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The Marvellous As We Know It: A Text World Analysis of Seamus Heaney's Squarings: Lightenings VIII

Nigel Mcloughlin

Abstract: In recent years Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007) has emerged as a powerful technique for exploring the cognitive interactions of the reader with literary texts. In the essay that follows, Text World Theory is outlined and used to analyse the pattern of world switches which the reader undergoes as they move through Heaney's poem Squarings: Lightenings VIII. The essay also examines the various mechanisms by which those mental switches are instigated. Through this analysis, it is shown how Heaney's metaphorical representations are constructed and maintained by the reader, and inferences are drawn about the importance of cultural knowledge, and the pragmatic interpretation of utterances in relation to the type of deictic and modal world switches the reader experiences in the poem. The analysis also generates some difficulties for Text World Theory as it currently stands, and attempts to resolve these.

Key words: Text World Theory, Cognitive Poetics, Seamus Heaney, Metaphor, Poetry,

1. Introduction

Text World Theory may be thought of as a development of Leibniz's idea that the world we think of as the 'actual' world is only one of an infinite number of possible alternate states (Bradley & Schwartz 1979: xv). Text World Theory was developed by Paul Werth in the 1980s and 1990s and was published in a posthumous monograph in 1999. It is one of a number of theories, such as possible worlds theory (Ryan 1991), mental space theory (Fauconnier 1994), contextual frame theory (Emmott 1997), and deictic shift theory (Galbraith 1995), which share similar underlying ideas around constructing and tracking mental spaces or conceptual structures. In his introduction (1999: 7) Werth identifies his main questions as "how do we make sense of complex utterances when we receive them (as hearers and readers)?" and "how do we as speakers (writers) put together a complex utterance in order to express particular concepts?". Werth asserts that "a large part of the answer to both of these questions is that we build up mental constructs called text worlds." Since the basic processes we use to make sense of, and to construct discourse, are mental constructs unrelated to the form of the discourse, whether written or spoken, and whether in verse or prose, and since Werth (1999: 324-

5) analysed lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet II, and several dramatic works, as well as examples from prose fiction, it is apparent that the theory can be applied to any form of 'complex utterance'. Text World Theory has proven to be a popular and powerful technique for exploring and analysing how readers construct the conceptual worlds within particular texts as a result of linguistic devices present in the text. Text World Theory has been used to analyse a range of poetry from Keats to Carol Ann Duffy (Giovanelli 2013; Semino 2009, 2010; Stockwell, 2002).

Seamus Heaney's work has been studied from a variety of critical perspectives. Among others, there have been feminist (Coughlan 1991), postcolonial (Cullingford 1996; Hardwick 2002) and historicist (Lloyd 1979) readings of his work. Critics have investigated a great many themes in Heaney's poems, including his treatment of imagination and the sacred (Tobin 1999), as well as his language use in relation to 'The Troubles' (Molino 1993), and in relation to identity (Lloyd 1985). His work has also been studied from a cognitive stylistic perspective. Semino (1995) used schema theory to analyse Heaney's poem 'The Pillowed Head' to examine how linguistic description may be combined with schema theory in the analysis of texts, and to elucidate how useful schema reinforcement and refreshment are to account for the differences between projected worlds. Calderon Quindos (2005) used an analysis of Heaney's poem 'Oracle' to illustrate how blending theory may be used to explain the mental integration of the various pieces of the poem in relation to the aesthetic principle of unity-in-variety. To date, there has been no Text World analysis of Heaney's poems.

I intend to use Text World Theory to analyse the different worlds constructed in the course of Heaney's poem 'Squarings: Lightenings VIII' and the various mechanisms by which the reader moves between these worlds. It was published in the collection *Seeing Things* (1991) as part of a long sequence 'Squarings' which contained four sub-sequences of twelve poems each, the first of these sub-sequences was 'Lightenings'. I have chosen the eighth poem in that sequence, because it hasn't received as much

critical attention as many of his poems, and because I think Text World Theory will open up to systematic analysis the poem's shifts and unusual otherworldly narrative. This will offer insights into how readers interpret the poem, and the ways in which Text World Theory may account for the interpretive process.

