CHAPTER II

‘TO SET THE DARKNESS ECHOING’: Death of a Naturalist

and Door into the Dark

The pose comes first, and then the poetry.

- Boris Postemak.

‘Incertus’ was the pseudonym that Heaney chose to publish poems under, in his adolescent years, suggestive of an abashed tentative creative effort. But when he published Death of a Naturalist in 1966, he had already formulated very ‘certain’ notions about the nature of poetry and of what it meant to ‘find a voice’ for that is where every lyric poet starts perforce. And he describes with hindsight in Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978, “I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading” (37). He touches upon the two traditions that fostered him thus, with almost epigrammatic precision. At the same time he sets forth his definition of poetry, clearly placing himself in the broad spectrum of the poetics of Romanticism. These two concepts may be seen to be cornerstones of his early writing and indeed sustain the ‘holistic’, fugal structure of the Heaney canon. The Self being the centrifugal force of the poetry, the urge to relocate identity in terms of the familial tradition of farming, in terms of his ‘patria’ or sense of place, in terms of language
and ethnicity, becomes the major preoccupation in this first volume. When Heaney read Kavanagh and later, R.S. Thomas and Ted Hughes he found himself stirred to an unprecedented extent. He was thrilled to find that what they wrote about life in the countryside in Ireland, Wales or England connected profoundly with the scripts written within his being. This was a significant confirmation, coming as it did in the wake of the great sweep of Modernism and the more modest thrust of the Movement, both of which looked askance at rural subject matter. "Suddenly the matter of contemporary poetry was the material of my own life. I had some notion that modern poetry was far beyond the likes of me—there was Eliot and so on—so I got this thrill out of trusting my own background and I started a year later, I think" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 18).

'Digging' the first poem in *Death of a Naturalist*, is a manifesto poem and, therefore, pardonably programmatic. The scene described is of his father digging potatoes in the garden and this in turn engenders the memory of his grandfather working on Toner's bog. The Heaneys were associated with Derry since Gaelic times and the sense of tradition must have been overwhelming. The poem moves in accordance with the physical rhythm of manual work, of stooping and digging and coming up again. It is structured with the help of a series of props—gratuitous images and obvious antitheses.

*Between my finger and my thumb*

*The squat pen rests*

*Sнug as a gun.*  

(DN 13).

The effect is very self-conscious and the intention of the poet is to arrest and hold attention through a striking image. That this image of the gun does not seem to emerge organically is immaterial at this stage. The poet is 'making' a poem and is carefully monitoring its movements, its rhythms, its verbal effects.
In contrast to his traditional family vocation, his life has been sedentary. He is the odd one out. The pen is 'squat' while the spade functions with elegance and efficiency. To start with, therefore, Heaney's vocation as writer is seen self-deprecatingly in comparison with the traditional vocation of his ancestors--farming. But somehow, insidiously, by the time the poem comes full circle, writing is affirmed as a continuity and not a break from tradition. The decision that clinches the poem at its conclusion-- 'I will dig with it' --may be defensive, but Heaney has found his objective correlative. Poetry assuming the methods of archaeology, the poet can dig below the surface for 'living roots' and can hope to reveal new meanings-- 'Scatter new potatoes'.

The language of the poem is earthy, consonantal, forceful. In fact, Heaney declared that the lines "have more of the theatricality of the gun-slinger than the self-absorption of the digger" (P 41). "It is a big coarse-grained navvy of a poem" but "its rhythms and noises still please me" (P 43): the forceful 'd's 'g's and straining 'n's the deft short-vowelled 'making' and 'slicing' and the long-vowelled assonantal emphasis of 'neatly', 'heaving'. 'Thumb', 'gun', 'snug' communicate a brute force and their stress is monosyllabic. Instances of assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia are quick to make themselves felt.

What Blake Morrison identifies as the Speech-Reticence antithesis is a motif that is introduced early in Heaney's work (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 19)--the Northern Irish Catholic's typical, inherent reticence, his predisposition to silence, and his credo of work as worship. Manual work and heroism are equated here. "Toner's Bog unknown to us otherwise is the scene of genuinely heroic endeavour in which work measures heroic satisfaction and is not just a means of getting on, of aggrandisement. This heroic theme, oddly enough, has not often expressed itself in English writing" (Tamplin 3). The poet's vocation, is seen as sedentary in contrast.
The pen is ‘squat’. The gun image, as Morrison observes, is "too macho, melodramatically so" (26). The real interest of the image is that it seems to be over-compensating for the poet’s shame at departing from lineage. Interestingly enough and subtly the poem, when it comes full circle (an important structural point with Heaney), with a reiteration of the opening lines, sheds the gun image. Self-consciously it proceeds with the resonant affirmation-- 'I will dig with it' --indicating not a break from but a continuity with tradition.

In this regard one may contrast Heaney fruitfully with writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Joyce who through characters such as Paul Morel and Stephen Dedalus signalled the emergence of the artist persona through a thrusting assertion of the self and a break with tradition. Heaney does not at this stage advocate self-exile or iconoclasm. Instead, he is "social and effaces himself within a tradition and indeed a locale" (Tamplin 3). The inspiration in the main came from Kavanagh who raised "the inhibited energies of a sub-culture to the position of a cultural resource" (P. 116).

...............................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.

(Kavanagh, ‘Epic’, Muldoon 76).

This centrality given to the poetics of identity which inheres in this first book within the familial and the local may be better understood alongside similar preoccupations among his contemporaries:

..................I have watched

his father’s hands before him
cupped, and tightening the black plug
between knife and thumb
carving off little curlicues...

(Kinsella, 'His Father's Hands', Muldoon 195).

Twenty years afterwards, I saw the church again,
And promised to remember my burly godfather
And his rural craft, after this fashion:

So succession passes, through strangest hands.


.............................Each night
his shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock
Against the future, then his light goes out.
Nothing escapes him, he escapes us all.

(Mahon, 'Grandfather', Muldoon 281).

All those family histories
are like sucking a polomint-
You're pulled right through
a tight wee sphincter
that loses you-

(Paulin, 'Descendancy', Muldoon 354).

With Heaney, this theme reverberates right into his most recent work The Haw Lantern and Seeing Things when he takes up the filial relationship into reckoning.

'The Diviner' amplifies the scope of the objective correlative that Heaney discovered in 'Digging'. The diviner resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, in tapping latent sources and making palpable what is
sensed or intuited. Divining is a technique which cannot be learnt. It is a 'gift for mediating'. The diviner is a compelling personality and, characteristically, says nothing. He remains silent but "opens the channels of communication" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 31-32). The poem is eminently successful on its metaphorical plane and in its establishing a nexus between diviner and poet, because, as Pound’s dictum has it, a poem must first of all work for the reader for whom "a hawk is simply a hawk." Here, the diviner is authentically a diviner and only then, a representative of the poet.

When Heaney declares that the water diviner’s is an intuitive technique, he is making a distinction between the kind of skill that can be acquired and that which cannot. In his essay "Feeling into Words" (P 47-48), he distinguishes between craft and technique. Craft is the skill of making. "It is what you learn from other verse ..... it wins competitions in the Irish Times or the New Statesman ..... a capable verbal athletic display." Craft plays a signal role in a poet’s discovery of style, in his search for a poetic voice. Heaney insists that there are sounds that one hears in another writer which flow in through one’s ear and "enter the echo-chamber of your head and delight your whole nervous system; and your first step as a writer will be to imitate consciously or unconsciously those sounds that flowed in, that in-fluence" (that split last word revealing Heaney’s absolute relish of words and their etymology).

