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Heaney Translating Heaney: Coupling and Uncoupling the Human Chain

Kevin Murphy

Translation is a central element in Seamus Heaney's poetry. Early in his poetic career, he found ways of locating in other languages, or even other media, particular sites of anxiety or tension in his own circumstances and using his responses to, or translations of, those sites to record and interrogate those tensions. The photographs of P. V. Glob in *The Bog People*; the conflicted circumstances of Sweeney, the medieval Irish king driven astray; and the peculiar political tensions at the core of Greek drama have all provided Heaney with opportunities to explore, albeit obliquely, the psychic and political consequences of living in the midst of division and civil violence. At times, Heaney has been criticized for the liberties he takes in his translations, especially his versions of Sophocles, at one point being accused of bleaching out all political ambiguities in *Antigone* (Wills n. pag.) and at another of using *Philoctetes* as a kind of knacker's yard, a handy source of raw material for his Muse (Turner 131).¹

Heaney himself does not seem to have been particularly disturbed by these criticisms and in many ways saw Robert Lowell's 1961 *Imitations* as a permission-granting exemplar. In a diverting exchange with Robert Hass discussing various approaches to the act of translation, Heaney proposes an analogy with the strategies employed by the Vikings in their early assaults on the islands of England and Ireland—one involving a raid, the other a settlement. As he says, "Now, a good motive for translation is the Raid. You go in—it is the Lowell method—and you raid Italian, you raid German, you raid Greek, and you end up with booty that you call *Imitations*." In contrast, "there is the Settlement approach in which one enters the oeuvre, colonizes it, takes it over—but you stay with it and it changes you a little bit. Robert Fitzgerald stayed with Homer, Lattimore stayed with him, Bob Hass has stayed with Czeslaw Milosz. I stayed with *Beowulf*." Heaney then goes on to describe his raid on Dante when he translated the Ugolino section of the *Inferno* in *Field Work*. He admits that he added imagery and thought that his translation did not have the

smooth fluency of the original. Even more, when he thinks back to his initial translation of the passage from Book VI of *The Aeneid* where Aeneas has to find the golden bough, he describes that translation as “a raid, and it led into a book where I met my father in a poem called ‘Seeing Things.’” But then Heaney adds a significant explanatory afterthought: “As ever in the raid system, there was something out there in the other language that I needed” (Heaney and Hass n. pag.).

In this essay, I am specifically interested in the way Heaney weaves and transposes translations into the poems of *Human Chain*, particularly in his grafting of the circumstances of the original texts to crucial situations and tensions in his own life. Even more, it seems Heaney wishes to expand and modify the entire notion of translation itself so that the poems he finds in other languages become an avenue for reprising and addressing unresolved anxieties in his own formation. In this sense, the “need” these translations seem to address in this, his final volume, is considerably more personal and autobiographical than in earlier Heaney poems. At times, this translation, or transference from one circumstance or location to another, seems straightforward. For example, “A Herbal,” a sequence of poems after Eugène Guillevic’s “Herbier de Bretagne,” becomes in Heaney’s translation a herbal of Derry, as the graveyard flowers of Brittany become the whin and docken and broom of Northern Ireland, imparting a local flavor and fragrance to the self-elegaic *memento mori* ambiance of the sequence (*Human Chain* 35–44; hereafter *HC*). But even here, it is clear that, in paring Guillevic’s already sparse and elemental evocation of the Brittany landscape by almost a hundred lines and carefully rearranging the closing sections of the sequence, Heaney is more interested in what Denise Levertov calls in her translations of Guillevic “reconstituting” the poem than in reproducing it as such (xii). As we will see, in a volume in which Heaney envisions the entire span of his existence, from his imagined moment of conception to his imagined moment of mortal rupture, the Guillevic sequence becomes something of a meditative interval, with the stark lines “I had my existence. I was there. / Me in place and the place in me” a distillation of the fragile sense of mortality that pervades the entire volume (*HC* 44).²

Again, the cluster of three eleventh-century Irish poems attributed to Colmcille seems at first simply one Irish writer’s distant salute to another. The three poems, however, which depict the Irish saint’s stoical embrace of his work as a scribe and scholar, his love for the town of Derry, and his lament as he sailed into exile from Ireland, have both subtle and specific linkage to Heaney’s life and work. As Michael Parker notes in a comparative analysis of Heaney’s translation of “Colum Cille Cecinit” and earlier translations of the poem by Kuno Meyer and Flann O’Brien, Heaney here links Colmcille’s forbearing stance toward writing to the diction and values of his own work, so much so that, as Parker says, “[w]hat

we seem to be witnessing here is both identification and expropriation as Heaney self-consciously translates himself book after book in his quest for self-renewal" (340).³ Moreover, as we will see, within the intertextuality of *Human Chain* itself, Heaney conflates Colmcille's writing and that of his father as a cattle drover ("Lick the Pencil"). But perhaps most poignantly, Heaney elliptically cites the line of Colmcille's exile lament ("a grey eye will look back") at the very moment when, at age twelve, he was left off at his boarding school in Derry and separated both from his parents and from the thatched-roof-cottage world of his childhood at Mossbawn ("Album"). That this sense of exile is associated with the act of writing is sealed by the parents marking the occasion with the gift of an elegant fountain pen ("The Conway Stewart").

