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When Seamus Heaney died at 7.30 on the morning of 30 August, 2013, news of his death spread rapidly not just throughout Ireland and Britain, but the entire Anglophone world – and beyond. Doubtless the fact that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 contributed to his celebrity; but even had he not won the Nobel Prize, his death would in any case have had a dramatic impact in Ireland. Nothing more vividly illustrates the affectionate regard in which he was held by the Irish people as a whole than the fact that, on 1 September, two days after his death, a crowd of over 80,000 spectators applauded him for two minutes or more just before an All-Ireland Gaelic football semi-final at Croke Park. It is difficult to imagine any other major Irish literary figure receiving such generous popular acclaim.¹

Something of that intense interest carried over to the day of his funeral on 2 September, so that people were fully primed for the remarkable revelation made by Seamus' son, Michael, at the funeral mass in Donnybrook that morning. What Michael revealed was that, just minutes before his death, Seamus had texted his final words to his wife, Marie. The words were in Latin: '*Noli timere*' ('Do not be afraid'). This was, to begin with, a private message to his wife; and it may well be that it was a message of general reassurance, along the lines of 'Don't worry, I'll be all right'. But some two years after his father's death, Michael (Mick) Heaney gave a lecture on Seamus' last words which includes a fairly detailed indication of the mood among the Heaney family as the time approached for the major operation that Seamus was to undergo. Seamus, he revealed, had 'died on his way to surgery,

1 On 1 September 2013, two days after Heaney's death, a minute's silence was called just before the All-Ireland senior football semi-final between Dublin and Kerry. In fact, it was called to mark the passing not only of Seamus Heaney but of former Kerry All-Ireland winner Ray Prendiville, and of Irish-language author and musician Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé. But to most observers the prolonged applause that followed for over two minutes appeared to be primarily for Heaney.

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shortly after composing the message'. But of more significance is Mick Heaney's account of the events leading up to the operation: 'My father ... learned the seriousness of his condition only two days before his death. After being told that the doctors had detected a "split aorta", we didn't discuss the implications at any great length'. But in a telling addition Mick Heaney adds: 'Dad soberly admitted that the diagnosis was "quite serious"'.

On Mick's last evening with him, just before he was transferred to Blackrock Clinic from St Vincent's hospital, his son 'spoke to him about pretty much anything except what was about to happen, making lame jokes to distract from the almost unreal air that prevailed'. Then he hugged him as he left – 'not our usual farewell – but I tried not to think about the possible finality of the gesture'. On the basis of this evidence, it would appear that Seamus Heaney and his family were fully aware of the seriousness of the operation, and that Seamus might not come out of it alive. It is against that background that we can most readily make sense of Mick's capacity to find in those last words a degree of comfort to counter the sense of devastation. We 'seized on his final words as a kind of lifebuoy'. For the family felt 'that he had encapsulated the swirl of emotion, uncertainty and fear he was facing at the end, and articulated it in a restrained yet inspiring way'. His words, Mick Heaney concludes, 'have certainly helped me since his death'.²

Seamus' last utterance was meant as a private message to his family and especially his wife, and might perhaps be regarded as his final love-poem. But once the words were made public, they became a final admonition to all of us, and by extension to posterity. Not 'From the Frontier of Writing', but from the frontier of life itself – from Hamlet's 'undiscovered country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns' – there arrives a message, cryptic in its brevity, but resonant and clear, and carrying with it the authority of a great and honest writer.

