Chapter III

Seamus Heaney's Poetry: Continuities and Discontinuities
representation of things in the world'.\textsuperscript{91} To use Yeats' words the will must not usurp the work of the imagination'. But confesses that the power of poetry as a mode of redress – an agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices is being appealed to constantly in the twentieth century and after. But in spite of external stimuli poetry 'has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify'.\textsuperscript{92} This is in perfect accord with Heaney's own poetic practice of not supplying poems with readymade meanings but maneuvering between positionings to achieve a more complex and nuanced response. His own poetry is a consistent effort to become 'a working model of inclusive consciousness'. The resultant 'alternative truth' provided by poetry is of primary importance for 'as long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counter-weighting function, it becomes another truth to which we can have recourse', before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.\textsuperscript{93}


\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid}, p 8.

Seamus Heaney (b. 1939) is undoubtedly the most written about poet in the English speaking world today. Critical acclaim has been abundant and ecumenical: "The greatest Irish poet since W.B. Yeats"\(^1\) to "The one undoubtedly major poet in the English – speaking world".\(^2\) Terry Eagleton comments: "Heaney has been much praised, and properly so; he probably is one of the finest English-language poets of the century".\(^3\) Heaney’s poetry and prose present a formidable body of work – nineteen books of poetry, nine poetry pamphlets, two books of selected poems, one book – length verse translation, three collections of essays, one play and two anthologies

---

of poetry. Few writers in their lifetime achieve the kind of popularity and reputation that Seamus Heaney has. Rand Brandes, co-author of a comprehensive bibliography of Heaney materials, believes:

more critical and media attention has been focused on Heaney and his work than any other contemporary Irish poet and perhaps any other poet in the English-speaking world outside of America in the last thirty years.⁴

That British poetry experienced a state of passivity and decline in the 1960s, and onwards is well known. The genre had clearly spent itself (like the novel before it) and no new genuine ‘poet’ was likely to succeed T.S Eliot in England. Martin Booth comments on the state of confusion and atrophy that defined British poetry in the years 1960-1970:

British poetry is a mess: it has lost itself in a bog of indifference, apathy and artlessness such as it has never seen before.⁵

But poetic impetus was provided to poetry written in English by a group of Northern Irish Writers or Ulster poets including Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and, of course, Seamus

Heaney. Christopher Ricks heralds Heaney’s poetry as an inventive, fertile corrective to the atrophied condition of modern British poetry: “Literary gentlemen who remain un stirred by Seamus Heaney’s poems will simply be announcing that they are unable to give up the habit of disillusionment with recent poetry. The power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection Death of a Naturalist is outstanding.” 6 It was towards this innovative brand of poets writing out of strife-ridden Ireland that English poetry looked for thematic and technical sustenance. This poetry rehabilitated the regionalism that the Movement poets had scorned and consequently became a model and inspiration for ‘mainland’ verse. Thus, Ulster poetry has been useful to the English writers helping them to turn English provincialism into an authentic regionalism. David Perkins distinguishes mainstream British poetry from poetry produced in Ireland:

In the first twenty years of this century the situation of writers in Ireland differed fundamentally from those of England. Irish Nationalism was the turbulent centre of cultural life, and works of literature, like everything else, were informed by it and viewed in

Seamus Heaney's is perhaps the most important voice to embrace this nationalistic metaphor with a remarkable depth and nuance of poetic response. His career presents a dazzling example of the intersection of various forces: the intersection of the Self and Poetry, of Poetry and Politics or the consort of "lyric gift with communal disaster", of the individual utterance thus represented with the ultimate claim[s] of Art itself – poetry as its own redemptive force and Poetry 'as the language of the tribe'. These contending issues lend to Heaney's poetry a peculiarity, a strength and fluidity that merit a detailed and rewarding attention to his canon.

Writing from an explicitly articulated sense of an indigenous tradition-Heaney clearly has no affinity with "the Eliot Voice," though he confesses to being influenced by Ted Hughes whose atavisms too did not particularly fall within the urbanized themes of mainstream English poetry either. Heaney praises Hughes poetry for its "tremendous dynamo" and finds him particularly inspirational for

---


“[Hughes’] ... rebellion against a certain kind of demeaned, mannerly voice” and for “the release that reading his work gave [Heaney]”.

Whether seen as an act of cultural realignment or a contemporary poet grappling with his role as poetic spokesperson in a constantly changing global scenario, Heaney’s is clearly the poetic voice that has freed itself of the constricting confines of the dominant literary/cultural legacy of Britain.

It is interesting however, that Heaney achieves this distinctness not by a radical innovativeness or by challenging our preconceptions with a new poetic form. Instead, he works with what is available to him bringing to it great powers of expression. John Forster Wilson identifies the following characteristics of Heaney’s poetry: “Single mindedness of purpose, a fertile continuity of theme, increasing competence in execution [and] an unmistakability of voice”. He further comments: “Beyond sales and celebrity, Heaney has raised the name of ‘poet’ to an exalted honorific, and he has been the uncrowned laureate...in Ireland where poets, like nationalist heroes, have

historically been held in devout reverence. By the 1970s Heaney was beyond hailing distance of most younger British poets.

The first issue to be taken into account about Heaney’s poetry is the distinctness that the poetic voice possesses, a voice emanating out of a troubled historical situation and the strong individual response to this situation. One of the seminal tropes of Northern Irish poetry would be “the attractions and liabilities of home”. Heaney belongs to what is politically speaking Northern Ireland; officially part of the United Kingdom, but a political unease exists in the north. Catholics form a minority in the Protestant and Unionist north but a majority in the whole of Ireland. This has led to internal strife in the form of sectarian rivalry often resulting in bloodshed. The resultant pressure on a Catholic poet like Heaney writing out of troubled times is immense: to voice the predicament of his own community and to give adequate poetic representation to the complexities of the situation. In this sense Heaney becomes the immaculate “Irish” poet brimming with a strongly felt concept of identity who in due allegiance to the demands of art teases out to its fullest extent the

enabling as well as hindering aspects of identitarian nationalism. An overriding concern with the nation is thus mandatory for the Irish poet whether in the role of cultural revivalist (Yeats) cultural dissenter (Joyce) or cultural pioneer (Kavanagh). Helen Vendler states

[Heaney’s poetry] is an oeuvre of strong social engagement looking steadily and with stunning poetic force at what it means to be a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland.\(^{13}\)

But also adds:

Heaney has made imaginative cast after another in an attempt to represent the almost unrepresentable collective suffering of the North, yet it has tried equally consistently, to bring intellectual reflection to the emotional attitudes that too often yield, the binary position taking of propaganda.\(^{14}\)

Cultural commentators and analysts have diagnosed that no simple solution to the “Irish question” exists. Instead, the long standing conflict shows no signs of essential resolution. Richard Rankin Russell comments:

A model of hope and transformation exists, however, in Seamus Heaney’s body of work. What Heaney offers in his best poetry

---


...is transformative, more than just a print - out of the given circumstances of its time and place. The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them.\(^{15}\)

The frontier of writing that Heaney’s poetry explores becomes then no mere revivalist exercise but increasingly gives credence to the realistic as well as the imaginative.

Helen Vendler sees the poems, not only as immersed in the mythos and logos of his own community but also as poems with an unmistakable aesthetic appeal. She argues for the technical virtuosity and mastery over these overriding autobiographical and political aspects that Heaney’s poetry exhibits:

These thematic elements do not by themselves make for memorable poetry. The powerful symbols Heaney has found for his poetry are responsible for much of its effect. His commentators find themselves talking not merely of but within those powerful symbols... The exhumed bodies in North, the Lough Derg Pilgrims in Station Island, the political parables of frontiers and islands in the The Haw lantern [Heaney] has made out of his

The validity of this remark is borne out by the trajectory of Heaney’s poetic development itself. Heaney’s earliest volumes *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969) are clearly written in the Revivalist – Pastoral mode, with autobiography blending into locale to inscribe a notion of Self and nationhood. *Wintering Out* is a kind of a break with the bucolic earth bound earlier poetry; instead it resounds with themes which are of urgency to the poet; sectarian warfare, the long-standing rivalry with Britain etc. *North* is the most overtly political of Heaney’s volumes of poetry, representative, to many, of the agony of a community, in strife torn Northern Ireland, from a Catholic’s point of view. The real shift in poetic style comes with *Field Work*, as Heaney struggles to find a balance between the conflicting claims of attachment and an ideal of personal and artistic freedom. From here on, in such volumes as *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*, his poetry undergoes a profound transformation as the poet increasingly takes up issues not dealt with in the pre-*Station Island* poems—Death, the Transcendent, Absence and the Spiritual. The earthy realism of the earlier poetry gives way to “a bright

---

nowhere"¹⁷ and the accompaniments of this longing, which to some critics leads to an aesthetically liminal position, a quality that ultimately proves enabling for the poet who gains in poetic technique from this self division, since the political, however obliquely, does make a claim on the later poetry as well.

_Death of a Naturalist_ (1966), together with the volume _Door into the Dark_ (1969), derive their primary material from his own origins, his rural childhood and young manhood in Country Derry. The observed and recollected facts of his early rural experience are conveyed in a language of great sensuous richness and directness: farming practices like digging potatoes and turf, picking black berries, churning butter and ploughing are all rendered in poems of which the most obvious characteristic is their robust imagery. Poems such as _Seed Cutters_ then stand for the poet’s recognition of the immemorial nature of the work done on the family farm, which he is intent on perpetuating in language. It is in these early poems that _Heaneyspeak_, a term coined by Seamus Deane for Heaney’s rich, physicality of tone would be at its best. The ‘crackle’ and ‘pop’ “the squelch and slap/of soggy peat” of Heaney’s earlier diction has been a subject of much of the critical debate about Heaney’s style. Tony Curtis comments that it

---

is in *Death of a Naturalist* that “Heaney’s powers of language are employed orchestrally with a full score for the percussion”.18

The poem that was to be the most celebrated in these debut volumes was “Digging” – The poem that opens *Death of a Naturalist* and in many ways opens a career.

It clearly has the charge of a manifesto or statement of intent. The subject is “working the earth”, a digging for Self, Identity and a digging into history. Heaney indicates his sense of the poem’s significance when he writes in *Preoccupations*.

*Digging*, in fact, was the name of the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words, or to put it more accurately, where I thought my feel had gone into words... this was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words. I felt I had let down a shaft into real life.19

Commenting on the importance of landscape and its emotive hold over the imagination of the poet, Harold Bloom identifies as Heaney’s “central trope, the vowel of the earth”.20
Digging registers many of the themes and concerns that would dominate his early poetry, in addition to providing an early glimpse of certain other issues that would surface as important elements in the later work.

During this early phase, the role of poetry, for Heaney, is clearly archeological:

poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself, poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city, poetry as dig, a dig for finds...  

The poem is quoted below:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests, snug as a gun. Under my window, a clean rasping sound
when the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down.
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands
My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head
But I have no spade to follow men like them
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.  

