CHAPTER IV

‘A TENTATIVE ART’: Field Work

Must men stand by what they write
as by their camp beds or their weaponry
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?

-Geoffrey Hill.

When questioned in an interview about the manner in which his books hold together, warranting a ‘holistic’ approach to his work, Heaney commented-

I’m certain that up to North, that that’s one book. In a way it goes together and grows together. There has been a good bit of writing about the metaphor of digging and going back, but luckily that was unselfconscious. In a way, I wish it had been conscious. It’s the kind of unselfconsciousness that poets approaching the age of forty know they won’t have again (Haffenden, Interview 15-16).

The ruefulness is endearing but belies entirely the refreshingly different note struck by Heaney in Field Work. North for all that it is a tour de force in its mythologising power does leave the reader with a feeling of satiation. The bog poems and the Viking poems stretch the language-landscape trope to an extreme and begin to acquire the stale predictability of mannerism. The sincerity is redoubtable
but the reader's response is overpowered by the verbal inventiveness. Time and again, Heaney replots the same terrain of his monomyth, exhumes, excavates, broods, agonises, panegyrises. The poet's persona is programmatically mythologised and this shields him from the stark realities he would have to confront otherwise. As a result of this, these poems lack the fresh dynamic impulse and the drama of 'The Tollund Man', the almost jingoistic excitement of the language poems in Wintering Out.

One is brought back to, and refreshed, by the quotidian in the second half of North, in 'Exposure', best of all, and those poems anticipate the manner of Field Work. In fact, one may more relevantly place the Mossbawn poems as epigraphs to Field Work: the single image of 'love like a tinscoop in the mealbin', engenders the affirmative vision of Field Work, its rediscovery of pleasure in things of everyday as against the sweepingly bleak, transcendent monomythical vision of North. The overriding concerns in Field Work however take off from 'Exposure' --Heaney's paranoia with the issue of commitment and his struggle with the rival claims of Art and Life subsumes all else in Field Work.

'Oysters' is an interesting complement to 'Exposure'. In the earlier poem, the poet had felt a sense of despair at his having missed the once-in-a-lifetime's portent, the comet's pulsing rose. He regrets his lack of social commitment in the face of his pursuit of the 'diamond absolutes' of Art. But here in 'Oysters' he finds the social conscience an unwanted burden, and history itself a ubiquitous intrusion, infringement upon the poet's artistic freedom and autonomy.

The poem commences with a highly sensory evocation of the experience of eating oysters. It is a complete gourmet experience of hedonistic pleasure--'shells clacking', 'taste conjuring starlight' and 'the salty Pleiades', the 'tongue a filling estuary'. But with the second stanza, the sensory images yield to those of violence:
.........Alive and violated

They lay on their beds of ice.  (FW 11).

The oysters are now seen as ‘bivalves’ and have somehow burgeoned in
number, and brought forth a nightmarish vision of ‘millions of them ripped and
shucked and scattered’ (FW 11). The movement of the poem is still one with that of
‘Death of a Naturalist’. There is, first, innocence and then, loss of innocence. Here,
the innocent unspoilt pleasure derived by the poet from eating the oysters is gradually
corroded and loaded with a new meaning.

There in the idyllic coastal eating place, even as the poet toasts friendship ‘in
the cool of thatch and crockery’, his mind, his interfering intellect goes back almost
compulsively to the historical past. He sees in his mind's eye the Romans returning
over the Alps from conquests abroad bringing with them imperialist plunder,
disgorging their cargo of oysters, ‘the frond-lipped, brine-stung / glut of privilege’.
The oysters become, then, symbols of imperialism and privilege and the act of
enjoying them goes counter to Heaney’s sense of his own origins, his professed
identity as member of a minority that is victimised, deterritorialised, under-privileged.

This is prototypal Heaney territory - the duality within and the constant
struggle to transcend this unresolved conflict into a realm of artistic wholeness. The
poet confesses that when history thus ‘unloads’ its ‘foul lumber’, he is angered and
frustrated. It is not merely the meal that is ruined but the poet’s sense of his artistic
freedom. To allay this frustration he proceeds deliberately and defiantly to ‘eat the
day’, to extract in full his pleasure in the present moment, that its tang ‘might quicken
me all into verb, pure verb’. The poet resents this habit of intellecction because that
summons up conflict which, in turn, may paralyse the feeling, creating sensibility.
Poetry and freedom are clear and liberating like light ‘leaning in from the sea’ but
the dark is to be contended with, the exigencies of Irish history. The lyric is typically
structured around these dichotomies—light and dark, verb and noun, innocence and experience, and all these attest to, expand upon the profound schematization of Art and Life.

The ‘Triptych’ poems—‘After a Killing’, ‘Sibyl’ and ‘At the Water’s Edge’—address this ubiquitous phantom of the Ulster Troubles in three different ways. The first lyric strives towards and achieves an aesthetic transcendence. It opens with the menacing spectre of two young men walking the hills armed with their rifles. The poem was written according to critics, after the murder of the-then British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Briggs in 1976. This is no pseudo-theatrical image like that of the gun in ‘Digging’. This is for real. These gunmen are equated with ‘the unquiet founders’ of the modern Irish State. Like the image of the ‘mound-dwellers’ in ‘Anahorish’ earlier, here the image of the unquiet founders walking again, brought forth by the incubating racial memory, has a disturbing atavistic suggestiveness. The young soldiers are as ‘profane’ and ‘bracing’ as their guns, their weapons, and depending on the cause or the side they espouse these revolutionaries are ‘profane’ or ‘bracing’. And Heaney’s achievement is this capacity to hold contrarieties together and sustain ambivalence unresolved in his lyric.

The poem takes a rhetorical turn when Heaney questions—‘Who’s sorry for our trouble / Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves / In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?’. The picture he paints is one of desolation and loneliness, of a modern-day Irish wasteland. ‘Sorry for your troubles’ is said to be an Irish colloquialism, a standard expression of condolence, here taking on a heavily ironical colouring. And the form of the question persists refrain-like throughout Field Work, soul-searching, probing for answers, but at most times merely rhetorical in its burden, expressing despair, anger, sorrow or whimsy. The suggestion of a spiritual barrenness in the symbolic landscape of the poem (its unattractive inventory of
‘basalt, blood, water, headstone, leeches’) is amplified in the succeeding poems of ‘Triptych’.

But here there is hope yet, there is the possibility of survival. That is signalled by the ‘tiny flowers’, ‘the stone house by the pier’ and by the space and amplitude of country light and air--much like the clear light leaning in from the sea in ‘Oysters’. ‘The heart lifts’ with thanksgiving for the joy of the quotidian life, the simple everyday chores such as walking down to the boats and shopping for mackerel, and the simple everyday sights such as this one that Heaney exalts to the status of a vision-

And today a girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them. (FW 12).

The image is full of an intertextual resonance for one recalls Maguire in The Great Hunger thoroughly conditioned by the letter of Protestantism (its sense of Sin, primarily), being suddenly awakened one day in June: ‘He met a girl carrying a basket / And he was then a young and heated fellow’ (Muldoon 33). Heaney taps on the image almost verbatim as also on the power of the vision.

The movement in ‘After a Killing’ is from an apprehension of violence and its images to an image of the female principle that tentatively suggests affirmation. The atavistic Nerthus, the territorial Goddess deified in North is now replaced by this bearer of joy.

‘Sibyl’ however blots out that little spirit of hope and optimism with its bleak message. The poet confronts the sibyl and questions her: ‘What will become of us?’ Significantly, now, his tongue moves, ‘a swung relaxing hinge’, freed from the ‘tight gag of place and time’. Utterance is possible and he is beginning to question, clarify
or merely vocalize. The sibyl begins to reply and her utterance is given the traditional epic significance due to it. For, it is described in grandiose terms—
as forgotten water in a well might shake

At an explosion under morning

Or a crack run up a gable

She began to speak ...