2. Text World Theory

According to Werth's (1999) Text World Theory, meaning is produced through the interaction of participants in a language event. This interaction includes both text and context. It considers both the social and cultural knowledge possessed by the participants and how they apply that knowledge to the immediate situation. Text World Theory operates at three levels. The first level is that of the discourse world. Here the participants interact according to the contextual and cultural knowledge they bring to the language event. In the simplest type of discourse world, where speakers are face to face, the interaction between speaker and hearer takes place in a shared environment and both participants have access to each other. In the discourse world of literature, the reader has no direct access to the writer (and vice versa) and they are usually separated in space and time.

The second level is that of the text world itself. This consists of the mental representation of the world as constructed by the text. This is the world as it is depicted by the discourse. It may contain indications of time and place, and is populated by characters and objects, which Werth called 'world building elements' (1999:180). There are also 'function-advancing propositions' which are defined as actions, events, states and processes, whose function is to move the discourse forward. These may be used specifically to advance the narrative (plot-advancing), give more detailed description (scene-advancing), to set out a point of view (argument-advancing) or flesh out characters (character-advancing). Function advancing elements are processes, which affect these elements in some way, so while a ship is a world building element, when it

'sails' it can be taken to advance some function in the text. These are only really confusable where an assumption, which is defined as a world-building element, is a process, such as 'if I catch a fish down at the lake today, I'll bring it back home and cook it for tea. Here one must infer that the 'catching of the fish' although a process, which might in another context, be a function advancing proposition, is an assumption in this case (assuming I catch a fish), and as such is a world building element. If the assumption is fulfilled the fish can then be taken home and cooked which are function advancing propositions.

Inference is sometimes necessary in order to decide what function of the text is being advanced. Werth (1999: 57-58) discusses two basic types of inference, deductive and abductive. Deductive inference employs logical inference such that if one says "A father, a son, and another Irishman left for the coast, then one can logically infer that more than one Irishman exists in the text world, otherwise, why would we need the label 'another'. It cannot tell us who the other Irishman is. However, in abductive inference, if the context is that these three men have recently stepped off a boat to New York in the mid-nineteenth century, then we can use our world knowledge and the context to infer that all three are Irish, since at that time, families were likely of a single nationality, and all three are likely Irish émigrés fleeing the famine. Werth (1999: 263-64) is less clear on invited inference, but I take it to be related to abductive inference, whereby the context and world knowledge makes clear an otherwise opaque meaning. For example, if someone asks "Are you seeing anyone?" in a singles bar, one can infer from the context, and our cultural knowledge that in that context 'seeing' = 'dating', that they are sexually or romantically interested in the other person. Werth (1993) makes the point that inferences that occur in natural language are always context dependent, in that there is always a rolling relation of the new utterance to the common ground, which is undertaken as part of the process of understanding. This process of understanding may be related in part to our common embodied experience, schemas and conceptual

metaphors, but will also involve sociolinguistic factors (Stockwell 2011). I have applied deductive and abductive inference where appropriate in relation to material already in the common ground of the discourse and my cultural and contextual knowledge related to the specific poem and the wider discourse of poetry as a communicative act.

The final level in Werth's model of Text World Theory is that of the sub-world. Werth asserts that sub-worlds are constructed using three different 'departures'. Deictic departures involve flashbacks or direct speech, or any linguistic device that directs us to other text worlds. These operate by disrupting the deictic signature of the conceptual world through things like alternations in time, place and point of view. Attitudinal departures offer glimpses into other text worlds. This tends to be achieved through interaction with thoughts, beliefs or purposes entertained by protagonists rather than their actions in the main text word. Epistemic departures are modalised propositions, which are used by participants or characters to refer to text worlds that are hypothetical, modal, or in some way alternate to the main text world (1999: 216).

These sub-worlds may arise through departures initiated by the participants at the discourse level, in which case they are described as being participant-accessible. Or they may arise through departures initiated by characters in the text world, in which case they are referred to as character-accessible. Werth defines accessibility in terms of the degree of truth and reliability that can be attached to the worlds which characters and participants create. A participant has no way of assessing the truth or reliability value of a world created by a character since that character is not bound by the normal conventions of co-operative discourse. Participants can, on the other hand, verify worlds created by their co-participants in order to accept them as reliable. Upward access in the model is not possible, so no character in a sub-world has access to the main text world, and no character in the text world has access to the discourse world.

