# SEAMUS HEANEY'S EARLY WORK

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*To my mother*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| *DN* | *Death of a Naturalist* |
| *DD* | *Door into the Dark* |
| *WO* | *Wintering Out* |
| *N* | *North* |
| *OG* | *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* |
| *P* | *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* |
| *GT* | *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and other Critical Writings* |

# PREFACE

This monograph tackles the question of poetic duty and responsibility in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, with specific reference to the work he published before moving his family to the relative safety of the Republic of Ireland. It attempts to demonstrate how the first four poetry collections by Heaney exhibit a progression in how the poet, after coming to grips with his artistic vocation, finally discovers the means by which to address the troublesome events that afflicted Northern Ireland at the time.

The very first poem in *Death of a Naturalist* informs us that Heaney is fully committed to use his pen in order to 'dig' (*DN* 1) in all that constitutes his country. Besides other things this is a declaration by someone willing to do something about the problems of his community. However, the main aim of this study is to show how difficult and at times burdensome has the artistic call been for Heaney. The first two collections give one a picture of a budding poet developing a style of his own, as well as creating in his mind the conception of the poet's figure as some sort of diviner, tapping the unknown and retrieving wisdom for his community. We come to see how the image of darkness is used as a symbol of the Jungian collective unconscious to which the poet has special means of access. *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* lay the foundations for the poet's engagement with 'external reality' (*OG* 449) in Heaney's future collections. *Wintering Out* focuses primarily on the question of the Irish language and investigates the problems elicited by the poet's use of the English language as his poetic medium. In *North*, Heaney grapples with the dilemma of how best to respond to Northern Ireland's political and religious climate, the dilemma of whether one should use the 'symbolic' or the 'explicit'[1] mode of poetry-writing.

Through a detailed analysis of the poems in these first four collections by Heaney, as well as a consideration of his critical writings, the relationship between the poet and his vocation is examined. The manner by which Heaney at times makes the issue of poetic responsibility the subject of his poetry and the way by which he seeks to break free from too deep a concern with the brutality and division of Ulster are also traced out.

By glossing upon the above-mentioned aspects of Heaney's work among others, this study intends to project Heaney's view of 'poetry's...power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it' (*OG* 467).

## *NOTES*

[1] Seamus Heaney, quoted in Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 54.

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# CHAPTER 1
## Heaney's Poet and Tightrope-Walking[1]

> From the back of the mind, a simple question
> Of being in two places at the one time.
>
> Michael Longley – 'Alibis'[2]

In the lecture 'Feeling into Words' Heaney describes his poetic work 'as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as 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' (*P* 41). In this statement Heaney describes poetry as being both a tool of exploration and a discovery in itself. This is because for Heaney poetry is the self's voice, the voice of consciousness and the unconscious. In the act of writing the poet's self is exuded in the form of words. He suggests that words are the carriers of psychic elements that originate in the unconscious and slowly flow up into the poet's consciousness. Heaney seems to believe in the idea that each individual is made up of a collective unconscious, which allows the reader to appreciate and value the truth of a poet's words because he 'has spoken something essential to you, something you recognise instinctively as a true sounding of aspects to yourself and your experience' (*P* 44).

In 'Feeling into Words' Heaney distinguishes between craft and technique claiming that the former is merely 'the skill of making' while technique is what makes the water diviner special; 'it is a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released' (*P* 47-48). He goes on to say that

'The diviner resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised' (*P* 48). This somewhat elitist view of the poet shows us Heaney's belief in the ideal poet's characteristics of a public spokesperson. It is also a statement somewhat in the spirit of Barthesian structuralism because Heaney seems to believe that the individual human subject is not the source of literary meaning or truth. As Blake Morrison points out, in Heaney's work 'There is the shared notion of language working through the medium of the author rather than the author through language'.[3] But with this we must find a means of tying in the ambiguities elicited by Heaney's belief in absolute truths or 'The diamond absolutes' (*N* 73) of his poems. For even though Heaney exhibits an acquaintance with De Saussure's concept of langue, he at times conveys the idea that one must distinguish between what he regards as the different phenomena of language and poetry. In his Nobel Lecture Heaney says that 'in lyric poetry, truthfulness becomes recognizable as a ring of truth within the medium itself' (*OG* 466). However, this statement should be read in conjunction with what Heaney claims in 'The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry': 'Poetry of any power is always deeper than its declared meaning. The secret between the words, the binding element, is often a psychic force that is elusive, archaic and only half-apprehended by maker and audience' (*P* 186). Heaney seems to imply that poetry is not created solely by language but is the amalgamation of language and elements that flow out of a source deep within the human psyche. When Heaney speaks about technique he is not referring solely to the technical aspect of poetry-writing or to the form itself. Technique for the poet 'involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate' (*P* 47). For Heaney the poet serves a social function, he is in touch with 'the heart of the mystery' (*P* 48) and his role is that of bringing wisdom to his community. For him poetry 'involves the divining, vatic, oracular function' (*P* 49).

The tenets presented in 'Feeling into Words' and other lectures and essays by Heaney, as well as in his poetry itself, seem to be remarkably contiguous to the Jungian interpretation of the self, through which perspective one feels invited to read Heaney's conception of the poet, the poet's function in a strife-ridden community and his responsibilities towards art and humanity in general. C.G. Jung groups the psychic contents of the psyche into Consciousness, the Personal Unconscious and the Collective Unconscious. The personal unconscious is the uppermost level of the unconscious and those subliminal elements that reside in it are in some way 'lost', but if occasion arises they can be brought back into one's consciousness. These subliminal elements are usually personal memories or things experienced transitorily and then forgotten. In 'Feeling into Words' Heaney gives a number of examples of such phenomena in a bid to elucidate his method of poetic composition. Such are, for example, the memory of being told that "the pen's lighter than the spade" (*P* 42) as a child, or the warning of old people that the bogs are bottomless.

Jung proposes the idea that the psychic elements of the personal unconscious are somewhat linked to a deeper level of the unconscious, what he calls the 'collective' or 'objective unconscious'. Whereas the manifestations of the personal unconscious are different from one person to the next, the manifestations of the collective unconscious are relatively identical. The contents of the collective unconscious as the collective unconscious itself are not a product of an individual's consciousness. This led Jung to claim that the collective unconscious is a kind of framework binding all human beings together, a mountain range whose various peaks are individual conscious minds.

Jung's method is sometimes called 'archetypal psychology'. This is because he believed that the collective unconscious contains patterns of psychic perception and understanding shared by all human beings. These archetypes are psychic moulds in which individual and common experiences take shape and give rise to symbolic and imaginal manifestations that share traits of similarity from

one person to the next. Manifestations of the collective unconscious have a larger than life quality about them. They usually occur in dreams and fantasies and Jung has found that they include images and ideas that form part of the core of religion and mythology. Jung thought that the collective unconscious contains wisdom that is necessary for all humanity. For Jung positive development comes about when one brings into consciousness the contents of the archetypes and when one is consciously in touch with the source of power and wholeness present in the collective unconscious. He believed that one of the psychotherapists' main functions is that of bringing people into contact with the collective unconscious. He claimed that since the archetypes of religion and mythology are embedded in the collective unconscious religion is an important force in human life. For Jung the human need for religious experience is an inherent part of the human mind. He defined religious experience as contact with the divine, spiritual, or what he called the numinous, which for Jung can take place through dreams, visions and mystical experience.

In Heaney's early collections poetry is perceived as being a kind of mystical experience. In such poems as 'The Forge', 'The Diviner', 'Personal Helicon' and others, the idea of the poet as a connection linking the known and the unknown is conveyed. The poet peers into the depths and then 'set[s] the darkness echoing' (*DN* 46). In this regard poetry can be seen as being similar to religion: the nexus with a transcendent reality that fulfils human beings and elevates them beyond their limitations. This transcendent reality can be seen as existing within the collective unconscious, which therefore incorporates the spiritual dimension of human existence. Poetry is a means of forming a relationship with this other reality.

However, in 'The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry', Heaney speaks of this transcendent reality as existing within Nature. Heaney describes the poet in terms of a druidic high priest to whom the gods of Ireland, the spirits of Nature, 'shrouded in the living matrices of stones and tree, immanent in the

natural world' (*P* 186), accord revelation, and through whom they communicate with the people. In the poem 'Oracle' the poet is the 'small mouth and ear / in a woody cleft, / lobe and larynx / of the mossy places' (*WO* 28). Heaney says that 'some authorities would have it that the role of the *file*, the official poet in historic times, was continuous with the role of the druid in archaic times. I like that possibility a lot because the root of the word 'druid' is related to *doire*, the oak grove, and through that the poet is connected with the mysteries of the grove, and the poetic imagination is linked with the barbaric life of the wood, with Oisin rather than with Patrick' (*P* 186). Furthermore, Heaney affirms that early Irish poetry 'is sustained by a deep unconscious affiliation to the old mysteries of the grove' (*P* 186). Basing ourselves on these assertions we can argue that the connection with Nature is also a connection with the unconscious. The values of Nature, the source of poetic inspiration for poets such as Wordsworth and Heaney, are the same values found in the human unconscious perhaps due to the fact that man's ancient bond to the earth allowed him to discover in it those elements that are necessary for human fulfilment. In his poems about the thatcher, the blacksmith, the fishermen and other such characters, Heaney's reverential tone betrays a sense of anxiety that something valuable is being lost. This is not solely the heritage of Ireland, but the values that his rural characters harbour within themselves and their way of life. It is as if the connection with the other dimension, the spiritual or numinous dimension buried in the unconscious of the people themselves as well as in the landscape and in the people's traditions, is being quickly weakened. Moreover, all this allows us to say that the pagan element found in such a playwright as J.M. Synge is also to some extent found in Heaney's early collections of poetry.

Jung claims that the contents of the objective psyche can also be negative but this definition usually depends on how much an individual is ready to identify with the contents of the collective unconscious. Jung states that beside wisdom abnormal behaviour and psychosis can result out of a too heavy identification

with the psychic elements of the collective unconscious. Identification is the means by which the individual identifies with an element of the collective unconscious and ultimately allows that element to dominate his consciousness. For Jung a common form of identification is that of identifying with the image of the divine guide. This is common in people whose social role attributes to them an amount of power over others or a status that is superior to that of others. If this kind of identification is allowed to grow in a person's mind it leads to 'inflation', which allows the individual to fully believe in his or her absolute authority. Jung believed that certain men and women in certain contexts and circumstances are capable of bridging the gap between consciousness and the unconscious. Some do this by identifying with a certain unconscious idea that they allow to reign over and destroy their ego; others explore what flows out of the collective unconscious and try to use it in a controlled and beneficial manner. What makes dictators, prophets and poets similar is that they give concrete expression to the inner desires of the collective unconscious, desires that struggle to find a means of expression through one medium or another. Hitler promised the embittered German nation dignity and power and Jesus Christ promised the persecuted Jews and modern-day Christians peace and salvation. The poet creates an art that assuages the deep innner thirst for what Heaney calls 'truths in disguise' (*P* 49).

Heaney sees the poet as having a function, not quite unlike that of a priest or a psychotherapist. For him poetry is a kind of religion necessary for human fulfilment. When Heaney speaks of poems as 'archaeological finds'; when he refers to poetry as 'a dig for finds that end up being plants' (*P* 41), Heaney is implying that poetry is embedded deep within the human unconscious and that through it people are capable of arriving at truth, value and meaning. Poetry helps define collective human kinship and the poet is the bridge between the source of poetry and everyday human life. Heaney never speaks of himself as the origin of poetry. The oracle in the Classical Age was the medium through which divine utterances were transmitted, sometimes ambiguously but always authoritatively.

The vatic function of the poet is also hinted at in *The Waste Land*. Both the sibyl in the epigraph and Tiresias in the third movement contribute to the allusive prophecy of the poem, part of 'the visionary strangeness of Eliot' (*OG* 451). For Heaney, poems are conceived in 'the pre-verbal operation of the psyche...the essential power source on which the poem depends...a preconscious source [that] is giving power from below'.[4] In this regard Heaney also claims that 'The crucial action is pre-verbal' (*P* 49). This leads us to affirm that Heaney's poet is a kind of person who is vested with the special ability of tapping the needs of collective humanity, besides those of his immediate community.

Even though by identifying with the special powers of the diviner and by speaking about the oracular function of the poet, Heaney is guilty of some inflation, still as evidenced by his work the psychic element of the divine guide is not allowed to run reinless within him. The ambivalence and self-criticism found in the first four collections of Heaney's poetry show us a poet who even though capable of seeing himself as similar to one of the various special craftsmen and tradesmen we find in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*, described by Blake Morrison as 'pantheistic go-betweens, establishing bridges between the known and the unknown',[5] Heaney is also a poet who at times loses faith in his own art and in his own function. Furthermore, the typical euphoria of an inflated person that is felt by Heaney in the first two collections is checked by feelings of disillusionment in *Wintering Out* and *North*. Jung's concept of the 'persona' helps us to further understand Heaney's conception of the poet. For Jung the persona is a psychic division that though formed by the unconscious resides in a close association with one's ego and hence at an extreme point from the collective unconscious. In order for the individual to effectively play his role in society and accept the responsibilities that role carries with it he must perforce identify with the psychic elements associated with that role. For Heaney's poet, responsibility for others and artistic integrity, as well as the guise of a moral leader are the psychic elements woven into the persona of the poet. The persona and the

individual ego are not distinguishable but the persona is the personality used to express the individual ego and which is best suited for the outside world. Heaney's conception of the persona of the poet is what is traditionally understood by everyone in Western civilisation: a kind of Romantic creature whose spirit and perception are honed much better than those of ordinary human beings. In Jungian terms such a poet may be described as fitting the psychological type of the intuitive person, someone closer to the unconscious realm of experience and perceptions of which other psychological types are not aware of, and from which this kind of person is capable of deriving the contents of the psychic archetypes. The poet's persona serves to bring out those elements that are an intrinsic part of the poet's ego, as well as those elements that the poet excavates out of the collective unconscious. In Heaney these latter elements are blended both with elements from his personal unconscious and with elements from his consciousness, that is, elements that the poet derives from his great sensitivity to external reality, both in its spiritual and in its material manifestations.

Two months after the publication of *Door into the Dark*, in the summer of 1969, violence erupted in Belfast between Protestants and Catholics. Affronted by the brutality of the murders, clashes and executions, Heaney felt that 'From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (*P* 56). He felt himself entrapped in the dilemma of having to adhere to the artistic principles he believed in while 'at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity' (*P* 56-57). The word 'complexity' tells us about the difficulties a poet faces when he feels flushed into the murky world of politics and violence. It is a world other poets admired by Heaney experienced, too: Dante, Wordsworth, Yeats and Zbigniew Herbert, for example. It is a world that can be simplistically defined in terms of black and white; however, this is something that Heaney refused to do from the very beginning. The 'complexity' lied in the fact that Heaney had taken

on the guise of the poet fully committed to its role. For him this was both an artistic and a social one and so when faced with the 'predicament' Heaney had to remind himself of what he was and not let himself be influenced by who he was. The voice inside him had to resist the bias of the Catholic Nationalist Seamus Heaney.

The bog in Heaney's poetry is an image for Ireland's unconscious. It is for the poet to dig 'Inwards and downwards' (*DD* 41), excavate that which is necessary for the consciousness of his people. It is his duty to do so and it is his responsibility to remain truthful to the values and wisdom he manages to excavate out of it. Heaney's main dilemma is that his responsibilities towards his Catholic Nationalist background, which he cannot deny and to which he feels personally very much part of, clash with the responsibilities entailed by his artistic function. In *Wintering Out* and *North* we see a poet in conflict with himself, continually struggling to find the golden mean between the seemingly opposite demands of the factions of tradition and art. In Jungian psychology consciousness is born out of the unconscious. It develops when unconscious psychic elements are brought into consciousness. The poet's responsibility in such a context as that of Northern Ireland is that of salvaging those elements that are required for the development of the people's consciousness. His responsibility is that of retrieving solely positive elements that ennoble the consciousness of his race and not degrade it or narrow it further. Hence the poet's artistic responsibility is that of not using his poetry as propaganda aimed at propelling his public towards what is universally considered to be wrong. His poetry is a door allowing his readers to discover themselves. If that door leads his readers to identify with psychic elements that will distort their egos and make them inhuman; if the poet fails to remain self-critical and alert to the dangers that can arise out of his work; if the poet demeans art and its principles, then that poet would have transgressed heavily.