(FW 13).

Her message is ominous and her diagnosis is unrelentingly accurate. Ireland has now become a decadent nation. Her people are spiritually sterile and ‘think money / And talk weather’. Oil rigs have become the comfort of their future and the soil of the country has been ripped open, calloused by desecration and violence. The poem and the sibyl end on a moving subversion of Shakespeare’s The Tempest. ‘Our isle is full of comfortless noises’ —a version of Caliban’s ‘Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises / Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not’.

Heaney is anxious, like Kavanagh before him, to strip bare the glamourized myth of the ideal Ireland projected by the Revivalist writers. Very much in the manner of his older contemporary R.S. Thomas (and his Wales), Heaney seeks the truest images of the life and spirit of contemporary Ulster, described by Tamplin, perhaps justly, as the ‘land of milk and money’ (87). The sibyl’s verdict is rationalistic and the sibyl herself as the representative female principle is distinguished from the earth-goddess who seemed to demand sacrifice and martyrdom quite insatiably. The sibyl on the other hand preaches the dictum of forgiveness. She is the voice of humanism. And the vision of the present and a possible future that she projects is surrealist:

Unless forgiveness finds its nerve and voice,

Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
Can green and open buds like infants’ fists
And the fouled magma incubate

Bright nymphs .................. (FW 13).

In the face of such a bleak scenario and the dire warnings of the sibyl, Heaney is ‘at the water’s edge’, searching for assuagement, seeking a spiritual wholeness. The answer he has received from the sibyl is disturbing and he visits three islands in Lough Erne in County Fermanagh. On Devenish he visits the monastic ruins and on Boa, he sees some primitive-pagan culture, ‘the god-eyed, sex-mouthed stone’ answering his silence with silence. The two images bring together and define the total Irish past, Christian and Pagan.

Then, it is on to Horse Island, and to a deserted hut. He finds there a cold hearthstone, a hammer and a cracked jug full of cobwebs and, then, only the sky beyond the open chimney. The desolation is overwhelming and humbling. Longing for solace, he desires
to bow down, to offer up,
To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,

And pray at the water’s edge. (FW 14).

The supplcicatory posture is second nature to him as a Catholic. In the words of Blake Morrison it signals “the feminine humility of a Marian religion which genuflectingly murmurs its devotion to the things of this world” (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 82). The poet looks up toward the sky habituated as he is to seeking out heavenly portents and signs. But all he can find and hear at the present moment is the symbol of the brave new world—the army helicopter patrolling overhead bringing to mind immediately the senselessly violent incident at Newry, the Bloody Sunday massacre
on 30 January, 1972. The poet writes the poem a week after the event and responds pietistically. The tone and the attitude anticipate the 'Station Island' sequence wherein Heaney is to undertake a therapeutic, cathartic journey seeking to resolve the tormenting struggle within for ascendency between a sense of artistic autonomy and the socio-historical conscience.

The three poems of 'Triptych' reveal three kinds of responses to the same issue—namely, Ulster as an entity. 'After the Killing' offers a feeble but positively directed aesthetic resolution; 'Sibyl' is the voice of rational humanism and measures upto Ireland as it really is; while 'At the Water's Edge' is nationalistic in its topicality and pietistic in its mood. The sequence acknowledges, in its faceted approach, the awesome complexity of the issue at hand.

Field Work defines its world in terms not dissimilar to the methods of Death of a Naturalist. It is a physical world realised in terms of touch, sound, taste or smell:

The pumps whooping cough, the bucket's clatter....

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

............................the pocked white enamel

of the brimming bucket, and the treble

Creak of her voice like the pump's handle. (FW 16).

Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,

Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds

Of outhouse roofs... (FW 15).

blooms like saucers brimmed with meal,

Its berries a swart caviar of shot,

A buoyant spawn, a light bruised out of purple... (FW 37).
... the fuchsia in a drizzling noon
the elder flower at dusk like a risen moon. (FW 38).

... the tart green shade of summer
thick with butterflies
and fungus plump as a leather saddle. (FW 54).

It is the world of the pastoral, the modern pastoral albeit, where life goes on, patterned on its ineluctable rhythms in close communion with Nature, pulsating, throbbing with the spirit of the Omphalos. Heaney comments on this at the very outset of Preoccupations (17) "I would begin with the Greek word, omphalos, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door."

And here again, in ‘The Toome Road’ he evokes it with an upsurge of emotion, almost nostalgic:

It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppedpled omphalos. (FW 15).

He affirms this in the face of the ugly spectre of violence that has raised its head, pock-marking the country, emerging as the anti-pastoral. The poem is occasioned by the vision that he suffers one morning.

.....................early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres
All camouflageed with broken alderbranches
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets. (FW 15).

The irony is heightened by the use of words such as ‘warbling’ normally associated with feathered songsters.
Wherever he turns, then, in *Field Work*, there are disturbing signs of an unwelcome change, not merely from the old, the beautiful and the pastoral to the new, the ugly and the mechanized but (as a natural adjunct) also from a value-governed world to a world without values. It is not surprising therefore that the singular form that Heaney expresses himself in, repeatedly, in the course of *Field Work* is the elegy. There are six of them out of which three commemorate victims of the troubles and three are elegies to fellow artists--Robert Lowell, Francis Ledwidge and Sean O'Rioada.

Critics have almost unanimously agreed that 'The Strand at Lough Beg' is the most classical of these elegies. Tony Curtis' comment in this regard is most relevant: "I regard this as the high point of *Field Work*. Heaney has been struggling to come to terms with the troubles in his last two collections. He shows in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' that he, already the proven master of images from his native rural countryside, can build on that facility, deepening and extending his art to tragic proportions" (Curtis 112). In his early poetry, Heaney sets out to translate his world to word, define his responsibility and find his voice. But with *Field Work* which till date one may assume to be the mid-point in his career, the priorities have shifted and the poetry reflects Heaney's profound struggle to reconcile or transcend the quality that is inherent in human nature, overwhelmingly present in human experience.

The direct subject of the poem is the death of Heaney's second cousin Column McCartney, who is shot down when returning home from a Gaelic football match in Dublin one Sunday. The poem commences with a recapitulation of McCartney's ill-fated traipse back home along a route of desolation. The effect is one of a ghostliness and a vulnerable solitariness-- 'the white glow of filling stations', 'a few lonely street lamps' among fields, 'a high bare pilgrim's track' --the very ground where Sweeney fled from his monstrous pursuers. The reference to the legend of Sweeney, the Celtic
king who was cursed by St. Ronan to spend his life as a migrant feathered creature, is natural at this juncture, for it is most likely that Heaney was busy translating Buífh Suibhne into Sweeney Astray.

McCartney was alienated from his tribe, like Sweeney, but in a physical sense of distance from home territory, familiar territory, when he was so cruelly gunned down:

................................tailing headlights

That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down:

Where you weren't known and far from what you knew (FW 17).

McCartney was vulnerable and an easy prey to these gun-toters because he was tragically far from the loved and cherished lowland clays and the waters of Lough Beg. He was far from the spire of Church Island rising above 'its soft treeline of yew', a landscape profoundly and indelibly imprinted upon the mind's eye.

