

## EXISTENTIAL AND STOICAL IDEAS IN HEANEY'S POETRY

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*The literal opus of Seamus Heaney is imbued with problems that range from the essence of being a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland, exposed to conflicts, fear, betrayals and murders to the centuries old convulsions related to religious, political, class, regional or tribal differences. Heaney's poetry is strongly autobiographical even though it is clear that he is not confined to his own experience, but that he merely uses it as a base from which to explore the world. I will analyse Heaney's poems taking into consideration something we can refer to as "a problematic northerness"<sup>2</sup> at the same time emphasising the notion that poetry could be the power that can move things forward. Heaney expresses the hope that what still exists as a brutal conflict at the level of politics might be somehow resolved at the level of culture. I will also trace some elements of philosophical background. Thoughts in Heaney's poetry result in existentialism which is at the same time based on the need of self-deprivation and even on the need of a secured after-life, as well as it is also imbued by the anxiety of surviving through the hardships of everyday existence. One way of dealing with such heaviness is certainly the stoic endurance. Heaney developed his philosophical attitude primarily under the strong influence of Socrates and Plato but we can also trace some main ethical features of the Stoic school of philosophy.*

**Keywords:** "a problematic northerness", politics, culture, existentialism, stoic endurance

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit for elements of philosophical thought or any kind of philosophical background often results in mere simplification of the essence of what the author wants to convey. Speaking of philosophical literary criticism, Milivoj Solar explains it as a type of literary criticism that introduces philosophy as a mediator between the literal work and the reader. Such philosophy explains the work in a way that it translates it into its own language.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Veleučilište u Šibeniku

<sup>2</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Between Shadows: Modern Irish Writing and Culture* (Dublin-Portland, OR, 2009.), p.182

<sup>3</sup> Milivoj Solar, *Granice znanosti o književnosti*, Zagreb, 2000., p.293.

In that respect, I consider that in Heaney's poetry we can trace one unique philosophical thought and in this article I will emphasise the elements of existential and stoical philosophy which serve as a mediator between the literal work and the reader.

The essential element of human emancipation lies in the obvious importance of the conscious and rational existence. We are all aware of our primeval position in this world but philosophical speculation is not the only possible way of its interpretation or comprehension. According to that, we can encounter essentially identical questions and dilemmas that both poetry and philosophy are dealing with. As Immanuel Kant stated<sup>4</sup>, it is absurd to feign indifference regarding the research whose object to the human nature could never be indifferent.

Italian existentialist Nicola Abbagnano considers that philosophy derives from the essence of human being, essence that appears to be the obvious limitation and definitiveness of man in this world. Philosophical thought appears to be something common to all people and therefore anybody could be interested in philosophy. It could never be the exclusive privilege of philosophers but the duty of man in regard to his limited status in this world. However, except philosophy this duty of mankind can be just as well achieved through religion, speculation or art itself. Man with his own powers yearns to comprehend the essence of truth in this world. Therefore, philosophical thought appears to be a remarkable aspect of human freedom closely tied to the truth and pure existence that we experience in the course of our life. Even though nobody can control his own thoughts they are still tied to the fundamental cognitive matter that we express through ideas and words on the basis of phenomenological insight of reality.

Unlike the exact or natural sciences, philosophy cannot accept things considering only empirical knowledge but is interested in the essence, truth and being of things. Philosophical reflection of reality can never be completed just as well as the sense of being can never be exhausted.

Philosophy keeps on asking the same unsolved questions, but in that revision of problems and solutions the real inevitability, necessity and therefore the justification of philosophy is concealed. Milivoj Solar regards that today philosophy is something that we no longer need in a way that everybody thinks it is one's own right to exploit it in every possible way. It seems that it is at the same time everybody's and nobody's matter. The necessity and importance of philosophical reflection in literature has yet to be justified.<sup>5</sup>

If we claim that Heaney's literal work is the result of some inevitable circumstances in which the poet grew up and spent his life we can't escape the sense that what we are doing is injustice towards the author and his work. There is no doubt that certain historical or social conditions in the life of a nation can serve as a background or as a starting point from which we explore and explain the work of art. We cannot completely exclude Heaney's work from political disturbances in the country or some personal tragedies that permanently changed him in a way that can be indisputably felt in his work. Nevertheless, the central concern is

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritika čistog uma*, Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, 1984., p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Milivoj Solar, *Granice znanosti o književnosti*, Zagreb, 2000., p.309.

unquestionably on his literal work. Finally, many people as well as artists lived through great social or personal tragedies and yet they haven't accomplished such achievements.

