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### **The Mary Renault Essay Competition 2022**

Classical Reception Essay competition: Discussion on the reception of Greek and Latin literature in Plato and Seamus Heaney.

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## Introduction

Louis Mac Niece and Harold Bloom represent two of the viewpoints on the reception of Classics into 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. In 1938, Mac Niece wrote in *Autumn Journal*,

'The Glory that was Greece: put it in a syllabus, grade it  
Page by page  
To train the mind or even to point a moral  
For the present age:  
Models of logic and lucidity, dignity, sanity,  
The golden mean between opposing ills  
Though there were exceptions of course but only exceptions –  
The bloody Bacchanals on the Thracian hills.  
So the humanist in his room with Jacobean panels  
...  
Chops the Ancient World to turn a sermon  
To the greater glory of God.  
But I can do nothing so useful or so simple;  
These dead are dead  
...  
And how one can imagine oneself among them  
I do not know;  
It was all so unimaginably different  
And all so long ago.'<sup>1</sup>

Harold Bloom noted succinctly that 'everyone who now reads and writes in the West, of whatever racial background, sex or ideological camp, is still a son or daughter of Homer.'<sup>2</sup> Such apparently diverse views are my starting point for asking what is classics and what is classical reception? I define Classics as knowledge relating to the Classical Greece and the Roman world, which has value in a normative sense. The reception of classics for me is the merging of the intellectual analysis, synthesis, experience and evaluation into a response by the recipient of the time. I have limited the scope of the reception to literary genres and texts in this essay.

Firstly I am considering reception by two authors: Plato's reception of tragedy, comedy and satyr elements to create a new genre, his dialogues, being the inter-disciplinary fusion of such elements encompassing dramatic techniques<sup>3</sup>; Seamus Heaney's reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* VI, in his poem, *Route 110*.

## Plato's dialogues

The interaction between various theatrical genres set the basis for Plato to create a further genre. Plato embraced tragedy and recast the mythical past to facilitate the

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<sup>1</sup> MacNiece, L. (1939). *Autumn Journal*, Faber & Faber.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, Harold. "The Dialectics of Literary Tradition." *Boundary 2* 2, no. 3 (1974): 532.

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Laertios maintains that Plato brought the prose dialogue to perfection notwithstanding they were literary precursors to Plato.

audience confronting their limitations of existence, power of intellect, passions and more public topics such as the civil order and interactions between the human and the divine.

Plato's dialogues recount stories of the recent past and wrestle with issues through exploiting tragic irony to facilitate catharsis. To take an example, the *Phaedo* is interpreted as a tragedy depicting a hero's life and death, set in the last hours of Socrates' life.<sup>4</sup> The discussion of the immortality of the soul in the context of his execution is designed to elucidate an outcome. The outcome will show whether Socrates was correct to lead his life in the manner chosen that led to his death or whether his beliefs were unfounded. This eschatological myth and arguments which focus on death and the soul could be construed as a response to traditional mythology, which constitutes the backbone of epic and tragedy. Plato's use of Socrates' own words, strong emotional forces and the lament of the disciples prove that Plato intended a work comparable to a tragedy.

While the dialogues borrow their themes and drama from tragedy, their structures, techniques and motifs are suggestive of comedy. The language and interactions of the characters are full of colloquialisms, use of irony, ridicule, jokes while laughter is a standard feature. For example, the *Protagoras* dialogue can be compared to comic theatre with Hippocrates rushing to Socrates' house, an angry door keeper, the tableaux of three sophists and Socrates' cancelled departure.<sup>5</sup>

To the tragic and comic elements, Plato inserts components from the satyr plays. In satyr drama, characters are not part of the polis as it operates in a private place.<sup>6</sup> Through the use of features of the satyr plays Plato creates a confluence of the dialogic and the satiric evidenced in the character of Socrates.

