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## TAKERS AND MAKERS: HEANEY'S VIEW ON TWO POETIC MODES

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**Abstract.** *Two of Seamus Heaney's poems - 'Glanmore Sonnets (II)' and 'Elegy', and a number of his essays, are analysed in order to abstract and formulate the poet's theory about the two principal poetic modes. The difference between the takers and the makers, i.e., the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' poets, is in their attitude to the sources of creativity and to experience in general. It is demonstrated how the former yield to the flow of energy inherent in nature and the unconscious, which they regard as mysteries never to be completely divined. The latter, on the other hand, tend to bring the initial creative impulse under greater conscious control, illuminating and rationalizing the 'raw material' of their poetry. The paper also discusses formal and stylistic features of the two modes, as well as Heaney's own creed in this context.*

The essays, reviews and interviews of Seamus Heaney repeatedly advance the idea that it is basically possible, regardless of historical differences and literary movements, to distinguish between two kinds of poetry and two kinds of poets. Namely (as Blake Morrison summarized), these are:

*...les vers donnés as against les vers calculés; the poetry of chance and trance as against the poetry of resistance and perseverance; the poetry of 'sinking in' or the poetry of 'coming up against'; the instinctual or the rational; the feminine or the masculine; the 'artesian' or the 'architectonic'; the epiphanic or the crafted; the 'ooze' of poetry or its 'spur of flame'; the 'lived, illiterate and unconscious' or the 'learned, literate and conscious'; the takers (Wordsworth, D.H. Lawrence, Keats, Patrick Kavanagh) and the makers (Yeats, Hopkins, Jonson, Lowell, John Montague, John Hewitt); poets who sense, surrender, dive, divine,*

receive and coax, or poets who command, plot, assert, strike, labour and force.<sup>1</sup>

The division is evidently based upon two different attitudes to the sources of creativity and to experience in general. The poets who create in the 'feminine' mode, i.e., the mode of 'takers', yield to the flow of energy inherent in nature and the unconscious. In his essay on Wordsworth, Heaney quotes from *The Prelude* to demonstrate how the poet 'makes his music' by listening to his inner voice and also by registering, as a 'living tuning fork', the voices transmitted by woods, rivers and hills. According to a diary entry, again, Wordsworth lies in a trench listening to a nearby waterfall and imagines 'it would be as sweet thus to lie in the grave, and hear the peaceful sounds of the earth'.<sup>2</sup> Here the creative act is likened to plunging or falling into a trance, while the poem becomes a medium conveying the same experience to a reader.

Shakespeare is, in Heaney's opinion, also one of the 'takers':

Shakespeare... was more a medium through whom words flowed than a master who subdued them to his will. His imagination, in a single act, fused perception and intention; expression was recognition and discovery at once. An instinctive apprehension of what he had to say outstripped any deliberation on how it should be said. In his play *Timon of Athens* Shakespeare makes a poet speak about the process of composition and the multiplying metaphors of growth and energy convey what it must have felt like to the dramatist himself...

Poetry welled and flamed in his mind, naturally, without any difficult forcing. He was totally in communication with the life and abundance of his subconscious; insights and images, rhythms and rhetoric flowed like gifts...<sup>3</sup>

A work of art written in the 'feminine' mode does not issue from a conscious intention or an abstract idea, but from an intuitive insight which gradually takes on the shape of a poem. It is a concept Heaney has borrowed from T.S. Eliot, who calls this initial creative impulse 'the dark embryo'. Both Shakespeare and Eliot, according to Heaney, have a vision of poetic creation as a feminine action, parthenogenesis, 'where it is the ovum and its potentials... that underlies their accounts of poetic origins'.<sup>4</sup>

The poetry of 'takers' views the Universe and the psyche as secrets never to be completely divined. This is why this poetic mode renders its discoveries in intimations and allusions, by means of images, rhythm or sound, rather than in declarations or explicit statements. Heaney cites Blake's 'Sick Rose' as an example; it is a poem which 'drops petal after petal of suggestion without ever revealing its stripped core: it is an open invitation into its meaning rather than an assertion of it'.<sup>5</sup> The dominant elements of this kind of poetry are water and earth. They represent the unrestrained flow of natural energy and the unfathomable depths of the psyche; at the same time, however, these are archetypal feminine symbols.

<sup>1</sup> B. Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, London, Methuen & Co., 1982, pp. 53-54.

