CHAPTER 1

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

Who ever heard
Such a sight unsung
As a severed head
With a grafted tongue?

- old Gaelic poem.

In the lyric sequence titled 'Shelf Life', Seamus Heaney celebrates certain archaic, inanimate objects, an old smoothing iron among them, which seem to make conflicting moral claims on the poet. He imagines his aunt at the ironing board, working intently.

To work, her dumb lunge says,
is to move a certain mass

through a certain distance,
is to pull your weight and feel
exact and equal to it.

Feel dragged upon. And buoyant. (SI 22).
The title of this thesis is founded on this image of dualism because it defines with clarity and economy the fundamental dialectic governing Heaney’s work till date.

It is significant that Heaney summons up the same law of physics in his recent collection of prose, *The Place of Writing*, a compilation of lectures delivered at Emory University in memory of Richard Ellmann:

> To work is to move a certain mass through a certain distance. In the case of poetry, the distance moved through is that which separates the historically and topographically situated place from the written place, the mass moved is one aspect of the writer’s historical / biographical experience and each becomes a factor of the other in the achieved work. The work of art, in other words, involves raising the historical record to a different power (36).

—in most cases, the symbolic or the visionary.

The journey that Heaney may be seen as attempting to make in his poetry is from writing a region into existence, and thence, moving on to recreate that region as a space in the mind, transforming topography into poetic symbol. His poetry has striven to lift itself from a rootedness in the earth to a buoyancy in regions of the air. In his most representative work, these opposing impulses are held together, quite naturally unresolved: the ‘drag’ of the ‘home-water’s gravities’ which encompasses all of tradition—the ‘presentness’ of the past, familial, communal, ethnic, or literary—and, the sheer ‘buoyancy’ of artistic freedom and autonomy.

In as small a country as Ireland, individual voices necessarily crowd upon one another and the awareness of tradition, with the concomitant issue of influence, is registered with far greater immediacy than in a heterogeneous melting pot such as America. Yet the Irish poet, as Heaney puts it, “lives of another hump” as well—namely, the eclecticism that may derive from the mainstream Anglo-American, or
Continental traditions. In Heaney’s poetry, in particular, the two feeder-strains of roots and reading exist in a symbiotic relationship. The dialogue between tradition [which includes in the main "the long shadow cast by Yeats" (Brown 4)] and the need to escape from it has been the sustaining preoccupation in his poetry. The early poetry in earnestly striving to relocate identity consciously addressed tradition and professed, established a poetics of earth. "Finding a voice" was the need of the hour for Heaney. But with the overwhelming politicization of life in Ireland, his writing as a Catholic poet in Ulster, became inexorably politicized too. Thenceforth, he began to be tossed between the conflicting demands of socio-political commitment and of aestheticism. Despite the criticism that dismissed his work as prone to the habitual or as paralysed by stasis, Heaney has increasingly and of late, displayed a robust, living creativity that attests to the fact that he has assimilated tradition creatively and, that, this has enabled him to "adumbrate changes and developments within his creative career" (Brown 5).

Heaney has forged his poetics against a background that is movingly defined by Kinsella, perhaps Heaney’s seniormost Irish contemporary.

Every writer in the modern world ... is the inheritor of a gapped, discontinuous tradition. Nevertheless if the function of tradition is to link us living with the significant past, that is done as well by a broken tradition as by a whole one-- however painful it may humanly speaking. I am certain that a great part of the significance of my own past, as I try to write my poetry, is that that past is mutilated (Brown 138).

Poetry is redemptive utterance. But Kinsella rightly proceeds to touch upon that other hump which Heaney cites as being vital to the poet, namely, "the relationship with other literatures, with the present, with the human predicament, with the self" (Brown
139). Heaney sees himself a receiving station for these opposed "in-fluences" (as he etymologically splits the word)--Irish and non-Irish, which is for the most part, English.

