

Wells and Dunghills: Division in Seamus Heaney's Poetry

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Abstract

Oppositions and seeming contradictions run deep in Heaney's writing; they come as part of his territory. In several of his poems and prose writings, Heaney speaks about the effect which the political strife in Northern Ireland has had on him. He says that ultimately he felt he had to choose sides. Making that choice, however, is not a simple matter for the poet.

For Heaney, the situation in Northern Ireland in the seventies gives rise to a great number of questions which lie beneath the surface; like the layers of the earth, each time we dig one away, we only reveal another. Heaney asks himself, to begin with, about the poet's place in society: to what extent need he be involved, or to what extent might he distance himself? Underlying this problem, however, is the question of his relationship to his place, to the land itself. Is place known through the present and the personal, or through the past and the impersonal? Or indeed, is it knowable at all? And what is the spirit of the land; is it benevolent, malevolent or indifferent? He asks, too, if place is known through the personal, to what extent his poetics are a betrayal of his community's reticence? Or more generally, is it possible to write in a Northern voice using forms which belong to his tradition, a tradition which is cut off from the developments of urbane Modernism?

While Heaney asks many questions, he does not come up with definitive answers. In the question of stylistics, Heaney finds himself caught in the middle, between tradition and innovation, and in the thematic

questions which are raised, he finds himself arguing both sides, always reluctant to settle finally on either one.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

When cartoonists draw Seamus Heaney, the poet who is at the forefront of the contemporary poetry scene in Britain, they make him out to be a very rustic-looking farmer wearing rough woolens and holding a shovel,¹ or else they portray him as a long-horn cow.² There is an interesting contradiction in these caricatures which strikes a true note: contradiction, antithesis and division are words that inevitably come up when we look at Heaney's work. In an important interview with Seamus Deane in 1979, Heaney spoke of something which he called a "double sense of manners":

. . . my background differed from that of many Northern writers whose background was urban, maybe even that of a ghetto of Derry or Belfast. So from my very early days I had a kind of double awareness of division, and at the same time, of a courtesy that wasn't quite a duplicity maybe. Such courtesy crossed the divide--almost. Perhaps that double sense of manners has persisted in me.³

While Heaney is rather vague about what this "double sense of manners" means, I will argue not only that the duplicity Heaney speaks of here has had a profound effect on him and that it manifests itself in every aspect of his writing, but also that it is Heaney's ability to hold these oppositions together which contributes both to his success and his genius.

Throughout Heaney's work we find innumerable examples of one idea, one word, one style, one opinion being weighed against its opposite. Blake Morrison points to a handful of these oppositions:

His [Heaney's] essays, reviews and interviews repeatedly advance the idea that there are two kinds of poetry and two kinds of poet: les vers donnés as against les vers calculés; the poetry of chance and trance as against the poetry of resistance and perseverance; the poetry of "sinking in" or the poetry of "coming up against"; the instinctual or the rational; the feminine or the masculine; the "artesian" or the "architectonic"; the epiphanic or the crafted; the "ooze of poetry" or its "spur of flame"; the "lived, illiterate and unconscious"; the takers (Wordsworth, D.H. Lawrence, Keats, Patrick Kavanagh) and the makers (Yeats, Hopkins, Jonson, Lowell, John Montague, John Hewitt); poets who sense surrender, dive, divine, receive and coax, or poets who command, plot, strike, assert, labour and force.⁴

In a very useful essay called "Landscape as Culture", Anthony Bradley, too, argues that certain oppositions are basic to Heaney's writing:

"This connection of work with poetry, of the illiterate with the literate world, of the pagan and unconscious with the civilized and conscious is something that is at the core of Heaney's gift."⁵ But these are only some oppositions.

The most obvious source of division in Heaney is the one which is unnamed but understood in the passage quoted from the Deane interview, that is, the division between Catholic and Protestant, and consequently, the division between the Irish and English in Northern Ireland. Like most writers from the North, Heaney is deeply affected by the troubled political reality of his home. According to Heaney, the rift between the two races is implicit even in the name of the farm where he grew up:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. Moss, is a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and bán, the name the English colonists gave their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounce it Moss bann, and ban is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster.⁶

Heaney also speaks of the division between the Irish and the English in terms of his initiation into writing. He uses the metaphor of vowels and consonants to describe this opposition: "If you like, I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading. I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished on English as consonants."⁷ Elsewhere, recounting some of his early experiences with verse, Heaney makes the distinction between "roadside rhymes" and school poetry (or "poertry"),⁸ that is, the poetry of the everyday world and the poetry of the literary world.

The present and past represent another fundamental opposition in Heaney. Many of his poems begin in the present and work their way back into the past. "Digging", the first poem of Heaney's first volume, breaks the ground for this technique. In "Digging", the speaker watches his father turning the soil and begins to reflect on the past:

. . . I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away⁹

A sustained retreat into the past as a way to understand the present begins, however, in Wintering Out. A significant number of poems in this volume recall the Elizabethan period. In North, the past and the present are clearly divided by the sections of the volume. In Part I, Heaney pursues the past like an archeologist. His fancy is attracted by every artifact which is preserved in the natural museum of the bog. And in Part II, he concentrates on the present, on the contemporary political situation in Northern Ireland.

Wintering Out also has a binary structure, but here the opposition is between the public and the private. Again, this opposition is prominent in much of Heaney's work. Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark hark back to his early days in Derry. In North, however, Heaney quite consciously accepts the role of public poet. But in Field Work, he abjures that role and retreats again into the private sphere. In Station Island, he escapes even further into himself and begins to explore his own subconscious.

Another interesting opposition in Heaney, and one which has not received much attention from the critics, is the opposition of the mythic and the ordinary, or the sacred and the secular. According to Terry Eagleton, this opposition has a special significance among Irish writers:

. . . if the Irish have always had a rather more substantial sense of the 'sacred' than that [of the English], it's also important to see that it exists in a continual tension with the 'secular'. For nothing can be more plainly, brutally unpriestly than those ruined cabins perched among depopulated rock.¹⁰

In Heaney this tension shows up over and over again. A young priest that the speaker meets in "Station Island IV" somehow embodies it:

. . . his purple stole and cord
 or cincture tied loosely, his polished shoes
 unexpectedly secular beneath
 a pleated, lace-hemmed alb of linen cloth.¹¹

Heaney has a way of elevating the ordinary into ritual or miracle. I am thinking here of poems like "Churning Day", "At a Potato Digging" and "Rite of Spring" where everyday events become charged with a deeper significance. This is how potato digging is described in the second poem:

Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black
Mother. Processional stooping through the turf

Recurr mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind the humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.
(DN, p. 31)

And in "Churning Day", after a long ritual of purification and churning,
the milk turns to butter almost magically somewhere between the stanzas:

. . . Arms ached
Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered
with flabby milk.
Where finally gold flecks
began to dance.
(DN, p. 21)

In other poems like "A Winter's Tale" and "Girls Bathing, Galway 1965",
ordinary women became near-goddesses. In the latter poem, the girls on
the beach are described as the "matter-of-fact" Venus:

For the time has been accomplished

As through the shallows in swimsuits,
Bare-legged, smooth-shouldered and long-backed
They wade ashore with skips and shouts.
So Venus comes, matter-of-fact.¹²

In "The Skunk", another of these poems which bring together the
mythic and the ordinary, Heaney uses the line, "Mythologized, demytholo-
gized".¹³ This line is, I think, typical of Heaney, for in addition to
the polarities in his views on poetry and his culture, Heaney has a ten-
dency to write in lines which are balanced or which bring together two
opposites. "Ancestral Photograph" focuses on a man whose appearance is
oddly ambiguous, "Whose look is two parts scorn, two parts dead pan"
(DN, p. 26). The final line of "In Gallarus Oratory" is based on two
equal parts which neatly balance and oppose one another; the first
describes the ocean and the second, the land: "The sea a censer, and the

grass a flame" (DD, p. 22). The same opposition and harmony of land and sea is considered in "Lovers on Aran". Here, too, Heaney uses a balanced line: "Did sea define the land or the land the sea?" (DN, p. 47). The Antaeus-figure, who represents the land in North, is also seen in terms of his opposite or enemy the Hercules-figure, who represents the powers who conquer the land. Something of the same kind of opposition is set up between Wordsworth and Yeats. While one is English and private the other is Irish and public. And both, although quite different, are acknowledged as Heaney's mentors in "Singing School". The Irish people, too, are seen in terms of extremities. In "The Toome Road", Heaney calls the Irish "Sowers of seeds, erectors of headstones" (FW, p. 15). In "Field Work IV", Heaney describes his wife as being "stained to perfection" (FW, p. 55). The obvious contradiction of these lines tells us a great deal about Heaney's view of nature as redeemed. In "Elegy", Heaney refers to life in general as being a choice between two opposites, and neither one is said to be better or worse than the other:

The way we are living,
timorous or bold,
will have been our life.
(FW, p. 31)

And in "September Song", he describes life as a metaphor based on the opposition which is intrinsic to September: ". . . We toe the line/ between the tree in leaf and the bare tree" (FW, p. 43).

In other places Heaney describes the oppositions within himself in lines which vie with one another. In the last two lines of "The Tollund Man", when he wants to intimate what he imagines the experience of visiting Aarhus would be, he writes, "I will feel lost,/Unhappy and at home".¹⁴ And in "Exposure", Heaney calls himself "neither interneer

nor informer",¹⁵ as though in some way he feels he must be one or the other. In "The Guttural Muse" as he listens to young couples congregating in a parking lot outside a disco, Heaney considers how he is divided from his youthful self: "I felt like some old pike all badged with sores/Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life" (FW, p. 28). In an interview with John Haffenden, he recalls the experience which prompted the poem: "It was like a vision of the kind of life I had in the fifties, going to dances and so on, and I felt the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self".¹⁶ There is something of Heaney, too, in the earth-bound Antaeus who describes his downfall in a clever line of very clear opposition and balance: "My elevation, my fall" (N, p. 12). The strongest sense of the divisions within Heaney comes out, however, in "Making Strange". Here the division is implied not in a single line but in the poem as a whole. Here Heaney, in fact, appears as two different people. First he is the poet/scholar:

. . . with his travelled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring.
(SI, p. 32)

And second he is the local Derryman:

. . . unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him.
(SI, p. 32)

Andrew Carpenter offers the very interesting hypothesis that all Anglo-Irish writers suffer from a kind of double vision:

The works of Anglo-Irish writers spring often from a view of life that is continually probing the different values which exist in Ireland and testing them against the other; they spring from the understanding of the fact that the intensity and colour of life in Ireland--and of the literature which reflects that life--comes at least in part from an enforced, continuous interrelationship between values, philosophies, languages and cultures antipathetic if not downright hostile to one another.¹⁷

Carpenter uses the example of Synge's plays to illustrate how contradictory views are often seen to be quite acceptable and how both can exist simultaneously.¹⁸ Carpenter groups Heaney with Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, all of whom, he claims, show an ironic detachment from themselves in their work:

It is as if they see themselves double: Heaney in the woods escaping the massacre, Kinsella following the route of the Táin, Montague bumping down to Tyrone in the bus: yet each, as well, is active outside the poem, defining, explaining, analysing with the reader the relationship between the poet and the person who bears his name in the poem, as well as the effect of the place upon the person. The whole exercise seems to be aimed at clarification of both Heaneys, Kinsellas, or Montagues, so that each may be freed from what is obviously a personal, but may well be also a cultural sense of insecurity.¹⁹

While this and several other of the oppositions I have been discussing are engaging and warrant fuller inquiry, I only point out these other instances of division within Heaney's work as illustration of my central thesis.

For me, one of the most curious contradictions in Heaney is found in the comments of the critics who review his work. According to some critics, like Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison for example, when we discuss Seamus Heaney's poetry we are involved in a discussion of what is best in contemporary poetry, a discussion of a poetic revolution. In the introduction to The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry,

Motion and Morrison call Heaney "the most important new poet of the last fifteen years".²⁰ They praise him for his "greater linguistic daring".²¹ The selection of Heaney's poems in their anthology is both the first and the most extensive. Motion and Morrison give credit to Heaney for providing the stylistic innovations upon which their anthology--one which they feel is as important as Edward Marsh's²² and the other major anthologists of the twentieth century--is based:

Now after a spell of lethargy, British poetry is once again undergoing a transition: a body of work has been created which demands, for its appreciation, a reformation of poetic taste. It is in the belief that this shift is genuine and important and needs to be brought to the attention of a wider public that this anthology has been compiled.²³

In some ways the evocation of Edward Marsh's name seems particularly appropriate, for like some of the Georgians, it seems that Heaney might well be said to represent a counter-reformation rather than a reformation of poetic taste. Certainly Heaney was initially embraced by many critics not because they saw him as an innovator, but rather because they saw him as fitting into the established British tradition. There is a whole group of critics, those like Harold Bloom, John Foster, John Press and Christopher Ricks, who when they speak of Heaney quite naturally place him in the company of Clare, Hardy, Edward Thomas and the Georgians, Robert Graves, and R.S. Thomas.²⁴ As Anthony Thwaite points out in several of his articles in the Times Literary Supplement, it is the quality of the familiar in Heaney's poetry which has assured him a place in "the" tradition by way of the classroom:

Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark were winsome, eas[y] to like because the poems in them dwelt lovingly on country matters which . . . are likely to have a strong and

nostalgic appeal. Educationalists have recognized and cultivated this: along with Wordsworth, Clare, Edward Thomas, Lawrence, Laurie Lee, Ted Hughes, Mr. Heaney himself has been built into the current school anthology and syllabus orthodoxy.²⁵

A. Alvarez is a dissenter from this second group of critics only because he sees Heaney's traditionalism as a flaw rather than a strong point. Alvarez's argument is a challenging one:

Heaney's work fits into this British tradition. It 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's²⁶

As a dissenter Alvarez is, however, merely a voice crying the wilderness. Almost like a latter-day Rupert Brooke, Heaney has won the favour of critics and readers alike. I include some documentation of that acclaim because, being something of an oddity in contemporary poetry, Heaney's popularity has become an important part of his story.

Death of a Naturalist (1966), Heaney's first book, won the Somerset Maugham award for poetry²⁷ and received unusual attention from both British and American reviewers. The Times Literary Supplement called it "substantial and impressive".²⁸ Although a decidedly lesser achievement in my view, Door into the Dark (1969) received equal approbation from the same journal: "The spirits lift to the flash of wit. There ought to be more of it. Nobody in his right mind would deny that Heaney's is one of the outstanding talents on the scene or want that talent to settle in its ways too early."²⁹ The third collection, Wintering Out (1972), was called a "transitional book",³⁰ while North (1975) was enthusiastically applauded by almost every one of its reviewers. It was said to solidify Heaney's "arrival as an important poet".³¹ North won several prizes,

including the 1976 W.H. Smith Memorial Prize,³² and it sold an impressive six thousand copies in its first month of publication.³³ Field Work (1979) enjoyed a similar launching. It was chosen by Robert Nye, a reviewer for the Times, as one of the books of the year,³⁴ and was awarded the E.M. Forster Award (a prize awarded to an English writer to enable him to travel to the United States). Even Preoccupations, Heaney's collection of critical essays on poetry, is according to Francis X. Cline "[one] of the most active on the list of the American publishing house Farrar, Strauss and Giroux"³⁵--a phenomenon which is nowadays unheard of for books about poetry. None of the earlier works has sold less than 15,000 copies.³⁶ The critics' reaction to the more recent volumes, Sweeney Astray (1983)--a translation of the Buile Suibhne, a Middle-Irish manuscript--and Station Island (1984), is still in the making, but thus far Blake Morrison has offered nothing but kind words for both.³⁷ Nicholas Christopher joins in the chorus of praise for Station Island, saying that "some of Seamus Heaney's finest [work]--his best since North--is in this collection. Station Island is that rarity, a book of poems to be read through rather than dipped into."³⁸

In addition to sales figures and reviews, Heaney's success can also be measured by his appeal both in academic and non-academic circles. He has become successor to Robert Lowell as poet-in-residence at Harvard. He has received honorary degrees from various universities, including Fordham University in New York City where he was honoured along with James M. Henson, creator of the Muppets.³⁹ He has been reviewed in Time⁴⁰ and quoted as the voice of the poet in an article on Ireland in National Geographic.⁴¹ Here in Halifax, one of the few bookstores which

carries poetry at all includes Heaney as one of the six-odd British poets in its collection--that is, alongside poets like Eliot, John Betjeman, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, and Thom Gunn.

Now Heaney is not only matter-of-factly being described as "the most important contemporary voice in Irish poetry",⁴² but he is also being compared with Yeats himself. In a review of Heaney entitled "A Voice of Kinship", Harold Bloom argues that several poems in North are reminiscent of the middle Yeats of The Green Helmet and that several poems in Field Work are "worthy of comparison to the Yeats of The Seven Woods and Responsibilities".⁴³ Jay Parini, too, compares Heaney to Yeats in terms of his importance. He writes: "I think Heaney is among the finest poets writing today in English . . . and now [1980] at the height of his powers one awaits each new book with the expectancy afforded Yeats and Eliot in their middle years."⁴⁴

The comparison to Yeats is conceivable, but the only similarity I see between Eliot and Heaney is that they have both written poems about Sweeney. In many ways Heaney's works, and especially the early works, do not strike me as representing the vanguard of the contemporary poetry scene; if Heaney is looking in any direction it is not forward but backward. Heaney, in fact, has a poem called "Backward Look" where he considers the loss of the Irish language. In Death of a Naturalist, were it not for the mention of the "mechanical digger" in "At a Potato Digging", or the mention of the "bumper" in "Mid-Term Break", the reader could hardly recognize that this poetry belongs to the industrial or post-industrial world. It is the rural, almost pastoral setting of Heaney's early work which, as Christopher Ricks puts it, has established

Heaney as "the poet of muddy-booted blackberry picking",⁴⁵ and which as Richard Schirmer has argued has led to Heaney's popularity among readers who see a romantic or even escapist element in his work:

Heaney's immediate welcome among the non-Irish readers may owe something to the image of Ireland that his first books tended to present: that of a pastoral world governed by rural values--precisely the kind of Ireland that many English and American readers nostalgically wanted to see. At its worst, this degenerates into finding something merely quaint about Heaney's work.⁴⁶

An American reviewer, J.E. Chamberlin, fits Schirmer's description of this kind of reader. In an article in the Hudson Review, Chamberlin comments on Wintering Out: "Heaney's poems are very lovely, at times agonizingly so, and rely upon the concrete and immediate delights of language hedged by the melancholy sensitivities of his mind in a way that is universally charming."⁴⁷

In his style, too, Heaney does not seem to belong to the post-Eliot world. Instead of experimenting with new verse forms--if indeed there are any--or using looser forms, Heaney prefers to use more or less regular stanzaic forms, or even the strictly regular forms like the alternate-rhymed quatrain or the sonnet. He is quite comfortable with the almost tyrannical English iambic pentameter line⁴⁸ or the shorter two-foot Anglo-Saxon line. At times he uses rhyme, assonance and consonance like some of the best poets of the modern period.