The language of *Digging* introduces us to what would become for much of his career, Heaney’s dominant register. Of the three men in the poem, grandfather, father and son, it is the son who is the odd man out. But the ‘digging’ image has in it, room for the ‘pen’ as poetry will be used as a means of revealing the memories and the traditions that impel Heaney to see his own poetic vocation as one more man digging. In this poem, and others like it, tradition and locale become important for the poet and subsume for the time being any attempt at individualization. But digging in one form or the other remained the archetypal act in Heaney’s poetry long after *Death of a Naturalist*.

Poems are thus used here as soundings, that probe the landscape for a shared and diminished culture, interpreting the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past.

*Digging* is itself centrally concerned with this issue of

22 Seamus Heaney. *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*. London: Faber & Faber, 1990, p 1. All subsequent references to the poems are from the same edition and are indicated in the parenthesis. NSP refers to the title of the anthology.
alienation and the need somehow to negotiate the distance between origins and present circumstances. If he cannot literally ‘dig’, he can ‘dig’ metaphorically, unearthing the details of the life of his family and community and honoring them by preserving them in verse.

Helen Vendler comments:

> These early poems memorialize a way of life which the poet does not want to follow, could not follow but none the less recognizes as forever a part of his inner landscape.23

The poem is also strikingly at odds with poetry of the mainstream “English” poetic tradition. The theme of manual labor metamorphosing into heroic possibility is not frequently celebrated in English Poetry. To find work treated as heroic activity, the closest and most apt parallel is in Ireland, his ‘guru’ Patrick Kavanagh. In a sense, Heaney draws his primary inspiration as poet-to-be from Kavanagh’s description of the rudiments of Irish rural life. Kavanagh’s assumption that such Irish rural experience was a proper subject for poetry in English was genuinely liberating for Heaney. He makes the point when he says “I have no need to write a poem to Patrick

---

Kavanagh: I wrote *Death of a Naturalist*.24 Numerous poems in *Death of a Naturalist* like *Black Berry Picking, Cow in Calf*, derive their sustenance from Kavanagh’s major poem, *The Great Hunger*. Heaney’s preoccupation with and commitment to the legacy of Kavanagh would be an abiding concern throughout the former’s career.

A remark of Heaney’s from his interview with John Haffenden also seems relevant. It is concerned with a distinction between what he calls the ‘Antaeus’ sensibility and the ‘Hercules’ sensibility. Antaeus is the son of Ge, the Earth—mother, and whenever he is thrown he gains renewed strength from his contact with the earth. Hercules can only overcome him by lifting him away from the earth, into the air of the latter. The possibility of the play of ‘intelligence’, becomes a shaping factor in his later poetry, but *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* are both molded by the poet-as-Anteaeus—a native, an earth-grubber, in touch with the ground.

Andrew Murphy comments:

> Antaeus serves as a figure for the native communities who opposed the advance of colonialism throughout the world. The struggle of these traditional, pastoral earthbound societies was...

always doomed to failure, as they faced an adversary whose technological advantage and whose world view always outstripped and exceeded that of the communities who resisted them.25

Or Heaney himself:

The Hercules – Anteaus thing came to seem like a myth of colonization almost – that Antaeus is a native, an earth gruber, in touch with the ground, and you get this intelligent and superior interloper who debilitates the native by raising him, taking him out of his culture, his element, and leaving him without force. You could think of Ireland in those terms.26

One could think of Pablo Neruda, another poet whose pleasures are more of the Antaean kind.

Heaney’s own distinction between ‘Craft’ and ‘technique’ could be illustrative here. If “craft” is the “skill of making”, technique, according to him “involves not only a poet’s way with words…it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality”.27 In these early volumes, Heaney connects craft and technique in order to express a deeply felt attitude towards

community in a language that possesses a brilliant evocative power of the physical, The poetry being “visceral rather than intellectual, making its effect by the exploration of image rather than by discursive argument…”. In the early volumes the aim is then clear: a Revivalist mode, expressed in sensuous diction, that concerns itself primarily with landscape as sacramental, enmeshed further with the issue of Identity. Though an explicitly Nationalistic dimension enters the poetry with North, Heaney tackles in these early volumes, the notion of history, and often makes his poems points of intersection between history, legend, myth and contemporary politics. A point of departure in Heaney, it distances his own passionate commitment to landscape from Kavanagh’s poem The Great Hunger. Kavanagh’s poem is rooted in the here and now. There is no sense of the present being suffused with the past. As Heaney said “At the bottom of Kavanagh’s imagination there is no pagan queen, no mystique of the national, the mythic or the tribal”. What Kavanagh offered in his long antipastoral was an anguished denunciation of the spiritual starvation of country life on the hillsides of County Monaghan, uncomplicated by


any cultural or national purpose. But even in his early as yet undeveloped political poems, Heaney explores not just the history of his people, disinheritcd and dispossessed but he probes the psychic roots of his community to discover an identity bound to immolation and propitiation. He works within the 'adequate symbols' that he as poet conjures up as part of his response to the slaughter, not within any premeditated scheme of thought.

Requiem for the Croppies is an 'early' Heaney poem but an important site for the interplay of the above mentioned forces. In a recognizably oblique way, Heaney celebrates not the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916 (which is its apparent theme) but what he considers its original seed in the rebellion of 1798. The 'Croppies' were defeated by the superior technology of British weaponry: "Terraced thousands died, shaking scythe at canon" (NSP.12). The croppies are then seen as resurrected and the poet's piety creates for them the self-epitaph that their lack of funeral rites or a gravestone denied them. Neil Corcoran observes:

Heaney's poem makes its nationalist sympathies clear when its final line And in August the barley grew up out of the Grave weaves into its image of seasonal renewal, the sense of political
Heaney offers his own gloss on the ending of the poem in *Preoccupations*:

> The poem was born of and ended with an image of resurrection… the oblique implication was that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the year of liberty [1798] had flowered in what Yeats called “The right rose tree of 1916.”

What Heaney seeks to do, in *Requiem for the Croppies* is to affect a sense of historical continuity between Irish acts of resistance across the centuries – from the uprising of 1798 to that of 1916.

The Easter Uprising of 1916 and other such political events clearly become for Irish writers potent cultural symbols that quicken the poet into a powerful and resonant poetry.

Another peculiar cultural symbol that Heaney invents for mythicizing purposes is the geographical wet-land known as the bog in Ireland. Heaney elevates the “bog” from a mossy wetland into a national and cultural repository.

---


The poem *Bogland* concludes *Dig or into the Dark* and is very much a new beginning rather than an ending and contains within itself the capacity for further development and extension. It is no longer any particular farmland or personal experience Heaney is digging into, but terrain of a different scope: the whole substance of Ireland – the poem celebrates and mythicizes a preservative amorphousness wherein are discovered historical and symbolical dimensions unsuspected in *Death of a Naturalist*.

Heaney’s own comment on the poem throws light on the intricacies that have entered his art:

> It was the first poem of mine that I felt had the status of symbol in some way; it wasn’t trapped in its own anecdote, or its own closing – off: it seemed to have some kind of wind blowing through it that could carry on.\(^{32}\)

*Bogland* apart from its function as a revivifying symbol in Heaney’s poetry could also be seen as Heaney’s heroic, answering national myth to the American concept of the frontier – the prairie. The American pioneering spirit and its fulfillment through movement, advance and exploration is countered by Heaney’s definition of Irish

topographical experience:

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening, Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white. The ground itself is kind, black butter
Melting and opening underfoot
Missing its last definition
By millions of years
They'll never dig coal here
Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards
Each layer they strip
Seems camped on before
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage
The wet centre is bottomless.” (NSP. 17)

Bogland is earthed in the actual. A landscape is presented but contemplated with such intensity and susceptibility that it becomes a prospect of the mind and the image and expression of culture.

The archaic, primeval level of history and national consciousness in Ireland is made clear and the value and distinctness of this cultural and racial icon is spelt out artistically, in complex symbolic terms. That Heaney should elevate the familiar, Irish Bog into a poignant poetic metaphor is evidence of his commitment to the theme of identity and locale which finds expression even in his later,
more sophisticated style.

Heaney's third volume *Wintering Out* (1972), contains some of the earlier themes, but also hints or gestures towards the realities of the contemporary historical situation though without the directness of *North*. Neil Corcoran hails *Wintering Out* as a volume wherein Heaney taking command of his "proper material, seems hardly able to keep up with itself; it is a volume in which the promise of future work is almost as satisfying as the recognition of present achievement."\(^3\)

*Wintering Out* is also seen as a transitional volume, a break with the bucolic, earth bound poetry of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*. *Wintering Out* has thus a more resounding feel of a poet enlarging upon themes which are of urgency: sectarian warfare, the long-standing rivalry with Britain, which are given an immediacy through poetic means.

Most of the poems in *Wintering Out* were written between 1969 and 1973, a time when the political situation in Northern Ireland had become suddenly volatile and violent. Heaney comments:

> There was an energy and excitement and righteousness in the air at

---

that time, by people like myself who hadn’t always been political.\textsuperscript{34}

With the resurgence of the “Troubles”, Heaney’s notion of what poetry should be changed:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.\textsuperscript{35}

That Heaney will speak the language of the tribe is imminent, the question is, will his artistic impulses be satisfied with a static creed? As Heaney progresses poetically, a more complex and pluralistic sense of political identity emerges. However, in volumes such as \textit{Wintering Out} and \textit{North}, Heaney is clearly immersed within the “givens” of his culture, and within the foundationalist positioning that that immersion demands.

The prefatory poem \textit{Whatever you Say, Say nothing} is an example: it draws for its title upon the famous Northern Catholic reticence, of keeping one’s counsel, saying nothing, intoning the clichés of communication for safety’s sake:

\begin{quote}
One sides as bad as the other never worse
\end{quote}


where bad news is no longer news
where media – men and stringers shift and point
where zoom lenses
litter the hotels ‘Backlash’ and crackdown.
Is there a life before death?
Coherent miseries, a bite and sup,
We hug our little destiny again. (NSP. 79-80)

A satirical piece, that is memorable for its plain language and almost journalistic reportage of the situation, yet redeemed by its ending, that registers a kind of cynicism that comes from bitter familiarity through suffering. In the closing lines of the poem, an entire community settles down to the desperate mundanity of the conflict.

This poem and Wintering Out in general attempts to find a voice for this abjection. The rest of the poems in the book have to be read in the context of this numbed despair. Accordingly, the poetry in Wintering Out “is everywhere bruised by Northern politics, even though rarely confronting them directly”.36 According to Neil Corcoran, the volume “gestures towards the realities of the contemporary historical moment rather than attempting to address them with any specificity or intimacy”.37 The reason for this obliquity is that the poems are subtly responsive and alert to the political

37 Ibid., p 28.
conflict but are at the same time concerned to be poetry, not political positioning. Heaney's own pre-occupation with the definition and function of poetry becomes evident in this volume as:

the poems [in Wintering Out] hover intricately between the literal and the symbolic, realism and allegory, politics and philology... they avoid the snares of ideological declaration and received opinion. Instead they feel tentatively along the lines that bind an individual to his people and a people to its history.38

Wintering Out has its own bog poem, Bogoak a poem meditating on oak wood retrieved from the bogland, and deriving from it a colonial history in which the “great” poet of Elizabethan England, Edmund Spenser is heavily implicated. The poem is an indictment of Spenser’s treatise A View of the Present State of Ireland, in which the Irish peasantry are shown in a wretched light, the author calling them “antimonies of death”, Heaney comments in a Guardian article:

From his castle in Cork, (Spenser) watched the effects of a campaign designed to settle the Irish question. “Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not carry them; they looked like anatomies of death...” At that point I feel closer to the natives, the

In its minimal, unostentatious style, the poem registers clear sympathy for these historically dispossessed and maltreated and for their successors, “The moustached/dead, the creel filters”. (NSP. 19)

A poem like *Bogoak* shows how tangentially and suspiciously related a poet like Heaney is to the supreme Renaissance/English poetic tradition of which the *Fairie Queen* is emblematic, and which perhaps was the flower of a culture whose roots lay in the brutal realities described in the *State of Ireland*.

