

Seamus Heaney's "The Strand at Lough Beg": An Intertextual Reading¹

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"The Strand at Lough Beg" first appeared in Seamus Heaney's *Field Work* (1979) as one of the six elegies included in the collection. The poem was written in memory of Heaney's second cousin Colum McCartney, a young Catholic who was shot by Protestant militants in the Fews Forest, south-west of Armagh, Ireland, in 1975. Some ten years later, "The Strand" became the object of Heaney's self-critique in *Station Island* (1984), where he questions and arguably condemns his earlier use of poetry as a means of evading (or "whitewash[ing]", as the poet has it) the terror and crudity of the Irish "Troubles".² Through an analysis of the rich nexus of intertextual references which constitutes "The Strand", I suggest that one should question Heaney's self-critique, and ask whether his later characterization of the poem as a drawing of "lovely blinds"³ over "the fact"⁴ really individuates what is central to the poem. While the poet's deliberate integration of medieval narratives into the poem may certainly be read as effecting the kind of poetic and political evasion which Heaney so unsparingly criticizes, these very narratives also support a different reading. In particular, I shall argue that although the poet's treatment of Colum's violent death results indeed in a "whitewashing" of facts, this "whitewashing" rather paradoxically turns out to allow for the uncovering of something that

¹ I am thankful to Professor Margery Sabin for helpful comments on a first version of this essay.

² Seamus Heaney, "Station Island" in Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground. Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998), line 74.

³ *Ibid.*, line 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, line 69.

lies beyond the “blood and roadside muck”;⁵ something distinct from but *as valuable as* a lucid appreciation of “facts”: the possibility of assuaging grief through memory, and a capacity to mourn without despair, pausing in hopeful meditation even when “the facts” would have one forgo both hope and poetic creation. For the purposes of this essay, my analysis will first focus on the first and third stanzas; the second stanza will be considered in some detail in the course of my discussion of the third.

Following the epigraph from Dante’s *Purgatorio* I,⁶ the participle clause which opens “The Strand at Lough Beg” creates an effect of measured, slow-paced motion as well as a gradual expansion of one’s field of vision in space:

Leaving the white glow of filling stations	1
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields	
You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton	
Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars –	
Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim’s track	5

From the filling stations to the streetlamps of a landscape that those “fields” characterize as rural, the distancing motion of the first two lines acquires a subject only at the beginning of the third, with the poet’s direct address of “[y]ou”. Directed “towards”, moving “past” and “out”, briefly pausing “beneath” for the time allowed by the strong caesura of line 4 and then proceeding “along”, the traveler’s varied movement seems to be observed from a bird’s-eye view which allows a seamless zoom from the fields to Newtownhamilton, and from the forest to the road. The significance of this perspective will be touched upon later in the essay. More

⁵ Heaney, “The Strand at Lough Beg” in *Opened Ground*, line 37.

⁶ “All round this little island, on the strand/ Far down below there, where the breakers strive,/ Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand./ Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 100-3” (“The Strand at Lough Beg”, 145).

important for present purposes, the qualification of “that road” as a “pilgrim’s track” associates the addressee “you” with the figure of Dante the pilgrim, introducing an intertextual parallel which will be developed more fully in the last stanza. While the image of the pilgrim is perhaps too generic, by itself, to justify such a specific identification, the epigraph and a number of consonances between *Inferno I* and these lines make the parallel between Heaney’s poem and Dante’s *Commedia* conspicuous: like Dante at the beginning of his journey, Colum proceeds past a forest evocative of the Dantean “dark wood”;⁷ like Dante, he “climb[s]” the hills at daybreak along a “high, bare...track” that may remind one of the “desert slope” leading the pilgrim to the gates of Hell,⁸ but also of the “cliff so steep” that Dante and Virgil have to climb as they ascend the terraces of Purgatory.⁹ Despite the mitigating impressions of light and spaciousness that the phrases “out beneath the stars” and “white glow” convey, the overall effect of these references to the *Inferno*, compounded with the “loneli[ness]” of the place and the “bare[ness]” of the road, is one of somberness and slight apprehension. More clearly “infernal” and far more feverish, however, is the atmosphere created by the lines that follow, where the poet focuses on the “pilgrim’s track” as the place:

Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,
Goat-beards and dogs’ eyes in a demon pack
Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing

⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ed. Matthew Pearl (New York: Modern Library, 2003), Canto I, line 2.

⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, line 29.

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), Canto III, line 47.

A legendary Ulster king who lived in the seventh century, Sweeney is the protagonist of *Buile Suibhne*, an Irish medieval work probably composed in the ninth century, and first translated into English in 1913.¹⁰ Seventy years later, Heaney himself wrote and published a second translation titled *Sweeney Astray* (SA), which he was beginning to revise at the time of *Field Work's* publication.¹¹ After being cursed by a cleric whom he has offended and attempted to kill, Sweeney goes mad during the battle of Moira, where he is suddenly seized by such convulsions, "lurchings/ and launchings", that he drops his weapons and "levitate[s] in a frantic cumbersome motion/ like a bird of the air".¹² From that moment, Sweeney roams Ireland "grieving and astray",¹³ separated from society by the same "great gulf" he sees yawning between his "craziness and reason".¹⁴

The flight mentioned in these lines of "The Strand" reproduces a particular episode of *Sweeney Astray*: as Sweeney momentarily recovers sound judgment, the cleric Ronan prays—and is satisfied—that the curse on Sweeney be renewed. Enforcers of this renewed condition of *geilt* or madness are five "bleeding headless torsos and disembodied heads—...scraggy, goat-bearded" that appear to Sweeney in the Fewes Forest, causing him to flee and startling him into a new "fit".¹⁵ Lexically indebted to Heaney's own translation of SA ("snapping", "squealing" and

¹⁰ Conor McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 13-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1983), 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. Certainly in this wondering figure with a gift for poetic improvisation there is something of the artist-tramp, a recurrent type in Irish literature. But the character of Sweeney also embodies aspects of the madman ("geilt")-hermit or "Christian geilt" who endures extreme privations as a way of expiating sin, while still harboring feelings of *guilt* (cf. Hart in McCarthy, *Heaney and Medieval Poetry*, 21). For a discussion of the possible derivation of Old English *gylt/ gelt* (hence "guilt") from the Irish and Scots Gaelic *geilt*, see *ibid.* 20-21.

¹⁵ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, 69-70.

ghouls".¹⁷ What one is presented with is the vivid yet fragmented narrative of a vision or dream; starkly-contoured details drawn in the attempt to answer the uncertainties of a death that the poet did not witness; and the rendition of a feeling that runs unchanged from the seventh-century *geilt* chased after in the Fews to the victim of a political murder of the 1970's: the confusion of sights and sounds immediately before the fact ("engine, voices, heads hooded..."), the "sudden[ness]" of the pursuers' moves, perhaps even a suggestion of bewilderment and fear as one imagines Colum looking into the driving mirror and realizing that he is being pursued. Throughout, death remains impalpable, inferable only from the commemorative intent of the poem and the violence suggested by these lines, and finally eluded by the shift of focus that the poet marks with the connective "[w]here".¹⁸ To this transition from the action of the scene to its geographical reality there seems to correspond a changed source of pain, which in the last part of the stanza is no longer (or not primarily) the violence and the fear, but rather Colum's remoteness from home, his foreignness to the uplands of the Fews, and a sense of longing for familiar landscapes that is also Sweeney's as he laments his farness "from those rushy hillsides, /...from home among the reeds",¹⁹ Dante's during his political exile from Florence, and perhaps – as suggested by the caressing tone of lines 15-6 – the poet's own.

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While one could argue that this convergence of intertextual threads carries Colum's figure and death beyond their historical, political and national specificities, exposing what may

¹⁷ Ibid., 70, 73.

¹⁸ Heaney, "The Strand at Lough Beg", line 14.