He also strikes happily upon another image to define craft-

Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry. Usually you begin by dropping the bucket half way down the shaft and winding up a taking of air. You are ruminating 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 will have broken the skin on the pool of yourself (P 47).
Heaney's prose takes wings, is given a poetic, lyrical afflatus when he explains, with the sensitivity and the insights that only a poet-critic can command, the manner in which the self unfolds, begins to know itself reflexively.

"The Diviner' emphasises the antithesis of craft, namely technique; the poet's instinctual ballast as against his intellectual baggage. "Technique is what allows that first stirring of the mind around a word or an image, or a memory to grow towards articulation" (P 48). The crucial action in creating a poem is pre-verbal. It is he says, quoting Frost "a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It finds the thought" (P 49). In his essay "The Makings of a Music", Heaney defines technique in terms that come close to 'The Diviner' - "What kinds of noises assuage him, what kinds of music pleasure or repel him, what messages the receiving stations of his senses are happy to pick up from the world around him, and what ones they automatically block out" (P 62).

The bystanders would ask to have a try.
He handed them the rod without a word.
It lay dead in their grasp till nonchalantly
He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred. (DN 36).

The poetic function is vatic, oracular, and to that effect 'word' and 'stirred' rhyme felicitously and bring into conjunction the two functions of vates in one sound.

'Death of a Naturalist' like 'Digging' is concerned with self-definition. While in the first poem of the book, Heaney sought to find a place for himself in the ancestral tradition of farming, in 'Death of a Naturalist', the poet is seen in his best apprentice demeanour, grafting himself on to the acquired English literary tradition. It is the roots and reading ramification that is clarified in the two poems respectively. The parameters of his early work are patented in them.
The title poem explores a childhood memory, an experience that hastened the poet's growth from boy to man, quite transforming his sensibility. In the first half of the poem, the boy is at the flax-dam and his senses are quite overpowered by its beauty. The poet summons up images of sight, smell and texture in heady succession:

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell. (DN 15).

The effect, by accretion, of 'festered', 'heavy-headed', 'rotted', 'weighted down' 'sweltered', 'warm thick slobber' and 'clotted' is designed to communicate the overwhelming sensual impact upon a vulnerable, adolescent consciousness.

Thereafter, the poem shifts to the school-room scene and emphasises the innocence of the protagonist who absorbs the elementary biology lesson about 'bull frog' and 'mammy frog' and 'frogspawn'. "The school-room lore brings homeliness to the whole thing" and the biology lesson is meant to deride gently the theoretical Naturalist's methods of "responding to the rawness of Nature by putting it in jampots" (Tamplin 17). The poem is thus mildly polemical in its intent.

In the final stanza, the boy is seized by a nightmarish vision of the frogs; his imagination sees them as menacing and as preying upon him for vengeance. He imagines this horrifying retribution for that one innocent act of stealth--dipping into the frogspawn in the flax-dam. The turn in the tone and mood is effected with the break in stanzas.

Then one hot day when fields were rank.... (DN 15).

In this stanza, once again, the building up of effect is through conscious accumulation of detail suggestive of the grossly anti-pastoral: the hiss of sibilants in 'sods', 'loose necks' 'pulsed', 'sails'; the onomatopoeia in 'cocked', 'slap', 'plop',; the grating consonantal harshness of 'mud grenades' and 'blunt heads farting'. The poem reaches
a crescendo of fear and revulsion before coming to a Wordsworthian finish, of self-illumination.

I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it. (DN 16).

Wordsworth is almost ubiquitously present in Heaney's poetry, more so in such early writing when he is only beginning to locate the self in an acquired literary tradition. Heaney's rendering here of one of those 'spots of time' and its significant contribution to 'the growth of a poet's mind' is strikingly reminiscent of *The Prelude* and its method.

'Death of a Naturalist' is not the product of a naturalist who is content with observing and describing. It is a movement beyond the description of Nature per se to a conscious thesis regarding 'the transforming power of the Imagination'. It is not the priority of the poet to be a Naturalist. Heaney's preoccupation is, rather, with the watermarks of the self and, in the process, Nature is clarified. The poet affirms the visionary power of the imagination to register awareness of a degree of perception beyond the merely sensory.

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (Book I) and those famous snaring, boating, skating episodes are definite pointers to Heaney's intertextual forays. Though his poem does not possess the same mystical energy of *The Prelude*, it represents Heaney's squarings in tradition. Other literary forerunners to such poetry would be Hopkins and his breathtaking sense-effects, his wrestle with words. Heaney comments with tremendous sensitivity upon Hopkins' "sensual apprehension of natural life" and the manner in which this is most rapturously united with his dark descending will", his masculine "string vision" (P 95). The poetry of Kavanagh, it cannot be too often reiterated, confirmed the value of the 'potato patch' and of one's parish as material for poetry.
More relevantly and closer in time to Heaney's context, Ted Hughes' physical, muscular writing on Nature (rather dehumanized in relation to Heaney's) released Heaney's creative energies at a time when poetry was cramped by the genteel and the tronic modes patented by the Movement.

Thomas C. Foster astutely puts it all together-

Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Wordsworth, Patrick Kavanagh, Ted Hughes valorized the use of the local, personal, rural, natural subjects for poetry and sanctioned the young poet's use of his own background as material for his verse. This heavily romantic reading pushes him to find transcendent meaning in life on the farm, with the result that many poems are crushed under a symbolic or psychological freight they simply cannot bear (14).

The pose, indeed, comes before the poetry. The novitiate poet undertakes to identify and describe the 'echo-soundings, searches and probes' of the self with a self-conscious clearing of the throat. For, the visionary reaches of the art of poetry are scarce attained without the maturity of a Wordsworth or the mystical energy of a Blake.

'Churning Day', 'Blackberry Picking' are examples of other poems that summon up the pastoral of Heaney's childhood in Derry:

My mother took first turn, set up rhythms
that slugged and thumped for hours. Arms ached.
Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered
with flabby milk. (DN 21).

The emphases are similar—the sounds and smells of a farmhouse brought alive by the use of assonance, onomatopoeia and those 'consonantal bolts'. It is 'Heaneyspeak' at its most emblematic. Also typical is the manner in which a poem that is given to
texture, detail and description, suddenly shifts gear and acquires symbolic trappings. In ‘Churning Day’ there is the magic of butter appearing suddenly during the routine of churning--‘heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight’. The whole process resembles the ineluctable mystery of creating poetry, the organic coaxing into being of something already there, present. It also anticipates Heaney’s passion for apprehending the extraordinary in the ordinary or the quotidian.

‘Blackberry Picking’ written for Philip Hobsbaum pays homage to Hobsbaum’s tutelage, the poetry located, stripped of the vestiges of sentimentality, sensual and vibrant. It does have the serious defect of banality:

At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot. (DN 20).

The iambic pentameter rhythm, and the rhythm that comes pat, are symptomatic of this. The ‘in-fluence’ is Keats. Heaney was intoxicated in his formative years as a reader of poetry, by the ‘narcotic’ rhythm of Keats’ verse which in his opinion had “the life of a swarm” of bees, “fluent and merged”, had the power to woo and seduce with its sweetness (P 85). The Keatsian echo here is obvious-

..........................its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine; summer’s blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking .......

