

Books & Culture

From 'Furrow' to 'Windfall': Creation and the Fall in Seamus Heaney's 'Kite' Poems

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Seamus Heaney's place in popular culture in much of the English-speaking world (and beyond) is not hard to establish. It is estimated that sales of Seamus Heaney's books of poetry accounted for over two thirds of all poetry by living authors sold in the UK in the first decade of the new millennium, and his work continues to be among the best-selling books of poetry of all time (Coyle 2020). He was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature in 1995, and his poem 'When all the others were away at Mass' was chosen as Ireland's best-loved poem from the last 100 years in a poll conducted in 2015, eighteen months after his death ('Seamus Heaney poem chosen as Ireland's best loved' 2015). A translation of his final text to his wife, 'Noli timere', appeared as graffiti on buildings in Dublin: 'Don't be afraid', an image of which can be seen on the cover of Richard Rankin Russell's excellent *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Russell 2016).

As Heaney's widow Marie has commented in a recent BBC documentary, it is commonplace for his 'Scaffolding' poem to be read at weddings in Ireland and beyond ('Seamus Heaney and the music of what happens' 2019) - and indeed, I seriously considered it for my own wedding earlier this year, only at the last minute deciding to go with a poem by a fellow Scot (and friend of Heaney's), Norman MacCaig.

If Heaney's importance as a poet of popular as well as critical acclaim is assured, his role as mediator of biblical and theological insights is a more complex matter to determine. As a student, Heaney had gradually grown apart from the strict observance of Roman Catholicism of his childhood, but in his conversations with Dennis O'Driscoll published in 2008 in *Stepping Stones*, he commented that 'Catholicism provided a totally structured reading of the mortal human condition which I've never quite deconstructed' (O'Driscoll 2008, 471). The language and liturgy of the faith had given him a very particular and expansive world view: 'You had your puny South Derry being within the great echoing acoustic of a universe of dark and light, death and everlasting life, divine praise and prayers for the dead' (O'Driscoll 2008, 471). While this 'first visionary world' had been 'screened out' to some extent, in his later years he came to understand that 'from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region'. This had led him latterly in his work to 'dwell with' and 'imagin[e] in terms of those archetypal patterns', including, particularly, the biblical and theological categories of his youth (O'Driscoll 2008, 472).

While this shift in Heaney's understanding of the significance and importance of these archetypal patterns may be charted through his lifetime, it would also be hard to refute that the language and narratives of the Bible are to be traced across the whole breadth of his poetry. The biblical critic Richard Hays effectively situated Paul in his scriptural 'cave of resonant signification' (Hays 1989, 21), quoting John Hollander (Hollander 1981, 65). Heaney's constant resonant 'cave', or one of them at least, is clearly the stories and language of the Bible heard in his youth. For example, as I have argued elsewhere (Jack 2020), the Gospel story of Jesus healing a paralysed man (Matthew 9.2–8; Mark 2.1–12; Luke 5.17–26) is directly alluded to in markedly different ways in three Heaney poems written across a period of over twenty years: 'The Skylight' (1991); 'Miracle' (2006); and 'The Latecomers' (2013). Russell had first noted this (Russell 2016, 226) and had also discussed Heaney's use of an image from this Gospel story in *The Dublin Review* to describe the way a poem, once written, takes on a life of its own (Russell 2016, 149): 'The poem... must grow its own legs, arise, take up its bed, and walk' (Heaney 2002). Biblical echoes and allusions may be heard throughout Heaney's work, reflecting their ongoing prominence in the 'echoing acoustic' of his intertextual universe.