¹⁹ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, 22.

be topical or generally “human” about them (e.g. the experience of violence, loneliness, displacement), one might also wonder whether the multiple identifications of Colum with the figures of Sweeney and Dante-pilgrim may not result in a mystified Colum. If “The Strand” purports to be “*in memory of Colum McCartney*”,²⁰ how much and *what* of the individual, “historical” Colum – as well as of his death – is remembered between the rich intertextual strata of the poem? Further, *should* one way of remembering Colum – personal, factual, historical– be preferred over the other – emblematic, un-historical, sublimating? In a politically troubled context like the one in which “The Strand” was written, does the poet have a duty to choose certain forms of poetic representation, and to avoid others?

These are questions that Heaney’s later critique of “The Strand” urges one to consider, and that he appears to answer at least in part through the accusing words of the revenant Colum we encounter in section VIII of “Station Island” (*Station Island*, 1984). “Pale-faced” and “plastered in mud”,²¹ Colum first insinuates that the poet’s immediate reaction to the news of his murder – staying in the company of other poets, “dumb” and unable to act or show any emotion – was contemptible.²² Then, in response to the poet’s attempt to excuse himself, Colum addresses more directly the poet’s representation of his death, accusing him of “hav[ing] confused evasion and artistic tact”.²³ In writing “The Strand”, Heaney “whitewashed ugliness and drew/ the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*/ and saccharined [Colum’s] death with morning dew”.²⁴ The poet – Colum/ Heaney seems to imply –is culpable not merely for sentimentalizing

²⁰ Heaney, “The Strand at Lough Beg”, 145.

²¹ Heaney, “Station Island”, line 52.

²² *Ibid.*, line 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, line 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 74-6.

a political death (“the fact”),²⁵ but also for mystifying it by omitting or concealing what was perhaps its truth – its “ugliness”.²⁶ Since Colum explicitly mentions the *Purgatorio* in his accusation, it may be useful to consider Heaney’s ethic and aesthetic self-critique in connection to the last stanza of “The Strand”, which most explicitly draws upon the first canto of the

Purgatorio:

Across that strand of yours the cattle graze
Up to their bellies in an early mist 30
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in dew. Like a dull blade with its edge
Honed bright, Lough Beg half-shines under the haze.
I turn because the sweeping of your feet 35
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss 40
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Opening with the sense of placidity conveyed by the image of cows grazing and contemplating “unbewildered” the world around them, the stanza recreates from its beginning the peaceful if muffled atmosphere that characterizes parts of the *Purgatorio*. Immersed in “an early mist”, suffused with the “bright[ness]” and shimmering of the waters partially visible through the “haze”, at first sight the strand might appear as a place of “evasion” from the

²⁵ Ibid., line 69.

²⁶ Ibid., line 74.

gloom and hellish echoes of the Fewes. In contrast with the confusion of sounds we encountered in the first stanza, silence pervades the scene, broken only by the “squeaking” of rushes and the “sweeping” of the poet’s and Colum’s feet. Here even death seems ineffectual in producing a change in atmosphere and mood: as the poet turns to Colum and finds him inexplicably dead, there follows no abrupt gesture, no sign of what might be expected as a natural reaction of surprise and discomposure; instead, the knowing controlled acts (“kneel”, “gather up”, “wash”, “dab”, “lift”) of someone who performs a familiar ritual of purification and deposition.

To anyone acquainted with *Purgatorio I*, the image of Colum and the poet who “work [their] way through squeaking sedge”,²⁷ the former being led by the poet, may easily call to mind Virgil’s exhortation that Dante “follow [his] steps”, and their “anda[r] per lo solingo piano” (“going along the lonely plane”).²⁸ Now the poet’s ritual gestures deepen this intertextual connection by evoking one of the crucial moments of the *Purgatorio*: on a shore abundant with dew, Virgil “gently spread[s]/ his hands upon the [tender] grass” with which he removes the grime of hell from Dante’s face.²⁹ Then, symbolizing Dante’s repentant state and renewed humility that make him ready to continue the ascent, Virgil girds him with a rush that prodigiously regenerates itself “in the very place where he had plucked it”.³⁰ Although the sort of purification which the poet performs on Colum might not be religious, it does express a wish to remove from him the signs of his violent death, with all its “ugliness” and its concreteness as a historical and political fact. As argued by Colum in “Station Island”, then, one might see the

²⁷ Heaney, “The Strand at Lough Beg”, line 32.

