

## ABSTRACT

After spending more than half of his life flying in airplanes back and forth the Atlantic, the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney decides to revisit his native Northern Ireland in *District and Circle* (2006). In order to do so, the poet assumes a vernacular cosmopolitanism that, owing to its capacity to capture the multiple narratives of the present and due to its resistance to the neo-liberal discourse, find means to be the Other of reality. By being this other, the poet presents a collective subjectivity that is characterized by Hanna Arendt's *vita activa*.

KEY WORDS: vernacular cosmopolitan, *vita activa*, subjectivity.

## SEAMUS HEANEY'S *DISTRICT AND CIRCLE*: COSMOPOLITAN VERNACULAR *VITA ACTIVA*

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## RESUMO

Depois de passar mais da metade de sua vida em pontes aéreas através do Atlântico, o ganhador do prêmio nobel de literatura, Seamus Heaney, decide visitar a sua Irlanda do Norte em *District and Circle* (2006). De modo a efetivar essa atitude, ele assume um cosmopolitismo vernacular que, devido à sua capacidade de captar as múltiplas narrativas do presente, encontra meios para ser o outro dessa mesma realidade. Ao ser o outro, o poeta representa uma subjetividade coletiva que é caracterizada pela *vita activa* de Hanna Arendt.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: cosmopolita vernacular, *vita activa*, subjetividade.

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“If the self is a location, so is love:  
Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,  
Options, obstinacies, dug heels and distance  
Here and there and now and then, a stance”  
(Seamus Heaney)

The most recent book written by the Irish writer and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney is a flabbergasting volume that tactfully oscillates between the hues of an enchanting nostalgia, and a cunning irony. Inasmuch as the author inscribes his subjectivity along these lines, his poetic self resembles a prismatic kaleidoscope, in which the reader can identify gentle traces of a poetic narrative that is, more than depicting the *District and Circle*, engraving the district in the circle. This is precisely the distinctive feature that enables him to sound as different as the tonalities he shades, but simultaneously, without losing the singularity of the Northern Irish context.

If on the one hand it is crystal clear that the poet is positioning himself geographically in his native land, on the other hand, it is revisited through the eyes of an exile just returned from a world in the “twilight of transition” (BHABHA, 2002, p. 4). After spending more than half of his life flying in airplanes back and forth the Atlantic – attitude which pertains his internal and external exile<sup>1</sup> – the poet assumes a vernacular cosmopolitanism that, by any means, should be associated with the modern enterprise of a unified nationalist self-centred identity. Instead, owing to its capacity to capture the multiple narratives of the present and due to its resistance to the neo-liberal discourse, this new cosmopolitan can find means to be the Other of the old one.

If art is most correctly interpreted according to its movement, not its invariants (ADORNO, 1970, p. 13), the poet assumes a dialectical relationship with his personal and public history. By doing that, he is motivated to recollect the memories of a sectarian past, intertwined in a cosmopolitan present that permits him to epitomize a version of history that is:

increasingly deterritorialized by migration, mediatization, and capital flows... [and] not simply... going forward into the past [it] is going to a past that is at the same time somehow new, a grotesque caricature of the past where the propositions of Western modernity, now catastrophically universalized, are being re-enacted. (BHABHA, 2002, p. 3)

Following the first seeds sowed by Homi K. Bhabha and Sheldon Pollock we ought to, first and foremost, comprehend that Heaney’s

1 For further information on the topic see: Annuniação, Viviane Carvalho da. *Seamus Heaney: Poética do Exílio*. Trabalho de Graduação, 2005, unpublished.

appreciation of history is closely linked to what the German philosopher Walter Benjamin called “the Angel of History” (2006). This complex mechanism involves, simultaneously, the rewriting of a distant past, combined with the impression of an ephemeral present that continues roaming towards the future. This is precisely the impact the audience receive when getting into contact with the first poem “The Turnip-Snedder”. Originally built into ten couplets of four, six, seven, eight and nine line stanzas, the poet draws a particular slant line in which the legendary stories of the Celtic Halloween – the lights lit inside turnips – are inscribed in the modern industrialization of natural goods that produces mechanised men. Unable to escape “the turnip cycle”, which engulfs poetry and arts, the poet is represented as one of the images through which “God sees life”. Like so, by the reminisces of two kinds of past – the mythical and tangible – the author wishes to call the people’s attention to the historical perspective of the events, without losing the beauty and aesthetic formations that poetic texts must carry. The last verse “bucketful by glistening bucketful” demonstrates this longing for, more than people in their natural state – like “barrel-chested breast-plate/ standing guard/ on four braced greaves” – a clear aesthetic cut that would slice the idea of present.