One can say that the above principles are firmly adhered to by Heaney, even though this should not stop us from considering how difficult it is for him

not to identify with those radical forces that promise quick change in Northern Ireland. In 'Crediting Poetry' he confesses that at times he was led to consider violence as the only way of 'helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential' (*OG* 457). But he quickly admits that such moments were brief and shocking. In an interview with Karl Miller, Heaney, speaking about section VII in the poem 'Station Island', defends his position for not stating outrightly that the killers of the murdered shopkeeper who appears in the poem were in fact members of the RUC. He says 'I felt that if I blazoned that into the poem, it would constitute an inflammatory, propagandist, almost pro-IRA gesture. It would be taken as saying that all the RUC were what the graffiti called them – murderers'.[6] Here we see Heaney's sense of responsibility coming out to defend the innocent, even though the RUC is composed mainly of members of the Orange Order whose twelfth July parade is partly responsible for the perpetuation of the embittered relationship between Protestants and Catholics. In another interview Heaney acknowledges the fact that if he were to speak out he would 'move in behalf of those guys – you're part of the war machine now, and in a way you have lost your mystery'.[7] Here we find a confirmation that his responsibility is reflected also in his deep respect for art and his vocation, refusing to tarnish it with anything that might associate him to blind violent mechanisms.

As already mentioned, in Heaney's poetry Ireland's history, its traditions and customs, problems and divisions can be seen as constituting the Jungian personal unconscious. The bog is an apposite metaphor for this and since Ireland's unconscious is conveyed to the reader via the poet, in this bog we must also see deposited Heaney's own memories and experiences. But in the poem 'Bogland', Heaney claims that 'The wet centre is bottomless' (*DD* 42), and this might be interpreted as signifying that Heaney's poetry is not just Irish poetry bedaubed solely with the concerns of the Ulster background. It is rather a kind of poetry that taps the collective unconscious of humanity from which Heaney extracts universal

themes and values. The latter are blended with elements taken from his immediate context and the final product is one applicable to all sorts of readers.

Speaking about Thomas Hardy's poem 'Afterwards' in a lecture given at Caen University in June 1992, Heaney says 'that in the end the poem is more given over to the extraordinary than to the ordinary, more devoted to the superabundance of the imagined response than to the adequacy of the actual social one'.[8] These words are obviously very much true of Heaney's own work. His poetry at times deals with quite ordinary things while at other times it focuses on disquieting events and experiences that even though brutal are not beyond the grasp of modern day readers, the audience of the constant media-powered inundation of gore and violence. But the point is that Heaney transforms the ordinary. Whether it comes to portraying the executed 'Windeby Girl' or else himself watching his aunt baking scones, Heaney defamiliarizes the event and in doing so he follows the truth of his own words: 'poetry brings human existence into a fuller life'.[9]

In the prefatory essay to *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney outlines the basic predicament for most poets in his kind of situation: 'Both Art and Life have had a hand in the formation of any poet, and both are to be loved, honoured and obeyed. Yet both are often perceived to be in conflict and that conflict is constantly and sympathetically suffered by the poet' (*GT* p. xii). For Heaney 'political and social impositions' are the cause of 'constricting forces' and in a way they 'represent the repressions and self-censorings which hamper a writer and keep him or her stalled at the barrier of composition'.[10] He compares such an experience to the feelings felt at a road-block at which you are stopped and you know that 'If your name is Seamus, you have known from childhood that you are marked by that name as one of the suspected and that feeling of having something to answer for is reinforced by the fact you are now being investigated anyhow'.[11] Here Heaney is implicitly showing us how someone in his position feels, given his kind of background and working in his particular historical context. Pressing

demands are made upon him by all quarters and in *Wintering Out* and *North*, especially, we see a perplexed poet who does not completely know in which direction he should tread. In 'Crediting Poetry' these pressing demands are described as 'A public expectation...not of poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups' (*OG* 451). But underlying this perplexity, which manifests itself in ambivalent and ambiguous poems that at times give vent to a strong sense of disillusion and dissatisfaction, we sense something much more forceful emerging, something which reaffirms Heaney's belief in art. Art 'is another moment, a moment of gratifying permission when the license is handed back, you are waved on, the brake and clutch release, the gears get purchase, and everything is on the move again'.[12] For Heaney poetic composition allows him to free himself and follow the road he truly wants to follow.

Poetry is essentially an art of freedom and this is what Heaney seeks for himself and his readers. Setting down Anton Chekhov, Wilfred Owen and Sorley MacLean as examples, Heaney describes how at times a poet feels embarrassed to practice his art since it 'has an element of the untrammelled about it' (*GT* p. xviii), which is a striking contrast in the face of horror, pain and lack of freedom. However, in other poets, themselves the victims of persecution, Heaney finds the desired dispensation to create works of beauty and truth and justice. Zbigniew Herbert and Osip Mandelstam urge him to write poetry even while bombs are exploding on the streets, peppering the ground with charred human remains. They urge him to write poetry as long as he does not imbibe in it as a means of escapism. Together with these poets, Heaney believes that through art peace and other everlastingly true values can be achieved. This is demonstrated to him by how anti-totalitarian writers working under the Communist regime slowly managed to undermine the system and push it towards its final collapse. Heaney passionately embraces the liberating power of art, but he never allows himself to forget who he is and what his responsibilities to his own Northern Irish

community entail. However, as we see in the 'Bog Poems', for example, Heaney is only capable of depicting the turmoil going on around him when he can translate mind-raping phenomena into a language his readers and he himself can understand and think about, or else a language that helps us to appropriately 'digest...this savage food'.[13] This is what he calls 'poetry's gift for telling truth but telling it slant' (*OG* 454). For Heaney, 'lyric writing always involves the shifting of a weight of personal experience through a certain distance...In a poem, the load of the world is not abandoned or absconded from; it is more that by application of imaginative force it is set in motion, and once it is in motion, it feels lighter and more manageable; it is still recognisably a weight but the weight is no longer a dead weight'.[14]

Heaney's poetry builds a connection between human reality and ever-positive values. It is his answer to those who knock on his sense of responsibility demanding loyalty and outrage. In his poems Heaney exercises sympathy, compassion and understanding. His is a poetry of pity, not of outrage. Anger blinds reason and Heaney knows that a poet has to develop a sense of detachment in order to glean all the shades of the matter. As he admits in the essay 'Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', in Jung, Heaney finds a means by which the 'insoluble conflict' (*GT* p. xxii) of Northern Ireland can be resolved. Heaney believes that the only way towards the achievement of harmony is that of 'outgrowing' the conflict and 'developing in the process a 'new level of consciousness'' (*GT* p. xxii). If the people keep identifying themselves with combatants in a struggle for victory over the other party, problems will never cease to crop up over and over again. In order to bridge the gulf a 'juster internal balance' (*GT* p. xxi) has to be achieved. Heaney claims that this important fact was also acknowledged early on by poets like Derek Mahon and Michael Longley. These poets sought to partly free themselves of the conflict in order not to narrow down the scope of their work. Heaney claims that

> By the 1960s, in Jung's scenario, 'a higher consciousness' was manifesting itself in the form of poetry itself, an ideal towards which

> the poets turned in order to survive the stunning conditions...The tongue, governed for so long in the social sphere by considerations of tact and fidelity, by nice obeisances to one's origin within the minority or the majority, this tongue is suddenly ungoverned. It gains access to a condition that is unconstrained and, while not practically effective, is not necessarily inefficacious (*GT* p. xxii).

The beauty and artistic freedom of Heaney's poetry is a retaliation against the forces of strife, division and dispossession. It transcends, transmutes and translates political and religious dissonance and all the ill-effects this has left to litter its wake. In 'The Frontier of Writing' Heaney quotes the poet-critic Robert Pinsky who says that 'this need to answer by transforming is primary...The poet needs to feel utterly free, yet answerable'.[15] This parallels Heaney's definition of poetry as 'an order...true to the impact of external reality and...sensitive to the inner laws of a poet's being' (*OG* 449). Heaney struggles against the forces of discord by affirming his belief in the life-force of art even when he seems disillusioned with the efficacy of art in such a context as that of Northern Ireland. Heaney's belief in art is both a political stand and a route towards the resolution of a culture of injustice and violence, discrimination and dispossession and religious and political feuds. Heaney credits poetry's 'power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it' (*OG* 467). Art is life-affirming and for Heaney the main function and responsibility of the poet is that of guiding people towards what lies beyond the complex yet senseless dissension they create from a want of wisdom.

*Notes*

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[1] In the poem '1751' by Miroslav Holub we find the following lines 'So the counting out began, to separate the sane, who / veil themselves in words, from the insane, who rip off / feathers from their bodies. / Poets had to learn tightrope-walking'. Miroslav Holub, *Vanishing Lung Syndrome*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990, p. 3.
[2] Michael Longley, *Poems 1963-1983*, Penguin Books, London, 1986, p. 105.
[3] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, 1982, p. 15.
[4] Seamus Heaney, 'The Frontier of Writing', in Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellgouarc'h, eds., *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 1996, p. 14.
[5] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 32.
[6] Karl Miller, 'Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller', *Between the Lines*, (31 July 2000) <http://www.interviews-with-poets.com/seamus-heaney/> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[7] Francis X. Clines, 'Poet of the Bogs', *The New York Times*, (13 March 1983) <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/20/specials/heaney-bogs.html> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[8] Seamus Heaney, 'The Frontiers of Writing', p. 4.
[9] Ibid, p. 5.
[10] Ibid, p. 6.
[11] Ibid, pp. 5-6.
[12] Ibid, p. 6.
[13] Maurice Harmon, 'Seamus Heaney and the Gentle Flame', in Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h, eds., *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 1996, p. 23.
[14] Seamus Heaney, 'The Frontier of Writing', p. 7.
[15] Ibid, p. 10.

CHAPTER 2

## Growing into a King of the Dark:[1] *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969)

> I saw my life and I walked out to it,
> as a seaman walks out alone at night from
> his house down to the port with his bundled
> belongings, and sails into the dark.
>
> Desmond O' Grady – 'Purpose'[2]

*Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* are both closely tied to Heaney's early life in the rural setting of County Derry. They are books that allow us to glean the poet's gradual development and his growing self-awareness as a poet. Heaney admits that his childhood was a very important period in his life and a powerful influence on his poetic career: 'I like to feel that the line I am writing is being paid out from some old inner voice reel, that it is coming from the place I re-enter every time I go back to where I grew up'.[3] In terms of literary influences, Heaney derived much from the stylistic and thematic characteristics of such poets as Ted Hughes and Gerald Manley Hopkins. Such poems as 'Trout', 'Cow in Calf', 'Turkeys Observed' and 'The Early Purges' are clear examples of this. In these two early collections we find what Philip Hobsbaum calls 'Heaneyspeak',[4] that is, the heavy use of a distinctive kind of onomatopoeia. In fact, right from the start the texture of the language is a very important aspect of Heaney's poetry. Another important influence upon Heaney was that of the fellow Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. In Kavanagh, Heaney found an emboldening force, someone who had experienced his own dilemma, encouraging Heaney to pursue his interests in the rural setting of his homeland. Kavanagh's 'Epic' provided Heaney with a much-needed reassurance:

> That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
> Was more important? I inclined
> To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
> Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
> He said: I made the Iliad from such
> A local row. Gods make their own importance.[5]

Kavanagh helped Heaney to link the cosmopolitanism of literature with his illiterate ancestral past.[6] This was necessary for Heaney since he had to move out of that inferiority complex the poets of the contemporary technological world created in him. In fact Morrison says that 'If Kavanagh had not existed, Heaney would have had to invent him'.[7] Heaney had to be assured that the Wordsworthian vein of poetry could co-exist with the Modernist one and still be considered valid. Heaney says that one of the main forces that propelled his early poetic career was his 'reading of contemporary poets like Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas, Norman MacCaig, John Montague and, most important of all, Pat Kavanagh. From them I learned that my local County Derry experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to 'the modern world', was to be trusted. They taught me that trust and helped me to articulate it'.[8]

The education of the poet in the first two collections is somewhat similar to that of the young Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. Throughout much of the early Heaney a sort of pantheistic streak is detected. For example, in 'At a Potato Digging' (*DN* 20) the earth is called 'the black / Mother' and in the last stanza the Catholic ritual of communion is turned into a pagan one as the field-workers 'take their fill, / Thankfully breaking timeless fasts; / Then, stretched on the faithless ground, spill / Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts'. In his nature poetry, Heaney adopts Hughes's violent imagery in order to depict the forceful energy of the natural world. However, unlike Hughes, Heaney does not aim at depicting nature's indifference to man and its greater power when the two are contrasted. As Roland Mathias says 'What Heaney owes to Hughes...is a subject-matter that is rural, ungenteel and treated with force, not any kind of interpretation of that subject-matter'.[9] Even though in some poems the natural world is seen as an

intractable force defying human categories and expectations (as in 'Death of a Naturalist', 'Blackberry-Picking' and others), the poet never focuses on how pale and fragile the human world is when contrasted with the natural one. Heaney's creed is what one may call Humanist and for him nature's at times savage power is not something to daunt human beings, but something that aids the liberation of human potential. This is due to the fact that Heaney considers man as being a fundamental part of nature, sharing its mystery, and not something apart from it. The mystery is depicted as a female power, and this correlates with the prehistoric identification of the earth with a female in most western cultures, Marian devotion and the Ancient idea of female muses. This feminine creative force is the breeding ground for life and art, and the image of clear water running freely in 'Rite of Spring', 'Undine' and 'Bann Clay' is an apposite metaphor for poetic inspiration. Even though for the poet in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* nature's power is frightening and disquieting, he instinctively knows that the darkness is beckoning him and he must perforce enter it. This is not just a case of mastering one's fears but of diving into the mystery because one knows that it is the source of meaning.

In his first two books, Heaney identifies himself and his Irish community with the mythological figure of Antaeus, as testifies the poem bearing that title and collected for the first time in *North*, even though written as early as 1966. Both *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* are the products of the poet's close bond to the natural world around him, something derived from his upbringing in the rural limits of Castledawson. However, his is not just a more aggressive strand of Georgian poetry. Heaney is not a nature poet; he detaches himself from nature because his poetry is not a mere extolment of the Irish countryside and rural life. Heaney uses nature as an image for a mysterious dimension he feels impelled to explore. His concern is not with the mutable natural world outside, but with artistic creations. Even in later collections like *Electric Light* (2001) we find poems constructed on a rural background or on

scenes from the natural world. However, his purpose goes beyond mere portrayal. 'Ballynahinch Lake' is a good example of this. In this poem the landscape is beautifully and concisely described, but Heaney's aim is that of using the landscape for a kind of spiritual binding element uniting the poet and his wife together in an act of communion that transcends the landscape itself.

The first step in the poet's development that is enacted out in the first two collections is that of the loss of childhood innocence. According to Neil Corcoran 'Death of a Naturalist' and 'Blackberry-Picking' 'are poems in which an enlargement of consciousness is enacted in an interchange between mind and nature'.[10] In 'Blackberry-Picking' (*DN* 10) the child is ecstatic about the mouth-watering blackberries:

> You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
> Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
> Leaving stains upon the tongue and a lust for
> Picking.