The old Gaelic poem sums up in typically cryptic fashion the agon of a culture robbed of its tongue, a body of tradition truncated, and the compounded identity that "resides in the hyphen separating the Anglo from the Irish" (Shapiro 336). The distinctive Irish experience is one of division, registered acutely and perversely in a country so small. Though common knowledge, it bears reiteration that in Ireland's chequered history, division has taken these forms:

Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist, Ireland and England, North and South, the country and the one bloated city of Dublin, Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland, the comfortable and the poor, farmers and P.A.Y.E. workers, pro-treaty and anti-treaty, child and parents, the Irish and English languages, the visible Ireland and the hidden Ireland, landlord and tenant, the Big House and the hovel. To which it is now necessary to add, a defensive Church and an increasingly secular State .... (Donoghue, We Irish 16).

Ireland, unlike most Western European states has not seen national unification follow upon the heels of nationalist victory, during these past few decades. Rather, as the history of the Indian sub-continent in these post-Partition decades fully confirms, the advent of nationhood has institutionalized divisions: "like rabbit pads that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land" (P 20).

This issue of 'crossed pieties' and of the grappling of opposites in the Irish identity, and the centrality of 'identity' per se in Irish writing are not due simply to the contingent claims of political preoccupations, major factor though that may be. Rather, they indicate the crucial nexus between these political preoccupations and
literature in Ireland. The latter has since the nineteenth century articulated the search for a resolution of political conflict and has at times represented the transcendence of it as well.

Tom Paulin has commented on this overwhelming politicisation of Anglo-Irish writing so lyrically, expressively--"politics is like a rainstorm that catches us all in its wet noise" (Paulin 18). A poem need not make any ideological profession or statement. It can merely "embody a general historical awareness--an observation of the rain--rather than offering a specific attitude to state affairs" (Paulin 18). But whether actively political or not, the creative writer is vested with the onerous burden of representativeness. This, in turn, in a strife-ridden land like Ireland with a politics of identity, engenders an inexorable poetics of identity.

'Irishness' becomes a hallowed pursuit for the writer and, possibly within its purview and its broad mystifications, the writer typcasts sectarian ideas and symbols, whether Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Republican. History also tends to be mystified and interpreted as a repetitive, cyclical pattern of deterritorialisation and its antithesis successively. The sum-total of post-colonial aesthetics in Ireland, therefore, quite naturally inheres in tropes of recovery, metaphors of reterritorialisation. The writer attempts to relocate racial and individual identity, rephrase it in terms of origins, and such recovery which is broadly typical of the poetics of Romanticism, engenders in the context of post-colonialism, a "naive return" to racial origins, a mythologization of native territory in a bid to heal division and transcend it.

The Irish Revival or Renaissance of the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries proved to be the single large movement which effected a brilliant signal fusion of the politics and aesthetics of identity. It was the time when the written word was deemed to have the power to send out 'certain men the English shot'. The urgent need of the hour was a crude avowal of 'Oirishness'. In a manifestly Romantic
programme, Yeats and his literary companions wrought a Celtic Revival that was a celebration of ethnicity, perhaps valorized for the present. Yeats' early pastoral vision projected the Edenic, aristocratic rural Ireland of yore. This then developed into a mythologising compulsion when he gave the territorial numen of Ireland, Cathleen ni Houlihan, a symbolic force. He exhorted Synge to proceed to the Aran Islands and give them a tongue, a lyric expression. It was a concerted movement and a productive one, located at the confluence of politics and art.

It is no exaggeration to declare that Yeats is the Bloomian 'agon', the overbearing ancestral presence in the writing of contemporary Anglo-Irish poets. There is a popular critical notion cited with reference to Plato and his achievement—that, whichever path a writer may be set upon to tread, he is bound to meet Plato on his way back. This theory is ratified in the context of the contemporary Irish writer and his relationship with Yeats. Every writer worth the mention has to perfome contend with Yeats for the Master will call him to reckoning. Paul Muldoon's Meeting the British (1987) posits a typically ventriloquist dialogue with Yeats in a poem called '7, Middagh Street', with the voice of W.H. Auden taking on the Irish Master:

    If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead
    would certain men have stayed in bed?