At the heart of the collection, however, is once again Heaney's very self-conscious translation of passages from Book VI of *The Aeneid*, passages which have been a constant with him for years, and passages, as it happens, he associates with a particular site and memory in his adolescent formation.⁴ The two poems dealing specifically with Book VI, "The Riverbank Field" and "Route 110," were brought out in 2007 in a separate edition from Gallery Press and were subsequently incorporated into *Human Chain*. While both poems develop Heaney's complex response to Book VI, the first becomes, in addition to an explanation and explication of the passages at hand, an illustration of Heaney's unusual expansion of straightforward translation from one language to another into what becomes for him a kind of meshing of classical and autobiographical circumstance. This intertextual weaving is a strategy he will employ throughout *Human Chain*. Heaney opens "The Riverbank Field" with these lines:

Ask me to translate what Loeb gives as
 "In a retired vale . . . a sequestered grove"
 And I'll confound the Lethe in Moyola

By coming through Back Park down from Grove Hill
 Across Long Rigs on to the riverbank— (HC 47)

While the speaker states his intention to transpose the circumstances of the Virgilian underworld to the more familial topology and place-names of County Derry, he employs the unusual verb "confound" to indicate this transformation, a verb that can mean to mix up or mingle so that the elements become difficult to distinguish or impossible to separate, but more often indicates a state of confusion of mind or feelings (*OED*). In addition, this riverbank field that the speaker finally comes to is a place of spiritual transformation and transmigration where "memories of this underworld are shed" and souls can respond to their longing "to dwell in flesh and

blood / Under the dome of sky" (HC 47–48). As it happens, this mingling, or confounding, of memory and transformation moves to the forefront in the companion poem "Route 110."

In this twelve-section poem, the speaker recounts the purchase of Book VI in a used bookshop in Belfast and then, by means of a bus journey across Northern Ireland in space and backward in time, draws an extended parallel between that journey and Aeneas's journey through the underworld to encounter his father in the Elysian Fields. At one point, Heaney shifts "Venus's doves" to "McNicholls' pigeons / Out of their pigeon holes but homing still" (HC 52); at another, he opens with Virgil's description of Dido's shade in the underworld ("*As one when the month is young sees a new moon*" [HC 54]) to allude to his own misgivings about an early romantic breakup. One might see in this kind of parallel a version of Patrick Kavanagh's "Epic," in which the local row means more to the speaker than the Munich bother, with the Latin epic transfigurations infusing the local and autobiographical with a kind of universality.

More significantly, at least in terms of the larger classical motif, the penultimate section of "Route 110" has both father and son fishing on the riverbank in silence, enacting, or reenacting, the encounter between Aeneas and his father on the riverbank in the Virgilian underworld. This scene, however, is filled with perceptual uncertainty, both father and son unsure whether the gleam in the water's surface is an otter's head or, in the twilight filled with the hovering of midge-drifts, the riverbank field itself was solid ground. The final lines underscore the unresolved nature of the encounter:

as if we had commingled,
Among shades and shadows stirring on the brink
And stood there waiting, watching,
Needy and ever needier for translation. (HC 56–57)

What both father and son are watching and waiting for is not identified, nor is the need which each has for "translation," a word whose meaning now seems closer to some kind of emotional or spiritual transformation than its usual semiotic connotation of the transfer of meaning from one language to another. While the word can mean alternation or renovation, or, more broadly, in terms of rhetoric, the very act of metaphor itself, given the riverbank as the locus of spiritual transformation and transmigration in the Virgilian underworld, it seems Heaney also wishes to imply in his use of "translation" the connotation of the removal of a physical body to a spiritual state (*OED*). The twelve-section poem ends with a reference to the birth of a granddaughter, but the scene on the riverbank field remains enigmatically unsettled.