With that, the poem perforce turns to the past that the poet shared with his cousin, plotting and replotting the same terrain. In their childhood years, the only guns they heard dispel the quiet of the surrounding country were those slugged by duck shooters. Even then, the young boys were disturbed and were apprehensive of stumbling upon spent cartridges among the bulrushes and marigolds, those cartridges that were 'acrid, brassy, genital, ejected'. Why their sensibilities were so rudely offended was because they belonged to a tribe of people who performed unassumingly their daily round of duties and worked the land to make an honest living. They were not a class who could 'crack the whip or seize the day'. They 'fought shy' and thus the irony is tragically heightened that such a man should have been victimised through a senseless demonstration of tribal passions.

The third and final section of the poem moves across to a dreamscape figuring the two men walking across the farmland. Heaney invokes certain formalities of the
elegiac tradition but adapts or subverts them as the case may be. In place of the overwhelming endorsement of mournful sympathy from Nature that is all around the mourner in the pastoral elegy, here there are only the cattle which graze

Up to their bellies in an early mist
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in dew ........... (FW 18).

The poem however concludes on the traditional elegiac note with the poet engaged in a poignant ritual of cleansing his dead cousin’s face of ‘blood and roadside muck’ with ‘cold handfuls of dew’ and with ‘moss / Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud’. And he plaits with the green rushes that grow in abundance in that strand ‘scapulars to wear over your shroud’. It is a deliberately Dantean conclusion to the poem that began with an epigraph from the ‘Purgatorio’. Haffenden traces the reference to Canto I of ‘Purgatorio’ when Cato instructs Virgil to wash Dante’s face with dew, supply him with a new girdle made from a reed symbolising Humility. Dante is in the forefront of more than one poem in Field Work and as for Station Island, the title sequence in that later book by Heaney, attests to the overpowering impact of the Divine Comedy on Heaney’s consciousness.

There once again Column McCartney figures as a spirit encountered by Heaney at one of his Stations but McCartney denounces Heaney roundly for having prettified reality here in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ with such artifice and meaningless ritual. That family of men ‘who could not crack a whip or seize the day’ are later exposed in all their inadequacy and in their failure to confront the violent realities of their time.

The pace of the poem is one of stately progression section by section culminating in the dream sequence and its formalised action. It is a classic elegy
despite its subversion of the norms of the literary form because of the spirit of it. What is conspicuous by its absence in this Heaney lyric is almost the mannered ambiguity. The poem is unilaterally sympathetic evoking pathos, rich in sentiment. Above all, it is not wracked by the typical soul-searching, fretting self-inquisition. Heaney strikes the true classical note of loftiness and representativeness.

With 'Casualty' however the quizzical interfering intellect returns. The casualty referred to by the title is a fisherman-companion of Heaney's, Louis O'Neil by name, who was blown up when he broke the IRA curfew. This incident occurred three days after the Sunday of 30 January '72 when "soldiers of the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment shot dead thirteen people during a civil rights March in the Bogside in Derry city" (Tamplin 75). Again comprising three sections 'Casualty' is written in a swift moving trimeter and a regular ababcdcd rhyme. The first section quickly arrests the spirit of the man:

He would drink by himself
And raise a weathered thumb
Towards the high shelf
Calling another rum
And blackcurrant, without
Having to raise his voice,
Or order a quick stout
By a lifting of the eyes
And a discreet dumb show
Of pulling of the top; (FW 21).

The 'he' is anonymous, deliberately to lend the man a generic representativeness even while his traits are individualised. He is a man of few words, typical of most characters in Heaney's portrait gallery but he is an instinctual being, a natural like the
Servant Boy, 'sure-footed' but too shy, his dead-pan face, his fisherman’s quick-eye. He inhabits a world that is at an unbridgeable remove from that of the poet, working with his hands and not with his wits, comfortable not with talk of poetry but with folklore and with talk of eels. The poet states boldly that he was blown to bits three nights after the Derry massacre on a tense Wednesday when he was

Out drinking on a curfew

Others obeyed ... (FW 22).

That is the rub. With that comment the reader is also reminded of the fact that Heaney has not merely described his aloofness and reticence but his recalcitrance too, very insidiously, in the poem. His ‘turned back’ is mentioned twice, already, signifying his obdurate rejection of ‘custom and ceremony’. At the conclusion of the opening section of the poem, the conflict is already explained and the poet’s sympathy is evident.

Heaney proceeds to detail the events of that fateful day that was bleak in every sense, blustery and cold, and witness to the common funeral of the Derry marchers. The poet recalls the funeral procession almost surrealistically, the occasion itself ‘a swaddling band’ bringing and holding the community together comfortably. But the poet goes beyond that comfort. This ‘swaddling band’ can also tighten its hold till one is ‘braced and bound’ constrictingly.

Heaney’s intellect probes further into what impelled the man to that fatal error. O’Neill ignored the palpable danger and tension in the air, ignored the pleas of his own friends and went headlong to his doom. But, questions the poet

How culpable was he

That last night when he broke

Our tribe’s complicity? (FW 23).
After all, he had merely acted upon instinct, had been lured to the pub entirely by a 'natural' impulse. The image Heaney uses is happily apt to O'Neill's vocation "For he drunk like a fish / Nightly, naturally / Swimming towards the lure / of warm lit-up places'.

Heaney imagines (rather guiltily) O'Neill challenging him, the supposedly literate man, to answer that question if he could. When Heaney is called upon to puzzle out the answer, he begins to empathise with the fisherman, identify with him. He recalls a boat-ride he had enjoyed in O'Neill's company and recalls the exhilarating sense of freedom which he attained then. The experience is epiphanic and he realises that the man's fishing activity and his own making of poetry signify one and the same thing—in the end, it is all about yielding to a rhythm that finds and works you

Into your proper haunt

Somewhere, well out, beyond (FW 24).

One is thus brought back to Heaney's reflexive concern with his art and O'Neill becomes a role-model for the artist, the traditional Romantic variety, pursuing his art beyond the demands of the tribe in a Daedalian quest flying by the nets of nationality, language and religion. O'Neill like the creative writer is being true to his instinctual nature. To that extent, he is similar to Yeats' Fisherman, a wise and simple man whom the poet looks upon as an exemplar, and who represents a similar rejection of populist ambition in favour of a poetry 'maybe as cold / and passionate as the dawn'. Wordsworth is yet another precedent with his 'dawn-sniffing revenants and plodders through midnight rain' such as the Leech Gatherer full of 'resolution and independence'. Heaney like his two great exemplars is fond of these self-communings, and is inclined to self-recrimination. The poem concludes on a flourish apostrophising the fisherman. The poet makes a rhetorical plea-- 'Question me
again’. The progression is thus from murder and genocide to what William Scammell baldly describes as "navel-gazing." The critic wonders whether this reflexivity does not quite detract from the tragic dignity of the poem, and whether 'question me again' "is a hint of the poet's own uneasiness, an honest acknowledgement of a feeling of inadequacy" (Scammell 42).

The self-consciousness which has been a signal aspect of Heaney's poetry from the early years however expresses itself with a subtle difference in these mid-career lyrics. From Death of a Naturalist through North, Heaney expressed his poetics in terms of the analogy between art and rural craft or activity or, later, archaeological divination. All these are affiliated to the community and the act of writing poetry is correlative to the routine round of rural life and traditions. The poet like the servant boy or the mummer does this service, despite his isolation, of mediating between the society and the unknown originary life-force of the tribe. But with Heaney's move to Wicklow, establishing a physical distance between the Self and social upheaval, there is discernible a shift in terms of placing or locating the Self in his poetics. The earlier certainties regarding the nexus between the writer and the energies of his community are gradually replaced by a more 'tentative art' (as he puts it in 'Casualty') and naturally, by a more rigorous self-inquisition. Questions proliferate and the crisis of conscience is acute. The 'navel-gazing' which Scammell finds rather unacceptable is, in fact, a crucial point of growth in his work and sensibility. There is something passionate and urgent in this mature foregrounding of the Self, that was not present in his earlier programmatic presentation of the Self on debut.

