CHAPTER V
‘A MIGRANT SOLITUDE’: Sweeney Astray and Station Island

If a way to the Better there be,
it exacts a full look at the Worst.

- Thomas Hardy.

Auden in the curriculum that he hypothesised for a college of Bards insisted that engagement with a major act of translation was almost mandatory for a practising poet. The challenge that is implied therein is the fact that one’s mind wrestles with what is already the creation of another’s mind. This demands, exacts, a certain rigour and discipline from the poet, more so from an essentially lyric poet like Heaney. The Self has to, perforce, efface itself and the drama of another soul’s creativity has to unfold through the translator’s mediation.

Heaney had enough precedents set for him in the Irish literary tradition in the area of translation. Yeats had celebrated Cuchulainn, Joyce had dealt with the legendary Finn McCool and, more lately, Kinsella had translated the epic Tain. What was common to all these efforts was that they were tales of legendary Irish heroes, epics of heroic action in the classical sense of the genre. It is significant and understandable that Heaney, given his context, desists from celebrating any heroism and chooses instead the story of Sweeney, the legendary Celtic bird-king, a tale of
peregrination and alienation, of exile and suffering. *Bullhe Suibhne* is the title of the original and it is said to translate into 'The Frenzy of Sweeney'. Heaney's title is double-edged and *Sweeney Astray* effectively clinches the physical and mental disorientation that Sweeney suffered.

The story Heaney adheres to is from J.G.O'Keefe's bilingual edition of *Bullhe Suibhne* published by the Irish Text Society in 1913, which was in turn based on a manuscript written in County Sligo approximately between 1671 and 1674. The oral version of the Sweeney legend is however deemed to have been handed down and shaped roughly since the Battle of Moira in AD 637.

The last date is significant since it explains why the story is born out of a conflict between the new stringent order of Christianity in Ireland and the old native paganism of the Celtic temperament. Sweeney, the king of Dal-Arie discovers Ronan Finn, the ecclesiast, planning to construct a church on his kingdom. In an act of punitive defiance, Sweeney seizes Ronan's psalter and flings it into the lake (where it is later recovered intact by an otter). To aggravate issues further, Sweeney in a subsequent confrontation kills one of Ronan's acolytes and also throws a spear at Ronan, severing the sacred bell he wears round his neck. The churchman curses the king declaring that he is doomed to become a bird and wander aimlessly and homelessly all his life, to die eventually by the spear. *Sweeney Astray* true to the original concerns itself with the aftermath of the Battle of Moira--the peregrinations of cursed Sweeney, his existential tale of woe, leading up to his tragic death, prior to which he is reconciled, rather tentatively, to Christianity.

For Seamus Heaney, troubled as he was at this juncture with the conflicting claims of social commitment and the autonomy of the creative imagination, the tale of Sweeney provided the framework necessary to work out cathartically this ongoing struggle within. This impetus is best explained in his own terms-
there is a sort of schizophrenia in him. On the one hand, he is always
whinging for his days in Rasharkin, but on the other, he is celebrating
his free creative imagination. Maybe here there was a presence, a fable
which could lead to the discovery of feelings in myself which I could
not otherwise find words for, and which could cast a dream of
possibility or myth across the swirl of private feelings: an objective
correlative (Andrews 146).

Heaney was at the time living in County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland
on a self-imposed exile and was physically close to St. Mullins, where Sweeney is
thought to have been interred. Heaney describes in his preface that he had for more
than thirty years lived close to several of Sweeney’s haunts and that “one way or
another he seemed to have been with me from the start”.

So intensely is Heaney attuned to the moments of lyric intensity in the work
that the structure itself presents a sustained series of contrasts in poetic style. The
divide is fairly simplistic. He writes in prose to outline the physical details and pattern
of Sweeney’s journey, and in verse to capture the psychological trauma of Sweeney’s
experience. The poetry traverses a breathtaking range of forms all of them identified
by Heaney as found in the original. Heaney in his preface, describes Buelhe
Suibhne as a “primer of lyric genres” --laments, dialogues, litanies, rhapsodies, curses,
all of them playing upon devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme and pun.
Heaney works round the original in his individual voice and manner, always however,
striving to render intact the spirit of it.

Syntax and pace, for example, create the relevant energy in passages like this:

His fingers stiffened
His feet scuffled and flurried,
His heart was startled,
His senses were mesmerized,
His sight was bent,
the weapons fell from his hands
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.

And Ronan’s curse was fulfilled. (SA 9).

The banal bathetic landing of the last line from the dramatic crescendo of the preceding lines cunningly clinches the reader’s sympathies in favour of the pagan, suffering Sweeney as against the unrelenting Christian rigour symbolised by St. Ronan. Heaney dwells intimately upon natural sensory experiences and tenderly upon place-names and landscapes. Section Forty of the poem is an evocation in monologue by Sweeney of the trees the animals and flowers of Ireland.

The little timorous stag
like a scared musician

startles my heartstrings
with high homesick refrains -

The aspen pales
and whispers, hesitates:

a thousand frightened scuts
race in its leaves. (SA 36-38).

In a fitful frenzy, almost stream of consciousness in technique, the mind of Sweeney wanders in and out of experiences and the mood swings from despair to love and affirmation. The collective effect of this incoherent montage of emotions and moods,
is to bring home to the reader the poignancy of his situation—a king dethroned and exiled, coming to terms with reality as one of nature’s creatures. The scenario is familiar: Lear’s heath and the dispossessed king recognising himself to be, merely, ‘unaccommodated man’.

The verses are gnomic in their brevity and sense of economy. They recall Heaney’s own praise of early Irish nature poetry in his Preoccupations. In the essay titled, “The God in the Tree”, (181) Heaney sensitively analyses early Irish nature poetry as expressing a profound delight in beauty through a mellifluous panegyric style which was undotted, lucid and epiphanic like the Japanese art of the ‘haiku’.

my hurry flushes
the turtle-dove
I overtake it
my plumage rushing,

am startled
by the startled woodcock
or a blackbird’s sudden
volubility

Or

I face dark days
in frozen lairs
and wind-driven snow

Haunting deer-paths,
enduring rain,
first-footing the grey
frosted grass. \textsuperscript{(SA 51)}.

The quatrain is short-lined like the traditional Irish one but it is `artesian' or capillary-like as in Heaney's earlier verse. It is a very economical vehicle, carrying a whole gamut of emotions and moods, all of them arrested with precision and concrete imagery. A typical technique which achieves this is the hyphenation of words as in `wind-driven', `deer-paths', `first-footing'.

The pattern of imagery in the work supports richly the inherent tensions in the story between Celtic and Christian ethos, or in Heaney's terms, the free wheeling imagination of the artist and the strictures of society. Elmer Andrews identifies two main strands of imagery. 155. On the one hand there is the pagus, the natural man in his natural habitat—primitive, atavistic, unrestrained—and on the other, there is the Church with its arch, the door, the churchyard, the crown, the queen, the spearshaft. The dichotomy is worked out imagistically but in the end the Christian stricture edges out the pagan instinct when at the end of the tale, Sweeney begs forgiveness of the Church and acquires a halo of sorts. That is the plot but Heaney's bias is consistently felt as an underpinning. It is in favour of "the Celtic, the impious and the irresponsible" (Hildebidle 402). Heaney endorses this reading further in his essay "The Poet as a Christian".

But I have no doubt that I am also a pagan and that every poet is: the poet will have to be standing with Oisin against Patrick, he will have to roost in the tree of his instincts with Mad Sweeney while St. Moling stands ideologically in the cloister. The poet in this way is deeply conservative hoarding the knowledges and consolations that old religions discovered and rendered into the ever-stable currency of myths and literature (Haffenden, "Feminine Sensibility" 114).
It is obvious that Heaney now settled in 'the hedge-school' of Glanmore far from the noises of battle in the North, identified strongly with the persona of Sweeney, doomed to exile in the countryside, after the battle of Moira. Thereafter, Sweeney becomes like the poet of Wintering Out, a man who is almost the 'lobe and larynx of mossy places', intimately in touch with organic life in nature and seeking nourishment from it, from not only place and locale, but also from the sheer naming of them. True to the dinnseanchas tradition of Irish poetry, Sweeney Astray dwells lovingly and possessively on placenames.

Imagine them,

the stag of high Slieve Felim,
the stag of the steep Fews
the stag of Duhallow, the stag of Orrery
the fierce stag of Killarney. (SA 44).

Ronald Tamplin's observation is pertinent. It is to Heaney's credit that though he coalesces with Sweeney in the process of translation, he maintains nevertheless the distance necessary for dramatizing "the construct of another's mind" (Tamplin 92). The conjunction between the respective destinies of Sweeney and Heaney (the rhyme is only coincidental) is felt in the book but never overtly. Sweeney exists in his own right as 'dramatis persona' and the poet 'fosters' him, projects him as he was in his habitat and subtly launches him also into contemporary life in terms of relevance. He confesses by way of recall in the lyric entitled 'King of the Ditchbacks' in Station Island:

I was sure I knew him. The time I'd spent obsessively in that upstairs room bringing myself close to him - each entrenched hiatus as I chain-smoked and stared out the dormer into the grassy hillside, I was laying
myself open. He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase (SI 56-57).

Through such fosterage, Sweeney acquired a spirit of contemporary angst, becoming specifically an objective correlative for the duality inherent in Heaney. "Nevertheless for all its attractions, Sweeney Astray does not permit Heaney to discover fully the uses to which the title character may be put in his poetry. In order to develop the possibilities he sees in Sweeney, the poet must write his own Sweeney poetry" (Foster 105).

