

*Digging' New Ground?*

**Sukanya Basu** (University of Aberdeen)

A Review of

**Ashby. B. Crowder** and **Jason. D. Hall**, eds., *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*

(Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), ISBN-13: 978-0-230-00342-2, ISBN-10: 0-230-00342-7, xii + 214pp

In their introduction to *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*, the editors justify yet another collection of essays devoted entirely to Seamus Heaney by pointing out the relative under representation of Heaney's prose and later verse in the reams of available scholarship on the poet. The book claims to 'redress' this imbalance in 'Heaney Studies' by focussing its attention on the overlooked translations, the prose and the 'connections between the prose and the poetry' (2). While this fresh perspective is indeed commendable and long overdue, the volume as a whole does not quite fulfil the criterion that it sets out for itself in the introduction. Of the twelve essays in the collection, only four deal directly with Heaney's critical prose while another two are concerned with the translations. The remaining six essays all concentrate on various aspects of Heaney's verse. Apart from Ruben Moi's discussion of *Electric Light*, the essays on Heaney's poetry tend to rehearse some of the critical ideas that have become commonplace in 'Heaney Studies'. Heaney as 'a poet of in-betweenness' (8) is identified as the central conceit of the book by its editors. They fail to mention that this notion has already been widely explored (see, for instance, Neil Corcoran's discussion of this topic in *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1998)). There is also no perceived structural unity in the collection as the essays follow each other in no particular order. A clearer division of the book into separate critical categories would greatly benefit the reader. Despite these shortcomings, the collection is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the field of 'Heaney Studies'.

The book opens with Stephen Regan's appraisal of Heaney's use of the elegiac form as a vehicle of 'redress'. The close alliance of this view with Wordsworth's belief in the 'consolatory powers of literature' (9) is duly noted. Regan situates Heaney's poems within the context of not only Classical and the English elegiac traditions but also the distinct tradition of 'ritual mourning' (10) in Ireland which is seen to be more political and public in nature. He argues that Heaney's elegies draw upon these several traditions yet remain contemporary by keeping their 'modern readership' (22) in mind. The essay revisits select elegies to demonstrate how Heaney's adoption of a position of in-betweenness enables him to move beyond limiting personal concerns.

The next essay by Richard R. Russell once again foregrounds the significance of the poet's liminal stance vis-à-vis the political situation in Northern Ireland. This enabling poetic strategy is said to be borrowed from Yeats as Heaney, like his predecessor, is able to look beyond given circumstances and articulate a 'vision of reality... [that] is transformative' (39). Both Regan and Russell see the state of in-betweenness as a positive creative force which is unusual given the criticism that has come Heaney's way for political fence-sitting (See Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982) pp.15-16).

Colleen McKenna, in her discussion of Heaney's literary 'terrain', traces the symbolic significance of the 'poetic tree' in Heaney's oeuvre and demonstrates how it assumes 'literary, mythical and cultural' significance at separate stages in his poetic career (42). She

notes how Heaney identifies with the tree of his childhood much like Yeats does with his tower at Thoor Ballylee.

There is a shift of focus in the book as the next chapter finds Sidney Burris examining Heaney's critical essays on the work of exemplary poets. Burris uses Heaney's Nobel Lecture *Crediting Poetry* to explain the specific way in which Heaney reads other poets which he argues is akin to Virginia Woolf's 'notion of the common reader' (61). Burris contends that Heaney's prose, like his verse, is 'a site of variously contending discourses' (65) and that Heaney is able to ultimately balance out the 'contending discourses' of Northern Irish politics in the course of his writing. He concludes that Heaney sees artists such as Hopkins, Keats, and Wordsworth as exemplary for having struggled with and overcome conflict in their lives and art. Michael Baron's well-researched study lists the various reasons for the negative publicity that Heaney's critical writing has attracted. Baron finds the critics over eager in demanding a price for Heaney's literary success and puts forward a persuasive defence of Heaney's critical procedures. To the argument that Heaney does not sufficiently 'separate poetic and critical writing' (75) Baron claims that Heaney's critical writing is similar to that of Marina Tsvetaeva in that it is 'a continuation of poetry by other means'(82). Furthermore, he provides evidence that Heaney is himself aware of the double-edged nature of poetic authority. The subsequent essays, by Jerzy Jarniewicz and Daniel W. Ross, look at the ways in which Heaney's art is shaped by his engagement with exemplary poets from America and Poland such as Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert.

Alison Finlay and Paul Turner concern themselves with Heaney's translations of Beowulf and Sophocles's *Philoctetes* respectively. Turner, a classical scholar, compares Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* with *Philoctetes* and is strongly critical of the liberties that Heaney's version takes with the Greek original. Turner calls for a revision of the accepted norms of translation from classical literatures where the translators no longer remain 'verbally faithful' (132) or respectful to the spirit and style of the source text. Unlike Turner, who finds Heaney's method of translation exploitative, Finlay is kinder in her assessment of Beowulf. In a detailed analysis she demonstrates how Heaney is alert to the intonations and poetic styles of Old English poetry and maintains 'a fine line between antiquarian formality and modern demotic' (140) in his version of the poem.

The final section of the book returns to the poetry: Joseph Brooker's essay retraces the paths of Heaney's 'retrospective imagination' (156) in his *Station Island* poems and demonstrates the different strategies (such as 'archaeological memory') adopted by the poet to represent and comment on the past.

Ruben Moi, in his wide-ranging discussion of *Electric Light* (2001), reads Heaney's verse in light of his established position as a celebrated poet. In an extensive and illuminating analysis of Heaney's poetic procedures, Moi provides readers with useful close readings of several poems. He observes that the poems in *Electric Light* revisit some of the preoccupations of Heaney's earlier verse but with lesser force than the previous volumes. Moi illustrates the progression that Heaney's verse has undergone by comparing the earlier 'The Toome Road' with 'At Toomebridge'. He also emphasises the fact that 'conscientious questions of aesthetic autonomy and social relevance have continued to inform Heaney's creative and critical idiom throughout his career' (173).

The concluding essay in the collection by Barbara Hardy reveals various inter-textual echoes in a sample of Heaney poems. In each case, she expresses discomfort with

Heaney's literary borrowings because they affect the 'host art' in a negative manner. Heaney's verse invariably suffers in comparison with the original context of the quotations as Hardy finds Heaney's allusions to be 'a habitual part of serious self-history and self-projection' (207).

To summarise, Heaney's relationship to place, memory, language, politics, literary tradition, poetic exemplars, his exploration of verse forms, his deep sense of artistic responsibility, the self-referential nature of his poetics and criticism are the diverse threads that tie this book together. Although Heaney as a poet dominates this collection, the roles of critic and translator are also given some space to assume their true importance. Despite the imbalance in the volume between the poetry and the other work, it is nevertheless a useful resource for students of Heaney and signals a way forward for future discussions on Heaney's critical prose and translations.