Heaney certainly intended that his art be 'tentative', full of 'echo soundings, searches and probes'. Blake Morrison quotes from two earlier draft versions wherein Heaney sounded more strident and opinionated. Therein, he has described the
observers of the curfew in one version as ‘wiser hypocrites’ and has ended another draft thus—

Sometimes men obtain
A power when they betray
And swim out from the shoal

Daring to make free... (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 80).

But he has abstained from striking such flagrantly biased postures in the finished poem ‘Casualty’ probably because he has had second thoughts on the dispensability of social commitment. Instead, he has worked on the imagery of the poem, its sub-text, which effectively absolves the man of any ‘wrong’ and goes on to render him emblematic of the artist and his inevitable alienation from society—in this particular context, an endorsement of Heaney’s self-imposed exile in County Wicklow.

The move to Glenmore Cottage was born out of a longing for assuagement, and the hope that distance and poetry would effect that healing. The poet’s sense of his own being at this stage of life and in these circumstances is defined movingly but with no touch of the sentimental in ‘The Guttural Muse’.

The poet is stationed at a window over a hotel car park one oppressive night ‘late summer’. The season is significant since it spells an overblown quality, spells the poet’s state of mind and being. The poet is alone, and vulnerable, as he watches a young crowd leave a discotheque below. The sounds that carry to him from that young group are reassuring, summoning up the image of the ‘slimy tench’. Heaney explains in an interview to Halfend-

there’s this kind of slimy goodness about them; they told me they were called a doctor fish because there was a superstition that the slime upon them healed wounded fish, pike and so on, that went past them.

And I was in a hotel up around County Monaghan one night feeling
strange and barren poetically and there was a dance on, a lot of country kids listening to pop music, but at about half past one they came out over the car park and these absolute dialect voices came bubbling up to me .... the kind of life I had in the 50s going to dance and so on, and I felt the redemptive quality of dialect, of the guttural, illiterate self (Haffenden, Interview 8-9).

Heaney's muse is seen as therapeutic like the tench and like 'the girl in a white dress' so tenderly, lyrically evoked by the poet— that young girl, fresh, innocent, full of life; giddy with joy and exultation being courted below and her voice 'breaking into laughter'. He yearns to reach out to that young life, feeling like an old pike all badged with sores, seeking the redemptive touch of the doctor fish. As in the 'Triptych' poems, Heaney's muse is now a domesticated one, no longer the presiding numen of Irish history. It might be the girl walking home 'carrying a basket full of potatoes' fresh from the soil or it might be 'the girl in the white dress' brimming with joy and 'soft-mouthed life'. Poetry can heal. It can recover beauty, innocence and spontaneity.

Heaney had reached saturation and exhaustion point with the bog poems, those "inward, twisting things." He declares that one evening in May, "there was a cuckoo calling, rabbits playing up the field, there was a corn-crake." And this iambic, melodious line-- 'this evening the cuckoo and the corn crake / (so much, too much) consorted at twilight' --came to me ...... and I skimmed on and did the sonnet" (Kinahan, Interview 412). Heaney places the Glanmore Sonnet sequence, which he then went on to complete, at the heart of the Field Work collection. The affirmative impetus as he has described it, is a trust in Art as reality, trust in melody. But the self-reckoning can never be left behind completely by Heaney and his poetry is always in a state of inherent negotiation.
marginally met from indigenous Rock Phosphate supply even as bulk is imported as rock or as imported Phosphoric Acid.

Under the current policy scenario, imports are resorted in the context of bridging demand supply gaps or overcoming shortages. The relevance of imports in the future scenario of the phosphatic industry would essentially depend on whether the government embraces the concept of import-price party as the determinant while assessing concession or duty protection requirement within the reasons of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) obligations, or else adopts an approach of only protecting the viability of the domestic industry.

Though the domestic fertiliser production has been growing quite rapidly, fertiliser consumption has in fact been growing even faster, always leaving a gap to be bridged through imports.
the hiding places’, ‘words ferreting themselves out’ from their dark hutch (not being ferreted out, significantly). Wordsworth’s lines from The Prelude run very close to Heaney’s:

The hiding places of my power
Seem open, I approach and then they close;

I would enshrine the spirit of the past
for future restoration ... (P 41).

Heaney takes a Wordsworthian delight in the creative relationship between poetry and Nature. He has arrived, he declares, in the ‘hedge-school’ of Glanmore to raise a poetic voice from the backs of ditches that might ‘continue, hold, dispel, appease’. Such, he hopes, might be the efficacy of his poetry. This new-found voice will be one caught back ‘off slug-horn and slow chanter’; it will no longer depend upon elaborate mythologizing but on sensitivity, receptivity to ‘all the realms of whisper’.

This second sonnet extends and completes the poet/ploughman identification, and the poetry, in a structural pattern typical of Heaney, comes full circle like the plough turned round. Heaney relates this in Preoccupations to Wordsworth’s method of poetic composition, the manner in which he walked up and down the gravel path, the rhythm of movement engendering the metronome. "The poet as ploughman, if you like, and the suggestive etymology of the word 'verse' itself is pertinent in this context. 'Verse' comes from the Latin 'versus' which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that the ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another" (P 65).

The third sonnet consolidates the defence that Heaney is putting up in favour of his move to Wicklow, as an answer to the charge of betrayal he imagines to have been levelled against him. In the interview given to Frank Kinahan he recalls just how
the change from North to Field Work came about in precise terms. That was the time when the poet was tensely working out his austere and anguished artesian quatrain of North. He had believed that “the melodious grace of the English iambic line was some kind of affront” and had not trusted the music, the sweetness of this line that had happened upon him, “all crepuscular and iambic” (Kinahan, Interview 412).

This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake

(so much, too much) consorted at twilight

(FW 35).

The ‘so much, too much’, signals the embarrassed distrust of sentimentality and emotion quite clearly.

This sweetness of Art, its compulsion, are constantly opposed to the poetry he feel due to his community. In this sonnet, he deliberately evokes the classical pastoral complete with larch, May, green spruce in the tradition of Virgil and Horace and declares his position. Here in the heart of Wicklow county, he lives a life of ‘strange loneliness’ from which he will not ‘relapse’. Identifying himself and his wife with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, he professes a similar faith in Nature as the great fostering mother and teacher. The possible presumptuousness of the compariron is subtly pre-empted by his wife’s countering question ‘You’re not going to compare us two?’ This question takes nothing away from Heaney’s supreme confidence in his standing as poet-critic.

In Sonnet IV, one finds Heaney supine on the ground at Mossbawn listening for the railway engine shunting at nearby Castledawson station. There is an almost predictable natural shift within the sequence to childhood and auditory memory. When one listened in, one was told, one would hear the rather romantic ‘iron tune’ of flange and piston, but one always ended up disillusioned and only heard the pathetically ‘struck couplings and shuntings’, the metallic intrusions of ugly reality upon the romantic pastoral of Derry. Heaney deliberately evokes the gratuitous
image of the classic beauty of the horse to play off the pastoral against the anti-
pastoral.

..............................................The head

of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey

Turnover of haunch and mane ...

(FW 36).

The sonnet may also be read as a metaphor of the political situation vis-a-vis the poet
in Wicklow. The childhood figure of the poet straining his ear for the distant tune may
represent the poet in exile, looking apprehensively to his native Ulster, waiting for
news from the battlefront.

Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook

silently across our drinking water

(As they are shaking now across my heart).