<sup>2</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, London, Faber & Faber, 1980, pp. 68-70.

<sup>3</sup> S. Heaney, 'Introduction' in *Macbeth*, W. Shakespeare, Dublin, Folens, 1973, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

It is the creative approach typical for Heaney's own early poetry, as numerous personae peopling his writings may serve to prove: the diviner, Antaeus, the Tollund Man; the fiddler in 'The Given Note', who discerns a melody in the sound of a storm on a mid-Atlantic island, while the others hear only 'strange noises'; Synge on Aran; 'The Last Mummer', whose performance invokes the shift of seasons and who leaves 'dark tracks' behind; 'Cairn-maker', upon whose monuments 'unexpected hives' and 'heather-bells' spring out of 'strange affiliation', while he talks about his work 'with almost fear'. In the sequence entitled 'Glanmore Sonnets', Heaney also associates his art with the poetic tradition of 'takers':

GLANMORE SONNETS (II)

Sensing, mountings from the hiding places,  
 Words entering almost the sense of touch,  
 Ferreting themselves out of their dark hutch -  
 'These things are not secrets but mysteries,'  
 Oisín Kelly told me years ago  
 In Belfast, hankering after stone  
 That connived with chisel, as if the grain  
 Remembered what the mallet tapped to know.  
 Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore  
 And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise  
 A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter  
 That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:  
 Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,  
 Each verse returning like the plough turned round.

Glanmore is an estate in Co. Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, where Heaney withdrew after the Troubles in Ulster had started taking their toll. This is why the poet says he 'landed' in Glanmore, as one would in a peaceful haven after sailing stormy seas. The uncomplicated rural life on this estate is compared to a 'hedge school', where the poet will be able to develop and perfect his utterance. The purpose of this schooling is to attain a kind of poetry which will be able to 'appease' passions and 'dispel' hatred; its task is not only to 'hold' and 'continue' a certain poetic tradition, but also to preserve basic human values.

The first line already reveals that 'Glanmore Sonnets' are to a great degree a homage to Wordsworth: 'the hiding places' from which the poet's inspiration emerges allude to 'the hiding places of power' in *The Prelude*:

The hiding places of my power  
 Seem open; I approach, and then they close;  
 I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,  
 May scarcely see at all, and I would give,  
 While yet we may, as far as words can give,  
 A substance and a life to what I feel:  
 I would enshrine the spirit of the past  
 For future restoration.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> W. Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. By T. Hutchinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 578.

Implicit in these verses is Heaney's own view of poetry, as he explains in his essay 'Feeling into Words'. 'The spirit of the past' may refer, as it most often does with Wordsworth, to the intensity and immediacy of the poet's childhood experiences. However, it may also refer to the past of humanity in general and the ancient instinctive wisdom which it is essential to 'enshrine' for spiritual 'restoration' of modern times.<sup>7</sup>

Finding a stronghold in nature and 'the hiding places' of one's inner self is also characteristic for both poets. Anne Stevenson writes:

...in Wordsworth we have the first instance in Britain of a poet in retreat from a corrupt society and a doubtful religion, digging in and fortifying the bastions of his own psyche. The poet as a hero appears romantically, of course, in Goethe and Byron; yet it is in Wordsworth that his *retreat* is most in evidence, his withdrawal from the world into a sacred area of personal sensitivity; opposing to the world not only Nature... but, *in* Nature, a subjective, irrational self.<sup>8</sup>

The analogy Heaney draws between a verse and the turn of a plough is also connected to Wordsworth. Wordsworth is a 'poet-ploughman'; the rhythm of his poetry corresponds to the slow sway of the body, since it was his practice to compose aloud while pacing up and down the country paths. This reminds Heaney of the fact that the English word *verse* comes from the Latin *versus*, 'which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another'.<sup>9</sup> The metaphor implies constant returning and diving into 'the hiding places', ritually invoked by the very rhythm of poetry. Writing a poem is like plunging into depths which are never fully fathomed, as the image of the opened ground at the end of 'Glanmore Sonnets' suggests. The ground symbolizes the portion of reality which is hidden, inarticulate and inaccessible to the rational comprehension, often referred to by the modern linguistics and philosophy as 'the other'. In Heaney's poem, however, it is exactly 'the other' which is the raw material of poetry, the terrain to be ploughed by the 'vowels' of poetic tongue. Heaney has already intimated most of these ideas in his early poem 'Digging', yet here they appear with new intensity and precision.