As it happens, the riverbank field is a site that Heaney has visited often before in his poems, and it's helpful to remember that "the riverbank field" itself is linked to Heaney's childhood, since it was the name of one of the planting fields at Mossbawn which ran down to the Moyola River (O'Driscoll 18). The early poem "Broagh," meaning "riverbank" in Irish, explores the etymological roots of the name, which fuses Scottish, Gaelic, and English diction, together with its peculiar sonic "gh" ending, which "strangers find so hard to say" (*Opened Ground* 55; hereafter *OG*). It's also the location of Heaney's first encounter as a child with an intimation of his father's mortality in the third section of "Seeing Things" (*OG* 317). Perhaps most tellingly, this poem also revisits the exact scene portrayed in "The Harvest Bow" in which, during these fishing expeditions to the riverbank just before the son's departure for boarding school, the father's skillful plaiting of a harvest bow becomes an artistic stand-in for the emotional affirmation that remains unsaid, allowing the now-retrospective adult to "tell and finger it like braille, / Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" (*OG* 175). For the most part, readers have followed Neil Corcoran's view of the poem as a wholly positive one, an exemplum of filial and artistic piety which extends and enriches the parallel elevation of the father in Heaney's signature poem, "Digging" (108). That said, one should also note that other commentators, while in general agreement on the poem's salutary view of the memory and experience, have noted what appears to be qualification in the poem's final stanzas (Morrison 86) and, more literally, the logical impossibility embedded in the poem's appealing imagery (O'Donoghue 105). Here, however, in reprising the exact scene so warmly presented in "The Harvest Bow," Heaney introduces, or underscores, a need and a note of uncertainty not apparent in the earlier poem.

More broadly, in terms of the volume as a whole, *Human Chain* has a range of rich ambiguities, expanding the emotional register of translation in its broadest sense as a transference of meaning. The title, for example, implies a sense of human solidarity, and the title poem, which focuses on aid workers passing bags of meal hand to hand in the midst of some violent crisis, certainly reinforces this notion. In addition, given the number of poems devoted to the Heaney family across four generations, with two poems written in response to the births of grandchildren, the book seems dedicated as well to family continuity. However, a human chain also paradoxically implies restraint and imprisonment. Throughout the volume the concept of human interconnectedness gets played out on very different levels, ranging from the autobiographical and the specific to an allusive Eliotic intertextuality, and what from one perspective presents images of affirmation and continuity will, from a different perspective, have its own dark implications.

Nowhere is this more evident than in "Album," the poem which for all intents and purposes constitutes the portal to the volume as a whole. This five-part poem, with each section a kind of *Life Studies* snapshot, presents a sequence of remembered or imagined encounters with his parents. "Album" is the closest Heaney comes to confessional poetry, at least in the sense of a willingness to expose raw and vulnerable emotions, but given Heaney's elegance, reticence, and courtesy, one might be hard-pressed to discover any Lowellian criticism of either parent. In earlier poems, Heaney focused on an individual parent, either the mother or the father, emphasizing that each was an emotionally reticent person whose stance on life provided, albeit mutely, an avenue into his own "that is best which is half said" Irish poetics. In times of extremity, the mold can crack (in "Mid-Term Break" responding to young Christopher's death the mother coughs out tearless sighs, while the father is uncharacteristically crying; in the "Clearances" sequence elegizing the mother, the father breaks the marriage-long silence: "In the last minutes he said more to her / Almost than in all their life together" [OG 289]). But again and again, and this is a perspective that will be underscored and reinforced at the outset of *Human Chain*, the poems which seem to emphasize so poignantly the moments of intimate familial unity simultaneously also imply a broader and starker continuous lack of communication and warmth (see the two-edged last line of the potato-peeling sonnet in "Clearances": "Never closer the whole rest of our lives" [OG 285]). The form used in "Album," and employed predominantly throughout *Human Chain*, is the twelve-line, four-tercet unit which Heaney developed in the forty-eight-poem sequence "Squarings" of *The Spirit Level* (1996; in OG). Its flexibility allows Heaney, as it did in the earlier sequence, an improvisational immediacy and philosophical detachment across a sequence of situations, and, since the poem returns to and clarifies the context of the riverbank scene in "Route 110," it is worth looking at closely.

"Album" opens with the image of an oil-burner boiler coming to life, a straightforward enough image for the awakening of memory, but then follows with a strange simile, "like the timed collapse / of a sawn-down tree" (HC 4). While an ordinary reader might strain to imagine the acoustical equivalence being proposed here, the image itself has its own history in Heaney's poetry. In "Clearances," Heaney's eight-sonnet elegy to his mother in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), he establishes an elaborate analogy between himself and his "coeval / Chestnut" (OG 290), a tree which was planted in the same year as his birth and whose absence becomes, once it was cut down after the move from Mossbawn to Bellaghy, a spiritual equivalent in present memory to the now absent mother. In many ways, we will see this kind of intertextual subtlety and nuance forming a weave or mesh, a human chain of sorts, between the individual poems and