Gavins (2003, 2007) has further developed Text World Theory, particularly in relation to the hierarchical relationship between text worlds and sub-worlds. She uses the terms world-switches and modal worlds to signify the changed relationship between them because in her model these alternate worlds are not necessarily subordinate to the main text world, but can exist on the same level as the other text worlds that they switch from. World-switches occur when there is a change of scene, flashbacks and flash-forwards, and direct speech or direct thought, which roughly correspond to Werth’s category of deictic departures. Modal worlds are created through three forms of modality in discourse. The first of these is deontic modality, which expresses obligation in relation to a particular action and this is usually signified through verbs such as ’may’, should’, or ‘must’. In these situations the action that one ‘should’, ‘must’, or ‘may’ do sets up an unfulfilled future action or set of actions in a text world that is different from the text world in which it originates. The second, boulomaic modality, expresses wishes and desires of speakers and outlines a set of conditions which will satisfy the wish or desire. This tends to be signalled through verbs such as ‘hope’ or ‘want’. The future conditions which satisfy the desire or wish create a set of future unrealised circumstances in a similar way to deontic modality, and this again results in a separate text world from the one in which the desire was expressed (Gavins 2003: 131).

The final category of modality is the broadest. The epistemic modality relates to expressions of possibility through verbs such as ‘could’ or ‘might’; or belief through verbs such as ‘think’ or ‘suppose’. Hypothetical and conditional expressions are also included in this modality. It also contains as sub-system related to perceptions, and to the degree of commitment expressed in relation to the truth. This may be signified by constructions such as ‘obviously’, ‘it is clear that’, or ‘apparently’. The expression of such beliefs or hypothetical scenarios makes manifest an epistemically remote world in the participant’s mind. Various forms of indirect speech and indirect thought, including free indirect speech and free indirect thought are also included in the epistemic modality

since they form modal worlds through the filtering of world-building and function-advancing elements through the perspective of a character or characters and this perspective is unverifiable (Gavins, 2003: 132). In the next section, I will examine how Heaney creates the various text worlds of his poem, how he populates them, and how he manages the departures and switches between those text worlds.

3. Analysis of Lightenings VIII

As participants in the discourse world, Heaney and I are separated in time and space but we share some similarity in background and cultural knowledge. Like Heaney, I am from a rural Northern Irish background, though a generation younger. Cultural and background knowledge are factors which can influence the interpretation of the poem, but in this case, as I will argue, they may also affect the analysis of the deictic shifts in the poem.

In the initial text world of the poem, we are given no direct indication of time or place, so we assume a deictic origin of I, here, now in relation to the narrating voice, which is taken by convention to operate in the discourse world (Werth 1994: 82). The only objects that populate the initial text world are the annals we are immediately directed to: 'The annals say:' (line 1). The narrative voice of the poem immediately creates a departure to what Werth calls a deictic sub-world, the text world of the annals. For someone with the cultural knowledge related to these annals, the departure is not a simple one. According to McCarthy (2008: 11), the story on which the poem centres was based on a loose translation of an Old Irish anecdote. The translation was published in a book entitled *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts Vol. III* (Bergin et al. 1910: 8-9). So it could be argued that when the poem directs us to the annals, it carries out a deictic shift to the translation of a retelling of an account of the event. There have been at least four filtering consciousnesses between the events and the reader: Heaney's, Bergin et al., the recorder of the anecdote, and the person who told the anecdote to the recorder of it.

Because it was an anecdote even in Old Irish, we may assume that it had a folkloric quality. There is a bare account (in Latin) in the Annals of Ulster of ships being seen in the air at Clonmacnoise dated to 749AD (McCarthy 1895), but the Annals of Ulster were only compiled from earlier source documents (in Old Irish or Latin) in the 15th Century (Gwynne 1958, 1959). A reader in possession of this background knowledge related to the source of the poem sees the deictic departure as a much more complicated one, and is more on guard, because they have evidence that the narrator is operating with an unreliable source, which the narrator may also have changed to suit their purposes.

