

eScholarship

California Italian Studies

Title

Heaney, Pascoli and the Ends of Poetry

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cf9h0qc>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 8(1)

Author

Falconer, Rachel

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/C381038903

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Heaney, Pascoli, and the Ends of Poetry

Rachel Falconer

In one of the most beautiful odes in the English language, the Romantic poet John Keats forgets his mortal cares as he listens to a nightingale singing “of summer in full-throated ease.” To Keats’s nineteenth-century ears, the bird’s song is a spectacular instance of the voicing of Nature, a voice that is undyingly renewed through the generations:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:¹

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, with Keats in mind, Thomas Hardy listens to another bird singing, a song thrush this time, “In full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited.”² But this singing bird, in contrast to Keats’s nightingale, is nearing the end of a finite, biological existence. He is “An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small, / In blast-beruffled plume” (21–22). The song is still ecstatic and full of hope, but it is flung out in defiance of a “growing gloom,” Hardy’s sense that the forces unleashed by the industrial revolution would darken the world as he knew it.

A hundred years or so later, we are the inheritors of Hardy’s sense that Nature is mortal, and maybe even that, as a personifiable goddess, she no longer exists.³ Some deep ecologists speak of Gaia, a mother Earth in whom we might all be united. But even Gaia doesn’t undertake the moral education of individual poets, “chastening and subduing” them, as she once did William Wordsworth, who hears:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought

¹ John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), in *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 285–88, ll. 61–64. My grateful thanks to the Heaney Estate, Faber and Faber Ltd, and The Gallery Press for permission to quote from Seamus Heaney’s *The Last Walk*. I would also like to thank Marco Sonzogni, Niccolò Scaffai, Michael Parker, and Federica Massia for exchanges about Heaney and Pascoli; and Annabel Mills, Leila Benallal, and Francesca Scala for reading earlier drafts of this essay. Special thanks are due, also, to Robert Pogue Harrison for first suggesting this *folle volo* to me, and the Accademia Pascoliana di San Mauro for generously sending me a copy of *Rivista Pascoliana* 24–25. The present article is dedicated to Mathias Monnet (1999–2018), a brilliant young man who loved poetry.

² Thomas Hardy, “The Darkling Thrush” (1900), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Jahan Ramazani and John Stallworthy, 9th ed. (New York: Norton & Co., 2012), 1933–34, ll. 19–20.

³ See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989; repr. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006); Bruno Latour, “The End of Nature” in his *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 25–31; Will Steffen, J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36/8 (2007): 614–21; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 1976; repr. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); and Robert Watson, “Paradoxes: Alienation from Nature,” in his *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 77–109.

And rolls through all things.⁴

That immortal voice, the voice of Nature, is what inspires his poetry, and teaches him to hear “the still, sad music of humanity” (92). From the perspective of Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” without Nature we would have no music or poetry, and very possibly no sense of what it means to be human. And yet, not only has Nature as a divine, essentially benevolent and unifying force ceased to exist for many people in the developed world, but nature as an eco-system is understood to be subject to destruction by human activity and hence as “born to death” as we are ourselves.

So what are the ends of poetry in times when humanity has to face up to the possibility of nature’s finitude and our own lethal capacity to bring about its end? John Felstiner poses this question in his book, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*⁵ His answer is a tentative “yes”: poetry can help us better appreciate the natural environment, which may induce us to better care for it. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate grounds that position in the philosophy of Heidegger, for whom “dwelling on the earth” is something that needs to be actively sought out and claimed.⁶ Without this active effort, we are merely “existing,” strangers to ourselves and the world around us. Bate coined the term “ecopoetics” for poetry and criticism that “asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poesis*) of the dwelling-place” (*The Song of the Earth*, 75). But for environmental critics such as Greg Garrard and Susanna Lidström, asking what poets are for, with respect to the human condition, does not go far enough.⁷ Such “ecophenomenological poetry,” as they term it, seeks merely “to heighten individual readers’ awareness of their natural surroundings” (37). What is urgently needed is “environmental poetry,” which looks beyond the particular individual’s experience of the natural world to address concrete ecological problems affecting whole societies. In shifting the emphasis from individual experience of nature to ecological ethics, their definition of “environmental poetry” aligns with Lawrence Buell’s widely cited description of environmental writing in general, one of whose essential features is that “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical framework.”⁸

Garrard and Lidström invoke the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney as their example of a fully-fledged environmentalist poet, since (in contrast to his poetic mentor Ted Hughes, whom they characterize as “ecophenomenological”) Heaney “reflects and recognises an increasing global interconnectedness, between cultures as well as biologies.”⁹ From the mid-1990s (he received a Nobel Laureate in 1995) to his death in 2013, Heaney’s poetics reflect his increasing internationalism and “ecocosmopolitanism” (“Images,” 45). For Garrard and Lidström, it is this global ecological awareness and accountability that is necessary to poetry in our present, Anthropocene era.

While their extensive knowledge of environmental theory is extremely impressive, in describing Heaney’s late work as “ecocosmopolitan,” Garrard and Lidström seem to me to have

⁴ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written above ... Tintern Abbey” (1798), in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Celio de Piro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117–122, ll. 94, 101–04.

⁵ John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?: A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁶ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁷ Greg Garrard and Susanna Lidström, “‘Images adequate to our predicament’: Ecology, Environment, and Ecopoetics,” *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014): 35–53.

⁸ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7–8.

⁹ Garrard and Lidström, “Images,” 45.

skewed the evidence, and shoehorned his poetics into an explicitly activist agenda that Heaney himself would have resisted. Heaney's last collections of poetry are *Human Chain* (2010),¹⁰ containing "Route 110," a sequence of Virgilian imitations or "transfusions" that had been published three years earlier as a stand-alone volume entitled *The Riverbank Field*;¹¹ *The Last Walk* (2013),¹² consisting of a translation of "L'ultima passeggiata," a sequence of sixteen madrigals by Giovanni Pascoli, published in his collection *Myricae*;¹³ and finally, *Aeneid Book VI* (2016), a translation of the book in which Virgil relates Aeneas's descent into the underworld.¹⁴ *The Last Walk* and *Aeneid Book VI* were published posthumously, but their contents occupied Heaney up to the last months and weeks of his life.¹⁵ Left in nearly finalized form, these poems, together with those collected in *Human Chain*, constitute the last phase of Heaney's ever-evolving but remarkably coherent corpus of poetry. None of these volumes is explicitly "environmentalist" in the terms set out by Buell or Garrard and Lidström. Indeed, *Human Chain* has been critiqued as being "aloof in its powerfully self-elegiac mode" and lacking the strain of "ecological lament" found in earlier poems by Heaney, such as "The Tollund Man in Springtime," "Moyulla," and "Höfn."¹⁶

In my view, Heaney's late "self-elegiac mode" does powerfully address our relation to the natural world, but it does so on its own, internally generated terms. All of Heaney's last volumes draw on pastoral and georgic conventions; they are self-consciously literary, technically innovative, and centrally concerned with the dynamics of translation. They are also inward-looking, meditative, and memorious, which is to say that they evince some of the characteristics of ecophenomenological poetry, as defined by Garrard and Lidström. In his translations of Virgil and Pascoli, Heaney is also engaging poetically with Wordsworth, Keats, Hardy, Pound, Eliot, and Yeats about the ends—or the good, or *telos*—of poetry, and its ability to align us with our fundamental, rhythmic, patterned, human, and natural senses of being. Heaney's conviction of the serious purpose of poetry far transcends the current, in-house divisions of ecocriticism. It also restores a sense of poetry as playful, pleasurable, and health-enhancing to the individual reader or poet. To advance this argument, I would like to begin with a close look at *The Last Walk*, Heaney's translation of Pascoli's "L'ultima passeggiata," precisely because this sequence of slight, finely turned poems, while celebrating the rhythms of rural life, seems farthest removed from any explicitly political or environmentalist agenda. I will then return to a general discussion

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (London: Faber, 2010).