It is the seeming contradiction of Heaney's rather traditional forms precipitating a "reformation of poetic taste" that I will consider in my second chapter. I will give particular attention to Heaney's use of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter line. There, as well, I will look at the tensions within Heaney's form between the long line and the short

line.

The tensions within Heaney's writing are also evident in his use of language. In "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing", Heaney uses the term "fork-tongued" to describe his attitudes towards Northern Ireland's political questions, but I think this term can be applied to Heaney's voice more generally. His voice is divided between poetry and plain speech, and it is torn between the articulate and the inarticulate. It is these tensions that I will focus on in the third chapter.

Taking a cue from the dualism I see in Heaney, my thesis will also be divided. In the fourth chapter my discussion will turn from stylistics to thematic questions. Here, I will look at Heaney's attitude to his place, both in terms of the landscape and culture themselves and in terms of the political strife which is unavoidably part of the Northern Ireland ethos. In his reaction to both aspects of his place Heaney is typically divided: he shows both a conscious and unconscious sense of place, and he understands and argues both sides of the political question.

In my final chapter I will take up the crucial question of Heaney's attitude toward nature. Here, too, I will argue that Heaney allows the oppositions which he sees in nature to exist simultaneously; he does not try to reconcile them. His view of nature approximates both the contemporary and the Romantic views of nature. He sees nature both as indifferent and as charged with a religious spirit, and as both malevolent and benign.

A sense of tension and division is everywhere in Heaney's writing. The political strife of Northern Ireland presents the most obvious source of division in Heaney, but it also has a profound effect on Heaney's conscience; it creates what he calls his "double sense of manners". It influences his use of form and language, and the way in which he sees nature. It means that he has a kind of double vision, a tendency to see things in terms of opposites, and it means that he has difficulty accepting or subscribing to one definitive view.

Chapter Two

FORM: THE WELL-MADE SCHOOL AND THE LET-IT-ALL-HANG-OUT SCHOOL

When Heaney describes the form of his poetry he uses words like "tight", "traditional", and "well-made". In response to a question put to him a few years ago by Frank Kinahan, Heaney called himself a formalist and referred to the influence that some other Northern Ireland poets had on him:

I suppose we shared traditional beliefs about what good writing is. It wasn't the let-it-all-hang-out school, it was the well-made school Yes and that [formalism] continued to inform the work. I remember somebody describing Longley, Mahon and myself as a tight-arsed trio, speaking formally, of course.¹

When we look at the poems, however, it seems that Heaney misjudges his own writing, for even if we can point out certain elements of strict technique at work, the poems are not usually so formal that we notice these elements straight off. In some cases, it seems that Heaney really belongs to the let-it-all-hang-out school. Besides a strong repetition of the "s" sound, what, for example, are the formal elements of technique in "No Man's Land"?:

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

Must I crawl back now,
spirochete, abroad between
shred-hung wire and thorn,
to confront my smeared doorstep
and what lumpy dead?
Why do I unceasingly
arrive late to condone
infected sutures
and ill-knit bone?

(WO, p. 40)

What is the tradition informing "Night-Piece"?:

Must you know it again?
Dull pounding through hay,
The uneasy whinny

A sponge lip drawn off each tooth
Opalescent haunch, .
Muscle and hoof

Bundled under a roof.
(DD, p. 13)

However, while it is true that these poems are rather untraditional they are the exception rather than the rule. In Heaney's poetry the rule is to use conventional forms and to take liberties within them. About half of Heaney's poems are written in quatrains, albeit sometimes informal and varied ones. Heaney shows a considerable interest, too, in the sonnet, and yet he does not approach it like a mathematician. Heaney's staple lines are the pentameter line--albeit a rather uneven one--and the two-stressed line--albeit a rather idiosyncratic one.

Heaney's comments about his writing make a little more sense when we keep in mind the context in which he began writing. In the mid-nineteen sixties and seventies the poetry scene--as it so often is--was divided. In Heaney's language, the division was between the well-made and the let-it-all-hang-out schools. For the critics, however, the division was between the Group poets, who were in very broad terms interested in tradition, and the Review poets, who were in very broad terms interested in experimentation.

At the London Poetry International of June 1972 we find one instance of when the two schools came together. A couple of days before the international programme began where audiences would hear the Russian

poet Joseph Brodsky, the beat poet Gregory Corso, and the poet who was gaining great respect from the Review group, Robert Lowell, some of Britain's own men of light gathered to read some of their own works as well as pieces they admired from other poets' works. John Betjeman read Larkin. Adrian Henri read from his Autobiography to a slide presentation of some of Liverpool's buildings and graffiti, and to the music of the Alan Peters Trio. Edna O'Brien read some "sultry"² epigrammatic prose-poems. It was reported that audible sighs were heard from the listeners as Harold Pinter intoned some of Ian Hamilton's bedroom poems, poems like this one:

At four, a line of trucks. Their light
 Stops in and spreads across the ceiling,
 Gleams, and goes. Aching, you turn back
 From the wall and your hands reach out
 Over me. They are caught
 In the last beam, and pale,
 They fly there now. You're taking off, you say,
 And won't be back.

Your shadows soar.
 My hands, they can merely touch down
 On your shoulders and wait. Very soon
 The trucks will be gone. Bitter you will turn
 Back again. We will join our cold hands together.³

According to Richard Holmes, the highlight of the evening came, however, when three women offered a dramatic presentation of parts of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. The Irish contribution for the evening was given by Seamus Heaney, a relative unknown, who is described in the Times article as a "stalwart, fuzzy, smiling figure who . . . read a peaty sort of poems about bogs, wells, water-roots, and dark traditions".⁴ Among other poems, Heaney read "Personal Helicon". This poem is tailor-made for a live reading because it introduces Heaney's rather earthy muse and his belief in the gift of poetry, because it shows the

attention he pays to the "craft" of poetry, but more importantly, because it reads well, because it observes certain rules of traditional verse which make it easy for the listener to feel the metre and where the line endings come. The formal elements of the poem become all the more evident when we compare it to the Ian Hamilton poem quoted above. While the Hamilton poem is written in an irregular metre, Heaney's poem is written almost entirely in pentameter: only lines one and twenty are an exception in having one foot more or less than five. Despite this, however, the metre of the first stanza appears almost unmeasured; we hear the metre mostly through several trochaic reversals on the words "pumps", "drop", and on the first syllable of "fungus":

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
 And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
 I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
 Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

(DN, p. 57)

In the final stanza, however, there seems to be a movement towards regularity; there are fewer reversals and substitutions, and the poem finishes with six iambic feet which reproduce the echoing which is described in the poem:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
 To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
 Is beneath all human dignity I rhyme
 To see myself to set the darkness echoing.

(DN, p. 57)

And while the Hamilton poem does not use rhyme or a regular strophic organization, Heaney's poem is written in alternate-rhyming quatrains, the most natural of strophic forms in English.⁵ And yet the bold use of

enjambment tends to under-emphasize the formal rhyme scheme of the poem.

Look, for example, at the fourth stanza:

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
 With a clean new music in it. And one
 Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall
 Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.
(DN, p. 57)

The dedication of "Personal Helicon", "For Michael Longley", provides another reference point for Heaney's particular kind of formalism. Besides their association as the "tight-arsed trio", Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Heaney were also allied, at least at the beginning of their careers, as members of the Belfast Group, a group which Heaney claims played a significant role in his development as a poet:

When Hobsbaum arrived in Belfast, he moved disparate elements into a single action. He emanated generosity, belief in the community, trust in the parochial, the inept, the unprinted. He was impatient, dogmatic, relentlessly literary: yet he was patient with those he trusted, unpredictably susceptible to a wide variety of poems and personalities He and his wife Hannah kept open house for poetry and I remember his hospitality and encouragement with the special gratitude we reserve for those who have led us toward confidence in ourselves.⁶

Philip Hobsbaum is of particular interest here because of the influence he had on Heaney. Born in London in 1932 and educated at Cambridge under Leavis, Hobsbaum went to Belfast in 1962 to establish in that cultural backwater a transplanted version of the Group salons which were going on in London and Cambridge. On Monday nights in the mid-nineteen sixties the Belfast literati (i.e., Longley, Mahon, Heaney, Stewart Parker, James Simmons, etc.) would gather at Hobsbaum's Fitzwilliam Street flat for, as Heaney puts it, "regular coffee and biscuits . . . irregular booze . . . [and] boisterous literary

legislation".⁷

The distinguishing feature of the Group poets was a somewhat graduate-seminar approach to poetry. Cyclostyled copies of the recent works of some of them were distributed to others in the group to be examined and discussed in the same way as better-known works were discussed by students of Leavis. And although it is generally accepted that the Group members were more dissimilar than they were similar, they were at least united in their conviction that "poetry was discussable . . . that the process by which words work in poetry is something open to rational examination".⁸ According to Roger Garfit, this type of critical activity, especially in the Belfast Group, "resulted in a convincing revival of strict technique".⁹

Some of Hobsbaum's remarks about the situation of poetry in the sixties--despite what we might think about their validity--indicate a great deal about the spirit of the Belfast Group. One of Hobsbaum's fundamental teachings was that British poetry should rediscover its British roots. Hobsbaum, in fact, blamed the "thin poetic haul"¹⁰ from 1935 to 1965 on the disruptive influence of vers libre in English poetry:

A conventional account of the rise of modern poetry would I suppose run something like this. The Georgians of Sir Edward Marsh's anthologies represented the last lap of Victorianism, sheltered subjects and literary diction. English poetry was shocked out of its torpor by the Imagists' insistence on experiment, free verse. The resistance to "modernism" so called was overcome by the mature work of Eliot in The Waste Land and of Pound in Hugh Selwyn Mauberly. But their work has never been satisfactorily implemented in English poetry.¹¹

Hobsbaum, furthermore, objected to a certain American, and therefore alien quality about Eliot's style:

It's not often enough remembered that Eliot's an American by birth and upbringing Eliot's urbane reading of his own verse rather muffled its colloquial, experimental and, I would say, very much American qualities.

For one thing, Eliot habitually wrote in free verse. This form never sat very happily on the English language as the nineteenth-century attempts of Southey, Arnold and Henley show . . .¹²

Perhaps Hobsbaum felt that the need to reaffirm the virtues of Britain's own poetic tradition became paramount after the publication of A. Alvarez's New Poetry (1962), which included the works of four American poets as the model for some of the most important younger writers in Britain.

Hobsbaum admires poets like Hughes who he says show an awareness of the tradition of English poetry, and scoffs at the Review poets (Ian Hamilton, et al.), who he says do not show the same awareness:

. . . the poets of value now writing show a . . . sense of tradition . . . the biggest influence on Hawk in the Rain was Shakespeare. I wonder how many poets of either camp--that of The Review or that of, let us say, the pop anthology, The Children of Albion--have their Shakespeare at their elbow. When did they read Othello or Hamlet last?"¹³

Hobsbaum has not written a great deal of poetry himself. Most of it is concerned with university life and the life of a university professor. Most of it, too, shows the appropriate sense of tradition. This is Hobsbaum's "A Lesson in Love":

Sitting straightbacked, a modest Irish miss,
Knees clenched together--even then I knew
Your full mouth would open under my kiss,
The line under your eyes gave me my clue.

Now on your floor, legs thrashing your dress
Over your stocking-tops, your tight blue pants
Bursting to be off at my caress,
This is the underside of our romance.

Which is the truer? I speaking of Donne,
 Calling the act a means and not an end,
 Or at your sweet pudenda, sleeking you down:
 Was there no other way to be your friend?

None, none. The awkward pauses when we talk,
 The literary phrases are a lie.
 It was for this your teacher ran amock:
 Truth lies between your legs, and so do I.¹⁴

The persona in the poem appears to be something like the rakish Donne; he instructs his mistress about love in a rather male-chauvinistic fashion; he uses witty language ("This is the underside of our romance", "Truth lies"); and he ends the poem with a balanced epigrammatic line. The alternate-rhymed stanzas, although very neat, sound amateurish; the rhymes on "miss" and "kiss", and "pants" and "romance" are more than a little opportunistic. The metre is predominantly iambic pentameter. Except for the initial spondee in line thirteen, the final stanza is written in perfect iambic pentameter, and if we ignore the context it seems to work.

When we turn to Heaney in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark, the links to Hobsbaum are clear. "Thatcher" is like Hobsbaum's poem in form. We immediately notice the symmetry which suggests control: four stanzas of four lines each, pentameter lines ending in assonance. But the thatcher himself is important, too. Like many of the craftsmen in Heaney's poetry, the thatcher in this poem has something in common with the poet. Not only does the thatcher create something magical, but the way in which he does it is similar to the way Heaney writes:

He eyed the old rigging, poked at eaves,

Opened and handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw.
 Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow
 Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.
 It seemed he spent the morning warming up:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well honed blades
 And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods
 That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple
 For pinning down his world handful by handful.

(DD, p. 20)

There is a strong sense in Heaney--and here he meets Hobsbaum's criterion --that he "eyes the old rigging" and builds his own pieces on an older framework. And like the thatcher's straw, one feels that Heaney's lines are measured and cut by "well honed blades" and that the words are carefully lashed in place one by one. It is doubtlessly this element of control in Heaney's work which prompted his early critics to remark on a certain slickness in his style.¹⁵

But Heaney's poem differs quite radically from Hobsbaum's. Besides being simply better and less self-indulgent, Heaney's poem is built on variation rather than regularity:

Bespoke/for weeks, he turned/up some/morning
 Unex/pected/ly, his/bi cy/cle slung
 With a/light lad/der and/a bag/of knives.
 He eyed/the old/rigging,/poked at/the eaves,
 (DD, p. 20)

This rather Edward Thomasian uneven metre exists to a varying degree in all of the pentameter poems in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark. As a rule, however, the blank verse poems like "Death of a Naturalist" and "Dawn Shoot" tend to be less regular than the poems written in stanzas like "The Barn" and "Ancestral Photograph". In the

first six lines of "Death of a Naturalist" it is difficult to determine the base foot:

All year/the flax/-dam fes/tered in/the heart
 Of the/townland;/green and/ heavy-/headed
 Flax had/rooted there,/weighted/down by/huge sods.
 Daily/it swel/tered in/the pun/ishing sun.
 Bubbles/gargled/deli/cately,/bluebottles
 Wove a/strong gauze/of sound/around/ the smell.
 (DN, p. 15)

The heavy-headedness of the rotting flax is suggested in the metre, which can only be clearly defined when it slows down, when it appears to become weighty. Part of the weightiness is evoked when two words of seemingly equally strong stresses come together, as in "flax-dam", "townland", "huge sods", and "strong gauze". This sultry feeling is further reinforced by an initial trochaic reversal in lines three, four, five, and six.

In the third stanza of "Ancestral Photograph" scansion is easier:

Twenty/years a/go I/herded/cattle
 Into/pens or/held them/against/ a wall
 Until/my fa/ther won/at ar/guing
 His own/price on/a crowd/of catt/lemen
 Who han/dled rumps,/groped teats,/stood, paused/and then
 Bought a/round of/drinks to/clinch the/bargain.
 (DN, p. 26)

Here, the regularity of agricultural life provides the iambic basis for the poem; it is especially notable in lines fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen.

Iambic rhythms are an important part of Heaney's poetry, which grows out of his cultural roots. The connections between the rhythms of the rural life and the rhythms of Heaney's poetry are first suggested in "Digging". This poem, although somewhat naïve in many ways, is made much of by the critics because it spells out several of Heaney's interests. At the heart of the poem, however, certain parallels are drawn between Heaney and his father; between the pen and the spade; between writing and digging. In the third stanza when the younger Heaney looks out the window at his father digging and describes the regular motion of the harvest as "stooping in rhythm through potato drills" (DN, p. 13), the implication is that Heaney the poet also stoops in rhythm in the lines of his poetry. In "Follower", too, a poem which is written in iambic tetrameter, Heaney observes the regular rhythms of ploughing:

I stum/bled in/his hob-/nailed wake,
 Fell some/times on/the pol/ished sod;
 Sometimes/he rode/me on/his back
 Dipping/and ri/sing to/his plod.
 (DN, p. 24)

In several other poems as well, which describe different aspects of agricultural life, we hear its iambic rhythms. The woman in "Churning Day" "set up/rhythms/that slugged/and thumped/for hours" (DN, p. 21). The final lines of the poem echo those rhythms:

the plash/and gur/gle of/the sour-/breathed milk,
 the pat/and slap/of small/spades on/wet lumps.
 (DN, p. 22)

When the workers stop for lunch in "At a Potato Digging", "The rhythm deadens" (DN, p. 33). Here, as in "Follower", the rhythm is iambic

tetrameter:

Under/a gay/flotil/la of gulls
 The rhy/thm dead/ens, the work/ers stop.
 Brown bread/and tea/in bright/canfuls
 Are served/for lunch./Dead-beat/ they flop . . .
 (DN, p. 33)

And in "The Outlaw", the bull's movements in the breeding process are described as being like "an old steam engine shunting" (DD, p. 16). In the iambic metre of the lines we hear the shunting train's rhythm:

His knob/bled fore/legs strad/dling/her flank,
 He slammed/life home/impas/sive as/a tank,
 (DD, p. 16)

The tight and traditional side of Heaney's poetry is also evident in his use of rhyme in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark. The alternate-rhymed quatrain is the staple form for these two volumes, but Heaney also uses several variations of the four-line stanza. He uses the quatrain based on the principle of enclosure with an abba rhyme scheme ("The Penninsula", "Whinlands"), as well as the couplet quatrain ("Thatcher", "Night Drive").