However, the blackberries do not remain so for long, for soon after 'the bath was filled we found a fur, / A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache'. The child's rage at what will not keep is his growing awareness that one's desires in life are continually thwarted despite one's renewed hopes: 'Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not'. Reality undermines our expectations and this theme is also pursued in the poem 'Death of a Naturalist' (*DN* 5), in which the idyllic pictures of childhood innocence are destroyed by 'a coarse croaking I had not heard / Before'. The child comes to realise that there is another world besides the secure one of Miss Walls' classroom and the one where 'Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles / Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell' of rotting flax. The 'warm thick slobber / Of frogspawn' the child was fond of collecting every spring suddenly undergoes a transformation that threatens the child with the reality of things:

> The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
> Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
> I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings

Were gathered there for vengeance, and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

In other poems the young poet is faced with the crude reality of death in its many forms and manifestations. In 'The Early Purges' (*DN* 13) the poet feels 'Suddenly frightened' witnessing the bodies of drowned cats, 'watching the three sogged remains / Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung'. And 'the fear came back / When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows / Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks'. But before long, death for the child is no longer 'unnatural'. He comes to realise that 'living displaces false sentiments' and that 'on well-run farms pests have to be kept down'. His fear is slowly dissolved and in 'Dawn Shoot' (*DN* 18) he participates in hunting snipe. Through the use of military terms and images the poet projects himself and his friend Donnelly into the paradox of a situation that sways between acceptance and condemnation. They shoot dead the snipe but then leave the carcasses where they fell: 'the prices were small at that time / So we did not bother to cut out the tongue'. The poet is embroiled in brutality and mercilessness, but at the same time these are part of the sacrifice demanded by everyday life. The child sheds off his innocence and broadens his consciousness, coming to accept death as an inevitable fact of life even though at times painful, as is conveyed to us in 'Mid-Term Break' and 'Elegy for a Still-Born Child'. The death of the naturalist, the death of the innocent child inside the poet marks the death of a blind kind of freedom, the freedom to wander serenely without the burden of responsibility.

In Heaney darkness is not just a symbol for the mysteries of the natural world but also a symbol for his own self, history, tradition and, most importantly, the unconscious source of his poetry. It is the latter which most disquiets the young poet of the first two collections. In those poems dealing with what Heaney depicts as his calling, fear is the predominant feeling conveyed to us. The poet is affronted by 'The dark gulfed like a roof-space' and he feels like 'chaff / To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits' (*DN* 7). For Heaney darkness is

both a mother and a lover; he both needs it and fears it. Darkness is also a symbol for the numinous. It is an ineradicable part of himself as he admits in the first line of 'The Forge', and it even haunts him in sleep: 'Before I woke / I heard the steel stop / In the bone of the brow' (*DD* 3). In 'The Forge' (*DD* 7) the figure of the blacksmith is not just something part of Heaney's symbolism. What Heaney does is that of using something out of common everyday-life (even though now on the brink of extinction) and vesting it with the extraordinary by amplifying the signification of the ordinary event. The anvil is an 'altar' standing 'somewhere in the centre'. The poet is its high-priest and going round its circumference he 'expends himself in shape and music', like Hephaestus determined 'To beat real iron out'. This is a symbol for the 'immoveable', the permanent in a world of transitory values, ideologies and beliefs. One comes to feel that the idea of the blacksmith is not coincidental. Stephen Dedalus's intention 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'[11] in the penultimate paragraph of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is very significant. It binds in with Heaney's view of the poet as a moral leader, a prophet bringing truth to the people, or else an artist replenishing the depleted soul of his community. Dedalus's rejection of Irish pettiness is the blacksmith's rejection of the contemporary world's materialism and lack of spiritual fulfilment, a world whose only prospect is that of 'traffic...flashing in rows'. However, Heaney's pursuit of artistic freedom is somewhat hampered by his sense of social responsibility. Heaney sees the artist as a social function, not as an outsider. Hence in the first two collections, Heaney's main dilemma immediately comes to the fore: Heaney as a poet attached to his community's ancestral past and traditions, as well as to its present social situation, and at the same time Heaney as a poet harbouring a powerful need to forge his own poetic voice. He projects to us the dilemma of choosing between being a follower, or else someone to be followed and hence shouldering all the responsibilities this entails.

Heaney forms part of a generation that was the first to benefit from the United Kingdom's 1947 Education Act. In the poem 'Digging' (*DN* 3) the poet gazes out through the window and realises just how alienated he feels from the traditions of his forefathers. However, 'Digging' also manifests Heaney's intention to dig with his pen, to propagate the traditions and culture of his community through the power of art: 'The squat pen rests; snug as a gun'. Michael R. Molino points out that Heaney symbolises both Hercules and Antaeus since he seeks to effect both a disjunction with the past and a conjunction with it. Heaney's chosen mode of digging is 'both a productive and a destructive act'.[12] Heaney does not write to preserve the past as it truly was. His poems are in a way a re-evocation of the past, but they are also a detached contemplation and investigation of it. Heaney's work re-inscribes the past for 'the image of the Irish past must be continually reinscribed to avoid fossilization'.[13] 'Digging' is a poem that both epitomises Heaney's rural verse as well as confronts the issue of a poet's vocation and his sense of responsibility. 'Digging' blends the tradition of the spade with that of the pen into one redeeming life force.

Heaney projects himself as a reviver of history. The image of the poet digging in the bog is an apposite metaphor for Heaney's intent to discover value and meaning in the history of his Irish community, something that forms part of the collective unconscious of the human race. The bog is a symbol for the infinite depths of the unconscious in which past, present and future are intertwined together, forming man's metaphysical reality. In an interview with Francis X. Clines, Heaney alludes to this idea by quoting the poet W.B. Yeats who says: 'If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about those others, but because all life has that same root'.[14] In fact it is interesting to note that images of roots are used quite frequently by Heaney, both as something symbolising a common human bond and also as something symbolising the source of poetry itself; in Heaney roots are associated with

darkness. In 'Digging' the poet can feel the 'living roots' inside his head, and in 'Personal Helicon' (*DN* 46) he recounts how 'When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch, / A white face hovered over the bottom'. By these two lines we must not see roots as a mere impediment that the poet has to surpass in order to arrive at what lies buried; roots are something that give unity to the darkness. In 'At a Potato Digging' after 'a clean birth' of potatoes is unearthed we are told that they have a 'solid feel' about them and that their 'wet insides / promise taste of ground and root'. In 'Dawn Shoot' the poet faces 'A sandy bank, reinforced with coiling roots'.

In 'At a Potato Digging' the poet binds past, present and future by pushing forward a sense of nationhood that is structured on common experiences: a history that unites all generations, and the earth that is presented as the Irish people's mother. The poem 'Bogland' shows us how the continuity of history fits in well with the Jungian interpretation, since all past cultures are found sandwiched together in the present existence of the bog that symbolises the human unconscious. Other poems such as 'Shoreline', 'Whinland', 'Relic of Memory' and 'Gravities' expose the past's persistence; the quasi-deterministic quality of tradition; the past as something always carried in the present, always existing within oneself. In 'Gravities' (*DN* 32) origins are described as an ineradicable part of oneself. Just as 'High-riding kites appear to range quite freely, / Though reined by strings, strict and invisible', Joyce, 'Blinding in Paris, for his party-piece / ...named the shops along O' Connell Street'. In 'Shoreline' (*DD* 38) ancient fortifications 'Stay, forgotten like sentries', but still the landscape is marked by their presence. In 'Bogland' (*DD* 41) 'Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years / Was recovered salty and white'. In 'Whinlands' (*DD* 35) the whin, even when given fire, 'Persists on hills, near stone ditches, / Over flintbed and battlefield'. The whins can be read as a symbol for the violent atmosphere bequeathed to the contemporary Irish community by a history steeped in violence and brutality since the days of rival Celtic kings. This line of thought resurfaces in

'Shoreline' in which the poet feels confused whether what he hears are the echoes of 'the Danes, / A black hawk bent on the sail', 'Or the chinking Normans', 'Or currachs hopping high / On to the sand'. In the poem the word 'forgotten' might be read as expressing Heaney's exasperation at the fact that the blood-bath of history has failed to teach anything of value to modern day Irish society. The poem also points at the fact that Northern Ireland's history is one characterised by constant foreign invasions and dispossession. In 'At a Potato Digging' the Great Famine is described as Ireland's 'running sore' and in 'Requiem for the Croppies' (*DD* 12) the dead rebels of 1798 claim that 'They buried us without shroud or coffin / And in August the barley grew up out of the grave'. Both these poems push forward the idea of the past's continuity. In both poems the land plays an important role as a preserver of history and what might be seen as a sense of rebellion and anger. Both poems can be read as Heaney's expression of nationalistic sentiment; Heaney laying down proof for the validity of the struggle for independence. However, Heaney resists labelling. He rarely exhibits his political allegiances in his work and he does not allow his poetry to become too narrow and limited scope-wise.

Some critics have discussed Heaney's tendency to overturn the ordinary cultural categories of positive and negative. The dark, for Heaney, is not something inhibiting and he uses it as a concept incorporating within it all that accords him revelation. As the poet gradually develops in poetic awareness his fear of the dark diminishes and he slowly starts to identify with the element of darkness. *Death of a Naturalist* contains both poems that express the poet's fear of the dark and ones that express his growing ease with it. In 'The Barn' (*DN* 7) the poet recounts how as a child he felt scared to enter the huge dark space in which 'bright eyes stared / From piles of grain in corners, fierce unblinking' as he 'lay face-down to shun the fear above' while 'two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats'. However, in 'An Advancement of Learning' (*DN* 8) Heaney charts his move from fear of the dark to a feeling of comfort with it. In the poem

the child is stopped in his tracks when a rat 'slobbered curtly, close, / Smudging the silence'. But then the poet wills himself to move out of his petrifaction and he manages to overcome his terror by recognising its incongruity in the face of something capable of beauty, too. The child in this poem moves beyond social preconceptions and the categories to which everything is allotted. He learns to see everything from a new perspective, discovering value in what he had believed to be valueless before:

Incredibly then

I established a dreaded
Bridgehead. I turned to stare
With deliberate, thrilled care
At my hitherto snubbed rodent.

In 'Personal Helicon' the poet shows us how his poetic career was structured on a childhood curiosity involving things that could be seen as being somewhat mysterious:

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

In Lacan's 'imaginary' state the idea of a central self does not yet exist and so the distinction between subject and object cannot be made. By looking at himself in a mirror or something of the sort the child extends his self by incorporating the 'other'. We can say that by staring at his reflection in the water at the bottom of wells and ponds an extension of consciousness comes about and the child develops an affinity with darkness. He also starts developing his poetic awareness through the fact that the dark 'had echoes, gave back your own call / With a clean new music in it'. In the last stanza of the poem, Heaney exhibits his commitment to sculpture poetry out of darkness, to bring its mysteries out into the light and hence acquire the truth. Corcoran states that the two main poles that form Heaney's poetry are those of 'social responsibility and self exploration'.[15] These

poles are not to be seen as being in opposition to one another. They complement each other for if Heaney sees himself as the diviner he obviously is the best one equipped to retrieve the truth from the deep well of the unconscious. But Heaney is well aware that such a view of himself is a conceited one and this is why the legend of Narcissus finds its way into 'Personal Helicon'. The risk of drowning in his own art and of abandoning the immediate problems of his community are clearly envisaged by Heaney. Throughout his later work we see that Heaney shuns unnecessary self-indulgence and that the grapple with his responsibility towards society is ever present. Mathias calls the ending of 'Personal Helicon' 'an opaque but exhilarating conclusion. The poet does not know where he is going or what he will find, but the writing of poetry is itself a kind of compass: it is by examining himself, as he does in writing that he begins to know direction'.[16] The ending lines of 'Personal Helicon' anticipate what Heaney fully discusses in *Door into the Dark*:

> I rhyme
> To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

In the first two books we see the poet engrossed in a search for identity. As a symbol for poetic creativity the dark and the persona of the poet he discovers in it become an inseparable part of his self: 'All I know is a door into the dark' (*DD* 7).

For Heaney darkness symbolises the fount of wisdom and creativity and the fear we find in *Death of a Naturalist* is the first step towards this darkness. The transitional nature of *Door into the Dark* helps us to understand the full significance of Heaney's first collection, as well as what the poet attempts to do through his art in *Wintering Out* and *North*. Darkness is an image for detachment, something that the poet has to yearn for in order to perceive things lucidly and appropriately convey them through his artistic creations. The poet has to move away from light-drenched external reality and discover what has not yet been discovered or what has been forgotten. The dark is the unknown and when compared to the known it feels immense and terrifying, a bottomless centre that

when looked at gives back a mere reflection that the poet has to surpass. For Heaney when one becomes a true poet one realises this immediately:

> Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry. Usually you begin by dropping the bucket halfway down the shaft and winding up a taking of air. You are miming the real thing until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself (*P* 47).

In the poem 'In Gallarus Oratory' (*DD* 10) Heaney speaks about how detachment allows us to move away from habitual perception. Immersing himself in darkness is the poet's way of honing his perception of the outside world and the creative abilities that depend upon it. Inside the 'core of old dark' the poet is astounded by the immensity of invisible space:

> When you're in it alone
> You might have dropped, a reduced creature
> To the heart of the globe.

But once he comes outside in the light of day everything looks strangely new and fabulous: 'The sea a censer and the grass a flame'. Heaney feels that he must withdraw himself from the events of external reality in order for him to feel 'a lift in my heart, a surge towards happiness...[a] sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination' (*P* 189). He must do so in order for him to communicate art's freedom, a force that liberates him from habitual perception, clichés and stereotypical categorisations. This becomes evident in his depiction of the contemporary problems of Northern Ireland through the devices used in the 'Bog Poems' and other works. For Heaney it seems as if darkness reveals that which is in the light. Somewhat like the Dantian pilgrim, Heaney must enter the darkness before he can find the light.

In 'The Plantation' (*DD* 36), the speaker, unlike the other visitors of the wood, 'thankful / For the hum of the traffic', shows a lack of fear in exploring its darkness. The wood seems to have no defining boundaries; it seems as if Heaney uses it as an image for infinity:

Any point in that wood
Was a centre, birch trunks
Ghosting your bearings,
Improvising charmed rings

Wherever you stopped.

Given the title of the poem the wood is also an image for Heaney's Jungian conception of history and tradition, and possibly even for past literature with whose echoes the writer must perforce deal in one way or another. Heaney managed to do this by developing his own distinctive style or what he describes as his own voice. In the dark wood the speaker finds traces of other sojourners, but it still remains a place that invites new discovery: 'Someone had always been there / Though always you were alone'. The last stanza of the poem gives us an image of the multifold nature of the poet in Heaney's vision: the poet as creator and as a function of something using him for its own purposes; the poet as someone in control and at the same time someone lacking control; the poet giving expression to his own self and to something that transcends the confines of that self:

You had to come back
To learn how to lose yourself,
To be pilot and stray - witch,
Hansel and Gretel in one.

In 'Night-Piece' (*DD* 1) Heaney sets down another image for what he calls the 'dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts, the hidden core of the self', that which for him is 'the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet'.[17] It is a mysterious dimension that in the poem is translated into the image of a dark stable. Standing inside it the poet can hear the 'Dull pounding through hay, / The uneasy whinny'. He can feel a presence inhabiting the black space before his eyes and after a creative effort the moonlight falling on the horse reveals to him an 'Opalescent haunch'. This particular adjective testifies to the poet's effective use of his

imaginary powers. Even though the last line tells us that the whole scene is all 'Bundled under the roof', we realise that in just seven lines Heaney has taken us beyond physical confines. This ties in with the opening line: 'Must you know it again?' The whole experience becomes as addictive to the reader as to the poet himself.

In 'The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon' (*DD* 6) a fishing episode takes on the guise of an epiphany. As in Ted Hughes's 'Salmon Eggs' and 'That Morning', in Heaney's poem the river is an image for the unknown or a quasi super-life force in which the poet casts his bait. As he does in other poems the speaker reminds us of his centrality – 'And I shall stand in the centre casting' – but the salmon, too, represents a centrality in its own right. The fishermen and the salmon are opposite or complimentary forces and they are attracted to each other:

> Walton thought garden worms, perfumed
> By oil crushed from dark ivy berries
> The lure that took you best, but here you come
> To grief through hunger in your eyes.
>
> .....
>
> I go, like you, by gleam and drag
>
> And will strike when you strike, to kill.

When the forces inherent in each one of them finally merge the speaker becomes one with the forces he is trying to capture and the poem is created.

> You can't resist a gullet full of steel.
> I will turn home, fish-smelling, scaly.