All the above mentioned motifs in the sonnet - the focus on nature and the irrational; a discourse whose main characteristics are intimations, allusions and the evoking rhythm; inconclusiveness; earth as the dominant element - point to the poetic mode Heaney has named 'feminine', or the mode of 'takers'. The most important idea, however, is conveyed by the image of the stone which Heaney's friend Oisín Kelly 'hankers after'. The sculptor longs for a stone whose natural grain is identical to the cleavage he intends to make with his chisel: human and natural creativity in complete harmony. The secret of this correspondence is in deep respect with which the ego should approach natural mysteries. Instead of setting out to carve with a complete and preconceived shape in mind, the sculptor 'taps' with his mallet as if the stone were a door which would open and reveal 'what the grain remembered'.

According to Heaney, in the 'masculine' mode, or the mode of 'makers',

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<sup>7</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> A. Stevenson, 'Stations: Seamus Heaney and the Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self' in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by T. Curtis, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 1994, pp. 47-48.

<sup>9</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p.65.

...the language functions as a form of address, of assertion or command, and the poetic effort has to do with conscious quelling and control of the materials, a labour of shaping; words are not music before they are anything else, nor are they drowsy from their slumber in the unconscious, but athletic, capable, displaying the muscle of sense.<sup>10</sup>

Although the poets who write in this mode use the creative impulse from the unconscious, they never yield to it. On the contrary, they tend to bring it under conscious control; their poetry is characterised by penetration, by the effort to illuminate and rationalize the dark and unclear which Heaney refers to as 'the other'. At the physical level, their idiom is also different from the idiom of 'the takers'. While the latter seem to surrender to the music and rhythm of the voices they hear in their trance, the former tend to impose greater formal control upon their material and compose their verse's music with greater awareness.

Gerard Manley Hopkins's famous 'sprung rhythm' is a good example of exactly this kind of control. In Heaney's opinion, Hopkins's rhythm originated in the unconscious and was probably inherent to his personality, but the poet felt an urge to convert it into strictly determined structures: 'He valued what he called "the masculine powers" in poetry, the presence of "powerful and active thought" - it was typical that when he realized his "new rhythm" he had to schematize it into a metric.'<sup>11</sup> This rhythm is 'a stimulant to the mind' and Heaney juxtaposes it to the rhythm of a typical 'taker' such as Keats. In Keats, the rhythm is narcotic and woos us to receive; Hopkins's alerts us and invites us to perceive.<sup>12</sup>

It is the kind of poetry whose style is precise and whose statements are crystallised and final, contrary to the 'feminine' poetry which endlessly drops 'petal after petal' of associations and suggestions. Instead of incubating 'the dark embryo', i.e., elaborating on a subconscious notion, 'the makers' create their poems by 'forging' and shaping. As Heaney says about Hopkins, 'There is a conscious push of the deliberating intelligence, a siring strain rather than a birth-push in his poetic act.'<sup>13</sup> The elements of the 'masculine' poetry are light, air and fire; hence the title of Heaney's essay on Hopkins - 'The Fire i' the Flint'.

Heaney supports Ted Hughes's theory that poetic imagination, sensibility and connectedness of feeling and thought are determined by the poet's notion of his Creator. The notion of the Great Mother, for example, is essential for Heaney's own poetics. To Hopkins, as Heaney points out, the Creator is a father, and all the features of his verse result from this fact.<sup>14</sup> Heaney also writes that certain images in Yeats's poetry recall the first chapter in the Book of Genesis, where God the Father's mind moves upon the waters.<sup>15</sup> Yeats's voice in poetry is also a 'masculine' voice, holding sway over the waters of the unconscious. However, Yeats is not a typical 'maker': in his best achievements, according to Heaney, he manages to reconcile the feminine and the masculine, proving that 'deliberation can be so intensified that it becomes synonymous with inspiration'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

In 'Elegy', written on the occasion of Robert Lowell's death, Heaney also analyses the credo of 'makers':

## ELEGY

The way we are living,  
timorous or bold,  
will have been our life.  
Robert Lowell,

the sill geranium is lit  
by the lamp I write by,  
a wind from the Irish Sea  
is shaking it -

here where we all sat  
ten days ago, with you,  
the master elegist  
and welder of English.

