CHAPTER III

‘HOARDER OF COMMON GROUND’: Wintering out and North

Next to the fresh grave of my beloved grandmother
The grave of my first love murdered by my brother

-Paul Durcan.

Heaney’s epigraph to Wintering Out (1972) reads:

Is there a life before death? That’s chalked up
on a wall downtown. Competence with pain
Coherent miseries, a bite and sup,
We hug our little destiny again.

In 1969, the Irish Troubles erupted with the Civil Rights March in Derry being met with gunfire and London’s sanctimoniousness. The political situation in Northern Ireland became suddenly volatile and "There was an energy and excitement and righteousness in the air at that time, by people like myself who hadn’t always been political" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 38). The compulsion to ‘say something’, the pressure of civil strife which had ripped through the normalcy of quotidien life, the trauma of empathy with the alienated, brutalised Catholic in Ulster—all these factors worked upon Heaney’s notions of what poetry was all about.

"From that moment, the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of
achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (P 56). The New Critical prescription for poetry, Heaney realised, was workable only in an ivory tower.

The 'aggravated young Catholic male' in Heaney resurfaces with Wintering Out and he identifies himself profoundly with the condition of alienation among fellow human beings at a time of severe political crisis. Heaney has said, "In Ireland, our sense of the past, our sense of the land, and even our sense of identity are inextricably interwoven" (Andrews 54). The poet's search for some deep centre in himself, which he has not yet clearly traced, touched or understood, continues into this book. But, laden with this new public role, Heaney, who had created personae from among the silent craftsmen, workers and ancestors of Derry, now strives to break through this 'gag of place and time' and become 'the lobe and larynx of mossy places', the voice of the communal experience, the one who listens and the one who utters.

Neil Corcoran observes astutely that "the exemplary figures in Wintering Out are not drawn from the immediately local community but from its history" (Corcoran, "Art of the Exemplary" 12)--the 'sense of the past' is so totally enmeshed with the present in Ireland. The title poem 'Servant Boy' articulates the major theme of the book, survival.

He is wintering out
the backend of a bad year

(WO 17).

The fact that the book gets its title from the poem suggests the emblematic status of the servant boy, and the sense of identity that the poet shares with him. The present continuous tense denotes that the struggle for survival is an ongoing process. The servant boy labours hard and is at the beck and call of the people of the 'Big Houses'. He is 'the old work-whore' 'slave-blood' but is, significantly, 'impenitent'
proud, independent, a survivor who comes 'first-footing' the snows to the household carrying eggs warm from the nest, those eggs being meaningful symbols of regeneration and warmth in the dead of winter. He embodies for Heaney so many Irish poor 'hired help' or 'service', who enact their duty with dignity, keeping counsel and patience. The poet remarked in a review in 1969 that contemporary Irish writers had "grown wary of the PQ, i.e., peasant quality", and 'Servant Boy' may represent an iconoclastic image of the peasant, a slightly defiant "declaration of resistance" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 36).

The strong sense of identification that Heaney feels becomes evident and the rhythm of the poem carries him on its surge into

.........................how

you draw me into

your trail. Your trail

broken from haggard to stable (WO 17).

The poet and the persona come together, almost, in their role play. This merging is made possible by the rhythms of Heaney’s new found quatrain, a quickness, a melting, a dissolving of line into line, image into image. Like "a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem rides upon its own melting."

The poet sees their roles as analogous in that the servant boy is a mediator between the community and what lies hidden, namely, the originary life-force. Like the water diviner, he is in touch with the ‘deep springs of their lives’ and society is dependant upon him to keep the eggs warm. Similarly at a time of strife, the community depends upon the poet to recover the wellspring of its identity. He remains independent in his fierce artistic isolation "so that he can play the true servant to his community as the magus who can create the community’s dream and make
'dark tracks' between its members and the deep springs of their lives" (Bloom, Seamus Heaney 88-89).

The poetic form contrasts with the early poems. There is no longer "the kind of Heaney'speak that borders on self-parody" (Curtis 37)—the 'snap, crackle and pop' of his early verse. The reassuring prop of the iambic pentameter evoking an overwhelmingly physical world is now replaced by a looser, more flexible and altogether tentative art. It is fluid and rings more true and spontaneous than the prefabricated mould of earlier verse. The relatively barer, more denuded aesthetic serves to describe a landscape that is more a dreamscape now with fleeting visions and apparitions from the past. The servant boy is described as 'a jobber among the shadows'.

'The Last Mummer', similarly, is a dream figure who 'moves out of the fog on the lawn, pads up the terrace'. He has about him the same mystique, the same sense of alienation as the 'servant boy'. He has, too, a similar independence and defiance of norms.

He came trammelled
in the taboos of the country
picking a nice way through
the long toils of blood
and feuding....

(WO 19)

-the words reminiscent of the trail of the servant boy, drawing the poet after it. And also like the servant boy 'first-footing the snows', the mummer 'makes dark tracks, who had / untouled a first dewy path / into the summer grazing'. They are both firsts, path-finders, untrammelled spirits, and Heaney recovers them from the enshrouding mists of 'the buried life'.
The message of the book is curiously bleak and affirmative all at once. Heaney summons up other figures, exemplars of survival, suffering and sheer martyrdom. There is in Part II of the book, 'Shore Woman' (WO 66-67), who walks the desolate beach sands 'between parched dunes and salivating wave', the only narrow strip whereon she has 'rights' and 'the taste of safety' in her otherwise adrift life and conjugal relationships.

Or there is 'Maighdean Mara' (WO 68-69), the star-crossed mermaid woman who longingly conjures 'patterns of home' and drains 'the tidesong from her voice' while reality imprisons her in the form of life on shore tied to 'man-love'.

And there is the 'Bye-child' cruelly confined in the henhouse, incapable of speech. Heaney upon seeing the photograph of the boy imagines how, communicating through 'a remote mime / of something beyond patience / your gaping wordless proof / of lunar distances / Travelled beyond love' (WO 72).

There is the vivid image of a cow's 'afterbirth strung on the hedge' in 'First Calf', strung 'as if wind smarted / And streamed bloodshot tears'. The cowmother is another survivor, her wide eyes blank and emotionless while 'the semaphores of hurt / swaddle and flap on a bush' (WO 74).

However, one of the most terrifying and moving of these parables of suffering is 'Limbo' (WO 70), the nightmarish story of how fishermen hauled an infant along with the salmon one night. The poet imagines the monstrous proportions of guilt which the woman must harbour who abandoned him to the alien waters. He imagines the cross she must have carried as she waded in. The poem concludes with a bleak reference to the region of limbo which is so bereft of solace that 'Even Christ's palms, unhealed / Smart and cannot fish there'.

It seems that the reference to Christ will crown the conclusion of the book. 'Westering (in California)' is a poem that Heaney writes sitting beneath a map of the
moon recalling "the last night in Donegal". The moon's surface is cratered, pitted, wounded. Heaney remembers Good Friday and the commencement of a journey on that day, "the penitential climax of the church year" (Tamplin 50). The poet is at the wheel in his most representative posture and drives past drawn shopblinds in the lull of the afternoon, cars parked outside churches, bikes stood against the walls. The scene inside the church is of a bare altar and the Irish people 'bent / to the studded crucifix' in a posture of supplication.

What nails dropped out that hour? (WO 80).

The sense of this question is ambiguous. The nails signify pain and then dropping out seems to suggest a release. For, the poet proceeds thereafter on the journey as 'Roads unreeled unreeled / Falling light as casts / Laid down / On shining waters'.

Does Heaney wish to construct an Ireland beyond conflict, at peace with herself, and consequently, a Christ beyond pain and crucifixion? Or does he merely express a sense of personal release from constraints, from a distance of six thousand miles?

The conclusion of the poem does not resolve matters

Under the moon's stigmata

six thousand miles away

I imagine untroubled dust,

A loosening gravity,

Christ weighing by his hands. (WO 80).

This reference to Christ, the apotheosis of suffering, clinches the conclusion of Wintering Out. Christ is the supreme exemplar of martyrdom in the book and the poet brings the book to a close with this richly ambiguous image.
‘Moon’s stigmata’ brings the poem full circle with a recall of the moon’s pitted surface, bringing into collusion the poem’s literal and metaphorical levels of meaning. ‘Untroubled dust’ brings the Moon and Ireland together because it is an image of desolation (the moon’s dust is ‘untroubled’) and also suggests a peaceful world. Heaney, possibly, fantasises about an Ireland redeemed, and takes one to the final image of ‘loosening gravity’ and ‘Christ weighing by his hands.’ Foster has described this as "a marvel of double entendres" (45). ‘Loosening gravity’ may imply either of two possibilities: it may mean a ‘less grave’ situation in Ireland or it may mean a society where there is no longer a true centre of spiritual gravity though the superficial ritual pretensions like church-going are kept up. In such a context of confounding ambiguity, ‘Christ weighing by his hands’ may signify the redemptive stigmata of Christ; Christ as a symbol of universal redemption, or else, Christ balancing and judging mankind.

The poem is thus sustainedly ambiguous. Is Heaney’s vision positive or is it bleak? Does he hold out any hope for Ireland or does he, like R.S.Thomas in Wales, find no nourishing spiritual centre in Irish society. Christ is the redeemer but he is also the judge. All this the poet imagines from a clarifying distance of six thousand miles under the map of the moon, symbolising the cosmic framework of emptiness. ‘What nails dropped out that hour’ is the unresolved question.