*Wintering Out* stands out for another act of cultural retrieval or repossession: the group of “place-name” poems justly acclaimed by most critics as a potent act of cultural and linguistic decolonization. Some of the most famous of these are *Anahorish, Broagh, Toome*. Almost like love poems in their outpouring of emotional communion with these geographical places, *Anahorish, Broagh, Toome, Derrygrave* are names of what is known and loved cherished, because of their tribal, etymological implications. Heaney thinks of himself as survivor, a repository, a keeper: names and place names are precious because

---

they are bearers of history and ancestry, resonant clues of a shared and diminished culture. This tradition of place-name poems again is alien to mainstream English poetry but is indigenous to native Irish literature, the tradition of the dinnschenchas, or love of place-names.

The tradition of place – names poems then, seizes “a world from a word”:

Anahorish, soft gradient
of consonant,vowel – meadow
My ‘place of clear water’
the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass. (NSP. 21)

It is almost an act of translation – a bringing to surface of a suppressed language – Irish, and its associate cultural paradigms.

Andrew Murphy states that what Heaney presents here is:

a narrative of decolonization [wherein] the native language returns [as in most postcolonial cultures, especially Indian and African] to supplant the language that banished it – over running the imperial ‘demesnes’ and ‘consonants’ (Heaney writes elsewhere that the thinks of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants) and displacing
Heaney’s image for this displacement is the repossessing of the colonizers ‘bleaching greens’ by the native grass symbolic of the Irish pastoral farming tradition, a figurative taking back of the land from the colonist. It has been observed of the poem *Broagh* that it has significance in Heaney’s work altogether disproportionate to its length. In terms of a linguistic retrieval, *Broagh* functions supremely. Heaney comments on the pronunciation of “Broagh” noting “That last gh/ the strangers found / difficult to manage.” (NSP. 25). The harsh sounding final phoneme of *Broagh* indicates a sound that has been largely lost within the English language. Linguistically, the correct pronunciation of Broagh serves simultaneously to unite the divided communities of the North, ultimately to set them apart from the alien community of the English, establishing their identity as the “Other”.

The Irish writers’ usage of the English language is fraught with an acute sense of unease, an unsettled state as he finds himself dually poised: the allegiance to the English literary tradition and to the native Irish/Gaelic tongue “silenced” by the colonial presence of the English. The issue of language is taken up brilliantly by Heaney in the poem...
Traditions: The title a reference to the dual traditions that the Irish poet inherits – English and Irish. This poem establishes akin to Joyce, the dichotomy between a native and an ‘acquired’ tongue, the poem becomes a major enunciation of the consciousness of “Linguistic otherness”\(^{41}\) that the Irish writer compels upon himself (see chapter I, Joyce) to set up a cultural paradigm at once indigenous and separate from the homogenizing colonial language “English”.

Our guttural muse
was bullied long ago
by the alliterative tradition
while custom, that “most sovereign mistress,
Beds us down into the British Isles.
We are to be proud of our Elizabethan English.
We ‘deem’ or we allow. (NSP. 45)

This first section likens Elizabethan English to that “alliterative tradition” which, following the Elizabethan plantation of Ireland, has “bullied”; raped, masculinely forced its will upon “the guttural muse” of the native Irish language. The initial act of rape is followed by acceptance of custom who “beds us down into/ The British Isles.’ We are to be proud ‘suggests another enforcement, it is not the same as “we are proud.”

The poem reaches its emotional intensity in the third, final section where Heaney invokes Mac Morris, the first stage Irishman from Henry V, who is also especially sensitive about his “Nation”

\[\text{What is my nation?} \]
\[\text{Ish a villain,} \]
\[\text{and a bastard and knave,} \]
\[\text{and a rascal. What Ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?}^{42}\]

The dominant question, Mac Morris onward would always be one of nationality: The intertextual nature of Heaney’s writing in particular and Irish writing in general is nowhere more evident than in this last intermixing of the voices of Heaney, Mac Morris and Joyce, for Heaney provides the answer to Mac Morris from James Joyce, a precursor obsessed with Ireland in his own way, whose remark gives a haunting quality to the last line of the poem. “\text{What Ish my nation? And sensibly, though so much later/the wandering Bloom replied,} \]
\[\text{“Ireland” said Bloom/’I was born in Ireland’ (NSP. 45). Quite aptly,} \]
\[\text{Eugene O’Brien calls MacMorris’ interrogative regarding his nation as “the most quoted question in Irish studies.”}^{43}\]

The connotations of this emotional entity called “Ireland” has compelled generations of

---


Irish writers to find an appropriate voice to render this attachment to land and landscape.

One of the most powerful and memorable symbols in Heaney's poetry is the "Bog". The function of the bog symbol as a representative national myth has already been established. The bog clearly then becomes one those "befitting" emblems of adversity that Heaney's poetry is searching for. Through the "bog poems" of the 1970's, Heaney, therefore, explores the troubling parallel between sectarian killings in his own North and the ritual sacrifices to the earth Goddess in early Iron Age settlements across other parts of Northern Europe. Writing about the impact on his poetry of P. V. Glob's anthropological study The Bog People (1969) he remarks:

The unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles.44

The poem The Tollund Man expresses in a precise verbal texture, Heaney's ritualistic, mythic interpretation of modern Irish history. The Tollund man is one of the recovered bodies featured by Glob in his book. The image of the Tollund Man blends with the bodies of

Catholic victims of sectarian murder in the 1920's. Heaney also takes recourse to the archetypal feminizing of Ireland when he states:

Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose Icon is Cathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern.45

Violence, past and present, justified in terms of archaic metaphor is the overriding concern of the poem, for the sacrificial, violent deaths of the archaic ritual and modern sectarian political killings are to be read in unison. Martyrdom, involuntary or voluntary, becomes pattern and is such as to subsume the latter within the former.

The connection between Jutland and Ireland is made in the third, final section of the poem and this leads to one of the most interesting features of the poem.

The Tolland Man would be a simple, nativist Irish poem evoking from a ritual past a unified, national heritage that is seen under threat from alien forces. But the ending is fraught with ambivalence.

Out there in Jutland
In the old man killing parishes
I will feel lost,

Heaney’s ‘home coming’ is never the celebratory, complacent arrival imbued with a parochial sense of piety, instead this poem and several others in the future show that Heaney’s theme of “home coming” involves a complex conflict of sensibility so wonderfully presented in his poem *Exposure*. As Elmer Andrews’s comments:

This tension between allegiance to “our holy ground” and its sacrificial demands, and the claims of individual values which react against the barbarism of the sacrifice is where Heaney’s most intense poetry is located.46

Heaney’s poetic development reaches a kind of zenith with *North* (1975). It is in this volume that the insistent question of the allegiances to art and the dictates of the community is posed with full artistic insight. Edna O’ Longley comments that “[North]... raises the most fundamental questions about the relationship between literature and politics.”47 The proclamation of his very first poem *Digging* is put to test here in this volume, since poetry will replace traditional occupations, and excavate a sense of political and cultural identity. The volume explores the precarious balance between, and at times wavers between,


clear political positioning, to a subtle distancing from adherence to a fixed orthodoxy in others. Eamonn Hughes hails *North* "among the first and most keenly anticipated poetical responses to the Northern political situation. It is the first step in the politics of contemporary poetry in the North and is indicative of the struggle the Northern poet has to undergo in order to create a representative voice."^{48}

Thematically as well as technically, *North* remains an accomplishment in the Heaney oeuvre containing some of Heaney’s most artistically complex and memorable poems like *Punishment, Funeral Rites, Exposure, Bog Queen, Kinship, Strange Fruit* etc. Helen Vendler ranks the publication of *North* in 1975 with that of *Prufrock* and *Harmonium* and *North of Boston*, in "Its key role in the history of modern poetry"^{49} and calls the volume "one of the crucial poetic interventions of the twentieth century".^{50} A tour-de-force, *North* has been praised for its technical innovations, linguistic virtuosity as much as for its subject matter: "The impersonal, sacramental idiom of the book must be counted one of the more

notable stylistic innovations of late twentieth century poetry...".51

Clearly, Heaney’s earlier notion of his poetry as being a product of his
“Parish Pump” has changed into clearly recognizable themes of particular
and universal validity. Heaney himself sees North as a culmination:

I am certain that up to North, that that was one book; in a way it
grows together and goes together.52

But North has also raised the most amount of controversy, with some
critics heralding it as representative poetry about strife-torn Northern
Ireland from a Catholic’s view point, others looking askance at the
mere ‘aestheticization of politics’ in the volume. Ciaran Carson
charges Heaney of having become “a laureate of violence a myth –
maker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for the
situation, in the last resort, a mystifier”.53 This paradox of being
culpable simultaneously of either ‘saying too much’ or not saying
‘enough’ has troubled Heaney since the publication of North.

Connor Cruise O’ Brien comments:

51 Patrick Crotty. “All I Believe That Happened There Was Revision: Selected
I had the uncanny feeling, reading these poems, of listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution, the tragedy of a people in a place: The Catholics of Northern Ireland.54

Interviewed by Seamus Deane in 1977 about the relationship of the Ulster poets to the Northern crisis, Heaney said, “the root of the troubles may have something in common with the root of the poetry”, then adds “the very first poems I wrote, Docker reveal this common root. A very inept sort of poem but my first attempts to speak...,to make verse, facing the Northern sectarian problem”. Heaney in this very interview speaks of “the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part” of him that he had tried to suppress in the earlier poetry. In North, it is perhaps this “slightly aggravated young Catholic male part”55 of Heaney’s sensibility that takes over and sustains some of Heaney’s most politically motivated poems. Edna Longley also points out the occasional surfacing of “the slightly exaggerated young Catholic male part” in a volume like Wintering Out until its complete emergence from hibernation in North. Elmer Andrews comments: “In Wintering Out he began the search for a metaphor of Ireland. Ireland

is mother and bride, territorial numen and poetic muse”. In *North*, this strategy is elaborately developed; setting ancient situations, perceived with freshness and immediacy and with sensitivity to their disturbing and awe-inspiring mystery, against contemporary situations.

Heaney is himself aware of the challenging nature of the task at hand:

> In Ireland at the moment I would see the necessity, since I am involved in the tradition of the English lyric, to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it had never eaten before...the messy...incomprehensible obsessions in the North, ...and make it still an English lyric.57

Heaney is clearly aware of the defamiliarizing tendencies of his deviant mode of writing “English” poetry. But will allegiance to his culture endanger poetry’s self-determining status? Heaney’s prose writings clearly articulate for poetry an autonomous state where “the will must not usurp the work of the imagination”.