In this sense the aesthetic proposed is of a subjectivity that is torn in three, such as the “the turnip snedder”, “the cast iron”, and “the bare hands” of the first poem. At the same time Heaney falls back on the Irish history – or on the myth of Irish history, which is already problematized by the implications of this narrative in the present world – he is also proposing a new version of humanity. If the *vernacular cosmopolitan* stance bears, with all its antinomies and cultural shocks, a close relation to the legal citizenship position in the Greek *polis*, and the language of the *verna* or house-born slave in the ancient Rome, then this individual is trying to envisage a “meaningful context of choice” that gives him or her considerable ways to re-signify his or her culture across a wide rage of human activity.<sup>2</sup> However, going back to the art developed by the author, if this form of life he represents is moulded by the work of labour, since the first two lines already explain this particularity, thus, this artist, in order to inscribe the district in the circle, is formulating a cosmopolitan vernacular that is relevant and meaningful because it explores and reflects Hannah Arendt’s human condition, or *vita activa*.

In Hannah Arendt’s words:

2 The concept of vernacular cosmopolitan involves “a resistance through-appropriation”, which means that the individuals who embody these two kinds of characteristic can re-signify their culture throughout time and space. The hybridity they entail is not a mongrelization, but a “tactful reversal of domination”. POLLOCK, Sheldon. *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History*. In: *Cosmopolitanism*. United States of America: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 47.

the term *vita activa*... designate[s] three fundamental human activities: *labour*, *work*, and *action*. Labour is the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body... work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose morality is not compensated by, the species' ever recurring-life cycle. Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from natural surroundings. Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things, corresponds to the condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the Earth and inhabit the world. (1998, p. 7)

In this way, it can be perceived that the hypothesis we are raising here is that Heaney's subjectivity, after going through a process of exile, has acquired a cosmopolitan vernacular garment that, in order to comprehend his human condition, mingles history and labour. By suggesting that his bare hands can capture the multiple narratives of the present, he also revisits the position of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the world as countries that have evolved from victims to dominators. Although this play of particular and global is also sarcastic, because suddenly the conflicts of north have evolved from a separate sphere to a global one, it is indeed relevant that the poet, brought up as a minority citizen of Northern Ireland, which is still in an unsteady identitarian position in the world, has chosen the automate labour to signify the emptiness and loneliness of the human. It is as if, chopped by the bare iron, these turnips that turn "bucketful glistening bucketful" are what is ironically left of a past that vanishes rapidly and is transformed into an evanescent present-future. Moreover, the term turnip retakes the ancient Halloween legend of Jack-o-lantern, whose tricky deeds have denied him entrance in heaven and hell, condemning him to wander, with a faint flame to light his way, between the two worlds.

As someone who has been per per-passed by history in his *labour* and *work*, for these two realms of life are already shaped by his culture, the author turns to the question of Empire as well, and how this continues to characterize the present through an "in-dependence" relationship between countries. Correspondingly, the terms "the turnip circle" and "cast iron", are indeed, part of this condition in which history and labour cannot be dissociated. In order to provide some *action* – diversity and plurality – the poet has to empty his hand, that is to say, he needs to be a repository which "invites us to place it in various systems of power or discursive orders, be they imaginary or symbolic, spatial or temporal, geographical or historical" (PARANJAPÉ, 2000, p. 37). In addition to configuring a multi-faced reality, the cycle of life defined by the turnip, conjures up the identification of the poet with someone who have been denied the permission to enter different worlds – such as Jack.

That means that not only does he have to place himself between his community and the global – ironically disguised as heaven and hell – he has to find ways to communicate the artificiality of both.

With the purpose of analysing how this three-faced subjectivity – *labour, work and action* – absorbs a cosmopolitan world and transforms it into vernacular, we are going to examine some of the poems that best represent this cycle. Our intention here is to provide a critical place for poetry within the post-colonial thought, and more than that, observe how it can be the Other of reality, by being this very same reality. As Pollock has argued “this practice derives from a realization born of accumulate historical experience of both pre- and postcoloniality that the future must somehow become one of and than either/or” (2002, p. 47). Maybe this future, following Arendt’s view, may be obtained through a collective and continuous maintenance of the public sphere and debate, and with the nomadic visionary consciousness of the legendary Jack. And his pranks, perhaps, might provide some room for improvement. As far as we are concerned, they can produce a version of reality that truly sees this world in its shadows and lights: while the shadow is diminished by the flame that is placed inside the turnip, it reflects an ironic and grotesque mask in which the present is a pale facsimile of a history of suffering and domination. The poems that best represent this feeling are the ones which, instead of being inspired by *avant-garde* ideals and techniques, resort to a wit re-formulation of the traditional sonnet.