If Wintering Out suggests the struggle to survive, to affirm survival over an onslaught of bleakness, it also represents Heaney’s most aggrandised political stance. D.H. Lawrence would have interpreted it as the ‘daemon’ overwhelming the young farmer from Derry.

The series of ‘placename’ poems in the book evolve directly from the nourishing sense of place one finds in his early poems. In Death of a Naturalist, he recovers the familial past, or in other words the place feeds the imagination, and
fosters it, helping to relocate the poet’s identity. At the next stage, in *Door Into the Dark*, he goes beyond the parochial and his soundings in the Collective Unconscious culminate in the discovery of the bog as the mindscape of the Irish people. Politically too, Heaney’s engagement with obvious political themes develops from a conscious neutrality to an oblique endorsement of the reality and validity of the Northern Irish Catholic issue.

With the outbreak of the Troubles and the concomitant pressure to break through to utterance, Heaney writes a set of poems which name places, utter their sounds in a confident assertion of identification and empathy. ‘Fodder’, ‘Anahorish’, ‘Toome’, ‘Brough’ — all words which have a unique resonance for a person who ‘belongs’. Critics have traced the impetus of these poems to the ‘dinnseanchas’ poems of yore in Celtic literature which relate the original meanings of placenames and constitute a form of mythological etymology. Placenames become cherished because of their tribal, etymological implications and associativeness. For John Montague, Heaney’s senior contemporary, the litany of names brings assuagement of sorts when he describes his father’s ‘Last Journey’ i.m. James Montague—

small hills and hidden villages—

*Beragh, Carrickmore, Pomeroy, Fintona—*

Placenames that sigh

like a pressed melodeon

across the forgotten

Northern landscape ......

(Muldoon 198).

For Heaney, in *Wintering Out*, they are bearers of history, resonant clues to a *shared* culture.

The poet’s imagination is mythopoeic and he becomes the voice of instinct, articulating ‘all the realms of whisper’. ‘Oracle’ is the poem in which he casts himself
in such a role, with a feeling of déjà vu for he recalls an incident in childhood in

Preoccupations on which this poem is founded:

but especially, I spent time in the throat of an old willow tree at the
der of the farmyard. it was a hollow tree, with gnarled, spreading
oots, a soft perishing bark and a pithy inside ... once you squeezed
throug it, you were at the heart of a different life. Looking out on
he familiar yard as it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness...
In that tight cleft, you sensed the embrace of light and branches, you
ere a little Atlas shouldering it all (P 18).

'Oracle' reworks this in verse form-

You can hear them
draw the poles of stiles
as they approach
calling you out
small mouth and ear
in a woody cleft,
lobe and larynx
of the mossy places.

(WO 28)

'Land' finds the poet in the same posture

if I lie with my ear
in this loop of silence

long enough, thigh-bone
and shoulder against the phantom ground,
I expect to pick up
a small drumming ...

or there is 'Gifts of Rain'

I cock my ear
at an absence-
in shared calling of blood

arrives my need
for antediluvian lore
soft voices of the dead
are whispering by the shore...

It is as the voice of his territory that he invokes 'Anahorish' his 'place of clear water'.
The word is said to be a transliteration in English of the Celtic original 'anach fhior uisce' and the place is a townland bordering 'Mossbawn' the family farm of the Heaneys. The poet attended Anahorish High School until he has twelve years old.

He hymns the place as 'the first hill in the world'

Where springs washed into
the shiny grass

and darkened cobbles
in the bed of the lane.

'First hill in the world' is rich with possible meanings. It may simply mean the hill of the poet's first world, the world of his childhood or it may further imply an originary place, pre-historic almost, establishing a profound sense of tradition, antiquity and continuity.
The poet then lingers lovingly on the sound of 'Anahorish' describing it as 'soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow'. The description is made in terms of two things that Heaney cherishes—the language and the land. The sound 'Anahorish' suffuses the soft gradient of consonant and the gentle meadow of vowel, and the whole brings to mind, an 'afterimage' of lamps swung through the yards on winter evenings. 'After-image' is an unusual expression capturing an image of light in the mind's eye, reflected from the memory of the poet, of childhood winter evenings when lamps glowed in the farmhouse yards. It is this soft ambience of warmth, comfort and security that the utterance 'Anahorish' brings with it.

With the past so sustainingly present now, the poet nostalgically recalls 'those mound-dwellers' shrouded by mist going out 'to break the light ice / at wells and dunghills'. Though the ostensible reference is to the townspeople of Anahorish the earlier image of 'the first hill' renders these mound-dwellers archaeological inhabitants of that hill. They become, as it were, ancestral presences in the territory. In brief, the poem "arranges itself around words such as 'the first hill' 'spring' 'bed' 'wells' 'dunghills' --all points of source, of life and growth" (Tamplin 41).

The structure of the poem's meaning derives from the juxtaposition of the local and the originary. The poem is a vision of the buried life, for, like the servant boy who is a jobber among the shadows, and the Mummer who moves out of the fog, like the poet in 'The Planatation' led astray by mist and going round in circles, the 'mound-dwellers' are 'waist deep in mist' and are dream figures, inhabitants of a dreamscape. Heaney is to invoke several such visionary, mist-enshrouded figures in his 'Station Island' sequence, later on.

'Broagh' is a similar poem stimulated by another placename. The name is 'an anglicization of Bruach meaning 'riverbank'. The poem itself is highly 'formalised' since it very consciously orchestrates Heaney's intended theme of language expressing
the landscape and, in turn, the nationalistic ethos. Heaney compares the sound of 'Broagh' to the sound of rain;

its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
difficult to manage. (WO 27).

The utterance of the sound itself implies a community. The difficulty that strangers find in saying that last Celtic 'gh' excludes them from the community of 'those mound-dwellers' whom Heaney resurrects in 'Anahorish'. He is achieving two ends simultaneously in such a poem. He celebrates the exclusiveness of the sound, on the one hand, asserting the community's private and proprietorial rights to it. On the other hand, he "releases it into the public articulation of a poem" (Corcoran 90).

Heaney writes in his essay 'Among Schoolchildren', "the word 'Broagh' is a sound native to Ireland common to Unionist and Nationalist, but unavailable to an English person" (Corcoran 90). This suggests, explains Corcoran, that he wanted the poem to "act as a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division" (90). It is significant that transcendence of strife and sectarianism are, in Wintering Out, concerns that are vocalized alongside his resentment of English Imperialism. And in these placename poems, he comes closest to aggrandizement.

In 'Toome' the poet becomes a mole-like creature prospecting into the earth, pushing into the 'souterrain', unearthing layers 'that were camped on before' until he becomes 'sleeved in
alluvial mud that shelves
suddenly under
bogwater and tributaries
and elvers tail my hair.

(WO 26).

And the impetus to this archaeological excavation is the 'soft blastings' of the sound 'Toome' 'toome' --his mouth holds round it as under the 'dislodged slab of the tongue'. Utterance is action. The pertinent technical point of interest about the poem is that the lines run on without a period, in the artesian quatrains, plummeting into the earth, as it were, until the poet strikes alluvial mud, symbolic of the life-source.

Heaney told Seamus Deane in an interview:

I had a great sense of release as they were written, a joy and devil-may-careness and that convinced me that one could be faithful to the nature of the English language for in some sense, these poems are erotic mouth-music by and out of the anglo-saxon tongue--and at the same time be faithful to one's own non-English origin; for me that is County Derry' (Bloom, Seamus Heaney 58).

The poet's interpretation of his placename poems may be perfectly amplified by Deane's sensitive response in The Times Literary Supplement:

to name a place is to pronounce the kind of ground it occupies; to fail to pronounce the name properly is to fail to possess it truly, to be foreign. This devotion to the ground and its names, the constant ascent from original shore to the nominations of geography and history, provides Heaney's poetry with a highly complex sonar architecture, in which vowels and consonants dispute between
themselves, for an equilibrium that will allow to each its separate function, and yet acknowledge for both their interdependence (Deane 275).

The politicisation of the terrain gets more flagrant and Heaney's posture more jingoistic on occasion with poems such as 'A New Song', 'Traditions', 'Gifts of Rain', 'The Wool Trade' and 'The Other Side'. 'Gifts of Rain' identifies and establishes the Irish language/experience as guttural, vowel-oriented and naturally expressed in the music of water, here the rhythmic chant of the river Moyola:

The tawny guttural water
spells itself: Moyola
is its own score and consort

bedding the locale
in the utterance
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists
through vowels and history. (WO 25).

But this 'guttural Muse' of Ireland was 'bullied long ago' by the English 'alliterative tradition'. Heaney composes a paradigmatic relationship between Irish and English, as guttural and alliterative, vowel and consonant, in linguistic terms that may well be questionable but are expedient.

In 'Traditions' Heaney speaks of the two traditions. At the outset of the poem, the feminine, ravished Irish tradition countered by the masculine English tradition. The alliterative tradition is a reference to the poetry of old and early Middle English. The Irish tongue 'like the coccyx / or a Brigid's cross / yellowing in some outhouse has become 'vestigial', neglected, since Ireland cannot escape her destiny,
the conspiracy of geography and ‘custom’ ‘that most sovereign mistress’. The quotation is significantly from Othello where while the Duke describes opinion as ‘sovereign mistress of effects’, Othello replies -the tyrant custom.../ Hath made the flinty and steely couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down’ (Corcoran 82). As Corcoran puts it, "the first section of the poem adapts Shakespeare to create a linguistic - sexual metaphor for Ireland’s traumatic colonial history, a history whose crucial moment occurred during Shakespeare’s time" (Corcoran 82).