He accomplished that in the course of his next book, a magnum opus in his corpus, entitled Station Island, published in 1984. The book has a tripartite division. The first nineteen lyrics which make up Part I by and large focus on objects and experiences of everyday life which represent reality and make their moral claims on the poet. They are all random objects and quotidian experiences but they orchestrate the theme, by now predictable in Heaney, of Life versus Art.

The second part is the title sequence of lyrics, ‘Station Island’, and one can link the sequence with Sweeney’s Last Poem in Sweeney Astray, the lyric which rings the curtain down on Sweeney’s tragic life and death, signals his reconciliation with the church:

To you Christ, I give thanks
for your body in communion
Whatever evil I have done
in this world, I repent. (SA 83).

This connects profoundly with Station Island which is Heaney’s Purgatory, a pilgrimage he undertakes to catharsise his guilt and his sense of penitence.

From this section and the shedding of the burden of guilt, it is a logical move to the final section ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ wherein Heaney picks up the threads from
‘The King of the Ditchbacks’ and wooes a state of ‘migrant solitude’. He becomes the druidical spirit of his natural environment, Sweeney on his ‘thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post’. The poet is successfully airborne and the verse though still cognisably located and textured, is more willing to come at abstractions and this is an augury for the poetry of *The Haw Lantern* and most recently, *Seeing Things*.

‘Sandstone Keepsake’ is the most representative piece of the first part of *Station Island*, in the sense that it is ostensibly written in praise of an object but which, however, accrues meaning and signification as it develops and finally makes an attempt to resolve or transcend duality. The poet clasps a piece of sandstone he has just picked up from a shingle beach while on a stroll. Russet-hued and ribbed, it feels ‘so reliably dense and bricky’ to the touch. One recalls ‘North’ and the ‘longship’s swimming tongue’ advising him-- ‘trust the feel of what rubbed treasure your hands have known’.

But gradually, as the poem unfolds, the ruddy sandstone keepsake acquires complexity and symbolic value. There seems, upon closer look, an ‘underwater hint of contusion’ to it. And then the poet names the shingle beach in which he is wading-- Inishowen. There is mention of the lights coming on one by one in the camp across the estuary. Inishowen Head is in County Donegal on the shore of Lough Foyle which separates Ulster from the Republic of Ireland and which is bordered immediately in the northern side by the Magilligan internment camp.

The scope of the poem ramifies into the arena of politics by the mere act of naming a place. The red stone in his hand now becomes heavier with possibilities and is predictably mythologised. It could be a ‘stone from Phlegethon’, the river of boiling blood mentioned in Dante’s ‘Inferno’. The image is traced by critics to Canto Twelve of ‘Inferno’ which deals with ‘those who were violent against their neighbours’ (Foster 114). It fits neatly here into the context of the Magilligan camp.
Stanza IV effects yet another transformation of the ruddy stone. It now appears as the heart of Prince Henry, nephew of Henry III killed vengefully by Guy de Montfort in the church at Viterbo. The imagining gets progressively grandiose and Heaney shakes himself back to the present moment from this flight into the past with the studiedly casual 'but not really' and the 'Anyhow, there I was with the wet red stone', (almost displaying a sense of embarrassment at having been borne away on a strong tide of emotion). The poet looks at himself realistically, deprecatingly even. He is merely an individual 'stooping along' on the shingle beach, gazing at the watchtower across on the other shore. He imagines that even if the security guards were to focus on him with their binoculars, they would dismiss him as 'a silhouette not worth bothering about', a harmless individual, merely one of the observes from the 'free state of image and allusion'. He is not like Hamlet 'about to set times wrong or right'. The irony is strongly self-directed and exposes the attitudinising of the poet so shrewdly. "The pun which makes over the 'Irish Free State' into a phrase for the disengagement of poetry" and "the allusion to Hamlet which refuses the obligation which Hamlet found so overwhelming" (Corcoran 158)--these two verbal devices subtly mock the poet's Self and its inadequacy with regard to active political engagement. The poem projects the Self as ridden with ambivalence, conventionally in an attitude of 'stooping along', one of the venerators. The supplicatory posture is mentioned on several occasions by Heaney as being typical of Irish Catholic peasantry, religiously and politically. Here it is described as the characteristic gait of one such observer, a man who can only 'venerate' the political activist-victim.

The movement of the poem then is from the quiet contemplation of an object picked up casually by the poet (significantly however on a shore which is the topographical divide between North and South Ireland), to a complication engendered by the 'free state of image and allusion'. The irony leads one to the
question raised by the poem—to what extent can the observing eye remain innocent and unimplicated in history. Is there an exclusive insular world of the verbal icon, or the well-wrought Um totally impervious to or divorced from its materialistic context. Here, as time and again in his poetry, Heaney examines the unconscious complicity between violence and the atavisms that rise within the self. The poet is a non-entity, anonymous stroller in scarf and boots, but his poetic imagination the reader knows to be capable of engendering disquieting ideas and thoughts. In Joseph Brodsky’s words (Robinson 135): "Ambivalence ... is the chief characteristic of my nation. There isn’t a Russian executioner who isn’t scared of turning victim one day, nor is there the sorriest victim who would not acknowledge (if only to himself) a mental ability to become an executioner."

It is this singularly curious nexus that Heaney examines in his ‘Chekhov on Sakhalin’ which seems to be almost deliberately set on the page adjacent to ‘Sandstone Keepsake’. Heaney picks on an episode in Anton Chekhov’s life and draws from it a value for himself as an act of clearance. Chekhov’s friends once presented him with a bottle of cognac before he embarked on a visit to the island prison of Sakhalin in pre-revolution Russia. The purpose of this journey was supposedly to interview the convicts and write about their lives: ‘To try for the right tone—not tract, not thesis’.

The conflict that rages within Chekhov is identical to the one that traumatises Heaney. Can he write about suffering from the ‘free state of image and allusion’, from the ivory tower that is Art? Can he, preoccupied with getting the ‘right tone’ merely walk away from the floggings. Even as he smashes his empty glass on the rocks after savouring the cognac, the ringing of broken glass brings to his mind the sound of the convicts’ chains, and this sound continues to haunt him through months to come.
He who thought to squeeze
his slave’s blood out and waken the free man

Shadowed a convict guide through Sakhalin.

Chekhov, by birth an agricultural bonded labourer, sets out for Sakhalin to ‘waken the free man’ in him and among the convicts but finds to his consternation that the task is not easy. He is shadowed by ‘a convict guide through Sakhalin’. The guide that dogs his steps is in one sense his conscience, his guilt about his neglect of social responsibilities in his pursuit of Art. In another sense, it represents the ‘unconscious complicity’ between himself and the criminal spirit. Chekhov has encountered his criminal Other on Sakhalin. Like the Heaney of ‘Punishment’ and ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, the Heaney of ‘Chekhov on Sakhalin’ has discovered the unnerving symbiotic relationship between social order and its antithesis - be it anarchy, crime or violence. The phrase ‘shadow a convict guide’ anticipates clearly the entire ‘Station Island’ sequence, the middle section of the book, wherein Heaney is to shadow several revenant guides through his own Purgatorio, questing towards the centre. The achievement of the poem may be summed up in the words of Tamplin: “this is not self-dramatization but story-telling. Heaney does not coerce Chekhov to his own needs but lends his experience to give expression to Chekhov’s” (91).

In The Government of the Tongue, Heaney singles out Zbigniew Herbert’s poem ‘The Knocker’ “Go, in peace”, his poem says, “Enjoy poetry as long as you don’t use it to escape reality.” Herbert’s lyric about a knocker which claims that lyric utterance is inadmissible ends thus:

for others the green bell of a tree
the blue bell of water
I have a knocker
from unprotected gardens
I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralist’s dry poem

Yes - Yes
No - No.

The reader is persuaded that he is against lyric poetry but through an entirely successful demonstration of that very process in action. Herbert’s poem, Heaney concludes, is saying two very different things.

Heaney has his own sense of what moral value life’s everyday objects represent. ‘Shelf Life’ is a sequence of six lyrics each of them celebrating a keepsake like the sandstone, each of them sending out a message to the poet like the harvest bow, guiding the poet along on the route to self-knowledge. There is first a ‘Granite Chip’ with its sharp contours, ‘Jaggy, salty, punitive / and exacting’. It is ‘houndstooth stone’, ‘Aberdeen of the mind’, ‘insoluble brilliant’ with a ‘Calvin edge’. All these epithets are gathered together to create an image of uncompromising, unrelenting, committed hardiness. It is hurting and its message is ‘seize the day’ and ‘you can take me or leave me’. The phrases recall ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ in Field Work and the community of those such as Heaney and Colum McCauney who

Spoke an old language of conspirators

And could not crack the whip or seize the day

Here Heaney describes his credo as ‘complaisant pith’. It is the poet’s intrinsic nature to compromise, yield, accommodate and understand. He admires the granite chip but feels little in common with it. The significant point of interest is that the keepsake is no commonplace object but ‘a bit hammered off Joyce’s Martello / Tower’. It thus carries with it the confidence and audacity of its master who is to be the most
stringent of mentors to Heaney in the ‘Station Island’ sequence. Further, the placing of ‘Tower’ in syntactical isolation brings it into special focus. ‘Tower’ brings with it the field of force associated with Yeats’ tower erected with masterly arrogance on the Ballylee landscape symbolising the invincible edifice of his poetry; the mind seizing the landscape and not the landscape possessing the mind. Yeats, Joyce, Lowell exemplify a masculine aggrandisement which Heaney can only envy or admire. Heaney is to write in praise of ‘... the purpose and venture’ (Sl 110) of Yeats in ‘The Master’ in Part III of the book, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’. Heaney’s corpus is a self-consistent body of work and a unique blend of intertextuality and self-referentiality is his signature.

