

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

"PROTECTIVE COLOURING"

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THE POLITICAL COMMITMENT IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY

BEING A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

BY

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PREFACE
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I came to Heaney's poetry through FIELD WORK, which I read for a seminar on contemporary British poetry when I was studying English at the University of Hull. At the time I knew nothing whatsoever about post-Yeatsian Irish poetry and so I was agreeably surprised by the quality of Heaney's work. Initially, it was not so much the contents of his poems, but the rhythms, the sound patterns, the physical immediacy of his poetry which I admired most. Accordingly, I concentrated on Heaney's nature and love poems. His political verse requires the reader to be more or less well informed about what was and still is going on in Northern Ireland and it was only gradually that I acquired such knowledge.

After FIELD WORK, I read the SELECTED POEMS 1965-1975 and they became a kind of journey through the diverse aspects of Heaney's multi-faceted work. In the course of six years' research on Heaney I have come to study other poets from Ulster as well and, though I still feel that Heaney is the most promising talent, it seems to me that Ireland is once again making a considerable contribution to English literature. Heaney is definitely on his way to becoming a major poet. The relevance of his work is not limited to the Irish context; he has something to say to

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Summary of Thesis submitted for PhD degree
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"Protective Colouring"

The Political Commitment in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

There is a tension in Seamus Heaney's poetry between his desire to escape from the Northern Troubles into a private domestic world, and the political responsibilities he has towards his Catholic community. He tries to reconcile the demands of politics and art by concealing his political message below the protective colouring of analogy, metaphor and parable.

This technique is evident even in his first collections. In his second book Heaney opens a door into the dark and discovers the bog as a storehouse of the past, a memory bank with resurrectionary powers.

The bog myth establishes an analogy between fertility sacrifices in Iron Age Denmark and sectarian murders in contemporary Ulster. The language and place-name poems of Wintering Out illustrate Heaney's ecumenical stance in that they merge Irish and English elements - a reconciliation on the linguistic level foreshadowing a possible political reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics.

In North Heaney wavers between an oblique approach to politics (in the bog poems, the Viking analogies, the sexual metaphors) and a more explicit documentary verse in part II. In Exposure he adopts protective colouring to avoid too obvious a political commitment.

Field Work is elegiac in tone and focuses on individual suffering. Analogies with Dante stress the need for a rite of healing capable of breaking the lethal cycle of terror and counter-terror.

On his pilgrimage to Station Island Heaney becomes aware of conflicting influences and, adopting the protective colouring of Sweeney, he attempts to fly free of all obligations and to "strike his own note".

Cont'd...

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The parables of The Haw Lantern document a more realistic assessment of the political evolution in the North and of the poet's political influence. Heaney still advocates reconciliation and his metaphorical verse seems to be the most satisfactory way of responding to the Crisis.

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(297 words)

the whole of mankind. Therefore he is not a local poet, but a man whose work ought to be appreciated by a larger audience than Ireland and Britain can offer.

Although this thesis is exclusively concerned with Seamus Heaney's political commitment, the poetical and aesthetic qualities of his verse and the beauty of his non-political nature and love poems should not be neglected. An appreciation of that "private" part of his temperament requires a study of its own.

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I owe particular thanks to my supervisor, Dr Bruce Woodcock, who introduced me to Seamus Heaney's poetry and whose generous assistance and advice have been invaluable.

I also wish to thank my parents without whose moral support this study could never have been written. This thesis is dedicated to them.

A.S.

April 1988

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT
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The page references in parentheses refer to the Faber editions of Seamus Heaney's works listed in the bibliography.

The following abbreviations have been used:

DN	<u>Death of a Naturalist</u>
DD	<u>Door into the Dark</u>
WO	<u>Wintering Out</u>
S	<u>Stations</u>
N	<u>North</u>
FW	<u>Field Work</u>
P	<u>Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978</u>
OL	<u>An Open Letter</u>
SI	<u>Station Island</u>
SWA	<u>Sweeney Astray</u>
HL	<u>The Haw Lantern</u>

The footnotes give full bibliographical details only for publications not listed in the bibliography. Those listed are referred to by name of author, title and page reference only.

ERRATA
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- p. 14, l. 9: read "The" instead of "the"
- p. 69, l.16: read "And the" instead of "Andthe"
- p.144, l. 9: read "polit-/ical" instead of "poli-/tical"
- p.158, l. 3: read "is" instead of "has"
- p.171, l. 4: read "re-/sponsible" instead of
"res-/ponsible"
- p.189, l.16: read "without" instead of "withour"
- p.212, l. 4: read "himself" instead of "hinsel"
- p.242, l. 9: cancel "against"
- p.243, l.11: read "Chekhov" instead of "Chekhon"
- p.255, l. 8: read "sec-/tarian" instead of "sect-/arian"
- p.306, l.27: read "chapel" instead of "chaple"
- p.308, l.13: read "propria" instead of "propia"
- p.324, l.21: read "encourage" instead of "enourage"
- p.363, l.25: read "pp.368-79" instead of "pp.369-79"

"THE MUSIC OF WHAT HAPPENS"*

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POETRY AND POLITICS IN IRELAND

Our hearts starred with frost
Through countless generations

Derek Mahon (1)

The history of Ireland is a history of invasions, oppression, injustice and suffering. Hibernia had never been under Roman occupation and thus its Gaelic culture was left to flourish peacefully. It may have been this fact and the conversion of the Gaels to Christianity by St. Patrick, who arrived in 432, that led to the Golden Age of the Gaelic-Christian civilization in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D.

But while Irish missionaries were taking the light of Christianity to a Continent that was only slowly recovering from Barbarian invasions, Vikings began to raid the coasts of Ireland itself.

In 1014 a decisive battle between the Gaels and the Vikings (who, incidentally, had Irish allies) brought victory to the Irish. But Brian Boru, the High King, was killed in the victorious battle of Clontarf. "Christ's champion, King Brian, was the passive sacri-

* a line from Song (FW, p.56).

1 From Derek Mahon, North Wind: Portrush, in: The Hunt by Night, Oxford: OUP, 1982, p.13.

ficial victor, a leader who refused to fight on the holy day and was struck down in the moment of victory by Brodir, Odin's defeated hero. Brian Boru was one of the first of Ireland's lost leaders" (2). This victory over the Norsemen became a symbol of national identity for the Irish (3).

The Battle of Clontarf also announced a future of invasions. Not always was Ireland to have a royal hero like Brian Boru. Often enough in subsequent centuries was it to stand alone, left defenceless to the greedy hands of foreign invaders. Finally, Clontarf was important because Brian Boru did not only fight against the Vikings. They were supported by Irish allies, a pattern which was to be repeated more than once in the history of Ireland, the inner-Irish quarrels contributing to the progressive loss of independence and national identity.

It was such a conflict between Dermot Macmurrough, the King of Leinster, and his High King that brought Strongbow, the Earl of Pembroke, and his Normans to Ireland in 1170. In their wake came the troops of Henry II, King of England, and thus began a series of English attempts to lay hands on Ireland. From the arrival of Henry II in 1171 to the Act of Union of 1800, Ireland was to come more and more under English and later British domination.

The history of Ireland is not only a history of defeat, it is also a history of resistance. From the Kildare rebellion against Henry VIII in 1534 to the

2 Seamus Heaney, Celtic Fringe, Viking Fringe, p.254.

3 Cf. René Fréchet, Histoire de l'Irlande, Paris: PUF, 1981, p.21: "Cette victoire, acquise au prix de sa vie, devait devenir pour les Irlandais symbole d'unité nationale et d'indépendance."

Easter Rising, the English domination of the country kept being challenged, not only by the Gaelic part of the population, but also, as in the case of the Kildare rebellion, by the very people who were supposed to represent royal authority in Ireland.

As Ireland's past is one of political strife, oppression and rebellion, it is not surprising that its poets should have dealt with this tragic predicament. The poet has a much more prominent position in society in Ireland than he has elsewhere and there are historical reasons for that. The Gaelic bard, or 'ollamh', was one of the key-figures of his society. Indeed, "the making of verse was regarded as a social craft or service" (4), the bard was a professional verse-maker, who often passed his craft on to his sons: "Poetic inheritance by blood is indeed part of the story: many of the professional poets of the classical period were of certain specific families." (5)

The bard was subsidized by a patron who paid for his verse. When the early Norman invaders settled in Ireland, thereby threatening Gaelic institutions, the native lords were especially eager to preserve "the assurance of continuity and stability which the praises of the bards could give them" (6). The bards thus became a potential danger for the new order and were recognized as such by the English. They were pursued for it "and during the Elizabethan campaigns which put an end to the native

4 Séan MacRéamoinn (ed.), The Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry, London: Allen Lane, 1982, p.15.

5 *ibid.*

6 David Greene, The Bardic Mind, in: MacRéamoinn, *op.cit.*, p.38.

Irish order the bards were especially marked out for liquidation." (7)

One has to be aware of the special function and position of the bards in Gaelic Ireland to understand the role of the poet in modern Ireland. The contemporary Irish poet is a more influential figure than are his British and Continental colleagues. He is still an upholder of traditions, a defender of the national identity. He is also a kind of public spokesman, a person whose opinions are valued by the majority of the population.

The central importance of the Gaelic bard is reflected in the contemporary Irish poet's influence on public life, an influence unequalled by the poets of any other European society. It has also given him responsibilities not many other poets share.

The political had always been a prominent aspect of bardic poetry. The bards' praising of ancient Gaelic glory was an implied rejection of the new English values. The bards sang a Gaelic order which the English were busy abolishing. Political Irish poetry has a long tradition and just as the bards reacted to their country being taken over by the English, modern poets have had to react to the injustices of the twentieth century.

There is thus a strong link between Irish poetry and Irish politics. Irish poets remain close to the nation's heart; they voice its grievances, its suffering and its revolt.

But nowadays they seldom voice it in Gaelic. The new medium is English, the language of the colonialist. The

7 *ibid.*

slow death of Gaelic has many reasons. The primary one was the collapse of the old Gaelic social order in the seventeenth century. The institutions of Ireland were anglicized. Gaelic ceased to be the 'official' language. Its decline began and was amplified by "the erosive effects of intense colonization ('plantation') and the growth of small cities and towns as centres of Anglicization" (8). The crucial event, however, was the Famine of 1845-49, during which many Gaelic-speaking Irish died or emigrated abroad. "In a new demographic situation the language went into a sharp decline." (9)

National identity is closely linked with language. Once Ireland had practically lost its language, how could it preserve its identity? There have been many attempts to revive the use of Irish; the Gaelic League has contributed enormously to such efforts. Nonetheless, English has become the first language of Ireland and for most Irish people their native tongue is English, not Irish.

This causes some problems for the Irish poet, who has to write in English in order to gain a wider audience. Recently there has been a revival of Gaelic poetry, but it is still less important than the Irish literature written in English, although the majority of the citizens of Eire have at least a passive knowledge of Irish.

The use of English by an Irish poet might lead to a conflict of loyalties. Some critics have even accused Irish poets of writing in the language of the oppressor, of giving in to British cultural imperialism. Whether this is so is debatable. The same could be said of

8 MacRéamoinn, *op.cit.*, p.12.

9 *ibid.*

African writers from Commonwealth countries writing in English. Yeats, doubtless the best poet ever to have come out of Ireland, was an Anglo-Irish Protestant. He wrote in English. Yet, he was Irish through-and-through. He revived old Gaelic myths, he founded a new Irish theatre and he took a vivid interest in public affairs and politics.

His play Cathleen Ni Houlihan had a decisive influence on Irish history. It encouraged and motivated some of the Easter rebels. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in a 20th Century Studies interview, mentions statements by Countess Mariekiewicz and P.S. O'Hegarty that Yeats's play was a 'gospel', a 'sacrament' to them and he asks "whether a writer was entitled to put on such a play unless he was prepared for people to go out and shoot and be shot because of what he had written" (10). Yeats was an Irish nationalist, but not an extremist. In Easter 1916 he mourns the death of the rebels, but also questions the necessity of these deaths. And in The Man and the Echo (11) he wonders what the power of words can do and whether he has to accept part of the responsibility for the Rising:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?

We have seen that the Gaelic bards did not only deal with politics in their songs, but also played a part in the political struggle for power by encouraging the

10 In: 20th Century Studies, November 1970, p.101.

11 W.B.Yeats, Collected Poems, London: Macmillan, 1950, p.393.

Gaelic lords to defend their order and institutions against the English. Yeats's role was similar. His fiercely nationalist plays showed potential Irish rebels what they had lost, what the English had taken away from them and they roused their patriotism. Later on he realized that there is "More substance in our enmities / Than in our love" (12), but at the time he did not anticipate the full effect his words were to have.

Thus the Irish poet has to be aware of the responsibilities he has towards his country, but also of the dangers inherent. He is responsible for what he says and has to realize that whatever he says is not a private utterance, but a public statement.

What goes for the Irish poet in general is also valid, and much more so, for the contemporary Ulster poet. Louis MacNeice wrote:

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation
Built upon violence and morose vendettas. (13)

These, "our murderous divisions" (14), are a feature of Ulster, too. In the North the conflict is not between Irish and British only, but between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, the first descendants of Gaelic ancestors, the others of British (Scottish and English) planters and settlers.

The poet has to come to terms with these conflicts, he has to look for a way out. One might argue with W.H. Auden that poetry is impotent, that it cannot change anything,

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen (15),

12 Meditations in Time of Civil War, in: Collected Poems, op.cit., p.231.

13 Eclogue from Iceland, in: Selected Poems, London: Faber, 1964, p.34.

but that is the view of a foreigner, an Englishman. Derek Mahon sees a moral obligation forcing the Ulster poet to respond to the Crisis:

One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
The things that happen in the kitchen houses
And echoing back-streets of this desperate city
Should engage more than my casual interest,
Exact more interest than my casual pity. (16)

During the 1960s a young generation of poets emerged from the city that "is built on mud and wrath" (17). One may speculate whether it was the explosive political situation that encouraged the recent flowering of poetry in the North ("Fear is the emotion that the muse thrives on", as Heaney has said (18). Whatever the reasons for the resurrection of poetry in the Province may be, it has produced a number of excellent poets and is still producing them. Seamus Heaney is probably the best-known of these and his prominence has made him the centre of attention, but also the main target of criticism.

Thus the fact that Heaney writes in English and publishes in Britain, that his reading public is largely a British one, has made him the object of severe criticism. In an interview he once said: "Quelqu'un m'a dit assez cyniquement, un républicain, que j'étais un poète récupéré par l'establishment, le poète lauréat de l'Ulster" (19). Anthony Burgess wrote in an essay that Heaney was

14 Seamus Heaney, Lost Ulstermen, p.551.

15 In Memory of W.B. Yeats, in: Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957, London: Faber, 1966, p.142.

16 The Spring Vacation, in: Poems 1962-1978, Oxford: OUP, 1979, p.4.

17 Tom Paulin, Under the Eyes, in: A State of Justice, London: Faber, 1977, p.9.

18 Interview, in: John Haffenden, Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation, p.69.

an Irishman rejecting his national tradition, who belonged to British literature because he wrote in the language of the British (20).

These arguments do not hold. As Derek Mahon has said, "there is nothing dishonourable (if ever there was) in a Catholic writer, or an Irish writer for that matter, envisaging a larger audience than Ireland provides" (21). This is exactly what Heaney does and no one who has read his poetry can honestly claim that he has rejected Irish traditions or that he has become a kind of alibi of the British Establishment. If Heaney's poetry is not as radical as, e.g., Michael Hartnett's, then the reasons are to be found in his character and his convictions rather than in any wish to please the British. Nothing is further from his mind, as his pamphlet AN OPEN LETTER shows.

What about Heaney's political views? In a period witnessing renewed bloodshed in Ulster, a Northern poet's response to the Troubles is of considerable interest. There can be no doubt that Heaney's poetry is political. A. Alvarez misjudges Heaney when he writes that his work "challenges no presuppositions, does not upset or scare, is mellifluous, craftsmanly, and often perfect within its chosen limits. In other words, it is beautiful minor poetry, like Philip Larkin's" (22). That may be true of Heaney's early verse, but not of his mature poetry.

19 Le clivage traditionnel, p.188.

20 Anthony Burgess, Viel kam nicht aus dem Mutterland, in: H.L.Schütz, M.L.Fenner (eds.), Welt-Literatur heute, München: dtv, 1982, p.132: "Seamus Heaney (ein Bürger der Republik Irland, der seine nationale Tradition ableugnet und, indem er in der Sprache der Briten schreibt, einen Teil der britischen Literatur bildet)."

21 Derek Mahon, Poetry in Northern Ireland, p.90.

22 A.Alvarez, A Fine Way With the Language, p.17.

Graham Martin has argued that "the crisis in Ulster is never far away" (23) and Heaney, though he has characterized himself as "torpid in politics" (24), has also admitted that "the world around me was demanding something more" (25).

Derek Mahon wrote that "the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem ... is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time" (26). But what is political poetry? What connotations does the word have for Heaney? In an interview he said: "I think it was probably inevitable that I would write political poetry, in some way. But 'political', you see, is a strong word again. Some people would ask for Marxist solutions: I don't think you can write poetry like that. You can't bring in a programme and impose it. You can if you're a political speaker; but I think you have to be true to the grain of the emotions and personality generally of the community and the society. And that is rarely consonant with any kind of large doctrine." (27)

* * *

It is the purpose of this thesis to analyse Heaney's political response to the Crisis. How does he react to it? What are his views? How have they evolved over the

23 Graham Martin, John Montague, Seamus Heaney and the Irish Past, p.391.

24 Artists on Art, An Interview with Seamus Heaney (Frank Kinahan), p.409.

25 Talk with Seamus Heaney (Seamus Deane), p.47.

26 Derek Mahon, Poetry in Northern Ireland, p.93.

27 A Raindrop on a Thorn: An Interview with Seamus Heaney (Robert Druce), p.34.

years? What solutions, if any, does he suggest? - Those are the questions I will try to answer by looking in detail at Heaney's poems.

The title of the thesis, Protective Colouring, stresses the basic tendency in his poetry to evade explicit political statements in favour of an obliqueness of approach, which, though taking different forms, is characteristic of most of his verse. It seems to me that the image of protective colouring, from the poem Exposure, expresses this idea most adequately.

CHAPTER I

"A VOCATION BEING SOUGHT"*

DEATH OF A NATURALIST (1966)

Even before the more straightforward political poems of WINTERING OUT and NORTH, there was an undercurrent of political concern in Seamus Heaney's verse, although he announced himself and was hailed by his early critics primarily as a 'nature' poet.

When his first collection of poetry, DEATH OF A NATURALIST, was published in 1966, it was reviewed enthusiastically by most critics. C.B.Cox admired the "full-blooded energy of these poems" (1), Christopher Ricks was impressed by their "power and precision" (2) and Richard Kell praised the "accuracy and freshness with which sense-impressions are recorded" (3).

These judgements are representative of the reception of Heaney's first book; the critics focused on the "directness, openness, and apparent matter-of-factness" (4) of his style, on what Heaney himself has called the

* From Peter Stoler, Singing of Skunks and Saints, p.58.

1 from a review in the Spectator, quoted on the back cover of the 1978 reprint of DN.

2 from a review in the New Statesman, quoted on the back cover of the 1980 reprint of FW.

3 from a review in the Guardian, quoted on the back cover of the 1978 reprint of DN.

4 Robert Buttel, Seamus Heaney, p.22.

"grunting consonantal music" (5), and on the striking rural imagery of his verse (6):

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.

(DN, p.15)

The opening lines of the title-poem from DEATH OF A NATURALIST will suffice to illustrate the qualities mentioned above. The stress falls heavily on the key-words, which are further emphasized by alliteration. Harsh sounds and a rural vocabulary of largely Anglo-Saxon origin convey the idea of a realistic, down-to-earth, a farmer's approach to life. The words "not only mean what they say, they sound like their meaning" (7), as Richard Murphy put it: the /dʒ/- and /d/-plosives of 'huge sods' lie heavy on the tongue, just as the sods themselves weigh on the flax. Thus the sounds make the poetry come alive. The personification (the festering and sweltering flax-dam) shows the farmer's closeness to nature. The adjectives and adverbs, as becomes clear in these lines, are carefully chosen, just as much for the sake of melody and rhythm as for the sake of meaning. This is one example of what John Montague has called the "verbal pedantry which dances through Irish

5 Seamus Heaney on the Faber Poetry Cassette (cf. note 9).

6 Buttel, *op.cit.*, p.19, discussing Turkeys Observed, admires the "imagistic exactitude" of that poem.

7 Richard Murphy, Poetry and Terror, p.38.

Buttel, *op.cit.*, p.38, supports this view when he writes that it is "difficult to draw a clear line separating poetic artifice and physical reality, ... the two becoming one in the body of the poem. It is also through such physical immediacy of word and image that Heaney creates emotional impact."

literature" (8), a pedantry which will become more marked in Heaney's later poetry.

At this stage Heaney's style was strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon literature and by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. He never denied this indebtedness, but, on the contrary, acknowledged it several times (9).

Thematically speaking, the poems are mostly about "the colourful violence of his childhood on a farm in Derry" (10). The themes are domestic and rural. Besides the reminiscences of a country childhood there are love poems and poems about animals or about life on the farm, a fact which made Christopher Ricks call Heaney "the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking" (11).

In Digging, the first poem of the collection, digging is seen as a metaphor for writing, for poetic creation. Timothy Kearney regards the poem as "a parable of the vital connection between man and nature" (12). Death of

8 John Montague, The Faber Book of Irish Verse, p.28.

Anthony Thwaite, in Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984, p.110, admires the poet's "verbal and physical precision, fresh eyes and fresh phrases".

9 On the Faber Poetry Cassette he says: "I had read Anglo-Saxon and I'm sure that that had something to do with the relish that is in the first poems I wrote for a kind of grunting consonantal music. I also had read Gerard Manley Hopkins with some delight and these first poems really were trying to weave a kind of mat of sound that was as thick and sturdy as the kind of music in Anglo-Saxon verse and in Hopkins."

Heaney also acknowledged this indebtedness to Hopkins in the essays The Fire I' The Flint (P, pp.79-97) and Feeling Into Words: "The result of reading Hopkins at school was the desire to write, and when I first put pen to paper at university, what flowed out was what had flowed in, the bumpy alliterating music, the reporting sounds and ricocheting consonants typical of Hopkins's verse." (P, p.44).

10 C.B.Cox, op.cit. (cf. note 1).

11 Christopher Ricks, Lasting Things, p.900 (about DD).

12 Timothy Kearney, The Poetry of the North: A Post-Modernist Perspective, p.469.

a Naturalist is about a boy's experience with frogs; An Advancement of Learning deals with a young child's overcoming his instinctive fear of rats. The Early Purges is a meditation on life and death started by the drowning of kittens on the farm. A pregnant cow is at the centre of Cow in Calf. In Mid-Term Break the poet remembers the death by accident of his younger brother. The Play Way is about a teaching experience. In Ancestral Photograph Heaney experiences a sense of belonging and continuity, another important theme in his poetry.

It is not difficult to see the influence of Ted Hughes on DEATH OF A NATURALIST. The rural element, the closeness to an untamed nature, the latent violence, the presence of life and death as parts of a never-ending cycle, are characteristics of Hughes's poetry, too (13).

Though Heaney is indeed indebted to Hopkins and Hughes, though he does deal with rural themes, it would be wrong to say that he is no more than a kind of Irish Ted Hughes. It would be equally wrong to claim that his early poetry is a-political. There are political poems in this collection and there are elements of a political consciousness even in the unpolitical ones. This presence of political and unpolitical poems in one collection points to the double nature of the poet's interests.

In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney admitted

13 Heaney acknowledged this debt in an interview with James Randall: "I remember the day I opened Ted Hughes's Lupercal in the Belfast Public Library. And that was again a poem called 'View of a Pig' and in my childhood we'd killed pigs on the farm, and I'd seen pigs shaved, hung up, and so on. So again, suddenly, the matter of contemporary poetry was the material of my own life." An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.14.

that he had always been interested both in the sectarian political problems of Northern Ireland as he experienced them in his local community, and in a kind of private nostalgia for the world of his childhood:

Then this [i.e. the facing of the Northern sectarian problems] went underground and I became very influenced by Hughes and one part of my temperament took over: the private County Derry childhood part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part. (14)

It is this "private County Derry childhood part" that is most prominent in DEATH OF A NATURALIST. But although the "young Catholic male part" is somewhat neglected, it is represented in the collection - by poems such as Docker or For the Commander of the 'Eliza'.

Before moving on to an analysis of these poems, we ought to have a look at Heaney's political background. The poet was brought up on his father's farm in Co.Derry. Mossbawn, as the farm was called, was part of a mixed community, a community in which the tensions between Protestants and Catholics were experienced on a local, parochial level. The young farmer's son was constantly reminded of these differences:

For if this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division. ... The lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. In the names of its fields and townlands, in their mixture of Scots and Irish and English etymologies, this side of the country was redolent of the histories of its owners. (15)

A certain degree of tolerance is always required if two communities live in the same area. People have to cope with the situation as best they can. The present troubles in Ulster illustrate what happens if there is

14 Unhappy and at Home, p.66.

15 P, p.20.

not even a minimum of good will.

Heaney's background was not a radical one. His family had always been aware of the divisions separating Catholics and Protestants, but they believed that the Irish had to find a way of living together, whatever their differences. Unlike the Republicans on the one and the Unionists on the other side of the sectarian gulf, they saw that radicalism offered no solutions.

In an interview with Monie Begley, Heaney said:

Our household fell into the Papish rather than the Republican class. I never had any hint of blistering Republican dogma. For example, I knew very little about 1916. On the other hand, I knew a lot about 1798. When people met in the house, they would sing songs or recite poems about '98. (16)

Thus the sympathies of the Heaney family were not with the radical Easter Rising and its Sinn Féin ideology, but rather with the defunct Society of United Irishmen, which wanted to substitute "the common name of Irishman for that of Catholic and Protestant" (17), as Wolfe Tone wrote. Tone's ideal of an Irish revolution "which would unite Catholics and Protestants as one Irish nation in an Irish republic" (18) suffered a severe setback with the Bantry Bay fiasco in December 1796 and failed definitively when the Wexford rebellion of 1798 ended with the disaster of Vinegar Hill.

The atrocities committed by both rebels and government troops were scarcely apt to further the ideal of

16 Monie Begley, Rambles in Ireland, p.162.

17 Robert Kee, Ireland - A History, p.60.

18 *ibid.*

uniting Catholic and Protestant Irishmen. Thus the attempt of 1798 to set up a united Irish nation with no links with Britain failed, partly because the rebels were not efficiently organized, probably also because the sectarian antagonisms and prejudices were too strong to be surmounted.

It is important to realize that Heaney was brought up in a climate of moderation. His family favoured reconciliation, not conflict:

There is still no future until there is a political structure to allow dignity and self-respect for both sides. My position is that the Protestants could live with dignity and self-respect in a United Ireland. (19)

This basically conciliatory attitude was the basis of Heaney's political thinking. It encouraged his seeing the situation in Ulster not as a national, but as a sectarian problem. Even before the influence of Ted Hughes made Heaney turn to his rural childhood for inspiration, he had dealt with the political question in his earliest poems: "My first attempts to speak, to make verse, faced the Northern sectarian problem" (20), he told Seamus Deane.

One of these first attempts is the poem Docker (DN, p.41). It is about a Belfast docker, a Protestant, and his attitudes. The presentation of the docker in the first stanza is not exactly flattering: he is the caricature of a strong, tough, rather dumb Protestant, violent, radical and ignorant. Robert Buttel mentions his

19 Monie Begley, *op.cit.*, p.167.

20 Unhappy and at Home, *op.cit.*, p.66.

"obtuseness, inarticulate rage, and warped Calvinism" (21). The imagery Heaney uses is taken from the man's place of work, the docks, suggesting, as does the whole poem, that he is a hard worker and that a Protestant work ethic is at the centre of his life.

Stanza 2 stresses the docker's radicalism and his latent violence, but it also has a prophetic quality:

That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic -
Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again;
The only Roman collar he tolerates
Smiles all round his sleek pint of porter.

In the first line the Catholic is seen as the enemy whom the docker is prepared to kill, a vermin to be destroyed. Yet the utterance has to be put into its context: it is produced in a pub and therefore has to be relativized, because it is largely drunken brawling. Would he really "drop a hammer on a Catholic" - if he were sober? It is difficult to answer this question, but the poet obviously takes the threat seriously, as is shown by the prophetic statement of the second line ("That kind of thing could start again"), prophetic because the poem was written before the present Northern Troubles began. That kind of thing has started again and "the bitter divisions of the past" (22) have broken through once more.

The black humour of the second half of this stanza is in line with the brawling pub atmosphere. We can imagine the drunken laughter of the docker's friends when he compares the froth on his beer to the collar of a Catholic priest.

Buttel mentions the "moral vacuum of intolerance and

21 Buttel, op.cit., p.46.

22 P.R.King, Nine Contemporary Poets, p.201.

hate" (23) exhibited by this docker and he is right in suggesting that the docker does not understand the real depth of the sectarian problem; he ignores its implications. His hate and violence are not based on any personal "insight" - they were implanted into him by the rules of the tribe. In a sense the docker is a typical example of the Paisleyite: blind hatred and ignorance turn him into a character dangerously easy to manipulate.

The docker's religion is a primitive Protestantism. God is at the centre of his beliefs - a patriarchal God, an absolute ruler, a commander, a leader. The docker can only imagine Him as

a foreman with certain definite views
Who orders life in shifts of work and leisure.
A factory horn will blare the Resurrection.

This simplification is a caricature, but at the same time it implies danger. How will such an infantile imagination, such a crude mind react to the demagogues on both sides? Will he not see the Northern issue in a black-and-white perspective, will he not abandon his own judgement (if he ever had any) and listen to radical preachers, above all if they claim to be the priests of that very God whom he regards as the supreme commander?

Thus, despite his violence, the docker is not entirely responsible for what he does. He is a man easily manipulated by others and therefore, ultimately, pitiable. He is both victim and tyrant.

To his acceptance of a patriarchal God corresponds his own tyrannical behaviour at home:

He sits, strong and blunt as a Celtic cross,
Clearly used to silence and an armchair:

23 Buttel, op.cit., p.46.

Tonight the wife and children will be quiet
At slammed door and smoker's cough in the hall.

The comparison with the blunt Celtic cross stresses the ambiguity of the docker's character. The hard plosives of the alliteration "Celtic cross / Clearly" sound aggressive, threatening. The docker is "blunt", i.e. dull and unrefined, uncompromising and lacking in sensitivity.

But why is it a Celtic cross? J.W.Foster takes the image for "an unwitting incongruity or misguided stroke of ethnic ecumenism" (24). Ecumenicalism this certainly is, but I doubt that it is incongruous. The docker might, after all, be a descendant of Episcopalian Scottish settlers - a Protestant, but undoubtedly of Celtic stock. Thus beneath the criticism of the Protestant's violence, there is Heaney's search for a common root and the attempt to find explanations for the docker's attitude.

In Docker Heaney tries to characterize the typical Protestant worker. He will most probably have known such people; he will have met them in Belfast, in the city where the sectarian antagonism is stronger than in the country, where radicalism prevails over moderation. In the city the two communities keep to themselves, a fact which encourages prejudice.

Yet the poem has a parochial character. Heaney is interested in individual persons, though in this case the individual is a caricature of the archetypal Protestant worker. He criticizes this Protestant, but his family's United Irishmen mentality breaks through in his attempt at ecumenicalism. The spirit of '98 was still strong in Heaney at the time of writing this poem - but then that was before Bloody Sunday.

24 J.W.Foster, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.38.

Poor Women in a City Church (DN, p.42) is the poem immediately following Docker in the collection. The two poems are complementary. Poor women are kneeling in front of the Virgin's altar in a church. Their humble attitude contrasts favourably with the docker's bragging. A comparison between the two poems reveals more contrasts: male Protestant versus female Catholics, patriarchal God versus matriarchal Virgin, pub versus church. Rita Zoutenbier has argued that the two poems "present images of the two cultures in Ireland: the violence of the Belfast docker ... and the submissive women kneeling in a church" (25). This is true and the difference between Protestant and Catholics is seen on a parochial level, not in terms of theoretical disputes or ideological quarrels.

The docker and the poor women share one characteristic: neither of them has insight into the essence of religion. For the docker God is a kind of foreman, life a cycle of work and leisure. Religion as the poor women see it is a beautiful church, "Golden shrines, altar lace, / Marble columns and cool shadows". Buttell stresses the same idea: "With Browningsque irony the speaker conveys the oppressiveness of the scene. ... [The women] are consoled by the atmosphere and decor of religion, not by its spiritual depth" (26). Just as the docker is a caricature, the poor women "seem as lifeless as the candles" (27).

It has become clear by now that Heaney criticizes the superficiality with which problems are regarded in both

25 Rita Zoutenbier, The Matter of Ireland and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.7.

26 Buttell, op.cit., p.47.

27 ibid.

communities. The Protestants and the Catholics share many characteristics and there are also a lot of differences between them, but they fail to analyse these differences, a prerequisite to overcoming them. They are satisfied with clichés, prejudices, comfortable preconceived opinions. Both sides lack the necessary tolerance and understanding to see the other's point of view.

Heaney seems to argue that compromise and tolerance between the individual members of the two communities on a local or parochial level could be a possible way out of the deadlock in Northern Ireland. He thus advocates a parochial ecumenicalism in the spirit of 1798.

It would be an unrealistic simplification to see the Northern predicament only in terms of prejudices and misunderstandings and Heaney is aware of this. There is e.g. the history of past atrocities and there is the reminiscence of injustices committed by the British. In this context, the famine of 1845-9 was and still is a traumatic experience for many Irish people. Heaney has dealt with this subject in two of the poems in DEATH OF A NATURALIST, one of which is For the Commander of the 'Eliza' (DN, pp.34-5).

The poem describes an incident during the famine. The facts are taken from Cecil Woodham-Smith's The Great Hunger (28), a quote from which constitutes the epigraph.

28 "In remote districts the people were starving. The revenue cutter, Eliza, making a visit of inspection, on June 22, to the Killeries, a wild district of mountain and deep ocean inlets in the far west, was implored for food by a boatload of skeletons. The Commissariat officer at Westport, supply centre for the Killeries, had been instructed to send no more meal to the region because the depot was becoming empty.

A British patrol vessel sights a rowboat off the coast of West Mayo. The speaker, the commander of the vessel, discovers, to his horror, that it contains six starving men:

Six wrecks of bone and pallid, tautened skin.

The commander knew about "the shortage" (the understatement is bitterly ironic), but owing to the fact that

on board

They always kept us right with flour and beef,

he had never realized the true extent of the famine. The commander's attitude is ambiguous: on the one hand he feels compassion, on the other hand he has no orders authorizing him to support starving Irishmen. He

had no mandate to relieve distress

Since relief was then available in Westport -

Though clearly these poor brutes would never make it.

I had to refuse food: they cursed and howled

Like dogs that had been kicked hard in the privates.

The disappointed famine victims become violent in their despair. The commander, concerned for his own safety ("Less incidents the better") abandons them at sea.

P.R.King has suggested that "the commander is unable to feel some pity" (29), whereas Buttell regards him as "an English naval officer sensitive to a group of desperate starving natives, whom he hailed in Gaelic (30)

One man, stated the officer in command, was lying on the bottom of the boat, unable to stand and already half dead, the others, with emaciated faces and prominent, staring eyeballs, were evidently in an advanced state of starvation. The officer reported to Sir James Dombrain, Inspector-General of the Coastguard Service, who had served on relief during the famine of 1839, and Sir James Dombrain, 'very inconveniently,' wrote Routh, 'interfered.' He 'prevailed' on an officer at the Westport depot to issue meal, which he gave away free; he also 'prevailed' on the captain of the Government steamship, Rhadamanthus, to take 100 tons of meal, intended for Westport, to the Coastguard Station at the Killeries. 'The Coast Guard with all their zeal and activity are too lavish,' wrote Routh to Trevelyan." Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, p.80.

though he refused to help them. The poem's bitterness and sorrow are filtered through his mingled sympathy, self-concern ... and dutiful matter-of-factness" (31). I much prefer Buttell's point of view. It seems clear from the poem that the commander is actually compassionate and the irony arises from the fact that, despite his pity, he insists on doing his duty, thus signing the death-warrant for the six 'boat people'. The commander's basically sympathetic attitude is stressed by his reaction when he sees the starving men in the boat:

O my sweet Christ,
We saw piled in the bottom of their craft
Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills,

and also by his clumsy attempts to find an excuse for his ignorance of the true extent of the catastrophe. This is very similar to the attitude many Germans had after the breakdown of the Nazi régime when they admitted that they had known of the existence of concentration camps, but not of what had actually happened there.

The commander of the 'Eliza' has got into a situation he is unable to cope with emotionally. So he looks to his orders for support. The poem is "neatly ironic" (32) because the commander's dread of his superiors is greater than his compassion, and his own career is more important to him than the lives of the starving Irish. His reaction

30 There seems to be a misunderstanding on Buttell's part here. The thrice-uttered cry "Bia, bia, / Bia" is not a salutation; the word simply means 'food' in Gaelic. Therefore the speaker cannot be the commander, but must be one of the famished Irishmen. Neil Corcoran, in Seamus Heaney, p.68, notes that this is "Heaney's first use in his work of an Irish word", certainly a significant choice.

31 Buttell, op.cit., p.46.

32 Roland Mathias, Death of a Naturalist. In: Tony Curtis (ed.), The Art of Seamus Heaney, p.22. Buttell, op.cit., p.46, calls the irony "terse".



illustrates how the inhuman cruelty of the administration can thwart any humane feelings an individual may still have.

The second part of the poem deals with the commander's reporting the incident to his superiors. He obviously has a sense of guilt because he has to bear the moral responsibility for the death of these Irishmen. He wants to exorcise his guilt by passing the responsibility on to someone else. The Inspector General, Sir James Dombrain, is willing to help the famine victims, but he

earned tart reprimand from good Whitehall.

The truly responsible people are the members of the British Government, which here, with sharp irony, is qualified as 'good'. The epigraph mentions the name of one of the responsible politicians, Routh. Robert Kee writes about him:

On the west coast ... distress had been so great so early on that some local relief officers had, against orders, been distributing small amounts [of corn] for sale. Sir Randolph Routh, the Commissary General ... reprimanded them for this action which 'undermined market forces' and ordered them to close down at once. (33)

The sardonic tone of the last four lines of Heaney's poem is not exaggerated; it is in accordance with the actual reaction of the British Government:

Let natives prosper by their own exertions;
Who could not swim might go ahead and sink.

This inhuman, merciless, laconic attitude is quite unlike the commander's impotent pity.

Heaney does not criticize the British commander so much as the men behind him, the cruel, inhuman system that did

33 Kee, *op.cit.*, pp.90-1.

nothing to relieve the starving Irish, although the corn silos were full (34), just as his criticism of the dockers was less severe than his condemnation of the prejudices and hatred that some demagogues had implanted into him. Heaney thus shows that it is the political system, or, in more general terms, the climate of intolerance and inhumanity that has to be accused, a climate that not only allows for these injustices to be committed, but actually encourages people to commit them. The individuals themselves could live together, he seems to say, not exactly in harmony, perhaps, but with some tolerance, if there were not forces at work that inhibit such a reconciliation (35).

The other poem in this collection dealing with the Famine is At a Potato Digging (DN, pp.31-3). Its first section is a description of the farm labourers harvesting potatoes with the help of a mechanical digger. The poet focuses on their work in some detail and uses striking imagery to describe them gathering the potatoes

Like crows attacking crow-black fields.

Potato digging is conceived of as a kind of rite, an old

34 This view is also held by King, *op.cit.*, p.201: "This poem is an accurate, restrained but nevertheless fierce accusation of the past wrongs done to Ireland, and it succeeds in both explaining the lack of humanity in the political sphere and making us feel the tensions between an official's carrying out of orders and the human being's sense of pity for suffering."

Can we spot a contradiction between the commander's "human being's sense of pity for suffering" and his being called a man "unable to feel some pity" earlier on in King's essay (cf. note 29)? I also wonder whether the accusation can be both "restrained" and "fierce"?

35 Heaney's view is too optimistic here. It is unrealistic to put all the blame on the political system, as it was constructed by the people and thus its inherent defects reflect those of the people. As Heaney suggests in WQ and N, there are a lot of other possible explanations for the sectarian division in Ulster.

annual tradition:

Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

Potato digging is a kind of homage which the labourers perform humbly in order to appease the famine god.

In section 2 Heaney describes the potatoes themselves, as they "lie scattered / like inflated pebbles". This section ends with the potatoes being compared to "live skulls, blind-eyed". In section 3 the same image is associated with the famine and stands no longer for the potatoes, but for the famine victims:

Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in 'forty-five,
wolfed the blighted root and died. (36)

The image could come straight out of a painting by Pieter Brueghel or Hieronymus Bosch. Heaney is explicit: he creates in our minds a picture of living skeletons wandering across the country, gobbling poisonous potatoes - a horrible, nightmarish vision.

The Irish are pictured as

A people hungering from birth,
grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth.

There is a clear contrast between the soil, the 'Mother Earth' as seen in section 2,

the black hutch of clay
where the halved seed shot and clotted,

and the 'bitch earth' of this section. The earth is ambig-

36 Cf. Woodham-Smith, *op.cit.*, p.135: "Bands of starving men roamed the country, begging for food, 'more like famished wolves than men'."

uous and treacherous. It creates and destroys, decides over life and death. Whereas in section 2

Good smells exude from crumbled earth,
in section 3

you still smell the running sore.

Indeed, you can still smell it. The Famine has not been forgotten: it is a sore wound, not yet cicatrized.

Section 4 shows how the labourers interrupt their work in order to have lunch:

Thankfully breaking timeless fasts.

There is a subtle irony in the workers gathering a good potato harvest and, later on, spilling "libations of cold tea", scattering "crusts" on the ground which contains the bones of their starved ancestors, whose fasts were indeed "timeless" (37).

In this poem Heaney inserts, "a little uneasily" (38) it may be granted, the reminiscence of the Famine into a description of present-day potato-digging. He thus stresses the fact that history, in Ireland, is omnipresent: it is present in the land and in the minds of the people (39). Catastrophes like the Famine cannot be forgotten. The history of Ireland, like its present, is characterized by injustice, suffering and pain. There are sore wounds in the Irish consciousness and they explain so much of what happens nowadays.

37 Cf. Kearney, *op.cit.*, p.469: "The workers spilling their libations of cold tea and crusts fail to discern that the ground on which they lie is 'faithless', that in less prosperous times she is the 'bitch earth', 'the black mother', 'the famine god'."

38 Mathias, *op.cit.*, p.22.

39 "The world they inhabit is the world of personal and racial memory," as he wrote of the old people in John Montague's The Rough Field. (Lost Ulstermen, p.55o).

I have said earlier that *DEATH OF A NATURALIST* is to a large extent the result of Heaney's interest in his own rural childhood. Poems with a political background are rare in this collection but they reveal some characteristics of Heaney's political views at the time. First of all there is the parochial nature of his politics: he deals with single persons and tries to analyse the reasons for their behaviour. These people are both individuals and archetypes. Heaney's stance is ecumenical: he "sees the function of poetry as essentially an act of reconciliation operating at a psychological level" (40).

Next, there is Heaney's interest in the history of Ireland, an interest so far limited to the Famine, but which will become one of his primary concerns. History is important because it sheds light on the past. Just as past experiences condition the individual's psyche, past events condition the consciousness of the nation. Thus, Heaney's 'digging' into the past can be regarded as an attempt to understand and explain the present.

Finally, Heaney stresses the violence that is inherent in the land. It can be found in the docker's aggressiveness or Whitehall's inhumanity and heartlessness, but also in the poems that do not overtly deal with politics and history. Heaney may be sensing that violence is somehow part of Ireland, an undeniable part of the Irish heritage. Non-political violence is prominent in his early poetry. D.E.S. Maxwell has said that "violence, menace, are inherent in the land, whether in its daily occupations,

40 John Williams, Twentieth Century British Poetry, p.88.

or in a heritage of blood" (41). Both Richard Murphy and Blake Morrison point to the importance of the words Heaney chooses in these poems (42). Thus in the very first poem of DEATH OF A NATURALIST, Digging, the pen lies in the poet's hand "snug as a gun". In Death of a Naturalist itself we find expressions like "invaded", "threats", "mud grenades", "vengeance"; in Churning Day the metaphor "large pottery bombs" is used, in The Barn we are given "an armoury / Of farmyard implements", in Dawn Shoot two boys play war games; there is an "almost absurd range of military metaphors" (43) in Trout, Cow in Calf and Turkeys Observed. The Early Purges is about the violent death by drowning of kittens and in this latter poem "an initially sympathetic and pitying response succumbs to a shrug of resignation, an acceptance of killing as part of an inevitable pattern" (44).

Violence, suffering, fear and death in Heaney's non-political poetry denote, in Maxwell's words, a "heritage of blood" (45), an acknowledgement that whatever ecumenical tendencies there may be, whatever hopes of a reconciliation one may cherish, there is the message of history,

41 D.E.S. Maxwell, Contemporary Poetry in the North of Ireland. In: Douglas Dunn (ed.), Two Decades of Irish Writing, p.172.

42 Blake Morrison, Seamus Heaney, pp.21-2, writes: "Noise ... becomes a threat. ... The title poem of Heaney's first book uses noise to denote loss of innocence. ... Terror [is] evoked ... through a violent 'bass chorus' and assonantal nightmare - 'cocked', 'sods', 'plop', 'obscene'."

Richard Murphy, op.cit., p.38, argues: "His primary statement about this craft, in the opening lines of his first book, connects poetry with terror. ... Bullfrogs are compared to 'mud grenades', and butter crocks on a pantry shelf to 'large pottery bombs'."

43 Neil Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.45.

44 Blake Morrison, Speech and Reticence: Seamus Heaney's 'North'. In: Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (eds), British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey, p.106.

45 Maxwell, op.cit., p.172.

of a history of atrocities, bloodshed and cruelty. It is not easy to come to terms with that heritage and it seems to be the fate of Ireland to suffer it for ever and ever. It is symptomatic that in his first political poems Heaney advocates reconciliation, whereas below the surface of his non-political poems, in the imagery, in the allusions, in the analogies, there is the unspoken realization that violence and death are part and parcel of the Irish predicament.

CHAPTER II

SEARCHING FOR A METAPHOR

DOOR INTO THE DARK (1969)

I seek an image, not an idea.
Seamus Heaney (1)

When DOOR INTO THE DARK was published in the summer of 1969, there had been important political changes in Ulster. The Civil Rights Campaign had not had the results hoped for; the riots at Burntollet Bridge had proved the sectarian antagonism to be as strong as ever. But none of these incidents is directly echoed in DOOR INTO THE DARK.

In my first chapter I argued that politics were of secondary importance in DEATH OF A NATURALIST. There were three or four poems with a political background, but most of the book was about rural life, childhood experiences and love. That is true for DOOR INTO THE DARK as well. When we read the poems in this collection, we get the impression that the Ted Hughes line has finally triumphed, that Heaney has abandoned politics for good. DOOR INTO THE DARK looks a bit like a second volume of DEATH OF A NATURALIST. The TLS-reviewer wrote: "The subject-matter is loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the

1 In an interview with Robert Druce, A Raindrop on a Thorn, op.cit., p.26.

stink of turned earth. Close to the vest, close to the bone and close to the soil" (2), a judgement that would not have been out of place in a review of DEATH OF A NATURALIST. The same can be said of Lyman Andrews' remark in The Sunday Times about the "almost literal resurrection of the world through language" (3), a point we mentioned while discussing Heaney's first collection.

The poems in DOOR INTO THE DARK manifest the same spirit as those in DEATH OF A NATURALIST. One could even speak of stagnation in Heaney's poetical output. The influence of Ted Hughes accounts for poems such as The Outlaw, which deals with the insemination of a cow, or A Lough Neagh Sequence, which is about the life-cycle of eels and the lives of the Lough Neagh fishermen, to whom it is dedicated. Erotic imagery, which will recur in Heaney's later poetry, is first used in poems like Undine and Rite of Spring.

The one political poem in DOOR INTO THE DARK, Requiem for the Croppies (DD, p.24) was written in 1966 to celebrate the Easter Rising. "That rising was the harvest of seeds sown in 1798, when revolutionary republican ideals and national feeling coalesced in the doctrines of Irish republicanism and in the rebellion of 1798 itself - unsuccessful and savagely put down." (P, p.56).

Some details used in the poem were taken from P.O. Kelly's General History of the Rebellion of 1798 (Dublin, 1842), as the author acknowledges in a note.

The croppies were peasants who, in 1798, revolted

2 Anon., Fear in a Tinfoil of Bait, p.77o.

3 From a review in The Sunday Times, quoted on the cover of the 1978 reprint of DN.

against the cruelties committed by their Protestant landlords. The name 'croppies' has nothing to do with 'crop', although it is tempting to suspect a pun, but "they got that name because their hair was cropped" (4).

Before studying the poem in some detail, we ought to have a look at the events of 1798, already briefly mentioned in chapter I.

The United Irish Society, founded by Theobald Wolfe Tone in Belfast in 1791, did not have the same impact on Wexford it had on some of the neighbouring counties. Therefore there were only few Government troops in the area and at the rumours of a possible French landing at the port of Wexford the local Protestant yeomanry was asked to search for arms and gather information about suspected Catholic conspiracies.

The Protestants went about their job "in an undisciplined and even vicious fashion" (5), thus terrifying the Catholic population that had already been frightened by reports of atrocities committed in other parts of Ireland. The Government then sent the North Cork militia, "a particularly tough regiment" (6), to assist the Protestants. It should be noted, by the way, that the rank

4 Artists on Art, An Interview with Seamus Heaney (Frank Kinahan), op.cit., p.413. The suggestion that the rebels of 1798 were called 'croppies' because the supporters of the ideas of the French Revolution used to wear their hair cropped is only one possible explanation for this word. Frederik Hetmann, Irische Lieder und Balladen, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979, p.20, suggests two other origins. The English used to cut off a lobe from criminals' ears (and nationalist political activity was regarded as a crime), thereby 'cropping' them. Moreover, rebels were tortured by putting a cap with boiling pitch on their heads.

5 Kee, op.cit., p.64.

6 ibid.

and file of the militia were largely composed of Irish Catholics, who did not shrink from harassing their own co-religionists.

The cruel behaviour of the militia provoked a Catholic rebellion under the leadership of Father John Murphy, a local priest from Boolavogue. The Wexford rebellion was thus more akin to a movement against government-sponsored oppression than to an Irish nationalist revolution.

The rebels won an easy victory at Oulart Hill, raided the town of Enniscorthy and camped on the near-by Vinegar Hill. During that time they killed a number of captured Protestants and took revenge for the atrocities inflicted upon them by burning a barn at Scullabogue. Some 200 Protestants died in the fire. Thus, "the horribly familiar cycle of one set of atrocities breeding counter-atrocity was already at work" (7).

As I have said earlier, these horrors did not further the cause of the United Irishmen. Catholics and Protestants had moved apart again, in spite of the fact that a moderate Protestant, Bagenal Harvey, was appointed commander of the campaign. The early victories were succeeded by severe defeats at New Ross, Arklow and, finally, Vinegar Hill. Afterwards, government troops scoured the land in search of scattered rebels and killed them off mercilessly. The croppies stood no chance against the well-organized soldiers.

In a contribution to the Listener, published in November 1969, Heaney writes about 1798, the "Year of Liberty", which saw the failure of the United Irishmen's movement:

7 *ibid.*, p.65.

The Protestant middle-class founders and leaders of the movement were as much inspired by Paine as patriotism, and must have been as disappointed as the loyalists were terrified by the burning of a barn full of Protestants at Scullabogue and the ritual piking of persons of property on the bridge at Wexford. They did believe that violence was a necessary prelude to the planting of the tree of liberty, but can hardly have envisaged the sectarian massacres that left pigs rutting among the piled corpses on village streets all over south-east Ireland: massacres where systematic retaliation supervised by military and gentry far outpointed the frenzied, uncoordinated excesses of the peasantry. (8)

Heaney then goes on to show certain analogies between the events of 1798 and those of 1968/69:

Incidents and observations keep one's mind shuttling between the United Irishmen's annus mirabilis and this less bloody but equally unexpected crisis year for civil rights. It's not just that disorder in Ireland brought direct rule from Westminster with the 1800 Act of Union; not just that social and religious grievances and prejudices were instinctively combined on both sides; but even some of the tactical problems facing the Irish government on each occasion were the same. (9)

Once more, Heaney's political analysis proves to be lucid and prophetic. Direct rule was not to be imposed on Ulster until March 1972 and, after a brief period of suspension, to be reimposed in May 1974. This article was written in 1969!

Heaney also points out similarities between the role of the Orange Order in 1798 and 1969 and he mentions another crucial analogy:

There was also the universal inability of the official military leaders to control the auxiliary mi-

8 Seamus Heaney, Delirium of the Brave, p.757.

9 *ibid.*

litia forces, whose inadequacies in the field were more than compensated for in the burnings, hangings, shootings and mutilations of the dispersed peasantry during mopping-up operations. (10)

These quotes make it clear, I think, that by 1969 Heaney's political attitudes had become slightly more radical. But when Requiem for the Croppies was written in 1966, two years before the Civil Rights Campaign started, Heaney was still in a conciliatory mood. It is nonetheless interesting to compare the poem with Heaney's opinion about the same historical events three years later.

The speaker of the dramatic monologue, one of the dead croppies, tells the reader about the rebels wandering over the country, their pockets "full of barley", because they never knew where and when they would find food. There is a tone of indignant anger in the line

We moved quick and sudden in our own country.

The croppies have become outlaws in their own homeland. New tactics are developed by the rebels - their fighting comes to resemble that of modern guerilleros. The topography of the land is favourable to their resistance:

We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
And stampede cattle into infantry,
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.

But the early successes are quickly followed by defeat, and the next lines of the sonnet focus on the Battle of Vinegar Hill:

Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

The poet stresses the inadequacy of the rebels' weapons:

10 *ibid.*, p.759.

pikes and scythes against cannons. The image of the hillside 'blushed', 'soaked' in the blood of the failed rebellion, the 'broken wave', shows the basic sympathy between the personified land and the people, as if they shared a common predicament. And it is this very land that, as it were, allows the croppies to be resurrected, that allows a new crop to grow:

They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

The incident is apparently historical. The barley the croppies were carrying as food grew out of their graves as a symbol of resurrection and renewal. Robert Buttel writes that "here historical fact merges into mythical overtones: these heroes died like fertility gods in the spring, the continuity of nature preserved" (11). The death of fertility gods, resurrection, renewal - ideas that Heaney will use again in his bog poems. We thus see that the elements of Heaney's bog-myth were already appearing before he had read Professor Glob's book.

Heaney himself has said in Preoccupations:

The poem was born of and ended with an image of resurrection based on the fact that some time after the rebels were buried in common graves, these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing from barley corn which the 'croppies' had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march. The oblique implication was that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the Year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called 'the right rose tree' of 1916. I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published. (P, p.56)

11 Buttel, op.cit., p.54.

He is referring to the troubles in Derry and Belfast in August 1969, which resulted in British troops being sent to Northern Ireland.

The final image of the sonnet reveals a closeness between the Irish soil and Irish history, as P.R.King has suggested (12). It also prefigures the bog myth, with its hopes of a resurrection of justice and liberty. Finally, it can be associated with the rebellion of 1916, another attempt to secure freedom for Ireland. Moreover, like The Tollund Man, Requiem for the Croppies also seems to contain a message of hope - the hope that out of violence something positive may grow. Despite its rather profane causes, the Wexford rebellion has become a symbol of an Irish rebellion against the British, an assertion of Irish identity.

And it was a United Irish identity. Thus, what I think Heaney is insinuating, is that the spirit of unity and all-Irish ecumenicalism as it was represented by the rebellion of 1798 (despite all the atrocities that were committed by both sides) did not die with the croppies, but was reborn and has remained alive in people's minds. So has the spirit of rebellion against British oppression and it is thus that the poem links with the Easter Rising, a point also stressed by Stephen Regan (13).

12 King, op.cit., p.208: "The closeness of these people to the land is what the poet emphasizes as he describes them on the run and living off the crops - people who, when they died, would sift down to become the very land from which the crops would spring. ... But this image of the soil in Ireland literally containing the blood and bones of its past is to become a central symbol in his later poems."

13 Stephen Regan, The Poetry and Prose of Seamus Heaney, p.309, writes: The poem "is obliquely prophetic of the renewed conflict in that it acknowledges the fierce suppression of Irish Republicanism in the rebellion of 1798 at the same time as it marks the anniversary of the 1916 Rising. ... [It is] an image of resurrection which links three stages of conflict."

Requiem for the Croppies shows that Heaney is still committed to the ideals of 1798 and to an anti-British, but united-Irish nationalism. His political attitudes have not changed very much since DEATH OF A NATURALIST, but, almost unnoticeably, his stance begins to harden as he links the rebellion of 1798 with that other rising of 1916, the aims of which were much more radical than those of 1798. What is more, his political analysis has become less parochial: he deals with history, his concern is a national and no longer a local one.

A final point to be made about this poem is the fact that the soil, the earth has been discovered as a preserver of the past, an idea anticipating the bog-myth.