The quatrain, like the more or less regular iambic line, seems suited to the rural context. Besides being traditional, it appears rather unsophisticated, and has the advantage of making the poems appear simpler than they are. "Night Drive", for example, one of the best poems in Door into the Dark, appears to be nothing more than an account of the persona's journey through France. He smells the fields and woods; he passes small towns, a combine seeding a field, and small cafés as they shut; eventually he thinks of his wife as he crosses the border into

Italy. The stanzas are divided according to the speaker's thoughts and the rhymes unpredictable and unobtrusive:

The smells of ordinariness
 Were new on the night drive through France:
 Rain and hay and woods on the air
 Made warm draughts in the open car.

(DD, p. 34)

But despite its rather straightforward presentation, the poem is not so straightforward. The poem is not just about a journey. It is about loneliness and desire. The only way to illustrate how this technique works is to provide a short discussion of the poem. The meditation on being alone is evoked by pleasant smells. But as pleasant as the situation is, it is mixed with sadness. Towns known only as names on signposts flit past one after another; they grant nothing more than "their name's fulfillment" (DD, p. 34). As all sources of light are extinguished, the poem becomes more melancholic. At first, signposts "whitened relentlessly" (DD, p. 34). But shortly there is only the solitary light of a seemingly driverless combine: "A combine groaning its way late/Bled seeds across its work-light" (DD, p. 34). A forest fire "smoulder[s] out" (DD, p. 34); the lights in small cafés are turned off. At the end of the poem there is only the "darkened sphere" (DD, p. 34) which reminds the speaker of his solitude. The undertones of sexual desire are suggested in the seeds being sprayed from the groaning combine, in the smouldering fire, and in the image of France and Italy meeting in a sexual embrace: "A thousand miles south where Italy/Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere" (DD, p. 34). Despite its simple exterior, the poem evokes strong emotion through setting and understatement in a way which is similar to Robert Frost's "Stopping by

Woods on a Snowy Evening".

"Night Drive" is also satisfying because it offers a sense of unity which suggests control, tightness. The final line of the poem is a return to and beyond the first line: "Your ordinariness was renewed there" (DD, p. 34). The poem is, then, somehow cyclical, somehow a finished whole.

This same technique is used in several poems in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark. In "Digging" there is a repetition of the line "The squat pen rests" (DN, pp. 13, 14) in the first and last stanzas. In "The Diviner", the hazel stick provides the parameters of the poem: "Cut from the green hedge a forked hazel stick" and "He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred" (DN, p. 36). In "Poor Women in a City Church" there is a reference to the wax candles in the first and final lines. In "Twice Shy" the same rhyming sounds are used in the first and last stanzas and much the same line is repeated at the ends of both of these stanzas: "Took the embankment walk.", "Along the embankment walk" (DN, pp. 44, 45). In "Requiem for the Croppies" the opening reference to the barley in the pockets of the croppies is echoed in the description, in the final line, of the barley growing out of their graves. "Up the Shore" begins and ends with the line, "The lough will claim a victim every year" (DD, p. 38). And in "The Given Note", a pun is made on the word "air" in the first and final stanzas which suggests the intimate relationship between folk music and the sounds of the natural environment:

On the most westerly Blasket
 In a dry-stone hut
 He got this air out of the night.

.

. . . He took it
Out of wind off mid-Atlantic

Still he maintains, from nowhere.
It comes off the bow gravely,
Rephrases itself into the air.
(DD, p. 46)

While these repeated references are not always overt, they do, nevertheless, imply a certain tightness in the poems.

Many of the formal elements in Heaney's poems are like this, understated and oblique. "Blackberry Picking", for example, appears to be written in a rather informal blank verse form. Except for one full rhyme, the poem is, however, written in half-rhymed couplets:

Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.
(DN, p. 20)

"Relic of Memory", too, quietly uses assonance, but without any pattern. In the last stanza only the word "stone" does not have a complementary sound:

. . .
Are too simple,
Without the lure
That relic stored.
A piece of stone
On the shelf at school,
Oatmeal coloured.
(DD, p. 37)

Some of the poems which do not use rhyme or assonance are ordered through a consistent use of alliteration. These are the first three lines of "Churning Day":

A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast,
hardened gradually on top of the four crocks
that stood, large pottery bombs, in the small pantry.
(DN, p. 21)

And in "Mid-Term Break" and "St. Francis and the Birds" a final balanced line which rhymes with the unrhymed line of the preceding tercet acts rather like the final couplet in a sonnet and produces a strong ending for the poem:

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.
(DN, p. 28)

. . .
Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played
And sang, like the images took flight.
Which was the best poem Francis made,

His argument true, his tone light.
(DN, p. 53)

These final lines are, in fact, rather like the final lines in some of Heaney's sonnets. "The Forge" ends with two balanced lines: "Then he grunts and goes in, with a slam and a flick/To beat real iron out, to work the bellows" (DD, p. 19). "The Seed Cutters" ends with the same kind of lines with strong caesuras: "Yellowing over them, compose the frieze/With all of us there, our anonymities" (N, p. 10). And "Glanmore Sonnets II" ends with a line made up of two equal phrases which offers a pointed commentary on the sonnet as a whole: "Refreshes and relents. Is cadences" (FW, p. 35).

This is not to suggest, however, that Heaney's sonnets are strictly formal. The early sonnets do not conform to either the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean rhyme schemes. "Requiem for the Croppies", the most conventional of the early sonnets, combines the two classical models: the octave, like that of the Shakespearean sonnet, is made up of two alternate-rhyming quatrains, and the sestet, as in the Petrarchan sonnet,

is made up of six alternate rhyming lines. The metre rests somewhere between speech rhythms and iambic pentameter:

The pock/ets of/our great/coats full/of/bar/ley--
 No kit/chens on/the run,/no strik/ing camp--
 We moved/quick and/sudden/in our/country.
 The priest/lay be/hind dit/ches with/the tramp.
 (DD, p. 24)

And "Strange Fruit", the least conventional of the early sonnets, is written in uneven pentameter, uses no rhyme and introduces an unusual subject. The sonnet describes the preserved decapitated head of an Iron-Age girl who was sacrificed to the Earth Goddess:

Here is/the girl's/head like/an ex/humed gourd.
 Oval-/faced,/prune-skinneD,/prune-stones/for teeth
 They un/swaddled/the wet/fern of/her hair
 And made/an ex/hibi/tion of/its coil,
 (N, p. 39)

In the revision of the "Act of Union" sonnets we see a movement again toward the less conventional. The earlier version of the poems, a sequence of sonnets called "A New Life", was originally published in the Listener in 1973. These poems conform to the style of Shakespeare's love sonnets. The lines flow within the five-foot limits without sounding forced. The speaker in the poem is seemingly the male lover praising the beauty of his mistress:

When I came among your loughs and bushes,
 Your soft levels between gradual hills,
 Your hide-outs among ferns and webbing ivies,
 Your mounds and ring-forts, secret grassy wells,

I came determined upon occupation.
 You were a wood-kerne that I would uncover.¹⁶

But the speaker in the poem is not a lover, he is a symbol of the imperial forces of England and the mistress, the Irish land. The love affair deteriorates into bitterness and hurt within the third sonnet:

But now this civil strife inside the compound
That was reserved in you for my love's sake
Will leave you raw again, like broken ground,
O we foreknow it all, how you will take

The weeping issue, bloody, unwashed, blind
And find my name re-uttered through your wound.¹⁷

For North, Heaney pares the sequence down to two poems by taking parts from all four poems. He omits the white spaces and alters the metre so that it is no longer strictly pentameter. These lines fluctuate from pentameter to tetrameter to trimeter:

To-night, a first movement, a pulse,
As if the rain in bog land gathered head
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny bed.
(N, p. 49)

The voice is different, too. Here it is, because less regular, more threatening. Compare these lines to the unrevised ones quoted above:

. . . No treaty
I fore-see will salve completely your tracked
And stretch marked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.
(N, p. 50)

What is lost in lyricism is gained in dramatic effect. The use of the sonnet form here as a vehicle for irony (although historically correct), is strictly speaking untraditional.

In the "Glanmore Sonnets", however, the appropriate tone of sincerity is restored. Unlike "Act of Union", the "Glanmore Sonnets" show a renewed interest in tradition and strict technique. It seems that Heaney sees himself as a follower of some of the great sonneteers. Allusions are made to Sidney in IX and to Wyatt in X; while in III Heaney quite directly compares himself to Wordsworth.

In terms of form in the "Glanmore Sonnets", the debt is to Shakespeare. (Heaney offers only a few variations.) Except for I, II, VI, and VII, the sonnets can be divided up into three quatrains and a couplet with an abab, cdcd, efef, gg rhyme scheme (even if the rhyme is in some places sacrificed to assonance). Heaney does not, always, however, enact the turn in the thirteenth line. In II, III, and IV, the turn comes in the ninth line, as in the Petrarchan or Miltonic sonnets.

The metre of the "Glanmore Sonnets" is iambic. The revelation that iambic rhythms imitate the rhythms of the natural world in Glanmore (rural County Wicklow, Ireland) was, in fact, the inspiration for the sonnets. Heaney recalls the experience:

. . . one evening I was sitting upstairs in the study in the month of May. There was a cuckoo calling on the hillside in the wood; there were rabbits playing up the field; there was a corncrake. And this iambic melodious line-- "This evening the cuckoo and corncrake/(So much, too much) consorted at twilight"--came to me and I was really attracted by it; and I skimmed on and did the sonnet.¹⁸

Like some of the poems in the earlier volumes, the "Glanmore Sonnets" insist on the connection between the rhythms of agriculture and poetry, only here the connection has a classical source. In the oblique reference to the Latin meaning of "verse" and to Wordsworth's method of composition in the final couplet of II, that connection is very clearly

made: "Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,/Each verse returning like the plough turned round" (FW, p. 34). Heaney provides a gloss for these lines in "The Makings of the Music":

"Verse" comes from the Latin versus [sic] which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of a field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another. Wordsworth on the gravel path, to-ing and fro-ing like a ploughman up and down a field, his voice rising and falling between the measure of his pentameters, unites the old walking meaning of versus with the new, talking sense of verse.¹⁹

And as in the earlier volumes, the agricultural--perhaps pastoral--context calls for iambs.

To point out that the "Glanmore Sonnets" are written in iambic pentameter is to state the obvious. Less obvious, however, is the proliferation of two-word phrases joined by "and" which creates a repetition of sounds which subtly reinforce the iambic rhythm. I'll list only some of them: "Slug horn and chanter" (FW, p. 34), "cuckoo and corncrake", "crepuscular and iambic", "larch and May-green spruce", "Dorothy and William", "refreshes and relents" (FW, p. 35), "shoot and flourish" (FW, p. 37), "chaff and hay", "sweat and dust" (FW, p. 41), "asperged and censed" (FW, p. 42).

According to Heaney, Field Work, more generally, grew out of a conscious effort to revive the long line of the earlier volumes, but this time with a less dense, less packed feeling:

Field Work was an attempt to do something deliberately: to change the note, lengthen the line and to bring the element of my social self, elements of my usual nature which is more convivial than most of the poems before that might suggest, to try to bring all that into play. . . . What holds Field Work together--this is only my view of it--is a certain ease of voice.²⁰

Field Work, Heaney also tells us, represented a change from the style of North:

I suppose, then, that the shift from North to Field Work is a shift in trust: a learning to trust melody, to trust art as reality, to trust artfulness as an affirmation and to not go into the self punishment so much. I distrust that attitude, too, of course. These two are negotiating with each other.²¹

This deliberate change in line length is not remarkable in itself. What is remarkable, however, is that Heaney, at least for a time, sees the iambic line--the line which I have been arguing is his staple line--as an affront: "Back then during North, I thought that the melodious grace of the English iambic line was a kind of affront, that it needed to be wrecked."²² In North, Heaney attempts to strike out on his own, outside of or beyond the English tradition. That this change represents a duality for Heaney is clear in his view that Field Work and North "are negotiating with each other". The two volumes are like a negotiation where two parties argue cases which are at least partially valid, and come up with a solution which is ideally a compromise, making some concessions to each party. In Heaney's poetry, however, the negotiations are continuously in progress; no agreement is reached.

North Part I and some poems in Wintering Out come out of another side of Heaney, and represent a different kind of tightness and another tradition. In "Bone Dreams", Heaney makes it quite clear what that tradition is:

/ /
I push back,
through dictions,

.

/ /
 to the scop's
 / /
 twang, the iron
 / /
 flash of consonants
 / /
 cleaving the line.
 (N, p. 28)

Like this passage, the majority of poems in North Part I are written in the Anglo-Saxon two-stressed line. And in the same way as iambic tetrameter and pentameter lines are suited to Heaney's rural/agricultural poems, the two-stressed line seems appropriate for the archeological poems of North.

But while this line, too, comes from a well-established poetic tradition, it also looks somewhat loose and free-flowing on the page. Look, for example, at the last stanza in "North":

 ' . . .

 Keep your eye clear
 as the bleb of the icicle,
 trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
 your hands have known.'
 (N, p. 20)

The third line looks as if it should be two lines. But despite the apparent variation in line length, the overall shortness of the lines, along with the threadbare diction, suggests economy and tightness. As Heaney explains, the short line "came out of a time when I was tight myself".²³

But not all of Heaney's poems exemplify tightness. Wintering Out is a mixed bag of poems of varying degrees of formalism. There are a fair number of poems like those of North Part I written in two-stressed metre ("Fodder", "Bog Oak", "Anahorish", "Servant Boy", "Toome", "Broagh", "Oracle", "The Backward Look", "Traditions", "Midnight").

There are a couple written in tetrameter ("A New Song", and "Cairn-Maker"), and some written in pentameter ("Shore Woman", "No Sanctuary", "Nerthus" and "Good-Night"). And there is one written in lines of six syllables ("Maighdean Mara"). But there is a whole group of poems which cannot be discussed in terms of formal structure. The remarkable number of these poems with the word "I" as the first word or as part of the first line reveals the particular realm of these informal poems:

I stepped it, perch by perch
(WO, p. 21)

I deserted, shut out
(WO, p. 40)

I am riding to plague again
(WO, p. 41)

Some day I will go to Aarhus
(WO, p. 47)

I am afraid
(WO, p. 57)

It's a long time since I saw
(WO, p. 74)

When I looked down from the bridge
(WO, p. 75)

Heaney's loose and irregular line is used for his personal poems. And yet, except for "Wedding Day", these poems are not confessional. In the poems from "A Northern Hoard" and "The Tollund Man", Heaney looks for answers to the Irish question. And in "First Calf" and "May", he observes two aspects of nature.

"Wedding Day", "Mother of the Groom" and "Summer Home" are interesting because they break the ground for the more confessional poems of Field Work. "Summer Home" is the most experimental of the three. It is broken up into five sections of differing stanzaic organization and

line length. The poem looks at the fragility and mutability of married life. Like the changing form in the different sections of the poem, the feelings of the speaker fluctuate from guilt and conflict to reconciliation. In the first section of the poem the speaker wonders what has gone wrong and feels the need to purge himself:

To realize suddenly,
whip off the mat

that was larval, moving--
and scald, scald, scald
(WO, p. 59)

The second section presents signs of reparation. Flowers are offered, some rhyme is used and the establishment of order seems imminent:

I hear her small lost weeping
through the hall, that bells and hoarsens
on my name, my name.

O love, here is the blame.
(WO, p. 59)

In the middle of the poem, there is a return to the irregular couplets of the first section, and yet the symbolic religious ritual is baptism, a reversal of the purgation by fire of the first section:

More and more I postulate
thick healings, like now

as you bend in the shower
water lives down the tilting stoups of your breasts.
(WO, p. 60)

Section IV moves again toward regularity with two quatrains of two-stressed lines, and in the final and most regular section, the obstacles to union are overcome:

My children weep out the hot foreign night.
We walk the floor, my foul mouth takes it out
On you and we lie stiff till dawn
Attends the pillow, and the maize, and vine

That holds its filling burden to the light.
 Yesterday rocks sang when we tapped
 Stalactites in the cave's old dripping dark--
 Our love calls tiny as a tuning fork.

(WO, p. 61)

The confessional poems set the tone for Field Work. Here Heaney reflects on his love for his wife ("The Otter", "The Skunk", "A Dream of Jealousy"), on approaching middle-age ("September Song", "Guttural Muse"), and on the death of some of his friends ("The Strand at Lough Beg", "A Postcard from North Antrim", "Casualty"). Once again, these are difficult to scan, and although some are written roughly in pentameter ("The Strand at Lough Beg", "The Skunk"), the length of the line seems to be measured by the phrase rather than by the foot. The certain "ease of voice" which Heaney refers to in Field Work is his own conversational voice. In "A Postcard from North Antrim", the abundance of commas and periods and end-stopped lines approximates the speaking voice:

Fifteen years ago, come this October,
 Crowded on your floor,
 I got my arm around Marie's shoulder
 For the first time.
 'Oh, Sir Jasper, do not touch me!'
 You roared across at me,
 Chorus-leading, splashing out the wine.

(FW, p. 20)

And in the last stanza of "The Guttural Muse", the metre, although written in speech rhythms throughout, falls quite naturally into iambic pentameter:

A girl in a white dress
 Was being courted out among the cars:
 As her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs
 I felt like some old pike all badged with sores
 Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life.

(FW, p. 28)

Apart from the variation of line length in North and Field Work, the divisions in Heaney's use of form are less affected by his "double sense of manners" than by an attempt to bring the traditional forms into the twentieth-century idiom and context. The oppositions in Heaney's use of form are, nevertheless, like the other oppositions I discuss in the way in which they co-exist. In the variation between the unconventional and the conventional in the five lines quoted above from "The Guttural Muse", we see a kind of microcosm of Heaney's style which is too loose to really be part of the well-made school and too tight to really be part of the let-it-all-hang-out school.