## 2. THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN HEANEY'S POETRY

In his literary opus, Heaney could not possibly escape the political disturbances of his place and time. Within its autobiographical elements, his poetry also involves a strong social engagement.

It is impossible to attain a full understanding of Heaney's literary opus without taking into consideration the phenomenon of living dualism that inevitably influenced and defined the course of his development as a writer.

Heaney's life was pervaded by terror of religious intolerance (Catholic versus Protestant), political intolerance (Nationalist versus Unionist), class prejudices (the deprived versus the economically dominant), region disunion (the agricultural against the industrial) and finally of tribal duality (Celts versus Anglo-Saxons).

The problems he presents in his poems range from the essence of being a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland, constantly exposed to conflicts, fear, betrayals and murders to the centuries old convulsions related to religious, political, class, regional or tribal differences. Even though, as Foster claims in *Between Shadows*<sup>6</sup>, Heaney's achievement has been acknowledged far beyond the borders of Ulster and far beyond Ireland, the authentic tension of Ulster as well as an intense localism of engagement has remained in his work. He inherited something that Foster refers to as "a problematic northernness"<sup>7</sup>. Heaney moved to Dublin but he grew up in Northern Ireland, which had been separated from the rest of Ireland for forty years by the time he entered university. Foster even states that many college students of Irish literature, writing essays on Heaney and the North, apparently believe that Northern Irish literature began with the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966. He regards that fact as "a sign of current cult of celebrity that can stifle in all but the brighter students' interest in the complexities of the past and the uncertainties of the present."<sup>8</sup>

Some other authors also write about ethical and political influences on Heaney's literal opus. Eugene O'Brien in *Searches for Answers*<sup>9</sup> explores his sense of the aesthetic, and its political and ethical role involving his relationship with contemporary politics. He compares Heaney to Derrida emphasising their similarity in terms of their attitudes to the value and purpose of literature. Both writers are exploring the interstices between the literary and the political, "Derrida examining the constitutive function of a literature which sanctions and enhances debate and discussion, while Heaney examines the relationship of the literary to notions of place, heritage and contemporary world."<sup>10</sup> According to O'Brien they are both exploring the epistemological status of the literary and examining the interactions of the literary text with the cultural and social context.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.181.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene O'Brien, *Searches for Answers* (London,2003.)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.13.

When in 1995 he was awarded a Nobel Prize, Heaney, in his Nobel lecture referred to that period of his writing as “a quarter century of life waste and spirit waste”<sup>11</sup> he was thinking of internal strives, the Catholic civil rights marches of the sixties followed by police repression and disturbances that the Ulster government attempted to quell in 1971 by the internment without trial of thousands of citizens. He was also referring to “Bloody Sunday” in 1972 when the British army killed fourteen unarmed Catholic marchers.

Terrorist actions were the part of the IRA Provisionals and the Ulster paramilitaries until September 1994 when they agreed to a truce and the moment of political hope occurred in Northern Ireland.

Heaney`s Harvard colleague Professor Helen Vendler to whom Heaney dedicated his latest volume *The Spirit Level*, in her book *Seamus Heaney*<sup>12</sup>, studies the poet`s continual evolution of style and subject matter through different stages of his life obviously corresponding to the shifts in his literary work as well.

Helen Vendler represents what some consider to be a virtual critical orthodoxy in the American academy. At a time when it seemed as if poetry was in danger of being swamped by theory, she emphasised the value of an “aesthetic criticism” that focused on the poetry itself rather than on the statement it makes. However, she regards any aesthetic and intellectual experiment attempted in Heaney`s poems a serious one. For Vendler, Heaney is a reflective poet who incorporates his past into the present and consequently the existential burden of his lyrics becomes heavier over time.

Heaney`s poetry is strongly autobiographical. However, it does not suggest that he is confined to his own experience, but rather that he uses that experience as a base from which to explore the world. Naturally, Heaney`s rural background provides a starting point for almost all of his poetry, with emphasis on his early stage, which is often an exploration of childhood experiences on his father`s farm. That stage of Heaney`s poetry Vendler discusses in the terms of “anonymities”<sup>13</sup> as Heaney speaks both about and for those whose names are lost to history. These recollections from childhood Heaney introduces in his first two books, *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*. Even though he approaches that motive with piety, Heaney is not uncritical of rural life. That life the poet could not follow and does not want to follow, but nevertheless recognises as the eternal part of his inner landscape.

