persona in his place of exile is combined with the representation of a time and place which suggest themselves as characteristically post-apocalyptic, beyond the sacred (“Pan is dead”), the metaphysical void feared to imply an imaginative emptiness—or is it merely the absence of an audience, the inability to verbally come through and connect?

The Muse is somewhere
Else, not here

By this frozen lake—

Or, if here, then I am
Not poet enough
To make the connection.

Are we truly alone
With our physics and myths,
The stars no more

Than glittering dust,
With no one there
To hear our choral odes? (Mahon 1982, 41)

In his work of the 1990s, self-doubt will tend to take the form of self-irony, as when, in the opening lines of the title-sequence of *The Hudson Letter*, the poet humourously registers the expectation that revisiting one of the previously more stimulating settings of his poetry, a wintry seascape (even if in American version), would automatically set off his imagination:

Winter; a short walk from the 10th St. Pier —
and what of the kick-start that should be here? (Mahon 1995, 37)

From another perspective, a passage of a poem in his 1997 *The Yellow Book* questions the relation between public respect for the artists, in particular as revealed by greater economic support of the arts (which, as is well known, is especially evident in Ireland), and the aesthetic quality of their output. Couched as a rhetorical question, the passage is almost suggestive of a nostalgia for the hungry artist in his garret, and for the good old days of clerical obscurantism, and it could remind us of Brendan Kennelly's dictum, in an article on Mahon, that "only the Protestant humanist has this special combination [of the Romantic and the ironic] in his veins" (Kennelly 1989, 144):

Oh, poets can eat now, painters can buy paint
but have we nobler poetry, happier painting
than when the gutters bubbled, the drains stank
and hearts bobbed to the clappers in the sanctuary? (Mahon 1997, 19)

The question of the artist's worldly comfort, and of its relation to aesthetic accomplishment, raised by Mahon in this poem, is almost inevitable when what I have been calling 'the bardic' is approached; and the contemporary Irish poet who immediately springs to every reader's mind

the issue of the poet's fame and power. In this respect, Heaney seems to waver between a 'proper modesty' mixed with embarrassment at being invested in bardic robes, and the capacity to yield to the temptations of the empowered voice and of the appertaining public stance: again inevitably, the example of Yeats is often conjured. We thus find Heaney, at a *Sunday Times* banquet in the late 1980s, quoting Eliot on the way Yeats would "not [allow] himself to become a mere coathanger upon which the world draped its honours", and declaring the need to avoid "the token role of the poetic Irishman" (Heaney 1988, 9); or, at an interview from the same period, evading the 'National Bard' label as something to be mocked, and stating: "There's a difficult line between self-respect and image projection" (Adair 1989, 8). But we also find him, particularly when addressing the example of Yeats, veering from an early discomfort before the "rhetorical cast" of a voice "theatrical in its triumph" (Heaney 1980, 73), to an undisguised attraction for Yeats's imaginative scope, together with his "authority" (see McDonald 1996, 98–9)—a course which had been fully run by the early 1990s, when Heaney edited the Yeats section of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, and published *Seeing Things*, with its emphasis on transcendence and the marvellous.

Critical assessment of this issue has also been divided between unquestioned acceptance of a version of Heaney as shying off bardic distinction ("His stardom may distort our view of him, but he keeps a steady watch on himself"—Hunter 1987, 9), the view that he assumes a position of authority, but somehow justifies himself and/or deserves it ("he has redignified the bardic stance"—Hamilton 1987, 10), and straightforward indictment for bardic pretentiousness and shrewd management of his 'career'. Amongst examples of the latter, one might retrieve, from the 1980s, Edna Longley's harsh treatment of *Station Island* as a work impaired by the poet's posing as "Chief Bard", by indulging in verbosity and (indeed) "Heaney-speak" (Longley 1984, 56, 58); Mary Kinzie's only slightly more benevolent charge that Heaney's infatuation with 'the bardic' really went against the grain: "[Heaney] hankers after a species of court dress and bardic intonation, for which almost everything in his unconscious music automatically disqualifies him" (Kinzie 1988, 22); or Donald Davie's denunciation of how, in his view, Heaney had sold himself out to the easy ways and the meretricious attractions of the poetry industry (Davie 1989, *passim*). As a view from the front of the literary cocktail-and-banquet circuit, one might also quote Hugo Williams's sarcastic description of the already-mentioned 1988 *Sunday Times* banquet graced by "the now fully-Yeatsified image of Seamus Heaney, forty-eightish, half-frames balanced at the end of his nose and no reading matter within miles"—a report which also included Craig Raine's remark that "Irishmen turn into their fathers earlier than we do" (Williams 1988, 110). And if the early 1990s seemed somewhat more appeased at first by the relative and welcome surprise which *Seeing Things*

proved to be, the wave of acclaim which accompanied the winning of the 1995 Nobel Prize was met (even if not outdone) by resentful remarks like Robert MacLiam Wilson's that "Heaney has had a glittering if predictable career", and "the career has been the story": "his progress seems a well-planned climb up a variety of literary ladders" (Wilson 1995, 23-4).

Even if one discounts the polemical drift of much of these comments, they all share the acknowledgment, when dealing with a poet like Seamus Heaney, of that significance of *ethos* which was underlined above in connection with Aristotelian rhetoric—as well as with the historical importance of the rhetorical tradition for helping define the public persona of the poet, and the way it comes to be represented in the poems themselves. The relevance of that rhetorical model for understanding the way Heaney relates to his role could also be argued by referring to Neil Corcoran's remark, in one of the chapters recently added to his classic study of this poet, that Heaney's criticism "ponders not only the work but also the life of his chosen subjects, as it is revealed in some of its most characteristic or problematic gestures, attitudes and alignments ... [carrying], that is to say, a strong ethical as well as aesthetic charge" (Corcoran 1998, 209-210). Corcoran further reminds us of the extent to which Heaney's criticism is a continued reading of himself, as refracted through his readings of others—"[coming] to poetic terms with myself by considering the example of others" (Heaney 1980, 13)—at which point the issue becomes the poet's self-fashioning as 'exemplary' wielder of words, a figure of moral and artistic responsibility *vis-à-vis* his craft and his audience.