In this article I focus on biblical echoes in Heaney's poem 'A Kite for Aibhin', which has captured both the scholarly and the popular imagination in part, at least, because it appeared as the last poem in his final major collection of poems before his sudden death, *Human Chain* (Heaney 2010). Because of this, it seems to speak with a powerfully prophetic voice about his preparedness to leave behind the legacy of his work and family ties. The poem is also notable because of its relationship to an earlier and well-known poem by Heaney. 'A Kite for Aibhin' foregrounds the same object of poetic inspiration, the kite, which Heaney had used over twenty-five years before in his poem 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher', published in *Station Island* (Heaney 1984). The earlier poem was dedicated to his two young sons, the later to his second granddaughter. The differences between the two kite poems have been highlighted as illustrating a perceptible and widespread shift in Heaney's work over time. Scholars have compared the earthbound 'artesian' focus of, for example, Heaney's famous early poem published in 1966, 'Digging', with the more 'aerial imaginative structure' as Eugene O'Brien describes it in, for example, the later sequence of poems 'Lightenings' in *Seeing Things* published in 1991 (O'Brien 2016, 5). Something of the same contrast between a downward and upward focus may be discerned in the reference to the 'soul at anchor there' in 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher' and the kite 'climbing and carrying, carrying further, higher/ The longing in the breast' in 'A Kite for Aibhin'.

These three features, then, combine to explain the hold of these kite poems on the popular as well as the scholarly imagination: the passing of time seen through the shift in generations from sons to granddaughter; the way the two poems conform so neatly to the perceived development in Heaney's work; and the poignancy of the

writing of the later poem comparatively close to his death. Something of the growing popularity and the significance of the image of the kite in Heaney's poetry may be noted visually in the choice of a kite as the defining image on the cover of O'Brien's edited volume about Heaney's later work (O'Brien 2016). The cover depicts a sheet of white paper with an image of a red kite flying against blue sky appearing where a strip of the paper has been torn away. Behind the words of the book's title, and perhaps its contents too, flies the imaginative potential of all the kite represents to the poet and the reader. The kite in the sky appears on the spine of this weighty tome too, so readers are sure to get the point. Discussions of the kite poems find their way into many of the chapters in the book, however fleetingly, and it will be no surprise that several references to this volume will feature in my own contribution here. The cover reminds us all, however, that any attempt to 'wrap up' or 'paper over' the image of the kite in Heaney's work and imagination are temporary and contingent.

In this short article I argue that Heaney's two kite poems interact with biblical images of creation in different and contrasting ways. I will concur with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews that in the later poem in particular 'Heaney reworks an old-fashioned vocabulary of the sacramental and the mystical to reassert a metaphysics of presence and the transcendental belief in the oneness of all creation' (Kennedy-Andrews 2016, 180), specifically, I suggest, through his invocation of references to the stories of creation in Genesis 1-3. My aim is to demonstrate why this reworking of biblical images of creation is significant, and runs counter to the prevailing scholarly and popular reading of 'A Kite for Aibhin'.

In 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher', the two stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2-3 are firmly invoked. The speaker is identified as the creator of the kite ('I'd seen it grey and slippy in the making...I'd tied the bows of newspaper/along its six-foot tail') and the day is 'Sunday', in Christian tradition identified with the day of rest after the labours of the week, associated with God's taking stock of God's creation. The similes presented relate to the elements of creation in Genesis 1: the kite is 'like a small black lark'; its string is like a 'wet rope' to 'lift a shoal'; the soul and the string 'weigh like a furrow'. Earth, sea and air are all represented here in the moment of reflection offered by the creator in the description of the scene: the birds of the air, the creatures of the sea, and the work of humanity to bring fruitfulness out of the land. In the opening stanza, the kite flies 'above Sunday', but the movement of the poem is downwards from there. The Fall is presupposed in the final stanza, in which the speaker addresses his human creations, his sons, and urges them to experience the 'grief' of the pull of the kite, before it returns to the reality of the created world. It is this Genesis 2-3 reality, of human solidarity but also of pain and work, which is the resolution of the poem. The kite offers a momentary, tantalising experience of 'the heavens'. Flying it is 'like' knowing creation as it might and should have been. But the 'soul', like the kite, is nevertheless 'at anchor' in the real and fallen world, and the string of the kite becomes 'useless' once it has returned to the earth.

In 'A Kite for Aibhin', the kite of the opening stanza is imagined as being untethered to the earth. It is supported by 'Pale blue heavenly air', air whose origin is not of this time or place. This miraculous vision then provokes a memory of kite-flying in a very specific time and place ('opposite/Anahorish Hill'). This kite's tail associates it with a 'comet' rather than the 'pull of grief' in the earlier poem. As the kite 'Rises', the word stressed by its position at the beginning of the fifth stanza, the speaker's 'longing in the breast' as well as his physical 'planted feet' and 'gazing face and heart' are taken upwards with it.

