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Taking Possession of “Extraterritorial” Poetics: Seamus Heaney and Eastern European Poetry in English Translation

Most of Heaney’s prose deals with the dichotomy between “life” and “art;” this chapter briefly looks at how the poet nuances and attempts to solve this dichotomy through his reading of Eastern European work.¹ Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert appear prominently in Heaney’s prose written during the 1980s. Additionally, the Irish poet wrote dedicatory poems to each of them. Heaney presents his critical work as a form of autobiography, saying that the poets he discusses have become part of his memory.² In particular, he sees his relationship with the poets he writes about as a form of immersion, where their work, over time, comes to bear on his poetics.³ Another metaphor for this form of influence emerges from Heaney’s discussion of his translation practices. He speaks of two motives: the “Raid” occurs when the poet looks for something specific in the foreign text and ends up with a “booty” called “*Imitations.*” This is a more superficial appropriation of the text. The “Settlement approach” happens when the poet “enter[s] an oeuvre, colonize[s] it, take[s] it over” (changing it) and remains with the text, allowing himself to be changed by it in return.⁴ I argue that

Heaney's relationship with Eastern European poetry, though one of reading translations rather than translating, is a "Settlement;" this poetry has, over time, become part of his memory and he has allowed himself to be changed by it.

Faced with questions about "the responsibilities that come with delighted utterance,"⁵ the Irish poet turned to the Eastern bloc poets for "a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology:"⁶ that was his motive. In the process of reading their poetry and prose, he adopted what he calls the technique or the definition of those poets' "stance towards life."⁷ To borrow an equivalent expression from Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney took possession of a particular Eastern European pattern of ideas and attitudes⁸ as it placed lyric utterance in relation to historical reality. The term "extraterritorial," discussed at some length later in this chapter, is used to mean "poetry written outside the territory of Heaney's language or historical experience." While much will be said about Seamus Heaney and his poetic *credo*, the issue of reception of Eastern European poetry in translation will be underscored. Heaney's relationship with these poets may best be explained as a process by which their example validates his own inclination to credit art.

Seamus Heaney and his poetic dilemma in Ireland

By 1972 Seamus Heaney had already published three collections of poems with Faber. That was also the year in which he and his family moved from Belfast to Wicklow, having already travelled to Europe during part of 1969, and having spent 1970-71 in California, at the University of Berkeley. In 1972 the poet wrote an autobiographical essay for *The Guardian*, later gathered in a sequence of shorter pieces entitled "Belfast." He concluded his essay by saying that he began as a poet when his "roots were crossed

with [his] reading.”⁹ One major aspect of Heaney’s Irish poetic inheritance is rooted in early nature poetry, which he characterises as a “surge towards praise,” a “sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination:” in other words, it is poetry of celebration.¹⁰ This inherited celebration in poetry is something that Heaney would question deeply before confirming it as right. But along with nature poetry he inherited internment without trial, civil rights marches, neighbourhood murders, sectarian killings and travelling across road blocks, all taking place between 1969 and 1972.

Because Heaney believes that “there is a connection between the core of a poet’s speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice”¹¹ he became keenly aware of the impact that his own biography was making on his poetry. When violence erupted in Belfast in 1969, two months after Heaney’s *Door Into the Dark* was published, “the problems of poetry moved from simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate for our predicament.”¹² This was the first shift in Heaney’s poetics: from celebration to searching for symbols which would take on board the historical, political and aesthetic predicaments. Reading became important at this stage. In his essay “The God in the Tree” Heaney wrote: “I have confined myself to poems that have had an enhancing effect on my own imagination.”¹³ In 1969 Heaney found the English translation of P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People*, which was to provide him with images fit for the contemporary Northern Irish situation and his perhaps most influential poetry book, *North* (1975). In 1972, in direct response to the violence in the North, the poet also began translating, or more aptly put, “raiding”¹⁴ the Middle Irish text *Buile Suibhne* for Mad Sweeney, a figure which provided him with the image of an exiled poet, “guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance.”¹⁵ It is precisely at this moment that

Heaney felt a strong sense of exile and aggressively assimilated Sweeney's image into his own. This is also when, driven by historical duress, Heaney's habits of reading poetry (as opposed to translating *Sweeney Astray*) became a bit more aggressive, turning into a series of raids and settlements. In other words, Heaney was scouring poetry for the confirmation he needed himself.

