

Lux Perpetua: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, from Door into the Dark to Electric Light

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The early poems of Seamus Heaney, especially those in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), are memorable for the many dark places associated with the poet's childhood in rural Co. Derry and his awakening consciousness as a writer. These dark places function as vivid actualities, as with the 'musty dark' of 'The Barn', but also as symbolic realms of metaphysical darkness where the self might be explored and a poem might be conceived (*Opened Ground*, 7). In 'Antaeus' (1966) the poet speaks through the mythological giant, boldly announcing 'I am cradled in the dark that wombed me', and in 'Personal Helicon', strategically placed at the end of *Death of a Naturalist*, he reveals his love of 'the dark drop' of wells, and declares the reason for his art: 'I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (*Opened Ground*, 16, 15). Darkness persists in *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), as political violence begins to impact on Heaney's exploration and understanding of the role of the poet. Throughout this pervasive darkness, however, there is a yearning for light that becomes more urgent and pronounced in the poems of *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), and *Electric Light* (2001).

Light has a powerful and perpetual presence in Heaney's poetry. It has a vital role in poetic composition, and in the cognitive and imaginative processes of poetry, from seeing and perceiving objects in the world to reflecting upon them and recreating them in the mind. Increasingly, the light that streams into the poems comes to be equated with political hope and the possibility of change, tentative at first but gaining in assurance from volume to volume. The equation

of a more relaxed and hopeful self with the processes of peace and reconciliation is repeatedly acknowledged in the symbolic play of light and lightening. In the later poems, especially those written after *Electric Light* (2001), light is cast on a host of theological and eschatological mysteries, and inspires the poet's visionary apprehension of final things. All of these processes of light, from the glimmerings of poetic imagination in the moment of composition to the equation of light with political freedom and philosophical understanding, are validated for Heaney by their profound significance and appeal in Romantic poetry and poetics.

It is also clear, however, that Heaney's early ideas of poetic conception and gestation are influenced by a modern poetics that had begun to absorb the findings of psychology while simultaneously moving away from a long tradition of Romantic idealism. Across the broad spectrum of poetic theory, Heaney's apprehension of light draws on the legacy of the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats, while acknowledging the experimental play of light and the new art of epiphany in the work of modernist writers, including T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and W.B. Yeats. The fertile darkness of Heaney's first two volumes, in particular, recalls Eliot's idea of 'the dark embryo' that appears in the poet's consciousness and gradually takes on the form and speech of a poem (Eliot, xiii). Even so, the creative impulse that continues to motivate and inform much of Heaney's writing, right through to *Electric Light* at the beginning of the next century, is the familiar Romantic belief in the illuminating power of the imagination, an idea well-known to Heaney's generation of undergraduate students in English through the massive popularity of *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) by M.H. Abrams. The Keatsian imperative of going forth lamp in hand

takes on a new urgency in *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) as Ulster enters a traumatic phase of political darkness.

'The Forge', an early sonnet in *Door into the Dark*, opens with a declaration of negative capability and a determination to encounter the dark places of artistic creation, even while being in the grip of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts: 'All I know is a door into the dark'. The blacksmith's anvil is imaginatively transformed into 'an altar' as the sonnet slips from octave to sestet, confirming the role of the forge as a dark cave of making where craft and labour combine with inspiration and dedication. The aspiring poet finds an exemplary music in 'the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring' and a startling image of inspiration in the 'unpredictable fantail of sparks' (*Opened Ground*, 20). Looking back on these early ideas of poetic composition in the interviews in *Stepping Stones*, Heaney is drawn to the theories of Carl Jung by way of explanation, and especially to the function of symbolic archetypes in poetry: 'You learned that, from the beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region...' (*Stepping Stones*, 472). Indeed, much of Heaney's early poetry corresponds to Jung's fundamental concern with acknowledging and exploring personal darkness: 'Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious' (Jung, 265-66). That willed enlightenment, a stage of personal development beyond the child's narcissistic staring into water, is memorably evoked in the lines already quoted from 'Personal Helicon': 'I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (*Opened Ground*, 15).