So far Heaney has been searching for a metaphor for his experience. Digging had been one possibility, digging as a metaphor for writing. But writing alone is not enough; the poet needs a topic, something to write about. Frank Ormsby argued that Heaney saw "digging as a metaphor for personal and historical exploration" (14) and indeed one can dig in the earth as one can dig in the self. Both the earth and the self hide secrets and both are dark - digging into the dark: an exploration of hidden secrets, of secret truths, a search for insights, "a kind of archaeology of the imagination" (15) ?

Heaney uses the metaphor of darkness in the last poem of DEATH OF A NATURALIST, Personal Helicon (DN, p.57), where he writes:

I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

14 Frank Ormsby (ed.), Poets from the North of Ireland, p.9.

15 Seamus Heaney, A Poet's Childhood, p.661.

In that poem Heaney remembers how as a child he used to stare like Narcissus at his own reflection in a well or a spring. It was a way of finding his own true self. Now this is "beneath all adult dignity" and poetical inspiration has become the means of knowing himself. Poetry allows him to 'see' himself, to explore the darkness of his psyche.

The dark is not merely a personal metaphor, though. It has wider implications:

All I know is a door into the dark,
Heaney writes in The Forge (DD, p.19). The dark is the forge, but it is also something unexplored, mysterious, unsettling, frightening, uncanny even. The dark is a place like Hephaistos' cell where strange things happen. Gallarus Oratory is another of those places,

A core of old dark walled up with stone.

The poem In Gallarus Oratory (DD, p.22) also announces the critical attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church Heaney will manifest in Station Island. The oratory is like a 'turfsack', "it feels as if you are sustaining a great pressure, bowing under like the generations of monks who must have bowed down in meditation and reparation on that floor. I felt the weight of Christianity in all its rebuking aspects, its calls to self-denial and self-abnegation, its humbling of the proud flesh and insolent spirit." (P, p.189).

Darkness is associated with humiliation, fear and terror, but also with curiosity and a sense of there being something below the surface. In Preoccupations Heaney writes:

When I called my second book DOOR INTO THE DARK I intended to gesture towards this idea of poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it. Words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning. (P, p.52)

The dark can thus be seen as something hidden below the surface of the personal or national consciousness. It can be unearthed and brought to light by poetry. Words act as go-betweens. They help us to understand the present by bringing it into contact with the past.

In a Freudian interpretation, the dark could be seen as the 'Id', the unconscious, the primitive energies, the vital forces that slumber below the conscious mind, a kind of darkness within the self.

On a more general level, the dark could be associated with the primitive passions in the history of the country, the archetypal patterns in the collective unconscious of the people. It represents all the forces that act upon Ireland, forces Heaney has not yet fully analysed or identified and that therefore remain in the dark. As Rita Zoutenbier has said, "in this volume Heaney is groping about in the dark, trying to get a grasp on his subject" (16).

M.P.Hederman has argued that "the almost mystical call of the earth [is] encompassed in the most comprehensive image of all: the dark" (17). It is in fact a comprehensive image, encompassing Heaney's innermost feelings, the

16 Zoutenbier, *op.cit.*, p.8.

17 M.P.Hederman, Seamus Heaney, the Reluctant Poet, p.64.

darkness inside himself, the Irish past, which has sunk into darkness, and also the dark passions that characterize Irish history. Finally, it is an ambiguous metaphor: the dark harbours both the violent passions that have been so harmful to Ireland and the urgently needed vital energies of renewal.

The dark will be replaced eventually by another metaphor, the bog, that door into the dark of the Irish consciousness and the Irish past.

At the origin of Heaney's interest in the bogs was his intention of finding a myth corresponding to the American myth of the Far West:

I ... had been reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up - or rather, laid down - the bog as an answering Irish myth. (P, p.55)

In the American myth the Far West and its endless prairies symbolize the American search for liberty and individuality. Though the bog is, as Denis Donoghue has pointed out, "the only unfenced country in Ireland" (18), I do not think that Heaney wanted to find an Irish image for American values. What he was looking for was a correlative of the dark, of the Irish past still present under the turf of the bogs:

The allusion was that the bog was a kind of Jungian ground or landscape in that it preserved traces of everything that had occurred before. It had layers of memory. The objects, the material culture by which the nation identifies itself, were mostly found in the bogs and are now in museums. (19)

18 Denis Donoghue, 'Field Work' by Seamus Heaney, p.45.

19 Begley, op.cit., p.167.

Cf. also King, op.cit., p.208: "It is as if the key to the past of the whole race is in the grip of the land. In all senses the soil gives the community its roots and life."

Thus the bogs are the doors, the "openings into the dark of history" (20), the 'black holes' that bridge the gap between past and present.

So I began to get an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. ... I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. (P, pp.54-5)

Heaney has stressed the symbolic quality of the bog more than once (21). It is the memory of the land; it preserves the past and the roots of the Irish community (22).

In the first two stanzas of Bogland (DD, pp.55-6) Heaney explains why he chose the bog as a symbol:

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening -
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

Unlike America, Ireland has no endless prairies, allowing

20 Jay Parini, Seamus Heaney: The Ground Possessed, p.109.

21 Thus, e.g., in the interview with Robert Druce, A Raindrop on a Thorn, op.cit., p.30: "The 'Bogland' poem 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." To James Randall, op.cit., p.18, he said: "The first poem I ever wrote that seemed to me to have elements of the symbolic about it was 'Bogland'. It was the first one that opened out for me, that seemed to keep going once the words stopped, not really like the other poems that were usually pulled tight at the end with little drawstrings in the last line or two."

22 The bog is not the only element in Ireland that can preserve the past. In Relic of Memory (DD, p.37) Heaney notes that "The lough waters / Can petrify wood", thus conserving it as a relic of the past. The water can also "incarcerate ghosts"!

the eye to scan hundreds of miles of flat land. The Irish landscape is richer, less monotonous, but also less free. The only free country is the bog and no one lives there. What then does it symbolize if not freedom?

Heaney tells the reader that "the skeleton / Of the Great Irish Elk" and

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years

were recovered from the bog. The butter was still edible; it had been well preserved by the earth.

In the second half of the poem Heaney shows archaeologists digging into the bog and discovering the vestiges of previous civilizations:

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.

The bog has preserving qualities; it preserves the past. Digging into the bog means lifting the past out of the dark and bringing it to light. The bog is the place where Heaney can look for his identity. He has at last opened the "door into the dark".

Dick Davis has seen allusions to sexuality in this poem (23). Although the line on which the assumption is based,

The wet centre is bottomless,
was explained by Heaney as a childhood memory:

I remember when we were children, they used to tell
us not to go near the bog because there was no
bottom to it (24),

23 Dick Davis, Door into the Dark, in T.Curtis, op.cit., p.30: "The earth presents itself as both mother and lover; the sexual implication of 'and opened her fen' [from The Tollund Man] is unmistakable, as is that of the closing line of 'Bogland', ... 'The wet centre is bottomless'."

24 Begley, op.cit., p.167.

Davis's interpretation is consistent with the bog poems in WINTERING OUT. There, too, sexual imagery stresses the preservative and regenerative qualities of the bog.

It is the emergence of certain key-images, especially the use of the bog as a symbol for a soil preserving the past, the identity of the Irish nation, which makes DOOR INTO THE DARK an important collection of verse. Edna Longley has rightly regarded the bog-metaphor as an essential step forward in Heaney's poetical development:

He opens his proper door into the 'matter of Ireland', by imagining history as an experience rather than a chain of events, by dramatising his own imaginative experience of history, by discovering within his home-ground a myth that fits the inconclusiveness both of memory and of Irish history, and by fusing the psychic self-searching of poet and nation. (25)

By finding his proper myth, Heaney has also shifted the focus of his attention from the parochial to the national level. His poems deal no longer with single persons and their petty prejudices. Instead he tries to explain the Irish predicament and to assert the Irish identity by referring to the past, to the roots of today's problems.

The frequent invasions of Ireland by foreign raiders and conquerors are among these roots. In Shoreline (DD, pp.51-2), which he calls a "meditative landscape poem ... meant to encompass notions about history and nationality" (26), Heaney describes the coasts of Ireland - from Co. Down to Antrim, from Wicklow to Mayo and the Cliffs of

25 Edna Longley, 'North: "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur"?', in: T.Curtis, op.cit., p.68.

26 PBS-Bulletin 61, p.1.

Moher. He hears the sound of the waves washing against the rocks and is reminded of those past invasions:

Listen. Is it the Danes,
A black hawk bent on the sail?
Or the chinking Normans?
Or currachs hopping high

On to the sand?
Strangford, Arklow, Carrickfergus,
Belmullet and Ventry
Stay, forgotten like sentries.

The invaders have disappeared, but their memory stays alive thanks to their legacy: the names of the settlements they founded. In NORTH Heaney will once again deal with invasions, whereas WINTERING OUT features several place-name poems. Thus the last poems of DOOR INTO THE DARK provide a thematic link with WINTERING OUT, just as Personal Helicon links the first with the second collection.

* * *

The poems in DOOR INTO THE DARK are mostly unpolitical, but in the one political poem a subtle move away from parochialism and to a more general analysis of the situation is discernible. The poet's attitude is still ecumenical, he still holds on to the principles of 1798 and to moderation. But the years between the publication of DOOR INTO THE DARK and WINTERING OUT were crucial years for Ulster and they had a strong impact on Heaney's poetry.

There was another major influence on him in those years. His fascination with the bog and its "possible poetic resources" (27) had made him write Bogland. Some

27 Jon Stallworthy, The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney, p.165.

time later he came upon a book by Professor P.V.Glob, The Bog People, published by Faber and Faber. It deepened his interest in the bogs and provided him with new ideas and new material for what were to become the bog poems of WINTERING OUT and NORTH.

CHAPTER III

CONSTRUCTING A MYTH
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WINTERING OUT (1972)

You deal with public crisis not by accepting the terms of the public's crisis but by making your own imagery and your own terrain take the colour of it, take the impressions of it.

Seamus Heaney (1)

The untitled first poem of WINTERING OUT is a surprise to any reader who, relying on his reading of DEATH OF A NATURALIST and DOOR INTO THE DARK, has come to regard Heaney as a rural poet with only a cursory interest in Irish history and politics. Indeed, in its concern with internment, it displays a more overt political element than any of his poems so far. WINTERING OUT signifies a fundamental change in Heaney's poetical output: the predicament of Northern Ireland has come to the forefront of his concern. Some poems in Heaney's third book deal with Ulster in a much more direct way than his earlier work. We have seen that he had always been interested in the sectarian political problems of Northern Ireland, but had evaded them in his poetry, preferring to deal with "the private County Derry childhood part" (2) of himself.

1 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.13.

2 Cf. chapter I note 14.

Heaney's shift away from the Ted Hughes line and towards a response to the events in Ulster was prompted by the political evolution in Northern Ireland between 1967 and 1972, the year WINTERING OUT was published.

Encouraged by the success of Martin Luther King's black civil rights movement in the USA, some Catholics founded the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967. Its leadership was "middle-aged, middle-class and middle-of-the-road" (3). It was a movement controlled by politically moderate people whose aim it was to campaign peacefully against the social injustices in Ulster. A first civil rights march was held on 1 August 1968, a second in Derry on 5 October. The march was carried through although it had been banned by the Ulster Minister for Home Affairs, William Craig. It was broken up with brutality by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Captain O'Neill, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, was impressed and promised social reforms, but they came too late.

On New Year's Day 1969, the People's Democracy, a radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement, organized a march from Belfast to Derry to support their claim for jobs, housing, and 'one man, one vote'. Robert Kee writes about this march:

It was not banned but was afforded only minimal protection by the police, particularly when it arrived at Burntollet Bridge seven miles from Derry on 4 January. Here the marchers were attacked on the road from an overhanging slope which dominated it by a Protestant mob throwing stones and wielding spiked cudgels. Television news film showed RUC in uniform among the attackers, but making little

3 Eamon McCann, quoted in Kee, *op.cit.*, p.235.

attempt to arrest them. None were in fact arrested. Instead the police arrested about eighty of the marchers whom they were supposed to be protecting. Later that evening the police moved into the Bogside in Derry where according to the British government's later Cameron report they 'were guilty of misconduct, ... assault and battery ... malicious damage to property ... and the use of provocative and sectarian slogans.' (4)

As a consequence of these events, Terence O'Neill called new elections after which he resigned. The new P.M., James Chichester-Clark, whom Kee calls "equally well-meaning but even less magnetic" (5), was unable to improve the situation. In April there were riots in Dunganon and in August combats between Catholic rioters and a Protestant mob supported by the RUC - B Specials caused the death of six people. The British Government reacted by sending in British troops on 14 and 16 August 1969.

This hastened the end of the Civil Rights Movement. The Catholics in Ulster began to look to the IRA for help. Since its failed campaign of 1956-62, the IRA had been playing a secondary role in the North. Now it was "back in business" (6). The first British soldier to be killed by the IRA was shot in February 1971. Some weeks later Chichester-Clark resigned. His successor, Brian Faulkner, managed to secure the British Government's approval to his plans of reintroducing internment. 342 people were arrested in August 1971. In December of that year 1576 people were in prison (7).

Internment provoked massive civil disobedience in Bog-

4 Kee, *op.cit.*, p.235.

5 *ibid.*, p.237.

6 *ibid.*, p.239.

7 cf. *ibid.*, p.13.

side and Creggan, the Catholic areas of Derry. In spite of a ban, a demonstration was organized on 30 January 1972. After initial clashes between the demonstrators and British troops, peace was restored and Catholic leaders assembled at Free Derry Corner to make speeches.

At that moment 1 Para (8) moved in with armour and precision and opened fire on the assembly. The shooting lasted for more than a half hour. When it was over, thirteen civilians had been murdered and ten wounded. (9)

Bloody Sunday was a traumatic experience for the Catholic minority in Ulster. The shock was comparable to that caused by the execution of the Easter rebels in 1916. The Protestant extremists were in triumph. In Belfast graffiti were scribbled on the walls announcing the 'victory' in most cynical words:

PARAS 13 - BOGSIDE O
WE'VE GOT ONE, WE'VE GOT TWO,
WE'VE GOT THIRTEEN MORE THAN YOU. (10)

In March 1972, Stormont was suspended and London imposed direct rule on Northern Ireland.

* * *

WINTERING OUT was published in November 1972. The poem most directly referring to contemporary Ulster is the introductory one, which is about the reintroduction of internment. In the other poems Heaney uses analogy and allusion to deal with the Crisis.

When discussing Heaney's first two collections of poetry, I argued that he was basically in favour of compromise, that he advocated a middle way, a way he later

8 i.e. the First Paratroop Battalion, an élite force.

9 Jill & Leon Uris, Ireland - A Terrible Beauty, p.220.

10 quoted in ibid., p.221.

described as being "between Scylla and Charyb" (11). The Civil Rights Movement was predominantly moderate and its aims, social justice and tolerance, were such that Heaney could not but sympathize with it.

That is why he participated in the marches and became "a determined campaigner for civil rights" (12). The injustices had become so gross, so insufferable and intolerable that he had to turn his back on his tendency towards escapist nostalgia and confront the challenges of the present:

There was a feeling that things were on the move. Well, things were on the move, with the Liberal Unionist oligarchy in command and this feeling that we would not tolerate it, that things were going to change. So I was involved, not as a member of any civil rights organization, but I was on the marches. There was an energy and excitement and righteousness in the air at that time, by people like myself who hadn't always been political. (13)

The sobering effect of the events of the 5 October 1968 can be seen in an article Heaney published in the Listener, not even three weeks after the riots:

The events in Derry shocked moderate opinion on all sides and are likely to become a watershed in the political life of Northern Ireland. Up until then, a Catholic might believe in shades of grey. ... It seems now that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland at large, if it is to retain any self-respect, will have to risk the chance of wrecking the new moderation and seek justice more vociferously. ... Since the administration is so unwilling to recognise shades of grey even while pleading their existence in other spheres, they must not feign surprise if opinion hardens. They will have been

11 OL, stanza 28, p.12.

12 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.38.

13 Begley, op.cit., p.165.

responsible: not the local police, who must bear the brunt; nor the special reserve force, who are trained and ordered to do what they do. (14)

These are prophetic words and history has proved Heaney right. A change in the political attitudes of the Ulster Catholics, away from moderation and towards radicalism, was effected by the intransigence of the Protestant majority. Heaney, too, changed his stance. His warning that opinion might harden must not be regarded as a sign of a considerably more radical approach on his part. It is proof of his political foresight. Nonetheless, the Listener-article was his first open attack on the Unionist radicals.

Shortly after the Derry clashes Heaney wrote a polemical poem ironizing the genre of the celebratory popular ballad. It was never published by its author, but, according to Karl Miller, "seems to have circulated anonymously, as samizdat" (15). The ballad is called Craig's Dragoons:

14 Seamus Heaney, Old Derry's Walls, p.522.

In the same article, though, Heaney reasserts his belief that a definite change has occurred in Northern Ireland. The contradiction is only apparent: Heaney's conviction that the end of the Civil Rights Movement will lead to short-term troubles does not lessen his belief that the spirit of the Movement will prevail in the long run, a conviction that is illustrated by his putting the Movement into a historical perspective: "A real change is taking place under the thick skin of the Northern Ireland electorate. Catholics and Protestants, Unionist and Republican, have aligned themselves behind the civil rights platform to examine the conscience of the community. There are naturally vast resources of prejudice and complacency still around, but there are many shattered ivory towers among educated and articulate people who had opted out of political affairs from embarrassment or disillusion. This is probably the renaissance of an interest in the rights of man which began here (and was effectively ended, of course) with the United Irishmen in the latter part of the 18th century."

15 Karl Miller, Opinion, p.47.

Craig's Dragoons (Air: 'Dolly's Brae')

Come all ye Ulster loyalists and in full chorus join,
Think on the deeds of Craig's Dragoons who strike below the groin,
And drink a toast to the truncheon and the armoured water-hose
That mowed a swathe through Civil Rights and spat on Papish clothes.

We've gerrymandered Derry but Croppy won't lie down,
He calls himself a citizen and wants votes in the town.
But that Saturday in Duke Street we slipped the velvet glove -
The iron hand of Craig's Dragoons soon crunched a croppy dove.

Big McAteer and Currie, Gerry Fitt and others too,
Were fool enough to lead the van, expecting to get through,
But our hero commandos, let loose at last to play,
Did annihilate the rights of man in the noontime of a day.

They downed women with children, for Teagues all over-breed,
They used the baton on men's heads, for Craig would pay no heed,
And then the boys placed in plain clothes, they lent a loyal hand
To massacre those Derry ligs behind a Crossley van.

O William Craig, you are our love, our lily and our sash,
You have the boys who fear no noise, who'll batter and who'll bash.
They'll cordon and they'll baton-charge, they'll silence protest
tunes,

They are the hounds of Ulster, boys, sweet William Craig's Dragoons.
(16)

Craig's Dragoons is a "harsh, ironic piece purporting to come from the Loyalist side but calculated to stir Catholic solidarity" (17). It is written in archaic language reflecting the anachronistic nature of the conflict in Ulster. The Craig of the poem is the former Ulster Minister for Home Affairs William Craig (18),

16 printed in *ibid.*, pp.47-8.

17 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.38.

18 William Craig was Minister for Home Affairs during the time of the Civil Rights marches, which he banned. "He was sacked ... by Prime Minister Terence O'Neill in 1968 after disagreements about reform. He climbed to a leading position in the Protestant system as the hardest of the hard-liners and became the leader of both the paramilitary vanguard movement and the ultra-right-wing vanguard party, both dedicated to a policy of not yielding an inch." Uris, *op.cit.*, p.252.

Eddie McAteer was a Nationalist leader in the Parliament of Northern Ireland.

Gerry Fitt, a Belfast labour leader and Nationalist M.P., was active in the Civil Rights Movement. He co-founded the SDLP, which signed the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement.

whereas his Dragoons are the members of the RUC. The speaker, probably meant to be a Loyalist agitator, calls on his friends to celebrate "the deeds of Craig's Dragoons", i.e. the 'victory' over the Civil Rights marchers.

Heaney's irony is based on language effects, e.g. the archaic vocabulary and the colloquial register. The speaker's cynical jokes are turned against him; the light, triumphant tone emphasizes his cruelty, his boundless hate and inhumanity. The speaker's bragging shows that he has no scruples, that his 'ideals' are negative and destructive. He boasts of the most unfair and revolting actions, of striking "below the groin", of mowing "a swathe through Civil Rights", etc. His feigned indignation at the Catholic who "calls himself a citizen and wants votes in the town" is counter-productive. By making such a person ridicule the Catholic demand for fundamental civil rights, Heaney stresses the necessity for a reform which would finally protect the minority from such antisocial elements.

Old prejudices are renewed, e.g. that of the fertility of the Catholics; fun is made of their leaders; violence and murder are glorified. The speaker's anti-Catholic agitation is not supported by logical arguments (how could it be?) or by a socio-cultural analysis of the situation. His thinking is primitive and coarse.

The final ode to "sweet" William Craig, "our lily and our sash" (the irony is obvious), is merely the utterance of a primitive unthinking mind, a sad instrument of the Loyalist establishment.

The power of this poem lies in the fact that what from the Loyalist speaker's point of view is worthy of cele-

bration, has to be condemned not only by the Catholics in Northern Ireland, but by any person for whom human rights are more than just words. Heaney attacks the Protestant establishment for withholding civil rights from the Catholic minority and for violently suppressing any attempt at protest.

Craig's Dragoons is a fierce attack on Protestant extremists and on the injustice of the Unionist establishment. It grew out of Heaney's frustration after the failure of the Civil Rights Movement, which had carried hopes of a compromise. Once more the voices of moderation had been silenced by violence and Heaney suspected, correctly as we now know, that a new round of terror and counter-terror was ahead. The Loyalist extremists and their unthinking allies in the administration were responsible for the renewed bloodshed. But in this poem Heaney also expresses the idea that the conflict in the North is archaic. Craig's Dragoons belong to the 18th century, not to Ulster in the 1960s.

The ballad is a polemical work and deliberately so. The poet's prose writings show that his response to the events of 1968 was more balanced than is suggested by this poem.

Here is an extract from another as yet unpublished work, Triptych for the Easter Battlers:

For in the sun, their shadows a quick blur,
Two crested cocks, like hammers drawn back
On trigger legs, crouch low to spring: each spur
Fixed deadly, each beak honed as a saw's tooth.
Look at the blind man's mouth, opening black,
And flailing his crutch, the man with gout -

All set down as for a crucifixion.
His eye maintains it all in ecstasy,
Bird and man extinguished in communion:
The battling ringside, hot as a hot stud
(This is the Easter battlers' Calvary)
And airborne cocks, buoyant on their own blood. (19)

The most striking aspect of this poem is the tone of violence, threat, menace, aggression. The manner in which the two cocks fly at one another in a rage is merciless - they fight to kill.

There is no doubt that the battle is metaphorical: the cocks represent the Protestant and Catholic extremists in Ulster. Their combat is lethal; they seem to thrive on blood. Moreover, Heaney's use of words like 'crucifixion', 'communion', 'Calvary' gives the battle a religious intensity, but this is a perverted and destructive religion.

There is further irony in the fact that the cockfight takes place at Easter. Not Christ's resurrection is commemorated here, not the Christian message of love and forgiveness, but the ancient heathen rule of hatred and death.

It is interesting to speculate on the identity of the Tiresias-like figure of the blind man. Does he stand for England, the England that "maintains it all in ecstasy" by encouraging its champion, the Unionists?

Heaney's accusation of the extremists in both communities is founded on the belief that hatred and fighting are counter-productive. They do not solve any problems; instead they perpetuate the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence. What is more, the extremists play the English game. British political power in Ulster rests

19 quoted by Press, Ted Walker, Seamus Heaney and Kenneth White: Three New Poets, p.685.

on the sectarian division. If the two communities joined forces against Britain, so Heaney seems to imply, they could live together in a truly ecumenical spirit, provided there were no foreign interference. By opposing such a reconciliation, the extremists become instruments of Britain. England, of course, is guilty, too - as the instigator of a battle upon which it looks as if on a kind of sport.

Craig's Dragoons and Triptych for the Easter Battlers were not the only political poems Heaney wrote at the time. Indeed, "some of the most political poems have not yet been collected into book form" (20).

The question why Heaney did not publish his polemical poems is worth thinking over. They may have been the result of a momentary anger, generated by the failure of the Civil Rights Movement. Heaney may not have wished to undermine the image of a moderate poet, which he cultivates. His polemical verse would certainly not have fitted into a Faber collection and it would have been practically impossible to publish such fiercely anti-Loyalist and, by implication, anti-British propaganda in Britain.

Even if he had had the possibility of publishing those poems in Ireland, he would have realized that they improved nothing and that it could not be the poet's mission to fan the flames. Heaney's comparatively moderate verse has most probably done much more to focus the attention of the British and international reading public on what is happening in Ulster than crudely propagandist verse would ever have done.

20 King, *op.cit.*, p.209.

Yet, Heaney could hardly publish a new collection of poetry without reacting to the Troubles in some way. He knew that he had to write about the North, but he did not do so enthusiastically. We have already seen that there had always been two tendencies in him: an interest in the political predicament of his country coupled with an escapist desire to turn his back on it all. This indecision is what J.W.Foster has called Heaney's "Janus-facedness" (21).

When WINTERING OUT was published in 1972, it became clear that this Janus-facedness, this double interest in Heaney's poetry, had found its expression in the two parts of the book. The TLS-reviewer stressed the new element in Heaney's work:

As the grim situation in Mr Heaney's native Ulster became grimmer, a different kind of poem began appearing above his name in the periodicals - recognizably by the same man, but speaking from the centre of a bitter, and bitterly present, conflict. (22)

Heaney himself admitted that he was now prepared to deal with the Crisis in his poetry:

It is meant to gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the minute. It is meant to be, I suppose, comfortless enough, but with a notion of survival in it. ... If people have wintered out through the last four or five years in Northern Ireland, they can summer anywhere. (23)

Both these statements refer to part I of WINTERING OUT, in which Heaney deals with Northern Ireland, but does so indirectly, by looking at Irish history and the Irish language, at place-names and traditions. He does not, as e.g. in part II of NORTH, use contemporary events as material for his poetry, except in the very first

poem. Part II of this volume is in line with Heaney's earlier work. "The poems in the second part seem a retreat into a private world of marriage and home, or to stand for the continuity of ordinary human life in the context of violence" (24). Heaney is opposing a domestic world of commonplace human concerns to the obtrusiveness of the Troubles.

The poems in part II are about weddings (Wedding Day, Mother of the Groom), about a mermaid (Maighdean Mara), about an infant drowned by his mother (Limbo), the birth of a calf (First Calf) and a sojourn in California (Westering). There are also love poems, like Summer Home.

The two parts of WINTERING OUT represent the two faces of Janus-Heaney, the two aspects of his poetry: the obligation he feels to write about the political predicament of his native Ulster and the secret wish to escape from it all, to be not a public figure, but a private nature poet.

* * *

The first poem in WINTERING OUT stands out because it is not included in either part I or part II. Its realism predestines it for part II of NORTH and it is indeed reprinted there as the fourth part of Whatever You Say Say Nothing. Nonetheless, it is useful to have a look at it at this point, not least because of its prominent position in WINTERING OUT, as a kind of introduction. It

21 Foster, op.cit., p.46: "There is good reason for Heaney to be Janus-faced."

22 Anon., Semaphores of Hurt, p.1524.

23 Seamus Heaney, Mother Ireland, p.79o.

24 Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.14.

seems to have been written shortly after the reintroduction of internment in August 1971. The camps shocked Heaney; they were outward symbols of oppression. There was a feeling of solidarity with the internees (25) among Catholics, and Heaney, too, thought of

the internees in Long Kesh camp. Which must, incidentally, be literally the brightest spot in Ulster. When you pass it on the motorway after dark, it is squared off in neon, bright as an airport. An inflammation on the black countryside. Another of our military decorations. (P, p.32)

The reader is immediately struck by the direct and concrete way in which Heaney deals with his subject. Even in Craig's Dragoons a metaphor was used for the B Specials. The analogy was obvious to any reader but, after all, there was an element of distancing, of alienation. That is not so here:

This morning from a dewy motorway
I saw the new camp for the internees.

There is a marked contrast in this verse between the matter-of-fact tone, the mention of a banal detail like the "dewy motorway" and the importance of the matter at issue - internment. The camp is not a pleasant sight. The scene has something unsettling and ghostly to it: the early morning, the bomb crater (probably the remains of an IRA attack), the machine-gun posts:

There was that white mist you get on a low ground.

It seems as if the camp were shrouded in white mist, as

25 Roberta Berke's suggestion, in Bounds Out of Rounds, p.145, that "Heaney, unlike some propagandists, does not specify the religion of the internees" and her conclusion that "the implication is that here is one of the camps where both sides are imprisoned" strikes me as being a bit far-fetched. The fact that Heaney does not specify the religion of the internees is not evidence enough for his having both confessions in mind. In 1971/72 most of the internees will have been Catholics, anyway.

if the internees had been buried there to be forgotten, or as if things were going on there that had better not be noticed by the world outside.

and it was déjà-vu, some film made
of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

It is hard for the poet to accept the reality of what he sees. The camp is so out of place, so unexpected in a civilized democracy in the 1970s that it must be a nightmare. Neil Corcoran has argued that "the internment camp is as unlikely, in this familiar territory, as a Nazi concentration camp; it has defamiliarized the locale. Yet it is utterly familiar too, in all the received images of the Second World War it summons to mind" (26). But the camp is real and it is associated with alarming thoughts.

The analogy with a German POW-camp (27) is important on more than one level. Heaney seems to regard the internees as prisoners-of-war in an undeclared conflict and his sympathy is with them. On the other hand, the comparison between the British camp and a German WWII-camp is not exactly flattering (28). It is not supposed to be, for what is the difference for the internees? (29)

Bernard Sharratt suggests that the aggravation of the situation in the North may have encouraged Heaney to search for relief in the ordinariness of normal life:

26 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.72.

27 Stalag 17, a film by Billy Wilder, released in 1953, is set in a German POW-camp in Austria in the winter of 1944.

28 The Maze, the most important prison for the internees, was called "Silver City" by the British army and "Dachau" by the Catholics (cf. Uris, op.cit., p.202), - the analogy with Heaney's Stalag 17 is telling.

29 It should be noted, though, that Heaney compares the camp to a German POW-camp, not to a concentration camp. Between the latter and the British camps there is, of course, a difference.

When the internment-camp has become a familiar landmark on a motorway journey and the hooded, dumped corpses are numbered in round figures, the insignificant, the ordinary, the domestic take on the compelling attraction that home has for the exile or the imprisoned. (30)

This point confirms Rita Zoutenbier's interpretation of part II of WINTERING OUT and it is a further illustration of the two parts of Heaney's temperament.

Heaney openly criticizes internment in this poem. The conflict in Ulster is no longer concealed behind allusions or analogies with the past. Heaney's message has become more explicit, his treatment of the Crisis direct and immediate. Yet between the lines one can feel his unease, his wish that all this injustice were just a dream. But he knows it is not, he knows it is bitter reality and that it is his duty as a poet to write about it. His attitude is complex: protest against internment on the one hand, latent escapism on the other. Escapism is comfortable, but could be interpreted as defeatism. Can Heaney justify escapism to his own conscience? Protest, however, is potentially dangerous for the poet himself and for other people. He must not remain silent if he is confronted with injustice, but what can he do?

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up
on a wall downtown. (31)

The graffiti - "the writing on the wall" (32) - cries out against the violence that causes so much suffering and death. Yet even the protest itself is dead - dead language, cliché. In Ulster the conflict is verbalized in

30 Bernard Sharratt, Memories of Dying: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.370.

31 In NORTH, "on a wall downtown" is changed into "in Ballymurphy", a district of Belfast where Heaney taught at St Thomas's Intermediate School from 1962 to 1963.

32 Uris, op.cit., p.204.

terms of clichés, slogans facing each other on opposite walls. Creativity has died - even in language. William Bedford argues this point convincingly when he writes about the deterioration of language, the loss of a means of communication between Catholics and Protestants, which is symbolized by the use of these barren clichés (33). Then again, clichés can be a means of identifying oneself with a particular group or community, especially in a time of crisis. Andrew Motion notes: "I suppose a bringer of bad news will always talk in clichés: clichés are protective, and they're meant to be easily understood" (34).

The poet is thus faced with a challenge. The answer, or one answer, to the question of what he could do is: develop a new "competence", a new form of poetic expression adequate to dealing with the Crisis:

Competence with pain,
coherent miseries, a bite and sup,
we hug our little destiny again.

The last line suggests that the problems of Ireland have scarcely changed. Its destiny is still the same - pain and misery. If the problems have not changed, then the poet's role has not changed either: it is still his duty to analyse the situation and to deal with it in his work. He must, as P.R.King put it, "use his craft to bring an order to the chaos of divided feelings, to grasp and hold

33 "Perhaps the answer to 'Is there a life before death?' lies in the fact of graffiti being 'chalked up' all over the Province: there can't be much life, neither can there be much understanding, language having deteriorated into the clichés of political and journalistic evasion."

William Bedford, To Set the Darkness Echoing, p.4.

34 Andrew Motion, Dangerous Play, Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1984, p.71.

both sides of the struggle, to speak for the past, dead Ireland and in so doing to create a new song out of the deeper destiny of the country that links past and present to reveal its 'coherent miseries'" (35).

The task is formidable, but it is appropriate to the challenge.

The poem is a telling comment on the poet's mission. Heaney does not only clearly expose his Janus-facedness, but he also faces contemporary political problems directly for the first time and he sees one aspect of the poet's mission in becoming a voice of his people, an ordering voice, a voice competent with pain and trying to discover the significance of the 'events', if significance there is. In other words, the poet has to become a bard, "a prophet with authority to pronounce on the major issues of life" (36).

This poem stands half-way between WINTERING OUT and NORTH. It deals with the Troubles in a way that is typical of NORTH, but its programmatic content makes it a valuable introduction to the earlier book. It is a piece of self-analysis telling us what Heaney thinks ought to be the function of the poet.

* * *

For the reasons stated earlier, neither the polemical ballad Craig's Dragoons, nor the programmatic introductory poem of WINTERING OUT are typical of that collection. The poems we find in part I are much closer to

35 King, *op.cit.*, p.214.

36 John Williams, *op.cit.*, p.4.

the political poems of DEATH OF A NATURALIST and DOOR INTO THE DARK than to those in part II of NORTH. They can be classified under several headings: bog poems, poems about language and poems about Irish history.

I have pointed out in the previous chapter that Heaney had been interested in the bogs even before he read Professor Glob's The Bog People, but it was the impact of this book that prompted him to write the bog poems in WINTERING OUT and NORTH. The most famous of these, The Tollund Man (WO, pp.47-8), is about a 2000-year-old corpse dug out of Tollund fen in Jutland (Denmark) on 8 May 1950. Professor Glob devotes an entire chapter to this corpse (37) and illustrates it with a number of photographs that particularly impressed Heaney (38). He was not only fascinated by the preservative powers of the bog and the idea that such a body could emerge from the soil virtually unchanged after 2000 years (39), but also by the potential poetical power of the image. The bog could become a myth, a symbol for ritual sacrifice, fertility and resurrection, and thus an analogy for the ritual murders in the North.

Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison have argued that the bog poems

refract the experience of the contemporary Irish
Troubles through the sufferings of a previous

37 P.V.Glob, The Bog People, pp.18-36.

38 cf. especially ibid., pp.19, 21, 26-7, 29, 191.

39 This idea, which fascinates every reader of Professor Glob's book, inspired other artists, too. Thus the young German painter Egbert Verbeek produced an impressive painting, Schläfer im Moor (1981), based on the photograph on p.27 of Glob's book.

Northern civilization and its sacrificial victims. The Bog People, whose ritually murdered bodies were preserved in peat for centuries, become Heaney's objective correlative. (40)

Heaney has repeatedly said that it was the photograph of the Tollund Man's head (41) that impressed him most. For him the Tollund Man was a kind of Christ figure, a man sacrificed to satisfy the fertility gods. In this sacrifice he saw an archetypal pattern that linked those iron age rites with what is happening in contemporary Ulster:

The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those mustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside. I just felt very close to this. And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to make a connection between the sacrificial, ritual, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing in The Bog People (42)

Heaney has expressed the same ideas in interviews and essays (43). He has come to regard the Tollund Man not as an individual, but as a symbol of the sacrifice of human life in general.

The Tollund Man consists of three parts, the first of

40 Blake Morrison, Andrew Motion (eds), The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry, pp.13-14.

41 cf. Glob, op.cit., p.191.

42 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.18.

43 "The photograph of his head came home to me more than any representation of Christ ever did, because this was a real man's head. He is a kind of Christ figure: sacrificed so that life will be brought back. It's a kind of fertility sacrifice. He is a symbol to me of sacrifice to the goddess of territory, and in many ways the political upheavals of Ireland, especially in the 20th century, have been a renewal of that kind of religion."

Poets on Poetry (Patrick Garland), p.629.

which is largely a description of the corpse. The details are taken from Professor Glob's report and Heaney went as far as using words straight from the book (44). The poet begins by vowing a pilgrimage to Aarhus, where the head of the Tollund Man is exhibited (Heaney then only knew the Tollund Man from Professor Glob's book) (45):

Some day I will go to Aarhus
to see his peat-brown head. (46)

He goes on to describe the corpse and then calls him the

"One man in particular, the Tollund Man, ... entranced everyone who looked at him. I've thought since that he looked like every old country man, every great uncle at home, that I had ever seen confined, with that kind of gentleness on the face that is partly a product of rigor mortis. The photograph of that man moved me at just that subconscious level."

Begley, *op.cit.*, pp.167-8.

"Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern. And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with the photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles. When I wrote this poem, I had a completely new sensation, one of fear." (P, pp.57-8)

"He looks like an ancestor; he looks like every photograph of a great uncle in every house in Europe. He's slightly archaic, but not 'other'. It's partly that it's a human head with the status of a work of art. Very strange, but it's very familiar, that face, I've seen it in coffins so often in my adolescence. I used to go to a lot of funerals and to wakes, kneeling beside the coffins at eye level with aged rigor mortis heads."

Haffenden, *op.cit.*, p.57.

44 cf. Glob, *op.cit.*, p.20 and p.33.

For a summary of Glob's theories, see: Maurice Shadbolt, Der Mord am Tollund-Mann, Das Beste aus Reader's Digest, 8 (August 1977), pp.80-3.

45 The Tollund Man's head is actually exhibited in Silkeborg, a town some 25 miles west of Aarhus.

46 Whether what Stallworthy, *op.cit.*, p.167, called "the lucky near-pun on Aarhus / our house" was intentional remains doubtful. It is an interesting suggestion, though, as it would anticipate the idea expressed in the two final lines of the poem.

Bridegroom to the goddess,
She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body.

The imagery here, as we have seen (47), is clearly sexual. The opening of the fen in order to bury the corpse is compared to a woman opening her legs to let the male penetrate her and the bog water with its preservative qualities becomes the dark juices, the mucous substance secreted by Bartholin's glands during the female orgasm. There is a paradox in these lines which prepares the reader for the final paradox of the poem. The Tollund Man is the bridegroom of the goddess (Nerthus, the Earth), but the consummation of their union signifies his death. At the same time, through his death he becomes saint-like (48). Thus we have here the fusion of creation and death in the analogy between the victim's burial in the bog and the sexual act. Penetration means death for the Tollund Man, but the Earth's 'orgasm' preserves him and makes his resurrection 2000 years later possible. According to Glob's theory, the Tollund Man was sacrificed as part of a fertility rite. His penetration of the Earth was supposed to create new life, to make the Earth fertile, just as the man's semen fertilizes the woman during the sexual act.

In the second part of the poem, the speaker ponders the possibility of praying to the fertility goddess:

47 cf. chapter II, note 23.

48 This idea is reminiscent of one of the practices of the mound people, which Prof. Glob describes in his book The Mound People, London: Paladin Books, 1983, p.125: "At the sacrifice the glorious image of the sun was broken and 'killed' to give it eternal life in the keeping of the sun god."

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers.

Such an invocation would be blasphemy, a relapse into heathenism. Yet, if the bog preserved the Tollund Man and, as it were, resuscitated him, could it not also "make germinate" the victims of sectarian violence in the North? The Tollund Man was a sacrifice to Nerthus, a sacrifice meant to guarantee the fertility of the land: new life was supposed to grow out of violent death. Heaney wonders whether new life could also grow out of the murders in Ulster, those

Stockinged corpses
Laid out in farmyards,

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

The episode Heaney is referring to is historical:

There's a reference in the second part of the poem to four young brothers. This is part of the folklore of where I grew up that there were four brothers, four Catholic brothers, who had been massacred by Protestant para-militaries, or whatever you want to call them, in the 1920s and had been trailed along the railway lines as a kind of mutilation. (49)

These four martyrs are a sacrifice, like the Tollund Man. The analogy between the four brothers and the bog corpse is emphasized by the pun on 'sleepers': the word refers to the railway sleepers over which the four victims were trailed and to the Tollund Man who "lay on his right side

in a natural attitude of sleep" (50). Thus Heaney links the violent deaths in iron age Jutland with those equally violent ones in contemporary Ulster. He hopes that out of this violence and destruction something positive may grow (51).

In part 3 Heaney explores the countryside, trying to get the feel of the place, to have insight into that strange culture which has ritualized murder:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard.

Jon Stallworthy has said that the poet hopes "a liturgical naming of places familiar in the victim's mouth will admit him to something of his sad freedom" (52). But these names are modern ones; they were not familiar to the Tollund Man. The 'liturgical' listing of places is rather

the love-act and its pledge,
as Patrick Kavanagh put it (53). Morrison notes that "to

50 Glob, op.cit., p.20.

51 Edna Longley, in T.Curtis, op.cit., p.77, asks: "Do these later images imply that suffering on behalf of Kathleen may not be in vain, that beauty can be reborn out of terror: 'The cured wound'?" and she answers: "The prototype developed by The Tollund Man is a scapegoat, privileged victim and ultimately Christ-surrogate, whose death and bizarre resurrection might redeem, or symbolise redemption" (ibid., pp.74-5).

On the Faber Poetry Cassette Heaney says: "What I was trying to do for a while was to find a way of being true to that experience and yet being true to the hope that these destructive old passions might in some way be transferred or transmuted into some kind of benign future. I just tried to link ritual killing and fertility rites of the Iron Age, which the Tollund Man was a part of, to ritual killings and violence in the contemporary Ireland, in the hope that they might become fertility rites of some kind and that some kind of growth might occur at the end of it all."

52 Stallworthy, op.cit., p.166.

53 Patrick Kavanagh, The Hospital. In: Collected Poems, London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1972, p.153.

'list' once meant not just to document but to love or desire" (54). The poet desires access to the Tollund Man's "sad freedom". He wants to evoke the atmosphere of iron age Jutland, just as the atmosphere of contemporary Ulster is evoked by names such as Belfast, Derry, Armagh, with all the associations they carry. What is this "sad freedom"? Is it freedom from suffering, from fear? Or is it the freedom of the martyr, the dead?

The poet does not understand the language of the Danish country people. But he understands the Tollund Man. Thus, paradoxically, though he is completely lost in Jutland and knows nothing about its people, he experiences a sense of belonging, of affinity with the Tollund Man.

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

The poet feels "at home" because of the similarity between the "man-killing parishes" of iron age Jutland and those of contemporary Ulster. In both places people are murdered, but whereas the sacrifices to Nerthus were to guarantee renewal, those to Heaney's "dark life-denying goddess" (55), Mother Ireland, Kathleen ni Houlihan, seem meaningless.

The speaker is shocked that such barbarous rites are still going on and, though elsewhere he expresses the hope that something good may ultimately come out of the

54 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.82.

55 Dillon Johnston, "The Enabling Ritual": Irish Poetry in the Seventies, p.10.

sacrifices, one cannot help feeling that the bog-myth is an ambiguous metaphor and that there is a strong pessimistic element to it because history seems to repeat itself. Such a historical determinism does not leave much room for hope (56).

The Tollund Man is an important poem because in it Heaney makes use of an analogy (that between iron age fertility rites and contemporary sectarian murders in Ulster) to throw light on the events in the North. In one of his first interviews Heaney explained his use of analogy: for him it is much more appropriate a transposition of the actual events than direct description. He is concerned with more than just describing, he wants to recreate an atmosphere, a general feeling in his poetry that helps the reader to grasp the true nature of the Irish predicament intuitively rather than rationally:

Il va me falloir saisir la crise actuelle. Mais ça m'inquiète. J'hésite à intégrer l'histoire contemporaine dans mes poèmes car ce n'est pas vraiment mon sujet. En fait, il vaudrait mieux sans doute se servir d'analogies. ... L'écrivain en Irlande du Nord a un rôle réel. Même des gens que l'écriture n'intéresse pas vous demandent parfois: pourquoi n'écrivez-vous rien sur ces événements? L'utilité de l'acte d'écrire est pour moi un problème permanent. J'ai une conception presque magique de l'oeuvre écrite. Je crois à la parole, au mot; et je suis convaincu que si la poésie doit se saisir de cette crise elle le fera de par sa propre énergie. Les solutions, ou plutôt les réflexions, les inquiétudes, de la communauté se refléteront mieux dans mon oeuvre à partir de l'analogie, par la force du langage. Je ne vais pas me contenter de décrire des faits; ... il ne suffit pas de décrire. Le poète doit traduire les événements selon ses

56 Cf. Irvin Ehrenpreis, Digging In, p.45: "Heaney accepts the view that at least some [of the bog people] are the remains of a fertility ritual. But he uses them in his poems to suggest that modern terrorism, rather than meaning a breaking with the past, belongs to an archetypal pattern."

propres termes. Pour moi cela se fera toujours par des analogies. Et ceci est lié au milieu dans lequel je vis. ... On procède de façon indirecte; et c'est ainsi que je construirai mon poème, avec des images que comprend la communauté. (57)

"Images that can be understood by the community" - the Tollund Man is such an image. He can stand for the futility of human martyrdom (for after all, the sacrifice of human life did not make the earth more fertile). For Heaney, he represents the hope, qualified by what I have argued above, that the sacrifices in the North may not be in vain, that some good may still come out of violence and murder, that they are a kind of necessary cleansing, a redemptive punishment (58).

The use of analogy allows Heaney to avoid dealing with the Crisis as directly as he has done in the introductory poem. It is "Heaney's way of distancing immediate emotional concerns" (59). It is also a way of inserting the tragedies in the North into a tradition, a wider pattern, to point out similarities between what is going on in Ulster and what happened elsewhere. I do not know if such an idea is consoling, but it may at least throw light on the Troubles and make them, if not acceptable, easier to understand. Blake Morrison has rightly argued that The Tollund Man announces Heaney's more abundant use of the

57 Le clivage traditionnel, pp.188-9.

58 I cannot agree with Helen Vendler's argument in The Music of What Happens, p.152, that "Heaney finds in his patient vision of the topography of the dead a linear movement wholly devoid, for moral purposes, of resurrective power. This corpse and the others in Ulster are as dead, and as violently dead, after he has mapped their repose as before." Of course, poetry cannot bring the dead back to life, but it can and should prevent further deaths. And what is more, the discovery of the bog corpses, though no literal resurrection, can be regarded as a symbolical one.

59 Anon., Semaphores of Hurt, p.1524.

technique of analogy in his subsequent books (60).

Graham Martin has said that the analogy is "the medium of a gravely contemplative searching" (61) and P.R.King writes that "a fiction ... may be the only kind of resolution possible in a deeply troubled world and the only way left for preparing the ground for the growth of a new and solving insight" (62). On the basis of this and of Heaney's own statements (63), we are justified in seeing more than just a comparison in the analogy. With the bog Heaney has found "a myth through which we might understand Northern Ireland today" (64). Aidan Mathews stresses the importance of this myth in Heaney's poetry:

The strata of significance and implication which myth and anthropology proffer are his favoured instruments, it is the reader's choice whether such a procedure strengthens or adulterates, not the articulation itself, but its expressive potency.
(65)

The bog-myth, and the use of analogy generally, opened new ways for Heaney. By clothing his political message in an analogy, he could express ideas and views on Ireland he might have found it difficult to express openly, and he could also build a mythological framework which made it possible to see the events in Ulster in a wider perspective and to look at them not only from a parochial and national, but from a universal point of view (66).

60 Cf. note 68.

61 Martin, op.cit., p.391.

62 King, op.cit., p.219.

63 Cf. Le clivage traditionnel.

64 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.69.

65 Aidan Mathews, Modern Irish Poetry. A Question of Covenants, p.386.

66 Cf. Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.18: "Though these poems contain references to the present situation in Ireland, they can also be read as poems about the universal fate of man."

Heaney realized this political aspect of his new technique, he realized that The Tollund Man was not just a poem about iron age Denmark, but that it had implications for present-day Ulster. The crossing of the two was deliberate:

I'm not really political, and I can't think politically, but in a sense I can feel the meaning of the politics in these things. (67)

The Tollund Man introduces a new aspect of Heaney's craft, a "new-found ability to allow historical, political, linguistic and mythological material to overlap and interpenetrate" (68).

The substance of Heaney's political commitment has not changed. Despite the ultimately unsuccessful Civil Rights Movement, he is still basically moderate. But the form politics take in his poetry is new. There is still the concern with history, but there is also a new tendency, a search for correlatives and analogies, an attempt to construct a myth transcending the narrow boundaries of Northern Ireland and inserting the Troubles in a wider, more general perspective, an attempt to see the predicament of the Northern Catholics as a reenactment of the condition of Man.

* * *

Besides the bog-myth, Heaney has another broadly political concern, a concern with language and, more specifically, with place-names. Heaney revives an old Gaelic tradition, that of writing dinnseanchas, "poems and tales

67 Begley, op.cit., p.168.

68 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.47.

which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology" (P, p.131).

Place-names in Ireland are of different origins. Some go right back to Gaelic times; others are of Norman or English or Scottish origin and there are also mixed ones. The Heaney farm, as we saw in the previous chapter, was called Mossbawn. In Preoccupations Heaney has explained that the morpheme 'moss' is of Scottish origin and was probably brought to Ireland by the planters in the 17th century, whereas 'bawn' was the English word for fortified farmhouses (69). Thus this place-name contains the traces of the colonizations of Ireland. The history of the land can be read in its names. Heaney's place-name poems uncover "a history of linguistic and territorial dispossession" (70).

It was not only Heaney's purpose to diagnose the traces of English domination in place-names; he wanted to recover the remnants of the dying Irish language, the Gaelic fossils preserved in them. In Preoccupations he wrote that "words as bearers of history and mystery began to invite" him (P, p.45) and in an article for the Listener he made the point more directly: "Lost civilizations are immanent in runic stones, the dying Irish language is exhaled in the place-names" (71). Thus his

69 Cf. P, p.35.

Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.39, argues that 'moss' is of Norse or Viking and 'bawn' of English or Scottish origin. Sharratt, op.cit., p.366, points out that Mossbawn "has buried in it Irish, Norse and English elements".

According to the COD, 1976 (6), p.710, the origin of 'moss' is Scottish and Northern English. The etymology is OE 'mos' rather than ON 'mosi' (cf. Collins English Dictionary, 1979, p.960).

70 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.41.

71 Seamus Heaney, Lost Ulstermen, p.55o.

interest in place-names becomes a kind of digging into the secrets of a language, a digging that is at the same time an exploration of the Gaelic consciousness of the Irish as expressed by their history. "When we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced ... that it is to ... the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity" (P, p.149). The recovering of the Gaelic place-names is both an assertion of Gaelic roots against English influences and an attempt to establish a historical continuity for Ireland.

The Gaelic place-names carry us right back to the origins of the Irish society. They are a door into the dark of a lost innocence, a lost purity, a lost but hopefully recoverable Gaelic identity. "The naming of places gives Heaney magical access to his own country through the mirror of its language" (72).

Heaney himself has stressed this role of the place-names:

Mossbawn was bordered by the townlands of Broagh and Anahorish, townlands that are forgotten Gaelic music in the throat, bruach and anach fhíor uisce, the riverbank and the place of clear water. The names lead past the literary mists of a Celtic twilight into that civilization whose demise was effected by soldiers and administrators like Spenser and Davies, whose lifeline was bitten through when the squared-off walls of bawn and demesne dropped on the country like the jaws of a man-trap. (P, p.36)

A poem which illustrates this digging into history is Toome (WO, p.26). In it Heaney likens the movement of the tongue when pronouncing the word 'Toome' to the movement a labourer has to make when he digs into the ground:

72 Stallworthy, op.cit., p.166.

I push into a souterrain
prospecting what new
in a hundred centuries'
loam.

The word 'souterrain' is not just a synonym for 'under-ground', but an expression often used for subterranean megalithic burial chambers like those in the Bann valley near Toome.

The digger moves down through the ages, from the
flints, musket-balls,
fragmented ware,
connected with the 1798 rebellion, to the
torcs and fish-bones
of the megalithic population, and finally to the mud and bogs of the earliest ages. Blake Morrison has adequately identified the different findings (73). The articulation of the place-name 'Toome' is associated with a journey into the Irish past. The language is metamorphosed into the land from which it was born. The word becomes the linguistic representation of the country and its history. The word 'Toome' is the essence of the place.

In Broagh (WO, p.27) a shower of rain is identified with the sounds of the name 'Broagh':

the shower
gathering in your heelmark
was the black o

in Broagh,
its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

73 Cf. Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.44: "They recede and descend through time - from the 'loam' of the recent past, through the 'musket-balls' used by the British military during late eighteenth-century skirmishes (Toome Bridge was the scene of one such skirmish, the place where the Irish nationalist Roddy McCorley was hanged in 1798), to the 'torcs' (neckwear) of the ancient Irish."

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
difficult to manage.

The strangers are the English, but it would be wrong to see xenophobic polemics in this poem. Heaney asserts the Irishness of these place-names and sets them against those of English origin, he regards them as witnesses of the Gaelic past, he finds a closeness to the soil and the true spirit of his ancestors in them that modern Anglo-Irish cannot provide. But all this does not imply a rejection of his Anglo-Irish heritage.

On the contrary, the vocabulary he uses in the poem "reflects the mixed linguistic and, thereby, the mixed racial heritage" (74). There are words of Scots origin (rigs, boortrees) and an Old English plural (docken). There are Dutch words (tattoo, pad) and a verb of Latin origin (to canopy). 'Broagh' itself is an anglicized form of the Gaelic 'bruach', a riverbank.

Strangers are unable to pronounce the final sound of that word, but native Irish, whether Catholics or Protestants, have no problems with it. They share the ability to articulate a difficult sound. This is another of Heaney's attempts at political ecumenicalism: unlike the two murderous cocks in Triptych for the Easter Battlers, the two communities in Ulster should stop fighting each other and build a new community based on reconciliation and a common heritage. "This community of pronunciation is an implicit emblem for some new political community. ... It acts as a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond

74 Maguire, Notes on Selected Poems by Seamus Heaney, p.34.

sectarian division" (75).

Anahorish (WO, p.16) is a poem about the "place of clear water", a small town near the Heaney farm, where the poet went to school as a child. The sound of the word

Anahorish, soft gradient
of consonant, vowel-meadow,

evokes reminiscences of the place itself, of "lamps / swung through the yards / on winter evenings" and of the mound-dwellers who lived there aeons ago. The association of memories from the poet's childhood with the mound-dwellers is explained by Heaney on the Faber Poetry Cassette: "These people actually dwelt on this small hill, but mound-dwellers to me has an archaic, primitive quality about it and I had the feeling and still have that that world where I grew up was continuous with an archaic world and that I belonged to that archaic world by some kind of vestigial inheritance" (76).

Heaney is once again trying to establish a continuity with the past. What is remarkable, too, is the way the poet analyses the word 'Anahorish', describing its 'soft' consonants, its 'vowel-meadow'. The characterization of Irish sounds as 'soft' is also important in another place-name poem, A New Song (WO, p.33).

It begins, like Anahorish, with a listing of memories, the memories the poet associates with the name Derrygarve. But in the second part of the poem he is no longer satisfied with exploring or remembering or maybe even bewailing what is past; he asks for more:

75 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.90.

76 Faber Poetry Cassette.

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

One is tempted to see in the first two lines of this stanza a direct reference to Toome and the image of the tongue digging into the past, "licking deep in native haunts". The poet envisages an invasion of the consonantal English settlements by the vowel-like Irish river:

And Castledawson we'll enlist
And Upperlands, each planted bawn -
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass -
A vocable, as rath and bullaun.

The idea here is that words of Irish and English origin will merge, that the Irish vowel and the English consonant, the 'soft' Irish element and the 'hard' English one will form new words, vocables. A New Song is "a rallying poem, written out of impatience with the state of cultural affairs, the separateness of the two cultures" (77), writes Rita Zoutenbier and Irvin Ehrenpreis notes that "what the poet means to accomplish is a union of the two traditions" (78). Foster interprets the poem similarly when he asks: "Is the poem a veiled reference to the possibility of Protestant and Catholic Ulstermen solving their political problems on the heels of the possibly departing English?" (79)

I think this poem really is another attempt at ecumenicalism, another suggestion that Catholics and Protestants should be conciliatory, that they should join forces to construct a new, homogeneous entity, not a vowel, not a

77 Zoutenbier, *op.cit.*, p.11.

78 Ehrenpreis, *op.cit.*, p.45.

79 Foster, *op.cit.*, p.46.

consonant, but a vocable:

I once wrote that I thought of the British influence as a kind of consonant and the Irish experience as a vowel. I would like to make works that would be 'vocables': vowels and consonants turning into a harmony of some kind. (80)

This idea, which Heaney also explained elsewhere (81), is in line with his whole political thinking. I do not agree with Blake Morrison, whose statement that A New Song "toys subversively with the possibility of some kind of repossession" (82) seems to me to imply a Gaelic domination. This, I think, is not what Heaney has in mind: he wants a true unification. Seamus Deane has said that "musical inflections play the role of political divisions" (83). This is true, and the union of 'soft' and 'hard', of 'female' and 'male' sounds symbolizes the union of Catholic and Protestant Ulstermen on the political, as it symbolizes the union of Gaelic and English sounds on the linguistic level.