However, we are reminded that both the salmon and the fisher are 'Involved in water's choreography' and compared to this both poet and poem pale into insignificance: 'We're both annihilated on the fly'. In other poems that have to do with fishing Heaney uses the image of water as a symbol for the concept of the unknown or darkness. In 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' (*DD* 26-33) there are three poems that utilise this kind of symbolism. The eel is identified with a creation of

darkness: in 'Beyond Sargasso' we find that the 'Dark / delivers him hungering / down each undulation', and in 'The Return' the eel is described as an inhabitant of 'the weltering dark'. In 'Setting' the lough's fishermen become Heaney's explorers of the unfathomable:

> A line goes out of sight and out of mind
> Down to the bottom of silt and sand
> Past the indifferent skill of the hunting hand.

In poems such as 'Bann Clay' and 'Undine' water is identified with a spiritual element and the image of water is used by Heaney as a symbol for poetic creativity:

> Under the humus and roots
> This smooth weight. I labour
> Towards it still. It holds and gluts. (*DD* 40)

Furthermore, Heaney uses the natural elements in most of the poems in the first two collections as archetypal symbols shared by all human cultures and thus conveying universal meanings. In a poem such as 'Storm on the Island' (*DN* 40), Heaney uses the image of the wind on a wintry day to stand for the concept of darkness:

> Space is a salvo,
> We are bombarded by the empty air.
> Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

As in the poem 'In Gallarus Oratory', in 'The Peninsula' (*DD* 9) darkness allows the poet to create imaginatively the objects of external reality. Using the second person he tells himself 'you're in the dark again', but it is this that will help him 'recall' all that he saw in the daylight:

> And drive back home, still with nothing to say
> Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
> By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,
> Water and ground in their extremity.

In 'Night Drive' (*DD* 22), the speaker projects to us an image of himself lulled into tranquillity, pondering on how 'The smells of ordinariness / Were new on the

night drive through France'. In this poem the speaker once again finds himself vesting common things with an aura of novelty, and all this is of course made possible by the presence of darkness. However, it is not just those things that the poet sees on his night drive that appear transformed in his eyes, but even the memory of his very wife feels recreated in his mind, as we see in the last stanza of the poem:

> I thought of you continuously
> A thousand miles south where Italy
> Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere.
> Your ordinariness was renewed there.

As he commenced to do in 'An Advancement of Learning', Heaney in the poem 'At Ardboe Point' (*DD* 23) shows himself to have moved beyond a preconceptional fear of elements usually perceived negatively. In the poem a 'visitation' of mosquitoes described as a 'smoke of flies' is depicted as a pervasive force:

> Outside the window,
> Their invisible veil
> Weakening the moonlight still further....

However, the speaker finds nothing repugnant about this image of darkness and for him the mosquitoes become 'our innocent, shuttling // Choirs, dying through / Their own live empyrean'. In 'The Given Note' (*DD* 34) the speaker's friend plays 'spirit music' which 'Rephrases itself into the air'. It is a melody that is inimitable and we are told that 'He got this air out of the night'.

*Death of a Naturalist* provides us with further examples of Heaney's fascination with the creative powers of darkness. In 'Poor Women in a City Church' (*DN* 31) the 'Old dough-faced women' become as beautiful as the church's interior, illuminated only by 'The small wax candles' that 'melt to light, / Flicker in marble':

> Thus each day in the sacred place
> They kneel. Golden shrines, altar lace,
> Marble columns and cool shadows

Still them. In the gloom you cannot trace
A wrinkle on their beeswax brows.

In 'Lovers on Aran' (*DN* 36) we can read the island as standing for the poet's physical existence and the ocean as standing for a spaceless deep reality. In the encounter between poet and darkness we can see the sea as an external force rushing 'To possess Aran', that is, something which incorporates the poet, as in the case of history and tradition. However, Heaney posits an alternative reading that can co-exist with the first interpretation: the poet harbouring the dark within himself as a human being harbours the unconscious or the spiritual within himself:

Or did Aran rush
To throw wide arms of rock around a tide
That yielded with an ebb, with a soft crash?

Moreover, the poem's final stanza can be read both within the intended amorous context of the poem, that is, each lover sustaining the identity of the other, and also within the artistic context of Heaney's poetic development, that is, the poet structuring his identity from the dark just as the dark is voiced by means of the poet:

Did sea define the land or land the sea?
Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
Sea broke on land to full identity.

Love can be seen as a facet of the dark, expanding the individual selves of the lovers. This is something we find in 'Poem' (*DN* 37), which Heaney dedicated to his wife Marie. Love is a force that compels the poet to redefine himself and expand his limits:

Love, you shall perfect for me this child
Whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking....

The idea of infinity as a guiding force in the poet's life is also used in the poem 'Honeymoon Flight' (*DN* 38), which besides being a poem about the efforts of marriage, also has indirect artistic connotations. The newly wedded couple 'can

only trust' as they 'hang, miraculous, above the water, / Dependent on the invisible air / To keep us airborne and to bring us further'.

In *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* poetic creativity, tradition and history, as well as a unifying human force are packed into Heaney's concept of darkness, out of which the poet derives his symbolism and through which he opens the ground covered by his future work.

*Notes*

[1] The first part of this title is an allusion to the subtitle of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: 'the growth of a poet's mind'. 'King of the Dark' is the title of the synopsis of an interview with Heaney that appeared in *The Listener* 5 February 1970.
[2] Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 127.
[3] Karl Miller, 'Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller', *Between the Lines*, (31 July 2000) <http://www.interviews-with-poets.com/seamus-heaney/> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[4] Philip Hobsbaum, 'Craft and Technique in Wintering Out', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, p. 37.
[5] Patrick Kavanagh, *Selected Poems*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 102.
[6] According to Andrew Murphy, in Heaney's work 'we find several poems in which, like Kavanagh, he focuses upon the minute particularities of the local in order to expose within them the traces of a greater world'. Andrew Murphy, *Seamus Heaney*, Northcote House Publishers, Tavistock, 2000, p. 20.
[7] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, p. 29.
[8] Seamus Deane, 'Talk with Seamus Heaney', *The New York Times*, (2 December 1979) <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/20/specials/heaney-talk79.html> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[9] Roland Mathias, 'Death of a Naturalist', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, p. 16.
[10] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, p. 5.
[11] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Wordsworth Editions, 1994, p. 253.
[12] Michael R. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 9.
[13] Ibid, p. 22.
[14] Francis X. Clines, 'Poet of the Bogs', *The New York Times*, (13 March 1983) <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/20/specials/heaney-bogs.html> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[15] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, p. 12.
[16] Roland Mathias, 'Death of a Naturalist', p. 23.
[17] Seamus Heaney, 'King of the Dark', in *The Listener*, 5 February 1970, p. 181.

CHAPTER 3

# The Swinging Tongue in Vowelling Embrace: *Wintering Out* (1972)

To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh a humiliation
as twice to be born.

John Montague – 'A Grafted Tongue'[1]

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited;
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the fingertips of instinct.

John Montague – 'A Lost Tradition'[2]

Whereas in his first two collections of poetry we find charted out the birth and development of the poet in Heaney's vision, in his later work Heaney is somewhat sundered from self-centredness and given to focus much more heavily on external reality. Something that hastened this process was the eruption of the Troubles in the summer of 1969. If the first two books acquired for Heaney the appellation of a peasant poet, fond of the backward look or anything to do with rural life and the Irish countryside, in *Wintering Out* Heaney's readers find themselves affronted by a collection of poems cast in a completely different mould. In this book the poet rebels against the PQ label and is felt to be following in the steps of his friend Seamus Deane who made it quite clear that the political situation in Northern Ireland was making urgent demands upon all the country's artists. For Deane poetry had to move out of the category that marked it as a civilised pleasure.

Heaney realised that his work had to confront current ideological issues and this did not fail to immediately daunt him.

Heaney's resentment of the actions carried out by the British government in the late 1960s is apparent in what he said at the time: 'the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland at large, if it is to retain any self-respect, will have to risk the charge of wrecking the new moderation and seek justice more vociferously'.[3] However, when shortly afterwards violence erupted in Belfast, Heaney grew disillusioned with the fierce rebellious stance of the Nationalists. In 1972, the year of publication of *Wintering Out*, Heaney departed from Northern Ireland, settling alternately in the Irish Republic and the United States of America. What propelled Heaney to abandon the Nationalist struggle was his deep sense of conflict. Besides the fact that as a poet he could never come to condone violence, Heaney knew that he could never come to feel that deep malevolent hatred for the British that many of his compatriots deliberately stirred up within themselves. Heaney realised that despite all the wrongs his community had suffered at the hands of the British colonial system, he himself still owed a debt to that very system. He was a poet writing in English as well as a university lecturer teaching English literature. All this taught Heaney that neither he nor Northern Ireland could easily dispose of the English culture. In Ireland the English character is as deeply rooted as the Irish one and separating the two is next to impossible. Even though Heaney accuses the English of having eradicated a great part of the Irish consciousness – weakening the Irish language in order to cut off the people from their Gaelic heritage – still he knows that he has to accept the reality of things and make do with what there is. In fact Heaney's greatest achievement, and that of other Irish poets writing in the English language, is that of their having superbly managed to do just this and thus revitalise the culture of a dispossessed race of people.

It is quite clear from the research carried out by a number of critics that when Heaney came to compile the contents of *Wintering Out* he discarded a large number of explicitly political poems that in his opinion did not consist of a poetic

expression of the Troubles, but were only meant to stir Catholic solidarity and give vent to Nationalist anger. These poems are partly a product of the excitement that at the time swept over all those touched by the civil rights movement. For example, Heaney wrote a ballad entitled 'Craig's Dragoons' (initially circulated as *samizdat*) that refers to the massacre of the 1798 rebels by the RUC and English soldiers under the orders of the then home minister William Craig. Furthermore, Heaney drastically revised many of the poems that appear in *Wintering Out*, but which had initially been published in journals and literary magazines. He did so in order to eliminate the factional perspectives at times promoted by these poems. Heaney realised that by adopting a mentality based on polarisation he would be diminishing the artistic value of his work and thus cutting short the lives of his poems.

The untitled poem (*WO* p. v) that opens the volume *Wintering Out* presents us with a kind of Irish reality that was only lightly touched upon in Heaney's first two books. Such poems as 'Docker', 'At a Potato Digging' and 'To the Commander of the *Eliza*' in *Death of a Naturalist* and 'Requiem for the Croppies' in *Door into the Dark*, tackle the religious and political strife that has existed for centuries in Ireland, but which took on a different guise in the late 1960s when the stronger demands for national freedom were combined with the use of modern weaponry. The poem is dedicated to David Hammond and Michael Longley and in it Heaney presents us with a picture that is strongly evocative of World War Two and its concentration camps. Bomb craters, internee camps and machine-gun posts were at the time the new landmarks dotting the Irish landscape. The internee camps were part of the Stormont government's decision in August 1971 to arrest and intern without trial all Catholic suspects. The reference to war films is meant to adumbrate the idea that the mass media are a force familiarising violence and bloodshed for the common audience. Moreover, the whole scenario of the poem is presented as a *déjà vu* and this is meant to allude to Ireland's violent past. In the last stanza of the poem Heaney quotes an

ironic piece of graffiti – 'Is there life before death?' – that is meant to underline the stifling atmosphere the citizens of Northern Ireland were subjected to live in while the conflict raged on. However, the poem is not a wholly pessimistic one since its last lines, highlighting the resilience of everyday life and the life struggle ordinary people never seem to abscond from, are somewhat equivocal:

> *Competence with pain,*
> *coherent miseries, a bite and sup,*
> *we hug our little destiny again.*

Like the above-mentioned poems from the first two volumes, these last lines also lead us to reflect upon the recurrent nature of history in Heaney's vision. It is a poem that fulfils the prophetic warning of the docker in *Death of a Naturalist*: 'That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic- / Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again' (*DN* 30). This poem is very important for as an introductory piece to *Wintering Out* it moulds the reader's perception of the Troubles and Northern Ireland. The reader is not allowed to bypass the atmosphere of horror and fear that was a staple of everyday reality of those living in that period.

*Wintering Out* manifests Heaney's sense of loss in a political situation that made him feel the full burden of a poet's responsibility. Hence *Wintering Out* is more of a collection of questions and dilemmas than a collection of answers, in which guise the poet-diviner presented each of his first two books. The very title of the volume reminds us of the opening line from *Richard III* and a bleak dispirited atmosphere hangs all over the contents of *Wintering Out*. Furthermore, this dull landscape is not just an echo of the social context at the back of each poem's existence, but also a pointer indicating the poet's exasperation at the fact that his faith in poetry has been somewhat jolted, or forced to undergo a re-evaluation. In *Door into the Dark* the darkness allowed the poet to free the waters of his creativity and explore whatever he wanted, unhindered and without restraint. His pantheism daubed his poetry, especially when his work found new ways by which to portray the many facets of external reality: stripping off the habitual guise and exposing the mystery. But after the publication of his second

volume, Heaney felt that an external reality he had skirted by in his previous work was now harshly pressing for his attention.[4] At times in *Wintering Out*, Heaney feels reluctant to abandon the safe dark embryo of the artist's world. In 'Oracle' (*WO* 28), for example, the child hides like a dendritical eremite in 'the hollow trunk of the willow tree' and when 'they / cuckoo your name / across the fields' a note of fear is sounded as they 'draw the poles of stiles' and 'approach / calling you out'. The question of how to depict the violence, the dispossession and the religious and political antagonism seemed to lie beyond his grasp and he rejected 'journalistic'[5] poetry for this went completely opposite to his vision of the artist as a spiritual medium through whom the mystery can find a voice.

In 'A Northern Hoard', a sequence of five poems, Heaney portrays the poet's tightrope walk over the landscape of art on the one hand and that of life on the other. Both seem to pull him towards themselves, to make him drown within either one of them. However, his skill lies in maintaining balance between the gravities of each world, desisting from being either a Narcissus or a hack writer giving out his gift for free. In 'Roots' (*WO* 39) the speaker lies in bed with his lover listening to 'the din / Of gunshot, siren and clucking gas / Out there beyond each curtained terrace / Where the fault is opening'. The consolation of their tranquil love-nest is shattered as 'The touch of love, / Your warmth heaving to the first move, / Grows helpless in our old Gomorrah'. The speaker knows that the world outside is banging upon his sense of duty. Following the somnambulistic method of poetry writing explicated in essays such as 'Belfast' and 'Feeling into Words', the speaker tells his lover, 'I'll dream it for us before dawn'. He does so by uprooting 'A mandrake, lodged human fork, / Earth sac, limb of the dark'. The mandrake, a root with healing powers and human form, is said to grow out of murderers' graves. Just as he does in the 'Bog Poems', Heaney identifies the earth with the deposit of past culture and wisdom, symbolically the source of poetry itself as he implies in 'Belfast': 'I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been

laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery' (*P* 34). 'Roots' also reminds one of 'Gifts of Rain' (*WO* 23-25) in which the speaker, standing on the bank of the Moyola river, strains to listen as

> Soft voices of the dead
> are whispering by the shore
> that I would question
> (and for my children's sake)
> about crops rotted, river mud
> glazing the baked clay floor.

In 'No Man's Land' (*WO* 40) the world of gore and terrorist victims asks for his pity but the speaker admits that he 'deserted, shut out / their wounds' fierce awning'. On the other hand, Nationalist terror asks for his approval since it is working for the good of the cause. However, the poem ends with a question that truly places the speaker in no man's land:

> Why do I unceasingly
> arrive late to condone
> infected sutures
> and ill-knit bone?