The second section of the poem works upon the Shakespearean source in a vein of rich irony.

we are to be proud
of our Elizabethan English

‘Varsity’ for example
is grass-roots stuff with us. (WO 31).

Other archaisms which the Irish use such as ‘deem’ ‘allow’ are also part of the Elizabethan inheritance. Heaney strikes an ironic note of self-approval for their having so effectively mastered the alien tongue that was imposed on them. ‘We are to be proud’ --that is another imperial compulsion.

The third section extends the Shakespeare reference to Henry V and MacMorris, the caricature Irishman strutting and claiming— ‘What ish my nation’?

Ish a villain, and a bastard,

and a knave and a rascal. What ish my nation?

who talks of my nation? (Tamplin 43)

The traditionally handed down stereotyped notion of the Irishman as ‘very bare of learning’ as ‘wildhares’ and ‘anatomies of death’ Tamplin traces back to Edmund Spenser’s ‘State of Ireland’. This caricature is countered by Joyce’s Bloom with
accuracy and confidence. In the Cyclops episode of 'Ulysses', a Jew of Hungarian ancestry, a picaro, defends himself against a rabid anti-Jew Irish nationalist with the simple dignified statement that also answers MacMorris' question - 'what is my nation' "Ireland", said Bloom. "I was born here. Ireland", quite simply. Tamplin describes this clarifying force as the existential "given" of one's birth (43).

Bloom the exilic hero speaks in plain English having made it his native weapon of self-expression. Heaney's emphasis through this example of Joyce is an insistence on the achievement of the English language as it is spoken and written in Ireland. Heaney was to personally meet with the tutelary ghost of Joyce in the 'Station Island' sequence and also comment critically on Joyce in "The Interesting Case of John Alphonsus Mulrennan"- "his achievement reminds me that English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation but a native weapon" (Corcoran 83). The movement in 'Traditions' is, thus, from a strident declaration of nationality to an unservile Joycean acceptance and appropriation of the English language, a classic exposition of the dichotomy in Heaney.

'A New Song' evokes the name 'Derrygarve', 'vanished music', a 'lost potent musk', a smooth libation of the past. However, the poet realises that the day has come when Ireland must step out of the shadows and mists of her chequered history. The poem concludes with a clarion call for resurgence:

But now our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts
To flood, with vowelling embrace,
Demesnes staked out in consonants.

And Castledawson we'll enlist
And Upperlands, each planted bawn-
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass-

A vocable, as rath and bullaun. (WO 33).

Heaney virtually paraphrases this in Preoccupations (37) "I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants. My hope is that the same will be vocables adequate to my whole experience." He beats out to extreme thinness the same theme over and over again in the course of this volume. In fact, the repetitiousness may just begin to pall to a casual reader. One may, however, equally be struck by the discernible extent to which Ireland and her politics subsumed, almost entirely, the poet's sensibility during this phase. 'The Wool Trade' rehearses the 'vowel and consonant' opposition, with a loaded epigraph from Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man--Stephen Dedalus wonders, "How different are the words 'home' 'Christ' 'ale' 'master' on his lips and on mine." The 'Wool Trade' is characterised by the language of waterwheels, a 'lost syntax of looms and spindles'. The phrase itself is as warm as a fleece, and soft as the vowel sounds which describe it--'shear' 'bale' 'bleach' 'card'.

But now in the industrialised present this is a way of life that is past and gone forever like the skill of the blacksmith in an age of mechanization.

How they hang

Fading, in the gallery of the tongue!

And I must talk of tweed,

A stiff cloth with flecks like blood: (WO 37).

The monosyllabic consonantal emphasis of the last line contrasts vividly and unfavourably with the long, languid vowel sounds earlier in the poem.

This problem of language and idiom ramifies in 'The Other Side' to that of religion and sectarianism with Catholic and Protestant arraigned on two sides of one
fence. The persona is the Catholic protagonist while there is the antagonist who is the Protestant neighbour. The ‘Other Side’ very cleverly and non-committally points to the manner in which either side may refer to the other.

The first section zeroes in on the neighbour standing thigh-deep in his garden of sedge and marigold and dismissing the poet’s ground as being ‘poor as Lazarus’. The poet’s land is composed of ‘moss and rushes’ and he has perforce to swallow the disdainful ‘biblical’ dismissal ‘in that tongue of chosen people’. The comment becomes loaded with irony when one wonders who does the choosing and when one recalls Calvinism and its doctrine of election. The white-haired neighbour is deliberately cast in the posture of a Moses as he pontificates and ‘swings his black thorn at the marsh weeds’. And as he turns away to his ‘promised furrows’ he unsettles the pollen with his feet, quite thoughtlessly, and this drifts to the poet’s bank, a potential threat to the coming season’s crop. Corcoran points out that this is an ironically biblical reference, “deriving from the parable of the Sower in Mathew XIII where they (the pollen) are set among wheat by an enemy’” (Corcoran 91).

The second section of the poem unfolds the embarrassed, uneasy interaction which is the only kind possible between these two human beings. The old man would comment self-righteously ‘your side of the house, I believe / hardly rule by the book at all’.

His brain was a whitewashed kitchen
hung with texts, swept tidy
as the body o’ the kirk’. (WO 35).

That is the quintessential Protestant-Puritan from the Catholic perspective, living life according to the laws laid down by the book, his whitewashed brain and home tidy and text-hung. The juxtaposition is tersely economical. ‘Kirk’ suggests brilliantly the
distance between the two as it derives from Scots and is "a word which a Catholic would never apply to his church" (Foster 40).

In contrast there is the poet’s kitchen and home with the mournful incantation of the rosary, its doleful observances of rituals. The neighbour would shuffle by outside but wait for the litany to end before knocking at the door because the moan of prayer in the background would hit him almost as if ‘he were party to / lovemaking or a stranger’s weeping’. He would then volunteer an awkward, hesitant and shy greeting. So powerfully does Heaney evoke the complete alienness of the two cultures, the absolute lack of any possible meeting ground. The poet can only go on to offer a tentative resolution, a marginal transcendency of conflict.

    Should I slip away, I wonder,
    or go up and touch his shoulder
    and talk about the weather

    or the price of grass-seed                  (WO 36).

It is almost as if the old man’s uncertainty has sparked off something tentative but positive in the poet too. He experiences a struggle within to understand and act upon the ‘right thing’. And there is a glimmer of hope in the unfailing realm of the banal and the commonplace and its linguistic register—the weather, the price of seed. With this, one can just about begin to mend one’s fences. Frost is there behind Heaney’s shoulder, with ‘Mending Wall’ an obvious inspiration. Kavanagh’s model of Maguire the Protestant farmer and the peasantry in the The Great Hunger would have made a definite intercession in his mind while writing this poem:

    Like the after birth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind
    Life dried in the veins of these women and men
    The grey and grief and unlove,
The bones in the backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them. (Muldoon 40).

However, Heaney's is a far gentler irony and there is constantly a yearning for transcendence and integration, for, significantly, 'Your side of the house' implies that there is one house.

But when the poet is confronted with the unspeakable horror of the troubles in Ireland, the gruesome spectre of mindless violence and destruction, the facade of the onlooker, the slight squeamishness and the defensiveness crumble because "the pain cannot be supported by such a mannerly style" (Andrews 61). Instead, one finds the surreal imagescape of 'A Northern Hoard', the lyric sequence in Wintering Out, which connects with the prefatory poem. The sequence has five lyrics and they all "work through dream and nightmare" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 39) and work through a mythologizing vision.

'Roots' presents the failure of sane and moral human emotions such as love in the midst of the nightmarish blighting exigencies of history:

............... The touch of love,

Your warmth heaving to the first move

Grows helpless in our old Gomorrah

We petrify or uproot now. (WO 39).

The scenario is bleak, overwhelmed by violence and derangement. The poet goes on to say that he shall be the symbolically transmogrified mandrake 'soaked by moonlight in tidal blood' and shall possibly also acquire the magical healing property of the mandrake.

In 'No Man's Land' the poet's guilt surfaces and gnaws at his sensibility.

Why do I unceasingly

arrive late to condone
infected sutures
and ill-knit bone? (WO 40).

'Stump' vividly imagines his overwhelming sense of futility as he looks upon the poor, the brutalised civil victims of strife:

What do I say if they wheel out their dead?
I am cauterised, a black stump of home. (WO 41).

The same "sense of complicity within a community" (Bloom, Seamus Heaney 58-59) prevails in 'Tinder' also. The poem projects the continuum of history—the animal side of man’s nature, the savagery, the striking up of the tinder of revolution and the failure to learn the lesson that this taught.

What did we know then
of tinder, charred linen and iron,

Huddled at dusk in a ring
Our fists shut, our hope shrunken? (WO 43).

The poem is ridden with echoes of 'tinder'—‘charred’ ‘ash’ ‘dead igneous days’. The past fails to ignite the tribal imagination. And new history is merely a concatenation of ‘flint and iron’, ‘cast-offs, scraps, nail, canine.’