(DN 20).

The images (like the gun image in ‘Digging’) verge on the gratuitious. While the bottom of the cans is covered with blackberries, the tops are covered with ‘big dark blobs’ that ‘burned / like a plate of eyes’.

..............................Our hands are peppered
with thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard’s. (DN 20).
The movement, as in 'Death of a Naturalist' is from pastoral to anti-pastoral. The poem gradually acquires such a resonance after its elaborate accretion of sensuous detail. With the sinister 'plate of eyes' and the 'Bluebeard' image the reader is prepared to accommodate the spirit of the concluding stanza.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre,
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
the fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It was not fair
that all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot,
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not. (DN 20).

The encroachment of Experience upon Innocence is one of the key concepts of a full-length doctoral study by Sidney Burris on Heaney and the pastoral tradition, now published as The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition. Burris, in tracing the history of the tradition avers that by the late 18th and early 19th century, "the labourer's groan was at least as loud as the shepherd's song and the literature that had once celebrated the harmonies of the countryside now exposed the poverty and hardships suffered by its people" (6). Examining Heaney's poetry in the dual contexts of Romanticism on the one hand and the Irish problem on the other, one may certainly find in his early work "the fondest recollection of a childhood passed in the country with an aggressive, even militaristic diction emphasising at once the integrity of his culture and the violence that has become a part of its daily ritual" (Burris 7). That will account for the 'gun', the mud grenades', the 'pottery bombs' and the 'plateful of eyes.' The point of censure regarding these poems, however, is tenable—namely that the pastoral and its antithesis are held together in a rather forced
contraposition. At this stage, the dichotomy does not appear to be organic to the vision of the poet. Nowhere is this more evident than in, 'The Early Purges'. The title of the poem purports a moral unabashedly. Dan Taggart, a local farmer is the hero of the poem, a man who is practical enough to drown batches of kittens quite unceremoniously because

..... on well-run farms, pests have to be kept down. (DN 23).

'Prevention of cruelty talk' only cuts ice in big fashionable towns. The didacticism is even obtrusive.

The Hughesian tendency towards the anti-sentimental combines favourably, however, in most of Heaney's personae, with the celebrated Irish Catholic reticence. Silence was a virtue which implied inherent strength, wisdom, efficiency and above all, endurance. Heaney's father and grandfather, the diviner, are all prototypal figures—all of them typecast and representative. The 'Docker' is also deliberately cast in the same mould. His speech 'clamped in the lips' vice', he is emblematic of any bigoted Protestant labourer of Ulster. The image of speech being clamped, suggests Blake Morrison, "might stand as an epigraph for Heaney's early work and its obsession with silence" (20). The poet's prejudice is flagrant and he makes for the first time and, perhaps the last, such a frontal, committed attack on the other faction.

In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney speaks of the relationship of the Ulster poets to the Northern Crisis:

The roots of the troubles may have something in common with the roots of the poetry. The very first poem I wrote, 'Docker'..... reveals the common root ..... Then this went underground and I became very influenced by Hughes and one part of my temperament took over: the private county Derry childhood part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic part (Andrews 17).
Heaney's early poetry was thus divided between the private county Derry childhood part and the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part. But what holds the poetry together is a voice that is intensely self-aware, rehearsing, imitating, sizing up and distinctive in tone and character. There is, always, the ethos of the farming life and community in Derry, the speech rhythms and diction firmly rooted in the soil of Derry, the sense of place acutely registered. The accent of the poet is thus paradoxically, representative and individualistic. The danger consists in the fact that the programme he peddles in this, his introductory work, may be a trifle too comfortably ensconced in tradition and stereotype. The Docker "never rises above type", and metaphor in the poem is unsubtle. "Accuracy loses importance to tone and attitude and the reader finds it impossible to sympathize with a poem that is capable of so little sympathy of its own" (Foster 19).

The cap juts like a gantry's crossbeam
Cowling plated forehead and sledgehead jaw
Speech is clamped in the lips' vice.

That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic- (DN 41).

It is only subsequently that Heaney develops a distance from the political issue at hand, develops 'a cunning middle voice' and a talent for obliqueness and understatement.

The only distinction about the poem is that it turns out to be uncannily prophetic. The poet's comment, 'that kind of thing could start again', looks ahead with a sense of foreboding, and only two years after the publication of the poem, the Irish troubles erupted with renewed rancour and vigour. And, for the last twenty years, the problem of how best to address the crisis confronts every creative artiste
in Ulster. Heaney’s prophecy disturbs the reader with its magnetic field of vatic utterance.

The ‘aggravated young Catholic’ finds expression more vividly and dramatically in ‘At a Potato Digging’ which Tamplin describes as "the finest of Heaney’s early poems" (24). The poem’s subject is the land, the soil and its presiding spirit, ‘the black Mother’. It evokes the Peasant working on the land harvesting a traditional crop of potatoes. As in ‘Digging’, work is valorized and is here interpreted as ritual propitiation.

Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black Mother. Processional stooping through the turf

Recur mindlessly as autumn. (DN 31).

History is seen as a continuum and it is enacted in the present in a pattern of repetition. In fact, the digging image is employed yet again with its dimensions enhanced. The individual’s attempt to recover and affirm a familial, personal tradition, now amplifies into a communal restoration and subtle reterritorialization.

What Heaney sets out to do is deliberately mythologise present rural experience by bringing it into conjunction with "the larger national history." He seeks "to give historical sufferings and dispossession a contemporary application" (Andrews 18). This is the first instance when he evokes Earth as Mother–Goddess–Lover. She is the territorial numen who demands obeisance. Heaney captures the classic Irish-Catholic posture of kneeling, stooping; he defines supplication as characteristic of their temperament and as attributable to their historical past. The heroism inheres in the fact that this act of obeisance does not enfeeble the mind or body but ‘toughens the muscles behind their humbled knees, / Make a seasonal altar of the sod.’
Heaney respects the peasant and others like him, "who practice the timeless rituals of work and faith" (Foster 16). He finds a tremendous dignity in the humility of the peasant, but he does not romanticize him. In this regard, the similarity between Kavanagh and Heaney is obvious. Heaney concurs with Kavanagh in his rejection of the Yeatsian version of the peasant as the Romantic 'noble savage naked in the thundershower', as also Yeats' programmatic insistence upon 'Antaeus-like' contact with the soil. Heaney's peasant is for real though he is not the subject of savage irony like Maguire in Kavanagh's The Great Hunger.

It can be said that Heaney takes up a middle position in his espousal of Romantic ideals. He rejects Yeats' brand of revivalism and signs in with Kavanagh's deromanticising technique. On the other hand, he stops short of the latter's total disenchantment with tradition. "Kavanagh's poem was rooted in the here and the now" (Andrews 19). His work was a vigorous anti-pastoral which denounced the spiritual malaise that was scourging country-life in Monaghan. He was more directly a literary forbearer of R.S. Thomas and his bleak, grimly ironic scenario of the Welsh hills where Iago Prytherch roamed. But with Heaney, there is still the land, the soil, its mystique, its pagan rituals, its myths. There are these extra-personal symbolic dimensions which he is to explore to fuller effect in later poems. Heaney deromanticizes the peasant but relentlessly romanticizes the land.