Moving on from the conciliatory mood of the place-name poems to the poems that deal with language in general, the reader is struck by the aggressive attitude they show towards English. Heaney is clearly differentiating between Anglo-Irish as spoken by the Catholics, and the Protestant dialects. The epigraph to The Wool Trade (WO, p.37) is taken from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Stephen Dedalus has just had a conversation with the dean and reflects on the Irish attitude to the

80 Poets on Poetry (Patrick Garland), p.629.

81 "I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience." (P, p.37)

82 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.42.

83 Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, p.4.

English language:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (84)

Linguistic colonialism is particularly bad in Ireland, because since the Famine English has practically replaced Gaelic as the first language of Ireland and the Gaeltacht has been progressively growing smaller (85). John Montague wrote about this in his poem A Grafted Tongue (86):

To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh a humiliation
as twice to be born.

Decades later
that child's grandchild's
speech stumbles over lost
syllables of an old order.

The Irish attitude to this change of language is ambiguous, as Joyce has Stephen argue:

My ancestors threw off their language and took another, Stephen said. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. (87)

The problem is of course more complex than that. The circumstances at the time (after the Famine) put a heavy compulsion on the Irish to adopt the English language. And today, what with the influence of the Anglo-American

84 James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976, p.189.

85 Cf. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-79, pp.267-78.

86 John Montague, Selected Poems, Oxford: OUP, 1982, p.111.

87 Joyce, op.cit., p.202.

culture worldwide, not only in Ireland, Gaelic is in a weak position. The dying of Irish seems to be, unfortunately, a historical process (88).

The Wool Trade is not a polemical poem. It is not aggressive, like Stephen's statement or Montague's poem; it is a lament, a sad establishing of a sad truth.

The poet considers the way of the wool from the fleece to the completed cloth. The wool is constantly likened to the language: it develops, changes and ends up as something quite different from what it was at the outset.

The wool/language is
warm as a fleece,
it is shorn, baled, bleached and carded, it is
Unwound from the spools
Of his vowels.

Heaney's preference for 'soft' sounds is stressed by the "soft names like Bruges". He laments the loss of a tradition:

O all the hamlets where
Hills and flocks and streams conspired
To a language of waterwheels,
A lost syntax of looms and spindles,
How they hang
Fading, in the gallery of the tongue!

Wool and language become intertwined in this poem; their histories and fates are comparable. Just as the

88 Tom Paulin, in A New Look at the Language Question, p.12, writes: "The movement away from Irish in the 19th century was not the product of 'any law or official regulation'. Instead it was the result of a 'social self-generated movement of collective behaviour among the people themselves'. English was the language of power, commerce and social acceptance, and the Irish people largely accepted Daniel O'Connell's view that Gaelic monolingualism was an obstacle to freedom. Particularly after the Famine, parents encouraged their children to learn English as this would help them make new lives in America."

native production of rural cloth has succumbed to the industrially manufactured cloth (incidentally from Scotland), the local language has succumbed to the "grafted tongue":

And I must talk of tweed,
A stiff cloth with flecks like blood.

The lost tradition of indigenous wool-production is "fading" and the poet now has to "talk of tweed / A stiff cloth", not soft like the Irish wool. In the same way Gaelic is disappearing fast and being replaced by a language with harsh, male sounds, unpleasant to the ear and unnatural in an Irish environment. English is a language "not made or accepted" (89) by the Irish.

This sense of regret at the loss of the indigenous and the triumph of the foreign tongue is also expressed in Traditions (WO, pp.31-2). In its first part Heaney mourns the defeat of Gaelic, "our guttural muse", of whose former glory only vestiges have remained. In so far it is like the coccyx, the poor remains of a tail, or like a Brigid's cross, the more impressive remnant of a dead civilization. The loss of the Irish language and the culture to which it belonged has resulted in Ireland being swallowed up into the British world.

In part II the poet stresses the inadequacy, even the ridiculousness of the language that has replaced Gaelic. It is "Elizabethan English", "correct Shakespearean", full of "cherished archaisms", some of which he lists, and there are

the furled
consonants of lowlanders.

89 Cf. note 84.

Ulster English is made to appear archaic, old-fashioned and therefore slightly funny. It is a mixture of Elizabethan English and Scottish Lowlands elements. The critics' reactions to Heaney's attitude in this poem were not unanimous. Stephen Regan argued that "the 'alliterative tradition' and 'Elizabethan English' are viewed as encroachments on Irish soil" (90); Jay Parini thought that Heaney "makes fun of such English words as 'varsity' and 'deem'" (91); J.W.Foster asked: "Is the poet resentful? Is he bridling at the pride of Ulster Protestants in the Elizabethan cast of Ulster dialect?" (92) I think Heaney does make fun of this archaic form of English, which he contrasts unfavourably with the Irish "guttural muse". The relationship between the Irish poet and the English language, "at once his own and not his own" (93), is an ambiguous one. Heaney writes in English. English is his medium. Yet he criticizes the loss of the indigenous Gaelic language. He asserts his true Irish identity, difficult as this is in a "grafted tongue". The basic dilemma of the Irish poet writing in English has been mentioned in the introduction and it is in poems like this one that Heaney deals with it. Traditions is a poem about lost traditions and about new ones.

Not satisfied with asserting his Irish identity Heaney makes a gesture in favour of reconciliation in part III. Macmorris is enraged when Fluellen appears to be criti-

90 Regan, op.cit., p.311.

91 Parini, op.cit., p.112.

92 Foster, op.cit., p.45.

93 Harold Bloom, The Voice of Kinship, p.137.

cizing his nation:

Of my nation! What ish my nation? Ish a villain,
and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal - what ish
my nation? Who talks of my nation? (94)

The Irish soldier protests against anti-Irish prejudices, against the idea that "Irish and backwardness are somehow inextricably intertwined" (95). He is a pitiable character, the more so as even Shakespeare makes fun of him and his accent, thus starting a tradition of the Irishman as a "garrulous comic drunkard" (96).

The "wandering Jew", Bloom, in the course of a discussion about the definition of the concept 'nation' in the "Cyclops" episode of Ulysses, says:

Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland. (97)

He is not afraid of asserting his nationality. Bloom is Irish and proud of it. He wants to be respected for it, just as Macmorris is prepared to fight Fluellen for his scorning of the Irish.

But how can the Jewish Bloom be Irish? Because, he argues, he was born in Ireland, a point of view Heaney regards as 'sensible'. Thus everybody born in Ireland, Catholic, Protestant and Israelite, is Irish. The ecumenical tendency of this point is obvious.

National identity, however, is not just a matter of

94 Shakespeare, King Henry V, III.ii.125-7.

95 Brown, op.cit., p.347.

96 Eileen Cahill, A Silent Voice: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics, p.70.

Tom Paulin, in A New Look at the Language Question, p.7, recalls that Jonathan Swift, in his essay On Barbarous Denominations in Ireland, "observed that an Irish accent made 'the deliverer ... ridiculous and despised', and remarked that 'from such a mouth, an Englishman expects nothing but bulls, blunders, and follies'."

97 James Joyce, Ulysses, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, p.330.

birth. It relies on the culture an individual feels attached to, on what Edna O'Brien calls "a state of mind" (98). Bloom's definition that "a nation is the same people living in the same place" (99) and his qualification "or also living in different places" (100) is insufficient. There has to be a strong link between the individuals and groups constituting a nation. Language can be such a link (101).

The language spoken in Ireland by the majority of the people is the language of the English conqueror and thus hardly suitable for a reunited Irish nation. Heaney cannot accept linguistic colonialism but he cannot completely reject the English language either (102). Moreover, if he wants to reconcile the two factions in Ulster, he has to take into account the fact that English is the native language of the Protestants.

98 Edna O'Brien, in Mother Ireland, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, p.88, writes: "Irish? In truth I would not want to be anything else. It is a state of mind as well as an actual country. It is being at odds with other nationalities, having quite different philosophy about pleasure, about punishment, about life, and about death."

The suggestion that being Irish is a state of mind strikes me as very adequate indeed. Doesn't the fact of belonging to a nation, a culture, condition the mind and thus determine the individual's attitudes?

99 James Joyce, Ulysses, p.329.

100 *ibid.*, p.330.

101 Cf. G.B.Shaw, John Bull's Other Island, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, p.9: "When I say that I am an Irishman I mean that I was born in Ireland, and that my native language is the English of Swift and not the unspeakable jargon of the mid-XIX century London newspapers."

102 If he had wanted to do that, Heaney could have followed the example of Michael Hartnett, who, after the publication of A Farewell to English, decided only to write Gaelic poetry in future.

Thus Heaney still favours reconciliation, but not at the cost of a complete acceptance of standard English by the Irish. What he wants is a cross-fertilization between English, the lingua franca in Ireland, and what Irish elements there remain. Such a language, which would still be an English dialect, would grow out of both traditions. It would boast clearly identifiable Irish characteristics and could be regarded as idiosyncratically Irish.

* * *

Language is used for communication. The lack of communication is the theme of The Other Side (WO, pp.34-6). It starts with the speaker's neighbour, a Protestant, working in his field or garden and complaining about the poor quality of the soil:

'It's poor as Lazarus, that ground.'

The speaker makes fun of

his fabulous, biblical dismissal,
that tongue of chosen people

and of his "promised furrows". His prejudices and latent dislike become clear when he speaks of "a wake of pollen / drifting to our bank, next season's tares", as if the neighbour were responsible for the weeds growing in the speaker's field. A climate of mistrust and antagonism is created from these trivial, yet significant details.

In part II the poet criticizes the Protestant attitude to religion, the "patriarchal dictum", the emphasis on Bible-studies and the neighbour's narrow-minded puritanism:

His brain was a white-washed kitchen
hung with texts, swept tidy
as the body o' the kirk.

The use of the word 'kirk' suggests that the neighbour may be of Scottish descent.

In part III, however, this negative picture of the neighbour is shown to be unfair and prejudiced. After the Catholic family have finished their prayers, the Protestant knocks at the door, trying to make a friendly call, which, in the circumstances, looks like a tentative, slightly clumsy offer of peace.

The speaker is at a loss what to do:

Should I slip away, I wonder,
or go up and touch his shoulder
and talk about the weather
or the price of grass-seed?

He is uncertain whether or not to accept the offer of peace. If he accepts it, what could they talk about? The weather perhaps? Is small talk worth the effort? It is significant that the only possibility of communication stems from the land ("the price of grass-seed"). Philip Hobsbaum made this point when he said: "One can approach him only on the prosaic level of inquiries about the weather or the price of grass-seed" (103). The lack of communication between Catholics and Protestants can be overcome with the help of the land, which provides at least one topic. The poem, in Edna Longley's words, "searches for a common dialect whose rudiments, significantly, derive from the land" (104) and, as she argues elsewhere, "Heaney intertwines land, religion, and language to characterise, and tentatively close, the distance between his own family and a neighbouring Protestant farmer" (105).

103 Philip Hobsbaum, Craft and Technique in 'Wintering Out', in T.Curtis, op.cit., p.38.

104 Edna Longley, Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees, p.60.

105 Edna Longley, 'North': "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur", p.69.

The poem, in its dealing with the difficulties of living together on a parochial level, is reminiscent of DEATH OF A NATURALIST. And its message is also similar: the lack of communication must be overcome - but can it be overcome? "We sense the speaker's humanity in the dilemma; he does very much want to overcome his contempt and separation even if he must resort to banalities of conversation, but what basis for a real communication exists? And that last line sadly and with quiet irony seals the hopelessness" (106). I do not share Buttell's pessimism because, even if communication is difficult, there is the readiness in the speaker and in his neighbour to establish it, and where there is a will there is a way.

The Other Side acknowledges the existence of prejudices even in people who are basically tolerant. It also acknowledges the difficulties that arise when both sides want to overcome their differences, difficulties that are due to the lack of communication. Heaney believes that the search for a "language which crosses rather than takes sides" (107) is not hopeless.

Among the poems dealing with historical matter is Linen Town (WO, p.38), which describes the High Street in Belfast in 1786, twelve years before the rebellion of 1798. The poem is in fact a description of a printing. The poet mourns the loss "of reasonable light", which, at a time when there seemed to be a perspective of Protestants and Catholics uniting (108), was held high. "Take

106 Buttell, op.cit., p.64.

107 Edna Longley, Poetry in the Wars, p.201.

108 It was a time when Protestants were actually "petitioning and fighting for the Catholics". (Sharratt, op.cit., p.367).

a last turn / In the tang of possibility", the poet says and remembers with nostalgia that time when reconciliation seemed possible. But it remained a dream:

In twelve years' time
They hanged young McCracken.

The dream did not come true. The United Irishmen failed. The poem is a sad lament, a nostalgia for a lost opportunity.

Another poem which leads us back into the past is Bog Oak (WO, pp.14-15). The view of a piece of oak wood, old, weather-beaten, a remnant "from Ireland's vanished oak forests" (109), under a thatched roof, makes the speaker ponder about the past, about the craftsmen and farmers of past times. But just as in Linen Town the memory of a happy time was disturbed by the thought of violence and death, in Bog Oak the vision of the craftsmen becomes blurred and a new picture forms itself in the poet's mind, a picture of Edmund Spenser, the Elizabethan poet, but also the English official and landowner in Ireland. The last stanza contrasts the imaginative mind of Spenser, "dreaming sunlight", with the famished Irish survivors of the Battle of Kinsale (110).

With bitter irony, using a quote from Spenser himself (111), Heaney mourns the fate of those soldiers and,

109 Foster, op.cit., p.38.

110 On Christmas Eve 1601, outside Kinsale, the final battle for Gaelic Ireland was fought between the forces of the English Protestant Mountjoy and those of the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell. The Irish lost and had to submit to the English.

111 Spenser, View of the Present State of Ireland: "Out of every corner of the woodes and glynnes they came creeping forth upon theyr hands, for theyr legges could not beare them; they looked like anatomyes of death, they spake like ghostes crying out of theyr graves; they did eate of the dead carrions, happy were they if they

implicitly, attacks Spenser, the politician and Elizabethan colonialist, while at the same time respecting him as a poet.

Spenser's political activities put him "at a distance" from Heaney. "At that point I feel closer to the natives, the geniuses of the place", he wrote in Preoccupations (112).

The Battle of Kinsale in 1601 and the Flight of the Earls six years later signified another defeat in the fight for Irish independence. It was during those years that the plantation of Ulster with Scottish settlers began, a step towards the final subjugation of Ireland by the English. In Midnight (WO, pp.45-6) Heaney regrets the way Ireland was domesticated: the wolves were exterminated (the last one was killed by a Quaker!) and

The wolfhound was crossed
With inferior strains,
Forests coopered to wine casks.

The old free Ireland disappeared. And with the loss of its wild natural freedom it also lost its political liberty. Ireland was on England's leash and the poets felt the new ties, the loss of the old bardic licence:

The tongue's
Leashed in my throat.

Ireland was made to serve its English conqueror. Everything was controlled:

Nothing is panting, lolling,
Vapouring.

In Land (WO, pp.21-2) Heaney uses "the image of Ire-

could finde them, yea, and one another soone after, insoemuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of theyr graves; and if they found a plot of watercresses or shamrokes, there they flocked as to a feast..."

land as the tortured body of a woman" (113) and, putting his ear to the soil (in a rather typical Heaney posture), he hears the "small drumming" of the Orange drums:

and must not be surprised
in bursting air

to find myself snared, swinging
an ear-ring of sharp wire.

Land bridges the gap between Heaney's early nature poetry and those poems in NORTH in which Ireland is imaged as a woman at the mercy of the conquering English male.

* * *

In WINTERING OUT, as we have seen, Heaney's Janus-facedness is expressed by the two parts of the book: part I tries to grip, however metaphorically, the Northern Crisis, whereas part II signifies an escape into the private life and its trivial, but in the face of political violence, comforting concerns.

In part I the poet elaborates his bog-myth, the analogy between iron age fertility sacrifices and the fruitless sacrifices in contemporary Ulster. He also voices a hope that the sectarian murders in the North may not have been in vain, that ultimately some good may come out of those "man-killing parishes".

The other major theme in WINTERING OUT is Heaney's concern with language and place-names. He mourns the loss of the Irish tongue and, realizing the dilemma of a nation speaking a language that is not its own, he asserts the Irish national identity against the danger of

113 Grant, *op.cit.*, p.86.

Ireland being sucked up into the British world. He also advocates a reconciliation on the linguistic level (which of course symbolizes a political reconciliation) between the soft Irish vowel and the hard English consonant, a marriage that should bear creative fruit, unlike that other violent Act of Union he will deal with in NORTH.

Heaney has thus moved away from the párochial level (except in The Other Side) and on to a national and, with the bog-myth, even a universal level. But he is still loath to deal with the Crisis directly. He uses analogy and metaphor, he alludes to contemporary events, but he seldom faces them directly. He does so once in WINTERING OUT, in the introductory poem, and he does so again, to some extent at least, in a sequence of five poems called A Northern Hoard (WO, pp.39-44).

The first of these, Roots, shows the poet in bed with his lover. The calm of the night is disturbed by the intruding noises of street fighting:

the din
Of gunshot, siren and clucking gas
Out there beyond each curtained terrace.

Confronted with violence, love fails; it

Grows helpless in our old Gomorrah.

Nightmarish visions contrast sharply with the harmony that was not to be, visions of the "pale sniper", or of the poet, who "soaked by moonlight in tidal blood / A mandrake". The mandrake becomes a symbol of the tortured human body. Thus the title Roots is given a double meaning: mandrakes are roots and the poet has his roots in Ulster, that violent Province. Stephen Regan has argued that in this poem "the world of human love and natural

growth is insidiously threatened by the conflict" (114). Violence is omnipresent and it intrudes upon everybody's privacy. The poet wants to turn away from it, to desert,

shut out
their wounds' fierce awning,
those palms like streaming webs.

He longs for escape from the murders, from the bleeding hands of the victims meaning to draw him into the conflict, to web him into their net of blood. Yet desertion, as he makes clear in No Man's Land, is no solution:

Must I crawl back now,
he asks,

to confront my smeared doorstep
and what lumpy dead?

Will he have to face the murders? This is once again the question about the poet's duty: Can he escape from the massacre, or is there a moral obligation to face the suffering of his countrymen? Rita Zoutenbier has said that "there is a sense of guilt at the inadequacy of one's reaction" (115). This is true if the reaction is flight. But flight is "inconclusive, broken by fitful returns, neither return nor absence satisfying" (116). The problem raised here is in fact that of the poet's mission: can he turn his back on the nightmare, or would that be cowardice, defeatism, lâcheté?

Even if he does face the nightmare - what can he possibly do? He is powerless; can he only

114 Regan, *op.cit.*, p.311.

115 Zoutenbier, *op.cit.*, p.12.

116 Maxwell, *op.cit.*, p.174.

condone
infected sutures
and ill-knit bone?

It is part of the poet's frustrating predicament that he always "arrives late", that he can only warn and, afterwards, mourn and lament. Is that enough? Is it satisfactory?

What do I say if they wheel out their dead?
I'm cauterized, a black stump of home

he writes in Stump, thus acknowledging the inadequacy of his response to the Crisis.

What could strike a blaze
From our dead igneous days?

he asks in Tinder. Heaney's problem is Yeats's - how to create aesthetic beauty from an inhuman conflict. Can a terrible beauty be born from Ulster? The question remains unanswered. The prehistoric imagery of Tinder - "a return to the stone age - the nightmare imagery of Northern slaughter" (117), though signifying a renewed use of analogy instead of directness, gives a gloomy view of the North. The poem is "desolating and bitter" (118). It strikes a pessimistic note in a book that, on the whole, manages to convey some hope. This note is not out of place in a sequence of poems dealing with the poet's mission.

A Northern Hoard is one example, like Exposure in NORTH or the poems in STATION ISLAND and THE HAW LANTERN, of Heaney's tendency to ask himself what the purpose of his poetry is, can and should be. It shows a measure of self-analysis that is admirable and reveals a desire to find an adequate response to the challenge he is faced

117 Sharratt, *op.cit.*, p.367.

118 Buttel, *op.cit.*, p.71.

with.

So far he is still hesitating between an oblique approach, relying heavily on metaphor and analogy, and a more straightforward, overtly political stance. Far from criticizing this fact, I regard it as the particular charm of Seamus Heaney's poetry. His self-questioning is the expression of an honest attempt to reconcile the demands of art and those of politics.

"Heaney writes, in WINTERING OUT, a poetry everywhere bruised by Northern politics, even though rarely confronting them directly. His obliquities are not evasive: they are, on the contrary, subtly responsive and alert to the present conflict; but concerned to be poetry, and not some other thing. As a result, the poems themselves hover intricately between the literal and the symbolic, between realism and allegory, between politics and philology" (119).

A NOTE ON "STATIONS"

In 1975 Ulsterman Publications published a slim pamphlet with twenty-one prose poems Heaney had written between 1970 and 1974. The poems in STATIONS are reminiscences of past experiences, stations in the poet's life. In his introduction to the pamphlet, Heaney wrote that "those first pieces had been attempts to touch what Wordsworth called 'spots of time', moments at the very edge of consciousness which had lain for years in the unconscious as active lodes of nodes" (1). He began writing them in California, during his one-year guest-lectureship at Berkeley. Most of the poems deal with episodes from the poet's childhood. Nesting-ground, for example, is about exploring a sandmartin's nest and the thrilling fascination of such a novel experience; Sinking the shaft deals with the sinking of a pump, a scene Heaney will often have watched on his father's farm; Waterbabies is about children's games during the Second World War. These and similar pieces are reminiscent of the poems in DEATH OF A NATURALIST and DOOR INTO THE DARK with their concern for private happiness and the closed idiosyncratic phantasy world of the child.

When Heaney returned from Berkeley, a month after the introduction of internment, his "introspection was not confident enough to pursue its direction. The sirens in

1 S, p.3.

the air, perhaps quite rightly, jammed those other tentative if insistent signals" (2). The poet found he had to try and come to terms with the situation, to define his position as a poet. The poems in NORTH are the result of this new phase in Heaney's work.

When he finally took up STATIONS again after his move to Glanmore in Co. Wicklow in the summer of 1972, he was no longer satisfied with recalling childhood memories, but decided to represent "the sectarian dimension of that pre-reflective experience" which "presented itself as something asking to be uttered also" (3). Thus STATIONS is not only about the innocent days of a happy childhood. It is also about the sectarian divisions, which were very much alive during the poet's childhood, though he did not see them as such at the time. The icons of sectarianism were there, accepted uncritically as something normal and their true nature to be recognized only later by the adult, 'reflective' poet.

Sweet William is a carnation "with flat clusters of white, pink, red, or purple flowers" (4). But to an Irish Catholic it is more than a beautiful flower: its name, reminiscent of William of Orange, makes it "suspect in the imagination" (P, p.134). In an interview Heaney said:

There's a cottage garden flower called Sweet William. A lovely flower, strong crimson and white. I'm certain that my response to Sweet William was affected by the William thing and the Orange element. (5)

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*

4 Collins English Dictionary. London: Collins, 1979, p.1468.

5 Begley, *op.cit.*, pp.162-3.

The example of Sweet William shows that trifling everyday details can get tainted through association with the symbols of sectarian division. What does Sweet William suggest to the poet?

The words had the silky lift of a banner on the wind, where that king with crinkling feminine black curls reached after the unsheathed flare of his sword - and that was heraldry I could not assent to.

The poem Sweet William (S, p.11) makes clear that everything in Ulster becomes somehow political, that the name of an inoffensive little plant can awaken old animosities. Sectarian division is omnipresent in Ulster; nobody and nothing can escape being drawn into the Conflict.

The Sabbath-breakers (S, p.13) also deals with the impact of the Conflict on everyday matters. Gaelic football is usually played by the Catholics on Sundays. Protestants object to this as being opposed to the spirit of the Sabbath - there should be no such joyful activities on Sundays. This poem describes how Catholic sportsmen prepare the ground for the Sunday match, the final incidentally, an important event in the life of the community. But,

the next morning the goalposts had been felled by what roundhead elders, what maypole hackers, what choristers of law and liberty.

Despite this vandalism ("Call it a pattern. We can hardly call it a pogrom.") the players go ahead with their match, improvise a salute to the tricolour and sing their anthem. The chestnut tree becomes a symbol of defiance:

The green chestnut tree that flourished at the entrance to the Gaelic Athletic Association grounds

was more abundantly green from being the eminence where the tricolour was flown illicitly at Easter or on sports days. (P, p.134)

The poem is both an attack upon Unionist intolerance (6) and an assertion of Catholic firmness:

We lived there too. We stared into the pennanted branches and held the tableau. In spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Implacable. (7)

The Conflict is here transposed onto the parochial level. But it is symptomatic of the small, perhaps trivial, and yet so meaningful provocations between the two communities. It is a pattern, to be enacted again and again, illustrating the absurdity of the antagonism.

The flag is one of the most prominent icons in Ulster: William's banner, the tricolour in the chestnut tree, or the "newly painted flagpole" of Kernes (S, p.14). This poem is about an anecdote the poet remembers from his school-days:

I remember a fellow, Jacky Dixon, who was on the road with us. He was a Protestant chap. I guess his age would have been nine or ten. The Catholics were called Fenians. I remember Jacky, when he'd got inside the gates of his own house would shout, 'I could beat every f...ing Fenian at Anahorish school.'" (8)

Kernes recounts the same experience in slightly different terms, adding to young Dixon's aggressive proclamation

6 The expression "roundhead elders" establishes an analogy between the Ulster Protestants and Cromwell's Puritans and thus with a particularly nasty time in Anglo-Irish relations.

7 The football players' gesture of defiance is amplified by the allusion to a Nationalist hymn: "Faith of our Fathers, living still, / in spite of dungeon, fire and sword."

8 Begley, op.cit., p.162.

"I could beat every fucking papish in the school!" other symbols of sectarian division: the red, white and blue flagpole, representing the domination of the Union Jack over Ulster, the breastplate of Sir Walter Raleigh, the Elizabethan poet and adventurer, remembered in Ireland for his part in the plantation of Munster, the Unionist slogans ("No surrender! (9) Up King Billy every time!"), the British national anthem. It is shocking that the antagonism between Catholics and Protestants perverts even children's games. From their earliest age young boys who do not yet understand what the Conflict is about are being brain-washed to hate each other and to adhere to symbols that have no meaning for them except as signs of defiance and provocation.

Heaney points not only to the omnipresence of the Conflict in everyday life, but also to the fact that fossilized symbols have replaced argumentation:

The whole pageantry of the Orange and Green affected you. The Orange drums in July. That was a kind of purple memory. Not necessarily menacing, but obviously unforgettable. On the first of July the Orangemen started the 'wee 12th'. They would practise drumming in the evening. There were drumming matches in the summer. Down the field from us was the Hibernian Hall, called the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and they practised too. So you had the air full of the music of division. I wouldn't like to be melodramatic and say that you were scared. We weren't scared, but we knew the meaning of the Orange drums. (10)

9 'No Surrender!' was the answer the citizens of Londonderry sent to the troops of James II during the siege of the town in 1689. They refused to surrender and the siege was finally broken by British ships sailing into Derry harbour on 28th July 1689. 'No Surrender!' "has been the watchword of the northern Protestants ever since" (Kee, op.cit., p.50).

10 Begley, op.cit., p.163.

The drums rehearsing for Orange Day are another of those symbols, celebrating William III's victory over James II at the Boyne on July 11th, 1690.

In Preoccupations Heaney writes: "The rattle of Orange drums from Aughrim Hill sets the heart alert and watchful as a hare" (P, p.20). In the poem July (S, p.15) he re-creates the atmosphere of such a night: the low drumming, a murmur gradually growing louder, hammering, coming nearer like a wave rolling up the shore:

Through red seas of July the Orange drummers led
a chosen people through their dream.

The ironic analogy with Moses' leading the Jews out of Egypt turns into images of violence:

The air grew dark, cloud-barred, a butcher's apron.
And this is repeated year-by-year, the same celebration of differences, the same cultivation of hate. Instead of looking for common points between the two communities, the extremists perpetuate an anachronistic iconography. The wheel turns on.

Heaney's criticism is not only turned against the Unionist side. Of course, being a Catholic, he resents the Orange pageantry much more than the Republican one. But prejudices and what, for the lack of a better word, we have to call Schadenfreude, are also prominent among the Catholics. In England's Difficulty (S, p.16) he shows how they gloated over the destructions caused by German bombers in Belfast during World War II:

When the Germans bombed Belfast it was the bitter
Orange parts were hit the worst.

We must object as much to the Catholics' scarcely disguised satisfaction at the destruction of mainly the Protestant parts of Belfast as to the Loyalist rituals

criticized in July.

In Trial Runs (S, p.18) Heaney writes about a demobilized neighbour, a Protestant, returning from the Second World War (11). The official welcome to the homecomer is suspect to the poet because it is "painted along the demesne wall, a banner headline over the old news of Remember 1690 and No Surrender." The neighbour has brought rosary beads as a present for the poet's father:

"Did they make a papish of you over there?"
"O damn the fear! I stole them for you, Paddy,
off the pope's dresser when his back was turned."
"You could harness a donkey with them."

The interchange is light-hearted, almost jocular, and yet there is a feeling of unease. Is this just teasing - two friends making fun of conventions they have outgrown? Or is it only a moment of release before they fall back into the old antagonism; is it a mere sabbatical from the Conflict?

Their laughter sailed above my head, a hoarse
clamour, two big nervous birds dipping and lifting,
making trial runs over a territory.

The wanderer (S, p.19) is an autobiographical poem about a young man who has won a scholarship to Derry and who, years later, reflects on what he has experienced since. The reader gets a glimpse of the poet's life, the life of an Ulsterman who has "seen halls in flames, hearts in cinders, the benches filled and emptied, the circles of companions called and broken."

11 For Buttel, op.cit., p.33, this scene is an illustration of his claim that "Catholics, the majority in Heaney's area, lived in relative harmony with the Protestants, a sharp awareness of differences notwithstanding. (George Evans, a Protestant neighbour, on one occasion brought rosary beads back from Rome and presented them to the Heaneys: 'I stole them from the Pope's dresser,' he said.)"

We could go on analysing the prose poems in STATIONS in more detail and we would see how these pieces become more and more explicit. Ballad (S, p.21) e.g., which, according to Blake Morrison (12), is based on a 1950s political killing, uses very concrete images to describe the horrors of the violence in the North:

Blood ran a jewelled delta down the back of the lorry.

...

They left him dying there on the cold floor of a barn.

Heaney has thus moved on from early childhood reminiscences through the iconography of sectarian antagonism to the cruel realities of the contemporary war in Ulster. STATIONS follows the line of the poet's three collections of verse, from detachment to a more immediate response to the Conflict.

In the pamphlet we also find a poem expressing regret for the loss of the Gaelic language: The stations of the west (S, p.22). The poet meets an old woman in the Gaeltacht and sits

on a twilit bedside listening through the wall to
fluent Irish, homesick for a speech I was to
extirpate.

The question raised here is whether the Irish poet writing in English is contributing to the extinction of Gaelic. The poet has come to "inhale the absolute weather"; he has not come to learn Gaelic, as so many Northern Catholics were to do later on. No "gift of tongues" descended on him then, but he found the vestiges of the lost Gaelic culture in the place-names, Rannafast, Errigal, Annaghry and Kincasslagh, "names portable as altar stones, unleavened elements" they recover the

12 Cf. Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.48.

essence of the lost culture.

The possibility of a partial recovering of the Gaelic spirit prepares the reader for the conciliatory poem Inquisition (S, p.23). The speaker is involved in merry banter in a pub when he suddenly realizes that the other drinkers are Protestants. The door is barred, the speaker's hand firmly gripped and one of the Protestants tells him that he "was christened in Boyne water":

I thought he was going to ask me to curse the pope.
Instead, he thumped my back again.

"Ah, live and let live, that's my motto, brother.
What does it matter where we go on Sundays as long
as we can still enjoy ourselves. Isn't that right,
brother?"

The speaker is released and leaves. The Protestant's tolerant attitude is a further indication of Heaney's ecumenicalism. Inquisition is the penultimate poem of STATIONS, which thus ends on a note of tentative optimism.

CHAPTER IV

"TAKING PROTECTIVE COLOURING"

NORTH (1975)

The sick counties we call home.

Michael Longley,
Letter to Seamus Heaney (1)

NORTH was published in 1975, three years after WINTERING OUT. Those three years had been marked by renewed attempts to find solutions to the political crisis in Ulster. The imposition of direct rule and the suspension of Stormont in March 1972 had led to talks between the moderate wings of the Catholic and Protestant communities. They resulted in the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973. The British Government, the Protestant establishment under its leader Brian Faulkner, and the SDLP agreed on a new Assembly with power sharing and a joint Protestant/Catholic administration. The extremists on both sides, however, saw to it that this last-minute attempt failed. The Ulster Workers' Strike in May 1974 brought Faulkner and the Assembly down. Direct rule was reimposed by the British Labour Government. In response the IRA intensified its bombing campaigns and extended them to England in 1975.

1 In: Michael Longley, Poems 1963-1983, Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1985, p.84.

With the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement a situation had been created that has basically remained unchanged since then: Northern Ireland administered directly from Westminster and British troops in the Province.

* * *

In the summer of 1972 Seamus Heaney left Northern Ireland and moved to Glanmore in Co. Wicklow (Eire). He had by then become a fairly well-known poet in the North, a kind of spokesman people were looking to for his opinions about the Crisis. Thus his leaving Ulster in favour of the Republic was more than just a private decision. Heaney realized the implications of this move, as he told James Randall:

Undoubtedly I was aware of a political dimension to the move south of the border, and it was viewed, I think, with regret by some, and with a sense of almost betrayal by others. That was because a situation like that in the north of Ireland generates a great energy and group loyalty, and it generates a defensiveness about its own verities. Some people felt rejected by my leaving. ... The crossing of the border had a political edge to it because we were opting to go into the Republic. But I was quite content in a way to accept and undergo that political dimension because I had never considered myself British. (2)

The poet's move to the South may be regarded as another assertion of his Irishness, an assertion that he later renewed by protesting against being called a 'British' poet (3). The move to Glanmore may also have been another manifestation of the poet's Janus-facedness:

2 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.8.

3 Cf. OL.

away from the political insecurity of Ulster to the safety and quietude of Glanmore.

* * *

Heaney's fourth collection of verse is noticeably different from its predecessors. Its main subject-matter is, as the title indicates, the North - not only, but mainly, the North of Ireland. The reception of the book was not unanimous: it is still regarded by many as Heaney's finest collection to date; others criticized it severely. Ciaran Carson, for example, wrote: "Everyone was anxious that NORTH should be a great book; when it turned out that it wasn't, it was treated as one anyway, and made into an Ulster '75 Exhibition of the Good that can come out of Troubled Times" (4). One can understand Carson's view, shared above all by Irish critics (5), but I think he is simplifying Heaney's concern. It is paradoxical that aesthetic beauty should have its roots in the terrible things going on in Ulster, but that paradox has always existed; as long as there has been art, there has been art dealing with violence, injustice and death.

4 Ciaran Carson, Escaped from the Massacre?, p.186.

5 For the reception of NORTH in Ireland and Britain, cf. Fiona Mullan, Seamus Heaney - The Poetry of Opinion, p.16: "Among British reviewers NORTH was greeted with a sigh of relief; it provided the answer to the long-standing question, 'Where are the war poets?', and it proved to many people's satisfaction that something good had come out of the troubles. In some circles it was welcomed as an articulation of and an apology for the political grievances and religious hatreds which had erupted into violence in the province seven years before, while in others concern over what Heaney was actually saying about violence grew into outraged condemnation. ... Among republican sympathizers in Ireland and the United States, the collection was revered as the voice of an oppressed people. ... In the tightly-knit literary circles of Belfast, most of Heaney's contemporaries were sceptical of popular responses, at best regretting that the collection had been largely misunderstood, and at worst suspecting Heaney of trying to 'cash in' on political voyeurism."

Richard Murphy argued this point convincingly when he wrote that NORTH is "a triumph of art over terror. It has the fear of death on almost every page, and brings the terror under artistic control" (6).

How does Heaney manage to bring "the terror under artistic control", how does he proceed to integrate the Northern Conflict into his poetry, to deal with the Crisis? In NORTH he has chosen two ways already foreshadowed in WINTERING OUT, and they are represented by the two parts of the collection: the one based on metaphor and analogy, the other explicit and almost documentary.

The poems in part I deal with historical subject-matter and they are a kind of journey through the Irish past: from the iron age via Viking Dublin (the original book jacket showed a drawing of a Viking longboat) and Elizabethan Ireland to the Act of Union of 1800. Heaney's symbolical treatment of the Irish Crisis, his establishing a link between past and present is followed in part II by poems dealing directly and explicitly with contemporary Ulster. In his admirable study of Heaney, Blake Morrison has put much emphasis on these two parts. He has noted that "the dominant verse-form" in part I "is the compressed, 'artesian' quatrain already employed in WINTERING OUT", whereas in part II it is "the rhyming quatrain in iambic pentameters" (7). He has also stressed the difference between the language of part I, "deeply rooted in the past, to the extent of reviving defunct and

6 Murphy, op.cit., p.40.

His view confirms the blurb of NORTH, which claims that these poems "recognise tragedy and violence without despairingly allowing them to flog human utterance into fragments."

7 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.53.

archaic words", and that of part II, "contemporary and at times journalistic" (8). Finally, the tone of the first part is "reverential, formal, serious", that of the second "conversational, irreverent, humorous" (9). Morrison then develops an interesting theory when he says that the two parts of NORTH represent two kinds of poems, "two different types of poetic composition", the one "having been laboured over and 'made'", the other "having been 'given'" (10). He explains that this shift from an artful, symbolic to a more direct and explicit poetry was Heaney's reaction to the failure of the attempts at reconciliation in the North: "The decent, ameliorist, civil rights mood that had lain behind WINTERING OUT seemed to belong to an earlier period" (11).

I agree with Morrison that Heaney's poetry in the second part of NORTH has become "urgent in tone" (12) and this urgency may be due to Heaney's sensing that the realities of the conflict in Ulster were asking for a new kind of poem: not metaphorical but direct, not metonymical but explicit. In an interview for The Crane Bag he said:

The two halves of the book constitute two different types of utterance, each of which arose out of a necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form to two kinds of urgency - one symbolic, one explicit. (13)

One is tempted to see in these two modes a progression

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*, p.54.

11 *ibid.*, p.55.

12 *ibid.*

13 Unhappy and at Home, p.71.

away from the metaphorical poems of WINTERING OUT and part I of NORTH and on to a more obvious commitment, a commitment foreshadowed by the introductory poem of WINTERING OUT and fully developed in the second part of NORTH. The two parts of NORTH recall Heaney's Janus-facedness. He realizes the dilemma between commitment and retreat. The poems in part I, like those in DEATH OF A NATURALIST and DOOR INTO THE DARK, search for a way out, a method of dealing with the Crisis indirectly, with the help of analogy and myth. On the other hand there is the urge to be more explicit, to take up a clearly defined stance. These two urges, the one, if we like, 'radical', the other tentative, uncertain, mildly escapist, characterize NORTH, as they characterize most of Heaney's poetry (14).

It has already been said that the first part of NORTH is a kind of journey through 2000 years of Irish history, "an imposing sequence of poems linking the grim Irish present with its even grimmer past of Norse invasions and ancient feuding" (15), as A. Alvarez put it in one of his rare positive statements about Heaney's work. Another characteristic is the one mentioned by Norbert Platz, and that, too, has already been hinted at: "Lassen sich in seinen früheren Gedichten noch deskriptive (= beschreibende) Züge beobachten, so überwiegt in NORTH die Tendenz

14 The "division into two parts seems to reflect some basic dilemma, between the need to be precise, and the desire to abstract, to create a superstructure of myth and symbol."

Edna Longley, Escaped from the Massacre?, p.183.

15 Alvarez, op.cit., p.16.

zur metonymischen und elliptischen Darstellung" (16).

In fact, in NORTH Heaney uses several old and new analogies: the bog-myth makes its second spectacular appearance, the historical analogies are taken up again, there are poems with sexual imagery and there is, and that is new, the Antaeus-myth.

Antaeus is a figure from Greek mythology. The son of Gaia and Poseidon, he was King of Libya and got his power from a close contact with the earth. Hercules killed him by lifting him off the earth and thus cutting him off from his source of power.

Part I of NORTH is framed by two Antaeus-poems: Antaeus (N, p.12) and Hercules and Antaeus (N, pp.52-3). The first of these, a monologue by Antaeus, starts with the speaker exposing his magical power:

When I lie on the ground
I rise flushed as a rose in the morning.
In fights I arrange a fall on the ring
To rub myself with sand

That is operative
As an elixir.

Antaeus is the son of the Earth (Gaia), a product of the soil, who can only thrive if he keeps in contact with his element, the earth that mothered him:

Down here in my cave
Girdered with root and rock
I am cradled in the dark that wombed me.

Imagery well-known from earlier Heaney poems creeps into this one: the earth-goddess of the bog-poems and the darkness-metaphor. It would be going too far to say that Antaeus represents Heaney, but they do share certain

16 N.H.Platz, Seamus Heaney: 'Freedman', p.233.

characteristics, for example their being rooted in the soil (a rural background).

Let each new hero come
Seeking the golden apples and Atlas.

Antaeus is the King of Libya. His realm is an obstacle barring the way to the Islands of the Blessed. The allusion here is to Hercules' fetching the golden apples of the Hesperides from Atlas, the eleventh of his labours. Heaney thus introduces Hercules, who will appear as Antaeus' opponent in the second poem:

He must wrestle with me before he pass
Into that realm of fame.

Antaeus prophesies what will, or may, happen:

He may well throw me and renew my birth
But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,
My elevation, my fall.

There is a paradox in these lines, the paradox that Antaeus' fall will be his rebirth and his elevation will be his fall, because he needs constant contact with the earth. What, or whom does Antaeus symbolize? Is he the rural poet who needs his roots to survive? Is he Heaney, who wants to turn his back on politics and escape to the comfortable quietude of the country, so as not to sever his bond with the earth? Is he the poet who refrains from being elevated into the realm of political poetry because he is afraid this elevation might bring about his downfall? These questions are answered in Hercules and Antaeus, which begins with a description of Hercules and a reminder of some of his labours. The narrator then tells us that Antaeus has been beaten:

a fall was a renewal
but now he is raised up,

he is taken

out of his element
into a dream of loss.

Antaeus, the representative of an old vanishing order, will die, just like those other ancient heroes: Balor, of whom Douglas Dunn writes: "Balor (Balar úa Néid) was king of the Fomorians, king of the aboriginal gods of Erin to whom the invading Milesians and Celts were hostile. He was slain by Lugh. Balor and Lugh are invoked in a 16th-century Gaelic poem addressed to the Earl of Argyll before the Battle of Flodden in which Balor is likened to Saxon tyranny and Lugh is the source of salvation" (17); Byrthnoth, the Anglo-Saxon hero killed by Viking invaders at the Battle of Maldon; and Sitting Bull, the Sioux chief shot by Indian police shortly before Wounded Knee. These four heroes, Antaeus, Balor, Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull, share a common predicament: they represent an indigenous order defeated by an imperialist enemy - Hercules, Lugh, the Vikings, the white Americans. Morrison rightly sees in this stanza "a parable of imperialism generally" (18).

Morrison develops his political interpretation of the Antaeus-myth, arguing that "politically, these are poems about colonization, suggesting that dispossession is the inevitable lot of small, backward nations" (19). Antaeus thus becomes a kind of Caliban, a primitive creature dwelling in the earth, who succumbs to the stronger power of a mighty Prospero. Morrison makes Heaney sympathize with the "'minority' represented by Antaeus" (20), a view

17 Douglas Dunn, Mañana is Now, pp.77-8.

18 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.59.

19 *ibid.*, pp.58-9.

20 *ibid.*, p.60.

that is perfectly sound in the context of this interpretation, and yet he realizes that there is a historical fatality favouring the strong, the powerful: "Heaney's sympathies may be with the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, but his historic sense prevents him from developing any hope for their success, or indeed any hope of solution generally" (21).

Morrison's interpretation thus suggests that Antaeus stands for an indigenous minority defeated by imperialist invaders. The fact that the two Antaeus-poems frame part I of NORTH with its poems about successive invasions in Ireland seems to confirm this theory. Antaeus shows a self-conscious hero whose self-confidence is to be shattered by invasions until he is finally defeated by Hercules in Hercules and Antaeus. Is the Antaeus-myth a metaphor for colonialism and dispossession? I think it is, but there is more to it than just that.

The Antaeus-myth can also be regarded as a metaphor for the poet himself, for the kinds of poetry he produces. In this context, Antaeus represents an instinctive, intuitive sort of poetry, a poetry 'found' not 'made'. He is a singer, whereas Hercules is a maker, a rational, political poet. Antaeus stands for the poetry of part I of NORTH, the myths, the analogies, the metaphors, whereas Hercules, who defeats him in the final poem of that part, represents the direct, explicit poetry of part II:

Instead of remaining, like Antaeus, with the dark,
he decides, at the end of this section, to allow
Hercules to lift him up off the earth and to plan
his political elevation to the rational domain of

21 Morrison, Speech and Reticence: Seamus Heaney's 'North', p.110.

relevance. (22)

What M.P.Hederman explains here in terms almost as poetical as the poet's own is why, in part II, Heaney abandons the images provided by the soil (bog, place-names) with their mythological implications, in favour of rationalization.

This distinction is, of course, slightly artificial. The poet has to be both visionary and commentator, both singer and maker. But the differences between parts I and II of NORTH, the different modes in which those poems are written, do actually reveal a shift of emphasis from an earlier metaphorical to a later documentary poetry.

* * *

The origins of the bog-myth have already been explained in the previous chapters. It started off with a general interest on Heaney's part in the bog as the memory of the land (23), as the preserver of its past. This idea was at the heart of Bogland in DOOR INTO THE DARK. Then the publication of P.V.Glob's book on the iron age bog people of Jutland came to Heaney as a kind of "revelation". In an interview with James Randall he made it clear that the bog-myth had been an inspiration, not an artificially created symbol:

22 Hederman, op.cit., p.61.

Cf. also Heaney's statement in Unhappy and at Home, p.68: "Hercules represents the balanced rational light while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity. Overall, I think that in the case of almost every Northern poet, the rational wins out too strong. This poem drifts towards an assent to Hercules, though there was a sort of nostalgia for Antaeus."

Caroline Walsh, op.cit., p.5, was told by Heaney: "There was a great uncertainty for poets from the North as to whether they would address themselves directly in a prejudiced, in a committed, politically naked way to things or not. I, in a sense, have done both in NORTH where I appeased myself."

23 "The bog bank is a memory bank." Seamus Heaney, PBS-Bulletin 85, p.1.

I'm very angry with a couple of snotty remarks by people who don't know what they are talking about and speak as if the bog images were picked up for convenience instead of being, as I'm trying to take this opportunity to say, a deeply felt part of my own life, a revelation to me. Then I went to Denmark - this whole period of my life was one of richness and at the same time of unease. (24)

This statement recalls the final stanza of The Tollund Man, that most famous of the bog poems, in which Heaney established an analogy between the iron age fertility sacrifices in Denmark and the sectarian murders in contemporary Ulster. We have also seen that Heaney expresses the hope that some good may grow out of those murders. Moreover, as John Greening has said, in the bog poems Heaney becomes "an excavator ... seeking through fable, myth and image some continuity in the face of harsh division" (25).

It is one of the purposes of part I of NORTH to provide such a sense of historical continuity and it is very strong in the bog poems, eight of which are included in this collection. The Grauballe Man (N, pp.35-6) is based on the second chapter of Prof.Glob's book (26) and, above all, on the photographs on pp.38 and 47. It begins with a description of the corpse, whose wrists are compared to "bog oak", whose heel is "like a basalt egg", the spine "an eel arrested / under a glisten of mud".

With great tenderness does the poet describe the slow metamorphosis of the sacrificial victim into a timeless work of art, a "vivid cast" lying in "opaque repose" like those mysterious, venerable and awe-inspiring effigies

24 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.19.

25 John Greening, Peter Huchel. Agenda 21/3 (Autumn 1983), p.39.

26 Glob, op.cit., pp.37-62.

on medieval tombs. It is almost a sacrilege to regard the bog man as a "corpse", a "body"; it is only too easy to forget the circumstances of his violent death.

The Grauballe Man is lodged in Heaney's memory as an image of combined

beauty and atrocity,
the beauty of the work of art he has become and the
atrocity of his murder.

The last stanza, like that of The Tollund Man, suggests an analogy with the present:

with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

The "hooded victims" might of course be other bog people, or also victims of more recent political assassinations (27). The Grauballe Man is thus another correlative for the murders in the North, both a reminder and a warning. As Morrison and Motion have argued, he is "a living commentary on the world [he] has rejoined, ... a pathetic prophet of contemporary violence" (28). As in The Tollund Man there is the hope for a possible rebirth: the Grauballe Man lies

As if he had been poured
in tar,

he "seems to weep", is almost alive, looks like a "foetus", a "forceps baby" (29). He represents not only the

27 Cf. Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.63: "This equation of the Iron Age and the IRA is briefly made at the end of 'The Grauballe Man', where the 'hooded victim, / slashed and dumped' ... might belong either to the past or to the present."

28 Morrison, Motion, op.cit., p.15.

29 Cf. in this context Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.18: "The bog is not only a symbol for

victims of iron age sacrifices and contemporary political violence, but also the possibility of resurrection. He is a kind of Phoenix, reborn, released by the Earth goddess, or rather wrenched from her by force.

Strange Fruit (N, p.39) is about the decapitated girl from Roum (30). In the two quatrains of this sonnet Heaney describes the girl's head, the exhibition of which in a museum he regards as slightly irreverent. He feels a kind of tender sympathy for the dead girl, the "perishable treasure". In the first tercet he mentions the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (31):

Diodorus Siculus confessed
His gradual ease among the likes of this.

The reference is obscure: why should the historian have felt at ease among murdered people? Richard Murphy writes that Diodorus "as a critic ... seems to have been altogether ignorant of the ethical advantages of history, and shrinks from administering praise or blame to the persons whose history he writes" (32). He avoided moral judgments and was satisfied with reporting facts. Heaney shows a similar detachment in his bog poems, which "could be a necessary element in the purification of our guilt" (33).

Ireland as a female goddess to whom sacrifices are made, but also the 'all-tombing womb' of the earth-mother where the bog corpses lie buried like embryos awaiting rebirth."

30 Cf. Glob, op.cit., p.100, and also the photograph on p.99.

31 Diodorus Siculus of Agyrion (Sicily) worked for thirty years at his history of the world in 40 books, fifteen of which are extant. He lived in the first century B.C.

32 Murphy, op.cit., p.39.

33 *ibid.*

What Heaney tries to achieve in this poem is an objectification of the girl's head. It becomes a symbol, an accusation, a monument, standing not only for the iron age or contemporary Ulster, but for a general truth: the horror of violent death and the guilt of those who do not prevent it. The dead girl's head is a relic, something holy and transcending every human interpretation:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

The poet realizes that the head is no longer of this world - nothing happening on earth has any importance for it - neither the executioner's axe, nor the possible beatification by the poet, nor the reverence felt by those who see it in the museum. Faced with this metaphysical aspect of the head, only essential truths subsist: the horror of death, the guilt of the murderers, the bad conscience of those who tolerated the murder.

Punishment (N, pp.37-8) is perhaps the most interesting and controversial of the bog poems in NORTH, not least because it made Heaney suspect of sympathy for the IRA. The poem is based on the photograph on p.111 and the text on pp.112-14 of The Bog People. Like the other bog poems', its first part is descriptive and summarizes the information Prof. Glob provides about the corpse and the circumstances of her death. The girl was most probably an adulteress, killed for her unfaithfulness:

Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you.

The poet then confesses to an attitude that is shared by many people who object to injustice, but lack the courage or the will to intervene:

but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.

He, too, would have become guilty of silence. The biblical analogy with John 8:7 ("He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her") makes the criticism of such passivity the more vivid: silence implies consent, acceptance of violence, complicity, guilt.

Although he condemns such an attitude, Heaney admits that he would probably have subscribed to it, that he would have accepted and tolerated this revenge. This paradox can only be understood if we keep in mind how strong are the laws of the tribe, to which all its members owe allegiance:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Heaney is alluding to an episode he has described elsewhere:

Around the time of the move to Wicklow, I had a chance to go to Jutland, after which I wrote The Grauballe Man. During that trip girls were being tarred and feathered in Derry. I wrote a poem called Punishment, which is maybe the most explicit poem, where the connections are made. ... From a girl, an adulteress, who has had her hair shaved and who was buried in the bog to the girls whose faces are black, not because of this inhumation in

the bog, but because of the tar on them, to the girls in Derry. Both victims, the adulteress and the girls; both supposed to have betrayed their community; both punished by their own community. Also both viewed from the outside with some civilized outrage. The Daily Telegraph was writing about the punishment of the girls by tar and feathering, very righteously and 'how inhumane' it was, and 'in violation', and so on. Well this is true enough. On the other hand the British armies were using brutal and much more efficient methods. So connections like that came up. I suppose that that was what was in the poems and the reason I was able to do them was that the bogs were a part of a chain, part of one's own psyche. It was the irrational symbol, and I was trying to harness the dynamo of the irrational with the politics and problems of the moment. (34)

The comparison between the iron age adulteress and the Catholic girls in Ulster is telling: not only does it show once more the "unsettling parallels between the Iron-Age murders and the current violence in Ulster" (35), but it also helps to explain an attitude of passivity that might otherwise have remained obscure and incomprehensible. Two feelings are at war in the poet's mind: on the one hand outrage about such inhuman torture and humiliation, on the other hand a certain understanding for the revenge of the tribe on those it believes have betrayed it. The poet regards what is going on as an inevitable law of the tribe. Ancient loyalties are opposed to enlightened humanism, and the onlooker, torn between the two forces, realizes that his intellectual revolt is outbalanced by his emotional ties to the tribe.

34 Begley, op.cit., p.168.

35 A.E.McGuinness, The Craft of Diction: Revision in Seamus Heaney's Poems, p.62.

If he were in such a situation, he would connive. "The word 'connive' decisively tips the balance, suggesting that Heaney's civilized outrage ... is forced and artificial in comparison with his instinctive understanding of the laws and needs of the tribe. It is a courageous piece of self-analysis, acknowledging what he calls elsewhere 'the persistence of what appear to be anachronistic passions'" (36). "The poet is sitting on the fence" (37), as Tony Curtis wrote.

I think, however, that Morrison is wrong when he interprets Heaney's indecision in this poem and in Kinship as granting "sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability which it is not usually granted in day-to-day journalism" (38).

It should be made clear that Punishment, though exposing "a representative Irish conflict between 'humane reason' and subconscious allegiances" (39), does not, either openly or obliquely, give murder any degree of respectability. It is not possible to read into this poem any support for extremist action. There is a certain sympathy for the laws of the tribe, but it is a long way from tarring and feathering to murder. Heaney's sympathy is with the girls, not with the terrorists. Alan Young supports Morrison's view that Heaney identifies with "the Catholic community of Ulster today - including its killers, its terrorists" (40). This is going very far indeed

36 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.64.

37 Tony Curtis, op.cit., p.100.

38 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.68.

39 Edna Longley, 'North': "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur", p.78.

40 Alan Young, The Gag of Place, p.63.

and I think one should not turn Heaney's cautious attempt to explain an attitude into an extreme position and a latent support for terrorist activities. As Timothy Kearney has argued, "caught between the sacrificial demands of his allegiance to the soil of Ireland 'our Holy ground' and the loss of human life which that of necessity entails, he chooses a stance of indirection" (41), and John Carey, in a review of Morrison's book, criticizes its author's point of view:

What will surprise most readers is that Morrison takes the poems as expressions of sympathy with the terrorists. Heaney, he declares, favours revenge...
(42)

Carey goes on to prove that "such accusations seem blunderingly false to the scrupulous feeling of the poems" (43).

Indeed, the last two stanzas of Punishment show neither support nor sympathy for the terrorists. All they prove is that the average Northern Catholic, if faced with an injustice he must, as a humane person, condemn, is caught in a conflict of loyalties: should he be loyal to his rational humanism, though that might be interpreted as betrayal, or should he support an action that

41 Kearney, op.cit., p.470.

42 John Carey, The Poet of the Bogs.

43 ibid.

More recently, Neil Corcoran has suggested that "the poem's business is to remind us, once again, of the persistence of atavistic emotions and responses in the North." Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.116.