Heaney's wider oeuvre and, even more broadly, between his poems and the larger Eliotic tradition Heaney sees his work a part of. Even within the collection itself, images from different poems will reappear and subtly alter and enrich other poems; and phrases, which on their own may seem discretely descriptive, take on additional nuance as they reappear in other poems.⁵ But if the allusion to the earlier poem seems oblique, the occasion, which the poem recalls, is itself exceedingly opaque. It is only at the end of the second section, when the speaker makes explicit reference to his "getting" (HC 5), that one realizes Heaney is here imagining the physical circumstances of his own conception. Heaney, born on April 13, was surely conceived the previous summer, and for a moment the speaker imagines the place where the sex occurred, "And the place, it dawns on me, / Could have been Grove Hill before the oaks were cut." Even though he immediately recalls himself as a child later standing in the same place with his parents ("shin-deep in hilltop bluebells") and offers Saint-Exupéry's idealistic but distinctly unromantic definition of love as "steady gazing / Not at each other but in the same direction," it's a later understanding that comes, as he says, "[t]oo late, alas" (HC 4). In contrast to the first section, the second section of the poem concentrates on Heaney's traumatic separation from his parents as they leave him off at age twelve at St. Columb's boarding school. Once again, in terms of the elliptic and allusive nature of the narrative, it would help to know that the motto of St. Columb's is "Quaerite Primum Regnum Dei" (Seek ye first the kingdom of God) and that the phrase "a grey eye will look back" is a line from Heaney's own translation later in the volume in which St. Columb or Colmcille laments his exile from Ireland and its men and women. Here, however, it is the older Heaney who looks back on his youthful exile from his parents, seeing them now, in the unifying sorrow of having to leave their oldest child, as a couple for the first time, "all the more together / For having had to turn and walk away, as close / In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting" (HC 4–5).⁶

The third section, the nadir of the poem, is a startling flashback to the consequence of the conception in the first section: the speaker imagines himself present, "[u]ninvited, ineluctable," in his mother's womb at his parents' wedding meal, with the allusion to Stephen Dedalus's "ineluctable modality of the visible" in *Ulysses* suddenly taking on devastating and specific implications for the as yet unborn Heaney. This is an unexpected and unwanted child, the wedding meal itself with its "[s]tranded silence. Tears" a forced occasion of chagrin and sorrow. The retreating waitress leaves the unhappy newlyweds to themselves "[a]nd to all the anniversaries of this / They are not ever going to observe // Or mention even in the years to come" (HC 5–6). For most readers of Heaney, the exemplar of filial piety among contemporary poets, this imagined revelation is a shock, and surely one which complicates the poems and elegies he has written for

each of his parents, since it introduces an unresolved note of anxiety and tension into his very origins.

In fact, the next section directly addresses the dark emotional undertow running beneath earlier poems to and about his father. He says, "Were I to have embraced him anywhere / It would have been on the riverbank / That summer before college, him in his prime," with the contrary-to-fact subjunctive setting the mood of failed expectation. The hoped-for embrace does not take place on the riverbank, the locus of significance later in "The Riverbank Field" and the penultimate section of "Route 110." One characteristic of Heaney's poetry that this awkward silence underscores is the way he frequently presents an inability to articulate an emotion as somehow proof of the emotion's authenticity as opposed to its absence or failure, a tendency which this poem questions or at least scrutinizes more closely. The two embraces that the remainder of the section does recall indicate not affection but support given to the father because of drunkenness and finally terminal infirmity. Given this poem's location in the sequence, there is inevitably some associative connection between the sense of being "uninvited" to the wedding and the need for some kind of affirmation from the father at this most crucial juncture in his life path. Still, this is a poem of retrospective illumination (with "dawn" and "dawning" being used in the first and last sections to indicate such a growing awareness). Both the apt quotation of Saint-Exupéry and the speaker's present realization that the father "must / Keep coming with me because I'd soon be leaving" (HC 6) introduce possible, perhaps even plausible, reconsideration of what clearly has been a persistent and troubling memory.

The final section of "Album" offers something of a resolution, in which the casual occasion of the speaker's son spontaneously hugging the father provides for the speaker an oblique demonstration of the father being "vulnerable to delight" (HC 7). Utilizing what Patrick Crotty calls Heaney's "authorial courtesy" of providing an unfussy incorporation of gloss within the text of the poem (45), the speaker proposes a parallel between the three embraces addressed in the previous section and Aeneas's three failed attempts to embrace his father in the Virgilian underworld of *The Aeneid*, as if the allusion itself to the classical scene of filial piety, translated to the circumstances of the speaker's life, could be an adequate clarification of what remains an unresolved anxiety. It's as if the recognition of some parallel or analogue in classical literature provides Heaney with a steadying handle on what clearly has been a source of anxiety concerning his own origins.⁷ Even so, the image with which the poem concludes, "the phantom / *Verus* that has slipped from 'very'" (HC 7), underscores the slipperiness of translation and anticipates the equally unsettled and unsettling conclusion to the riverbank scene in "Route 110," in which both father and son "stood there waiting, watching, / Needy and ever needier

for translation" (HC 57). In this particular poem, the speaker finishes with a memory of his young son spontaneously embracing his elderly father, with the impulsiveness of the speaker's son demonstrating, perhaps, the emotional capacity and connectedness of the adults. Given the extent to which Heaney's formation as a poet is fused with his understanding of his family origins, "Album" as a whole seems to prompt a reconsideration of that poetic formation, and the poem which immediately follows does indeed just that.