    For history's a twisted root
    with art its small, translucent fruit

    and never the other way round.
    The roots by which we were once bound

    are severed here, in any case,
    and we are all now dispossessed.  

    (PW 40).
Heaney gives his essay on Yeats, in *Preoccupations*, the title "Yeats an example?", harking back to Auden’s essay in 1940 which bore the same title; and the question mark perhaps acknowledges the orthodox notion that a very great poet can be a very bad influence on younger poets. Nevertheless, Heaney singles out Yeats’ peremptoriness and arrogance as exemplary, his intense intellectual wrestle with ideas and words that becomes synonymous with inspiration. And more than all else, his moving awareness that all artistic mastery is yet vulnerable to the exigent pathos of life:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought. (Yeats 393).

The Byzantium poems orchestrate upon the hoary dialectic of Art and Life, ‘the golden bird set upon a bough to sing’ and ‘the tattered coat upon a stick’ -- masterful images of Art and of the ‘foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’. It is this that haunts Heaney till date, in mid-career. "W.B.Yeats and Thoor Ballylee" in *The Place of Writing* pays, at last, unqualified homage to Yeats after all of Heaney’s holding back. He pins Yeats’ greatness down to the fact that he had established his majestic visionary kingdom at Ballylee, built that solid monument to Art, his Tower, and was yet in the end vulnerable to doubt and was poignantly aware that "the much-vaunted insulation of the tower-dweller--that quarantined, stone-kept otherness of the artist" was "helpless against the unaccommodated cry of suffering nature" (PW 33).

If Yeats’ poetry was a profound metaphor of grounding and later of attempted transcendence, Joyce’s nationalism was oblique, thrown into emphasis by exile and
distance. If Yeats and his fellow-Revivalists yielded themselves to the country's history and culture, Joyce desired to 'fly by those nets' of religion, race and nationality. To use Heaney's law of physics, Joyce pitched his lever at a greater distance from Ireland but this sharpened rather than obscured his view of his mother-country. Heaney observes astutely in an interview given to Frank Kinahan (407): "Yeats is the national poet ... but the word "England" only appears once in his poetry" ... ('England may keep faith'... 'Easter 1916'). But with Joyce one senses a ferocity "every time England or an English person appears in the letters or the work". It is not "political anger" but "intellectual disdain" and Heaney gives him the credit for having brought "Irish literature beyond both national griefs and national grievances" (Kinahan, Interview 407) and for freeing Anglo-Irish writing from such obsessions. "His achievement reminds me that English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon" (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 115). To that extent, certainly, Joyce was an iconoclast in those hallowed times of the Revival.

The years that followed the Revival most naturally engendered a critical reaction to the profound issue of 'commitment'. The counter-trend was most interestingly represented by Louis MacNeice and, later, in a different sense, by Patrick Kavanagh.

MacNeice, like Joyce, removed himself physically from Ireland. Yeats' was the pioneer's need, "the founder's need" (PW 47) of achieving the poem of place, of grounding the writing into the place and all that it signified. Joyce sought objective vision and almost achieved it in his journey from Stephen Hero to Ulysses. But for MacNeice the compulsion was merely to deconstruct 'patria' or sense of place, and his poetry is stirred by a profound sense of unrest and flux. In a dialogue with F.R. Higgins, (which is quoted in full by Muldoon in his prologue to The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry), MacNeice castigated the "racial blood-music" potentially
expected of an Irish poet. He thundered that the "innocent burble" about it had become malignant in retrospect, tainted with the stain of Nazi ideology and Aryan racism. MacNeice’s ‘Carrick Revisited’ Heaney reads as "wonderfully honest, not superior to the down-beat of Ulster, not overly susceptible to the aura of the West of Ireland, not denying a fidelity to the chosen ground of England" (PW 45).

Whatever then my inherited or acquired
Affinities, such remains my childhood’s frame
Like a belated rock in the red Antrim clay
That cannot at this era change its pitch or name-
And the pre-natal mountain is far away.  
(PW 46).