Michael Parker rejects Morrison's point of view outright: "Punishment doesn't show Heaney hardening gradually into an atavistic Nationalist position. On the contrary, with its shifting perspectives of distance and intimacy, and its Christian allusion which sensitises our response to the 'scapegoat' victims and frames the self-accusation, the poem articulates that whirlpool of contradictory emotions which make up the human spirit everywhere." Parker in: The Catalogue, Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1987, p.31.

is unjust and inhumane, but pretends to be the law of the tribe? The onlooker is undecided, he realizes that a point can be made in favour of tribal 'justice' and, as Morrison has it, his "own stance is noticeably ambivalent: he pities the victims of punishment, but his pity is offset and finally outweighed by his understanding of the motives for judicial revenge" (44). Intimate understanding is neither sympathy nor support, and it seems to me that the poet does not opt for understanding merely - he remains undecided (45). The use of the conditional indicates that the reaction described here is not really Heaney's but would or could be his if..., perhaps if he were not the humane poet with insight into the destructiveness of such anachronistic passions, but just an ordinary, average Northern Catholic.

If then, he had been in such a situation, he would not have defended the two girls - nor would he have helped to punish them. He would have remained a passive onlooker; he would have "stood dumb".

Punishment is an important poem in the context of Heaney's analysis of political attitudes in the North. It proves that archaic sectarian feelings, old loyalties with the laws of the tribe, still exist and are constantly at war with modern humanitarian ideals. Below the thin skin of civilization, there still linger ancient irrational allegiances. This realization helps the poet to understand why normally sane people can tolerate such

44 Morrison, Speech and Reticence: Seamus Heaney's 'North', p.109.

45 P.R.King, op.cit., p.218, writes: "The artist's role, Heaney insists, is to stand on all sides and to accept 'the mire and complexities' of the blood of a whole people." His attitude, however, is less a deliberately chosen one than a stand the poet has been compelled to take.

injustice. His admission that this could also happen to him shows how generally valid his conclusion is. The inherited loyalties, the "stigmata of heredity" (46) are unfortunately stronger than compassion and pity.

* * *

"Kinship celebrates the treasure house of the bog that links past and present, and relates Ireland to Europe and the world" (47). It is a kind of summary-poem, containing the essence of Heaney's bog-myth. Its first section describes the bog physiologically. For the poet it is a reminder of the past: the bog contains his roots, it links him with his ancestors:

I step through origins
like a dog turning
its memories of wilderness
on the kitchen mat.

The bog is a memory-bank; it contains
the cooped secrets
of process and ritual.

We are familiar with these ideas from other bog poems, but Heaney repeats them in a kind of climactic finale, stressing his emotional attachment to the bog, that mysterious ground he identifies with the earth-mother.

Section 2 of Kinship (N, pp.40-45) has been admirably analysed by Graham Martin, whose views I should like to quote: "The alliterative 'estranging' set of variations present the bog first biologically, then as the grave of prehistoric and more recent corpses, then as the mythic earth-mother ('insatiable bride'), then taking in the wit

46 a phrase quoted by Simon Curtis, Seamus Heaney's 'North', p.81.

47 Alan Warner, A Guide to Anglo-Irish Literature, p.266.

of 'sword-swallower', as the encompassing impersonal movement of history, the geological 'floe' (which is also 'flow') insisting on how far back this history reaches" (48).

Section 3 revives the sexual metaphor of The Tollund Man and Come to the Bower. The poet finds an old turf-spade and starts digging in the earth:

the shaft wettish
as I sank it upright
and beginning to
steam in the sun.

The metaphor recalls both the sinking of the pump in STATIONS and the early image of digging into the dark. The bog, as we have seen, is dark and it is also Nerthus, the earth-goddess, the 'insatiable bride'. Sexual and mythological metaphors are linked inextricably. The bog, as a memory-bank, as a preserver of the past, is also timeless: the earth-goddess enjoys eternal life:

I stand at the edge of centuries
facing a goddess.

The bog allows the poet to look into the past; it broadens his view, gives him insight into past rituals, makes him perceive a continuity in human dealings, which is also a continuity of violence, cruelty and murder.

The imagery of section 4 is full of contrasts between growth and decay, creation and destruction:

This centre holds
and spreads.

The bog becomes a symbol for seasonal change, for the death that creates life and the life that ends up in death. The cycle of nature is the ordering principle of

the world, it makes birth and death meaningful. Whereas Yeats prophesied:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world; (49)

and foresaw the end of the Christian order, Heaney regards the seasonal cycle of birth, death and rebirth as basically comforting and reassuring. Life and death imply one another; death is no longer absurd but part of the natural order of things, the prerequisite of renewed life.

The paradox, so typical of the bog poems, that death creates life, that death and fecundity are intertwined, is here raised onto a general level:

This is the vowel of earth
dreaming its root
in flowers and snow,

mutation of weathers
and seasons,
a windfall composing
the floor it rots into.

This section ends with a strange image:

I grew out of all this
like a weeping willow
inclined to
the appetites of gravity.

There is a double ambivalence in these lines: did the poet grow out of this paradoxical, though natural, cycle of growth and decay, or did he outgrow it? And as to the simile of the weeping willow: is the willow inclined towards the earth because of the laws of gravity, or do we have to read the line metaphorically: does the willow, i.e. the poet, incline towards solemnity, seriousness? All these different shades of meaning interact: the poet

has both grown out of a rural background, in which birth and death are omnipresent, and he has outgrown this rural part of his temperament. He has lost the innocence of childhood and eaten the apple of knowledge, the knowledge of the political crisis in Ulster and, more generally, of the inhumanity of human dealings, a knowledge that has made him grave.

In section 5 we meet an old acquaintance:

I deified the man
who rode there,
god of the waggon,
the hearth-feeder.

Who is this god - the Tollund Man whom Heaney raised from a mere bog corpse to the status of symbol and archetype?

Section 6 begins with an invocation of Tacitus, the Roman historian, who, in the Germania and Agricola, reported on Germanic and Celtic rituals. The poet asks Tacitus to

observe how I make my grove
on an old crannog
piled by the fearful dead:
a desolate peace.

The crannog, an old lake dwelling, is now deserted and has probably become a kind of bog, holding the remnants of the old settlement, perhaps even the bones of its inhabitants. Is the "desolate peace" the peace of the dead or the Pax Romana? Whatever it is, it is a peace not worth searching for, the peace after the storm, the peace of the graveyard.

Our mother ground
is sour with the blood
of her faithful,
they lie gargling
in her sacred heart.

The reference in these lines is both to the bog people, who were after all sacrifices to the earth-goddess, most of them probably faithful believers in their fertility rites, and to the faithful of Ireland who died for their convictions. Ireland is the country "where nothing will suffice". In the following stanzas images from other poems are used, e.g. the shaved heads of the girls in Punishment, the "man-killing parishes" of The Tollund Man and the earth-goddess of most of the other bog poems. The recurrence of similar motives and images in part I of NORTH has an obsessive, nightmarish effect. It seems as if the murders in the North and elsewhere were engendered by a common stock of atrocities, eternally re-assembled in new patterns.

Read the inhumed faces
of casualty and victim;
report us fairly,
how we slaughter
for the common good

and shave the heads
of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror.

The poet asks the historian to report what is going on in Ulster, as he reported the inhuman rites of the Germanic tribes of his age (50). The pattern has remained

50 The burial of criminals in the bog is reported by Tacitus in chapter XII of the Germania:

"Distinctio poenarum ex delicto: proditores et transfugas arboribus suspendunt, ignavos et inbelles et corpore infames caeno ac palude, iniecta insuper crate, mergunt. Diversitas supplicii illuc respicit, tamquam scelera ostendi oporteat, dum puniuntur, flagitia abscondi."

In chapter XIX he describes what happened to adulteresses:

"Paucissima in tam numerosa gente adulteria, quorum poena praesens et maritis permissa: accisis crinibus nudatam coram propinquis expellit domo maritus ac per omnem vicum verbere agit."

basically unchanged in the last 2000 years: people pretend to kill for the good of the community; sectarian murder is justified by anachronistic laws and loyalties. The goddess becomes a kind of heathen idol asking for human sacrifices, feeding on human lives. The language Heaney uses in these lines is "the language of the tribe, brutal though that language may be" (51). I do not agree with Morrison when he fails to see the bitter irony in these lines:

If we cannot quite believe that Heaney really supposes slaughter such as the IRA carried out in Ireland and England in the 1970s to be 'for the common good', nor is there anything to suggest that the phrase is intended to be some kind of civilized irony - that would be to read into the poem a gap between the speaker and his subject which is simply not there. (52)

I think it is there and it is astonishing that Morrison does not see the irony. John Carey has commented on this in his review of Morrison's book (53).

Heaney is ironical, but this irony does not leave much room for hope. He realizes that the violence in Ulster is yet another link in an endless chain which started a long way back in prehistory and will most probably go on for ever. "Heaney understands tribal impulse only too well, but, however much he might want to, he cannot see

Human sacrifices are reported in chapter XXXIX:

"Stato tempore in silvam auguriis patrum et prisca formidine sacram omnes eiusdem sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia."

51 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.68.

52 *ibid.*

53 Carey, *op.cit.*: "Morrison says he has spent many hours over these lines, and can detect no irony in them: Heaney simply gives his assent to the brutal language of the tribe. To which one can only reply that it is not possible, in English, to congratulate oneself on 'slaughter' without some irony being present: the language will not allow it."

any hope of a 'solution' in Ulster. His allusions to former cultures amount to a sort of historical determinism" (54).

"Yeats who, meditating on blood-sacrifice in the closing section of Easter 1916, had asked himself: 'O when may it suffice?' Heaney gives him his answer" (55). Indeed, he does, and the answer is a recognition of the fatality of the Northern murders:

nothing will suffice,
the murders will go on. At this stage the poet leaves the level of Irish history, though his statement is of course also valid for Ireland. But it gains a universal significance as we realize that murder and violence are characteristics of human history generally; they are part and parcel of mankind's social experience and therefore the bloodshed will never stop, unless mankind learns from its history. This conclusion is depressing; there is scarcely any hope in it:

Digging up the past, or writing poetry, appears to be the only way of redemption or renewal: a kind of resurrection. ... The bog does not liberate us with new knowledge of accurate history: it horrifies us with timeless myths perpetuating acts of cruelty based upon errors of judgement. (56)

The bog-myth is more than a metaphor. It is a system of images, the whole constituting a kind of cosmology, a myth of human inadequacy and cruelty. It has not been accepted by every critic. Edna Longley, for instance, accused Heaney of having become "the laureate of violence - a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an

54 Morrison, Speech and Reticence, p.110.

55 Stallworthy, op.cit., p.169.

56 Murphy, op.cit., p.39.

apologist for 'the situation', in the last resort, a mystifier" (57). Ciaran Carson criticized the bog-myth as

a messy historical and religious surmise - a kind of Golden Bough activity, in which the real difference between our society and that of Jutland in some vague past are glossed over for the sake of the parallels of ritual. (58)

This is a misinterpretation of Heaney's purpose. He may have started off by comparing the two societies, but he has ended up by pointing out certain structural parallels between iron age Jutland, contemporary Ulster and human society in general. He tried to understand the origin of the violence, to find its causes, or, as J.W.Foster put it, "to delve beneath the violent surface of life in the province into lore, history and myth, on the principle that the poisonous plant can best be understood by its roots" (59).

There are of course other aspects of the bog-myth: the function of the bog as a preserver of the past, the hope for resurrection, the sexual metaphor, etc. These have already been dealt with. Generally, we can say that the bog poems operate on two main levels: there is a comparison, an analogy between iron age Jutland and contemporary Ulster (60), but the myth also has wider, more universal implications.

57 Edna Longley, Escaped from the Massacre?, p.183.

58 Carson, op.cit., p.184.

59 Foster, op.cit., p.35.

60 Cf. Heaney's article Mother Ireland, p.790: "The early Iron Age in Northern Europe is a period that offers very satisfactory imaginative parallels to the history of Ireland at the moment. It turns out that the bogs in Northern Europe in the first and second centuries AD contained the shrines of the god or goddess of the time, and in order that the vegetation and the community would live again after the winter, human sacrifices were made: people were drowned in the bogs. Tacitus reports on this in his Germania. You have a society in the Iron Age where there was

Thus Heaney has moved on from a preoccupation with the problems of Ulster to a concern for the predicament of Man. He has put the Irish question back into the general context of human intolerance and violence. He has discovered the pattern of human behaviour and realized that the Northern Troubles are not accidents of history, but rather repetitions, reenactments of an old fatal law. This determinism is depressing, but there is, after all, the hope that some kind of resurrection may be possible. Yet if the murders in the North are rituals, if they are part of a pattern, perhaps even of the natural cycle of birth and death - then will they ever end?

* * *

The bog imagery and the linguistic concerns of the place-name poems of WINTERING OUT are brought together in Belderg (N, pp.13-14). It is about an Old Norse settlement in Co.Mayo and shows a farmer reporting the discovery of ancient quernstones in the bog. Once again the bog functions as a storehouse of the past. The use of quernstones for grinding corn is a practice that establishes a sense of continuity between the earliest days of history and the present:

When he stripped off blanket bog
The soft-piled centuries
Fell open like a glib.

ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centring on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our time. They are observed with amazement and a kind of civilised tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century AD and by leader-writers in the Daily Telegraph in the 20th century."

The bog can be read like a book, from

the first plough-marks,
The stone-age fields, the tomb
Corbelled, turfed and chambered,
Floored with dry turf-coomb

to the stone walls of Belderg. The farmer is aware of
this continuity when he tells the poet

about persistence,
A congruence of lives,

and that the land preserves the remains of earlier ages.
The soil they live on now has grown like the rings of a
tree, each generation building on the legacy of its pre-
decessors.

The history of the land is associated with the history
of its language. If the bog contains the fossils of old
civilizations and invasions, then so do the place-names.
They are the living witnesses of the country's history.
Mossbawn, the name of Heaney's father's farm, serves as
an example. In Preoccupations (61) Heaney explains its
mixed origins, and he does so again in Belderg. The word
'moss' is of Old Norse origin, whereas 'bawn' is English.
Thus the very name of the poet's birthplace reflects the
history of the country. The land and the language bear
witness to Ireland's past, "a past of invasion, coloniza-
tion and language shift, a past which, as Seamus Deane
has pointed out, 'the Irish are conscious of as a process
which is evidently unfulfilled'" (62).

Thus Belderg is in line with the place-name poems of
WINTERING OUT. The land and the language are in sympathy

61 Cf. chapter III, note 69, and P, p.35.

62 Seamus Heaney in the PBS-Bulletin, 85, p.1.

with the sufferings of the Irish people; both the land and the language have been raped by these successive invaders.

Belderg ends with a vision. The poet imagines a huge tree made of quernstones like vertebrae, crushing, grinding the marrow. The vision remains vague and obscure. It seems that the quernstones stand for all the invaders whose rule was based on violence. Thus violence is the backbone of the world and it crushes the people it is supposed to rule. Neil Corcoran suggests that the world-tree is Yggdrasil, the ash tree of Norse mythology and that "its sustaining power is terror and savagery" (63). And, one might add, each quernstone stands for another nation's, another age's contribution to oppression. The world is built on violence, a vision that is truly frightful (64).

Whereas Belderg is a reminder of Viking and English invasions in Ireland, in Bone Dreams (N, pp.27-30) Heaney imagines an Irish invasion of England.

In section I he finds a white bone and images it as "a small ship-burial", a "flint-find", a "nugget / of chalk". He throws it at England and then follows it like an invader. "Bone Dreams takes up that notion of the Irish situation being a matter of invasion by England, but it takes it up with an intention of not just repelling the invader, but of invading England. So this is a kind of linguistic invasion of England" (65).

63 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, pp.108-9.

64 The first syllable of Yggdrasil 'uggr' means 'frightful' in Old Norse.

65 Seamus Heaney on the Faber Poetry Cassette.

The poet works his way back through the history of the English language, the Elizabethans, the Normans, the influences on Middle English of church Latin and Provençal troubadour poetry, down

to the scop's
twang, the iron
flash of consonants
cleaving the line

of Old English. After discovering "the coffered / riches of grammar / and declensions" of Anglo-Saxon in section III, he notices that the bone he found has become part of a ban-hus, or bone-house, or body. Thus the poet has literally reversed the invasion. The Anglo-Saxon warrior who died in Ireland is taken back to his origins by an Irish poetic "invader".

Once the poet has seen the roots of the invaders, the

cauldron
of generation
swung at the centre:
love-den, blood-holt,
dream-bower,

he moves forward in time again. The bone-house changes into a "love-nest" in the early Middle Ages. It has grown flesh again, a woman's flesh. The poet starts to explore her body and this in turn becomes an exploration of the English landscape. The woman and England become one. "The last two sections go to what has been called the cradle of England, down into Wessex, down to Maiden Castle and kind of relish that very chalky, kindly landscape down there" (66).

The topographical details of England are associated with parts of the female anatomy, which the poet, who

sees himself as the Giant of Cerne Abbas in the South Downs (67), is exploring: her back the South Downs, her shoulders Hadrian's Wall, her sex Maiden Castle, etc. His roving hands take in every detail until, in the final section, the bone turns into a mole whose body is, again, a miniature of the English topography.

Terry Eagleton has suggested that Heaney's purpose in this poem is "to find in the evolution of words a mode of access to the past, tunneling back through the mutations of speech to retrieve an alien culture" (68), but there is more than mere cultural curiosity in these lines. The poet's invasion of England is very different from the English invasions of Ireland. The sexual imagery is telling: as we shall see later, Heaney often uses the metaphor of Ireland as a woman raped by the male English conqueror. Here this metaphor is turned upside down. It is the Irish male who explores the English female, but he does so tentatively, tenderly. The English took Ireland by force, but the Irish poet dwells admiringly and lovingly on the English landscape.

Heaney makes it clear that he could, if he wanted, behave like the English, conquer and possess the landscape as personified by the woman. Instead he opts for dalliance, a kind of courtly love, more exploration than consummation (he only dreams of Maiden Castle, after all), more contemplation than possession. The contrast suggests that Heaney advocates a different kind of intercourse between the Irish and English nations, founded on mutual respect rather than violence, on courtship rather

67 The Giant of Cerne Abbas in Dorset is a strongly erotic representation of Hercules.

68 Eagleton, New Poetry, p.78.

than rape.

Such a conclusion confirms the conciliatory mood of Heaney's early poems and the final image of Funeral Rites.

* * *

Funeral Rites (N, pp.15-18), far from being an explicitly political poem, is concerned with death. But there are so many concealed references to the Crisis in it that, though very indirectly, it expresses a cautious, perhaps mournful and nostalgic, but yet discernible political attitude.

In the first part Heaney remembers an incident from his childhood, a wake:

I shouldered a kind of manhood
stepping in to lift the coffins
of dead relations.

In a few words only Heaney evokes the atmosphere of that moment, his hesitation, his summoning of courage. There is something disquieting about the scene: the minute description of the corpses renders the thought of death obsessive. The faces of the dead turn into "soapstone masks" with "igloo brows". The image suggests that this wake is a gruesome lie, a façade, covering a carefully hidden and repressed reality. Something is strange about this funeral and when Heaney goes on to describe

the black glacier
of each funeral

we realize that we are not in the presence of one dead person, but of many. There are many funerals, many dead relations, many mourners. The coffins form a whole procession, a river of black coffins, a "black glacier", a

never-ending icy, dead stream. It is the glacier of death, of darkness. Who are these dead people; how could they all die together; what caused the "black glacier"? Are they the thirteen victims of Bloody Sunday?

The answer has to be read between the lines: the dead are the victims of sectarian murders. The "black glacier" is both a bird's-eye-view of a funeral procession and the sash worn by the mourners, a sash like the bog queen's:

My sash was a black glacier.
(Bog Queen, N, pp.32-4)

In section 2 we move on from the poet's childhood memories to the present:

Now as news comes in
of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms:

the temperate footsteps
of a cortège, winding past
each blinded home.

The "neighbourly murders", a euphemism for civil war: that is the unnatural thing about those deaths. The reference to the Troubles in Northern Ireland is not explicit, but implicit. The news of the murders makes the poet "pine for ceremony / customary rhythms"; in a situation of disorder and insecurity man escapes into ritual, asks for a pattern, some order to hold on to in his despair. Ritual is the super-structure put onto a chaotic world in the hope that order may be restored. Ritual has a soothing function - it gives the individual a sense of belonging.

Today's ritual, the funeral procession, merges with the funerals of times immemorial:

I would restore
the great chambers of Boyne,
prepare a sepulchre
under the cupmarked stones.

Two connotations are relevant in this context. The first is of course with the Battle of the Boyne, that symbol of the differences between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Moreover, the Boyne valley is one of the oldest settling areas in that country. Megalithic graves, "the great chambers of Boyne" are the relics of a once glorious civilization. Once more Heaney makes an analogy between the remote past and the present. The poet asks for a restoration of those monuments; he wants to replace modern ceremonies by ancient ones because the Christian iconography is heavily loaded with sectarian prejudice. Only a new ritual, or the revival of an old pagan one, can provide a common ground for both communities. The Boyne valley, symbol of division, will thus become a meeting ground, the cradle of a new conciliatory rite.

In the subsequent stanzas we watch a whole country joining the cortège:

purring family cars
nose into line,
the whole country tunes
to the muffled drumming
of ten thousand engines.

This drumming is not the aggressive drumming of the Orangemen, but a reverent mournful murmur. The procession moves away from Ulster down south to the Boyne. It is extremely long, and while its head "enters / the megalithic doorway", its tail is still in the North. The cortège has become a kind of pilgrimage, a demonstration of

unity, a link between the North and the South.

The message of the poem is made clear by section 3:

When they have put the stone
back in its mouth
we will drive north again
past Strang and Carling fjords

the cud of memory
allayed for once, arbitration
of the feud placated.

After the burial the mourners drive back home. They are changed people: no longer do they long for revenge, no longer does the memory of ancient and more recent murders stir them to renewed bloodshed: the "cud of memory", the undying memories revived again and again, have been forgotten for a time - the mourners are peaceful, conciliatory. The Boyne valley, the symbol of division, has thus been turned into a symbol of unity; it has become the territory of reconciliation.

Heaney would not be Heaney if a historical analogy did not come to his mind, and he took it from Njal's Saga:

imagining those under the hill
disposed like Gunnar
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon.

Gunnar Hamundarson, one of the heroes of the Icelandic saga, is killed at Hlidarend and buried:

They raised a burial mound for Gunnar and sat him upright in it. (69)

...

One day the shepherd and a housemaid at Hlidarend were driving cattle past Gunnar's burial mound; it seemed to them that Gunnar was in good humour and chanting verses inside the mound. (70)

...

One night, Skarp-Hedin and Hogni were standing outside, to the south of Gunnar's burial-mound. The moonlight was bright but fitful. Suddenly it seemed to them that the mound was open; Gunnar had turned round to face the moon. There seemed to be four lights burning inside the mound, illuminating the whole chamber. They could see that Gunnar was happy; his face was exultant. He chanted a verse so loudly that they could have heard it clearly from much farther away. (71)

The final image of Funeral Rites is a symbol of reconciliation. Gunnar, the hero slaughtered by his enemies, is happy in his grave, although he has not been avenged. He symbolizes the end of a cycle of revenge, of terror and counter-terror, as Heaney has pointed out (72).

69 Njal's Saga, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964, p.172.

70 *ibid.*, p.173.

71 *ibid.*

72 Heaney on the Faber Poetry Cassette: This poem "ends with an image from an Icelandic saga, from Njal's Saga, in which at a certain point one of the heroes, Gunnar, is lying in his burial mound, unavenged, his blood-price hasn't been paid and therefore, theoretically speaking within the terms of that culture, his spirit shouldn't be appeased. But, at this point in the story, his comrades are passing his burial-mound and they see the burial-mound lit up and they have a vision of Gunnar lying in obviously some state of bliss and it stands in some ways like a dream of forgiveness, the dream of the possibility of forgiveness in this dark vengeful world. So this poem tries to link up a number of things. My experience, first of all, of going to wakes and funerals in the countryside, which was a three-part experience: you went to the wake where the dead body was laid out, you went to the funeral and, the third part, which is an important part of it, you came home from the funeral. The coming home and remembering and talking about the deceased was an important part of the rite. It tries to link that with the idea that we need a rite in the North to remind ourselves of the enormity of what it is

In this poem Heaney abandons the Catholic iconography of section 1 ("rosary beads") for a new ritual that may unite the two communities in Northern Ireland. He finds that ritual in their common past, in the megalithic monuments, and in the pagan rites that he associates with the Vikings (73). Funeral Rites is another illustration of Heaney's ecumenicalism, his search for reconciliation and tolerance, for common roots that might help to overcome the present differences. Paradoxically, those common elements are provided by the Boyne valley, which is also a symbol of division. The burial ground has become "common ground" (74).

In North (N, pp.19-20), the title-poem of this collection, Heaney looks to the Vikings for an answer to one of his fundamental concerns - the poet's mission. The question whether he ought to write openly political verse, or conceal his commitment behind allegory and myth, or stick to pure aestheticism, has always fascinated Heaney and it runs through his work like a red thread. Time and again he deals with this dilemma expli-

to kill one person. So I imagined an enormous funeral going from Belfast to this Boyne valley, prehistoric burial ground, to these megalithic chambers at Newgrange and then tried to link that, the wake and the imagined funeral, with the vengeful culture of the Vikings in Iceland."

73 Cf. McGuinness, op.cit., p.64: "He suggests that, while traditional Christian rituals are a source of divisiveness in Northern Ireland, more ancient tribal rituals might help to bring suffering people together. Such rituals could restore dignity to the experience of death, and might also touch ancient cultural roots in the Irish people to remind them of their common past before the divisive inroads of sectarian Christianity."

Heaney's use of the old Viking names Strang fjord and Carling fjord instead of the modern Strangford and Carlingford is another indication of his regarding the common past as a possible ground for reconciliation.

74 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.62.

citly, most of all in Station Island. North is one of the three or four poems in this collection that tackle the problem head-on. In stanza 1 the poet returns to the sea-side and looks out over the Atlantic towards Iceland and Greenland. His thoughts go to the Viking invaders, their bases in the Orkneys and in Dublin, their raids, their long swords and longships. Those

ocean-deafened voices

warn him, who has been "lifted again / in violence and epiphany", they warn him against using the violence in the North as material for his poetry. In earlier drafts (75), this condemnation was even more explicit, the voices "cursing the necessary / mystique of violence". The longship counsels him against

thick-witted couplings and revenges,
the hatreds and behindbacks
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

These lines show that Heaney is aware of the danger of becoming, as Edna Longley wrote, "the laureate of violence" (76), a poet who thrives on the Troubles. Of course, as we have already had opportunity to point out, Heaney is not that kind of poet. He is neither propagandist nor opportunist and it is to his credit that he is sincerely concerned about preserving his integrity as a poet. So far, his solution has been a metaphorical poetry with oblique references to the Crisis and he has avoided becoming one of the "poets incubating spilled blood" (77).

75 Cf. Tony Curtis, op.cit., pp. 53-62.

76 Cf. note 57.

77 A line from an earlier draft of North (cf. T.Curtis, op.cit., p.56).

Heaney's political message is implicit in the analogy between the Vikings and the present. "The past is redolent with the same violent revenges as the present" (78). The Vikings' cruel customs are still alive in Ulster, the cycle of revenge and counter-revenge, the blood fathering new bloodshed, the memory of violence breeding new violence. Iron age Jutland, Viking Dublin, contemporary Ulster - the pattern has remained the same.

What does the voice of the longship advise the poet to do?

It said, 'Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

The advice is against propaganda and in favour of art. In fact the voice encourages Heaney to keep on doing what he has been doing so far: write 'elaborate' verse, "follow / the worm of your thought / into the mound" (79). The poet's first and foremost purpose must be art, and if this art has something to say about the Crisis then so much the better - but never must politics become his prime concern.

The imagery of this stanza is reminiscent of DEATH OF A NATURALIST: the poet as digger, as explorer of the dark:

Compose in darkness,
i.e. in seclusion, away from the Troubles. The poet should not let himself be brain-washed by the events of the present. His poetry ought to be timeless and there-

78 King, *op.cit.*, p.215.

79 Lines from earlier drafts (cf. I.Curtis, *op.cit.*, p.60).

fore he must shut out the present as much as he can, though of course he can and should never do so completely. What can he expect? Light?

Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.

Yes, but a light similar to the northern lights, dim, difficult to see and slow to come. Yet, once found, it rewards the poet with permanence. His enlightenment cannot be a sudden "cascade of light", a temporary "epiphany". In Exposure Heaney wonders whether he has missed this moment of epiphany, whether the Crisis was not supposed to be his theme. The longship in North makes it clear that the "aurora borealis" of art is more valuable than any short-lived explosion of light. The last stanza emphasizes this idea:

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.'

The poet must rely on his own poetic talent and keep clear of anything that might disturb him, divert him from the main purpose, the production of art.

Thus the voices of North encourage Heaney to continue writing beautiful metaphorical verse and warn him against the dangers of too evident a political commitment. Heaney's dilemma is not solved definitely, though. In part II of NORTH he will nonetheless write more documentary poetry and in its final poem, Exposure, the "overwhelming question" will be asked again.

North is followed by another 'Viking' poem, Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces (N, pp.21-4). An incised bone, en-

countered in a museum in Dublin, becomes the starting-point for a chain of associations. The bone, a trial-piece by a long-forgotten anonymous child-artist, is finally compared to a sword and to a Viking longship. In section IV the longship turns into the poet's own longhand script. Heaney develops this association, this "worm of thought", seeing himself in a "half-mocking, half-serious self-identification" (80) as a kind of necrophiliac Prince Hamlet:

I am Hamlet the Dane,
skull-handler, parablist,
smeller of rot

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

murders and pieties.

The mocking references to Shakespeare's Hamlet contain a grain of truth. The bog-myth and the Viking analogies reveal a Heaney obsessed with death and with bleak images of destruction and decay. In a way he has really become the "parablist" of the Troubles, reporting them in an oblique way, using the "murders and pieties" of Ulster as material for his poetry,

coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering.

One may wonder if this self-criticism is serious. I very much doubt whether the picture Heaney gives us of himself in these lines really "implies a gay acceptance" as Rita Zoutenbier argues (81).

80 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.105.

81 Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.16.

The poem is in marked contrast with North and Exposure, which deal with the poet's predicament in a much less emotional manner. Viking Dublin is like a cry of despair, as if Heaney thought that everything he had said so far was somehow short of the mark, inadequate, because his poetry could not stop the killings. It may be artistically rewarding to point out similarities and analogies, but, practically speaking, that might just be "blathering".

In section V Heaney repeats the idea of the "neighbourly murders" of Funeral Rites:

neighbourly, scoretaking
killers, hagers
and hagglers, gombeen-men,
hoarders of grudges and gain.

These images do not only recur in Heaney's work, they also haunt the history of Ireland and even the history of mankind in general. From the iron age via the Viking feuds to the sectarian murders the pattern is repetitive. The poet prays to the Vikings invoking them as

cunning assessors
of feuds and of sites
for ambush or town,

ancient killers modern terrorists can turn to for first-hand opinions about the use of violence.

The final section begins with a quotation from Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell, two small farmers, discuss the possibility of concealing murder. Philly asks:

Supposing a man's digging spuds in that field with
a long spade, and supposing he flings up the two

halves of that skull, what'll be said then in the papers and the courts of law? (82)

Jimmy Farrell very lucidly replies that the truth would not be revealed, that history would be "compounded", re-written:

They'd say it was an old Dane, maybe, was drowned in the flood. (83)

Is Heaney accusing himself here? Is he denouncing the bog-myth, which transfigured the dead of Ulster by turning them into the human sacrifices of iron age Denmark? Is he thus rejecting the advice of the voices in North, rejecting his oblique approach to the Crisis as morally unjustifiable?

Perhaps he is. Perhaps he is despairing of the omnipresence of death as symbolized by the skulls of Dublin. He is dissatisfied with the limitations of his role as a poet who can only write about the Troubles, who can only condemn the murderers and mourn the murdered. Can he ever really change anything?

My words lick around
cobble quays, go hunting
lightly as pampooties
over the skull-capped ground.

The poet is clearly frustrated at his powerlessness to do anything more than make poetry about the terror, at his realization that "poetry makes nothing happen" (84).

It is hard to define the correct position of this poem in Heaney's work. He is not usually desperate, nor is he

82 J.M.Synge, The Playboy of the Western World. London: Unwin, 1979, p.56 (beginning of act III).

83 *ibid.*

84 Cf. introduction, note 15.

prone to emotional outbursts. Moreover, the facts are not as bleak and hopeless as they appear in Viking Dublin. It is noteworthy, however, that after a poem which advocates a certain detachment from current affairs, we are here in the presence of lines that denounce the insufficiency of such an approach. Thus the same dilemma is discussed again and again in Heaney's work with often contradictory results.

Suffice to say that Heaney is aware of the problem of the poet's commitment and of his responsibilities towards his art on the one hand and towards his community on the other. He has experienced the dangers of commitment and the frustration of escapism and he is searching for a possible way out of this dilemma.

* * *

With Ocean's Love to Ireland (N, pp.46-7) we move on from the Vikings to the Elizabethan Age. The poem is largely based on John Aubrey's biographical note of Sir Walter Raleigh (85). It begins with a line from Aubrey (86) and uses a scene also described by him (87). In Heaney's poem the maid of honour becomes an Irish girl:

Speaking broad Devonshire,
Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree
As Ireland is backed to England

85 John Aubrey, Brief Lives, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, pp.316-23.

86 "He spake broad Devonshire to his dying day." Ibid., p.318.

87 "He loved a wench well; and one time getting up one of the Mayds of Honour up against a tree in a Wood ('twas his first Lady) who seemed at first boarding to be something fearfull of her Honour, and modest, she cryed, sweet Sir Walter, what doe you me ask? Will you undoe me? Nay, sweet Sir Walter! Sweet Sir Walter! Sir Walter! At last, as the danger and the pleasure at the same time grew higher, she cryed in the extasey, Swisser Swatter Swisser Swatter." Ibid.

And drives inland
Till all her strands are breathless:
'Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!'

Just as Raleigh takes possession of the girl, he (the representative of England) has taken possession of Ireland. His "broad Devonshire" contrasts with the maid's delicate Irish. His driving inland is both literal, i.e. a move into Ireland, and metaphorical, i.e. the intercourse with the Irish maid.

The important idea in this first section is that England is conceived of as male and Ireland as female (just as the English consonants in the language poems were male, the Irish vowels female) and that the male conquers the female by force, the love-making closely resembling a rape.

The title of the poem, Ocean's Love to Ireland, was inspired by Raleigh's poem The Ocean's Love to Cynthia and, indeed, Raleigh's love belongs to Cynthia, i.e. Queen Elizabeth, not to a poor Irish girl. It is to England that his heart inclines, to the Queen, to his career at the Court. His good name

Will rise on water, and on these dark seepings:
Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses
Of six hundred papists, 'as gallant and good
Personages as ever were beheld.'

Smerwick was the scene of a battle in 1580. "Colonel San Joseph, despatched by the Pope, landed at Smerwick Harbour. Raleigh, under the command of Ormond, besieged the fort and massacred over 500 of San Joseph's soldiers" (88). After the battle most of the land in Munster was seized and redistributed to English aristocrats, among

88 David Annwn, Inhabited Voices, p.146.

them Raleigh and Spenser. Smerwick thus made Raleigh a rich man.

Ireland's dream has gone. "The ruined maid complains in Irish", but to no avail. Raleigh has destroyed her dreams of Spanish fleets coming to her rescue, "The Spanish prince has spilled his gold / And failed her". All hope is lost for Ireland, even her poets have taken to the woods, where the bards are persecuted by the English. The "iambic drums" of the English language are busy replacing the native Gaelic.

The last line of the poem sums up the history of Ireland and is at the same time the conclusion of Raleigh's love-making:

The ground possessed and repossessed.

Raleigh represents English imperialism in Ireland. His name stands for the Munster Plantation and for the defeat of the Spanish allies; it also stands for the English cultural and linguistic colonialism. Thus political, cultural, and linguistic colonialism are united in one metaphor. The English policy is like a rape, an "act of union" forced upon Ireland.

This interpretation links the poem with Act of Union (N, pp.49-50), which has a similar subject-matter and uses the same metaphor. The poem consists of two sonnets and takes the form of a "dramatic monologue" (89). Heaney himself has called it a "pregnancy poem" (90). The first sonnet compares the sexual act to heavy rainfall flooding the bog, breaking over the land with the force and sud-

89 McGuinness, *op.cit.*, p.68.

90 In: John Haffenden, *op.cit.*, p.61.

denness of an ejaculation. In the following lines, the woman is identified with Ireland: her back the East coast, her arms and legs the western counties. The man is
the tall kingdom over your shoulder
caressing

The heaving province where our past has grown.
The metaphor of sexual union is based on the geographical outline of the British Isles.

Conquest is a lie.
That line is ambivalent. Why should the conquest of Ireland be a lie - has it never been conquered? Or was the conquest more akin to a rape - as we might interpret the line in the context of the sexual metaphor. The male, growing older, draws back from the female and can do so because his child, his off-spring, is growing inside the female: "My legacy / Culminates inexorably".

The woman is Ireland, the man Britain, the child Ulster: thus the history of the relationship between England and Ireland is summed up in one single metaphor: that of England raping Ireland and planting its seed in it.

England has retired,
leaving you with the pain,
The rending process in the colony.
Its off-spring, the child of that violent act of union,
is

an obstinate fifth column,
and that fifth column is Ulster. The image does not refer to the Protestant community alone because the child is hostile to both its parents. It is "both loyalist and rebel" (91). George MacBeth's question "Is this the IRA?

91 Robert Tracy, An Ireland / The Poets Have Imagined, p.507.

Or a Protestant militant group?" (92) is justified. In fact the child is both: it represents Ulster, the Northern Crisis.

Edna Longley did not see the whole implications of the metaphor when she saw the "speaker guiltily fathering Ulster Unionism" (93). The "aggressive offspring" (94) is not a community, but a political problem: sectarian antagonism as such, not just one of its representatives:

His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum
Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
At me across the water.

The child is opposed to both Ireland and England. It is both Catholic and Protestant, it represents the North with all its divisions, antagonisms and contradictions.

Heaney's conclusion is pessimistic, full of a "chilling hopelessness" (95):

No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.

"The political implications suggest that no treaty will salve the wound inflicted by England on this 'ruined maid' of Ireland" (96). The consequences of the act of union cannot be undone. This has to be taken both literally (the growing child cannot be aborted) and metaphorically (the Ulster Crisis, outcome of, among other events, the Act of Union of 1800, cannot be easily solved by a

92 George MacBeth (ed.), Poetry 1900 to 1975, p.346.

93 Edna Longley, 'North': "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur", p.81.

94 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.64.

95 McGuinness, op.cit., p.69.

96 Parini, op.cit., p.119.

treaty). The last image shows us Ireland as opened ground, ready to be possessed once again, ready also, like the earth goddess, to swallow new sacrificial victims.

The perversion of love and marriage by violence is also the theme of The Betrothal of Cavehill (N, p.51), a short poem about the ritual of firing guns over a bridegroom's car. The atmosphere is tense with aggression, of which the groom, one of the "simple unquestioning men" (97), is not aware:

Gunfire barks its questions off Cavehill.

Heaney does not specify the nature of these questions, nor are there any answers. The basalt becomes a symbol of the Protestant virtues the groom subscribes to:

proud, protestant and northern, and male.
Adam untouched, before the shock of gender.

The contrast with the Catholic ethos is obvious. Ireland is always female in Heaney's mythology; the Loyalists are the incarnation of maleness and machismo. They are pure males, "untouched" by feminine emotions, hard and cold as basalt.

This male ethos, defined by violence, the "ritual gun", dominates even love. The gunshots send the groom on his way to the bride. The male imagery of the first quatrain (the phallic outline of the basalt rocks and of the raised guns) contrasts with the soft, female world of the bride, her "bed", "love's hideouts, her pods and broom". The cave is the opposite of the gun, the girl's snug home the opposite of the male's primitive self-importance.

The Betrothal of Cavehill remains a rather sketchy poem. Heaney contrasts male and female imagery and implicitly criticizes the Protestant male ethos. "Adam untouched" is a poor caricature of a man, only half a human being, lacking the outbalancing female qualities that are so important for Heaney.

Thus the poem is another illustration of the male-female theme that Heaney uses time and again in his poetry, applied to religion (Docker, Poor Women in a City Church), to language (A New Song), history (Act of Union, Ocean's Love to Ireland) or, as here, to love. Whatever the context, the male element is always aggressive, cold, threatening, whereas the female is protective, warm and welcoming. In Preoccupations Heaney wrote:

To some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power. (98)

* * *

In part I of NORTH we find basically four kinds of myths and analogies. There is the bog-myth with its connotations of sacrifice and murderous rites, of people being killed by their own neighbours. But the bog-myth also contains a hope of preservation and resurrection, a hope that something good may ultimately come out of the Troubles.

The Viking analogies, though stressing the continuity of violence in the North and thus seeing the Ulster Crisis as only another enactment of an archetypal pattern, do search for common ground and thus carry the hope of a reconciliation.

The outlook in the poems with sexual metaphors is somewhat bleaker. This metaphor of possession and colonialism hardly leaves room for hope: the historical facts cannot be changed and the consequences they have engendered are difficult to overcome.

The Antaeus-myth, which frames part I, also shows a picture of invasion and defeat of the natives. It is Hercules who triumphs in the end and he stands for imperialism.

Edna Longley has said that "part 1 of NORTH ... often falls between the stools of poetry and politics instead of building a mythic bridge" (99). I cannot agree with her at this point. It seems to me that Heaney has successfully constructed a link between politics and poetry and that, as poetry, part 1 of NORTH is much more rewarding than the, admittedly more explicit, second part. He has been able to weave the contemporary Crisis in Ulster into a mythic web, a point also stressed by M.P.Hederman: "In this collection NORTH the different metaphors spread out through his previous poems gather together into a more explicit web, and the bogland, field, potato patch, archaeological site, earth, have become a recognizable space inside ourselves" (100).

99 Edna Longley, 'North': "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur", p.74.

100 Hederman, op.cit., p.65.

Another important theme in NORTH is the role of the poet. In Hercules and Antaeus Heaney differentiates between the two aspirations in his work, but time and again in his poems he asks what the poet's mission is. It is to "report fairly" on the events in Ulster, to make poetry of what is so far removed from aesthetic beauty, to add his share to a hoped-for resolution of the conflict (101).

Heaney's poetry is primarily about Ulster and Ireland, but what makes it compulsory reading for anyone is the fact that its analysis and diagnosis, its message of the absurdity of violence is generally valid:

The setting is specifically Irish, of course, but the subject matter obtains for all of us, in any country of the present. His theme, that love is what redeems the past and makes living possible in today's violent world. (102)

* * *

The first poem of the second part paints a rather pessimistic picture of the poet's power to influence politics. The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream (N, p.56) mocks Shelley's view of the poet as the world's unacknowledged legislator (103). The prose-poem is a fantasy whose central character, Tarzan, was one of Heaney's childhood heroes. In Preoccupations he reminisces:

101 Cf. Regan, op.cit., p.312: "Heaney develops a powerfully appropriate idiom to suggest the role of the contemporary poet within the historical context of ritualistic killings."

102 Parini, op.cit., p.116.

103 In this Heaney may have been influenced by Louis MacNeice's statement that the poet is "a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer; he is not a legislator, however, unacknowledged, nor yet essentially a prophet." From Modern Poetry (1938), quoted in: Alan Heuser (ed.), Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, p.98.

Didn't Vinny Hunter keep me in wonderland with his
stories of Tarzan:

'When he jumps down off a tree
Tarzan shakes the world.' (104)

However, the Tarzan we meet in this poem is a very different figure. The lord of the poetic jungle, the would-be liberator, is arrested and imprisoned: "I swing on a creeper of secrets into the Bastille". He is now a pitiable man, guarded, blindfolded. His total powerlessness and insignificance are brought home to him when the commandant greets him almost affectionately, "amused and genuine", and, very solicitous, assures him that he will be well looked after. His attempts to escape from the cell seem absurd, ludicrous and futile. In the last line he is watched through the hatch by unknown eyes - are they the readers', his countrymen's, his gaolers'?

The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream, "a fantasy of the poet-hero-liberator, who fails even in fantasy" (105), is an apt introduction to the second part of NORTH in so far as its sense of failure is echoed in most of the poems that follow. In Viking Dublin Heaney had already voiced his despair, but in Hercules and Antaeus he seemed to say that more explicit documentary poetry was called for. Yet he realizes that whatever poetry he writes, metaphorical or political, he cannot become an unacknowledged legislator. Tarzan does not shake the world.

We should keep this in mind when we move on to part II

104 P, p.24.

105 Sharratt, op.cit., p.376.

where Hercules takes over from Antaeus.

These poems are less metaphorical and more explicit, rational, directly political. They are in line with the introductory poem of WINTERING OUT; they have the same explicitness, the same political urgency. Heaney himself has admitted that "the second section is the result of a need to be explicit about pressures and prejudices watermarked into the psyche of anyone born and bred in Northern Ireland" (106).

The sequence Whatever You Say Say Nothing (N, pp.57-60) deals with the language of the Crisis, the language used by the two communities, the language used by outsiders, by journalists, or by the poet. The title stands for what Heaney has called "strategies for evasion and compliance" (107) and he remembered his mother "repeat a saying, 'Whatever you say, say nothing'" (108). Thus the title of the sequence indicates a reluctance to speak out, to make clear and definite statements. "Whatever you say, say nothing" advises the person addressed to be careful about what he or she says, because saying the wrong things can be dangerous in Ulster.

Section 1 of the poem was written, as Heaney says in the first two lines, after a meeting with an English journalist looking for opinions about the Northern Irish Crisis. The worsening of the conflict has led to a situation

where bad news is no longer news

106 Seamus Heaney, PBS-Bulletin 85, p.1.

107 Seamus Heaney, Celtic Fringe, Viking Fringe, p.254.

108 *ibid.*

and the reporters are eagerly searching for material they can use in their articles and documentaries. Heaney's attitude to this hubbub is clearly negative; he is annoyed and angry. Like Hamlet he can only realize that

the times are out of joint.

The situation is such that the media can hardly make a contribution towards the resolution of the conflict, even if they wanted to. To

the jottings and analyses
Of politicians and newspapermen

the poet prefers "rosary beads", prayer. He criticizes the vocabulary used by the media and the politicians, a vocabulary full of clichés, out-worn phrases, concealing the crude reality behind a stock of meaningless words alienated from the truth that is only being played down by their use.

He cries out against a jargon that "is a betrayal, not a redemption of popular sanity, as it reduces pain to a few stock phrases" (109). The poet, though, is also a part of that world:

Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,
Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours.

Even he, though he is aware of the unnaturalness, the inadequacy of that vocabulary, uses those

sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts,
commonplace remarks, banalities, sure signs of the individual's unease, his lack of confidence, his urgency to escape from the terror to the comfort of clichés. A writer will resort to clichés when he feels his language is incapable of dealing satisfactorily with a crisis.

William Bedford writes:

[The poem] explores the ease with which language can become cliché when faced with extremes of experience such as the terrorist campaign in Ulster. ... In such a situation, the great risk is that language will act virtually as an anaesthetic, turning reality into imagination. ... An inversion where it becomes difficult - deliberately so - to distinguish clearly between cliché and serious question, solution and straightforward description (110).

How can the poet write about the Troubles? How can he try to name the unnameable, to put into words what, apparently, is beyond the power of words?

In section 2 Heaney describes what is happening in Ulster:

Men die at hand. In blasted street and home
The gelignite's a common sound effect.

Heaney has said this before in interviews and articles. Neither what he says nor how he says it is so very different from the way the Crisis is reported in the media (111). We learn of Protestant prejudices, Catholic moderation threatened by IRA terror, Orange drums opposed to Pearse (Irish Republicanism) and Pope (Catholicism). We also learn of para-military forces being formed, ready for another round in the conflict.

The poet is aware of his inadequacy, he realizes that he does not find the right words either:

I sit here with a pestering
Drouth for words at once both gaff and bait

110 Bedford, *op.cit.*, p.3.

111 David Annwn, *op.cit.*, p.136, defends Heaney's use of clichés when he writes that "the poet cannot and, if he is to communicate with a large audience, must not, ignore the changes in the written and spoken word. Heaney therefore includes the very slang of the media which he always mistrusts and sometimes hates."

To lure the tribal shoals to epigram
And order.

Once again, Heaney calls his ability to contribute to a solution of the Conflict in question. What can the poet do, how can he

draw the line through bigotry and sham if he is unable to find the "right line"? How can he say something that is not just cliché, that is important enough to survive the day, "aere perennius" (112)? The question as yet remains unanswered. As Rita Zoutenbier has said, Whatever You Say Say Nothing is "a poem about different kinds of language: the language of codes of the community, the clichés of journalism ... and the language of poetry, all inadequate to cope with the situation" (113).

In section 3 the poet analyses this inability to respond adequately to the challenge. He discards the tentative, cautious remarks that try to evade the main issues. He feels a necessity to make a hole into

the great dykes the Dutchman made
To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.

He wants to break through the silence that followed the Boyne, but he realizes the difficulties involved:

Yet for all this art and sedentary trade
I am incapable. The famous
Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing.

112 The phrase means "more lasting than bronze" and was used by Horace in the 30th ode of his third book of Odes (cf. Annwn, op.cit., p.135).

113 Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.20.

These are the reasons for his inadequacy: the "Northern reticence", the "gag of place / And times". In the six counties of Ulster it is important to "save face", not to commit oneself. The last line of this stanza is ambivalent: it means, first, that one should not say anything definite or relevant, that one should stick to trivial small talk. It also stresses that whatever one may say is nothing compared with the realities; it does not reach up to the truth.

The main problem, however, is that nothing is being said. The Catholics remain silent and thus subtle means have to be found to identify people as friends or foes. Controversial issues are avoided in conversation; people are classified on the basis of their schools, addresses, names:

That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod
And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape.

The members of the two communities in Ulster seldom communicate with each other; they rarely voice their grievances. Problems that are not talked about cannot be solved: they smoulder until a violent explosion can no longer be prevented. The final image of a community split up into two halves, one of them like a fifth column, a Trojan horse, besieged inside the siege, shows the feelings of the Catholics in the North: a minority among Protestants who are themselves a minority in the whole of Ireland. The Catholics are effectively silenced by this siege-mentality:

Tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,
Where half of us, as in a wooden horse
Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,
Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.

They have not yet found an adequate way of responding to

their predicament, just as the journalists, the politicians and the poet, too, have failed to develop a language apt to deal with the Crisis. It is the poet's task to "communicate the horrors in a compassionate and responsible way" (114), but "Heaney ends up saying not nothing, but what he has said before - the dedicatory poem of WINTERING OUT" (115).

* * *

This sense of failure cannot be final, because if it were, the poet would have to stop writing. He does not do that, of course, but he searches for a way out of the dilemma and he seems to find it in Freedman (N, p.61). The epigraph, from R.H.Barrow's book The Romans, reports how the Romans turned former slaves into useful members of their society through education and cultural integration. This is exactly what has happened to the freedman of the poem, who, of course, stands for the Irish poet, for Heaney himself.

In the first quatrain he remembers that he has been

Subjugated yearly under arches,
Manumitted by parchments and degrees.

His emancipation gave him no real freedom. In fact, though theoretically he is no longer a slave, one kind of slavery has been replaced by another, subtler one: he has been Romanized, turned into a Roman. In the same way, though the Catholics in Ulster are free, they are compelled to live under British rule, to speak English, to accept British ideas and the British way of life. They

114 Annwn, op.cit., p.147.

115 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.123.

are, as it were, remoulded in a British cast.

England, however, is not the only agent of oppression in the North. The Roman Catholic Church restricts people's freedom, too. The Latin phrase "Memento homo quia pulvis es" (Remember man what dust thou art) is pronounced by the priest on Ash Wednesday when he draws the ash cross on the foreheads of the faithful:

I would kneel to be impressed by ashes,
A silk friction, a light stipple of dust -
I was under that thumb too like all my caste.

The pun in the last line turns the Church into yet another foreign oppressive force. The ash cross marks the poet out as a Catholic. The Protestants can identify him by that sign and they stare at him with prejudiced eyes as at a released slave who is still wearing the mark of his disgrace. The Protestants are "'census-taking' because they anxiously reckon the growing proportion of Catholics in the Six Counties" (116).

Oppressed by society and religion, the poet searches for relief and he finds it in poetry:

Then poetry arrived in that city -
I would abjure all cant and self-pity -
And poetry wiped my brow and sped me.

Poetry makes self-liberation and real emancipation possible. It "does provide the means of release from the most defining marks of tribe and caste" (117). It allows the poet to free himself, but

Now they will say I bite the hand that fed me.

He must bear this reproach, though. It is the price he has to pay for independence and objectivity. N.H.Platz

116 Ehrenpreis, *op.cit.*, p.45.

117 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.123.

argues, correctly I think, that Heaney chooses to distance himself from the events in the North in order to see them in a broader perspective and to reduce his subjective emotional involvement (118). He is, so to speak, trying to objectify the Crisis, to make sure that his poetry is neither rhetoric nor partisanship. Only art allows for a balanced, unbiased point of view and that is, after all, what the voices in North told him to aspire to.

In Freedman the poet uses an analogy, and he seems to imply that such analogies are more adequate to dealing with the North than outspoken statements. This attitude will be confirmed by FIELD WORK. Is Hercules being beaten on his own territory? Freedman does look odd, poised between the explicit poem Whatever You Say Say Nothing and the sequence Singing School. Has Heaney thought better of his decision to embrace the Hercules-line? Or does he opt for both possibilities, does he reserve the right to be both Antaeus and Hercules? I think the latter is the case and FIELD WORK will see explicit political poems side by side with metaphorical ones.

* * *

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence.

These lines from Yeats's Sailing to Byzantium (119) in-

118 Platz, op.cit., p.246: "Wie James Joyce ist auch Heaney von der Notwendigkeit überzeugt, dass der Künstler sich von den Zwängen, die Herkunft und Geschichte ausüben, innerlich loslösen muss, um sie künstlerisch verarbeiten zu können. Erst diese Distanz erlaubt es ihm, die spezifisch irische Erfahrung adäquat zu gestalten. ... Mittels der Kunst ist es jedoch möglich, eine ausgewogene Perspektive zu etablieren und Verständnis für die verworrenen und zutiefst widersprüchlichen Gegebenheiten der irischen Misere zu wecken."

119 W.B.Yeats, Collected Poems, p.217.

spired the title of the final sequence in NORTH, Singing School. It recalls events from the poet's life in a very simple, straightforward style, "a sort of journalism" (120), as Douglas Dunn wrote. The title suggests that Heaney has to learn his craft from Ulster. The North is his background, the school where he learned to sing.

The first of the six poems in the sequence, The Ministry of Fear (N, pp.63-5), is dedicated to Heaney's friend and fellow-poet Seamus Deane. Its title is reminiscent of the odious ministries in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four or of the novel by Graham Greene. The Ministry of Fear may be a government department (the Home Office?), which would then suggest institutionalized oppression; or it may be, and this sounds very ironic indeed, the performance of a minister's duties, fear then becoming a new religion opposed to the Christian religion of love. 'Ministry' may also mean 'ministration' and thus suggest that there are ways in the North to intimidate people and that the poem is about that.

These ideas are not incompatible and the title of the poem therefore announces a critical view of Ulster. Underlying it there is the distinction between the two communities, between us and them, between oppressed and oppressors.

With all these connotations in mind we are surprised by the anti-climactic, almost casual first lines of the poem:

Well, as Kavanagh said, ...

This 'Well' sounds quite unpoetical. The contrast with a title conveying perhaps too much meaning is deliberate,

because from this casual beginning Heaney works towards a climactic finale in which the title-image reappears.

The first line is a reference to Patrick Kavanagh's poem Epic:

Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived
In important places.
(Heaney)

...
I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided.
(Kavanagh, 121)

A paragraph in Preoccupations is relevant in this context:

We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes. Some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth. (P, pp.219-20)

This is not, as one might be led to suppose, a condemnation of political poetry. It is a rejection of propagandist verse, the prime purpose of which is not art, but its utilitarian function as propaganda.

The poet must not be a rhymester campaigning for a political cause. His poetry has to be art; it has to be balanced, as objective as possible. Heaney is trying to do that in this poem by recreating a mood, an atmosphere which will allow the reader to draw his own conclusions rather than accept those provided by other, possibly biased people.

The poem, addressed to Seamus Deane, is full of reminiscences of the poet's youth, his homesickness at college, his time in Belfast and in Berkeley. The second

121 Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Poems, p.136.

stanza is concerned with poetry. It is about Heaney's and Deane's first attempts at writing verse. They exchanged their work and Heaney soon found that

Vowels and ideas bandied free
As the seed-pods blowing off our sycamore.

Poetry gave him a sense of release from the constraints of sectarianism. His work was different from mainstream English poetry, though, not least because his language was different. He

innovated a South Derry rhyme
With hushed and lulled full chimes for pushed and pulled.

By rhyming words that do not rhyme in RP, by pronouncing /ʌ/ as /ʊ/ Heaney creates a distinctive element; he transforms the English language so as to make it sound specifically Irish, an idea familiar from the language poems of WINTERING OUT.

Heaney is thrilled when he discovers that he can write good poetry, despite the fact that he is a farmer's son "from beyond the mountain", despite all the prejudices that deny the Catholics any sophistication:

Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
Were walking, by God, all over the fine
Lawns of elocution.

