

# Seamus Heaney's Proleptic Elegies

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## Abstract

Most critics agree that Heaney's greatest works are his elegies, poems of mortal loss and consolation. He not only subscribes to the genre, he bends it, through his creation of the proleptic or anticipatory elegy. These poems participate in the conventions of the elegy, but are written before the elegized person is actually dead. Heaney restricts his use of this technique to poems about his father. An understanding of the essentially Freudian nature of the elegy (with its Oedipal overtones) is crucial for a clear interpretation of these poems.

In "Digging," Heaney's first poem in his first volume, Heaney elegizes his father almost twenty-five years before he is to die. He utilizes many of the conventions of the elegy, but adds an ironic twist. The opening image of the poem, with the pen as a gun, has Heaney dealing death in order to write. This image remains suspended throughout the poem, until it is resolved in the closing stanza, where the pen/gun becomes a spade. In effect, then, Heaney is "killing" his father in order to entext him, and the elegy becomes reflexive, itself creating the need for its existence. As in all Father and son connect through work and memory.

"The Harvest Bow" is a more conventional elegy, where Heaney remembers his father and the work he did with his hands, weaving a harvest remembrance out of stalks of wheat. Again, Heaney subscribes to the conventions of the elegy, remembering himself when young, watching his father create the harvest bow, and already knowing that the moment could not last. The warm burnished tone of his recollection makes this far more sorrowful than "Digging," and it points to the more temporally correct elegies found in *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*.

## Article

Many critics writing on Heaney today agree that his most important and beautiful works are his elegies, his poems mourning and memorializing his dead. In these elegies, Heaney's project is the original function of poetry, and in doing so he utilizes many, if not all of the conventions of the formal Western elegy. But this is not enough. He also adds to the genre, bending it to his purpose, through the creation of proleptic, or anticipatory elegies. These are poems which take on the cast and utilize the conventions of the elegy, but are written while their subject is still alive. In Heaney's case, these are all written for one person--his father, Patrick.

Peter Sacks, in his seminal work, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, lays out these conventions and demonstrates their use. He calls the elegy "a poem of mortal loss and consolation" (3), and catalogs the following tropes, among others, as characteristic of the genre: pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetative deity, the use of repetition and refrains, reiterated questions, rewards or inheritances, traditional resurrection images, flowers, the movement from grief to consolation, and the elegist's need to draw attention to his surviving powers. His heavily Freudian overview of the genre makes connections between the poet and the child, and suggests that both child and elegist must address the father-figure, who represents the symbolic order of the universe and is the most powerful intervention between the child/poet and the object of his attachment or loss (18-38). Sacks notes that

there is a significant similarity between the process of mourning and the oedipal resolution. . . . In the elegy, the poet's preceding relationship with the deceased (often associated with the mother, or Nature, or a naively regarded Muse) is conventionally disrupted and forced into a triadic structure including the third

term, death (frequently associated with the father, or Time, or the more harshly perceived necessity of linguistic mediation itself). (8)

He concludes his presentation of these connections with a crucial dichotomy surrounding the father-figure and the elegy: “In both the oedipal resolution and the work of mourning, therefore, a father figure’s castrative authority keeps us in life. His Law, the society’s code, with its network of detours and substitutions, bars us from the fulfillment of a premature death and provides us with figures for what outlasts individual mortality” (17).

In this post-Freudian world, where psychological criticism is merely one of the stances available in any reader’s bag of tools, a poem concerning a poet’s father has certain Oedipal overtones. The nexus of this psychological reality and its importance for the genre of the elegy are illustrated in most of Heaney’s poems about his father. Two of those which most easily lend themselves to this psychological reading are “Digging,” and “The Harvest Bow.” In both of these, Heaney presents a father who now has room to become authentic, to face death with resoluteness. In doing so, he proleptically mourns this impending death and eventually resolves to allow memory to serve as a surrogate for the absent father.

The first poem in Heaney’s first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, and one of Heaney’s most famous, is “Digging.” In what he calls a “big, coarse-grained navy of a poem,” his father and grandfather, the avatars of memory, dig peat and potatoes, creating holes in the ground (*Preoccupations* 43). He does not mourn their deaths here, but creates a space for the mourning to come. Participating in many of the conventions of the elegy, “Digging” opens up and explores Heaney’s relationship not only to his father, but to the whole of the received tradition of the genre. But the poem is more than this; it is also an

announcement poem, a piece written by a young poet which claims a poetics and the arrival of a new voice.