Two related questions arise at this point; and it is the intention of what immediately follows in this essay to focus upon these. Why was the text sent in Latin? And – more pertinently – why did it use the particular Latin words, *Noli timere*? The first question prompts at least one ready answer: since the text was meant as a private message to his wife, the Latin might act, at least to an extent, as a code which would give pause to any casually intrusive reader. But there is more to our first question than that. The truth is that Heaney was, from an early age, familiar with Latin, and

2 <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/mick-heaney-my-father-s-famous-last-words-1.2348525>. The date of *The Irish Times* was Saturday 12 September, 2015. As a note appended at the end of the piece makes clear, it is in fact 'an edited version of the Mary Holland Commemorative Lecture, given at the Forum for End of Life in Ireland, thinkahead.ie'.

developed an even deeper interest in the language, especially as used by Virgil, as he grew older. Any child, of course, growing up as a Catholic in the 1940s, would have been unavoidably exposed to Church Latin from an early age, and perhaps would be aware also of the prestige of a language which was repeatedly used in religious ritual. But in any case Heaney had the good fortune to be introduced to classical Latin from an unusually early age. He would study Latin at St Columb's school in Derry, but even prior to that, as he informed Dennis O'Driscoll in the indispensable series of interviews Heaney provided and published under the title *Stepping Stones*, he had been formally introduced to Latin at Anahorish primary school. Heaney describes himself as belonging 'to the last generation that learned Latin', and in response to O'Driscoll's question, '*Did you always enjoy Latin?*', replies: 'Yes, from the beginning'. He goes on to recall the 'early morning lessons' in the language provided by Master Murphy at Anahorish after he had won the scholarship which would allow him to progress to secondary school in Derry. This meant, as he says, that when he undertook Latin at St Columb's, he 'started at an advantage and never looked back'. He was further fortunate 'in the teacher I had during my senior years: Father Michael McGlinchey, who loved the language and had a feel for the literary qualities of the texts – especially Virgil'.³

Latin, then, came readily to Heaney, and he was thoroughly steeped in both the language and the literature. All of this is, however, well known, and leaves untouched the specific question as to the possible genesis – literary or otherwise – of the precise Latin words texted. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the phrase *Noli timere* occurs, in either its singular or plural form ('*noli/nolite timere*') about seventy times in St. Jerome's Latin translation (the 'Vulgate') of the Bible.⁴ But so numerous are the uses of the phrase that there seems little point in trying to nominate one of these over the others as Heaney's source. Moreover, we need to indicate a context in which the fear referred to is related to a particular kind of fear – namely, fear of death.

There is, I believe, a relevant literary source with which Heaney would have been familiar from his engagement with English at Queen's University in the late 50s/early 60s. Thanks in large part, it seems, to the presence of one Matthew P. McDiarmid, a Scot, and a senior figure in the English faculty at that period, the syllabus gave some prominence to the poetry of the so-called

³ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), pp. 295-6. Master Murphy appears in Part V of 'Station Island', one of many ghosts in that poetic sequence.

⁴ See, for instance, Christopher Howse's piece, in the 'Books' section of *The Telegraph* (3 September, 2013): available online at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10283710/Why-Seamus-Heaneys-last-words-werent-the-last-laugh>.

Scottish Chaucerians of the fifteenth/early sixteenth century. These were: Robert Henryson (?1424 - ?1505), and William Dunbar (born ?1459 or 1460, had died by 1530: in both cases the dates have been the subject of dispute). There is certainly abundant evidence of Heaney's high regard for the poetry of Henryson. In 2004 the Enitharmon Press published his first affectionate tribute, a translation of *The Testament of Cresseid*; and this was followed some five years later by the republication of the *Testament*, along with translations of seven of Henryson's wryly comic *Fables*, inspired by Aesop.⁵

Beyond question, Heaney would have had the same kind of exposure to the work of William Dunbar; and it is difficult to imagine that a sensitive reader of poetic language such as Heaney could fail to respond to the ebullience and variety of Dunbar's rich and inventive style. As an aspirational poet, he may have read with additional interest one particularly famous poem by Dunbar: the 'Lament for the Makaris' ('makaris' is the plural of 'makar', meaning 'poet'). Dunbar lists many of the famous poets who preceded him, including Chaucer and Gower, now piteously devoured by death (ll. 49-51)⁶; but formally the poem derives much of its power from the refrain that concludes all twenty-five of the stanzas. That refrain tolls like a death-knell throughout the poem: and it is this refrain which might give us a clue as to the purpose of the text sent by Heaney just before his death. It is given in Latin, and reads: '*Timor mortis conturbat me*'. It can be translated as 'The fear of death confounds [or dismays] me' ('conturbat' requires a stronger translation than 'disturbs'); or, to handle the Latin refrain a little more freely, it could be translated as 'I am greatly troubled by the fear of death'.