At the same time as having its origins in Romantic poetic theory, the light that spills into Heaney's poetry emanates from his own local places and experiences. By his own admission, his way of seeing the world places him in the company of Patrick Kavanagh rather than Yeats, with a 'fundamentally Catholic mysticism' being grounded in everyday domestic realities: 'My starlight came in over the half-door of a house with a clay floor, not over the dome of a Byzantine palace; and, in a hollowed-out part of the floor, there was a cat licking up the starlit milk' (*Stepping Stones*, 318). This domestication of light helps to make tangible and intelligible its startling range of symbolic effects, without losing the mythical, magical qualities that are part of its appeal. The function of 'Sunlight', the first of the two dedicatory 'Mossbawn' poems with which Heaney opens *North*, is to provide a bright and sustaining image of beneficence in which the love and security associated with home act as a stay against the darkness that follows. There is a reassuring certitude in the simple declarative past tense of the opening line: 'There was a sunlit absence'. The abstract 'absence' has a strangely liberating effect here, allowing a momentary contemplation of nothing but the light itself. The play of light turns absence into a positive, creating space for tranquility and stillness. The poem contrives to do what other poets have failed to do, making the sun stand still, but its most potent achievement is in its revelatory figuring of love 'like a tinsmith's scoop / sunk past its gleam / in the meal-bin' (*Opened Ground*, 93). There is a nurturing plenitude in 'scoop' that makes it an apt image of love, but the persistence of light in the buried 'gleam' lifts the poem from its modest kitchen setting into a numinous present where hope and inspiration might still be found.

'Gleam' has a venerable place in poetic tradition, registering both a lost potential, as with Wordsworth's 'visionary gleam', and an elusive future, as in Tennyson's 'Ulysses': 'Yet all experience is an arch where thro' / Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades / For ever and forever when I move' (Wordsworth, 298; Tennyson, 563). In Heaney's *North* it reappears in the title poem, in which the imagined tongue of a Viking longship bids the poet, 'Lie down / in the word-hoard, burrow / the coil and gleam / of your furrowed brain'. The instruction here is to 'Compose in darkness', but darkness now signifies not so much the fertile place of making in *Door into the Dark* as a necessary withdrawal, perhaps even self-protection. At one level, what Heaney proposes in 'North' is a tempered modernist poetics of occasional epiphanies rather than a romantic ideal of sustained visionary power: 'Expect aurora borealis / in the long foray / but no cascade of light' (*Opened Ground*, 99). At another level, though, 'the long foray' carries obvious suggestions of conflict and warfare, as well as aptly describing the poet's self-imposed intellectual endeavours. The image of 'aurora borealis', better known as 'the northern lights', brilliantly conveys the northern geography of the book while also fixing the image of the poet as a late 'watcher of the skies' intent on discovering beauty in the shifting, uncertain lights drifting through winter darkness.

Throughout the 1970s, then, Heaney's imagination moves furtively through a poetry of 'night and light and the half-light' (Yeats, 35). In his prose writings in the early 1980s, there are signs of a deeply felt need to open the door into the light even further and embrace an art of brilliant luminosity. 'The Main of Light' was written for the *festschrift* volume *Larkin at Sixty* (1982) and reprinted in *The Government of the Tongue* (1988) and *Finders Keepers* (2002). It

retains its freshness and appeal as a positive reappraisal of the poetry of Philip Larkin. The essay begins, however, not with Larkin, but with Shakespeare, and with the startling way in which ‘the mind’s eye gets dazzled by “the main of light”’ as we progress from ‘nativity’ to ‘maturity’ in Sonnet 60 (*Finders Keepers*, 145). Heaney’s enthusiastic appreciation of a poetry of intense vision and revelation draws him to a previously unacknowledged brightness and brilliance in Larkin’s poetry, but it also signals the direction in which his own poetry would tend from this time onwards.

Challenging the familiar critical assessment of Larkin’s downbeat, empirical way of seeing the world, Heaney claims that ‘there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality’ and an appetite for ‘the sensation of revelation’. He traces ‘a stream of light’ that flows through Larkin’s poetry, noting how it generates a ‘hymn to the sun’ in ‘Solar’, and how a ‘light-filled dilation’ at the centre of ‘Deceptions’ transposes that poem from ‘lament to comprehension’ (*Finders Keepers* 146-48). He claims that the concluding lines of ‘Here’, with their magnificent vision of ‘unfenced existence / Facing the sun’, constitute an ‘epiphany’, and he goes on to reveal the many and various effects of light in ‘Water’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, and ‘High Windows’: ‘The minute light makes its presence felt in Larkin’s poetry he cannot resist the romantic poet in himself who must respond with pleasure and alacrity...’ (149-50). The final, generous assessment of the work is that ‘Larkin also had it in him to write his own version of the *Paradiso*’ (152). We know, in retrospect, that Heaney had it in him, too.