Thus, as an artist, he feels the necessity to align himself with forces other than the material or the immediate. He says in his brilliant essay *Feelings into words* that in order to remain faithful to

---


the twin demands of art and life, he must create “a field of force” wherein the allegiance to the community and fidelity to artistic technique is achieved by the act of poetic composition itself. This enables him, in postcolonial terms, to dismantle stereotypical discourse of his native land which often falls into neat categories of homogeneity / homogenization and therefore prevents any scope for artistic fluidity.

The expanse of *North* is largely due to the series of Bog-Poems which lie at the centre of the meaning and achievement of this volume. These poems uncover a history of the conquest of Ireland first by the Vikings and later by the English.

In the overall structures of *North*, the myth occupies only the first of its two parts, the second containing poems directly responsive to the Northern present, rather than to its past.

*Bog Queen*, is Heaney’s most explicit treatment of the traditional archetype of Ireland as a kind of Kathleen ni Houlihan, a mother Ireland. It is also considered to be Heaney’s most striking female allegory. Speaking of the exhumed body and Ireland simultaneously, the bog queen’s and hence Ireland’s native authority,
symbolized by her 'diadem' is gradually undermined: “My diadem grew carious” (NSP. 67), like the bearings of history, her hair is “robbed”. The poem is at one level a delicately accurate account of the processes of her decay, but the implications raise the Bog Queen to the status of a symbol of disaffected native resentment. Another political reference may be in the “rising” of the last stanza, to the emergence of the Irish free state, once imbued with legendary charisma by the Revivalists, then having to make its way as a viable political entity in the realm of international affairs. In poems like Bog Queen Heaney simply draws upon “the matter of Ireland”: the revealing of cultural icons that equate poetry with the act of “digging”.

But with poems like Punishment and Exposure, Heaney's aesthetic orbit widens to reveal a gradual mastery of the impulse merely to identify with or deify. A greater self-consciousness enters the poems and the attitude is not only one of surrender or supplication. Instead, Heaney problematises any single-minded pursuit of Irishness and the nation is conceived in terms that are more nuanced. Though the Bog remains the repository of culture, an anguished self-analysis replaces the earlier tendency to idealize. The poetic attitude in these poems is more complicated, divided, guilt-ridden, self-critical, ironic.
In *Punishment*, the girl hanged or dumped in the bog for adultery is linked with modern-day transgressors of the tribal code. Catholic girls who were tarred and feathered for fraternizing with British soldiers by the IRA. Both are seen as forms of betrayal of the tribal pieties. Heaney establishes a timeless pattern of ever-recurring and inescapable conflicts. The punishments incurred are not viewed as fundamentally moral or political acts but as ritual sacrifices demanded by the indigenous territorial numen. It is such atavistic leanings for the endemic violence that sunders his country that led Blake Morrison to comment that Heaney "grants sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability which it is not usually granted in day to day journalism".59

Or Neil Corcoran

Certainly the poem’s business is to remind us, once again, of the persistence of atavistic emotions and responses in the North, and therefore also, to some degree, in any poet born into the community of Northern Catholicism who wishes to tell a truth about it.60


This is true enough, but this atavism is clearly brought into tension with its opposite nuance: reason. This is then the crux of the poem: sub-conscious allegiances to the tribe? Or demands of humane reason?

My poor scapegoat
I almost love you but would have cast I know
the stones of silence
I am the artful voyeur
of your brains exposed and darkened combs....
I who have stood dumb
when – your betraying sisters
cauld in tar
wept by the railings
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (NSP. 71-72)

The poem registers the dilemma of the poet, whose feelings cannot easily lodge themselves in either rational humanism or atavistic piety, thus belying any monological nationalistic reading of his poems.

Heaney wrote in 1972 “At one minute, you are drawn towards the old vortex of racial and religious instinct, at another time you seek
the mean of humane love and reason".61 The achievement of the poem thus lies in its interplay between these two contending forces, and the consequent refusal of the poet to subscribe to any one of these pressures. Ronald Tamplin states: “If we are looking for confessional poetry, it would be hard to equal the last four stanzas of *Punishment*. The poem provides therefore in quintessence the evolving, liminally positioned poetics of Heaney.

*Punishment* according to Elmer Andrews is “a fine example of Heaney’s own concept of “technique” which “involves not only a poet’s way with words... it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality.”62

Heaney’s transparent self-analysis in the poem, labeling himself the *artful voyeur* and one who would also understand the “exact and tribal, intimate revenge” (NSP. 72), would later on lead to a partial disavowal of overtly “political” themes as Heaney’s poetry would explore other worlds.

However, a group of poems in *North* do take up explicitly the

---


issue of Anglo-Irish relations, with open declarations of resentment accompanying a note of growing pessimism. Neil Corcoran identifies them as: “Politico-sexual allegories” where Ireland’s relationship with England is spelt out in traditional, mythico-sexual terms, with Heaney taking recourse to the archetype of Ireland as female, being violated by an imperial male oppressor—England. The placing of the inner sectarian problem within the broader conflict with England is acknowledged by Heaney:

I always thought of the political problem...as being an internal Northern Ireland division.... Now I think that the genuine political confrontation is between Ireland and Britain.64

This endemic sense of subjugation finds a direct expression in these poems.

In Oceans Love to Ireland the “maid” backed by Raleigh to a tree is compared with “Ireland....Backed to England”. ‘Ireland’ ‘is the maid ruined by Raleigh’s plundering rape and forced to surrender her language to the Iambic drums of these English poet-courtiers. This is a poem in which “Raleigh and Spenser are caught in the act of

slaughtering for the common good; or at least for the common good of 'Cynthia' (Queen Elizabeth) and those English colonists who dispossessed the rebel landholders".65

*Act of Union* "similarly draws upon the historic parliamentary Act of Union of 1800. The poem allegorizes the act as one of sexual congress between England and Ireland. England "Imperially Male"; impregnating Ireland, and the resultant Northern province of Ulster. The poem clearly regards the act of union as initiating a process which culminates inexorably in the present 'Troubles', in this child whose *parasitical / And ignorant little fists* are raised against both Ireland and England."66

Clair Wills comments:

The *Act of Union* becomes a struggle between primitive, situated feminity and 'rational', organized masculinity which creates the inhabitants of the bastard province of Northern Ireland.67

Part II of *North* raises in a more discursive or declarative manner some of the besetting preoccupations of part I. *The unacknowledged*
Legislators Dream, Freedman, Whatever you say, say nothing address the relationship possible between poetry and the public life. Singing School explores some of the conditioning cultural circumstances of the poet's own biography culminating in Exposure, a classic modern poem on a poet's anxiety about the place and function of his own art in relation to an ideal of civic responsibility.

The poems have a clear political context out of which they spring, In Whatever you Say, Say nothing, one of the most politically direct and vigorous of the poems in Part 11, incapable Heaney at one point breaks into direct speech:

Christ, its near time that some small leak was sprung
to dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus
Yet for all this art and sedentary trade
I am incapable. (NSP. 79)

Heaney draws on Yeats' concept of poetry as "sedentary trade" and poses the question of poetry's efficacy in the world of action. Yeats too oscillated between the demands of the 'man of action' and the 'man of reverie'. Heaney similarly seems to confess poetry's inadequacy in the face of the "dangerous tide" of violent political history. And consequently Heaney's precise political positioning vis-à-vis Ireland is charged with ambiguity, making Heaney's most
striking proclivity his ability to put himself in a mediating position between polarities.

Heaney is himself anxiously alert to the problematics of writing poetry in an atmosphere wherein artistic creativity has traditionally been conscious of political and cultural pressures. Much of his poetry is scored with this apprehension that this sense of responsibility as a Northern Irish poet brings to him. For this reason, Heaney is profoundly attracted to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who suffered greatly at the hands of Soviet authorities because of his fidelity to his poetic vision. Heaney poses the guilty question regarding ethical imperative and poetic truth: "why do I unceasingly / arrive late to condone / infected sutures and ill-knit bone? "What do I say if they wheel out their dead?"68

Heaney's sense of the conflicting demands of Self, Community and Art is brought out brilliantly in Exposure, the poem which draws North to a close. The poem was written after Heaney's much publicized move from Belfast (In the North) to Wicklow (The Republic of Ireland) in 1972. It hovers between different meanings of

its title: his celebrity status as a public poet who has received much
media exposure and also to his sense of vulnerability as some one
who has attempted to engage with the political conflict, and who as a
result bears the weight of his own community’s expectations as well
as those in the North who are faithful to an opposing tradition.

The poem begins by locating the poet, geographically, *It is
December in Wicklow (NSP, 91).* In an interview with Seamus Deane
in the *New York Times*, Heaney recalled his own sense of ambivalence
about the move:

> Going to the south was perhaps emblematic for me and was
certainly so for some of the people I knew. To the Unionist, it
looked like a betrayal of the Northern thing. Living in the south, I
found myself lonelier, imaginatively.69

Imagining himself

> a hero

> on some muddy compound, (NSP, 90)

who might make a stand for his oppressed people like David
challenging Goliath.

But Heaney has already exposed the poet as unable to offer

---

69 Quoted in Andrew Murphy. *Seamus Heaney*. Devon: Northcote House Publishers,
2000, p 53.
anything more than a kind of brief and ineffectual bravado. *Exposure* is a definitive example of self-scrutiny by Heaney in which easy categorizations don’t lend themselves too easily to the poet:

```
I am neither internee nor informer
An Inner émigré, grown long - haired
And thoughtful; a wood kerne.
Escaped from the massacre
Taking protective colouring
From hole and bark
Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once in a life time portent
The comet's pulsing rose. (NSP. 91)
```

He imagines himself at last as a native solider a *wood kerne*, who has managed to escape from the scene of hostilities receding into a natural, rural world. To this extent, the poem seems to signal a kind of “retreat”. The issue of ‘exile’, or self-division within the poet is foregrounded here. Heaney is an inner émigré, both in his status as an emigrant from the north to the Republic of Ireland, and in his internal psychological status as an emigrant from certainty and self-assurance to a transitional zone of anxiety and insecurity. *Exposure* is then emphatically a poem of despondency and crisis, a valediction to one kind of poetry and an implicit recognition of the need to develop
another. And though he may have escaped from the massacre he does not deny his heritage—he is still a *wood-kerne*, a soldier enlisted in his country’s cause. But the battle is to be fought on his terms, the terms of art.