Next in ‘Shelf Life’ is the message of the ‘Old Smoothing Iron’ which is cited in the title of this thesis. The poem takes up the description of the nature of work and the theme is superficially reminiscent of the early poems celebrating work and the skill of the silent worker. Here, the poet uses the terminology of physics to define work. As he watches his aunt angle her elbow, stoop intently and aim the iron onto the linen, ‘her dumb lunge’ says that ‘to work is to move a certain mass / through a certain distance’. Heaney orchestrates upon this definition in his The Place of Writing and colludes poetry and physics brilliantly. To work is to also ‘Pull your weight and feel / exact and equal to it’. There is Newton and his first Law of Motion: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. And to work is largely, ‘to feel dragged upon and buoyant’. That is perfect equipoise. The sequence proceeds along similar lines. An old pewter plate seems to give him an image of his own soul in its ‘fogged up’ state—

Glimmerings are what the soul’s composed of

Fogged-up challenges, far conscience-glitters

and hang-dog, half-truth earnest of true love. (Sl 23).
The imagery is aptly suggestive of winter, unrelieved in its flatness and its grey tones. There is the iron spike that was once a part of the North American Railway line. It evokes along with its particular "milieu of steam locomotion", the nineteenth century, a sense of the presentness of the past and a conflicting sense of mutability. In the fifth poem of the sequence, a stone from Delphi offers him its oracular wisdom, advising him to keep away from the ‘miasma of spilled blood’: ‘govern the tongue’ ‘fear hybris’ ‘fear the god until he speaks in my untrammelled mouth’. Quite irresistibly, Heaney picks on this phrase for the title of his prose selection, The Government of the Tongue, in 1988 and puns on it felicitously. The tongue may be checked, restrained or it may, in turn, reign untrammelled: "a denial of the tongue’s autonomy and permission .... monastic and ascetic strictness" (GT 96) or "poetry as its own vindicating force... the self-validating operations of what we call inspiration" (GT 92).

Finally, in the ‘Shelf Life’ sequence, there is the ‘Snowshoe’ suspended from the hall. Winter images abound in this piece as well. The poet is sitting in silence, imagining presences and the ‘snowshoe’ is one such. He imagines hearing sounds like love sounds after long abstinence. The room in which he finds the snowshoe is ‘drift-still’, the love making that precedes its discovery is an ‘amorous blizzard’. The poet recalls ‘scuffling the snow-crust’ like a sleepwalker while climbing the stairs. The images are that of winter and the pervasive atmosphere is one of silence. In the midst of this, the snowshoe is an object enshrined in memory—a ‘veritable hieroglyph for all the realms of whisper.’

The sequence has with its six lyrics and its distinctive imagistic pattern celebrated these objects as object lessons, celebrated, too, the power that Art or poetry has in giving them permanence. Like Keats’ ‘sylvan historian’, these objects have a ‘shelf life’ that is enduring, not in their own right but in the value that the poet bestows upon them. Heaney is making his music from what rubbed treasure his
hands have known, and has indeed recognised that it is 'perilous to choose not to love the life we're shown'. In doing so, he is constantly bound to address the dual impulses that comprise the thrust of his poetry--on the one hand the feeling of being 'dragged upon' and on the other, the feeling of being 'buoyant'. It is to his credit entirely that these opposing strains do not paralyse but enrich his creativity.

He most beautiful and comforting lyrics in this section and indeed, in the Heaney canon, by far, are those addressed to his children; the special quality about them is the fact that, as Elmer Andrews puts it, they are both "tough and magical", "consolingly solid and a stimulus to the imagination" (196). 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher' takes up where 'Shelf Life' lets go and as in so many Heaney's lyrics, the structure of the poem is a movement from the intimate, the real world towards a derivation of significance, almost in fabular fashion. Heaney describes with relish the preliminary operations involved in making and launching a kite,

now it was far up like a small black lark

and now it dragged as if the bellied string

were a wet rope hauled upon

to lift a shoal....

(SI 44).

The latter image recalls 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' and one realises that the groundswell of Heaney's poetry remains fairly unaltered and firmly bedded in a locale. From the soaring and the being dragged, it is a short cut to the life and experience of the soul. Heaney calls upons his sons to take the kite into their own hands and feel for themselves the exhilaration and the burden, feel 'the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief'. This is their initiation. And for the poet, it is an endorsement of the truth that the poem is the space wherein all contrarities are held together in equipollence albeit for a brief spell. The poet is anchored, rooted, and yet, airborne like the kite. He is to be 'pilot and stray', 'witch, Hansel and Gretel in one'.
‘A Hazel Stick for Catherine Ann’ delightfully achieves a fusion of “the tough and the magical.” The hazel stick is another of Heaney’s ‘objects’, which partakes of a symbolic value. It has the evanescent beauty of ‘the living mother-of-pearl of a salmon’ and is yet solidly permanent. On the one hand it is used frivolously to play with or pose with while the other end points back to ‘cattle / and spatter and beauty / the bars of a gate’, going back to life on the farm and ancestry. The latter half of the poem works out a contrast between the mundane and the fantastic. One enters the realm of fairy tale quite suddenly. The poet cuts and carves the hazel stick for his daughter, his eyes drawn to it initially ‘by the living cobalt of an afternoon dragonfly’, perching on it. That very evening, when Catherine Ann parts open the grass at their feet with the ‘blunt cut end of the stick’, she sees her first glow-worm. The prosaic and pedestrian instrument, the hazel stick, has opened a vista of the magical as the glow-worm flashes its ‘tiny brightening den in the darkening sky’.

The same sense of wonder carries the poet forward into ‘The Railway Children’. The poem affirms the sheer instinctual childlike attunement of the poet with Nature and also offers a sophisticated insight into the poet’s technical skills. The poet revokes one of those ‘spots of time’ from childhood when he climbed the slopes of the cutting and came on level with telegraph poles and their humming wires. He describes the complete ingestion by the child of the beauty around and his profound unquestioning assimilation of awe and wonder. The wires curve like ‘lovely freehand’ for miles on either side ‘sagging at times under their burden of swallows’. The children, watching, imagine with total belief and conviction that messages are transmitted

    In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
    Each one seeded full with the light
    of the sky ....
Seen from the perspective of this awesome canvas, the children are scaled down to infinitesimal proportions and feel they could actually stream through the eye of a needle. The fitting verdict is Elmer Andrews' (196): "Much in Station Island seems worried and sombre but the poetry though barer and more sinewy is as richly sensuous, as intensely celebratory as ever." The comparison may well be between a stained glass window and a skylight. The movement is towards a greater rarefication of the air one breathes in the poetry of Heaney.

So much for the intuitive in the poem. The discursive is also present as a subtext. In the adult poet’s scheme of things, the words of his craft are the raindrops and the Self "scaled down and merged with nature finds its proper vehicle in the miraculously fluid, translucent medium of words" (Andrews 196). At any given point of time when the poet creates or makes, his words tap on the infinite which is the ‘lovely freehand’ that is curving for miles and miles. The dichotomy is held in a state of fruitful irresolution. One must be up and away coursing through the eye of the needle into the empyrean and yet one must feel the ‘strumming rooted long-tailed pull of grief’.

‘Making Strange’ pleads for a ‘cunning middle voice’. The poet constructs a classic situation of choice when he imagines himself standing between two men, both of them representative of a polarity of lifestyle-- ‘one with his travelled intelligence ... his speech like the twang of a bowstring’ and ‘another unhorn and bewildered / in the tubs of his wellingtons’, one the alien and the other a local, one Hercules and the other Antaeus; King Sweeney and then Sweeney Astray. ‘A cunning middle voice’ akin to many others in his poetry, speaks up and urges a synthesis of the two styles. The Muse, supposedly, tells him that he must ‘be adept and be dialect’. He must go beyond the reliable and what is grounded with the puddles and stones and take to
regions of the air like Sweeney. He must remember that he has already made
‘departures’ in this direction which he cannot
renege upon.

I found myself driving the stranger

through my own country, adept

at dialect, reciting my pride

in all that I knew, that began to make strange

at that same recitation ...

(Sl 32-33).

The oxymoron clinches simultaneous feelings: of comfort in what one knows
(‘bedding the locale’) and the exhilaration of taking off from it, ‘making strange’ or
‘defamiliarizing’ as the Russian formalists would define it, or perhaps, the Martian
Poets would prefer it.

‘Go beyond what’s reliable’, ‘be adept’ --this piece of advice concurs with the
message that the Sheelagh na Gig bears in the poem of that name. The subject of the
poem is a pre-Christian gargoyle of a woman symbolic of an earthy sensuality and
fecundity. But she seems to say to the poet ‘Yes, look at me to your heart’s content
/ but look at every other thing’.

Heaney’s tone, his lyric voice gets gradually more and more self-admonitory
in this first part of Station Island. Barring the poems written for his children, the others
carry a more severe burden of didacticism and are more painfuilly inward-looking.
Even as he is invited by the possibility of heady flight, even as he tells himself that he
must go beyond the reliable, he is acutely aware that it is difficult to leave behind the
‘known’. ‘The Loaning’ says as much-
When you are tired or terrified

Your voice slips back into its old first place

and makes the sound your shades make there. (SI 52).

Heaney's poetry invokes ‘all the realms of whisper’, summons voices originating from
gable ends, raftered sheds. And in this poem, these gather, rise to a crescendo, a
cacophony of ‘screeching’ and ‘beseeching’. The scenario is similar to Dante's
‘Inferno’ and the horror generated cuts across time and place.