The challenge to the poet going forth lamp in hand in the bitter political climate of the 1980s is well illustrated in the title poem of *The Haw Lantern* (1987). Here, it seems that the poet is still 'wintering out' and the emblematic red berry of the hawthorn is a votive light for his beleaguered art: 'The wintry haw is burning out of season, / crab of the thorn, a small light for small people'. That small light modestly instills in the people a measure of self-respect, 'not having to blind them with illumination'. In the turn of what looks like an inverted sonnet, the tree comes to resemble the cynic Diogenes roaming through daylight Athens with his lamp, in search of 'one just man'. Now, the light of poetry, it seems, takes on a more active civic role, but one as much given to self-scrutiny as to the judgement of others. The image of the red berry as a 'blood-prick' suggests a pricking of the conscience, and one in which the poet is as implicated as his readers (*Opened Ground* 275).

It is not until *Seeing Things* (1991) that Heaney allows the main of light to flood into his work with the transforming power that he had commended in the essay on Larkin. The impulse is candidly announced in 'Fosterling', with its rueful acknowledgement of 'Me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels'. The title of the poem and its epigraph acknowledge the 'heavy greenness' of nationalist politics, as well as the burden of the poet as 'water carrier' in John Montague's early poem of that title. 'Fosterling' also brings to mind the growth of a poet's mind 'Fostered alike by beauty and by fear', prompting us to look back to *North* and the quotation of those lines from Wordsworth's *Prelude* in the epigraph to 'Singing School' (*Opened Ground*, 126). As in the earlier poem, Yeats is also a shaping presence, with 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' providing the stirring image of 'brightening air' and 'Easter

1916' reminding us that 'too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart' (Yeats 29, 86): 'So long for air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten' (*Opened Ground*, 331).

A further instance of 'tremendous change' in Heaney's life and work, 'again something to do with getting near fifty', is recorded in 'The Skylight', the seventh sonnet in 'Glanmore Revisited'. As Heaney acknowledges in the *Stepping Stones* interviews, Glanmore Cottage had become for him not only a workspace and a retreat, but a physical embodiment of what Wallace Stevens describes as 'the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality'. Having initially opposed the idea of introducing a skylight to the roof of the cottage, Heaney returned from Harvard and found light flooding through the low ceiling: 'I lifted up my eyes to the heavens' (*Stepping Stones*, 325-26). The resistance and the release are skillfully manipulated in the octave and sestet of the sonnet, with the turn amply registering a shift of mood and outlook: 'But when the slates came off, extravagant / Sky entered and held surprise wide open' (*Opened Ground*, 325). Unexpectedly, but assuredly, the poetry acquires its own 'light-filled dilation', admitting that 'crystalline reality' so admired in 'The Main of Light'. The experience brings with it, for Heaney, the sought-for healing and forgiveness that had seemed so difficult to obtain in 'The Haw Lantern'. The cynic Diogenes makes way for the man sick of palsy, lowered through the roof in St Mark's Gospel (2.4) to be physically and spiritually restored. Along with this new-found spiritual valency comes a new-found conception of unroofed poetry, a preoccupation with unroofed dwelling places, and a visionary apprehension of an unroofed world.

Complementing the new Glanmore sonnets in *Seeing Things*, and displaying a 'tongue-and-groove' poetic craft, is a sequence of 'Squarings', consisting of four sections, each with twelve poems (*Opened Ground*, 325). Each poem has twelve lines, arranged in four stanzas. The four-square architectural solidity of the sequence nevertheless allows for considerable freedom of poetic composition. The opening section of the sequence, 'Lightenings', gives notice of 'Shifting brilliancies' that are both aesthetic, in terms of the luminous visual images embedded in the poems, and spiritual, in terms of the fluctuating longing for knowledge and revelation that the poems convey. Light aids meditation and brings to mind unforgettable anticipatory images of 'the particular judgement', the moment of final spiritual reckoning in Catholic theology. These images are brilliantly ushered in by 'winter light / In a doorway' and 'A beggar shivering in silhouette'. The scene is magnificently desolate and unroofed, with the abandoned house or 'wallstead' anticipating Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* a few years later: 'Bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into – / Bright puddle where the soul-free cloud-life roams'. The ambivalence here (souls free among clouds, but also clouds free of souls) percolates through 'Lightenings', prompting a poetry that provides no great revelation or clarification, just 'old truth dawning' (*Opened Ground*, 332).