The appeal of Eastern bloc poetry

In 1972 Heaney met Joseph Brodsky at *Poetry International* in London. He had already read the transcript of Brodsky's famous trial in 1964, where the Moscow judge charged him with "parasitism" for writing non-conformist poetry. Heaney had been familiar with the work of Milosz since 1965, Herbert's since 1968, and was about to read Mandelstam's poetry, having already read Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*¹⁶ in 1971. These poets' individual historical experiences, indelibly linked to their contemporary political situation, led to a fusion between their historical and artistic identities, raising questions of aesthetic responsibilities. And on the basis of Heaney's search for adequate images to express his own situation, he had begun his involvement with their work. His needs in relation to East European poetry were not linguistic—his language is well nourished by the local English dialect, Irish, and just as importantly, English poetry, particularly the Romantic tradition; he accessed the East European poems on the level of the pattern of attitudes which came through in translation.

It would be a gross oversimplification to lump these four Eastern European poets together and diagnose the influence their biographies and work had on Seamus Heaney over the years. Their presence in his work isn't apparent until the 1980s when he had finished translating *Sweeney Astray* (1983), completed his poetic and spiritual journey on

Station Island (1984), scrutinised himself through Diogenes' *Haw Lantern* (1987), and written self-reflexively on each of these poets. The second and most important shift in his poetics is marked by the transition between his books of essays *Preoccupations* (1980), where he is more concerned with celebration, and *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), where worries about "responsibilities that come with delighted utterance"¹⁷ and the move towards "crediting poetry" take centre stage. In this context it is important to note that Heaney's relationships with the Eastern bloc poets reflect more of his poetic needs than the actual work of the poets themselves. Thus it is helpful to think of the Eastern Europeans discussed here as "Heaney's Mandelstam," "Heaney's Brodsky," and so on. Consequently, this chapter touches on the points of intersection between Heaney and these poets.

Poetics of exile

Heaney's reading of East European poets created in his work what I call a "poetics of exile." Such a poetics reflects in essence a "stance towards life" or, more precisely, a stance towards writing. Though he always advocates the value of lyric pleasure, Heaney does so only after he performs his "stations" during times of self-consciousness and reflection. The poetics of exile is an aesthetic distance gained by actively escaping what Milosz calls the "captivity" that historical realities exercise on the imagination.

Influenced by East European poetry, Heaney distances himself from the local situation: in one poem he speaks about St. Kevin who, in a gesture of altruism, sits still to allow a blackbird to nest in his palm; in a set of poems he speaks "from" parabolic places; in another poem yet he weighs his "responsible *tristia*." And yet, as he makes his arguments

for the necessity to “credit marvels,” the Irish poet burdens the lyric utterance with a social responsibility.

The Heaney-Mandelstam relationship is based on the organic process of writing poetry. In this sense it can be placed squarely in the English Romantic tradition, particularly Coleridge’s notion of the form which “shapes and develops itself from within.”¹⁸ The poem, according to Mandelstam, generates itself out of the poet’s inner freedom, language and cultural milieu. His own “organic poetics” is a notion developed by the Acmeist poets at the beginning of 1912, who saw writing as a biological process¹⁹ in which language has physical and tangible presence.²⁰ Through Mandelstam, Heaney extends the scope of the lyric to include a social responsibility, in the sense of poetry as a beneficent “electric shock”²¹ meant to restore the heart’s rhythm. Mandelstam sees the social function of poetry as being a remedy for people’s “living hearts,”²² a remedy occurring through pleasure. Writing from this instinct is “writing/ for the joy of it.”²³ Heaney often invokes Mandelstam’s “martyrdom” and exile in order to highlight a commitment to the lyric event, in which he himself believes.

Truth and truth-telling are crucial concepts in Heaney’s poetics and appear most often as he speaks of Eastern European poets. How to define and express those truths is something that Heaney discovers, among other places, in the work of Joseph Brodsky. The Heaney-Brodsky relationship is founded on the notion that aesthetic experience (the writing of lyric and the reading of poetry) is a deeply private, individual experience which nuances our understanding of language and saves us from falling into the linguistic trap of political demagoguery. Brodsky insisted on keeping politics separate from poetry and declared aesthetic choice “a form of defense against enslavement.”²⁴