Heaney`s third book, *Wintering Out*, takes up anonymity with a different perspectives, exposes the dark side of rural decency, and investigates the hardships of women in a sexually repressive culture. In *Wintering Out*, Heaney also found a different sort of anonymity that was immensely productive for his later collection *North* as well. It is a question of the archaeological anonymity of the buried bodies known to the poet from a book by a Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob in his work *The Bog People* where he described the bodies of the murdered victims from the Iron Age preserved in the peat bogs in Denmark.

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<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Crediting Poetry”

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html)

<sup>12</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London, 1998.)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13-37.

In his next stage, that Vendler called "archaeologies"<sup>14</sup>, Heaney reveals a fascination with the archaeological, in particular for the victims of ancient ritual killings perfectly preserved in the bogland his ancestors worked for a living. In Heaney's poetry such killings provide a telling link with the violent present.

Naturally, the literary historians examined the poems about the bog-bodies exclusively in relation to the disturbances in Ireland. It is hardly possible that Glob's book would have had the same effect on Heaney if Northern Ireland had been at peace. But Vendler draws our attention to the poet's attempt to replicate in words some versions of himself, in which case we can come closer to their whole being as artwork without forgetting their function as symbols of a cultural predicament<sup>15</sup>. In *North* Heaney turned to an archaeological myth suggesting that a wide practice of prehistoric violence, both in Scandinavian countries and in Ireland, is actually the issue of the survival of savage tribal conflict, which was fundamentally neither colonial nor sectarian but rather deeply cultural. He is referring to other countries that have religious differences without religious wars, or other postcolonial countries that do not continue to avenge grievance dating from the sixteenth century. According to Vendler, it is quite possible that Heaney is proposing that what we are seeing is not Catholics against Protestants, or rich against poor, but more likely a generalised cultural approval of violence, dating back many centuries ago<sup>16</sup>.

Under the title of "anthropologies" Vendler discusses Heaney's next stage marked by his fifth collection of poetry - *Field Work*. In this volume Heaney makes an almost radical break with anonymity and archaeology. He is no longer the anonymous child on his father's farm, or the witness of a renewed archaic violence. In this stage Heaney is an individual man engaged in ordinary domestic and social relations, but above all – an elegist. In this respect, work in the field arises from the obligation of survivors to celebrate those who have died. What becomes obvious is that Irishness is not the unitary thing, which is an inconvenient fact to the unitary view of both nationalist propaganda and single-minded mythology, but still it is extremely important as a cultural interest for an ethnographer or anthropologist. The contrariness within a supposedly unitary culture is most visible in "Casualty" where Heaney introduces his Northern Catholic friend who, against a curfew went out for his usual nightly drink and was blown up by his own people. Naturally, this inconvenient fact is the part of history of what happens in Ireland even though propagandists are often not eager to mention it. Besides elegies, domestic life with his wife and social occasions with friends make up the other half of the book.

In *The Spirit Level* Heaney is closely tied to the existentialism provoked by his response to a post-catastrophic moment in Ireland. Vendler approaches the poem "Mycenae Lookout" as the emotional centrepiece of *The Spirit Level* revealing the impotent position of the ordinary citizen caught in the crossfire of civil atrocity<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.156.

The whole collection is chiefly concerned with “keeping going” - a stoic endurance, or “a stoic Afterwards”<sup>18</sup>. That obviously refers to the resuming of ordinary activities after social catastrophe. Such element of unchanging stoic endurance Heaney introduces in poems like “St Kevin and the Blackbird” or in “Keeping Going” where he expresses deep admiration for his brother’s restoration of equanimity of everyday existence.

In celebratory poem “Poet’s Chair” Heaney even approaches the happier side of endurance through the hardships of everyday existence. In this poem Heaney uses the motive from philosophy, once more involving the character of Socrates in his poetry. He again refers to the breaking point of Socrates’ life – the day he was to die. Using the motive of Socrates’ exemplary and stoical death, among all other things mentioned above, Heaney almost gives us a hint that we should pass through some important passages of history and philosophy before comprehending his poetical thought.

