PREFACE

I began reading Seamus Heaney seven years ago, quite by chance. Flipping through the pages of a journal, casually, I stumbled upon ‘Digging’—appropriately, the first poem of his first book, quoted in full. Something snapped to attention within me. I later knew that such a positive response had been touched off by my dismayed reading of largely nihilistic or hysterical contemporary poetry. As Heaney would put it, nothing in all of that ‘connected’ with the scripts written within my being. I connected with the affirmative thrust of the writing, the earthy diction, the physical rhythms of the verse and the authenticity of the poet’s voice. It was only later when I, predictably, took up Heaney’s poetry as subject for my M.Phil. dissertation, that I went on to analyse.

I based that modest dissertation on the first three books of poems that Heaney published—Death of a Naturalist, Door Into the Dark, Wintering Out—and glanced obliquely at North in conclusion. ‘Digging’ then fell into place as a manifesto poem of sorts and larger issues of Irish literary history, of tradition and identity, began to emerge. The poet professed himself an avowed traditionalist and, yet, seemed to endorse the emphasis of post-modernist poetics, namely, a profound self-reflexiveness.

When I registered for my doctoral programme, in 1989, I was initially fascinated by the broad, umbrella-term ‘Regionalism’ (a logical outcome of my study of Heaney). I wished to do a comparative study of the tropes of regionalism as rehearsed by Anglo-Irish, Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Scots writers and this would, in turn, tie up cognisably with my reading of Indo-Anglian poets. It would simultaneously involve widening the scope of the thesis, and bringing the ideological content of it closer home.
However, after a few months spent making forays into Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Scots poetry, I realised that this would inevitably entail simplifying and strait-jacketing individual poets and do them, in the last analysis, a disservice. Besides, Heaney had made such rapid, gigantic strides as a poet and warranted a whole-length study involving eight books of poems, a major work of translation, three books of discursive prose. The growth was not merely quantitative. There was a progression in his poetics too. When I read The Haw Lantern in 1988 after I had spent two years dabbling in the early poetry, I realised that only the originary impetus was unchanged. His poetry was still rooted in Derry but the region had become an abstraction, an idea. 'Mould-hugger' had become 'parablist'. His writing seemed to have acquired a greater linguistic freedom probably deriving from his American experience. With a mild sense of shock registered, I began to fill in the gaps in my knowledge.

This dissertation is, in the main, a critical response to Heaney's corpus of writing till date. It has kept abreast of Heaney, to the extent possible, and includes a consideration of Seeing Things, his latest book of poems published in 1991. I cannot lay claim to making any major contention about a poet who is still writing at the top of his bent. As he has pronounced with a sense of new-found confidence and authority, "The tune is not called for the poet. The poet calls the tune."

There is a discernible pattern governing the work of Heaney which manifests itself as the profound dialectic of tradition and the forces of gravity on the one hand, autonomy and buoyancy on the other. Given the socio-cultural and literary contexts which determine his poetry, this dialectic or "DNA pattern", as Heaney defines it, is worked out from a fundamental rootedness in the poetics of earth to an attempted transcendence of it into regions of the air. The early poetry formulates the terms of the dichotomy but is grounded firmly in native soil. The poems of Wintering Out and
North politicize the terrain, mythologize Irish origin and at the same time begin to confess subtly to the validity of English influence. *Field Work* strives to shed the burden of representativeness and probes the nature of loyalties, communal or social. Heaney deliberately demythologizes his consciousness and begins to intuit the extraordinary in the quotidian. He also begins to fight free of the vowel of earth and finds in the persona of Sweeney a possible release. *Station Island* works out moralistically Heaney's self-exoneration and his bid for untrammelled utterance. It is, perhaps, the most necessary book for Heaney to have written and it makes way for his "book of changes", *The Haw. Lantern* which emerges from the sterile 'font of exhaustion'. In it one finds the exemplary spectacle of "a poet taking a crowbar to a perfected style", unwriting his earlier style. But the world of the poems is not, as yet, depoliticized. The political spirit that informs the poetry is rendered in the form of the moralistic, abstract parable, located in a visionary Ulster. The place no longer nourishes the poet. The poet, instead, seizes the place with his imagination and puts his visionary imprint upon it. *Seeing Things*, finally, lays to rest the New Critical prescription of ambivalence which characterized Heaney's work. In it Heaney breaks through to 'fleetness, furtherance', 'a letting go of our usual hold upon ourselves'. There is not a single instance of irony in the entire book. He embraces, without guilt, and unabashedly, the active and the responsive voices.

I have charted the course of this growth chronologically, obviously so, since the poet is still writing prolifically and throwing challenges at the reader. Going counter to the declarations made by critics that Heaney's work has suffered a stasis attributable to the stranglehold that this dichotomy has over his work, I have attempted to show that Heaney has emerged from his interaction with tradition undebilitated, and in fact, strengthened. The rich, eclectic prospecting that he has
done in tradition--familial, ethnic or literary--has endorsed the universal in the local and has rendered his poetry a zealously humanistic endeavour.
The following is the list of abbreviations which have been used to represent Seamus Heaney's works cited.

DN - Death of a Naturalist
DD - Door Into the Dark
WO - Wintering Out
SP - Selected Poems 1965-1975
FW - Field Work
P - Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978
SA - Sweeney Astray
SI - Station Island
HL - The Haw Lantern
GT - The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978 1987
PW - The Place of Writing
NSP - New Selected Poems: 1966-1987
ST - Seeing Things