As a number of commentators, including Heaney himself, have noted, "The Conway Stewart" seems a reprise of Heaney's trademark poem "Digging," the poem which opens his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), and which has been placed first in all selected collections since. In the earlier signature poem, the speaker, exhibiting great admiration for his father's and grandfather's artisan spadework with turf and potatoes, meekly offers his "squat pen" (OG 3) as the awkward instrument of art with which he will dig. *Human Chain*, as it happens, is filled with references to writing and instruments of writing, capped by "Hermit Songs," the nine-section sequence dedicated to Helen Vendler. Here, however, the Conway Stewart fountain pen is an elegant gift the parents purchase for the speaker the day of his traumatic separation from them at boarding school. Tellingly, the wonderfully precise description of the pen as it ingests ink ("[g]luttery, snottery") gives the parents and the twelve-year-old an opportunity to deflect, by steady gazing in the same direction, the pain of the separation, "[g]iving us time / To look together and away / From our parting, due that evening" (HC 8). The squat pen of "Digging" is avowedly dedicated to a familial and cultural pride and continuity; here the Conway Stewart complicates the act of writing with a subliminal awareness of pain and exile.

If "Album" considers the parents, in the hindsight of this collection, for the first time as a human couple, the next poem, "Uncoupled," breaks the human chain of their togetherness and allows each parent a separate, unique portrait. Each parent receives a twelve-line, four-tercet single sentence, which is itself complicated by opening with the interrogative "Who is this" but continuing through with indicative description. The mother, "as if in a procession," bears the pan of coal ashes to the ash-pit, a task and an element Heaney specifically associates with the long-suffering woman.⁸ Significantly, neither parent is identified as such within the portraits, though the point of view here is one of collective loss: "Proceeds until we have lost sight of her / Where the worn path turns behind the henhouse" (HC 9), as if the speaker were a spokesperson for all the children. The portrait of the father, by contrast, is again focused on a failed attempt at communication between the man and the speaker, between the cattle driver and the young boy "[o]n top of a shaky gate." The man is waving and calling something the speaker cannot hear, and, when the man is dis-

tracted and turns his eyes away, the speaker experiences a distinctly first-person-singular loss which he will only later be able to articulate: “and I know / The pain of loss before I know the term” (HC 10). The double “I know” articulates the emotional loss of the moment and the subsequent loss of the parents, recorded in the poem, as they recede in memory from coupled parents to the uncoupled anonymity of the separate portraits.

Counterbalancing these family poems at the opening of the volume are the ones which close it. If “The Conway Stewart” can be seen as a reprise of the writing instrument of “Digging,” “In the Attic,” the volume’s next-to-last poem, also presents a different look at one of that poem’s protagonists. In “Digging” the grandfather is an exemplar of physical labor, stamina, and ability (“My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner’s Bog”). Moreover, the grandfather’s artful digging, “nicking and slicing neatly,” contrasts sharply with the proposed labors of the speaker’s “squat pen” (OG 3). In this poem, the speaker is “a man marooned / In his own loft,” remembering reading *Treasure Island* as a boy, and specifically the dramatic moment when Jim Hawkins, similarly aloft in the cross-trees of a ship, shoots and kills Israel Hands, one of the pirates in the tale. He then recalls his grandfather asking him about the film version of the novel, but in doing so mistakes the name of Israel Hands as Isaac. The speaker realizes that he is now of an age such that, like his grandfather, he is going blank on names and becomes lightheaded as he climbs stairs. Rather than being the exemplar of physical stamina and artisan craftsmanship, the grandfather here is presented as an example of inevitable physical decline and mental lapse, with the blurring of memory being a significant and irreversible turn of events, “his mistake perpetual, once and for all.” For a poet so utterly dependent on the resources of memory and its nuances, such a loss should be catastrophic. But against such decline, the speaker affirms the primacy of the imagination:

As the memorable bottoms out
Into the irretrievable,

It’s not that I can’t imagine still
That slight untoward rupture and world-tilt
As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed. (HC 84)

The double negative in the affirmation is intriguing, since it both asserts and subtly qualifies a defiant optimism in the face of such decline. Rather than passively accept his marooned condition, this speaker is ready to lift anchor.