In 'Stump' (*WO* 41) the poet depicts his sense of inadequacy in face of the horror of external reality. When he sees 'the needy in a small pow-wow' he asks rhetorically, 'What do I say if they wheel out their dead?' His background kills all empathy within him: 'I'm cauterized, a black stump of home'. This is also an expression of the lack of empathy between the opposite cultural factions of Catholics and Protestants. In 'No Sanctuary' (*WO* 42) the Catholic trick-or-treater (a descendant of the Celts, hence a 'true' Irishman), celebrating the essentially Celtic custom of Halloween, labels a Protestant house as 'unhallowed'. In 'Tinder' (*WO* 43) the speaker affirms that it is by examining past culture – 'Cold beads of history and home / We fingered' – that 'a blaze' can be struck up 'From our dead igneous days' and a 'new history' created. This poem promotes an idyllic picture in which the inhabitants of Northern Ireland move beyond sectarianism in order to forge together a better future for all involved.[6] Tying in

with this conciliatory message we find the poem 'The Other Side' (*WO* 34-36), a poem that glosses upon a scenario in which the warm relations between neighbours are threatened by the fact that they belong to antagonistic religious and political factions. The Protestant neighbour is depicted as some kind of patriarchal figure fully convinced of his elect status: 'white-haired, / swinging his blackthorn' the neighbour 'prophesied above our scraggy acres, / then turned away // towards his promised furrows'; his 'tongue of chosen people' utters a 'patriarchal dictum', a 'fabulous, biblical dismissal'. These expressions help to accentuate the exclusive nature of the neighbour's religion. However, the man himself is highly respectful of his Catholic neighbours even though the poem exposes the way in which people are moulded by the ideology they think through. In the final section of the poem the grown-up speaker desires to re-establish a bridge of communication between himself and the Protestant neighbour. However, now more than ever, he acknowledges just how pervasively influent religion and politics can be. Just as in Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall', the differences people erect as barriers between themselves inhibit the speaker and the neighbour from experiencing true warmth between them. Their interaction is strained or reserved solely to the bane of small talk and perfunctory greetings:

> Should I slip away, I wonder,
> or go and touch his shoulder
> and talk about weather
>
> or the price of grass-seed?

However, the touch on the shoulder can be seen as an element of redemption. In the poem hope is present and its importance is emphasised without downplaying the factors that are the opponents of any kind of conciliation.

In an interview he gave after the publication of *Wintering Out*, Heaney explained the title of his book by saying that 'It is meant to gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the minute. It is meant to be, I suppose, comfortless enough, but with a notion of survival in it'.[7] The poem

'Servant Boy' (*WO* 17) best develops this statement for in it Heaney identifies Irish people like himself with the 'jobber among shadows', the 'Old work-whore, slave- / blood, who stepped fair-hills / under each bidder's eye'. The servant boy 'is wintering out / the back-end of a bad year', and despite humiliation and persecution he acts wisely and does not rebel. In this the poem's speaker finds something admirable:

> kept your patience
> and your counsel, how
> you draw me into
> your trail.

The conflict in Northern Ireland haunts the poet and it even intrudes into such a domestic setting as that of 'Summer Home' (*WO* 59-61) in which the lover's argument is overshadowed by the country's problems:

> Was it wind off the dumps
> or something in heat
>
> dogging us, the summer gone sour,
> a fouled nest incubating somewhere?

Like Edmund Spenser before him, Heaney cannot dispel the urgent reality of the conflict. It makes him don all the poems in this collection with a wintry atmosphere that taints even the most cheerful of events; a wedding, for example. In 'Wedding Day' (*WO* 57), the groom in the first line claims that he is 'afraid'. Around him he sees 'tears' and 'wild grief' and 'The sap / Of mourning rises / In our waving guests'. His wife looks 'Like a deserted bride / Who persists, demented, / And goes through the ritual'. This poem is an epitome of those works in *Wintering Out* that deal with love and nature. Such poems are segregated from those that voice an at times explicit political concern. This is due to the fact that in a landscape of terror Heaney feels that 'love calls tiny as a tuning fork' (*WO* 61).

In *Wintering Out* it is not just love and nature that lose their splendour in the poet's eyes, but even the heroic figure of the poet is deflated. As mentioned in regard to 'Servant Boy' the poet in this collection identifies with a number of

characters that have to bear the brunt of a life laden with misery and thwarted aspirations. In other words Heaney tries to come closer to the general sense of dispossession of the Irish people. According to Ronald Tamplin, Heaney manages to do this through a distancing device by which the poet seeks to highlight random experiences and thus throw light on the human condition. The experiences lived through by the other do impinge on what Heaney himself has experienced as an Irishman, but they have about them that aura of immediacy which makes them far more authentic for the reader. Hence such poems as 'Limbo', 'Bye-Child', 'Maighdean Mara', 'Shore Woman' and others, voice the conditions of people who represent other worlds to that of the poet, despite 'the shared calling of blood' he mentions in 'Gifts of Rain'. Heaney weaves an intricate web in which the Irish identity is fastened into place by a number of poems that are a kind of dramatic reconstruction of the life and mind of the other, while the poet becomes a means through which the other's mode of being is articulated. In 'Bye-Child' (*WO* 71), for example, the illegitimate child, hidden by his mother in the henhouse, is lighted upon by the poet who gives him a voice: 'But now you speak at last'. However, it is not only those poems that appear to be detached from Heaney's biography that are capable of giving us insights into the other's psyche. Even such poems as 'The Other Side' and 'Summer Home', poems that present us with a scene from the poet's life, speak to us 'from within'.[8] They are poems whose meaning we recognise all too clearly because it is as if a part of ourselves is speaking. For Hobsbaum in such poems Heaney so excels in his use of technique that even by focusing on an event from his own married life, for example, he is capable of presenting a 'dramatic fiction'[9] that is valid for all his readers.

*Wintering Out* is a transitional book, just like *Door into the Dark*. It does not offer the kind of unifying vision we find in *North* and it is characterised by a technical and thematic experimentation that springs out of the dilemmas that commenced to plague the poet in the period 1968-1972. Some critics have

remarked upon the change in style we find in this volume. The poetry of *Wintering Out* is a much more masculine one to that of the first two books. This is seen in how the kind of detailed imagery we get in *Death of a Naturalist* is replaced by a terse compact kind of verse that is heavily laden with ideas and allusions. Heaney's concern with a much more expressive style relates to the question of language, which the poet tries to tackle in a comprehensive manner in *Wintering Out* and *North*. In the early 1970s, Heaney felt compelled to address the issue of language and to reassess his use of English as a medium through which he could tackle his community's problems. Heaney delves into the origins of the present conflict, differences and divisions and elucidates how all this is found embedded in language itself. In the place-name poems the focus is on pronunciation and etymology and through this we see how dispossession was enacted out even through language itself; how the country's topography and the culture vesting it were appropriated by the colonial invader when the latter anglicised the names of the localities that fell under his reign. For Heaney, Ireland's vowel-language was displaced by England's consonant-language and it is interesting to note that in Heaney Ireland, its people and the land are always given a feminine representation. They are symbols for fertility and this makes it easy for the poet to identify the 'guttural muse' (*WO* 31) with the 'black / Mother' (*DN* 20-22).

At times in *Wintering Out*, the reader becomes aware of feelings of frustration and alienation that are related to Heaney's use of the English language. The poet realises that he is using a medium that somewhat detaches him from his own community and this knowledge becomes much more acute at a time when he knows he should be manifesting his full support for it. English is intrinsically the language of the invader and as Corcoran points out 'English is, at least in the traditional nationalist reading of the case, the imposition of the colonial oppressor, dispossessing the native Irish of their own first 'tongue''.[10] In this light we come to understand the aspirations of the Irish Literary Movement in the early twentieth

century. We also come to comprehend the frustration of many native writers whose countries suffered from the effects of colonialism. In *Wintering Out* we find a number of poems in which Heaney voices feelings of anger and exasperation at the fact that he was denied the right to follow in the wake of Celtic poets, to form part of a tradition which was slowly undermined with the emergence of the English language in fifteenth century Ireland. In 'The Wool Trade' (*WO* 37) the epigraph from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* refers us to the episode in which Stephen Dedalus reflects on how different in significance is the use of the English language for him and for the Dean of Studies. In the poem the Irish language is described as 'a language of waterwheels, / A lost syntax of looms and spindles' that 'hang[s] / Fading in the gallery of the tongue!' Referring to the English language and the sins of its country of origin, the speaker resents the fact that he 'must talk of tweed, / A stiff cloth with flecks like blood'. In 'The Backward Look' (*WO* 29) the death of the Irish language is traced out in the metaphor of a snipe being hunted down. After the snipe flees 'its nesting ground / into dialect, / into variants' it becomes an inhabitant of 'nature reserves' until its 'tail-feathers' are heard 'drumming elegies / in the slipstream'. Ultimately it is seen

> disappearing among
> gleanings and leavings
> in the combs
> of a fieldworker's archive.

The 'failed' language becomes an object of study for the linguist and all that remains of it are traces incorporated into a stronger language that is embellished by its echoes, just as English is embellished by Irish terms. The metaphor of a hunted animal is also employed in 'Midnight' (*WO* 45) in which we are told that 'Since the professional wars' 'The wolf has died out / In Ireland'. We also find that 'The wolfhound was crossed / With inferior strains' and all this has made the speaker affirm that 'The tongue's / Leashed in my throat'. The last two lines from the poem also remind us of what Heaney says in the prefatory essay to *The*

*Government of the Tongue*, even though there the tongue is 'leashed' for slightly different reasons. The references to 'tongue' are many in *Wintering Out*. In 'Linen Town' (*WO* 38) the lynched body of the Protestant rebel Henry Joy McCracken, leader of the United Irishmen in the insurrection of 1798, is described as a 'swinging tongue'. This image simultaneously merges together the ideas of death and life. McCracken was for a united Ireland, a republic, and in him we find a symbol calling out for a Protestant and Catholic *rapprochement*.[11] The fact that he died does not signify that his dreams and ideas died with him. Gaelic, too, can be compared to the image of a 'swinging tongue'. It is a murdered tongue, but still, the values, beliefs and identity associated with it are propagated by a poet like Heaney whose use of the English language is a means by which an appeal for the end of dissension can be made, and by which Ireland's identity can continue to flourish. The 'swinging tongue' may very well speak English, but it is undeniably Irish.

As is attested by various sociolinguists, language is at the heart of a nation's or a race of people's identity. Ronald Wardhaugh points out that 'A feeling of solidarity can lead people to preserve a local dialect or an endangered language to resist power, or to insist on independence. It accounts for the persistence of local dialects, the modernization of Hebrew, and the separation of Serbo-Croatian into Serbian and Croatian'.[12] Some contemporary Irish poets like Michael Davitt, Michael Hartnett and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill sometimes write in Gaelic, perhaps in the hope of preserving the language of their homeland from imminent extinction. This hails back to Patrick Pearse whose Gaelic League at the turn of the century advocated in favour of literature in Irish. However, writers like Joyce mocked the Irish Revival because, as Declan Kiberd says in his introduction to *Ulysses*, Joyce felt that 'nationalism was an imitation of the original English model, rather than a radical renovation of the consciousness of the Irish race'.[13] The Joycean influence on Heaney is felt particularly in the poem 'Traditions' (*WO* 31). The first section describes to us how 'Our guttural muse / was bulled

long ago / by the alliterative tradition' and how 'custom' retains power in the hands of Britain, 'beds us down into / the British isles'. In the second section Heaney speaks about how Elizabethan English 'is grass-roots stuff with us' and in the third section he shows how the invaders used the English language as a means by which to establish themselves in Ireland and to treat the Irish race as an inferior lot: 'had heard tell of us // as going very bare / of learning, as wild hares, / as anatomies of death'. The words of Shakespeare's MacMorris in line 32 – "What ish my nation?" – help confirm Molino's claim when he says that Heaney is the 'inheritor of...discontinuous and disparate traditions'.[14]

In the last stanza of the third section Heaney finds the solution to the problem of language in the figure of Leopold Bloom. Using English the Jewish Bloom unhesitatingly affirms his Irishness: "Ireland', said Bloom, / 'I was born here. Ireland." The Gaelic tongue was raped by the English language, however, something positive emerged from the experience, for Heaney believes that it is by accepting as one's own all that is enriching in one's antagonist that one moves beyond a traumatic experience and manages to grow. Furthermore, Heaney closely follows Joyce's words in *Station Island* – 'The English language / belongs to us'[15] – even to the point of differentiating between the English language and Irish-English.

In *Wintering Out* the emphasis upon language is partly manifested in Heaney's growing use of Irish dialect. Many critics have interpreted this as a kind of political statement by Heaney, a statement that exhibits the poet's approval of cultural diversity and his rejection of all kinds of monologisms. In this book the poet found a means by which to move beyond a mere indictment of England's invasion of the Irish consciousness. He seeks to depict the positive elements of such an experience and the polyphonic language we encounter in *Wintering Out* is sure evidence that he succeeds in doing so. Heaney, through the particular variety of English he enlists for his use in this collection, manages to portray his community's consciousness and tradition as something much richer and stronger

than the guise of a victim of colonial despoilment inferior poets are given to picture it in. In his essay 'Englands of the Mind', Heaney defines T.S. Eliot's notion of the 'auditory imagination' as a phenomenon sustaining what he calls 'the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abysm of mind and body' (*P* 150). His use of dialect words in *Wintering Out* is done with the purpose of alluding to a whole Irish history and tradition inherent in each particular word. Hence the language we find in this collection is unsatisfactorily labelled when termed as *English Language*. By this it is not to be understood that Heaney is pushing forward an exclusionist philosophy. In a poem such as 'Broagh' (*WO* 27) we find the notion that those who can pronounce the term form a community of people separate from those who cannot: 'that last / *gh* the strangers found / difficult to manage'. However, as Molino points out, 'The term is difficult but not impossible to manage, and the reader, in some measure, enters its community of users'.[16] The reader is invited to form part of a community that embraces cultural differences and diversity and repudiates that kind of frame of thought that utilises difference as a means towards division. 'A New Song' (*WO* 33) can be read as a poem that promotes this kind of conciliatory view. The birth of the vocable is the result of the confluence of the vocalic and the consonantal traditions not the rejection of one in favour of the other:

> And Derrygarve, I thought, was just,
> Vanished music, twilit water,
> A smooth libation of the past
> Poured by this chance vestal daughter.
>
> But now our river tongues must rise
> From licking deep in native haunts
> To flood, with vowelling embrace,
> Demesnes staked out in consonants.

Despite all of Heaney's positivity in such poems one must not forget the bitter tone in 'The Wool Trade', 'The Backward Look', 'Midnight' and others. The speaker in these latter poems fully acknowledges the fact that Ireland's cultural

diversity is partly a product of colonialism, an experience that has much damaged all sectors of Irish culture.

The poetic form Heaney adopts in *Wintering Out* and *North* is described by Morrison 'as nurturing [Heaney's] 'arterial' imagination'.[17] According to Morrison the form liberates Heaney and allows 'the poems... to be seen as drills, wells, augers, capillaries, mine-shafts, bore-holes, plumb-lines'.[18] From this we are to understand that the short lines of the compressed quatrains of these two collections aid the poet's digging. For Morrison, in *Wintering Out* Heaney 'began to draw on previously repressed psychic and mythic material'.[19] In the poem 'Bogland' we see how past and present are capable of overlapping or coexisting together in the same medium. In the place-name poems Heaney's excavation in the etymology of Broagh, Anahorish, Toome and Derrygarve yields him with evidence that confirms this notion. From this we can postulate the idea that Heaney in *Wintering Out* vests language with the symbolic attributes of the bog. In 'Toome' (*WO* 26), for example, the speaker reiterates the word *Toome* until he feels himself pushing 'under the dislodged // slab of the tongue' moving 'into a souterrain / prospecting what new'. There he discovers 'loam, flint, musket-balls' and other relics of past times. In the poem the search for a national identity is conducted by means of an excavation as much as in language as in the bog. But even though Heaney in some poems parallels language with the dark psychic region of the human unconscious, he never comes to identify language as the sole human reality or as what gives us meaning. In the essay 'Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', Heaney admits that he is 'highly conscious of the conditioning nature of language itself, the way it speaks us as much as we speak it', however, for him 'the essential point' is that we must recognise 'the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act' (*GT* p. xix). This is substantiated by the poem 'The Tollund Man' (*WO* 47) in which Heaney seeks answers to the present problems of his country in a photograph of the ancient body of a sacrifice-victim unearthed from the bog in Denmark.