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Riverbank Field*, with illustrations by Martin Gale (Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2007).

¹² Seamus Heaney, *The Last Walk: Translations from the Italian of Giovanni Pascoli*, with illustrations by Martin Gale (Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2013).

¹³ Giovanni Pascoli, "L'ultima passeggiata" (1886–94), in *Myricae. Tutte le poesie di Giovanni Pascoli* (Milan: Mondadori, 1935), 1:56–64.

¹⁴ Virgil and Seamus Heaney, *Aeneid Book VI: A New Verse Translation* (London: Faber, 2016).

¹⁵ According to Michael Parker, Heaney met with his friend and editor Peter Fallon on August 22 and 25, 2013, in order to discuss the proofs of *The Last Walk*. He died on August 30th. See Michael Parker, "Keeping Time: Seamus Heaney's Translations of Giovanni Pascoli's 'L'ultima passeggiata,'" in *Seamus Heaney: Legacies, Afterlives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). Heaney's *Aeneid* translation was almost complete in 2008, but not published until 2016. See "Editors' Note," *Aeneid Book VI*, 51–53. For an introduction to Heaney's engagement with Pascoli, see also Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 252–56.

¹⁶ Brendan Corcoran, "Seamus Heaney's Cold Heaven: 'The Ecological Lament,'" *Irish Pages* 10/1 (2011): 127–45, 134. In Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), Heaney discusses poetry and environmental causes, and mentions these poems in particular (406–11).

of Heaney’s aesthetics and ethics, and how we might read his poetry from an environmental perspective.

The original sequence of Pascoli’s “L’ultima passeggiata,” published in 1886, consisted of one *ballata* and eight *madrigali*:

Original title	Translation
I. Arano	Ploughing
II. Di Lassù	From Above
III. Galline	Hens
VI. La via ferrata	The Iron Road
VIII. Quel giorno	That Day
IX. Mezzogiorno	Noon
XII. In capannello	In a Huddle
XVI. O vano sogno	O Vain Dream!

The second edition of *Myricae* (1892) added four more madrigals to “L’ultima passeggiata”:

Original title	Translation
VII. Festa Lontana	Feast Day in the Distance
X. Già dalla mattina	Since Early Morning
XIV. O reginella	O Princess!
XV. Ti chiamo	She Calls You

The third edition of *Myricae*, published in 1894, added a further four poems:

Original title	Translation
IV. Lavandare	Washerwomen
V. I due bimbi	Two Boys
XI. Carrettiere	Carter
XIII. Il Cane	The Dog ¹⁷

The final, sixteen-poem sequence provides a series of vignettes of rural life in tightly structured, and highly patterned and resonant verse:

Original title	Translation
I. Arano	Ploughing
II. Di Lassù	From Above
III. Galline	Hens
IV. Lavandare	Washerwomen
V. I due bimbi	Two Boys
VI. La via ferrata	The Iron Road
VII. Festa Lontana	Feast Day in the Distance

¹⁷ On the genesis of “L’ultima passeggiata,” see Gianfranco Contini, “Il linguaggio di Pascoli,” in his *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), 219–45; and Federica Massia, “The Last Walk, Seamus Heaney Traduttore di Giovanni Pascoli: Una Consonanza Poetica Profonda,” *Il Confronto letterario* 66 (2016): 307–32.

VIII.	Quel giorno	That Day
IX.	Mezzogiorno	Noon
X.	Già dalla mattina	Since Early Morning
XI.	Carrettiere	Carter
XII.	In capannello	In a Huddle
XIII.	Il Cane	The Dog
XIV.	O reginella	O Princess!
XV.	Ti chiamo	She Calls You
XVI.	O vano sogno	O Vain Dream!

All but the final poem consist of ten lines, recalling the fourteen-line traditional sonnet, in the way that an opening idea gets turned over, or opened up, by a *volta* after the opening sestet. Throughout the sequence, with the exception of the final poem, Pascoli employs a consistent rhyme scheme of two interlaced tercets (ABA CBC) followed by a rhymed quatrain (DEDE). Against the ordered regularity of end-rhyme, Pascoli uses a wide variety of internal rhymes (assonance, alliteration, near-rhyme, etc.). This juxtaposition of ordered end-rhyme against variable internal rhyme produces an “internal duplicity” at the level of sound, according to some Pascoli scholars.¹⁸

Thematically, Pascoli’s country scenes have little to do with Nature as moral guide or pristine wilderness, and yet they do intimately concern poetry’s relation to earth and human labour. Generically, they might be described “bucolic,” a subgenre of pastoral that is historically closely related to georgic, being concerned with *labor* as well as *otium* [leisure].¹⁹ They are also “bucolic” in the technical sense that they describe ploughmen and their oxen, rather than shepherds or goatherds. In Suetonius’s *Life of Virgil*, “there are three kinds of herdsmen that have standing in things pastoral. The least of these are called *aipoloi* [goatherds] [...] Somewhat more esteemed are *melonomoi poimenes* [sheepgrazing herdsmen] [...] The greatest and best-esteemed are the *boukoloi* [oxen-drivers].”²⁰ One reason to esteem Pascoli’s madrigal sequence, in the context of contemporary environmental poetry, is in the way they combine the theme of rural labor with the poetic form of a song. Before the twentieth century, this is a rare combination to find in English poetry—so much so that in his study of English eighteenth century poetry, Juan Christian Pellicer can confidently claim, “there is no such thing as georgic song.”²¹

Seamus Heaney’s country poems, dating well back into the 1960s, might all be described as “georgic songs.” And the singing of rural *labor* in “L’ultima passeggiata” strikes him as immediately familiar and felicitous, as we shall see below. Heaney’s *The Last Walk* is, in my

¹⁸ See Gianfranca Lavezzi, *I numeri della poesia. Guida alla metrica italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2002), 188; and Massia, “*The Last Walk*,” 314.

¹⁹ Bernard O’Donoghue also uses the term ‘bucolic’ to describe Heaney’s early volumes, with their ‘precise, agricultural language’. See O’Donoghue, ‘Heaney’s Classics and the Bucolic’ in O’Donoghue, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 106–120, 108.

²⁰ Jan Ziolkowski and Michael Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 195. Heaney’s family ploughed with horses, rather than oxen.

²¹ Juan Christian Pellicer, “Pastoral and Georgic” in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Vol 3 (1660–1790)*, ed. David Hopkins et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 287–321, 293.

view, the first successful rendering of Pascoli's complete madrigal cycle in English.²² If the translations aim for a light, spontaneous tone and pace, there is no doubting the seriousness of Heaney's aim to introduce Pascoli into the mainstream of the English literary tradition. Heaney believed Pascoli to be a poet of major stature, for reasons that he enumerated in "On Home Ground."²³ Briefly, these are that 1. Pascoli never ceases to develop aesthetically and intellectually; 2. there is an "ongoing emotional crux" which supplied his writing with "energy from underneath"; 3. there is "a range of formal achievement" and 4. a "beloved landscape" which "he delights in naming"; 5. there is "the whole body of classical literature and learning that came to mean as much to his creative being as the flora and fauna of his home ground in Romagna"; and finally, 6. there is Pascoli's ability to "face the inevitable end with no slither," which I take to mean, in this context, no slackening of energy, focus and artistic originality.²⁴

In praising Pascoli's ability to "face the inevitable end with slither-free" poetry, Heaney is probably referring to the Italian poet's later work rather than "L'ultima passeggiata," which Pascoli began at an early age. But the madrigal sequence comes already imbued with a sense of endings. Set in late summer, the series loosely traces the arc of a summer's day, with twilight encroaching on the poems of the second half. While the occasion for composing "L'ultima passeggiata" was a celebratory one—Pascoli presented it as a marriage gift to Severino Ferrari and his bride Ida Gini—, the sequence itself contains only glancing references to marriage, and its overall mood is thoughtful and sombre. According to Gianfranca Lavezzi, the disquieting, elegiac tone intensified with every later addition to the original, eight-madrigal sequence.²⁵ Heaney translated the sequence in a period when, having survived a stroke in 2006, he was writing with a heightened sense of his own mortality. It is in response to this sense of his own "inevitable end" that he turned for refreshment and reinvigoration to Pascoli's writing.