Patrick Kavanagh struck a strident anti-pastoral note and consequently a militant anti-Revivalist posture. He endorsed the life-giving artistic validity of the "potato patch", the local parish. Heaney records, delightfully,

I was like a child with his nose pressed to a sweet-shop window gazing from behind a barrier at the tempting mysteries beyond. And then came this revelation and confirmation of reading Kavanagh ... What was being experienced was not some hygienic and self-aware pleasure of the text but a primitive delight in finding world become word (GT 7-8).

Kavanagh’s Maguire in his long seminal poem The Great Hunger was in every way the anti-Romantic Irish peasant, an antithesis to the 'buck-lepping' (the term he coined) 'Oirish' caricature perpetrated by the Revival which in itself he castigated as a "thorough-going English-bred lie" (PW 38).

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh
Where potato gatherers like mechanized scarecrows move
Along the sidefall of a hill, Maguire and his men.  
(Muldoon 26).
What Heaney found even more exemplary in Kavanagh was the subtle movement in his later poetry towards a weightlessness, a celebration of 'the placeless Heaven' 'where the self reposes' away 'from the sour soil of a town where all roots canker'. The Self became, as it would become in its own time for Heaney, a redemptive force that upheld and affirmed the artist's inner freedom in the face of worldly disillusionments, an infrangible dignity.

Seamus Heaney and his contemporaries thus found themselves addressing a complex Irish inheritance that swung between the polarities of commitment and its rejection, between participation in the historical moment and pure aestheticism. In the last couple of decades, 'Irishism' has come to suggest not merely ethnic kitsch (as Kavanagh interpreted it) but also "an implied loyalty to the aims and (by extension) the methods of the Irish Republican Army" (PW 38). This has been, politically, a negative feedback to the Revival and this view has certainly not been corrected by the literary trend of post-modern deconstructionism which is inherently sceptical about "ideological depth-charges in all literature" and, indeed, "about the very possibility of justified language arts after Auschwitz" (PW 38). Such an intellectual environment has spawned in broad terms, in contemporary Irish poetry, a trend which confuses the poet to utterance "that might include the ludic, the ironic, the parodic, the satiric, the pathetic, the domestic, the elegiac and the self-inculpatory, but which would conscientiously exclude the visionary-prophetic, the patriotic witness and the national epical" (PW 38). The commitment to nation and to a rooted mythology may be discredited by these poets but they have nevertheless not disappeared. One confronts lyric irony rather than jingoism, subliminal partisanship rather than naked avowal of communal loyalties. The methods are sophisticated, less naive.
Paul Muldoon’s ‘The Mixed Marriage’ (1977) projects an imagination fathered by the subculture on the mothering literate culture of the schools, at once lifting the poem to the level of allegory and parable:

She has read one volume of Proust,
He knew the cure for farcy.
I flitted between a hole in the hedge
And a room in the Latin Quarter. (P 211).

John Montague, Heaney’s senior contemporary writes that poem ‘The Water Carrier’ which Heaney found almost religiously confirming:

Twice daily I carried water from the spring,
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets. (Muldoon 177).

Tom Paulin expresses it cryptically:

And this is where I live: a town
On the wrong side of the border. (Muldoon 336).

These poems may, all of them, read as epigraphs to Seamus Heaney’s work, for they orchestrate a profoundly similar sense of dichotomy.

Writing in the post-Nationalism years these writers are all trapped in the unsettling conflict between their sense of a native Ireland, their real and given place, and their sense of an England, acquired from that fosterage by and through English literature. Resisting Yeats but inevitably confronted by his overbearing presence, they are sustained by an eclecticism, the nourishment provided by the alternative tradition of Anglo-American poetry and in Heaney’s instance, of classic and contemporary European poets.