Chapter Three

LANGUAGE: STAINED GLASS AND WINDOW GLASS

Voice and language carry a great deal of weight for Heaney. It is probably more important, in fact, that the reader have an appreciation for the use of language in Heaney's poetry than it is to have an understanding of the form or context. In "Feeling into Words", Heaney discusses the importance of finding a voice which is convincing, a voice which sounds like the poet's own:

Finding a voice means that you get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them; I believe that it may not even be a metaphor, for the poetic voice is probably very intimately connected with the poet's natural voice, the voice that he hears as the ideal speaker of the lines he is making up.¹

Eventually, though, Heaney does turn to metaphors to drive his point home: ". . . a voice is like a fingerprint, possessing a constant and unique signature that can, like a fingerprint, be recorded and employed for identification".² If we apply the fingerprint test to Heaney, however, we come up with a confusing composite. When we look at the language in "Turkeys Observed", with its plosive consonants and distanced tone, we assume that the poet is a hard and indifferent man. When we look at "Freedman", with its multisyllabic and Latinate language, we assume that the poet is an erudite scholar from the Eliot school. When we look at "Glanmore Sonnets X", a veritable purple passage of lyricism, we assume that the poet is a hopeless romantic. And when we look at "Last Look", with its colloquial language and plain-speaking

voice, we assume that the poet is the man next door. This is not to say, however, that the test does not work: Heaney's language, like his line which is divided in its length, reflects different aspects of himself and different attitudes toward art and the world which are typically divided and dualistic.

In "Glanmore Sonnets II", Heaney gives us one of the keys to his use of language. He describes words as "entering almost the sense of touch" (FW, p. 34). The strongly sensual and almost palpable presence of Heaney's language is unavoidable. Many of the critics who reviewed Heaney's early works could not, it seems, avoid commenting on Heaney's rich and sonorous language, on what they often called the "muscularity"³ of his language. The critics were quick, too, to pigeonhole Heaney as a follower of Hughes, and to a certain extent they were right in doing so. Heaney himself has on many occasions praised Hughes for opening up new linguistic possibilities. For Heaney, the Hughes voice was a rebellion against the mannerly, intelligent, urbane voice of Eliot and his following. Heaney writes:

I think that Hughes's great cry and call and bawl is that English language and English poetry is longer and deeper and rougher than that [the Eliot] voice Ted's poetry had that kind of linguistic energy, arrest and power, texture and surfaces. What I searched for in a poem like "Death of a Naturalist" was that kind of texture and richness. I had a notion of poetry being like stained glass almost. . . .⁴

"Death of a Naturalist" is, however, only one example of Heaney's stained-glass language. Heaney's first volume is full of Hughesean poems that with their physicality and linguistic energy almost spill off the pages. Poems like "Churning Day", "Blackberry Picking", "Dawn Shoot",

and "Personal Helicon" are slowed down by a glut of highly evocative nouns and adjectives. Look at the first six lines of "Blackberry-Picking":

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
 For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
 At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
 Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
 You ate the first and its flesh was sweet
 Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
(DN, p. 20)

And poems like "Trout" and "Waterfall", powered by a plethora of active verbs, race headlong from the opening line to the finish. "Trout", in fact, begins with a verb:

Hangs, a fat gun-barrel,
 deep under arched bridges
 or slips like butter down
 the throat of the river.
(DN, p. 39)

Heaney's language, however, has a longer ancestry than the 1960s. Calvin Bedient has called Heaney's "thick textures" Jacobean.⁵ I am inclined to place Heaney in the nineteenth century and, more specifically, to call him a disciple of Hopkins. In the same way as Heaney approximates Hopkins's sprung rhythm in some of his pentameter lines, his language also sounds Hopkinsesque in places. Heaney has often remarked on the role which Hopkins played in his poetic education. Heaney tells us that some of his first attempts at poetry, at university, were inspired by Hopkins. A piece called "October Thought" has strong intimations of the poet of "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire":

Starling thatch-watches, and sudden swallow
 Straight breaks to mud-nest, home rest rafter
 Up past dry dust-drunk cobwebs, like laughter
 Ghosting the roof of the bog-oak, turf-sod and rods
 of willow . . .

Like much of Hopkin's work this piece is marked by an abundance of hyphenated compound nouns and adjectives. Fortunately, Heaney does not indulge in these compound words to quite the same degree in later works, but they are, nonetheless, there also. In Death of a Naturalist I count twenty-four noun and adjective compounds, in Door into the Dark, fourteen, and in Field Work, twenty-five. In "Girls Bathing, Galway 1965", Heaney composes a line from compound adjectives alone: "Bare-legged, smooth-shouldered and long-backed" (DD, p. 23). Heaney often uses compound adjectives to describe colour, such as "mouse-grey" (DN, p. 17), "rat-grey" (DN, p. 20), and "crow-black" (DN, p. 31), or to describe eyes, as in "big-eyed Narcissus" (DN, p. 57), "dead-eyed fish" (DD, p. 51), "small-eyed survivor" (FW, p. 12), "god-eyed stare" (FW, p. 14), and "fish-dart eyes" (FW, p. 52).

Heaney may also be allied with Hopkins and his medieval mentors in his use of alliteration. According to Hobsbaum the principle of interlacing consonants is essentially an English one; it enhances the natural character of English, which is "tactile and kinaesthetic".⁷ A sense of tactility is created in "Digging", "Turkeys Observed" and "Death of a Naturalist" through the use of alliteration:

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground. . . .
 He rooted out the tall tops, buried the bright edge deep. . . .
 Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
(DN, p. 13)

. . .

Blue-breasted in their indifferent mortuary,
 Beached bare on the cold marble slabs
 In immodest underwear frills of feather.
(DN, p. 37)

. . .

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
 Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell. . . .
 I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied
 Specks
(DN, p. 15)

These highly alliterative, strongly assonantal, densely adjectival poems are clear examples of what Heaney calls his "stained glass" style of writing. However, although I think "Death of a Naturalist" is a fine poem, the same kind of language in a lesser poem like "Poem, for Marie" borders on the ridiculous:

Or in the sucking clabber I would splash
Delightedly and dam the flowing drain
But always my bastions of clay and mush
Would burst before the rising autumn rain.
(DN, p. 48)

It is just this type of sound-conscious language that makes Heaney the victim of a funny, but pointed parody by Clive James in his The Improved Version of Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage Through the London Literary World (an eighteenth-century-style satire on contemporary poets and poetasters). In James's poem Heaney becomes Seamus Faemus who speaks in very earthy, compacted and almost explosive language:

'White spoors of cockle,'
Faemus mumbled, 'plumb
Tight mounds brine-splashed with goat-frost, Futtled,
numb
I slop the dunt melt of the scurving bog's
Black molars to the shred-hung mandrake. Dogs
Like spirochetes torment my afterbirth'⁸

James's parody is also directed at what Heaney would call the "noise"⁹ of poetry. There is a strong tendency in Heaney's early works to mimic the sound of the thing being described. So we find a multiplication of words like "squelch", "slop" (DN, p. 14), "pop", "thumped" (DN, p. 21), "plash" and "gurgle" (DN, p. 22), "pat", "slap" (DN, p. 22), "clicking" (DN, p. 24). This highly idiosyncratic language is perfect for the parodist; it is not, however, sustained throughout Heaney's work.

In Field Work, Heaney maintains a nineteenth-century style of alliteration, but here he is more like Tennyson than Hopkins. In poems like "In Memoriam of Sean O'Riada", "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge", and "Glanmore Sonnets III, IV, V, VI, VIII, IX, and X", alliteration is used sparingly in a way which heightens the lyrical appeal of the pieces. Compare this passage from "Glanmore Sonnets V" to the passage I quoted earlier from "Poem, for Marie":

I love its bloom like saucers brimmed with meal,
Its berries a swart caviar of shot,
A buoyant spawn, a light bruised out of purple.
(FW, p. 37)

Here, in addition to the fact that there is less assonance than in "Poem, for Marie", the alliteration is also subtler: Heaney limits himself to only two repeated consonants in a line.

A. Alvarez also makes a case for Heaney's Tennysonian voice. He quotes lines seven and eight from "Glanmore Sonnets X":

Darkly asperged and censed, we laid out
Like breathing effigies on a raised ground.

The last two lines [says Alvarez] are purely ornamental, they add nothing except a solemn reverberating grandeur.

It is something of a miracle for a poet writing at the latter end of the twentieth century to sound so Victorian without at the same time sounding merely pompous and second hand.¹⁰

Where Alvarez differs from Heaney, however, is in his belief that what is purely ornamental is worthy of unfavourable criticism. There are many lyrical passages in Heaney which stand on their own as beautiful pieces of writing. The opening passage of "Dawn Shoot", for example, is written in what could be considered ornamental or 'poetic' language. The clouds are personified: "Clouds ran their wet mortar, plastered the day-break/Grey" (DN, p. 29). A railway bridge is described in a highly

visual, almost photographic image: "The rails scored a bull's eye into the eye of a bridge" (DN, p. 29). The whole opening passage is based on an extended metaphor which suggests that there is a battle going on between man and nature. The clouds are cannons; the corncrake is a sentry; the snipe "rocket[s] away on reconnaissance" (DN, p. 29); the boys feel like "two parachutists" (DN, p. 29). The beauty and artifice of the language is soothing. Except for the reference to the cows "knowing" something the reader imagines that this will be a rather pleasant poem about two boys out shooting. The description of the fields in the quiet grey of dawn is stunningly beautiful:

Clouds ran their wet mortar, plastered the daybreak
 Grey. The stones clicked tartly
 If we missed the sleepers but mostly
 Silent we headed up the railway
 Where now the only steam was funnelling from cows
 Ditched on their rumps beyond the hedges,
 Cudding, watching, and knowing.
 The rails scored a bull's-eye into the eye
 Of a bridge. A corncrake challenged
 Unexpectedly like a hoarse sentry
 And a snipe rocketed away on reconnaissance.
 Rubber-booted, belted, tense as two parachutists,
 We climbed the iron gate and dropped
 Into the meadow's six acres of broom, gorse and dew.
(DN, p. 29)

From this passage, as well as from the opening passage of "Death of a Naturalist", and "The Peninsula", and "New Song", and a dozen other poems it is clear that Heaney has no reservations about ornamental language.

In some poems, Heaney even uses rather archaic language which belongs strictly to the realm of poetry. In "The Barn" he refers to dust particles shining in the sunlight as "gilded motes" (DN, p. 17). In "Mid-Term Break", Heaney speaks of "bells knelling classes to a close"

(DN, p. 28). In "Summer Home", he indulges in poetic gesture with the rather Shakespearean-sounding phrase, "till dawn/Attends the pillow. And in another love poem, "Serenades", he sounds rather like Arnold:

So fill the bottles, love,
 Leave them inside their cots.
 And if they do wake us, well,
 So would the sedge-warbler.
 (WO, p. 62)

This kind of poetic language is even more pronounced in Field Work. In "The Skunk", when Heaney describes the skunk's back as "damasked like a chasuble/At a funeral mass" (FW, p. 48) one is reminded of Shakespeare's roses "damasked, red and white".¹¹ In "The Toome Road", when Heaney refers to armoured cars as "warbling along on powerful tyres" (FW, p. 15), the reader thinks of the small birds in springtime ballads. In the final lines of the same poem, Heaney rises into poetic apostrophe and addresses the British soldiers as charioteers:

O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
 It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
 The invisible, untoppled omphalos.
 (FW, p. 15)

Poetic apostrophe is used again in "In Memoriam Sean O'Riada". Heaney commemorates the composer and inspirational force of the Irish music revival in terms similar to those used to describe Our Lady in the Litany:

O gannet smacking through scales!
 Minnow of light.
 Wader of assonance.
 (FW, p. 30)

These lines and passages, it seems to me, are also examples of what Heaney calls his "stained glass" language; they have something of the reverence, sense of tradition and artifice which we associate with church

windows.

But not all of Heaney's writing fits this metaphor. Heaney tells us, in fact, that in his later writing he aims for the same element that Orwell sought in his prose. There is a second half to the quotation I cited earlier from Heaney's interview with John Haffenden: "I had a notion of poetry being like stained glass almost, although now [1981] I would like to write a poetry that was more like window glass".¹² Heaney makes much the same plea for simplicity and clarity of expression which is firmly grounded in the concrete in "North":

' . . .

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.'

(N, p. 20)

Heaney finds the "window glass" voice in the volume North. There, not only the lines, but the language, too, is pared down to a minimum: the forte of the guttural muse of North is the list. Article, preposition, adverb, verb and adjective are largely sacrificed to the noun. In the description of the land in "Kinship", we find one of the most effective examples of this kind of language:

Earth-pantry, bone vault;
sun-bank, embalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.

Insatiable bride.
Sword-swallower,
casket, midden,
floe of history.

(N, p. 41)

Similar passages of lists can also be found in "Viking Dublin", "Bone Dreams", and "Bog Queen".

The list genre--if we can call it that--is clearly borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, as is much of the language in North. I do not need to point out examples of words with Anglo-Saxon origins; they are ubiquitous in the volume. Besides, a great deal has been written about the origins of the language in North.¹³ I will not comment on the language any more than to say that it, too, indicates something of Heaney's preoccupation with division: Heaney writes North in a special kind of language, a language from a different tradition. The emphasis on Anglo-Saxon language in North is an oblique political statement of independence from the tyranny of Modern English which was implanted in the North of Ireland in the Elizabethan period.

And while Heaney's voice is consistent throughout North Part I, it is so monotone that the reader can hardly differentiate one poem from the next. I wonder how many Heaney's readers could tell if these lines are from "Viking Dublin", "Funeral Rites", "Bone Dreams", or "Kinship"?

. . .
re-enter memory
where the bone's lair

is a love-nest
in the grass.
I hold my lady's head
like a crystal

(N, p. 29)

But the voice in North Part II is different again. The language here is as close as Heaney comes to window glass. This is Heaney's "declarative voice".¹⁴ For his commentary on the 'Irish thing', Heaney turns to a diction which is contemporary and colloquial. In "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing", Heaney works with journalese and cliché:

I'm writing just after an encounter
 With an English journalist in search of 'views
 On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter
 Quarters where bad news is no longer news,

Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,
 Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads
 Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint
 But I incline as much to rosary beads

As to the jottings and analyses
 Of politicians and newspapermen
 Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas
 And protest to gelignite and sten,

Who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',
 'Backlash' and 'crack down', the 'provisional wing',
 'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'.
 Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,
 (N, p. 57)

In "Ministry of Fear", Heaney writes in the Movement's epistolary style:

Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived
 In important places. The lonely scarp
 Of St. Columb's College, where I billeted
 For six years, overlooked your Bogside.
 I gazed into new worlds: the inflamed throat
 Of Brandywell, its floodlit dogtrack,
 The throttle of the hare. In the first week
 I was so homesick I couldn't even eat
 The biscuits left to sweeten my exile.
 (N, p. 63)

Often, too, Heaney lets the voices of his personae speak for themselves. Their voices are plain, curt, and unfriendly. The Commandant in "The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream" processes Heaney; his voice is sarcastic: "'I am honoured to add a poet to our list/. . . You'll be safer here, anyhow'" (N, p. 56). The man in the street makes the usual comments about the violence:

'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree'
 'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse.'
 'They're murderers.' 'Internment, understandably . . .'
 (N, p. 58)

The schoolteacher intimidates the child Heaney: "'What's your name, Heaney?/. . . Fair enough'" (N, p.64). The constable officiously tallies up the farm produce: "'Any other root crops?/Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?'" (N, p. 57). The Northern voice is apparently a harsh one.

But Heaney seems to have something in common with these Northerners. From the first poem in Death of a Naturalist when Heaney describes the pen as resting "snug as a gun" (DN, p. 13) in his hand, we are led to believe that the poet is a bit of a tough guy. Heaney seems to thrive on dark and unsavoury places like a smelly flax-dam, a storage barn with bats in the rafters, a murky rat-infested canal, old dank wells, and in most of these places something is inevitably rotting. There is something of what Joyce would have called "that special odour of corruption"¹⁵ in Heaney. Heaney makes no apology for the use of words like "farting" (DN, p. 16), "shits" (DN, p. 23), "dung" (DN, p. 24) and "catpiss" (FW, p. 55). He uses metaphors which are indelicate. He describes the moans of the starving famine victims as being "like dogs that have been kicked hard in the privates" (DN, p. 34). It seems as though he is drawn to the dark side of the world and especially to death. The killing of the kittens in "Early Purges" is passed off in an unsympathetic tone:

. . . They were slung on the snout
Of the pump

Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced
Them out

(DN, p. 23)

(The tone and language in this poem were found so coarse, in fact, that Eldon Griffith, Conservative MP for Bury St. Edmunds, calls the poem

"sick" and feels it is unsuitable for teaching in the school system).¹⁶

The dead body of Heaney's second cousin, Colum McCartney, who is killed in random violence is described in realistic detail:

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,
(FW, p. 18)

The corpse of Heaney's younger brother is described with the indifference of a child who does not understand death:

. . . . I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,
Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.
(DN, p. 28)

In "Funeral Rites" we get another detached close-up of yet more corpses:

their eyelids glistening,
their dough-white hands
shackled in rosary beads.

Their puffed knuckles
had unwrinkled, the nails
were darkened, the wrists
obediently sloped.

(N, p. 15)

In "Dawn Shoot", Heaney focuses on two boys who indulge in violence for its own sake, and he describes with vigour the selfish delight both boys take in annihilating the seemingly innocent bird:

Donnelly's left hand came up
And came down on my barrel. This one was his.
'For Christ's sake', I spat, 'Take your time, there'll
be more'
There was the playboy trotting up to the hole
By the ash tree, 'Wild rover no more',
Said Donnelly and emptied two barrels
And got him. I finished him off.

(DN, p. 30)

In "Turkeys Observed", Heaney describes the death of the turkeys with what seems to be a rather shocking fascination with the morbid:

But a turkey cowers in death.
 Pull his neck, pluck him, and look--
 He is just another poor forked thing,
 A skin bag pumped with inky putty.

.

Now, as I pass the bleak Christmas dazzle,
 I find him ranged with his cold squadrons:
 The fuselage is bare, the proud wings snapped,
 The tail-fan stripped down to a shameful rudder.

(DN, p. 37)

And in "Casualty", Heaney describes the death of his friend Sean Armstrong, who is killed in a pub bombing, in a few blunt and savagely ironic lines:

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.