However, the acme of Heaney’s achievement in Wintering Out, the impetus to the next volume of poems, North, is ‘The Tollund Man’. The poem comes into being out of a nexus of motif and style in Heaney’s work. The persistent use of ‘digging’ as an analogue to the act of writing poetry, the discovery of the bog as the archetypal memoryscape of Ireland, and more recently, the mythologizing of territory and individual consciousness: all these strains are discernible as disparate elements in Heaney’s poetry. But that single spark, that igniting force which effects a brilliant
fusion of these salient aspects is, self-professedly, his reading of P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*:

My emotions, my feelings, whatever those instructive energies are that have to be engaged for a poem, those energies quickened more when contemplating a victim, strangely, from 2000 years ago than they did from contemplating a man at the end of the road being swept into a plastic bag.... somehow, language, words didn't live in the way I think they have to live in a poem when they were hovering over that kind of horror and pity.... And it was in these victims made strangely beautiful by the process of lying in bogs that somehow I felt I would make offerings or images that were emblems (Corcoran 96).

Seeing the photograph of the Tollund Man in Glob's book, moves Heaney to this tragic-ironic utterance. In an interview with James Randall, Heaney has explained his response thus: "The Tollund Man seemed like an ancestor, almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside" (Corcoran 77). It is thus with something approaching reverence that Heaney describes this bog victim.

Section I finds the poet-protagonist determined to make a journey to Aarhus to see the Tollund Man, his 'peat-brown' head, his painted skin cap and 'the pods' of his eyelids. The details are sufficiently unconventional for the reader to sit up and take notice. And then one is back in 'Bogland' and reads of the last meal of winter seeds still caked in his stomach.

Naked except for
cap noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,
The period at the end of the third line suggests a distinction, a gap between the poet-observer and the Tollund Man but when the poem is read aloud, the fourth line goes with the third in terms of stanzaic pattern and, then, this distinction is collapsed. These lines achieve by means of some clever punctuation and syntactic arrangement, a collusion of protagonist and poet. The ‘I’ of the poem becomes ‘mythologized’ and the poet becomes, as it were, along with the Tollund Man, bridegroom to the Earth-Goddess, and practitioner of the primitive cult of Earth-worship. Heaney’s sense of involvement is religious in its intensity. "When I wrote that poem, I had a sense of crossing a line really, that my whole being was involved in a sense of—the root-sense of—religion, being bonded to do something. I felt it a vow........" (Andrews 65).

The goddess referred to here is Nerthus the Norse goddess of fertility whom Heaney apotheosises in the cryptic companion poem of that name. The sexuality inherent in the ritual worship of Nerthus is highlighted in this poem with its description of a forked ash stick:

For beauty, say an ash-fork staked in peat,
Its long grains gathering to the gouged split;  
(WO 49).

The poet having established the empathy with the Tollund Man, goes on to describe just how the goddess exercises her powers:

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint’s kept body.  
(WO 47).

The metaphor is sexual and religious all at once. The bog’s juices are ‘dark’, vaginal and mysterious, and the action of these juices preserves him. Here there is a reciprocal flow of pagan and Christian belief and ideas. The Tollund Man’s body embodies a primitive pre-Christian existence, scientifically preserved by the properties
of the bog and now scientifically exhumed intact. On another level, it embodies his saintly Christian sacrifice and martyrdom. And very soon in the poem, the poet is going to raise the issue of more recent sacrifices.

Section II opens with Heaney ‘risking blasphemy’ in this context of Christian hagiology, and praying to the Tollund Man to ‘make germinate’ or fruitful, the sacrifice of contemporary victims of strife and violence-- ‘the scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers’ and more specifically the-

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines. (WO 48).

The incident referred to here is the ugly death of four young boys, brothers all, who were victims of sectarian killings in the 1920s. ‘Germinate’ brings to mind the Croppies of the 1798 rebellion who went to their deaths with barley coms in their pockets which, says Heaney, sprouted as the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Here, in ‘The Tollund Man’ Heaney would similarly superimpose history upon the present. The Tollund Man’s sacrifice is seen by the poet as possible intercession for the redemption of his suffering, victimised countrymen. Heaney would risk ‘blasphemy’ and invoke this Iron Age saint to make germinate the martyrdom of early twentieth century Irishmen. The word ‘trailed’ marks the transition from the second to the third section as it summons up ‘The Servant Boy’ and the poet drawn irresistibly to his trail of insouciance. Here in the last section of the poem, he hopes to be visited by that spirit of sad freedom in which the Tollund Man rode the tumbril on his last journey. Even as the poet drives along uttering a litany of names ‘Tollund’ ‘Grauballe’ ‘Nebelgard’, the very utterance of these a revelation, he becomes increasingly
conscious of his position. The fog in his mind clears almost as if the mythologizing perspective from which he has seen his country, has clarified the issue for him.

And this is what he realises. In Jutland, he is on alien territory and is pointed at by country people looking on curiously. He is an alien in those 'old man-killing parishes' and there 'he will feel lost / Unhappy, and at home'. The savage tragic irony of the last phrase cannot be missed. The word 'home' is totally comfortless here and Corcoran (80) draws one's attention to a similarly bleak context in Derek Mahon's 'Afterlives' where he rhymes 'home' with 'bomb'. Heaney's imagined pilgrimage to Aarhus ends in self-knowledge and a revelation of artistic destiny. "As Heaney moves through this psychic territory, chanting the placenames, seeing the people pointing at him but not understanding his tongue, his own complex relationship to the 'man-killing parishes' of Ulster gradually clarifies itself and the poem reaches towards its characteristic starkly ambivalent recognition" (Andrews 65)

'The Tollund Man' is the signal poem in Wintering Out with inputs from preceding poems in the volume such as 'Servant Boy' or 'Bye-child' the latter with a similar victim of society, dumb but profoundly communicative-- 'you speak at last / with a remote mime / of something beyond patience / your gaping wordless proof / of lunar distances / Travelled beyond love.' At the same time, 'Tollund Man' looks ahead to North and in particular to the celebrated series of bog poems. In an interview, speaking to John Haffenden, when questioned on his repeated forays into a bygone dead past, his anthropological questings, Heaney has replied, "I think there is some kind of psychic energy that cries out for a house, and you have to build the house with the elements of your poetry, with the elements of your imagery, which have to have a breath of life in them....." He goes on to insist that it is wrong to have "a teacherly notion" that subject matter must be modern (Haffenden, Interview 18).
North totally defeats any possibility of such a teacherly notion or expectation. For the entire book is a panoramic geographical and historical view of the North, as in Northern Europe and, more specially, Northern Ireland. The book is bifurcated and the two halves are presented in two radically different modes. The first half is governed by the mythologizing perspective and may be further streamlined into a group of 'bog poems' and a group of 'Viking poems', while the latter half of the book is almost journalistic in its prosaic declarative address of political issues.

In an interview granted to Frank Kinahan, when Heaney was asked about his position vis-a-vis Eliot's threefold avowal of faith as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, Anglo-Catholic in religion Heaney quipped that he was "passionate" in literature, "torpid" in politics and "Jungian in religion" (Kinahan, Interview 409). Haffenden writing on this quotes from Jung to clarify the nexus between Heaney's earth-religion and his poetics-

the creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs ...... the unsatisfied yeaming of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on the image, and on raising it from the deepest unconscious, he brings it into relation with conscious values (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 90-91).

This is a profound formula sustaining the mythologizing impulse in contemporary poetry. Eliot outfaced the sterility he saw around him in life and values by recourse to myth in The Waste Land and Heaney confronted by the bleak
hopelessly irresoluble scenario in Ulster looks beyond the bounds of immediate society for a working mythology to help him comprehend and interpret his world. At such a juncture, the bog proved to be a tremendous resource, emotionally and materially. As Heaney put it in an interview on Denmark Radio—"It is Jungian ground presenting layer upon layer of our history, a kind of geological memory-bank" (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 91).

Therefore, in the series of twelve acclaimed bog poems, Heaney systemically runs through the gamut of his major motifs and preoccupations—a near amorous surrender to place, here presided over by the earth-goddess, progenitrix, repository of the race's collective experience of myth and history; atavism, genetic memory, ritual, sacrifice for the mother country and so on. On this point too, Jung is an invaluable source:

the ideal of the mother-country is an obvious allegory of the mother..
Its power to stir us does not derive for the allegory but from the symbolic power of our native land. The archetype here is the participation mystique of the primitive man with the soil on which he dwells and which contains the spirits of his ancestors (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 90-91).

As Heaney broods in the bog poems over the Iron Age victims he is inevitably distanced from the horror of the present moment in Ireland, and myth becomes the pair of tongs with which he handles these live coals. The poetry is oblique, suggestive and as Deane puts it "There is no risk of that pornographic observation of atrocity which is so frequently found in the reportage of political crises" (Deane 275). Moreover, the poetry is also universalized through the mythopoetic vision since Heaney rightly perceives violence and death as originary and pre-historic.
'The Grauballe Man' a singularly representative piece from the bog poem series in *North* serves as a companion piece to 'The Tollund Man' to the extent of being comparable to the Byzantium poems of Yeats or the Toad poems of Larkin. P.V. Glob explains that "the man's neck was slashed from ear to ear, and his naked body dropped in the bog around 310 B.C. during the winter celebrations. His grim death was intended to hasten the coming of spring" (Hart, "History, Myth ..." 406).