The available facts suggest, then, that Heaney's '*Noli timere*' was nothing less than a riposte to the sentiment expressed in Dunbar's insistent refrain; or, more broadly, a rejection of the recurrent medieval preoccupation with death (and transience) – as found, for example, in the tradition of *memento mori*. The Latin phrase used by Dunbar derives from the Catholic Office for the Dead⁷; and it

5 Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid & Seven Fables*, transl. by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2009).

6 *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. W. Mackay Mackenzie (Edinburgh: The Porpoise Press, 1932), p. 21.

7 See 'Timor mortis conturbat me', Wikipedia, online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timor_mortis_conturbat_me. The Latin phrase, we are informed, is 'commonly found in late medieval Scottish and English poetry', and 'comes from a responsory of the Catholic Office of the Dead in the third Nocturn of Matins'. A more complete version is provided: '*Peccantem me quotidie, et non poenitentem, timor mortis conturbat me. Quia in inferno nulla est redemptio, miserere mei, Deus, et salva me.*' ('Sinning daily, and not repenting, the fear of death disturbs me. For there is no redemption in Hell, have mercy on me, o God, and save me'). '*Quia*' should perhaps be translated as 'Since' rather than 'For'.

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is just possible, though unlikely, that Heaney would have known it from that source. Even if he had, however, the four-word Latin phrase would have had a more dramatic and memorable effect once he had encountered it in Dunbar's poem.

In any case, there is further significant evidence that Dunbar's refrain had fully registered with Heaney; although in order to present it here it will be necessary to resort to undocumented anecdote. A friend of mine, who was an exact contemporary of Heaney's at Queen's, in that he went to the university as an undergraduate in 1957, the same year as Heaney, can still recall an exchange with him about ten years ago. The friend had heard me refer to the *Timor mortis* phrase in a slightly dramatic tone which suggested that it had made a real impression. He mentioned the phrase to Seamus, in a way that jocularly implied that he too might have been similarly affected by it. Seamus laughed, and replied in his usual affable manner: 'Oh no, you've got the wrong man! It was Brian [naming myself] who was haunted by *Timor mortis*, not me!' What this implies is that the phrase had not only registered with Seamus, but that he had, even as an undergraduate, refused to take it too seriously.

2

The main concern in this essay is not with Seamus Heaney's *experience of death* (obviously the death of others), but with his *attitude to death* as articulated in his writings. There is, however, one death at least which may have profoundly affected him; and that is the early death, in February 1953, of his young brother Christopher (about which Heaney subsequently spoke at some length with Dennis O'Driscoll). Christopher was only three and a half years old, while Seamus himself was at the time less than fourteen years of age. The death, from a tragic traffic accident near the Heaney home, would certainly have had a profound effect on his parents. In his conversations with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney reveals that it was one of the contributory factors in the decision of the family to move from Mossbawn, near which the accident occurred, to the farm at The Wood.⁸ The traumatic impact on the family – if 'traumatic' is the right term – can only be imagined. His own grieving found what may have been a therapeutic outlet in one of his best-known poems, 'Mid-Term Break', which appeared in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). Therapeutic: for, as John Donne astutely observed, 'he tames it, that fetters it in verse' ('The triple Foole').⁹ Apart from the formal nature of the

⁸ *Stepping Stones*, p. 22.

⁹ *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson. 2 vols. 1912; repr. 1958 (London: Oxford University Press) I, 16.

utterance – seven three-line stanzas followed by a single ‘stand-out’ line – the mathematical neatness in that single line (l. 22, ‘A four foot box, a foot for every year’) hints at a resort to rational control, even while the line at the same time reveals the bleak inadequacy of its own content.¹⁰ It would seem fair to describe the tone of the poem as Stoical, an adherence to a deliberate poise behind which the reader is free to imagine a severely painful and ineradicable sense of loss.