The myth in 'At a Potato Digging' is enhanced by the use of ritual imagery in the poem. Heaney's phraseology is significantly liturgical: 'Heads bow', 'trunks bend', procession al stooping', 'fear and homage', 'seasonal altar', 'libations'.

This imagery is in the second section employed to describe the potato crops, but somehow in the third section, it is transferred to describe the people themselves. The peasants like the potatoes are depicted in terms of allegorical, macabre emblems--skulls, blind-eyed'. The anti-pastoral finds its most heightened expression here
when Heaney lays bare the violence that is inherent in the peaceful life of the countryside.

One is assuaged when in the concluding section, the poem returns to a sense of affirmation by restoration. Death and its imagery are outfaced and in their place, Heaney is impelled to invoke ‘custom and ceremony’—continuity, tradition. The act of libation rehearses a sense of ritual thanksgiving and annuls the horror of suffering and hardship. The mythological perspective, achieved through Heaney’s imagistic tapestry, thus enables the poet to come to terms with his present sense of dispossession and suffering. Myth is the prototypical encrustation which the poet gives to a classic poetics of identity.

Death of a Naturalist orchestrates the theme of self and family, of rootedness in a farming community in Derry. ‘Digging’ is followed by other poems which explore Heaney’s sense of family. ‘Follower’ and ‘Mid-Term Break’ face each other on opposite pages in his New Selected Poems 1966-1987.

‘Follower’ conforms to Heaney stereotype of a man, his father, who works ‘expertly’ on the land.

........................ his eye

Narrowed and angled at the ground,

Mapping the furrow exactly, .... (DN 24).

The movements are precise, unfussy and economical. The poet as a boy ‘stumbled in his hob-nailed wake / fell sometimes on the polished sod’. The effects are very similar to those striven for in ‘Digging’ when Heaney recalls carrying milk in a bottle ‘corked sloppily with paper’ to his grandfather cutting turf. The old man, by contrast, works with a beautiful physical rhythm.

‘Living roots awaken in his head’ in ‘Follower’ too and the poet wistfully confesses that though he wanted ‘to grow up and plough’. All he ever did was to
follow the broad shadow of his father around the farm. But, now the poet has found his vocation and he will work out the entire beautiful metaphor of his creativity in 'Poem' later in this volume.

'Mid-Term Break' is yet another unsentimental look at a traumatic childhood experience. The poem is a terse understated description of grief. Heaney recalls being away at residential school when his four-year old brother dies in an accident. The poem is a sensitive but unemotional rendering of his embarrassment, his self-consciousness and, above all, his sense of loss. The scenario is real—the neighbours collecting him from school, his father crying but taking funerals in his stride ‘Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow’, whispers floating about the room that ‘I was the eldest / away at school’ and, then, his mother, coughing out ‘angry tearless sighs’. All this is personal and is recorded with a sense of immediacy.

But the tone shifts when ‘the corpse’ is described. The language becomes denuded; great restraint is achieved. There is a clinical precision and a distance is established suddenly between the self and the experience:

He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clean.

A four-foot box, a foot for every year. (DN 28).

The end-stopped lines, the halting verse, the caesurae suppressing the emotion, the classic understatement of grief—in this demonstration of restraint and defensiveness, in this tendency towards reticence, rather than loquacity, Heaney is at the fruitful confluence of the British and the Irish tradition of verse. On the one hand, there is the poetry of the 1950s and after—Philip Larkin, Jon Silkin, Charles Tomlinson speak for the mainstream tradition going back to Hardy, Edward Thomas. Silkin’s poem,
'Death of a Son' in fact serves as a striking parallel to 'Mid-Term Break' in terms of its demonstrating a posture—the stiff upperlip:

Something has ceased to come along with me,

Something like a person: something very like one.

And there was no nobility in it


The Irish for their part, "have learned to hold their tongues from extra-literary affairs" (Foster 21). They wear reticence like a second skin.

Heaney’s self-reflexiveness as an apprentice poet, his awareness especially, of the unprecedentedness of his vocation in the light of his family tradition, pushes him on to the brink of posturising in many of his early poems. The poet himself, his craft, his poetics are tropes that are rehearsed in Death of a Naturalist. Nature and life on the farm in Derry provide merely the framework as ostensible ‘themes’, while the underpinning is the reflexive presentation of his craft and his consciousness by the poet for the world of the poetry reader. In so doing, he triumphantly pleads the case for lyric utterance as a supremely redemptive activity.

Nowhere does he ‘perform’ this task more purportedly than in ‘Poem (for Marie).’ The lyric, written for his wife, expresses in affirmative terms the sacrament that is marriage, and has been in the main, regarded as one of Heaney’s ‘marriage poems’.

Love, you shall perfect for me this child

Whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking:

Within new limits now, arrange the world,

Within our walls, within our golden ring. (DN 48).
These geometric shapes symbolise perfection in Heaney's scheme of things and have continued to make significant statements and suggestions until as recently as Seeing Things (1991) wherein he has used them to order experience.

The sub-text of 'Poem' is the creative process. At this level the lyric dwells upon "the paradox of transforming life's failures and disappointments into perfection through the magical power of art" (Andrews 22). Heaney develops the metaphor of digging to describe his creative effort.

   Yearly I would sow my yard-long garden.

   Or in the sucking clabber I would splash
   Delightedly and dam the flowing drain
   But always my bastions of clay and mush
   Would burst before the rising autumn rain. \(\text{\textcopyright DN 48}.\)

The emphasis resembles the thematic slant of Hughes' 'The Thought Fox' but the image is more pedestrian, in keeping with the overall quotidian concerns of Heaney's early poetry. 'Poem' is his unambiguous avowal of faith in the artistic vision, registered prior to the imminent turmoil engendered by politics.

Thereafter, he would in the acute social register of Wintering Out move out of the personal dimension to seek and find personae such as 'the servant boy' and the 'last mummer', all off them vested with a mediating role and a redemptive value in society, despite being marginalised by it. Heaney would through them continue to project the power of Art in troubled times. It is only still later with North and thereafter that the dichotomy between the exigencies of reality and the claims of aestheticism emerge to take an unrelenting hold over the poet's sensibility.

For now, in Death of a Naturalist, the curtain is brought down with fairly ringing tones in 'Personal Helicon'. With Heaney there is this compulsion to work
consciously at a 'holistic' organisation of his canon of poems. The last poem in every volume anticipates the next, indicating possible directions that his poetry might take.

At the basic level, the poem insists upon literal descriptions of Nature and felt experience in it. It is bucolic and antipastoral in turn and all the strong, emphatic, sounds and images go to establish the palpable presence of a child's experiential world.

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.                (DN 57).

Gradually, another level unfolds, already hinted at in the title of the poem. Nature is seen as Muse in the Wordworthian sense of it. The Helicon allusion establishes the poet as a divine instrument, like the water diviner; he is the inspired mediator between the palpable and the unknown. Even at the verbal level in the poem, 'The Diviner' had an uncanny conjunction of 'stirred' and 'word' bringing together the two vatic functions in the same sound. In 'Personal Helicon' the felicitous collusion of 'slime' and 'rhyme' and of 'spring' and 'echoing' recognises and establishes the force of Nature as Muse. As Elmer Andrews comments-- "Like Wordsworth who spoke of 'the Bible of the Universe' as a state of types and analogues of the infinite, Heaney found in Nature a system of symbols and a machinery of realisation" (26).

