

Seamus Heaney's Sonnet in the 'New Age of Anxiety'

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Abstract:

Around one-third of the sonnets Seamus Heaney published over his entire poetic career are found in the collection *District and Circle* (2006). Heaney maintained that this collection was distinct from his previous ones because it described a world that, in his view, was characterised by 'a new age of anxiety'. Such anxiety manifests itself repeatedly in poems that tend toward fragmentation and incompleteness. And thus the question that immediately suggests itself relates to the adequacy of the sonnet form to tackle such a subject. For the sonnet as a form tends towards resolution and its architectural structure is inclined towards completion. By referring closely to a sonnet sequence from his 2006 collection, this article seeks to assess the ways in which Heaney makes of the sonnet form an apposite vehicle to reflect on the anxiety-ridden world of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Seamus Heaney, District and Circle, contemporary sonnet, sonnet sequence, unconventional sonnet, the 'new age of anxiety'*

Seamus Heaney's Sonnet in the 'New Age of Anxiety'

Around one-third of the sonnets Seamus Heaney published over his entire poetic career are found in the collection *District and Circle* (2006). Indeed, of the 68 poems in this collection, an unusual 21 are sonnets. For Heaney, as he remarks in an article about his choice of title for the collection, what distinguishes these poems from earlier ones is the fact that we live in 'a new age of anxiety' (Heaney 2006b). It is certainly significant then, that Heaney would turn to the sonnet form so insistently when reflecting on, in the words of the blurb, 'the eerie new conditions of a menaced twenty-first century' (Heaney 2006a). It would appear that the lyrical potency of such a form proves attractive to him. After all, as Michael Parker correctly observes, 'Evidence from previous collections suggests that the poet frequently has recourse to this highly governed, strongly traditional form when political and personal concerns are at their most intense' (Parker 2008, p. 370). And yet the question about the adequacy of the sonnet form to reflect upon such anxiety immediately suggests itself; not least since the fragmentariness of the contemporary world that Heaney seeks to bring to the fore can hardly be reflected in the sonnet's rigorous structure. On the face of it, the sonnet's architectural structure appears to be less

than amenable. Indeed, as the ensuing brief overview of its salient formal features will make clear, the sonnet is characterised by a logical development that tends towards a neat and final resolution.

Writing in 1972, John Fuller provides a rather narrow understanding of what constitutes the sonnet; he claims that 'the essence of the sonnet's form is the unequal relationship between octave and sestet' (Fuller 1972, p. 2). For Fuller, this relationship is of far greater significance than the fact that there are fourteen lines in a sonnet. Indeed, he goes so far as to maintain that 'it is the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet which is the legitimate form, for it alone recognizes that peculiar imbalance of parts which is its salient characteristic' (Fuller 1972, p. 1). For Michael Spiller who traces the development of the sonnet from its Sicilian origins to its 17th century specimens, the distinguishing characteristics of the sonnet are three, namely proportion (it is split into an octave and a sestet), extension (it is written in ten- or eleven-syllable lines), and duration (it has fourteen such lines). He goes on to claim that, 'Any poem which infringes one of these parameters will remind us of a sonnet quite closely; a poem which infringes two will be more difficult to accommodate, but we will probably try to establish some procedure to account for the deformation; and a poem which infringes all three will not be recognisable as a sonnet at all, and we will regard it as something else unless there is contextual pressure' (Spiller 1992, p. 3).

Helen Vendler's introduction to her commentaries on the art of Shakespeare's sonnets also reveals a proclivity towards a rigid understanding of the formal properties of the sonnet. Indeed, the emphasis on the basic requirements of 'structural coherence' and 'logical development' is amply felt throughout her analyses of the sonnets. The sonnet, as she argues, has a rigid organising structure in which each part of the sonnet has a logical relation to the others. The parts are thus strategically linked in an identifiable rhetorical structure or what she calls 'the architecture of the sonnet' (Vendler 1997, p. 4-5). Writing elsewhere, she succinctly sums up the sense of finality achieved at the end of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms when she observes that the 'European sonnet is very satisfying, since it implies, by its very symmetry, that the shorter six lines can resolve the preceding eight, just as the Shakespearean sonnet implies by its closing couplet that the quatrains' engagements can somehow be summed up, or capped, or ironically dismissed' (Vendler 2019, p. 79). Thus the sonnet as a form is recognised as one that tends towards solution; its architectural structure is inclined towards completion.