As you swayed the talk  
and rode on the swaying tiller  
of yourself, ribbing me  
about my fear of water,

what was not within your empery?  
You drank America  
like the heart's  
iron vodka,

promulgating art's  
deliberate, peremptory  
love and arrogance.  
Your eyes saw what your hand did

as you Englished Russian,  
as you bullied out  
heart-hammering blank sonnets  
of love for Harriet

and Lizzie, and the briny  
water-breaking dolphin -  
your dorsal nib  
gifted at last

to inveigle and to splash,  
helmsman, netsman, *retiarius*.  
That hand. Warding and grooming  
and amphibious.

Two a.m., seaboard weather.  
Not the proud sail of your great verse...

No. You were our night ferry  
 thudding in a big sea,  
 the whole craft ringing  
 with an armourer's music  
 the course set wilfully across  
 the ungovernable and dangerous.

And now a teem of rain  
 and the geranium *tremens*.  
*A father's no shield*  
*for his child -*

you found the child in me  
 when you took farewells  
 under the full bay tree  
 by the gate in Glanmore,

opulent and restorative  
 as that lingering summertime,  
 the fish-dart of your eyes  
 risking, 'I'll pray for you.'

The first lines already reveal a lot about Lowell's writings and life. Lowell certainly belongs to those whose 'way of living' was bold. Throughout his life he was a merciless critic of the American establishment. He labeled the postwar years 'the tranquillized fifties', condemning America for its life anesthetized by abundance, patriotism and conformity. In the sixties he was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. In his poetry and public appearances he accused his nation of continuing indifference to civil rights and its habit of imperialism and racism. Norman Mailer wrote that Lowell possessed 'the unwilling haunted saintliness' of a man who was repaying centuries of his nation's moral debts.<sup>17</sup>

The resolute, clear voice of Lowell's verse managed to influence the public, while still maintaining artistic qualities. It is Heaney's own poetic objective to attain such a voice, since he is aware that his age also calls for the condemnation of bloodshed and political hypocrisy. It is a feature of the 'masculine' poetry he would like to master:

It's clear, bare... I use the word public because it's not inwardly turned, it's set *out*. I think that the first voice I have is an inward musing, entranced at its best, but I would love to master a voice that could *talk out* as well as go into a trance.<sup>18</sup>

Another feature which makes Lowell a typical 'maker' is his tendency to control the unconscious. He wrestled with it, as it were, throughout his life. He was repeatedly institutionalized for recurring manic-depressive psychosis. Peter Conn notes the sharp contrast between an urgent, apocalyptic emotion in Lowell's poetry and an elegant,

<sup>17</sup> P. Conn, *Literature in America*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 456.

<sup>18</sup> J. Haffenden, ed., *Poets in Conversation*, London, Faber & Faber, 1981, p. 70.

mannered technique which holds it in check.<sup>19</sup> 'Lowell's bravery', Heaney points out, 'was different from the bravery of John Berryman or Sylvia Plath, with whom his name has often been joined. They swam away powerfully into the dark swirls of the unconscious and the drift towards death, but Lowell resisted that, held fast to conscience and pushed deliberately towards self-mastery.'<sup>20</sup>

In 'Elegy', Heaney applies the same water symbolism. Lowell's poetical and life creed - gaining mastery over emotions and irrational urges - is presented in the images of a tillerman and a night ferry whose course is 'set wilfully across the ungovernable and dangerous'. There are more images and motifs indicative of Lowell's 'masculine' approach to poetry. Lowell is likened to a *retiarius*, a netsman who weaves his intuitive insights into a firm web of rational structures and definitions. He 'hammers' his love poems, shaping them to fit the strict form of blankverse sonnets. His ship, 'thudding in a big sea' is 'ringing with an armourer's music'. The image suggests not only that Lowell creates his poems by forging, i.e., by the conscious strain of intellect, but also that he tends to deal aggressively with 'the dark element'.