### 3. THE TRACE OF EXISTENTIALISM IN HEANEY’S POETRY

It is no wonder that at this stage the influence of existentialism in Heaney’s poetry can be felt. If we take into consideration the social climate existing in Ireland at this period we can realize that it precisely responds to the one that gave rise to the existentialism in the first place. Existentialism appeared in the thirties of this century, following the first world war (the post-catastrophic moment) both in philosophy and literature. After the Second World War it became a cultural climate surpassing its original philosophical frames. This stream reveals the conditions of uncertainty and doubt typical for human nature in general and by all means characteristic to a post-catastrophic moment that in Ireland in 1994. The event of such importance is normally followed by suspense and precariousness of people accustomed to violence and despair. The notions of this kind are especially elaborated in “Tollund” and “Myce-nae Lookout” even though they represent a different point of view. At a moment of truce in September 1994 Seamus and Marie Heaney were visiting Tollund in Denmark, the site of the discovery of Tollund Man which served as the inspiration for Heaney’s first poem of the bog bodies written in 1972. In that respect, “**Tollund**” symbolically stands for enthusiastic and joyous response to the presumed end of violence in Ireland:

“we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe  
More scouts than strangers, ghosts who’d walked abroad  
Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning  
And make a go of it, alive and singing,  
Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.”

*September 1994*

*(l. 20-24.)*

This represents a premature reaction to the truce. However, the course of events that followed announced that life must be sustained as the ceasefire might not last and violence could return.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp.155-178.

Consequently, in a short time Heaney turned to a Greek drama – Aeschylus' "Agamemnon" that served him as a basis for a tragic sequence "**Mycenae Lookout**". Heaney discovered an analogy that is present both in the aftermath of the Trojan War and the aftermath of Northern Ireland's quarter-century of civil conflict. Naturally, it is no wonder that Heaney decided upon this particular event as it stands for another post-catastrophic moment as well.

"Mycenae Lookout" is *The Spirit Level*'s main sequence and it is considerably less sanguine than "Tollund". The whole sequence is imbued by continual slaughters and bloodsheds and even water, which often serves as the symbol of purification, is polluted by blood. Heaney presents us a cease-fire with elements of such brutality and massacres that we could not possibly draw the line between such truce and the most violent slaughter.

The speaker is the Watchman in Agamemnon's place. He is familiar with the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father, a witness to the adultery of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus during Agamemnon's absence at Troy as well as the helpless bystander at the murder of the returned Agamemnon by his wife and her lover in his own bathtub and to the prophecies of the raped Cassandra. Finally, he even foresees the murderous rivalry of Romulus and Remus.

However, what is important from the point of view of existentialism is the moral line of the Watchman's character as he stands for the ordinary citizen, an "innocent bystander" impotent of making any kind of fundamental difference. The watchman is isolated in this sequence. He is an outsider standing as an almost perfect equivalent to a fiction of a man's role model created from a point of view of existentialism. In that respect he is abandoned, solitary, insecure and left on his own. He communicates anxiety, terror, death, nausea, absurdity and finally inevitable damnation. In Kafka's manner, the Watchman conveys the overwhelming degradation of man in his banal and trivial existence as well as the paralyzing meaning of undefined but at the same time also unavoidable menace.

Philosophy of existentialism deals with such states of uncertainty and doubt as the essential attributes that constitute man as a stranger in this world. He is a traveller thrown in it by accident but at the same time also condemned to carry the burden caused by his own freedom. However, precisely that freedom to chose is the final warning that Heaney communicates by his sequence and it is obviously juxtaposed to the passivity of the Watchman.

It is evident that Heaney is unable to comprehend the act of murder. He does not approve the massacre in "Mycenae Lookout" and he doesn't approve the Watchman's passivity either but he can still recognize the unavoidable recurrence of murder in human affairs. Nevertheless, through this particular Watchman he warns us that there is "no such thing, /as innocent/bystanding" ("Mycenae Lookout", "Cassandra", l.1-3.):

"No such thing  
as innocent  
bystanding.

Her soiled  
her little breasts,  
her clipped, devast-

ated, scabbed  
punk head,  
the char-eyed

famine gawk-  
she looked  
camp-fucked  
and simple."  
("Cassandra" l.1-13.)

Accepting such attitude, we are actually approaching the existentialism of J. P. Sartre who emphasized freedom as the main structure of our existence. According to him, it is shameful to defend oneself by claiming determinism as well as to justify our failure to correct things by unfavourable circumstances. In this respect our choice is always our own and we can never decide not to choose as we are never free to terminate our own freedom. Our proper inability to accomplish something is simultaneously our proper culpability.