Through the writing of the *Symposium* depicting Socrates as the central character,<sup>7</sup> I believe that Plato was establishing his own form of drama as a legitimate successor to the theatre. It was intended for the general public as well as for members of the Academy. As the Academy had been an established institution for many years, Plato is thus able to position himself as a public and accepted voice of the Academy. The topic of the *Symposium*, the dramatic setting, the rich characterisation and the variety of philosophies promoted in the various speeches suggest that the broadest possible audience capable of appreciating the dialogue was being addressed. His use of standard themes from Socratic literature such as the Socrates' liaisons and the use of Diotima are crafted into this Platonic creation. He also incorporates features such as mythology, encomia (praise) pointing to an inter-disciplinary approach to genres in his work.

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<sup>4</sup> Plato (1966) [1925], *Plato in Twelve Volumes*. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA & London, UK: Harvard University Press & William Heinemann Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, & Jowlett, B. (1990). *Protagoras*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, Rowe, C. J.(1998), *Symposium*: Aris & Phillips, lines 215 a5 to b4.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, Rowe, C. J.(1998), *Symposium*.

The Symposium is an embodiment of all three genres of theatre. Satyr is evident with reference to the primeval state of affairs described in lines 189c to 193d. This recalls a world inhabited by satyrs which Alcibiades refers to in line 221d5. Subsequently Socrates mediates this position in lines 222d5 with the symposiasts. Comedy is supported by a relaxed atmosphere, 'komos' (revel) of drink, sex and flute players. Tragedy is foreshadowed if not actually present with Alcibiades soon to destroy his city, himself and his beloved Socrates. His actions resembling the primeval men of Aristophanes myth, whose arrogance brought upon them divine vengeance in lines 190c5 to 190e1.

With Socrates as the hero of the *Symposium*, Plato succeeds with a meta-theatrical nature of his drama by incorporating two related themes, the Dionysian ambiance and the rivalry between Socrates and the other members of the Symposium. Rivalry is referenced a number of times in lines 194a to 194c in general terms; in 175e between Agathon and Socrates and in line 212c between Aristophanes and Socrates. These two themes converge when Socrates is declared victor by Alcibiades in line 213e1 to e5. This exhibits the victory of dialogue over tragedy as expounded by Agathon in lines 194e to 197e and over comedy as per Aristophanes in lines 189e2 to 194e2. Through this structure, Plato produces the ultimate drama that unites and transcends the three genres in the dialogue format, which endures to contemporary times.

While Socrates is the hero, both Agathon and Alcibiades refer to his hubristic nature in lines 174e7 and 215b7 respectively. Plato does not shrink from the tensions created by the issue of having a hubristic victor who is not a communicator with the masses and 'almost never ...succeeds in winning over an unwilling interlocutor.'<sup>8</sup> The resolution is that Agathon remains crowned alongside Socrates with Plato repeatedly noting in lines 213e1 to 213e5 that Agathon 'seized some of the ribbons to crown Socrates'. This positions the theatre for the masses while creating the symposium and dialogues to co-exist for the 'few'. The 'few' are referenced by Socrates and Agathon in lines 194b5. Dialogues thus creates a new private space for the 'few' heightening the intellectual formality, as Socrates referenced in line 194b5, away from the public sphere of the theatre, a polis institution.

## Route 110

Seamus Heaney offers a view of poetry in his essay entitled 'Feelings into Words' as 'poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, a restoration of the culture to itself, poems as elements of continuity with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants.'

Heaney's poem, 'Route 110',<sup>9</sup> encompasses the past while simultaneously breaking with the past to create a poem based on his personal reflection of his past life and his future death. Through his reception of the Aeneid including its elegiac features he

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<sup>8</sup> Blondell, R. (2002). *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp126-127.

<sup>9</sup> Heaney, S. (2010). *Human Chain*, London: Faber and Faber, p.50.

accesses his imagination and feelings. He noted that, 'The motifs of *Aeneid VI* have been in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the dead father'.<sup>10</sup> It is through the comingling of Aeneid 6 verse that we experience the intimacy and immediacy of his poetry supported through his matching and shaping of the imagery of light, water and renewal as he penetrates the mythical world that facilitates his self-reflection.

The verse sequence begins with Heaney's consciousness of his literary birth through the purchase of *Aeneid VI*,

'In the slack marsupial vent/ / For a used copy of Aeneid VI/ Dustbreath  
bestirred in the cubicle mouth/ I inhaled as she slid my purchase Into a  
deckle-edged brown paper bag.'