It would be an overstatement to describe the poet’s attitude in ‘Mid-Term Break’ as ‘tough-minded’; but we can avail of an alternative orientation, which leads us to a not dissimilar conclusion. There is a revealing moment in *Stepping Stones* where O’Driscoll points to the awareness of contemporary political events as that is found in the collection *District and Circle* (2006). Heaney refers to a passage he had come across in the Romanian writer, E. M. Cioran, some decades earlier in the seventies. It had made such an impact on him that he knew it by heart and was able to quote it then and there. The statement by Cioran includes the admonition that we should not ‘complain too much’ in the face of ‘the world’s disorders’: for, he adds, ‘have we not ... the consolation of possessing, with regard to pain, a professional competence?’ This is, arguably, a point of view that includes but extends beyond the world of politics. It might be seen as a credo which helped Heaney to keep his pact with life itself, through all the horrors of the so-called ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, the victims of which included his second cousin, Colm McCartney¹¹; and beyond that it may have encouraged Heaney to sustain his (often low-key) celebrations of the vitality of the ordinary, and the simple, sheer ‘livingness’ of the human being.

If we wish to invoke a prime example of Heaney’s impatience with those who ‘complain too much’ in the face of death – their own personal extinction – then we need look no further than the provocative essay included in *The Redress of Poetry*, which reveals its preoccupations in its title: ‘Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin’. The essay is structured around a contrast between what we may call Larkin’s defeatist attitude, and Yeats’s positive response, to one’s own death. A subordinate argument is included, to the effect that we have all too readily accepted Larkin’s rejection of Yeats’s more romantic stance.

A summary of Heaney’s evaluation of Larkin’s attitude to death

¹⁰ *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966), p. 28.

¹¹ See ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, in the collection *Field Work* (1979). The ghost of McCartney appears in section VIII of the sequence ‘Station Island’, in *Station Island* (1984).

is provided early on in the essay, when Heaney writes: ‘As [Larkin] aged, his vision got arrested into a fixed stare at the inexorability of his own physical extinction’.¹² Then, in the interests of establishing just how negative Larkin’s general *weltanschauung* can be, Heaney, en route to his close reading of Larkin’s notorious *Aubade*, pauses to contrast Yeats’s ‘The Cold Heaven’ with Larkin’s ‘High Windows’. Where Yeats’s ‘cold heaven ... is neither frigid or negative’, but is ‘an image of superabundant life’, Larkin’s ‘sunstruck distances give access to an infinity’ which is ‘void and neuter ...’ And from Larkin’s ‘High Windows’ Heaney quotes the concluding lines about ‘the deep blue air, that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless’. He concludes that ‘all we have to protect us against these metaphysically Arctic conditions is the frail heat-shield generated by human kindness’.

It is useful, perhaps essential, to quote at length from Heaney’s essay, in order to convey a sense of the intensity of his writing when he sets out to refute any form of nihilism. But his main target is Larkin’s *Aubade*, which, in spite of its French title, means a poem appropriate to dawn (dawn symbolising new life), is a poem obsessed with death – it is in fact, as the title of the essay suggests, a ‘night’ poem. Interestingly, Heaney quotes *Aubade* in its entirety, all five ten-line stanzas.¹³ Heaney is willing to praise ‘the technical aspects of the poem’ (and subsequently acknowledges *Aubade* as a ‘high poetic achievement’), but cannot reconcile himself to its ‘post-Christian’ character, whereby the poem ‘abolishes the soul’s traditional pretensions to immortality and denies the Deity’s immemorial attribute of infinite personal concern’.

He first of all highlights the opening phrase of the poem, ‘Unresting death’, and finds implicit in the image ‘all the rangy hungry speed and relentlessness of a death hound’. Larkin, in Heaney’s words, ‘unleashes it at line five’ (with that line’s obsessive focus on ‘dying, and being dead’) so that for the next forty-five lines ‘it beats the bounds of our mortality, forcing its borders to shrink farther and farther away from any contact with consoling beliefs’. Among such consoling beliefs (or fictions, or delusions, as Larkin might claim) the poem in its third stanza includes ‘Religion’, but only to dismiss it immediately as

That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die ...