Strikingly remarkable is the quantity of poems in which the author seems absorbingly obsessed with the sonnet form. Amongst the fifty two poems of the volume, the reader finds thirteen sonnets – in its form classical formulation – and a number of others which are on the verge of becoming sonnets, meaning that as a substitute for the typical fourteen line structure, there are poems with fifteen, or thirteen, or even sixteen and seventeen verses. Amongst the sonnets “A Shiver”, “Polish Sleepers”, “Anahorish 1944”, “To Mick Joyce in Heaven”, “District and Circle”, “Poet to Blacksmith”, “A Chow”, “The Nod”, “A Clip”, “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, “Quitting Time”, “Home Fires”, “A Stove Lid for W. H. Auden”, which characterise the cosmopolitan vernacular *vita activa*, we are going to analyse the five first because they give a clear picture of how these mechanisms work within the sonnet aesthetic.

In this fashion, it is important to pay heed to the fact that, for being the first poem in which the author deals with the reformulation of his artistic paradigms, “A shiver” ought to be envisaged as a prelude, after the fist poem, to his own reinscription of the sonnet form. Following a logic that mingles the traditional Italian and English sonnet, Heaney composes a very descriptive poem that replaces the conventional formation of thesis antithesis and

conclusion for a description that produces an aporia of questions. In the first two quatrains he mixes alternate couplets in order to express an intimate wish to found the person who is placing the sledge in the snow to the object that is going to be used for his or her amusement. This is achieved through a progression of broken iambic pentameters in such a way that these two figures reach an innocuous symbiosis, which enables the poet to pose the last question. While the first triplet suggest that his or her bones have become thoroughly part of the snow cart, the very closing one works up this line of thought by interrogating whether all the work employed by the person to adjust the snow sledge on the ground is valid. Moreover, not only does this simple act affect the sledge and the person, but also the Earth itself, for it shakes with fear: “the stark earth quailed and shivered in the handle?” (HEANEY, 2006, p. 5).

By doing that, the poet contrasts the world of work and mechanized men, described in “The Turnip Circle”, with the world of diversion and freedom. Nevertheless, instead of placing them in different spheres, which would additionally make an apology for an easy form of art that smoothly reaches the public, the poet suggest a close bound between the two, since they represent layers of meanings of this cosmopolitan world. The detail that makes the world of difference in the poem is the word *starked*. Commonly used as an adjective, *stark* means inflexible and concluded, but here, used as an adjective, or even a verb, alludes to a very popular electronic magazine called *starked.com*, in which readers can find articles and exchange gossips about their favourite television shows and movie stars. That is why the distortion of the ordinary use word. Like so, the force the unnamend person applies to the cart may represent an Other of this *starked* world of mass media and cheap entertainment. At the same time the poet is presenting a nostalgic look towards the past in which people had simple means of diversion, he is also displacing the place poetry occupies in such a world. Due to its complicated arrangements and difficult syntax, the poet longs for something that can shake this order of things – a complex art that revisits the traditional canon and opens up path of a true reflection about the world.

As a matter of fact, this consideration ought not to be reached simply with a discreet reading of a single poem, since there is a correlation of poems that invites the reader to have a global vision of the book. Not surprisingly enough, the poem that gives sequence to the present one is “The Polish Sleepers”, another sonnet that recaptures the northern Irish social and historical landscape. The portrayal of how Heaney’s personal contemplation of the Polish sleepers – which started to be seen in Castledawson, near his native Derry during the time of the Second World War – allows him assess the Polish genocide during the second world war. By doing that, the poet

recreates a continuum of history that challenges the *starked* world, and revisits the theme of war. Contrary to what Fran Brearton claims about his treatment of the topic of war: “[it] can be used to express his position and dilemma as a poet” (BREARTON, 1999, p. 242), we believe that this subtle epiphany directs the reader to a *human condition*. In other words, he builds bridges between objects and people, in order to place them in the very machine that originates the contemporary world: imperialism, division of work and incessant drive to power. Nevertheless, instead of doing that just on the thematic level, he does that by revisiting his poetic forms.