'The Tollund Man' was charged with the dynamic impetus of a personal pilgrimage undertaken by Heaney and thus has a passion and an urgency deriving from it. 'The Grauballe Man' on the other hand, has about it the spirit of iconolatry. Heaney is here the observer and the bog victim is the object of contemplation. The poem starts on a descriptive account assisted by a string of similes.

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself
The grain of his wrists
is like bog oak
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg,
His instep has shrunk
cold as a swan's foot
or a wet swamp root. (SP 190).

'to weep the black river of himself' --the comparison finds Heaney at his self-reflexive best but there is yet not that sense of identity that is found in 'The Tollund Man'.
The accretion of these similes creates a composite picture of the Grauballe Man as an object that is cold, wet, preserved: a lifeless artefact.

Then suddenly the poem shifts to metaphor and is rendered tauter for it. 'His lips are the ridge / and purse of a mussel, / his spine an eel arrested / under the glisten of mud'. The man becomes an icon, divested of any possible human features. And the tone of the poem contrastive to that of 'The Tollund Man', is not dramatic but incantatory. The metaphoric celebration of the Grauballe Man culminates in the horrifying but clinically rendered image of his 'slashed throat' and 'the cured wound / opens inward to a dark / elderberry place', a mysterious region.

And then comes the turn in the poem and with it commences discussion of the Heaney dialectic of Art and Life.

Who will say 'corpse' to his vivid cast?

Who will say 'body' to his opaque repose? (SP 191).

This form of interrogation takes one back to Shakespeare and his classic question--'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?' (P 33). Heaney here questions the relevance of stark and ugly reality in the context of the tranquil beauty of the Grauballe Man lying in repose. In a lyrical afflatus, he seems to affirm the triumph of metaphor over undisguised truth, of Art over Life.

Heaney recalls in a sudden back-tracking movement that he first saw the Grauballe Man's 'twisted face' in a photograph but now, the picture that he has painted has been the one etched perfectly in his memory, down to the last detail. The bog man has his place forever in the poet's memory hung in the scales with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul

too strictly compassed

on his shield,

with the actual weight

of each hooded victim,

slashed and dumped. (SP 191)

As Tamplin comments with great feeling: "this is how a poem enters into human agony, certainly by saying how it is, but more by laying bare reading after reading of the event it memorializes until the unavailable word that is sufficient to it, is only just unuttered" (61).

The concluding sentiments in the poem bring the poet almost inexorably into a competition with real-life atrocity. Heaney in his mythologising predilection in the earlier stretches of the poem almost makes an icon out of the bog victim, appropriating him "to the poem’s own form and order" (Corcoran 115). But the final confrontation with reality in the form of the actual real weight of each brutalised victim cannot be evaded. The horror communicates itself verbally and emotionally. And then it seems as if the poet himself is pressed upon to say ‘corpse’ to ‘his vivid cast’ and ‘body’ to his opaque repose. The tinted falsifying vision of myth is then perfectly counterpoised with plain, unadorned truth. Art and Life are hung in the scales.

Foster goes that step further and urges that one must not be "too quick to release the poem and its subject from the realm of art" (56) since despite the horror, the operative metaphor in the poem has been one of birth, a coming into being of the Grauballe Man, as the poet itemises every part of his ‘body’:
a head and shoulder
out of the peat,
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies
perfected in my memory. (SP 191).

The birth metaphor immediately summons up 'Poem' from *Death of a Naturalist* and its process of perfecting in the imagination and in memory. Thus despite all the contending with reality that the poet must do, the poem itself, and its whole process of 'bringing forth' as in the process of birth, is a brilliant, self-reflexive assertion of Art over the claims of exigent Life. The complex response that the poem engenders, and in the end, the unresolved duality structurally disclosed in it, make it a typical Heaney set-piece, lacking the dynamic, fluid drama of 'The Tollund Man' and looking ahead to the perfect well-made New Critical Poem 'Exposure' which is to clinch the message of *North* in conclusion.

One point remains to be made. And it inhere[s] in Heaney's reference to the 'Dying Gaul'. The allusion is from the poet David Jones (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 92-94). Jones cited in his work the Dying Gaul sculpture and other bronzes of defeated Celts decorating the acropolis at Pergamon in 2nd Century B.C. The Gauls, says Haffenden, symbolise a once-powerful culture repressed to a fringe culture. They are 'too strictly compassed' on the Grauballe Man's shield suggesting a sense of wilful repression. The cultural implications are thus obvious. The Grauballe Man, the bog victim, becomes a representative of a repressed culture and the poet makes this teleological connection between the Gaul, the Grauballe Man and the Catholic community in Ulster. Thus though on the one hand, Heaney seems to place
himself at a distance and work the Grauballe Man into an artefact, on the other hand, there is this subtext vindicating Catholic identity in Ulster. That classic dichotomy of Life and Art seems to naturally engender the issue of commitment and evasion of it.

The same issues are reiterated in 'Punishment'. What is striking about Heaney's achievement in the poem is not the by now predictable theme and form but the acute self-consciousness of the poet. He involves in this poem a far greater part of himself than he permits in 'The Grauballe Man' and that is signalled at once by the 'I' which launches the poem on its way:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front

(SP 192).

The subject of the poem is a fourteen year old girl who was in the first century A.D. "led naked out on to the bog with bandaged eyes and the collar round her neck, and drowned in the little peat-pit" (Hart, "History, Myth ...” 407) in the Windeby estate in Schleswig. Her head was seen as partially shaved. Her crime was adultery.

The poem strikes upon identification instantaneously. 'I can feel....': the poet is so involved that he is fully sensitised to her experience - 'I can see her drowned / body in the bog, / the weighing stone.....' the skin soused with the touch of wind and also the drag of the stone that pulled her inexorably downward.

Thereafter, the poem proceeds to itemise her along the lines laid down in 'The Grauballe Man'. If the Grauballe Man was a forceps baby the anonymous girl is a 'barked sapling' dug up 'oak-bone', 'brain-firkin'. Her shaved head is a stubble of black corn, her noose 'a ring', ironically, to 'store memories of love'. The poet evokes her erstwhile beauty and at this juncture, the poem reads true to type and is iconolatrous.
But the expected turn arrives and, at once, a wedge is driven between poet and subject when he begins an anguished self-analysis. 'My poor scapegoat, I almost love you / but would have cast, I know / the stones of silence'. He castigates himself for being voyeuristic in his clinical study of his victims. His art a tool, he has preyed upon all her 'numbered bones' incisively and ghoulishly. The poem acquires a Biblical resonance in this stretch and one recalls St. John's gospel and the episode of the adulterous woman going to Jesus for justice. Heaney is guilty like others of his tribe of casting stones of silence and complicity at fellow human-beings similarly humiliated and traumatised in Ulster. Corcoran traces 'scapegoat' to Leviticus - as something that "takes on the sins of the tribe and is driven out into the wilderness", a term that is applied to Christ himself in the Catholic liturgy. He also observes that 'numbered bones' derives from the psalms wherein Christ points out "they have pierced my hands and feet, they have numbered all my bones" (Corcoran, Seamus Heaney 117). The clinching comment to be made in this context is the double-edged irony of these lines. They place tribal revenge and injustice in the context of Christian mercy while at the same time point an accusing finger at that very Christian religion that spawns such barbaric sacrificial rituals in contemporary Ulster. The equation Heaney forces is between primitive religion in Jutland and Christian religion in Ulster.

The agonising Self proceeds on its contortionary emotional circuits and in the process touches upon the contemporary trauma which has sparked off the compulsion, in Heaney, to connect, comprehend and mythologize:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauld in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (SP 193).

In a radio interview in Skoleradioen, Denmark, Heaney explained-- "I used that connection to try to come to grips--used the bog find, the ancient body, the ancient, humiliated, punished body of a girl to try to refract a perspective on the humiliated girls in Derry and Belfast" (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 97-98).

The poem reaches its conclusion on this confessional and typically ambivalent note. Seamus Deane sums it up eloquently-- "Imaginatively he is with the revenge, morally, with the outrage. It is a grievous tension for him, since his instinctive understanding of the roots of violence is incomparable with any profound repudiation of it" (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 99). This two-faced Janus-like posture is inherent in Heaney's personality and derives from the fractures of history. This inability to cast stones or stop those who do, is attributable to the opposition between his liberal, rational English education and his native, Celtic, Catholic, nationalistic sensibility. The two strains criss-cross and paralyse each other. He knows that the crude unfeeling brand of barbarism is reprehensible but he also understands the community's need to lay down rules and protect them and live by them. Such an unsentimental and pragmatic view of society's norms and codes is not new to his poetry. 'The Early Purges', from as early as Death of a Naturalist, professes an eminently practical dictum-- 'on well-run farms, pests have to be kept down'.

This uneasy ambivalence is best described in Heaney's words-- "At one minute, you are drawn towards the old vortex of racial and religious instinct; at another time you seek the mean of humane love and reason" (P 34). "I am fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung at one moment by the
long tail of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror" (P 30). Such complete understanding and emphatic repetition of the poet's stance is necessary in the light of the veritable tirade directed against the bog poems and their politics by several critics, chiefly among them, Ciaran Carson, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Blake Morrison and Edna Longley.