Is Heaney, like Yeats Joyce before him, taking recourse to abstention?—a tactic favored by numerous other Irish nationalist writers too. An understanding of Irish poetry reveals that the preservation of the poetic voice in the Irish situation is particularly difficult. An avoidance of the predominant public discourse becomes impossible. Thus, the condition of exile becomes the poet’s only way out, the sole means of retaining the autonomy of his poetic voice. More than merely a survival tactic, it is a strategy of finding “home” elsewhere: it has already been seen that the notion of “home” in Heaney is fraught with a tension that always foregrounds the doubts and anxieties native to a rigorous self-scrutiny. But abstention need not necessarily be an act of political cowardice—it can and does signify patience, strength and self-confidence. *North* onwards, politics per se don’t find a place in the continuously developing poetic vision of Heaney. But it would be a gross misunderstanding to claim that Heaney’s poetry after *North* is devoid of the political. Rather than
discarding the political altogether, the poet assumes an ongoing dialogue with it, full of the uncertainties and ambiguities which only an honest self-examination can produce. With the possible exception of the earliest work, Heaney constantly positions himself face-to-face with the community. Heaney’s poetry after North clearly moves towards its “ungoverned” aspect and “the appetites of gravity” so strongly felt in North give way to a more inclusive form of poetic vision. John Foster Wilson comments:

However, the role of political poet is only briefly entertained, and refused... politics is not his element; he is more at home with the ways in which politics... becomes history.... But poetry is an archeology whose end is art... not knowledge, much less judgment”.

This isn’t to say that Heaney ceases being political, he remains “political” till his most recent poetry, as long as political is not confused with factional or propagandist. Politics is the most dominant and revealing metaphor in Heaney’s poetry but Heaney’s master theme since North has also been the possibility of poetry’s self determination: how poetry can be restored to its original dignity and

how it can properly be constituted. In this sense, politics though the seed out of which Heaney’s poetry grows could also be seen as representing a challenge to poetry – an opposition, in the face of which poetry needs a kind of self-validation, but paradoxically, particularly in Ireland, a possible constituent of poetry as well. Heaney sums up his own attitude to the “political” nature of the poems in *North.*

I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its authenticity and complexity.\(^7^1\)

This conflicting demand might be seen as underlying all of Heaney’s poetry that is politically motivated. It is this idea of Heaney’s of creating ‘a field of force’ rather than a static structure in a poem, that allows for a dialectical interplay between contending forces. He is anxious about the primacy of the artistic act but at the same time gives voice to that visceral aspect of his own community’s sense of self which valorizes violence as a creed. Also, Heaney’s use of the Bog

symbol is to be seen as literary and created by him, not a tried and
tested, clichéd response which is sanctioned by any nationalist
mythos. The connection between the Iron Age bog victims and the
victims of contemporary Northern Irish violence is a willed one and
deconstructs, through oscillation, any received meaning that it might
otherwise have for the community. By freeing himself from all
readymade systems of thought and belief, and facing into the
mysterious depths of the self, as exemplified by poems like
*Punishment, Exposure, The Tollund man*, Heaney allows freer play of
mind, will and sensibility. In these and other poems, he resists the life
of politics, direct action and confrontation and instead embraces the
role of “*Dives, hoarder of common ground,*- the assuaging, preserving
role of ‘mediator’ and artist.”72

*Field Work*, Heaney’s volume of poetry written after *North* is
suggestive of the change in the imaginative parameters of the poet.
The scope and ambition of *Field Work* are reduced. It does not range
so freely in the bog lands and along the shorelines of cultural history,
the tone is more confessional and intimate. Heaney’s muse is no
longer the mythological goddess of Irish history; instead he develops

the image of the domestic muse or Sibyl who appears in a variety of guises in *Field Work* including the poet’s wife who inspires a renewed interest in love-poetry as the consummation of the domestic. Helen Vendler comments:

In *Field Work* Heaney makes an almost complete break with both anonymity and archaeology. He is no longer the anonymous child of a quasi-medieval rusticity, nor the spectator of a renewed archaic violence, symbolized by bodies long nameless. Rather, his poetry becomes recognizably that of an *individual* (stress mine) man... who writes in an idiom largely shorn of both archaism and portent... and he is increasingly an elegist.73

There is a sense of new beginnings in *Field Work* and a conscious readjustment of poetic style which is designed to embody what Heaney calls “a more social voice”.

I wrote a fairly constricted kind of verse in Wintering Out and North in general, and then in the new book Field work, I very deliberately set out to lengthen the line again because the narrow line was becoming habit...Well, after these poems I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out...74

The word ‘constricted’ provides a clue to an understanding of what

directions Heaney’s new poetics will take. A number of poems in The Glanmore sonnet sequence in Field Work are about poetry. In the second sonnet, the poet, newly landed in ‘The hedge school’ of Glamnmore, speaks of himself as hoping:

\[
\text{to raise} \\
\text{a voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter} \\
\text{that might continue, hold, dispel, appease. (NSP. 110)}
\]

Poetry no longer depends on elaborate mythologizing, but on sensitivity to sensings, mountings from the hiding places. Never leaving sight of the immediate Irish context, the poetry attempts in Heaney’s own words to withstand the “appetites of gravity” and probe along lines that exemplify the poet’s need to go beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography. In this context Heaney comments:

\[
\text{I suppose that the shift from North to Field Work is a shift in trust:} \\
\text{a learning to trust melody, to trust art as reality, to trust artfulness} \\
\text{as an affirmation and not to go into the self-punishment so much.}\text{75}
\]

Oysters, the first poem in Field Work is a fine example of Heaney’s new style and sets the pattern of what is to follow.

The poem expresses an impatience with conscience that prevents him from reposing his trust In the clear light, like poetry or freedom / leaning in from sea (NSP, 92).

Such “clear light” would apparently be the opposite of the “dark” of Irish history and self-scrutiny given expression in the work from Death of a Naturalist to North. This ‘clear light’ is presumably the kind of unfettered poetry that transcends the diminishments of human history: poetry as alternative, as delight and consolation, as the free play of imagination:

I ate the day
Deliberately, that its tang
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb. (NSP. 92)

The ‘pure verb’ has attracted a lot of attention mainly for the verbal felicity with which Heaney dedicates himself now to ‘word’, to art, in the face of those perennial, inescapable pressures from everyday life which threaten to distort or obliterate what is unique, irreducible and most intimate in his negotiations with the world. Yet the repose of such unfettered imagination however deeply desired remains in the realm of the ideal, for the Irish poet must, in his attempts to come to terms with his role as writer in Ireland, “develop a style from
despair”.76 This despair is no chronic sense of passivity or inertia but an artistic response to the grim realities of the present.

The poetry after *North* is usually discussed in terms of Heaney’s struggle to move from the Antaean darkness into the Herculean light, to find a balance between the claims of attachment and an ideal of personal and artistic freedom. “I was mired in attachment”77, the poet complains in one of the poems of *Station Island*. ‘Mired’ effectively recalls the early interest in puddling through muck, probing the rich alluvia of decay, excavating the dark recesses of the past. His attachment was to landscape, family, tribe, community, “the first Kingdom”78 but he seems to have discovered a new kingdom of the imagination.

*Field Work* contains an important strand in Heaney’s work and what many consider his genuine enriching contribution to the genre: elegy writing. Some of the elegies are of course for those acquaintances, friends, relatives killed during political violence and sectarian warfare. These six elegies are written for the social worker Sean

78 Ibid., p 208.
Armstrong, for the composer Sean O Riada and the poet Robert Lowell, for an acquaintance Louis O’ Neil and for the young Irish Catholic poet Francis Ledwidge. According to Helen Vendler,

*Field Work* is Heaney’s deliberate choice to remain on the human, colloquial, everyday level – to remain there even for elegies, which normally tend towards apotheosis....”79

That Heaney’s poetry persistently draws on the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland is borne out by *The Strand at Lough Beg*, Heaney’s elegy for his dead cousin Colum MacCarthy who was ambushed and shot in a sectarian killing. It proves to be a decisive poem, since it leads in *Station Island*, to a fierce self-indictment in the form of an answering poem.

Greatly indebted to the work of Dante, (who becomes a permanent influence in the later Heaney), borrowing image and setting from *The Divine Comedy*, Heaney imagines himself:

*Kneel... in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clear with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud. (NSP. 99)

The poem's ending and its emphasis in peace, purification and renewal will later be attacked in a moment of acute self-interrogation, for its attempts to *sweeten death's revenges* (*NSP*, 99). The poem becomes complex as the poet is painfully aware of the inadequacy of his sedentary trade to offer nothing more than a virtuoso attempt at literary elegy for which the 'shade' of his dead cousin will reprimand him later in *Station Island*.

That Heaney's thought is still burdened with the immediate socio-political context is borne out by this elegy and the one on Francis Ledwidge whose fate is *to be called a British solider while my country / has no place among nations* (*NSP*, 131). Heaney sums up the duality at the heart of all Irish literary endeavors in his epitaph for the poet: *In you, our dead enigma all the strains/ Criss-cross in useless equilibrium* (*NSP*, 131). Heaney's engagement with the Irish poet is more rigorous and he begins by discovering in himself the central conflict which was sensationally proclaimed in Ledwidge's life and work. Ledwidge is not an historical curiosity but a representative figure – representative of the difficult negotiations between the public and the private worlds in an artist's life in strife ridden Ireland.
In *Casualty* Louis O’Neill who has broken an IRA curfew has been blown up in the reprisal bombing of a Protestant pub. Apart from being an elegy for O’Neill, evoking the quality of the man’s life, the poem is also a meditation on the ethics of betraying our tribes complicity (*NSP, 102*), the complex loyalties of a Northern Catholic. Interrogating the violent means of the death, Heaney offers an implicit critique of the time-bound politics of the tribe and the poem celebrates the kind of poetic release Heaney writes about in *The Government of the Tongue*:

The achievement of the poem is an experience of release. The tongue, governed for so long in the social sphere by considerations of tact and fidelity, by nice obeisances to one’s origin within the minority or the majority. This tongue is suddenly ungoverned. It gains access to a condition that is unconstrained.  

*Casualty* like *Punishment* again takes up the issue of loyalty to the tribe, but if he is simply ‘dumb’ witness to the atrocity in the latter poem, unable to speak out against the violence, in *Casualty* he proclaims the necessary freedom of the creative imagination:

> As you find a rhythm  
> working you, slow mile by mile

---

into your proper haunt
somewhere well out, beyond... (NSP. 103)

*Casualty* is in most critics view a landmark poem in Heaney’s career for it was there the poet reached full awareness of his “proper haunt” beyond any socially ordered constraint.

The difference between *Field Work* and its predecessor volumes lies then in this: though *Field Work* constructs an Irish landscape at once politically charged, communal, relevant (the elegies particularly bear this out) but it is a kind of cultural landscape molded out of Heaney’s own psychic disposition. He deals with the contemporary crisis, not by accepting the formulation that is a given, but by the insertion of a strongly individualized tone.