And yet (or should I say "thence...") the poetic self in Heaney's *oeuvre* often resorts to self-irony, in connection with his real or supposed limitations when faced with various aspects of experience—be it private experience, as when the subject of "The Guttural Muse" allows the reader a glimpse into his feelings as those of a man regretting his approaching middle age and phantasising about a laughing young woman he overhears being courted (Heaney 1979, 28); or the public, political domain, as with the sense of ineffectuality suffered in "Sandstone Keepsake", when the guards of an internment camp will not even bother to scrutinise from their watch-towers the poet's evening walk, promptly disregarding him as harmless, "a silhouette not worth bothering about", "not about to set times wrong or right" (Heaney 1984, 20). But, to the extent that the metapoetic drive of Heaney's poetry has (if anything) tended to increase, doubt and self-irony will predominantly be directed at writing, or, in even broader terms, at the use of words—as in "The Stone Verdict", an elegy for the poet's father in which the paucity and the mistrust of words which characterised him all his life ("an old disdain of sweet talk and excuses") implies honesty and straightforwardness; a sense of adequacy and "justice" would therefore require of "the ultimate court" that, in the end (as if this were a negative image of *Logos*, of the equation of God with the Word as what was "In the

straightforwardness; a sense of adequacy and “justice” would therefore require of “the ultimate court” that, in the end (as if this were a negative image of *Logos*, of the equation of God with the Word as what was “In the beginning”, according to John 1:1), there should be “more than words” (Heaney 1987, 17). The ensuing wish or command—“Let it be like the judgment of Hermes”—thus becomes, by alluding to the silent acquittal of Hermes in a trial at which the gods dropped pebbles at his feet, a yearning for a more material and trust-deserving pronouncement than the verbal; the extent to which the poet is thus making himself the rightful legatee of that “self-doubt” which “maimed” his father (Heaney 1987, 17) is further emphasised by the fact that, as Neil Corcoran points out, “Hermes is also the god of writing itself” (Corcoran 1998, 135). One might add that, within the volume *The Haw Lantern*, “The Stone Verdict” was immediately followed by the civic allegory “From the Land of the Unspoken”, with a scope of reference which included “a display / of absolutely silent quernstones”, and a range of memorable *dicta*—amongst which: “Our unspoken assumptions have the force / of revelation” (Heaney 1987, 18, 19).

This mistrust of the verbal would be pursued and reemerge, in different registers but with a remarkable permanence of lexis and phrase, in some of Heaney’s poems in the 1990s. We thus come upon the persona of the sequence “Mycenae Lookout” voicing his indifference to Greek respect for the power of the word in the *polis* (which also implies a minimisation of the ideal formative qualities of classical rhetoric):

Still isolated in my old disdain
Of clagues who always needed to be seen

And heard as the true Argives. Mouth athletes,
Quoting the oracle and quoting dates,
Petitioning, accusing, taking votes.

No element that should have carried weight
Out of the grievous distance would translate.
Our war stalled in the pre-articulate. (Heaney 1996, 33)

The notion that the verbal is tainted, and the corresponding yearning—all the more remarkable in a poet whose verbal wealth has been the basis of much of his success—for a pristine stage of pre-verbal meaning, would be restated in the translation (“from the Romanian of Marin Sorescu”) which, under the title “The First Words”, followed the Mycenaean sequence in the volume *The Spirit Level*:

The first words got polluted
Like river water in the morning

Flowing with the dirt
Of blurbs and the front pages.
My only drink is meaning from the deep brain (Heaney 1996, 38)

This yearning had, however, been previously ironised by Heaney, in one of the “Squarings” poems in his ground-breaking *Seeing Things*, as just another instance of bardic pretentiousness. The poem is about climbing the Capitol, and that *locus*, a seat of a great power, is suggestive of the sin of pride and of Christ’s temptation on top of the Temple (*Matthew* 4:5–6), an analogy somewhat balanced by the poet’s consciousness of being privileged:

We climbed the Capitol by moonlight, felt
The transports of temptation on the heights:
We were privileged and belated and we knew it. (Heaney 1991, 98)

But this experience of elation is promptly followed by invective against a classicizing sort of writing, construed in the image of that American public architecture for which the place in question is the topmost example—as well as an objective correlative for the poet’s own institutionalization. This awareness directly leads to a wish for a pristine plainness and spirituality:

Then something in me moved to prophesy
Against the beloved stand-offishness of marble
And all emulation of stone-cut verses.

‘Down with form triumphant, long live,’ (said I)
‘Form mendicant and convalescent. We attend
The come-back of pure water and the prayer-wheel.’ (Heaney 1991, 98)

All this is reduced, however, to its quixotic dimension by a condescending other voice which, frustrating any hierophantic expectations, superimposes on all previous considerations the imperative banality of social rituals and bodily needs (that deflation of sublime pretensions by the materiality of the body which Bergson defined as one of the conditions for laughter (Bergson 1963, 411–12)):

To which a voice replied, ‘Of course we do.
But the others are in the Forum Café waiting,
Wondering where we are. What’ll you have?’ (Heaney 1991, 98)

It is not the most violent and obvious instance of self-denunciation of those considered. But the mixture of patient condescension and sycophantic humouring in the voice which closes this poem signals a crucial

are of the favour as well as the onus inherent in writing from within a culture traditionally proud of the empowered word.

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