Chapter 6

Conclusion: Between Proximity and Distance

In countries caught up in political turmoils, creative writers have always found themselves in a quandary whether to live in the world of their individual artistic callings or allow themselves to be drifted away by the currents of political or social issues of their nations. The accounts of revolutions and struggles for independence, and the literatures produced during these periods, show the inevitable dilemma of the writers. In the history and literature of Ireland, a nation that has been witnessing waves of invasions, and internecine feuds for centuries, the story of varying response of writers to the socio-political conditions has been quite evident. An eighteenth century poem "The Wake of William Orr" by William Drennan portrays the plight effectively:

Hapless Nation, rent and torn,
Thou wert early taught to mourn;
Warfare of six hundred years!
Epochs marked with blood and tears!
Crowns of unity, swept away!
Hapless Nation! hapless Land!
Heap of unceremonious sand!
Crumbled by a foreign weight:
And by worse, domestic hate. (27–28)
After nearly two hundred years, the conditions appear more or less the same. Though the light in the tunnel appears to be sure and bright after the recent settlement, it is yet to be seen whether the dispute between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland is settled forever. Seamus Heaney, as a contemporary poet and a sensitive individual true to his own conscience, has not suppressed the dilemma of his true self as a writer and a humane person.

There is an additional crisis that Heaney faces and this too, is reflected in his poems. The individual is pitted against the social forces that try to engulf him. These two issues – the artistic question versus the political issues and individuation versus socialization – are intertwined and the poet solves the first question as he chooses to go through the process of individuation. The present investigation, considering the immensity of the issues and the popularity of the writer, deals with these issues in detail. Poets before him from other lands have tackled the question when they too were to choose between aesthetics and politics. Heaney’s identity is shaped by both continuity and resistance. Hence these two terms are used as key terms to assess the larger issues confronted by the poet.
In the process of individuation, Heaney passes through two main phases separated by a short phenomenon that culminates the first phase and initiates the second. This thesis as revealed in the previous pages, shows how during the first phase of association Heaney gets in touch with his personal and communal past. The association with political, communal and literary traditions helps him to understand himself better and strengthens him to choose a stand for himself and this is a mark of individuation. The linking phenomenon is a break from all that shackles him to the trodden paths, and the individuating self chooses only those traditions and experiences which, like a spring-board, would help him to go higher and be liberated. The second phase is that of reintegration in which contraries are balanced when the poetic self evolves. Heaney places the aesthetic concern above the political because his vocation is to be a poet and all contradictions have to be settled if he has to be true to his calling. Yet, he asserts that creativity of art is in itself a form of resistance to all kinds of political suppressions and powers that prevent the crossing of boundaries. The poet, thus finds an answer in his unique way.

In the phase of association, Heaney's desire to find continuity is observed. Having been born in a farming community that valued manual labour, and growing up in a society that distrusted words, Heaney has obviously broken his tradition by choosing his vocation
of working with words; yet there are enough instances in his poetry to show that he integrates the beauty, magic and skill seen in the farmers and craftsmen of his community in his calling. In fact he even identifies himself with the womenfolk in his family who did the household chores like churning and baking with love and care.

The second and third chapter of the thesis illustrates the fact that Heaney sees his role as a poet as a continuation of the rustic labour done in the countryside. He connects himself to the "filid" of the pre-Christian era and attributes to the poet, the vatic function too. Hence the art of writing poetry is seen as digging, drawing water from the depths, mediating between the latent resource and the community, and recreating the "mysteries of the grove." In his "The God in the Tree", Heaney says, "Poetry of any power is always deeper than its declared meaning. The secret between words, the binding element, is often a psychic force that is elusive, archaic and only half-apprehended by maker and audience" (Preoccupations 186). The poet is synonymous with the water diviner, the thatcher, the blacksmith, the cairn-maker and the archaeologist who excavates the past.