Differently from the doubts generated by “A Shiver”, “The Polish sleepers” is clearly built into the thesis and antithesis line of thought, whose contrast is very well marked by the word *but* in the beginning of the second stanza. The sonnet, which rhymes according to the *abac deef ghi jli* pattern, is divided into two distinctive logics that disclose the ground for the poet’s reflection: movement and inertia. At the same time the first quatrain describes the sleepers as, paradoxically, a repository for movement and lethargy, the first triplet exhibits the poet’s subjectivity as a static instance that should be triggered by the *action* of thought. In addition to be “listening for the goods from Castledawson”, he is *ling* – in the same way as the sleepers – and receiving a deluge of transformations. This is finally obtained when the last line suggest the slow death of the human “afterwards, *rust, thistles, silence, sky*” (HEANEY, 2006, p. 6). By representing the cycle of life through words that evolve from the ground to the sky, the poet is conveying that the forces which operate in the course of everybody’s life are chiefly the ones that coordinate work. Hence, the *human condition* is represented by a biological *labour*, that in the course of *work* is defined, and due to *action* and art can resist determinations and repression.

The evocation of the Nazi’s holocaust reaffirms that poetry can, and should, be written after Auschwitz, mainly because it is an illustration of our lives at the same time it is merely art. The word *goods* alludes to the *starked* world of the previous poem, proposing that this subjectivity does not wish to be linked to the empires that perpetrate a continuous reproduction of illusions and dreams, but to the ordinary people that are victims this condition. The local characteristic of Northern Ireland that is inserted via Castledawson serves to remind the reader that Heaney is speaking from a world periphery and not a centre, and that this position of the vernacular is what makes this form or art possible. In this sense, we have in these three first poems the perfect example of Hannah Arendt’s *vita activa*, which in or vision becomes vernacular cosmopolitan *vita activa*, for while the first one stands for *work* itself, the second goes to *action* – that concerns art’s resistance – and the third is the *labour* – the biological functioning of the body in death.

The cosmopolitanism can be foreseen in Heaney's attempt to place vigorously his district of the poor, naïve, tranquil Northern Ireland, as a vernacular in the cosmopolitan. Furthermore, the next poem clings to this one in such a manner, that this underdeveloped simple world is abruptly invaded by the American "tubes of coloured sweets" (HEANEY, 2006, p. 7).

The forth poem of the book, "Anahorish 1944" recaptures the arrival of the Americans before the D-Day in an, at least, intriguing manner, in view of the fact that there is a slight and ironic similarity between the two kind of works that were being performed. While the northern Irish butchers were killing pigs – amongst whom the poet is included – the Americans were marching and throwing sweets on them. Achieving an indeed interesting reversal of meaning, Heaney puts into practice one of the affirmations of his Nobel Prize discourse "poetry should be true to the impact of external reality and... sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being" (HEANEY, 1998, p. 452). This inner law is precisely being true to reality and understanding that these sweets do represent the beginning of that *starked* world of mass culture.

As Adorno puts it:

The industry only has interest in men as clients and employers what, actually, reduced the whole humanity... as employers, men are reminded of rational organization and advised to fit according to common sense. As clients, they go to the cinema so that media can show them, based on private issues, their freedom of choice, which is the missing enchantment. They are objects in both cases.<sup>3</sup> (ADORNO, p. 137)

Even though the poet is part of this industry that absorbs humanity, for he is publishing by one of the most important editors in England, it can be still envisaged as an Other for three reasons. First, because it does not give in to a "common sense", second, because it is not based only on "private issues", and third because it deals, mainly, with a collective and historical experience. This state or resistance is achieved, in accordance with Bhabha, because of the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitans, [who] are compelled to make a tryst with cultural translation as an act of survival. Their specific and local histories, often threatened and repressed, are inserted 'between the lines' of dominant cultural practices" (BHABHA, 2000, p. 139). In spite of bearing utopian and unobtainable ideals, this sentence reveals a huge tension

3 Translated form in Portuguese: "A indústria só se interessa pelos homens como clientes e empregados e, de fato, reduziu a humanidade inteira... enquanto empregados, eles são lembrados da organização racional e exortados a se inserir nela com bom senso. Enquanto clientes, verão cinema e a imprensa demonstrar-lhes, com base em acontecimentos da vida privada das pessoas, a liberdade de escolha, que é o encanto do incompreendido. Objetos é que continuarão a ser em ambos os casos."



inside the artistic subjectivity, for while Heaney's poetry seems to be looking for new ways to transcendent art, it is precisely wondering about and resisting late capitalism, postmodernism, and new imperialism. He does that by placing his particular local in the global, and revealing the tensions between the two: if on the one hand the Americans have the appearance of movie stars who spread a false enchantment or magic, the Irish look like butches recently gotten out from the slaughterhouse.