The emptiness that the act of digging creates is not the point of his father's exercise, but rather the necessary by-product of the operation. This avatar is interested in the sod piled up around the hole, the creation of something from nothing but the ground beneath his feet. But Heaney takes a different approach. His poetry is not concerned with the pilings, with what is removed. Rather, it is the interplay between presence and absence, the gap of the hole itself, and the creation out of that gap, that interests him. As he writes in the last sonnet of "Clearances," an elegiac sequence on the death of his mother, describing the hole where a chestnut tree once was:

I thought of walking round and round a space  
Utterly empty, utterly a source. (1-2)

Heaney's concern is with the production not of the emptiness of the hole itself, but of the creation from that emptiness that is poetry. He claims ancestral rights not to this hole, but to this process.

The writing of poetry, then, is the act of digging, the act of creating a space, of removing the accretions of time and decay, the erosions of the hard ground and grounding of present experience. What is formed within this space is not a piling, but pure language, with its inherent images and effects. And in this, Heaney pays homage to the first lines of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." The Word, with a capital "W," creates the world out of nothing, while the word, small "w," Heaney's words, creates nothing that has not already been there. The act of human creation, of ordering that which already exists independently, not only frames the something that exists, but also illuminates that which does not. Heaney's work goes down into this absence in order to give depth by shedding light, and even, as he says in

“Personal Helicon,” the last poem in this volume, “to set the darkness echoing” (*Naturalist* 44).

Even the spatial relationships in the poem emphasize this downward movement:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into the gravelly ground  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging. (3-9)

Here, at the end of the stanza, set off by a full stop before it and the brilliant manipulation of stanza length after it, is Heaney’s poetic credo. His control of line and stanza delays the conclusion of the thought in order to point up the importance of this spatial siting. When the line does continue, Heaney, with his father serving as his alter-ego, completes his journey into memory, his manifesto. So this descent is not merely spatial; it is also temporal. Heaney looks down into his memory to produce what appears before him, his father physically echoing his imaginative movement.

There is a further level of descent that can be problematic at times. Despite his desire for the approval of his ancestors, Heaney does not view them here as his equals; he is looking down at them. This may seem to be a privileging of the work of the mind over the work in the fields, but Heaney is acutely aware of his position. He knows that his escape from the farm life that befell his family for previous generations is a gift, and he knows that he owes something to that legacy of hard work close to the soil. However, this self-siting, this placement of himself above

his father, with its inherent condescension and lack of sympathy, must be addressed. The tension between Heaney's longing for the life of his ancestors and the justification of his own calling asks where exactly he situates his dead. He explores this in other poems in this volume ("Follower," "Ancestral Photographs"), preferring to maintain a tension between present and past, and concludes finally, in "Personal Helicon," that his writing is not about removing power from the dead, but about empowering his own acts in the face of ancestral judgment.

And that judgment is never far from him. As Blake Morrison has it, Heaney's preoccupations throughout his early work arise from a single source, his "sense of belonging to a silent ancestry, an ancestry with which he . . . has embarrassed relations" (20). This embarrassment has at its center a desire for expiation. Heaney does not pursue the active life as his ancestors did; he is removed from the soil that remains under their fingernails, and he may be shamed by this break from familial tradition. In fact, in an interview, Heaney offered this assessment of his own work of writing, placing it in the context of the work that came before him: "It's the generations, I suppose, of rural ancestors--not illiterate, but not literary. They, in me, or I, through them, don't give a damn" (Haffenden 63). Ingenuous as this self-deprecation may sound, Heaney nevertheless addresses here the tension between this pride in production of such cultural artifacts and his desire to ask for forgiveness for choosing a different path than that of his ancestors.

The physical labor of digging brings with it cultural significance. This is the land of farmers and turf-cutters, where, as we see in "Bogland," the land is rich in sustenance and carries the memory of its people. Indeed, delving into the soil not only is an exploration of emptiness, it brings forth life and the artifacts of previous lives. But one must go deep in order to uncover the treasure that the land holds. Heaney's grandfather was capable of plumbing such depths, of taking what the land gave to those strong enough to work for it. He is shown

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging. (22-24)

In this way generations have provided for themselves, tapping into the seemingly inexhaustible motherland. Again, Heaney's command of line structure leaves the reader at the end of the second line within the descent, before the third line moves on to the fruit of such an action. We also see here Heaney's answer to accusations of condescension. The poet mirrors the actions of his ancestors. In fact, he admits to creating only an inferior copy of the models he is presented with, for his grandfather, "going down and down," doubles Heaney's activity, earlier in the poem, of simply looking down.