(FW 36).

The poet is the keenly sensitised listener, receiver. And here he registers the ripples
of sectarianism which threaten to disturb his drinking water, his peace in exile.
Heaney collapses temporal past and present brilliantly and gives sustained expression
to the theme of the fostering power of beauty and fear. But what was in the early
poetry a simplistic depiction of the growth of an individual adolescent’s consciousness
is now rendered complex by his examining the role and nature of fear in the context
of his maturity, the terrible fear which is concomitant to the upheaval and violence
in Ulster. These ripples of fear shake across his heart and they disappear, interestingly
enough, into ‘where they seem to start’. It is a vicious circle and Heaney is at his
reflexive best. The poet cannot immure himself from this self-inclosedness.

Deborah McLoughlin cites from DeQuincey’s sketch of Wordsworth instances
when he awaited the arrival of the railcoach bringing news of the progress of the
Peninsular Campaign. “At intervals Wordsworth had stretched himself at length upon
the high road, applying his ear to the ground, so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance" (McLoughlin 201). The poet as a passive receiver, attuned and sensitised, acquires, most naturally, a sense of political participation and involvement.

Sonnet V may be most gainfully read along with Sonnet IV because here too Heaney draws upon a childhood recollection, a memory most vividly brought to life in *Preoccupations* (18) as well. He recalls hiding in the hollow of the boortree and listening keenly to Nature’s broadcasts. The tree with its ‘throat’ ‘mouth’ ‘breathing’ and ‘whispering’ is at the hub of a veritable system of communication. One may also recall the earlier poem ‘Oracle’ which projected the poet as ‘the lobe and larynx of mossy places’, hiding in the bole of a willow tree.

This pastoral reminiscence however bears now an underpinning of fear and apprehension. There is also a wistful feeling of inevitable loss. Childhood is a time of plenitude and vision-- ‘the green young shoots’ of the boortree, its blooms ‘like saucers brimmed with meal’, ‘its berries a buoyant spawn’. But this beauty is threatened by intimations of violence and mutability. The boortree is, first of all, also known as ‘the elderberry’ involving suggestions of age, decay. It is ‘a greenish dank/ and snapping memory’ now; its berries even as they symbolise plenitude are described as ‘a swart caviar of shot’.

The poet who is self-professed ‘etymologist of roots and graftings’ whose signal function is one of recovery, longs to revoke that instincuality of childhood. He longs to revoke through language that ‘quickening’ experience which was his when he played ‘touching tongues’ in the hollow of the boortree. The message from Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode comes at the reader again routed true and clear through Heaney. It is as if Wordsworth’s exemplary genius here urges him to ‘fall back’ to the tree-house of his childhood and
Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush. (FW 37).
The ghosts are well-nigh domestic in Field Work for the poem also looks ahead to the poignant figure of Sweeney whose legend Heaney was translating about this time. Sweeney, the bird-king, outlawed and persecuted went from bole to bark for refuge. Heaney interprets this tragic persona as symbol of the displaced artist.

The drift of Heaney's sequence becomes logical as he moves from first to third person and the sixth sonnet presents a stirringly affirmative generic rendering of the role of the artist. The post-modern artist is hero, and Heaney figures him as 'a wild white goose heard after dark above the drifted house'. His story has that quickening surge to it when all else founders in the benumbing cold. It has that life-giving, hope-engendering power. The poet is the sensitised perceiver who sees

...........the fuchsia in a drizzling noon

The elder flower at dusk like a risen moon. (FW 38).

Heaney sees him as the hero (from childhood memory) who reportedly raced his bike daringly across the frozen Moyola River. He is the man who vowed to break through 'what he glanced over/ with perfect mists and peaceful absences', the one who can "go beyond the safe limits into those realms of consciousness fraught with risk, to retrieve whatever is life-enhancing" (Andrews 142).

Heaney's artist is not without antecedent in his own work which is scrupulously self-conscious about the artist-persona. There is the adventurer-poet in 'The Plantation' who breaks the confines of the circumscribed 'picnic' zone and wanders into the unknown. There are the Servant Boy and the Last Mummer who lived in the 'unsayable lights' like the poet in this sonnet, and are like him, heroic contenders. Such an endorsement of the regenerative, humanistic power of art, of the efficacy of the artist's 'story' and 'song' is fundamental to Heaney's poetics and to the
Irish literary tradition at large. The Romantic mystique of Gaelic Imagination is posited against an industrial, utilitarian ethos which is deadening.

Sonnet VII is conjoined with the preceding one in that it attempts a symbolic exposition. The poet sketches a stormy Atlantic seascape impressionistically. As in the naming poems of Wintering Out, consonants and sibilants come together:

Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Irish Sea:

Green swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux

 Conjured by that stormy gale-warning voice

 Collapse into a sibilant penumbra. (FW 39).

Then there is the pounding rhythm of ‘eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road, rise / Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize / And drive the trailers to the lee of Wicklow’ (FW 39). The sestet is a study in contrast. There is the softness, the fluidity of the vowel. The French names of the boats are languid and easy on the tongue. The poem is a chant, a loving ritual of naming like the nationalistic poems of Wintering Out.

Heaney recalls in Preoccupations (45) that he was stirred by the beautiful sprung rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast: ‘Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre’. He remarks upon these broadcasts, this litany of names, heard from within the safe confines of his family kitchen, just as he is now immured from the violence in Ulster. In this context, the North Atlantic Storm becomes a metaphor of the storm raging in Northern Ireland.

.........................It was marvellous

And actual, I said out loud ‘A haven’

The word deepening, clearing like the sky. (FW 39).

Wicklow is a veritable haven to Heaney in these troubled times. His posture is comparable to that of Hopkins in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’—‘On a pastoral
forehead of Wales / I was under a roof here. I was at rest/ And they the prey of the
gales'. This poem only skims lightly upon the mood of self-recrimination, unlike
Hopkins' sombre one. Heaney's sonnet is borne on the upsurge of his passion for
words and their music.

This dangerous storm, the evil that rages in the distant North overwhelsms the
unreal quiet of Wicklow soon enough. Heaney's state of mind, the guilt and the fear,
is transposed in Sonnet VIII to Nature (classic Wordsworthian pathetic fallacy). That
sonnet has a Macbethian atmosphere of ominous evil. The sky is suffused with
thunderlight and 'the raindrops are lush with omen'. A sleeping horse suggests
thoughts of 'armour and carrion'. The poet finds a toad in a woodpile and wonders.

What would I meet, blood-boltered on the road?

What welters through this dark hush on the crops? (FW 40).

The questions are rhetorical and full of a sense of horror and apprehension.
The poet's sense of guilt is thus apotheosised. The 'haven' he had presumed to have
discovered seems to be illusory. The turn in the sonnet comes when there happens
an image of love and hope, an epiphanic vision or memory of an old woman in a
French pension who 'rocked and rocked and rocked' (the repetition assuages), 'A
mongol in her lap, to little songs'.

On the heels of this comforting vision, the poet urgently pleads with his wife
to come to him 'quick' (the effect of the pun on 'quick' is effortlessly achieved).

Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking
my all of you birchwood in lightning. (FW 40).

The poet so actuely aware of evil wishes to withdraw into the haven of the domestic
once again. Too much 'exposure' is overwhelming to this vulnerable 'inner emigre',
this 'wood-kerne who's grown long haired and thoughtful'. 'My all of you' is an
unusual sensuous phrase which has been traced back to Joyce who is said to have written in a letter to Nora: "give yourself to me, dearest, all, all when we meet" (McLoughlin 212). It is significant that Joyce should figure in a poem written by another Irish poet in exile. What clinches Joyce's place in Heaney's pantheon of mentors is the fact that he is a formidable presence in the 'Station Island' sequence which is paraded by almost exclusively Irish ghosts who happen upon Heaney on his torturous therapeutic pilgrimage.