'Lightenings' involves a prolonged meditation on the meaning of 'lightening', without any arch or affected postmodern self-reflexiveness. In fact, the self-scrutiny is conducted with a striking combination of colloquial ease and theological scholasticism, one leading us gently into the other, from 'that' to 'this':

And lightening? One meaning of that
 Beyond the usual sense of alleviation,
 Illumination and so on, is this... (*Opened Ground*, 341)

The meaning in question, couched in the brittle terms of a dictionary definition, has to do with what Heaney elsewhere defines as 'a flaring of the spirit at the moment before death'. This is 'lightening' in the special sense of 'being unburdened and illuminated' (*Stepping Stones*, 321). It is, of course, just 'one' meaning, and it doesn't displace the more obvious and immediate sense of 'lightening up' alluded to in 'Fosterling'. Even so, light in *Seeing Things* guides us unswervingly into the realm of eschatology. It also guides us, just as surely, into the realm of the political. Poem xxxvi of 'Squarings', part of the 'Crossings' sub-sequence, recalls the civil rights marches that Heaney took part in, but it does so 'in the light' of a later life. The danger of the march and the confrontation with the police is now defused and seen in the broader aspect of the poet's expansive imaginative life. The poem opens with the Old Testament valley of darkness (Psalms 23.4) and closes with the Classical myth of Charon, the ferryman of the dead, but it is Dante who prompts the comparison between fireflies and the 'unpredictable, attractive light' of the policemen's torches' (*Opened Ground*, 354). There are multiple crossings here, and the crossing to a new, and later, imaginative conception of the event does not displace the powerful memory of that initial crossing to safety in a time of panic and uncertainty.

There is no doubt that a further letting-in of the light was occasioned by the IRA ceasefire at the end of August 1994, and that much of the 'lightening up' in Heaney's work at this time had to do with changing political relations that

permitted a new, if somewhat guarded, optimism. There is confirmation of this in a short article, 'Light Finally Enters the Black Hole', written by Heaney for the Dublin *Sunday Tribune*, just a few days after the announcement was made:

I went outside to try to re-collect myself and suddenly a blind seemed to rise somewhere at the back of my mind and the light came flooding in. I felt twenty-five years younger. I remembered what things had felt like in those early days of political ferment in the late sixties (*Finders Keepers*, 45).

A hope that new possibilities might quell the political conflict of the previous twenty-five years flows through the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 'Crediting Poetry', in 1995, and it manifests itself in the forward-looking poems of *The Spirit Level* in 1996. The changing political circumstances of the early 1990s encourage Heaney to look again at the familiar places associated with his earlier work and to see them in a new light. 'Tollund' is an especially important instance of this act of re-appraisal, since it inevitably calls to mind the ritual violence of 'The Tollund Man' and the poet's pained condition of feeling 'lost, / Unhappy and at home' (*Opened Ground*, 63). Dated 'September 1994', 'Tollund' candidly announces a post-ceasefire perception of having 'travelled far'. A new sense of being 'at home' infuses the closing lines of the poem, in which the poet appears as revenant, 'Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning' (*Opened Ground*, 410). The revisiting of old haunts in a new light is evident, too, in the later poem, 'At Toomebridge', in *Electric Light* (2001). This time, Heaney returns to a place that has strong associations with both historical memory and more recent political

events – ‘Where the checkpoint used to be. / Where the rebel boy was hanged in ‘98’ – both now receding in the electrically charged atmosphere in which the poet senses the possibility of the marvelous in the ‘shining’ water of the River Bann. The slippage from ‘slime’ to ‘silver’ (not ‘sliver’ or ‘slither’) in ‘The slime and silver of the fattened eel’ releases a sudden sense of promise and well-being, subtly triggering a subliminal connection between electric eels and electric light (*Electric Light*, 3).

The title poem of *Electric Light* alludes to the electrification of rural areas, including Co. Derry, in the 1930s and 1940s, but it also clearly signals the emergence of a new and bright conception of poetry and poetic vocation. It is as if the poet’s memories are given a powerful new charge. A switch is pressed and a light shines searchingly over the long perspective of the past sixty years.

‘Electric Light’ gives symbolic resonance to the light switch and the wireless knob, granting the mature writer a new way of seeing his own poetic calling, and of tuning in to the voices of his education, including those of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Philip Larkin. In a Poetry Book Society Bulletin, later reprinted in the *Guardian*, Heaney gives a candid account of how the poems in *Electric Light* were composed, and how perspective brings significance. His lucid explanation has a particular bearing on the title poem: ‘Incidents from childhood and adolescence and the recent past swim up into memory: moments that were radiant or distressful at the time come back in the light of a more distanced and more informed consciousness’ (Heaney, 2001).