In a conversation with Michael Laskey at the 2010 Poetry Prom, Heaney suggested that if *Human Chain* were to have an epigraph, it would be the

lines from Eliot's "Little Gidding": "See, now, they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them / To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern." Poems like "Uncoupled" and "In the Attic" poignantly record the vanishings of Heaney's familial human chain, but it is his reliance on translation, especially as he develops and expands this concept to clarify elements of his own life, which will be the source of the renewal and transfiguration he sees as the imaginative counterweight of such loss.

In terms of this collection of poems, which balances family continuity and disintegration, Heaney finishes the book appropriately enough with a poem dedicated to his new granddaughter. The poem "A Kite for Aibhín" is, again appropriately enough in a volume containing so many infusions from other languages, prompted by a translation from the Italian of the poet Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912). Gabriella Morisco provides the background for Heaney's first exposure to the Italian poet during his 2001 visit to the University of Urbino to receive an honorary degree. In the midst of a tour of Urbino, they arrived at Cappuchin Hill, and Morisco told Heaney that it was the location of Pascoli's "L'aquilone." At Heaney's request, Morisco provided him with a literal translation of the poem, and Heaney subsequently in 2009 included his translation in a festschrift published by the Royal Dublin Society dedicated to Mary Kelleher, a librarian retiring after forty-seven years (Morisco 35–45).⁹

But the Pascoli poem that Heaney translated from the Italian and published as "The Kite" in the RDS collection and the one he transforms into "A Kite for Aibhín" turn out to be translations of a very different order. The speaker of the Pascoli poem, prompted by a vision of kites above his beloved city of Urbino, remembers the exhilarating kite flying of his childhood and, further, recalls the early death of one of his childhood friends. The memory finishes by affirming the superiority of the child's dying in a state of innocence, a scene that is capped by the arresting image of the mother's combing the hair of the dead child gently, so as not to harm him. Both the kite flying and the childhood death are accurately captured in "The Kite," but in "A Kite for Aibhín" Heaney purposefully transforms and truncates the original. Here's the Heaney version in its entirety:

Air from another life and time and place,
 Pale blue heavenly air is supporting
 A white wing beating high against the breeze,

And yes, it is a kite! As when one afternoon
 All of us there trooped out
 Among the briar hedges and stripped thorn,

I take my stand again, halt opposite
Anahorish Hill to scan the blue,
Back in that field to launch out our long-tailed comet.

And now it hovers, tugs, veers, dives askew,
Lifts itself, goes with the wind until
It rises to loud cheers from us below.

Rises, and my hand is like a spindle
Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower
Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher

The longing in the breast and planted feet
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
Until string breaks and—separate, elate—

The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall. (*HC* 85)

Just as he had fused and conflated Virgil's Book VI with sites and events of his own life, so Heaney here transposes Pascoli's Urbino to the Anahorish Hill of his own childhood in Co. Derry, and even more specifically "translates" the kite flying of Pascoli to a memorable kite-flying scene of his own childhood, one which Heaney had already written about in his 1984 poem "A Kite for Michael and Christopher" (*Station Island* 1984; in *OG*).

That poem, even though it is dedicated to Heaney's two young boys, is as it happens yet another memory poem concerning his father. In his commentary on this poem in *Out of the Marvelous*, the 2009 RTÉ film biography, Heaney says he is recalling "the one extraordinary thing he [the father] did for me in childhood." As a country farmer, he says, the father had no time for playing with his children, but this one time he constructed a kite. What is strange about the earlier poem is its tone and, even more unusual, its outcome. Rather than being a memory of joyful childhood play to share with and to pass on to his own children, as the title might imply, the 1984 poem is filled with disconsolate imagery, the kite string weighing "like a furrow in the heavens" and the kite itself "a soul at anchor" (*OG* 215) in the sky. This momentary display of paternal affection, rather than producing elation or delight, instead releases some deeply felt grief, a kind of Virgilian "sunt lacrimae rerum" so powerful that the speaker enlists the help of his children to whom the poem is dedicated to help him hold and contain the strain of the kite string.