The significant development in the poem since preceding ones in this volume is that Heaney is now ready to commune with the dark, confront it and not flee from it in fear. The 'spots of time' he had identified earlier, which had schooled his soul, now evolve from being merely irrational experiences to epiphanies. In this newly-realised dimension which may be described as 'metaphysical', the Dark is the
Unknown, and the poet is inexorably drawn to it in order to comprehend it. The concluding lines

.......................I rhyme

To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (DN 57).

anticipate Heaney’s second book of poems Door into the Dark (1969)—the poet reaches beyond the narrow circumscription of the subjective to an exploration of the mythological ramifications of identity.

The preoccupation with the creative self and the compulsion to make poetry about it, are typical of the ‘post-modernist’ school. In a book of poems such as Death of a Naturalist which has been criticised as a throwback, a regression to the Georgians, this is an unlikely similarity. It is a coincidence that the umbrella term ‘post-modern’ may happily glance upon him, for shaped as it is by the peculiar nature of his experience as a Catholic in Ulster writing in English, Heaney’s poetry is inevitably and predictably self-reflexive. On this technical count, then, Heaney qualifies as ‘post-modernist’, if he must be anointed.

‘Personal Helicon’ is dedicated to fellow-Northern Irish poet Michael Longley. "It is a poet’s poem", and the language" ratifies that suspicion "because there is all through "a playful self-referentiality" (Foster 18), a readiness to dwell upon and describe the creative process, and share with the reader the excitement of having awakened to a new raison d’être—the dark—that does not anymore intimidate the poet but, on the contrary, beckons to him.

‘All I know is a door into the dark’—asserts the persona of ‘The Forge’, the title poem of Heaney’s second book Door Into the Dark. In the first volume, darkness signified an "uncontrollable fecundity", "a pullutation of alien absorbing life" (Curtis 29), suggestive of sex, death, and the Muse was driven by fear. In an
interview, Heaney confessed - "Fear is the emotion that my muse thrives on. That's always there" (Haffenden, Interview 21). Fear, in tandem with Beauty, fostered the consciousness of the poet and the entire book testified to his growth from boy to man, farmer to poet.

But Door Into the Dark represents an advance in most aspects save few. 'Door' is archetypal in its significance-- 'Ask and it shall be opened unto you', pronounces the Bible. It is the threshold position of the questing poet. More complex is the manner in which this archetypal simplicity ramifies in terms of meaning and symbolic value.

"I think this notion of the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts, the hidden core of the Self--this notion is the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet" (Kiely, "A Raid..." 10). Heaney's Catholic sensibility submits most naturally to a mysticism, a sense of gloom, guilt and self-abasement, which endorses the negative dark as an analogue, a basic motif.

The word 'dark' resonates in mystical Christian theology and Ronald Tamplin quotes, with great force and relevance, St.John of the Cross in stanza 38 of his Spiritual Canticle. "The Saint interprets contemplation or meditation as 'dark' and argues that God teaches the soul "as in the silence and quiet of the night hidden by darkness from all that is of the senses and of nature" (30). He further elaborates upon the two modes, the positive and the negative, through which one attains knowledge of God. Through the positive mode, one comprehends God through understanding his Creation, "the indicative objects" in the Universe. But in the negative way, one can only see Him "as not like anything we can perceive and register on the senses" (Tamplin 30). Darkness is thus a negative metaphor because it indicates the sheer inadequacy of our means of approach, and as a corollary, the sheer splendour of the Light, and God, one seeks. It is a state of anguish because
one does not seek positively through the senses. It is a ‘via negative’ to the ultimate knowledge and truth.

There is a striking concurrence in the more recent poetry of R.S. Thomas where the Anglo-Welsh poet expresses succinctly his understanding of absence and presence as a supreme paradigm in the quest of God. Thomas’ ‘Via Negativa’ comes very close to Heaney’s sense of negative dark-

God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within; the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left.............. (H’m 16).

With Heaney, this mysticism is blended with a paradoxically pagan relish at creation, a descriptive relish that makes itself felt right from his early poetry. It is the dialectical pattern at work—Oisin and St.Patrick—the former the native Celtic druidical wanderer in the woods, representing the pagan instinct and attunement with the world of the senses. The latter is the controlling discipline of religion, of withdrawal from the world of the senses. Such a dialectic that unfolds in his poems such as ‘The Forge’ or ‘Gallarus Oratory’ is to become the sustaining structural device in his ‘political’ lyric.

Another concept that must be understood prior to decoding Heaney’s poetry effectively is his notion of the centre and of circularity. Henry Hart amplifies the idea by citing philosophers such as Mircea Eliade and Emerson. The Centre is explained with reference to the theory of the ‘eternal return’. “Every creation repeats the pre-
eminent cosmogenic act, the Creation of World. Consequently, whatever is founded has its foundation at the centre of the world (since, as we know, the Creation itself took place from the Centre)" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 12). Innumerable poems of Heaney's bear references to this centre. Heaney's quest to attain this heart of the mystery is vested in the pattern of the circle. One must again and again, inexorably, circle around the centre. In the centre is the truth that holds everything together, that stays confusion, chaos and disintegration.

Emerson's essay 'Circles' is also cited by Hart ("Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 13): "the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere." The circle becomes for Heaney emblematic of a mysterious area of being where there are no directions, no limits, no uncertainties. It is the path one treads constantly seeking but not with the hope of arriving.

The three notions of the dark, the centre and the circle are the relevant clues with an understanding of which one takes on the challenge of Heaney's metaphysics. It is almost as if one steps out the back door of the farm in Derry and is suddenly plunged into the awesome dark abyss of the Unknown.

The initiation begins with a classic sonnet 'The Forge'. Heaney describes a smith working in his forge and his focus zeroes into the centre from without, and proceeds away from the centre once again to the world outside. While critics have emphasised the philosophical core of the poem, the metaphor of forge, they have not adequately drawn attention to the manner in which Heaney places the smith concretely in his socio-economic context. The man is real and credible at the first level down to the hairs in his nose and to his leather apron. And like Heaney's ancestors, he works off the sweat of his brow, beating 'real iron out', 'working the
bellows'. At this level, he is also the representative of the bucolic old-world values as he leans against the door-jambs dreaming of horses and carriages as automobiles whizz past outside.

He is a maker and, with Heaney, that becomes immediately and predictably, an objective correlative. 'The Forge', the title of the poem is resonant with significance in this context and one recalls the Dedalean persona of James Joyce and his desire to forge in the smithy of his soul, "the uncreated conscience of his race" (Joyce 235). The blacksmith like the diviner is a figure of the artist, then, and the theme of the poem is the ineffable nature of the artistic mystery from the lay person's perspective. It is magic; Heaney calls it 'technique' and it is inarticulable.

Heaney attempts to articulate it by creating an aura of mystery around the smith. The forge embodies the dark and the smith working within, "the passionate irrational will to creation" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 5). The world outside is "governed by the grim incontrovertible law of entropy and corruption" and "things fall apart" while inside, "somewhere in the centre they are held together and hammered into unity" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 5). It is the typical Heaney dualism which organises the structure of the poem. The anvil is at the centre, at the heart of things, and the evocation of the legendary horned unicorn in the image, lends the poem its mystique. 'Square' suggests solidity and order; 'altar' is where the blacksmith serves his craft like a priest, his liturgy being 'shape and music' --form and harmony. Thus the speaker of the poem from the threshold of the forge has these insights into the dark mystery of Creation.