The tension proposed by the poem is never fully resolved but remains in solution within the aesthetic formation. At the outset, the rhymes are inconclusive, they appear as if they were trying to reach a harmonic circle, but on the brink of harmonization, when an arrangement of pattern starts to be visualized, it fractures and is transformed into something else. The first quatrain could have become the Italian parallel, *abba*, but ends up being, *abbc*, the second stanza could have been the alternate English couplets, but concludes as *cdef*, and the last two triplets could have represented a foreclosure in the aesthetic formation, but finishes up as *ghi, jkg*, implying cyclic a return to the Empire rhymes *sweets* with *jeeps* – two imported commodities. This disposition of forms represents failures and cracks within the hegemonic system from where they stem. These fractures are not simply a way to renew art and its singularity, but they do intent to oppose the iambic tradition of the sonnet, which, throughout Renaissance and Romanticism was seen as a natural form of speech derived from the musicality of language.

According to Anthony Easthope:

the pentameter can be seen as a mechanism by which the poem aims to deny its production as a poem, a mechanism therefore that promotes commodity fetishism... it corresponds to the ideological opposition between the 'social' and the 'individual', an opposition which envisages society as a "necessity" against and within which the individual finds his or her freedom. (EASTHOPE, 1983, p. 68)

As soon as the poetic feet is either expanded or suppressed, the poet deconstructs the privileged position of the iambic pentameter as a fetish. Due to the fact that the poet assumes a subjective *we*, he poses the ideological formation of aesthetic it in the same place as these dirty Irish who were flabbergasted by the sight of those idealized soldiers. Consequently, even though the Irish wish to obtain this divine aura, they will indeed remain filthy and barbaric butchers who "were killing pigs" (HEANEY, 2006, p. 7). Nevertheless, inserted in a complex mechanism of district and circle, or detail and whole, or even transcendence and eminence, these Irish are precisely what defines the Americans, for they have acquired, nowadays, their level as a nation whose project of modernization, at least in the economic level, has

worked. Along these lines we can perceive that while this mythical encounter of cultures symbolizes resistance, it does so because it reveals the subjective wish for sameness and hegemony, or in other words, an allegory for a country is a that has evolved from periphery to the centre. This is the reason why this Other has to be recaptured as a cosmopolitan *vernacular* and located at the core of the artistic formation. The accomplishment of this task happens with the dedication of the next poem to a simple individual who is also unconsciously affected by the global transformations. The unconscious we use to characterize this process is:

a radical series of discontinuous interruptions... one epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured... the West still masquerades a disinterested history, even when the critics presume to touch its unconscious. (SPIVAK, 1999, p. 208)

The remaking of tradition leads the poet to an overlap of transformations and combinations of the most different and varied meters in “To Mick Joyce in Heaven”. The main feature of the poem is that, instead of being just a single sonnet, it is multiplied by five, and reduced, in its number of poetic feet, to five. For a second time, we encounter the subjectivity hidden in a clash between form and idea: if on the one hand, the aesthetic of the sonnets is fragmented, fractured and discontinuous, such as the imperialistic unconscious Spivak recalls, on the other hand, its idea remains harmonious for it pays homage to Mick Joyce, a bricklayer who was also his uncle and has served as a soldier in the Second World War – for the third successive time we find Heaney touching on the theme of war. Additionally, the construction of the poems progress from an opening sonnet that describes the world of labour in relation to Empire, in relation to a literary history since Mick, “when skylined on scaffolds” is compared to “a demobbed Achilles/ who was never a killer,/ The strongest instead/ of the world’s stretcher-bearer” (HEANEY, 2006, p. 8), and finishes with a rise from the ground to heaven through death.

The first poem revolves around an epiphany, which, according to James Joyce is constructed according to the following scheme:

first we recognise that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany. (JOYCE, 2007)

The *kilt bag* and the *tool-bag* are the words that prompt the epiphany because they are, more than a metonymy for the worker, containers that can be taken from one place to another, indicating once again movement. The second poem describes him as a perfect worker, whose deeds have always been performed according to a precise technique. Shifting from this professional atmosphere, the third one describes him in his free moments, in which he would go on about the war stories, and tell jokes, especially those which degrade the British. The fourth and the fifth sonnets are the ones which position the subjectivity as an admirer and a story-teller who feels extremely compelled to recollect this person, in its shadows and lights. Metamorphosed as Jack-o-lantern the poet appears in an attitude of contemplation, even though this may lead him to an ironic conclusion at the end. By expressing the craftsmanship of him handling the trowel, the poet eloquently articulates alliterations of fricative /s/, /th/ – and plosive consonants – /t/, /p/, /g/ – that perfectly imitate the sound of a shovel hitting the brick. This device is probably used to draw a parallel between the poet's work and his uncle's. Even though they are different, they are equal for they are caught within the human condition of *labour*, *work* and *action*.