And yet such theories of the sonnet may appear unyielding and extremely conservative when juxtaposed to the views of more recent literary critics and poets whose answer to the question, 'What is a sonnet?', is as liberal as it gets. Think, for instance, of Don Paterson's remark in his introduction to an anthology of 101 sonnets that 'the sonnet is pretty much in the eye of the beholder' (Paterson 1999, p. xi) and Stephanie Burt's similar position when she claims that 'the sonnet is what each poet makes it' (Burt 2011, p. 263). The latter views are clearly very much informed by the reading of sonnets that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth-

century and the first decade of the twenty-first century—exemplars that would certainly fail to pass muster by the standards of the more conservative critic. For as Burt aptly observes in an essay on the contemporary sonnet, while 'questions about what counts as a sonnet, about how we should use the term, are now centuries old', what distinguishes the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is 'a strong sense that such questions have no stable answers, that they can never be resolved' (Burt 2011, p. 245). Twentieth- and twenty-first century practitioners of the sonnets have extended the definition of the sonnet through their experiments and practice. It is, after all, *praxis* that informs theory in the field of literary genres and not vice-versa. Burt's remark that many of the poems included in the 2008 Norton anthology of the sonnet 'would not, a hundred years ago, have been called sonnets at all' is revelatory in this respect (Burt 2011, p. 245). Genre theories change in accordance to the ever-inventive works of the contemporary practitioner. And the sonnet form, in spite of its brevity and seeming constraints, has certainly proved immensely adaptable. So much so that as Paterson remarks, 'the form has diversified to the point where its definitive boundaries are so blurred that it has effectively ceased to exist' (Paterson 1999, p. xi).

Only it hasn't, of course. The sonnet is one of the oldest verse forms and it is hardly surprising that 450 years of sonnet writing in the English language have produced exemplars that have strayed considerably from the normative characteristics established in the early prototypes. For conservative critics such as Fuller and Spiller, such instantiations earn the descriptions of 'freak varieties' (Fuller 1972, p. 1) and 'deformation[s]' (Spiller 1992, p. 3). Even the more accommodating Stephanie Burt and David Mikics, whose *The Art of the Sonnet* (2010) explores many unconventional sonnets from the twentieth-century, make the all too stark distinction between contemporary sonnets that are 'self-consciously traditional' and those that are 'decidedly *impure*' (Burt, Mikics, 2010, p. 5, my emphasis). The terms ascribed to sonnets that fail to conform rigorously to the rule book are evidently disparaging and point to the firm conviction in the existence of a 'pure' form—unsullied by the vagaries of the errant poet. And yet, interestingly, when speaking about the notion of genre, Jacques Derrida opts precisely for the term 'impurities' to describe those works that are *integral* for the continued existence of the genre. It is indeed fitting in the context of this discussion that Jacques Derrida, in the essay 'The Law of Genre', should argue that the notion of genre is made possible through an a priori counter-law of 'impurity' (Derrida 1980, p. 57). Rather than focusing on the properties that are fundamental to the genre, Derrida turns his attention to instances that defy the rules that govern a genre. In his view, such instances of impurity serve to *strengthen* rather than weaken the law of genre. Far from compromising the strength of the law of genre, Derrida argues, the counter movement against the law serves to legitimise it further. And thus the negative connotations of the term 'impure' are promptly erased. Indeed, provocation and defiance in the face of the law of the genre not only ensure productive continuity, but are a necessary lifeline for the genre.