In Heaney's late poetry, a sense of mortality always comes twinned with natality, the endings of a human life always bound up with new beginnings; this is the "human chain" thematised in his final volume of original verse. And Pascoli is one of the late poetic exemplars who stimulated in Heaney's imagination this sense of beginnings enfolded in endings and vice-versa. Before coming on to "L'ultima passeggiata," Heaney had already concluded what was to be his last volume of original poetry in English, *Human Chain*, with the translation of a poem by Pascoli. Heaney's poem in celebration of the birth of a second grandchild, "A Kite for Aibhín," translates and adapts Pascoli's "L'aquilone" (1897), an elegy for the death of a child.²⁶ It was on

²² Other translations of "L'ultima passeggiata" include Giovanni Pascoli, *Last Voyage: Selected Poems*, trans. Deborah Brown, Richard Jackson, and Susan Thomas (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2010); and Giovanni Pascoli, *Giovanni Pascoli: Selected Poems*, ed. P.R. Horne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

²³ Heaney, "On Home Ground," *Rivista Pascoliana* 24–25 (2012–13): 19–26.

²⁴ The phrase, 'no slither' is Pound's (see note 52). Another possible interpretation of "facing the end with no slither" might be the capacity to face death without the religious consolation of the promise of afterlife. But as Heaney's secularism retains much of his Catholic upbringing, this seems less likely. See, for example, his essays "Joy or Night," in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), 146–63, and "A Soul on the Washing Line," *The Economist* (June 1991; repr. Sept. 5, 2013):

<<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2013/09/05/a-soul-on-the-washing-line>> (accessed Oct. 16, 2018).

²⁵ Giovanni Pascoli, *Myricae*, ed. Gianfranca Lavezzi (Milan: BUR, 2015), 229.

²⁶ See Seamus Heaney, "A Kite for Aibhín, after 'L'Acquilone' by Giovanni Pascoli," in *Human Chain*, 85. Heaney first prepared a translation of the entire poem for inclusion in *Augury: To Mary Kelleher*, ed. Fergus Mulligan (Dublin: Dublin Royal Society, 2009): <<http://www.griseldaonline.it/sonde/heaney-kite-pascoli-aquilone.html>> (accessed Sept. 15, 2018). He subsequently published the second half of the translation (lines 30–64) in *The FSG Book of Twentieth Century Italian Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Brock (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 14–17. For 'L'aquilone' [1907], see Giovanni Pascoli, *Poemetti*, ed. Edoardo Sanguineti (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), 147–150.

the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Pascoli's death that Heaney first learned about "L'aquilone" and made his first forays into translating the elegy, so it must have been associated from the first with Pascoli's own end, as well as with the death of the child figured in the poem.²⁷ In his translation, Heaney draws from only the first part of the poem, focussing on a kite-flying scene that further recalled, for him, a poem about a kite he had himself written earlier, for his own two boys. That poem had been melancholy if not elegiac, concluding with an instruction to "take in your two hands, boys, and feel / the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief."²⁸ In the final section of his adaptation of Pascoli's "L'aquilone," Heaney breaks away from the Italian text, to imagine the kite breaking free of its string, like a newborn infant being cut loose from the umbilical cord.

In *Human Chain*, "A Kite for Aíbhín" follows immediately after a poem about the poet's own encroaching old age ("In the Attic"), and together these two final poems echo the close of "Route 110," which ends with the poet and his father about to cross an underworld river dividing the realms of the living and the dead, and another grand-daughter crossing the same river to be born into new life. Positioned—in a late decision by Heaney—as the last poem of *Human Chain*, Heaney's adaptation of Pascoli's "L'aquilone" functions as a closing, distancing frame to the "self-elegiac mode" deployed in the collection as a whole. It is analogous to the closing lines of Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), in which the first-person, elegiac voice is suddenly distanced to a third-person singer, who twitches his mantle and steps briskly away from the business of grieving. But while it closes, and closes off, the elegies of *Human Chain*, the Pascoli adaptation also anticipates and opens up a new chapter, which turned out to be Heaney's last major poetic project, the translation of "L'ultima passeggiata."

In translating these *madrigali*, Heaney particularly delights in Pascoli's naming of a "beloved landscape." Like the Virgilian poems in Heaney's *The Riverbank Field*, the Italian poet's madrigal sequence is set in a rural landscape that Heaney identifies with his own native ground. He claims that his translation has a "biological right to life" because Pascoli's "late 19th century Italy" is "still there to be witnessed in mid-20th century Ireland."²⁹ Pascoli's Romagnan landscape is "a familiar world" that for Heaney recalls "the home ground of my own childhood—open countryside with breezes blowing, flowers blooming, berries on briars, robins in hedges" (*The Riverbank Field*, 20). Recalling his recent translation of "L'aquilone," Heaney describes the "piece of string that stretches from Italy to Ireland, from Urbino to Ulster," a natal sense of connection which has led him to undertake this volume-length engagement with Pascoli's verse. I underline Heaney's insistence on his biological entitlement as a translator of Pascoli's home ground because this identification informs his portrayal of the natural environment in *The Last Walk*. While Heaney's versions of these Italian bucolic poems evince a twenty-first-century awareness of nature's vulnerability and finitude (hence, "environmentalist"), they are also home grown from the Irish poet's first-hand experience, memory, and self-reflexive imagination ("ecophenomenological").

At the same time, Heaney is attracted to the Italian madrigal sequence for its "formal achievement" in rendering these rural scenes "in lovely miniature, as if they were a book of hours." In his translation, he preserves the tight-knit formal structure of "L'ultima passeggiata." Heaney's line endings alternate between full and near-rhymes, and he sometimes varies the length of individual lines, but he always preserves the *volta*, marking a shift of perspective from

²⁷ See Heaney, "On Home Ground," 21ff.

²⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), 44.

²⁹ Heaney, *The Riverbank Field*, 21.

the sestet to the final quatrain. As Federica Massia has convincingly shown in a comparative analysis of Pascoli and Heaney's formal techniques, Heaney also mirrors Pascoli's frequent use of enclosing grammatical structures and interweaving chains of internal rhyme.³⁰ For example, the first poem, "Arano" ["Ploughing"] begins:

Al campo, dove roggio nel filare
qualche pampano brilla, e dalle fratte
sembra la nebbia mattinal fumare,
arano.³¹

[In the field, where there's a reddish look
And shine off the trained vines, where from hedgerows
Morning mist appears to rise like smoke,
They are ploughing.]³²

In this first tercet, two dependent clauses are enclosed by "Al campo" and the main verb, "arano," beginning the next tercet. In place of Pascoli's end-rhyme "filare" and "fumare," Heaney chooses a near-rhyme, "look" and "smoke." But his "reddish look" for "roggio" also supports the dominance of the visual field in the first tercet, which then gives way to aural field in the second. Pascoli's chain of internal rhyme in "sembra la nebbia mattinal fumare" finds an answerable chain in the "m"s, "r"s and "s"s of "Morning mist appears to rise like smoke." If Heaney's alliteration is less intricate than the Italian internal rhyme, his interpretation of "fumare" as "appears to rise" heightens the oneiric quality of the scene, with its suspended action (the delay of the main verb, "are ploughing"), its layers of gleaming light, and in Heaney's case, its additional echo of Wordsworth's memorius "Tintern Abbey," and Keats's "To Autumn," one of Heaney's favourite poems.³³

A medieval book of hours, to which Heaney compares Pascoli's poetic sequence, typically contains a set of daily, devotional practices for personal use. In one sense, it is a formal, linguistic equivalent of a rural environment that is being regularly and rhythmically worked by the plough, and other instruments of human and animal labor. Instead of "little stimulants for nostalgia," Pascoli's miniature scenes are "tautly constructed artifacts," as Heaney notes with admiration.³⁴ So too are the ploughed fields and mill houses in which human figures are depicted in regular, patterned interaction with the natural environment. From the opening of the sequence,

³⁰ Massia, "The Last Walk," 312–14 *et passim*.