This strongly individualized tone which is as inimitable as the earliest tactile, sensuous style becomes increasingly present in such volumes as *Station Island, Seeing Things, The Spirit Level*. The titles are clearly suggestive of a poetry that draws its primary sustenance from the imagined rather than the real. The characteristic imagery too changes spectacularly, from the archeological and excavatory to the aerial and ornithological, from earth to air, darkness to light, expressive of the poet’s desire for transcendence. It is representative
not only in the opposition between native earth-grubbing Anteaus and the superior intelligence of the ‘Sky born’ Hercules, but also in his use of the Sweeney myth. His verse translation of the original Irish text *Biule suibine* paid off another debt to the Irish language – whose ghost is subliminally present throughout the book. It is one way of easing the unrest of the language dilemma that confronts the Irish writer. As a ploy, Joyce invented a language; others like Heaney would receive their inspiration from translation. In a linguistic sense, postcolonial literature like translation is subversive, translation becoming “one of the crucial conditions of creativity”.81 By using it Heaney forged another kind of relationship with a literary tradition now half submerged in a forgotten language, it allowed Heaney to affirm a specifically Irish tradition that went beyond Yeats and Kavanagh. He could think of his poetry as belonging to a larger Irish whole while embodying the private creative moment, the aim of Heaney’s poetry to the present. *Sweeney Astray* achieved two aims. One, It spoke of the longing for a depoliticized poetry that draws instead from nature:

*I prefer the elusive
rhapsody of blackbirds*

---

to the garrulous blather
of men and women. (NSP. 136)

The bird man Sweeney is a figure of the divided poet who relishes his freedom yet is unable to slip personal and social attachment, a signal of the poet leaving the civilized world of history and language and entering the pre-verbal, illiterate "realms of whisper". The figure of Sweeney allows the poet to view the world from new, detached perspectives, to overcome the "appetites of gravity" and consider things from a Kavanaghsque "weightlessness" or "placelessness".

If North is the epitome of Heaney's achievement in the task of "Writing" the nation, then Station Island is the crowning achievement of the latter Heaney, exhibiting a style at once more imaginative and surreal: a style that would reinvigorate the earlier themes with an idiom resonant with more modernist or even post-modernist techniques. Heaney's poetry in Station Island:

Is in the process of successfully negotiating what is, for any poet, the most difficult phase of a career, the transition from the modes and manners which have created the reputation, to the genuinely new and unexpected thing.82

Station Island is extremely crucial to an understanding of Heaney's overall developing aesthetic. One, it paves the way for subsequent volumes like Seeing Things The Spirit Level, Seeing Things, The Haw Lantern, in which volumes critics have unanimously identified a dispersed, open ended, imaginative flight into a kind of poetry less constrained by identities (Irish or otherwise) and more openly metaphysical in its concerns.

Secondly, Station Island proves to be a climactic expression of Heaney's desire to come to terms with his artistic obligations. The poem grapples with an almost spiritual force the vexatious issue of the role of the Irish poet in search of coherence and integrity. Heaney interrogates his own tradition-historical, cultural, literary and in a series of brilliantly choreographed encounters with representative figures from the dead, Heaney experiences a sort of an individual and artistic release. He says Station Island "is a purgatorio in itself... involving a dark night and a bright morning, a departure from the world and a return to it."83 Station Island takes its mythic structure from Dante's Commedia, using actual people to dramatize his own crisis of conscience.

The challenge for the Irish poet is to reconcile historical and political contingencies with free exhilarated imagination. This strain Heaney sought to present:

by meeting shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to refuse those claims. They could probe the validity of one’s commitment.84

Many Irish poets have used the island of Lough Derg in County Donegal as a setting for their works, amongst then William Carleton, O’Faolin, Kavanagh, Denis Devlin. Heaney follows this tradition using the same setting, which has been a site of pilgrimage in Ireland for over a thousand years.

In the allegorical dream landscape, (a process analogous to Yeats’ “summoning up” images and memories in *The Tower*) the first meeting is with Simon Sweeney, a genius of the woods, a free pagan spirit, appearing now as in the child-Heaney’s memory as a transgressive figure upon whom the child projects his fears of the alien and the unknown. Sweeney, who lives exposed to elemental influences, dismisses the child’s “civilized” learning and silences his

presumptions with the colloquial command: *Damn all you Know* (NSP, 163). The Sweeney figure’s demand is for a self-forgetting, a condemning all of the knowledge, all of the traditional pieties that the poet had passively half-accepted for so many years. He further warns the poet to *Stay clear of all processions* (NSP, 165).

Heaney then proceeds to stay clear of “all processions”: implying nonalignment with the communal realm, including religion. In a significant encounter with a priest Terry Keenan, the poet places the inner life above the public one and the priest places the public over the private. The poet in addressing Keenan sees the latter’s priestly vocation as a futile surrender to convention, with the young man *doomed to the decent thing* (NSP, 172). In the poet’s eyes, Keenan is virtually sacrificed to the common pieties of his community and calls him “holy mascot” and reviles him for an adherence to ritual devoid of genuine meaning:

*You gave too much relief, you raised a siege*

*the world had laid against their kitchen grottoes*

*hung with holy pictures and crucifixes.* (NSP. 172)

Keenan responds to the poet’s self assurance: *What are you doing, going through these motions? Unless you are here taking the last look?* (NSP, 173).
Keenan’s question penetrates to the heart of *Station Island* and he effectively queries the nature and purpose of Heaney’s pilgrimage. Neil Corcoran observes:

> What the poem presents us with is a peculiarly ironic, even reversed form of pilgrimage, which leads to no confirmation in the religion and values of the tribe, but to something very like a renunciation of them.\(^8^5\)

Heaney’s relationship to his sense of religious faith is dealt with in section xi of the poem where again Heaney poses the all-important question about his role in the realm of aesthetics to various literary predecessors, the choice of whom is akin to the “naming” of his tradition, making *Station Island* the most intertextual of Heaney’s poems as well as the most definitive attempt at a resolution to the question of his artistic compulsions. The interrogation of this tradition, a criss cross of the cultural and the artistic, includes among others William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh and James Joyce, the only conspicuous exemplar not to find a place in this intense drama of the self is W B Yeats.

In section II, he meets William Carleton, the nineteenth century

novelist from County Tyrone. Carleton denounced Catholicism and the pilgrimage tradition as an act of unthinking superstition. Calreton's work has been described as "the product of an instinctive realism, of close feeling with the textures of Irish peasant life and in his stories of Lough Derg pilgrims, of hedge-schools, flax-pullings, dances and local characters". Heaney, thus, recognizes an affinity with his own rural experience. Carleton represents for Heaney the dilemma between the inherited sub-culture and the living tradition of English, and, like most poets writing from post-colonial cultures, he contributed to the demise of the culture he wanted to preserve.

For Heaney, Carleton represents the plight of the artist in Ireland, his difficulty in creating imaginative space for himself-that "sunlit space" of which Heaney was so appreciative in North.

Yet, however reassuring Carleton's assertions may be to the despondent poet, Heaney limits Carleton's success as an artist and his values as a mentor:

All this is like a trout kept in a spring
or maggots sown in wounds
another life that cleans our element. (NSP. 168)

---

Heaney’s master influence from his early days, Kavanagh, is duly presented in section V, who appears together with two school masters: the presences making themselves feel as part of the landscape itself:

As I stood among their whispers and brave feet
The mists of all the morning I set out
For Latin classes with him, face to face
refreshed me.... (NSP. 175)

Kavanagh’s is an no-nonsense, brusque, sardonic figure and speaks with the same oracular authority as the masters. For Kavanagh, the great poet “turns neither to Dublin, London or Paris, but to the Eternal. He dreams from his tiny foothold of the Known to the Unknown.” Heaney’s Kavanagh jibes at the poets who crave for wider experience than that afforded by fidelity to roots Where else would you go? Iceland, maybe? May be the Dordogne? (NSP,**)

Heaney’s enacts Kavanagh’s “need to go back”, to return to the past, to roots. Kavanagh clearly exemplified for Heaney the poet who in expressing the “hard, buried life” of the community, divested of all picturesque elements, was the Anteaen voice of his people.

Heaney is brought under an aggressive, scathing attack by another “shade”, his dead cousin, Colum McCartney whom Heaney

---

had commemorated in *Field Work*. He utters the most unrelenting accusation, viewed from the stand point of allegiance to community:

> You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact
> You confused evasion and 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". (NSP. 185)

Heaney portrays here a wry self-portrait of the artist as political outsider, incapable of a political role. Neil Corcoran remarks:

> This is the supreme instance in Heaney’s self-corrective work of the poet blaming himself for the act of writing: an attitude which is, indeed, so pervasive as to constitute an always restless, mobile aesthetic. In these self-cancelling passages great rhetorical and visionary capacity exposes and undermines itself, marking anxiety as a fundamental principle of creativity.\(^8\)

Despite the new departure of these lyrics, what nevertheless keeps pleading at some level in a number of them is the political reality of the North. But in this long central sequence of poems, Heaney responds to the Northern Ireland tragedy, not with rhetoric and

---

commitment, but with appropriately modern reactions of doubt, pain and self-distrust.

Heaney’s final outburst of section IX is worth quoting where he castigates himself for an alignment with established discourses that might resemble a kind of intellectual servitude:

I hate how quick I was to know my place
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming. (NSP. 187)

Here, knowing a place is not so much establishing an identity with a particular territory – which is celebrated as a virtue often enough in Heaney’s earlier work, as meekly accepting a servitude to the mores of a community where to “know your place” is to stay put, where to stay put implies a certain naivété arising out of any simplistic notion of “identity”. Heaney’s own critical postulation of poetry as a site for negotiation and not upholder of dogma stands vindicated.

Station Island is a Catharsis, and Heaney has not been easy on himself. It works towards the resolution of personal dilemma in artistic terms and it finally the figure of James Joyce who releases Heaney from this sense of failed responsibility and inadequate responsiveness which surface again and again in Station Island. It is
Joyce’s hand which stretches down from the jetty (NSP, 192) in the final section of the poem, as Heaney returns to the mainland at the end of his pilgrimage. Joyce, an epitome of the émigré writer and the most exuberant of exiles, dismisses Heaney’s peasant pilgrimage as an irrelevant waste of time and brushes aside impatiently Heaney’s stricken consciousness:

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. Cultivate a work-lust
that imagines its haven like your hands at night
And don’t be so earnest
so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget
You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note. (NSP. 192-193)

Clearly acknowledging James Joyce as his aesthetic priest, Heaney brilliantly defines the alternative and more liberating artistic creed. Heaney’s Joyce proposes a view of literature which detaches it from the necessity to provide a direct engagement with the particularities of the immediate political situation. What Heaney, in Joyce’s voice, commands himself to do is to strike out for loneliness and joy, to probe along tangents beyond the expected. Critics have
analyzed Heaney’s own poetic posture as of one “exile” – a condition self-imposed by an Irish writer in the interests of poetic autonomy. This disarmingly simple agenda is clearly in line not only with Heaney’s own spirit, but also with Joyce’s whose useful ghost in fact utters it. Joyce himself of course set up this paradigm of exile as it were, as he struggled to transcend his being simply an Irish writer.

Joyce also settles for Heaney the “language issue” by reprimanding him about his “infantile” concern about the English language, the debate about which is now redundant:

*The English language*

*belongs to us You are raking at dead fires*

*rehearsing the old whinges at your age*

*That subject people stuff is a cod’s game*

*infantile, like this peasant pilgrimage*

*You lose more of yourself than you redeem*

*doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent*

*When they make the circle wide, its time to swim*

*out on your own and fill the element*

*with signatures of your own frequency. (NSP. 193)*

This is an enabling moment, for no acts of penance are therefore required and linguistic retrieval is made possible by Joyce the Irish writer who bends the once alien English language suitably to his own purposes, as it is equally successfully done by Seamus Heaney. Joyce
combined in his work a tendency to subvert various deleterious conceptions of Irishness and hence the consequent self-exile from Ireland.