From his early political sonnet 'Requiem for the Croppies' (1962), which Vendler describes as an 'anomalous sonnet' (Vendler 1998, p. 22) to the poignant elegiac 'Clearances' sequence (1987) that finds ways, as Stephen Regan observes, of adequately betraying 'the standard form' (Regan 2019, p. 189), Heaney's use of the sonnet has always sought to do novel things with the fourteen-line poem. In his essay 'The Art of Heaney's Sonnets', Thomas O'Grady argues that while Heaney borrows the 'scaffolding' of the sonnet, several of his sonnets 'suffer from defects' (O'Grady 2000, p. 355). In a similar vein, Constance Jackson, who provides an astute reading of Heaney's early sonnets, remarks on his complete 'disinterest' in the perfect rhyme that typifies the sonnet form. After all, she quips, 'breaking the sonnet convention is conventional' (Jackson 2012, p. 36). And yet it seems that the 2006 collection establishes something further still. First, it is apparent that Heaney turns to the sonnet form with a far more urgent insistence in this collection; no other collection in his extensive oeuvre includes as many sonnets. Second, his use of the sonnet pushes the boundaries of the form to such an extent that critics cannot agree on the number of sonnets included in the collection. Third, there is a prevalent sense in which the 'scaffold' of the sonnet, to use O'Grady's term, is erected only to be summarily dismantled on the page. As Tara Guissin-Stubbs remarks when reflecting on the five-sonnet sequence 'District and Circle' in particular: 'Though the sonnet offers us a foundation, this soon breaks down. Our inherited knowledge of the form gives us hints on how to read these (often confounding) poems, but it does not help us square the circle' (Guissin-Stubbs 2020, p. 76). Turning its attention to this sequence, the rest of the article shall address precisely the question of the adequacy of the sonnet form to reflect what Heaney described as 'the new age of anxiety'.

Described by Andrew Motion as 'the single most impressive poem in the book' (Motion 2006), 'District and Circle' details the journey of the persona on the London underground train with uncanny precision. The speaker in these poems is a strange composite. In part, it is the younger Heaney who travelled on the District and Circle lines during a summer of vacation work in London in 1962. And yet it is also, as Heaney observes, partly the figure of the Tollund Man who had given him 'rare poetic strength more than 30 years earlier' (Heaney 2006b). The near-perfectly preserved bog body from the iron-age who inspired Heaney's Bog poems in the 1970s is here resuscitated and brought to life in the 'new world of virtual reality and real pollution, a world of violence and polluted public speech' (O'Driscoll 2008, p. 410).

'District and Circle' is a sequence that attempts, in its limited space, a Dantesque descent into the underworld. As Rachel Falconer explains in her illuminating discussion on the literary genre of *katabasis* (from the Greek for 'going down'), the descent 'relates a journey through which a character or persona undergoes an education or a trial of the self to achieve a certain wisdom' (Falconer 2012, p. 405). She convincingly demonstrates that this ancient literary genre has been revived in

recent years by contemporary poets as diverse as Geoffrey Hill, Alice Notley and Paul Muldoon who have sought, among other things, 'to discover continuities and coherences in otherwise fragmented or grief-struck lives, to defamiliarize and critique present-day politics, or to affirm certain values in the face of destabilizing global events' (Falconer 2012, p. 404). In her essay 'Heaney, Virgil and Contemporary *Katabasis*', she argues that the entire collection 'comprises a sustained *katabasis*' and singles out the five-sonnet sequence as the most explicit manifestation of this genre (Falconer 2012, p. 406). For Heaney, the underground journey must have had conscious parallels with Aeneas' venture into the underworld, not least since, as he explains, it is 'the one Virgilian journey' that was a 'constant presence': 'the motifs of Book VI [of Virgil's *Aeneid*] have been in my head for years—the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father' (O'Driscoll 2008, p. 389). It is indeed highly significant that Aeneas' journey ends with the encounter with his father that yields a prophetic vision of the destiny of Rome. Indeed, viewed in light of the katabatic genre and the evident Virgilian influence, 'District and Circle' creates the expectation of a prophecy. Heaney's descent into the underworld is ultimately a search for meaning in an increasingly alienating world that would presumably end with a vatic revelation and the longed-for 'resurrection scene'—one that he anticipates as early as the second sonnet in the sequence (Heaney 2006a, p. 17). And yet as shall become amply clear as we look closely at the third and final sonnet in the sequence, this journey offers no such insight and no such ascent.