But keeping away from politics is an act of self-restraint which may be seen as the element of distance in Heaney's poetics of exile. Joseph Brodsky discovered the poetics of deliberate "self-restraint"²⁵ in W. H. Auden's poetry. In his essay, "To Please a Shadow" (1983), he describes Auden's influence on his poetics as the treatment which Auden gives to sentiment: "quiet, unemphatic, without any pedal, almost *en passant*."²⁶ Brodsky's Auden is a poet whose "sentiments inevitably subordinate themselves to the linear and unrecoiling progression of art."²⁷ The poetics of exile through the Brodsky-Heaney relationship is best seen as a form of "detachment from one's emotions," a concept Heaney describes in his essay "Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland" (1984) as "higher consciousness"²⁸ and refines in the Auden essay as "alternative worlds."²⁹

The Heaney-Milosz relationship revolves around the idea of responsible poetry. Seamus Heaney finds himself closest to Milosz's sense of ethical self-questioning, hence he applauds the Polish poet's effort to make sure that poetry does not forget humanity in its violent historical moment. Describing the predicament of Polish literature as an effort to "free itself from [the] moral obligation" to address historical events, Milosz decried his own situation, saying that he "was inclined to say *non serviam*, as young James Joyce said about the Irish cause:" "I was torn internally between a desire to practise what I considered perfection in literature and a cry of indignation and anger."³⁰ Heaney's own Joycean moment comes in *Station Island* (1984) where he declares that "subject people's stuff" in poetry "is a cod's game."³¹ Milosz questions the meaning of "poetry which does not save / Nations or people."³² Then he suggests that "gentle verses written in the midst of horror declare themselves for life,"³³ implying that poetry might be a form of

salvation. As a result of his own self-questioning, Heaney looks to Milosz for the confirmation of his own belief that “poetry is strong enough to help”³⁴ and, like the Polish poet, he aims to define that kind of poetry. The poetics of exile Heaney develops through Milosz is best seen as the active escape from the captivity of history: this is best represented by the image of the astronaut Heaney adopts in “Alphabets” (an image with which he describes Milosz) and in the various parabolic distances expressed in the cycle of the “From” poems in *The Haw Lantern* (1987).

Finally, the relationship Heaney develops with Zbigniew Herbert is sparked by Heaney’s need to face the guilt for writing a poetry which is more lyrical than it should be, given the violent history which provides its context. The Irish poet suggests that Herbert’s poetry written in the midst of suffering is not lyrical: the poet renounced “poetry as a self-indulging ornament”³⁵ and “barbered its luxuriant locks to a stubble of moral and ethical goads.”³⁶ If, through Brodsky, Heaney developed the concept of “ethics through aesthetics,” through Herbert he develops what may be called “aesthetics through ethics.” In the process of reading Herbert’s work, Heaney is transformed from a poet who has scruples about writing poetry in the face of suffering to someone presenting lyric poetry as a necessary act of preserving civilisation. Heaney’s take on Herbert’s poetry is that “in the exactions of its logic, the temperance of its tone, and the extremity and equanimity of its recognitions” it “resemble[s] what a twentieth-century poetic version of the examined life might be.”³⁷ In the end, Heaney writes poetry which is more lyrical than Herbert’s. The poetics of exile in the context of Herbert’s work may be seen as a form of penitence Heaney undergoes in order to credit poetry. This is best seen in the

image of Atlas, who, isolated and unobserved by the world, nevertheless shoulders the sky over the earth.

The four poets provide Heaney with the “exterior or alien material” through which he “refract[s]” his engagement with his Northern Irish experience; this procedure of indirect confrontation of history, as Neil Corcoran argues, is an essential feature of Heaney’s poetry.³⁸ Their work is “extraterritorial” not only to Heaney, in the sense that it is originally written outside Ireland and in languages other than English but in a more significant sense: it is a “literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee.”³⁹ The coming into existence of these poets’ works in English translation reflects their tragic lives—they were either internal or external exiles. Thus, as Said writes quoting Steiner, “It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely.”⁴⁰ In this sense, we may also say that Heaney’s own sense of exile attracted him to these outsiders.