³¹ All citations of "L'Ultima passeggiata" are taken from Giovanni Pascoli, *Myricae. Tutte le poesie di Giovanni Pascoli* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1935), 1:56–64 (here, 56, ll. 1–3). All further in-text parenthetical citations include page numbers followed by line numbers.

³² Citations of Heaney's *The Last Walk* are taken from Seamus Heaney, *The Last Walk* (Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2013). Heaney's line numbers correspond to Pascoli's, and The Gallery Press edition is unpaginated, so where both versions are cited together, no further line or page numbers will be given for Heaney's translations.

³³ Cf. Keats, 'And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue' (*The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 'To Autumn', l. 26, 360, and Wordsworth:

Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms, Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! ("Tintern Abbey," ll. 14–18).

³⁴ Heaney, "On Home Ground," 21.

the “turned” shape of a poem is associated with the rhythmic labor of ploughing a field with oxen. Thus “Arano” continues in the second tercet:

arano: a lente grida, uno le lente
vacche spinge; altri semina; un ribatte
le porche con sua marra paziente; (56: 4–6)

[They are ploughing. One drives slow oxen with a slow
Ploughman’s word; one sows; one grubs the furrows
Patiently with his hoe.]

Pascoli’s tercet moves slowly in short phrases, with the heavy punctuation and repetition of “lente” slowing the line down in imitation of the slow movement of the plough. Heaney also repeats the “slow,” and draws it out still further in the long-vowel rhyme of “sows.” The far-off shout of Pascoli’s “grida” is muted further in Heaney’s grave and stately phrase with its endline turn: “a slow / Ploughman’s word.” Pascoli’s indefinite pronouns (“uno, altri, un”) underline the poem’s sense of distance from these labouring figures, which is accentuated in Heaney’s repetition of the depersonalised “one.” And the silence trailing the “hoe” in the sixth line illustrates how, in Heaney’s translation, these distant figures are turning up time, as well as turning over the earth.³⁵

Elsewhere Heaney points out how in English we get “verse” from the Latin *versus*, meaning a line of poetry but also “the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another.”³⁶ Pascoli’s sequence calls attention to this when the second poem, “Di lassù” [“From Above”] doubles back on the thematic content of the first, returning to a similar ploughing scene but in the second instance, from the perspective of a skylark that will view it “from above,” as the title indicates. Heaney’s translation ensures that we are returning to the *same* scene since in the second poem, his oxen are still in harness, “criss-cross[ing] the field” whereas Pascoli’s beasts were “sparsi,” scattered, and freely grazing. The return to the same field in Heaney’s version invites us to recognise that the poet is consciously working over old ground, specifically the bucolic sonnets featuring in his earlier volume, *Field Work* (1979).³⁷

Field Work is possibly Heaney’s most georgic-themed volume, and the first to contain a sequence of “songs of the earth”: the “Glanmore sonnets,” so named after the cottage in which he wrote them. That sequence also opened with two poems about ploughing, and the second also self-consciously doubled back to turn over the matter of the first. Thus the second sonnet begins: “Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground,” (29) where the midline caesura cuts a furrow into the line, like a ploughshare. These earlier poems deliberately integrate the writing of poetry with the cultivation of land, so that “the good life” becomes a simple act of “cross[ing] a field” and art, “a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / Of ploughs” (28). As Daniel Tobin writes, Heaney’s Glanmore sonnets are “little fields where art and nature inform each other [...] just as

³⁵ In his “Introduction” to Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Odyssey*, Heaney quotes Russian poet Osip Mandelstam: “poetry is a plough which turns up time” (Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, intro. Seamus Heaney [London: Everyman Library, 1992], xvii: http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/classics/intro/odyssey_homer.pdf) (accessed September 15, 2018).

³⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Makings of a Music: Reflections on the Poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 1978), 5.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979).

the world becomes transfigured through its connection with art, so art itself becomes fully empowered through its connection with the earth.”³⁸ The echoes of this earlier sonnet sequence recur throughout Heaney’s *The Last Walk*. For example, the sparrow and robin in “Ploughing” recall the pair of birds in the third Glanmore sonnet; “Iron Road” has the same the soundwaves echoing off a railway line in the fourth Glanmore sonnet; and the enigmatic face of “That Day” recalls the face of his wife that Heaney glimpses through a half-obscured window in the ninth Glanmore sonnet. The difference is that while in the Glanmore sonnets, the poet was writing of his daily, lived experience in the Irish countryside, in *The Last Walk* the poet is summoning up familiar images from the past, as well as from another poet’s language and landscape.

Both Pascoli and Heaney succeed in creating poetic cadences that mirror the rhythms and sounds of rural life. Onomatopoeia and internal rhyme, for example, help convey the furious, punctuated churning of a mill-wheel: “Acqua, rimbomba; dondala, cassetta” [“Water, race and roar. Shake, mill-wheel and pour”].³⁹ But neither poet is simply recreating a physical sensation or documenting an immediate experience of the natural environment. Rather, I would say, a memory of this experience is being drawn up through time and reimagined, in resistance to some present impediment or absence. The imperatives in the line just quoted indicate that this poetry is conjuring rather than straightforwardly transcribing present experience of the home ground. Another indication, in Heaney’s translation, is the careful crisscrossing of verb tenses, from past to present, from present to future, and most insistently, from continuous tenses into the simple, “eternal” present tense of lyric. Thus, in the first poem, “they are ploughing” shifts to “One drives”; and in the fourth, “A plough is standing” resolves to “From the mill-pond comes.”

The fourth poem, “Lavandare” [“Washerwomen”] provides an example of some of Pascoli’s, and Heaney’s, most skillful “georgic singing,” that is, shaping poetic rhythm and rhyme out of the sound patterns of rural labor. At the same time, this poem illustrates how such georgic song aims at more than realistic imitation; it conjures material presence out of an experience of absence and loss. Pascoli begins with a dreamlike image of a plough, this time half veiled in mist:

Nel campo mezzo grigio e mezzo nero
resta un aratro senza buoi, che pare
dimenticato, tra il vapor leggero. (57: 1–3)

[Out in a field half-fallow and half-furrowed,
A plough is standing, no oxen-team in sight,
Forgotten looking, half-hid in a mist-cloud.]

The uncertain light recalls the morning mist in the first two poems, and Heaney’s translation of “campo mezzo grigio e mezzo nero” as “a field half-fallow and half-furrowed” foregoes Pascoli’s rich color scheme in order to repeat more precisely the image of the furrow from the opening poems. In Pascoli’s tercet, the enjambment between second and third lines emphasizes the word “dimenticato” (in Heaney’s translation, “forgotten looking”), and introduces the poem’s theme of abandonment. As Pascoli’s commentators suggest, this image of the abandoned plough calls attention to the historic reality that Italian farms were losing their labor force to mass

³⁸ Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 156.

³⁹ “Già dalla mattina” [“Since Early Morning”], 60, l. 1.

emigration in the late-nineteenth century.⁴⁰ The poem circles back to this image in the last quatrain.