The smith is reticent, true to type, and clings mutely to the past. As Foster puts it, "Romantic Ireland may be, as Yeats asserts, dead and gone, but, Heaney suggests in this and a number of other early poems, it is not quite forgotten" (Foster
25). He is a Yeatsian persona, and one cannot but recall the thrust of the Byzantium poems--the paradigm of Art and Life--and in particular the apt reference to the smithies of Byzantium. The Yeatsian 'agon' is present discernibly enough in this compulsive juxtaposition of Life and Aestheticism in Heaney's work.

'Thatcher' figures another persona who works quickly, silently with the minimum of fuss. His movements are precise like the bull in 'The Outlaw' who goes about his job of siring with the 'the unfussy ease of a tradesman'.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,

And left them gaping at his Midas touch. (DD 20).

This is technique. So too, the music that comes to the fiddler's bow in 'The Given Note'. As the title of that lyric indicates, Art is a gift that is given unsought. The image of the fiddler/artist that is created and established in the poem is of a solitary spirit who is attuned to Nature and to 'the other world'. Heaney is to bring repeatedly into focus this persona of the artist as a 'pagus' who braves the elements, wanders untrammelled by any system or ideology and is emblematic of the "lived, illiterate and unconscious" as against the "learned, literate and conscious" impulse (P 131).

The poet's quest takes him beyond the personal and the artistic to the topography of Ireland--in particular the problem of land and sea defining one another. In 'The Peninsula', the poet at a moment of 'having nothing more to say', exhausted and lonely, drives around the peninsula.
The sky is tall as over a runway
The land without marks so you will not arrive

But pass through, though always skirting landfall. (DD 21).

The poem insists that one will never arrive but keep moving with no possibility of communication, with a positive denial of contact. The poet sets out to seek stimulation in the sensuous variety of the phenomenal world--the ploughed field, the white washed gable, the horizons 'drinking down sea and hill' at dusk, and in a circle, he is brought back to the dark again. The dark is the fecund fog of unconsciousness and it is by means of 'recall' in this dark that the poet can 'uncode all landscapes', give the things he has seen a definite form, shape and contour. "Previously unfocussed", the speechless poet is now prepared to translate what he uncodes in the landscape into writing. "Rather than write an imagist poem, Heaney writes a poem about how one gets written" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 8). Speech is without value in Heaney's world but the pen has its undeniable efficacy.

..............................Now recall

The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log
That rock where breakers shredded into rags
The leggy birds stilted on their own legs
Islands riding themselves out into the fog.

And drive back home, still with nothing to say
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
By this: things founded clear on their own shapes
Water and ground in their extremity. (DD 21).
Darkness is the element in which the poet must create and order like the smith in the forge. The necessary sense of isolation that accompanies this is embodied in the metaphors that are strung together in the passage. Christopher Ricks in a masterly analysis of the poetry of Andrew Marvell draws a parallel between the metaphors of Marvell and those strewn all over the work of recent Ulster poets. He cites Empson’s definition of these as "self-inwoven similes" or "short-circuited comparisons" (Ricks 34).

Such reflexive imagery is typically engendered from an acute awareness of self-division or, in political terms, Civil War. In this, Heaney’s early poem, the political overtones are not as discernible as later. But there is, like Marvell, an intense self-reflexive concern with the art of poetry itself, a preoccupation with the nature of the imagination as a shaping, creating agent.

Heaney’s near-Narcissistic impulse is to turn inward and look within the dark embryo of the imagination and 'uncode' life’s meaning. Here too, he completes the circular, non-arriving journey (which he is to present elaborately in the ‘Station Island’ sequence later) and then, once in the dark again, he will recall the emblematic reflexive landscape of Ireland. "The birds and islands are emblems of the poet who is also double-backed on himself, who meditates on the writerly imagination by means of the imagination" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney’s Poetry of Meditation" 8). Mind and landscape are both self-inclosed each reflecting on the other.

Once this landscape / mindscape has been uncoded as ‘water and ground in their extremity’, the political undertones surprise the reader. There is a suggestion, it seems, of alien, hostile elements conflicting within the sensibility of the poet, a symbiosis of opposing elements. This political consideration however is not the main thrust of this poem. But there is a tension arising from "the interplay between the turning inward and the outward encounter" (Foster 26). For the moment, the poem is about the poet’s need for the dark in order to achieve a vision, and the poet’s
compulsion to turn inward. But this self-reflexiveness is to engender not just philosophical or psychological insights but also civil and political ones, later.

The dark, and submission to it, is "close to the centre of religious faith" (Andrews 27). 'Gallarus Oratory' is a poem which describes Heaney's visit to that place, an early Christian oratory in County Kerry. (The title plays on the twin notions of oratory-- namely-- 'speech' and 'a small chapel for special prayers'). The poem renders the epiphanic experience that the monks must have gone through time and again as they emerged into the light-- 'the sea a censer, the grass a flame' --after the intense subjection to the dark within the oratory.

Inside in the dark of the stone, it feels as if you are sustaining a great pressure, bowing under the generations of monks who must have bowed down in meditation and reparation on that floor. I felt the weight of Christianity in all its rebuking aspects, its calls to self-denial and self-abnegation, its humbling of the proud flesh and insolent spirit. But coming out of the cold heart of the stone into the sunlight and the dazzle of grass and sea, I felt a lift in my heart, a surge towards happiness that must have been experienced over and over again by those monks as they crossed the same threshold centuries ago (P 189). Darkness and light are both part of the sum total of creation, of vision. The one precedes the other and depends on the other too.

In 'The Plantation', the poet's persona is, again, one who traverses the Unknown, the uncharted darkness of the interior. Physically, he leaves the picknicking zone, the noises of the traffic and all the cornucopia that earmarks everyday living. Upon this withdrawal, he finds himself in a mythic world of toadstools always repeating themselves, bringing the poet around in circles. There are no certainties, there is no definite direction, no "there" for this mental state (Andrews 29). In this
metaphoric wood, all the poet can do is to move around (like he drove round the peninsula without arriving) for "in this realm, knowledge is a product of the mind which can only interpret the world, never fully possess it" (Andrews 29).

It is a poem about the landscape of the imagination, its dark interior space and the scenario is almost reminiscent of a "Kafka story or a Pinter play" (Tamplin 38). The Plantation is where the poet seeks inspiration and to attain it he must submit to the irrational element of the dark, and yet, paradoxically, he must remain in control of the situation. The poem brings this self-division to the foreground and holds the oppositions together in equipollence. The poet thus establishes these antitheses in the course of the poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>dark</th>
<th>light</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inside</td>
<td>outside</td>
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<tr>
<td>irrational</td>
<td>rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silence</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stray</td>
<td>pilot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansel &amp; Gretel</td>
<td>witch</td>
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and one is back again in the realm of Heaney's dichotomies. Just as Heaney is impelled to turn back to the dark again and again.

You had to come back

To learn how to lose yourself

To be pilot and stray--witch,

Hansel and Gretel in one. (DD 50)

The reflexivity is apparent in this poem as it is in 'The Peninsula'. The wanderer in the poem is yet another objective correlative for the figure of the artist, the risk-taker, the one who dares to go beyond the known and takes his inspiration 'from
nowhere.' He is to put this in the form of a breathtakingly beautiful image in his Glenmore sonnets (FW 38) where the artist is figured as a wild white goose 'Heard after dark above the drifted house', the one who lives in 'the unsayable lights'. He is the one who is "pledged to break through, to go beyond the safe limits into those realms of consciousness fraught with risk, to retrieve whatever is life-enhancing" (Andrews 142).