The basis is thus well-founded for the 'Station Island' sequence of poems, the
central section of the book. The sequence of twelve lyrics presents in the familiar
Dantesque framework, the protagonist going on a pilgrimage and meeting
systematically with revenants all of whom advise him and interpret the poet's
responsibilities, in the contraposed realms of Art or Morality. 'Station Island' involves
a journey like the 'Purgatorio' into the dark and a re-emergence into light, symbolic
of the journey away from the world and a return to it.

The setting is Lough Derg in County Donegal, a traditional pilgrimage centre
popularly known as Station Island or Patrick's Purgatory. St. Patrick was deemed to
be the founder of the penitential ritual of fasting and praying which till date comprises
the basis of the three-day pilgrimage to Station Island. According to 'The Golden
Legend' quoted by the Yale Review (Shaw 583-84) it is believed that St.Patrick did
not achieve much success in converting the Irish. He was thus commanded by God
to trace "a wide circle with his staff, and a very deep pit opened within it." Those who
chose to go down into it could expiate their sins therein and would be exempt from
purgatory after death. The pit is not to be seen now but the pilgrim is called upon to
visit twelve ‘stations’ which are stone circles said to be the remains of the cells of
medieval monks. He is to walk barefoot and go in prayer around the circles. The
atmosphere was held to be highly conducive to introspection and meditation and
hence the Irish literary tradition has seen several writers base their work on the Lough Derg pilgrimage. Significant among Heaney’s predecessors in this context are William Carleton, Denis Devlin, Patrick Kavanagh, Sean O’Faolain and their works date from 1828-1958.

Heaney is said to have demurred since there was a surfeit of writing with this background, but Dante’s example sustained his interest and he went on to write out the drama of his own conscience. The most important ghost is thus the one off-stage, namely, Dante, and from the retinue of revenants whom Heaney encounters, he professes to have made Carleton ‘a sort of Tyrone Virgil’ and Kavanagh ‘a latter-day county Monaghan Cavalcanti’ (Andrews 156). Dante’s exemplary status finds the utmost relevance to Heaney’s situation in that he too, like Heaney, strove to reconcile the universal with the local, the social consciousness with the autonomy of the imagination. Heaney acclaims Dante as "very much a man of a particular place ... his great poem, full of intimate placings and placenames ... recognized by his local speech" (Shaw 584). He brings his lyric sequence closer home not merely by giving it a ritual Irish setting but also by describing his dream-encounters with shades "who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to refute those claims. They could probe the validity of one’s commitments" (Andrews 156).

The first of these is Simon Sweeney in Section 1, as much a spirit of the woods as the legendary Sweeney was. The man is a tinker, remembered from Heaney’s childhood, ‘an old Sabbath breaker’, dead for years, ‘mystery-man’, almost druidical, with his bow-saw held stiffly up like a lyre. Heaney meets him now on his way to Station Island, even as the urgent bell-notes summon him to prayer. Sweeney recalls with a certain degree of tartness how Heaney’s ‘First Communion face’ would gaze upon him with awe, and, to some extent fear,
when

woodsmoke sharpened air

or ditches rustled

you sensed my trail there

as if it had been sprayed. (SI 62).

Even while Sweeney holds his attention, the bell-notes begin a second time and Heaney watches a crowd of women hastening to prayer, their skirts brushing the young corn and whispering 'Pray for us, Pray for us.' Thereafter, the entire field is filled with a mass of people, all 'half-remembered faces' a congregation of believers 'straggling' on. Simon Sweeney warns him loud and clear-- 'Stay clear of all processions' but the poet is set upon 'the drugged path' opened by the crowd and he trails them, aware of the fact that unlike them, his faith is denuded and needs renewal.

The point of interest in the encounter is that the language of the poem and its emphases place the poet's sympathies solidly behind Sweeney, the pagan wanderer, pre-Christian in sensibility, dramatized sharply by the poet. On the other hand the crowd of believers on its 'drugged path' is a threat to the poet's individuality as Sweeney recognizes and warns. This dichotomy is to be worked out within the framework of every encounter and dream-vision in the sequence. The poet places the sequence subtly and deftly in its tradition of dream-vision sequences. When he describes the field as 'full / of half-remembered faces', the echo from the opening lines of Langland's *Piers Plowman*—its alliterative 'fair field full of foke'—serves as a reminder that this tradition is not merely Italian but native as well.

In Section II, the poet is in his car, parked on the high road, in a reverie, when he meets with William Carleton, the nineteenth century rural Irish poet. He is not
mentioned by name until the end of the poem but is instead mentioned as the author of *Lough Derg Pilgrim*. It is significant that Heaney meets him on the road to Lough Derg and not on the island per se because Carleton renounced Catholicism after his visit to Station Island and castigated its ritual superstitions in his work.

He presents himself in Heaney's vision as a big, determined man, in a hurry, aggressive and aggrivated. He is impatient with Heaney's pilgrim instinct—"O holy Jesus Christ, Does nothing change?" His philosophy is to live a life of eminently practical realism. 'It is a road you travel on your own'. 'If times were hard, I could be hard too.' He explains away thus his becoming an 'old fork-tongued turncoat', yielding to the Anglo-Irish Establishment.

We are earthworms of the earth and all that
has gone through us is what will be our trace.       (SI 66).

This is the apogee of his practical wisdom, a simple process of worm-like digestion of experience and circumstance and an effort 'to make sense of what comes' quite simply. Heaney tries to talk to him of how much they share and hold in common, for example, this Lough Derg station, flax-pullings, dances, fair-days, the entire rural Catholic-Irish scenario. But Carleton is impatient and dismissive—'I know, I know, I know, I know,' and urges his naive practical sense upon Heaney, and moves away 'headed up the road at the same hard pace'. The slightly farcical manner in which Heaney dramatizes the man and his speech suggest his awareness of Carleton's limitations as an exemplar.

Section III is a kind of hiatus and the poet is caught up in a reminiscence. He can hear the 'beadcliks' and the murmurs of the confessional; smell the candle wax at side altars. Amid this nostalgic recall of his ritual childhood faith, there floats in a vision of a toy grotto pasted with mussels and cockles, cherished by a girl who died young. It was, in fact, his aunt Agnes, his father's sister who died of tuberculosis in
the 1920s. The grotto became in Heaney’s mind a symbolic shimmering ark, housing her young life and whenever he foraged for it past the tissue wrappings, ‘it was a Wordsworthian act of stealth’. Her name, seldom uttered, was ‘a scared white bird’ trapped within him, fluttering in despair everytime ‘Health of the Sick’ was sung in litany. Thus in an intuitive association of idea and emotion in his mind, lost aunt and a lost faith come together and here at Station Island, he feels a profound absence, a void at the centre of things, and himself walking round and round that emptiness. The image of the circle recurs to define Heaney’s quest and the notion of the absence in the centre is carried forward right through his writing, even as recently as The Haw Lantern. In a classic instance of self-referentiality, he is to write these very lines in the latter book in the sonnet sequence ‘Clearances’, treating of his mother’s death:

I thought of walking round
and round a space, utterly empty,
utterly a source ...

(SI 68).

This depressing awareness leads, in turn, to the concluding image of the poem—one of stark rottenness—the image of a swamp of grass and rushes where he found once ‘the bad carcass and scrag of hair’ of his family dog that had disappeared weeks before. The image signifies strongly the state of his feeble faith and his sense of guilt at having undertaken this pilgrimage with this impure impetus. The whole poem provides a contrast to the narrative structure and the physical action of the sequence for it is wholly reverie and charged with introspection.

The poet is in Section IV facing the sun, his back to ‘the iron cross’ and he is all set to say the dream words ‘I renounce’. At that critical juncture, he meets a young priest dressed nattily, down to his polished shoes, looking ‘unexpectedly secular’. The poet rediscovers the man’s name (Terry Keenan, a clerical student from Heaney’s youth) like ‘an old bicycle wheel in a ditch overgrown with jungle briars’. The young
man proceeds to give the poet an account of the experiences of his vocation in the rain forests of the Philippines where he went out to serve the community. He is thoroughly disillusioned: 'I rotted like a pear, I sweated masses ...'. He finds it inexplicable that Heaney is going through these motions of faith despite his awareness of reality. The 'god has withdrawn' and his chosen vocation of priesthood is mere convention. He adheres to it, paying lip-service to serving the community, but his faith is corroded.

The picture Heaney paints of Keenan is of the representative Irish Catholic priest 'doomed to do the decent thing'. He does identify with his condition in more ways than one. He too is more programmatically conditioned to the practice of religion rather than a conscious believer; it is the 'drugged path' which the tribe is conditioned to tread. That is basically why he has chosen to do the 'Stations' and thereby conform to the orthodox ways. Keenan wonders whether Heaney is perchance 'here to take the last look?', to take stock of "the cultural and personal implications of his Catholic origins" (Andrews 163).

The vision fades abruptly and the poet is left alone, knee-deep in the mist, ironically wading 'silently / behind him, on his circuits, visiting'. The poet's role like the priest's touches the community at all points in the circle, and here, Heaney symbolically treads the same circuits which Keenan had been doomed to tread in his lifetime. 'Visiting' very nicely sums up the social duties of both priest and poet, literally and metaphorically, respectively. The ritual journey has to be made and the motions of belief have to be gone through.