Morrison remarks obliquely that these poems "give the sectarian killings a historical respectability which it is not usually given in day-to-day journalism" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 68). Edna Longley is more forthright when she says that "poetry and politics like church and state should be separated" (Tamplin 62). O'Brien declares that at the "unhealthy intersection" of literature and politics is engendered bad politics and bad literature, a disastrous inbreeding caused by an excessive romanticism (Tamplin 62). Carson is of the opinion that Heaney seems to be "condoning such acts" by "understanding them" by "removing them to the realm of sex, death and inevitability." It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then; they happen now and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution" (Foster 55). It appears, then, that the collective verdict of these critics is that Heaney wrote far better poetry out of the private County Derry part of himself.

A defence of Heaney's 'political' poems would have its basis in the fact that political verse is not necessarily 'propagandist' but simply alive to the political condition and is as old as Homer or Dante. As Tom Paulin writes in his introduction to The Faber Book of Political Verse, politics like a rainstorm "catches us all in its wet noise" and a political poem may be one which embodies a general historical awareness, "an observation of the rain" (Paulin 18). The choice of a political subject entails no necessary or complete commitment to an ideology. Political reality is not effortlessly transcended.
Thematically, then, the bog poems are unprejudiced and consistently work out Heaney's trope of duality. However, formalistically, they tend to a predictability of mannerism: each bog poem may well lend a part of itself to another. The poetry suffers marginally from a lack of spontaneity. It just about begins to pall on the reader. One only has to quote at random from other bog poems such as the 'Bog Queen' or 'Strange Fruit' to emphasise the similarities. This is the utterance of 'the bog queen' another of the corpses exhumed from Glob's Danish bog:

through my fabrics and skins
the seeps of winter
digested me,
the illiterate roots
pondered and died
in the cavings
of stomach and socket. (SP 187).

And the opening lines of 'Strange Fruit'

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd,
Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth. (SP 194).

The hyphenated inventory of descriptive detail is pavlovian.

The first half of North does not limit itself to a vertical descent into bogland with its Iron Age victims who seem to connect with contemporary Ulster in their martyrdom. It has in the scope of the title poem 'North' and companion pieces such as 'Funeral Rites' 'Viking Dublin' and 'Bone Dreams' a horizontal sweep across the immensity of North European history. These have been for the sake of convenience categorised the 'Viking poems'.

The title poem commences with the poet questing for revelation as he does in 'The Tollund Man'. He returns to a long strand (in Heaney's work, the persona never
merely 'goes' he always seems to 'return' in a motion of inexhaustible circularity) and finds the 'secular powers of the Atlantic thundering'. The phrase 'secular powers' is sufficient to strike a political note, to launch the poem on its political track however obliquely. Even as he is facing the 'unmagical invitations of Iceland' on the one hand and the pathetic colourless colonies of Greenland on the other, he is hit by an epiphanic experience.

He is able to hear all of a sudden the ocean-deafened voices of those 'fabulous raiders', the Vikings and their ilk, lifted in 'violence and epiphany', warning him. These are the great warriors of yore, now archaeological curiosities in 'the solid / belly of stone ships' or 'hacked and glinting / in the gravel of thawed stream'. But their lives are coterminous with that of human beings in the present, says Heaney, because their 'longship's swimming tongue' is an oracular voice that is 'buoyant with hindsight ......'. Having seen through civilizations and centuries of human experience, the voice becomes mentor to the poet. It presents a depressing demoralising panoramic view of historical experience-

> Thor's hammer swung
> to geography and trade,
> thick-witted couplings and revenges,
>
> the hatreds and behindbacks
> of the althing, lies and women,
> exhaustions nominated peace,
> memory incubating the spilled blood.  

(SP 175).

The moral of it all is that lust, pettiness, feuding and intrigue have occurred in a constantly renewed pattern in history. The poem's syntactic structure—'geography and trade ...... lies and women', emphasises the monotony and repetitiveness that are
the bane of a civilization "reduced to a litany" (Andrews 99). The oracular voice attests to this with hindsight.

Then it proceeds to counsel the poet in the context of such a striking congruence between past events and the present. The poet has nothing to do but

......... Lie down

in the word-hoard, burrow

the coil and gleam

of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.

expect aurora borealis

in the long foray

but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear

as the bleb of the icicle,

trust the feel of what rubbed treasure

your hands have known. (SP 175).

The voice seems to exhort the poet to commit himself to art. He is to immerse himself in the repository that is tradition and simply get on with what he has been chosen to do. He must expect no ‘cascade of light’ or sensational vision, but only seek the suffuensement of the Northern Lights in the long journey he makes as a poet towards self-knowledge and fulfilment. He must maintain a sense of balance and look on everything with a clear eye. Above all, he must trust in what is known, felt and experienced, the quotidian reality.
The poet's role is thus defined by Heaney through this oracular voice in a spirit of understated affirmation and confidence. The past is as Morrison puts it "not another country but a neighbouring field" (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 61) and human experience in the present, however depressing it might be, confirms that of the past. The whole of Northern history can testify to this. And the poet's role in such a set of circumstances must be to have faith in his Art and in his Art as Artefact. And politics, Heaney seems to say, is a proper subject for poetry "only as long as it can be subsumed in personal, historical or mythological contexts" (Foster 64). Thus the poem which commenced with the journeying personal pronoun 'I' has taken one through a capsule commentary of Northern history and brought one back reflexively to the poet's consciousness. The 'longship's swimming tongue' as critics have so often pointed out, is only the first of the several mentors, ghostly, imagined, who are to appear in Heaney's work henceforth, counselling him, guiding him, hectoring him as he is enmeshed further and further in this problematic dichotomous relationship between Life and Art.

A point that is of technical interest in these poems as a whole is the fact that Heaney burrows into the past ages not only through history but through language. Throughout the poem, he takes recourse to words which are of Northern origin, either Anglo-Saxon or Norse, words which pre-date the Norman invasion, and additionally, he avoids words of Greek and Latin origin so scrupulously that even when only two of them occur, they have a significant resonance—'violence and epiphany'. By such extensive use of Northern words, he seems to make a point, namely that the past has so much relevance to and bearing upon the present that one can scarcely write or talk now without being "touched upon by the conquerors of the native Celts" (Foster 62). One's language itself becomes a point of entry into the buried life of the nation. Heaney thus uses 'bleb' and 'rubbed' as rare examples of
original Celtic words to throw light upon the concept of the 'word-hoard' --that repository of linguistic tradition which the poet must sink into in order to recover and clarify.

In 'Viking Dublin : Trial Pieces', however, the poet's mood is not as assured or confident. It tends more towards self-parody. Recognising his predilection for digging, excavating and his compulsive interest in times fossilised and long gone by, the poet parodies himself as Hamlet, the Dane:

    skull-handler, parablist,
    smell of rot

    in the state, infused
    with the poisons,
    pinioned by ghosts
    and affections,

    murders and pieties,
    coming to consciousness
    by jumping in graves,
    dithering and blathering.  

    (SP 178).

    But once again, he invokes the Vikings for guidance and apostrophises them thus-- 'old fathers, be with us / old cunning assessors / of feuds and sites / for ambush or town'.

    'Bone-Dreams' recalls the language poems of Wintering Out in its singular preoccupation with 'philology and kennings'. The poet burrows his way through dictions, 'Elizabethan canopies' 'Norman devices' 'the erotic mayflowers of Provence' 'the ivied Latins of Churchmen' 'the scop's twang', 'the iron flash of consonants
cleaving the line', and finally arrives at 'ban-hus' or 'bone-house', the word-hoard of the language. That is, in other words, 'a skeleton', the originary state of language and, indeed, of human life. The artesian quatrain is at its most efficient here, almost physically digging into the layered earth-memory and the poem's rhythm signals the poet's heady exhilarated questing.

Before one is transported from the realm of myth by a strident, declarative voice to the Ulster of contemporary history, Heaney gives the first half of North a framework in the twin poems of 'Antaeus' and 'Hercules and Antaeus'; the two legendary forces represent in Heaney's scheme of things, two opposing strains of temperament.

Antaeus is the 'mould-hugger', of the earth, while Hercules is 'sky-born' and royal, 'dung-heaver'. In the first poem, Antaeus claims that he 'cannot be weaned / off the earth's long contour, her river-veins'. He is cradled in the dark womb of the earth and 'nurtured in every artery / Like a small hillock'. In the latter poem, Hercules overcomes Antaeus, weans him off his element, the earth, raises him up with a 'spur of light', a blue prong, and he is cut off from all that sustained him hitherto - the cradling dark, the river veins, the secret gullies of his strength, the hatching grounds of cave and souterrain. He is tossed into a region from where he can only 'dream of his loss and origins'. Hercules, man of action, intelligent and rational, exposes Antaeus for what he is-- 'a sleeping giant / pap for the dispossessed'.

And thereby hangs a long familiar tale as far as Heaney is concerned. Heaney takes recourse to Greek myth, surprisingly, but not without reason, for the Hercules-Antaeus dualism fits in thematically with the structure of North as a book, its binary division into the mythological and the declarative modes of address lent to the same issues.
The twin poems could be read as allegories of imperialism with its references to Balor, Byrthnoth, and Sitting Bull, three defeated heroes—Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Red Indian respectively. During Heaney’s year at Berkeley, he was witness to a trend among minorities wanting to have a say—the Chicanos and Blacks were examples—and in his mind this came together with events in Ulster. At the same time, Vietnam had happened, and poets were agitating aloud. Heaney would definitely have noted the fact that leading young American poets of the time such as Bly, Snyder and Duncan were endorsing the mythological idiom of poetry as against the discursive-rational one. Thus Antaeus came to represent Ireland, the dispossessed territory, and Hercules England, the invading colonial power. In Heaney’s paradigm, this ramifies into feminine and masculine, earth and sky, instinct and reason, assuaging emotion and aggravating intelligence, Catholic and Protestant.