(FW, p. 22)

Heaney tries to explain his preoccupation with the morbid and violent in a letter to Jon Stallworthy. At first he figures he saw too many war movies when he was young, but he further suggests that maybe the violent poems came out a violence within himself:

I was tensed and triggered myself. I usually wrote at a sitting and generated a charge within me; the actual writing was an intense activity, battered down. So maybe that state reflected itself in the diction and imagery.¹⁷

This explanation helps us to understand where Heaney's callous voice comes from, but it does not account for Heaney's lyrical voice. It also fails to shed any light on the divisions within Heaney's voice between the literate and the illiterate.

Because of its divided language, a poem like "An Advancement of Learning" sounds somehow flawed or at least jarring on the tongue. The poem is about a child's sighting of a rat in a canal, and it uses predominantly expressive language like this:

Something slobbered curtly, close,
Smudging the silence: a rat
Slimed out of the water and
My throat sickened

(DN, p. 18)

In the same poem, however, we find phrases like "deferring/The bridge" (DN, p. 18) and "At my hitherto snubbed rodent" (DN, p. 18). The words "deferring" and "hitherto" seem quite clearly out of place. Yet, perhaps they are not out of place, perhaps the incongruity of language here is part of Heaney's struggle with finding a voice which represents the two sides of himself, the literate and the illiterate.

Blake Morrison argues that the tensions within Heaney's language between speech and reticence are the most interesting aspect of Heaney's earlier works:

The most striking feature [writes Morrison] of Seamus Heaney's first two books, his work of the sixties, is not their sensuousness of language, nor their rough physicality, nor their celebration of Irish customs and crafts, nor even their description of rural life; it is their mediation between silence and speech.¹⁸

Morrison cites several examples in Heaney's early poetry where speech is seen to be unnecessary or at least unpreferred. Many of Heaney's personae, Morrison tells us, are close-mouthed.¹⁹ The water-diviner goes about his work "without a word" (DN, p. 36). The Lough Neagh fishermen realize the importance of silence when fishing: "The bucket's handle better not clatter now" (DD, p. 40). The haymakers in "The Wife's Tale"

sit down after lunch, "Smoking and saying nothing" (DD, p. 28). The two boys in "Dawn Shoot" remain "mostly silent" (DN, p. 29) as they head up the railway. The thatcher says nothing as he works, and he leaves the onlookers "gaping" (DD, p. 20) at his finished roof. The blacksmith utters nothing more than a grunt. The docker sits "strong and blunt as a Celtic cross/Clearly used to silence" (DN, p. 41). And the young couple in "Twice Shy" are ill at ease with conversation:

We thrilled to the March twilight
 With nervous childish talk:
 Still waters running deep
 Along the embankment walk.
 (DN, p. 45)

According to Morrison, as a young poet Heaney suffered from the division within himself of being the educated and literate son of a "silent ancestry":²⁰

Heaney's sense of belonging to a silent ancestry, an ancestry with which he, as someone who went away to boarding school on a scholarship at the age of eleven (he was an early beneficiary of the 1947 Education Act, which gave Northern Catholics greater educational opportunities) and who has become a writer, has rather embarrassed relations.²¹

Heaney comments on his sense of separation from his community in

Preoccupations:

The first glimpse I have of myself reading on my own is one of those orphaned memories, a moment without context that will always stay with me. It is a book from the school library--a padlocked box that was opened more or less as a favour. . . . The oil lamp is lit and a neighbour called Hugh Bates is interrupting me. 'Boys but this Seamus fellow is a great scholar. What book are you in now, son?' And my father is likely wringing what he can from the moment with 'He's as bad as Pat McGuckin this minute.' Pat McGuckin was a notorious bachelor farmer--a cousin of ours--who was said to burn his scone like King Alfred every time he lifted a book. Years later, when Death of a Naturalist was published, the

greatest commendation at home was 'Lord knows Pat would fairly have enjoyed this.'²²

Coming from this kind of background, Heaney has something in common with what some call the archetypical Canadian artist. Like David Canaan in Ernest Buckler's Mountain and the Valley, who escapes upstairs to his literary world to write about his life and then finds he is cut off from it, Heaney faces the problem of using language without betraying "the clamped speech"²³ of his rural community.

Heaney's problem is complicated by the fact that he comes not only from a rural community, but also from a Northern Irish and Catholic one which, as Morrison points out, has "additional reasons for clamming up".²⁴ Heaney's reaction to the question of Irish nationalism is, however, a question which must be considered not just in terms of language, but in its own right.

Chapter Four

PLACE: FROM MOSSBAWN TO STATION ISLAND

Division has a special significance for Anglo-Irish writers, a division which is expressed in the term 'Anglo-Irish' itself. For Elizabeth Bowen, part of being Anglo-Irish meant that she only felt at home when she was half way between Dún Laoghaire and Holyhead.¹ For Heaney, having grown up in Northern Ireland and in the midst of 'the Troubles', being Anglo and Irish means that he has what he calls a 'double sense of manners' and also that he feels a certain responsibility to the community to say something about Northern Ireland's political difficulties.² Heaney's response to the problem is, however, not simply a matter of commenting on the divisions between England and Ireland and laying blame. While Heaney does look quite deeply into the political situation, he does not get beyond the questioning stage. This questioning forces Heaney both to take sides and to refuse to take sides, as well as to explore his feelings about the poet's role in the public sphere. But this is only part of Heaney's reaction to his place and not the most interesting part from a literary point of view. In "The Sense of Place" Heaney tells us that there are two ways in which every place is known:

I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension.³

Tracing the tensions within Heaney's attitude toward his place involves, then, a consideration of the conscious and the unconscious ways in which place is known, as well as a consideration of Heaney's position on the political situation in Northern Ireland.

Through the examples of Patrick Kavanagh and John Montague, Heaney illustrates his theory that place is evoked in two ways. Although both Kavanagh and Montague are what one might call parochial poets, the way in which they look at their respective parishes, Heaney tells us, is quite different; while Kavanagh's reaction is illiterate and unconscious, Montague's is quite conscious and literate:

Now it is obvious that although both Montague and Kavanagh look and listen with intensity inside their parishes, their eyes and ears seek and pick up different things. Kavanagh's eye has been used to bending over the ground before it ever bent over a book but we feel with Montague that the case is vice versa. If Montague, for example, had been born in Kavanagh's county, Ardee and the Black Pig's Dyke would have figured significantly in his literary topography. But Kavanagh never mentions them. Kavanagh's place names are there to stake out a personal landscape, they declare one man's experience, they are denuded of tribal or etymological implications.⁴

The contrast that Heaney points out here is quite an interesting one in terms of his own work, for Heaney, too, "looks and listens with an intensity inside his parish" and Heaney, too, has a literary topography which is defined by certain named places. Unlike Kavanagh and Montague, however, Heaney does not fit into one or the other of these categories, but rather into both. Heaney's sense of place is both conscious and unconscious; he is concerned with both the present and the past, and with the personal as well as the "tribal and etymological implications".

I would argue, and in this I am agreeing with Anthony Bradley,⁵ that Heaney is like Kavanagh in his insistence on recording the rituals of his place. It seems to me, in fact, that Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark do little more than this--almost. Death of a Naturalist is on one level like a coffee-table book on the way of life in rural Northern Ireland. There are pictures of people at a potato digging ("Digging" and "At a Potato Digging"); there is a detailed picture of a storage barn ("Barn"); there is a picture of some people picking blackberries ("Black-berry-Picking"); there is a series of pictures of the process of churning butter ("Churning Day"); there are several nice landscape scenes ("Waterfall", "Lovers on Aran", "Storm on the Island"); and there are some pictures of some of the local people ("Follower", "Dockerman", "Diviner", "Poor Women in a City Church").

By pointing out the picture-bookish aspect of Death of a Naturalist, however, I do not mean to sound derogatory. I think that Heaney's conviction that Northern Ireland is not only worthy of poetry, but also that it has a certain beauty of its own is a fairly novel one. According to Derek Mahon the North of Ireland was considered by both the London and Dublin literati as a cultural wasteland having neither poets nor the stuff that poetry is made of:

. . . until two years ago [1968] not many were aware of a place called Northern Ireland, let alone that it might produce poets. From the Irish, i.e., Southern Irish, point of view, the development has been followed with mixed emotions varying from amused surprise (since the North is traditionally philistine) to the distaste of literary chauvinists.⁶

It is perhaps because of the example of Kavanagh that Heaney is able to see the beauty of his traditionally philistine landscape. In the case

of Belfast this seems a particularly bold achievement, since that city (like several others) is often considered the "armpit of Europe". But Heaney is able to see beauty in these places because, like Kavanagh, he writes according to the "laws of feeling" rather than to the "laws of aesthetics [or] by the disciplines of physical geography".⁷ The most obvious examples of Heaney's ability to see beauty in the mundane or the physically unappealing are found in poems like "Death of a Naturalist", "The Barn", and "An Advancement of Learning". In "Death of a Naturalist" the festering flax-dam is described as a rather pleasant collage of colours and textures:

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
 Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
 Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
 There were dragon-flies, and spotted butterflies,
 But best of all was the warm thick slobber
 Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
(DN, p. 15)

In "The Barn", the way light shines on dust particles creates an appealing picture:

There were no windows, just two narrow shafts
 Of gilded motes, crossing, from air-holes slit
 High in each gable.
(DN, p. 17)

And in "An Advancement of Learning", light reflecting on the dirty canal is unexpectedly attractive:

. . . The river nosed past,
 Pliable, oil-skinned, wearing
 A transfer of gables and sky.
(DN, p. 18)

Like Kavanagh, too, Heaney is able to capture the feeling of the North through the characters and natural speech of the region. In "The Outlaw", in fact, it seems that Heaney borrows a phrase from Kavanagh that he is particularly fond of because he feels that it is particularly regional. In "The Sense of Place" Heaney praises Kavanagh's use of dialect:

In the first line [of "Inniskeen Road, July Evening"]
'the bicycles go by in twos and threes'. They do not
'pass by' or 'go past', as they would in a more standard
English voice or place, and in that little touch Kavanagh
touches what I am circling. He is letting the very life
blood of the place in that one minute incision⁸

In "The Outlaw" this same phrase "go by" is used in direct speech and has a rather different meaning, but the effect it produces of calling up a particular region is the same:

I gave Old Kelly the clammy silver, though why
I could not guess. He grunted a curt 'Go by

Get up on that gate'.

(DD, p. 16)

There is a noticeable effort in Heaney's writing, especially in the first two volumes, to use direct speech whenever possible. Through the several personae in these volumes we hear the voices of some of the ineloquent Northerners. The language of Dan Taggart in "The Early Purges" and the boys in "Dawn Shoot", all rough, coarse males, is predominantly profane and idiomatically Northern:

. . . 'the scraggy wee shits',
'Sure isn't it better for them now?' . . .

(DN, p. 23)

'For Christ's sake', I spat, 'Take your time, there'll be
more'
. . . 'Wild rover no more',

(DN, p. 30)

Big Jim Evans and the old men at the wake in "Mid-Term Break" are more polite, but no less dependent on well-worn phrases:

And Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

. . . and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble',
(DN, p. 28)

The famine victims in "For the Commander of the 'Eliza'" can do nothing more than cry for food in Irish: "'Bia, bia,/Bia' (DN, p. 34).

Through the use of the dramatic persona in "The Wife's Tale", "Mother" and "Shore Woman", we hear the voices of three rural Northern Ireland women. Their voices are, however, not quite what we expect. Yet they are curiously homogeneous; the three women share feelings of frustration and alienation:

And that was it. I'd come and he had shown me
So I belonged no further to the work.
I gathered cups and folded up the cloth
And went.

(DD, p. 28)

I am tired of the feeding of stock.
Each evening I labour this handle
Half an hour at a time, the cows
Guzzling at bowls in the byre.
Before I have topped up the level
They lower it down.

(DD, p. 29)

I sometimes walk this strand for thanksgiving
Or maybe it's to get away from him
Skittering his spit across the stove
(WO, p. 67)

And while Heaney's Northern women and men are clearly separated from one another they are at least united in their relationship to nature. Except for the husband in "Shore Woman" and the boys in "Dawn Shoot",

Heaney's personae react to nature instinctively; it is almost as if they are part of it. The husband in "The Wife's Tale" is described as being proud of the harvest, "as proud as if he were the land itself" (DD, p. 28). The woman in "Mother" has a kind of beatific vision of the day when she is at one with nature:

O when I am a gate for myself
 Let such wind fray my waters
 As scarfs my skirt through my thighs,
 Stuffs air down my throat.

(DD, p. 29)

The woman in "Shore Woman" also has an intimate link with nature, partly through a knowledge of folklore and partly by instinct. While out fishing she is acutely aware of the porpoises' presence and knows that they will attack the boat:

They will attack a boat.
 I knew it and I asked him to put in
 But he would not, declared it was a yarn
 My people had been fooled by far too long
 And he would prove it now and settle it.
 Maybe he shrank when those sloped oily backs
 Propelled towards us: I lay and screamed
 Under splashed brine in an open rocking boat
 Feeling each dunt and slither through the timber,

(WO, p. 67)

The fishermen of Lough Neagh, too, have a folkloric, instinctual understanding of their world. The opening stanza of "Up the Shore" is a string of fables about the lake:

The lough will claim a victim every year.
 It has a virtue that hardens wood to stone.
 There is a town sunk beneath its water.
 It is a scar left by the Isle of Man.

(DD, p. 38)

There is a simplicity and orderliness about the lives of the fishermen which is admirable. Their fishing follows the natural cycle of the eel.

They set up gates and tanks to catch hundreds of eels where the lake flows into the River Bann at Toomebridge, and then they sail up the lake along the Antrim and Tyrone shores to fish the eels "one by one" (DD, p. 38). The regularity and orderliness of the fishermen's existence is reflected in the metre and rhyme of "Up the Shore". The poem is written in alternate rhyming quatrains and in iambic pentameter lines with no enjambment; each line completes itself.

"A Lough Neagh Sequence" is also relevant to my discussion here because it is the first of these 'regional' poems which names a particular place. In the sequence, Heaney refers not only to the lake, but also to Antrim, Tyrone and Toomebridge. Lough Neagh and the towns and counties mentioned are important not only because they are all connected to the eel-fishing industry, but also because they are all within Heaney's own region. Heaney charts the boundaries of this region in several places in Preoccupations:

If Lough Beg marked one limit of the imagination's nesting ground, Slieve Gallon marked another. Slieve Gallon is a small mountain that lies in the opposite direction, taking the eye out over the grazing and ploughed ground and the distant woods of Moyola Park, out over Grove Hill and Back Park and Castledawson. This side of the country was the peopled, communal side, the land of haycock and corn-stook, of fence and gate, milk-cans at the end of lanes and auction notices on gate pillars.⁹

Benedict Kiely describes Heaney as "the poet of the Lough Shore".¹⁰ In his book, All the Way from Bantry Bay, and Other Irish Journeys, which is a collection of off-beat essays about the author's rambles through literary Ireland, Kiely tells us about the day he spent travelling through 'Heaney country' that is, from Belfast to Ardboe Point. According to Kiely, this country is as exclusively Heaney's as County Monaghan is

Kavanagh's, County Sligo, Yeats's, and Dublin, Joyce's. In their rambles, Kiely and friends stop at, among other places, Anahorish, where Heaney went to school, and at a pub at a crossroads on the road from Toomebridge to Castledawson which Heaney knew from his childhood and where apparently Heaney once watched a thatcher repair a roof. Kiely reflects on the visit to the local:

The woman of the house has a welcome for the poet and his two companions. Why shouldn't she? When he was a boy, a neighbour's child, hadn't he day after day carried the milk to the pub from the farm he was reared in. A rare thing, when you think of it for a poet to be at: carrying the juice of the cow to the house where men at their pleasure knock back the juice of the barley.¹¹

The last stop on the tour is at Toomebridge, another place which Kiely tells us in his roundabout way is of particular significance to Heaney:

I had the words of the old ballad from a man here in Toomebridge on the day . . . when Rody's [McCorley] memorial was unveiled by Father Eamon Devlin and curiously enough it was a priest called Devlin who stood by Rody when he went to the scaffold 179 years ago . . .

Well perhaps it's not so curious, Devlin is a great name in these parts. The wife of the poet who stands with the professor and myself on the bridge of Toome is a Devlin whose father's place is right beside the ancient high cross of Ardboe on the Tyrone side of the lough.¹²

Heaney writes a poem about Ardboe Point, but he doesn't mention anything about the one-thousand-year-old stone cross or the ancient monastic settlement which it seems are Ardboe Point's most significant landmarks. For Heaney, the most memorable feature of Ardboe Point is the mosquitoes. This strikes me as not only a fairly real kind of feature, but also a fairly evocative one which gives the reader a far better feeling for the place than references to geographical or man-made landmarks would.

Heaney does not, however, see the mosquitoes as they are ordinarily seen.

He sees them first as beautiful and at the end as almost mythic:

Right along the lough shore
A smoke of flies
Drifts thick in the sunset.

They come shattering daintily
Against the windscreen,
The grill and bonnet whisper

At their million collisions:
It is to drive through
A hail of fine chaff.

.

I'm told they're mosquitoes

But I'd need forests and swamps
To believe it
For these are our innocent, shuttling

Choirs, dying through
Their own live empyrean, troublesome only
As the last veil on a dancer.

(DD, pp. 35, 36)

Heaney's picture of Ardboe Point is a highly personal one. "At Ardboe Point" is a delightfully unusual, and I think effective, love poem which I gather harks back to the time when Heaney and Marie Devlin were dating. The mosquitoes, rather than being seen as the necessary summertime curse, contribute to the eroticism of the poem ("the last veil of the dancer") and to the sense of stealth and romance:

Yet we leave no clear wake
For they open and close on us
As the air opens and closes.

To-night when we put out our light
To kiss between sheets
Their just audible siren will go

Outside the window,
 Their invisible veil
 Weakening the moonlight still further
 (DD, p. 35)

"At Ardboe Point" is as fine an example of the "eye being regulated by the laws of feeling" as we will find anywhere.

In the books that follow Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark, Heaney's way of seeing place changes quite sharply. Here the personal and unconscious reaction, the reaction I have been referring to as Kavanaghese, gives way to a reaction which like that of John Montague's is quite conscious and literary. The similarity of approach with regard to place in the works of Heaney and Montague has already been pointed out by Thomas Redshaw¹³ and Graham Martin.¹⁴ Martin's views are especially interesting because he discusses the part which the past plays in the works of both poets.