Furthermore, his “settlement” with some aspects of these poets’ attitudes towards writing do seem to the British poets and critics somewhat untimely and problematic. There is no space here to deal with issues of reception: for now, we shall take note of Steiner’s remarks on the cross fertilisation between the poetics of the East and West:

The new status of eastern Europe has occasioned a veritable tide of translations both into English and into the relevant languages. Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian literature are beginning to reach the Anglo-American world-audience. In turn, Western texts, long forbidden, are being imported. Criteria of interlingual transfer, the history of translation, and the implication of the translator’s “exact art” in every aspect of comparative literary and cultural studies, are the object of study and teaching. By salutary paradox, moreover, Anglo-American masters, notably among the poets, are themselves turning more and more to translation. It is as if the planetary dominion of their privileged world-speech entails growing

responsibilities towards the genius of more constricted national traditions and sensibilities.⁴¹

When Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort founded the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 1965, their ambition was to “amplify those contemporary voices (especially East European) that seemed” to them to “demand a hearing in English.”⁴²

English poets and critics supported Hughes’s and Weissbort’s enterprise. W. L. Webb, John Bayley, Donald Davie and Neil Ascherson, for example, pointed out (in one way or another) that translations from the continent and especially from Eastern Europe brought a “fresh wind of poetic energy... across the British Isles.”⁴³

Ted Hughes acknowledged two levels of interest in these translations. There was an urge “to find humanity on the level of the heart” and then there was “the political role of poetry in Russia” and elsewhere, which galvanised the translation business into a political gesture.⁴⁴ It is quite clear that the relationships between poetry and politics, history and lyric pleasure, were the new seriousness missing in English poetry⁴⁵ and blowing fresh from the sea. Of course, Socialist Realism aesthetics and the governments enforcing them were the misfortune of Eastern European poets alone and that made the poets *and* their work compelling. The issue of translation was brilliantly settled by Hughes as follows: “Whatever the verbal texture of the originals might be, evidently, their [the poems’] real centre of gravity was in something else, within the images and the pattern of ideas and attitudes.”⁴⁶

Hughes’ ambitions in publishing the ensuing Penguin Modern European Series “weren’t beyond the hope of influencing [the British] writers in a productive way,” even though that influence might only help to “confirm home-grown virtues.”⁴⁷

Reading poetry in translation: conclusion

The availability of Eastern European poetry in translation since 1965, the publication of Brodsky's trial for parasitism in *Encounter* the year before,⁴⁸ and the ordeals of the Mandelstams at the hand of Stalin set the stage for a new development in Seamus Heaney's poetics as they were being defined against the background of his Northern Ireland. As history unfolded violently on his doorstep in the 1970s, Seamus Heaney began to think seriously about the role of poetry. He received the translations of Mandelstam, Milosz, Herbert and Brodsky like "messages from those holding their own" as poets, and said that "poets in English have felt compelled to turn their gaze East and have been encouraged to concede that the locus of greatness is shifting away from their language."⁴⁹ This short chapter does not make such strong claims for the influence of Eastern European poetry on the English-speaking world. The above discussion aims to suggest, however, that in times of historical duress the poetic imagination deals with reality in ways which show profound similarities, regardless of whether the poets come from the East or from the West. As the Shelving Translation conference abundantly showed, practising translators as well as those reading literature in translations open the English language to rich possibilities, which should be welcomed in an age of global travel and exposure to various cultures.

Notes

¹ This chapter is a slightly modified version of the introduction to my doctoral thesis, "Poetics of Exile: East European Poetry in Translation and Seamus Heaney's *Ars Poetica*," defended at the University of Oxford, 14 October 2004.