"A Kite for Aibhín," however, represents this same kite-flying memory from an entirely different perspective. The imagery is all light and air, the mood entirely upbeat, and in that sense the translation is quite faithful to

the opening of Pascoli's poem. But when the speaker presents the specific experience on Anahorish Hill, there is no mention of the weight, the gravity of Heaney's earlier kite memory; if anything, Heaney neatly embraces the opening uplift and innocence of the Pascoli poem. The kite in this poem is not "a soul at anchor," but rather "a thin-stemmed flower" carrying aloft "[t]he longing in the breast and planted feet / And gazing face and heart of the kite flier." While these images are faithful to Pascoli's poem, this translation all but elides the more tragic implications of Pascoli's dead child. In the Pascoli poem a scream interrupts the rise of the kite and shifts the focus of the poem to the memory of the young schoolmate who died in childhood. Here, however, the rise of the kite culminates in a final image of rupture: "Until string breaks and—separate, elate— // The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall" (HC 85). This ending is richly ambiguous. On the one hand, the kite is indeed a "windfall," a casualty of the wind's lift and force, somewhat analogous to the word's original meaning of ripened fruit blown down by the wind. On the other hand, rather than lament such a break and loss, Heaney seems to affirm this final snapping of the string, or human chain if you will, since "windfall" ordinarily carries with it an implication of unexpected good fortune. Thus, this poem, dedicated, as the title suggests, to welcoming a newborn into existence, simultaneously affirms the windfall destruction of the "separate, elate" kite with a kind of Dickinsonian exultation. While the image of the kite string snapping seems an apt conclusion to a volume thematically dedicated to the coupling and uncoupling of the human chain, one should also note Heaney's willingness here to use the Pascoli poem to assuage and "translate" an earlier traumatic experience into something more affirmative and uplifting. This translation, or transfiguration, seems very much what the father and son were in need of on the riverbank field as they fished in silence, with the final release of the kite paradoxically unperplexing the anxiety surrounding the speaker's origins in "Album."

Almost as an extension and recapitulation of this intervention into the act of translation, Heaney took the second half of his translation of the Pascoli poem and published it without comment in the Pascoli section of the Farrar, Straus and Giroux anthology of twentieth-century Italian poetry (Brock 14–17). In this more recent translation, or partial translation, the kite-flying experience of the first half of the poem is entirely eclipsed, with the unidentified scream abruptly interrupting the rise of the kite and focusing the speaker's attention on memories of the childhood companion and his religious devotion and untainted innocence. Without the context of the first half of the poem, the excerpt becomes a vignette centered on the fond memory of the innocent child and his mother's attentive devotion. But we should note that Heaney, in truncating and changing the focus of the poem, returns to a different central trauma in his own formation, the

death of his three-and-a-half-year-old younger brother Christopher in a car accident. As was the case with the kite-flying memory, Heaney had already addressed this enduring memory in one of his first published poems, "Mid-Term Break." That poem, however, focuses mostly on the adolescent speaker, who finds himself being treated as an adult for the first time in his life, with the death of the young brother being starkly noted at poem's end by equating the age of the child with the shortened length of the coffin: "A four-foot box, a foot for every year" (OG 11). Heaney had already circled back to his memory of his little brother in "The Blackbird of Glanmore," the final poem of *District and Circle* (2006). There, rather than being the pale, still child with a poppy bruise in a four-foot box, the child is more fondly and actively remembered as "[h]aunter-son, lost brother— / Cavorting through the yard / So glad to see me home, // My homesick first term over" (*District and Circle* 77). Still, the blackbird that augured the death of the child prompts an overview of the speaker's life, in effect transforming the poem into a self-elegy.

Likewise, the latter section of "The Kite" focuses on the death of the innocent child as an exemplary way to confront one's own mortality: "Better to arrive there breathless, like a boy / Who has been racing up a hill, / Flushed and hot and soft, a boy at play." But perhaps even more poignantly, this section of the poem also captures the gentle and maternal love of the mother. Unlike the mother who "coughed out angry tearless sighs" at the wake depicted in "Mid-Term Break," this mother combs the hair of the dead child gently, so as not to harm him. And like "The Blackbird of Glanmore," the poem contains its own self-elegy for the speaker: "O you, so young, the youngest / Of my dead, I too will soon go down into the clay / Where you sleep calmly, on your own, at rest" (Pascoli, "From 'The Kite'" 17).

Thus, it seems this Pascoli poem, which Heaney had been dwelling on for almost a decade, provides the poet with what he calls in another context "a point of entry into a common emotional ground of memory and belonging" ("Past, Pastness" 31). The poem, divided into two parts, allows Heaney not only entry into those different traumatic experiences of his early formation, but also an avenue to translate those experiences—and his earlier poetic renditions of those difficulties—into an assuaging recognition and acceptance of parental love which has been an ongoing source of anxiety in the speaker's formation. More specifically, at different points in *Human Chain*, Heaney has father and son, either in memory or imaginative transfer, together in moments of poignant but failed expectation. In "Album" this failure is counterbalanced by the hug of a grandchild in the final section, providing a kind of clarification and recompense in the speaker's allusion to Aeneas's failed embrace of his father in the underworld. Toward the end of "Route 110" both father and son are watching