In Wintering Out we see some obvious changes from the earlier works. Here there is less interest in characterization and dialect. There is also no longer an interest in the rituals of the rural way of life, or in describing the beauty of the region. In Wintering Out, Heaney's interest turns from the strictly regional to national questions of language and politics. While Heaney, for the most part, simply described his cultural background in the earlier volumes, in Wintering Out he begins to look at the forces which oppose and threaten that culture. Here, more than elsewhere, Heaney starts to take sides in the matter of Ireland question. He changes from the personal point of view to an impersonal one, which is, as it was for many Irish poets before him, constantly looking into the past.

There are four poems in Wintering Out, which like "At Ardboe Point", are centered on or bear the names of some of the significant places from Heaney's background. These poems are, however, quite unlike "At Ardboe Point". "Anahorish", for example, makes no reference, oblique or otherwise, to Heaney's schooldays. There is a suggestion, in fact, that the poem reaches far back into the past, beyond Heaney's own lifetime, to the beginning of the world. Anahorish is called

the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass

and darkened cobbles
in the bed of the lane.

(WO, p. 16)

Apart from this rather vague description of the landscape we gain only a very dim feeling of what Anahorish is really like. It seems that Heaney is more interested in the word "Anahorish" than he is in the place Anahorish. The poem begins with an English gloss for the Irish place name, Anach Fhior Uisce:¹⁵ "My 'place of clear water'" (WO, p. 16). Heaney also reflects on the sound of the word "Anahorish": ". . . soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow" (WO, p. 16). We are led to believe that the ultimate significance of the place is determined by word association--intimations of Eliot's auditory imagination. As the word is pronounced it suggests an image of life in the Iron Age:

after-image of lamps
swung through the yards
on winter evenings.
With pails and barrows

those mound-dwellers
go waist-deep in mist
to break the light ice
at wells and dunghills.

(WO, p. 16)

It is the image of the mound-dwellers that we are left with.

Much the same is true of "Toome" and "Gifts of Rain IV". In "Toome" there are again no personal or public references, no reference to the American aerodrome nor to Rody McCorley. Here again the interest is in the word "Toome", in the way its soft Gaelic vowel feels in the mouth: "My mouth holds round/the soft blastings" (WO, p. 26). And here as well the pronunciation of the word summons up a vision of the past, in this case, the whole archeological history of the place. Layer upon layer of earth is exposed, revealing the artifacts of each period. In "Gifts of Rain IV" Heaney reflects on the word Moyola, the river which flows to the west of Heaney's home. But Heaney does not tell us what the river is like; he only tells us of how the river is a conscious part of the spirit of the region. Its music is based on Celtic strains; its accent is guttural like the Northern accent:

The tawny guttural water
 spells itself: Moyola
 is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale
 in the utterance,
 reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists
 through vowels and history.
 (WO, p. 25)

To the extent that Heaney's place-name poems in Wintering Out attempt to restore the hidden meanings to the landscape they have something in common with Montague's place poems, which, as Heaney says, "are . . . sounding lines, rods to plumb the depths of a shared and diminished culture".¹⁶ But both Montague's and Heaney's place-name poems belong to the older Irish tradition of the dinnseanchas. Heaney

explains this word in "The Sense of Place": ". . . in Irish poetry there is a whole genre of writing called dinnseanchas, poems and tales which relate the original meaning of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology."¹⁷ He gives an example from the Táin bo Cuailgne (the epic which recounts the exploits of Cuchulain, and principally the cattle raid at Cooley) which is "full of incidental dinnseanchas".¹⁸ The example Heaney is referring to is the description of the journey of the Connacht army from Cruachan to Carlingford, but for those of us who are not immediately familiar with this passage, Thomas Kinsella's English translation of the Táin is useful:

The Monday after Samain they set out. This is the
way they went, Southwest from Cruachan Ai:
through Muicc Cruinb
through Terloch Teora Crich, the marshy bed
where the territories meet
by Tuaim Mona the peat ridge
through Cuil Silenna, where Carcin Lake is now--
is named after Silenn, daughter of Madchar,
by Fid and Bolga, woods and hills . . .
over Trego Plain, of the spears
through Ord, "the hammer" . . .
by the river Indiuind, "the anvil"¹⁹

Although Heaney's dinnseanchas are more artful than the traditional ones, that Heaney should write his own version of the dinnseanchas shows an aspect of his conscious and literate understanding of place.

But the purpose of writing dinnseanchas in contemporary English poetry is not only to restore meaning to the place, it is also to establish the divisions which are latent in that place. This is most clearly brought out in "Broagh", the fourth of these place-name poems. The final stanzas broach the topic of the Plantation in tones of quiet resistance:

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

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

(WO, p. 27)

The word "stranger" carries a great deal of meaning. The use of the word "found", however, is even more significant because it is connected with the search into the past which is so important in Wintering Out. It also introduces the concern for the loss of Irish language and culture and the question of the all-too-present rift between the English and the Irish. It is here that Heaney's attitude towards his place becomes more than a regional love of the land; it becomes a political position, and the side that Heaney takes is clear.

Like Montague, Heaney is fairly selective in his treatment of Irish history.²⁰ He centers his attention on the Elizabethan period. In "Bog Oak" Heaney recalls with bitterness the view of Ireland forwarded by Spenser from his comfortable, sequestered castle in Cork:

The softening ruts
 lead back to no
 'oak groves', no
 cutters of mistletoe
 in the green clearings.

Perhaps I just make out
 Edmund Spenser,
 dreaming sunlight,
 encroached upon by

geniuses who creep
 'out of every corner
 of the woodes and glennes'
 towards watercress and carrion.

(WO, pp. 14-15)

In Preoccupations, Heaney tells us that he feels "closer to the natives, the geniuses of the place".²¹ Heaney also feels a bitterness toward Spenser's contemporary, Sir John Davies, who Heaney tells us "arrived in Ireland as Queen Elizabeth's Attorney General with special responsibility for the Plantation of Ulster, playing a forward-looking colon to my backward-looking colonisé".²² Heaney's sympathies are not obscure. In his poem called "A Backward Look", Heaney defends the freedom of the snipe, a symbol of the Irish people, as he evades the "sniper's eyrie" (WO, p. 30) and disappears into his home fields. In "Midnight", too, Heaney writes of the losses suffered in Ireland as a result of colonization:

Since the professional wars--
 Corpse and carrion
 Paling in rain--
 The wolf has died out

In Ireland. The packs
 Scoured parkland and moor
 Till a Quaker buck and his dogs
 Killed the last one

In some scraggy waste of Kildare.
 The wolfhound was crossed
 With inferior strains,
 Forests coopered to wine casks.

(WO, p. 45)

But this is not all that was lost. In "Traditions", Heaney laments the loss of language:

Our guttural muse
 was bulled long ago
 by the alliterative tradition,
 (WO, p. 31)

He reminds us that the language of the North was implanted in the sixteenth century, and while the lines say that one is to be proud of that language, the implication is quite the opposite:

We are to be proud
of our Elizabethan English:
'varsity', for example,
is grass-roots stuff with us;

we 'deem' or we 'allow'
when we suppose
and some cherished archaisms
are correct Shakespearean.
(WO, p. 31)

Ultimately Heaney feels that nationality was lost:

MacMorris, gallivanting
round the Globe, whinged
to courtier and groundling
who had heard tell of us

as going very bare
of learning, as wild hares,
as anatomies of death:
'What ish my nation?'
(WO, p. 32)

Heaney answers this question in the final stanza, and again it is clear where his sympathies lie concerning the Irish question:

And sensibly, though so much
later, the wandering Bloom
replied, 'Ireland', said Bloom
'I was born here. Ireland,'
(WO, p. 32)

The themes of language and place come together again in "A New Song". This poem starts off like the place-name poems, only in this case the etymological significance of "Derrygarve" is left mysterious: "And the name, a lost potent musk" (WO, p. 33). Yet despite the fact that the meaning is unclear, the word "Derrygarve" is evocative in itself; it summons up a romantic vision of the past:

Recalled the river's long swerve,
A kingfisher's blue bolt at dusk

And stepping stones like black molars
 Sunk in the ford, the shifty glaze
 Of the whirlpool, the Moyola
 Pleasuring beneath alder trees.

(WO, p. 33)

The poem works around certain oppositions. Derrygarve is weighed against Castledawson, which represents England and imperialism. The words "demesnes" and "bawn" are also scored off with the words "rath" and "bullaun". The first two, Heaney tells us in Preoccupations, represent the English side of Northern Ireland's culture. Of demesne, Heaney writes:

I was symbolically placed between the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experience, between 'the demesne' and 'the bog'. The demesne was Moyola Park, an estate now occupied by Lord Moyola, formerly Major James Chichester-Clark, ex-Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.²³

And "bawn", Heaney explains, is "the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses".²⁴ "Rath", however, has an Irish root (as do only a few English words).

But while the poem starts off as a lament for the past, at the end it is almost a call to arms for the future:

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

(WO, p. 33)

Like most polemical poems this one is unsuccessful because it is simplistic: the problems in Northern Ireland cannot be discussed in terms of a simple opposition between England and Ireland. At the time that Wintering Out was written, however, the matter was far from settled in Heaney's mind. North, the volume which succeeds Wintering Out, is exclusively dedicated to a further inquiry into the Irish question.

This inquiry is far more sophisticated and sensitive.

While I am arguing that North is quite different from Wintering Out, it is like Wintering Out--half of it, at least--in the significance it places on history. There are in fact two poems which deal with the Elizabethan conquest, but here things are not as simple as they were in Wintering Out. In some ways "Act of Union" sounds very much like "Bog Oak", "Midnight" and "Traditions", but in "Act of Union" it is admitted that "Conquest is a lie" (N, p. 49). And in the second section of the poem, which is set in the present, the speaker of the poem allows us to see the imperialistic forces in a sympathetic light. The Empire father is sensitive to the pain suffered by the colony, and as much as he wants it to end, he sees no way for that to happen:

. . . No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.
(N, p. 50)

The use of the word "again" here is very important, and it hints at the key difference between Heaney's attitudes toward Northern Ireland's political questions in Wintering Out and in North.

The idea of domination being a recurring trend comes up again in "Ocean's Love to Ireland", which is Heaney's most explicit consideration of the Elizabethan conquest. The conquest is symbolized through Raleigh's rape of an Irish country girl--the title is a nice bit of irony. There is no mistaking the symbolism: "Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree/
As Ireland is backed to England" (N, p. 46). And here we are reminded yet again of Ireland's loss of language and culture:

The ruined maid complains in Irish
 Ocean has scattered her dream of fleets,
 The Spanish prince has spilled his gold

And failed her. Iambic drums
 Of English beat the woods where her poets
 Sink like Onan

(N, p. 47)

But we are also told that this is not something new. Although it is true that England colonized Ireland, that is only part of the story:

She fades from their somnolent clasp
 Into ringlet-breath and dew,
 The ground possessed and repossessed.

(N, p. 47)

If North attempts to do anything, it attempts to tell a more complete story of Ireland's history. In a poem like "Bone Dreams" we see how Heaney is now aware of the history that comes before the Elizabethan period and that it is not only the English who have left their mark on the culture and language of the North:

I push back
 through dictions,
 Elizabethan canopies.
 Norman devices,

the erotic mayflowers
 of Provence
 and the ivied latins
 of churchmen

to the scop's
 twang, the iron
 flash of consonants
 cleaving the line.

(N, p. 28)

The continuity of history is considered again in "Belderg". An archeologist tells Heaney that the past is an unbroken line which reaches back to pre-historic times:

He talked about persistence,
 A congruence of lives,
 How, stubbed and cleared of stones,
 His home accrued growth rings
 Of iron, flint and bronze.

(N, p. 14)

Heaney's awareness of the larger history directs him to his interest in the Viking invasion of Ireland. The Dublin Museum's records of the Vikings inspire awe in Heaney. In "Viking Dublin" he admires the craftsmanship in the bone study of designs that would be used in metalwork:

Like a child's tongue
 following the toils

of his calligraphy,
 like an eel swallowed
 in a basket of eels,
 the line amazes itself

eluding the hand
 that fed it,
 a bill in flight,
 a swimming nostril.

(N, p. 21)

But despite the beauty of these artifacts, Heaney realizes that the Vikings were no better an imperialistic force than the English. In section V of the same poem, Heaney refers to the Vikings as

neighbourly, scoretaking
 killers, hagers
 and hagglers, gombeen-men,
 hoarders of grudges and gain.

With a butcher's aplomb
 they spread out your lungs
 and made you warm wings
 for your shoulders.

(N, pp. 23-24)

But even before the Vikings, Europe was not a pastoral idyll. From his reading of P.V. Glob's Bog People (1969), Heaney learns that the Iron-Age man was the victim of some of the most horrible forms of violence.

Heaney's poems which have come to be known as the bog poems commemorate the "slashed and dumped" bodies of the men and women who were sacrificed to the Earth Goddess or executed for criminal offences. These preserved, tortured bodies provide an important link to Heaney's own context of violence in the North. Heaney points out this link in "Punishment", which focuses on the body of a young girl who was scalped:

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

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.

(N, p. 38)

In an interview with Caroline Walsh, Heaney explains that Glob's book was a kind of revelation for him. It allowed him to see the violence which came out of Northern Ireland's own "territorial religion" in a new, more detached light:

I saw in these pictures the archetypal symbols of territorial religion and in some ways I think Irish republicanism is a territorial religion. There's a noumen that presides over the whole ground and she's even enshrined in the Constitution.²⁵

Heaney's search into the past in North is not pursued to define divisions, as it was in Wintering Out, but rather to encourage understanding. If we are aware that violence and the domination of the weaker by the stronger are almost the rule of political man, we are able to be slightly more detached from the present-day examples of this rule than we might otherwise be. That a knowledge of the past provides greater consciousness is precisely the point that Heaney makes in "Viking Dublin IV":

I am Hamlet the Dane,
skull-handler, parablist,
smeller of rot

in the state, infused
with its poisons,
pinioned by ghosts
and affections,

murderers and pieties,
coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering.

(N, p. 23)

While Heaney pokes fun at himself in this portrait, I think he is also quite serious in what he says.

But this view appears somewhat academic--if not fatalistic. In any case, it offers little consolation to those who suffer from the violence in the North. But Heaney does not claim to have answers; he does not share the optimistic view that the problems can be worked out. He in fact quite plainly states in several places that there is no solution. In "Kinship" Heaney recognizes the deep tribal hatred and claims that nothing can be done to break it down:

Come back to this
'island of the ocean'
where nothing will suffice.
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.

(N, p. 45)

And again in "Hercules and Antaeus", Heaney admits that the weaker will always be conquered by the stronger:

he has bequeathed it all
 to elegists. Balor will die
 And Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull.

(N, p. 53)

But Heaney's admission of defeat here is not pessimistic; it is simply realistic.

In the part which he plays in Northern Ireland's tragedy, Heaney does not admit defeat. He realizes that there is little he can do as a poet. The ironic treatment of the place of the poet in the political arena in "The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream" offers as much evidence as we need that Heaney feels that the poet is ineffectual in 'the real world'--he is, in fact, almost a joke. But more than this, I think Heaney is simply uncomfortable there. In the final poem of North, Heaney quite typically all but retracts everything that went before by intimating that he is really more in his element when he is detached from politics:

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 every bole and bark, feeling
 Every wind that blows. . . .

(N, p. 73)

And while Heaney resigns himself to the fact that he cannot effect political change, he can write elegies, and through the elegies acknowledge the courage of the victims of the violence and lament the waste of life. It is this approach that Heaney turns to in Field Work. The elegy also provides Heaney with some distance from the whole mess. And here it seems that Heaney feels that when all is said and done there is no division between the English and the Irish--at least not one of ultimate significance. In "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" (Irish poet 1891-1917), Heaney points out the irony of the fact that when Ledwidge dies he dies alongside his British comrades-in-arms:

' . . .

To be called a British soldier while my country
Has no place among nations ' You were rent
By shrapnel six weeks later. 'I am sorry
That party politics should divide our tents.'

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains
Criss-cross in useless equilibrium
And as the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze
I hear again the sure confusing drum

You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans
But miss the twilit note your flute should sound.
You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones
Though all of you consort now underground.

(FW, p. 60)

It is perhaps because of Heaney's even more detached view here that place has so little importance in Field Work.

But Heaney does offer some consolation about the Irish question in Field Work. In the celebration of the land in Field Work the reader feels that this is the 'centre that holds' (N, p. 43). While all things pass, the earth remains. This is precisely what Heaney is getting at in the final lines of "The Toome Road":

O charioteers, above you dormant guns,
 It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass
 The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

(FW, p. 15)

While the soldiers may travel up and down the Toome Road, they are in fact only "passing". But the earth itself "stands here still"; it stands "vibrant", and will always stand, despite divisions, "untoppled".

In Sweeney Astray, Heaney finds another escape from the contemporary scene where one is forced to speak in terms of oppositions. And here, too, it is a celebration of the land which is at the centre of the work. It is Sweeney's love for the land which first causes him to sin; he opposes the construction of a church at Killaney, which is part of Sweeney's kingdom. For Sweeney, "It would be sweeter to listen to the notes of the cuckoos on the banks of the Bann than to the whinge of this [the church's] bell to-night" (SA, p. 25). In his love of nature Sweeney fits into the early Irish tradition of nature poems which praise the beauty of the natural world. Heaney claims that the best way to describe the tone of these poems is to use the Wordsworthian phrase "surprised by joy".²⁶ Certainly Sweeney's panegyric on trees shows a similar enthusiasm to that of Heaney's in "Glanmore Sonnets V":

Suddenly this bleating
 And the belling in the glen!
 The little timorous stag
 like a scared musician

startles my heartstrings
 with high homesick refrains--
 deer on my lost mountains,
 flocks out on the plain.

The bushy leafy oak tree
 is the highest in the wood,
 the forking shoots of hazel
 hide sweet hazel-nuts.

The alder is my darling,
 all thornless in the gap,
 some milk of human kindness
 coursing in its sap.