- ² Seamus Heaney, speaking in “An Interview with Seamus Heaney” conducted by Rand Brandes (*Salmagundi* 80, 1988), 14.
- ³ Ibid. Heaney says: “The only way I can write with any conviction is out of love. Not necessarily from my long immersion in the poet, but the poet’s long immersion in me.” His “criticism,” says the poet, is a “communing with a previously excited self,” a “resuscitation of what has been already settled” in relation to that poet.
- ⁴ Heaney in conversation with Robert Hass: “Sounding Lines: the Art of Translating Poetry,” Occasional Papers (9 February 1999), University of California at Berkeley <<http://repositories.cdlib.org/townsend>>
- ⁵ Heaney, Interview with Rand Brandes, 15.
- ⁶ In his Nobel Prize speech, Seamus Heaney expresses concern with the fact that he wanted to practise the writing of poetry without having to worry about taking political stance. East European poets, because they committed themselves to the practice of poetry when they were forced to make a political statement, inspired the Irish poet to clarify his commitment to poetry. This he acknowledges in his speech, especially in direct reference to Osip Mandelstam, the Russian poet who died at the hand of Stalin. See, “Crediting Poetry: the Nobel Lecture”, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 419.
- ⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Feeling Into Words,” *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 47.
- ⁸ Ted Hughes, “Introduction” to Daniel Weissbort, ed., *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983* (London/Manchester: MTP/ Carcanet), 13.
- ⁹ Seamus Heaney, “Belfast,” *Preoccupations*, 37.
- ¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree,” *Preoccupations*, 188.
- ¹¹ Seamus Heaney, “Feeling Into Words,” *Preoccupations*, 43.
- ¹² Ibid., 57.
- ¹³ Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree,” *Preoccupations*, 188.
- ¹⁴ In his essay, “Earning a Rhyme,” Heaney confesses to initially pressing the medieval text of *Sweeney Astray* into “showing” him off; eventually, Heaney “earned” his “rhyme” by focusing more on the text and less on his initial motives for translating it. I take Heaney’s first attempt to translate the text as a form of “raiding.” See, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 63.
- ¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Introduction” to *Sweeney Astray* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).
- ¹⁶ Heaney mentions this in a variety of places, among which a Letter to the Author (19 November 2002).
- ¹⁷ Heaney, Interview with Rand Brandes, 15.
- ¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Shakespeare’s Judgment equal to his Genius,” *Lectures and Notes of Shakespeare and Other English Poets* (London: George Bell, 1904), 229.
- ¹⁹ Osip Mandelstam, quoted by Clarence Brown in “The Romance of the precise,” *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 155.
- ²⁰ Ibid., Clarence Brown’s comment.
- ²¹ Seamus Heaney, “Crediting Poetry,” *Opened Ground*, 420.
- ²² Osip Mandelstam quoted by Nadezhda Mandelstam in *Hope Abandoned*, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 299.
- ²³ Seamus Heaney, “Station Island,” *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 93.
- ²⁴ Joseph Brodsky, “Uncommon Visage: the Nobel Lecture” (1987), *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 49.
- ²⁵ Joseph Brodsky, “To Please a Shadow,” *Less Than One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 360. On pp. 364-5, Brodsky elaborates on Auden’s “self-restraint” in his approach to public subjects: though always “keeping an eye on civilization,” Brodsky’s Auden would “never put himself in the center of the tragic picture.”
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 372-3.
- ²⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 118.
- ²⁹ Heaney, “Sounding Auden,” *The Government of the Tongue* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 114.

- ³⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, speaking at a panel with Central European and Russian Writers, *The Lisbon Conference On Literature*. See proceedings published in *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture* no. 9, Ann Arbor, MI, 1990), 79.
- ³¹ Heaney, "Station Island," *Station Island*, 93.
- ³² Heaney, "Secular and Millennial Milosz," *Finders Keepers*, 413.
- ³³ Czeslaw Milosz, "Anus Mundi," *To Begin Where I am: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 372.
- ³⁴ Heaney, quoting George Seferis in "The Redress of Poetry," *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 9.
- ³⁵ Heaney, "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," *The Government of the Tongue*, 19.
- ³⁶ Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue," *The Government of the Tongue*, 100.
- ³⁷ Heaney, "Atlas of Civilization," *The Government of the Tongue*, 54.
- ³⁸ Neil Corcoran, "The Poetry of Northern Ireland," *English Poetry Since 1940* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 184. Corcoran says: "The second characteristic procedure recognizable in the contours of the career is the aim of engaging Northern experience not directly but by refracting it through some exterior or alien material... The result is a kind of poetry in which the matter of contemporary British and Irish political history at its most urgent and terrifying is run along the very private lines of an interior sensibility and personality."
- ³⁹ Steiner quoted and discussed by Said in "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000), 174.
- ⁴⁰ Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile*, 174.
- ⁴¹ George Steiner, "Preface" to *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1998).
- ⁴² Daniel Weissbort, "Foreword" to *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983*, 7.
- ⁴³ Neal Ascherson, "Foreword" to Adam Czerniawski, ed., *The Mature Laurel: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1991), 10: "All this labour [of translation] has released a fresh wind of poetic energy to blow across the British Isles, where the stimulus of American verse had long subsided."
- ⁴⁴ Ted Hughes, "Introduction" to *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 10.
- ⁴⁵ A. Alvarez, "The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle," *The New Poetry*, an anthology introduced and edited by A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 28.
- ⁴⁶ Ted Hughes, "Introduction" to *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 13.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁸ See "Trial of a Young Poet: the Case of Joseph Brodsky" (*Encounter* 23.3, London, 1964), 84-91.
- ⁴⁹ Heaney, "The Impact of Translation," *The Government of the Tongue*, 44, 38.