In fact, Heaney explained in an interview given to Haffenden, the impetus behind the poem. He says the poem grew out of a conversation about poetry with Iain Crichton Smith.

He’s got a kind of Presbyterian light about him. The image that came into my mind after the conversation was of me being a dark soil and him being a kind of bright-pronged fork that was digging it up and going through it .... That kind of thinking led into the poetry of the second half of North which was an attempt at some kind of declarative voice" (Haffenden, Interview 22).

Antaeus and Hercules, then, exist as other terms of the dichotomy do in a symbiotic relationship in Heaney’s poetry. These strains criss-cross productively in his work and the result in North is a structural division representing the responsive and the active impulses respectively. And Heaney makes the transition and signals it, as well, through ‘Hercules and Antaeus’.
'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' a robust, chatty poem from the second half of the book, the explicit half, does come as a relief to the reader after the overwhelming mythologizing of the first and symbolic half of the book. As Colin Falck puts it, "it is a relief that he can still call on some of his old directness in dealing with the Ulster conflicts" (Curtis 72).

Heaney’s objective in this unprecedented declarative phase was "to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before...... like all the messy and it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North" (Corcoran 95). And now when Heaney talks of the North it is a specific interest and concern evinced in the problem of Northern Ireland. The poem is almost journalistic in its forthright and spirited evocation of contemporary horror. ‘The times are out of joint’, says Heaney, quoting Hamlet but now he is no longer dithering and blathering, excavating skulls from the graveyard. On the contrary he is ‘expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours’ feeling the pulse of the times-- ‘I live here too, I sing’ --in the world of media men, with their journalistic cliches, (‘backlash’, ‘crackdown’, ‘polarization’ and so on), zoom lenses, politicians, stringers, recorders and more than these, the world of falsehood and deceit. While in ‘North’ Heaney captured in one sweep the bottomline of human conduct in history--the ‘behind-backs’ and ‘back-bitings’ --here he is firmly ensconced in the present historical moment listening to the tired meaningless expressions of dismay that are bandied around socially-- ‘Oh, its disgraceful, surely, I agree’. ‘One side’s as bad as the other’. ‘When’s it going to end?’. In this land of ‘password, handgrip, wink and nod’ where people are tacitly arraigned on either side as sure-fire ‘Paps’ or ‘Prod’, the poet finds himself gagged effectively by the (in)famous Northern reticence and by the unwritten rule ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’. In the final section after scanning the contemporary scene, he
is back in his customary and favourite role of observer-commentator, from the
vantage position of driving along a dewy motroway. And when he sees the land
around him, fresh clay and greenery ravaged by bombs and machine-gun posts, he
is taken back to that telling bit of graffiti that he saw decorating the walls in
Ballymurphy, which he preaced *Wintering Out* with:

*Is there a life before death*? That’s chalked up

*In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,*

*Coherent miseries, a bite and sup,*

*We hug our little destiny again.* (SP 215).

There is no great resolution that the poet can offer but there is affirmation to the
extent of celebrating the small life, the quotidian aspects of life. And he is to write a
paean to that life in a whole book, *Field Work.*

In this context, it is necessary to recall and pause upon the two poems with
which Heaney launches *North*: 'Mossbawn : Two Poems in Dedication', namely
'Sunlight' and 'The Seed Cutters'. These are dedicated to Mary Heaney, Heaney's
paternal aunt, who lived with the Heaneys, almost a surrogate mother to the poet
and one of the sustaining, fostering feminine presences in his life, along with his
mother and his wife.

Heaney revives from memory, a domestic scene which has the qualities of a
'haven' - a yard with its pump, sling bucket and all these suffused by a 'sunlit
absence'. Absence in Heaney partakes of something positive, a relished emptiness
that is paradoxically fulfilling and radiating a wonderful quietude. And presiding over
this haven is the goddess-like figure of his aunt, a far cry from Nerthus, a real-life
person in a domestic situation donning a floury apron, 'her hands scuffed over the
bakeboard'.
Space, like absence, is something solid, heartwarming, a place to relocate oneself and have one’s being in. And such a place fosters love ‘like a tinsmith’s scoop / sunk past its gleam in the mealbin’. Love, though an abstract intangible concept can be humanely realised in the quotidian. It shines forth, like a tinscoop in the mealbin, from amidst the commonplace.

‘The Seed Cutters’ shifts from the domestic to the communal spirit. Heaney apostrophises Breughel, the Old Master of the Real and the True in Art, and sketches fastidiously and lovingly the seed-cutters at work ‘to get them true’. He details ‘the tuck and frill / of leaf-sprout’ on the seed potatoes, and the knives cutting lazily into the roots, disclosing a milky gleam. The poet hails these ‘calendar customs’, the customary rhythms of farming life. He desires to capture in his Art all these minuitiae, these anonymities; he wishes ‘to compose the frieze with all of us there’.

With Breughel providing the background, the poet brings together generations, countries and diverse cultures—‘all of us there’ touched by the everyday realities of life, the bottomline to living. In this context, it is significant to recall that Heaney’s sister-in-law Polly Devlin writes, soon after, her autobiography and gives it this title—*all of us there*—from ‘The Seed Cutters’, feeling that it epitomised a community.

Mary Heaney and the seed-cutters represent a sense of community, stability and of local memory, and the poet’s past is seen as an arcane world. Foster quotes Heaney pertinently—

that was set in what you might call mythic surroundings: well water and scythes and sickles, so that the dedicatory poem of *North* specifically mentions Breughel and specifically mentions ‘calendar
customs' and the Book of Hours and ratified modes of cultural seeing. Once you become the kind of person who can see your own childhood as a reenactment of a work of art, you've clearly become self-conscious (Foster 2).

It is of great significance that Heaney deliberately places these affirmative twin poems at the very outset of North which is, whether symbolically or explicitly, a bleak book. It is almost as if Heaney had already worked out, envisaged Field Work.

'The Singing School' sequence with which Heaney concludes North is a perfect blending of the two modes manifest in the book—the symbolic and the explicit. Significantly, Heaney places two epitaphs from Wordsworth and Yeats respectively to the entire sequence. The lines Heaney cites from Wordsworth's The Prelude are oft-quoted:

Fair seedtime had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear;
Much favoured in my birthplace, and no less
In that beloved Vale to which, ere long,
I was transplanted ...... (SP 217).

Heaney acknowledges through this quotation the relevance of the English tradition, especially the Romantic movement, and, in particular, the impetus to his own writing deriving from Wordsworth's poetry. He endorses the role of the natural world in shaping and nurturing a young consciousness and one may recall the seminal poems in Death of a Naturalist which look to the natural world for nurture through the concomitant influences of beauty and fear.

With Yeats' childhood, the emphasis is different as can be seen in the lines quoted by Heaney from Yeats' Autobiographies: "When I began to dream of my future life, I thought I would like to die fighting the Fenians" (SP 217). Contrary to
Wordsworth's statement, Yeats' thrust is political and cultural and that is inexorable to any Irish poet worth the mention. A dimension is thus added to the bucolic world of childhood; its dark and nameless fears are now coloured politically, inevitably so.

Another point that Heaney makes subtly by juxtaposing these two quotations is that he does not purport to offer any facile solution to the political Northern Irish crisis. Neither will he display a rancorous partisanship for though England's imperialism is offensive, the English literary tradition has provided a nurture, a fosterage which is irrefutable. The classic duality presents itself as always.

'The Ministry of Fear' the first poem in the sequence traces the sway that fear has had over the poet's life, commencing with St.Columb's College and his stint there as a boarder when he was so homesick that he furtively threw the biscuits 'left to sweeten my exile' over the fence one night. 'It was an act of stealth' comments Heaney in retrospect in the same words used by his mentor Wordsworth in The Prelude to describe childhood experiences.

Heaney proceeds to recall his growth as an Irish writer and the singular memory of 'those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountains walking all over the fine lawns of elocution'. The atmosphere gets more sinister and distinctly politicised as the poem progresses. 'Catholics in general, don't speak / As well as the students from the Protestant schools'; 'What's your name, Heaney?', Names politicise the terrain more flagrantly than any other means. The poet then recalls how when he is out courting on long vacations and the air is all moonlight and redolent with hay, reality intrudes crudely in the guise of policemen flashing their torches and toting their stenguns. Heaney concludes tellingly:

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.
‘A Constable Calls’ is a child’s eye-view of a policeman’s visit home. The visitor’s profession is never mentioned. Instead one has to use Heaney’s various ‘indirections to find directions out’. An aura of mystery and sinister uneasiness is created metonymically by the mere mention of the Constable’s accoutrements—his bicycle with its ‘fat black-handlegrips’ its dynamo ‘gleaming and cocked back’ the ‘heavy ledger’ which is later described as the ‘domesday book’, ‘the polished holder with its buttoned flap’, ‘the braid cord looped into the revolver butt’. And the manner in which his exit is described—‘His boot pushed off / and the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked’, —there is the menacing suggestion of a time-bomb ticking away. Such verbal effects create a dominant impression of a leashed but always potentially present violence.