Encounters with three 'fosterers' comprise Section V. The first two are Heaney's schoolmasters. Barney Murphy, the first of them, makes an animal-like entry into Heaney's mind and vision, his 'soft paws rowing forward', groping and warding off the mists. The images Heaney uses to portray age are felicitous:
His sockless feet were like the dried broadbean
that split its stitches in the display jar
high in a window in the old classroom ...

in the limbo and dry urn of the larynx
The Adam’s apple in its weathered sac
worked like the plunger of a pump in drought.  (S! 72).

The man is nostalgic about bygone days and Heaney registers his sense of loss with
empathy. When he speaks of Anahorish School (where he taught the young Heaney)
whose grass is now ‘loose black mould’, he trembles and his breath rushes the air
‘softly as scythes in his lost meadows’. With this acute sense of loss recorded, Master
Murphy disappears. Heaney is overpowered with nostalgia and the schoolroom Latin
decensions of ‘Mensa, mensa, mensam’ seem to reverberate in the air. Everything
seems to have gone away and he is ‘faced wrong way / into more pilgrims absorbed
in this exercise’.

The second fosterer evokes the spirit of native life, close to the soil, when he
celebrates the experience of drinking three cups of cold water from the well at his
family farm in Toome. For, he avers, the wellspring of verse is ‘feeling’ and ‘love’.
Heaney, the earth-grubber, Antaeus-like in his rootedness to the soil, can attune
himself with such sentiments.

But he is yet to contend with the irony of Patrick Kavanagh, the third ‘clear-
eyed’ fosterer. The adjective probably suggests that the first two masters were just a
little bleary-eyed with sentiment. Kavanagh’s shade is sardonic and opinionated. He
acknowledges with a touch of mockery that Heaney has followed in his footsteps and
recorded the life of his community, his parish. Forty-two years have passed since
Kavanagh and Irish poetry has ‘gone no further’ than the past. And yet, Kavanagh
mocks the poet’s desire to transcend the local—‘Where else would you go? Iceland, may be? May be the Dordogne?’ The jibe is probably directed at MacNeice who went to distant Iceland and evoked the ‘Nordic mist’ in his poetry out of a sense of disenchantment with Irish matter. Kavanagh’s position is ambivalent. The artistic validity of one’s parish is total and the experience of finding one’s world becoming word is appeasing, and yet there is the conflicting need to break away, to snap the constricting bond of tradition.

Thus while all three masters in their different styles, sentimental or pragmatic, preach rootedness, Kavanagh being Heaney’s professional mentor and inspiration, acknowledges the Antaeus and the Hercules in a creative writer’s sensibility. His ‘parting shot’ is typically laden with levity. ‘In my own day / the odd one came here on the hunt for women’. And it seems singularly apt in the light of what follows in Section VI. Heaney is once again lost in reverie, this time about a childhood love, and possibly a very early sexual experience. The recall is warm and affectionate—‘catkin-pixie, little fern-swish : / Where did she arrive from?’. This experience is set against a classical pastoral backdrop:

Late summer, country distance, not an air

Loosen the toga for wine and poetry

Till Phoebus returning routs the morning star.  
(SI 75).

The rhythms and the mood are Horatian in their classical pastoralism, but the conflict inheres in the claims of religious conditioning. Heaney shuts his ears to the bell-notes and, as always, finds himself going down the steps as the pilgrims trail up and he is headed for the shade of an oak-tree, ‘Shades of the Sabine farm / On the beds of Saint Patrick’s Purgatory’.
When a somnolent hymn to Mary rises in the air, he recalls wryly his own long
virgin fasts and abstinences under the sway of his Catholic indoctrination. All that he
had access to in terms of experience was kneeling at a keyhole for a glimpse of
absolution and he was finally blessed with a vision of

..................................honey-skinned

shoulder-blades and the wheatlands of her back. (SI 76).

Heaney describes his sense of sexual appeasement in terms of the pastoral once again
with an almost epic style:

As little flowers that were all bowed and shut

By the night chills rise on their stems and open

As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight ...

The pagan in Heaney is in the fray against the programmed Catholic. The response
is totally similar to that expressed in an earlier poem in Station Island, ‘La Toilette’,
where a woman’s toilet, in particular the sensual act of undressing for lovemaking, is
described in the imagery of Catholic ritual. The erotic and the ecclesiastical registers
come together and comment on each other. The poem is simultaneously a reaction
to the suppression of the instinctual by Irish Catholicism and an acknowledgement of
the ubiquitous attraction that Catholicism and its mysteries still hold for the poet. All
this Heaney holds together in the poem in a manner that is witty and quite
Metaphysical in its conceits. Oisin and St. Patrick are in conjunction.

The poet is caught in a pensive mood once again at the edge of the water,
‘soothed by just looking’. The lines refer back to ‘At the Water’s Edge’ from the
Triptych poems where he is similarly impelled to ‘go barefoot, foetal and penitential
/ and pray at the water’s edge’. Now, when he looks into the water, he senses a
presence, meets a horrifying reflection of a man’s face with the brow blown open and
blood congealed on neck and cheek. The surrealistic vision yields to the explicit and
the story is told in direct narrative with a heightened sense of drama. William Strathearn, Heaney’s friend, football companion of childhood, was killed by two off-duty policemen in a gory, infamous incident in Country Antrim and here as a revenant he recounts how it happened—the grisly tragedy of a night’s happenings, his wife in bed suffering a nightmare, and, below, the murderers luring him with a fabricated lie, to get out of bed and open the door to them. And the rest is history.

All this brings into focus for the poet the political horror of his times. Strathearn is ‘big-limbed, decent, open-faced’ and in a touch of pathos, shares, reminisces with his poet-friend about their days of courtship. Heaney recalls that he was the one stylist in the team, smartly attired and in every way possible ‘the perfect clean unthinkable victim’. After all the preamble about their shared life, this line is made to stand in isolation at the commencement of a stanza and it sets the reader thinking about this entire issue of culpability and commitment.

The poet is moved into a confession of his own guilt and inadequacy. He rues his ‘timid circumspect involvement’. Strathearn’s death challenges his passivity. This situation repeats itself in Section VIII which finds Heaney kneeling at St. Brigid’s Bed, one of the Stations. These are moments of reckoning for the poet and the surrounding scene is all black and white—‘Black water, White wares, Furrows Snowcapped’. The airy space around him is also described as ‘granite’. It is in that unforgiving environment that he meets the spirit of Tom Delaney his archaeologist-friend and finds his countenance clouded over in pain. That brings to Heaney’s mind Tom’s trauma of heart disease, his stint at the hospital, the impersonal but menacing monitor at his bedside and, to top it all, the poet’s paralysing sense of inadequacy and helplessness. He feels as if he had ‘broken / convenants, and failed an obligation’, and his usual ‘banter’ fails him when confronted with such real misery.
Delaney, in turn, rationalises that he came to terms with death, and found courage to face it alone because of 'still-faced archaeology' his vocation and passion. Heaney too now seeks some sort of appeasement by summoning to his visionary eye certain archaeological finds that held meaning and value for him. Archaeology and poetry are always linked in Heaney's mind and he has defined poetry in terms of archaeology in *Preoccupations* (41). Here in the early version of Section VIII, according to Elmer Andrews, he is said to have categorised both poetry and archaeology as 'soft weeds from the slime of history'. He looks for comfort to objects from the past since the overwhelming problems of an individual's present life can seem surmountable when viewed in relation to "the great timeless continuities of history that are revealed in archaeology and poetry" (Andrews 168).

The specific reference here is to a 'hoard of black / basalt axe heads', 'a stone force that might detonate'. Heaney is thinking of the Malone Axe Hoard in the Ulster Museum found in 1872 off Malone Road in Belfast, archaeological finds traced back to the Stone Age and bearing a primitive field of force. The second reference is to a plastercast of an abbess, an antique, gifted to him by Delaney, 'a character of grace' affirming the redemptive and healing power of Art.

But the poet cannot rest with this heart-uplifting vision because 'hunkering' in the place of Delaney's ghost is that of a 'bleeding pale-faced boy', namely, the poet's cousin Colum McCartney. Heaney is taken to task severely by his young relative for his reluctance to confront the political issue directly. Recalling Heaney's elegy written for him in *Field Work*, McCartney accuses Heaney of having 'confused evasion with artistic tact':

The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you,
Who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the ‘Purgatorio’
and saccharined my death with morning dew. (St 83).

In spite of all this dream-action in the foreground, Heaney assiduously maintains the
framing narrative and makes mention of the pilgrims, stronger in their faith, passing
by and headed for the hostel in the night.

Section IX opens with yet another response to Ulster’s problems. Francis
Hughes who hailed from Country Bellaghy was one of the ten IRA hunger-strikers
who died in Long Kesh between March and September ‘81. Heaney is attuned here
to this ‘voice from blight / And hunger’, telling its story in a fragmented, disoriented
manner—a montage of images building up the horror:

Often I was dogs on my own track

Of blood on wet grass that I could have licked. (St 84).

Past and present flow into each other incoherently with half - rhymes and shifting
persepectives but the pain flashes a very strong signal. The man’s account tapers off
and the poet’s introspection commences true to pattern. The intensity of the horror
surrounding Hughes’ death is matched only by the intensity of Heaney’s guilt.
Confronted with Hughes’ pain all over again in ‘the black dorm’ at Station Island,
Heaney envisions Hughes’ funeral and the details of this vision assume a morbid
character - woodworm, mildew, ‘the maimed music’ of helicopters and curlew, and
’sphagnnum moss’.