The deictic sub-world of the annals takes primary importance in the poem, and because of this, it better fits Gavins' definition of a world-switch. It cannot really be thought of as subordinate to the main text world since it is here that the vast majority of the world building elements and function-advancing propositions occur. There is no specific indication of time. The poem indicates that the monks 'were all at prayer', (line 2) which might be any of several daily offices. The place is more specific: the oratory of Clonmacnoise. The reader may be able to supply the missing information, that there was a famous monastery at Clonmacnoise in the Middle Ages, but even if they are unaware of this, the use of 'monks' and 'oratory' and later 'altar rails' (lines 2-5) should be enough for them to place the action in a church or monastery. The characters that populate the text world are monks, an abbot, and a crewman. There are also objects such as altar rails, a ship (and metonymically, a hull), an anchor, and a rope. These are lexically connected either to the religious environment or to the ship that materialises in above it in the air.

The function-advancing propositions are largely plot advancing. There are a number of these, moving the story along without detailed descriptions of individual characters or objects. So initially, 'the monks of Clonmacnoise / were all at prayer in the oratory' which describes the initial state (line 2/3) and a ship 'appears above them in the air'. This may be taken as a state-advancing proposition since it changes the original

state, as well as a plot-advancing proposition. Lines 4-8 contain plot-advancing propositions where 'the anchor dragged along' (line 4) 'and hooked itself into the altar rails' (line 5) and then, while the 'big hull rocked to a standstill' a crewman climbed down a rope to release the anchor (line 7/8). Later in lines 11 and 12, there are further plot-advancing propositions where the monks help to free the anchor and the ship sailed and the man climbed back up. This strategy leaves the characters flat and allows them to function as actors in the narrative without distracting the reader from the plot by engaging in character-advancing propositions. There is some sense of character in the abbot, in we can deduce that he is a calm and kindly man, perhaps able to accept the marvellous as he experiences it, with a sense of fellow-feeling for the other being who enters his world.

Apart from the complex initial deictic world switch at the beginning of the poem, there is a complex and interesting set of further departures in the poem, which occur because of the Abbot's speech in lines 9 and 10. Both Gavins and Werth agree that direct speech causes a deictic departure or world switch. This occurs in lines 9-10: "This man can't bear our life here and will drown," / the abbot said, "unless we help him." This results in a departure into an alternate world where the man drowns. However, it can be argued that the pragmatic force of his utterance is a wish for the monks to help the man. Thus moving the reader into what Gavins calls a boulomaic modal world, which contains the conditions required for the wish to be realised. This boulomaic modal world is fleeting and in fact is realised almost immediately in the main text world when the narrator informs us that the monks help the man: 'So / they did' (line 10-11). The abbot's utterance may also occasion an epistemic modal text world, because the abbot believes that the man will drown, and this modal world is also fleeting, because it is almost immediately negated by the narrator telling us that 'the man climbed back' (line 11). The opening of the text world where the sailor will drown further adds to the impression that the oratory is submerged. More tenuously, there is also perhaps, a

fleeting deontic modal world because the pragmatic force of the abbot's utterance implies a duty to help the man that underpins the abbot's wish for the monks to fulfil that duty. This modal world is also fleeting because the act of helping fulfils the duty to help. However, what this illustrates is that utterances may simultaneously evoke a number of different departures and consequent text worlds; and that these text worlds are not as discrete as either Werth or Gavins describe them in their models.

The final part of the poem presents an interesting world switch where there appears to be a judgement on the crewman's experience: 'out of the marvellous as he had known it' (line 12). This doesn't fit with something that might have been included in the annals, which are more likely to have ended with the description of the man climbing back up the rope. It is also stylistically different, since at no point in the narration in the first eleven lines is there a judgement on the experience, only a series of descriptions of the action. The annals' account of the incident is written from the perspective of the monks and focus on the marvellous appearance of the ship above Clonmacnoise. The reader of the annals is invited to position themselves with the monks and view the marvellous from that perspective. Heaney changes the perspective in the poem, instead choosing to privilege the marvellous from the crewman's perspective, who climbs out of the marvellous, and therefore back to the mundane. The reader is invited to position themselves at the level of the ship and view the world of the oratory as marvellous, and this is helped through the estrangement of the oratory through the generation of an image of submergence.