The sense of evil that overwhelmed Heaney intensifies in Sonnet IX and hovers over the poet:

Outside the kitchen window a black rat
Sways on the briar like infected fruit.

(FW 41).

When one reads of rats, one thinks of rat's alley from Eliot and in Heaney himself, of 'Personal Helicon', 'The Barn', 'An Advancement of Learning', 'Blackberry Picking'. One is in familiar territory it appears with frightening intimations of decadence.

'Did we come back to the wilderness for this?' --this disillusioned outcry and the reality of the infected fruit takes one right back to the first couple, Adam and Eve, and their punishment.

We have our burnished bay tree at the gate
Classical, hung with the reek of silage
From the next farm, tart-leafed as invit
Blood on a pitchfork, blood on chaff and hay,
Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing.

(FW 41).

The pastoral was celebrated in earlier sonnets of the sequence as a haven and a classic time-honoured refuge. [McLoughlin (212) mentions Virgil's Georgics, with their accounts of sowing and ploughing and of storms on land and at sea, as also,
Horace's life as poet-farmer exiled from Rome. But the classical Bay tree is now
tartleafed as 'inwit'. Critics have traced this usage once again to Joyce's "agenbite of
inwit", meaning 'remorse of conscience', a phrase which recurs in Ulysses signifying
sexual and familial guilt. The burnished bay tree now 'reeks of silage' from the next
farm. The disillusionment is stark and acute.

'What is my apology for poetry?', Heaney questions piteously, in a loaded
reference back to Philip Sydney. The poet wonders about the justification for his
poetry-in-exile. He is plagued by a sense of guilt at having imposed this exile upon
his family, his wife in particular, at having distanced himself wilfully from the problems
that are raging in Ulster. The pastoral which he had erected as a supreme irreducible
value is beginning to be infected, coloured by his own unsuagable guilt and in a
space of a few sonnets, the meaning or basis of 'the good life' has become
questionable.

This sonnet ends on a tentative note of appeasement. The image of his wife's
face haunts him 'like a new moon' glimpsed through 'tangled glass'. The ultimate
appology for poetry may be the quest for beauty and truth. The moon symbolises
purity, cosmic order and grace but only makes a rather tenuous affirmation in the
light of the fact that the 'empty briar is still swishing' though the rat is gone; and the
glass is 'tangled', does not return an undistorted image.

Sonnet X is almost artificially set up in the wake of Sonnet IX to round off the
sequence and retain some of the vestiges of the lost peace and comfort. The poet
here casts himself and his wife in the roles of two legendary pairs of lovers--Lorenzo
and Jessica, Diarmuid and Grainne--both celebrating their love in hostile conditions.
It is significant that one pair of lovers is from Shakespeare and the other from Irish
myth but both couples are fugitive and in danger of losing their lives. This double-
breasted look is one which has become the poet's natural accoutrement.
Heaney has a dream vision of himself and Marie as lovers asleep 'in a moss' exposed all night in a wetting drizzle

Pallid as the dripping sapling birches; (FW 42).

The verdant, drizzling pastoral plentitude is back in the last sonnet. The literary allusions and the stringing together of words like 'aspersed' 'censed' 'breathing effigies' convey a death-like atmosphere but the poet recalls his first night with Marie-

When you came with your deliberate kiss
To raise us towards the lovely and painful

Covenants of flesh. Our separateness:

The respite in our dewy dreaming faces. (FW 42)

This is a celebration of private love. It balances love with fear, life with the living death of the legendary lovers, heaven with exile. The love is hard-won and the 'respite' is deliberately indicative of a transience. The 'dewy' face is an oblique reference to 'Purgatorio' and Virgil cleansing Dante's face with a dew of tears he shed in anticipation of their climb up Mount Purgatory. The same reference figured in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' the elegy to Colum McCartney, whose face Heaney washed with dew.

The structure of the Glanmore sonnet sequence allows for, equally, the possibility of a paradise at Glanmoroe and the reality of Purgatorial intimations. Dante is a strong ghost to contend with, a formidable presence in Heaney's Field Work and the volume ends with a translation of Dante's 'Ugolino'. Thomas C.Foster (96-97) comments pertinently on the fact that a sonnet sequence "in and of itself" involves squarings in tradition and the Glanmore sonnets are, indeed, an "extremely literary exercise." There is besides Dante, Wordsworth, Joyce, Shakespeare, and Foster includes Sir Thomas Wyatt, Pasternak, Kavanagh while Corcoran cites Mandelstam. Virgil is also obliquely glanced at. The delightfully allusive sequence which is all about
the poetry of place and about writing that poetry proves that "Heaney, a relatively conservative poet formally, shows himself to be quite in touch with postmodern trends of reflexivism and self-referentiality. Of course in his case, that metalanguage may be as much in the spirit of Donne and Marvell as of Borges and Fowles" (Foster 96-97).

In the fugal structure of the sonnet sequence then, the facile access to ‘the good life’ evident in Sonnet I is countered and reproached by the poet’s ultimate understanding of paradise as only a few moments of respite and of epiphanic clearances. There is guilt, there is fear, there is the overwhelming evil beyond, but there is Nature and its bounty, there is domestic love, there is the profound concern for Ireland and her destiny. Such is Heaney’s compensatory creed.

The poet attempts to spell out the terms of such a creed in ‘The Harvest Bow’, one of the signal parabolic lyrics in the collection. The poem like ‘The Follower’ harks back to Heaney’s father who is however not mentioned overtly here. The ‘you’ who plaited the harvest bow is a general ancestral figure as the poem begins, unparticularised, and it is only when reading on that one draws inferences regarding the relationship. As is usual with Heaney, he celebrates the ‘mellowed silence’ of his ancestor engaged in ‘implicating’ (used in the etymological sense of ‘twist’ or ‘turn into’) the wheat into a firmly knotted corona of bright straw, into the emblematic harvest bow.

The poet then waxes eulogy with his recall of deft practised hands working almost in a dream to create this object of art that like Keats’ Grecian Um tells several stories. Between the knotted golden loops of it, he can almost visualise his idyllic childhood—the long walks on railway slopes with his father, the fishing expeditions, with his father; casually brandishing his stick ‘whacking the tips of weeds and bushes’, sporting a harvest bow on his lapel. Heaney is, in brief, able to glean ‘the unsaid off the palpable’. The knowable real ‘love-knot of straw’ at this point effortlessly assumes
a paradigmatic relationship with created art, poetry specifically. It becomes an
analogue like other rural crafts Heaney identified earlier. Like the eggs the servant
boy bears, this corona that the poet has pinned on his dealwood dresser is still warm
and is ‘burnished by its passage’. It symbolises continuity, tradition and the poet offers
tentatively the suggestion that the motto of the harvest bow, this frail device, could
read thus: ‘The end of art is peace’.

The harvest bow made of ‘wheat that does not rust’ may achieve a peace, a
transcendence like the poet’s own art aspires to constantly. As Blake Morrison puts
it “Peace of one sort or another (his own, his readers’, his nation’s, psychological, civil
and aesthetic) is what all his poetry works towards” (Morrison, Seamus Heaney 86).
But the poet is not presumptuous enough to make a confident assertion of this. Unlike
the Grecian Urn, the harvest bow’s motto is not exhortatory or assumed but, rather,
tentative and hopeful—qualified by the use of ‘frail’ and ‘could’ significantly.