The first sonnet details a routine encounter with a specific individual; the only such encounter in the entire sequence that otherwise describes the movements of the persona as those of one commuter in the midst of many. The persona recounts the habitual crossing of paths with a busker whose 'tunes from a tin whistle' would greet him as he descended the stairs. The emphasis in this first half of the poem is clearly on the exchanged looks between the commuter and the busker—described here as the former's 'watcher'. Although highly conscious of the 'two eyes eyeing' him, the persona does not feel threatened by the busker's 'unaccusing look'; neither does he avoid eye-contact (Heaney 2006a, p. 17). What follows in the sestet, however, is the persona's hesitation, as he would 'trigger and untrigger a hot coin', regarding the appropriateness of tipping the busker. It is the sudden 'recognition' that they are equals (a musician and a poet) that compels the persona to 're-pocket' the coin he held at the ready. Satisfied with his decision, the persona returns the busker's nod and moves on; the apparent serenity and finality of the sonnet is captured in the rhyming couplet:

[...] I would re-pocket and nod,
 And he, still eyeing me, would also nod.
 (Heaney 2006a, p. 17)

It is only midway through the third sonnet that the subject is brought up again:

Another level down, the platform thronged.
I re-entered the safety of numbers,
A crowd 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 now-or-never whelm
Of one and all the full length of the train.
(Heaney 2006a, p. 18)

The sonnet begins by detailing the near automated movements of commuters on the London underground. Descending further down into the underground railway network, the persona is ever-sensitive to the movements of fellow human beings as they succumb to the mechanical directives of the train. The sounds and motions alter to a rhythm decreed by the arriving trains as 'street-loud' gives way to 'herd-quiet'. It is during this brief moment of silence that the sonnet gives way to reflection. Arguably, the most striking feature of the sonnet is, in fact, the volta. For the question that is posed after the incomplete quatrain refers back, not to earlier stanzas of the sonnet, as would be expected, but to the first sonnet in the sequence: 'Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?'. Strategically positioned midpoint through the sequence, the question reveals the sudden realisation on the persona's part of having committed an act of betrayal by deciding not to tip the busker on a previous floor. The effect created by the question is simultaneously one of interruption and continuity. The present sonnet seems to be cut short as it returns to an earlier moment in the commuter's journey and thus to an earlier sonnet. At the same time, the sonnet returns to what turns out to be an unresolved issue from a previous sonnet in the sequence. The supposed unity and self-sufficiency of the sonnet (a mainstay even within sonnet sequences) comes apart as the persona has second thoughts about his encounter with the busker.

This sense of fragmentariness is further enhanced through the missing line in the quatrain. Comprised of three lines, the second quatrain ends with suspension points that seem to stand in for the missing line in this thirteen-line sonnet. The rhyming scheme of the opening quatrains (*abab cdc-*) stops short of completing the pattern of alternating rhymes that is typical of the Shakespearean form. The absence of perfect

rhyme at the end of the Heaney line does not come as a surprise to his readers. Firm in his belief that there is 'virtue' in 'a slight dissonance', Heaney had been, by then, long-practised in the art of what he calls 'off-rhyme' (O'Driscoll 2008, p. 378). The rhyming pairs 'thronged'/'strung', 'numbers'/'newcomers' and 'vault'/'herd-quiet' can be deduced without too much difficulty and they point to the evident missing line that would provide the expected end-line rhyme to go with the word 'doors'. Yet 'doors' finds no imprecise echo as the 'herd-quiet' of the previous line gives way to a silent line. Moreover, the tense unease of the dissonant rhyming pairs is all the more conspicuous in the sonnet form where the audible harmony of end-line rhymes typically creates a distinctively noticeable rhythm. The effect is such that, as Meg Tyler remarks in relation to other sonnets from this collection, Heaney produces 'verbal structures that do not sound much like sonnets' (Tyler 2016, p. 138).

The second half of the sonnet, which comes closer in structure to a Petrarchan sestet with its *efgfeg* rhyme scheme, begins with the question: 'Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?'. The unmistakably intrusive line has the effect of announcing the volta of the sonnet in a striking manner. Indeed, the question, comprised of one full line and following on from the 'silent' line at the end of the three-line 'quatrain', has the effect of stalling the poem. The disjunction owes, in part, to the fact that the question does not properly belong to this sonnet. In fact, it is not immediately evident what the betrayal referred to is or who the pronoun 'him' refers to. By introducing an unrelated subject, the question breaks from the quatrains in a decisive way. Clearly, there is no continuity or logical relation between the two parts. Moreover, the dramatic shift in tone, announced by the arresting question, creates the expectation of a definitive response. The Petrarchan sestet, after all, is the place where the sonnet finds its resolution.