‘Breaking bread with the dead’ is the activity Heaney confesses as being vitally necessary to the life of poetry. In Preoccupations, his first prose collection, he
confesses to a "half-clarified desire to come to terms with myself by considering the example of others and to try to bring into focus the little I knew" (P 13). The signal word here is 'example' --his use of it reverberates in his poetry and his critical writing, warranting studies of his work as 'the art of the exemplary'. Constantly, Heaney reads himself in the context of literary tradition and presents a paradigm of sorts, a system of classifying his precursors which almost runs the risk of being over-schematized.

He places himself squarely in the Romantic tradition when he defines poetry in "Feeling Into Words" as "divination, as revelation of the Self to the Self, as restoration of 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). Poetry then is a recovery of the past, a return to origins, a point of entry, like archaeology, into the buried life of communal and individual feelings and the point of exit from it. More significantly, it is an organic stirring of the mind round a numen or a donne; it is a growth towards articulation.

The activity is thus feminine in its suggestions, a yielding, an almost amorous surrender to words, instinctual and natural. In this regard, Heaney identifies Wordsworth as the greatest exemplar. The great Romantic's method of composition Heaney ingeniously explains (P 65) through an etymological reading of the word 'verse' --the turn (Latin 'versus') the ploughman makes from one furrow to the other and, as well, a single unit of poetry. Wordsworth's electrically charged rhythmic perambulations on the gravel path while composing, engendered the metronome, it is said. His creativity was an attuning, a brooding meditation upon ideas embryonically felt within--the quintessential lyric poet. His emphases which he describes as 'spots of time' in his *The Prelude* are with Heaney right through to his most recent writing.
Heaney's first three books of poems "sparred gently" with precursors such as Ted Hughes, R.S.Thomas, Robert Frost and Theodore Roethke. Hughes was a towering forceful presence in the early 60s, inconoclastic, since his voice had no truck with all that gentility of the typically English middle-class. Heaney confesses "I'm a different kind of animal from Ted, but I will always be grateful for the release that reading Ted's work gave me. I had gone through the education as to Eliot's bringing in irony and urban subject-matter and intelligence and nothing in that connected with the scripts written in my being". Hughes' "great cry and call and bawl is that the English language and poetry are longer and deeper and rougher than that" (Haffenden, Interview 2). At the same time Heaney was becoming aware that in the Welsh countryside, R.S.Thomas, inspired too by Kavanagh, was dislodging myths regarding Welsh peasantry and was coming to grips with what was real--the natural and spiritual impoverishment of his people. Heaney found this eminently confirming and realized that world could become word.

But there is also undeniably, the skill of making, of crafting poetry masterfully. This Heaney interprets as the play of intelligence, deliberate or conscious, a masculine assertion of will over form and idea. Hopkins' ingenious and untiring wrestle with words and their 'inscape', made a lasting impact on Heaney. In "Feeling Into Words" he makes a contrastive study of Hopkins and Keats--the latter with his 'narcotic' rhythm, 'wooes us to receive', while the former with his pre-verbal intellection 'alerts us to perceive'. With Hopkins poetry becomes a siring activity ('the achieve of, the mastery of the thing'), "a masculine forging rather than a feminine incubation, with a consequent intentness rather than allure in his style" (P 97).

The early Lowell Heaney looked up to for his masculine 'command', his peremptoriness akin to Yeats'. He draws a parallel between such a stance in Lowell's early poetry and his letter to President Roosevelt refusing to enlist in the U.S. Army
for the II World War in 1943, playing conscientious objector. Heaney sees in both a tendency, a determination to "force an issue by pressure of will" (GT 134). However, what Heaney discovers in the later Lowell is even more confirming and ‘exemplary’. Breaking beyond the ‘Parnassian impasse’ it had reached, Lowell’s poetry mellowed and acquired a gentler autumnal colouring:

Past fifty, we learn with surprise and a sense
of suicidal absolution,
that what we intended and failed

could never have happened-
and must be done better. (GT 147).