Thus his accent does not prevent him from making excellent poetry. Hence the ironic question "Have our accents / Changed?" If the Catholics speak less well than the Protestants, how is it that Heaney could have become a good poet? The social value given to accents is just one of the prejudices, injustices and discriminations based on language:

'Catholics, in general, don't speak
As well as students from the Protestant schools.'
Remember that stuff? Inferiority
Complexes, stuff that dreams were made on.

'What's your name, Heaney?'

'Heaney, Father.'

'Fair

Enough.'

Heaney's criticism is not demagogical. It is not even what I would call a revolt, but a statement of facts, a description of a situation, a frustration as it is experienced by perhaps the majority of Ulster Catholics. Prejudices become generalized in that society and, worse, they are even accepted by some Catholics. Thus the priest makes Heaney say his own name to test if his pronunciation is accurate, i.e. conforms to British standards. Yet Heaney's accusation shows "an almost embarrassed tentativeness" (122). He refuses to add another prejudice and is satisfied with denouncing a human condition that is humiliating. This poem is an attempt to overcome inferiority complexes, an attempt to assert one's own self, one's own identity.

Prospero's line

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on (123)

asks whether life has any meaning at all and whether a humane existence is possible. Heaney's answer to this question is the fact that he keeps on producing poetry, that he does not surrender - an act of defiance?

After this first conscious encounter with political reality, symbolized by physical punishment, Heaney is still

shying as usual,
unable to react.

122 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary, p.119.

123 Shakespeare, The Tempest, IV.i.156-7.

The experience is made worse by the fact that fear stems from a minister, a priest, and a Catholic priest at that. Thus it is not only the dominance of Ulster Protestants that is felt to be oppressive, but the Catholic Church is potentially so too, as Graham Martin has noted: "Confronted with his rural charges, the strap-wielding Father at Heaney's Catholic boarding-school evidently brought to bear one powerful version of 'English middle-class culture', a conception of correct speech" (124).

Another anecdote from the poet's adolescence provides the theme of the next stanza. Just as poetry is associated with linguistic prejudice, the first experience of love and courtship is overshadowed by a disillusioning encounter with policemen. The scene starts calmly and yet ambiguously:

The summer's
Freedom dwindling night by night, the air
All moonlight and a scent of hay.

This is almost romantic. The only disturbing element is the dwindling summer's freedom: is it the length of day, or the approaching end of a summer vacation, or is it the dwindling of freedom as such? The atmosphere is soon spoiled:

Policemen
Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round
The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing
The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:
'What's your name, driver?'
'Seamus...'

Again we have the insistence on Irish Seamus? names, understandable in this case, because Heaney's Christian name re-

minds the Protestant policeman of that other Seamus (James II) he is probably as hostile to as the Catholics are towards William of Orange.

The scene looks absurd: an unoffending lover is confronted with armed policemen, suspected, his private life impinged upon. Heaney cannot but despise these people, comparing them to snuffing black cattle. The atmosphere is thick with stifling hatred and distrust, and, on Heaney's side, powerlessness. We are reminded of Orwell's "Big Brother is watching you" and it is not difficult to imagine how much restraint is necessary not to react violently to such provocations. Heaney does not accuse openly; his protest is subdued, silent, he is "submerging protest beneath a silent surface" (125). Heaney recreates a tense, an intensified situation from his own experience, or, by analogy, from history or myth, and confronts the reader with it. Thus the reader can experience the same anger, the same fear, the same frustration and impotent, silent revolt which Heaney or any other Irish Catholic in these circumstances would experience.

What we get from Heaney's poetry is an indirect political statement hidden behind a very intense and direct experience. We are not told about Ulster, we experience it. Heaney is honest in the way that Keith Douglas is. He objectifies his own personal experience and tries to put a distance between the event and its evaluation. Like Douglas he leaves the conclusion to the reader, satisfied

125 Cahill, *op.cit.*, p.62. Cf. also *ibid.*, p.56: "I argue that through a deliberate use of silence and such related conditions as inarticulacy, stammering, and questioning, Heaney tries to make the poetical political. He engages silence, therefore, as a voice."

with guiding him, but refusing to force his views on him.

Not only does the policeman treat the poet without respect, he also reads his letters and makes fun of his friend's verse. To the political oppression of the Catholics he adds the depreciation of their cultural achievement:

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
the English lyric.

The British impose their cultural imperialism but they scorn the Irish who make poetry in English. The situation is paradoxical, but it is not the only paradox in Ulster:

all around us, though
we hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.

Heaney's political commitment is fairly clear in these lines. It is a commitment to humanity, dignity, understanding and peace. It is a rational commitment, the commitment of a man who wants to tell the truth, a man who rejects militancy. Heaney is proud of his origins and he is opposed to the discrimination of the Catholic minority in Ulster. He tries to make us understand his attitude, to make us, through his poetry, feel as he feels, react as he reacts and as his countrymen react.

In the North fear has been institutionalized. People have grown used to it. That sort of climate was well defined by Graham Greene in his novel The Ministry of Fear:

"He's economical." She said, "They are all economical. You'll never understand them if you don't understand that." She repeated wryly, like a formula, "The maximum of terror for the minimum time directed against the fewest objects." (126)

...

"They formed, you know, a kind of Ministry of Fear

- with the most efficient under-secretaries. It isn't only that they get a hold on certain people. It's the general atmosphere they spread, so that you can't depend on a soul." (127)

Those were the methods also used by the Ulster administration to intimidate the Catholic minority, as Heaney remembered in an interview:

C'était durant la campagne de l'IRA des années cinquante. J'étais à un âge impressionnable, seize ou dix-sept ans. Je n'étais en rien tourné vers la politique, mais plutôt papiste que républicain. Mais je me souviens d'avoir été ulcéré, ainsi que toute la communauté, par la façon dont le gouvernement se servait des hommes de la milice, les "B specials". En réalité la menace était très limitée; mais on l'exploitait, et la communauté catholique a ressenti cela comme une injure. Par exemple, vos voisins, armés, vous arrêtaient, vous fouillaient; moi-même j'ai été fouillé en revenant des vêpres. ... On a fouillé mon portefeuille, on a lu mes lettres. Tout ceci accompli par des hommes presque illettrés. Je le dis sans amertume. (128)

In Ulster the notion of fear is often linked with the police, the RUC. A mainly Protestant police force, it is of course not very popular among the Catholics, who suspect it of supporting the Unionist cause more or less openly. The second poem of Singing School, A Constable Calls (N, pp.66-7) elaborates on this mistrust between the Catholic community and the RUC. The poem is about an incident from Heaney's childhood: a policeman coming to his father's house to register the family's crops. The scene is seen through the child's eyes. The poem begins with a description of the bicycle, its mudguard, handle-grips, dynamo, pedals. Although this is basically a peaceful picture, almost a still-life, there are threat-

127 *ibid.*, p.121.

128 Le clivage traditionnel, pp.187-8.

ening undertones: the "'spud' / Of the dynamo" is "cocked back" like a gun, the pedals are

relieved

Of the boot of the law,

as if even the bicycle were glad to be rid of its rider. The phrase "the boot of the law" suggests an authoritarian law, a law that oppresses rather than protects. While the RUC-man is waiting quietly, the poet's father is

making tillage returns

In acres, roods, and perches.

The spirit in which he does this is fear ("Arithmetic and fear"): there is always the danger of error, of forgetting something and thus conjuring up unpleasant consequences. This registration is one of the methods of intimidation used by the Ulster administration. The father's fear is associated both with the constable's revolver and with his aggressive, commanding voice.

The father's reply that there are no other crops frightens the son, who knows of "a line / Of turnips" that has not been mentioned. Feelings of guilt and fear of "the black hole in the barracks" merge.

The policeman finally leaves, closing his "domesday book" (129). The tension is released, but not quite, because when the RUC-man is on his bike,

His boot pushed off

And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.

The sound it produces is like a time-bomb, as if the day of doom had only been delayed, but was sure to come. Or is it that oppressive methods like this registration are quietly accumulating in the Catholic conscience until one day they explode like a bomb?

129 The "domesday book" links the RUC-man with the Norman invaders, another oppressive force.

Like The Ministry of Fear this poem recreates an atmosphere of fear and discrimination. George MacBeth writes: "English readers might reflect on how easily one could interpret this poem as one about the 1940s in Nazi-occupied Vichy France, or the Channel Islands. The force of suppression remains the same" (130).

Thus we have once more the link between a particular Ulster situation and analogous situations elsewhere. Heaney suggests that oppression has many faces; as much as a policy, it is a general climate of humiliation and intimidation.

On no other day is that atmosphere more perceptible in Ulster than on the twelfth of July, Orange Day. Commemorating William of Orange's victory in the Battle of the Boyne, the Protestants march through the streets, drumming, wearing orange sashes and carrying Loyalist flags. In Orange Drums, Tyrone 1966 (N, p.68) Heaney describes such a drummer with fierce irony. The drummer is a grossly exaggerated caricature of himself. In the first quatrain he appears as an uncontrollable mountain of meat, a bulldozer, who

is raised up by what he buckles under.

The imagery Heaney uses is significant - he has no sympathy whatsoever for this Orangeman. His drumsticks are phallic rods, the drums "giant tumours", the parade is a ludicrous ersatz for sexual virility.

In the final stanza the imagery is thick with meaning. The "cocked" ears of the on-lookers, eagerly listening to the drumming, link up with the phallic images of the

130 MacBeth, op.cit., p.346.

preceding quatrain and they are suggestive of the cocked guns threatening the Catholics. The Loyalist mob is like an anonymous primitive mass of people, lusting for blood. The stethoscope, another phallic image, registers the mounting tension, the approaching crisis, the possible outbreak of violence.

Orange Drums is a radical condemnation of Protestant extremism. There can be neither moderation nor reconciliation if the symbols of sectarianism are held high, if instead of searching for common ground, people cling to the icons of division. The drummer in this poem is an alter ego of the docker in DEATH OF A NATURALIST, a primitive brute, an uncompromising fanatic.

Three years later, Heaney was spending the summer in Spain. In section 4 of Singing School, Summer 1969 (N, pp.69-70) he is in Madrid, reading a biography of James Joyce, while at home in Ulster

the Constabulary covered the mob
Firing into the Falls.

The first part of the poem, a sonnet, is largely a description of Spanish scenes, though oppression is present in the form of the Guardia Civil, Franco's police force. Spain has its "flax-poisoned waters", too.

The poet is experiencing a feeling of guilt at having 'escaped' to Spain while people are suffering in Ulster. A friend tells him to follow the example of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (131), another says:

131 Lorca (1898-1936), the famous Spanish poet and dramatist, was a progressive liberal thinker. He sided with the oppressed, which made him unpopular with the Fascists. He was arrested and shot by the Falange in Viznar (Granada) at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

'Go back,' one said, 'try to touch the people.'

Yes, we might say, but how? A possibility is suggested by the Prado. The poet goes there to admire Goya's "Los fusilamientos de la Moncloa 3 de Mayo 1808" and his "Caprichos". Looking at the paintings, he realizes that it is possible to make art about violence, to say something significant about the North without being either crude or trivial, to "touch the people". Goya's representation of the shootings of the third of May is art, and yet, in all its details, it is a protest against inhumanity, a documentation of the suffering of mankind.

That final image

Where two berserks club each other to death
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking

could be a parable of Ulster. 150 years after its conception it still makes sense in a Northern Irish context.

Goya becomes an example for Heaney. Like the Irish poet the Spanish painter had to respond to the challenges of history, to the atrocities of the Napoleonic wars in Spain, to the hardships of his people. He did it by flourishing "the stained cape of his heart", which is also his art, by trusting in the mighty power of art to turn private outrage into a timeless accusation and condemnation of oppression and murder.

This is what Heaney, too, wants to achieve in his poetry. "The only possible commitment is through art" (132). He is given the same advice in the following poem, Fosterage (N, p.71). It is dedicated to Michael McLaverty, the short story writer, who was headmaster of the school where Heaney started teaching in 1962.

132 Zoutenbier, op.cit., p.21.

McLaverty echoes the voice in North and anticipates James Joyce's advice in Station Island:

'Listen. Go your own way.
Do your own work. Remember
Katherine Mansfield - I will tell
How the laundry basket squealed... that note of exile.'

The poet must not let himself be influenced or manipulated by concerns that are not his own. He is the sole moral judge of his work, he alone is responsible for it. His quest should be for art. McLaverty's voice also recommends accuracy - the poet should report every detail that is important, he should leave nothing out. Only thus can he be true to his calling. This message is McLaverty's legacy to Heaney, "words / Imposing on my tongue like obols".

We have now reached the penultimate stage of Heaney's discussion of the poet's dilemma. Should poetry be politically committed, should it run the risk of becoming propagandist, partisan - or should it remain aloof and try to be objective?

Heaney analyses the contradictory pressures on himself, he imagines them as voices trying to advise him. He tends towards embracing the line counselled in North, Freedman, Summer 1969 and Fosterage, but he dreads a sense of failure ("I am incapable" he writes in Whatever You Say Say Nothing). Escapism is not satisfactory either.

The problem is brought to a climactic close in the final and finest poem of NORTH, Exposure, in which he is looking for an image that is also a way out of the dilemma.

Exposure (N, pp.72-3) is a poem about the poet's calling, about his responsibilities. Heaney has offered a treble interpretation of the title:

The title plays with the two or three ideas that the word contains: the idea first of all, I suppose, of revealing oneself, it's more like a confession of how I feel in many of the poems I've written and exposes that part. It also has the idea of being exposed to the elements in it, which you do have if you live in the country, a renewed sense of the seasons and so on: this is a kind of wintry poem. And also the third meaning ghosting Exposure is the kind of media-meaning of getting a lot of exposure, being aware that having moved to Wicklow, instead of moving away from the focus of public events in the North, in some odd kind of way I have moved into it as somebody who is expected to say something about it. (133)

The poem is set in Wicklow in December, a season corresponding to Heaney's mood at that time. He is in doubt about his role as a poet and feels "cold" in the "last light". He hopes to see the comet Kohoutek (which appeared in December 1973), but

Those million tons of light
remain invisible. All he sees is a "falling star"; there is not even a meteorite. This imagery recalls the "aurora borealis" and the "cascade of light" of North. Heaney is disappointed because he has missed some great opportunity and has to be satisfied with the less spectacular shooting star. The let-down is complete. The poet sees himself as

a hero
On some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate.

There is a sense of failure in these lines, a sense of

having wasted his talent. Looking back on what he has achieved, he asks:

How did I end up like this?

He remembers his enemies' criticism and his friends' advice, those often contradictory voices mirroring "his own self-division" (134), and he ponders it all,

weighing and weighing
My responsible tristia.

Tristia is the title of books by Ovid and by Osip Mandelstam, written in exile. How responsible are the poems Heaney wrote in Wicklow? And responsible to whom - to his art, to his tribe?

For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?

This line again links up with North. Is there an answer to the question? The rain that drops through the trees is ambivalent: its low mutter speaks of "let-downs and erosions", thus describing the poet's state of mind at that moment, but at the same time it reminds him of the fascination of excellence:

each drop recalls
The diamond absolutes.

The perfection of nature is associated with the absolute timeless perfection of pure art. Heaney's "anguished self-questioning" (135) leads him back to the basic dilemma - aestheticism or commitment, poetry or politics, responsibility to his art or to his community. He is neither a propagandist nor a mere aesthete. He does not want to neglect his obligations towards his tribe, nor has he forgotten the "monuments of unageing intellect",

134 Jeremy Hooker, Seamus Heaney's 'North', p.73.

135 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary, p.125.

to quote Yeats.

What is his role? Who is he?

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 bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows.

He is neither extremist nor collaborator, but an "inner émigré", a poet who has retired from the North to the private contemplative world of Glanmore. He is one of the poets who are "not inhabitants of their own lives so much as intrigued observers, not victims but onlookers" (136). The poet acknowledges his having become an "inner émigré" without bitterness. He does not regret his move south of the border, because he has grown older and wiser, "long-haired and thoughtful". He is a wood-kerne, a peasant footsoldier, a Catholic who has taken to the woods so as not to be captured, a kind of guerillero, "escaped from the massacre", trying to survive in order to come back when the situation allows for it.

But the exile leaves the poet with a feeling of unease, a "sense of isolation, of a lonely existence in the woods, misunderstood by society" (137). There is, as we have seen, a desire in Heaney to withdraw from the Conflict, to retire to Glanmore and become "a private, neutral and apolitical writer" (138). But at the same time he knows that this is impossible, that, as he says

136 Morrison, Motion, op.cit., p.12.

137 Anwn, op.cit., p.83.

138 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.57.

on the Faber Poetry Cassette (139), the move to Wicklow has turned him into somebody who is expected to say something about the Troubles.

So what can he do? He has to reconcile the two tendencies that run through his work. He has to be both political and aesthetic, committed and at a distance. How can he achieve that? By

Taking protective colouring,
and in his art, protective colouring takes the form of metaphor, analogy, and myth. Heaney uses his background, nature, history, the past, language as protective colouring in order to, so to speak, pack his message into a metonymical statement, conceal, camouflage it. Protective colouring is an image for Heaney's style, for his use of indirect statement, his uncovering of analogies and similarities. It is also an image for the political commitment of his poetry: it is seldom open, direct, explicit, but mostly indirect, oblique and metaphorical.

Yet the feeling of failure remains. Heaney is afraid to

have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose.

The comet Kohoutek here stands for the Northern Crisis and the poet thinks he may have missed his one and only chance to find a theme.

Morrison argues that Heaney "having withdrawn into his art ... has missed the opportunity to observe a unique

139 Cf. note 133.

historical moment in the North" (140). Neil Corcoran found Heaney "guiltily conscious that in defining a new stance he might be evading a more primary responsibility" (141), but more recently he has argued that Exposure

may be regarded as the tentative, muted rejection of the kinds of exemplary status offered by his own community and culture, and the assertion of a new kind of exemplariness; more elusive, uncertain and oblique, still conscious of political obligations, but aware too that the self, if it is to be adequately realized in art, must be more than merely a socially exemplary self. (142)

Edna Longley saw the poet wonder "whether departure from Ulster ... has precluded some personal and poetic revelation" (143), whereas Tony Curtis believed that the poet had to acknowledge "the fact that he must now be a politically-committed poet; no mere observer of The Troubles" (144). But just as withdrawal left him guilty and with a sense of failure, unconditional commitment would also be inconclusive. Both are essential: he must reconcile commitment and withdrawal:

Exposure is, again, a meditation of the poet's responsibility in a desperate historical moment. It is a poem about withdrawal, deeply autobiographical; for Heaney has himself in a sense withdrawn into Eire, the south. ... Heaney acknowledges the need for detachment and engagement at the same time. ... A ... balance of conflicting needs. ... Without independence and withdrawal, a poet's work becomes infected with the language of propaganda. (145)

140 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.71.

141 Corcoran, Quickened Into Verb, p.69.

142 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary, p.124.

143 Edna Longley, 'North': "Inner Emigré" or "Artful Voyeur", p.91.

144 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.101.

145 Parini, op.cit., pp.122-23.

Jeremy Hooker makes the same point:

The tragedy is far too deeply rooted in his Ireland, in himself, for it to be expressible in either purely political or self-consciously personal terms. It is both political and personal, of course, but it is the roots of politics and personality, not their manifestation in political event or autobiographical detail, that Seamus Heaney can write about most effectively. (146)

Exposure shows the poet realizing that he has to reconcile the urge towards withdrawal and privacy with the moral necessity of commitment. The only way he can do that is by "taking protective colouring", by writing poetry that is committed, but indirectly so, through the guises of metaphor and analogy.

* * *

NORTH is a book of crucial importance. The poems in part I carry on the line of WINTERING OUT; they elaborate its metaphors and construct a mythical framework around the bog, the landscape, the history of Ireland. These myths allow Heaney to make indirect political statements about Ulster by pointing out analogies and precedents. He also puts the Northern violence firmly into a pattern stretching from the iron age to the 20th century. His myth and its message of the archetypal nature of violence are relevant not only for Ulster, but for the predicament of Man generally. Part I of NORTH is the natural climax of a movement that began with poems like For the Commander of the 'Eliza' and Requiem for the Croppies. It is the apotheosis of Antaeus and it is also the most poetical treatment of the Northern Crisis Heaney had achieved so far.

Yet he thought that he had not been explicit enough and so he decided to write more direct and outspoken poems, those in part II of NORTH. These, however, led him into a deadlock. They made him doubt the usefulness of verse stressing its social function rather than its art and they prompted "an urge towards withdrawal" (147). But "withdrawal stimulates guilt" (148) and Heaney had to find a way out of this dilemma, a way reconciling his duties as a poet with those of the Northern Irish Catholic. He found a solution and used the metaphor of "protective colouring" for it: the poetry he was going to write would be more akin to the mythical verse of part I of NORTH than to the explicitness of part II. Myth allows for rebirth and resurrection, for hope. And this hope is a message he addresses not only to the Catholic community in Ulster, but to mankind generally, because, as Jay Parini has argued (149), his poetry has now become relevant for all human beings; it deals with archetypal sorrows and fears that have once again broken out violently in the North, but lie dormant in the soul of any man and woman.

Heaney has retired from the forefront of the political battle. But he is still aware of the suffering, he is still concerned and compassionate. It seems as if his fight for the political emancipation of the Ulster Catho-

147 Sharratt, *op.cit.*, p.375.

148 Simon Curtis, *op.cit.*, p.83.

149 "The poems are richly autobiographical, yet the poet consistently weaves the particulars of his life into a mythic frame; he has evolved a unique species of political poetry which refers at once to the current Irish 'troubles' and to the human situation generally." Parini, *op.cit.*, p.100.

lics has become a general fight for human dignity. Seamus
Heaney has surely not

missed

The once-in-a-lifetime portent.

CHAPTER V

MOURNING THE DEAD
=====

FIELD WORK (1979)

Youth has gone out
Like a light.

Seamus Deane (1)

In the final poem of NORTH Heaney found an image which held the promise of a solution to his dilemma. By taking protective colouring, by weaving his political message into analogies and metaphors, he could produce a poetry that was committed without being crudely propagandist and artistic without the escapist flavour of pure aestheticism.

He realized that the longing for an innocent poetry, untainted by the Troubles, was not realistic. Although he managed to reconcile the demands of poetry and politics, he regarded this association with unease and even anger. Why indeed should the poet be compelled to respond to a political crisis, why should he not be allowed to concentrate on his art?

Of course Heaney is aware of the fact that in Ulster everything is permeated by the bitter taste of the

1 Seamus Deane, Fourteen Elegies, Six: After Derry, 30 January 1972.

Troubles, but he admits it only grudgingly. In the first poem of FIELD WORK, Oysters (FW, p.11), he gives vent to his anger. While eating a plateful of oysters, "alive and violated", he thinks of the Romans carrying oysters across the snow-packed passes of the Alps down south to their capital city. The oysters are like spoils of war, the loot robbed by an imperialist nation from its colonies.

The very fact that such an association comes to his mind, that even as innocent a thing as an oyster tastes of conflict and oppression, provokes the poet's anger. He would rather be with his friends,

toasting friendship,
Laying down a perfect memory
In the cool of thatch and crockery.

Escapism is no solution, however. Not only do his readers expect Heaney to comment on the situation in Northern Ireland, he himself would have a feeling of failure if he tried to evade what he considers to be his responsibilities towards his community.

We have seen in chapter IV that Heaney is torn between the demands of his tribe and those of his art. The compromise he has settled for may be as unsatisfactory as any compromise, but the only alternative would be to forsake either his tribe or his art - neither of which he wants to do.

This realization does not prevent Heaney from wishing that he were not caught in the dilemma, that he were not a public figure but a private poet licensed to grace mankind with what beauty and comfort his verse can give:

And was angry that my trust could not repose
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
Leaning in from sea.

The "clear light", an image reminiscent of North and Exposure, is not to be his. Heaney "knows radically that there is no innocent work" (2). His hope that he might produce "verb, pure verb" is an idealistic aspiration, not a realistic expectation.

The poems in FIELD WORK are thus hybrids of Hercules and Antaeus; they comment obliquely on the political situation in Ulster, but they seem more distanced than those in part II of NORTH. The mood is one of mourning, though not of resignation.

A substantial part of FIELD WORK is not at all, or only very remotely, concerned with politics. The ten Glanmore Sonnets concentrate "themes apparent elsewhere in the book, the individual's responsibility for his own choices, the artist's commitment to his vocation, the vulnerability of all in the face of circumstance and death" (3). In High Summer the poet and his family are on holiday on a farm in Southern France. The idyll is spoilt by nightmarish images recalling the Troubles:

I found a bag of maggots
and opened it. A black
and throbbing swarm came riddling out

like newsreel of a police force run amok,
sunspotting flies in gauzy meaty flight,
the barristers and black berets of light.

Song is a poem about different kinds of verse: folk poetry ("the mudflowers of dialect"), the classic charm

2 Corcoran, Quickened Into Verb, p.69.

3 From the blurb of FW.

of rhyme and rhythm ("the immortelles of perfect pitch") and socially responsible, politically alert poetry ("that moment when the bird sings very close / To the music of what happens"), all three of which contribute to Heaney's work.

In An Afterwards the poet's wife sends him to the ninth circle of Dante's Inferno because he is too "egotistical", too "ambitious". He values poetry too much and neglects his family:

Why could you not have, oftener, in our years
Unclenched, and come down laughing from your room
And walked the twilight with me and your children -

The poem illustrates "the domestic treachery of too great a devotion to his art" (4). Heaney compensates for this lack of attention with a collection of love poems addressed to his wife: Polder, The Skunk, The Otter, A Dream of Jealousy and Field Work itself.

September is a nostalgic farewell to Glanmore, whereas Leavings deals with a visit to England where the poet discovers in Ely Cathedral how political fanaticism can destroy art (5).

These poems are the result of Heaney's voluntary exile in Glanmore from 1972 to 1976. In 1975 he accepted a post at Carysfort College, a Catholic Teacher's Training College in Dublin and, a year later, he and his family moved to Dublin. The move to Eire was thus definitive; Heaney

4 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.129.

5 Thomas Cromwell, Lord Chancellor of England from 1532 to 1540, was chiefly responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries and the destruction of much religious art during the reign of Henry VIII. Its devastating effects can still be seen in the Lady Chapel and Bishop West's Chapel in Ely Cathedral.

opted for the Irish Republic rather than the British Province. The years he spent in Co. Wicklow, away from the North, did not alienate him from the problems of Ulster, but in the rural quietness of Glanmore he got over his disappointment about the failure of the Civil Rights Movement, which had carried so many hopes.

While Heaney was at Glanmore, terror became a routine in Ulster. Both the IRA campaigns aiming at having public opinion force the British Government to withdraw its troops from Ulster, and several attempts at reconciliation and a stable political settlement failed. So did the Peace People movement, founded by Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, which united Protestant and Catholic women in a desperate bid for peace. From 1969 to 1976 a total of 1662 people were killed in the conflict; among the dead there were many Heaney had been closely acquainted with.

1662 casualties - the number is too abstract to convey the sufferings of the people in Northern Ireland. Heaney's protest against the slaughter the sectarian killings have become takes the form of the elegy: he wants us to grasp the fact that each murdered person had his or her own history; the dead are not just numbers. Therefore, unlike the poems in NORTH, which were about "generalized deaths", the elegies in FIELD WORK are "laments for specific deaths" (6).

There are several elegies in FIELD WORK, some of them more akin to obituaries, like e.g. In Memoriam Sean O'Riada, or Elegy, which mourns the death of Robert

6 Graham Martin, op.cit., p.394.

Lowell.

The Strand at Lough Beg (FW, pp.18-8) is about Colum McCartney, a second cousin of Heaney's, "a carpenter in Armagh who wasn't involved in anything at all political but was just coming home from a football match in Dublin" (7). McCartney was shot in Co.Armagh in 1975.

The first stanza is a "pilgrim's track", a kind of modern way of the Cross:

You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton

...

Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim's track.

The poet wonders what might have happened to his cousin, what unexpected events might have broken into this quiet night drive:

What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down
Where you weren't known and far from what you knew.

These scenes are typical of the war in Ulster; similar things have happened again and again. Heaney himself experienced such moments, one of which provided the material for The Ministry of Fear. These lines show a remarkable restraint and apparent disinvolvement. Yet they are full of pity and grief, though these are not verbalized but become constituents of a vague mood of unease which combines anger and fear, protest and the desire to escape. It is also an elegiac mood mourning a friend's death and the disappearance of a more peaceful happy past.

From the scene of his cousin's death Heaney moves back

7 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.21.

to Lough Beg where he spent his youth, back to Church Island, the common ground full of reminiscences he shares with his cousin. There, too, guns were fired, but they were those of harmless duck-shooters. Yet even then shooting was felt as a threat scaring the boys. The spent cartridges become

Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected,
sexual imagery reminiscent of the guns in The Betrothal of Cavehill.

Heaney is aware, as in Whatever You Say Say Nothing, that he belongs to a part of the population that shies away from these aggressions. Instead of defending itself, his family has always remained passive:

For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy,
Spoke an old language of conspirators
And could not crack the whip or seize the day.

The poet's self-conscious awareness is an implied criticism of his family's attitude. Political moderation is a good thing, but there are situations in which a more radical stance is required. Appeasement can sometimes encourage an aggressor; humility and passive suffering lead nowhere. "His family's incapacity for facing some of the violent realities of sectarianism" (8), their attempt to shun any recognition of the facts has been going on for much too long. Though Heaney condemns this attitude, he has to admit to himself that he is susceptible to it. The redemptive rite of healing at the end of the poem and the very fact that he turns a murder into a work of art could be regarded as just such a failure to "crack the whip". In Station Island McCartney's ghost

accuses the poet of confusing "evasion and artistic tact". He, too, might be one of those

Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground.

McCartney's drive from the football match back home has now become a walk around Lough Beg. And this walk in its turn becomes a metaphor for life, a life that ends suddenly and unexpectedly:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes.

Death is almost casual and in this unemotional view of death Heaney resembles Keith Douglas, though there is an undertone of sympathy and compassion that is absent from Douglas's verse. He might have treated the murder of McCartney in the Yeatsian manner, he might have turned it into a martyr's heroic death, he might have protested violently against the murder of innocents. Instead, death is seen as a part of the cycle of life: someone drops down behind us, we bury him and go along on our way. It could be argued that by leaving out direct references to the political situation (except in stanza 1), Heaney tries to escape from it, and I think that is actually part of the truth. Another aspect is that Heaney tries to make good what war has destroyed. "The grief in these poems is sharp, yet they are wonderfully free of a narrowing bitterness. He imagines the washing of his dead cousin's corpse. This is a rite of healing, a tender vision far beyond bitterness" (9).

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew

To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Heaney associates death with Christian charity and forgiveness. The rite of healing is not only a cleaning of the dead man's body; it is also an attempt to wash the stains from a tortured nation and, finally, and in accordance with the Dantesque motto, it is a retreat into Christian virtues (10). Not violent protest, not vengeance, but patience and humility are the only possible response. The contradiction between his rejection of the "old language of conspirators" in stanza 2 and his humility at the end of the poem illustrates once again the two parts of Heaney's temperament. He realizes the necessity of commitment, yet he keeps on trying to escape into a realm of metaphor and myth.

The epigraph is taken from the first canto of Dante's Purgatorio, in which Dante's face is washed by Vergil with the dew of purity and he is given the reed of humility. Do the correspondences between Dante and the washing of McCartney's body in Heaney's poem suggest that purity and humility are the only answer to murder and humiliation? Dante's "little island" is associated with Church Island, with Ireland and, perhaps, with the whole world. Heaney makes the Ulster Troubles part of a continuity of martyrdom reaching from prehistoric times, via Christianity, Renaissance Italy, via his own youth, to the murder of Colum McCartney.

10 The "green scapulars" combine Christian and Nationalist elements. The rite of healing is a kind of ordination for an order of Irish martyrs and it is a symbol of life and resurrection, too.

There is, though, some hope in this pattern. Just as the bog corpses were finally resurrected, just as Gunnar's death seemed to reconcile those who survived him, the rite of healing in The Strand at Lough Beg sets "Heaney the task of rising through the pain of the experience embodied in the poem and establishing a longer perspective, one that contains hope, transcendence even" (11).

Such a perspective is absent from the next two elegies, in which the poet seems to realize that even the pure and the humble are potential victims in the North.

A Postcard from North Antrim (FW, pp.19-20) is about "a man named Sean Armstrong whom I knew at Queens and who had gone to Sausalito where he became part of the commune - pot smoking generation - he came back to Belfast in the early seventies to get involved in social work and worked at children's playgrounds. And he was shot by some unknown youth" (12).

A postcard with "a lone figure ... waving / From the thin line of a bridge" reminds the poet of his dead friend. He visualizes him on his houseboat and among the beatniks of California, a sympathetic young man, care-free, merry, bearing nobody a grudge, an idealist who loves his freedom:

Drop-out on a come-back,
Prince of no-man's land
With your head in clouds or sand,
You were the clown
Social worker of the town.

Murder breaks into this picture with brutal force. The contrast between Armstrong's agreeable character, his

11 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.111.

12 An Interview with Seamus Heaney (James Randall), p.21.

engaging honesty (stressed by the adjective "candid"), and the suddenness and ordinariness (emphasized by the qualifier "teatime") of his violent death is particularly shocking:

Until your candid forehead stopped
A pointblank teatime bullet.

The murder seems meaningless, gratuitous; it does not further any cause. It is absurd, makes no sense. The reasons for the death of Sean Armstrong remain in the dark: did his social work provoke the extremists (13)? Or was there another, less obvious reason?

In stanza 5 the poet asks his friend to

Get up from your blood on the floor.

Unlike the almost tender, humble rite of healing in The Strand at Lough Beg, this imperative sounds angry and desperate. It is as if the poet hated the sight of his murdered friend, as if he ordered him not to accept his death. If he could only get up like Lazarus and flee the Troubles, then there might still be hope, then he might yet discover the "unfounded commune" he was looking for in California. Heaney offers his friend an idyllic rural Ireland,

grass by the lough shore,
Turf-smoke, a wired hen-run,

the commune of the dead martyrs. But when he sings of Henry Joy McCracken, the rebel hanged in 1798, there is a note of dissent:

Yet something in your voice
Stayed nearly shut.
Your voice was a harassed pulpit

13 Cf. Heaney in the PBS-Bulletin, 102, pp.1-2: "He then got caught up in the social work that led his killer up the stairs of his flat."

Leading the melody
It kept at bay,
It was independent, rattling, non-transcendent
Ulster - old decency.

Armstrong was above all a man proud of his independence, of his non-allegiance to any cause, a "prince of no-man's land". He was a searcher and he was not prepared to accept ready-made opinions. He had to pay with his life for this independence. He did not toe the line of the extremists, but remained his own master. The extremists, however, allow nobody to break free; they demand unconditional obedience.

The final stanza makes it clear that Armstrong was somebody Heaney liked and admired, a chorus-leader. His sorrow is a pathetic accusation of terrorism. Armstrong's fate is an example of the monstrosity of what is going on in Ulster, of what the Conflict has degenerated into.

Sean Armstrong was murdered because he was loyal to his own conscience. Anyone who chooses personal freedom puts himself outside the pale of tribal solidarity. This recalls the image of the first stanza: Armstrong, the individualist, stands on

the thin line of a bridge
Of ropes and slats, slung
Dangerously out between
The cliff-top and the pillar rock.

In Ulster it is dangerous not to take sides. The extremists' revenge is cruel and prompt, as Casualty (FW, pp.21-4) illustrates. The title is ambiguous: a casualty is, of course, a person killed in a war, but there may be a pun on the casualness of those murders that have become a routine. The poem is about a man called Louis O'Neill, who "was a regular patron of the pub of Heaney's

father-in-law in County Tyrone" (14). He was killed "in a Provisional IRA pub bombing on the day of the funerals of the thirteen people killed by British paratroopers in Derry in January 1972" (15).

The poem starts with a description of O'Neill drinking in his pub. With particular, almost loving care, does the poet remember details: the way he ordered a new drink, his quiet attitudes, his "discreet dumb-show". Heaney manages to paint a lively picture of this man, to present him as a man of flesh and blood and not just one more item in the statistics of terror.

Poetry was one of the subjects Heaney and O'Neill used to talk about, poetry, which remained

Incomprehensible
To him, my other life.
Therefore Heaney shifted the conversation to other topics, but now his poetry is forced to deal with this man:

But my tentative art
His turned back watches too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry.
PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,
BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday
Everybody held
His breath and trembled.

Conscious of his poetry's "tentativeness", Heaney is trying to grip what is happening around him through this dispassionate reportage.

The tribe does not forgive those who, like O'Neill,

14 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', pp.112-13.

15 Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, p.4.

refuse to obey:

How perilous is it to choose
not to love the life we're shown?

Heaney asks in The Badgers and Casualty gives the answer: it is lethal (16). O'Neill was killed by his own people because he 'betrayed' their cause by not respecting the curfew they had imposed in mourning for the 13 people shot dead on Bloody Sunday. But it is absurd to speak of betrayal if someone just goes out for his customary drink. O'Neill's death, like Armstrong's, is an example of the extreme demands the Catholic community has on its members. It demands absolute loyalty and denies personal freedom.

This spirit of the tribe, this sense of belonging together, is well worked out in the first stanza of part 2. The funeral of the victims of Bloody Sunday is like a "black glacier":

Coffin after coffin
Seemed to float from the door
Of the packed cathedral.

The funeral creates a sense of community: the murders have shocked all the Catholics in Ulster and shown them that they must stand together to defend their rights and their lives:

We were braced and bound
Like brothers in a ring.

The Catholic community reacted to Bloody Sunday with intense solidarity. The tribe had been seriously wounded and it asked for loyalty from all its members. O'Neill refused that obedience. Unlike the girls of Punishment,

16 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.116, writes that "getting noticed in Ulster may not be prudent."

he did not fraternize with the British; he merely insisted on taking his own decisions rather than being compelled to support a group loyalty that limited his personal freedom:

But he would not be held
At home by his own crowd
Whatever threats were phoned,
Whatever black flags waved.

As in Punishment, the poet's stance is ambiguous. He, too, felt solidarity with the victims, was one of the "brothers in a ring". Yet he can understand O'Neill's search for liberty. The dead man seems to have realized the danger of his action at the moment of his death: his face was

Remorse fused with terror,
remorse, perhaps, at not having shown his solidarity with the martyrs, but terror at the terrible consequences his refusal to obey had, consequences out of all proportion with his fault.

In stanza 3 the poet shows admiration for O'Neill's freedom. He is like a fish, free to move wherever he wants, but drawn irresistibly to "warm lit-up places". The poet envies O'Neill's independence, his non-conformism and his courage to defy threats. And he asks the fundamental question:

How culpable was he
That last night when he broke
Our tribe's complicity?

"Puzzle me / The right answer to that one" - these words are the dead man's legacy for him. "How culpable was he?" Was he culpable at all? If so, what did his guilt consist in? Heaney realizes the contradictions in the Conflict. Though fighting for greater justice, the tribe denies

liberty to its members. Its demand for loyalty is total, absolute. Can the death of innocents be justified by the general aims? "It is a measure of the madness of sectarianism in Ireland that the man should die as a direct result of having broken 'Our tribe's complicity'. That is the crux of both the problem and the poem for Heaney. He has to acknowledge the existence of the two 'tribes', and can even understand the reasons for such groupings, but the awful, casual deaths from these bomb-attacks extend blame and complicity to buildings and areas" (17).

O'Neill is an innocent victim of a conflict that has become a mechanism of killing, uncontrollable and self-perpetuating. What has happened to the principles of justice and equal rights the fight was initially about? Have they become secondary issues, less important than tribal solidarity?

The reader has to ask himself all these questions, though they are not directly asked in the poem. It seems as if the poet were looking for an explanation, as if he "refused to be seduced by a single answer" (18). Casualty transcends the context of contemporary Ulster to ask the one "overwhelming question" about the necessity and purpose of violence. Heaney denies violence any justification. He is thus in opposition to the terrorists and his poem "offers a lesson in questioning the community's own values and presumptions" (19).

Part 3 is about O'Neill's funeral. The details are

17 *ibid.*, p.114.

18 Kearney, *op.cit.*, p.471.

19 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.138.

moving and they remind the poet of the day he went on a fishing-trip with O'Neill in his boat:

I tasted freedom with him

...

Somewhere, well out, beyond...

There is a longing in these lines to escape, "to get out ... / Somewhere, well out, beyond ..." to leave the Troubles behind.

The dead man's spirit haunts the poet, who asks him:

Question me again.

Heaney has not yet found an answer to the question of how guilty O'Neill was. But the dead man may have a message for the poet. "In the context of Northern Ireland the dead have to pass some knowledge on to the living" (20). What is O'Neill's message? Is it that the poet needs independence and freedom to deal satisfactorily with the Crisis? In an earlier version of the poem Heaney wrote:

Sometimes men obtain
A power when they betray
And swim out from the shoal,
Daring to make free. (21)

He celebrates O'Neill's courage, his individual liberty, which he envies and would like to share. The poet must be free from the demands of the tribe, which "here begins to seem a threat to independence" (22). O'Neill becomes "a paradigm of artistic activity, ... the poet seen as someone whose pursuit of art places him above and beyond the demands of his tribe" (23).

20 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.115.

21 quoted in Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.80.

22 *ibid.*

23 *ibid.*, pp.78-9.

Casualty is a complex poem. It does not only deal with the murder of a close acquaintance, the injustice and cruelty of the tribe, the death of innocents, but it is also a poem about the poet himself. Heaney realizes that the kind of liberty he needs, the licence to stand outside, to distance himself from the tribe, could be interpreted as betrayal. The loyalty the community demands excludes liberty. Those who are not prepared to submit have to die.

The poet who lacks liberty becomes a propagandist. To avoid this, Heaney needs independence and for him it does not entail disloyalty or even betrayal.

These ideas are embedded in an atmosphere of grief and lament. On one level Casualty is a poem about the dead in Ulster, an epitaph for the victims whom only their friends mourn, the general public ignoring their individual fates. Behind the statistics there are suffering, pain and bereavement. While the politicians and the demagogues quarrel about principles and ideologies, this is what is happening behind the scenes, this is what the conflict has come to. Heaney's condemnation of the war in Ulster may not be explicit, but this condemnation by implication is stronger and more impressive than a rhetorical outburst. The dead speak for themselves and there can be no more moving protest than the silent lament of the bereaved.

There is one other elegy in FIELD WORK, In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge (FW, pp.59-60). It differs from the others in that it is not about a recent death, but about a poet who was killed in the First World War. In Preoccu-

pations Heaney wrote about him:

Ledwidge was killed in France in 1918, having survived two fronts in Gallipoli and Salonica, and a deep wound in his emotions when the Easter Rising occurred in his absence. ... His tensions might be represented in his sporting interests - he played Gaelic football for the local team but liked to be in on the cricket which Dunsany arranged each summer; or in his literary affiliations - he was friendly with Thomas MacDonagh, executed in 1916, and wrote his best-known poem to his memory, yet his first volume was introduced to the world by a Unionist peer and published while he was serving with the British Army. (P, pp.202-3)

I should like to focus on this idea of the divided loyalties, an idea familiar to Heaney himself (24). He, a Catholic from the North of Ireland, writes poetry in English and publishes in Britain. Ledwidge, another Irish Catholic with strong sympathies for the Republican cause, served in the British army and he, too, wrote poetry in English:

I think of you in your Tommy's uniform,
A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave.

In an article about Ledwidge, Heaney appreciated "the distressing process of the decision" which made a man who "was actively involved in the labour movement and a passionate supporter of the Irish Volunteers" (25) join the army of the colonialist. While he was serving in the British Expeditionary Force, Ledwidge heard of the Easter Rising being put down by soldiers wearing the same uniform he was wearing. His friend Thomas MacDonagh was executed for his part in the rebellion. These events must have put a heavy strain on the young Irishman in British

24 For a detailed analysis of the poem, cf. Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', pp.120-2.

25 Seamus Heaney, The Labourer and the Lord, p.408.

uniform:

'To be called a British soldier while my country
Has no place among nations...'

This line prefigures Heaney's refusal, in AN OPEN LETTER, to be called a British poet because he writes in the English language. Francis Ledwidge is "called a British soldier" because he has adopted the British uniform. We do not know why he took this decision. Perhaps he believed that the Germans were the greater evil and that Britain and Ireland had to join forces to defeat a common enemy. This view was not shared by a majority of Irish Catholics, though. But then, it seems that Ledwidge did not realize to what extremes of intolerance and bitter hatred the sectarian division had degenerated. He had friends in both camps, and Heaney makes him regret the antagonism:

'I am sorry
That party politics should divide our tents.'

In the Ireland of 1916, just as in the Ulster of the 1970s and 1980s, this may be a naive attitude. The roots of sectarian division go deeper than party politics. Ledwidge, though conscious of his divided loyalties, failed to meet the challenge:

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

Ledwidge is a puzzling character for Heaney, an "enigma" he does not understand. The "equilibrium" he found is "useless" - Ledwidge achieved nothing through his action. His gesture did not further reconciliation and he ended up between the stools, wondering what he was doing in the trenches dying for a foreign nation while his countrymen at home were dying for their freedom. Heaney disapproves of Ledwidge's decision, though he knows that it is easy to be misled by those "confusing drums" and to "miss the

twilit note your flute should sound". He reminds Ledwidge that he was different from the British soldiers, that he was not "keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones". In his naivety Ledwidge thought he could bridge that gap by pretending it was not there.

The final image of the poem sounds a conciliatory note,

Though all of you consort now underground,
but this is a reconciliation in death. One could argue that, like Funeral Rites or Wilfred Owen's Strange Meeting, this elegy transcends the level of everyday political strife and sees all human beings finally reconciled and peaceful in death. But there is irony in this notion. Such a reconciliation is worthless. Ledwidge belongs to the "arbitrators of the burial ground", he is someone who sought peace on the basis of self-denial. That, however, is not the way in which oppression, injustice and terror can be ended. Ledwidge stands as a warning: reconciliation cannot be achieved by giving in to the enemy. A sell-out is not a compromise. Ledwidge's death was pointless: he sacrificed himself for the wrong country, the wrong ideals.

There is a kind of progression in these elegies from the resurrectionary rite of healing in The Strand at Lough Beg to the defence of personal freedom and implied criticism of the IRA in A Postcard from North Antrim and Casualty to the self-assertion of In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge. The conclusions to be drawn from the elegies are contradictory: Heaney praises Armstrong's and O'Neill's independence, but he disapproves of Ledwidge's action, arguing that he should have been more conscious

of his responsibilities towards his community. It seems to me that this contradiction is another illustration of Heaney's own divided loyalties - art requires him to be independent and to keep aloof from political issues, whereas his responsibilities towards his tribe push him into the opposite direction. This dualism in its various forms is fundamental to Heaney's work.

Why is the elegiac element so prominent in FIELD WORK? It seems as if Heaney, after trying to dig up the roots of the conflict in Ulster in his previous books, now wanted to deal with its results: death and the suffering of the innocent. As Tony Curtis has said, "there is a cumulative effect too as one realises the number of people each man and woman must know who have died as a result of The Troubles" (26). Helen Vendler is wrong when she says that "the poems refuse accusation in favour of a steadily widening pool of reflection, question and recollection" (27). I would argue that the accusation is implied; it is not voiced openly, but it underlies the sorrowful mourning for the dead. The "murdered dead", the "violent shattered boy", the "carcasses" (28) are themselves silent accusations, yet they are not one-sided. Heaney's loyalties in the Northern Conflict are clear; he need not affirm them again and again. Therefore he can afford to criticize both sides, to show to both Catholics and Protestants what their quarrels have come to. The elegies are thus political demonstrations in favour of peace and humanity. They are not militant but pathetic. If Heaney's elegies can give some idea of the quiet suffering of the

26 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.103.

27 Vendler, op.cit., p.151.

28 from The Badgers (FW, pp.25-6).

bereaved, if he can make his readers understand what is really going on in Ulster, what cruel realities are hidden behind the newspaper statistics, then he can be satisfied with his achievement.

* * *

The Toome Road (FW, p.15) is a very different kind of poem. It is about an Irish farmer who encounters a British army convoy on a country road:

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.

Though these lines are apparently unemotional and purely descriptive, the words Heaney uses are highly significant. The contrast, first of all, between the "armoured cars / In convoy" and the single inoffensive Irish farmer is ludicrous, as if such formidable battle gear could be threatened by a single man. The "warbling" of the cars, the trilling sound their tracks make, could also be a "wobbling", the cars thus becoming ridiculously clumsy giants. The alder, according to Robert Graves (29), is "the tree of the power of fire to free the earth from water". In Undine in WINTERING OUT Heaney establishes a unity between water, earth and man. Fire could destroy this unity, but the "broken" alder branches of the cars symbolize their broken power. They are unable to break the natural bond between the Irish soil and the Irish people.

Nonetheless the situation is extraordinary: a peaceful farmer on his way to the fields is confronted with an

29 quoted in Annwn, op.cit., p.151.

armoured convoy, the convoy of the occupant. The fact that this happens on the Toome road, with its connotations of 1798, makes the sacrilege even worse. The farmer's road, the farmer's country are being raped by foreign soldiers:

How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them?

There is deep indignation in these lines. The farmer's presence on the road is justified. He has

rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs.

This peaceful rural imagery contrasts with the frightening military gear of the soldiers. They have no right to be there, but the farmer's protest is futile: he can do nothing except complain. He is powerless.

The frustrating hopelessness of the present makes Heaney look to the past for signs of hope. Using sexual imagery, he contrasts the old Irish

Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones...
with the soldiers' "dormant guns". The past triumphs over the present. The British presence in Ulster is just an episode in its long history and it can do no harm to Ireland's glorious past. The sexual imagery has a ridiculing element to it, as it implies that the British are weaklings, impotent barren invaders. Their victory is a Pyrrhic victory.

The poet hopes for a resurrection of ancient glory. The ruins of the past are still extant and the farmer warns the soldiers:

O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

This symbolical omphalos is the ghostly presence of a past glory that might be resurrected. The "untoppled omphalos", with its pun on phallus, contrasts with the "dormant guns", the invaders' lost virility. The omphalos was, historically, the boss on a Celtic shield and thus it could be regarded as the Irish defence against British aggression (30). It stands for the old wars against English invaders and, of course, it is a reaffirmation of the Irish ethnic identity: Celtic, not Anglo-Saxon.

Moreover, the omphalos was a headstone in Delphi, which in Antiquity was taken for the centre, the navel (= omphalos) of the world.

The omphalos gives The Toome Road a more general significance. The farmer is not only an Irishman, he could be a Palestinian, a Frenchman in occupied France during the Second World War, a farmer in Afghanistan, etc. The indignation would be the same.

Heaney links these two important meanings, the one narrowly Irish, the other universal, when he explains what suggested the omphalos-image to him:

I would begin with the Greek word, omphalos, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the

30 Jean Markale, op.cit., p.173, notes that the omphalos was the centre of a circular and cyclical world. It was the seat of the king who regulated and harmonized the world: "Le roi qui réside au centre de la cité, dans l'omphalos, généralement son palais, à l'intérieur de la forteresse, centre religieux, politique et ... économique." The omphalos is thus the religious, political and economical centre of a Celtic city - the stronghold of Celtic power!

Jean Markale, L'épopée celtique de l'Irlande, Paris: Payot, 1971.

pump outside the back door... There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. (P, p.17)

Thus past and present, Ulster and the world merge in this image. Moreover, it is ironic: the centre of the world is a headstone, the navel of Ulster an old rusty pump!

Heaney disengages from the political situation in Northern Ireland those elements that are not exclusively Irish, but have a general validity. Our mind works by association and analogy and we realize what Ulster has in common with, say, Palestine or Poland. The word "charioteers" emphasizes the fact that the British "are just the latest in a long line of conquerors" (31). It should also be noted that the farmer's act of defiance is aimed at the British, not at the Irish Protestants. This is in line with Heaney's basically conciliatory stance. Both Protestants and Catholics are Irish, the British are aliens, their army is a symbol of oppression.

* * *

Triptych is a sequence of three poems, which sum up some basic themes in Heaney's poetry: the continuity of violence in Ulster, the contradiction between his desire to escape, to drop out, and his realization that he cannot run away from his responsibilities, the recognition that a crucial change in people's mentalities is needed to stop the bloodshed.

The first of the three poems, After a Killing (FW,

31 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.105.

p.12), opens with a disquieting image:

There they were, as if our memory hatched them,
As if the unquiet founders walked again:
Two young men with rifles on the hill,
Profane and bracing as their instruments.

Who are these young men? Hunters? Or terrorists? Soldiers? The latter interpretation seems probable, especially as they are being compared to the "unquiet founders". Tony Curtis has argued that "the 'unquiet founders' is an ironical understating of the greed and cruelty of the centuries of English kings, the efficient, ruthless genocide of Cromwell's army and the still-hot memory of the British army's notorious 'Black and Tans'" (32).

Faced with this continuity of oppression, the poet asks:

Who's sorry for our trouble?

The line is ironical, based as it is on a standard expression of sympathy for other people's problems ('Sorry for your trouble' 33). No one expresses sympathy for the Troubles.

The poet's dream that he might be 'neuter' and retire to an unspoilt, peaceful Ireland,

The pined-for, unmolested orchid,
remains an illusion. Like Yeats, he would like to find his Innisfree, a

stone house by a pier.
Elbow room. Broad window light.
The heart lifts.

32 *ibid.*, p.106.

33 Cf. Mid-Term Break (DN, p.28):

I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand
And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.

34 Tony Curtis, A More Social Voice: 'Field Work', p.107.

Yet, as in Oysters, there is no escape from the Conflict. "It is impossible to be 'neuter' in contemporary Ireland; the division into Catholic and Protestant sects is absolute and ubiquitous" (34). The peaceful oasis the poet has created for his family and himself cannot make him forget that this idyll is unreal, that violence and bloodshed continue elsewhere. The final image of the farm-girl bringing vegetables "like the young Ceres she always seemed to be" (35), is in striking contrast with the political realities threatening to destroy still lives like this one. After a Killing, Morrison writes, was "written after the murder of the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, in July 1976" (36). Are the two men perhaps the killers and not soldiers? If so, the poet's retreat is directly threatened. Violence is just around the corner.

In Sibyl (FW, p.13) the poet asks:

'What will become of us?'

and the answer is horrible. The sybil prophesies:

Dogs in a siege. Saurian relapses. Pismires.

A catastrophe is bound to happen. Man will degenerate, unless he changes fundamentally:

Unless forgiveness finds its nerve and voice,
Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
Can green and open buds like infants' fists.

Forgiveness, reconciliation, the idea familiar from Heaney's earliest poems, is the only way towards peace. The tree is an image of contemporary Ireland, "helmeted and bleeding". Peace can only be found if the tree blos-

35 Seamus Heaney in the PBS-Bulletin, 102, p.1.

36 Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p.76.

soms. A kind of rebirth, a resurrection is necessary. New life has to be created from suffering and murder; buds have to grow on the bleeding tree. There is hope in the sybil's words, as there was hope in the bog-myth, but the hope is conditional. If both Protestants and Catholics surmount their prejudices, compromise, forgive, are reconciled, then the bleeding tree Ulster has become will blossom again.

In the two final stanzas Heaney suggests that growing materialism and the loosening of the ties with the soil may be among the reasons for the present state of Ireland:

The ground we kept our ear to for so long
Is flayed or calloused, and its entrails
Tented by an impious augury.
Our island is full of comfortless noises.

We have already noted the importance the soil, the mother-ground has in Heaney's poetry. The closeness to the soil is one of his key-ideas and he sees the roots of the Irish Troubles in a widening gulf between the people and the land. The soil itself has become an image for the nation: it is "flayed" and "calloused". What are the "comfortless noises" the island is full of? The explosions of bombs? Gun-shots? The mechanical noises of a materialistic age? The contrast between contemporary Ireland and Prospero's isle (37) is striking. Ireland has become a negative imprint of the island in The Tempest; it offers no comfort. The noises in Ireland give no delight, but very often they hurt (38).

37 Shakespeare, The Tempest, III.ii.133-34:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.

38 Another analogy with The Tempest is suggested by the idea that the "comfortless noises" may be the hard unpleasant consonants of the English language, the colo-

In At the Water's Edge (FW, p.14) Heaney shows how difficult it is to escape from the dismal shadow of the Troubles. He has gone on a pilgrimage to the sacred places of Christian Ulster, the islands of Lower Lough Erne. On Devenish (39) he looks for spiritual support, but the remains of the old monastic culture are "crumbling like bread on water". He hears a snipe (the bird or a shot?) and the keeper's elegies remind him of the victims of the Troubles.

On Boa the holy stone has nothing to say. It

Answered my silence with silence.

and its only remaining function is to collect rain water.

Finally, on Horse Island, where the hearthstone is "cold" and unsympathetic, after a vain search for answers, for the consolation of religion, the poet encounters a patrolling army helicopter, the flying god of the contemporary world. The ancient gods are dead but the instrument of oppression is very much alive. The poet remembers how he

Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,
And pray at the water's edge.

Now he realizes that religious devotion, silent suffering and humility do not improve the predicament of the people in the North.

How we crept before we walked!

This line, reminiscent of Incertus, the final piece of

nizer's legacy to the colonized, just as language was part of Prospero's legacy to Caliban, the colonized native of the island.