The nature of this creative energy, that preoccupies Heaney to such a profound extent, is feminine. The binary schematization of opposites begins to unfold gradually.

'Undine' is a poem which though not much anthologised is a useful poem which announces Heaney's credo. The 'embryo' from which the poem grew is best recalled by the poet himself. Undine is a water sprite who has to marry a human being and have a child by him before she can become human.

It was the dark pool of the sound of the word that first took me: if one's auditory imaginations were sufficiently attuned to plumb and sound a vowel, to write the most primitive and civilised associations, the word 'undine' would probably suffice as a poem in itself. Unda, a wave, undine, a water-woman--a litany of undines would have ebb and flow, water and woman, wave and tide, fulfilment and exhaustion in its very rhythms (P 52-53).

This embryo became a field of force that collected around it other images, one such being the poet's memory of seeing a man unblock a drain and watching the water flow free and unfettered. By a process of accretion, thus, the myth began to acquire a conscious meaning signifying "the liberating, humanising effect of sexual encounter" (P 53).
'Undine' then, at various levels is a 'lump in the throat', a 'thump in the ear', that organic pre-verbal numen that inspires a poem. It is the female element of water being released, unblocked, symbolic of the writer finding his voice and rhythm. One immediately correlates 'Rite of Spring' in the same book which is about the thawing of a frozen water pump; 'Cana Revisited' with a similar image of 'water locked behind the taps' and on the verge of finding release; 'Bann Clay' with the poet engaged in 'clearing a drain'

Till the water gradually ran

Clear on its old floor ...

I labour towards it still. (DD 53-54).

'St. Francis and the Birds' wherein birds like a 'flock of words / Released for fun' resemble 'images which take flight'. 'Undine' exemplifies how auditory imagination works. In Heaney's reading of Eliot and his critique of Eliot's poetry, Heaney finds nothing more exemplary or attunable than Eliot's theory of the auditory imagination. It was, he claims, Eliot who taught him how to listen to a poem and internalize its 'soundscape' (GT 91). The poet is listener, the sensitised antenna receiving signals from beyond the periphery of the banal everyday life, receptive, alert, the lobe and larynx of the mossy places. It is thus of great significance that the poet's personae are all reticent and good listeners. The poet rarely, if ever, speaks in his own voice unless it be much later in the nakedly autobiographical 'Station Island' sequence when he is seeking advice. The voices in his poetry are, overwhelmingly, "from the realms of whisper" as Elmer Andrews has so painstakingly illustrated in his book-length study.

The motifs of darkness and descent find their most disturbing and intense expression in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' in Door Into the Dark. The impetus to
write a lyric sequence derives from the more ambitious scope of the subject and the compulsion to go beyond the constraints of a single Lyric, explore a greater range of moods, scenes and tonalities within a single framework.

The Lough Neagh is a large inland stretch of water west of Belfast, stretching for eighty miles of shore along Derry, Antrim, Armagh, Down and Tyrone. The Lough is drained by the river Bann at Toomebridge. The waters of the Lough are said to have unique properties which petrify organic matter, virtue that hardens wood to stone.

The first poem 'Up The Shore' establishes the location and digs into the tradition of eel-fishing which is so much a part of the lives of the local fishermen. The poet interprets the collusion of the fishermen and eels with Fate, in terms of the symbol of the circle. The life cycle of the eel is rhythmic and repetitive and is best described in Polly Devlin’s terms. (Polly Devlin, Heaney’s sister-in-law has authored a book all of us there the title itself a quotation from Heaney’s Field Work—which is a chiaroscuro of Catholic life in Ulster Country and serves as an invaluable source for an understanding of the ethos that informs Heaney’s poetry). The circularity of the eel’s life pattern she describes thus, as having been told to her by her grandfather:

They are spawned in the Sargasso Sea over three thousand miles away between Bermuda and Puerto Rico and are carried by the Gulf Stream towards Europe; the young eels are called elvers. They head for the opening of the river Bann upstream to the lough where they remain for over ten years, maturing from brown to silver. After ten years, their digestive organs start to disintegrate and they begin the journey back to their birthplace to spawn and die (Devlin 104).
As for the fishermen along the shore it is the lure of fate, their destiny to hunt down the eels, that 'endless uncoagulated skein of flesh and lubricating slime.' 'Time confirms the horrid cable'. The pattern is repetition, continuity; the men in their fatalism enact it, as the eels do in their instinctive drives. Their lives are so inwound. And the structure of the lyrics in the sequence imitates this self-inclosedness. Imagery of the circle is insistently present in the sequence. In 'Bait', there is a proliferation of the circle motif with both worms and fishermen enclosed by them: the 'compass' of the men's lamp beams; the eels 'whorling their mud coronas', and becoming a 'garland' when they are ensnared by the hook. 'Setting', another poem in the sequence evokes the hypnotic quality of the fishermen's participation in the mystique of nature.

The oars in their locks go round and round

The eel describes his arcs without a sound. (DD 41).

'The Return' describes the cyclical, ritualistic life pattern of the female eel who with a sense of her 'home water's gravities' returns to her origins in the river to lay her eggs. The eels, when they are hauled into the boat are an indistinguishable 'knot of black and pewter belly-

That stays continuously one

For each catch they fling in

Is sucked home like lubrication. (DD 42).

The 'wakes' that the boats create in the water are like the eels so impossibly 'enwound' that they become indistinguishable too. The whole sequence enacts these correspondences between man and fish, between the atavistic ritual beliefs of the human mind and the ritual, deterministic life patterns of the eel.

Elmer Andrews observes that the language is a combination of "hieratic eloquence" and "the commonplace", the colloquial. This stylistic feature "dramatizes
the poem's double perspective of learned and literate divination on one hand, and lived illiterate instinct on the other" (Andrews 32-33). The poem, thus, through the motifs and tropes that collude in the life of man and reptile, explores the dark. The major part of the action of the poem takes place in darkness.

Besides the natural rhythms that are captured here, Heaney has put in that distinctive Irish flavour from folklore and ichthyology. His source book of the nineteenth century, The Fishes of Great Britain and Ireland, was authored by Francis Day and Heaney's pamphlet edition of 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' had two epigraphs from Day. Day remarks upon the Irish folk belief that eels are "the descendants of the serpents on whom St. Patrick served a writ of ejectment, depriving them of any local habitation on dry land", a writ devilishly defied by the eels' overland forays (Bloom, Seamus Heaney 48).

Ichthyology and folklore apart, the sequence marked a significant though tacit development in Heaney's politics. The issue of politics is never obviously raised in the poem. But it runs as a sub-text through the text of the poem. Heaney's Catholic Nationalist sympathies stitch together these lyrics seamlessly. Commencing with a dedication 'for the fisherman' he goes on to slyly, subtly pit the birthright or the natural rights of the fishermen against the official rights sanctioned them by the law. The British authority sets up weirs and sluice gates at Toomebridge at the estuary of the River Bann and hauls five hundred stone of eel at one time. Contrasted to this is the individual fisherman with integrity and sense of fair play who catches them one by one and does not even 'learn to swim' because he believes fatalistically, that 'The lough will claim a victim every year.' It is a more equal relationship he has with the eel; there is a collusion of destinies, a "cosmic rightness." As Foster comments, "the poet's sympathy for the fisherman's position
and attitudes is in itself a political statement; he need not push beyond that" (Foster 29).