(ll. 21-3)

¹² *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995), p. 147.

¹³ See Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (1988; repr. with revisions London and Boston: The Marvell Press/Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 208-9.

Heaney in fact bypasses much of this central argument, and pays special attention to the much-quoted lines from the end of the fourth stanza:

Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.
(ll. 37-40)

It is probably the last line quoted above which triggers Heaney's most vigorous rejection of Larkin's stance (Larkin's 'whined' may also have triggered a recall of E. M. Cioran's phrase, 'complain too much', cited earlier). As he has done all through the essay, Heaney once more contrasts Yeats's attitude with Larkin's: and having cited these lines from *Aubade*, he anticipates the contrast he intends when he writes that where 'Larkin was all for human beings huddling together in kindness, like refugees from the injustice of the skies, Yeats was all for flourish and theatrical challenge'. In a late poem, 'Lapis Lazuli', not here referenced by Heaney (probably because he assumes his reader is already familiar with it), Yeats celebrates the deaths of Shakespeare's great tragic heroes, and the defiant and positive manner of their confrontation of death: 'All perform their tragic play,/There *struts* Hamlet, there is Lear ...' (ll. 9-10: italics added). And those who play these parts

Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transforming all that dread.
(ll. 15-7)¹⁴

Heaney quotes a more measured, less rhetorical appraisal in Yeats's prose comment: 'No actress ... has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra ...' Which amounts to saying, Heaney adds, 'that death withstood is indeed very different from death whined at'; and, a further point, 'that it is up to poets and actresses [or actors] to continue to withstand'.

3

One cannot avoid the sense that Heaney is more personally involved than usual in the issues he discusses in this particular essay. On one level that is a tribute to the disturbing power of Larkin's poem, and it is difficult for the reader to banish the lingering, unsettling effect created by such lines in *Aubade* as the definitive description of

14 W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (1962; London, etc.: Macmillan, 1965), p. 181.

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death as 'The anaesthetic from which none come round' (l. 40); or the severely simple articulation, at the end of the second stanza, of what may be our ultimate fate:

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.
(ll. 17-20)

But on the other hand Heaney's attempts, with the help of Yeats, to pose an alternative possibility (or possibilities) will be seized on by many as a not just a welcome, but a corrective, relief from the suffocating passivity of Larkin's poem. There is, after all, an essential difference between futile 'whining' and affirmative 'withstanding'. Most important of all, a poem such as *Aubade* provides a powerful backdrop against which we may feel more vividly the immense significance of Heaney's last words. Seamus Heaney was, like many of us, a man who had experienced the painful bereavement and sense of loss in the death of others; and it seems unlikely that he ever forgot the death of his little brother Christopher. He suggests to Dennis O'Driscoll, in fact, that he remained susceptible throughout his life 'to poems about dead children' and was inclined to put this down to 'the accidental death of my own young brother, Christopher ...'.¹⁵ Yet in spite of all this intimate knowledge of human extinction, Heaney enters into the closing moments of his own life flourishing a pennant, on which is inscribed '*Noli timere*'.

There is a famous utterance by John Keats in a letter of 3 May, 1818, written to J. H. Reynolds. It is one with which, we can be pretty certain, Heaney was familiar. The statement reads: 'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms unless they are proved upon our pulses'.¹⁶ In other words, the basis of authentic knowledge is experiential. We cannot know what Heaney experienced in his last moments; but there is an indefeasible authenticity, and authority, in what is felt on the pulses when those pulses are the final indicators of life as death advances. '*Noli timere*' is a phrase to be stored in human memory; and in that sense is, as valediction, itself close to immortality.

¹⁵ *Stepping Stones*, p.427

¹⁶ A dictum widely known and quoted: see, for example, Stephen Coote, *John Keats: A Life* (1995; London: Sceptre, 1996), p. 152.