Accordingly, the syllogism: "The man is an innocent bystander." would be impossible and probably proclaimed a logical paradox as well.

Finally, in a concluding "Reverie of Water", the Watchman is still hopeful as Heaney, in Vendler's opinion<sup>19</sup>, cannot resist a trust that blood-shedding can find water for its purification. She saw through his final wish for a benign Afterwards to which alternative could be only his resigning to despair which he ought to resist as his moral obligation.

#### 4. STOICAL ENDURANCE

If existentialism appeared as a reaction developed under the influence of unenviable circumstances for people living in Ireland, then stoicism that imbues other poems of *The Spirit Level* developed as an explanation of the way of life that people who remained in Ireland managed to conduct in the given circumstances and also the way in which they managed to deal with their innate heritage of freedom to choose. These poems are mainly concerned with "keeping going" - a term that Vendler explained as "a stoic Afterwards"<sup>20</sup> referring to the resuming of ordinary activity after social catastrophe.

The leading character and at the same time the person Heaney obviously looks up to and uses as a role model to bring us closer to the idea of a true virtue of stoical endurance is a Greek philosopher Socrates who appears in Heaney's poetry at various occasions. In *The Spirit level*<sup>21</sup> Heaney uses the motive of his courageous death in order to point out the virtue of consistence and righteousness essential for man living in Ireland at such turbulent time. The presence of Socrates' incredibly courageous choice could be felt throughout *The Spirit Level*. His stoical death together with stoical endurance of other characters in *The Spirit Level*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.173.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.157.

<sup>21</sup> In *The Spirit Level* Heaney directly involves the character of Socrates taken from Plato's Phaedon in the poem "Poet's chair"



brings us to another evidence of Heaney's consistency in philosophical path he chose to follow. According to the rules of such ethics the wise man accepts inevitable order of the world and conducts his life in accordance with it. The ideal of the stoic is to live in harmony with the nature of the world and one's own rational nature as a constituent part of the order in the cosmos.

The stoic achieves the peacefulness of the soul by the virtue autarky or self-sufficiency. For Seneca the one pleased with little is not poor but blessed, and the one who yearns for more is the true poor man.

Vendler refers to stoicism<sup>22</sup> as the virtue of middle age, when one's progress is at best horizontal, and future can hold only a decline. In her opinion the formal beauty proper to stoicism and characterized by solidity, monumentality and simplification, has seldom been celebrated in lyric.

In *The Spirit Level* there is whole range of stoical characters beginning with a poem "At the Wellhead" where Heaney presents us the blind Rosie Keenan whose persistence was a solace and example for Heaney as a youth. Rosie is blind but she is also a talented musician and Heaney calls her a "blind-from birth, sweet-voiced, withdrawn/musician" (l.18, 19.) standing for the withdrawnness of all artists into their art. But anyhow, as Vendler remarks<sup>23</sup> she is the most competent person to show to the child the moral clear sky at the bottom of a dark place. This attitude only confirms Heaney's persuasion that our empirical senses are not crucial for essential happiness:

"Her hands were active and her eyes were full  
Of open darkness and watery shine.  
She knew us by our voices. She'd say she saw  
Whoever or whatever. Being with her  
Was intimate and helpful, like a cure  
You didn't notice happening. When I read  
A poem with Keenan's well in it, she said,  
I can see the sky at the bottom of it now."  
(l. 25-32.)

Another poem in which Heaney glorifies the persistence of the stoic stance is "**St Kevin and the Blackbird**". It is divided in two parts of twelve lines. In the first part of the poem the saint remains unmoving in his cell, with his arms stretched out. The blackbird lands on his palm and starts nesting and the saint is submitted to the sun and rain supervening until the young "are hatched, fledged and flown" (l.12.). To some extent we cannot help admiring such an act of unselfish submissiveness, but the second part of the poem where Heaney actually questions the affect of that stoicism on saint's inner state throw a considerable doubt upon the meaningfulness of that idea:

"Is there a distance in his head?  
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.159.

To labour and not to seek reward, `he prays,  
A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the river bank forgotten the river `s name.“  
(l.19-24.)