Heaney brings to his poetry the lessons he has learned in his boyhood and the feelings which have been too powerful to be overcome. As an adult and a poet, he may look upon those events
from a different angle but he appropriates the meaning that was imparted long ago, in the light of the present circumstances. This string of continuity that Heaney picks up from the past has been dealt with in detail in Chapter Two. The frogs in the flax-dam and black berries he picked every summer taught him about intrusion and resistance. Passive watching of kittens being killed had made him guilty but he found excuses to justify his behaviour. Later his conscience was quietened in the same way when he saw people killed, but the guilt surfaced and only a pilgrimage could settle it. The wonder at the rituals, especially the funeral ones and the fear that pervaded most areas of his life had their origin even at boyhood. In fact the fear that grips the Irish mind is centuries-old and it is this fear that finds expression in Heaney's poetry that belongs to the phase of association.

Writing in an atmosphere of sectarian violence, Heaney could not ignore the murder and bloodshed that was taking place in Northern Ireland. It was not only that “Men die at hand. In blasted street and home / The gelignite’s a common sound effect:” (“Whatever You Say Say Nothing” North), Heaney was also prodded by journalists in search of “views on the Irish thing.” The Belfast writers were pestering him to champion their cause and Heaney comments, “Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me” (“Freedman” North). This makes him dwell upon the current
violence and inhumanity and he finds a link with the Earth Mother Cult, the warring Norsemen and Jutland Celts. Dillon Johnston’s opinion confirms this:

Heaney constructs a hemispheric myth, inherent in the Viking foundations of Dublin, of man’s homicidal nature, which is as inexplicable as nature’s unconscious processes from which it is derived. Heaney associates war rites, ritual sacrifice and sacrificial victims with . . . the ancient Celtic worship of Nerthus, to suggest that current Ulster killings are conditioned by preconscious forces. (Garratt 204)

The third chapter of this thesis speaks more of this subject of continuity found in Heaney’s poems.

Land is an element to which the poet looks for continuity and the fourth section of Chapter Three is about how Heaney forges a link with the Irish tradition that loves to celebrate the landscape and place names which usually have a wealth of meaning attached to them. Dinnshenchas, a genre of Irish poetry relates the original meanings of places and narrates their mythical association. The British changed the names because the Gaelic words meant nothing to them and most of the words were difficult to pronounce. “Anahorish” was originally “Anachfhioruisce” and Heaney says in
"Broagh" that the "last gh" was difficult for the strangers to manage. Poets before him have immortalised place names in their poetry and Heaney chooses to continue that tradition. There are among the poems of Heaney those that deal with place names and there are poems where the names are sung like litany and in many places the names punctuate the events narrated in the poems.

As Heaney grows mature, he goes beyond his immediate context to continue the poetic traditions created long ago and in far away lands. Chapter Four shows how his poems are illustrative of this. *Station Island* and the following volumes have a stamp of Dante's influence. Classical poets like Ovid and Horace and the twentieth century poets of the Eastern Bloc like Osip Mandelstam and Czeslaw Milosz widen Heaney's poetic vision in various ways. Most of these writers felt uprooted but defied all suppression. Dante was excommunicated and never did he enter his beloved Florence in his life time. Ovid was banished by Augustus on the charge of having corrupted his daughters and he wrote his *Tristia* in exile. Mandelstam is called the "Lazarus of Modern Russian poetry" and for two decades his poems lay buried and he was persecuted in the Stalinist regime till his death at the age of forty seven. Writing about his internal exile, Mandelstam borrowed Ovid's title "Tristia", and in "Exposure" Heaney who calls himself an "inner émigré" mourns, "I sit weighing and weighing / My responsible tristia"
Thus he aligns himself with poets who found themselves the target of acrimony.

Heaney is a religious poet in the sense that he is consciously aware of the mysterious elements of nature and life, and though his intellect may repel the repressive nature of the institutionalised religion, his heart honours the sacred and the inherited. The pre-Christian fertility cults and their sway over the human mind is awe-inspiring to Heaney and in the Druidic religion he finds a kinship. Yet he calls himself a Catholic and his poems are rife with scriptural allusions and echoes. Religion also serves as a factor that marks the continuing feature in Heaney’s poetry. This has been discussed with suitable illustrations in the third chapter of the thesis.