Tony Curtis sums up the equation in the most straightforward terms—“Like
the love-knot his poems will be no more than devices, but if they are successful, they
will be ‘warm’ with emotion, the power of memory and ‘burnished’ by its passage.
Out of a crumbling world ..., the poet has to make something, has to tie some sort of
permanence into being” (Curtis 120). The knowledge that he is groping towards in
Field Work is the realisation of things as they are, in reality; the acceptance of them,
sans the glamour of apotheosising myth. The ‘longship’s swimming tongue’ had
admonished him in ‘North’ to trust only the feel of ‘What rubbed treasure / your
hands have known’. ‘The Harvest Bow’ is one such treasure, palpable, warm to the
touch and bearing intimations of the whole hinterland of the unsaid.

‘Badgers’ enacts within the framework of the poem, the movement from the
falsification of myth to the cognisance of reality. Initially the poet has a vision of the
badgers ’glimmering’ away from him in the night, from where he stands half-lit with
whiskey. This encounter like Lawrence's with the Snake is mysterious, and 'glimmer' and 'half-lit' enhance the numinous nature of the experience.

The second stanza shifts to another reading and to a change in the attitude of the poet with regard to their 'visitation'. He wonders whether the badger might not be some revenant 'violent shattered boy', the murdered dead. It might be a soft returning of dark demonic atavisms sensed in their sibilant haunting advent 'under the laurels'. The poet feels a vague sense of honour like Lawrence does in 'The Snake' about being visited by the nocturnal creature, perhaps one of Heaney's 'lords of life'. The parallel with Hughes' 'The Thought Fox' is too obvious to be missed. The initial vision is, in Heaney's own interpretation of Hughes' poem, "characteristically fluid and vowelling and sibilant" (P 154). The mystery is given its full 'dilation' but a turn occurs when the consonants take over, or put a brake on the dream-visions of the poet. The seizure of the mind and of the page is described thus-- 'with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head. / The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.' (P 154).

Here in Heaney's poem, the fourth stanza deglamourises the badger-- 'last night one had me braking / but more in fear than in honour'. Dispelled are the vague intimations and now the poet sees the creature for what he is--merely 'pig family and not at all what he's painted'. The lines are not only consonantal in their music but are also jagged and truncated in length, and bald. 'Braking' and 'broke cover' signal the dispelling of illusion or mystification, and jolt the reader along with the poet into a sharp sense of reality. The truth stares him in the face and the poet now observes the physical details, the badger's sturdy, dirty body, its 'interloping grovel', the 'intelligence in his bone'. In fact, he goes to the extent of identifying with the badger, admiring the tenacity of its 'unquestionable houseboy's shoulders / that could have been my own'. While a younger Heaney would have fled in terror from the creature
of night, the adult poet identifies with and celebrates the otherness of the animal. Foster declares that "this ability to find common ground with the Other has been present in Heaney’s poetry at least since ‘The Tollund Man’ ... it demonstrates a kind of psychic health in his ability to connect something (himself) with something very different" (Foster 84). Having thus empathised with the badger, it would amount to falsification not to accept himself, his origins and his given life. The poem’s message inheres in the profound question:

    How perilous is it to choose
    not to love the life we’re shown?           (FW 26).

The question is couched rhetorically and it is a tendency that recurs in Field Work and punctuates Heaney’s thought-flow in the book, the self-scrutiny and the resultant interrogation. The inquiry reaches its most persistent and dogged manifestation in the title sequence ‘Field Work’. Heaney has in this instance left conclusively behind the mystifying visions of North and is firmly anchored in the quotidian round of life. In the sequence of four lyrics which comprises ‘Field Work’, Heaney traverses a gamut of relationships—his marriage, his Art, and his communion with Nature—and at every plane, the dialectic of Art and Life is worked out, as it in every representative Heaney lyric.

The first section returns like most poems in the volume do, to the countryside and its restorative value:

    Where the sally tree went pale in every breeze
    Where the perfect eye of the nesting blackbird watched,
    Where one fern was always green ...               (FW 52).

This is idyllic and ‘perfect’ --the green never fades away and the eye of the blackbird is a perfect circle. The poet stands watching his wife going about her chores, reaching to ‘lift a whitewash off the whim’. At that point and from that vantage position, he
can see ‘the vaccination mark stretched’ on her upper arm, even as his line of vision
is intersected by a slow goods train going past, smelling of coal and bearing a cargo -
‘waggon after waggon full of big-eyed cattle’. [This last line, declares Donald Hall,
is so quaint but artless and, yet, he observes, "American poets seem shy" about
making such music, "as if it were pretentious to lay out a line like a gift" (Hall,
Weather for Poetry 190)].

One gets the impression that the contrast between lines and circles becomes
"a major organisational principle of the poem" (Andrews 143). The eye of the
blackbird corresponds to or becomes transmuted into the vaccination mark on her
upper arm, "the protective stigma of modern living" (Andrews 143). The sounds of the
verse are alliterative. The first three lines commence with ‘where’, and there is
‘whitewash off the whims’, and then ‘waggon after waggon’ --somehow this
conjunction of w’s evokes a langour, a pace of life that is relaxed, slow and
unfrenetic.

The second section focusses on the vaccination mark and the poet’s wife
becomes one with the natural world. He sees her wound as a stigma that leaves a
disfiguring scar and as a protective circle. Images of this opposition are found
everywhere in Nature. The bark of the chestnut tree is ringwormed but the tree is a
symbol of nurture. Another circle which is a powerful symbol of fostering and healing
is the moon. It is compared to the coin on the ‘Pequod’s mast’ in Moby Dick,
suspended above as the prize for capturing the white whale. It becomes an impetus
to reach out for the absolute, for perfection.

It is as if Heaney wills us to recall the moon in ‘Westering’ (Wintering out) with
its enlarged pores and ‘colour of frogskin’, and above all, its ‘stigmata’ like Christ’s,
signifying suffering and pain and, paradoxically, redemption. Here Heaney has moved
away from the compulsion to mythologize but he is writing out a personal paradigm of values in terms of the circular and the linear.

Section III runs through scenes from Nature and the poet's attention is riveted on the sunflower. The poem reads almost as if he is in a picture gallery of Nature and passes one frame after the other, rejecting, until he is enthralled by the last one which is confirming, endorsing. The preceding stanzas thus commence with 'Not the mud slick' 'not the cow parsley in winter', 'not even the tart green shade of summer' and finally, 'No'. These others suggest the cornucopia of Nature:

........................ black weedy water
full of alder cones and pock-marked leaves

........................the cow parsley in winter
with its old withered shins and wrists

..............the tart green shade of summer
thick with butterflies
and fungus plump as a leather saddle. (FW 54).

There is rootedness but decadence too.

But the sunflower lives out its life in its quiet corner leaning to the wall, 'heavy, earth-drawn, all mouth and eye', (Heaney's vowel-music signals the contrasts) 'dreaming umber'. The classic dialectic is at play again. The sunflower is earth-drawn and heavy, rooted to the soil and nurtured by it. One the other hand, it is looking to the sun constantly and yearningly, dreaming umber. It seeks transcendence unlike the weedy water, the winter cow parsley and the tart summer's shade. It is Antaeus and Hercules; of the earth and of the air. The simple isolation of the single last line--'the sunflower, dreaming umber'--is a masterly syntactical ploy best explained by Elmer
Andrews (144): “Since ‘umber’ could be the subject of ‘dreaming’ as ‘dreaming umber’ could be an appositional phrase further defining the sunflower, Heaney achieves effective double meaning; the sunflower is what it dreams about.” One is back to the reflexive, inexorably, in Heaney. The sunflower seems to symbolise in brief, reflexivity and transcendence, the one achieved unsought, and the other longed for, even as it is in Heaney’s poetry.