But in the meantime, as if in compensation for this absence in the visual field, the *sounds* of rural labor fill the second tercet:

E cadenzato dalla gora viene
lo sciabordare delle lavandare
con tonfi spessi e lunghe cantilene: (57: 4–6)

[From the mill-pond comes the wet slapping and surge
And rhythmic rinsings of the washerwomen,
Each splish-splash keeping time with their sing-song dirge.]

Pascoli's internal rhyme links the environmental sound of the mill pond's "cadenzato" with the women's singing, "cantilene," just as the beat of the song keeps time with the rhythmic splashing of water. Heaney's translation introduces a thoroughly Pascolian onomatopoeia, "splish-splash," which is then mirrored in the double-beat and internal rhyme of "sing-song." With, I think, an echo of Joyce's washerwomen in *Finnegans Wake*, Heaney departs from Pascoli's elegiac mood to take frank delight in these child-like, rhyming compounds. Describing their "lunghe cantilene" as a "dirge," which becomes comic when incongruously combined with "sing-song," Heaney deliberately make light of the sad content of the song. He draws our attention instead to the pleasurable harmonizing of human lyric with environmental sound.

The final quatrain then delivers the words of the song itself, which surprisingly include the image of the abandoned plough, described in the opening tercet:

*Il vento soffia e nevicata la frasca,
e tu non torni ancora al tuo paese!
quando partisti, come son rimasta!
come l'aratro in mezzo alla maggese.* (58: 7–10; italics in original)

[*The wind is blowing, the bush is snowing,
You've not come back to your native heath:
When you went, you left me sorrowing
Like a plough left out in a fallow field.*]

The phrase "aratro in mezzo alla maggese" would apparently have been familiar to Pascoli's listeners, as a line taken from a well-known song ("The Last Walk," 324). But it is still strange to find the young women identifying with the plough, which was traditionally worked by men, those very laborers who were leaving the Romagnan farms in this period. In addition, the repetition of the image from the poem's opening line creates a *mise-en-abyme* between two levels of narrative: the field where the plough is standing and the women are singing, and the hypodiegetic narrative of the song, where a young woman complains of being left by her husband or lover. As the poem shifts from visual to aural fields, from a description of a plough to a song about one, we are reminded of how the poem constitutes a performance rather than a

⁴⁰ See Massia, "The Last Walk," 324.

mimetic representation of rural life. And in this case, the communal performance of a popular lament fills in for, provides redress to, a material absence in the actual, farming community.

Once again, the “beloved landscape” is not merely being described, but called up from memory and reconfigured in the imagination. The visionary quality of the entire sequence is confirmed in the final poem, “O vano sogno” [“O Vain Dream!”], when the poet imagines accompanying his beloved upstairs at nightfall, only to remind himself that he is actually alone. Whether it is only the beloved’s presence that is being repudiated in this awakening to consciousness, or whether the entire day’s “passeggiata” in the country has been imaginary, remains ambiguous in both Italian and English texts.

Either way, even if it cannot transcend his present loss, the poet returns to versifying. The final lines discover him at his desk, singing in his own dialect (“cantare in mio latino”), to the accompaniment of a blackbird and snipe outside. Heaney translates “mio latino” as “my native tongue,” which puns on Pascoli’s closing lines in several ways. Firstly, it suggests not only that the poet within the sequence is getting back to writing, after his momentary loss of confidence, but also that Heaney is getting back to writing poetry in English, after translating Pascoli. And moreover, accompanied by “the blackbird’s warbling” he is returning to his own poetic idiom and natural symbols, since the blackbird is strongly associated with Irish nature poetry and above all with Seamus Heaney, whose poems featuring this bird are amongst his most well-known and loved in Ireland. The dialogue with Pascoli does not end there, though, since in “The Blackbird of Glanmore,” the flight of a blackbird makes Heaney think of his brother Christopher, the “little stillness dancer” who had been killed in an accident at four years old.⁴¹ As a poetic alter-ego, the blackbird not only returns Heaney to his native Irish verse, it also binds him anew to Pascoli, author of the child elegy, “L’aquilone.” A memory of this loss resonates in Heaney’s translation of the final poem. But within the poem, the poet—who refers to himself as such, using the first-person voice, only here in the sequence—seeks redress for loss in continuing to write.

We can appreciate the writing of bucolic poetry as a forceful act of imagination, rather than instances of descriptive realism or literary convention, if we recall once again Heaney’s description of Pascoli’s poems not as “little stimulants for nostalgia” but “tautly constructed artefacts.”⁴² The sense of original artifice is especially evident in the surprising twists at the end of Pascoli’s poems, as Heaney notes admiringly. In the final quatrain, he points out, Pascoli typically introduces “a swerve, a sudden shift of focus, a counter-intuitive exit line or lines,” and this unexpected swerve, Heaney suggests, “gives rise to a sudden sense of liberation” in the reader. Comparing Pascoli’s condensed economy of form to the modernist Imagist poets, he recalls Ezra Pound’s dictum that “the natural object is always the adequate symbol.”⁴³ In Heaney’s critical writing, the notion of poetry’s “adequacy” generally refers to its capacity to exceed and answer back to reality, as I will discuss below.⁴⁴ He finds Pascoli’s natural symbols, such as the image of ploughing oxen, “adequate” in the sense that they can be drawn up from memory and forwarded in the mind, in unforeseen directions.

Heaney’s translations are thus exceptionally responsive to the way Pascoli switches disconcertingly from panoramic shots to close-ups, from visual to aural fields, and from human

⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 75.

⁴² Heaney, “On Home Ground,” 21.

⁴³ Heaney quotes from Ezra Pound’s 1912 letter, “it is in the laconic speech of the Imagistes [...] Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won’t permit examination. It’s straight talk” (Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941*, ed. D.D. Paige [New York: New Directions, 1971], 11).

⁴⁴ See also John Dennison, *Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

to animal focalizers. In “Arano” [“Ploughing”], for example, while Pascoli observes the laboring figures at a neutral distance in the first six lines, in the final quatrain he suddenly zooms in for an intimate, avian perspective on the scene:

ché il passero saputo in cor già gode,
e il tutto spia dai rami irti del moro;
e il pettirosso: nelle siepi s’ode
il suo sottil tintinno come d’oro. (56: 7–10)

[Alert to this, the sparrow rejoices,
Spying all from the prickly mulberry tree;
And the robin—you can hear him from the hedges,
His notes like gold coins jingled for pure glee.]

Pascoli leaves us to imagine why the sparrow is rejoicing or in what way he is “saputo,” although Heaney’s translation, “alert to this,” suggests the bird is expecting to find food in the freshly ploughed earth. But the robin causes a particular jolt of surprise, not because he would be out of place in such a landscape, but because the bird fails to appear in the line just when we are led to expect it: the grammar breaks down, and the quatrain shifts from visual to aural field. In their translation, Brown, Jackson, and Thomas render “s’ode” as “he hears his own fine voice,” which does serve to underline the robin’s self-contained autonomy in the poem.⁴⁵ But a literal translation of the reflexive verb, “one hears” (or Heaney’s “you can hear”), better captures the disorienting effect of the Italian ending, as the focalization shifts once more, from avian to human listener. Pascoli’s final line chimes beautifully with internal rhymes (“s”s, “t”s and short “i”s), which Heaney imitates with an equally intricate aural weave (“notes like gold coins jingled for pure glee”). Unlike Pascoli’s “sottil tintinno,” Heaney’s “gl”s sound nothing like real robin song, but ornithological accuracy is not really what is at stake here. This last line takes the “natural symbol” of the robin and casts him into purely inventive territory, a move underlined by Heaney’s additional description of his singing “for pure glee.” The poet instructs someone (himself or a reader) to hear the robin’s song as if it is the voice of “pure” lyric, singing for its own pleasure.