39 "Einer der lieblichsten Flecken im Norden, wo die 'troubles' weit weg erscheinen." Elsemarie Maletzke, Nach Irland reisen, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1983, p.139.

STATIONS (40), is another element of defiance. The answer to the poet's old inclination to bow down is 'No!' - the times of creeping are over. The time to walk upright has come, the time to demand justice and political emancipation. The Catholics in Ulster must no longer keep silent and bear humiliations patiently; they are to speak out, to protest, to walk, to march, as they did at Newry in 1972, in protest against Bloody Sunday. The reminiscence of Newry is brought about by the helicopter, which the poet associates with that other helicopter

shadowing our march at Newry,

Their steps were "scared" then, but also "irrevocable"; the march was a further step towards greater self-confidence of the Catholic minority. At the Water's Edge asks the Catholics to take their fate into their own hands instead of trusting in the barren comforts religion offers.

* * *

The final poem in FIELD WORK, Ugolino (FW, pp.61-4), is Heaney's translation of cantos XXXII ll.124-139 and XXXIII ll.1-90 of Dante's Inferno. It is the most recognizable of several allusions to Dante in this collection. The poem tells the story of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, who was thrown into prison with his sons and grand-sons and, after some time, starved to death. The implicit analogy is, of course, with the Famine in Ireland. The Irish peasants who died during the Famine were as innocent as Ugolino's sons:

For the sins
Of Ugolino, who betrayed your forts,
Should never have been visited on his sons.

40 Cf. S, p.24: "Oh yes, I crept before I walked."

By analogy, all the details of Ugolino's account can also be applied to Ireland, and Ugolino's condemnation of Archbishop Roger thus becomes a condemnation of the British Government's attitude during the Famine. As the poem is a translation, any relevance it can have (and does have) for Ireland is implied. Ugolino is a beautiful example of how literature can be given new meanings when put into a different context. It shows that a genuine work of art can have a message far exceeding the artist's initial intention.

* * *

With FIELD WORK Heaney's political commitment changes in appearance, not in essence. The explicit political poems of the second part of NORTH are no longer a model; the poems in FIELD WORK are more moderate in tone, they are elegiac and mournful. Their message is implied; it is felt rather than heard. FIELD WORK confirms some of the characteristics of Heaney's poetry I discussed in the previous chapters: a longing for reconciliation, an ecumenical tendency, the hope that new life may grow out of destruction. There is also an urge to speak out, to articulate one's grievances instead of keeping silent (41). There is, finally, protective colouring under its different guises: the use of analogy and translation, the wish to withdraw into the quietude of the country. In FIELD WORK Heaney is also concerned with the role of the poet: "Those four years were an important growth time

41 Cf. Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.135: "FIELD WORK retains a large political resonance; ... for all its trust in the healing and consolatory affirmations of the artistic act, and the married life, it remains uncomplacently open to the urgencies of its historical moment, and responsively alert to the world beyond poem and home."

when I was asking myself questions about the proper function of poets and poetry and learning a new commitment to the art" (42).

The new element in FIELD WORK is, above all, its elegiac character, the note of quiet mourning, the stressing of individual suffering, counterbalancing the abstract official statistics. After pondering the reasons for the violence in Ulster, Heaney has now come to consider its consequences. The elegiac tone in these poems does not mean that he has become resigned. On the contrary, his urgent appeal for reconciliation is made stronger and more vivid by being born from suffering and pain. The mourners' silent protest is so much more moving than any rhetorical outburst could ever be.

Heaney has accepted the mission of the Northern Irish poet:

Minute your gesture but it must be made -
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,
Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,
Which is now your only duty. (43)

42 Seamus Heaney, PBS-Bulletin, 102, p.1.

43 Louis MacNeice, Eclogue from Iceland, op.cit., p.41.

A NOTE ON "AN OPEN LETTER"

In 1982 Penguin published their "Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry", edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. In their introduction, the editors also commented on Northern Irish poetry:

It is interesting to speculate on the relationship between the resurgence of Northern Irish writing and the Troubles. The poets have all experienced a sense of 'living in important places' and have been under considerable pressure to 'respond'. They have been brought hard up against questions about the relationship between art and politics, between the private and the public, between conscious 'making' and intuitive 'inspiration'. But on the whole they have avoided a poetry of directly documentary reportage. Love poems and domestic poems ... have been made to accommodate an uncommonly wide range of social responsiveness, while some poets have looked to other cultures as a way of putting the immediate and circumstantial into a wider perspective. (1)

Several points Blake Morrison made in his study of Heaney are taken up again in this paragraph, which reads more like a condensed description of Heaney's verse than of Ulster poetry generally.

The title of the anthology, especially the adjective 'British', is controversial, above all with regard to the Catholic Ulster poets represented in the book. In his review for the TLS Hugh Haughton rightly argued that "the

1 Morrison, Motion, op.cit., p.16.

British label sits oddly on a poet who 'emigrated' south of the border" (2). Whatever the reasons for this choice of title may have been (perhaps only the analogy with Donald Hall's "Penguin Book of Contemporary American Poetry"), the use of the adjective 'British' for a poet who, like Heaney, has repeatedly asserted his Irish identity, was ill advised.

A year after the appearance of the Penguin anthology, the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry published a small pamphlet by Seamus Heaney, appropriately called AN OPEN LETTER. This open letter to the editors of the "Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry" is in fact a long poem of 33 sestets.

In AN OPEN LETTER Heaney objects to being called a British poet. He had been called 'British' before, but the Penguin book was the last straw:

This time it's like the third wish,
The crucial test.

Heaney's protest is not rash, but the result of careful consideration. The question he was faced with was whether he should remain silent, an attitude adopted for too long by too many Catholics in Ulster, or whether he should speak out.

Silence, though perhaps the most comfortable attitude, is defeatist and potentially dangerous:

And what price then, self-preservation?
Your silence is an abdication.

He compares himself to Hamlet, whose hesitation caused his death. Therefore it is wrong to be silent (3); short-

2 Hugh Haughton, Twenty for the Eighties. TLS, 28 January 1983, p.78.

3 Cf. the epigraph from the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: "What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak... It was

term comfort may, in the long run, be regretted:

And therefore it is time to break
Old inclinations not to speak.

Ironically, Heaney's concern with the Ulster Catholics' inclination to shut up was diagnosed by Blake Morrison, the co-editor of the Penguin anthology (4). Heaney finally breaks his people's silence, after documenting it in his early verse and analysing it in poems like Whatever You Say Say Nothing. He is no longer prepared to tolerate attacks upon his Irishness. His stance has to be defined once and for all in order to prevent further misunderstandings and misjudgements.

In the subsequent stanzas Heaney argues his point and realizes that the basic problem may be the fact that he is an Irish poet writing in English, that, although he is Irish, his work belongs to the literature written in English. This, however, does no more make him British than it does writers from the United States or from Commonwealth countries.

How British are the Irish poets? - is thus the question to be asked:

As far as we are part
Of a new commonwealth of art,
Salute with independent heart
And equally
Doff and flourish in your court
Of poesie.

Heaney writes in English and thus belongs to a "com-

born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us."

4 Cf. Morrison, Seamus Heaney, pp.23-4: "The community Heaney came from, and with which he wanted his poetry to express solidarity, was one on which the pressure of silence weighed heavily. ... Heaney's early poems do not analyse the reasons for his people's silence; they merely document it."

monwealth of art". But he is an independent member of that "court / Of poesie", like, e.g., Joyce, Yeats, MacNeice, or any other Irishman writing in English.

There is a community of authors using English, just as there is one of those using French, Spanish or German. The fact that a person chooses a particular language as a vehicle for his thoughts does not necessarily mean that he identifies with that nation.

Heaney realizes that a substantial part of his audience is British. He writes in English, his books are published by the London-based Faber & Faber, his articles appear in The Listener, the TLS, the London Review of Books. Hence a tendency to see him as British.

But don't be surprised
If I demur, for, be advised
My passport's green.

Here it is again, the assertion of his Irish nationality. Heaney uses the very symbol of the British state, the Queen, to make the difference clear. It is not that he has a grudge against the Queen as a person or as the representative of the United Kingdom. But the Queen is not his queen. He has no grudge against the British either, but their interests

Defied, displaced, would not combine
What I'd espouse.

Heaney's attitude is not extremist. He is merely asking for what he deems to be his right: the right to his own homeland, the right

To be at home
In my own place and dwell within
Its proper name.

There is no aggression in these lines, only the demand for the recognition and respect of the Irish people's

national identity and dignity. The Irish are not British and it is a sign of British arrogance to do as if they were. The thought of Ireland makes the poet digress into a dream, in which he sees the "traumatic" aspect of contemporary Ulster, but also the remains of a more glorious past, the romantic vision of a sunset in Dublin, which reconciles the capital of the Republic with the Georgian brick of its colonial past. This digression is an *aisling*, a dream-vision, and it is the vision of an ailing country.

The imagery of stanzas 22 to 25 is based on the assumption that Ireland, the patria, is female, an idea familiar from the poems in NORTH. Heaney associates the fate of Ireland with the Leda-myth. There are direct references to Yeats's Leda and the Swan (5). The twins Castor and Pollux were the result of Zeus' rape on Leda; the twins Republican and Unionist are the result of the forced act of union between Britain and Ireland. The similarity with the idea expressed in Act of Union is obvious. British colonialism in Ulster has produced two very different brothers:

One a Provo, one a Para,
One Law and Order, one Terror -

The Troubles, the war in Ulster, are the direct consequence of the confrontation of these twins. The poet realizes, though, that this image "leads nowhere". It describes the situation but it does not teach us anything. Heaney suggests a slightly modified image: a conceit in which the Republic is seen as Ulster's true husband. But Eire has been cuckolded by Britain, and Ulster

5 E.g. "A sudden blow", "A shudder in the loins".

has had family by them both.

Now they both shun their responsibilities. "The cuckold's impotent in Leinster / House" and unable to control the terrorist activities of his offspring - the Provisional IRA. But the lover, "All passion spent", is not able to control his Loyalist offspring either - the Paratroopers are unable to cope with the Troubles. Thus

Exhaustion underlies the scene,

- a solution is not to be foreseen. Not even the slogans have any meaning left - again, this is an idea familiar from other poems. The situation is paradoxical: whereas the Unionists claim that Ulster is British, the British themselves would gladly be rid of the Province. For them

Ulster is part of Paddyland

and they would welcome any opportunity to get that weight off their shoulders.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is the same Heaney has always advocated. As neither Eire nor the UK are prepared to pay more than lip-service to their engagements, as they both remain passive, a solution has to be found by the people of Ulster themselves, a solution satisfying both Protestants and Catholics. Extremism is no way out; it offers no solutions. A "middle way", a moderate, conciliatory attitude is required.

So let's not raise a big hubbub.
Steer between Scylla and Charyb
A middle way that's neither glib
Nor apocalyptic.

There can be no easy, "glib", ready-made solution for the Conflict. But violence, "apocalyptic" destruction, is no good either. Negotiation is the way to adopt. Heaney opposes extremism of any kind. The fights between the

Unionists and the Republicans have caused only suffering and destruction. Therefore he is in favour of moderation and compromise.

* * *

AN OPEN LETTER contains several ideas that are prominent in Heaney's poetry: the idea that the Irish must not suffer injustice passively; the idea that they are not British, but a nation with a history of its own, a culture of its own, and with its own national identity; the idea that the English involvement in Ireland is responsible for a past of violence and that today's Troubles are the result of that violence; the idea that slogans have ceased to mean anything; the idea, finally, that progress towards peace is only possible if extremist attitudes are abandoned and a meliorist, conciliatory, ecumenical stance is adopted.

British, no, the name's not right.

The British and the Irish can negotiate, but they can only do so in a climate of mutual respect. That is what the British will have to realize and it was high time someone told them so.

Nothing Heaney says in AN OPEN LETTER is really new. But the way he voices his concerns is original. Although his poetry had always been self-consciously aware of the sectarian divisions, had always advocated moderation and compromise, it had never done so as explicitly as in this poem. Reconciliation can only be achieved if arrogance and prejudices are finally dropped and if both sides come to respect each other's dignity. To say so clearly and openly in a poem is something Heaney has rarely done before. AN OPEN LETTER seems to have been born from a

temporary irritation. It would be unwise to claim that the poem signifies a fundamental change or reorientation in Heaney's political views at the time (6). So far it has not been collected in book form and this confirms Neil Corcoran's point that Heaney "now wishes that he had addressed himself to the issue of 'British' literature more fully in prose" (7). AN OPEN LETTER is, like Craig's Dragoons and Triptych for the Easter Battlers, an angry poem and as such untypical of Heaney.

6 M.P.Hederman wrote to me in a letter dated October 19th, 1984: "I have the suspicion that Heaney was more or less forced into writing this and that it is the Herculean parallel to the Antaeus aside on the Sweeney translation."

7 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.41.

CHAPTER VI

"IMAGINING A HERO"*

=====

STATION ISLAND (1984)

My stealth was second nature
to me, as if I were coming in-
to my own. I remembered I had
been vested for this calling.

Seamus Heaney (1)

There is a short poem in the first part of STATION ISLAND, Widgeon (SI, p.48), about a hunter who imitates the cries of a widgeon by blowing upon the windpipe of the bird he has just shot:

he found, he says, the voice box -
like a flute stop
in the broken windpipe -
and blew upon it
unexpectedly
his own small widgeon cries.

The hunter's surprise at his ability to resuscitate the dead duck's voice is paralleled by the poet's discovery that he can give a voice to the dead, to the ghosts of Station Island and to Sweeney, the birdman. They are the protective colouring through which he expresses his self-doubts and conflicting loyalties.

* From Exposure (N, p.72).

1 From The King of the Ditchbacks, section II (SI, p.57).

The poems in part I are mostly private lyrics. In The Underground Heaney sees himself as an Orpheus-like figure in the London Underground; Iron Spike laments the impermanence of things; La Toilette contrasts the barren comforts of religion with more sensual pleasures; The Birthplace is about a visit to Thomas Hardy's birthplace in Higher Bockhampton in Dorset. There is a poem about Sloe Gin, "bitter / and dependable"; there are reminiscences of a sojourn in California (Remembering Malibu) and there is "a sad note of diminishment and loss, a sense of transience and of the perilous fragmentariness of memory" (2) in An Aisling in the Burren.

Heaney's preoccupation with the poet's vocation in some of these poems provides a link with part II. We have seen in previous chapters that he is prone to self-doubts and self-examinations, that he is uneasy about the poetry he writes, that he hesitates between a more obvious political commitment and a metaphorical, less documentary verse. The advice he gave himself in earlier collections was contradictory and it is so in STATION ISLAND too.

In Away From It All (SI, pp.16-17) the poet watches a lobster being lifted from a water tank. Its "colour of sunk munitions" encourages him to reflect about the Troubles and his response to them. Nature seems to mirror his indecision: in the "twilight", "the sea darkens / and whitens and darkens", just as the poet is unsteady and wavers between aestheticism and commitment. Quotations come to his mind, from Czeslaw Milosz' Native Realm for example. They are meant to justify his indecision but they sound "like rehearsed alibis":

2 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.157.

I was stretched between contemplation
of a motionless point
and the command to participate
actively in history.

The poet is aware of how thin the line of compromise is. It is not easy to remain neutral or to reconcile aspirations that are often mutually exclusive:

The light at the rim of the sea
is rendered down to a fine
graduation, somewhere between
balance and inanition.

Heaney has thought very deeply about this problem and he has realized that neither pure aestheticism nor propagandist verse are an adequate response to the challenge he is faced with. The "balance" he is looking for is only a small light, a "fine / graduation". His tightrope act has been successful so far, but balance can easily turn into inanition, poetical integrity into triviality and insignificance. The artist in Heaney doubts whether he can ever "participate / actively in history" and asks:

'Actively? What do you mean?'

The Catholic, however, looking at the lobster tank, feels guilty because he has abandoned his tribe:

I still cannot clear my head
of lives in their element
on the cobbled floor of that tank
and the hampered one, out of water,
fortified and bewildered.

The lobsters in the tank are the Catholics in Ulster, the one outside is the poet, who has opted out of his "element" and withdrawn to the Republic. His exile has fortified him, it has taken him out of the public eye, but he is also "hampered" and "bewildered", at a loss what to do, uncertain about the way to follow.

Has he made a mistake? Should he have stayed in his element with the others? These and such-like questions torment Heaney. His preoccupation with them may seem tedious. After all, his poetry reconciles the responsibilities he has towards his art and towards his community. Nonetheless, he sometimes wishes his verse were less public. Then again he is reminded of the predicament of the Northern Catholics and experiences mental agony at his powerlessness, at his being condemned to remain a passive observer, at best a commentator. Heaney still feels that he is not reaching up to the standards of perfection he has set up for himself. Indeed, if a compromise between committed and uncommitted art has to be found, complete devotion to either is impossible. Thus the poet has to settle for a middle way that cannot give him complete satisfaction. As a consequence, the artist in Heaney will sometimes regret that he is neglecting his art in favour of political comment, whereas the Catholic may feel he has betrayed his community in favour of art.

Similar feelings of unease and failure pervade Chekhov on Sakhalin (SI, pp.18-19). In a note Heaney writes: "Chekhov's friends presented him with a bottle of cognac on the eve of his departure for the prison island of Sakhalin, where he spent the summer of 1890 interviewing all the criminals and political prisoners" (SI, p.122). After his return from the penal colony, Chekhov published The Island Sakhalin, a report which ultimately led to improvements in the conditions of detention on that inhospitable island (3).

3 Shortly before his departure, Chekhov wrote to his publisher Suvorin: "Sakhalin is a place of unbearable suffering." And he criticized "that we have put millions of

The cognac he had been offered by his friends accompanied Chekhov across Russia and Siberia. When he finally arrived on Sakhalin, he smashed the glass on the stones and the sound of breaking

rang as clearly as the convicts' chains
That haunted him. In the months to come
It rang on like the burden of his freedom

To try for the right tone - not tract, not thesis -
And walk away from floggings.

Like Heaney, Chekhov is almost ashamed of his freedom. It has become a "burden" because he does not share the prisoners' suffering and misery, because he can turn his back on it and just "walk away". Heaney has walked away, too - he has left Ulster and moved to the Republic.

Chekhov's problem is, like Heaney's, to "try for the right tone - not tract, not thesis". Both the dramatist and the poet wonder how they can best write about oppression without being either crudely propagandist or escapist. How can they do justice to suffering, what can they do to alleviate it? Chekhov senses the inadequacy of his response:

He who thought to squeeze
His slave's blood out and waken the free man
Shadowed a convict guide through Sakhalin.

He had come to give these poor souls moral support, to "waken the free man" in them. But he is shown around the camp like a tourist: he does not belong there, he is not a convict. He may sympathize with them, he may pity them and wish to help them, but nothing can obliterate the barrier between the free citizen and the outlaw. Heaney

people to rot in prisons, to no purpose, barbarically; we have marched people tens of thousands of versts through the cold, we have infected them with syphilis, we have demoralized them, we have increased the number of criminals." Quoted in Das Tintenfass 26, Zürich: Diogenes, 1976, p.98 (my translation).

has a similar feeling of inadequacy due to his voluntary exile. But he is wrong to have a guilty conscience. It is not as if by moving south of the border he had abandoned his community in the North. After all, his poetry is still successfully making an international reading public aware of the problems in Ulster. It is the poet's destiny to remain at the fringe of events, to observe, to comment.

This idea leads straight on to the next poem, Sandstone Keepsake (SI, p.20). The poet has found a sandstone on a beach on the east coast of Inishowen in Co.Donegal. When it gets darker, he notices the lights of the Magilligan internment camp across Lough Foyle in Co.Derry. From a distance these lights look like the fire of hell. Lough Foyle is associated with Phlegethon, the mythical river of fire in Hades, mentioned in Canto XII of Dante's Inferno. In the seventh circle of hell Dante comes across Guy de Montfort, who murdered a cousin of King Edward I during a religious service in a church in Viterbo (Italy) in 1271. Guy de Montfort wanted to revenge his father, who had been killed by the English. The heart of the victim, Henry of Cornwall, was exhibited in a golden casket on one of the Thames bridges.

Unlike Dante, who condemns Guy de Montfort's crime, Heaney seems to identify with him, the poet's hand becoming the murderer's:

Evening frost and the salt water
made my hand smoke, as if I'd plucked the heart
that damned Guy de Montfort to the boiling flood -

Heaney quickly qualifies this impression when he adds "but not really". I do not agree with Deborah Tall when she argues that Heaney "alludes to the Inferno to convict

himself of virtual connivance with the British" (4). If Heaney sympathizes with somebody who killed an English prince, he can hardly be accused of conspiring with the British. Heaney's reasons for not condemning Guy de Montfort become clearer when we look at the biography of Simon de Montfort, Guy's father. The son of a French nobleman, Simon inherited the earldom of Leicester and became the leader of the baronial rebellion against Henry III. He inspired the 'Provisions of Oxford' of 1258, which contributed to the gradual transformation of Parliament into a political institution challenging the power of the King. After ruling England for a brief period in 1264-65, he was killed in the battle of Evesham by the successor to the throne, the future Edward I, and his heirs were deprived of his lands. Simon de Montfort was opposed to the concentration of political power in the hands of the monarch, and that is an attitude Heaney can sympathize with.

In the following stanzas Heaney unexpectedly rejects this chain of association and sees himself as a lonely figure

staring across at the watch-towers
from my free state of image and allusion.

In these lines one senses an implied criticism of his role as a voluntary exile, as someone who looks at important events from the outside. The "free state of image and allusion" is an ironic reference to both the Irish Republic and the poetical freedom he has gained by taking protective colouring, by rejecting explicit political statements in favour of an oblique approach. For this

4 Deborah Tall, Damned for Looking Back, p.479.

reason, like Chekhov on Sakhalin, he feels ill at ease, he has become

a silhouette not worth bothering about,
out for the evening in scarf and waders
and not about to set times wrong or right,
stooping along, one of the venerators.

He is an outsider, well-meaning perhaps, but "ironically assured of the poet's peripheral status: the most the poem may aspire to is the 'veneration' of the political victim" (5).

Just as Chekhov on Sakhalin was alienated from the convicts by the certainty that he could always go back to the comfortable salons of his hometown, Heaney has become an occasional visitor to the North, a sympathizer but no longer a fellow sufferer. The repetition of "venerated / venerators" links him with Guy de Montfort and stresses the difference between them: on the one hand the knight who took justice into his own hands, on the other the poet who can only watch and lament.

Heaney has to come to terms with his role as an observer, he has to accept the fact that the political impact of poetry is limited. In Stone from Delphi (SI, p.24) he prays to Apollo

that I may escape the miasma of spilled blood,
govern the tongue, fear hybris, fear the god
until he speaks in my untrammelled mouth.

He is very much aware of the dangers threatening his integrity as a poet. His longing to escape from the terror is only too natural, but escape remains an illusion as long as the Troubles continue. Therefore Heaney prays for a peaceful resolution of the Conflict, for a

5 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.158.

reconciliation that will allow his poetry to deal with more purely poetical themes. Heaney's role as an (in-)voluntary spokesman people are looking to for opinions about the Crisis has given him a lot of responsibilities. He has to be careful about what he says and remain moderate in his views. Sometimes it is unwise to say too much. Moreover, he must not overrate his wisdom, he must beware of presumption and wait for Apollo, the god of poetry and music, to speak through him. The adjective 'untrammelled' is ambivalent in this context: it can mean that divine inspiration helps the poet to break through poetical and political constraints, but it can also mean that his voice is unbiased, impartial.

Heaney's prayer is above all a plea for an honest poetry. The task he has set himself is formidable: to avoid the pitfalls of hybris, safeguard his poetic and moral integrity and at the same time encourage reconciliation in Ulster. This short poem illustrates "the fundamental honesty and conscientiousness of the poet, his regard for 'doing the decent thing'" (6).

But what is "the decent thing"? In Making Strange (SI, pp.32-33) Heaney is in the company of two men, standing between

the one with his travelled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,
and another, unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons.

Michael Allen argues that Heaney's companions are his father and the American poet Louis Simpson (7). They are

6 Bernard O'Donoghue, Singing Responsibly, p.59.

7 Michael Allen, Holding Course, p.116: "Heaney shows himself for the first time em-

like the two parts of his own divided self. Heaney is once again "characteristically caught midway" (8) between his old rural self, long-haired, stomping across the fields in his wellingtons, a rustic figure, and the sophisticated poet, famous and respected. These two represent qualities that are often at odds in Heaney's poetry. The father stands for his rural background, his closeness to the Irish soil, his latent desire to escape into the quietude of the country. He also stands for a simple private poetry, for the elaborate sound compositions of his early verse, for the use of dialect words and place-names and the pride in the Gaelic past. The intellectual stranger is the product of a more cosmopolitan culture. He represents the literary refinement that went into Heaney's subtle analogies and metaphors, and he is aware of political realities, of the necessity of commitment.

Heaney, "hovering between these two men ... seeks a means to bring them together or at least not to betray either one" (9). As usual he is looking for a compromise:

Then a cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect,

It comes as no surprise that this voice (his poetical muse?) advises him to combine his aspirations, to remain loyal to both his inherited background and his acquired learning. He compares the muse to

sweetbriar after the rain
or snowberries cooled in the fog,

barrassed by his own 'parish', 'these eyes and puddles and stones', when he visits it with the cosmopolitan Louis Simpson, 'speech like the twang of a bowstring'. The 'eyes' are those of Heaney's father who can't deal with the visitor any more than his own son can deal with the ensuing cultural tension."

8 Blake Morrison, Encounters With Familiar Ghosts, p.1191.

9 *ibid.*

lyrical, pastoral images, typical of escapist contemplative poetry, but also to "the cornfield of Boaz", an image that shows the poet's familiarity with literary antecedents, classical mythology or, as in this case, with the Old Testament (10).

The voice then encourages the poet to

Go beyond what's reliable
in all that keeps pleading and pleading,
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how bold you were

when I visited you first
with departures you cannot go back on.'

He must not be satisfied with "what's reliable" - he must be prepared to take risks. A return to an innocent, "prelapsarian" poetry is impossible. The poet ought to overcome his escapist desire to turn his back on the Troubles and keep on writing the metaphorical poetry of indirect political statement he is rightly famous for.

Such poetry allows him to reconcile the two parts of his temperament. The reconciliation becomes effective in the phrase "adept / at dialect", which combines the earlier demand to "be adept and be dialect".

Reassured, Heaney can now guide the stranger

through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at that same recitation.

He is elated and proud of both his heritage (his dialect) and of the knowledge he has acquired in schools and universities. His poetry combines cosmopolitan elements

10 Boaz was one of King David's ancestors. In the Old Testament he is a rich man, the owner of many fields. Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law, went gleaning into a part of his cornfield and thus made his acquaintance. They married and begot a son, Obed, David's grandfather (cf. Ruth 2-4).

with his rural background and thus "makes strange", transforms, alienates his "own country". The only way for Heaney to be sincere and loyal to all his values is to reconcile them in his poetry.

As Blake Morrison wrote, Making Strange is "typically Heaney-ish, examining the varieties of division, weighing loyalties, puzzling through some moral dilemma in a scrupulous, commonplace tone" (11).

It is a good introduction to the sequence Station Island, in which Heaney carefully evaluates his responsibilities.

* * *

Heaney has written several poems about the difficulties of communication between Protestants and Catholics. In conversation the sectarian issue is evaded in favour of small talk and polite trivialities. The young Heaney in The Other Side does not know what to say to his Protestant neighbour, but in An Ulster Twilight (SI, pp.38-9) the poet makes a tentative attempt to refer to the Troubles in conversation. The poem is about a Protestant carpenter, Eric Dawson, who once made a toy battleship, a Christmas present, for young Seamus. The poet wonders what has become of this man and he is certain

that if we met again
In an Ulster twilight we would begin
And end whatever we might say
In a speech all toys and carpentry.

Their talk would focus on the carpenter's craft; it would be polite and non-committal, evading controversial issues, above all the fact that the carpenter's father was a mem-

11 Blake Morrison, Encounters With Familiar Ghosts, p.1191.

ber of the RUC:

A doorstep courtesy to shun
Your father's uniform and gun,
But - now that I have said it out -
Maybe none the worse for that.

Heaney criticizes this well-meant "doorstep courtesy". It may be safer to talk about banalities than to risk a quarrel, but we do not solve problems by ignoring them. Even unpleasant truths have to be talked about and yet the poet hesitates. His attitude is ambiguous: he is angry about the general tendency to evade controversy, a tendency he shares, though. At the same time he does not want sectarianism to spoil personal relationships. Thus he finally accepts a fact he does not really want to change anyway. "A speech all toys and carpentry" may be escapist, perhaps even cowardly, but, as he says, "maybe none the worse for that" (12).

* * *

In his quest for a way to reconcile his political responsibilities and his desire for personal expansion as an artist, Heaney often imagines voices as representatives of the different urges in his temperament. The voice of the longship in North advises him to trust to his talent and avoid too obvious a political commitment. All he can expect is the small comfort of "aurora borealis". In Summer 1969 he is told to "touch the people", whereas Michael McLaverty in Fosterage says he should go

12 Eileen Cahill, op.cit., p.67, writes that "for the poet and Eric Dawson ... such artificial pleasantries are only a 'doorstep courtesy' to 'begin / And end whatever we might say'. That kind of speech allows the poet to overcome the symbols of political violence, the uniform and gun belonging to Eric's father. In An Ulster Twilight, then, the poet and his neighbour can communicate. 'Shop talk' is merely a way of easing into real speech." I am not convinced by this interpretation, as I fail to see why Heaney and Dawson should evade controversial issues only at the beginning and at the end of their conversation. Either they evade them altogether or they do not - there does not seem to be a middle way.

his own way, do his own work instead of praying to political gods. The Sibyl in FIELD WORK warns him of a coming disaster, whereas his wife in An Afterwards complains about his neglecting his family.

Thus it seems as if Heaney, well aware of the fact that he is expected to take up a clearly defined political stance, well aware, too, of his responsibilities towards his community, were trying to justify an urge that draws him into the opposite direction. No longer a servant of any cause, he wants to live for his art, to find fulfilment as a poet. But this artistic freedom is just as illusory as unconditional commitment would be fatal. "The desire for some abstract, artistic liberation is a recurrent and sympathetic yen; but by implication it is always rejected in the end because it is a lower thing than artistic conscientiousness" (13).

Heaney himself has recently argued that

Art must earn its keep by keeping itself allied to conscience and reality. Art certainly has to do with gardens growing, with wonder, with suns and bells and white cities, but unless you earn your right to walk in that garden, you are not going to bring back much from it that will be worthwhile. (14)

Though Heaney has long found the solution to this dilemma, he has an almost morbid need to justify his decision and thus Station Island is above all an apologia for his poetry. The ghosts he encounters accuse him of betraying his tribe or of neglecting his art, and he defends himself against both accusations.

The theme of Station Island is not new in Heaney's

13 Bernard O'Donoghue, Singing Responsibly, p.57.

14 Seamus Heaney, On Irish Expressionist Painting, p.39.

poetry. Neither is the use of voices as counsellors. The voices of the dead were obviously inspired by Dante's Purgatorio. Dante had already been a model for Heaney in poems such as The Strand at Lough Beg, Ugolino and Sandstone Keepsake. Station Island itself appeared in an earlier, as yet uncollected poem, Saint Patrick's Stone (15). It is quite unlike the later sequence in that it focuses on the legend of St Patrick, who is said to have been fasting and praying on the island for a week. The final lines of the poem announce a critical attitude to the pilgrimage Heaney himself made three times:

And pilgrims never bother
To find if the legend's true;
It serves their end by being
What pilgrims would like to do.

Station Island is situated

on Lough Derg in Co. Donegal. The island is also known as St Patrick's Purgatory because of a tradition that Patrick was the first to establish the penitential vigil of fasting and praying which still constitutes the basis of the three-day pilgrimage. Each unit of the contemporary pilgrim's exercises is called a 'station', and a large part of each station involves walking barefoot and praying round the 'beds', stone circles which are said to be the remains of early medieval monastic cells. (SI, p.122)

On Station Island Heaney meets the ghosts of friends, acquaintances and literary models. These meetings are highly significant because "the revenants are advisers from beyond the grave, on the poet's responsibilities in the realms of morality and of art" (16). Heaney himself wrote in the PBS-Bulletin:

15 Published in Outposts 65 (Summer 1965), p.3.

16 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.160.

The pilgrim's journey, its patterns of withdrawal and return, its encounters with people and memories, its moods of self-examination and re-dedication, offers a way of dramatizing contradictory awarenesses. The world which formed the protagonist and the world he now inhabits exert conflicting pressures and these pressures manifest themselves in the voices and visitations he experiences at different points in the sequence. (17)

In the first of his dream-visions, the poet is still on his way to Station Island. It is Sunday and he sees a man who is sawing at hazel bushes. That "Sabbath-breaker" is Simon Sweeney, a member "of a family of tinkers ... who used to camp in the ditchbacks along the road to the first school I attended" (SWA, p.viii). Sweeney was an intriguing figure, a "mystery man" enjoying a tinker's freedom, a man who both fascinated and frightened him, a man who chose not to respect conventions that forbade him to work on a Sunday. When a procession of "shawled women" moves past, Heaney is once again caught midway, between the outsider and the tribe, those "half-remembered faces" (18). Despite Sweeney's advice

'Stay clear of all processions!'

17 Seamus Heaney, Pilgrim's Journey, p.3. In Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet, he writes of his "attempt at a sequence of poems which would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country. The main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped that I could dramatize these strains 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 recognize those claims. They could probe the validity of one's commitment." (Quoted by Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.160.)

18 Corcoran, ibid., p.161, notes that the line "the field was full / of half-remembered faces" echoes a line from Langland's Piers Plowman ("A faire felde ful of folke fonde I there bytwene", 1.17) and thus puts the poem into a tradition of dream-visions.

he joins the congregation and slips easily, a little too easily perhaps, into the "drugged path / I was set upon". The power of the orthodoxy is stronger than the warning of the non-conformist Sweeney. It is difficult for the individual to keep apart: the "quick" bells' authoritative summoning, the familiarity of the faces, the mesmerizing "murmur of the crowd" and the "drugged path" draw the poet into the procession, "numbing the obedient conscience" (19). He becomes one of the "patient debilitated tribe" (20).

After the encounter with the non-conformist, Heaney meets the renegade. William Carleton was born in 1794 at Prillisk, Co.Tyrone, the son of Catholic farmers. He is best-known for his novel Fardorougha, the Miser. Carleton renounced Catholicism, denouncing its barbarities and superstitions in his first published work The Lough Derg Pilgrim. In his article A Tale of Two Islands Heaney argues that it was "Carleton's financial desperation that led him up the perhaps orange-peel strewn stairs of an office to write anti-Papist propaganda for the Reverend Caesar Otway" (21), and he quotes from one of Carleton's stories:

But that which was strangest of all, and, as I said before, without a parallel in this world, was the impression and effect produced by the deep, drowsy, hollow, hoarse, guttural, ceaseless, and monotonous hum which proceeded from about four hundred individuals half asleep and at prayer. ... Such a noise has something so powerfully lulling, that human nature, even excited by the terrible suggestions of

19 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.164.

20 Seamus Heaney, A Tale of Two Islands, p.11.

21 *ibid.*, p.12.

superstitious fear, was scarcely able to withstand it (22).

This passage may have inspired the "murmur of the crowd" in section I. The writer Heaney meets on the road to Station Island is "determined", "sure", challenging. The poet finds himself

face to face with an aggravated man
raving on about nights spent listening for
gun butts to come cracking on the door,
yeomen on the rampage, and his neighbour
among them, hammering home the shape of things.

After joining the Established Church, Carleton had to be wary of his Catholic neighbours. They might not need much encouragement to come and punish him for his betrayal. Carleton's ghost condemns his former co-religionists' violent intolerance. Heaney admits that he once read Carleton's book and that it left him with a feeling of unease. Nonetheless he has decided to return to Station Island "to do the station". Carleton exclaims disapprovingly:

'O holy Jesus Christ, does nothing change?'
He refuses to join Heaney on that road and then proceeds to justify his action:

I who learned to read in the reek of flax
and smelled hanged bodies rotting on their gibbets
and saw their looped slime gleaming from the sacks -
hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots
made me into the old fork-tongued turncoat
who mucked the byre of their politics.

This is the complaint of a disappointed, disillusioned man. Educated in a hedge-school, he came across the victims of sectarian murders (23) and learnt that both

22 From Wildgoose Lodge and Other Stories, quoted by Heaney in *ibid.*, p.11.

23 "Carleton saw the gibbeted bodies of Ribbonmen hanging by the roads of County

Catholics and Protestants can be uncompromising and intolerant, the Ribbonmen (24) stubborn and obstinate, the Orangemen bigoted. The realization that one side was as bad as the other made Carleton look after his own welfare and be contemptuous of sectarian politics. He became "the old fork-tongued turncoat" in order to survive.

He hopes the story of his life may serve as a lesson for Heaney. He has lost all idealism; hard times have made him hard, too. Therefore he is worried by the poet's "defensive" attitude. He advises political awareness:

you have to try to make sense of what comes.
Remember everything and keep your head.

Heaney, however, admits:

'I have no mettle for the angry role.'

The Ribbonmen of his day are different from their ancestors: the brotherhood has become a band of vainglorious drunkards, "frail", "obedient", playing "hymns to Mary". Such is Heaney's background: not radicalism, the "unforgiving iron / the Fenians strung", but the harmless folklore of the Ribbonmen. Unlike Carleton, Heaney accepted the poor consolations his tribe could offer: pilgrimages, farm-work, dances, conversations. The "Orange drums" and the "neighbours on the roads at night with guns" were borne patiently and failed to rouse the tribe to action. To Carleton's almost desperate appeal for a political

Lough while he hunted for a post as a hedge-schoolmaster." Ibid., p.12.

24 The Ribbonmen were a Catholic secret society in 19th century Ireland. "The peasants had formed their own underground conspiracies to mete out rough justice to unjust landlords, harsh agents, or land-grabbing fellow-tenants. Ribbonmen, to use the collective name often applied to these violent products of rural tension, had quite naturally attracted ecclesiastical condemnation, since it had led all too often to murder and every kind of bestial brutality." (F.S.L.Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, London: Fontana, 1982, p.129.) The Ribbon Societies were precursors of the IRB.

analysis the poet opposes images of farm life:

'The alders in the hedge,' I said, 'mushrooms,
dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dunged,
the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open
in your hand.'

Carleton regards such a rustic life as an attempt to escape from a harsh reality. Heaney's rural childhood is part of his background but he also has to face the sectarian issue. Every man is the result of all his contradictory awarenesses:

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

Heaney ought to realize that there can be no return to the innocence of his early verse (the stanza quoted above reads like a poem from DEATH OF A NATURALIST), that he must become (or remain) politically conscious and refuse to put up with the bigotry and intolerance that are so characteristic of Northern Irish politics. Simon Sweeney's warning is given added weight by William Carleton, who advises Heaney to stay clear of orthodoxies, to distance himself from the tribe because only critical honesty, untainted by emotional attachments, holds the promise of redemption. Both Sweeney and Carleton had to pay a high price for their independence: they became outsiders and renegades.

Heaney's criticism of the Catholic Church becomes even more severe in the next two poems. In section III, set on Station Island itself, he has returned to an atmosphere of prayer, confession and penitence. He has a vision of a "seaside trinket", elaborately decorated with shells and pearls. It brings back the memory of the little girl who owned it (25). Heaney re-experiences the feelings he used

25 The girl was actually Heaney's father's sister Agnes, who died of tuberculosis in 1920 (cf. Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.161).

to have when he secretly took the trinket out of the sideboard where it had been stowed away. He felt a strange fascination bordering on reverence. The fate of its owner made him scared he, too, could die of an illness. He remembers the superstitions that went with the trinket and his guilt at the sacrilege of "robbing the nest". His family "hardly ever spoke" of the deceased; her death was a taboo and thus the boy never developed a natural attitude towards death.

For the adult the relic is no longer a consolation, it cannot assuage his sense of emptiness ("a space utterly empty") and loss. Orthodox Catholicism refuses to face the cruel reality of death illustrated by

the bad carcass and scraggs of hair
of our dog that had disappeared weeks before.

The contrast between the mythological holy dying and the crude horror of real death is striking. The transfiguration of death practised by the Catholic faith is ludicrous in the context of contemporary Ulster.

Heaney always seems to hear warning voices when he is about to commit himself to the faith. First it was Simon Sweeney, then Carleton, who wanted to prevent him from going on the pilgrimage. Then the sense of emptiness he experienced made him feel the inadequacy of religious consolation. In this section he is ready to renounce worldliness, the necessary prerequisite to repentance, but his renunciation is thwarted by the vision of a young priest, Terry Keenan, whom Heaney knew when he was still a clerical student and who died on the foreign mission shortly after his ordination (26).

26 This and similar information about some of the characters appearing in the Station

The priest's stole is "tied loosely" and his shoes look "unexpectedly secular". Heaney compares him to
an old bicycle wheel in a ditch
ripped at last from under jungling briars,
wet and perished.

This simile throws a revealing light on the priest's function in Irish society. Keenan is a man used by the Church, exhausted by his work, exploited and thrown away into the jungle to rot and die. Heaney's criticism of the way the clerical hierarchy deals with its recruits is harsh. His compassion is vivid and so is his grief at the priest's sufferings.

Keenan reports that his work soon began to seem absurd to him. He could not survive in the jungle:

'Everything wasted.
I rotted like a pear. I sweated masses...
...
On that abandoned
mission compound, my vocation
is a steam off drenched creepers.'

To Heaney he appears like "some sort of holy mascot", "doomed to the decent thing". The combination of the words "doomed" and "decent" implies that the decent thing, obeisance to the laws of the tribe or the Church, involves self-sacrifice. Heaney, like Joyce in section XII, advises more selfishness, less devotion to the common cause. He respects the priest's commitment but it seems that the faithful are more interested in their "kitchen grottoes / hung with holy pictures and crucifixes" than in the actual humanitarian work of the priests. The hierarchy prefers a sheepish irrational devotion to

Island sequence is quoted by Neil Corcoran in his study of Seamus Heaney from a conversation he had with the poet in Dublin on 5th and 6th July 1985.

a critical but honest and enlightened faith. Carleton's condemnation of the superstition of the Church is proved right when the well-meaning priest fails in his quixotic fight against primitive piety. "Irish clericalism thwarts the lives of those who represent it, and bolsters the platitudinous pieties of those it 'serves'" (27).

Heaney has grasped what is wrong with the Church. But, of course, his intellectual awareness is at odds with what he is actually doing. His scepticism, sparked off by these visions, cannot be reconciled with his pilgrimage, with his clinging to old rituals in spite of his better knowledge. Keenan reproaches him:

'And you,' he faltered, 'what are you doing here
but the same thing? What possessed you?
I at least was young and unaware

that what I thought was chosen was convention.
But all this you were clear of you walked into
over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn.

Religion is seen as a kind of brain-washing here. It is a convention, something you adhere to not because you want to but because it is the "decent" thing to do. The young priest was too inexperienced to realize that at the time, but now he can feel the emptiness, the abandonment in a world without God. He has lost his faith: God has become "the god" and he has "withdrawn". He cannot understand what made Heaney return to Station Island but his assumption that he has come to say good-bye could be correct. The poet is no longer a believer, he has become a visitor seeking support for his decision to break free from the constraints of the Church, which limit the individual's freedom and prevent him from being responsible only to himself.

The priest is the sad wreck of a man who failed to rebel against the establishment. From a sense of misunderstood decency he let himself be manipulated for ideas that were not his. He betrayed his individual soul in the service of an anachronistic institution, he lost himself, as Joyce puts it in the final section. He thus stands as a warning to Heaney.

His old schoolmaster, Barney Murphy, is walking in front of the poet in section V. Heaney remembers episodes from his schooldays and notices how frail, old and exhausted the teacher has become. By contrast the surrounding nature is in full bloom:

Morning field smells came past on the wind,
the sex-cut of sweetbriar after rain,
new-mown meadow hay, bird's nests filled with leaves.

The implication is that Heaney's schooldays, represented by Master Murphy, are irretrievably over. He must look forward and not go back. A return to the past is also made impossible by the fact that Anahorish School has disappeared:

Birch trees have overgrown Leitrim Moss,
dairy herds are grazing where the school was
and the school garden's loose black mould is grass.

Such melancholic nostalgia offers no perspective to the poet. Once again he finds himself in a position that has become typical of him on this pilgrimage: he is "faced the wrong way". Yet the past still has its attractions - Heaney remembers his early morning walks to school with pleasure, and the monotonous recital of Latin declensions has the same appeal as the murmur of the women in section I.

Heaney then meets another mentor, who remains unnamed, but who might be Michael McLaverty, his former headmaster.

In Fosterage McLaverty quoted Katherine Mansfield and advised the poet to be attentive to details:

Coming in as usual
with the rubbed quotation and his cocked bird's eye
dabbing for detail.

He tells Heaney that "feeling, and / in particular, love" are the great inspiring forces of verse. This plea for private emotional poetry is another element in the discussion of poetical responsibilities. The poet is advised to learn from other people, something he has always done by comparing his own experience to that of other writers.

The third "fosterer" is a poet to whose work Heaney was introduced by Michael McLaverty and who became one of his most admired models, Patrick Kavanagh. In 1942, Kavanagh had written his poem Lough Derg about a similar pilgrimage (28). He deplores that in 42 years there has been no progress. Heaney has "got no farther" than he did. He understands, however, the motives for Heaney's quest, his search for an answer to the questions that harass him. After all,

He too was one of them. He too denied
The half of him that was his pride
Yet found it waiting. (29)

With his typical irony Kavanagh undercuts the seriousness of the pilgrimage when he tells Heaney that in the old days some pilgrims had very profane reasons to go to Station Island:

In my own day
the odd one came here on the hunt for women. (30)

28 Published posthumously in Peter Kavanagh (ed.), November Haggard - Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh, New York: Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971, pp.117-35.

29 *ibid.*, p.135.

30 This line echoes a passage from Kavanagh's The Green Fool, Harmondsworth: Penguin,

A young red-haired girl, his first love, is the next revenant from the past. As children this girl and Heaney used to play together, games that were redolent of undiscovered sexuality. Momentarily this "wish wished / And gone" becomes stronger than the appeal of the basilica in front of which he is standing now. He remembers how they were lying

Uncovered among dunes where the bent grass
Whispers,

but it is with unexpected suddenness that this happy memory turns into a nightmare which drowns innocence in feelings of guilt and shame:

Secrets, secrets. I shut my ears to the bell.
Head hugged. Eyes shut. Leaf ears. Don't tell. Don't tell.

The fact that the adult can still be overwhelmed by this fear verging on panic shows how strong those feelings must have been in the child. Lying naked in the grass with a girl was considered a grave sin. One can imagine what moral pangs the boy must have suffered afterwards, with what a guilty conscience he went to church and to confession.

Heaney accuses orthodox Catholicism of turning a child's innocent sexual curiosity into indecent lechery, of fostering shame, guilt and self-hatred in a boy too young to judge for himself. No wonder that the adult shuts his ears to the bells, that he turns back once again, no longer hesitating but firmly walking away from the basilica:

A stream of pilgrims answering the bell
Trailed up the steps as I went down them.

1975, pp.53-4: "All the vicinity of the Well was packed with pilgrims. Like the mediaeval pilgrims very probably; some were going round on their bare knees making the stations, some others were doing a bit of courting under the pilgrim cloak."

The shadow of an oak tree reminds him of the Sabine farm which Maecenas bestowed on Horace (31). Perhaps Heaney was also thinking of the Sabines, the Italian tribe whose women were abducted by the Romans in the time of Romulus (32). He waits for Phoebus Apollo, god of the sun, poetry and wine, to disperse the cold night that the strictness and puritanism of the Church have brought over his heart (33). Painful memories come up of the time he spent in repentance for his sin with "long virgin / Fasts and thirsts", times when he abhorred his own fantasies that turned bags of grain and forks and hoes into sexual symbols, times when he lusted for female breasts and was torn between his own repressed sexuality and the chastity demanded by the faith.

This interior agonizing went on for years:

As if I knelt for years at a keyhole
Mad for it, and all that ever opened
Was the breathed-on grille of a confessional,

until he was finally given release through an experience of true sexual fulfilment. All his fears, all his shame and guilt were then washed away by a woman's love. Sexual initiation and ecstasy came like a revelation, a breaking of old chains, the discovery of a new world of bliss:

31 Horace "was present on the losing side at the battle of Philippi, but obtained his pardon and returned to Rome; here he became the friend of Maecenas, who bestowed on him a Sabine farm." Paul Harvey, The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford: OUP, 1967, p.398. The Sabine farm represents a haven of peace where the poet cannot be disturbed by the claims of tribe and Church.

32 There is a grain of truth in this legend of the Rape of the Sabines. According to Michael Grant, Myths of the Greeks and Romans, New York: Mentor Books, 1962, p. 315, "the Romans were the descendants not only of a Latin community settled on the Palatine, but also of Sabine communities on other hills later incorporated in the city. ... As far as can be judged, the inhabitants on the various hills joined one another by gradual and peaceful means, presumably through intermarriage." Does Heaney envisage this process as a possible model for a reconciliation of the two communities in Ulster?

33 The quotation is from Horace's Odes, Book III, xxi, 24, as Heaney acknowledges in his notes (SI, p.122).

a window facing the deep south of luck
Opened and I inhaled the land of kindness.

The quote from Dante (34) confirms the vision of love as the sun that breathes new life into the young man's languishing soul.

To the criticism of the Church in the previous sections, Heaney here adds another that is now generally recognized as one of its worst faults: the repression of natural sexuality and the creation of a guilt complex in "sinners", with its consequences of unhappiness, despair, neurosis and hypocrisy. In Ireland, next to Poland the most Catholic country in Europe, the influence of the Church must have been much more devastating in this respect, much more inhibiting to the free expansion of the individual and the satisfaction of his needs, than elsewhere. There is no doubt that sexual frustration is partly responsible for some of the evils in Irish society, not least for its violence.

Two victims of violence speak to the poet in the next two sections. The first is an old friend of Heaney's, William Strathearn, a shopkeeper killed by two off-duty RUC-men in Co. Antrim.

After the religious turmoil of the preceding sections Heaney retires to the beach in search of inner peace, looking at the water "as if it were a clear barometer / or a mirror" of his emotional condition. He hears the voice of his dead friend and when he sees him he is shocked by the mutilations inflicted upon this victim of sectarian murder.

34 Dante, Inferno, Canto II, 127-32. Cf. Heaney's notes (SI, p.122).

Strathearn tells him about his death: the killers came at night, waking him from sleep on the pretext that a child was ill and needed medicine. The shopkeeper, at first cautious and made wary by the nightly disturbance, is implored by his wife, who senses danger, not to open. Although the two men are known to him, he is not reassured. He goes downstairs, "weak in the legs", opens the door and "from then on / you know as much about it as I do".

This narrative of fourteen and a half stanzas is Heaney's most detailed attempt to date to describe what may be going on in the mind of a man who suspects he is about to be murdered. He had briefly speculated about this in The Strand at Lough Beg, but in this section of Station Island every detail underlines the unscrupulousness of the assassins and the humility of their victim. The killers are not even ashamed of their crime: they wear no masks, show their faces openly as if they were proud of what they are doing (35). The fact that the criminals were caught and tried is no consolation for Heaney's dead friend.

Perhaps the most repulsive aspect of this murder is the fact that the victim is once again a thoroughly good man: compassionate, "decent, open-faced", a friendly smiling person whom Heaney still remembers as an athletic football player, a member of his team. Why did they kill him, Heaney seems to ask, why this man who never did any

35 The line "shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all" stresses the murderers' arrogance, but it may also be an allusion to Macbeth, I, vii, 4-5: "that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all", as if they hoped against hope that they could discontinue the chain of atrocities with a final murder. The cruel cynicism with which they proceed does hardly support such an interpretation, though.

harm to anybody? He is

the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim.

There have been countless meaningless murders like this one, people shot at random, people "punished" for absurd offences: Colum McCartney, Sean Armstrong, Louis O'Neill, to mention but a few for whom Heaney has written elegies. Once again he has a sense of failure, of having committed a sacrilege by making poetry about these murders instead of condemning them more vigorously:

Forgive the way I have lived indifferent -
forgive my timid circumspect involvement.

He is ashamed of the obliqueness of his reaction, of his tendency to evade the crude realities and render these deaths less repulsive by adorning them with analogies and metaphors. Poems are his "seaside trinkets". He should perhaps have been more explicit instead of retiring behind the protective colouring of his art. He should have had the courage to commit himself openly, to get involved for the sake of these innocent victims instead of choosing a stance that now seems to him like indifference to their fate.

Strathearn does not care for these self-reproaches. All that is beyond him, it is too abstract a problem for him to understand and so Heaney is left alone again. His attempt to feel with the victims, his striving to find an appropriate response to the killings is thwarted by the simple fact that he is not a victim. He is one of the lucky survivors. Like Chekhov on Sakhalin, like himself on Inishowen, he feels left out. He does not suffer the "stun of pain" that goes through Strathearn before he disappears.

Heaney's guilty conscience about his lack of involvement is to his credit but his self-reproaches are unfounded. After all, he is a poet, not a politician. One would prefer him to have a less gloomy outlook because "one also begins to weary of Heaney's obsessive guilt" (36).

The self-accusatory mood is brought to a (provisional) climax at the next station where Heaney meets the ghost of Tom Delaney, an archaeologist friend of his, who died aged 32. He does not specify the circumstances of this death but it seems as if Delaney succumbed to some fatal illness.

A standard feature of these poems is the gap between Heaney and his visions, a gap caused by the "unspoken pain" he cannot share. A pilgrim passes between the poet and his friend as if to emphasize that they are on different sides of the barrier that separates the living from the dead, the lucky from the unfortunate.

Heaney apologizes for his behaviour when he last went to see Delaney in hospital. The cold functionalism of the machinery scared him and he escaped back to Dublin,

guilty and empty, feeling I had said nothing
and that, as usual, I had somehow broken
covenants, and failed an obligation.

These lines have to be seen in the context of Heaney's visit at the hospital, but on a more general level they are an adequate description of his feelings about his poetry, his guilt, his unease, the sense of failure that

36 Tall, *op.cit.*, p.481.

Derwent May, in One Feels the Iron Swerving Out of Control, p.53, writes: "The subject-matter of this new collection is explicitly doubt, hesitation, guilt. ... One emotion that seems especially overworked here is guilt."

come out again and again in his verse. "Heaney is here to confess his disloyalties, his failure to be politically committed, his aesthetic waverings and much else" (37). The poet has responsibilities towards his art and towards his people; his realization that he cannot be exclusively loyal to either without betraying the other has led to this anxious self-examination and the need for atonement.

Delaney remembers the treasures he unearthed and he has not forgotten that in order to reach the remains of the Gaelic culture he had to dig through layers of soil recalling less happy times:

Why else dig in for years in that hard place
in a muck of bigotry under the walls
picking through shards and Williamite cannon balls?

Here it is again - the earth as a living store-house of the past, as it appeared in WINTERING OUT and NORTH. Delaney, however, is more concerned about his own untimely death and he asks the poet the embarrassing question:

Ah poet, lucky poet, tell me why
what seemed deserved and promised passed me by?

Such a question is bound to make Heaney feel guilty about his own good luck. Why did he survive? Why was he successful whereas others, less fortunate, failed or died?

In the second half of the poem, Heaney associates the "black / basalt axe heads" his friend dug out with hand-grenades, "the eggs of danger", and the plaster cast of an abbess metamorphoses into

a bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud.

This is Colum McCartney, Heaney's second cousin, the object of the rite of healing in The Strand at Lough Beg.

37 Morrison, Encounters with Familiar Ghosts, p.1192.

McCartney accuses Heaney of socializing with his poet-friends at Jerpoint on the Sunday he was murdered:

You were there with poets when you got the word
and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood
was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews.
They showed more agitation at the news
than you did.

Indifference, disregard of his obligations, lack of concern and decency - these are the points of McCartney's indignant accusation. The poet half-heartedly tries to defend himself, arguing that for him the murder was neither an exciting "crisis / first-hand", nor a rare opportunity to hear of "live sectarian assassination", but something he had been dreading for a long time:

I was dumb, encountering what was destined.

He was stunned, deeply shocked, and silent suffering seemed more dignified a response than bewailing. In a way he had always known that this could happen to one of his kin one day and now that his worst fears have come true, he is aware of that sense of emptiness that is so prominent in Station Island:

I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake.

Not for one moment does he envisage the possibility of rebelling against his destiny. Sorrow and sadness are his lot, apparently, and he humbly accepts it. McCartney, however, and thus the part of Heaney's temperament for which he speaks, rejects this response as totally inadequate. It is defeatist, inhuman even:

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.

Obviously, Heaney is not satisfied with the compromise between art and politics he has settled for. He "wants the communication of suffering to involve the exhilaration of art" (38), as he once wrote of Robert Lowell, but his more radical, more political temper, through the voice of McCartney, urges him to take a stance, to be openly committed. Heaney's poems make those murders more bearable by associating them with myths and rituals. That process can be criticized as "evasion", as a "saccharining" of cruel realities. The vision of the seashell trinket of section II is still hovering at the back of Heaney's mind.