*The Haw Lantern, Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level* reveal a change in Heaney’s poetic outlook. These volumes that follow *Station Island* (1984) do not in any way contradict the poetic message of the former books. He still returns to his boyhood experiences and the commonplace things of the Irish countryside, yet his vision transcends the visible and the spatial and the role of is poetry gets broadened. Instead of being viewed as a “dig” or a release”, poetry is assumed to have wider dimensions of perfecting mankind. In his essay “Joy or Night” Heaney writes, “poetry itself is
a manifestation of ‘joy’ and a redressal, in so far as it fortifies the spirit against assaults from outside and temptations from within” (Redress 163). To achieve this, he feels that the vision of reality that poetry offers must be transformative. The poet, “by interposing his or her perception and expression” will transfigure the given circumstances, the conditions of time and place and thereby overcome bleakness and this is “the redress of poetry” (Redress 159).

The fifth chapter of the thesis deals with how Heaney’s poetry manifests the transformative nature of poetry. His poems provide a counter-reality and bring to balance the gravitational pull of the actual historical circumstances. Heaney calls this “counter weighting.” The invisible thus is more pronounced than the apparent and empty spaces become “a source.” The poems become conceptual, abstract and allegoric, and memory and imagination play a significant part bordering the present and the real. Contrariness is accepted as found in life and nature, and there is a suggestive plea that his nation torn in strife should also accept it.

Resistance appears to be a contrary factor to continuity, very often associated with politics as something that aims to bring in change, a change which could be relative in merit because to those who resist it may appear to be good while to others it may seem a
threat to continuity. Paradoxically, resistance may come out of a desire for continuity, opposing factors that hinder progress or annihilate identity. In Heaney resistance is directed towards elements that pose a threat to all that is Irish and his ways of resistance undergo a change during his literary career.

In Heaney's early poems, resistance appears to be open, yet controlled, never superceding the artistic end. The opening lines of the first poem in his first volume announce: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun” (Digging” DN). But soon the pen ceases to be a gun and he proposes to use it like a spade for purposes that sustain life: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it.” This appearance of contrariness found in the poem runs in various ways through out the earlier volumes and is resolved only in the sixth volume Station Island. The poems studied in Chapters Two and Three are illustrative of this dilemma as to whether he should actively involve in the political struggle or confine to affirming life through art. This of course is in keeping with his assertion, “Poetry is out of the quarrel with ourselves” (Preoccupations 34).

Heaney's anger is expressed at several imperialistic attitudes and behaviours: the indifference shown to the famine victims which made them “violent and without hope”; the Protestant docker whose
"fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic" any time; the British settlers who razed down the "oak groves" and the "cutters of mistletoe" as well; "the alliterative tradition" of English that left the Irish muse "forgotten like the coccyx"; the "boot of law" that ran "the ministry of fear"; the "armoured cars" and "headphoned soldiers" approaching down their roads "as if they owned them"; the "subtle discrimination", internment and bombings that make them wonder, "Is there a life before death?". All these are to be resisted for they are forces that try to obliterate the identity of his race.

Heaney shows his resistance by using strong terms and in subtle ways. In "Oysters", he remembers how these molluscs, the "glut of privilege" were hauled to Rome. His mind associates the many privileges that they have lost and how the conquerors had deprived them over the centuries and then he says:

And was angry that my trust could not repose
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
Leaning in from sea. I ate the day
Deliberately, that its tang
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb. (FW)

There are other poems where he prophesied that resistance cannot be underground: "the barley grew up out of the grave" ("Requiem for the Croppies" DD). North is full of poems about the present conditions in Northern Ireland and has many that speak of blood-
shed and violence in the historical and legendary past. When published, it appeared as though it is a sign of passive acceptance of violence, and a justification that violence perpetrates violence. Heaney was severely criticised for that.

In Station Island he meets the ghosts of people who resisted physically and violently and also those who were the victims of violence. Both make him guiltier still and he finds no solution, yet the stock-taking does him good for he lets go the question that has been tormenting him and learns to trust in the invisible and the visionary. The translation of Juan de la Cruz's "Song of the Soul" teaches him to "see" "although it is the night." He comes to concentrate more on the nature of his art: "The trance of driving / made all roads one:"

(“On the Road” SI).