Push beyond that, he does, though not in the lyric sequence but in a sonnet in the classic mould. 'Requiem for the Croppies' like the earlier 'At a Potato Digging' uses history in transposing the past into present. Heaney wrote the poem in 1966 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rebellion of 1916. In doing so, he presents an image of resurrection which connects the 1798 Irish Rebellion of the Croppies with the events of 1916. He celebrates those legendary croppy boys who fought the British and died fighting them with barley corn in their pockets. The hillside blushed with blood and with shame. The poet envisages an agrarian renewal when, symbolically, the barley sprouts from their graves on the hillside. "The oblique implication is that the seeds of violent resistance sown in the year of liberty had flowered in what Yeats called the right rose tree of 1916" (P 56).

Heaney comments later "I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published (P 56). Once again one gets disturbing evidence of the shamanic powers of poetry. And one gets too a sense of the traditional mystification of Irish history as a pattern of ineluctable, archetypal recurrence. In his sonnet Heaney has pushed beyond the early poetry in his treatment of public life in Ireland but he is yet tentative, his tone is apparently neutral and he is careful not to name the enemy who are simply mentioned as 'they'. This ostensible detachment and non-committal treatment of a political theme becomes in Wintering Out and North a rather 'cunning' front to a profoundly committed politics.

The journey beyond the Self and the need to explore the hinterlands of Irish consciousness brings Heaney to the peat-bog. His compulsively mythologising
vision seeks and establishes an analogue. Ireland has a coherent and elaborate mythology. In the years of the Irish Revival, the existing scripts of mythology were tapped by poets like Yeats. But Heaney creates a myth through the use of nature and its forms, through the force of the ‘archaeological’ imagination.

‘Bogland’ is the last poem in *Door Into the Dark* and like all last poems in his volumes, it “demonstrates a remarkable prescience of the future direction of his verse” (Foster 28), anticipating *Wintering Out* and *North* and their unique sequence of ‘bog poems’. When Heaney establishes the bog as the symbolic landscape of Ireland, he almost defensively counters the American myth of the prairie-

We have no prairies
to slice a big sun at evening

(Corcoran 62) juxtaposes Heaney’s poem (as ‘an answering myth’) with Roethke’s ‘In Praise of Prairie’:

Horizons have no strangeness to the eye
Distance is familiar as a friend
The feud we kept with space comes to an end. (Corcoran 62)

T.E. Hulme said he first understood the meaning of God on the Canadian prairies. Heaney sees a similar awesomeness in the Irish bog. He celebrates the bog as a memoryscape, Jungian ground figuring the Collective Unconscious, the memory of the tribe as well as the individual psyche of the poet.

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards
Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage

The wet centre is bottomless. (DD 56).

E. Estyn Evans in *Irish Folk Ways* define the bog as "an approximate chronological sequence of landscapes and human culture going back several thousand years" (Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* 45). It is symbolic of tradition's hoard. In the European imagination which might be seen to include the British and the Irish, tradition is layered. Recovery of identity necessitates an archaeological excavation, a stripping bare of history, layer by layer, a vertical descent or a plumbing. While, the American imagination, apotheosised by Whitman, may be seen as expansive, democratic and all-embracing.

Thematically, it is thus "as if we had come in by the door of the old rural life and had fallen out down a shaft into the bottomless dark pit of the land itself" (Bloom, *Seamus Heaney* 85). Technically, Heaney achieves this felicitously by what he calls 'the artesian quatrains'. The verse is no longer iambic, dense, laden with cornucopia but, rather, taut and streamlined by the look of it on the page—a shaft boring into the heart of the land. Tamlin is one of the few perceptive readers who sees this not as development in Heaney's style but rather "a question of the needs of the poem" (9).

The poem has its rhythm, initially of expansion and then of a narrowing, 'the eye wooed into the Cyclops' eye of a tarn.' Once again, the Emersonian "concentration of the transparent eyeball which focusses in ever-intensifying circles on a mysterious centre" (Hart, "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation" 14). Thenceforth the movement of the poem is inward, downward towards the wet centre that is bottomless. The poem reflects upon itself also, typically, as it describes the bog as 'melting and opening underfoot'. It seems to describe "its own falling rhythms and constantly enjambed lines which also melt and open, aware,
perhaps, that the symbol of the bog itself will melt and open again" (Corcoran 63). This self-reflexiveness signals the greater sophistication of the Heaney lyric which one confronts with incredible frequency, Wintering Out and after. The journey from ‘Digging’ to ‘Bogland’ is from the personal to the field force of the national-mythic. But the impetus is the same, namely, recovery. In the course of the quest, certain motifs repeat themselves. The Self and its watermarkings the sense of self-division that engenders an acute self-inclosedness--these are forever asserting themselves and are emblematic of the oppressed Northern Irish Catholic culture. Representative of this culture are Heaney’s personae, thatchers, churners, croppies, blacksmiths, farmers—all of them archaic figures, "ancestral presences, kin to parents and grandparents, part of the deep hinterland out of which modern Ireland, like the poet, emerged" (Deane, Celtic Revivals 176).

Out of the skills which these figures are seen to possess, mysterious or even occult, emerges Heaney’s attempts at forging a poetics, an elaborate paradigm of values that maintain a symbiotic relationship in his work. And from this ‘civil war’ in creative terms, there evolves in his poetry a self-reflexiveness of theme and imagery, the poem making utterances on its own rhythms and double-backed upon itself.

The apprentice poet’s demeanour so evident in Death of a Naturalist, calling on the authority of a Wordsworth or Hopkins in terms of superficial likenesses is to yield gradually to a more fruitful assimilation of influences, a richer intersexuality.

The panoramic view of the farming life in Derry exhausts itself as a theme. The ‘validity of the local parish’ still rings true in Heaney’s poetry till date, but is not foregrounded for its own sake as it is in the early poetry. In Death of a Naturalist it is present in a spirit of pastoral celebration and confirmation in the wake of Heaney’s excited reading of Hughes and R.S. Thomas. The difference in Heaney's
own terms is that one moves on from "a primitive delight in finding world becoming word" to the realisation that places begin to exist instead as transfigured images, regions where the mind projects its own force.

In terms of politics, also, there is a subtle progression. In Death of Naturalist, Heaney comes at politics obliquely. He constantly focuses on reticence, silence or sheer inarticulacy—"Man's vocalization of his world is reduced to grunts, yelps, sighs, coughs, whispers and mute open-mouthed gapings" (Cahill 57-58). But there is the imagery of violence and cacophony which forms a significant underpinning—guns, grenades, tanks, pottery bombs which threaten to overcome the idyllic quiet of Derry. The personae of the Docker, the famine victims, the fishermen, help recreate a sense of oppression, helplessness, suffering and violence. Heaney's sworn neutrality is most naturally beginning to be coloured by a tacit, oblique, rather sly empathy for the minority Northern Irish Catholic community. 'That kind of thing' is how he describes strife in Ireland in deliberately casual understatement. However, this problem of political commitment is to subsume his writing and for a very long spell take complete hold of his mind.

In the meanwhile, the poet burrows into the dark, earth-grubber, Antaeus, working downward, 'gravitating' to the centre, in constant unrelenting quest of it.