‘I dreamt and drifted’ confesses Heaney and happens upon an extraordinary
vision of ‘a strange polyp’ ‘surreal as a shed breast’ floating down the mucky floor
symbolising ‘my softly awash and blanching self-disgust’. He suffers profound regret
about a life spent unquestioningly and passively endorsing connivance and mistrust.
It is only when a concomitant vision rises before his eyes of a glowing candle ‘like a
pistil growing from polyp’, that his drifting is steadied, his feet touch bottom and his heart is uplifted.

The poet’s dream-vision continues, however, but this time it is redemptive. It is of an object, ‘round and clear’ like a moon in the smooth lough water. From the cobwebbed recesses of his mind, the sheen of a metallic instrument flashes brilliantly and the vision lingers even after he awakens in the morning to sunlight and the bell’s summons. It is a vision of an old brass trumpet which the poet had discovered in the attic, contoured mysteriously with its polished convexes.

The fragmentariness of the vision—surreal glimpses of horror and the fleeting glimpses of redemption—engender in Heaney a longing for wholeness of being and in such a context this rejection of his conditioned past life and conduct sounds complete: ‘I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming’. Shaving at daybreak in Station Island, Heaney is repelled by his reflection in the mirror but is at the same time comforted that the mirror offers an unfragmented image, a whole. As Elmer Andrews observes "In this mode of being, the cairnstone does not defy the cairn, the eddy does not reform the pool, the stone can never be ground to a different core" (Andrews 170). Art (symbolised by the mirror relationship) is celebrated as having the capacity to give the artist an image of reflexive organic unity. The final image of the poem clinches the possibility of redemptive vision - Heaney imagines the atavisms of the

...............tribe whose dances never fail

For they keep dancing till they sight the deer.           (SI 86).

This quest for the deer is a positive exercise of the imagination, affirming its value, and finally, arresting it as a completed poem, an artefact, the deer sighted.

Heaney’s metaphysics derive from the commonplace or the quotidian. if it is a trumpet recovered from an attic in Section IX, in the following section, it is a mug.
On the level of the temporal narrative, the section opens in the morning and there are the attendant bustle and noises—'plumping water' 'hearthsmoke rambling and a thud of earthenware'. In the midst of the chaotic activities and the disparate objects, there stands the mug high on a shelf patterned with blue cornflowers and, significantly, 'quiet as a milestone'. Silence is virtue as always for the poet. Like the objects he addressed in 'Shelf life' and like the anvil at the heart of things in 'The Forge', the mug is a timeless artefact. 'When had it not been there?' wonders the poet.

The mug has been a survivor. In one sense it is also like the other revenants in the sequence, a ghost from the poet's childhood for he recalls an occasion when it was taken away from home to be used as a prop in a stage-play. It acquired a mystique on stage for a spell and then was deglamourized, restored to its old 'haircracked doze / on the mantelpiece'. The poet believes it to be a miraculous event like the amazing retrieval of St. Ronan's psalter from the waters of the Lough through the good offices of an otter. There is the same 'dazzle of impossibility' radiating from this mug, 'a sun-glare / to put out the small fires of constancy.' At this juncture, the poem has the playfulness of 'La Toilette' in juxtaposing a secular object alongside a Catholic relic as a signifier of immanence.

The whimsy apart, the poem does indicate a change of mood and tone. The pensiveness and morbid introspection have yielded to an uplift of the spirits as darkness has yielded to brilliant sunlight. The section is also divested of the burden of politics, guilt, history. The preceptor here is the mug, a contemporary symbol along the lines of Keats' Grecian Urn, a repository of human experience which is yet outside the purview of mutability. The signal difference is that Heaney's symbol endorses his
sense of Art as natural, homely, or to put it briefly, the ordinary transmuted into the magical or the wonderful in an epiphanic access. Thomas C. Foster's comment is closest to the thrust of the poem-

If the fabric of ordinary life can be rent in an instant by a bullet or a bomb— and the ghosts in the poem testify that it can—then it can also be obscured by the blinding flash of miracle or genius or inspiration, though that inspiration come from the most ordinary of objects. For a poet who shares in the post-modernist obsession with self-awareness in the creative act, surely such a notion has implications for his writing, and indeed, many of Heaney's finest poems have that shock of the ordinary suddenly touched by the impossible (Foster 127).

In Section XI, the images of light and of crystalline are sustained feelingly. The opening image of the poem is that of the kaleidoscope and its prismatic brilliance. This the poet places opposite contrasting images such as 'muddied water' and darkness. The poet imagines a monk's face emerging from the kaleidoscope, advising him to 'salvage' everything:

'Read poems as prayers', he said, 'and for your penance translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.'

(SI 89).

The liturgical rhythms and the chant-like nature of the translation from Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross) suggests that Heaney is willing himself out of his purgatorio by affirming his sense of faith, not perhaps in the Catholicism of St. John but in the poem as prayer, in the act of creating, making, which is life-giving and light-giving. It gives a dimension of meaning to life 'although it is the night'. It demands from the poet a devotion that is single-minded and a discipline that is rigorous but once attained, it is a miracle, 'a marvellous lightship surfacing from muddied water'. The equivalent to this image can be traced way back to Death of a
Naturalist and 'Churning Day' where amid the noises and routine activities on the farm, there is yet scope for magic and quite as miraculously as a poem does, butter appears like 'coagulated sunlight', weightless and set free.

St. John's hymn to the fountain of Trinity serves well Heaney's secular intent in the poem. The images are primarily of water, flowing, filling, running in the form of current, flood or fountain. Water has always been, with earth, Heaney's element. 'Undine' in Door into the Dark enacted the myth of unleashing creative/sexual energies through the act of clearing a blocked drain. Here once again, the poet invokes water as a life-giving source, in rhythms that may most appropriately be described as 'undulant':

That eternal fountain, hidden away,
I know its heaven and its secrecy
although it is the night.

But not its source because it does not have one,
which is all sources' source and origin
although it is the night. (SI 89-90).

The physical movement of the pilgrimage is winding down to a close and the poet is back at the boat jetty on the mainland, stepping on to comforting, firm ground with the help of a hand that feels 'fish-cold' and 'bony' to the touch. The tall man (identified as James Joyce) who meets with Heaney in this last section is described in quick, deft sketches - he walks straight, his eyes are fixed straight ahead, and he is 'wintered hard and sharp as blackthorn bush'. With a flash of recognition, the poet knows his accent even before the other speaks up. It is a voice that is
cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite
as a steel nib's downstroke ... (SI 92).
And when the man does speak, his counsel confirms his image. It is a message that is unambiguous, unequivocal and is all planes and angles like the man himself:

.....................your obligation

is not discharged by any common rite

what you do you must do on your own

The main thing is to write

for the joy of it ... (SI 92-93).

He exhorts Heaney to abandon his earnest posturising with sackcloth and ashes and to fly by the nets of religion and society. Heaney's feeling in response to this strident advice is significant:

It was as if I had stepped free into space
alone with nothing that I had not known already ...

(SI 93).

He experiences a release of sorts. Joyce's words have not effected an epiphany. Instead, they have profoundly endorsed the knowledge that Heaney had held deep with himself. As Seamus Deane comments on Heaney's relationship with his shades: "In effect, he is asking them for no specific guidance; he is really asking them to let him go, let him free. The Irish mentors in these poems, Joyce especially, talk like Heaney. They are occasions for self-endorsement to go ahead ..." (Deane 275).

This becomes more evident as Joyce continues his monologue. He criticises Heaney's 'peasant pilgrimage' as an infantile exercise and mocks him for rehearsing the same dead themes over again at his age, those tired tropes deriving from nationality, language and religion:
.......................... Keep at a tangent

When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on our own and fill the element

With signatures on your own frequency

echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements

elver- gleams in the dark of the whole sea. (Si 93-94).

Joyce recommends a course of action for Heaney that is contrary to that of the pilgrimage. It is an anti-communal, individualistic quest that acquires a greater aura of mystery as it ramifies. And it is defined in marine terminology that is characteristic of Heaney and not of Joyce. The quest begins with echo-soundings, very scientific and factual, and, progresses to 'allurements', 'elver- gleams', evoking the marvellous, suggestive of eels and elves, all at once. The image of the circle is once again typically Heaney's. There is always this circle of determinism which dogs the writer and when Joyce moves off on his straight walk, on the sizzling tarmac, he does not resolve Heaney's quandary. He merely eludes the circle. Joyce's stance thus rejects Colum McCauley's demand of political commitment and the priests' call to serve in keeping with one's sense of duty.

But there is a rich perspectivism at play in the sequence, and it has much to do with the language. The last section right down to the cinematic ending of Joyce striding away into the rain seems to project too much of a posture to be accepted as the ultimate. There is a very subtle touch of caricature to Heaney's Joyce and his brand of histrionics though on the surface, the poet seems to earnestly admire Joyce's creed. The section ends, singificantly, with no post-mortem on the encounter. Foster anticipates the response of the reader to this, and comments-- "Perhaps we are
mistaken to expect his (Joyce's) advice to be anymore valuable than any of the others in Station Island" and perhaps "the playfulness of Heaney's language here as elsewhere in the sequence suggests he does not really need that advice" (Foster 129).

It remains then to trace the journey that Heaney has made in the course of the sequence. It is a cathartic pilgrimage constantly striving towards a resolution of personal conflict in terms of his Art. Structurally there is no framework provided as narrative. Action and narration, involvement and irony are simultaneously maintained through the sequence. Helen Vendler defines the tone of the sequence in The New Yorker review (108) as "a mix of Chaucerian irony and Dantesque earnestness."

There is no indicator in the text which clarifies Heaney's response to the advice meted out by any of his revenant preceptors. He is sharply cognisant of their various postures. At the same time he does not get earnest about himself and is aware of his own attitudinising in front of the mirror. The post-modernist penchant for reflexivity is evident, as always, in Heaney's work.