Yet the moment of reflection fails to yield a satisfactory answer to the question. The two lines that immediately succeed the question initiate a response: the persona contradictorily reflects that the indecision regarding the appropriate course of action is both 'new' and 'familiar' to him. The transitory stationary moment whilst he waits for the train affords a brief opportunity for reflection, but this is quickly interrupted by the audible 'tremor' of the incoming train. And the persona — 'glad of a first tremor' — ends his ruminations there and then. He stops short of elaborating on his 'repentant' and 'unrepentant turn'. The last two lines of the poem return to the immediate setting, and the commuter's journey ensues as he boards the train. So once again, the sonnet fails, as does the persona, to conclusively resolve the matter in question. Here, as elsewhere in the sequence, the constant onward journey takes precedence over the commuter's reflections.

Similarly, the last sonnet in the sequence, which is arguably the most unconventional one in the entire collection, lacks the characteristic internal logic and sense of completion of the sonnet form:

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So deeper into it, crowd-swept strap-hanging,
My lofted arm a-swivel like a flail,
My father's glazed face in my own waning
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 so 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.
(Heaney 2006a, p. 19)

Surely the most obvious deviations of this sonnet are immediately evident at first glance. This is not the typical shape of the sonnet. Four incomplete lines (lines 4, 5, 13 and 14) signal the alluded to fragmentariness through the layout of the poem on the page. The missing part-lines are more conspicuous than the silent line of the third poem. The glaring white space at the start or the end of these lines creates a sonnet that is visually eschew. If, as Paterson argues, the sonnet is 'a small square poem' that 'presents the poet and the reader with a vivid symmetry', here Heaney produces a misshapen and asymmetrical square (Paterson 1999, p. xvi).

This sonnet follows the persona's further descent and the eventual longed-for encounter with the 'shade of the father'. The moment is a fleeting one as the Heaney persona catches but a glimpse of his father's visage in his own reflection. As is typical in this ever-moving sequence, the onward journey of the commuter disrupts the brief moments afforded to thought or reflection. Indeed, the apparition of the father's 'glazed face' lasts but an instant. Significantly, it is here that the poet uses the first incomplete lines. In Falconer's view what is particularly striking in Heaney's underworld journey is the absence of the conversation with the dead or *nekyia* that characterises the katabatic genre. As Falconer observes, here there 'is no exchange of human word' (Falconer 2012, p. 414). She later adds: 'The poet's father [...] imparts no knowledge of the past or future to his son. Instead what follows the ellipsis are two empty half-lines, cutting a gulf between quatrains. So, no prophecy; just silence' (Falconer 2012, p. 415–16). Whereas Aeneas' descent in the underworld ends with a dialogue with the spirit of his father that yields a prophetic vision, in Heaney's journey there is no such prophetic insight. The katabatic experience has not, as Falconer argues convincingly, yielded the education or wisdom desired. The formative experience of dialoguing with the other does not take place in the

alienating underworld of the twenty-first century. The greater the need for such a conversation, the more resounding its absence. The painful and heavy silence is finally broken by the 'growl/Of shutting doors' and the onward, if spasmodic, journey.

Indeed, the sporadic movements of the traveller seem to be reflected in the absence of recognisable stanzaic patterns in this sonnet. It is not possible to speak of a quatrain or an octave here since the rhyming words straddle over the two usually distinct parts of the Petrarchan sonnet. The rhyming words 'socket', 'relict', 'mirror-backed' and 'flicker-lit' create an unusual rhyme scheme (*abaabccdededxd*). While rhetorically, syntactically and visually, the sonnet appears to be split into an octave and a sestet, the end-line rhymes suggest another division. The eighth line of the poem seems to belong to the second half of the sonnet that contains, like the third sonnet, an unrhymed line. The penultimate line of the sonnet that ends with the hyphenated word 'rock-walls' remains unrhymed. Thus, it may be concluded that as Burt remarks in relation to the sonnets of Heaney's contemporary, Paul Muldoon, '[i]n such poems uncertainty about what counts as a sonnet joins up with uncertainty about what counts as a rhyme, and with uncertainty about whether and where we make the patterns [...] that we believe we find' (Burt 2011, p. 261).