²⁸ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto I, lines 112 and 118.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Canto I, lines 121-29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Canto I, lines 134-6.

Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground.

If one accepted Corcoran's qualification of the second half of this stanza as a "rueful acknowledgment"³¹ of Colum's and his family's incapacity to face the violent reality of the Troubles, it seems that one would be committed to the view that the poet's criticism of the idea and practice of "evasion" long precedes and perhaps prepares his later self-critique of poetic evasion in *Station Island*. Thus the question whether the poet of "The Strand" conceives of evasion in any criticizing sense could be answered in the positive. But it is in fact unclear how these lines express the poet's regret or disapproval for the attitude of his cousin's and his own family to "the Troubles". Both families "fought shy"; both "could not crack the whip or seize the day". Yet from this what can be inferred with some degree of confidence about the poet's own attitude to this incapacity common to both families? The modal "could not" leaves one in doubt: the poet might mean that they were unable to "crack the whip and seize the day", but both could and should have done otherwise; or that they could not have done otherwise, though they should have done so; or that they should not have done otherwise even in the event they could have done otherwise. If the metaphors "crack[ing] the whip" and "seiz[ing] the day" denoted actions or attitudes unequivocally desirable and ethically recommendable, it would be reasonable to argue that the poet's judgment of his family's and Colum's "evasion" implies indeed "ruefulness" and disapproval. But while both metaphors suggest sharp, brusque movements, and qualities of resolve and efficiency which might be in themselves valuable, they

³¹ Neil Corcoran, *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 136 (emphasis mine).

also clearly evoke violence, and – at least in the case of “crack[ing] the whip” – unflinching harshness. Militant Catholics and Protestants, the poet implies, are among those capable of this resolve, this purposeful hardness – which in the context of “the Troubles” is also a readiness to kill. The contrast with the poet’s cousin and his family is stark: as the poet remembers in the first half of the stanza in question, the sight of duck hunters’ cartridges wasted on the ground sufficed to make Colum “scared” and possibly sick, as suggested by the characterization of those cartridges as “[a]crid, brassy, genital, ejected”. As for Colum’s family and the poet’s, they live in a state of insulation from the political and historical developments: speaking “an old language of conspirators” among themselves, their “conspiracies” are inevitably limited – tribal, rather than national or broadly sectarian. To the readiness required for “seiz[ing] the day”, they oppose their measured pace and rhythms of “herders/... talkers in byres”, as well as their “slow[ness]”, as they uselessly “arbitrat[e]” the only thing that is beyond all need of arbitration – the “burial ground”.

Thus the question persists: does the poet in any way imply that these “slow arbitrators” are to be blamed? Should one conclude that the poet implicitly criticizes the kind of “evasion” which the attitude of the two families exemplifies? Leaving aside one’s personal ethical assessment of political disengagement – whatever that assessment might be – it seems that the text itself offers no definite answer. The reason for the poet’s seeming suspension of judgment in this regard, however, is neither an ‘oversight’ on his part, nor the result of agnosticism with respect to what one ought to do in times of political trouble. Perhaps “The Strand” neither criticizes nor endorses political evasion simply because – as the analysis of the third stanza suggested – the poem is primarily concerned with *poetic*, rather than political, evasion. Focusing

again on the third stanza, it is to the poet's attitude to this notion of poetic evasion that I now return.

As a possible use of one's imaginative powers to turn away from something, "evasion" is of course that which Colum accuses the poet of having misidentified with poetic "tact"³² – that is, a denial or "whitewashing" of "facts" realized through a weaving of motifs from various texts. What emerges from the third stanza, however, is an additional sense of "evasion" as a flight *toward*, rather than *away from* something: a move forward – "well out, beyond...", one might say echoing "Casualty", another elegy of *Field Work*³³ that suggests a view of poetic evasion as a means of creating or giving voice to something that is neither less real nor less worthy than "facts". Two images in particular convey this constructive view of poetic "evasion". First, as the poet "gather[s] up cold handfuls of the dew" to wash his cousin,³⁴ cleaning him with "moss/ Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud",³⁵ one might recall that in section VIII of "Station Island" the poet confesses that he felt "like the bottom of a dried up lake" when he first heard the news of his cousin's death.³⁶ Considering Heaney's recurrent use of water as a metaphor for poetic discovery and creation (e.g. "watermarking", "turn[ing] the windlass at the well of poetry", "The Diviner"),³⁷ the poet's gathering of dew might be seen not only as a fond tribute to Colum, but also as an affirmation of a renewed ability to make poetry, to find in it a means of assuaging grief, and perhaps even to mitigate a well-established (and

