

This essay focuses on the recurring motifs of transition between air, ground and underground in Heaney's poetry and demonstrates how these transitions represent the poet's concern with the relationship between the local communal realm and the realm of broader imaginative life. Heaney's interpretation of the interconnection between these three strata (air, ground and underground) is central to an understanding of the interconnections between local life and a broader imaginative one. The move from his early, grounded poetry to lighter, more airy work in the later part of his career reflects his changing attitude to the local and to community. Use of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory is particularly fruitful in elucidating the non-hierarchical, connectedness of air, ground and underground in Heaney's poetry. In applying this theory through close reading of key poems taken from across Heaney's career, this essay demonstrates how the connected layers of air, ground and underground reflect Heaney's varying, yet nevertheless important, attachment to the local in his creative, imaginative world.

Seamus Heaney's Plateaus: Transitions between air, ground and underground, and the relationship between the local and the imaginative.

Seamus Heaney's reputation as a poet who both represents and respects the community and local is evident and has been much discussed. However, he also explores other realms within his work. In particular he transitions both underground and the air in order to elucidate the relationship between the local communal and the imagination. Heaney suggests, "Poetry is more a threshold than a path," and it is through his transition into other realms that Heaney's poetry achieves this status. (Andrews 156) A prolific writer, he has produced not only an impressive body of poetry that spans over four decades, but he has also written extensively on his own work and the role of a poet more generally. He has written of poetry "as divination" in his essay "Feeling into Words." (Heaney 1974 14). Indeed, his poem 'The Diviner,' from his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*, extends this metaphor placing the poet in the role of dowser; searching underground through a connection to some higher power. The idea of interconnection has been theorised by Deleuze and Guattari in their work *A Thousand Plateaus* and much of Heaney's work can be linked to their

rhizome theory. Through application of this theory to Heaney's poems, this essay will show how interlinking of underground, ground and air relates to interconnections of the local communal and imaginative life.

From the beginning of his career, Heaney has shown an interest in the underground. His seminal poem 'Digging' underlines this. Here, the ground is clearly connected to male lineage and a local childhood while the downward movement is evident in the poem. Just as Heaney's grandfather digs "going down and down / For the good turf," so too will he delve into the imaginative realm of poetry. (Heaney lines 23-24) Hence, even at the inception of his career the beginning can be attributed to neither the ground nor the underground. Like the rhizome, his poetry "has neither beginning nor end, but a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows." (Deleuze and Guattari 21) Heaney does not take inspiration from the ground or the underground but rather it is from the transition between the two that his inspiration grows.

This childhood attraction to the underground and the possibilities it holds is fleshed out in 'Personal Helicon.' His childhood self is attracted not only to wells, but equally to the devices which allow the physical descent and ascent of water such as "old pumps with buckets and windlasses." (Heaney line 2) As a child, he could only "stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring." (Heaney 18) It is not possible to physically progress into the underworld and though the "dark drop" attracts him it prevents him from a true understanding of the depths of the earth. (Heaney 4) Thus, his descent is an imagined one punctuated by palpable sensory descriptions; "the smells / Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss;" "the rich crash when a bucket / Plummeted down at the end of a rope." (Heaney 3-4, 6-7) The enjambment of lines six and seven highlights the fast downward movement that transitions the poet

imaginatively underground. Nevertheless, within the confines of the well, Heaney sees “the trapped sky.” (3) This connects both underground and the air above without necessarily having to pass through the ground first. It disrupts traditional linear thought and mirrors the fact “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.” (Deleuze and Guattari 7) The realm of imagination is free from the predetermined arrangement of the broader communal realm: Adults place restrictions on children such as keeping them from wells while children in turn will become those adults and self-impose these restrictions, because of communal notions of “adult dignity,” for example. (Heaney 19)