The very last poem, which seems very metaphorical and lyrical, in our view is exceptionally political, because the three people who are in the bedroom where *death* penetrates, are everywhere, and their singularity is being part of a continuous movement, which, through the poetic words, come to life. In this sense, when Heaney describes himself as “a stranger [who has] arrived” (HEANEY, 2006, p. 8), he is drawing a distinction between the cosmopolitan version of his personality, that is someone who takes possession of an privileged art of the elites, and the infantile one that wishes to be just like his uncle. Likewise, when the poet assumes a cosmopolitan vernacular garment, he is also personifying a human condition that equalizes not only him and his uncle, but the whole world, and in this attribute, calls for some action on the reader's part. To say that others, as human, are present means that they too are acting and making themselves present to others. As a result, action enters a chain reaction of plural presence, or it initiates a chain reaction of presence and plurality. As state by Arendt:

Action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a close circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. (ARENDE, 1998, p. 190)

Through this mechanism in which plurality is obtained through art and representation, poetry incites reflection and *action*. Although it is not a performing art, it is indeed a place where dialogue, in Bakhtinian sense, can be take place. In Heaney's case, it is dialectical and dialogic because it gives voice to a plurality of people, whoever they might be, either the voice of the empire that wants to take over, or the ones who are often silenced by it. Thus, Arendt's reflection on art is also applicable in this case, since the subjectivity of the poet "depends on the surrounding presence of others" (ARENDT, 1998, p. 188). His presence is a presence to and within others. "[He] act[s], or change the political situation in an unexpected way" (ARENDT, 1993, p. 250) when he reveals his presence as an other, and to the presence of others. As the philosopher writes:

The performing arts ... have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists ... need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their "work," and both depend upon others for the performance itself. (ARENDT, 1993, p. 154)

Assuming his sameness in relation to a multitude of people and reminding the reader of Charles Baudelaire's legacy, the poet constructs a new "À une passante". Inasmuch as "District and Circle" characterizes this vernacular cosmopolitan *vita activa*, it does so by fragmenting the poet's identity throughout the stations of the metro. At the same time he is "spot-rooted, buoyed, aloof" in the wagon, the "bodies [readjust]/ blindsided to themselves and other bodies" (HEANEY, 2006, p. 18), suggesting that although these people are all together in the same situation, they are incapable of having a broader vision of each other. In the same way the French poet caught a glimpse of the passer-by who has changed his whole perception on life – for she represented a longing and lasting version of that momentary transitory reality, a dream of love that could have become real, if it were not for "the street [that] about me roared with a deafening sound" (BAUDELAIRE, 2007) – Heaney changes his perception of himself on the glance of his father's ghost. Even transcending the real and entering the realm of the supernatural, the poet shows a different version of himself as his father. This Other that constitutes himself, is exactly the vernacular of his personality, whereas the cosmopolitan is the Nobel Prize winner who tries to take in a distorted and problematic conception of reality, in which, even the sense of the real is being blurred.

Once more the poet constructs five sonnets, but instead of falling back on a broken rhythm, it follows a certain regularity of rhymes and rhythms that opposes the claustrophobic atmosphere of the underground station. In order

to sound even less composed and lyrical, he depicts himself as someone who is being followed – in the same way as people probably have wandered around the lanes of the British railway stations after the terrorist attacks. Describing himself in a kind of labyrinth where he can move and walk from one place to another, the subjectivity is somewhat trapped in a cage, in which all this movement is simply a small compartment of a reality that seldom offers any kind of freedom. The second poem, promotes intertextuality with Ezra Pound's "In station of the Metro":<sup>4</sup> However, he is not a particular or distinctive voice that observes people as works of art – "petals on a wet, black, bough" – but he is specifically one of these persons. At the moment he does that, he reverses the ethereal aura of the poet, and brings him back to the reality of work, individualism, imperialism and terrorism. The lines that best represent this feeling of loneliness and emptiness, of movement and stillness are "another levered down, the platform thronged. / I re-enter the safety of numbers,/ A crowd half straggle-revealed and half strung/ like a human chain... As I stood waiting, of a first tremor,/ Then caught up in the now-or-never whelm/ Of one and all the full length of the train" (HEANEY, 2006, p. 18).