Meanwhile, it is worth emphasizing that while Heaney greatly admires the musical cadence, the formal patterning of sound, in Pascoli’s work, he is equally interested in the way the Italian poems break the frame and disorient the reader. In medieval prosody, “cadence” referred to “the fixed patterning of [...] the last few syllables of a phrase or clause” and the “prefinal patterning in metrical verse.”⁴⁶ But in modern usage, “cadence” is also the term used to describe the rhythms of non-metrical verse, of verse that has “fallen away” from fixed meter. By extension, we might understand Heaney’s admiration for Pascoli’s cadences as extending in two different directions: on one hand, he delights in Pascoli’s ordering of sound and image into closed, harmonious worlds; on the other, he is stimulated and challenged by Pascoli’s enigmatic swerves of sound and disorienting shifts of perspective. The “beloved landscape” is not only named, as a safely sealed off treasure chest, it is also opened up for probing and self-questioning.

⁴⁵ Pascoli, *Last Voyage*, 41. Thanks to Niccolò Scaffai for his help in interpreting this line.

⁴⁶ Roland Greene, ed., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton, 2012), 173.

Indeed, the more time one spends immersed in this dream-like landscape, the stranger it becomes. Amid the bright, clear sounds of ploughing, washing, baking, carting, and so on, one notices more haunting, environmental sounds that traverse distances, dissolving the edges of these bucolic scenes, whether the sounds are of approaching trains (VI: “What are these growls and rumblings now that rise / To a crescendo”; ll. 7–8), electric wires (VI: “A querulous immense harp swept by wind”; l. 10) or distant bells (VII: “A steady tremulous ringing haunts the air”; “the bells boom hollow waves of sound”; ll. 2,4). In “In a Huddle,” the clanging of a passing train induces a group of gossiping women to interrupt their talk and stare after the train in silence: “Their gaze is far away and meditative” (Heaney’s rendering of Pascoli’s more opaque “occhi indifferenti”; XII, l. 10). Still more disturbing are the unanswered questions addressed to a range of potential listeners ranging from animate to inanimate (including a loaf of bread!). As he receives no reply, the questions continue to reverberate like the recurrent church bells. Thus, in “Two Boys,” he asks “is the big elm listening now?” (V, l.9) in “She Calls You,” “your ageing parents (do you hear?)” (XV, l. 1); and in “Carter,” “What did the howling north wind have to tell / As it echoed through the caves and the ravines?” (XI, ll. 4–5). In such passages, we become aware of the comings and goings of environmental sounds, and of the silences in between. The relation between the human subject (the poet, or the figure in the poem) and the environment becomes vertiginous, because the sounds we are straining to hear are constantly in flux, always emerging or dying away.⁴⁷ Not only is nature here fully mortal and subject to time, it is also fragmented and alienated from the human (the big elm is not listening, and the howling wind is not signifying in language). Thus, the beloved landscape, to which Heaney returns through Pascoli, is far from being an untroubled, timeless idyll.

Many of the poems interweave the sounds and images of rural life into formally intricate patterns, as we have seen above. But others heap together enigmatic, fragmentary images, in the manner of Japanese haiku. For example, in the eighth poem, “Quel Giorno” [“That Day”], the poet begins to tell a ballad-like story about the former occupants of an empty house. He interrupts his past tense narration to ask dramatically, “What whispering the rose-red tower heard / That day” (ll. 4–5) but he receives no answer. There is an abrupt shift to lyric present simple tense, and the poem ends with a series of condensed, disjointed images:

Or nel silenzio del meriggio urtare
 là dentro odo una seggiola, una gonna
 frusciar d’un tratto: alla finestra appare
 curioso un gentil viso di donna. (60: 7–10)

[Now in the midday silence, what I hear
 Is a chair inside being knocked against;
 The rustle of a dress; and at the window there
 A woman’s face, beautiful and intense.]

The sounds and images are close-up and intimate but indeterminate, hinting at some hidden, tragic narrative. Pascoli’s obliquity may derive from feelings about his sister that he could not fully articulate.⁴⁸ Heaney’s translation, while lacking that emotional charge, renders the appearance of the face still more enigmatic by leaving out the verb, “appare.” After hearing the

⁴⁷ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ See Pascoli, *Giovanni Pascoli. Selected Poems*, 46ff. and Heaney, “On Home Ground,” 23.

knock of a chair, and rustle of a dress, one expects another sound and so, in Heaney's translation, one almost *hears* the woman's face appear. And when it does, the "beautiful and intense" face that Heaney pictures seems altogether different to Pascoli's "curioso" and "gentil viso." Heard momentarily in "the midday silence," these sounds and emotions seem both fragile and transitory. What Heaney draws from Pascoli's text here is a kind of melancholy that he associates elsewhere with the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* [the pathos of things]: a "melancholy arising from a deep empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifested in nature, human life or a work of art" or again, that "sense of the evanescence, of the transitoriness of things, of the stillness behind things into which they eventually pass."⁴⁹

A sense of nature's transience comes across in the poem above through the juxtaposition of minute and fleeting sounds. In "Carrettiere" ["Carter"], one of the last poems to be included in the sequence, what Pascoli conveys instead is the country laborer's melancholy alienation from nature, in spite of his familiarity with this "home ground." The alienation is dramatized in the disjunction between two different sets of music: on the one hand, the music the carter (or cart-driver) is thinking about in his own head, and on the other, the environmental music of a storm gathering ahead, which the carter fails to notice. The music of poem itself, though, creates an "arched and airy bridge" ("Carter": l. 3) between the laborer and the storm, which offsets the theme of alienation, particularly in Heaney's translation. Both poets associate the carter with a rhyming chain of hard consonants ("c"s and "t"s). Heaney also introduces the carter with an unusually regular iambic pentameter in the first line, but thereafter none of the line-endings in his sextet rhyme, so the figure of the carter is sonically isolated from the menacing landscape through which he rides:

O carrettiere che dai neri monti
 vieni tranquillo, e fosti nella notte
 sotto ardue rupi, sopra aerei ponti; (61: 1–3)

[O carter coming at your quiet pace
 From the dark mountains, trudging through the night
 Under beetling cliffs, on arched and airy bridges,]

In the second tercet, Pascoli uses parallel phrasing, "che mai [...] che muggia," to emphasize the build-up of the storm. But Heaney imitates the disruptive rhythm of the storm instead, with the second tercet swooping from an irregular five stressed beats per line down to three, and back up to five:

che mai diceva il querulo aquilone
 che muggia nelle forre e fra le grotte?
 Ma tu dormivi, sopra il tuo carbone. (61: 4–6)

[Whát did the hówling nórth wínd have to téll
 As it échoed through the cáves and the ravínes?
 But you were sleéping on tóp of your loád of chárcoal.] (my accents)

⁴⁹ See Heaney, "The Pathos of Things," in *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Irene De Angelis and Joseph Woods (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2000), 2–3; repr. *The Guardian*, Nov. 24 (2007): <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview21>> (accessed Sept. 15, 2018).

Pascoli concludes the poem with a quatrain that neatly separates into two thematic halves: the storm growing “a mano a mano” louder and more violent, and the carter lapsing deeper into an interior dream-world.