Digging, or rather the descent into the hole that one creates while digging, carries yet more weight. When one digs a hole, one creates a space which is taken up by the digger. And, in assuming this space, the digger descends into the earth. Creation, then, entails a lowering of oneself and a giving over of oneself to the creative act, be it the creation of poetry or the digging of a hole. This descent into the earth, coupled with the expenditure of the self, works on many different levels, the most obvious being the entombment of a dead body.

There are also other levels of meaning surrounding this image. The idea of *kenosis*, Christ's self-emptying of his divinity in order to become human, is appropriate here for a complete understanding not only of Heaney's method and frame of reference, but also for an understanding of the elegy as a genre. This descent in order to arise is a cultural touchstone that Heaney claims for his method. The act of poetry is, then, a participation in a cleansing, affirming ritual that progresses through abnegation in order to achieve completion. For Heaney, this descent is not only physical, it is also temporal; the process

must necessarily start in the present and move down into memory in order to return to the present. The depth of the mind, the ancestral repositories, must be plumbed and brought to the present in order to complete the process. He makes his connection with the land:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awoken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them (25-28)

Heaney's reconstructive abilities, his cultural and personal memory, are like the soil that must be constructed, shaped, into something useful.

However, the most curious image in the poem, and the one that takes this poem beyond a mere reminiscence and toward a life of its own, is the first symbol in the poem, the gun, a cultural agent of death and destruction as well as, by extension, a tool for provender. It announces Heaney's ambiguity toward the reality of death.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun. (1-2)

The poetics of this juxtaposition work to reinforce it. In the opening lines, before we see the avatars of memory or the ones elegized, we see the conflict of ancestral expectations versus the calling of the poet. This gun is his chosen weapon; he deals death while providing sustenance. As with the seasonal imagery that surrounds his poetic farmsteads, death itself provides life. The act of digging, or shooting, or writing, brings fulfillment. Moving through one of the Freudian rites of passage to self-definition, playing with the idea of a resolution to the Oedipal conflict, he must "shoot" his father as he entexts him. This



writing / shooting announces itself as both memorial and cause for the memorial. The poem becomes reflexive, for his father's metaphorical death is at once the cause of the poem and is caused by the poem.

This binary pen/gun image remains unresolved throughout the poem, hanging between life and death, until the final lines, when, after having dealt death, the pen/gun becomes the spade, with which Heaney will dig and bury his dead. Heaney is creating his own maturity as a writer by dredging up, killing, and then burying his father. As Heaney shoots and writes his father, the oedipal conflict is resolved, and a space is created for mourning:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it. (29-31)

It is the striking nature of this image, its placement as a bracket for the rest of the poem, and Heaney's work with it on so many different levels, that brings this poem from merely an announcement of poetics to an elegy, and beyond, to a proleptic elegy which, in essence, engenders its own need for existence.

Killing and yet honoring his dead will continue to be important themes for Heaney, and it is within this interment in the text, within this storing in both personal and collective memory, that Heaney writes. This pitting of ancestral memories against the work that the poet feels necessary for himself is reminiscent of the feelings toward death seen in other, more conventional elegies. The ambiguity present in both relationships will be addressed at a much more mature level in the later stages of the poet's career. For now, it is sufficient for him merely to number the memories and emotions that pull at his psyche.

Heaney also creates an anticipatory elegy in his popular "The Harvest Bow." This paean of praise to his father is somehow subdued,

and seems to be yet another memory bathed in a golden haze. The images of impending and present vegetative death, the decay of the summer, the autumnal season and the harvest of the fields, are joined with the wonder of creation, of the plaiting of both bow and poem. This weaving is one of the historical images of the elegy, occurring, as Sacks says, with “significant frequency” (18). It may or may not be sexualized, but it is always one of the essential projects of the elegy. Both “Lycidas” and “In Memoriam,” for example, use images of weaving, either of cloth or of hair. It carries the additional weight of the pointing to the weaving of a burial shroud, making us realize once again the active nature of mourning and grief. However, what Heaney’s father is weaving is not words, but cut stalks from the field:

As you plaited the harvest bow  
You implicated the mellowed silence in you  
In wheat that does not rust  
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist  
Into a knowable corona,  
A throwaway love-knot of straw. (1-6)

We are reminded of the importance of the image of flowers to the elegy. Sacks presents cut flowers as a representation of castration, particularly appropriate here in a poem about the father, referring back once again to the Oedipal nature of the elegy.

Heaney begins the poem in direct address to his father, stating that creation of the harvest bow communicates on some level beyond the verbal, for his father was not adept at such skills. Immediately the created thing takes on a golden haze, brightening as it is twisted into its finished shape. But this creation, heavy with the weight of the vegetative myths and the end of summer, is somehow, through this fashioning, removed from the fate that awaits other wheat. It will not suffer rust, will

not decay. The communicative device is spared the necessary movement toward entropy, for it has been given a higher task.