Heaney first saw a photograph of the Tollund man in a book entitled *The Bog People* by P.V. Glob, a book that was to become the source of inspiration for some of Heaney's finest poems. In Glob, Heaney found a mythic framework from which he could address the present problems of Northern Ireland as well as an affirmation of his belief in historical cycles. The Tollund man, 'Bridegroom to the goddess', was killed as a sacrifice to the earth goddess, Nerthus, who 'tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen', the earth's 'dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body'. In 'The Tollund Man' and other poems by Heaney, Nerthus is at times cruel, demanding the blood of her worshipers in order to ensure fertility. The Tollund man is a symbolic figure for all those Irish people who were executed as a sacrifice for the cause, and Heaney juxtaposes the past and the present when he mentions the 'four young brothers, trailed / For miles along the lines', victims of the nationalist struggle. However, in the poem the description of the Tollund man as some kind of saint to whom the poet addresses his prayers, makes it quite clear that Heaney does not condone the practice of murdering innocent people for the sake of some higher goal. The embrace of Nerthus apotheosises the Tollund man and in the image of the sacrifice-victim Heaney finds a symbol of the numinous, one that can adequately replace that of Christ and thus sufficiently befit the Northern crisis. According to Edna Longley 'The prototype developed by 'The Tollund Man' is a scapegoat, privileged victim and ultimately Christ-surrogate, whose death and bizarre resurrection might redeem, or symbolise redemption for...victims of sectarian murder'.[20] In the second section of the poem the speaker renounces the ineffectual religion he forms part of by tradition and turns towards the Tollund man in order for the latter to help plant peace in the poet's troubled homeland:

> I could risk blasphemy,
> Consecrate the cauldron bog
> Our holy ground and pray
> Him to make germinate
>
> The scattered, ambushed

Flesh of labourers....

Just like the rebels in 'Requiem for the Croppies', the Tollund man carries with him the seeds of the future. His 'gruel of winter seeds', portents of the resolution of the conflict, are meant to be sowed in the wintry atmosphere of the Troubles by someone like Heaney, who makes 'a vow to go on pilgrimage' (*P* 58) to Aarhus in order to 'stand a long time' watching 'his peat-brown head'. In the last stanza of the poem Heaney imbues the Northern crisis with a universal element when he implies that his homeland's violence is a recurrent phenomenon in all world history, and this makes him identify with the sacrifice-victim's 'sad freedom':

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

The tone of *Wintering Out* is generally a gloomy one, but still a belief in hope and survival is at times detected, which underlines the theme of a nation's wait for spring. The fruit of Heaney's grapple with the different facets of his duty and responsibility, *Wintering Out*, through its exploration of language, myth and the domestic scene, at times proposes new ways by which age-old conflicts can be approached; in other instances it gives one a glimpse of the uncertainty, perplexity and fear that help root the poet-diviner in an immediate human scenario.

*Notes*

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[1] Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 47.
[2] Ibid, p. 44.

[3] Seamus Heaney, 'Old Derry's Walls', p. 522, quoted in Nicholas McGuinn, *Seamus Heaney: A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems 1965-75*, Arnold-Wheaton, Leeds, 1986, p. 57.
[4] According to Michael R. Molino 'Heaney needed to find a form of creative dialogue, an emancipating discourse that would face the realities of the ideologically motivated, violent, pragmatic political arena but would also circumvent the monologic, exclusionary, and restrictive discourses so often used by those who functioned in that arena'. Michael R. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 54.
[5] Michiko Kakutani, 'In a Lyric Vision Danger Casts a Long Shadow', *The New York Times*, (24 November 1998) <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/22/daily/heaney-book-review.html> [accessed 15 August 2009]
[6] According to Nicholas McGuinn 'In the bombings and the shootings Heaney saw the fulfilment of all that his second volume had foreseen. This sense of having been proved right made him more convinced than ever that the only contribution he as tribal poet could make to the current Ulster crisis, was to take his people to the heart of the Irish myth and show them the precise nature of the forces whose violence dominated their lives. If those forces could be understood, they might also be controlled.' Nicholas McGuinn, *Seamus Heaney: A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems 1965-75*, Arnold-Wheaton, Leeds, 1986, p. 68. Neil Corcoran says something similar when he claims that Heaney's poems 'avoid the snares of ideological declaration and received opinion. Instead, they feel tentatively along the lines that bind an individual to his people and a people to their history.' Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, p. 30.
[7] Seamus Heaney, 'Mother Ireland', in *The Listener*, 7 December 1972, p. 790.
[8] Philip Hobsbaum, 'Craft and Technique in *Wintering Out*', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, p. 42.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Michael Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, p. 38.
[11] The above statement must be somewhat qualified since according to R.F. Foster 'Despite the belief that the age of religion was over, ancient identifications ran through radical Irish discourse; 'the Catholics' were always referred to as a distinct group, if only a political one. Even when they were allies, they tended to

be seen as irritatingly obsessive. Consciousness of Catholics *qua* Catholics remained evident in the discussions even of advanced United Irishmen like Drennan, Russell, McCracken and Neilson. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, Penguin Books, London, 1989, pp. 265-266.

[12] Ronald Wardaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Massachusetts, 1998, pp. 26-27.

[13] Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction to *Ulysses*', in James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, p. xiii.

[14] Michael R. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 2.

[15] Seamus Heaney, *Station Island*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p. 93.

[16] Michael R. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 74

[17] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 45.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Edna Longley, '*North*: 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, pp. 74-75.

# CHAPTER 4
## Unearthing Befitting Emblems of Adversity: *North* (1975)

> We would need to dislodge
> the flesh itself, to dislodge that
> – shrivel back to the first drop
> and be spat back shivering into
> the dark beyond our first father.
>
> Thomas Kinsella – 'The Oldest Place'[1]

In *North*, Heaney aims at capturing the large-scale dynamics of epic poetry, pinning his vision onto a kind of mythic framework. In this book Heaney shows a deep concern with structure, something already exhibited in the way each of his previous collections adhere together through certain themes and poems that hinge a particular book onto the one superseding it. Most of the contents of *North* build upon the poems 'Bog Oak' and 'The Tollund Man', but they also continue the investigation commenced in the language and place-name poems from *Wintering Out*. *North* is divided in two; the first part deals with the mythic roots of the contemporary political and social scene presented in Part II. The first part tackles the historical aspects of northern Europe covering a period of two thousand years, while the second part focuses on Northern Ireland at the time of the book's publication. Hence we see that the idea pursued in 'The Tollund Man', the present situation in Northern Ireland as forming part of a larger whole, is expanded and constructed into the structural and thematic foundations of *North*.

According to Morrison 'In *North*, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say, the structure of the book is its meaning: the placing and interlocking of the poems amount to the creation of a historical myth'.[2] Edna Longley notes that in *North* 'In contrast with the fecund variety of *Wintering Out* there is system,

homogenisation. Certain poems seem dictated by the scheme (rather than vice versa), commissioned to fill in the myth or complete the ritual'.[3] The two segments that compose the structure of the book voice two different kinds of poetic expression that while divergent are at the same time complementary. Heaney says that 'The two halves of the book constitute two different types of utterance, each of which arose out of a necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form to two kinds of urgency – one symbolic, one explicit'.[4]

Part I tackles history in two different yet similar ways: a portrait of the land as a medium of the past, revered as the source and taker of life as well as the subject of incursions and war, 'The ground possessed and repossessed' (*N* 41); and in a conception of language as a repository of history and as an instrument in the hands of the colonial invader. Hence we see that Heaney in *North* continues his discussion on the issue of language. However, the book's main focus is on myth and its implications for such a crisis as that of Northern Ireland. In relation to Part I, Graham Martin claims that 'The 'person' uttering these poems, unlike the engaged polemicist of Part II, is a meditative, wondering and self-critical presence, less 'person' than medium through whom contradiction and conflict can find a voice'.[5] By highlighting the human dependence on the earth or Nerthus a sense of human communion based on the cycle of life and death, of birth and sacrifice, is made manifest by the poems of Part I. Just as the poet in Heaney's first two collections discovered his voice or his poetic persona by immersing himself in darkness, by looking down wells or by walking into a gloomy wood, in *North*, in the image of the bog people and in that of the Vikings, the poet discovers his alter ego, he extends the confines of his self and unearths insights about his community. Many critics consider Part I to be a group of poems whose majority belong to Heaney's instinctual poetic mode, unlike Part II, which is an explicit response to the social demands made upon the poet. Part I can be seen as the work of the poet-diviner while Part II can be seen as the work of the poet-politician.

Part I opens with the poem 'Antaeus' in which the mythic giant feels reassured that his strength will never end since his bond to the earth cannot be broken. This certainty is destroyed in the poem 'Hercules and Antaeus', which closes off Part I. The two poems frame the first part of *North* and they are meant to guide our interpretation of the poems composing the rest of Part I. In 'Antaeus' (*N* 3) the giant in some ways stands for the figure of Heaney's poet whose identification with the element of darkness resembles that of Antaeus:

> Down here in my cave
>
> Girdered with root and rock
> I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
> And nurtured in every artery
> Like a small hillock.

Antaeus is also symbolic of the earth and nature whose numinous quality is seen in the way it operates 'As an elixir' on the giant, who 'cannot be weaned / Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins'. When this poem is read in conjunction with 'Hercules and Antaeus' (*N* 46) the figure of Antaeus opens itself up to a broader range of interpretations. The way Hercules and Antaeus are described sets them off as antagonistic forces, very much like the figures of coloniser and colonised. Hercules is 'Sky-born and royal...his future hung with trophies'. He 'has the measure / of resistance and black powers / feeding off the territory'. Antaeus on the other hand, is 'the mould-hugger' who 'is weaned at last'. Hercules has learnt his trick and has lifted Antaeus 'out of his element / into a dream of loss / and origins'. Antaeus is transformed into 'a sleeping giant, / pap for the dispossessed'. In Celtic mythology the 'sleeping giant' was supposed to safeguard freedom for his people; however the poem's last line binds in with the rest of the book's bleakness, denying Northern Ireland any thoughts of hope. Even though Heaney is clearly expressing sympathy for Antaeus, his fatalistic sense of history makes him realise that ultimately the 'mould-hugger' is always defeated by the 'Sky-born and royal'. In 'Hercules and Antaeus', Hercules represents the coloniser's sophistication, the civilised world's intellectual and technological progress.

Hercules is a conqueror while Antaeus represents a primitive way of life very much attached to the earth. A remark by Heaney in 'Feeling into Words' substantiates this observation: 'What we have is the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power' (*P* 57). However, the poem is not just about the plantation of Northern Ireland; it is about imperialism in general. Two lines from the sixth stanza make this quite clear: 'Balor will die / and Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull'.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *North* is by far that number of poems in which Heaney focuses on the corpses of the bog people and on the Viking culture of Ireland. The importance of the mythic powers embodied by the executed bog people for Heaney is quite clear in his recollection of his first view of the photographs in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*:

> Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern. And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles (*P* 57-58).

The relationship between past and present is perfectly manifested by the murdered bog people, who provide Heaney with a substantiation of his belief in a cyclical vision of history. According to Nicholas McGuinn, in the 'Bog Poems'

> Instead of using images from *The Bog People* as a point of departure in his exploration of the Irish situation, Heaney works more like a midwife, writing as though his task requires him to do no more than bring the poems to birth rather than shape them to any intellectual design.[6]

The images painted by Heaney in the 'Bog Poems' are not aimed at providing direct answers to the Irish crisis. In these poems Heaney exhibits an obsession with the creation of aesthetically engaging images through the metaphoric vitality of the language he employs.

The 'Bog Poems' reveal to us the poet's growing fascination with gore and death, poems that even though imbued with the nightmarish are captivating all the

same. They manage to convey to us a dose of the horror prevalent in every scene of bombing, execution and violent clash. However, the threat we sense when reading these poems comes from our realisation that the poet seems to find a relish in conjuring up hideous (yet pulchritudinous) images that, unlike the fruitful corpse of 'The Tollund Man', seem to form part of a pointless ritual whose impetus is the poet's revel in a horrific surreal landscape. Blake Morrison claims that the 'Bog Poems' manifest Heaney's 'pure fascination' with the bog people and which he terms 'impure, sexual, necrophiliac'.[7] This is quite evident in such a poem as 'Come to the Bower', with its allusion to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and in other poems focusing on female corpses. Morrison also says that Heaney's 'fascination with their terrible beauty has indeed been a kind of sickness or love-sickness, a symptom not of mere respect with the past's example but of a dangerous obsession with its brutal laws'.[8] Furthermore, the reverential tone used in 'The Tollund Man' is inflated into some kind of intimate personal address springing out of the poet's gruesome fascination with the bog people. This is partly due to the fact that for Heaney the bog people are not mere corpses but a presence imbued with the spiritual or the divine. The following lines from 'The Grauballe Man' (*N* 28) seem to extend this vision to Heaney's own artistic re-creations of the bog people in the 'Bog Poems':

> Who will say 'corpse'
> to his vivid cast?
> Who will say 'body'
> to his opaque repose?

The cadavers of the bog people become for Heaney a means of escaping the weight placed upon him by the Northern crisis. However, the poet fails to shake off the responsibility towards his community and to indulge solely in an aesthetic re-creation of the bog people. The external reality in which context these poems were written impinges in a number of ways on what is said in the poems.

In 'Bog Queen' (*N* 25-27) Heaney presents us with the dramatic monologue of a female corpse retrieved from the bog in the eighteenth century. The woman

describes her own decaying body but instead of mere images of decomposition the notion that she is a personification of the earth, Nerthus or Mother Ireland is conveyed to us. The idea that history is a series of recurrent phenomena and events is found in her assertion, 'I lay waiting'; repeated twice in the poem. The manner in which the woman describes herself as waiting through the 'winter' of her burial implies the idea of hibernation, already encountered in *Wintering Out.* The identification of the 'Bog Queen' with an exploited Ireland is reinforced by her claim that upon being unearthed she was despoiled by the 'peer's wife'.

> My skull hibernated
> in the wet nest of my hair.
>
> Which they robbed.
> I was barbered
> and stripped....

The images of a semi-putrified body imply the fact that the wronged country of Northern Ireland is being defiled both by an intemal and an external process. The woman can feel 'the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis' and in Heaney's allegory this is due both to foreign intervention and to antagonistic forces working within her. The final lines of the poem suggest the idea that the woman (or what she stands for) will rise triumphantly, or is finally bom into the world to exact her vengeance:

> The plait of my hair,
> a slimy birth-cord
> of bog, had been cut
>
> and I rose from the dark,
> hacked bone, skull-ware,
> frayed stitches, tufts,
> small gleams on the bank.

In 'Punishment' (*N* 30) we get a complex picture of Heaney's relationship to the Northem crisis. Witnessing the brutally executed body of an adulteress the speaker identifies with her pain and fragility:

> I can feel the tug

of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

He feels for her and sympathises with her need 'to store / the memories of love'. His tone is not condemnatory or ironic when he calls her 'Little adulteress' and describes her 'tar black face' as 'beautiful'. However, further on in the poem the speaker feels the pangs of guilt as he admits to harbouring contrary forces within him that cannot allow him to defend his 'poor scapegoat', for as he claims, 'I almost love you / but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence'. The speaker calls himself an 'artful voyeur' and this brings into question the very role of the poet in *North* and, more specifically, in the context of Northern Ireland. By using this appellation, Heaney seems to doubt the adequacy, or even appropriateness of poetry in a scenario of horror and death. In 'Strange Fruit' (*N* 32) Heaney questions his practice of aesthetically perfecting the actual, of transforming each of the bog people into 'a saint's kept body' (*WO* 47):

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

The girl can see through the poet's attempts at 'beatification'; she affronts him with the 'terrible' and questions his need to beautify it.

The final two stanzas of 'Punishment' are the ones that have created most controversy and the ones that elicit most problems when it comes to a critical reading of the poem.

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

In the first stanza quoted above Heaney draws a parallel between his 'Little adulteress' and those Irish women who were publicly punished and humiliated for befriending English soldiers. This parallel leads him to the shifty balance struck up in the last stanza of the poem in which the poet acknowledges the fact that violence is wrong while at the same time seeming only capable of uttering the kind of clichés he attacks in the poem 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' in Part II. The punishment is depicted as the community's deeply embedded need for protection. The poet is caught up between understanding this practice and exhibiting superficial 'civilized outrage'. His true reaction seems that of connivance, consenting to the punishment without actually participating in it, perhaps due to his realisation that when seen in the overall picture this is a fundamental way of showing support for his country's struggle. As we see in the poem 'The Early Purges', Heaney's move from an expression of pity to one of acceptance or resignation is triggered off by the realisation that even though the rules of a particular community may seem harsh and hard to adopt at first, they are still a necessary foundation stone of the overall structure. 'Punishment' can be read as epitomising Heaney's seeming condonation of violence. However, there seems to be no clear-cut way of reading this poem and doubt seems to be the only certainty.