A mano a mano lungo lo stradale
venia fischiando un soffio di procella:
ma tu sognavi ch’era di Natale;
udivi i suoni d’una cennamella. (61: 7–10)

Sonically, however, the carter and the storm are interlinked, both by the DEDE end-rhymes and by internal alliteration. In translating the quatrain, Heaney exaggerates the sense of division by drawing on Anglo-Saxon meter, in which a line is typically split into two-beat pairs of alliterated phrases pairs. Even his diction here is etymologically Northern (“whistling,” Old English; “whirling,” Middle Low German; “skirling,” probably Scandinavian), rather than Romance-derived. Through the alliterative pairs, he conveys the energy of the storm and the carter’s obliviousness to it:

Thén grádually there gáthered on the róad
A stórm blást that came whistling and whírling,
But you were dreáming úp thére on your lóad
Of Christmastíme and the pípes skírling. (my accents)

Heaney also exaggerates the way the poem binds the two separate actants, carter and storm, together at the close. In the final quatrain, he adopts Pascoli’s alternative end-rhyme scheme, and the feminine end-rhyme (“whirling” and “skirling”) sets up a strong parallel between the interior and exterior music. In Pascoli’s poem, the human figure seems dwarfed by the giant earthly music surrounding him, and there is a touch of tragic irony in his ignorance. We never learn whether his sleepiness is also dangerous, or what becomes of him during the storm. In Heaney’s version, though, as we saw in “Washerwomen,” the jauntier rhythm provides more resistance to the poem’s melancholy content. The double beats of “stórm blást,” “úp thére,” and “pípes skírling” cause suspensions in the line that seem designed to keep the carter safely “up there” on his cart. The natural environment portrayed in this poem is alien and other to the solitary human figure, but in Heaney’s translation, he is both bound to its danger and protected from it by the music of the poem itself.

Heaney’s renderings of Pascoli’s tautly structured bucolic poems are thus as complex and varied as their originals. His exploration of their shared “beloved ground” leads him to discover extraordinary musical consonances between human labor and the natural environment. But exploration of the same territory leads him to find dissonance, alienation, and estrangement. What he seems to value most, and which he draws out in his translations of the Italian, is the capacity of Pascoli’s poetry to surprise the reader into a sense of newness, even while we are standing on familiar ground.

To decide whether Heaney’s *The Last Walk* qualifies as fully “environmentalist” according to the guidelines offered by Buell and Garrard and Lidström, it helps to have some awareness of the scope and trajectory of Heaney’s poetics in general. In support of their argument, Garrard and Lidström quote Heaney from a 2008 interview in which he declares that “environmental issues

have [...] changed the mind of poetry.”⁵⁰ What they skim over, however, is that Heaney is responding to a question about whether poetry can have an impact on environmental issues, and his answer is no. Reminding him of an earlier claim that “no lyric has ever stopped a tank,”⁵¹ Dennis O’Driscoll asks him, “can a poem stop an SUV?” Heaney’s reply to this is negative, as before.⁵² He goes on to invert the terms of the question: “what *has* happened, however, is that environmental issues have to a large extent changed the mind of poetry.” Both moves—the initial refusal of ethical obligation, followed by the qualified assent to it—are entirely characteristic of Heaney’s critical thinking about the ends, or good, of poetry.

Over the span of three collections of prose essays, Heaney conducts a debate with himself over two opposing ends of lyric poetry: on the one hand, its ethical obligation to stand for a human community or tribe (and to stand up for its politics, language, faith, and ways of life, which in Heaney’s case would be rural, Catholic, Republican, and Northern Irish), and, on the other hand, its obligation to itself to pursue its own creative impulses, to exercise artistic freedom unhindered by any pious (his word) allegiance to community or cause. In defence of this second position, Heaney asserts, in different ways and on numerous occasions, that “the first good of poetry is that it is its own reward. It gives immediate pleasure.”⁵³ In this other *telos* of poetry, “there is no hint of ethical obligation; it is more a matter of finding a course for the breakaway of innate capacity, a course where something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep ahead into its full potential,”⁵⁴ precisely the capacity he came to admire in Pascoli’s *madrigali*.

Heaney’s thinking shifts in emphasis from the aesthetic to the ethical, with *Preoccupations* (1980) the volume of essays most focussed on aesthetic freedom,⁵⁵ *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) most concerned with poetry’s ethical obligations, and the mid-career volume, *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), shifting uneasily between the two.⁵⁶ But nowhere does Heaney concede the point entirely to one or other side of his internal debate. At the same time, it is important to recognise that for Heaney, creative freedom is primary and essential to poetry, whereas the poet’s ethical obligations are typically a more distant and generalised set of tensions which affect him as a human being rather than specifically as an artist. Thus, it is quite typical of Heaney to describe his awareness of climate change as part of “the horizon of consciousness within which poet and audience operate.”⁵⁷ This awareness is no less important for occurring to him second. But his primary, “religious” bond (from *religare*, to bind or tie) is to the practice of poetry.⁵⁸ For Heaney, “the movement is from delight to wisdom, and not vice versa.”⁵⁹

But how would an aesthetic delight in poetic sound and form move us to wisdom? Not in the same way and not always for everyone, of course. Heaney would probably have agreed with Marcel Proust’s claim that “reading is on the threshold of the spiritual life; it can introduce us to

⁵⁰ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 407.

⁵¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1989), 107.

⁵² O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 407.

⁵³ Seamus Heaney and Brigid Collins, *Room to Rhyme* (Dundee: University of Dundee, 2004), 5.

⁵⁴ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, 15.

⁵⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980).

⁵⁶ For an analysis of Heaney’s prose, see Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994); Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1998); Michael Cavanagh, *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009); and Eugene O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney as Aesthetic Thinker: A Study of the Prose* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 407.

⁵⁸ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 133, 217.

⁵⁹ Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 5.

it: it does not constitute it.”⁶⁰ But somewhere between delight and wisdom, Heaney offers a strong view of poetry as being healthful and life-enhancing for the human as biological organism. In a lecture delivered to the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, he stakes the claim that poetry contributes to “the development of international health,” alongside “peacemakers, healers, researchers into new ways of combating disease, campaigners against war and pestilence.”⁶¹ No less than good medicine, he argues, poetry produces in its listeners “a sensation of rightness, a sensation you might characterize by saying, ‘it did me good to hear it’” (7). Its “goodness” comes from being a wholly made thing which contributes to a sense of psychic wholeness: “The virtue of poetry, of art in general, resides in the fact that it is first and foremost a whole thing, a hale thing, a thing formally and feelingly sound, right within itself, a thing to which the ultimate response—if not always the immediate response—is ‘yes’” (8). For Heaney, the haleness of poetry derives primarily from its sound structure, and thus rhyming verse with a strong rhythmic cadence has immediate benefits. Listening to, or even better, reciting metrical, rhyming poetry from memory produces “a sense of rightness,” and “for the duration of the poem, our sense of the world is in good order” (12). Similarly, in his Nobel lecture, Heaney speaks of the “adequacy which is specific to lyric poetry,” which has “to do with the energy released by linguistic fission and fusion, with the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza [...] It seek[s] repose in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds.”⁶² When Heaney praises Pascoli’s *madrigali* as “tautly constructed artifacts,”⁶³ then, he means too that they can induce a “sense of rightness” and psychic health in the reader.

In Heaney’s poetics, then, aesthetic delight in lyric’s “musically satisfying order of sounds” extends into a sense of patterned sound being psychically “good for us” as human beings. It might be argued that any ecophenomenological poet would share this opinion, but Heaney’s next step is habitually to ask how poetry can be directed to the common good. Hence the rejoinder following the note of caution in this statement: “in one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited.”⁶⁴ From a position of carefully guarded outside-ness, poetry exerts its leverage or “redress” to adverse social, political, and environmental conditions.⁶⁵ Being “equal to” these conditions, as well as or beyond being “true to” them, entails finding a point of maximum leverage from which poetry can heave an alternative, imaginary vision of reality into view. While in his Nobel lecture, he was thinking principally of the sectarian violence dividing Northern Ireland, the point holds good for his environmental poetry as well. Poetry engages in the dreamwork of loosening reality’s hold on us;

⁶⁰ Marcel Proust, “Days of Reading,” in *Essays on Language and Literature*, tr. E.H.W. Meyerstein, ed. J.L. Hevesi (London: Allan Wingate, 1947), 52–55.