‘Electric Light’ opens with a pre-electric image of candle wax, but also with the possibility of epiphany. The grandmother’s mangled thumb-nail, likened to the congealed ‘Candle-grease...dark-streaked with soot’, is transformed by the

light of imagination into a thing of beauty, ‘puckered pearl’. As we slip from tercet to tercet, new shapes and patterns of memory are brought into play. The ‘ancient’ mangled thumb is now likened to ‘Rucked quartz’ and leads us down the rock-strewn footpath to the Sybil’s cave in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The grandmother, a modern Sybil in her unzipped ‘fur-lined felt slippers’, would not be out of place in *The Waste Land*, except that Heaney’s attitude is one of familial warmth and attachment rather than comic condescension or ironic disdain. We are reminded here of the Sybil as she appears in the epigraph to *The Waste Land*, from the *Satyricon* of Petronius: ‘Nam sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis’: ‘With my own eyes I saw the Sibyl at Cumae’ (Eliot 1967, 37). The child’s vision of the grandmother has the force of revelation, occurring ‘In the first house where I saw electric light’. The electric light is left ‘turned on’ to appease the homesick child, but what might have been a ‘waste of light’ is seen retrospectively to have had a productive power in shaping the growth of the poet’s mind (*Electric Light*, 80).

The echoes of Eliot in ‘Electric Light’ further develop the association of poetic calling with the play of light. The artistic arrivals conjured up by ‘Splashes between a ship and dock’ bring to mind Eliot’s ‘Animula’ (1929) with its startling opening quotation from Dante: ‘Issues from the hand of God, the simple soul, / To a flat world of changing lights and noise’. Eliot’s brilliant exploration of the innocent soul that comes alive to ‘Pleasure in the wind, the sunlight and the sea’ before studying ‘the sunlit pattern on the floor’ is, for Heaney, an exemplary instance of the young artist’s coming to consciousness (Eliot 1967, 70-71). It perfectly adumbrates his own steady emergence into the light – his entry into England, into English, and into poetry itself. That process is aptly conveyed, as

well, in the memorable London image of emerging 'From tube-mouth into sunlight'. The compound 'tube-mouth' cleverly catches a number of mouths: the mouth of a baby being bottle-fed, the mouth of a river (linking his own native River Moyola to the Thames), and the mouth of the London underground providing an exit from darkness into light. It recalls, as well, W.H. Auden's famous pronouncement on the persistence of poetry in his elegy for Yeats: 'It survives, / A way of happening, a mouth' (Auden, 50). Southwark summons the aspiring poet with its traces of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims and Shakespeare's Globe, but the light of inspiration in literary London is undeniably Eliot's, with Heaney re-echoing the words of St Augustine already echoed in *The Waste Land*: 'To Southwark too I came' (*Electric Light*, 81).

The child's reaching for the light switch and the wireless knob points to sources of illumination and inspiration, both of them associated with technological change, that complement and extend the other symbolic objects and places of inspiration in the early poems of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*: the bog, the well, the forge. The repeated admission, 'They let me and they watched me', works as a mantra, giving concentration and emphasis to the rhythmic interplay of volition, assent and guidance by which the child acquires the light of knowledge in the adult world. The memory of the child who 'roamed at will the stations of the world' substitutes the stations of the cross with the glowing radio stations of the wireless set, without cancelling the intimations of pain and suffering that come with the passage from innocence to experience (*Electric Light*, 81). At the same time, the phrase cunningly echoes 'the stations of the breath' in Dylan Thomas's wartime elegy, 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' (Thomas, 94). Heaney's own wartime