In ‘Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966’, the childhood figure of menace, the constable, engenders a fear, the sense of which is amplified into the official scale—the poem depicts a drummer in the July celebration which commemorates annually the victory of William of Orange over James II at the Battle of Boyne in 1690, the signal event which led to the establishment of the Anglo-Scots population of Ireland. The Catholic is seen as repressed, threatened, and the reverberations of the drum seem to send out an anti-papist message. The drummer symbolises the ugly face of Protestantism and the poem itself expresses unabashedly Heaney’s resentment of the Protestant sense of superiority. Elmer Andrews has observed that the poem was written earlier than most others in North and thus lacks the finesse of more mature work by Heaney in the same volume. Significantly, Heaney omits this poem from ‘The Singing School’ sequence in the New Selected Poems Published in 1990.

The scene shifts to Spain in ‘Summer 1969’ but the violent, repressive ethos is the same. Ireland and Spain it appears, have everything in common. The images vouch for this. For, Heaney is in Madrid suffering ‘the bullying sun’, and ‘the stink
from the fishmarket / Rose like the reek of a flax-dam’. There is a palpable unease in the air, children in their dark corners, old women in black shawls near open windows, the air ‘a canyon rivering in Spanish’. And there is the Guardia Civil whose patent leather ‘gleamed like fish-bellies in flax-poisoned waters’. The images are Irish and Heaney’s heart is in Ireland, whatever be the physical distance that he has put between himself and events at home. Friends urge him to return home while he, uncertain, retreats to the cool of the Prado museum. He sees exhibited there Goya’s ‘Shootings of the 3rd of May’, a mural about the abortive Spanish rising against the French in 1808, and the sheer horror of their being put down by a Napoleonic firing squad. Other paintings of Goya also touch a raw nerve—Saturn drenched in the blood of his own children, and another in which ‘two berserks’ are clubbing each other to death ‘for honour’s sake greaved in a bog, and sinking’. The poem ends with a paean to Goya’s heroic, committed Art—

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished

The stained cape of his heart as history charged

The rival claims of Art and Life press upon the poet with a growing sense of urgency.

‘Fosterage’ gives quite the contrary advice to the poet in the voice of Michael McLaverty, who was deemed to have been a very diffident reluctant champion of the Ulster Catholic heritage and to have exalted the individual human being, ‘deracinated’ ‘anonymous’. Here he offers advice that is similar to that given by the ‘longship’s swimming tongue’ and is also identical to the wisdom peddled by Joyce in the ‘Station Island’ sequence later on. McLaverty on meeting the young Heaney in 1962 ‘newly cubbed in language’, exhorts him thus—‘Listen. Go your own way. / Do your own work’. Three other ghosts are evoked in this simple lyric, namely, Kavanagh, Mansfield and Hopkins. Kavanagh’s ‘Description is revelation’, Hopkins’ ‘Don’t have the veins bulging in your biro’ and Mansfield’s ‘I will tell how the
laundry basket squeaked' --all of which stirs up the issue of how art conducts itself in times of political exigencies, and all of which is opposed to the depth-charge generated in Heaney by the Goya mural in the preceding poem. His poetry begins to crowd over with presences hereafter. Several 'exemplars' exhort him to follow their credo, and the poet's self-consciousness, consequently, is to touch new heights.

The agonising self-inclosedness finds consummate expression in 'Exposure', the last poem of the sequence and of the book. Suddenly, with

It is December in Wicklow

Alders dripping, birches

Inheriting the last light,

The ash tree cold to look at... (SP 226).

one is plunged into the poetic sublime from the prosaic-colloquial register of 'Singing School'. Wicklow is depressing, rainy and cold and it becomes a 'prospect of the mind'.

Heaney moved to Wicklow in the south of Ireland in 1972 on self-exile, to distance himself from the turmoil in Ulster and 'Exposure' here works at least on three levels. The exposure to the elements, to the bleak and severe winter; the exposure of the Self to the searing, inward-looking poetic eye; the exposure that is unhealthy media publicity, the glare of the public eye.

The poet yearns for a visionary glimpse of the Comet, the revelation descending upon him, throwing light upon his commitment as a social being. Instead, reality finds him walking deflatedly through the damp leaves, the 'spent flukes of autumn' --the images equally suggestive of sterility and futility. He can only imagine a hero of the likes of Osip Mandelstam, 'His gift like a slingstone / Whirled for the desperate'. The reference to Mandelstam is clarified a little further in the poem when Heaney mentions weighing his responsible tristia.
The *Tristia* according to critics is the title given by an editor to a Mandelstam book written out of exile experience in Voronezh, echoing the title of Ovid’s *Tristia* written in exile from Rome. Mandelstam was confined in one of Stalin’s camps after being discovered to have written the ‘Stalin Epigram’, his most naked indictment of the tyrant’s regime. Customarily, however, Mandelstam’s method was oblique and as Heaney has commented in an interview, "his poetry doesn’t deal in any obvious way with political messages: it brought the sense of terror, oppression, suffering into images, with music" (Corcoran 125). But with the deadly epigram, "David had faced Goliath with eight stony couplets in his sling" (GT 72). Mandelstam became, for Heaney, a tremendous hero, a David whose poetic gift was like a ‘slingstone whirled for the desperate’ against Goliaths, agents of oppression such as Stalin. Heaney’s position is piquantly similar down at Wicklow, acutely aware as he is of his ‘tristia’, but the comparison is not made with any sanctimonious suggestion that his suffering is by any standards equal to that of Mandelstam. The tone stops short of presumptuousness.

‘How did I end up like this’, is the poet’s soul-searching outcry. He is troubled by the comments of friends and foes alike, the noises of the rain seemingly murmuring about his failure as a socially committed human being. The whole scenario evokes ‘North’ other epochs but the same ‘thick-witted couplings and revenges’ and the ‘same hatreds and behindbacks’. While the rain reminds the poet of the exigencies of the historical moment and his failure to recognise them, each raindrop on the contrary, seems to recall ‘the diamond absolutes’ of Art and his commitment thereof. The poem builds up to the prototypical classic Heaney lyric pattern of juxtaposing the opposing demands of Life and Art. The poet searches for clarification:

I am neither internee nor informer

An inner ‘emigre’, grown long-haired
And thoughtful, a wood-kerne
Escaped from the massacre
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows. (SP 227).

Heaney mocks his posture as the intellectual who is unable to attune himself
to the nitty-gritties of political reality. He has opted for exile like an anchorite and
seeks protection in his closeness to Nature, in isolation.

The poem already looks ahead to Sweeney, the legendary persona whose
peregrinations Heaney is to explore in his translation of Builhe Suibhne. Sweeney,
the Celtic king cursed by St. Ronan to become a bird and wander unto death, whom
Heaney projects as a type of the creative imagination, unfettered and ‘flying by the
nets of society and religion’.

‘Inner emigre’ is the paradox that Heaney uses to describe his piquant
situation and Corcoran traces it to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s Hope Against Hope
wherein she refers to her husband and Anna Akhmatova being branded as ‘internal
emigres’ by the Stalinist regime while still living in Moscow. This label was to play a
crucial part in their subsequent fate. The element of self-criticism and condemnation
makes itself felt in the syntax, the manner in which he describes himself as a ‘wood-
kerne’ (a foot-soldier in Tudor times), ‘Escaped from the massacre’ --the force of the
verb that launches the line in a fit of self-castigation.

The poet in an access to metaphor rues the fact that he, intent on ‘blowing up
these sparks / For their meagre heat’ has missed ‘the once-in-a-lifetime portent / The
comet’s pulsing rose’. The poem polarises the symbols of ‘the diamond absolutes’ and
the quasi-mystical symbol of the ‘comet’s pulsing rose’. Elmer Andrews (113)
interprets these with brilliant clarity as the longing for indefinable perfection" on the one hand and "externally bestowed revelation" on the other hand.

The poem cannot be said to dissent or assent to any one of the two contending bigotries. It is a culmination and a fusion of the two prevalent modes of North— the symbolic-mythical and the rational-subjective. Tamplin’s comment says it all—

There are certain irreducible positions that will obtain with a familial, sensitive Catholic Nationalist from the North wherever he or she ends up. They are mythic dimensions that sanction the personal life. They do not cruelly prescribe political positions. Instead their ancestral weights and dignities will echo through and enrich the poems (Tamplin 72).

Heaney himself while commenting on Yeats’ poem 'Long-Legged Fly' observed that every element is "at once literal and symbolic." So too, Heaney’s poem commences with the literal and the quotidian and transcends it to attain the symbolic plane where, though his is ostensibly a failure to engage with political reality, he is able to imaginatively and symbolically arrive at a truth which may not be attained even through direct engagement.

The poet’s anxiety can be equated with Yeats’ state of mind in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’:

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
In something that all others understand or share. (Yeats 232).

It is the Irish syndrome, and indeed, the predictable situation in which a living creative artist finds himself during times of political crisis.
The journey through *Wintering Out* and *North* may be best expressed in the poet's own terms in his interview given to Monie Begley:

The book ends up in Wicklow in December '73. It's in some ways the book all books were leading to. You end up with nothing but your vocation--with words and your own free choice. Isolated but not dispossessed of what produced you. Having left a context, stepped away, you can't really go back. It ends up with just the responsibility of the artist, whatever that is, and that responsibility has no solutions.... I would like to write poems of myself at this age. Poems so far have been fueled by a world that is gone or a world that is too much with us--public events. Just through accident and all the things we've been talking about, I've ended with myself, and I have to start there, you know (Bloom, *Seamus Heaney* 61).