Religion and politics are the overbearing preoccupations in the sequence. Catholicism on the other hand is the 'drugged path' the pilgrims are set upon. Heaney for the most part is physically and metaphorically faced the wrong way, and declares, 'I hate how quick I was to know my place'. He denounces not merely 'the potato patch' he strongly identified with but also his passive and servile acceptance of the religious mores handed down by his community. These mores are so ingrained that the word of the religion has become platitudinous and Heaney is able to treat it lightly in sacralizing sex. The repression that is habitual to Catholicism is seen as engendering frustration and guilt in the adolescent mind. The passive attitude of supplication at the basis of the faith is also seen as conditioning, pre-determining one's attitude to public events in adult life. Thus there is at the level of the sub-text, a critique of Catholicism in the sequence, but it must be emphasised that Heaney's
view is not bitter like that of Carleton or Kavanagh. It is rueful, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, and, in a sense, even while it deconstructs the faith, it acknowledges the sway that the religion, its mysteries and superstitions still have over the poet. This is apparent in the simple paradox—the choice of Lough Derg as the locus for a poem in which orthodoxy is to be challenged.

With regard to politics, the poem is a more tortuous necessity. While with religion, the area of conflict is private and internalised, with politics, the arena is public and the claim of the collective historical experience weighs against the claims of the ‘emerging self’. Heaney is all fluidity as against the ‘straightness’ of Joyce and the ‘hardness’ of Carleton. Station Island is where Heaney has come to in mid-career and mid-life to cull from the emotional and the artistic baggage what must be kept and to discard what must be jettisoned. He is taking stock and setting his house in order and the poem has thus come to be severely criticised for being ‘overschematized’ and ponderous. The symbols are overt and the didactic thrust of dialogue and monologue is unabashed. What the reader misses is the grace and delicacy of Field Work, the relative weightlessness and the sheer lyricism of ‘The Railway Children’ even. But the sequence had to be written and the exhilarating possibility of flight and migration from the mire of historical exigency had to be prospected.

Section I of Station Island had concluded with ‘The King of the Ditchbacks’. The poem may be more gainfully studied in the context of the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ section of Station Island. The progression in the poem highlights clearly the transformation of Sweeney to Heaney. The first part of the poem summons up the spirit of Sweeney who is a druidical presence in Nature:

He lives in his feet

and ears, weather-eyed,
all pad and listening, a denless mover. [SI 56],

In part II, the poet describes in prose and poetry the gradual but total absorption by the poet of his 'Dreamself' Sweeney: "He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase like a youngster dared out on to a alder branch over the whirlpool."

The culmination is part III when the coalescing with Sweeney is complete. His persona is a Christ-like figure, nevertheless secularised, crowned with 'plaited leafy twigs through meshes' and made 'King of the ditchbacks' even as Christ was crowned King of the Jews. Robinson's comment clarifies the comparison further-- "As King of the Ditchbacks his temporal power is as illusory as that of Christ as 'King of the Jews'. Instead, his strength lies in his imaginative charisma, for which he single-mindedly sacrifices all, as Heaney had in moving to Glanmore" (Robinson 129). The curious grammatical point is that Heaney has it described in the passive voice-- 'I was taken aside that day' ... 'they dressed my head in a fishnet' 'I had been vested for this calling'. It is being done to him, this translation, and he projects himself as quarry almost, fugitive and compelled to be submissive-- 'I went with them obediently'. He is the victim of great pressure, in the public eye, and is driven to becoming 'a rich young man / leaving everything he had / for a migrant solitude'. The New Testament image of the prodigal son leaving home is faintly suggested and the man's return is taken up later in the volume in 'On the Road'. The 'King of the Ditchbacks' thus works on several levels--the personal, the biblical correlative, and the pagan Sweeney correlative and all the three coalesce delicately in the poem.

If metamorphosis is the signal preoccupation in Heaney's mind, it is nowhere expressed with greater force of compression or intensity than in 'Widgeon' which anticipates most tellingly the Sweeney poems of section III in the book.
It had been badly shot
while he was plucking it
he found, he says, the voice box
like a flute stop
in the broken wind pipe
and blew upon it
unexpectedly
his own small widgeon cries.

The poem begins in a nondescript manner with a hunter picking up the voice box ‘like a flute stop’ from a hunted duck that he is cleaning. As a metaphor, it is banal and quite lifeless. But the poem is galvanized into sudden action when he picks up the voice-box and blows into it ‘unexpectedly’. The poem then takes that big leap from simile to allegory. The action becomes symbolic of the poet’s voice speaking through the dead, the familial dead, the historical, the legendary, the literary. It is a classic example of Heaney’s post-modernist concern with the activity of making a poem. It is self-reflexive. In a truly epigrammatic manner, ‘Widgeon’ points allegorically to various voices of Seamus Heaney’s poetry, the disembodied, the disguised or ventriloquial, the dramatic, the narrative. He gives expression to the Self obliquely in these modalities and this technique effectively counters the charge that his poetry is subsumed by a sense of self-importance. He is not merely ‘big-eyed Narcissus’.

‘Unexpectedly’ bears the force of epiphany. It is an unanticipated moment when the Self is realised through the Other. It is precisely such a fulfilment that Heaney derives in his ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ poems which conclude the book. These poems take off from Part II, the Station Island sequence and from Joyce’s precept—‘Let go, let fly, forget. You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note’. The
'tangent' prescribed by Joyce and the 'migrant solitude' are one and the same thing. And finally, the 'Sweeney Redivivus' poems take off from Sweeney Astray and extend fully the imaginative ground that Heaney can traverse with the protagonist of his translation.

'In the Beech' finds the poet's persona perched on a tree, a beech, a 'look-out posted and forgotten'. And in the most representative Heaney position of concrete road on one side and 'bullock's covert' on the other. The intersection of the two as always is significant placement. The beech tree itself is dichotomised as a 'strangeness and a comfort'. It is a comfort because it is rooted in the soil and therefore energises, gives life. At the same time, it has grown into regions of the air and has a detached perspective, a controlling vision from above which renders it a 'strangeness'. The poet's perspective is seen as a vantage one, given the optimum distance.

As in the Glanmore sonnets the incursions of the civilised world are sharply felt and here it is wartime violence. Heaney imagines the tanks as almost phallic violators of the idyll. The war-planes fly so low that the poet-child perched on the tree can see the pilot's goggles pushed back on his forehead and spot the cockpit rivets. The poem ends with Heaney apostrophising the tree:

My hidebound boundary tree. My tree of knowledge.

My thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post. (Sl 100).

The paradox picks up from 'comfort and strangeness'. The poet is at the intersection between the old traditional rural ethos and the modern day ethos of mechanization and violence. He is at midpoint between nearness and distance. He hails it as his 'tree of knowledge' and the uneasy implication of the forbidden fruit is not far away. And, finally, he achieves "a series of subtly modulated pulsations" (Andrews 175) with the last lines 'My thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post'. Andrews (175) brilliantly analyses the movement of this line from the "staccato thump of strongly accented
consonants” ('thick-tapped') through the "middle register" ('soft-fledged') to the "light sibilant sway of the final phase" ('airy listening-post'). The total effect is of a tree that is earth-bound, hard and rooted and at the same time soft, airy and sibilant.

The progression in terms of Heaney’s poetics is clarified if one compares the thrust of this poem with that of ‘Oracle’ in Wintering Out. There, the persona is not perched on the branches but is hidden in the bole of a willow tree. But here, the dimension of airy listening post is added significantly. The regions of the earth and the regions of the air come together and the poet is poised at their intersection. He is holding together in his art, ‘comfort’ and ‘strangeness’, being ‘dialect’ and ‘adept’ all at once.

In ‘The First Kingdom’, the dualism inherently felt between Sweeney’s first kingdom, his original state and his current position of exile is seen as a possible disparity between a primeval world in the bosom of nature, and the modern world. Then was the time when nobility were also toiling on the land, when science had not made such strides and ‘units of measurement were founded / by the careful, barrowful and bucketful’. But they too were not perfect times. There existed then the same calendar customs, rituals, superstitions ‘backyard note of names and mishaps’, murders, deaths in floods, miscarriages. The poet affirms through this sense of continuities, the value of inchoate pieties, cultural and tribal loyalties.

In the last stanza of the poem he contrasts this natural feeling with the kind of jingoism that is prescribed by the society. Heaney now in self-imposed exile from the North, avers that his right to this heritage and tradition, his sense of belonging does not depend upon the tribe’s acclamation of it or its confirmation. It is something that goes deeper than all this endorsement, his right to his First Kingdom:
And seed, breed and generation still
they are holding on, every bit
as pious and exacting and demeaned

(Sl 101).

From his present perspective of detachment and maturity, this is how life in Northern Ireland appears.

The poem obviously works initially and literally at the level of the Sweeney legend; the King in exile, disinherited and ‘astray’ but profoundly and poignantly aware of his rights to the First Kingdom. But beyond a point, the experiences of Sweeney and Heaney become so enmeshed that the reader tends to quite ignore the cursory prop of the legend. The distinctive parallel that come to mind in this context in contemporary British poetry is Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian Hymns in which the persona of King Offa is quite inextricably entwined with that of the poet and the poem works at two levels, in two time segments, simultaneously - namely, the fourteenth century and the twentieth.