The language of anticipation, 'marsupial...bestirred...cubicle...inhaled...slid' dominates the purchase, suggesting metaphorical birth. This establishes the trope of renewal that is present throughout the poem.

Heaney transforms the Cumaean Sibyl of myth who drove a bargain in selling her books of prophecies to Tarquinius Superbus into a second hand bookseller 'Of her change-pocket, thinking what to charge' with the 'cubicle' mirroring the entry to Sibyl's cave.

Section II is dominated by Heaney's attempt to mythically gain entry to the underworld as he compares the pet shop in Smithfield Market as being 'silent as birdless Lake Avernus' referencing Aen. 6.201, 237-42. Ruth Padel notes that 'It is as crucial to understanding Heaney as to understanding Dante, that the katabasis ['going down'] is not only a descent to the underworld but a descent into yourself, the inner journey every writer has to face'.<sup>11</sup> This first notion of this decent is suggested in this section through the presence of shades, the dead who dwell within the underworld in Aen.6.411-414, 'Then racks of suits and overcoats that swayed...Like their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge.' These shades mirror those Aeneas encounters in the underworld with Heaney adapting these shades to his context. The empty suits are also symbolically significant in a contemporary sense as they fortify the notion of absent presences maintaining the shape of their previous owners.

The mythical allusions grow though no God, or gods, are mentioned with these dead individuals. Helen Vendler notes that this stems from the influence of the modernists' efforts to 'rewrite in more believable terms, the heroic, sublime and religious conventions of the classical elegy', revealing Heaney's debt to such modernists as Eliot and Yeats.<sup>12</sup>

In Section III, Heaney compares the throngs of shades and the passengers to numerous leaves and migrating birds, 'agitated rooks / Around a rookery', echoing Aen.6.305-12, where birds denote descent into the underworld. The idea of descent

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<sup>10</sup> Driscoll, D.(2008), *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, p.389.

<sup>11</sup> Padel, R. (2016), *Aeneid VI* review, *Financial Times*, 26 March 2016 .

<sup>12</sup> Vendler, H. (2000), *Seamus Heaney*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.74.

proceeds Heaney probing a descent into his memory and his past. Heaney combines the mundane aspects of life where the classical ferryman to the underworld, Charon of *Aen.* 6.315-316, is replaced by a bus driver,

'Who ruled the roost.../  
Separated and directed everybody

By calling not the names but the route numbers.'

The sequence progresses as Heaney encounters 'Venus' doves' of *Aen.* 6.190-211, which reassured Aeneas of his journey and led him to the golden bough in 6.190-211. Heaney shapes the mythology and incorporates his own personal dynamic with 'Venus' doves? Why not McNicholl's pigeons'. Heaney reconstructs the golden bough as 'a head of oats with each grain wrapped in glittering silver foil,'. He creates a trivial link between Roman Catholic devotion with 'altar' and 'votive jampot' and Roman household gods of *Lares* and *Penates*. The contents of the jampot, stalks wrapped in tin foil, link the dead 'Mrs Nick' of the section to the following sections where promotes dead individuals that he elegises to the fore. The shine of the tin foil on the stalks act both as actual and metaphorical guiding lights to the young Heaney but in a later, retrospective manner the light signals a turn to mediating on, and lamenting, the dead.

The 'hand-held flashlamps' and the memory of Mrs Nick evidence Heaney's transition in Section VI to 'the age of ghosts'. Heaney's journey towards remembering the dead individuals is portrayed through the lens of a wake, 'lights moving at a distance'. It is the first funeral he 'attended as a full participant' and this conjures his earlier elegy, 'Mid Term Break', to his brother Christopher. During his brother's funeral Heaney sat amongst the mourners as a shocked immature teenager lacking insight into death,

'...I was embarrassed  
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.'