⁶¹ Seamus Heaney, “The Whole Thing: On the Good of Poetry,” *The Recorder: Journal of the American Irish Historical Society* 15/1 (2002): 5. With thanks to Sebastian Knowles for sending me a copy of this article.

⁶² Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel lecture* (London: Faber, 1995):

<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>> (accessed September 15, 2018), para. 29, where he is thinking of Rilke’s line, ‘da schufst du ihnen Tempel im Gehör,’ translated by Mitchell as ‘you built a temple deep inside their hearing’. See *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1989), 226. For Heaney’s association of this line with the poetry and influence of W B Yeats, see Michael Cavanagh, ‘Tower and Boats: Yeats and Seamus Heaney’, *New Hibernia Review*, 4/3 (Autumn, 2000), 17–38, 22. Note the pronouns *you* and *their*: i.e., this is not only the poet’s subjective experience but his public vocation. For a discussion of rhythm and sound in lyric, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 132–85.

⁶³ Heaney, “On Home Ground,” 21.

⁶⁴ Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, 107.

⁶⁵ Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 15.

it articulates and enacts the claim that “whatever is given // Can always be reimagined.”⁶⁶ Pastoral poetry, comprehending the bucolic poetry defined above, is one of literature’s means of “getting at reality,” even if it may seem to be governed heavily by convention. Properly understood, Heaney has argued, pastoral operates at an angle to reality, teasing out complexities, multiple perspectives, and alternatives to the way things seem ineluctably to be.⁶⁷ Such poetry, among which we should include *The Last Walk* as one of Heaney’s final examples, is efficacious as an imaginative force when applied to material reality obliquely, subterraneously, analeptically, prophetically, and so on, rather than directly.

So how might Heaney’s translations of Pascoli’s bucolic sequence help to move poet and reader from delight to wisdom on the subject of human relations to the natural world in the twenty-first century? Whatever their intended effect on a reader, they could hardly be mistaken for poems about actual, environmental problems. They are translations in more than the primary sense of carrying texts over from one language to another. They also carry over a reverie of rural life (distanced in place and time) that may happily resonate with the reader’s own memory and imagination. In a lecture published as “Towers, Trees and Terrors: A Reverie in Urbino,” Heaney muses on the importance that Italy’s literature has had on his own dream life, and he begins with a discussion of how the image of a tower in Urbino entered the consciousness of W. B. Yeats, exerting a life-changing effect on his poetry, and Yeats’s sense of what poetry was for.⁶⁸ In a similar way, Heaney “finds himself at home with the psychic content of the poetry” of Dante and Virgil (“Towers, Trees, Terrors,” 150). In the years immediately following this lecture, delivered in Urbino, Heaney immersed himself in a dream version of Pascoli’s countryside, overlaid with memories of his own home place in County Derry. His translations of Pascoli are thus anchored in “that thrilling moment when the place of writing shifts its locus into psychic space.”⁶⁹

Entering the “psychic space” of “L’ultima passeggiata” at the end of his life, Heaney recalls his origins in Derry, as we have said; in doing so, he is finding the means to begin again, as a lyric poet. As suggested by a passage from T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” which Heaney quotes on numerous occasions, “to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from.”⁷⁰ From 2007 onwards, Heaney appears to be consciously making an “end,” developing a “late style” which is constituted on a return to his earliest home ground.⁷¹ In some of his latest writing, *The Riverbank Field* and the two translations, *Aeneid Book VI* and *The Last Walk*, Heaney comes at the idea of home ground from starting points in Italy. With Virgil, he arrives at Mossbawn via Mantua,⁷² and with Pascoli, he comes to Ulster via Urbino. He conjures images of Northern Irish rural life, but *via the negativa*—the linguistically, temporally, and geographically

⁶⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), 29.

⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Eclogues ‘In Extremis’: On the Staying Power of Pastoral,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History Literature* 103C/1 (2003): 1–12, 4.

⁶⁸ Seamus Heaney, “Towers, Trees, Terrors: A Reverie in Urbino” [Università di Urbino, 2001] rpt. in “Seamus Heaney poeta dotto,” ed. Gabriella Morisco, special issue, *In forma di parole* 23/2 (April–June 2007): 145–56, 146–48.

⁶⁹ Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 68.

⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’ V, ll. 2–3, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 179.

⁷¹ For Edward Said, “late style” typically includes “a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against...*” (original italics; *On Late Style* [New York: Random House, 2006], 7).

⁷² See Seamus Heaney, “Mossbawn via Mantua,” in *Ireland in/ and Europe: Cross-Currents and Exchanges*, ed. Werner Huber, Sandra Mayer, and Julia Novak. *Irish Studies in Europe* 4 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012), 19–28.

distanced medium of translation. For those familiar with Heaney's earlier writing, there are unmistakable echoes of Heaney's own boyhood in Ireland, such as learning to plough with his father. But these memories exert an emotional pressure on the poetry subterraneously, so that Heaney arrives at the home ground "as from behind a veil of forgetfulness" ["dietro un vel d'oblio," 59, l.3]. At their best, Heaney's translations of Pascoli are uncannily powerful precisely because they combine a sense of intimate familiarity and meditative distance. They demonstrate how, in Heaney's words, "we go to poetry, we go to literature in general, to be forwarded within ourselves. The best it can do is give us an experience that is like foreknowledge of certain things which we already seem to be remembering."⁷³

The sense of delight leading to wisdom in Heaney's Pascoli translations, I would argue, stems from an immersion in the poetic rendering of human life whose pace and rhythm is shaped by, and in response to, rhythms in the natural environment. As we have noted, Heaney appreciates the formally patterned, visual, and aural structures of "L'ultima passeggiata," those musically satisfying forms which, while we are immersed in them, help restore a sense of psychic "haleness" in ourselves as biological creatures. However, he also appreciates Pascoli's enigmatic images, unresolved rhyme schemes, and subterranean emotional drives, all of which disrupt the sense of musically ordered wholeness. But these disruptions in poetic form might also be understood as sonic and visual analogies to our human experience of the natural environment as alien, other, threatening and unknowable. Poetic form helps us to balance, to hold in tension, a set of opposing relations to nature, on the one hand, as a *nostos*, or homecoming, and on the other, as a venture into the unbounded and unknown. It is in this complex figuration of the relation between human consciousness and natural ground, I think, that Heaney's translations of Pascoli may be said to have made a distinctive and significant contribution to contemporary environmental writing.

For Heaney, Pascoli's "L'ultima passeggiata" conveys the sense of human relation to nature that is both a homecoming, and a setting forth into alien otherness. The labor of translation, I would suggest, involves Heaney in seeking out elements in Pascoli's poetry that strike his ear as right, hale, and "homely"; at the same time, he discovers and furthers the disquieting ambiguities and unresolved chords in the Italian poetry's music. This double venture, into original and unknown language and ground, constitutes the good of poetry as a force that, as Heaney claims, can "forward us within ourselves," easing us toward the sense of an ending that is also the transition to a beginning.⁷⁴ If in our deepest psychic spaces, poetry can turn ends into beginnings, then it is ultimately a force on the side of life. And when it comes to "our care in a green age, in an age that's conscious of the ravages that have been done to the planet," as Heaney puts it, we should credit poetry for its capacity to articulate, and forward in its readers, an "utter reverence for life itself."⁷⁵

⁷³ Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 159.

⁷⁴ Compare Heaney's claim that "The great mythical stories of the afterworld are stories which stay with you and which ease you towards the end, towards a destination and a transition" (*Aeneid Book VI*, back cover). See also Andrew Auge's excellent article, "Surviving Death in Heaney's *Human Chain*," in *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 29–48, esp. 36.

⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, "A Soul on the Washing Line," *The Economist*, June 1991, repr. September 5, 2013, 4.