Regardless of our admiration for Kevin `s unchanging stoic endurance, we still feel the ultimate shade of uselessness of his suffering. Does it make any sense at the end? For the bird – maybe, but on the other hand if it wasn` t Kevin `s palm it would probably be some branch in the wood. Finally does it make any sense for Kevin if he ultimately loses every notion of his sacrifice, his pain and the mere cause of it.

However, admiration is still present as most of the people are not keen on sacrifice or any kind of suffering, that is, they would never consciously accept the harder path in life.

In his poems, Heaney mainly admires the people who managed to endure through hardships of life during the cautious revival in Ireland after quarter-century of civil conflict.

In “Poet `s Chair“ he involves Socrates` stoical death as an example of the true virtue and the devotion to the general cause regardless even of one`s own life.

In this poem Heaney is using the motive from *Phaedon*. He refers to the last chapter of the book describing precisely the last moments of Socrates` life “as the poison does its work“ (l.30.). The last hours of his life Socrates is spending in the conversation with his close friends. He is trying to convince them of the immortality of the soul and to persuade them that the philosopher terrified of death does not even deserve to die. To explain this phenomenon it is important to point out that Socrates is famous for his ethical intellectualism referring to the principles of his ideas of justice. He believes that it is better to suffer injustice than to actually conduct it. With this principle he abolishes the existing golden rule of the Greek traditional ethics that defines justice as an act of helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates categorically maintains the attitude that man, under no circumstances should be allowed to harm someone or to do him injustice. Moreover, he proved his doctrine with his own example. He is accused of corrupting youth by his innovations in religion. Even though he failed to prove his innocence, Socrates is consistent in his ethical maxim and he accepts the unjust verdict rejecting at the same time all possibilities of revenge or retreat from Athens.

Naturally, he has to sustain that injustice but he is at the same time strengthened in his persuasion that his submission to the ethical norms was the right thing to do. Suffering, which derives from the feelings of justness and truthfulness, according to Socrates undoubtedly, helps in achieving happiness. In “Poet `s Chair“ Socrates recommends never to hesitate in our persuasions. Heaney agrees with Socrates by all means but he cannot decide on the right path with the certainty of Socrates. This poem applies to the whole mankind and not exclusively to the individual person. Heaney implies that all of us will eventually sit on that chair (“All have a go at sitting on it some time“, ( l.13.) which means that we all have the same opportunities of the choice in life as well as we are all responsible for our own decisions.

Both Heaney and Socrates were offered the choice, but the difference between these two men is that for Socrates it was an easy decision to make and for Heaney it created a life-long

dilemma. In "Poet's chair" Socrates' choice differs from Heaney's and resembles that of his brother in "Keeping Going".

However, Heaney shows great admiration both for Socrates and all others who followed his example. But even though their choices obviously differ we mustn't miss the major similarity that exists in their motive. Socrates knows that if he leaves Athens he would endanger the credibility of his teaching and likewise the sense of his own life dedicated to philosophy. In this way his death has a higher purpose. Heaney's leaving the North could bear the similar meaning of higher purposefulness as in his poetry he always admired those who stayed and endured. He never presents his leaving as an example to follow.

Socrates' death is an extremely strong motive and it is no wonder that writers from the end of the twentieth century prefer to revise his philosophy for the purpose of intensifying their poetical thought. Nietzsche in his *Geburt der Tragodie* explains that the dying Socrates takes Achilles' place as the new ideal of the Greek youth as he resigned himself to death with the calmness that Plato assigns to the last boozier leaving the symposium in the morning in order to start the new day. His fellows are left behind to sleep on the ground or benches and to dream of Socrates, the true erotic. For Nietzsche the dying Socrates became the new, still unseen ideal of the Greek aristocratic youth.

Another character who chose the harder path and whose stoical endurance Heaney highly admires is his own brother who unlike him decided to remain and put up with all hardships of living in North. Heaney's brother Hugh stayed in the North maintaining the family farm and living in peace with his neighbours.

By naming all atrocities Hugh had lived through as well as his qualities that make such emotional stamina possible in "Keeping Going" Heaney is leading us to realize that the stoic response of that kind is actually a heroic one. Hugh stands for the actual role model of a stoic man. From his point of view the essence of our freedom is in our proper capacity of adopting ourselves to the indispensable and inevitable order of the world. Freedom is possible but merely in the domain of our conscience. Stoical ethics is the ethics of reconciliation with a free will. Liberated from all kinds of affects or retaliation Hugh gained his equanimity and firmness:

*"My dear brother, you have good stamina.*

You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor  
Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,  
You shout and laugh above the revs, you keep  
Old roads open by driving on the new ones."  
(l. 67-71.)