Heaney’s imaginative realm in which he explores transition and connections between plateaus lends itself more to creativity and freedom than the rooted local. This is highlighted by the rhyme of the stanzas. Heaney directly addresses an imagined local audience in stanza three; he directs them to remember “when you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch.” (Heaney 11) The rhyme is weakest in this stanza, being the only one containing no full rhyme. The half rhyme of “ditch” / “mulch” and “aquarium” / “bottom,” shows an incompatibility of the imagination and the local. If he does in fact “*rhyme* [emphasis added] / [...] to set the darkness echoing,” then this failure to produce full rhyme, using mainly the lexicon of earth in particular, would reflect the limitations that a poetry solely fixed on the ground and aimed uniquely at the local community present. (Heaney 19-20) Conversely, the final stanza which sees a return of the first person pronoun, is the only one to contain all full rhyme: “slime” / “rhyme” and “spring” / “echoing.” In the poetic process he is autonomous, freeing himself from the ground through his poetic imagined descent. The rhymes are realised as he is allowed the space to create in the realms of

imagination. He is allowed to fulfil the aims of the lyric as set out by Helen Vendler: “to grasp and perpetuate, by symbolic form, the self’s volatile and transient here and now.” (10) Although the deep darkness of the well, which allows creativity, is cut off from any known thing it is, in fact, not truly separate from the poetic act that Heaney envisions. Deleuze and Guattari argue “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines.” (9) The underground will throw back “new music” from the poets call and these “echoing[s]” will in turn reach the local ground and the community there without ever being a direct address to them. It is Heaney’s individual poetic act, which is allowed through a descent underground, that has an effect on the wider community.

If the early part of Heaney’s career can be characterised by a strong connection with the local, then “the change from the descriptive bucolic in [...] the early poems happens somewhere across the two volumes *Wintering Out* and *North*.” (O’Donoghue 3) These more politicised volumes contain poems that see a not just a move away from descent but rather a move upwards as “as a wider social world [intrudes ...] on Heaney’s pastoral.” (Vendler 37) The bog poems in particular introduce the idea of resurrection into Heaney’s work as he draws on ancient rituals to explore violence in the North. Although Vendler has described *North*, in particular, as a series of “archaeological investigations,” suggesting the downward movement of the digging process, it is in fact resurrection that is central to the poems. Not only is Heaney raising his subjects from history but he is pulling them up from under the ground which, as already discussed, holds a wealth of imaginative potential. In ‘Bog Queen,’ for example, the speaker says, in the first line “I lay waiting.” (Heaney line 1) The use of past tense and the word waiting implies firstly that the speaker is no longer underground and has indeed risen, and also, places the focus of the end of the poem

and the final verb “rose” for which the reader waits. (Heaney 49) Similarly in ‘The Tollund Man,’ the movement is one of ascent: “In the flat country nearby, / Where they dug him out.” (Heaney 5-6) The first stanza of ‘Bog Queen’ becomes a microcosm for the great layers of underground, ground and sky as the speaker positions herself “between turf-face and demesne wall, / between heathery levels / and glass-toothed stone.” (Heaney 2-4) This gradation of plateaus is reminiscent of the stratification in ‘Personal Helicon.’ The bog queen becomes the milieu from which the poem grows and transcends the strata. Heaney imagines “history as an experience rather than a chain of events,” and as such it is from the woman’s personal experiences that the poem grows and present and history are invoked. (Longley 34)

Although, the poem’s climax comes in the speaker’s resurrection, it cannot be ignored that the majority of this poem involves description of the underground. “The qualities and contents of the bog, as before of wells and plantation, represent an unconscious – this time collective.” (Longley 35) Unlike Heaney’s descent into the well, the move underground does not represent a movement into an autonomous world of imagination in this poem. Vendler notes, “Loughs and bogs contain Irish natural and domestic history.” (39) Nevertheless, they are as a core part of the local landscape. For example, the image of “a tuft cutter’s spade” reminds the reader of the local economic dependence on the bog. (Heaney 44) However, Heaney uses these local landscapes to comment on the broader community. He has said *North* and *Wintering Out* “were attempts to go from a personal rural childhood poetry, attempts to reach out and go forward from a private domain and make wider connections, public connections”. (Randall 182) Nevertheless, as already noted, to cut-off is only to begin to grow again. Though “the slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut” in ‘Bog Queen,’ the figure of the woman will have to retain part of the local in the form of a

bellybutton. (Heaney 47-48) The imagined resurrection or, more specifically, rebirth may have a message or meaning for the wider world but these will grow from its connection to the local.