The second stanza describes Patrick Heaney, his hands used to both hard work and hard play, and yet here given over completely to what Heaney sees as their true calling:

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks  
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks  
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent  
Until your fingers moved somnambulant (7-10)

It is as if these hands have become possessed by a higher force, while Patrick becomes a vehicle for the muse's intentions. His automatic creation of the bow, with an intentionality not his own, gives Heaney a sense of awe at the creative process, and explains his reverence in the next lines:

I tell and finger it like braille,  
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable (11-12).

The word "tell" has a beautiful multiplicity of meaning here, first as the teller of this poem, second as one who counts, who numbers the times spent together, and finally as a Catholic who prays with rosary beads, telling them as they pass through his fingers. The harvest bow, then, becomes an aid to communion not only with his father, but with his god. Heaney is able to feel beyond the physical object, gleaning (another fine, doubly-significant word choice) to what lies unsaid beyond it.

Within the harvest bow Heaney sees what he has lost. He remembers childhood evenings spent walking with his father, and presents a conflation of them in rich detail. Once again his attention to detail telegraphs the significance of this loss. But there is something

more here, for, in the midst of these walks, Heaney describes his own feelings at the time:

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick  
For the big lift of these evenings. . . (19-20)

If Heaney, in the midst of the experience, can already be homesick for it, he is practicing the frame of mind necessary for aesthetic living, for the creation of the elegy. The experience must already be burnished by memory, cherished as something which will pass soon. Perhaps this explains why this poem, more than any other elegy Heaney has written, possesses such a golden, autumnal tone. Heaney remembers his father's walking stick, the limb that he will recall again in "The Ashplant" and "1.1.87." His father silently beats the bushes with it, hoping to flush some game, but the land, like him, remains silent. Instead, the bow speaks for itself, in words that have been passed down from generation to generation:

The end of art is peace  
Could be the motto of this frail device (25-26)

This quotation which begins the final stanza, which Heaney took from Yeats who himself took it from Coventry Patmore, is best contextualized by Sidney Burris:

The emotions that lie behind that maxim, and that ultimately give rise to it, draw their strength from a past framed by the "golden loops" of the bow; such gildings, particularly when dealing with history--either personal or national--rely on a pastoral historiography that emphasizes the consoling perfections of the past. (123)

Heaney is indeed caught up in the consoling perfections of the past. But, in bringing the poem to the present for its conclusion, he can hardly avoid them. The image of the harvest bow offers no recourse to forgetting the past:

. . . this frail device  
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser--  
Like a drawn snare  
Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn  
Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm. (26-30)

The bow, and the past it symbolizes has become a snare. Perhaps the spirit of the harvest has escaped the past, but Heaney has not. The harvest bow has trapped him not with words, but with its physical signification of his father's spirit, which the man could never verbally express.

If the end of art is peace, the end of the elegy is doubly so. Out of the death of the fields comes food; out of the death of the moment comes memory. Art is created through death, for the bow and the poem are products of this process. This process is not merely personal, though both the narration and the incidents it recounts are intensely so. In watching his father age, Heaney anticipates his death, and begins to seek solace in memory. He tells himself that he must weave his own peace, through his own art, just as his father has done. But Heaney is also weaving his father's death clothes, and in doing so is participating once again in the Oedipal resolution of the grieving process. The poem moves from a celebration of his father's life to a reflexive reminder that memory and art are the only tools we can use to overcome the inauthentic fear of death. And in the end, both in "The Harvest Bow" and "Digging," as well as the other elegies for his father in *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit*

*Level*, Heaney is left, and leaves us, with his memories, at once personal and universal, as he mourns and rejoices, celebrating this man he still loves.

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## Digging

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground  
My father, digging, I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.



## The Harvest Bow

As you plaited the harvest bow  
You implicated the mellowed silence in you  
In wheat that does not rust  
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist  
Into a knowable corona,  
A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ash plants and cane sticks  
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks  
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent  
Until your fingers moved somnambulant:  
I tell and finger it like braille,  
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,

And if I spy into its golden loops  
I see us walk between the railway slopes  
Into an evening of long grass and midges,  
Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,  
An auction notice on an outhouse wall--  
You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick  
For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick  
Whacking the tip off weeds and bushes  
Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes  
Nothing: that original townland  
Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

The end of art is peace  
Could be the motto of this frail device  
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Like a drawn snare  
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