If this plurality of visions the poet is trying to achieve in the effective insertion of poetry within the contemporary world, we might be able to give a response to Pollock's text. Up to some point, the critic affirms, "the antinomy between the particular and the universal, the vernacular and the cosmopolitanism... seems to have shown itself to be ever more complex versions of vernacularity developing in response to what is perceived as cosmopolitanism in its ugly-American embodiment" (POLLOCK, 2002, p. 43-44), and inquires "is it all possible to be universal without preaching universalism?". In our view, and following the example given by Heaney's poetry, it can, and surly is, at the moment it advocates against exploitation, by inserting a particular detail of Northern Ireland in its poetic form, and in relation to the rest of the world. As a result of his positioning the artistic subjectivity in the same level as *work*, and resisting an Empire that continuously insist to strike back, Heaney's poetry forges a space of plurality and dialogue, demystifying the victimization of his nation, not only as a place for resistance, but as a place where complex interactions still happen.

In accordance with Steven Matthews we believe that "Poetry's 'way in happening emerges as a model of active consciousness whose 'negative knowledge of the actual world' simultaneously commands our political

4 "The apparitions of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough". The poem by Ezra Pound, according to Stephen Park, "sought to divorce itself from sentimentality by focusing on the image... and insists upon the importance of the particular rather than the general". In: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/abstraction.htm>. Consulted on May 11th., 2007.

attention and mocks its own presumption in doing so" (MATTHEWS, 1997, p. 185). Nonetheless, in spite of trying to create an art that wishes to be critical to the actual state of affairs and representing Ireland as a nation that has within itself the ideology of Empire, Heaney's subjectivity, as a cosmopolitan vernacular inserted in Arendt's *vita activa*, cannot hold, as Chinua Achebe's characters in the novel *Things Fall apart*. Derrida claims that "the centre is a function, not being-a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable" (DERRIDA apud HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 60). Even though the vernacular and cosmopolitan functioned as a centre throughout *District and Circle*, the last poem, "The Blackbird of Glanmore", deconstructs this subjectivity and places him in a pessimistic position that all the *action* he perform is bound to failure. If that is so, it is up to the reader find alternative paths to an empty plurality that cannot hold – such as Western democracy clapping its brad wings over the Middle East. Such as the poet states in "Anything can Happen", "Ground gives. The heaven's weight/ Lifts up off the Atlas like a kettle-lid./ Capstones shift, nothing resettles right". Maybe the question that Pollock should be asking is, how humanity after reaching such a stage in its development, can resettle the fields of *labour*, *work*, and *action*? Maybe the response to that is the *and* of inclusion and negotiation of values, as proposed by the critic. Nevertheless, we may bear in mind if that is not it reflecting a caricature of the instances it criticizes, such as the ugly mask projected by Jack-o-lantern's light? The question still remains.

#### ANNEX – POEMS CHOSEN FOR ANALYSIS

##### A SHIVER

The way you had to stand to swing the sledge,  
 Your two knees locked, your lower back shock-fast  
 As shields in a *testudo*, spine and waist  
 A pivot for the tight-braced, titling rib-cage;  
 The way its iron head planted the sledge  
 Unyielding as a club-footed last;  
 The way you had to heft and then half-rest  
 Its gathered force like a long-nursed rage  
 About to be let fly: does it do you good  
 To have known it in your bones, directable,  
 Withholdable at will,  
 A first blow that could make air of a wall,  
 A last one so unanswerably landed  
 The starked earth quailed and shivered in the handle?

##### POLISH SLEEPERS

Once they'd been block-built criss-cross and four squared

We lived with them and breathed pure creosote  
Until they were laid and landscaped in a kerb,  
A moulded verge, half-skirting, half-stockade,  
Soon fringed with hardy ground-cover and grass.  
But as that bulwark bleached in sun and rain  
And the washed gravel pathway showed no stain,  
Under its parched riverbed  
Flinch and crunch I imagined tarry pus  
Accruing, bearing forward to the garden  
Wafts of what conspired when I'd lie  
Listening for the goods from Castledawson...  
Each languid, clanking wagon,  
And afterwards, *rust, thistles, silence, sky.*

ANAHORISH, 1944

We were killing pigs when the Americans arrived.  
A Tuesday morning, sunlight and gutter-blood  
Outside the slaughterhouse. From the main road  
They would have heard the squealing,  
Then, heard it stop and had a view of us  
In our gloves and aprons coming down the hill.  
Two lines of them, guns on their shoulders, marching.  
Armoured cars and tanks and open jeeps.  
Sunburnt hands and arms. Unknown, unnamed,  
Hosting for Normandy.  
Not that we knew then  
Where they headed, standing there like  
Youngsters  
As they tossed us gum and tubes of coloured sweets.