The motif of ascent is strongest in Heaney's 1991 volume *Seeing Things*. Vendler has marked this book as "a suspended time of recognition." (150) This links to Heaney's own view of the art of poetry as a whole mentioned in interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, "poetry is like the line Christ drew in the sand, it creates a pause in the action, a freeze-frame moment of concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back upon ourselves." (O'Driscoll 383) Poetry creates a suspension in reality and enters into a creative realm within the terms of that reality. Christ created this space in his local landscape of sand; Heaney has made it from Irish locales whether these are wells, bogs, Glanmore or the city of Derry. In *Seeing Things* this is taken further, "Heaney, [Seamus] Deane suggests, 'wants the powers of earth to give him sufficient lift-off to carry him into the regions of air'." (Andrews 151)

In 'Squarings viii' Heaney makes this ascent into air and creates a momentary poem. The apparition of a ship in the sky is revelatory and invokes Christ-like imagery while the setting of Clonmacnoise oratory cements the divine tone of the poem. Heaney has reached Herculean ascension here but it is not without Antaeus influence (these are terms appropriated from Heaney's 'Hercules and Antaeus' poem in *North*, used to explore two facets of his poetry). The second stanza is reminiscent of Heaney's previous poetry that grew from the ground as two levels come together, here the ground and air rather than ground and underground. However, this connection to the ground is not altogether positive in this poem. The ship represents the lightness of imagination (underlined by the subtitle of this 'Squarings' section as 'Lightenings'). The words "dragged," "deep," "hooked," and "standstill" however

invoke heaviness and rootedness which are not conducive to poetry for Heaney at this point in his career. The ship must be taken out of “the first-order mimetic style, or the second-order memorial style” and “if the ship has not been lifted up onto the symbolic plane – that is made into art – it will die with the death of those who remember it.” (Vendler 151) This creation of a new symbolic plane is evident as Heaney disrupts the hitherto traditional stratification. If the ship is sailing through the air, the air then becomes sea and the ship and its crew are close to ground level. The crewman who tries to release the ship could possibly “drown” and so the monks’ ground becomes underground, or more specifically, undersea. (Heaney line 9)

There seems to be a move away from the local community through this image of drowning. However, this is qualified by the abbot’s assertion, ““unless we help him.”” (Heaney 10) This suggests that Heaney enters the imaginative realm with the help of the local community. Although the ship is “freed,” just as the queen is cut from the bog, it does not expire, but rather begins again along new lines that have a connection to the community of monks. They give it the freedom to move on and prosper without feeling constrained by the local. The underground that he was drawn to in ‘Personal Helicon’ and explored in the bog poems has become suffocating and Heaney must remove himself from it to gain a new perspective. He climbs out “of the marvellous as he had known it.” (Heaney 12) Two stresses of this line in iambic pentameter fall on the word “marvellous,” underlining its importance and highlight the poet’s search for the marvellous through poetry. For Heaney, “marvels occur when the world is turned into air, light or spirit.” (Wilson Foster 220) Rather than being constrained by the weight of history contained in “the annals,” he frees himself in the act of writing itself.