³² Heaney, "Station Island", line 70.

³³ Heaney, "Casualty", line 108.

³⁴ Heaney, "The Strand at Lough Beg", line 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 40-1.

³⁶ Heaney, "Station Island", line 68.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1980), 47-48.

“Casualty” would of course require an analysis by itself; here it may suffice to note how the poet’s sense of “freedom”, his finding “a rhythm”, and his letting that rhythm “work” upon him can easily evoke the trustful attitude toward “melody” and “artfulness” which Heaney mentions in his letter. Particularly relevant to “The Strand” is the fact that this attitude is associated with a water landscape, in the course of a trip that is yet another “evasion”: in this case, a long-sighted flight “well out, beyond”, toward a “proper haunt” which – however the poet might conceive of it – seems the object of a hopeful search propelled by “freedom” and the workings of an inner “rhythm”. Perhaps one might object that whatever connections between water and poetic creation might emerge from “Casualty”, they do not *necessarily* apply to “The Strand”. Yet, while one should surely grant the latter point, the thematic and stylistic closeness of the two poems, as well as their belonging to the same collection, are reasons to think that the “Casualty” associations of water with rhythm, freedom and poetry may *plausibly* apply to “The Strand”. Further (if secondary) support to this interpretation of water imagery in “The Strand” is provided by the *Purgatorio*, where the washing of Dante’s face and his girding with a rush are also usually read as a symbolic rebirth of the pilgrim or a new baptism, which closely relates to the suggestion of a poetic renewal outlined above.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Chiavacci Leonardi’s commentary to *Purg.* I.94 (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>), and Hollander’s commentary to *Purg.* I.124-29 (*Purgatorio*, Trans. Hollander & Hollander). For references to more detailed studies which argue for this interpretation of the rituals of *Purg.* I, see Nicola Fosca’s commentary to *Purg.* I.126-129 (although he is critical of those who see the pilgrim’s purification with dew as a literal second baptism). Whatever one’s interpretation of the rituals of Canto I, however, it is noteworthy (and uncontroversial) that the *Purgatorio* as a whole centers on (but not only on) the notion of regeneration. That this notion is rich enough to include Dante-poet’s *poetic* regeneration in addition to the more obvious *spiritual* regeneration of Dante-pilgrim is made clear beginning from the first two tercets of the *cantica*: “Per correr miglior acque alza le vele/ omai la navicella del mio ingegno, che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele;/ e canterò di quel secondo regno/ dove l’umano spirito si purga/ e di salire al ciel diventa degno” (“To run its course through smoother water/ the small bark of my wit now hoists its sail/ leaving that cruel sea behind./ Now I shall sing the second kingdom/ there where the soul of man is cleansed/ made worthy to ascend to Heaven” [*Purg.* I.1-6, trans. Hollander & Hollander]).

The second image contributing to the idea of valuable artistic “evasion” in “The Strand” is presented in the last lines of the poem, where we find the poet “plait[ing] green scapulars” for Colum with rushes “that shoot green again”.⁴¹ Plaiting rushes requires expert movements of the hands, and often results in a complexly interwoven product. Considering “poetry” in its etymological sense of “creating”, the poet’s gestures could be seen here as another metaphor for poetry-making. More precisely, a metaphor for the poet’s freedom to select images and words which – like the purgatorial pliant, self-regenerating rushes – carry with them the daring of hope, even when hoping for peace and assuagement might seem a politically inadmissible evasion from facts.

⁴¹ Heaney, “The Stand at Lough Beg”, lines 42-3.