The motifs strewn over these 3 sections are orchestratedly brought together in the last, the fourth section of the poem. Here, Heaney enacts a ritual, tenderly and deliberately. He picks a leaf of the flowering currant and presses it upon the back of his wife’s hand, allowing the sticky juice to flow and ‘prime’ her skin. Then, in a gesture of intimacy, he licks his thumb, presses it in mould and anoints ‘the anointed / leaf shape’ giving her a ‘birth mark’. She becomes, then, his ‘umber one’ ‘stained, stained / to perfection’.

There is an eroticism in the poem that is palpable but that is yet unlike the specious eroticism of the bog poems (such as ‘Punishment’ for instance). The voice has been toned down and its nuances are tender and certainly more mellow. The poet in a ritual act anoints his loved one with the umber stain almost as if he is working a primitive magic. Through this symbolic act, he is effecting a perfect union of Art with Nature. The stain, artificially devised by him is now her birthmark; Art imitates Life and perfects it and the powers of Art are redemptive, assuaging. For, one immediately recalls the vaccination mark and its protective function. This umber stain is the poet’s touch, his power to heal, protect his loved one.

The leitmotif that sustains is the circle, representing conjugal harmony, perfection, and this becomes transmuted in all the four lyrics into eye, coin, ring, moon, sunflower, vaccination mark, stain. Heaney’s ‘field work’ is this—achieving a communion with Nature, and in so doing celebrating the glorious union of Art and
Nature. It is fitting that the title poem is reasonably affirmative of the values that Heaney has recovered in Wicklow, away from the troubled scenario of Ulster. What Heaney as a poet has sought to perfect in the course of this self-imposed exile is best summed up and asserted through the sheer and compelling lyricism of 'Song':

A rowan like a lipstickred girl
Between the by-road and the main road
Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
Stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens. (FW 56).

But this does not conclude the book. One wishes that it would and that one could rest with the assuaging power of this lyric. What rings the curtain down on Field Work is yet another elegy and a disturbing passage of translation from Dante's 'Ugolino'. The elegy is written 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' (killed in France, 31 July 1917). Heaney wonders about the piquant situation and status of this man, an obscure Irish poet, a 'haunted Catholic face', his soul in the Boyne and yet, in his Tommy's uniform, fighting in the trenches of Flanders for Britain.

The poem opens with a focus on a bronze statue of a soldier, a memorial to war heroes with its commemorative plaque gazed upon quite uncomprehendingly by the young Heaney in 1945/46 while on tour with one of his favourite people, Aunt Mary.
Even as he reminisces over the childhood experience, his adult mind shifts to Ledwidge, cutting to his life in Ireland in pastoral surroundings, where he belonged, according to Heaney

.............................among the dolorous

and lovely ....

Mass-rocks and hill-top raths and raftered byres. (FW 59).

The technique Heaney develops is one of montage, moving next to the trenches and Ledwidge’s ‘haunted Catholic face’. The poem cuts back to his Aunt Mary and moves further back in time to her childhood in 1917, the pastoral idyll of her life on the farm so rudely intruded upon and violated by the war:

But a big strafe puts the candle out in Ypres. (FW 60).

Gradually Heaney is working towards a subversion of the earlier iconolatry of the soldier, towards a deconstruction of the ideal soldier, and casts Ledwidge in a more modern complex mould, an image that comes very close to defining Heaney’s position at that time. To that extent, the poem is an autobiographical exercise.

Ledwidge’s writings are quoted with ‘savage irony’ by Heaney. ‘To be called a British soldier while my country / has no place among nations’ --Ledwidge recognises and laments his status but does not comprehend the passion that underlay the Easter 1916 rebellion-- ‘I am sorry that party politics should divide our tents’. Heaney juxtaposes this comment with his own bald observation:

......................You were rent

By shrapnel six weeks later .... (FW 60)

Heaney finds in Francis Ledwidge the same sense of a duality between Irish roots and British learning. In the poem, the British drum is pitted against the Irish flute. Ledwidge in following the ‘sure confusing drum’ of the British from the Boyne to the Balkans, missed the proper ‘twilit note’ that his Irish flute ought to have sounded.
That was his natural blood-music, that twilit note and not 'the true-blue ones' he sounded with his British colleagues in the armed forces, with whom he is now interred, his poetry just some more deadwood in the annals of British war poetry.

What comes closest home to Heaney is the burden of conflicting allegiances that Ledwidge carried. He writes a couple of lines defining this state, which have since been quoted extensively to epitomise Heaney's own position.

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains
Criss-cross in useless equilibrium. (FW 60).

The 'our' signals Heaney's certain empathy and his inclination to endorse the Irish, rather than the British, claim upon Ledwidge's sensibility. The strains criss-crossing in Ledwidge are in the final analysis, paralysing. They are held together in him in an unproductive sterile equilibrium. Heaney is more than aware that such conflict and duality as he carries with himself can be enriching. But there is the very real danger that it can enervate or even ossify his creativity. These 'criss-crossing' strains, it would seem, are as old as the land itself. Heaney writes to this effect in Preoccupations (20):
"Like the rabbit pads that loop across grazing and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land."

The poet thus arrives at the heart of Ledwidge's life and problem; and the technique he employs is typical. As always, Heaney begins 'by indirections to find directions out'. He circles the subject at a radius which gradually diminishes in distance. He narrows his focus from the Port Stewart war memorial to rural Ireland and its denizens--couples courting on its beach front. Ledwidge is directly mentioned only at this point after five stanzas because Heaney manipulates his entry into the poem against the background of an immediate recall of the Irish pastoral, the 'twilit
note', and not against the heroic war memorial. The poem then shifts again (having established Heaney's intentions) to the Irish idyll, the days of Aunt Mary's past, and jolts this with a sense of contrast against the harsh reality of war. That is the time when he can fully take stock of and define Ledwidge's position and the obscure Irish Catholic poet becomes emblematic not in the heroic sense but in the deconstructed sense of being a realistic paradigm of crossed allegiances. Heaney is in total control of his method here and maintains a critical distance from his subject unlike in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' where the intimacy with the subject of the elegy, his cousin, renders the elegy tragic rather than ironic. Heaney does not at any juncture set out to do what Yeats did with his 'helmeted airman'. That was an unambiguous hero who went to his lonely death, nobly. Ledwidge's life and death were ambivalent--Boyne and Flanders--and Heaney understands his predicament only too well.

The ending to Field Work is thus troubled and at a significant remove from the soul-uplifting visions of 'After a Killing' or 'The Glenmore sonnets'. Heaney is brooding about complex allegiances and the uncompromising inevitability of such conflict in an Ulster Catholic. The poet is looking ahead to Station Island and its ghosts. And for this, the ground is well prepared in Field Work. For this volume has been filled with questions, answers, surmises, voices, on the whole, engaged in dialogue with the poet whose tongue is now 'a swung relaxing hinge'. And these voice are prophetic, sybilline, or merely exemplary. All of them teach him that no simplistic interpretation of 'loyalty' is possible within a community. As Heaney's 'Elegy' to Robert Lowell defines it-

the way we are living
timorous or bold
will have been our life. (FW 31).
Deane describes this as the ubiquitous parley between "the culturally conditioned self" and "the arrogance and autocracy of existential decision" (275). It is significant therefore that Heaney undertook at this juncture, a translation of Buíthe Suibhne and published it as Sweeney Astray in 1984. Self-professedly, he saw in Sweeney, as he puts it in his introduction, a "figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance" and saw the work itself as projecting "an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation" (SA Introduction).