The final comment must be a judgement passed on the crewman's experience by the narrator because it interprets the quality of experience one character in the story may have had. This draws us back to the initial text world of the poem, and completes a framing device for the poem. Because it returns to the original text world level, it becomes participant-accessible. The reader, as participant cannot judge the truth-value of the narrative, but they can judge the truth-value of the comment on it. The initial

distancing through the deictic departure and the return to the original text world offer the opportunity to create sufficient distance between the reader and the narrative, so that the reader can interpret the narrative as a legend, or as a metaphorical or allegorical tale that has been exaggerated through the several processes of transcription and/or translation. This is helped by the fact that readers are aware that allegory and metaphor are standard tropes used by poets. The line 'as he had known it' separates us from the ability to make a truth judgement, because it is a narratorial comment on the crewman's subjective response to his situation rather than one which offers us the chance to make a truth judgement on the narrator. It also invites us as readers to see the incident from the crewman's perspective in order to judge the truth-value of the comment on the experience.

By using a series of words related to the maritime to populate the world of the monks, Heaney sets up what Werth (1994) called a 'double vision' whereby the target domain can be understood in terms of source domain properties. In this case the target domain is the spiritual domain signified by the world of the monks, and through the use of the lexical set related to submergence, this spiritual domain becomes an alien and dangerous element into which the 'crewman' must venture. The crewman may be understood as standing for the poet who ventures into the subconscious or spiritual realm in order to take back some sense of the 'marvellous'. The ship and anchor are the tools he uses to secure himself in this journey, poetic form (the ship is a container, as is poetic form) and the tension of the poetic line (symbolised by the rope weighted by the anchor). Such 'double vision' allows the reader to move back and forth between the two frames in the same way we may perceptually switch between the faces and vase in Rubin's Vase, a figure-ground bi-stable reversible figure (Rubin, 1915). Gavins (2007) refers to this movement between frames as toggling.

This fits with a reading of the poem hinted at by Heaney in his essay *Crediting Poetry* where he says:

> 'Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body' (Heaney 1998: 466).

A similar reading is echoed by Smith (2008), who also positions the poet as crewman, being anchored by poetic form. The proposition that the 'crewman' will not be able to 'bear [their] life down there' indicates that the domain into which the poet ventures is hazardous for him, and only fleeting forays are possible. This is analogous to Don Paterson's (2004: np) statement that 'a constant state of epiphany would kill you in a week'. Padilla (2009: 26) in an ecopoetic reading, describes the poem as portraying the 'entente of balance and movement' between elements, 'an earthy root and an airy imagination', again positioning the imaginative energy of the poem with the ship in the air. Padilla's reading of the poems as balance and movement between elements is an interesting one. It is a reading that is more difficult to account for in terms of text world theory as it stands. I experience a similar balance and movement between elements as I read the text, but the balance and movement between elements I experience is between two fluids: air and water.

4. A Complex 'Double Vision'

The environment of the oratory appears to change as the poem progresses from being terrestrial with a 'marvellous' ship appearing in the air above it, to the monks environment being understood by the reader as existing in the submarine (or at least among a denser fluid than the air above) with the ship floating above it and the crewman emerging 'out of' it. This effect is achieved through two strategies. Initially an ambiguity is opened in line 4 by the structurally ambiguous 'above them in the air'. This structure affords the reading that the ship is positioned above the monks in the air, while the monks are on the ground, and that both ship and monks exist in the medium of air, but it also affords the meaning that the ship is above 'in the air', while the monks are below in a different medium. This may also imply that the 'air' in which the ship sits is so

rarefied as to sit on top of the atmosphere in which the monks exist in the same way as a less dense fluid such as air sits on a denser fluid such as water.