Implicit throughout the poem, actually, is Heaney's doubt about the properness of Lowell's attitude to poetry and the self. It is the same doubt Heaney expresses in his essay:

Was there a 'misalliance'... between the gift and the work it was harnessed to do? One is reluctant to say yes in face of the gigantic effort, the pile-up of magnificent things he brought off within the general plan, the honesty and daring with which he lived through private and public trauma in the late sixties and early seventies, and the boldness with which he wrote them out - but finally and reluctantly, yes is the answer.<sup>21</sup>

Heaney seems to suggest that Lowell controls something which should not be controlled. The image of a poet who 'bullies out' his sonnets implies that he does the same to his emotions, and perhaps it is also indicative of his relationship to his wife and daughter, of whom he writes. His verse also 'bullies out' the dolphin, a symbol of life joy and free creative energy. Lowell seems to have been aware of his mistakes: in the final poem of *The Dolphin* collection he confesses he was 'not avoiding injury to others / not avoiding injury to myself', whereas the last verse, 'my eyes have seen what my hand did', is interpreted by Heaney as a blend of triumph and self-accusation.<sup>22</sup>

The puns in Heaney's poem also allude to Lowell's 'masculine' mode of writing. In the eight stanza, for instance, there is the syntagm *dorsal nib*. One possible meaning of *dorsal* is 'of the back' and a reader, referred to a dolphin, is expecting the syntagm *dorsal fin*. Instead, however, we are given the image of a split pen-point (*nib*), which brings to mind another meaning of *dorsal* - 'at the back of the altar', reminiscent of Lowell's conversion to Roman Catholicism. Instead of a dorsal fin, which would symbolically enable a poet to swim in the waters of the unconscious, the resulting image is quite the opposite - it suggests that Lowell writes 'behind the church altar'. Such a twist reveals a lot about Heaney's view on Lowell's poetry.

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<sup>19</sup> P. Conn, op.cit., p. 457.

<sup>20</sup> S. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 98.



The poem also provides an insight into the relationship between the two poets. Self-assuredly, Lowell ribs Heaney about his fear of water. As always in Heaney's poetry, water stands for the hidden aspects of the psyche and natural mysteries which both fascinate the poet and fill him with primordial awe. 'Fear is the emotion that the muse thrives on,' says Heaney. 'That's always there.'<sup>23</sup> A fear of water, i.e., a fear of secrets within and around man which cannot be rationally comprehended, denotes Heaney as a 'taker' whose poetics is sharply opposed to Lowell's. On the other hand, Heaney, being younger, views Lowell's authoritative figure with almost filial respect, and wonders about the exact scope of the older poet's influence upon his work.

Finally, however, it turns out that their two poetics are completely different. The two poets take farewells under a bay tree. Robert Graves explains the complex mythological background of this symbol. At first, when the Triple Goddess or the Muse was the mother and enchantress to the poets, bay was used as an intoxicant; the celebrants of the Goddess chewed bay leaves to induce a poetic and erotic frenzy. Then, with the transition to patriarchy, Apollo was established as the new God of Poetry, while the Ninefold Muse was given a subordinate role to inspire individual poets in his honour. However, Apollo is also the God of Reason and his motto 'nothing in excess' determines new rules: poetic inspiration is still necessary, but it must not reach the point of ecstasy. Apollo's initiates no longer chew bay leaves - they just wear garlands of bay as a token of his favour.<sup>24</sup>

The bay tree in Heaney's 'Elegy' turns out to be a pithy symbol of the essential discrepancy between the two poetic traditions. In spite of occasional wavering, Heaney eventually opts for the one which requires completeness, a perception wider than a strictly rational world-view and deep respect for the secrets of the Universe.

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<sup>23</sup> J. Haffenden, op.cit., p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> R. Graves, *The White Goddess*, London, Faber & Faber, 1961., pp. 391-2.

## **PROROCI I ZANATLIJE: HINIJEVO VIĐENJE DVA POETSKA MODUSA**

**Nataša Tučev**

*Hinijeva teorija o dva ključna poetska modusa u ovom radu se razmatra kroz analizu njegove poezije i eseja. Pesnici čije je obeležje "ženski", "proročki" modus, stvaraju kroz proces predaje i prepuštanja energetskim tokovima otkrivenim u prirodi i nesvesnom; za njih su to ujedno i tajne koje se nikada ne mogu do kraja odgonetnuti. Predstavnici "muškog", "zanatskog" modusa, s druge strane, teže da početni kreativni impuls potčine većoj svesnoj kontroli; njihovo obeležje je penetracija, prodiranje svetlošću racija u ono što je nejasno i nerasvetljeno. Različit stav koji ove tradicije imaju prema izvorištima inspiracije i stvarnosti uopšte odražava se i na njihove formalne i stilske osobenosti. Ove Hinijeve postavke su, naravno, u neposrednoj vezi i sa njegovim ličnim stvaralačkim iskustvima.*