TO MICK JOYCE IN HEAVEN

1

Kit-bag to tool bag,  
Warshirt to workshirt  
Out of our element  
Among farmer in-laws,  
The way you tied sheaves  
The talk of your country,  
But out on your own  
When skylined on scaffolds –  
A demobbed Achilles  
Who was never a killer,  
The strongest instead  
Of the world's stretcher-bearers,  
Turning your hand

To the bricklaying trade.

2

Prince of the sandpiles,  
Hod-hoplite commander  
Watching the wall,  
Plumbing and pinting  
From the pegged-out foundation  
To the first course to cornice,  
Keeping an eye  
On the other eye in the level  
Before the cement seat:  
Medical orderly,  
Bedpanner, bandager  
Transferred to the home front  
Raising and shining  
In brass-buttoned drab.

3

You spoke of 'the forces',  
Had served in the desert,  
Been strafed and been saved  
By courses of blankets  
Fresh-folded and piled  
Like bales on a field.  
No sandbags that time.  
A softness preserved you.  
You spoke of sex also,  
Talked man to man,  
Took me for granted:  
The English, you said,  
Would do it on Sundays  
Upstairs, in the daytime

4

The weight of the trowel,  
That's what surprised me.  
You'd lift its lozenge-shaped  
Blade in the air  
To server a brick  
In a flash, and then twirl it  
Fondly and lightly.  
But whenever you sent me  
To wash it and dry it  
And you had your smoke,



Its iron was heavy,  
Its sloped-angle handle  
So thick-spanned and daunting  
I needed two hands.

5

'To Mick Joyce in Heaven' –  
The title just came to me,  
Mick, and I started  
If not quite from nowhere far off:  
A bedroom, bright morning,  
A man and a woman,  
Their backs to the bedhead  
And me at the foot.  
It was your first leave,  
A stranger arrived  
In a house with no upstairs,  
But heaven enough  
To be going on with.

DISTRICT AND CIRCLE

Tunes from a tin whistle underground  
Curled up a corridor I'd be walking down  
To where I knew I was going to find  
My watcher on the tiles, cap by his side,  
His fingers perked, his two eyes eyeing me  
In unaccusing look I'd not avoid,  
Or nor just yet, since both were out to see  
For ourselves.  
As the music larked and capered  
I'd trigger and untrigger a hot coin  
Held at the ready, but now my gaze was lowered  
For was our traffic not in recognition?  
Accorded passage, I would re-pack and nod,  
And he, still eyeing me, would also nod.

\*

Posted eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts  
Of escalators ascending and descending  
To a monotonous slight rocking in the works,  
We were moved along, upstanding.  
Elsewhere, underneath, and engine powered,  
Rumbled, quickened, evened, quieted.  
The white tiles gleamed. In passages that flowed  
With draughts from cooler tunnels, I missed the

light  
Of all-overing, long since mysterious day,  
Parks at lunchtime where the sunners lay  
On body heated mown grass regardless,  
A resurrection scene minutes before  
The resurrection, habitués  
Of their garden of delights, of staggered summer

\*

Another level down, the platform thronged.  
I re-entered the safety of numbers,  
A crowd of half straggle-ravelled and half strung  
Like a human chain, the pushy newcomers  
Jostling and purling underneath the vault,  
On their marks to be first through the doors,  
Street-loud, then succumbing to herd-quiet...  
Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?  
Always new to me, always familiar,  
This unrepentant, now repentant turn  
As I stood waiting, glad of a first tremor,  
Then caught up in the new-or-never whelm  
Of one and all the full length of the train.

\*

Stepping on o it across the gap,  
On to the carriage metal, I reached the grab  
The stubby black roof-wort and take my stand  
From planted ball of heel and take my stand  
From planted ball of heel to heel of hand  
As sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me.  
I was on my way, well girded, yet on edge,  
Spot-rooted, buoyed, aloof,  
Listening to the dwindling noises off,  
My back to the unclosed door, the platform empty;  
And wished it could have lasted,  
That long between-times pause before the budge  
And gaze-over, when forwardness  
Was unwelcome and bodies readjusted,  
Blindsided to themselves and other bodies.

\*

So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging,  
My lofted arm a-swivel like a flail,  
My father's glazed face in my wanting  
And craning...

Again the growl  
 Of shutting doors, the jolt and one-off treble  
 Of iron on iron, then a long centrifugal  
 Haulage of speed through every dragging socket.  
  
 And by night and day to be transported  
 Through galleried earth with them, the only relict  
 Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,  
 Reflecting in a window mirror-backed  
 By blasted weeping rock-walls.  
 Flicker-lit.

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