**GREGORY DOWLING**

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**Tilting the World*:* Seamus Heaney’s poem *Miracle***

**Miracle**

Not the one who takes up his bed and walks  
But the ones who have known him all along  
And carry him in –

Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked  
In their backs, the stretcher handles  
Slippery with sweat. And no let-up

Until he's strapped on tight, made tiltable  
And raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for healing.  
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait

For the burn of the paid-out ropes to cool,  
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity  
To pass, those ones who had known him all along.

(*Human Chain*, 2010)

*Miracle*, which appeared in Heaney’s last collection, is not one of his best-known poems but it is clearly one that meant a good deal to him, since he chose it for public readings on a number of occasions in his final years. The reasons why this poem, and the story it tells, should have appealed to him at this point in his life are clear enough: he wrote it after suffering a stroke in 2006. However, what is fascinating about the poem is that the emphasis is not in any way on the sick man, nor indeed on the figure of the divine healer, but rather on the community of people around the sick man, who help to bring about the miracle. The title of the volume that includes the poem is telling enough: *Human Chain*.

I therefore wish to examine this poem for what it tells us of Heaney’s sense of community. This, of course, is not a new topic and I cannot hope to explore it in all its complexity in the space of this essay; I do wish, however, to draw attention to the generosity of spirit that informs this poem, as the poet reassesses the important theme of an individual’s relationship to his community in the light of a major personal crisis. I also wish to bring out the way the feeling of gratitude expressed in this poem contributes to the overall sense of an opening out to the world, a theme that runs throughout the book and confers the dominant mood. This opening out implies a renewed sense of the wonders of the world, one expressed, as often in Heaney, through images of unexpected angles of vision, as offered by new skylights or “tilted” views of the world; Heaney not only tells the truth slant, but sees it so too. From the poem *Fosterling* onwards (in *Seeing Things*), Heaney has seen it as part of his role as a poet «to credit marvels».

With regard to his sense of his relationship to the wider community, Heaney had long been aware of his role as a «smiling public man», to quote the phrase from Yeats’s poem *Among School-Children*, a description that he found all too pertinent to himself. The Irish poet—and even more so the Northern Irish poet—is all too often forced to assume a public role, whether wishing to or not. It goes, so to speak, with the job. Heaney’s move with his family to Southern Ireland in 1972 was compared with Horace’s retirement to the Sabine farm, a comparison that sometimes became an accusation. In a poem with the deliberately ironic title *Flight Path,* Heaney tells of an encounter on a train with a political activist, who demands, «When, for fuck’s sake, are you going to write / Something for us?» The poet’s answer was: «If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for myself» (*The Spirit Level*, 25).

Heaney has written elsewhere of the need, when dealing with the political situation of his divided land, to view things from a shifted perspective. In an essay on Ireland he refers to the «large number of poems in which the Northern Irish writer views the world from a great spatial or temporal distance, the number of poems imagined from beyond the grave, from the perspective of mythological or historically remote characters» (*Finders Keepers*, 130). This may seem odd at first, for a poet whose physical closeness to his roots was always considered one of his most distinctive features: one need only think of the early intense poems about his own childhood and the rural community in which he grew up. In these poems he brings the reader into that world of close-knit family ties, of keenly observed manual and physical activities, so that we feel in direct and sensuous contact with the «green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms» of the wetlands (*Preoccupations,* 19).

But the paradox is only apparent. Closeness to the land and to one’s community does not mean an inability to observe things with a certain necessary detachment. Heaney said in a radio interview that «Lyric defiance was as important as civic responsibility at a certain point», and this defiance called for a certain obliqueness of approach. He talked about Northern Irish poems as being «stretched between politics and transcendence» (*Finders Keepers*, 231), giving the example of Derek Mahon’s *Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*; he could also have given the examples of his own archaeological poems in *North*, the sequence «Station Island»*,* or the tercet poems «Squarings»in *Seeing Things*.