Heaney found the "spectacle of a poet taking the crowbar to a perfected style" (GT 141), --even as Yeats did earlier--awesome and inspiring, especially in mid-career when he had begun to be weighed down by the compulsion to wave Irishness like a flag, by the pressure, as public cynosure, to address the Irish political problem; while on the other hand, there was the obligation to be true to the emerging Self, the obligation to serve his Art in an untrammeled manner.

This quarrel between the free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation Heaney identified in the greatest of poets commencing with Dante down to contemporary East European poets. He found in all such poets a psychological compulsion to move to a higher level of consciousness and resolve the conflict symbolically in Art, in Jungian terms. Writing in an article entitled "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet", Heaney observes: "When poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures" (Meyer 50). In this context, his poetry is
resonant with the voices of ghostly mentors, literary ancestors guiding, hectoring him, or, more often, endorsing his state of mind and being. He thus creates a near-global miscellany of 'displaced' poets who comprise his 'Republic of Conscience', and who are all "caught between a need to affirm the centrality of the local experience to his own being and a recognition that this experience is likely to be peripheral to the usual life of his age" (PW 7-8).

Dante exemplifies for Heaney the attempt to transcend the contrariness of consciousness and imagination, of personal realism and dramatic creation, of universal values and local intensity. He is an important presence in Field Work and, more crucially, in the autobiographical 'Station Island' sequence which is patterned after the 'Purgatorio' and works out the validity of Heaney's rival commitments.

Osip Mandelstam, the great Russian poet, inspires Heaney profoundly, his work affirming the sheer force of lyric utterance in the face of terror, oppression, suffering and tyranny of the Stalinist variety. Heaney does not presume to equate his plight with that of Mandelstam. Instead, he merely recognises: "We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes" (P 219).

Mounds of human heads are wandering into the distance.
I dwindle among them. Nobody sees me. But in books
much loved, and in children's games I shall rise
from the dead to say the sun is shining. (Paulin 350).

Following upon his reading of Mandelstam and his sordid story, Heaney turned to the work of modern European poets such as Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub and Commonwealth poets like Derek Walcott, the Caribbean. Reading these poets, some of them in translation, introduced him to a note struck in that
world, beyond the insular, by a modern ‘martyrology’ and this note was bleak and resuscitative all at once.

We look into the face of hunger the face of fire face of death worst of all—the face of betrayal and only our dreams have not been humiliated

(Herbért, ‘1982’ GT 69).

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books.
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,

And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.

(Milosz, ‘Incantation’ GT 36).

The Earth is turning,
says the pupil,
No, the Earth is turning
says the teacher ...
Because the teacher knows better.


What was the Caribbean? A green pond mantling
behind the Great House columns of Whitehall,

with bloated frogs squatting on lily pads
like islands, islands that coupled sadly as turtles
engendering islets ...

All of them bespeak an idiom that is translucent, weightless, unabashedly abstract and parabolic. It is a poetry with an access to visionary freedom of the kind that Heaney aspires to in his mature work.

The 'drag' and the 'buoyancy' sustained in a symbiotic relationship form the basis of Heaney's poetics of duality. The schematization or the terms of the dichotomy may be seen as feminine and masculine, technique and craft, vowel and consonant, earth and air, emotion and intelligence and, thence, mythologised as Irish and English, Antaeus and Hercules, Catholic and Protestant, Oisin and St. Patrick. The poetry reaches after a transcendence of this self-division and in his most recent work, Heaney writes with the knowledge that "Non-differentiation lies in the matter which precedes all difference and in the product which is the end of difference, the aesthetic object, the poem" (Lloyd 331).

But one must begin at the beginning, begin with the Self, its "watermarks and colourings", the way in which its spiritual pulse derives from "the inward spiritual structures of the community to which it belongs" (Deane, Interview 67). One must explore that curious nexus between poetry and politics which Heaney himself acknowledges in clear terms: "poetry and politics are, in different ways:, an articulation, an ordering, a giving of form to inchoate pieties, prejudices, world-views or whatever" (Deane, Interview 67). But while politics is a one-way street, poetry is growth, roofless space, and as Heaney would put it, 'ramifying forever'.