Joyce advises Heaney similarly to keep at a tangent:

Swim out on your own and fill the element with searches, probes, allurements ever gleams in the dark of the whole sea. (NSP. 193)

Helen Vendler calls Joyce "the most potent of... alter egos"89 in Station Island, one which mordantly sets free the poet from his nationalist anxieties and his familial inhibitions. Joyce’s own relation to his Irish subject matter – one of intimacy paired with detachment, of affection modulated by scorn, of absorbed tradition stimulating radical invention offers more to Heaney than the example of any other Irish alter ego. It is as though by means of the voices of victims and writers in Station Island, Heaney’s vocation has become clarified. The figure of Joyce symbolizing intellectual and moral independence is upheld, which resists the deflection and deformation of art by either politics or pity.

The crucial, pertinent question to be raised now is perhaps that do the new directions that Heaney’s poetry take towards a “depoliticized” landscape ensure the success and felicity of the earlier volumes? Does the latter poetry come home? Adverse judgments have been made on Heaney’s move from the earlier earth bound poetry into a more imaginative modernist idiom of the later volumes. To some, Heaney’s early volumes espouse his most powerful and original poetry brought to a sort of climax in a volume like *North*. Heaney’s strength is seen in his “gift of expressing in words the secrets of the earth”90 his “Heideggeran” ability to penetrate behind and beneath the everyday world and the normal kind of saying to pre-literate, pre-conscious levels of consciousness and culture. When he leaves the world of Aenteus to re-enter the world of Hercules, the poetry, according to these critics, loses force.

Heaney’s recoil from politics is also seen as an “escape from the massacre” an incapacity to carry forward the legacy he was to eager to draw upon in the earlier stages. Against such objections, other critics have identified Heaney’s themes as consistently political, as long as “political” isn’t confused with “Propagandist” or “factional”.

Heaney's art is fundamentally an art of consciously and carefully cultivated non-engagement. He remains the observer, "the inner émigré" who is "neither internee nor informer". That Heaney's most consistent metaphor is one of Identity is not falsified: his observations are colored by the particular voices of the community into which he was born; the crucial consideration for any artist and for Heaney is how successful he has been in working upon the received 'truths' to give us something new. How inclusive a vision does his poetry ultimately embody? This reading of Heaney understands his poetry as emerging out of an inner personal anxiety, a poetry that expresses the concern to understand rather than supply answers, to articulate an aesthetic response to violent events rather than use art as a political weapon. In the *Faber Book of Political Verse*,

Tom Paulin states:

Heaney's work rises out of the post-partition Ulster Catholic community, out of a rural society which has always felt itself trapped within the modern concrete of the State of Northern Ireland. To oppose the historic legitimacy of that state and at the same time refuse the simplicities of traditional nationalism is to initiate certain imaginative positives and offer a gracious and civil
trust.\textsuperscript{91}

Heaney's poetry then is clearly politically engaged in the larger sense of the word but simultaneously transcends the actualities to capture the mysteries of the artistic enterprise. Heaney says: I was stretched between contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history.\textsuperscript{92} Perhaps Heaney's ultimate fidelity to the:

ambiguity of opposing demands and to the inner maneuverings of poetic language... his refusal of any single place or position which would permit the illusion of a final solution is proof of his tireless transiting between revivalism and modernism.\textsuperscript{93}

*Station Island* then, breaks a sort of mould in which critics have noted, that in league with the concept of postmodernism, no one code or discourse is dominant. In his succeeding volume *The Haw Lantern* (1987), in accordance with recent deconstructionist theory, the aim of the poetry becomes a more multiple and less constrained subjectivity. Heaney apparently contests the codes which trap him within the


\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., pp 63-64.
social, tribal, professional or familial expectations, but at the same time does not envisage a position where these will be abolished. The work gets more and more Herculean, but the Antaean root does not snap.

Neil Corcoran has observed that while:

The island of Ireland and configuration of Northern Ireland seem within hailing distance... some of the parable poems in *The Haw Lantern* seem so recognizably different from the earlier Heaney style as to appear almost like translations from another language.94

Corcoran sees the adoption of a dislocated, phantasmal geography a kind of mask, persona or alternative self, an alibi or alias and the effect of this is that the lyric becomes what it has never been in Heaney's work before: abstract, diagnostic, analytic, dispassionate, admonitory, forensic, post-mortem.95

*The Haw Lantern* has been described as Heaney's "first book of the virtual".96

Neil Corcoran remarks about this volume which has an aptness for the subsequent poetry as well:

The book is very much in tune with its literary and cultural

95 Ibid., p 136.
moment since an extreme self-consciousness about the act of writing, and about the ways in which language itself constructs subjectivity and identity has characterized the academic study of literature since the 1960's.\textsuperscript{97}

That a "Postmodern" Heaney continues to explore the insistent theme of Irish identity is borne out by the poem \textit{Alphabets} in \textit{The Haw Lantern}. This poem is appropriately about educational achievement written as part of his tenure at Harvard University.

\begin{quote}
\textit{A shadow his father makes with joined hands}
\textit{And thumbs and fingers nibbles on the wall...}
\textit{He understands}
\textit{he will understand more when he goes to school.}
\textit{For he was fostered next in a stricter school...}
\textit{He learns this other writing. He is the scribe}
\textit{By rules that hardened the farther they reached north}
\textit{The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.}
\textit{He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.} (NSP. 212)
\end{quote}

The emphatic plural of the title derives from the fact that this is a Northern Irish Catholic education in which the growing child assimilates, or is assimilated into the different scripts of the English and Irish alphabets. The latter is prominently the one which 'felt like

home’, the one in which this poet, who writes now in the alphabet of English first discovers the “poet’s dream”; which is the Irish language. *Alphabets* is also in part an elegy which focuses on a vanished child, a bulldozed school, a disappeared rural way of life, and a language in danger of extinction, the ‘other writing’ of Irish. The poem’s ironical assertion *he alludes to Shakespeare* underscores once again the fallacious and inauthentic sense of identity that is a result of colonial infiltration into indigenous Irish culture. *The Haw lantern* also sees Heaney dwelling conspicuously on the themes of loss and absences, vacuous ‘places’, left behind by the deaths of his parents. Helen Vendler comments:

> As the earth loses for him the mass and gravity of familiar presences—parents and friends taken by death—desiccation and weightlessness threaten the former fullness of the sensual life.98

She points out further that it is very difficult for poets of brick and mortar solidity, like Lowell, or of rooted heaviness, like Heaney, to become light, airy, desiccated. In their new style they cannot abandon their former selves. The struggle to be one’s old self and one’s new self together is the struggle of poetry itself, which must accumulate

---

new layers, rather than discard old ones. Though a new intellectual, analytical force has now entered Heaney's poetry, Heaney's earlier commitment to the language of the "tribe" is not abandoned, though it may now take more sophisticated colorings.

The poem *The Mud Vision* is a religious-political-social poem that begins with a satirical portrait of an unnamed country dithering between atavistic superstition and yuppie modernity. The landscape displays a thin layer of industrial modernization over a desolate rural emptiness. In a typical scene, terrorist casualties are carried, in a helicopter, past the latest touring rock star.

*Statues with exposed hearts and barbed-wire crowns*
*Still stood in alcoves, hares flitted beneath...*
*The dozing bellies of jets, our menu-writers*
*And punks with aerosol sprays held their own.* (NSP. 238)

The despair brilliantly hidden in this sketch casts up a contemporary vision. What if a dispossessed country could believe not in its useless statues of the Sacred Heart nor in its modern veneer of restaurants and helicopters, but in its own solid earth?

*And then in the foggy midlands it appeared*
*Our mud vision, as if a rose window of mud*
*had invented itself out of the glittery damp*
*A gossamer wheel, concentric with its own hub.* (NSP. 238)
The Mud Vision has some of the quintessential Heaney themes: his territorial piety, his visual dexterity, his ambition for a better Ireland, his reflectiveness and his sense of inaction in the face of events. That the Irish landscape is never out of reach of a Heaney poem is also borne out by a poem like *From the Frontier of Writing*. The poem brilliantly works out a balance between the material and the immaterial, the transcendent towards which Heaney’s poetry moves in the later volumes. It opens around a space, utterly empty and stilled but this time the space is one of minatory “nilness”. It takes as its emblem the paralyzing experience of being stopped and questioned at a military roadblock in Ireland. The writer, however, has not only to pass through real roadblocks but to confront as well the invisible roadblocks of consciousness and conscience. An epiphanous moment for the constrained artist, Heaney sublimates the material into a visionary stance, a trajectory that doesn’t escape the political but goes beyond it.

*The tightness and the nilness round that space*

*When the car stops in the road, the troops inspect*

*its make and number, and, as one bends his face*

*towards your window, you catch sight of more*

*on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent*

*And suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed.* (NSP. 216)
Helen Vendler calls the poem “expressive of the present armed tension in Ireland”99 producing in us an “Irish weather: menacing, overcast, electric-so intense that for a while we live in it. But even though the soldiers in the poem are still shadowing the mental windscreen, they are gradually metamorphosing, almost, into the organic form of trees.”100

Seeing Things (1991) represents Heaney’s most sustained attempt to achieve imaginative lift-off into a kind of poetry less constrained by identities and more openly metaphysical in its concerns. This volume proves the degree to which for a new poet, a new sense of life must generate a new style, manifesting itself in “abstract unmythologized and mostly apolitical hieroglyphs.”101 Helen Vendler comments:

The poet sacrifices himself as autobiographical persona, as narrator of his own era, as a person representing his class or ethnic group in order to see things in the most basic terms of all, life viewed in the full knowledge of annihilation.102

100 Ibid., p 116.
101 Ibid., p 150.
102 Ibid., p 152.
Heaney's poetry grapples with new vistas and he now refers to his previous poetry as being "sluggish in the doldrums of what happens".\textsuperscript{103} He wants to cast off "heaviness" and embrace an unbearable lightness of being:

\begin{quote}
Me waiting till I was nearly fifty
to credit marvels ...
so long for the air to brighten
time to be dazzled and the air to lighten.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

The book is accordingly bathed in a dazzling light: the estranging irradiating blaze of the imagination. But for Heaney the appeal of metaphysical visions and voyages is still countered by a similar devotion to what many analysts call the Irish quotidian.

\textit{The Settle Bed} is one of the poems in \textit{Seeing Things} to refer with a sense of specificity to the conflict in Northern Ireland – perhaps based on the optimism of the IRA's ceasefire in 1994. But is in striking contrast to the urgent mythicizing quality of the earlier "political" poems.

\textit{The Settle Bed} finds a radiantly dreamlike image for such a


\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}
mood: bored, personal and political.