Heaney used the words «stretched between…» but he could equally well have said «balanced between…». It is striking how often images and metaphors of equilibrium recur in his poetry and his critical writings. He said, for example, of Simone Weil: «her whole book is informed by the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress—tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium» (*The Redress of Poetry*, 3). And when discussing Heaney I think it is worth occasionally tilting the scales towards his more transcendental side; the stress is all too often laid only on the Antaeus-like tendency of his poetry, the downward tug towards a muddy omphalos, as seen in all those poems celebrating «the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat» (*Death of a Naturalist*, 14), a ground that is like «black butter / Melting and opening underfoot» (*Door into the Dark*, 55). But it should be remembered that he also associates his home with a «sense of air, of lift and light», as in this wonderful description: «Light dancing off the shallows of the Moyola River, shifting in eddies on the glaucous whirlpool» (*Preoccupations*, 20).

He was, in fact, a poet with an extraordinary range of tones, sounds—and, indeed, visions. And the poem «Miracle» belongs to this more visionary side, even though in a rather paradoxical fashion, as we shall see. It was, as already said, the first poem he wrote after his stroke in the year 2006 and it is, among other things, a poem of gratitude. The story of the miracle is recounted in both the Gospel of St Mark and the Gospel of St Luke; Heaney seems to draw more on the latter version, because of the extra details that St Luke provides. Here are the salient details of the story as they appear in both Gospels in the Authorized Version:

*Gospel of St Mark*: And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken *it* up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.

*Gospel of St Luke*: And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him.

And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus.

It was not, in fact, the first time that Heaney had drawn upon this story for a poem. In a sonnet entitled *The Skylight*, in the sequence «Glanmore Revisited» (*Seeing Things*, 1991), Heaney uses the same story to describe the effect of the opening of a skylight in his house. In this case the emphasis is on the sense of sudden revelation, in keeping with the decidedly visionary tone of the book as a whole. Heaney uses the structure of the sonnet to great effect, so that the final sestet is in complete contrast in mood, imagery, sound and diction, with the octave. The first eight lines describe the poet’s previous love of the closed snugness of the old attic; he uses a series of characteristic adjectival compounds («tongue-and-groove», «nest-up-in-roof», «snuff-dry», «trunk-lid»), and words tightly paired by consonants or vowels («low and closed», «hutch and hatch») to add to the sense of musty constriction; the words are nearly all monosyllabic. The first line of the octave, by contrast, concludes with a long Latinate adjective, «extravagant», applied to the sky, which, we are told, now «entered» the house and «held surprise wide open» (*Seeing Things*, 37), as if it were a magic casement to a kingdom of marvels. The final simile takes us to the Gospel story, but seen from an unexpected angle, that of «an inhabitant / Of that house» where the miracle took place. The pertinence of the story is obvious enough, since the miracle was performed precisely because the sick man’s friends had opened a kind of skylight into the house so that their friend could reach Jesus.

In *Seeing Things* Heaney uses the story in order to communicate the sense of miraculous change that has come about thanks to the skylight. As already said, there is a strong visionary note to the whole collection; the notion of suddenly «seeing things» from an unexpected angle recurs throughout the book. For example, the title poem describes the unwonted experience of a sailing-trip in which the speaker gazes into the water:

It was as if I looked from another boat

Sailing through air, far up, and could see

How riskily we fared into the morning,

And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads

(*Seeing Things*, 16)

This poem finds its visionary counterpart later in the book with the legend of the monks of Clonmacnoise, a monastery founded in the sixth century on the River Shannon; the monks saw a flying ship above them: when the ship’s anchor hooked into the altar rails the monks had to help free the ship:

‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,’

The abbot said, ‘unless we help him. So

They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back

Out of the marvelous as he had known it.

(*Seeing Things*, 62)

The ordinary thus becomes the marvelous, the quotidian is transformed into miracle.

The poem *Miracle* is in some ways a kind of mirror-image of the Clonmacnoise poem. *Miracle*, as the title indicates, is actually describing a genuine miracle, and Heaney has the paradoxical task of turning it into something quotidian—and then finding a new sense of the miraculous in its very ordinariness. The poem takes up the story as the Gospel recounts it, and as he had recounted it in *The Skylight*. In this later poem he deliberately announces the shift of viewpoint in the first line: «Not the one who takes up his bed and walks» (*Human Chain*, 17). This is going to be the story of the helpers: those who undertook the sheer physical task of lifting the sick man onto the roof and then of lowering him into the house. This, of course, is Heaney’s tribute to all those who helped him in his illness.