and waiting on the riverbank, “[n]eedy and ever needier for translation,” a need which is again counterbalanced in the final section of that poem with the appearance, this time a birth, of a grandchild. Here, at the conclusion of a volume dealing with memory, conflict, and loss, a poem celebrating the birth of a grandchild once more provides a counterbalancing and compensatory note. In the Virgilian model, a human is translated to the underworld, passes through the alembic of the riverbank field, and returns to the world of mortality, innocent of all previous memory. But in the world of the here and now, this transformation of the kite-flying experience on Anahorish Hill from an occasion of grief to one of joy may be the translation father and son were in need of. By extending the concept and operation of translation into a kind of porous symbiosis of autobiographic interpolation and literal transfer of meaning from one language to another, Heaney in this volume finds an intertextual path to acknowledge, and perhaps thereby to release, the human chain, which has made him who and what he is. Taken altogether, this acceptance, an integral part of what Yeats called “the making of a soul,” is a fitting conclusion to what turned out to be the poet’s final volume of poems.

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NOTES

1. This essay builds on my review of *Human Chain*, “‘It’s not that I can’t imagine still’: The Reprise of Imagination in Seamus Heaney’s *Human Chain*,” *Recorder* 24.1 (Spring 2012), 104–19, and “Heaney Translating Heaney,” a paper I delivered at the 2014 Seamus Heaney Conference and Commemoration held at Queens University, Belfast.

2. This epitomizing stanza also illustrates the liberty Heaney takes with Guillevic, translating or transforming the original “J’existais. J’étais là. / Je servais de lieu” (Guillevic 209) to “I had my existence. I was there. / Me in place and the place in me,” with the concluding chiasmus bearing a distinctively Heaneyesque diction and acoustic.

3. Parker focuses specifically on the value Heaney places on “keeping going,” a phrase used in this translation which echoes its earlier use as the title of a poem valorizing his brother Hugh’s stamina working and maintaining the farm in the midst of political violence. More broadly, at a University of North Carolina commencement address, Heaney equates the term with the will and strength to become renewed and revived in the midst of a career. As it happens, Heaney also relies on the phrase in “A Herbal” to draw elemental and exemplary consolation from one of Guillevic’s flowers: “Broom / Is like the disregarded / And company for them, // Shows them / They have to keep going, // That the whole thing’s worth / The effort” (HC 39).

4. As Heaney says to Dennis O’Driscoll in *Stepping Stones*, their book of extended interviews, “But there’s one Virgilian journey that has indeed been a constant pres-

ence and that is Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs of Book VI have been in my head for years—the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father" (389).

5. The adjective "overgrown," for example, appears in four different poems: in the first it describes the bus stop where, as it happens, Heaney's younger brother Christopher was killed ("The Wood Road"); in the next, it refers to the garden of Annie Devlin, the blind singer and piano player Heaney found inspirational ("Derry Derry Down"); in the next, it refers to the verge which grows in and around graves ("A Herbal"); and finally, it describes a disused airfield as the concluding image of the bleak and disconsolate elegy to David Hammond ("The door was open and the house was dark"). Even though each use of the adjective is specifically descriptive within its own poem, the repetition within a volume devoted to memory and its blurring is increasingly and cumulatively dolorous.

6. In his O'Driscoll interviews, Heaney emphasizes his going off to boarding school in Derry at the age of twelve as a defining separation in his life, one which was underscored two years later by the death of his three-and-a-half-year-old brother Christopher as the result of a car accident, and made final and irrevocable the next year when the family moved from the thatched-roof farmhouse several miles away to The Wood, a house on the outskirts of the village of Bellaghy that Heaney's father had inherited from his uncle (32–33). In a PBS interview discussing *Human Chain*, Heaney calls attention to the unusual framing of "Album": "My parents appear early in the book at the moment when I imagined myself being conceived."

7. In response to a question John Haffenden posed about Heaney's preference for the word "assuaging" in his criticism, Heaney noted, "If I read *The Divine Comedy*, the *Purgatorio*, it's in the highest, widest, deepest sense, comforting. Great art is *comforting*, in some odd way. I think that art does appease, assuage" (68). In a shift reminiscent of Eliot's call for impersonality in poetry, Heaney here seems to find in traditional classical literature a consoling element for individual and personal grief.

8. For examples of the mother's association with coal and its tendering, see the epigraph poem to "Clearances" in *The Haw Lantern* (1987; in *OG*), "Two Lorries" in *The Spirit Level* (1996; in *OG*), or "Slack" within *Human Chain*.

9. Recently, the unadapted and undivided translation of the entire poem has been republished online with Heaney's note dedicating the translation to Mary Kelleher. In his note, Heaney, pointing out that he had written about kites in "A Kite for Michael and Christopher," suggestively concludes, "Sooner or later, therefore, I was bound to go 'fishing in the sky' (as the Chinese put it) one more time" (*Griseldaonline* n. pag.).

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