The 'I' of the speaker is held together with the kite in this description of his memory of kite-flying only 'until string breaks' and the kite, now 'separate' like the vision at the beginning of the poem, 'takes off, itself alone'. But the reimagined memory of flying it has offered a new, upward-facing perspective on the potential threshold or limits of creation, in contrast to the downward trajectory of the earlier poem. Furthermore, there is not the same identification of the speaker with the Creator here, filled with foreboding, as there was in 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher'. Instead, the kite-flyer, like the kite, is in the hands of a higher power and the kite returns to its original creator with 'elation'.

Another contrast between the two poems related to creation themes is offered by Andrew J. Auge in his chapter in O'Brien's edited collection, 'Surviving Death in Heaney's *Human Chain*' (Auge 2016). Auge suggests that, in 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher', 'the anticipated collapse of the kite in the woods signals death's eventual felling of the body'. In comparison, in 'A Kite for Aibhin', the kite's freedom still presents and represents death but it is not identified as being as utterly destructive in the way it is in the earlier poem: death here is 'also a bit of good fortune, a blessing' (Auge 2016, 35). Both poems, for him and for many other critics, relate to death as an inevitable consequence of the Fall of humanity, although differently in each case. I suggest a rather different interpretation of the fates of the kites in these two poems, which is rooted not in death but in a reimagining of biblical images of the created order.

We should remember that 'A Kite for Aibhin' is based on, we might say 'anchored in', Heaney's earlier translation of the poem 'L'Aquilone' by the late 19th/early 20th century Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli (Pascoli 1904). In 2001, Heaney received an honorary degree from the University of Urbina and during his visit to the University was taken by his friend Gabriella Morisco to see where Pascoli had found inspiration for his 'L'Aquilone': the hill where an annual kite-flying competition had taken place with the boys from a local boarding school. In her article 'Two Poets and a Kite: Seamus Heaney and Giovanni Pascoli' Morisco describes the series of events which led Heaney to attempt a first translation of the Pascoli poem, which is included in the article (Morisco 2013, 40-45). The translation was later published, with an introduction, in honour of Heaney's friend Mary Kelleher (Pascoli 2009).

In the Pascoli poem 'L'Aquilone', the speaker recalls the experience of flying a kite while a pupil at the school. Now an adult, he remembers the early death of a fellow schoolboy, and muses that the boy was 'lucky to have seen the fallen/only in the windfall of a kite' (Pascoli 2009). The connection between the image of the kite, its 'windfall' and death is clearly made, bolstering Auge's doom-laden reading of Heaney's 'A Kite for Aibhin'. However, I suggest that a comment by Heaney in the Foreword to his published translation of 'L'Aquilone' offers an important insight into his development of the kite image, and it relates to a vision of creation which turns the biblical narrative upside down, rather than a reference to the pull of death. In the Foreword, Heaney muses that Morisco drew his attention to the Pascoli poem because of its reference to a poem by W.B. Yeats, and because she knew that he had already written a kite poem of his own. Heaney concludes, 'Sooner or later, therefore, I was bound to go 'fishing in the sky' (as the Chinese put it) one more time' (Pascoli 2009). This image of kite-flying as 'fishing in the sky' to describe his engagement with 'L'Aquilone' begins to turn the cosmology of the created order of Genesis 1 upside down. The world imagined here is closer to that of Heaney's 'The annals say', the eighth poem of the sonnet sequence 'Lightenings', from the collection *Seeing Things* (Heaney 1991), than it is to the echoes of the Fall in Pascoli's poem.

As already noted, the collection *Seeing Things* is often associated with the ongoing shift in Heaney's work from 'rooted heaviness' to that which is 'light, airy, dessicated', as Helen Vendler had earlier described it (Vendler 1988). In 'The annals say', a ship appears from above to monks while they are at prayer in church in Clonmacnoise, and its anchor becomes caught in the altar-rail. A figure from the ship descends to attempt to unhook it, unsuccessfully. The insightful abbot realises 'This man can't bear our life here and will drown/...unless we help him'. This the monks do, the ship sails on above them and the figure climbs back up, 'Out of the marvellous as he had known it'. It is as if the firmament of the creation story in Genesis 1 has been breached, and what is below is both alien and filled with wonder for the inhabitants of the world beyond, just as the world above is alien and filled with wonder from the perspective of the monks. I suggest that it is into and through the firmament from whence the ship came that Heaney casts his fishing line in his second kite poem, 'A Kite for Aibhin'.