But to conquer that weight,

Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven
Like some nonsensical vengeance come on the people,
Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is given can always be reimagined, however four-square,
Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time
It happens to be. You are free as the lookout.105

The word ‘dower’ proposes the ‘settle bed’ as an inheritance which will cement a marriage, which will be the agent of reconciliation, and in doing so it transforms the inplacements of Ulster political and historical experience into the imaginative elsewhere of an alternative co-existence. Heaney’s own model of poetry as ‘redressal’, as balancing a counter reality in the scales, offering an alternative truth than the one provided by circumstances is aptly borne out by this poem. Apparently, the poem celebrates an inheritance which Heaney received from an elderly relative—an old fashioned, cumbersome bed. The bed’s stolid implacability is associated with the Northern Irish temperament, but the key point for Heaney is that the bed can be accommodated to a new environment, brought to meet the needs of

the future, and as such the bed becomes emblematic of history, of culture, and of politics. "Whatever is given", he tells us Can always be reimagined, however four square/Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time / It happens to be." The poem closes with the figure of a lookout, but this one differs from the somber, traumatized and guilt-ridden Mycenae lookout of The Spirit Level. In The Settle Bed the lookout is a 'far-seeing joker', who posted high on the mast of a fog-bound ship,' declared by the time that he had got himself down/The actual ship had been stolen away from beneath him. In envisaging new possibilities for Ireland, and in his willingness to imagine unexpected destinations for the hull-stupid ship of history, therein lies one of the enduring values of Heaney's poetry.

The Spirit Level (1996) offered something like a spiraling back to a number of Heaney's traditional poetic themes and interests. This volume written during a moment of political hope in Ireland has the quality of an 'afterward', a kind of 'finis' to the violence. The Flight Path dramatizes an encounter between a childhood friend whom he had dreamed of soliciting his help in blowing up the customs post on the Irish border. Like his dead cousin Colum Macarthy, the friend

too now berates Heaney for his failure to write representative poetry that registers solidarity with the community. "When, for fuck’s sake, are you going to write/something for us/".107 That Heaney still feels the need in these later volumes to go back to the Irish question which in Ireland is always the political question, validates the notion of Heaney as essentially a poet of "source", "a dweller" as he calls himself. But the blunt refusal of the poet to acquiesce in the demands of the tribe and make poetry subservient to a ‘cause’ which is prone to change is emphatic.

In *The Flight Path*, the whole issue of the relationship between poetry and politics and between the self as complex individual consciousness and the self as contextually belonging to a tribe or group is finally played out. In this poem, a kind of *bildungsroman*, the poet charts out his various recontextualisations that have taken place since his initial sense of ‘betrothral’ to his own land. Caught between the pull of “the appetites of gravity” and transcending the entrapments of the actual, Heaney consigns to the past any unconsciously held dimension of identity in the following interchange:

So he enters and sits down

Opposite and goes for me head on

"When for fuck's sake, are you going to write
Something for us? "If I do write something
Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself".
And that was that. Or words to that effect.\textsuperscript{108}

But in spite of the apparent resolution, the 'public' nature of the poet resurfaces in a poem like "Mycenae Lookout" – a poem written, according to Helen Vendler,

because it seemed the political troubles might be over, and one could write finis – with a summary sequence – to the whole incomprehensible slaughter."\textsuperscript{109}

Suggesting that the poem has a 'post-catastrophic' feel to it. The conceit of the poem, drawn from Aeschylus' Agamemnon depicts the aftermath of the battle of Troy with its stories of atrocity heaped on atrocity in a spiraling cycle of tragic revenge. Heaney takes a peripheral character from Aeschylus' play, a watchman, in the manner of Tom Stoppard's \textit{Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead} – and places him at the very centre of the narrative. The watchman is Heaney himself – at times a voyeur, a tongue-tied prophesier:

\textsuperscript{108} Quoted in Andrew Murphy. \textit{Seamus Heaney}. Devon: Northcote Publishers, 2000, p 94.

I balanced between destiny and dread
and saw it coming, clouds blood shot with the red
of victory fires, the raw wound of that dawn.\textsuperscript{110}

What Heaney seems to moving tentatively towards in many of the poems included in \textit{The Spirit Level} is a kind of anguished hope, offered also in his rendering of Sophocles' \textit{Philoctetes} in a contemporary idiom that speaks of "A hunger-striker's father" and "The Police widow in veils". The chorus tells us:

\begin{quote}
\textit{History says, Don't hope}
\textit{on this side of the grave}
\textit{But then, once in a lifetime}
\textit{the longed-for tidal wave}
\textit{of justice can rise up}
\textit{And hope and history rhyme.}\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

Heaney's adroit conceit of hope and history rhyming was much quoted during the course of the Northern Irish peace process. In view of the above poetic stance, one is reminded of Heaney's contention elsewhere that "the end of art is peace".\textsuperscript{112} This bears out his own

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{111} Quoted in Andrew Murphy. \textit{Seamus Heaney}. Devon: Northcote Publishers, 2000, p 108.

\end{flushleft}
concept of poetry as a “redress”. This function of poetry as a redemptive force is well brought out in his essay “The Redress of Poetry”. Poets according to Heaney are “typically concerned to conjure with their own and their readers sense of what is desirable or indeed imaginable”.\textsuperscript{113} The poet is or ought to be no mere documentator but has a tendency to “place a counter-reality in the scales, a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation”. This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances”.\textsuperscript{114} Heaney’s own poetry is perhaps best understood in terms of his capacity to placate, to bring poetic insight to the historical and political contingencies of Ireland making his poetry a kind of Irish “Purgatorio”.

He argues in the same essay for the raison d’être of Irish poetry as a fundamental principle, rooted in the politics of the nation with which the poets must negotiate, not necessarily become mouthpieces


\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Ibid.}, pp 3-4.
for one side or the other – if they do this – they allow “the will... to usurp the work of the imagination”.\textsuperscript{115} He comments:

The history of Irish poetry over the last 150 years is in itself sufficient demonstration that a motive for poetry can be grounded to a greater or lesser degree in programmes with a national purpose.\textsuperscript{116}

This kind of poetry, he says is a hallmark of emergent cultures wherein:

the struggle of an individual consciousness towards affirmation and distinctness may be analogous if not coterminous with a collective straining towards self-definition: There (becomes) then a mutual susceptibility between the formation of a new tradition and the self-fashioning of Individual talent.\textsuperscript{117}

This counterpoising of the Individuated notion of the poet with a sense of a commitment to a tradition best defines Heaney’s notion of poetry and his attitude towards his community.

Heaney’s own mode of poetry is therefore a working model of “inclusive consciousness”\textsuperscript{118}: a poetry that refuses to simplify. In his

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p 6.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p 8.
avoidance of any kind of partisanship, and his stress on the primacy of the ‘redress’ of poetry, Heaney has been hailed as an advocate of “peace”, and his poetry an agent of change and hope, of normalizing relations between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster. In his Nobel lecture Heaney defended poetry “as the ship and the anchor”\textsuperscript{119} of our spirit within an ocean of violent, divisive world politics. Perhaps the Nobel committee recognized this aspect too, as his Nobel citation bears out: “...for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.”\textsuperscript{120}

*Electric Light* (2001), Heaney’s eleventh volume of poetry, stands out for several reasons. Firstly, it continues his meditations on aesthetic values and moral profundity; Secondly, for the recontextualisations that the volume explores in its further explorations of Irish identity and nationalist politics. Thirdly, the increasing level of linguistic plurality that has entered Heaney’s work in this volume. Towards his later career, an increasing level of linguistic plurality is to be found in his writings. Translation becomes an increasingly important aspect of his canon with translations of


\textsuperscript{120} Nobel citation. Source: www.google.com
complete texts from Polish, Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin, Greek, Italian and Irish as well as snippets from a number of other European languages. The poems in *Electric Light* contain a polyglot range of allusions. In *Known World* for example, he describes his return flight from a poetry festival at Struga in Macedonia, in a highly polylinguistic style:

*I kept my seat belt fastened as instructed*  
*Smoked the minute the No Smoking sign went off*  
*And took it as my due when wine was poured*  
*By a slight de haut en bas of my headphoned head*  
*Nemaproblema. Ja. All systems go.\(^{121}\)

The "I" of the poem is clearly influenced by his European context and the linguistic and cultural reorientation is a metaphorical enunciation of an increasingly complex sense of identity within Heaney himself. The first poem *At Toomebridge* again refers in the manner of a place-name poem to a place, a landscape. Critics have noticed the absence of rootedness in this poem when compared with its counterpart in *Wintering Out, Toome*:

Toome appears in a volume which focuses at both the mythical and discursive level on the ideological associations of essentialist

---

nationalism. But *At the Toomebridge* empties the previous significations of that place and instead, valorizes a different source of poetry. The poem sees technological advances as a significant part of the landscape. This process of a gradual decentering of place is a peculiar feature of this volume, as Heaney attempts a deconstruction or recontextualisation of his poetic themes. This process of translating location into complex and plural forms of locution proceeds in the later poems of *Electric Light*. Eugene O'Brien comments: "This sense of the voiding of any essentialist connections with place is an ongoing trope in *Electric Light."{122} In *The Gaeltacht*, a poem about a Irish language speaking area of Ireland, one would expect the connection between place and ideology to be fixed and stable, but instead we find what Heaney himself has called a "field of force" in which four languages interact and intersect: English, the language of the poem; Irish, the language of the title; French, the locative ‘mon vieuxs’ of the first line and Italian, in the frame of reference and allusion of the last three lines: "...and if this sonnet/In imitation of Dante’s, where he’s set free/In a boat with Lapo and Guido, with their girlfriends in

---


196
it/Could be the wildtrack of our gabble above the sea." This "wildtrack of gabelle" Eugene O' Brien says:

Indicates a linguistic frame of reference which can become a vehicle of transformation in terms of the actual. His recontextualisations involve the second meaning of his phrase 'the government of the tongue', the idea of the tongue being 'suddenly ungoverned' and unconstrained.\footnote{Seamus Heaney. \textit{The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings}. London, Faber, 1988, p xxii}

This stance is also indicative of Heaney's concept of "poetry as its own vindicating force" shunning the mere "appetites of gravity" within which it works. Such a revisionary technique encourages also "transformative implications for any study of Irishness".\footnote{Eugene O'Brien. \textit{Seamus Heaney: Searches for Answers}. London: Pluto Press, 2003, p 132.} Heaney "invents" Ireland, perhaps far more comprehensively than Yeats' Revivalist leanings or even Joyce's Dublinscape but the way he refuses equally forcefully to let his work remain in a pose of artistic stasis is a tribute to his stature as literary artist. \textit{District and Circle} (2005), Heaney's latest volume of poetry takes further the artistic development that \textit{Electric Light} initiated; a poetry recognizably

cosmopolitan, yet at the same time tinged with some of the earliest pastoralisms which to some critics seem out of place in a post-9/11, global capitalist world. Topicality though does enter the five poem title-sequence, in which Heaney describes riding the London subway. The District and Circle lines converge at the Edgeware road, the site of the 2005 London bombings. Heaney describes the scene, reminiscent of Eliot’s description of the hellish London underground, Death becoming, as in Eliot, a ghostly presence throughout. Heaney’s choice of themes in this volume is eclectic, ranging from elegy, colloquial poems, love poems, pastorals etc. But at the same time, in the Irish pastoral countryside, an endemically politically charged context, war and violence are a distant yet a felt presence.