However, here we can draw comparison with the previous poem "St Kevin and the Blackbird" as in describing Hugh's sacrifice Heaney achieves the same sense of ultimate uselessness of his submission. He does this by juxtaposing the white world of his youth (whitewash brush, blanched skirted thing, brushing walls, whiter and whiter, brightening, whitewash, clean spot...) with the reality of the dirt and darkness (cattle dung, urine, smoky hair, grey

matter, gruel flecked with blood, stains, copious blood, smell of dung...) he perceived as a grown up person.

In the poet`s memory of his youth, whatever becomes dirty can be fixed by the rewhitening brush. Nevertheless, the reality changed together with poet`s perception as he now realizes that the city wall smudged with blood, cannot be whitewashed as the cottage could be:

“Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood  
In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot  
Where his head had been, other stains subsumed  
In the parched wall leant his back against  
That morning like any other morning,  
Part time reservist, toting his lunchbox.  
A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,  
Crossed the Diamond, slowed again and stopped  
Level with him, although it was not his lift.  
And then he saw an ordinary face  
For what it was and a gun in his own face.”  
(l. 51-61.)

Heaney is actually questioning the meaningfulness of such stoical endurance and suffering throughout the poem wondering if individual life can matter something in the scheme of things in general. Simultaneously, he warns his brother that he “cannot make the dead walk or right wrong”(l. 74.)

However, viewing Heaney`s literary opus we could never claim with certainty that he preferred leaving to staying at North or vice versa. It is more likely that was indecisive regarding that matter constantly weighing the both sides. Nevertheless, his thoughts were obviously always with those who stayed and his admiration towards them is unquestionable.

Besides, as he remarks in “Poet`s Chair” - even “the bloody chair” (l. 19.) could eventually “bloom” (l. 17.). Peace could possibly reach the North.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is no wonder that the thoughts in Heaney`s poetry results in existentialism which is at the same time based on the need of self-deprivation and even on the need of a secured after-life, as well as it is also imbued by the anxiety of surviving through the hardships of everyday existence. One way of dealing with such heaviness is certainly the stoic endurance.

I suppose that Heaney developed his philosophical attitude primarily under the strong influence of Socrates accomplished through Plato and his works with which Heaney was familiar with as well as with the main ethical features of the Cynic and Stoic school of philosophy. The interest for Plato probably developed as a result of Heaney`s fixation on mortality as Plato`s *Phaedon* represents the essential piece of work in that area and his arguments of the immortality of the soul are believed to be irreplaceable solace against death. On the other

hand, Stoic influence on Heaney's work is primarily the result of concurrent circumstances that imbued his life.

It is difficult to separate Heaney from what Foster he calls "a problematic northernness"<sup>24</sup>. In *Inventing Ireland* Declan Kiberd<sup>25</sup> argues that Heaney developed "an aesthetic in which the hard, masculine consonants of protestant English culture 'bulled' the softer, feminine words of Gaelic tradition."<sup>26</sup> He also implies that only a fully Anglo-Irish fusion might produce a single, workable language. He expresses the notion that what still exists as a brutal conflict at the level of politics might be somehow resolved at the level of culture.

In *Finders Keepers*<sup>27</sup> Heaney is saying that any account of the Irish poet and Britain must get past politics. In that respect he is talking about poetry in English, Irish, Welsh, Scots and Scots Gaelic:

"In a poem, words, phrases, cadences and images are linked into systems of affect and signification which elude the précis maker. These under-ear activities, as they might be termed, may well constitute the most important business which the poem is up to and are a matter more of the erotics of language than of the politics and polemics of the moment."<sup>28</sup>

What Heaney implies is that poetry has the power to move things forward once the poet and the poem find themselves out on their own. A fiction helps the writer "to cope with differences between two islands linked and separated in various degrees by history and geography, language and culture."<sup>29</sup>

As Foster remarks when talking about "northern nationalism" in relation to loyalty of Irish poets: "There is something noble about a Northern Irish poet's conviction that poetry transcends the otherwise fierce and deep differences of sect, politics, class."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>25</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland, The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, 1995.)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.592.

<sup>27</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, (New York, 2002.)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

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