experience in rural Derry is recalled in 'All quiet behind the blackout', a line that both echoes the title of a well-known anti-war novel (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) and looks back to Heaney's 'Stations' (that title once again pointing to rites of passage) in which 'Behind the blackout, Germany called to lamplit kitchens through fretted baize' (the wireless set). In that same prose poem or 'station', titled 'England's Difficulty', Heaney remembers the bombing of Belfast: 'I was on somebody's shoulder, conveyed through the starlit yard to see the sky glowing over Anahorish' (*Opened Ground*, 83). Here, and in 'Electric Light', the fluctuation of light and darkness sensitively records the anxieties and hopes of a child 'fostered alike by beauty and by fear'. Like the tick of the two clocks in 'Sunlight', the 'ticking' of knitting needles induces a counter-intuitive sense of time stilled while time is actually passing, but like the ticking of the bicycle in a later poem in *North*, 'A Constable Calls', it also prompts uneasiness. The child's fear is projected on to the grandmother's gashed thumbnail, but there is beauty, too, in the 'plectrum-hard, glit-glittery' nail, which becomes an art object, redolent of light and music (glittery nicely qualifying the slimy 'glit' of the earlier 'Fosterling' while keeping contact with it). More than a keepsake, 'it must still keep / Among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground'. 'Keep' here is inspired, as well as deftly placed at the end of the penultimate line: keep as 'remain' but keep as due observance of some ritual, as with 'keeping the faith'. There is an afterlife here, an afterlife predicated on the preservation of objects, that takes us back to 'Bogland'. There is also continuity and trust in the image of the 'dirt-tracked flint and fissure' of the nail, a keeping of faith with Heaney's own earlier work embedded in the darkness of the earth (*Electric Light*, 81).

‘Electric light shone over us’, the poem recalls (*Electric Light*, 81). The plural pronoun suggests inclusiveness and togetherness in those wartime years of change and uncertainty. There is a whimsical hint of prayer, as well, as Heaney remembers a prominent line from the Catholic liturgy for the dead: ‘And let perpetual light shine upon them’, a line that he cites approvingly many times in his prose writings, interviews, and other poems. The brief article in which he explains the title of his new book in 2001 carries the heading, ‘Lux perpetua’:

Once "Electric Light" got written, I had no doubt about it as the title poem. Apart from anything else, the brightness of my grandmother's house is associated in my mind with a beautiful line from the Mass for the Dead – "Et lux perpetua luceat eis", "And let perpetual light shine upon them" – a line which is also echoed in one of the sections of "The Real Names". Then, once I settled on the title, I began to see what I hadn't seen before, that there was light all over the place, from the shine on the weir in the very first poem to the "reprieving light" of my father's smile in the penultimate line of the penultimate poem in the book. And as well as this, there is an almost equally pervasive note of elegy (Heaney 2001).

The father's smile appears, memorably and movingly, in ‘Seeing the Sick’, which recalls the old farmer's shrinking stature not long before he died. The ‘reprieving light’ implies an easing of pain, but the happy associations of summer are dimmed by the harsh truth of a morphine-induced oblivion: ‘His smile a summer half-door opening out / And opening in. A reprieving light. / For which the tendered morphine had our thanks’ (*Electric Light*, 79)

Light shines perpetually in Seamus Heaney's poetry. It has its first glimmerings in poems conceived in darkness and brought into luminous being. Images and ideas are recovered from the dark earth of memory and subjected to the light of creation. Sparks fly as forms are beaten out like metal in the dark forge of poetry. The interplay of darkness and light becomes the prevailing metaphor in a poetry self-consciously preoccupied with memory and perception, especially in the books published in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, writing in a subdued light becomes a necessary condition in a tense and sometimes turbulent political climate, and the image that then prevails is that of the servant boy "swinging a hurricane-lamp / through some outhouse" in *Wintering Out* (*Opened Ground*, 48). The directive to "Compose in darkness" takes on enormous historical and political significance in *North* (*Opened Ground*, 99), a poetic ideal demanding patience and fortitude in the midst of violence. If the lightening-up that characterizes the later Heaney of *Seeing Things* and *Electric Light* is attendant on the poet's own mortality ('Me waiting until I was nearly fifty'), it is also surely a consequence of a political optimism that lifts the blinds at the back of the head (*Opened Ground*, 331). A more equable light shines in the work composed in the 1990s and later, enabling a poetry of meditation and spiritual scrutiny, of quiet celebration and elegy. This might seem too neat and simple a pattern to impose on a poetic career of such range and diversity, but the idea of imagining the world in terms of archetypal patterns was one to which Heaney readily gave his assent, even while gently mocking his own coming to consciousness as a writer: 'You had your puny south Derry being within the great echoing acoustic of a universe of light and dark, death and

everlasting life, divine praise and prayers for the dead: as in “Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them” (*Stepping Stones*, 471). Of the many Latin tags that Seamus Heaney cherished, *Lux Perpetua* seems particularly apt, both as a description of those later poems that fearlessly open a door into the light, and as an epithet for a poetic career and destiny of undimmed greatness.

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