The modified form of resistance as it appears in Heaney’s later works has been studied in the fifth chapter of this thesis. In a world that seeks to suppress truth and justice, poetry can affirm these essentials, create conscience and trust, resist and conquer all intimidating forces. Heaney argues that the human consciousness is "confronted with the limitations of human existence", the failure and the hurt done to oneself and others (Redress 160). What poetry does is to strengthen the spirit to endure by "pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman, by pitting the positive
effort of mind against the desolutions of natural and historical violence" (*Redress* 163). The "human resource" and "the positive effort of the mind" refer to the domain of the imagined. It has been discussed in Chapter Five how Heaney appropriates in his poems the negotiation of the real and the imaginary. A visit to the Republic of Conscience gave Heaney the recognition that he "was now a dual citizen" and he was given a responsibility as well:

He therefore desired me when I got home

to consider myself a representative

and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere

but operated independently

and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

("Republic of Conscience" *HL*)

This acceptance of divided identity and the spiritual maturity to trust contrariness solves many of the questions that the poet had when he started his career. One particular question that tormented him for long was the right of poetic utterance itself, whether a "song constituted a betrayal of suffering." Heaney narrates an incident in his essay "The Interesting case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker." In 1972 Heaney was planning to record some songs and poems with a friend and on the way to the studio they found that there had been some explosions and casualities. The air was filled
with the music of the wailing ambulances and they found it impossible to raise their voice at such a moment (Government ix). But at this later stage of maturity he feels that by accepting the antinomies and reconciling the two orders of knowledge, poetry can continue to be and continue to affirm life. Heaney's argument, spoken through his alter-ego Sweeney shows clearly that he is not going to allow his right to be tampered by the happenings outside:

Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps, bad harvests, fires, unfair settlements, deaths in floods, murders and miscarriages.

And if my rights to it all come only by their acclamation, what was it worth?

("The First Kingdom" SI)

Thus the creation of Heaney's artistic text becomes a text of resistance. He has successfully crossed the frontiers and he resists through his text all forces that perpetuate divisions. Resistance in Heaney's poems has been a healthy manifestation of growth. Jung's theories on individuation assert that the ego in its quest for wholeness undergoes a dialogical process of conflict and collaboration with the unconscious. The myth system which symbolises this central human experience calls this a "fight with a dragon." After the ego severs itself from the unconscious successfully, it reintegrates in a new way, keeping its identity and yet becoming part of the whole. A survey of the poetic works reveals
that the growth of Heaney’s poetic consciousness is reflected in his poetry and when studied in the context of this developmental process, the elements of continuity and resistance are evolutionary.

"The Errand", a poem in his recent volume *The Spirit Level* (1996) exemplifies how he preserves the continuity of his poetic art by returning to his past. The change is also seen in the blending of the real and the imaginary. He follows the communal tradition by making the silence speak more than words. The boy in the poem does not speak at all and the eight-line poem has to be read between the lines. The resistance shown candidly at the "fool's errand" in a clever way becomes the subject of the poem but resistance is internalised as well, and the text spells resistance:

‘On you go now! Run, son, like the devil

And tell your mother to try

To find me a bubble for the spirit level

And a new knot for this tie.’

But still he was glad, I know, when I stood my ground,

Putting it up to him

With a smile that trumped his smile and his fool’s errand,

Waiting for the next move in the game.
The phase of reintegration shows the successful completion of the individuation process. The doubts and probings are over and the socialization syndromes become subordinate. Creative writing is given priority over the need to get involved in the political issues and yet the issue of resistance gets integrated in the poetic text. The poet's predicament is thus examined, and it is seen how Heaney comes to terms with the dualisms that he and the other Irish writers had to struggle with. The possibility of creative response need not be the same even if poets are granted the same living conditions. In Heaney's case, his vibrant sensibility and the demand of his artistic mind interacting with the expectations of the external world and the experiences there in have had their impact. This thesis, by tracing the elements of continuity and resistance, comes to a conclusion that the poet asserts to be one of the Irish community and yet defying all intimidating forces remains an individual as well, enjoying the proximity and the distance.