Thus far an opposition is evident in Heaney's career between the Herculean and Antaeian forces. There is a move from "earth to air, darkness to light," and the two, although not mutually exclusive (we have already seen how they are connected to each other through rhizome theory), seem to resist one another. (Andrews 145) In interview, Heaney notes how Ted Hughes's idea that "a true poem must be 'a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us,'" coincides "entirely" with his own views. (O'Driscoll 390) By the publication of *District and Circle* in 2006, the very idea of powers in control had been called into question by the 9/11 attacks and the London Tube bombings closer to home. This volume "more than immediately preceding volumes accepts, anticipates and pays tribute to the heaviness of being." (Wilson Foster 222) With this, there is a clear "recurrence of poems set in the underworld," most notably the title poem, 'District and Circle.' (O'Donoghue 15)

In an opening that mirrors the "new music" that well produces in 'Personal Helicon,' Heaney descends into the underworld in 'District and Circle' to "tunes from a tin whistle" (Heaney line 1) Creativity is still found through movement into the deepest part of the earth. However, the movement is not restricted to being either one of ascent or descent but rather one of synthesis between the two. This is marked by the "escalators ascending and descending" (Heaney 15) Heaney can descend into the underworld without losing connection to ground above. Moreover, that ground has seen "A resurrection scene minutes before / The resurrection, habitués / Of their garden on delights, of staggered summer." (Heaney 25-27) Ascension of a sort remains possible even though the focus of the poem is the underground. The above ground "light" which Heaney misses can also be read as a 'lightness,' as the idyllic, tranquil atmosphere of summer in London is evoked. If poetry is a medium between

the real world and ourselves, [...] it is also a medium between the real world and the other-world.” (Wilson Foster 213) Hence, Heaney’s poetic act fully becomes a threshold in ‘District and Circle’ as no one world is cut off from any other unlike the cutting seen in ‘Bog Queen’ and ‘Squarings viii.’ The underground can be, and is, linked to both the ground and the possibility of an airiness.

Nevertheless, the underground is synonymous with London and the city and accordingly reflects a drastic move from Irish landscape and history. It presents a mass community through words such as “thronged,” “safety of numbers,” “crowd,” and “crowd-swept.” However, this is essentially a local community this is highlighted by the title of the poem, and collection, ‘District and Circle.’ Not only are these London Tube lines, but these words also suggest an encircling of and honing in on one’s local neighbourhood. The local professed here brings together the problematic elements of previous poems in their relationship between the local community and private imagination. In ‘Personal Helicon,’ the child Heaney descends into the well alone and seems uneasy at addressing a local community while in this poem he descends alone but enters into the community of the underground, “We were moved along.” (Heaney 17) Nevertheless, the individual remains clearly defined in the thronging horde. The pronoun “I” is used 13 times, for example and he can create his own stygian realm within the confines of the local community. Furthermore, interference from the community is presented as a sort of inspiration in ‘Bog Queen’ and ‘Squarings viii.’ The tribal violence and collective history of the bog inspire Heaney to write the poem, while the monks allow the imaginative ship freedom to sail. However as noted above, this always results in a cut; A rupture whereby poetry takes up along new lines tentatively connected to the old. No such distancing is evident in ‘District and Circle.’ The transition into this other world reminds the

speaker of his father and “Of all that [he] belonged to.” (Heaney 65) Moreover, the community is presented as part of “a human chain.” (Heaney 31) If the people in the community are connected to one another, and this would include the speaker in the poem, then the community is in some way also connected to the imaginative realm. It is through acceptance of the heaviness rather than attempts to break from it, “you can find yourself emancipated; [...] you are primed for a miracle (Wilson Foster 222) Rather than being the point of inception of the poetry, the local community, in truly rhizomic fashion, is part of the whole network of the poetry itself just as the layers of the world are simultaneously interconnected.

Through the trajectory of his career it is evident that transcendence through worldly and other-worldly layers, into territories which seem to allow imaginative processes more readily – the ground to underground, the underground to the ground and the ground to air – starts in a personal local. In *North* this widens out but the local remains an important, although not necessarily central, milieu. *Seeing Things* witnesses a move from the heaviness of the action, and poetry “sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.” (Heaney, *Fosterling* line 10) This is a period marked by ascent and airiness and a move into the marvellous. However, it is Heaney’s later poetry that truly embodies Deleuze and Guattari’s theory as it recognises that correlations between underground, ground and air noted from the very beginning of his career, represent the firm links between the local communal and the imagination and by extension a wider national and international community.

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