In the way it exposes the social forces working within the individual, leading him to follow the tribal instinct and accept its rules as an important means towards the community's survival, 'Punishment' resembles the poem 'Limbo' (*WO* 70) from *Wintering Out*. In 'Limbo' an unmarried woman or an adulteress 'wade[s] in under / The sign of her cross' and throws her newly born infant into the sea for fear of being condemned by her community. However, it is not just fear that guides the woman. The mother seems to acknowledge the importance of her child's murder as a means of ensuring stability, but still her love makes her feel the child's existence as 'a minnow with hooks / Tearing her open'. In both 'Punishment' and 'Limbo' Heaney presents us with the moral dilemmas involved

for the individual forming part of a tightly knit community that at times makes certain demands upon him which seem to go counter to other beliefs, values and instincts that individual may possess. The difficulty of making the right choice, of finding signposts and of reaching salvation is illustrated by the closing lines of 'Limbo', which in a way can be seen as a metaphoric spiritual landscape for Northern Ireland itself:

> Now limbo will be
>
> A cold glitter of souls
> Through some far briny zone.
> Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
> Smart and cannot fish there.

Heaney's ambivalent response to the tarring and feathering of the 'betraying sisters' reminds us of another writer's similar response to such a seemingly political and communal exigency. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his short story 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux' depicts the degrading act committed upon the person of a venerable loyalist governor in very ambiguous terms. This shows us how complex and delicate is an artist's position in the face of historical and political events that for all their intrinsic necessity are still sometimes the purveyors of iniquitous acts.

In the first half of 'The Grauballe Man' the use of similes to describe the corpse helps to create an imaginative reality that is structured by layer upon layer of images. The use of simile compels the reader to differentiate between the corpse as it is supposed to be and the corpse as moulded by Heaney's use of language. In the second half of the poem, Heaney reverts to the use of metaphor as is typical of his aesthetic process in the 'Bog Poems'. The use of metaphor forces the reader to identify the single reality of the corpse as described by Heaney. Hence in this poem Heaney creates a delicate balance between a multi-dimensional view of the corpse and a mono-dimensional one. This kind of balance is an extension of what the poem's speaker himself elucidates when he claims that the corpse 'now…lies / perfected in my memory…hung in the scales /

with beauty and atrocity'. The corpse's 'cured wound / opens inward to a dark / elderberry place' and there the poet is accorded revelation. These lines are a metaphor for Heaney's artistic process in *North*, since most of his poems in this book are borne by the 'wound' of the North, both past and present, but which still remains largely uncured. Heaney's 'Bog Poems' are analogous to the classical statue of 'the Dying Gaul': they possess 'beauty' but they are created out of 'atrocity' and bear 'the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped'.

In Heaney's poems about the bog people we sense what he calls a 'Marian quality of devotion'[9] which leads us to perceive him as a poet who expects something to come out of the whole ritual enacted especially in Part I of *North*. According to Longley, 'The decorative tinge that Heaney imparts to violence and to history derives from a ritualising habit, which itself derives from his religious sensibility', and this results in the fact that 'Heaney's 'rites', ancient, modern or imagined, are profoundly 'Catholic' in character'.[10] Hinging onto this, Morrison claims that in *North*, Heaney's 'poetry grants sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability which it is not usually granted in day-to-day journalism: precedent becomes, if not justification, than at least an 'explanation''.[11] Critics like Ciaran Carson and David Lloyd attack Heaney's portrait of the Ulster conflict. They say that his concern with myth has made contemporary political killings and violence part of an ancient cycle that is intractable and inevitable. For both Carson and Lloyd, Heaney is guilty of mystifying violence, of replacing history with mythology and of positing a view that bloodshed and sacrifice are part of the order of things, and thus understandable. Such a picture destroys any possibility of a solution to the Northern crisis apart from the aesthetic and idealistic one proposed in such poems as 'Broagh' and 'Funeral Rites'.[12] However, as he implies in some of his works in *North*, Heaney is well aware of his problematic position as a poet writing out of a strife-ridden country, torn apart

by his responsibility to the truth of external reality on the one hand, and his responsibility to the artist's poetic vision on the other.

The fatalistic aura enshrouding the poems in Part I is best summed up by the last section of 'Kinship' (*N* 33-39) in which the speaker addresses the Roman historian Tacitus and explains to him how both 'love and terror' are an intrinsic part of the country and its inhabitants' being:

> Read the inhumed faces
>
> of casualty and victim;
> report us fairly,
> how we slaughter
> for the common good
>
> and shave the heads
> of the notorious,
> how the goddess swallows
> our love and terror.

These lines root the present conflict in a mythic past and thus depict it as part of the cycle of history. In this poem Heaney answers Yeats's question, 'O when may it suffice?'[13] in 'Easter 1916' by saying, 'Come back to this / 'island of the ocean' / where nothing will suffice'. Heaney's portrait of Northern Ireland haunts the reader for, as the poem's speaker seems to suggest, the country is somewhat extraordinary because violence is seen as being an ordinary part of its being:

> Our mother ground
> is sour with the blood
> of her faithful,
>
> they lie gargling
> in her sacred heart
> as the legions stare
> from the ramparts.

The threat lies in the fact that despite all incongruities 'This centre holds / and spreads'. The country possesses a 'desolate peace' because it operates within a world all of its own. However, the speaker's use of the word 'sour' helps to

evince that the current order, even though ages-old, is deleterious to human meaning and hence must somehow be destabilised. But in spite of the speaker's discontent there is nothing much he can do besides constructing his 'grove / on an old crannog / piled by the fearful dead'. In the following lines from 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' (*N* 51-54) the poet reaffirms his belief in the notion of a complex historical web whose maladies cannot easily be swept away:

> (It's tempting here to rhyme on 'labour pangs'
> And diagnose a rebirth in our plight
>
> But that would be to ignore other symptoms.

The bleakness of *North* finds an adequate means of manifestation in Heaney's identification with Hamlet in the poem 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' (*N* 12-16):

> I am Hamlet the Dane,
> skull-handler, parablist,
> smeller of rot
>
> in the state, infused
> with its poisons,
> pinioned by ghosts
> and affections,
>
> murders and pieties,
> coming to consciousness
> by jumping in graves,
> dithering, blathering.

This declaration is both a sarcastic self-caricature and an act of posturing at a time when ordinary people where suffering terror and violence. But most importantly it is an affirmation defending Heaney's way of 'coming to consciousness' by drawing parallels between the horrors of past and present cultures in order to investigate and understand more fully the contemporary political and social scene. A pessimistic tone imbues the poem as it seems to suggest that the poet 'give[s] birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant then it's night once more'.[14] However, this lack of faith is contradicted by the

creative act itself, which is a sure sign of a struggling spirit, even though some deem this as being part of the absurdity of the human condition, instead of something defining man's significance. Moreover, Hamlet represents Heaney's grapple with the moral dilemmas of his meaning as a poet.

Whereas in the previous collections Heaney had immersed a notion of salvation, *North* is characterised by its absence. But this does not imply that Heaney closes off all avenues of hope. *North* is a collection of poems in which Heaney's view of himself as a social function helps him to echo the troublesome period of the early 1970s, and even though the picture is riddled with feelings of uncertainty and perplexity these were after all part of the frame of mind of those living through the conflict. Such a view helps us to further comprehend the at times self-indulgent and introspective tone of the poems. It also aids us to read the 'Bog Poems' as works in which Heaney is not merely giving voice to a morbid fascination of his, but continuing what he commenced to do in such poems as 'Gifts of Rain', 'Bog Oak' and 'The Tollund Man'. Heaney questions the dead as representatives of the past and of acquired wisdom. He unearths 'Befitting emblems of adversity'[15] and presents these to the people as symbols of consolation and understanding. This is quite evident in what he says himself in 'Feeling into Words': 'The question, as ever, is 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?' And my answer is, by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity'' (*P* 57). Furthermore, Heaney seeks emblems of unity capable of bridging divided factions and propelling the people towards a 'new history' (*WO* 44). This is made manifest in the poem 'Funeral Rites' (*N* 6-9).

In 'Funeral Rites' we are presented with the notion of an Irish funeral which even though an occasion of deep sorrow is also a consolatory and conciliatory event. In Heaney's poem the funeral in question is vested with the guise of epic and myth since it is meant to be an event marking the end of a history strongly marked by war and division. The first lines tell us that the speaker is acknowledging his responsibility for his community: 'I shouldered a

kind of manhood / stepping in to lift the coffins / of dead relations'; presumably the victims of the Irish conflict. The speaker is very much unlike that of the poem 'Mid-Term Break' in which the overall tone was one of shocked detachment, typical of the immature and inexperienced. In spite of this the lines, 'I knelt courteously / admiring it all', remind us of the 'artful voyeur' label the speaker gives himself in 'Punishment'. However, in 'Funeral Rites' the artist is physically involved, not just a spectator at the fringes. In the first section of the poem we see how death is restrained by ritual and how this allows everyday life to proceed unhindered. The dead are 'laid out / in tainted rooms...their dough-white hands / shackled in rosary beads'. The rosary beads, however, are an epitome of Catholicism, a negative binding force pushing the people onto the paths of religious bigotry and violent rivalry. Christianity has proved itself ineffectual and Heaney turns to something capable of replacing it and much better suited to fulfil the functions of religion. In the first stanza of the second section, Heaney parallels ritual to a healing power:

> Now as news comes in
> of each neighbourly murder
> we pine for ceremony,
> customary rhythms....

This notion introduces the vision of reconciliation present in the second and third sections of the poem. The great funeral created by Heaney's imagination is a reconciling force uniting all the inhabitants of Northern Ireland. By means of allusion Heaney strives to merge the present nation with a pre-Christian, pre-British Ireland and hence into a temporal and spiritual dimension in which the people are beyond the grasp of political and religious conflict. In the Celtic religion Boyne was the river of wisdom and Newgrange was associated with Aengus, the god of love. The last stanzas of the poem refer to Gunnar, a character in the *Njal's Saga*, whose death was uncharacteristically 'unavenged'. As in other poems by Heaney, in 'Funeral Rites' we find the notion that out of 'atrocity' 'beauty' can arise: 'disposed like Gunnar / who lay beautiful / inside his burial

mound, / though dead by violence'. In this poem Heaney is not just referring to the aesthetic beauty of a poem but to the vision of reconciliation that lies at the end of 'Funeral Rites'. This poem breaks out of the chain of determinism snaking through the majority of poems in *North*. It provides us with a radical vision of the ending of the historical cycle of violence and death, which has dominated the Northern scene for over two thousand years: 'the cud of memory / allayed for once, arbitration / of the feud placated'. This poem can be read as the poet's frustrated attempt at a solution to the Northern crisis. It offers an idealistic scenario that blinds itself to the fact that Northern Ireland's political and religious complexities partly know their origins in a pre-Christian and pre-British period, as attested by Heaney's Viking poems. In spite of some of its unrealistic elements the central vision of 'Funeral Rites' is a truly positive one, fuelled by a man's noble yearnings for true human communion. The need to find answers that can somehow solve destructive problems makes 'Funeral Rites' a product of Heaney's responsibility towards his community.

In the poem 'North' (*N* 10), Heaney once again investigates his meaning as a poet by placing himself against the historical backdrop of the Viking invasion of Ireland. In the poem Heaney is invited to go on a voyage of discovery that will lead him to explore his own spiritual dimension. In the poem the Vikings represent a brutal reality and thus bridge past and present in Heaney's cyclical vision of history. The poet can hear the 'ocean-deafened voices / warning me, lifted again / in violence and epiphany'. It is as if voices from the past warn a representative from the present that a terror-laden way of life will only lead to the community's extinction and that revenge will only breed further violence and hatred.

The longship's swimming tongue

was bouyant with hindsight-
it said Thor's hammer swung
to geography and trade,
thick-witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behindbacks
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

In 'North' Heaney forwards the notion that the poems of Part I are relics or artefacts unearthed from a medium coalescing past and present, hence this endorses the poem's main idea which is that of the poet's recourse to the past for advice. The latter is something also found in 'The Tollund Man' and in another Viking poem, 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces', in which Heaney addresses a prayer to the Norsemen, the 'neighbourly, scoretaking / killers, haggers / and hagglers, gombeen-men, / hoarders of grudges and gain', fully acknowledging the similarities between them and modern day Irish people:

Old fathers, be with us.
Old cunning assessors
of feuds and of sites
for ambush or town.

'North' is also a poem about the role of the poet, and the Norsemen give Heaney advice on how to deal with his precarious situation. The poet is asked to "Lie down / in the word-hoard" and "Compose in darkness", to maintain his impartiality and dignity and to believe in the power of poetry:

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.

The bleakness of *North* becomes more apparent in Part II in which the reader is led to contemplate the deterministic influence the kind of violent nature depicted in Part I has on contemporary events. The present scene seems to be a mere extension of the past one; the ritual slightly modified but intrinsically the same. In Part II of *North*, Heaney uses a kind of colloquial street-wise language that taps into a number of contemporary registers, including military and media jargon. Some of the poems are also satiric and explicitly critical of Loyalists and

Britain. The tone of Part II is essentially one of exasperation and sometimes one of outright despair. The ambivalence of Part I is present mostly in four of the six poems composing 'Singing School', which deals with the role of the artist; in those poems which tackle the current political situation Heaney's agenda is not all that well hidden. This is seen in such poems as 'Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966' and 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', as well as to some extent in 'A Constable Calls'. These poems bind in with the feelings expressed in the four poems preceding 'Hercules and Antaeus' in Part I, in which the sexual metaphor is employed to describe England's invasion of Ireland. Heaney's attempt to become a public spokesman in the political sense of the term is tinged with failure and this is why those works (both in Part I and Part II) which focus on Heaney's private experience of the conflict are much better poems. He himself came to realise that 'poets from Northern Ireland...will only be worth listening to if they are saying something about and to themselves'.[16]

'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' is one of the best examples of a 'political' poem we find in *North*. It is an insightful poem that speaks about how ordinary Irish people react to the conflict in their every day life. In the first lines, in which an English journalist prods the speaker to express his ''views / On the Irish thing'', the poet immediately lays down the scene for the rest of the poem.

> I'm back in winter
> Quarters where bad news is no longer news,
>
> Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,
> Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads
> Litter the hotels.

Whereas for the Irish people the conflict has entered the reality of everyday life, for the pursuers and constructors of sensationalism the brutality and division amount to the creation of more and more clichés. However, the speaker admits that he too, together with his 'civil neighbours', is guilty of uttering 'sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts', which are a sign of disinterestedness, perhaps, or else a condemnatory voice that like 'The 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse'. In the

second section the speaker investigates his position as an inhabitant of Northern Ireland. This can also be Heaney's own projection of himself into the landscape he left behind him three years previously or else a reminiscence of his time as a resident of Belfast. Whatever the case, the picture drawn up is one frequently encountered in the rest of Heaney's work: 'We tremble near the flames but want no truck / With the actual firing'. For the speaker, fear is a powerfully present emotion and the call for action cannot dispel it:

> The liberal papist note sounds hollow
>
> When amplified and mixed in with the bangs
> That shake all hearts and windows day and night.

In the last stanza of section two the poet knows that he is supposed 'To lure the tribal shoals to epigram / And order', however, besides feeling a 'Drouth for words' he doubts poetry's effectiveness in a scene where 'On all sides 'little platoons' are mustering'. In section three despite the fact that he presents himself as a typical Catholic victim of discrimination, Heaney admits to the fact that he cannot come to use his poetry as an instrument for propaganda: 'Yet for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable'. The speaker claims this in spite of the fact that some may see the whole poem as bordering on mild propaganda. Heaney's inability to lash out at the oppressor is partly a consequence of 'The famous // Northern reticence, the tight gag of place / And times'. The people are ruled by their fear of persecution and treason and so the same dictum is reiterated over and over again: 'whatever you say, you say nothing'. In this manner Heaney rejects the heroic mode of hardcore republicans and embraces the cautious ways of ordinary people who, 'Besieged within the siege', first and foremost value life and survival.