There is no doubt that this self-accusation is a kind of necessary purification. The poet has second thoughts about having, as it were, transformed the murder of his cousin into a rite of healing and he "now finds it necessary to revise earlier states of mind" (39). He "seemed to waken out of sleep" into an awareness of his obligations towards his tribe. This awareness made him write the next poem, which is about a hunger-striker (40).

38 Seamus Heaney, Prospero in Agony, p.22.

39 Douglas Dunn, Heaney Agonistes, p.93.

40 At this point it may be useful to have a brief look at the political evolution in Ulster between 1979 and 1982. During his visit to Ireland in September/October 1979 Pope John Paul II prayed for peace and reconciliation and called upon the extremists to renounce terrorism. On 9th July 1980 the new Conservative British Government set a signal by abolishing the practice of internment without trial, but refused to comply with the demands of imprisoned IRA terrorists. On 1st March 1981 Bobby Sands began a hungerstrike in the Maze prison and was quickly joined by other IRA members. The Catholic minority sympathized with the hunger-strikers and elected Sands MP for Fermanagh-Tyrone on April 9th, 1981. The British Government remained uncompromising. The death of Bobby Sands on 5th May led to a new outbreak of violence in the North. The local elections that year showed growing support for

The hunger-striker of section IX is Francis Hughes, "who came from Heaney's own district, Bellaghy, and whose family he knows" (41). In the first stanza the prisoner describes the effect the fasting had on him:

My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach
Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked.

He hides under his blanket (42) and in his hallucinations past and present merge into one blurred nightmarish vision. He remembers the countryside around Bellaghy he knew so well as a child (43), then he sees himself being driven to the scene of his crime, lying in ambush, taking aim. He recalls how "the bomb flash / Came before the sound". Police dogs tracked him down and, finally,

When the police yielded my coffin, I was light
As my head when I took aim.

This surrealistic kaleidoscope of memories, the product of a delirious mind, yet reflects a strange determination that is not unlike a missionary's quiet but firm certitude. This is a man who knows what he is doing, who, unlike Heaney, has no doubts about his action.

the radical parties (the Republican Sinn Féin and the Loyalist DUP). The IRA intensified its bombing campaign and extended it to London where ten people died on 20th July when bombs exploded in Regent's Park and Hyde Park. The hungerstrike ended officially on 3rd October 1981 after ten of the prisoners had died.

In the same year Mrs Thatcher and the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald had talks which led to the creation of an Anglo-Irish Council. On 20th October 1982 elections were held for Stormont (suspended in 1972), but they did not give a working majority to any party or coalition. Between 1969 and 1982 a total of 2245 persons were killed and about 25600 injured in the Troubles.

41 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.162.

42 One of the prisoners' demands was that they should be allowed to wear civilian clothes. They refused the prison clothes they were given, preferring to cover themselves only with a blanket.

43 Glenshane is situated in Co.Derry half-way between Dungiven and Maghera, about 12 miles north-west of Bellaghy.

The poet, asleep or drowsing in the dormitory of the pilgrim's hostel, remembers the funeral: the laying out of the corpse, the IRA firing party's "volley in the yard", the coffin. He feels a sort of tenderness for this "unquiet soul" (44):

Unquiet soul, they should have buried you
In the bog where you threw your first grenade.

In the womb of Mother Earth Hughes might finally have found peace. Maybe Heaney also had the resurrective power of the bog-myth in mind when he wrote these lines. The dead hunger-striker as an offering to some mythological goddess, as a sacrifice to Kathleen ni Houlihan - is this not yet another attempt to shun the reality of death, to "saccharine" Hughes's pain?

In the next stanza Heaney's visions grow more and more surreal as he drifts into sleep. One idea is central to his dream: his "softly awash and blanching self-disgust" which materializes as a polyp. The poet is shocked into repentance:

I repent
My unweaned life that kept me competent
To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.

Heaney regrets that he has not managed to free himself from the constraints of the tribe. He is a sleepwalker, "adrift" between "connivance", toleration of sectarian violence, and "mistrust" of his art. He has to find his own way, to become aware of his own possibilities. He must define his own stance, realize his own ambitions, be responsible above all to himself. These thoughts bring

44 The manner in which he addresses the dead hunger-striker recalls his tenderness towards the girls in Punishment and Strange Fruit.

up the vision of a lighted candle illuminating a kind of vessel that is no longer passively adrift, but rides the waves, steers its own course:

My feet touched bottom and my heart revived.

The decision to control his "powerful formative influences and experiences" (45) instead of letting himself be controlled by them, distinguishes him from the dead hunger-striker. Heaney pities the martyr, he has a certain degree of respect for him, but on the whole he does not approve of his action. Blind loyalty and total obedience to the tribe can destroy the individual. Heaney is not prepared to sacrifice his personality. In this respect, as in so many others, he is a moderate and he has understood that unconditional devotion to a cause is obtained at the cost of self-annihilation. He refuses to be a piece of driftwood carried along by the current.

In a new vision he sees an old brass trumpet he found when he was a child. What does it symbolize, this treasure he once thought was beyond him - the freedom of art? The possibility of finding a voice of his own? An instrument of liberty? With this vision still very much alive, Heaney wakes up to the sound of bells and hears other pilgrims at their morning wash. Orthodox Catholicism is

Still there for the taking!

but the poet turns away from religion to the values of artistic freedom, symbolized by the trumpet.

In the following lines Heaney repeats his earlier rejection of the values of the tribe in a rather angry outburst:

45 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.164.

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

Heaney's sense of place is a double-bladed sword. To know where one belongs can be positive: it conveys a sense of identity, establishes a continuity with the past, personal and communal. But it also limits the freedom of the individual, inhibits true self-fulfilment. The poet is both

Lulled and repelled by his own reflection,
by his docility, and so we see him once again torn between conflicting loyalties. He would like to break free but such a step is formidable, perhaps impossible:

As if the cairnstone could defy the cairn.
As if the eddy could reform the pool.
As if a stone swirled under a cascade,
Eroded and eroding in its bed,
Could grind itself down to a different core.

It thus seems that he cannot deny the part of his temperament that complies, that he is doomed to remain chained to the tribe. Yet, in the last two lines, a note of optimism is set against such fatalism:

Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail
For they keep dancing till they sight the deer.

Heaney hopes that if he goes on writing poetry he may one day chance upon the correct note, that he will find a way out of his dilemma (or realize that he has long found it without accepting it as such). "At the bottom I think that probably patience is the best virtue" (46), he once told John Haffenden, and patience he must have.

This section of Station Island rejects total submission to either the tribe or the Church and professes

46 Haffenden, *op.cit.*, p.60.

personal and poetical freedom. Heaney is not so naive as to believe that such a liberation is easy to obtain. Old loyalties and responsibilities are still strong, but the poem ends with the hope that a satisfactory compromise between tribal solidarity and personal expansion, between political awareness and artistic self-realization can be achieved.

Section X deals with an old mug the poet remembers from his childhood days. It is "beyond my reach", both physically (the boy cannot reach it) and figuratively, because it cannot be recovered now, because it represents some aspiration of his he is unable to fulfil.

In Heaney's memory the mug is invested with the magic of lares, Roman household gods, protectors of hearth and home. On one occasion only was it out of the house, when it was lent to some actors to be used during a performance. The ordinary household mug became a "loving cup" in that play and the young Heaney was deeply impressed by this imaginary transformation. There is a sense of disappointment when the curtains are closed "with an ordinary noise" and the mug is finally returned to its owners, ordinary again, divested of its magic:

Dipped and glamoured from this translation,
it was restored with all its cornflower haze
still dozing, its parchment glazes fast -

The poet associates the return of the mug with the miraculous recovery of Ronan's psalter (47). It represents the possibility of transcending the ordinary and

47 Ronan's psalter had been thrown into the lough by Sweeney, this being one of the reasons for the curse that turned him into a bird (cf. SWA, stanzas 4-6, pp.4-6).

giving it heightened value and meaning through art. Thus banal objects can be what they actually are (a mug is a mug is a mug) but the imagination can transform them temporarily into something much more brilliant, just as if the "loving cup" were "dozing" inside the mug, waiting for the artist to release it from a spell. The transformation is temporary, though; a definitive escape into a world of make-believe remains illusory. But in the drab world of reality, the imagination can be a source of enlightenment and release:

The dazzle of the impossible suddenly
blazed across the threshold, a sun-glare
to put out the small hearths of constancy.

Such moments of "sun-glare", of a sudden recognition of beauty in ordinariness, of epiphany, are exceptional. Heaney is nevertheless fascinated by the way new meanings can be given to things by transforming or translating them. This is shown in section XI.

The image of the kaleidoscope plunged into the water and resurfacing just like Ronan's psalter links this section with the preceding one. In the kaleidoscope Heaney perceives the face of a monk to whom he once made his confession. This monk told him

about the need and chance
to salvage everything, to re-envisage
the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift
mistakenly abased...

What came to nothing could always be replenished.

Just as the household mug became a "loving cup", just as Ronan's psalter was given the halo of sanctity when it was returned unharmed from the lough, just as the kaleidoscope seemed "like a marvellous lightship", anything can be transformed and magnified. The imagination "salva-

ges" the "jewels" from ordinariness, it recognizes majesty in triviality. Poems are no exception and one way of salvaging a forgotten poem, perhaps even from a foreign culture, is to translate it, to present it to a wider than its original audience and maybe invest it with new shades of meaning in a new context. Dante's Ugolino, the etching from Goya's Caprichos mentioned in Summer 1969, the bog corpses, Sweeney, and Chekhov's visit to Sakhalin have been given new relevance in the context of contemporary Ulster by Heaney's poetry.

It is quite appropriate, therefore, for the monk, who has recently returned from Spain, to ask Heaney to do penance by translating a poem by St John of the Cross (48). The poem is "Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fé" (Song of the Soul at Rest Because It Knows God Through Faith, 49). Heaney follows the monk's advice to read poems as prayers - Juan de la Cruz's original is actually a prayer in poetic form. In Heaney's translation, though, the refrain "although it is the night" ("aunque es de noche" in the original) becomes ambivalent. San Juan wants to express the idea that his soul is at rest in the knowledge of God; it finds security and comfort in the certainty that God exists. His praise of "aquella eterna fonte" / "that eternal fountain", i.e. God, is reminiscent of the evocations in a litany. The night in San Juan's prayer may be the actual darkness that cannot harm him because of his faith, or some metaphorical darkness (illness, disgrace, temptation)

48 San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591), a Carmelite friar, was a Spanish mystic and poet.

49 My translation.

or even the darkness of life itself he can easily cope with because of his belief in the eternal light after death. In the context of Heaney's pilgrimage, however, the night is above all an absence - the absence of light. His faith is no longer a comfort for him, it does not lighten the darkness. The poet finds himself alone and in doubt, searching in vain for a light to guide him.

Religion is no such guide, it offers no practicable solutions to him, but in the final section,

Like a convalescent, I took the hand
stretched down from the jetty.

The man who helps the poet step back onto the mainland is the last of his visions on this pilgrimage, James Joyce, who starts lecturing him on his obligations:

Your obligation
is not discharged by any common rite.
What you must do must be done on your own
so get back in harness. The main thing is to write
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust
that imagines its haven like your hands at night
dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.
You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.
Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,
let others wear the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget.
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.

Joyce's advice is unequivocal: he tells Heaney to keep clear of any obligations he may believe to have. He recommends "a course opposed to tribal and local fidelities" (50), answerable only to the call of art. The pilgrimage to Station Island has shown Heaney the dangers of commitment to a Church and a tribe denying the self full expansion of its faculties in an atmosphere of free-

50 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.167.

dom and tolerance. Of such political and religious influences he is now "fasted", "cleansed of ideological constraints" (51), "light-headed". This should be the starting-point for a new approach to his work, more selfish, less disinterested. Poetry should be its own justification. Heaney should "write / for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust", as Joyce himself did. The great novelist does not value Heaney's so-called responsibilities towards his tribe very highly. The poet is neither a martyr nor a scapegoat. Heaney has no reason to feel guilty about his detachment. Joyce advises him to rise above his obligations and concentrate on his work (52).

Heaney experiences a sense of relief because his own inclination towards artistic detachment is finally being confirmed and justified by Joyce's authoritative voice.

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

Reassured and refreshed both by Joyce's words and by the regenerative power of the rain, Heaney remembers an episode from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man which left a deep impression on him. An entry in Stephen's diary for 13th April was like a "revelation" to him,

a sort of password in my ears,
the collect of a new epiphany.

Heaney is alluding to a conversation between Stephen and the Dean, in the course of which the latter uses the word 'funnel'. Stephen fails to understand it and when the Dean explains what it means, Stephen argues that it

51 Stephen Tapscott, Poetry and Trouble: Seamus Heaney's Irish Purgatorio, p.528.

52 This recalls Michael McLaverty's advice in Fosterage: "Listen. Go your own way. Do your own work."

is a 'tundish'. The Dean has never heard that word:

- What is a tundish?
- That. The ... funnel.
- Is that called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.
- It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen, laughing, where they speak the best English.
- A tundish, said the dean reflectively. That is a most interesting word. I must look that word up. Upon my word I must. (53)

But it is Stephen himself who researches its etymology, as he reports in his entry for 13th April:

That tundish has been on my mind for a long time. I looked it up and find it English and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us. Damn him one way or the other! (54)

The fact that the English Dean uses a word of Provençal origin and has never even heard of the corresponding English word which Stephen, however, is familiar with, confirms Heaney's belief that the Irish can be more versatile in the colonist's language than the English themselves. Stephen's linguistic triumph over the Dean is a belated revenge for the English linguistic colonialism and it justifies Heaney's use of English as his medium. English is no longer only the language of England; in its particular Irish form it has also become a means of dealing with the Irish experience. This discovery is the more valuable to Heaney personally as he was born on April 13th, the date of this entry in Stephen's diary.

What to Heaney is "a new epiphany, / the Feast of the

53 James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p.188.

54 *ibid.*, p.251.

Holy Tundish" is no longer an issue for Joyce:

The English language
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires.

English belongs as much to the Irish as to the English and there is no point in keeping a discussion alive that is as obsolete as Heaney's pilgrimage to Station Island. Joyce warns Heaney against "doing the decent thing", i.e. giving in to the tribe and putting his responsibilities towards his community and the Church above his art:

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
doing the decent thing.

Bernard O'Donoghue has argued that "while the poetry has become increasingly self-examining and publicly answerable, the poet has had a hankering for an artistic detachment which here is identified as the freedom not to do 'the decent thing'" (55). Any kind of commitment restricts the poet's artistic freedom, hence Joyce's final advice:

Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim
out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency.

This imagery, reminiscent of the last lines of Casualty, stresses the necessity of the poet's using any freedom he is given. He must not let his poetry degenerate into political or religious propaganda. Joyce's solution was emigration, voluntary exile from Ireland. Only thus could he break free from the constraints that were upon him. His advice is the final word in Station Island. After his disappearance, a shower of rain seems to close the curtain on the pilgrimage and to wash away Heaney's doubts

55 Bernard O'Donoghue, Singing Responsibly, p.57.

and self-questionings. But even if Joyce's words are the last in the sequence, they are by no means the only guideline for Heaney's future work.

"He has been encouraged, both within and outside Ireland, to take his responsibilities very seriously, and the question of where those responsibilities lie - to the nation? to the tribe? to the Church? to art alone? - has become one of his main themes" (56). In Station Island the poet becomes aware of these responsibilities; he weighs and evaluates them, but there is no definitive conclusion. To some it may seem that Heaney is now going to do as Joyce advises him in section XII, but I think complete devotion to art alone is just one of the possibilities, not, as we shall see, a very realistic one.

The first part of this pilgrimage is dominated by religion. Despite his misgivings, voiced by Simon Sweeney, William Carleton and Terry Keenan, he follows his inclination to conform to tribal rituals, to obey the rules of the tribe (57). It is only when he realizes that the Church represses sexuality and "saccharines" the horror of death that he starts to doubt whether he ought to remain loyal. He has no responsibilities towards a Church that restricts individual freedom and does its best to prevent full personal expansion.

Sections VII and VIII reflect Heaney's unease at evading political issues. William Strathearn's and Colum Mc-

56 Morrison, Encounters with Familiar Ghosts, p.1192.

57 He once told John Haffenden, op.cit., p.61: "I also - just in my nature and temperament, I suppose - believe in humility and in bowing down, and in 'we' rather than 'I'."

Cartney's accusations generate guilt in him, but the example of Francis Hughes shows that too definite a political commitment can also be harmful. John Carey has pointed out that Heaney rejects "the simplification of the intellect that political alignment requires. He will not swell the ranks. But he feels guilty at his own tameness, especially as he acknowledges the gut loyalties of an Ulster Catholic" (58). Despite this unease, Heaney bewares of confusing politics and poetry. In 1981 he wrote:

I assume that the music of what happens will be an element in the music of the poem and that there will always be a nicely held tension between poetry's need to be true to the impurities of life and its need to remember that it intends to be pure language.

In order to be the power it should be, poetry has to establish a public force, yet it must never barter its private rights in exchange for a public hearing. (59)

Or, as Douglas Dunn put it, "poetry, it is implied, is strengthened at the same time as made vulnerable to attack by its author's participation in history" (60). On a much more general level it seems that obeisance to the demands of the tribe can be just as inhibiting to the personality as unconditional devotion to the Church.

In the final section Heaney has James Joyce make a point in favour of uncommitted art, but it remains doubtful whether he can really disengage himself from his background, whether he can really break free from his

58 John Carey, The Joy of Heaney, p.272.

59 Seamus Heaney, Current Unstated Assumptions About Poetry, p.650.

Elmer Andrews, The Gift and the Craft: An Approach to the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, o.376, notes that "if Heaney's poetry automatically encompasses politics, he is careful that it should not serve them."

60 Douglas Dunn, Heaney Agonistes, p.92.

obligations. "Whether Heaney can solve this problem and 'let go, let fly', remains to be seen, but it is, I submit, unlikely. Forgetting can be as plaquy on the imagination as on the conscience. For Heaney to be free of his qualms and handwringings - they are, in poetry, honourable - Ireland would have to be different from what it was and is, England different, and history different" (61).

Thus Station Island has not really changed much. It is a stocktaking of Heaney's doubts about his role as a poet, a self-examination, but the regenerative rain does not bring an epiphany. Heaney is still torn between different parts of his temperament. His most recent collection to date, THE HAW LANTERN, proves that his poems can still be politically explicit, or evasive, or combine both of his aspirations in the protective colouring-type of poetry that is so typical of him.

It is difficult to assess the importance of Station Island in Heaney's complete poetical output at such an early stage in his career. We may hope, though, that it will put an end to his guilty self-questioning, his "over-earnestness" (62) and "self-admonitory" mood (63). He can now accept the influences that work upon him as sources of inspiration and not as determining forces which he has to respond to. He should have enough confidence in his ability to use every kind of material at his disposal - political, religious, private, literary - to "strike his

61 *ibid.*, p.95.

62 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.180.

63 *ibid.*, p.157.

own note", to make poetry that does not evade political realities but gives them as much attention as needed, though not more than necessary.

* * *

Ever since his move to Wicklow in 1972, Heaney had been working at an English translation of the medieval Irish poem Buile Shuibhne Geilt (The Lament of Mad Sweeney). His version is based on a manuscript written in Co.Sligo between 1671 and 1674, but the oral tradition goes back to the Battle of Moira in 637.

Sweeney is the king of Dal-Arie in Ulster. One day he is told that Ronan Finn, a Christian missionary, is building a church on his lands. He goes to Killaney, disturbs Ronan at his prayer and throws his psalter into the lough. Then he drags the priest out of the church but is prevented from doing more mischief by a messenger who summons him to the battle.

The following day an otter brings the miraculously unharmed psalter back to the surface of the lough and returns it to its owner. Ronan interprets this as a divine sign and hurries to Moira to reconcile the antagonists. He fails but at least the enemies "made agreements that no killing would be allowed except between those hours they had set for beginning and ending the fight each day" (SWA, stanza 7, p.6). Only Sweeney makes an exception and on the morning of the battle he attacks Ronan with a spear. Though the priest has a narrow escape, he curses the king and turns him into a mad bird with a human head, condemned to roam Ireland for the rest of his life. Sweeney's punishment takes effect immediately. For years he

flies all over Ireland and Scotland lamenting his lost glory and the love and respect due to a king. But he also enjoys his new freedom, far away from his people and their petty quarrels.

After many adventures which purify his soul, he is reconciled with Christianity at the end of his life. He makes friends with the priest Moling of St Mullins. Fatally injured by the spear of a jealous swineherd, he repents and dies a Christian death.

It is possible that Heaney's translation of the Sweeney poem was prompted by Thomas Kinsella's version of the Táin Bó Cuailnge, but above all he was interested in the poetic potential of this figure:

And the question is, in a sense, whether one is content to take Sweeney as he appears in the manuscript, and to invest that version of the manuscript with things from within myself. Or whether to take Sweeney out of the old fable, and make him Sweeney Redivivus, and make him bear other experience. (64)

Heaney has done both - in SWEENEY ASTRAY he has translated the original poem, suggesting ways in which it is still relevant for contemporary Ulster, in part III of STATION ISLAND, the part actually called Sweeney Redivivus, he has taken him "out of the old fable" and used him as a mask for his own feelings and aspirations.

In his introduction to SWEENEY ASTRAY, Heaney argues that "the literary imagination which fastened upon him as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament" (SWA, pp.v-vi). The Sweeney poem is thus a parable of the last stand of the Celtic

64 A Raindrop on a Thorn, op.cit., p.37.

order and the triumph of the Christian dispensation. Sweeney himself, "who was at once the enemy and the captive of the monastic tradition" (P, p.187), who tried to break away from the new order only to surrender to it at the end of his life, can be compared to the poet in whom the need to break free from the constraints of religion and the need to conform, to bow down, are at odds.

In this respect, "Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance. It is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation" (SWA, p.vi). Sweeney escapes from all these obligations but his escape is not final. He becomes an exile from the world of men but in the end he is reclaimed by it, just as Heaney in Wicklow is a voluntary exile from the North unable or unwilling to silence his conscience, which keeps reminding him of his responsibilities.

On another level "Sweeney's easy sense of cultural affinity with both western Scotland and southern Ireland is exemplary for all men and women in contemporary Ulster" (SWA, p.vi). He reflects the dualism in the population of Ulster between the Protestants (descended from Scottish planters, loyal to Britain) and the Catholics (loyal to the Irish Republic). At the same time he recalls a common past, the glory of a Gaelic civilization extending over both Ireland and Scotland, and thus offers a common ground for a possible reconciliation (65). Hea-

65 There might even be an allusion to the earliest origins of the Anglo-Irish antagonism in the line "Sweeney was warned by Colmcille when he went over with Congal to ask the king of Scotland for an army to field against me" (SWA, stanza 15, p.11).

ney's suggestion that the story of Sweeney "may well have been a development of a British original, vestigially present in the tale of the madman called Alan" (SWA, p.vi) is another search for common ground, for a common origin of these stories in a shared Celtic folk-lore. Thus if Sweeney can be regarded as a symbol of the divided loyalties of the poet (between commitment and poetical freedom) and of the people in Ulster (between Britain and Ireland), he also represents a chance for reconciliation on the basis of a common past (66).

The potential interpretations of the Sweeney story are religious, political, poetical and personal. Moreover, Heaney's translation is in line with the earlier place-name poems and his realization, in section XII of Station Island, that the English language can be used to describe Irish experiences. In the Crane Bag interview he told Seamus Deane that the place-name poems had shown him how

one could be faithful to the nature of the English language ... and, at the same time, be faithful to one's own non-English origin, for me that is County Derry. That glimpse is enough to convince me that this is a proper aspiration for our poetry. The difficulty is of course to repeat such experiences. I think that it was the quest for such a repetition that led me to translate Buile Shuibhne. In this Sweeney story we have a Northern sacral king, Sweeney, who is driven out of Rasharkin in Co.Antrim. There is a sort of schizophrenia in him. On the one

This looking abroad for allies in an inner-Irish struggle is reminiscent of Dermot Macmurrough's asking Strongbow for help in his quarrel with his High King in 1170, which finally led to the Normans' establishing a stronghold in Dublin.

66 "It's a kind of all-Ireland event situated just within the North, and there's a little bit of submerged political naughtiness in that. This was one of the reasons I translated the placenames into their modern equivalents: I hoped that gradually the Northern Unionist or Northern Protestant readership might, in some minuscule way, feel free to identify with the Gaelic tradition." Seamus Heaney, quoted by Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.40.

hand he is always whinging for his days in Rasharkin, but on the other he is celebrating his free creative imagination. Maybe here there was a presence, a fable which could lead to the discovery of feelings in myself which I could not otherwise find words for, and which would cast a dream or possibility or myth across the swirl of private feelings: an objective correlative. (67)

Heaney began to identify more and more with Sweeney, to see him as a mask. The birdman reminded him of the tinker family called Sweeney he had known as a child: "So that Sweeney became a medium through which I could bring back that childhood intimacy with hedges and tinkers" (68). Moreover, as he states in the introduction to *SWEENEY ASTRAY*, his

fundamental relation with Sweeney ... is topographical. His kingdom lay in what is now south County Antrim and north County Down, and for over thirty years I lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney's places and in earshot of others - Slemish, Rasharkin, Benevenagh, Dunseverick, the Bann, the Roe, the Mourne. When I began work on this version, I had just moved to Wicklow, not all that far from Sweeney's final resting ground at St Mullins." (*SWA*, pp.vii-viii)

Heaney is visibly at pains to establish a sense of affinity between Sweeney and himself. The ancient king lived in an area close to Heaney's own home, he escaped from the constraints of religion and the endless battles just as Heaney took refuge from the Troubles by moving to Wicklow (69). The Sweeney mask develops its full poten-

67 Unhappy and at Home, p.70.

68 A Raindrop on a Thorn, p.35.

69 "It was after the battle of Moira that Sweeney had been turned into a bird, a roamer of the countryside, after the noise of battle. So I had this notion of how, out of the clash of arms in the North, I was living among the hedges myself, here in Wicklow." A Raindrop on a Thorn, pp.34-5.

tial in part III of STATION ISLAND, but even the translation itself shows Heaney's "Midas touch for current resonance" (70) when, e.g., the exiled king claims:

I often get as far
as my old domain,
those groomed armies,
those stern hillsides. (SWA, stanza 47, p.55)

This could just as well be the voice of Heaney, back in the North on a short visit, commenting about the paramilitary organisations of the two communities. When Sweeney, after a terrifying encounter with "bleeding headless torsos and disembodied heads" (SWA, stanza 64, p.69) and a subsequent fit, admits:

I have deserved all this:
night-vigils, terror,
flittings across water,
women's cried-out eyes (SWA, stanza 67, p.73),

he echoes words Heaney has used before, in the prose-poem The wanderer (S, p.19), in which he remembers his leaving Anahorish School on a scholarship to St Columb's College in Derry. He has changed since then:

I have seen halls in flames, hearts in cinders, the benches filled and emptied, the circles of companions called and broken. That day I was a rich young man, who could tell you now of flittings, night-vigils, let-downs, women's cried-out eyes.

Sweeney uses Heaney's words to express his distress, whereas in Sweeney Redivivus Heaney uses the Sweeney mask to voice his own preoccupations. Mad Alan, this alter ego of Sweeney's, also has affinities with Heaney. He was cursed by his people because he "laid solemn obligations on each of my chief's people that none was to come to the

70 Bernard O'Donoghue, Singing Responsibly, p.63, who also argues that "the resonances of the Sweeney story for contemporary Ulster are considerable, and the translation is an eloquent rejoinder to the view of Heaney as moving away from political statement" (ibid., p.62).

battle unless he was arrayed in silk. I did this so that they would be magnificent, outstanding beyond the others in pomp and panoply. But, for doing that, the hosts cursed me with three howls of malediction that sent me astray and frightened, the way you see me" (SWA, stanza 48, p.57). Just as Mad Alan tried to assert his aesthetic taste by artfully vesting the combatants with silk, and was cursed for it, Heaney has attempted to "saccharine" the Northern Troubles with analogies and myths, and was severely criticized for it by critics from Ulster.

This is what Heaney calls investing "that version of the manuscript with things from within myself" (71) and although it is often possible to find analogies between Sweeney's predicament and Heaney's, the limits of such an identification are defined by the translator's wish to remain true to the original. Heaney broke those limits when he took the Sweeney figure out of the framework, "the support system of the original story" (SI, p.123). Sweeney thus became a real mask for the poet, allowing him to comment, in the most oblique poetry he has written so far, on contemporary Ireland under the safe guise of a seventh century Irish king.

After the discussion, in Station Island, of the influences that have marked him, with Sweeney Heaney now finds "a way of finally flying free of all exemplars and instructors, becoming (suddenly, fiercely, and exhilaratedly) his own master, authority and guide" (72).

* * *

71 A Raindrop on a Thorn, p.37.

72 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney and the Art of the Exemplary, p.125.

Sweeney makes a first appearance (73) in the final poem of part I, The King of the Ditchbacks (SI, pp.56-8). In its first section the poet discovers similarities between himself and the birdman:

He lives in his feet
and ears, weather-eyed,
all pad and listening,
a denless mover,

like the poet, who listens for the "comfortless noises" of his island and moves restlessly from Mossbawn to Derry and Belfast, then on to Glanmore and Dublin. It is not surprising that the figure of the exiled king, watchful and wary, should appeal to the poet, that he should feel in sympathy with Sweeney, whose

reflection shifts
sideways to the current,
mothy, alluring.

Heaney is "haunted / by his stealthy rustling" because they share a common predicament: they have become exiles from their tribes, but in return they have gained individual freedom, in Heaney's case artistic liberation from the constraints of politics and sectarianism.

Section I of this poem thus provides the first hint to a growing identification of Heaney with Sweeney.

The prose-poem of section II sees Heaney in his room working at his translation of the Buile Shuibhne:

He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of
a translated phrase like a youngster dared out on
to an alder branch over the whirlpool.

But just as much as Sweeney depends on the poet's ability

73 Actually, Sweeney first appears in The Strand at Lough Beg when Heaney imagines his cousin driving "Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads".

to save his story from oblivion, does Heaney depend on Sweeney, who is that very "alder branch" that promises an artistic escape from the "whirlpool" of political strife and emotional turmoil in the North.

The more Heaney thinks about Sweeney, the more "alluring" he becomes. The poet is drawn to him, to his feathery protective colouring. Remembering dead birds from his past, he wonders whether one of them was Sweeney and then returns to the gate mentioned at the beginning of section I

to follow him. And my stealth was second nature to
me, as if I were coming into my own. I remembered I
had been vested for this calling.

These lines describe the slow metamorphosis of the poet into the birdman, whose "stealthy rustling" has now become "my stealth". This change of identity, or merging of identities, is like a return to some common source, an alliance with a kindred spirit. Heaney's poetry is, like Sweeney's feathers, a natural gift that predestines him to the role of a Sweeney of literature.

Section III opens with the young Heaney being camouflaged with a fishnet and leafy twigs so as to allow him to observe birds without being noticed by them:

so my vision was a bird's
at the heart of a thicket.

The people who have dressed him up like this are the tinkers he used to know. The Sweeney family, who share their name and their way of life with the birdman, make the boy feel like a bird, like the "King of the ditch-backs", and he imagines the pigeons speaking to him and calling on him to join them. At the end of the poem he is, like the rich young man in the Bible (74), prepared

74 Cf. note 82.

to leave

everything he had
for a migrant solitude,

just as Sweeney was forced to do.

This poem sees Heaney moving towards a growing identification with Sweeney, encouraged by childhood memories, his own involvement with the medieval tale of Sweeney, and a general sense of affinity with the exiled king.

The poem also provides a structural link with section I of Station Island (the encounter with Simon Sweeney) and, naturally, Sweeney Redivivus.

In The First Gloss (SI, p.97) an imperative voice tells the poet to

Subscribe to the first step taken
from a justified line
into the margin.

These glosses on Sweeney's adventures are only thinly disguised comments on Heaney's own experience. The Sweeney story provides hardly more than a convenient setting. Thus the reborn Sweeney Redivivus (SI, p.98) realizes that his familiar pastoral home-ground is lost:

The old trees were nowhere,
the hedges thin as penwork
and the whole enclosure lost
under hard paths and sharp-ridged houses.

Sweeney finds himself in a modern world, removed from his element, just as Heaney left his native rural Mossbawn for the urban centres of Derry and Belfast. His poetry has also changed: he is no longer the poet of farm life but he has had to face the political realities in the North and he has become a voice people listen to, a kind of public commentator about a situation so unlike the

peaceful farm-life he knew as a child:

And there I was, incredible to myself,
among people far too eager to believe me
and my story, even if it happened to be true.

Heaney does not feel at ease in this position. A spokesman has responsibilities he would rather do without. His artistic freedom could be severely curtailed.

The image of the unwinding twine, linking this and the following poem, makes Heaney/Sweeney appear like a blind man suddenly beginning to see clear again, suddenly aware of the truth, as if awakening from an escapist dream. The young farmer's son is leaving his comfortable cocoon and realizing that he has to break loose from his background. In Unwinding (SI, p.99) the criticism of "their sex-pruned and unfurtherable / moss-talk, incubated under lamplight" leads to the recognition that he must "unlearn" this restricting, though familiar territory and move out into the world where "everything / is going to be learning". This seems to be another reference to Heaney's move to Derry on a scholarship. The autobiographical element in the Sweeney poems is undeniable. The unwinding twine reveals to him new awarenesses, "understandings of all I would undertake".

In the Beech (SI, p.100) sees the poet in Belfast in his characteristic position of in-betweenness:

On one side under me, the concrete road.
On the other, the bullocks' covert.

He is "a look-out posted and forgotten", sent to Belfast from his rural community, feeling displaced in the city and experiencing a nostalgia for

the breath and plaster of a drinking place
where the school-leaver discovered peace.

The tree is an ambiguous symbol - a kind of borderline between city and country, it combines the natural comfort of bole and bark with the strangeness and unfamiliarity of masonry and built columns. Sweeney has retired to this beech-tree and from its safety he looks down on both his old and his new life, on the past and the future, like Janus. Similarly, Heaney, shunning exposure, hides behind his protective colouring, disturbed by the sight of British army vehicles in the Province:

I felt the tanks' advance beginning
at the cynosure of the growth rings,
then winced at their imperium refreshed
in each powdered bolt mark on the concrete.
And the pilot with his goggles back came in
so low I could see the cockpit rivets.

The twine is now completely unravelled, the Troubles have broken into the poet's life. Sweeney's tree is now a "boundary tree", a "tree of knowledge", a descendant of that infamous tree of knowledge in Genesis 2:17 representing both the loss of Eden, of innocence, and the knowledge of evil. If the tree is a refuge, the ivory tower of Heaney's poetry, then it symbolizes the growing realization in his work that the rural Eden is lost.

The poet is still "soft-fledged" at that moment, he has not yet reached poetic maturity, but he can feel the pressures on himself. Even up in his "airy listening post" he is "thick-tapped", secretly listened to by suspicious ears.

In the next poem Sweeney remembers his First Kingdom (SI, p.101):

The royal roads were cow paths.
The queen mother hunkered on a stool
and played the harpstrings of milk
into a wooden pail.

With seasoned sticks the nobles
lorded it over the hindquarters of cattle.

This is the life that used to be Heaney's. He remembers it with nostalgia, but also with ironic detachment. It was a home, a little world of its own, offering warmth, protection and security, concerned with the petty misfortunes typical of a rural existence. Heaney is aware of its limitations, its monotony, its self-importance, its lack of real challenges. Above all he criticizes his family's (and, as he admits, his own) tendency to bow down, to "say nothing", to be humble, docile and uncomplaining:

They were two-faced and accommodating.
And seed, breed and generation still
they are holding on, every bit
as pious and exacting and demeaned.

He rejects this fatalism, this refusal to rebel against humiliations and a sheepish, often dull life. The First Flight (SI, pp.102-3) is a parable of Heaney's move from Belfast to Glanmore at "a time when the times / were also in spasm". It was a period during which he felt the need to loosen his ties with the North, to put himself at a distance from the Troubles in order to salvage his artistic independence:

the ties and the knots running through us
split open
down the lines of the grain.

The move to Glanmore was not only an escape from the sounds of battle, offering an opportunity to re-evaluate his responsibilities, it was also a return to his rural origins. In Wicklow he was "relearning / the acoustic of frost // and the meaning of woodnote", but, as we know, his departure from the North did not meet with unanimous approval. He became prone to self-accusations and feel-

ings of guilt, while a lot of people in Ulster thought he was betraying them, running away from his obligations:

my empty place an excuse
for shifts in the camp, old rehearsals
of debts and betrayal.

People came to Sweeney's tree (Heaney's Glanmore) to lure him back to the North, to put him back into harness. They disturbed his peace of mind, revived his guilt. He was still attached to his community and was in danger of giving in, of slipping back,

until they began to pronounce me
a feeder off battlefields.

These unfounded accusations (75) annoyed him and confirmed his determination not to go back. Flying up high into the air, Sweeney/Heaney can observe the celebrations and the rituals of both his own tribe and those "levies from Scotland" (the Loyalists) from a safe distance. He feels alienated from them, does no longer share their petty prejudices and primitive rituals. Unlike

the people of art
diverting their rhythmical chants
to fend off the onslaught of winds
I would welcome and climb
at the top of my bent.

Those fresh winds symbolize political and poetical freedom. The "people of art" (can we detect a note of mocking in this phrase?) have enslaved their art to a political cause. Their "rhythmical chants" are unrefined, quite unlike the poet's sophisticated verse.

In a parable of bird-life, Drifting Off (SI, pp.104-5),

75 Cf. the critical attitude of many reviewers in Ulster, among them Ciaran Carson and Edna Longley, who called Heaney "the laureate of violence" (Escaped from the Massacre, p.183). Even the title of her review is revealing!

Sweeney the birdman rejects the squalor of the gutter-snipe and the graceful majesty of the albatross. Sweeney/Heaney prefers the virtues of "unbegrudging concentration", "camaraderie", "spiteful vigilance" and doughtiness, to gossip and shallow attractions. The poet has become wary and suspicious, he admits his mistakes, his exaggerated acceptance of compromise and of empty pathos, his trust in folklore, in the iconography of his tribe. He is now critical of these attitudes and advocates a much more cautious approach. The last stanzas see him on the attack again, clumsy, plump and heavy, it is true, but with his "spurs at the ready".

In Alerted (SI, p.106) the poet looks back at his childhood and the inhibiting influence of religion on his temperament. Just as in Station Island, Roman Catholicism is criticized for its tendency to thwart the needs of the individual:

to make sure I would not grow up
too hopeful and trusting -

This religion condemns pride and self-confidence, it promotes obedience and self-denial. Young Heaney/Sweeney is aware of the dualism in himself between the willingness to conform and a vestigial natural urge to break out. The latter is revived by the bark of a vixen in heat:

She carded the webs of desire,
she disinterred gutlines and lightning,
she broke the ice of demure
and exemplary stars -

The longing bark of the vixen wakes sexual desires long repressed by Catholic puritanism. The boy is reorientated from the barren spirituality of heaven (the "exemplary stars") to the natural sexuality of the earth. The vixen (is she the "fox-head" of section VI of Station

Island?) gives him the courage to accept his own flesh, makes him less humble, less prudish. But the experience is also frustrating because that world is as yet inaccessible to the boy:

and rooted me to the spot,
alerted, disappointed
under my old clandestine
pre-Copernican night.

The freedom of the vixen is not yet to be his. Both alerted to the concealed pleasures of his sexuality and disappointed by the fact that he has not yet broken out of his "pre-Copernican night", that he has not yet discovered that new world of sexual fulfilment, he remains a captive.

St Ronan is The Cleric (SI, pp.107-8) and he represents the domination of the Church over Ireland. He is not satisfied with

his own
cramp-jawed abbesses and intoners,

but wants to convert, and thus to rule, the whole country:

he had to get in on the ground.

The vocabulary Sweeney uses to describe Ronan's action, and the Church in general, is disparaging. It is with bitterness that he laments his defeat and Ronan's victory, which made him a refugee in his own land. Yet he is honest enough to ask himself whether he was really chased away or rather left of his own free will:

Or did I desert?

Did the all-embracing grip of the Church make him an exile or did he run away from it to preserve his artistic independence? Was his flight a desertion of his tribe and its values, its rituals, its religious traditions? Heaney does not go back on his decision to "stay clear of all

processions", but he admits that Catholicism did open a new path for him, a new kingdom. Just as St Ronan forced Sweeney into a natural and independent life with no responsibilities, no allegiances, Heaney found the freedom of the creative artist:

Give him his due, in the end
he opened my path to a kingdom
of such scope and neuter allegiance
my emptiness reigns at its whim.

This freedom from obligations and religious or tribal allegiances is the freedom to be "neuter". Heaney acknowledges the Church as a formative influence but, as Station Island stresses, he refuses to commit himself to it. The greater his distance from the Church (or any other restrictive influence), the greater his artistic and personal freedom. Thus it seems that alienation from the values of the tribe is a necessary pre-requisite to artistic independence.

This critical attitude towards the Church is emphasized when Sweeney meets The Hermit (SI, p.109), who lives in a clearing

where the blade of choice had not spared
one stump of affection.

The hermit appears as another agent of the Church's all-encompassing claims and of its bitter self-righteous asceticism. The "holy man" represents the denial of love and comfort, his "blade of choice" recalls the arrogance of some Protestants who regard themselves as the "chosen people". The empire of the Church is a "brutal" "field / of force"; it tries to dominate people instead of liberating them from political and spiritual slavery. There is nothing messianic about this faith. The Hermit is a more uncompromising poem than The Cleric, a condemnation of

religious fanaticism.

Sweeney's next station is Thoor Ballylee, Yeats's tower in Gort in Co. Galway. It is a visit to The Master (SI, p.110), the great man of letters, "the precursor, the poet against whom Heaney's own art must struggle in order properly to define and articulate itself" (76). Yeats is himself like a legendary tower, a landmark in the Irish literary landscape, a poet whose authority, whose towering presence is a challenge to all his successors. He is the model against whom all Irish poets are measured. Heaney is here to pay his respects, but also to assert himself. There is a note of joyful arrogance when he realizes that behind the private mythology of A Vision and the later poems there are ordinary concerns and preoccupations he, too, can share. There

was nothing
arcane, just the old rules
we all had inscribed on our slates.

It is a comforting thought for Heaney that Yeats was no marvellous Apollo of the literary Olymp, but a gifted craftsman like all good poets. He admires Yeats's assurance, the excellence of his verse, and his devotion, his "intransigent service" to the Muse. When he leaves the tower, Sweeney/Heaney does so with humility, feeling "flimsy", realizing that he has a long way to go before he will attain the grandeur of Yeats, but confident now that he can do it. He has overcome the natural dread of Yeats's achievement; he knows that he can step out of the great man's shadow and assert his own authority.

The Sweeney mask allows Heaney to take liberties he

could not otherwise take. In The Scribes (SI, p.111) he gives vent to his anger with literary critics and he does not mince words:

I never warmed to them.
If they were excellent they were petulant
and jaggy as the holly tree
they rendered down for ink.

He stresses that he "never belonged among them" and that, try as they may,

they could never deny me my place.

Heaney is sure of himself, he knows the value of his work. In the next stanzas he imagines the scribes/critics as an anonymous herd of petty self-righteous grumblers, never satisfied, always finding fault with other people's achievements. He sees them as narrow-minded frustrated failures, who nurse their "myopic angers" and "resentment".

It is a rare glimpse of Heaney as a revolted insolent poet we get in this poem, a man settling accounts with those who have the pretension to judge the value of creative work without themselves being creative. He feels "miles away" from these creatures and in a gesture of defiance he throws his poem to them, not caring for their opinions, sure of his talent:

Let them remember this not inconsiderable
contribution to their jealous art.

The poem is a criticism of the critics. Heaney does enjoy the licence to retaliate; he takes this opportunity of shedding his customary serenity and calling a spade a spade, in a manner reminiscent of AN OPEN LETTER.

A Waking Dream "imagines poetic composition as the attempt to catch a bird by throwing salt on its tail ...,"

but in fact being transported into flight oneself" (77), In the Chestnut tree Sweeney observes "old firm-fleshed Susannah" having a bath in a pool, Sweeney's Returns sees him come back to his wife Eorann (in fact a love poem for the poet's wife), Holly is a nostalgic memory of happy moments of the past the poet hopes to recapture, to bring alive again through his art.

An Artist (SI, p.116) is about the French painter Paul Cézanne, who is now widely recognized as one of the precursors of contemporary painting. During his lifetime, however, neither the general public nor the art critics appreciated his work.

Heaney is struck by the contradictions in Cézanne, whose life was a constant struggle with himself. He is fascinated by

The way his fortitude held and hardened
because he did what he knew.

Cézanne was often dissatisfied with his work but he knew that it was "the only thing that worked". In this respect he could be a model for Heaney - he did not let himself be discouraged but showed obstinacy and an iron will to work (78). Cézanne was also a disappointed man - he did not get the public acclaim he was hoping for but he went on painting, rejecting

the vulgarity of expecting ever
gratitude or admiration. (79)

77 ibid., p.175.

78 His friend, the novelist Emile Zola, once wrote about him: "I must not forget Paul's fits of despair. ... At times, utterly discouraged, he was ready to abandon his art; then again a masterpiece, a rapidly executed study would free him of his dejection." Quoted in: Christoph Wetzler, Paul Cézanne, Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 1984, p.50 (my translation).

79 Joachim Gasquet, an admirer of Cézanne's art, remembers: "He spoke to me of his

Heaney, who is very sensitive to the public response to his poetry, is impressed by Cézanne's defiance, by his anger and his "barking / at the image of himself barking", a rather futile action that, however, allows him to let off steam, to work off frustrations and is as such perhaps to be preferred to Heaney's ceaseless self-questionings and doubts (80).

It is with self-questioning that the next poem, The Old Icons (SI, p.117) opens:

Why, when it was all over, did I hold on to them?

What he held on to were three icons representative of the iconography of Catholic Republicanism: an etching of an imprisoned patriot, an oleograph of a priest pursued by British soldiers in the days of the penal laws, a photograph of a Republican committee. These pictures from the struggle for national independence can be found in many nationalist homes in Ulster, side by side with religious gadgetry. The poet thought he had outgrown such primitive idolatry. His political attitudes have become more sophisticated - he does not hesitate to criticize Republican extremism and the ritualization of the politics of both communities. Republican politics and the Catholic religion no longer have the hold on him they used to have, though he still sympathizes, from an independent, mature, self-conscious point of view. Why then, he wonders, this nostalgic attachment?

loneliness in which he was dying, of the martyrdom of his art and his life."
Quoted in *ibid.*, p.70 (my translation).

80 The three last lines of the poem allude to Cézanne's use of geometrical forms as support structures in his paintings, to his method of leaving parts of the canvas unpainted, to his still lifes and to one of his last paintings: "Montagne Sainte-Victoire".

His resolve to break free from these icons (and the loyalties they represent) is mixed with regret at the loss of what is after all a part of his personality. "Resolve and regret merge to create a peculiarly chastened tone, which is also peculiarly honest" (81).

In Illo Tempore (SI, p.118) deals with Heaney's loss of faith. The Latin title, words used to introduce the reading of the gospel in the Latin mass, is apt for two reasons: the poem starts with Heaney's recollections of a religious service and he makes it clear that "that time" is over now.

The children's attitude during the service is revealing: their interest focuses on the multi-coloured ribbons hanging out of the missal. They show no interest in the service but go through the rituals "intransitively". They seem impassive, unaware of the symbolic significance of the mass. Even the rhythm stresses this impression: the short sentences and word-groups show their impatience and their eagerness to get through the service and back to their games. The comparison between the mass and the movement of the sun through the skies is the result of a bored child's imagination transforming meaningless symbols into a concrete reality which here is far removed from their actual significance. Thus the grey altar stone looks like rocks before sunrise, the golden monstrance is the full sun at noon, the red letters of the rubric in the missal are "a bloodshot sunset".

The children are unable to grasp the essence of Catholicism. Their faith is purely formal: they attend mass

81 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.178.

because they have to and sit through a boring service without the slightest idea of what it is really about.

The adult poet has no inclination to renew this experience. The seagulls seem to him like "incredible souls", both unbelievable and unbelieving. His lonely walks along the seaside in search of conviction, do not revive his faith.

Heaney thus finds himself On the Road (SI, pp.119-21) again, sitting behind "the empty round / of the steering wheel". Emptiness is a prominent idea in STATION ISLAND, especially in the central sequence where it denotes the absence of faith, the loss of a clear direction. In this poem all roads are like one and the search for this one true road reminds him of the rich young man in Matthew 19, who already made a brief appearance in The King of the Ditchbacks. Like the young man, Heaney is looking for salvation, not in religion but in poetry. Jesus advised the young man to give up all his riches (82) and to become his disciple. Similarly, it seems that Heaney must give up his responsibilities and loyalties, perhaps even the kind of poetry he has been writing so far and on which his reputation is founded. Sweeney, who has also had to renounce what he valued most, his kingdom, his wife, is again a model. He follows a strange bird, leaves his earthly attachments behind "like a human soul", becomes a flitting, sorrowful "panicky shadow" until he crosses the deerpath. He then drifts away from religion, "the chapele gable" and the "churtyard wall", criticized as "super-

82 Matthew 19:16: "And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

Matthew 19:21: "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."

stition" unable to save mankind whose praying "at the cold, hard-breasted / votive granite" seems futile. Sweeney drifts towards a cave with the prehistoric painting of a deer that is perhaps the deer of A Migration:

restive, quick and silent
the deer of poetry stood
in pools of lucent sound.

In the 1970s "clandestine winds / stirred in our lyric wood", but those days are over. Just as at the end of A Migration "the battery's gone. They cannot raise a note", the "expectant" animal in On the Road stands "at a dried-up source". Does this mean that the source of Heaney's inspiration has dried up? Neil Corcoran thinks so when he finds "verbal echoes of his earlier work" (83) in this poem. According to him, Heaney is now looking for a new "book of changes", hoping for "the long dumbfounded / spirit"

to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion.

Hence one might conclude that Heaney is now going to write a different kind of poetry. Nothing could be more to the point, however, than Corcoran's warning "against too definite a conclusion" (84). The final metaphor is very vague and allows for various interpretations. The veil of ambiguity may one day be lifted by Heaney himself

83 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.180: "The road 'reeling in' remembers the roads that 'unreeled, unreeled' in that other poem of flight, 'Westering' at the end of WINTERING OUT; 'soft-nubbed' and 'incised outline' recall the archaeological diction of NORTH, as the poem's chain of optatives ('I would roost...', 'I would migrate ...', 'I would meditate...') make again one of the characteristic grammatical figures of NORTH; the 'undulant, tenor / black-letter latin' recalls the 'sweet tenor latin' of 'Leavings', and the phrase 'broke cover in me' in 'The Badgers', both in FIELD WORK. This unobtrusive self-allusiveness makes it plain how much in Heaney's earlier 'source' is now 'dried-up'."

84 *ibid.*

but until then it seems preposterous to suggest why the source of his inspiration (or one of the sources) should be dried-up.

It seems to me that the Sweeney Redivivus cycle is in parts so esoteric that it is hardly possible to establish correctly what Heaney wants to say. It is, after all, the poet's privilege to produce images that remain vague and suggestive. Poetry has the advantage over prose that not everything need be articulated, that moods and feelings are more important than messages.

The Sweeney mask allows Heaney to break free from conventions and loyalties and to say what he could not so easily have said in propria persona. There are poems in the sequence that have very little to do with Sweeney and could equally well stand on their own. Sweeney flies away from the constraints of Church, tribe and nation; he is independent and free; he tries to come to terms with his appreciation of his newly-won freedom and his regret at the loss of values he had grown fond of. Heaney is in a similar situation, he is trying to reconcile artistic freedom and independence with emotional attachments that cannot be severed so easily.

Neil Corcoran concludes that "Sweeney is, above all, the name for a restless dissatisfaction with the work already done, a fear of repetition, an anxiety about too casual an assimilation and acclaim, a deep suspicion of one's own reputation and excellence" (85). He thus sums up ideas apparent elsewhere in the book, from Chekhov on Sakhalin and Sandstone Keepsake via Station Island to

85 *ibid.*

Sweeney Redivivus. If the pilgrimage to Station Island is a stock-taking of influences and obligations here appearing as voices, then the Sweeney poems are Heaney's attempt to follow the advice Joyce gives him in section XII of Station Island:

You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.

Sweeney is the poet's chance to assert himself. Unlike the pilgrim, he is seldom humble. He does not bow down, he prefers to fly away. He is not meek, but he is self-conscious.

There remains the question whether Heaney now feels "vested for this calling". The personae of the pilgrim and of Sweeney are well chosen to represent different parts of the poet's temperament, or perhaps different stages in his development. On the whole, his use of protective colouring, of analogies, metaphors and parables is an apt way of responding to the challenges any Northern poet is faced with. What could be a better shelter than the feathery coat of Sweeney the birdman?

Even before the publication of THE HAW LANTERN, though, it was doubtful whether Heaney would take the Sweeney-line any further. As William Scammell recently wrote, "Sweeney is neatly turned but antiseptic, like the legend on a museum case" (86). These poems are far too oblique for the general reader and, what is more, Heaney can hardly carry the analogy between himself and the birdman further than he has already done.

CHAPTER VII

"THE CLEAR SONG OF A SKILLED POET"*

THE HAW LANTERN (1987)

The art of writing, the poet's craft, the power of language and, unsurprisingly, politics are prominent themes in Seamus Heaney's most recent collection of poetry. We have by now become familiar with his oblique approach to politics and in this book Heaney's protective colouring takes the form of the parable. He is like a traveller sending poetic messages back from imaginary places such as the Land of the Unspoken, the Canton of Expectation, the Republic of Conscience and the Frontier of Writing, countries of the mind whose names recall moods and attitudes encountered in earlier collections.

An elegiac tone, calm and serious, characterizes most of THE HAW LANTERN. Elegies for the poet's mother (The Wishing Tree and the admirable sonnet sequence Clearances), for Wolfe Tone, for Robert Fitzgerald, for a girl killed in a road accident (The Summer of Lost Rachel) "come out of experiences of death and loss, and one of the motifs in this collection is that of the empty space. Yet the idea that such a space can be an origin and resource also

* From Heaney's poem The Scop, l.2 (a translation of Beowulf, l.90).

comes to the fore, partly, no doubt, because the actual gift of the poems was a kind of restitution" (1).

The elegies do not make THE HAW LANTERN a mournful, depressing book, although Heaney seems to look to the past more often than to the future. The political poems show that the temperate radicalism of NORTH has given way to a more realistic assessment of what can be achieved. Despite the love poems (Holding Course, A Postcard from Iceland, Grotus and Coventina), Heaney's claim, in the PBS-Bulletin, that this book is "generally more amicable and candid than some of the ones which have preceded it" and that "the sombre mood which underlay much of the work in STATION ISLAND got dispersed" (2) may seem a slight exaggeration. THE HAW LANTERN is not a jovial book, but a sober and mature achievement, quieter than its predecessor, less dramatic and therefore perhaps more appealing.

Language in general and writing in particular are among Heaney's favourite concerns and a number of poems in THE HAW LANTERN show Heaney considering the politics (in the broadest sense) of writing and poetry itself. In Alphabets (HL, pp.1-3) he remembers his initiation into the art of writing, which at first holds an almost magic fascination for him. The young boy fails to see that the letters represent sounds and he compares them to a "forked stick", "a swan's neck and swan's back", "two rafters and a cross-tie", as if they were pictograms. But he soon masters the craft and the first section ends with an observation which shows that writing is becoming more im-

1 Seamus Heaney, An Amicable and a Candid Child, p.4.

2 ibid.

portant in the boy's life:

A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O.
No longer are the letters compared to concrete objects but here, for the first time probably, does the boy compare an object to a letter as if to suggest that writing can help us to understand the world (3).

In section II, after English, the boy learns Latin at St Columb's College. The perfect roundness of the globe is replaced by the rectangular "Latin forum", but the Roman script makes the poet associate writing with his father's farm, in a manner reminiscent of Digging. The illuminated capitals are like "orchards in full bloom", the ordinary letters look like trees. It was while studying these ancient texts that the muse of poetry first touched him. Poetry became a strict discipline, rewarding but also demanding. The poet's life can be as hard as that of the monastic scribe working, possibly, at Ireland's most famous manuscript, the Book of Kells:

He learns this other writing. He is the scribe
Who drove a team of quills on his white field.
Round his cell door the blackbirds dart and dab.
Then self-denial, fasting, the pure cold.

The script he uses reflects a growing asceticism: the Irish half uncial is abandoned for the less elaborate Merovingian minuscule. It seems that this choice of script stands for a change in Heaney's poetry. In his work, too, "Christ's sickle has been in the undergrowth", cutting the ballast and shaping a voice of his own.

It is a mature, sophisticated poet we meet in section

3 The title Heaney originally planned for this collection, THE GLOBE IN THE WINDOW, emphasizes the image of language as the all-encompassing globe.

III, a section dominated by the image of the globe:

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.

Time has gone by both for the poet and the world around him. He is now a man of letters standing in the "wooden O" of, presumably, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, an arena of the arts. Anahorish School and the window with the globe have vanished (4). As in the final simile of section I, concrete objects are being compared to letters. The Greek alphabet he uses ("lambdas", "delta", "omega") suggests how far away from his rural origins the now classically trained poet has moved. Language, writing, poetry have become his "good luck horse-shoe", his fiery writing in the sky. Just as Constantine was converted to Christianity (5), Heaney was converted to poetry.