This is reinforced by the use of 'anchor dragged' and 'deep' in relation to the oratory 'below' where the anchor 'hooked' onto the altar rails. This implies that the oratory is submerged, and the implication is further reinforced by the use of 'the big hull rocked' which implies a viewpoint from directly below (the hull) and from among the fluid on which the ship floats (and rocks). The crewman shinning down the rope and the abbot's belief that he will 'drown' also lead to the conclusion that this is a strange underwater oratory. However, we know that monks cannot normally survive under water, so we are forced to construct a world where the monks are in the normal atmosphere, but that atmosphere is so dense for the inhabitants of the ship, that the crewman of the strange ship will not survive it. Therefore we mush construct a world where the atmosphere in which the ship sits is alien and rarefied. It is an atmosphere where presumably the monks would not survive, and are incapable of reaching in any case. This sets up the situation where there are two worlds of the marvellous – the crewman sees the oratory as marvellous, the monks see the air-ship as marvellous. Both sets of actors, monks and crewman, can marvel at the unfamiliar, and the reader can see the marvel in both. This too says something about the function of poetry and the poet, to make strange the familiar and render it marvellous.

From the perspective of Text World Theory then, there might be said to be a world-split engendered by the ambiguity, in which separate worlds are constructed and accessed by the reader for each potential meaning. As these worlds are then further built and populated with world-building elements as they are encountered in the poem, the submarine world begins to take precedence over the other because of the use of a submarine lexical set to describe the terrain of the oratory. However, these two worlds of the oratory are blended later, where we understand that the oratory is not truly under

water, but is being portrayed by the poet as being within a domain as strange and dangerous to the crewman as the submarine is to us. Text World Theory as it stands cannot fully account for such switches and world blends.

It best fits with text world theory as a type of 'double vision', but it is certainly not a straightforward type where two worlds stand in metaphorical relation and can be toggled between. There is no toggling between submarine and air in the latter part of the poem, but a full blend emerges where we understand the relation between the monks' environment and the crewman's environment as similar to that between air and water, but the monks are not understood as being under water. The shift into this world is not directly signalled by any single linguistic structure, but by a gradual aggregation of such signals from the initial ambiguity and through the use of a lexical set which primes the submarine very heavily. The blend is achieved by combining this world constructed by the language structures of the poem, with the world we know exists contextually with reference to the original story, the actual place (Clonmacnoise), and our knowledge of the world.

5. Conclusion

In the Text World analysis of Heaney's poem, 'Squarings: Lightenings VIII', I have shown how the various text worlds are populated, and analysed the mechanisms by which readers move between them. I have considered the importance of background knowledge in relation to how deictic shifts might be interpreted and whether it might be appropriate to consider certain deictic shifts as multiple deictic shifts, especially when one is being directed to the text world of a translation of a copy of an account, as the reader is in the beginning of the poem. The initial deictic world-switch has been shown to operate as a distancing strategy, whereby the author places several removes between the 'story' and the reader, so that the unbelievable events portrayed are allowed to take on that allegorical, metaphoric or even mythic quality. I have also shown how some

departures may be thought of as having more than one type of modal quality attached to them, brought about through consideration of the semantic and pragmatic qualities of the utterance that engenders them. Finally, I have suggested that reading the poem as an extended metaphor in which the poet anchored by poetic form, ventures into the subconscious or spiritual self in order to find 'the marvellous' is supportable through the use of the mechanism Werth referred to as 'double vision' and Gavins called toggling.

However, another effect of the poem is the feeling it engenders of elements in balance and the movement between them. It is more difficult to explain how this 'double vision' is constructed. It is more complex, arising from an initial ambiguity, lexical primes, and a blend of words signalled by the linguistic devices and the world that our experiences and cultural contextual knowledge expects. This generates a feeling of balance and movement between the elements and the two marvellous worlds the actors of the poem experience in those elements. The poem offers the reader a sense of balance and movement between the elements, and a sense of being 'out of ones element'. It is also possible to toggle between these two readings: the poet anchored by poetic form enters the spiritual world to bring back a sense of the marvellous, and a sense that what is seen as marvellous very much depends on the viewpoint, both for reader and poet. It is the co-operative venture between them that brings out the marvels to be found.

(5250 words)

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