The family of Mulholland are left 'like strangers to themselves and us' shadows the classical influence of Palinurus who drowned and whose body was unrecovered and the ritual burial of Misenus, also drowned. Funeral traditions of card games, smoking, drinking tea, and storytelling recount the seemingly banal sombre mood of mourning. Helen Vendler has noted that Heaney deals in 'un-sublime elegies, to station his elegiac subjects at the level of daily life'<sup>13</sup>, 'rounds of cigarettes on plates, biscuits, cups of tea.' The lamentation that takes place is an occasion to understand and learn from recalled experience and not an extreme outpouring of anguish or emotion. The older, mature Heaney's retrospective view carries the scene into the realm of the mythical, whereby Heaney's smoke drenched clothes are compared with the smoke of the pyre upon which Misenus' body was cremated, 'my clothes as smoke-imbued /As if I'd fed a pyre.'

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<sup>13</sup> Vendler, H. (2000), Seamus Heaney, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

In Section VIII Heaney moves to recalling his own personal relationship with an ex-girlfriend during his youth, echoing Aeneas' encounter with Dido in Aen.6.453-453 and 6.450. 'As one when the month is young sees a new moon' a slightly truncated translation of Virgil's '*qualem primo qui surgere mense/ aut videt aut vidisse putat per nubila lunam*' (Aen. 6.453-4) from the episode where Dido, whom Aeneas deserted in Carthage, refuses to acknowledge him. Dido is described as '*recens a vulnere*' ('with wound still fresh', Aen. 6.450), with Heaney's reflection of 'her hurt still new.' The reader witnesses a subtle hint of guilt through Heaney's use of 'impurity' in reflecting on his emotionless state in contrast to Aeneas emotions of lines 455 and 460.

Heaney effectively cites Virgil's Elysium of Aen. 6.637ff '*His demum exactis, perfecto munere divae/devenere locos et amoena virecta fortunatorum nemorum sedesque beates*' and converts it into 'the land of joy, the pleasant lawns and happy seats of the blissful Groves...' on a sports day in Bellaghy. Orpheus is compared with the more contemporary Slim Whitman with the 'mile of road with parked cars in the twilight' mirroring the Aeneid's phantom chariots. With symbiotic elements of the classical and contemporary, the climax is 'the final whistle'. These words signal that for Heaney the end of life is approaching. The significant power of these words anticipating the immediate future is conveyed through the ordinary events and imagery that Heaney recalls from his past.

A sense of loss grows within Section XI at Heaney's recollection at the loss of his father with the lamentation and memory situated on the shore, beside water. This has both an elegiac resonance and undertones of renewal as water in this section alludes to the sense of resurrection that will ultimately come in the next and final section of the sequence.

Heaney compounds the process by placing himself 'on the brink', providing multiple interpretations. In a literal reading of the section, one may interpret that the brink suggests death or regeneration. We can also interpret the idea in terms the explanation of Anchises that 'the men thronging the banks in such a host' are 'spirits...to whom second bodies are owed by Fate'. Where the sequence began with notions of birth in the bookshop we now see allusions to instances of rebirth and a specific search for renewal or immortality in literary form, 'Needy and ever needier for translation'.

Literary immortality created in this instance from his reworking of Virgil's myths is not sufficient. The final sequence reveals the climax as he fuses the sense of regeneration of his spirit into the new life of his first granddaughter,

'So now, as a thank-offering for one  
Whose long wait on the shaded bank has ended, ...

As her earthlight breaks ...'

The sense of new beginnings that closes the sequence derives from the 'earthlight' image. Heaney uses this image of light to express the consoling strength that he finds in a new generation which displaces his grief at his looming death. Heaney's solace, which derives from a universal and timeless personal experience, steeped in

the translation of the temporal, spatial, intellectual and cultural aspects from his predecessor Virgil, creates a catharsis for Heaney and in turn for his readers.

## **Conclusion**

Though separated in time by 2 millennia, Plato and Heaney use their reception of Classics to evolve new personalised literary forms: the creation of a mode for elite discourse for Plato and renewal conveyed through the mythical and metaphorical sense in Heaney's poetry. Both Plato and Heaney actively receive and internalise the genres and *Aeneid VI* respectively for which they develop a love and familiarity. Out of such deep familiarity they are able to remake new literature through a symbiosis of the received works and their individual creative processes. Both succeed in contributing to the evolving normative framework of Classical literature.



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