The blackthorn is a jaggy creel
 stippled with dark sloes;
 green watercress in thatch on wells
 where the drinking blackbird goes
 (SA, p. 39)

Heaney and Sweeney also share the same region. According to Heaney, Sweeney's kingdom, Dal-Arie, is nowadays south County Antrim and north County Down, and thus on the "verges" of Heaney's own country (SA, p. ix). And like Heaney, too, Sweeney feels a strong attachment to his particular place. After being banished from his home, and after having wandered through every part of Ireland, Sweeney stumbles at last upon his homeland. The experience of that landscape is deeply moving. For him it is the most beautiful of all:

So what plain matches this plain?
 Is it the plain of Meath
 of the plain of Airgeadros
 or Moyfevin with its crosses?

Moylurg or Moyfea,
 the lovely plain of Connacht,
 the Liffey banks, Bannside,
 or the plain of Muirhevna?

I have seen all of them,
 north, south, east, and west,
 but never saw the equal
 of this ground in Antrim.

(SA, p. 57)

The sense of place in Station Island is unlike that in the rest of Heaney's works. Although the central poems are supposedly set in a particular place, the island in Lough Derg, a shrine known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, that place is essentially a psychological setting. We know that this is not a real place when in the first poem the speaker meets

the dead man, Simon Sweeney. Heaney's return to Station Island is a psychological pilgrimage which recalls Dante's journey through Hell. Like Dante, Heaney meets several figures from the past, Ireland's and his own, which have had an influence on him. He meets William Carleton, the "old fork-tongued turncoat" (SI, p. 65) who wrote a critical account of the Lough Derg pilgrimage; Barney Murphy, an Annahorish schoolteacher; Colum McCartney, Heaney's second cousin who is eulogized in "The Strand at Lough Beg"; Patrick Kavanagh and others. The characters of life and literature meet, and it is through the voices of these personae that the sense of place is evoked. The technique here is a combination of the lived and learned; to paraphrase Heaney, the illiterate and the literate co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension.

It is a long way from Station Island to Mossbawn and Death of a Naturalist. What is most remarkable in this journey is that Heaney is not a poet who can be pinned down. What he says about the political situation in Northern Ireland, or the way in which he reacts to his place in one poem or in one volume is bound to change, and seemingly quite radically, in the next poem or volume.

Chapter Five

NATURE: CONTEMPORARY AND ROMANTIC

Heaney provides the best introduction for my discussion of nature on pages 74 and 75 of Wintering Out. Here we find two poems about the spring which are so opposed in tone and in the attitude toward nature implied in them that it seems they are written by two different poets. "First Calf" has an acidic bite; it focuses on the pain suffered by a cow with the birth of her first calf. The language is simple and the images startlingly frank:

It's a long time since I saw
The afterbirth strung on the hedge
As if the wind smarted
And streamed bloodshot tears.

(WO, p. 74)

Although the wind appears to be crying, there is no suggestion that it cries for the cow. We are given a vivid picture of the mother cow with "her head almost outweighing/Her tense sloped neck" (WO, p. 74) and with "The calf hard at her udder" (WO, p. 74). The reader is made acutely aware of the hurt the cow feels in the perfectly natural experience of springtime calving. The reader senses that nature is harsh and unrelenting. In "May", however, the poem on the facing page, the feelings toward the springtime and the natural world are quite different. The poem begins with a description of a stream in springtime. It is a warm and pleasant scene:

When I looked down from the bridge
Trout were flipping the sky
Into smithereens, the stones
Of the wall warmed me.

Wading green stems, lugs of leaf
 That untangle and bruise
 (Their tiny gushers of juice)
 (WO, p. 75)

The speaker in the poem longs to become closer to the natural world with an almost religious fervour:

My toecaps sparkle now
 Over the soft fontanel
 Of Ireland. I should wear
 Hide shoes, the hair next my skin,
 For walking this ground. . . .
 (WO, p. 75)

The speaker searches for an idyllic, one could say pastoral, retreat into nature:

I'm out to find that village,
 Its low sills fragrant
 With ladysmock and celandine,
 Marshlights in the summer dark.
 (WO, p. 75)

But these two poems, although very opposed, are of course not written by two different poets, but rather by one who has double vision in the way he perceives nature. It is almost as though Heaney has one eye for each of his views of nature. With the contemporary or Hughesean eye he sees nature as an indifferent energy or life force, and with the other, the Romantic or Wordsworthian eye, he sees nature as a benign and moralizing force. These two views vie for position throughout Heaney's work, and in the end neither one nor the other wins out. The two exist simultaneously.

Heaney is foremost a poet of nature. The great bulk of his work is dedicated to observing the natural world, of which he shows an intimate knowledge, and for which he shows affection. In the "Mossbawn" essay in

Preoccupations Heaney speaks of his love of the earth. He recalls several events from his childhood which have left a mark on his personality and his writing:

To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or train, possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated.¹

Heaney's attraction to the earth is especially evident in Death of a Naturalist, the bog poems and Field Work. It is not surprising that the critics are wont to call Heaney the "poet of the bogs".² But Heaney is also, like Sweeney, the poet of the trees. He recalls another spot in time from his childhood:

. . . but especially I spent time in the throat of an old willow tree at the end of the farmyard. It was a hollow tree, with gnarled, spreading roots, a soft, perishing bark and a pithy inside. Its mouth was like the fat and solid opening in a horse's collar, and, once you squeezed in through it, you were at the heart of a different life, looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness. Above your head, the living tree flourished and breathed, you shouldered the slightly vibrant bole, and if you put your forehead to the rough pith you felt the whole lithe and whispering crown of willow moving in the sky above you. In that tight cleft, you sensed the embrace of light and branches, you were a little Atlas shouldering it all, a little Cerunnos pivoting in a world of antlers.³

Recalling the same incident in "Oracle", Heaney calls himself the "lobe and larynx/of the mossy places" (WO, p. 28). And again in "Glanmore Sonnets V", a reflection on the elderberry tree takes Heaney back to his favorite willow. Here, he calls himself an "etymologist of roots and

graftings" (FW, p. 37):

I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch
Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush.
(FW, p. 37)

Insofar as Heaney is a poet of nature he is part of something of a group of contemporary poets who show a renewed interest in the natural world. In a review of Death of a Naturalist, Alan Ross comments on this new trend:

Anyone coming fresh to the best poetry of the last few years--Hughes, Massingham, Walker, and now Heaney--could be forgiven for supposing Britain to be essentially an agricultural community, co-operative farms, bird sanctuaries and nature reserves jostling for space. Rats, foxes, fish, birds, frogs, cows and horses acquire central places in contemporary mythology and the arterial roads of the thirties seem a long way off.⁴

The renewed interest in nature seems a little unlikely, but it only proves Raymond Williams's observation that the further we get from the natural world, the greater the need to return to it. Williams writes, "there is almost an inverse proportion, in the twentieth century, between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas".⁵ But unlike the Georgian poets who led the last significant return to nature, the new poets do not see nature as quaint countryside which furnishes them with weekend rambles, they see it rather as an integral part of themselves. In his essay "British Nature Poets Today", Julian Gitzen argues that it is an affinity with the natural world which is at the root of the revived interest in nature:

. . . [They] recognize that man is equally subjected with the animals to natural law, and that he can manipulate nature only in its own terms. They are convinced that man's best hope of understanding himself and his destiny lies in

studying his natural surroundings--their history, their activities, and their laws. . . . They derive some comfort from the fact that nature's laws, however dreadful, are at least immutable. For them living energy is the single most compelling force and they resolutely and accurately observe and record its manifestations.⁶

According to Gitzen, too, it is nature's "living energy" which most attracts the new poets. They believe that while nature can be ruthless it is nevertheless beautiful and majestic.⁷

In these few comments, Gitzen points by association to some of the important characteristics of Heaney's way of viewing nature. The passion, for instance, for observing and recording the manifestations of nature is certainly very marked in Heaney's writing. But to claim that description is one of Heaney's particular gifts is, at this point, to restate the obvious. Terence Brown remarks how a recognition of Heaney's accurate powers of observation is now a critical commonplace:

From the first, critics responded to Heaney's extraordinary gift for realizing the physical world freshly and with vigorous, exact economy. Heaney can bring everyday natural events before the reader's eyes with such telling precision that his images are both recognition and revelation.⁸

For proof of Heaney's descriptive skill Brown judiciously points to "At a Potato Digging" and "At Ardboe Point".

I could multiply examples of where Heaney provides close and precise details of the natural world, but by way of illustration I will only refer to the small group of landscape poems at the end of Door into the Dark. In these poems Heaney memorializes the various topographical features of his own region. The first of these, "Whinlands", is dedicated to the hardy and seemingly immortal gorse:

All year round the whin
 Can show a blossom or two
 But it's in full bloom now.
 As if the small yolk stain

From all the birds' eggs in
 All the nests of the spring
 Were spiked and hung
 Everywhere on the bushes to ripen.

Hills oxidize gold
 (DD, p. 47)

"The Plantation" describes a roadside forest, and "Shoreline" the
 Northern Ireland coast:

Turning a corner, taking a hill
 In County Down, there's a sea
 Sidling and settling to
 The back of a hedge. Or else

A grey bottom with puddles
 Dead-eyed as fish.
 Haphazard tidal craters march
 The corn and the grazing.
 (DD, p. 51)

"Bann Clay" focuses in some detail on clay mining:

All day in open pits
 They loaded on to the bank
 Slabs like the squared-off clots
 Of a blue cream. Sunk

For centuries under the grass
 It baked white in the sun,
 Relieved its hoarded waters
 And began to ripen.
 (DD, p. 53)

And the final poem, "Bogland", describes the most characteristic of all
 Northern Ireland landscapes:

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.
 (DD, p. 55)

Although these poems are clearly involved with Heaney's idea that the landscape is somehow outside of time and that it holds the evidence of human history, they are primarily poems which describe that landscape.

Much of Heaney's work suggests that the artist has an unusual gift of vision. In several of Heaney's poems the artist is described as someone whose most remarkable feature is his eyes. In "Blackberry-Picking", a poem which obliquely extols the art of parochial poetry, the blackberries are described as being like "a plate of eyes" (DN, p. 20). The Northern-Irish painter, Colin Middleton, is described in "In Small Townlands" as "out-star[ing]" (DN, p. 54) the landscape he paints. His eyes are "Thick, greedy lenses" (DN, p. 54) which "fire/ This bare bald earth with white and red" (DN, p. 54). Joyce's incredible ability to see is remarked upon in "Gravities". Even with failing eyesight, Joyce's former visual rigour allows him to recall the lay of O'Connell Street: "Blinding in Paris, for his party-piece/Joyce named the shops along O'Connell Street" (DN, p. 43). In "Personal Helicon", Heaney's courtship of the muses is seen as being predominantly based in the visual:

To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
 Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
 To see myself
 (DN, p. 57)

In "North", as well, another of Heaney's ars poeticas, a plea is made for clarity of vision: "Keep your eye clear/as the bleb of the icicle" (N, p. 20).

Heaney also fits into Gitzen's classification of the contemporary nature poet in his belief that nature is ruthless. (In a country whose history has been profoundly shaped by the potato famine of 1845, this is hardly a surprising view). It is also not surprising that in "At a Potato Digging" there is a strong awareness of the fickleness of the earth. The earth is referred to as the "bitch earth" (DN, p. 32) and the "faithless ground" (DN, p. 33). The diggers submit themselves to her power and implore her favour:

. . . Processional stooping through the turf
 Recurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
 Of fear and homage to the famine god
 Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
 Make a seasonal altar of the sod.
 (DN, p. 31)

The fishermen of Lough Neagh have the same kind of necessary respect for the lake goddess who they know "will claim a victim every year" (DD, p. 38). The island dwellers, too, in "Storm on the Island", are aware of nature's malevolent spirit. For them it is as though nature quite literally attacks them with a storm:

. . . when it begins, the flung spray hits
 The very windows, spits like a tame cat
 Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives
 And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo,
 We are bombarded by the empty air.
 (DN, p. 51)

Some comment on Ted Hughes in this movement toward nature and on his influence on Heaney is, of course, unavoidable. Heaney himself acknowledges the role which Hughes played in providing him with a subject he could relate to and in inciting him to write. Heaney says that Hughes's voice was

. . . of a piece with his interest in Middle English, the dialect, his insisting upon foxes and bulls and violence. It's a form of calling out for more, that life is more I have gone through all that education about Eliot's bringing in irony and urban subject matter and intelligence, and nothing in that connected with the scripts written in my being. Then I read Hughes, Kavanagh, R. S. Thomas and I realized their work was dealing with my world.⁹

The critics have picked up on this, and especially those who reviewed the earlier works speak of Heaney's poems in rather Hughesean terms.

Terence Brown is one such critic:

The natural world as re-created in the language of Heaney's art is a powerful organic presence, manifesting itself in his early poetry in rich, massive processes The rhythmic and linguistic density of Heaney's early work suggests this, as poems of thick clotted verbal texture achieve, despite their weight, an ebb and flow movement, an ongoing fertility For Heaney, the natural world must be accepted for what it is--heavy, palpable in its irrefutable bulk, its almost intractable forms.¹⁰

Hughes's influence is unmistakable. In Death of a Naturalist there are a number of poems which concentrate on observing various animals. "Turkeys Observed", for example, the first poem that Heaney published under his real name,¹¹ shows a Hughesean interest in the actual fleshiness of animal life. The sides of beef hanging in the abattoir are described in realistic detail:

The red sides of beef retain
Some of the smelly majesty of living:
A half-cow slung from a hook maintains
That blood and flesh are not ignored.
(DN, p. 37)

The connection between man and animal is insisted upon: "Pull his neck, pluck him, and look--/He is just another poor forked thing" (DN, p. 37).

"Cow in Calf", which is probably an earlier version of "First Calf", shows a Hughesean tendency to identify with the animal. Apart from the final two lines, the poem does nothing more than describe the cow. We

are told what she looks like:

It seems she has swallowed a barrel.
From forelegs to haunches
her belly is slung like a hammock.
(DN, p. 38)

We are told what she feels like:

Slapping her out of the byre is like slapping
a great bag of seed. My hand
tingled as if strapped
(DN, p. 38)

And we are told what she sounds like when she is slapped and when she
lows:

. . . but I had to
hit her again and again and
heard the blows pump like a depth-charge
far in her gut.

. . . Windbags
of bagpipes are crammed there
to drone in her lowing.
(DN, p. 38)

In "Trout" the Hughesean energy and joy of nature is evoked and a
Hughesean language of violence is used, if not abused. The trout is
described as being as fat as a "gun barrel" (DN, p. 39). His eating is
seen as particularly violent:

his muzzle gets bull's eye;
picks off grass-seed and moths
that vanish, torpedoed.
(DN, p. 39)

And his swimming is compared to a veritable arsenal of weaponry. He is
"fired from the shallows"; he "darts like a tracer bullet"; and he "ram-
rod[s] the current" (DN, p. 39). Blake Morrison suggests that "Trout"
is "from the same finny school as Hughes's 'Pike'".¹²

Even the title Death of a Naturalist and the poem of the same name seem to have a Hughesean source. The naturalist's way of viewing nature, the one expressed by Miss Wells in the poem, is found to be faulty. From his experience of living nature in the "gross-bellied frogs" (DN, p. 16), the child learns that nature cannot be contained and studied in "jam-potfuls . . . /range[d] on window-sills at home" (DN, p. 15). He learns that nature possesses an energy that cannot be bottled up, an energy which is ruthless and mysterious:

. . . The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.
(DN, p. 16)

I could go on pointing out examples of how Heaney is like Hughes, but I think that would be misleading since I believe Heaney has his own unique view of nature. In the same interview where Heaney acknowledges his debt to Hughes during his formative years, he also points out that he is "a different kind of animal from Ted".¹³

Heaney's most important point of departure from Hughes comes in his attitude toward life. In Hughes there is an underlying awareness of the destructive forces of nature to which all life is finally subjected.¹⁴ In Heaney there is certainly a recognition of the destructive forces of nature. The reality that things decay and die is one of the most important laws of nature that the child/speaker in Death of a Naturalist learns. Death and rot, in fact, loom over the whole volume: the flax rots in the flax-dam; the blackberries turn sour and a "rat-grey fungus" (DN, p. 20) grows in the midst of the soft berries; Dan Taggart kills kittens and a whole host of other farmyard pests; the poet's four-year-

old brother is killed in a car accident; Donnelly and his friend shoot snipe; the famine victims deteriorate in their death ship. But more important than death in Heaney is regeneration.

There is something of a group of poems in Door into the Dark which concentrate on the theme of regeneration. "The Outlaw" is perhaps the most obvious example since its subject is breeding. Kelly's bull is a symbol of inviolable life; there is a feeling that the bull knows the unnamable energies from which life is created even if his powers are sinister and threateningly masculine. In the description of the coupling the reader is made to feel its undeniable power:

Then an awkward, unexpected jump, and
 His knobbed forelegs straddling her flank,
 He slammed life home, impassive as a tank,
(DD, p. 16)

The theme of regeneration is considered in terms of the irrigation of the land in "Undine". In "Feeling into Words" Heaney explains the source for this poem. Watching a farmer clearing out a drain between two fields, Heaney noticed the way the water, once liberated, ran free and made its own channels. The personification of the water as an undine turns the process into a sexual and procreative one where the water-spirit meets with the human and gains a physical being. All of this, Heaney tells us, is connected with the agricultural myth about "the way water is turned and humanized when streams become irrigation canals, when water becomes involved with seed".¹⁵ New life, the desired effect which the farmer expects from the union, is imminent; the undine describes her submission to the forces of regeneration:

. . . I alone

Could give him subtle increase and reflection.
 He explored me so completely, each limb
 Lost its cold freedom. Human, warmed to him.
 (DD, p. 26)

In "Mother", another poem which obviously touches the theme of regeneration, new life is seen as a force which cannot be assuaged. The child in the mother's womb is an unseen mass of playful energy:

. . . God, he plays like a young calf
 Gone wild on a rope.
 Lying or standing won't settle these capers,
 (DD, p. 29)

There is a suggestion in Heaney's work that even death will ultimately be destroyed by life. This idea is first brought to light in "Requiem for the Croppies". Despite the horrible slaughter of the croppies at Vinegar Hill in 1798, barley revivifies the hillside from the seeds which the croppies carried in their pockets:

The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
 They buried us without shroud or coffin
 And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.
 (DD, p. 24)

The idea of the integral connection between death and life comes across again in the bog poems. According to P.V. Glob some of the bodies of the Iron-Age men found in the bogs were of victims who were killed and buried as sacrifices to the earth goddess. The belief that sacrificial offerings would bring fertility is clearly connected to Heaney's idea of the ultimate triumph of life. There is also a suggestion in "The Tollund Man" that the twentieth-century discovery of the preserved bodies was a kind of resurrection for them:

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

The scattered, ambushed
 Flesh of labourers,
 Stockinged corpses
 Laid out in the farmyards,
 (WO, p. 48)

There is, furthermore, a curious similarity in the appearances of the preserved bog men and several forms of new life. The Bog Queen lies waiting for her resurrection in the ground which is called a "jar of spawn" (N, p. 32), and the Grauballe man's hair is "a mat unlikely/as a foetus's" and his body bruised "like a forceps baby" (N, p. 36).