In 'The annals say', the 'big hull' of the mysterious ship from another place beyond the monks' experience becomes like a kite for them when it is grounded by 'hook[ing] itself into the altar rails'. Its release is only possible through the intervention of the monks below: the 'crewman' sent to do so from above works 'in vain', and his descent puts him in danger. Rather than seek to detain or delay the revelation presented to them, the holy men set the ship free, so it becomes like the kite in 'A Kite for Aibhin', supported by 'air from another life and time and place'. They, just like the ship's crew, have known a moment of 'marvellous' in their

contact with those who are ‘from another life and time and place’ from their perspective.

What is presented in ‘A Kite for Aibhin’, I suggest, is a similar perspective on the created order. The breaking of the string of the kite transports the speaker from having the perspective of an earth-rooted ‘fisher in the sky’ to seeing the kite as a released inhabitant of another dimension of the created order, grounded and pulled from that which is above. When the kite ‘takes off, itself alone, a windfall’, the pull of gravity has shifted from that which is expected: in fact, it has turned upside down. Usually a ‘windfall’ apple, say, falls downward when the wind, rather than a human hand, plucks it from the tree. It is this image that Pascoli’s poem assumes when it states the dead boy was ‘lucky to have seen the fallen/only in the windfall of a kite’ (Pascoli 2009). For Russell, in his *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, the ‘windfall’ of Heaney’s poem pictures the speaker as ‘a ripe fruit ready to be harvested by another’s hand’, free from the sectarian concerns of his country of origin (Russel 2016, 221). The image for Russell remains bound up with the realities of Heaney’s life which is nearing its end. I suggest, instead, that the image reminds us that perspective is everything. This poem is not an elegy for a life coming to its end, but a celebration of poetic inspiration offering counter-intuitive perspectives on creation.

Unlike in Heaney’s earlier kite poem, here the known world is not a fallen place which cannot be escaped in life. Rather, in the playful inversion of notions of upwards and downwards, which ‘The annals say’ had also played with, ‘falling’ is not freighted with doom, and the created world may be considered in a new way. The poet, like the abbot of Clonmacnoise, when presented with an object full of imaginative and liminal potential (a ship in the air, a kite falling in to the sky) may bring a wisdom to the scene which is life-affirming. Both the world the kite leaves and the world to which it is going may be understood to be marvellous, when viewed from the perspective offered by those with perceptive imaginations (‘and yes, it is a kite!’), steeped in a tradition of translation whether spiritual or literary. Experiencing the poem allows the reader to glimpse the fruit of this poetic vision, to travel safely between these worlds and to imagine what lies beyond the firmament of the known.

It is tempting, given the relative and sad proximity between the publication of ‘A Kite for Aibhin’ and the death of Seamus Heaney, to read the poem as valedictory. On this view, the poem prophetically announces the release of his soul into the world of beyond, an inescapable consequence of the fallenness of creation which his earlier kite poem had asserted. I suggest we should resist that temptation. Pascoli’s kite poem might associate the kite with the Fall, but Heaney asserts his poem is ‘*After “L’Aquilone”*’ [italics mine], rather than wedded to its sombre message. Instead, ‘A Kite for Aibhin’ celebrates both the oneness and transcendent potential of creation, and the power of poetry to offer a new way to experience this through transforming memory. The feet may remain ‘planted’ but the ‘kite’ of the poetic imagination takes the reader through and beyond the known creative order.

It is poetry which enables these transformative moments of interaction between moments of vision, memory and the present. The gift to Aibhin, from Heaney's kite-flying fisher in the sky, is the assurance that this poet is very much there to 'take [his] stand again' and to mediate the marvellous. The message is conveyed within an 'echoing acoustic of a universe' (O'Driscoll 2008, 471) filled with biblical resonances.

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