Heaney pays his tribute by showing marvelous attention to the physical details of the work involved. It is clearly this aspect of the story that struck him; he imagines every detail of the great effort that is required first to get the invalid up to the roof, and then to lower him by ropes into the building. His awareness of the important of equilibrium is here given literal expression, as he describes the operation of strapping the invalid to his bed so that he is «made tiltable». We also see his sensitivity to the tools of work, something clear from the very first (and very famous) poem, *Digging*, in his first book; using his «squat pen» he succeeded in conveying to the reader all the physical sensations involved in the skillful use of a spade. In this much later poem he depicts both the «stretcher handles / Slippery with sweat» and the reverse sensation of the «burn of the paid-out ropes».

As in the poems I have cited from *Seeing Things*, much of the effect comes from the contrasting images of rising and lowering, and the change of viewpoint that this entails. What is sequentially the last action in the story is actually described in the first line: «Not the one who takes up his bed and walks». This, of course, is the actual miracle, the part of the story that everyone is familiar with; however, the poet tells us this only in the negative, announcing that his focus is going to be elsewhere. That action, so to speak, is the easy part; his interest is in the difficult part played by all those who prepared the way for the miracle. In contrast to the beneficiary of the miracle, who «takes up his bed and walks», the helpers are described by means of images that emphasize their sheer physical heaviness and downward-pulling exhaustion, and he uses one of his characteristic compound adjectives: «Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked / In their backs».

The poem has a touch of the didactic about it, as the speaker instructs the reader to «Be mindful of them as they stand and wait». The sentence will continue in the next tercet («For the burn of the paid-out ropes to cool») but the effect of the enjambment is to remind us of the final line of Milton’s sonnet «On his Blindness» («They also serve who only stand and wait»); Milton’s poem is, of course, about the very denial of light and vision. However, the helpers in Heaney’s poem do share in the elevatory effect of the miracle, as the penultimate line tells us, with a reference to «Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity». They too have been «made tiltable»—which is to say, their vision of the world has adjusted to a new and more wondrous order of things.

The word «lightheadedness» recurs in the penultimate poem in the same volume, *In the Attic*, which draws on an episode from Heaney’s childhood, which he recounts in one of his interviews with Dennis Driscoll; he says that the only words he can recall his grandfather saying were a question about a trip that he, the child, had made to the theatre to see a performance of *Treasure Island*; in asking the question his grandfather revealed he had forgotten the name of one of the characters in the novel: «I was vouchsafed a glimpse of the mysterious gulf between childhood and old age […] What that shift from Israel to Isaac told me was that he had read *Treasure Island* decades before, and that it had stayed with him and was a part of everything that had happened to him in between and the fleetness of all that was somehow processed into his slip of memory» (*Stepping Stones*, 27).

The poem is full of imagery of rising and sinking, drawn in part from passages in *Treasure Island*. In the second stanza he places himself as speaker in the attic with the famous skylight, which reveals a view of a birch-tree planted twenty years earlier, now cutting off his view of the sea but also offering an imaginary return to scenes in the novel, with the young Jim swaying in the crow’s nest. In the last stanza Heaney compares his aged failure to grasp names and his «uncertainty on stairs» to «the lightheadedness // Of a cabin boy’s first time on the rigging». As in *Miracle,* the word «lightheadedness» indicates both uncertainty and exhilaration, and in the final tercet of the poem another connection with the earlier poem becomes evident, as he states:

It’s not that I can’t imagine still

That slight untoward rupture and world-tilt

As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed.

(*Human Chain*, 84)

The «world-tilt» is clearly identified here with the «visionary gleam» of boyhood as celebrated by the Romantics. His last book testifies clearly to the passing of time and the onset of old age; however, he also reveals that his sense of wonder is as fresh as ever, as is his «sense of air, of lift and light». It is highly fitting that the last poem in the book is a version of Pascoli’s *L’aquilone*; Heaney had translated the entire poem (the translation can be seen in Geoffrey Brock’s *Italian Poetry: an Anthology*), but for this volume he selected and adapted a few central stanzas from the poem. In this adaptation, among other things, he changes the deliberately Yeatsian phrase «Urbino’s windy hill» (*To a Wealthy Man*) to «Anahorish Hill»—«the first hill in the world», as he describes it in an early poem. The most significant change is the fact that he cuts the last stanzas of Pascoli’s poem, which mourn the death of a boyhood friend, in order to end the poem, and the entire volume, with the exuberantly paradoxical line: «The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall» (*Human Chain*, 85).

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