The title poem of the section ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ and its sequel ‘Unwinding’ in fact play upon this idea of ‘entwining’ and ‘unwinding’. His head is imagined to be a ‘ball of twine’ wet, dense with soakage since he is stirring wet sand. The poet must learn to ‘unwind’ into a state when he casts off the accretions of tradition, such as a stale sense of responsibility or religion. The ideal position of the artist is thus rendered impressionistically. His art is autonomous and in direct communion with the mystery at the heart of the matter. This necessitates an unlearning of all that he has been conditioned to know hitherto. It is in this section at the conclusion of the book that Heaney makes bold to celebrate the independence of the artist vis-a-vis his community. He leaves behind, for the moment, his accommodating notion of the artist as mediator, bearer of the warm nest eggs making those tracks in the snow towards the people in the big houses.
So the twine unwinds and loosely widens
backward through areas that forwarded
understandings of all I would undertake. (SI 99).

The process of unlearning having begun, Sweeney-Heaney is to launch on his first flight.

I was mired in attachment
until they began to pronounce me
a feeder off battlefields

So I mastered new rungs of the air (SI 102-103).

The criticism levied against North by Heaney’s Northern Critics is obviously alluded to here.

Hereafter, the scenario of the poetry in this section begins to resemble an aviary. ‘Drifting off’ (SI 104-105) traverses the entire metaphorical gamut possible in the kingdom of birds. The poem is a litany of birdlife ‘reminiscent of Sweeney’s paean to the flora and fauna of Ireland in Sweeney Astray. Heaney comments towards the end of the poem that he is inspired by the goldfinch and the kingfisher which ‘rent the veil of the usual’ embodying the untrammelled, even the iconoclastic, spirit of the artist and his genius which can ‘make strange’. The poem concludes with the poet imagining himself as a hawk poised ‘unwieldy / and brimming / my spurs at the ready’. The anthropomorphic view of the winged creatures evokes a definite comparison with Ted Hughes’ Crow, in particular ‘Crow and the Birds’ (Hughes 37) where he establishes a ‘super-ugly language’ and personality for his super-ugly protagonist.
If Ireland is envisioned as a rookery, ‘the master’ of the Birds lives in an ‘unroofed tower’ in complete isolation. The poem ‘The Master’ refers to W.B. Yeats, the single unspoken name that is however hovering constantly in the intercession between Heaney and tradition. Heaney uses the Sweeney persona to take a look at the Master at work in his Tower at Ballylee. The metaphorical significance of the journey to ‘Thoor Ballylee’ and to Yeats’ room cannot be missed:

To get close I had to maintain
a climb up deserted ramparts
and not flinch ...

What is achieved in Yeats’ ‘book of with-holding’ is not arcane. The rules governing his poetry are old and time-tested. But the book is distinctive and ‘masterly’ because it is solidly structured, permanent like the Tower itself. Heaney uses words such as ‘blocked’, ‘volume’, ‘measure’, ‘space’, ‘quarrymen’s hammers and wedges’, ‘coping stones’ to suggest the Tower metaphor and the architectonic mastery of Yeats’ craft:

Like quarrymen’s hammers and wedges proofed
by intransigent service
Like coping stones where you rest
in the balm of the wellspring.

Yeats’ boldness and courage of spirit, his sense of the autonomy of his art, are exemplary to Heaney here. There is not merely awe on Heaney’s side but also a sense of identification. “Indeed Heaney’s steadfast refusal over the years to go to school to Yeats—this poem’s open admiration, notwithstanding—testifies to the strength and autonomy of his vision and poetics” (Foster 108). Neil Corcoran takes it further and calls the poem almost an allegory of Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, the master as a precursor poet “against whom Heaney’s art must struggle in order
properly to define and articulate itself" (Corcoran 174). In Heaney's case, it is not as much a struggle now as "a bold inspection" of the Master's art and a subsequent endorsement of his own notions regarding the autonomy of art. So once again, Heaney is looking not for guidance but for endorsement from his preceptor

How flimsy I felt climbing down
the unrailed stairs on the wall,
hearing the purpose and venture
in a wingflap above me. (SI 110).

Yeats is the rook in the tower, always ready to launch into a detached flight much in the manner of Hopkins' 'Windhover' ('the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.') In fact, Heaney in Preoccupations classifies Hopkins and Yeats together as 'public' poets, whose poetry is a mastery over form and a masculine 'siring' as against the yielding, incubating, feminine mode of writing exemplified by Keats or Wordsworth. Heaney suddenly appears to be seized by a feeling of inadequacy which is subtly, craftily preempted by the over-riding achievement of this poem itself, its integrity, its enduring value.

Later, in The Place of Writing (1989), Heaney comes to terms with the example of Yeats and writes out what reads as a paraphrase of this poem 'The Master.' The essay is entitled "The Place of Writing: W.B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee" and treats of not the young Yeats of Sligo country but the Yeats of middle-age, "a poet with a domineering rather than a grateful relation to place, one whose poems have created a country of the mind rather than the other way round (and the more usual way) where the country has created the mind which in turn creates the poems" (PW 21).
‘On the Road’ is the poem that concludes the book, and even more than earlier transition poems ‘Personal Helicon’, ‘Bogland’, ‘Westering’ or ‘Exposure’, this one serves as a resume of Heaney’s poetic career till date and as a pointer to the possible course his poetry might take. To begin with the poem sustains the overriding leitmotif of the journey, the pilgrimage or the migration in _Station Island_. The poet is at the wheel, driving, holding the steering wheel, which is described as a circle with an empty space at its centre. Commencing with this typical sterility, the poem drifts to the parable of the rich young man and his question to Christ about the way to salvation and when he is told

‘Sell all you have
and give to the poor’

(Sl 119-120).

The Christ-figure is imaged as a bird wheeling overhead and is sure to have an authoritative wingflap. The ornithological correspondences with Sweeney are maintained and the poet launches himself on the journey recommended by Christ. Sweeney-in-exile and Heaney ‘on the road’ pass by the chapel gable and the churchyard wall

Where hand after hand
Keeps wearing away
at the cold, hard-breasted

Votive granite ...

( Sl 120).

The migration takes him into a high cave-mouth through the soft-nubbed, clay-floored passage, face-brush, ‘wing-flap to the deepest chamber’. It is a journey to the realisation of the innermost being. The quest ends with the vision of a drinking deer carved in the rock face perfectly contoured, straining for water ‘at a dried-up source’. The inward journey has brought him to a prehistoric primordial zone beyond religion
and nationality to the deer of poetry referred to earlier in 'A Migration' and in 'King of the Ditchbacks'. It is a classic symbol suggesting transcendence.

Heaney is at this stage in his creative life, like the deer, at 'a dry point of exhaustion', of sterility and desolation. But he does not despair. He foresees, on the other hand, that for his new 'book of changes' he will emerge from the dust of his old poetry with a renewed energy:

For my book of changes
I would meditate
That stone-faced vigil
until the long dumbfounded
spirit broke cover
to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion.

The self-referentiality of Heaney's poetry is at its height here since it is thematically necessary. The degree to which he quotes himself indicates how truly dried-up his sources are and how he needs to recharge his creative powers and redirect them. Painstakingly, critics have identified echoes from his earlier poetry. At the outset, there is the 'artesian' quatrain form that is as dated as Wintering Out and North with a proliferation of hyphenated coinages 'face-brush', 'wing-flap' (which is not hyphenated in 'The Master') 'soft-numbed', 'stone-faced' etc. The image of the road 'reeling in' harks back to Westering in Wintering Out: 'Roads unreeled, unreeled ...'. 'Broke cover' recalls 'Badgers'. The very image of the poet driving at the wheel, becoming the archetypal figure of the man in quest of meaning, goes back to 'The Plantation', 'The Peninsula', 'Night Drive', Section II of 'Station Island' or 'Westering' to name only a few. The predominant use of the optative 'I would meditate', 'I would migrate',
'I would roost', is also identifiable as a technique revoked from the bog poems, 'these conditionals suggesting both speculative fantasy projection, and past experience gained through habitual action' (Andrews 184). Heaney thus reiterates these (now jaded) mannerisms and subjects his work to a relentless scrutiny. This plight and his self-awareness are like that of the Yeats of 'The Circus Animals’ Desertion' wherein the fatigue-ridden Master comes to terms with the 'foul rag-and-bone-shop of the heart.' Heaney's font of exhaustion, however, works on the several meanings that the word 'font' carries. 'Font' may be 'fountain' 'baptismal basin' 'source of plenty' or 'set of type' as Andrews has deciphered it. The oxymoronic status of the word gives rise to rich possibilities in terms of his future creative endeavours. It is almost as if his critics stand warned about expression crystallised opinions about Heaney's art which is still in mid-career and still throwing challenges constantly at the reader. The last word on this must be the poet's as said to Haffenden in an interview-- "The tune is not called for the poet, he calls the tune" (Haffenden, Interview 28). And one certainly can detect the 'purpose and venture' in that masterly 'wingflip.'

The scheme of things in *Station Island* as a book, then, is that while in Part I and II, Heaney is penitential and lends himself to tutoring and advice, in Part III he uses Sweeney as an analogue for his own experience and flies into a realm of autonomy, assurance and even arrogance. The 'Shelf Life' objects of Part I and others such as the granite chip or the kite are object lessons which strive to impart a discipline by example to the poet. The 'Station Island' sequence has artistic and historical exemplars guiding Heaney through self-inquisition but, significantly, they endorse more tellingly and convincingly than they exhort and Heaney is, at the end of it, poised to strike his own note. In Part III, the ventriloquist Widgeon cries take over the poetry totally, and Sweeney is used as a mask to such an extent that at times the two strands of the 'twinning' are not distinguishable. Though he does not in Part