The title of 'Singing School' (*N* 56-67) is taken from Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' and it consists of a sequence of six biographical poems in which Heaney presents us with the salient events in his development as a writer. Constituting the rest of the contents of Part II, 'Singing School' is highly

polyphonic and this is achieved without unnecessary strain on the overall flow of each poem in the sequence. The allusions, quotations and bits of dialogue are woven into the poems in a seamless manner. Moreover, the practice of naming other artists establishes parallels between Heaney's situation and that of other writers and painters who underwent the same kind of experience as that lived through by Heaney. It also points out the influences that helped mould Heaney's vision. The artists mentioned in the sequence are symbolic of one of the main themes of *North*: the interwoven nature of beauty and horror and the way in which the latter lends itself to the full manifestation of the former. This idea is best exemplified by the first poem from 'Singing School', 'The Ministry of Fear'.

'The Ministry of Fear' (*N* 57-59) conveys to us the anxiety that permeated Heaney's childhood years at boarding school when discrimination was rampant, especially since one's name and dialect were a means of increasing 'Inferiority / Complexes'. It is implied that such ideas as the one saying, ''Catholics, in general, don't speak / As well as students from the Protestant schools...'', were very common at the time. Just as in 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' 'Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod / And Seamus...was sure-fire Pape', the young adult of 'The Ministry of Fear' can feel a discriminatory tone in the policeman's voice when he is stopped at a checkpoint:

> crowding round
> The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing
> The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:
> 'What's your name, driver?'
> 'Seamus...'
> *Seamus*?

However, despite all this the poem manifests feelings of consolation and rebellion found in Heaney's attachment to art. The poem is dedicated to Seamus Deane and in it Heaney addresses Deane directly, telling him how his poems encouraged him to dabble in verses, blending Irish and English and thus countering the antithetical practices of an imperial mind.[17] Deane's 'Vowels and ideas' 'bewildered' Heaney

and his strong belief in the appositeness of the Irish scene as a subject for poetry must have surely influenced the young Heaney.

> I tried to write about sycamores
> And innovated a South Derry rhyme
> With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled.*
> Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
> Were walking, by God, all over the fine
> Lawns of elocution.

The last stanza of the poem reinforces the idea that Heaney has the full dispensation to use the English language as a means of expressing an Irish identity even though this act of defiance cannot dispel the anxiety created by the social situation the poet lives in.

> Ulster was British, but with no rights on
> The English lyric: all around us, though
> We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.

Moreover, 'the ministry of fear' is both a psychological and a physical condition that despite its negativity aids the poet to create the kind of verse we get in *North.* It is part of the delicate balance between 'beauty and atrocity' (*N* 29) that forms the core of Heaney's work in this volume. The poem's title is highly resonant of Orwell and Greene and in this we find the notion that fear and violence are what sustain the efflorescence of a particular kind of art and beauty.

'Summer 1969' (*N* 63), the fourth poem in the sequence, opens with an admission of guilt by Heaney:

> While the Constabulary covered the mob
> Firing into the Falls, I was suffering
> Only the bullying sun of Madrid.

In the following lines the reference to Joyce is meant to accentuate Heaney's sense of detachment from his people. Exile is a theme running through the whole of 'Singing School' and this is due to the fact that Heaney in the sequence delves into his own significance as a poet hailing from Northern Ireland. In the second stanza of the poem Heaney is advised to "Go back...try to touch the people."

The reference to Federico Garcia Lorca, who was assassinated by Franco's Falangists in Granada, is meant to remind Heaney of the poet's heroic role. Immediately after this three ambiguous lines elicit thoughts about the Irish crisis's sensationalism, referred to in 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing'. However, the lines can also be read as a means of emphasising Heaney's sense of detachment from the 'real thing', as well as creating an analogy between the gore of the corrida and that of war.

> We sat through death counts and bullfight reports
> On the television, celebrities
> Arrived from where the real thing still happened.

Visiting the Prado, Heaney finds the needed revelation in the works of Goya, who painted a number of paintings recording revolutionary uprisings. What strikes Heaney is a painting of 'Saturn / Jewelled in the blood of his own children' and one of 'Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips / Over the world'. Saturn was the Roman god associated with fertility, agriculture and prosperity. However, Saturn safeguarded his power by devouring all his children. In this sense we might draw a parallel with Nerthus or Mother Ireland or the Irish cause. The notion of sacrifice is juxtaposed with the reference to 'Gigantic Chaos' and in this we might read Heaney's condemnation of violence in his country. The three lines which immediately follow and which view the conflicting factions as running on the road to self-destruction highlight this idea:

> Also, that holmgang
> Where two berserks club each other to death
> For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

In the poem's last two lines describing Goya's behaviour at work, Heaney finds an affirmation of how an artist should act in times of social crisis. Goya's dedication to his work was counter-balanced by his love for his country and while politics and art do overlap in Goya's work the world of action is never allowed to demean the world of beauty.

> He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished

The stained cape of his heart as history charged.

This stanza can also be read as a reprobation of Heaney's neutrality and non-involvement.

The investigation of a poet's status is pursued further in the poem 'Fosterage' (*N* 65), which Heaney dedicated to the short-story writer Michael McLaverty. In this poem Heaney recounts how McLaverty advised him that "Description is revelation" just when he was 'newly cubbed in language'. It was a piece of advice Heaney followed thoroughly well since his poems are characterised by quasi-methodical descriptions. McLaverty also tells the young Heaney to "Go your own way... / Do your own work" and to remember Mansfield and Hopkins. His words presage Joyce's advice in section XII of the poem 'Station Island', in which Heaney is asked to give up worrying about the Irish crisis and to reach new heights of creativity. The last two lines from 'Fosterage' – 'fostered me and sent me out, with words / Imposing on my tongue like obols' – allude to the responsibility a poet has towards speaking the truth when confronted by such an explosive issue as that of the Northern Irish conflict.

The fact that different interpretations of Heaney's standpoint in *North* have been pushed forward along the years – some have accused him of condoning terrorist activities, others of remaining at the fringes without soiling his hands, and others have claimed that Heaney is purposefully ambiguous for lack of definitive arguments – provides us with a full picture of the perplexity engendered by the ambivalence of his work. This is best epitomised by the last poem in 'Singing School' and the closing poem of *North*, which is Heaney's most important meditation on his role as a poet originating from Northern Ireland. The title of the poem 'Exposure' (*N* 66) alludes to Heaney's media exposure when he came to abandon Northern Ireland in 1972. It also refers to the exposure enacted out in the poem itself: the poet as a dissenter from the nationalist struggle; the poet as someone who has always been careful of not completely committing himself to the Irish cause through his own work; the poet who has failed to

become the kind of public spokesman his community (and he himself) expected him to become. The poem's tone is similar to that of Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' and a number of parallels exist between the latter poem and 'Exposure'.

'Exposure' opens with a description of Heaney's new home in the Republic of Ireland. It is a dreary picture, cut off from the burning vitality and horror of Belfast and Heaney uses it as some kind of objective correlative for his own spiritual state. The poet stands waiting for a comet that 'Should be visible at sunset' and this builds up into the symbolic framework of the poem. In the third stanza the speaker claims, 'If I could come on meteorite!'; perhaps his reverie on the heroic role of the poet, the saviour of the community, bringing it wisdom and salvation. However, the next six lines portray Heaney's true feelings about himself and the achievements of his career:

> Instead I walk through damp leaves,
> Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,
>
> Imagining a hero
> On some muddy compound,
> His gift like a slingstone
> Whirled for the desperate.

The reference to the 'slingstone' reminds one of the first section from 'Bone Dreams' in which the poet imagines himself as fighting for Ireland's dignity by promoting its rich history and culture, manifesting its equality to that of England. In 'Exposure' that kind of idealistic tone is substituted by the poet's acerbic doubts concerning the efficacy of poetry as a means towards social amelioration. This is similar to Heaney's reflections in the poem 'The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream' (*N* 50), in which the Shelleyan poet is compared to Archimedes who 'thought he could move the world if he / could / find the right place to position his lever'. The speaker believes he can shake the 'masonry / of state and statute' and free his 'wronged people' who 'cheer from their cages'.

However, he soon finds himself imprisoned and is humiliated by the commandant who considers poets to be totally innocuous.

> The commandant motions me to be seated.
> 'I am honoured to add a poet to our list'. He is
> amused and genuine. 'You'll be safer here, anyhow.'

Heaney in this poem deflates the heroic view of the poet and depicts his insignificant stature in the world of politics. The poet-politician is seen as being ineffectual and the speaker comes to realise that it is only the cinematic character of Tarzan who is capable of shaking the world with one mere action of his. Unlike the biblical King David, Heaney fails to beat his Goliath.

In 'Exposure' Heaney tries to determine what exactly is his meaning as a poet and he ponders upon the responsibility this role has heaped upon his shoulders:

> I sit weighing and weighing
> My responsible *tristia.*
> For what? For the ear? For the people?
> For what is said behind-backs?

Listening to the rain coming 'down through the alders' Heaney can hear 'Its low conducive voices / Mutter about let-downs and erosions', voices accusing him of letting down the people and the Irish cause. However, his dejection is not a sign of his lost faith in poetry's validity in the sphere of human significance. For him beauty is an absolute value that does not require the existential justification of morality or politics: 'each [rain] drop recalls / The diamond absolutes'. In the next couple of lines Heaney describes himself as 'An inner émigré, grown long-haired / And thoughtful; a wood-kerne // Escaped from the massacre'. In his use of the appellation 'inner émigré', Heaney is drawing a parallel between himself and such poets as Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova and Zbigniew Herbert. Heaney is defining himself as a devotee of art, first and foremost, whose loyalty to the community cannot outweigh that to his creativity. A 'wood-kerne' was an Irish foot soldier and by identifying with such a title Heaney is emphasising his own

nationalistic sentiments. However, Heaney's rebel has 'Escaped from the massacre' and this highlights Heaney's own non-involvement as well as his departure from his own country of birth. In the dark wood of poetry he finds a safe refuge even though he cannot (and does not want to) renounce external reality:

> Taking protective colouring
> From bole and bark, feeling
> Every wind that blows....

The poem ends on a note of doubt. Despite his affirmations in the earlier stanzas, in the last quatrain Heaney points out the fact that each and every human being is exposed to solely one lifetime and that it is only within its brief duration that the individual can let loose the thrust of his potential. Heaney seems to imply that, unlike the rebels of 'Easter 1916', for example, he has 'missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose'. However, even Yeats's poem is a very ambivalent one and a slightly different reading of the ending of 'Exposure' is that seeing 'The comet's pulsing rose' as a symbol for the solution to the conflict of Northern Ireland. It is a solution that is very far in the poem's future (a solution partly arrived at in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement); or else the comet stands for the answers that Heaney has failed to provide his community with. But Heaney, like Yeats and other artists with whom he identifies, has arrived at truth and beauty and thus fulfilled his obligations as a poet. Being 'neither internee nor informer' the poet walks through a nebulous area that troubles his conscience and gnaws at his heart. Despite feeling the tang of failure sometimes, he can do nothing else but 'trust' himself and the 'nubbed treasure' (*N* 11) of his art.

In spite of all the pessimism of *North* the book opens with a positive affirmation that counterbalances the harsh reality of violence and strife glossed upon in the rest of the book's contents. The two introductory poems work as a foil to the bleak vision of *North*, pushing forward consolatory scenes of events that even though 'They seem hundred of years away' (*N* p. xi) from the world of political and religious dissonance are in fact a valid reality, since in Northern

Ireland the everyday run of domestic affairs has for long lived side by side with the riot of another common reality. In 'Sunlight' (*N* p. ix) we get more than just a realistic picture of everyday rural life. The verse is loaded with a number of abstractions that open up the poem's scope. For example, the first line of the poem – 'There was a sunlit absence' – introduces an idea of emptiness that is not viewed negatively in the poem. It is a space waiting to be filled up and what fills this 'absence' is the tranquil domestic scene described with great attention to physical details in the rest of the poem. It is the open space of the first line that allows life to flourish, to breathe freely. In the last stanza the vital force of love is a 'space' replete with the human physicality of work and life manifested in the poem. In 'The Seed Cutters' (*N* p. xi), Brueghel is a point of reference for a poet who just like all artists must struggle with the issue of how best to capture life through his creativity. Heaney addresses Brueghel and asks him to 'compose the frieze / With all of us there, our anonymities'. The seed cutters in the poem are part of the cyclic pattern of nature to which all must perforce form part of. The words 'our anonymities' speak about art's ability to address the human existence (or even the collective unconscious) shared by all individuals. Art voices the anonymous reality we all form part of and at the same time it has the power of intimately touching the individual. Coming as they do at the beginning of *North*, a volume that to a large extent is centred round what one may call human tragedy, 'Sunlight' and 'The Seed Cutters' are life affirming poems, counterbalancing the dreary picture of the rest of the book. They place 'all of us there', in a scenario in which we 'feel lost, / unhappy and at home' (*WO* 48). In these two poems Heaney depicts a world of everlasting values transcending the ravages of war and allaying division. Love embraces ugliness and transforms it, losing its romantic gleam and working with a more enduring substance:

> And here is love
> like a tinsmith's scoop
> sunk past its gleam
> in the meal-bin.

*North* builds upon the ideas, techniques and imagery of the previous three books and thus it should be considered as an apex in the early stages of Heaney's career. It consolidates the various preoccupations that were not fully pursued in his first three collections and it is also the first work by Heaney in which a unifying vision is created. In *North*, Heaney tries to understand the complex nature of Northern Ireland's conflict and to a large extent he comes to share Auden's belief in the ineffectuality of poetry in the political arena. The accomplishments of *North* allow us to peer into the future of a poet, who lived through the conflict, expressed something strong and cogent about it, but then moved on. For Heaney poetry works on our conscience; it does not influence the machinations of the political world, and even though poetry is at times visibly bedaubed with political concerns its goal should always be that of aiding our moral growth. The beauty of the lyric language employed in *North* offers us the consolation that something of value can truly be borne out of the most horrendous of phenomena.

*Notes*

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[1] Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 30.
[2] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 53.
[3] Edna Longley, '*North*: 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, p. 86.
[4] Seamus Heaney, interview, 'Unhappy and at Home' (Seamus Deane), *The Crane Bag*, 1, 1 (1977), p. 66, quoted in Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, 1982, p. 54.
[5] Graham Martin, 'John Montague, Seamus Heaney and the Irish Past', in Boris Ford, ed., *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Orwell to Naipaul* (Volume 8), Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 384.
[6] Nicholas McGuinn, *Seamus Heaney: A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems 1965-75*, Arnold-Wheaton, Leeds, 1986, p. 89.
[7] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, 1982, p.62.
[8] Ibid, pp. 62-63.
[9] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*, p. 64, quoted in Edna Longley, '*North*: 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Poetry Wales Press, Bridgend, 1982, p. 85.
[10] Edna Longley, '*North*: 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?', pp.84-85.
[11] Blake Morrison, *Contemporary Writers: Seamus Heaney*, Methuen, London, 1982, p. 68.
[12] Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", and David Lloyd, "Pap for the Dispossessed': Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity', in Elmer Andrews, ed., *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Icon Books, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 42-50 and 84-87.
[13] W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Picador-Macmillan Publishers, London, 1990, p. 204.
[14] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, p. 89.
[15] W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Picador-Macmillan Publishers, London, p. 227
[16] Seamus Heaney, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 85 (Summer 1975), p. 1, quoted in Nicholas McGuinn, *Seamus Heaney: A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems 1965-1975*, Arnold-Wheaton, Leeds, 1986, p. 87.
[17] In Heaney it is possible to find a follower of Joyce's artistic principles. According to Declan Kiberd 'In espousing the ideal of androgyny, just one year after the declaration of the Irish Free State, *Ulysses* proclaimed itself a central text of national liberation. Against the either/or antitheses of British imperial psychology, it demonstrated the superior validity of a both/and philosophy. Antithesis had been the master-key to the imperial mind, causing people to make absolute divisions not just between Irish and English, but also between men and

women'. Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction to *Ulysses*', in James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, p. lxiv.

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