Once again, the volta in this sonnet is marked by the clear anticipation of a conclusive sestet; the words 'And so' at the start of the sestet clearly ring of finality and declare the imminent unfolding of a conclusion in the final sonnet of the sequence that ends on a sombre note of uncertainty about identity and belonging. The estranging and anonymous experience of the underground journey that yields no conversation with the living or the dead ends with the recognition of a certain oneness shared with fellow commuters. The distance between the commuter and the ever-moving crowd he is part of is evident in the sequence. No opportunity for conversation arises and the persona only refers to people who cross his path as a moving throng 'hurtled forward' in near-unison. And hence the conclusion, at the end of the sequence and after the missed chance to converse with the father, that the anonymous 'they' are 'the only relict/Of all that [he] belonged to' is both unexpected and disconcerting. The journey promised to yield a comprehension of the self through a dialogue with the other and ends by admitting that the only sense of belonging is to be found among strangers. Conveyed through the poignant personification of the 'blasted weeping rock-walls' that give off his reflection, the sense of disillusionment, though subtly alluded to, is profound.

This feeling of discontent is compounded by the fragmentariness of the last line. Comprised of the compound word 'flicker-lit', the line is hardly conclusive. The half-lines in the first half of the sonnet only just prepare the reader for the final dramatically pared line. This noticeably shortened line at the close of the sonnet has the effect of positioning the last sonnet of the sequence (and subsequently the sonnet sequence in its entirety) in a space of in-betweenness: the poet at the end of this journey stands in between the earthly and the subterranean, the real and

the reflected, and, ominously, between light and darkness. Reminiscent of a flashing alarm or siren light, the irksome, indefinitely flickering light that brings the sequence to an end precludes closure.

In choosing a form where there is the evident expectation of closure and denying us that closure, Heaney heightens the sense of incompleteness further. Indeed, 'the dynamic relationship between form and subject matter', to use Regan's words, is still very much at work in these sonnets (Regan 2019, p. 8). For clearly the fragmented form mirrors the inconclusive and subsequently incomplete subterranean journey. The unanswered questions and unforthcoming prophecy are reflected in the fractured and fraught form of the sonnet itself. Speaking about the absence of completion in the sonnets from this collection, Tyler writes:

The sonnet forms in *District and Circle* act as membranes between the poet and the external world. The form is where he tries to work things out. However, the poems intimate that the sonnet closes too soon for the scope of the subject matter. There is something potentially too tidy about the form, too jewel-like in its perfection, in its insistence on resolution and completion. Having worked in the form for so many years, Heaney realizes its limitations; the sonnet is too complete and, at the same time, given the subject matter he tries to contain in it, leaves us with a feeling of incompleteness. (Tyler 2016, pp. 135–36)

And if, as Rachel Falconer astutely argues in her essay on the genre of *katabasis*, the katabatic journey ends with a return to the surface and a wisdom newly earned, what this journey underlines by refusing the persona a return to the sun-lit 'mown grass' recalled in the second sonnet is that no such wisdom has been forthcoming. The anticipated enlightenment which would bring closure to the persona and the sequence itself is here starkly absent.

Clearly, the sonnet form in Heaney's 'District and Circle' sequence announces itself decisively as incapable of completion. And it is precisely by creating the expectation of logical development and conclusion and upsetting such expectations that Heaney can further accentuate the feeling of anxiety that typifies contemporary society. On the surface it would appear that the sonnet is ill-suited to speak of contemporary angst. But rather than doing away with the form altogether, Heaney uses it to bring the concerns of an anxiety-ridden age to sharper relief. Fraying at the edges, it reveals a threadbare structure that reminds us only vaguely of the stalwart sonnet form. And far from being defective, deformed or freakish—to recall some of the unflattering epithets of the aforementioned critics—these sonnets speak of the contemporary world in a form that soon becomes recognisably our own.

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