The globe is a dominant presence in the following lines. The magician hangs it from the domed (i.e. half-spherical) ceiling of his abode to represent the universe. The astronaut sees it in the window of his space-ship in a vision paralleling the pupil's in section I, only this time it is the real thing, the whole huge planet:

The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum -

If one letter can represent a whole planet, "all he has sprung from", then writing can be a means of representing, analyzing and understanding the world, of interpreting it and, perhaps, of changing it. The boy's fascination at the plasterer's writing the name of his family

4 Cf. the reference to this in Station Island V (SI, p.73).

5 A reference to the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, who, on the night preceding his victorious battle against the usurper Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome in 312, is said to have seen a luminous cross in the sky with the words IN HOC SIGNO VINCES. He took it as a divine sign and made Christianity the state religion.

on the gable wall is a "pre-reflective" recognition that language and above all written language is the right way to deal with the accumulated experience of the individual, the nation, and the whole species. The alphabets give the poet access to a store-house of experiences and they allow him to articulate his own. Learning to read and write is a way of learning to live and what is true for writing in general is of course the more valid for poetry, its most refined form.

What is the poet supposed to achieve with that divine gift of his? Heaney has often attempted to answer that question and when he states in The Haw Lantern (HL, p.7) that he wants to provide

a small light for small people,
wanting no more from them but that they keep
the wick of self-respect from dying out,
not having to blind them with illumination,

he repeats an imagery and an idea we are familiar with from poems like North and Exposure. But his apparent contentment with such a limited achievement (emphasized by his decision to call this collection after the haw lantern) is at odds with the second stanza where "the poem ends on a note of unworthiness" (6). The poet's lantern turns into that of Diogenes, the Greek Cynic philosopher, seeking one just man. (7)

Heaney feels uneasy when he is being assessed by the philosopher's critical eye,

scrutinized from behind the haw.

6 Herbert Lomas, Two Faces of Yeats, p.92.

7 Diogenes of Sinope is said to have been wandering around Athens one day at noon carrying a lit lantern in his hand and stating that he was looking for one just man. Needless to say, his search remained fruitless.

When Diogenes finally passes on, it is implied that the poet has failed the test. Once again, Heaney's self-doubts shine through in these lines. He is not sure whether the small light he provides is enough, whether he might or should not have done more in support of his cause. William Scammell has argued that "at bottom perhaps, Heaney's agonizings are a series of vocational tests he administers to himself... Lord, I am not worthy. At what point does that truth turn into a boast, brazening things out in the singing-ropes of art" (8).

Scammell's criticism may be too harsh here but there is a point at which Heaney's "constant self-evaluative backward look" (9) and his exaggerated dread of failure become tiresome. Time and again a more self-confident approach seems called for.

A poem which shows similar misgivings about his art and even a feeling that it may be worthless after all, is The Stone Grinder (HL, p.8). Unlike Penelope, whose work, though seemingly absurd and meaningless, did in fact serve a very definite end (10), the speaker in this poem fails to see any purpose in his work.

The grinding of stones is boring, unchallenging, repetitive. It gives no satisfaction, no reward:

I was unrewarded as darkness at a mirror.

After fifty years he has accomplished nothing: what-

8 William Scammell, The Singing Robes of Art, p.44.

9 Allen, op.cit., p.109.

10 When Odysseus did not immediately return to Ithaca after the Trojan War, his wife Penelope told her suitors that she would choose one of them as her new husband as soon as she had completed the tapestry she was engaged on. At night she undid the work she had been doing during the day so as to defer its completion as much as possible. Thus her work was never completed.

ever was written on his slates got wiped off again. The stone grinder is just a handy-man, a provider of raw materials. He "deeply resents his 'inferior' craft of maintaining a 'medium' with no chance to put forward a 'message'" (11). The interesting work is done by others:

I ordained opacities and they haruspicated.

It is at this point that the analogy between the stone grinder and the poet is most revealing. The use of the verb "haruspicated" (12) tells us that the speaker feels he has been producing ordinary slates for years while others ("cartographers, printmakers") have put information onto them and read them, a process that to the supposedly illiterate stone grinder must seem like the magic of the ancient priests.

Similarly, the poet makes poetry but it is the scholars and critics who read and interpret it, who find in it ideas and attitudes sometimes remote from the poet's original intentions.

In the penultimate stanza there is yet again a feeling of unworthiness. Heaney has a deep suspicion of the critics' praise. Though they detect progress in his work, he himself has the impression that he is "coming full circle", that his output is static or, at best, repetitive, that it is

like the ripple perfected in stillness.

He is dissatisfied with that kind of perfection. His work to date seems to him like "coitus interruptus", an uncompleted, unprogressing creative process.

11 Allen, *op.cit.*, p.109.

12 In ancient Rome an haruspex was a priest who practised divination by examining the entrails of animals.

This distrust of his achievement is also the theme of The Stone Verdict (HL, p.17). Comparing himself to the Greek god Hermes (13), Heaney feels

maimed by self-doubt
And an old disdain of sweet talk and excuses.

This sense that he is unworthy of the critics' praise, that he has failed, that his action was in vain, is stronger here than ever it was in STATION ISLAND. Heaney is certainly exaggerating when he claims that he "will expect more than words" after "a lifetime's speechlessness". It is as if he wanted the reader to reassure and encourage him. And yet what he needs is his own approval, not the critics' or the scholars' biased and unreliable judgements. Those "verdicts" seem to him like stones, thrown at him and "piling up around him". His glorification is like a prison cell or a golden cage. He has the impression that he is being buried under this praise (14), that his reputation, strong and unshatterable as it may seem now, is in fact fickle and could end up being no more than

a gate-pillar
Or a tumbled wallstead where hogweed earths the silence.

Heaney refuses to be a living memorial, a poet in the shade of his own achievement. The male hardness and

13 Hermes (the Roman Mercury) served a variety of functions in classical mythology. As Hermes Psychopompos he was responsible for the departure of the souls of the dead to the underworld. He was the messenger of the gods and the god of luck and wealth. As Hermes Trismegistus he was the patron of writing and speech. Hermes was represented with the caduceus, a rod entwined by two serpents, a broad-brimmed hat and winged sandals. The name derives from the Greek for "heap of stones".

14 In his article On Irish Expressionist Painting, p.38, he writes: "But usually the success stands blinking like an unfledged bird in the dangerous ray of hyperbole. More, more, more, cries the maw of the media, and hurls terms of praise at the hapless creature, which outstrips all possibility and exceeds all expectation."

finality of the stones are averse to his nature, which inclines more to the female softness and warmth of the bog. As in The Stone Grinder, stones stand for stasis and immobility. Perhaps Heaney's self-mortification is an act of humility, a necessary counter-balancing of his success with the reading public.

His aspirations in A Daylight Art (HL, p.9) are much more humble. He admires Socrates, whose dream he would like to share. This was not a dream of political power or personal glory, but a very simple instruction: "Practise the art." It recalls the advice Heaney is given by the ghost of James Joyce in Station Island and by Michael McLaverty in Fosterage. Heaney envies the lucky ones who have found such an art:

Happy the man, therefore, with a natural gift
for practising the right one from the start -
poetry, say, or fishing.

He hopes for a "daylight art" that need not rely on dreams but comes naturally as an integral part of life. Happy the man who need not labour at his task but whose art is a natural expression of his temperament.

Hailstones (HL, pp.14-15) suggests one reason for Heaney's doubts about his work. Silence is a prominent idea in these poems and in the context of poetry silence can only mean that the writer has nothing to say, that the Muse has failed him and that his poetry is not creative but merely recreative of original experiences; "writing is elegy to experience", as Neil Corcoran has it (15). The poet is frustrated by the silence of "the real thing", by the fact that he can convey experience only second-

15 Neil Corcoran, From the Frontier of Writing, p.681.

hand. When he collects a handful of hailstones and presses them into a hard icy ball slowly melting away, he establishes an analogy between that experience and the writing of poetry: once he tries to (re-)capture experience, its splendour vanishes. Poetry can only be made

out of the melt of the real thing,

it can never be the real thing itself. Authentic experience is lost as quickly as the hailstones turn to "dirty slush". Perfection is temporary, it cannot last. The melting hailstones mock the poet's vain attempt to eternalize them. The beauty of art may be more lasting than the beauty of nature (and even that hypothesis needs to be proved) but it will always be inferior in perfection. Heaney deplores

the way they were perfect first
and then in no time dirty slush.

He would like to immortalize the hail and "the unstringable hands of Eddie Diamond / foraging in the nettles". Like Thomas Traherne, who "had his orient wheat / for proof and wonder" (16), he can only admire the magic of nature and remains unable to freeze it in a work of art.

This feeling of inadequacy is emphasized in part III by the idea that patience is futile because no experience can ever be fully recaptured:

when the shower ended
and everything said wait.
For what? For forty years

to say there, there you had
the truest foretaste of your aftermath -

16 A reference to Traherne's Centuries of Meditation, III, 3: "The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting." In: Thomas Traherne, Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings, Vol.I, Oxford: OUP, 1958, p.111.

The adolescent's experience with hailstones prefigures the mature poet's discovery of the artistic limits of his craft. He lives for the brief moment in which the hail is still perfect, in which the experience is still fresh. But all too soon

the light opened in silence
and a car with wipers going still
laid perfect tracks in the slush.

Poetry cannot completely (re-)capture the beauty and the frailty of the moment. It comes and goes irrecoverably, leaving the artist with a feeling of inadequacy and frustration. He has come to the artistic "frontier of writing".

* * *

In recent years Heaney's poems have tended to become more esoteric and less accessible to the average reader. The Sweeney Redivivus cycle was a definite move in that direction, leaving readers and critics alike puzzled and at a loss what to make of a particular poem or how to interpret it. The difficulties involved in correctly understanding a poem and in the correlation between the poet's intention and the reader's interpretation are the theme of The Riddle (HL, p.51). It begins with a description of an ordinary sieve but soon moves on to questions that can apply to poetic riddles as much as to sieves:

Which would be better, what sticks or what falls through?
Or does the choice itself create the value?

This raises fundamental questions about the reception of literature by the reading public and about the critics' responsibilities. The poet must acknowledge the fact that the communication between himself and the reader is of necessity imperfect and liable to misunderstandings be-

cause poetry can never be as explicit as prose. Another problem is whether poetry can have any objective value at all or whether what value it has is based on subjective preference, fashion, or taste. These questions are as old as art itself and will never be answered. But there can be no harm in reminding the literary critics of their responsibilities by telling them that "interpretation is a morally responsible act" (17).

Heaney has always done a lot to prevent or correct misinterpretations of his poetry. In interviews and essays he has commented on his own work, providing clues and helpful background information, and thus he has made it easier for us

To sift the sense of things from what's imagined

And work out what was happening in that story.

And what if the reader nonetheless fails to solve the riddle? Who then is responsible for the failure - the reader himself through his "culpable ignorance" of the facts that would have allowed him to understand, or the poet who may have frustrated an eager and willing reader by making his verse too oblique and thus taking him on

A via negativa through drops and let-downs?

The Riddle thus stresses the poet's and reader's co-responsibility for the success of a poem.

There are two poems in this collection in which Heaney's concern with writing gives way to a broader concern with language, especially A Shooting Script (HL, p.45), which is about the dying of the Gaelic tongue. The first two lines describe a scene that could come straight out of a Western movie:

17 Corcoran, From the Frontier of Writing, p.681.

They are riding away from whatever might have been
Towards what will never be, in a held shot:

These enigmatic lines could apply to the poet himself as a further indication of his self-doubts, or to Republican politics in the North hankering after lost opportunities.

In reality, however, the riders are "teachers on bicycles" in the 1920s, cycling through the Gaeltacht, probably trying to learn or improve their Gaelic as part of the new policy of the Free State government (18).

History has proved that the future did not turn out as many people in the 1920s believed it would. Irish has not yet replaced English as the native language of the majority of the people in Ireland and despite all efforts it probably never will. English linguistic colonialism seems to be irreversible and with the growing importance of English as a lingua franca even in areas never touched directly by British or American imperialism there is hardly a chance of eradicating it from Ireland. The Irish have created their own original brand of English and Anglo-Irish can no longer be regarded as the conqueror's tongue. For historical, socio-economic and also practical reasons (19), the revival of Gaelic has remained a par-

18 Encouraged by the Gaelic League, the Irish Government made the teaching of Gaelic in schools compulsory after independence. The success was limited and though J.J. Walsh, Government Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, claimed indignantly in 1926 that "the talk of ramming the subject down [the children's] throats was all nonsense", there could be no doubt that many Irish children who were native speakers of English were more or less forced to learn the language of their ancestors. At the same time the number of native speakers of Irish went into sharp decline in the Gaeltacht (cf. Terence Brown, *op.cit.*, pp.61-2).

19 English is a much easier language to learn than Gaelic. Both its grammar and its spelling make it a formidable rival for Irish and it is rarely the difficult languages that triumph in such a struggle, whatever political or cultural reasons

tial success, if not altogether a failure. The teachers in Heaney's poem are therefore

Not getting anywhere and not getting away.
Their efforts were admirable but futile. The clock cannot be turned back. No comment is needed to bring home the analogy between the fuchsia and the Gaelic tongue in the next take. Their slow disappearance is as deplorable as it is inevitable:

Mix to fuchsia that 'follows the language'.
A long soundless sequence.

The voices in the following take discuss the price of translating from English into Irish, but the books they translate belong to the past

Like nineteenth-century milestones in grass verges.
They may be venerable but they are old-fashioned, out-of-date. What is the good of translating forgotten authors like R.M. Ballantyne (20)? A living language must create a living contemporary literature. There is no point in trying to enrich Gaelic literature by translating a British writer's trivial adventure stories.

Salvation does not lie with the Church either, as Heaney made clear in Station Island. The priest's face in stanza 4 remains "blank", expressionless.

The final image leaves no room for ambiguity:

And just when it looks as if it is all over -
Tracking shots of a long wave up a strand
That breaks towards the point of a stick writing and writing
Words in the old script in the running sand.

What could be more futile, more absurd than this final quixotic action of writing Gaelic words into the wet sand

there may be for encouraging their survival.

20 R.M. Ballantyne (1823-94) was a Scottish writer of stories for boys.

at the beach, knowing that the next wave will wash them away? Similarly, the Irish words taught to the Irish children will rapidly be washed away when the tide of English breaks over them.

In a very different poem about language, the fourth sonnet of Clearances (HL, p.28), Heaney remembers how his mother deliberately mispronounced words she thought were "beyond her". The reason for this odd behaviour was "fear of affectation". The poet played the game and did likewise:

I governed my tongue
In front of her, a genuinely well-
adjusted adequate betrayal
Of what I knew better. I'd naw and aye
And decently relapse into the wrong
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

Their shared language develops into an idiosyncratic means of communication. On the family level it tightens the bond between mother and son; on a national and political level, accent, dialect or a special vocabulary and (even faulty) grammar can encourage and strengthen a sense of belonging (21). In Heaney's case his "betrayal / Of what I knew better" allowed him to bridge the growing gap between his origins and his present life, to overcome at least temporarily the sense of standing between his old rural self and the cosmopolitan life of a famous poet.

This idea is fundamental to Terminus (HL, pp.4-5). Its first part sees the poet characteristically caught between country and city, field and factory. He finds acorns and

21 Tom Paulin notes that "every family has its hoard of relished words which express its members' sense of kinship. These words act as a kind of secret sign and serve to exclude the outside world. They constitute a dialect of endearment within the wider dialect." (A New Look at the Language Question, p.18.)

rusted bolts, sees factory chimneys and mountains, hears engines shunting and horses trotting. The contrast between his rural past and his urban present prompts the question:

Is it any wonder when I thought
I would have second thoughts?

Sweeney pondered similar problems in In the Beech and Heaney himself told Neil Corcoran: "I was always going backwards and forwards. ... I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start" (22). He has second thoughts about leaving his background, his roots, and about his achievement since then. There is an undercurrent feeling of guilt in these lines, which comes out very clearly in section II when he remembers his selfishness and the bad conscience he often had. The "prudent squirrel's hoard" made him think of "gifts at a nativity" and

When they spoke of the mammon of iniquity
The coins in my pockets reddened like stone-lids.

He feels unworthy and he has the impression that even as a child he never went the whole way, never committed himself entirely, but hovered in-between, undecided, wanting to have it both ways. When he writes that

I was the march drain and the march drain's banks
Suffering the limit of each claim,

he does not only stress his being caught between two mutually exclusive positions (represented by the drain and its banks) but he also points out the pain, the mental agony that goes with such a predicament.

The following quotation from section III needs no comment - it speaks for itself:

22 Quoted in Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.13.

Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

The line

Baronies, parishes met where I was born
recalls earlier statements in interviews and articles,
in which Heaney called the readers' attention to his
mixed background, explaining for example the etymology of
the name of his father's farm (23) and commenting on the
location of Mossbawn: "A symbolic placing for a Northern
Catholic, to be in-between the marks of nationalist local
sentiment on the one hand [Toome Bridge] , and the marks
of colonial and British presence on the other [Castledaw-
son] " (24).

In a final analogy, the poet sees himself as
the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

The reference is to Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. He
was a descendant of the Ui Nialls who had ruled Ireland
as High Kings for centuries before the English came. But
he had also spent eight years in England as a young man;
he had had access to the court of Queen Elizabeth and she
had made him Earl of Tyrone. Thus he was caught in a con-
flict of loyalties: "Indeed, he wanted to have it both
ways. He wanted the queen's favour; but he wanted to be
free of her rule when he felt like it" (25).

23 Cf. the introduction to the place-name poems in chapter III.

24 The Saturday Interview (Caroline Walsh), p.5.

25 Kee, op.cit., p.35.

O'Neill finally rebelled against the English but was defeated at Kinsale in 1601.
Six years later, the two last Gaelic chieftains, Hugh O'Neill and Rory O'Donnell,

Heaney experiences a similar conflict of loyalties: between country and city, between artistic freedom and political commitment, between his Gaelic and his English heritage. The tone of this third section is basically optimistic, though - he is convinced that his double responsibility is "easier carried than one". We have already mentioned that he regards conflicting influences as rather positive, because they make him weigh his responsibilities and try to reconcile them in his poetry. The role of mediator suits him even if, time and again, as in AN OPEN LETTER and The Scribes, the more radical part of his temperament briefly takes over.

In an early poem first printed in this collection, A Peacock's Feather (HL, pp.38-9), written for the christening of one of his nieces, he builds a bridge between his native Ulster and her native Gloucestershire. He stresses the differences in the landscape but concludes:

Let us pray. May tilth and loam,
Darkened with Celts' and Saxons' blood,
Breastfeed your love of house and wood -

The summons to prayer is reminiscent of a Catholic service. Heaney prays that the future may reconcile the foes of yore, Irish and English, Catholic and Protestant, just as the baby's blood is a mixture of Irish and English, Celtic and Saxon blood. This poem thus stands in the tradition of Heaney's early ecumenical verse.

* * *

Earl of Tyrconnell, went on board a French ship at Rathmullen on 4th September 1607, preferring exile in Europe to "continual harassment from English officials" (Kee, op.cit., p.40) at home. After the "Flight of the Earls" their lands in Ulster were seized by the Crown and distributed to English and Scottish settlers. "It is here that the history of official modern Northern Ireland really begins" (Kee, op.cit., p.39).

The poems discussed in the first part of this chapter are not explicitly political. Heaney's interest in language and his doubts about his achievement as a poet are both artistic and political concerns, though, the awareness of political responsibility and its interplay with the demands of art being one of the dynamic forces of his poetry.

There are, however, several poems in this collection that are more directly political. Most of them are parables, but the documentary quality of From the Frontier of Writing (HL, p.6) recalls The Ministry of Fear from NORTH. Heaney recreates the atmosphere of tension and intimidation that surrounds an army checkpoint in the North. He comments on

The tightness and the nilness round that space,
thus anticipating an idea that becomes more evident later in the poem: the ambiguity of the individual's reaction to such military harassment. Road blocks at night, checkpoints, interrogations are no longer novel in Northern Ireland. For up to twenty years now, the Catholics in Ulster have been subjected to this aspect of the Troubles and it is to be expected that their response has evolved from indignant revolt to irritation, contempt, passive endurance of an annoying and humiliating nuisance. The "nilness" of the place, the total absence of confidence, tolerance and understanding between the army on the one hand and the Catholic minority on the other, is coupled with the "tightness" of the situation, an anxiety on the part of the driver, who feels nervous, intimidated, maybe even guilty, just as the younger Heaney did years earlier in The Ministry of Fear.

The Ministry is still active then. The poet is fed up, exhausted. He plays the role, drives away in the recommended manner "with guarded unconcerned acceleration" so as not to seem suspicious, wishing only to escape from this nightmare:

a little emptier, a little spent
as always by that quiver in the self,
subjugated, yes, and obedient.

The experience is repeated at the border when Heaney is about to cross over into the Republic. The following scene could come straight from a newspaper report or a television documentary:

The guns on tripods,
the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating
data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.

The relief at being released is undercut by the uneasy thought that in Ulster it is enough to be a Catholic to become suspicious and potentially dangerous in the eyes of the British Army. "Arraigned yet freed" the poet crosses the border and sees

the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen,

an image that adds to the unreal, nightmarish quality of the occurrence. The windscreen could be a TV screen, the scene just lived through a movie, a mere fiction. But it is only too real, only too true (26).

26 In Preoccupations, pp.30-1, Heaney writes: "It hasn't been named martial law but that's what it feels like. Everywhere soldiers with cocked guns are watching you - that's what they're here for - on the streets, at the corners of streets, from doorways, over the puddles on demolished sites. At night, jeeps and armoured cars groan past without lights; or road-blocks are thrown up, and once again it's delays measured in hours, searches and signings among the guns and torches. As you drive away, you bump over ramps that are specially designed to wreck you at speed and maybe get a glimpse of a couple of youths with hands on their heads being

The frontier of writing is not just the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The checkpoints are emblematic of the mistrust that characterizes the relationship between Catholics, Protestants and British soldiers.

Neil Corcoran argued that "if poetry makes nothing happen, it does at least make something 'happen again'. In repeating the experience of political oppression, the poem effects, even if only for the poet, a temporary release from it" (27). Any kind of release must indeed be short-lived because the poet knows that the oppression is continuing. The power of the pen is much weaker than the power of the guns or of the accumulated hatred of the bigots.

This is not to say that Heaney is despairing or has become a pessimist. But he is aware of the "frontier of writing": all poetry can do is provide short-term release and, perhaps, in the long run, contribute to a change in people's mentalities and attitudes.

From the Frontier of Writing remains the only documentary poem in THE HAW LANTERN. Heaney's favourite medium in this collection is the parable. It stresses "the implicit but detailed analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to

frisked on the far side of the road. Just routine. Meanwhile up in the troubled estates street-lights are gone, accommodating all the better the night-sights of sniper and marksman.

If it is not army blocks, it is vigilantes. They are very efficiently organized, with barricades of new wood and watchmen's huts and tea rotas, protecting the territories. If I go round the corner at ten o'clock to the cigarette machine or the chip shop, there are the gentlemen with flash-lights, of mature years and determined mien, who will want to know my business."

bring home to us" (28). This lesson is a moral lesson: "Such poems, with their ingenious allegorical worlds, constitute a new kind of political poetry for Heaney, and they make it clear that writing has, for him, a moral compulsion even deeper than the aesthetic compulsion" (29).

The idea that there is a moral necessity in poetry is not new to Heaney's work. He often insists upon the vital role of tolerance, reconciliation and friendship in human relations. The parable is a kind of protective colouring which allows him to show his readers, most notably his Irish readers, that their prejudices and dogmatism fuel a conflict that has been going on for much too long. If he tried to say this directly instead of obliquely, he would not achieve much. People would turn against him, reject him as a moralist or perhaps even as a traitor. Like that great parablist Jesus of Nazareth he prefers the indirect to the frontal approach. His parables are meant to be didactic but they do not preach. They teach through analogies.

The first verse of Parable Island (HL, pp.10-11) leaves no doubt as to which island the poet has in mind:

Although they are an occupied nation
and their only border is an inland one
they yield to nobody in their belief
that the country is an island.

The Irish may be "an occupied nation", but they are a nation nonetheless. Their only border is "inland" and it cannot conceal the fact that this country is one island

28 M.H.Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd edition, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, p.6.

29 Corcoran, From the Frontier of Writing, p.681.

and that its partition is unnatural.

The division of the nation is not only evident in its border, it is also reflected in its languages and its place-names. The "mountain of the shifting names", whatever it really is (Giant's Causeway perhaps) serves as an example:

The occupiers call it Cape Basalt.
The Sun's Headstone, say farmers in the east.
Drunken westerners call it The Orphan's Tit.

In the final stanza of this first part, Heaney, while mocking his countrymen for being "forked-tongued natives", registers an undercurrent hope in the population for

a point where all the names converge
underneath the mountain and where (some day)
they are going to start to mine the ore of truth.

These lines are reminiscent of Louis MacNeice's short poem Coda, in which he hopes that greater understanding between the two communities may one day be possible:

But what is that clinking in the darkness?
Maybe we shall know each other better
When the tunnels meet beneath the mountain. (30)

This note of optimism is not carried on into the second and third parts, which focus on attempts to make history serve ideological purposes. Thus the medieval missionaries' view that the round towers continued a native tradition of towers built "in honour of the one-eyed all-creator" is just as fanciful as their etymology of the word "island" (31). These priests were not looking for truth but they reinterpreted historical facts.

30 Louis MacNeice, Coda, op.cit., p.155.

31 In fact the round towers "were built as combined belfries and refuges for the monasteries which the Norsemen continually sacked" (Kee, op.cit., p.27).

Ironically, the archaeologists, who ought to be mining "the ore of truth", do exactly the same thing. They "begin to gloss the glosses". Heaney criticizes their feverish, almost religious devotion to their theories, their "schools". Ideologies have become more important than historical facts and scientific adequacy. In their attempts to adapt history to their foregone conclusions, the archaeologists resemble

the subversives and collaborators
always vying with a fierce possessiveness
for the right to set 'the island story' straight.

Heaney regrets that the subversives (Republicans) and the collaborators (Loyalists) try to interpret the history of Ireland in such a way as to make it serve their ends. A solution can never be found if subjective interpretation triumphs over objective fact.

In the final part, the image of the island disappearing "by aggrandizement" could be a reminder to his Irish readers that Ireland is not alone in the world. It contrasts with the earlier idea "that the country is an island". Maybe if the Irish managed to see their problems in relation with the much greater issues that threaten mankind as a whole, this new perspective would make them realize how anachronistic the Troubles are. Then there would be no need for escapist dreams "of boat-journeys and havens".

Heaney has his own dreams about countries of the imagination. From the Republic of Conscience (HL, pp.12-13) is a difficult poem, "a kind of surrealist bonus" (32), published by the Irish section of Amnesty International

32 Seamus Heaney, An Amicable and a Candid Child, p.4.

on Human Rights Day 1985.

The first-person narrator of the poem is on a visit to a country whose main asset is, as the title suggests, conscience. The traveller is welcomed in a most forthcoming manner, he is made to feel at home both by the quietness and peacefulness of the place and by the polite interest the immigration officials show in his origins and the country of his birth.

He is agreeably surprised by the total absence of privilege among these people:

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

The traveller then describes this nation's closeness to the sea. The "stylized boat", their "sacred symbol" reminds one of the longship in North that gave the poet such good advice. It contrasts with Scyld Shefing's frightening "ship so well furbished / with battle-tackle, bladed weapons / and coats of mail" in A Ship of Death, Heaney's translation from Beowulf. The different parts of the boat are associated with listening, writing, speaking (singing) and observing, the activities of a good poet:

The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
The hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.

Is this then a republic of poets, a land of honesty and modesty whose people, like Heaney, often feel unworthy of what they do and who, if they are politicians,

must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office -

an attitude in striking contrast with the behaviour of most politicians in Ulster. There are additional indica-

tions in the final part of the poem showing that the Republic of Conscience could be some kind of poets' republic and that moral action is required of its citizens. It is their task to teach the world the importance of virtue. The traveller becomes an ambassador of the imaginary country he has visited, an ambassador of moral responsibility. The customs woman "insisted my allowance was myself", the immigration clerk said "that I was now a dual citizen" and henceforth his task will be

to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

The poet has the moral obligation to make his readers aware of the choice they must make between right and wrong.

With From the Land of the Unspoken (HL, pp.18-19) Heaney returns to the subject of language. It is a poem of many contrasts. In the first stanza Heaney refers to the platinum bar kept by the French, "a logical and talkative nation", at the Pavillon de Breteuil in Sèvres (33). The Irish, it is implied, are neither logical nor talkative.

The place where the bar is kept appears to Heaney like "the throne room and the burial chamber", a paradox that stresses the dangers inherent in uniqueness. The poet

could feel at home inside that metal core
slumbering at the very hub of systems.

It may be a fascinating thought to be the centre of interest, to be the ultimate authority, but such fame has

33 The kilogram is the "basic SI unit of mass, equal to the mass of the international prototype held by the 'Bureau International des Poids et Mesures'" (Collins English Dictionary). This prototype is the platinum bar mentioned by Heaney.

to be bought dearly at the cost of being buried alive.

The Irish nation, unlike the platinum bar, is not treasured, not concentrated:

We are a dispersed people whose history
is a sensation of opaque fidelity.

Like the Jews the Irish have been forced into emigration, yet they have remained faithful to their ancestors, their Irishness. Heaney calls this fidelity "opaque", thereby suggesting not only its compactness, its incorruptibility, but also a dark, mysterious, uncanny quality it may have. The solidarity of the "unspoken", those exiled from the "speech-ridden", is based on their clinging to old legends and folk-heroes. The Irish have lost their language but their folk-lore is still very much alive both in Ireland and abroad. The poem contrasts Gaelic culture with the legends of the "speech-ridden", presumably the Anglo-Saxons, the English. The final lines of stanza 2 may be an allusion to Beowulf or, more particularly, to the scene described in A Ship of Death and hinted at in The Spoonbait.

Stanza 3 emphasizes the tribal solidarity that is at work wherever two or more Irishmen meet, be it on the underground, in a museum, or anywhere else. Heaney speculates that this strong attraction, this extreme sense of belonging may be due to the Irish having suffered centuries of oppression. The notion that they have to stand together to survive became a natural reflex in all those years.

Our unspoken assumptions have the force
of revelation.

Lines like these suggest that the poet dreads this mystical dark power which tribal solidarity with all its pre-

conceptions and prejudices has over the individual. It is not the first time he criticizes the Irish for their self-righteousness, which often goes hand in hand with superstition (see the last three lines of the poem), dogmatism and intolerance. No good can result from the triumph of tribal solidarity over personal responsibility, of loyalty over conscience.

The "unspoken" are not only a nation who have lost their language. We are back to the idea of the Irish as a nation who "say nothing", who shut up and assume rather than speak out and know. And if one of them ever dares open his mouth and break the general complicity, he is regarded as a traitor:

whoever is the first of us to seek
assent and votes in a rich democracy
will be the last of us and have killed our language.

This refers not only to a hypothetical (or historical) politician of Irish descent in the United States or the United Kingdom who has had to abandon his native Gaelic for the English of his host-country, but to any Irishman who rejects the tribal complicity of silence for the individual's right to speak out and make his opinions known.

The moral lesson of From the Land of the Unspoken is a bid in favour of personal integrity, honesty and conscience; a protest against the tribe's pretension to control and subdue the individual.

The next parable, The Song of the Bullets (HL, pp.42-43), sees the poet looking at the stars, as he did in Exposure, but the similarity ends there. Some shooting stars seem to him like bullets. When they talk to him

they sound cold and cynical. Their claim that

'The sky at night is full of us,'

is disquieting. Are there really so many of them among "the still / And seemly planets" ? Appearances are never what they seem and despite the bright lights of the majestic planets, we may in fact be living in the epoch of the small lethal bullet lights. Their unemotional matter-of-factness is not made to reassure us. The rhyme scheme Heaney uses (a mixture of full rhyme and half-rhyme) and the rhythm stress their cynicism. It seems as if they were mocking mankind for inventing them and now being unable to get rid of them.

Though

justice stands aghast and stares
Like the sun on arctic snow,

it is obvious that the real culprits are those who produce and use the bullets, not the projectiles themselves. They argue rightly that they cannot be blamed:

Our guilt was accidental.

The bullets are instruments of death. Their total lack of concern for the victims ironically mirrors the inhumanity of the killers:

We are the iron will.
We hoop and cooper worlds beyond
The killer and the kill.

Does this mean that the slave is no longer dependent on his master, that with the invention of bullets, those iron monsters, a new world, a cruelly inhuman and deathly world has been created? For Heaney the bullets are emblematic of a world of violence in which individual life counts for nothing. This is another facet of his rejection of tribal pseudo-values and of his upholding of the

individual's right to freedom and peace.

Neither the individual "soul's cadenced desires" nor the Christian promise of eternal bliss and felicity ("Mount Olivet's beatitudes" 34) stand a chance against the threat of the heartless bullets that are not only dangerous per se but above all because they are the servants and executors of man's cruelty: they

Dwell in the marbled fires
Of every steady eye that ever
Narrowed, sighted, paused:

The bullets are the emanations of a cynical, life-despising world.

The poem ends on a note of solemn sadness. There is not really much hope. Clouds cover "the still / And seemingly planets" and obscurity triumphs "above our darkened hill". The repetition of these two phrases adds to the solemnity. Whereas in stanza 1 the bright planets were a sign of hope for the land in darkness, in the final stanza this sign has disappeared. Heaney's gloomy meditation on the cruelty of mankind and the perversion of a mind whose main objects seem to be murder and destruction leaves no one indifferent. It is a sign of disillusionment and weariness and therefore it should be taken as a very serious and indeed necessary warning.

34 The reference is to Zechariah 14:4/5, in which the prophet announces an attack by heathen enemies upon Jerusalem. After this necessary purification of the Jews, the heathens will be destroyed by the Lord and He will lead His chosen people into an era of bliss and eternal happiness: "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains ... and the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee."

We are not entirely without hope, though, as Heaney reports From the Canton of Expectation (HL, pp.46-7). This poem retraces the political evolution of Northern Ireland since the Second World War. The first stanza describes the situation as it was in the 1940s and 50s: the Catholics were resigned and docile, they had lost the hope that any substantial change would come about in the foreseeable future.

We lived in a land of optative moods,
under high, banked clouds of resignation.
A rustle of loss in the phrase Not in our lifetime,
the broken nerve when we prayed Vouchsafe or Deign,
were creditable, sufficient to the day.

Words like "resignation", "loss", "broken nerve" characterize this phase. It was a time of longing and praying, a time of "optative moods", as Heaney says in the first of a number of grammatical metaphors.

Republican meetings were pathetic, closer to folklore than to political activism: the children sang Gaelic songs, relics from better days, veterans from the Civil War "enumerated the humiliations / we always took for granted". Nothing happened, though. The Catholics had learnt to live with oppression and

the usual harassment
by militiamen on overtime at roadblocks.

Subdued and passive, they survived on the small hope that one day justice would be done. They were like the Jews patiently enduring hardships and waiting for a Messiah.

Then the Education Act of 1947 laid the foundations for a decisive change. "In eventually supplying, for the first time, an educated, professional Catholic middle class in the North, this act may be considered largely responsible for the release of political energy there in

the 1960s" (35).

The second stanza is about this "change of mood". The young Catholics, "that might have dozed a life away" if they had not been educated, grew up to become the heroes of modern Ulster, the Finn MacCumhailles of the twentieth century building giant causeways towards political emancipation. University education encouraged "a grammar / of imperatives, the new age of demands".

This new generation, to which Heaney belongs, refused to dwell in misery and dejection:

They would banish the conditional for ever,
this generation born impervious to
the triumph in our cries of de profundis.
Our faith in winning by enduring most
they made anathema, intelligences
brightened and unmannerly as crowbars.

The contrast between these young people, who set up the Civil Rights Movement in the late 60s and put an end to the political complacency of the Loyalist establishment in Ulster, and their parents, who endured instead of rebelling, who kept silent instead of protesting, is striking. The late 1960s were the consequence of the 1947 Education Act and they brought about an irreversible change in the attitudes of the Catholics in Ulster. Their demands for equal rights and justice became more pressing, their claims for political power-sharing more insistent.

What looks the strongest has outlived its term.
The future lies with what's affirmed from under.

The old proverb, meant to console the patiently suffering, was now interpreted as a call to action. The young took the initiative and the "banked clouds of resignation"

35 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.17.

became

edged more and more with brassy thunderlight.

A violent, radical change was and still is about to be effected, a change as fundamental as the Flood that cleaned a sinful and blasphemous world, leaving only the just and God-fearing. The poet yearns

for hammerblows on clinkered planks,
the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins,

the noises of a new Noah at work. Noah stands here for a generation of Catholics whose indignation led them towards what they are convinced "was right action". They have rejected the conditional for the imperative and finally adopted a realistic indicative attitude. When the time is ripe their

boat will lift when the cloudburst happens.

These final lines are full of a determinism that we are not used to in Heaney's work. The tripartite structure of the poem (resignation, revolt, realism) leads necessarily to the triumph of the underdog. The allusions to both Gaelic and Christian mythology are meant to rally divine support for the Catholic cause. There are even indications that recourse to violence may be necessary ("a fang of menace", "thunderlight", "hammerblows", "uncompromised"). The Loyalists are made to understand that their blasphemous pride and hybris will not be tolerated indefinitely.

From the Canton of Expectation is a moral justification of the Catholic renaissance since the 1960s. The threatening undertones in this parable are meant to show the Loyalists that compromise is an absolute necessity. The Catholics are self-confident and determined: the

"cloudburst" can only be avoided if confrontation gives way to reconciliation.

It is significant that this poem is followed by The Mud Vision (HL, pp.48-9), a much more pessimistic assessment of the Catholic emancipation movement.

Contrasts are used in the first stanza to describe a nation hovering between tradition and modernism. The statues of the crucified Christ ("with exposed hearts and barbed-wire crowns") are like symbols of a tortured nation. Hares run away from jet-planes and "punks with aerosol sprays", those emanations of adolescent protest against the consumer society, have appeared in Ulster as well. The Pope's blessings come via satellite and the "charmed circles" are in fact helicopter pads. Television broadcasts pictures of

Our first native models and the last of the mummers.

The whole of Catholic Ulster is experiencing a metamorphosis, a change from a traditional rural society to a modern cosmopolitan urban one. At the moment the two phases coexist; Ulster stands in-between, watchful, a bit anxious,

airy as a man on a springboard
who keeps limbering up because the man cannot dive.

In this situation of cultural crisis, a sign appears, a "mud vision". It is a strange and fascinating appearance,

A gossamer wheel, concentric with its own hub
Of nebulous dirt, sullied yet lucent.

This dirty fog recalls the cloudburst of From the Canton of Expectation and the plagues that visited Egypt in the time of Moses. The people react with surprise, fear,

piety and superstition. But many feel like

A generation who had seen a sign!

The vision is a test that is going to establish whether the nation is worthy of an improvement of its predicament or not.

I think we are justified in recognizing in the mud vision the political optimism that prevailed in Catholic circles in Ulster in the late 1960s. The vision people had then probably did not go beyond a vague feeling that at last something was happening, that political reform had become a possibility (36).

That mood did not last. Political realities soon put limits to the new-born idealism:

We lived, of course, to learn the folly of that.
One day it was gone and the east gable
Where its trembling corolla had balanced
Was starkly a ruin again.

Heaney regrets that this unique opportunity was missed. He criticizes the "post factum jabber" and the "big explanations" of journalists and political commentators. The new spirit became the object of pseudo-scientific studies and it died in the process:

we forgot that the vision was ours,
Our one chance to know the incomparable
And dive to a future. What might have been origin
We dissipated in news.

This is an avowal of failure. The vision offered the chance of a breakthrough, of a definite improvement. The Catholics failed to live up to it, they failed to take it as a starting-point for far-reaching reforms and thus

36 It may be worth noting that this new spirit, this political awakening of the young Catholics in Ulster was contemporary with the international protest movements of 1967 and 1968.

the chance was slipped. There is bitterness and regret in Heaney's voice when he writes:

watch us
Who had our chance to be mud-men, convinced and estranged,
Figure in our own eyes for the eyes of the world. (37)

They have been reduced, or have reduced themselves, to extras in spectacular international TV newsreels. In Exposure Heaney thought he had "missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent". The Mud Vision tells the story of a nation who have missed a unique opportunity to improve their predicament.

The same disillusionment is at the heart of The Disappearing Island (HL, p.50), which reads almost like a briefer and more metaphorical version of The Mud Vision. The title associates the poem with Jules Verne's L'île à hélice (1895), a story about an artificial island off the coast of New Zealand. One half of it was peopled by Protestants, the other by Catholics. After perpetual wars between the two parts of the population, the island sank into the Pacific, killing all its inhabitants.

The poem stresses the idea that nothing can be taken for granted, that it is presumptuous to found on anything as secure. The people on the island emerge from

Between its blue hills and those sandless shores
Where we spent our desperate night in prayer and vigil,

but their attempts to "found" themselves, though successful at first, are finally thwarted when

The island broke beneath us like a wave.

37 The poet's disillusion is accentuated by the line "You could say we survived", which echoes the Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748-1836), a one-time prominent politician of revolutionary France. When asked what he had been doing during the French Revolution, the Abbé answered: "J'ai vécu" (I survived), an answer that testifies to his disappointment and disillusionment with that period.

Similarly, the new spirit in Catholic politics in the late Sixties held the promise of a lasting improvement, of a political and economic emancipation of the Northern Catholics. But failure was just around the corner and all the Catholics got was a vision. Heaney seems to suggest in the final stanza that only a return to the values inherent in the land can save Ireland from sharing the tragic fate of Jules Verne's island:

The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm
Only when we embraced it in extremis.

The sectarian conflict, the "vicious logic of terror and counter-terror" (38) is self-destructive but the land offers the common ground needed for reconciliation.

* * *

I should like to conclude this discussion of THE HAW LANTERN with a brief look at two sonnets with a political background. Clearances I (HL, p.25) is about a great-grandmother of Heaney's "on my mother's side", a Protestant who married into a Catholic family. He imagines how she was treated by her Protestant co-religionists after her marriage and her conversion to Catholicism:

She's crouched low in the trap
Running the gauntlet that first Sunday
Down the brae to Mass at a panicked gallop.
He whips on through the town to cries of 'Lundy!'

This ordeal must have been a bitter experience for the woman rejected by her tribe. She threw her lot in with her Catholic husband and suffered the intolerance and bigotry of her former friends who treated her as a traitor, a "turncoat", a "Lundy" (39).

38 From the editorial of Fortnight 257 (December 1987), p.3.

39 Lundy "was the governor of Derry who had been willing to open the gates to King

Catholics, of course, judged her more positively as "The Convert" or "The Exogamous Bride", expressions that suggest acceptance, though not enthusiasm. Heaney is reminded of this anecdote by a cobble-stone that was once thrown at the woman and which he has now inherited from his mother:

The exonerating, exonerated stone.

The cobble-stone was thrown in a gesture of contempt and rejection and thus it cleared the woman from any obligations she might still have felt towards her tribe. It has now itself been absolved from its guilt by the action of time and it has become a "genre piece", a relic.

Yet it is a reminder to the poet of the uncompromising attitudes of the two communities in the North. The condemnation of marriage across the sectarian limits (reminiscent of Apartheid), which Heaney's great-grandmother had to suffer the consequences of, is still an issue in present-day Ulster.

The sonnet The Old Team (HL, p.23) may have been prompted by an old photograph of a Loyalist football team of the beginning of the century. The two quatrains are fiercely ironic not only in their mocking description of the players, who look rather like caricatures of themselves,

a moustachioed tenantry togged out
To pose with folded arms, all musclebound
And staunch and forever up against it

James's armies before the Apprentice Boys of the city closed them and thus precipitated the Siege of Derry in 1689. His name, in the Orange lexicon, has been synonymous with 'traitor' or 'turncoat' ever since." (Seamus Heaney, An Amicable and a Candid Child, p.4.)

but also in the depiction of an Ulster that has vanished, an Ulster of which the Unionists were the unchallenged masters and in which they behaved as if it were just another English county, or just another colony. The idyll is false, though, and the arrogance and self-assurance of these men appear obsolete now.

Whatever was typical of the "Sons of Castledawson" (40) has "grown historical". Their world is gone: the "Team-spirit, walled parkland, the linen mill" and "those lightly clapped, dull-thumping games of football".

The poem ends with a nightmarish vision:

The steady coffins sail past at eye-level.

The Troubles of the present are the direct result of centuries of oppression and injustice during which the Protestant leaders' complacency and arrogance contributed a lot to the "black glacier" of coffins.

These two poems were inspired by anecdotes from the past, anecdotes illustrating the roots of today's problems. Between the lines there may be the thought that it could all have been so different if only people were more tolerant, more humane, more understanding.

* * *

THE HAW LANTERN does not mark any spectacular new step in Heaney's poetical output. The poems in this collection develop themes from STATION ISLAND, such as a feeling of unease and inadequacy, doubts about the poet's achievement and a deep suspicion of the critics' praise. The notion of standing in-between, not unexpected with a man

40 Castledawson is the home of the Chichester-Clarkes, a prominent Unionist family.

living in a country that is experiencing a severe political crisis, leads to a reaffirmation of Heaney's conciliatory, ecumenical spirit.

Seamus Heaney has grown wiser and more thoughtful. He is above all an honest writer, concerned for his people. His condemnation of oppression and discrimination is not meant to be destructive; he knows that only an objective assessment of the rights and wrongs done by each side can prepare the ground for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the parables Heaney regrets missed opportunities, warns against the nihilism of violence and upholds those values that he would like everybody in Ulster (and elsewhere) to embrace: conscience, tolerance, mutual understanding.

I have said before that this is not an optimistic book. Heaney seems to have reached the stage of the realistic indicative he mentions in From the Canton of Expectation. His political views have not changed fundamentally, though realism has taken over from idealism. He is at his best as a poet when he covers political comment and message with the protective colouring of analogy and allusion. There is no doubt that he really is a "word magician" (41).

41 Gillian Clarke in her introduction to the PBS-Anthology 1987-1988, London: Hutchinson, 1987, p.viii.

"THE END OF ART IS PEACE"*
=====

Delight in Art whose end is peace.

W.B.Yeats (1)

In the twenty years since the publication of *DEATH OF A NATURALIST* Seamus Heaney has come a long way, from the rural nature poetry of that first collection to an increasingly more self-conscious and responsible kind of verse. The basic challenge for him, and for any other poet in similar circumstances, is how to reconcile "his personal dedication to a reflective art and his public responsibility towards political action" (2). The tension between these two obligations reflects a tension in the poet's temperament between his origins and traditions, and the more cosmopolitan world he now inhabits.

Derek Mahon has pointed out "the oblique, and possibly escapist, relationship of the Artist to his historical circumstances, particularly where those circumstances include a violent and complex political upheaval" (3). An oblique approach does indeed seem to be the only adequate response to the Troubles. More directly committed poetry

* A phrase by Coventry Patmore, quoted in The Harvest Bow (FW, p.58).

1 From: To a Wealthy Man, in: Collected Poems, p.120.

2 Cahill, op.cit., p.55.

3 Derek Mahon in: Desmond Egan, Michael Hartnett (eds), Choice: An Anthology of Irish Poetry, The Curragh: The Goldsmith Press, 1973, p.80.

could easily degenerate into journalism or, worse, propaganda and thus cease to be art. Escapism, on the other hand, would seem dishonest and cowardly to Heaney, whose moral integrity and sense of responsibility for his community are beyond doubt.

The various kinds of protective colouring he uses allow him to steer a middle way, to combine his aspirations, to fail neither his art nor his conscience. In an essay about Irish Expressionist painting, Heaney has recently stressed "the necessity for innocence in a situation where it is disallowed to the intelligent person. That actually seems to be the crux of the artistic matter: to stand between two commands" (4).

His work to date illustrates how he gradually grew aware of his predicament and began to look for ways of coping with it.

Heaney's earliest poetry, in *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, is about nature and love, about childhood experiences and about life on the farm. In his first interview, he explained why his early verse was so local: "En fait, ma poésie est très locale. On part de ses propres croyances, puis l'on va vers celles de la communauté" (5). On the local, parochial level the poet finds themes that are relevant for the whole of Ireland and, arguably, for the whole of mankind.

In the Crane Bag interview Heaney stresses how his political thinking evolved, how he began to see beyond

4 Seamus Heaney, On Irish Expressionist Painting, p.35.

5 Le clivage traditionnel, p.188.

the local problems and to discover larger patterns:

I always thought of the political problem - maybe because I am not really a political thinker - as being an internal Northern Ireland division. I thought along sectarian lines. Now I think that the genuine political confrontation is between Ireland and Britain. (6)

In the sectarian conflict his attitude has always been one of moderation and ecumenicalism. This is evident in all his books - from DEATH OF A NATURALIST to THE HAW LANTERN.

A conciliatory mood also characterizes DOOR INTO THE DARK. In his second collection Heaney is digging into the dark of history, searching for an image. He wants to discover his roots, but also to set up a continuity, to explain the present through the past. In Preoccupations he writes:

I began by suggesting that my point of view involved poetry as divination, as a restoration of the culture to itself. In Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed. (P, p.60)

Heaney's interest in Irish history is also an assertion of his Irish identity. He is proud of the cultural achievements of his ancestors. Above all, he stresses the fact that the sectarian antagonism in Ulster, the violence in the North, is only the latest manifestation of a pattern that has been enacted and reenacted in Ireland for centuries. Violence has a long tradition in "this blind bitter land" (7).

6 Unhappy and at Home, p.67.

7 A phrase from Yeats's Words, in: Collected Poems, p.101.

In DOOR INTO THE DARK Heaney realizes that he needs a myth, one all-embracing image, to deal satisfactorily with this continuity of suffering:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. (P, p.56)

He finds this image by literally digging into the dark of the bog: the bog people. It may be that the reading of P.V.Glob's book was a kind of epiphany for Heaney - in the Joycean sense. It certainly was an inspiration, one of those rare lucky flashes of genius that make the great poet. The bog people do not only represent the hope for a return of peace, the wish that something positive may ultimately come out of the Troubles. Their symbolism goes far beyond the Irish context to gain universal importance. Robert Buttel argues that Heaney's concern with local matters, language, place-names, the bog (8), gives his poetry a wider significance:

In this sense Heaney is a parochial poet. With his own sensibility and mind he has dug into the fundamentals of his conscious and unconscious experience, into the mythos of place, the traces of racial memory, the dark human and natural forces, the archetypal patterns, and done so with such urgency that he breaks through the bonds of provincialism. (9)

It is thus by dealing with apparently local subject-

8 The bog people are of course not 'local' in so far as they were found in Denmark but the sense of community Heaney establishes with them ("Unhappy and at home") as well as the similarity between the local Irish bogs and those in Jutland make it possible for the reader to regard them as 'local' elements in Heaney's poetry.

9 Buttel, *op.cit.*, p.15. Cf. *ibid.*, p.14: "A poet who has transcended the limitations of the provincial by being inordinately true to the material of his locality." Cf. also John Press, *op.cit.*, p.675: "Paradoxically, this strong sense of regional pride, this immersion in the local, this rootedness in one small corner, may lend itself to a kind of universality which escapes the poetry of men whose material is derived from a study of contemporary politics."

matter that Heaney "breaks through the bonds of provincialism". With WINTERING OUT he definitely proves that he is a poet of more than local interest.

While finding images and correlatives for the predicament of Ireland and mankind in general, Heaney keeps on advocating a peaceful solution, a reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants, which, in WINTERING OUT, takes the form of a union on the linguistic level between the soft Irish vowel and the hard English consonant.

The basic themes and images of WINTERING OUT are repeated in the first part of NORTH: "I like giving out what I believe, and saying the same things over again" (10). It might be argued, though, that the correlations with the present become more insistent, as, e.g., in Punishment. It becomes clearer that the past is a commentary on the present, that the latter cannot be understood without an adequate knowledge of the former. In the second part of the collection, we find explicit political poems that do not comment indirectly, by means of comparison and analogy, but directly on the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland. There was an urge in Heaney to be more explicit and it seems as if he felt compelled to write those poems. They were prompted by his experience of the Troubles:

On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps - destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air. (P, p.34)

10 Haffenden, op.cit., p.59.

The explicitly political second part of NORTH adds a new element to Heaney's poetry. It does not signify a complete discarding of the earlier metaphorical verse. The two parts of the collection reflect the two sides of the poet's temperament, the desire for withdrawal, far from the Troubles, and the necessity of commitment, the moral obligation to speak out for peace. The only way he sees to reconcile these is by adopting "protective colouring", by camouflaging his message with analogies and metaphors:

Traditionally an oracle speaks in riddles, yielding its truths in disguise, offering its insights cunningly. And in the practice of poetry, there is a corresponding occasion of disguise, a protean, chameleon moment when the lump in the throat takes protective colouring in the new element of thought. (P, p.49)

Of course, even protective colouring has to be shed sometimes. Time and again it may be necessary to be more explicit. "At certain extreme moments it is more important to be truth-telling than to be beauty-hunting" (11).

The tone of the next collection, FIELD WORK, is elegiac. The elegies are an implied rejection of political and sectarian violence. The lament for the dead is a condemnation of the murderers. Heaney's ultimate aim is peace, and this accounts for his interest in Dante:

Like Dante, Heaney declares an affinity only to peace. ... It is Dante's personal predicament that attracts him - Dante's situation in his society (similar to his own) as a scholarly, imaginatively just man who adheres to peace in an environment corrupted by politics and rife with murderous betrayal. (12)

11 Seamus Heaney, On Irish Expressionist Painting, p.39.

12 Anne Stevenson, The Peace Within Understanding: Looking at 'Preoccupations'. In: Tony Curtis, op.cit., pp.132 and 134.

What can be done to bring peace back to Northern Ireland? Heaney has suggested reconciliation, moderation, ecumenicalism. But respect is also necessary, respect of each other's cultural identity and dignity and it is this respect he claims in AN OPEN LETTER.

In STATION ISLAND the sense of standing in-between, of being torn between conflicting obligations is very strong. So is the awareness of an unbridgeable gap between the survivor and the victims of the Troubles. Heaney makes his pilgrimage to Station Island to find out where his responsibilities lie, but the advice he is given by the voices of the dead is contradictory.

On this pilgrimage Heaney begins to understand the inhibiting effect of the tribal and religious pressures that are upon every individual in Ireland:

Personality in Ireland, individual personality, the self, is subject to the impact of several things; it's full of impacted history, impacted Christianity, impacted self-denial. ... In Ireland the very idea that you would set out to seek individual fulfilment has something slightly affronting about it. What you are expected to do is to live some kind of agreed common life. It's assumed that you won't raise your head above some tacitly decided personality standard for the whole country. Once any kind of self-transcendence appears, it constitutes a sort of affront to the deep norm, the mores of the usual, the consensus Irish style. ... What is taught in Ireland is loyalty to another thing or to the group. (13)

He rebels against these pressures and decides to break his chains, to go his own way. This process of emancipation reaches a climax when Heaney slips into the protective colouring of Sweeney and flies free of all attachments. The experience of unlimited freedom is exciting

13 Seamus Heaney, On Irish Expressionist Painting, pp.35-6.

but it leaves him stranded at an empty font.

Fortunately, his exhaustion is not final. The epigraph of *THE HAW LANTERN* sees him turn from nature as an inspiration ("The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves") to a more abstract, more intellectual kind of poetry ("Us, listening to a river in the trees"). His themes have not changed very much since *STATION ISLAND*. In *THE HAW LANTERN* we still find him doubt the value of his own achievement and distrust the critics' praise.

On the whole, this book leaves one with a feeling that Heaney has become more cautious, and perhaps that is a wise move. Herbert Lomas has noted that "to be a public poet is a traditional Irish fate and choice - and threat. Humility and an alert conscience are needed if the private man and true poet are not to be subsumed" (14).

In the parables of *THE HAW LANTERN* Heaney looks back at the evolution of Ulster in the last two decades. He has no illusions about the past or the future and he makes it very clear that only tolerance and an increased willingness to compromise could ultimately lead to reconciliation and peace.

What will his future poetry be like? *THE HAW LANTERN* gave me the impression of a transitional collection. It seems to me, though, that protective colouring will always be a characteristic of Heaney's verse. It is an ideal way of reconciling the demands of poetry and politics. Below the camouflage of metaphor and analogy, Hea-

14 Herbert Lomas, *op.cit.*, p.92.

ney's message is clear: a bid for peace (15). His credo is the phrase by Coventry Patmore he quotes in The Harvest Bow:

The end of art is peace.

15 This has been recognized by many critics. Stallworthy, op.cit., p.174, writes that he is "a deeply compassionate poet". Morrison, in Seamus Heaney, p.86, claims that "peace of one sort or another (his own, his readers', his nation's; psychological, civil and aesthetic) is what all his poetry works towards". Tony Curtis, op.cit., p.125, writes that "whilst acknowledging and defining his Catholic background, Heaney's poetry does take its base on non-sectarian, humanitarian principles". Finally, John Carey, in The Joy of Heaney, p.271, describes him sympathetically as "a big gentle bear caught in the sectarian crossfire".

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