In some of the elegies in Field Work, too, we are left with an image of life rather than one of death. The most striking example of this is found in "The Strand at Lough Beg". The emphasis in the final two lines of the poem is on greenness and new life: "With rushes that will shoot green again, I plait/Green scapulars to wear over your shroud" (FW, 18). In "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" it is said that the poet is most at home in a springtime country landscape:

You pedalled out the leafy road from Slane
 Where you belonged, among the dolorous
 And lovely: the May altar of wild flowers,
 Easter water sprinkled in outhouses,
 (FW, p. 59)

And in "A Postcard from North Antrim", the Bacchanalian scene at the end wipes away any ideas about death:

Fifteen years ago, come this October,
 Crowded on your floor,
 I got my arm round Marie's shoulder
 For the first time.
 'Oh, Sir Jasper, do not touch me!'
 You roared across at me,
 Chorus-leading, splashing out the wine.

(FW, p. 20)

This notion of the connection between death and life is also implied in "A Lough Neagh Sequence". Folklore would have us believe that "'The lough will claim a victim every year'" (DD, p. 38), as though the lake requires a kind of human sacrifice in order to be fruitful, that is, to sustain a crop of eels.

Presenting the earth and the lake as blood-thirsty goddesses is a curious notion in our contemporary world and especially when it is clearly suggested in "Relic of Memory" that the lough is a benevolent figure. The lough's ability to transform matter is described as an act of love:

The shallows lap
 And give and take--
 Constant ablutions,
 Such drowning love
 Stun a stake

To stalagmite.
 (DD, p. 37)

The benevolent forces at work in nature are also considered in "Lovers on Aran". Here the crash of waves against the shores is likened to an embrace:

. . . Or did Aran rush
 To throw wide arms of rock around a tide
 That yielded with an ebb, with a soft crash?
 (DN, p. 47)

The meeting of land and sea is described as an egalitarian marriage where each partner maintains his or her own identity while bringing fuller meaning to the identity of the other:

Did sea define the land or land the sea?
 Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
 Sea broke on land to full identity.

(DN, p. 47)

There is an almost Dantesque spirit about this poem that says that the world is held together by love.

At times, in Heaney, man too can take part in the love that Nature possesses. In "Undine", which I have already discussed, this is abundantly clear. The water spirit "Gratefully, disperse[s] [her]self for love" (DD, p. 26). In "The Wife's Tale", as well, there is a strong sense of a loving relationship between man and nature. It seems, in fact, that the farmer feels closer to the land than he does to his wife. While the wife spreads out the lunch the husband remains absorbed with the haying. He touches the hay and admires its appearance: ". . . plucking grass in handfuls/And tossing it in the air. 'That looks well.'" (DD, p. 27). And after when the farmer reclines on the ground for a smoke he is again caught up with his relationship with the land:

'There's a good yield,
 Isn't there?'--as proud as if he were the land itself--
 'Enough for crushing and for sowing both.'

(DD, p. 28)

Heaney himself feels something of the farmer's affinity for the land in "Dawn". The poem rises out of Heaney's experience of Academe. Although the poet/speaker in the poem is meant to be involved in some kind of seminar, his thoughts are far from the "tut-tutting colloquy" (WO, p. 77). The speaker's thoughts wander instead to the "shrub at the

window/. . . a mint of green leaves" (WO, p. 77) and to the pigeons on the street. Like the farmer in "The Wife's Tale", he is moved only by the natural world. Eventually, the speaker escapes from the university to a beach where he moves about with the hypersensitivity of Hardy's Jude:

I got away out by myself
 On a scurf of winkles and cockles
 And found myself suddenly
 Unable to move without crunching
 Acres of their crisp delicate turrets.
(WO, p.77)

But beyond even the necessary co-operative relationship between farmers and their land and the sensitive response of the poet to nature, there is a sense in Heaney that nature can be embraced and understood by those who reflect on it; there is a sense that man can communicate with nature. "The Penninsula" suggests the possibility that we can "uncode all landscapes" (DD, p. 21) through reflection in tranquility. After nightfall, after driving around the penninsula, the traveller reflects on what he has seen and experienced:

And you're in the dark again. Now recall
 The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log,
 That rock where breakers shredded into rags,
 The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,
 Islands riding themselves out into the fog
(DD, p. 21)

But nature is not only sometimes benevolent and knowable in Heaney, it is also imbued with a religious spirit. The implicit connection between nature and supernature is explored in "St. Francis and the Birds". St. Francis's natural mysticism allows him to communicate with the birds:

When Francis preached love to the birds
 They listened, fluttered, throttled up
 Into the blue

(DN, p. 53)

"In Gallarus Oratory" also deals with the theme of natural mysticism.

The early medieval, bee-hive oratory at Gallarus represents for Heaney a time when the Christian church was still in tune with its predecessor, natural religion. Even when the monks left the building of their church they were still in church:

They sought themselves in the eye of their King
 Under the black weight of their own breathing.
 And how he smiled on them as out they came,
 The sea a censer, and the grass a flame.

(DD, p. 22)

In Preoccupations, Heaney explains that his sacramental view of nature comes out of his experience of nature in Derry:

It was more or less sacred. The landscape was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities

There, if you like, was the foundation for a marvellous or a magical view of the world, a foundation that sustained a diminished structure of lore and superstition and half-pagan, half-Christian thought and practice. Much of the flora of the place had a religious force¹⁶

Although Heaney speaks about the religious forces of nature in the past tense here, elsewhere in his work he intimates that he sees a religious spirit in nature which is close to pantheism. In his earlier works this idea sounds rather false. In "Setting", for example, the gulls flying above the eel fishermen's boats are called "Responsive acolytes" (DD, p. 41), as if they are involved in a religious ceremony. In Field Work, however, the references to a natural religion are expressed in a convincing and sincere voice. The final seven lines of "The Strand at

Lough Beg" describe a natural funeral rite. The earth is an altar, the dew a holy ointment, and the rushes protective scapular medals:

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 a 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.

(FW, p. 18)

Like the rushes here the harvest bow, too, is for Heaney a kind of religious symbol. It seems to have magical powers which keep it from rusting, but its supernatural powers come from nature:

Like a drawn snare
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

(FW, p. 58)

In "Field Work IV" as well, the speaker enacts a natural religious ceremony which approximates the Ash Wednesday rite. But here leaves are used instead of ashes and the symbolism is strictly natural, of this world.

The woman's mortality is seen as perfection:

I lick my thumb
 and dip it in mould,
 I anoint the anointed
 leaf-shape. Mould
 blooms and pigments
 the back of your hand
 like a birthmark--
 my umber one,
 you are stained, stained
 to perfection.

(FW, p. 55)

And in "At the Water's Edge" the speaker goes to three natural shrines in search of understanding. The experience of the natural setting moves him to prayer:

. . . Everything in me
 Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
 To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,

And pray at the water's edge.

(FW, p. 14)

Insofar as Heaney subscribes to a pantheistic view of nature he clearly differs from his contemporaries--at least those referred to in the Gitzen article. To the degree that Heaney sees nature as both benevolent and imbued with a religious spirit, his poetic allegiance lies with the Romantics and more specifically with Wordsworth. I am, however, not the first to point this out. John Press argues that Heaney is like Wordsworth in his belief that nature is a teacher of morals: "Heaney shares Wordsworth's recognition that suffering and fear may play a valuable part in chastening and subduing the human spirit, and that a child is nurtured by terror as well as by beauty."¹⁷ There is a great deal to support this view, but one thinks immediately of "Death of a Naturalist" and "An Advancement of Learning". In both of these poems the child confronts an animal and comes away having learned something:

. . . The great slime kings
 Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
 That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

(DN, p. 16; emphasis mine)

One by one I took all in.
 He trained on me. I stared him out

 This terror, cold, wet-furred, small-clawed,
 Retreated up a pipe for sewage.
 I stared a minute after him.

Then I walked on and crossed the bridge.

(DN, p. 19; emphases mine)

(I am especially reminded here of the water snakes passage from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner").

Richard Gravil claims that the retreat to nature in Field Work is in some sense Wordsworthian:

Heaney's preoccupation throughout Field Work is itself a Wordsworthian one. Which is the greater temptation for the poet? Is it to seek enclosure in Grasmere-like circles of perfection, a sterile freedom? Or to submit to bondage in the divisions of the tribe? If Heaney refers to himself as an "inner emigré" or a "wood kerne", Wordsworth called himself a "border of the age".¹⁸

Again, this is a convincing argument since Field Work, written in Glanmore, County Wicklow, is very clearly a conscious retreat to what Heaney refers to as the "hedge-school" (FW, p. 34), and since there are numerous verbal echoes from Wordsworth in the volume. (I have referred to a few of these in my discussion of sonnets in chapter two.)

For me, however, the most Wordsworthian aspect of Field Work is found in the emphasis which is placed on the speaker's participation in and response to nature. In several poems it seems that Heaney gives us his own versions of "My Heart Leaps Up". The beauty of nature invariably demands a response from the speaker. In "At the Water's Edge", as I have already pointed out, the speaker is profoundly moved by the beauty of nature:

. . . Everything in me
Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
To go barefoot
(FW, p. 14)

In "Glanmore Sonnets I" the speaker is deeply revived by his experience of nature: "And I am quickened with a redolence/Of the fundamental dark unblown rose" (FW, p. 33). In "Glanmore Sonnets V" the speaker again cannot contain his delight with nature's beauty; he praises the elder-berry flowers:

I love its blooms like saucers brimmed with meal,
 Its berries a swart caviar of shot,
 A buoyant spawn, a light bruised out of purple.
 (FW, p. 37)

The speaker's reaction to the morning at Wicklow Bay is equally enthusiastic: ". . . It was marvellous/And actual, I said out loud, 'A haven'" (FW, p. 39).

It would be hard to imagine the speaker in the other volumes expressing such a response. But of course, nature herself is quite different in Field Work. Here nature is not violent. There are no threatening storms. The animals are not predatory, but anthropomorphized. Apart from the odd rodent, they are friendly and attractive. Rabbits and deer stroll through the fields; birds "consort at twilight" (FW, p. 35). In some cases, the animals are just people disguised. Sean O'Riada is a gannet, and Heaney's wife is at times an otter and a skunk. There is a great interest in flowers and trees. But here we are not given a close-up view of a potato. The natural world is viewed from a Romantic distance:

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

(FW, p. 56)

Field Work also suggests a pastoral view of nature. And like every pastoral poet, Heaney uses the form quite consciously. In "Oysters" we are reminded of the troubled urban world the poet is retreating from:

And there we were, toasting friendship,
 Laying down a perfect memory
 In the cool of thatch and crockery.

Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,
 The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome:
 I saw damp panniers disgorge
 The frond-lipped, brine-stung
 Glut of privilege

And was angry that my trust could not repose
 In the clear light of poetry or freedom
 Leaning in from the sea

(FW, p. 11)

And in "The Glanmore Sonnets" we find the familiar idyllic, pastoral world:

Now the good life could be to cross a field
 And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe
 Of ploughs

(FW, p. 33)

We have our burnished bay tree at the gate,
 Classical, hung with the reek of silage
 From the next farm, tart-leafed as inwit.

(FW, p. 41)

Heaney is even aware of himself as fitting into the tradition of pastoral poets. Like Sidney he asks, "What is my apology for poetry?" (FW, p. 41). And in "An Afterwards", when Heaney considers his wife's position, he likens her to Virgil's wife:

And when she'd make her circuit of the ice,
 Aided and abetted by Virgil's wife,
 I would cry out, "My sweet, who wears the bays
 In our green land above, whose is the life

Most dedicatory and exemplary?"

(FW, p. 44)

The elegies of Field Work also belong to the pastoral tradition. All that is missing are the shepherds and oaten flutes.

But I do not point out the pastoral aspect of Field Work because I think that Heaney ultimately believes that nature is idyllic. I think Heaney is aware that the pastoral is a false, or at least a limited view.

I point it out rather to show how far Field Work is from Death of a Naturalist. Heaney does not have a one-sided view of nature. In this respect he differs from Wordsworth. Heaney shows us that nature has two sides. She is neither entirely ruthless, nor entirely benevolent. In his dualistic portrayal of nature Heaney provides a more convincing picture of her than does either Hughes or Wordsworth.

CONCLUSION

One of the most striking examples of the way that Heaney embraces dualism as he develops is found in a comparison of "Digging" from Death of a Naturalist (1966) and "The Harvest Bow" from Field Work (1979). In the former poem, the speaker grips his pen like a pistol and promises to give us a gunslinger's kind of poetry. In the latter, however, the speaker echoes Coventry Patmore's words and opines that the "end of art is peace" (FW, p. 58). In "Glanmore Sonnets II" the speaker supports the second view of art and searches for a voice that soothes:

Then I landed in the hedge school of Glanmore
And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
That might continue, hold, dispel, appease. . . .
(FW, p. 34)

The difference in the way that art is viewed in these two volumes, it seems to me, is at the root of the innumerable disparities which exist between the two volumes, but both views are to be accepted as part of the whole. The main thread in Heaney's work is two-ply, a thread of dialectic and rethinking.

Station Island (1984) fits very neatly in the overall pattern. Here, at last, we think we are to find out what Heaney really thinks (this volume is even more confessional than Field Work). What we do find in Station Island, however, is something similar to Chaucer's retraction to the Canterbury Tales: it seems to be a blatant contradiction of much of what went before. For example, what are we to make of Colum

McCartney's retort to Heaney in "Station Island VIII"?:

'

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.'
 (SI, p. 83)

Does this mean that "The Strand at Lough Beg" represents false sentiments? Does this mean that Heaney now feels that his reluctance to become involved in Northern Ireland's politics is merely cowardly and convenient? And what are we to make of the speaker's revelation in X?:

'I hate how quick I was to know my place.
 I hate where I was born, hate everything
 That made me biddable and unforthcoming,'
 (SI, p. 85)

Does this mean that Heaney has completely changed his feelings about his place? Certainly this is what is suggested. And what, at last, are we to make of Joyce's comments to Heaney in XII?:

' . . . Who cares',
 he jeered, 'any more? The English language
 belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,
 a waste of time for somebody your age.
 That subject people stuff is a cod's game,
 infantile, like your peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
 doing the decent thing. 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
 (SI, pp. 93-94)

Of course the answer to all of these questions is "no". While Station Island appears to retract it really only opens up the same questions once again. Station Island forces the reader to reconsider and reweigh, to do what Heaney himself does.

In the example of the murder of Colum McCartney, Heaney reconsiders the question of how one is to respond to the violence of the North. In "The Strand at Lough Beg" (one of Heaney's major poems), Heaney finds a soothing response. "The Strand at Lough Beg" is an elegy, and like all elegies it attempts to console the mourners. In the poem, Heaney both commemorates the goodness of his cousin and laments his death. "The Strand at Lough Beg", as I have already said, also has elements of the funeral rite. The symbolic washing of the body at the end of the poem is a highly sentimental and highly effective attempt to make the tragedy of the death bearable. In "Station Island VIII", however, Heaney feels that this kind of artistic response is too unreal. He feels that an attempt to find some consolation through poetry is to belittle the real, human tragedy. This, of course, opens up the whole question of the poet's role in society: is he to be isolated or involved? And on this question, too, Heaney is uncertain, divided.

It is quite clear that Heaney's questioning and divided views will not stop here. In "On the Road", the final poem of Station Island, Heaney hints--as he did in the previous volumes--at what is to follow in his next work. Here the speaker asks another very broad question:

Master, what must I
do to be saved?
(SI, p. 119)

In his search for salvation the speaker looks to religious sources which

are partly pantheistic, partly Christian--divisions again. But the poem ends, as we might expect, before an answer is found. The speaker is left in meditation:

For my book of changes
I would meditate
that stone-faced vigil

until the long dumbfounded
spirit broke cover
to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion.

(SI, p. 121)

From this I assume that Heaney's next volume of poetry will be more religious than Station Island, and that the spirit will break cover and disclose certain answers which will be again only partial answers. Heaney is not a poet with answers, but a poet with questions which continually open up the argument so that we see the partial validity of both sides.

I think A. Alvarez is on the mark when he says that Heaney masters a "difficult balancing act".¹ In his style he vacillates between the traditional and the untraditional. Like Yeats, Auden, and Graves, he adapts the traditional forms to the rhythms of twentieth-century speech. In his language he mixes the poetic with the colloquial and the articulate with the inarticulate to communicate in a way which does not betray the community he describes, a community which is naturally and politically shy of speech. In his sense of place he switches from a technique which is based in the present and the lived to one which is based in the past and the literary. In his reactions to the political strife of Northern Ireland he feels quite at a loss to come up with a convincing position. He considers both sides, but feels ultimately that taking sides in a political question is too simple; the soul of man is larger,

more complex than that. And in his attitude towards nature he fluctuates between, or brings together, the contemporary and Romantic views because he sees neither one nor the other as true in itself. Heaney's mind works like a set of scales, weighing ideas on a system of balances and counterbalances.

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⁸Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 138.

⁹Heaney, Preoccupations, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰Benedict Kiely, All the Way to Bantry Bay, and Other Irish Journeys (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1978), p. 42.

¹¹Kiely, p. 35.

¹²Kiely, p. 35.

¹³Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "Rí, As in Regional: Three Ulster Poets", Eire-Ireland, v. 9:2, 1974, p. 43.

¹⁴Graham Martin, "John Montague, Seamus Heaney and the Irish Past", in The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Present, v. 8 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

¹⁵Redshaw, p. 49.

¹⁶Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 141.

¹⁷Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 131.

¹⁸Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 131.

¹⁹Thomas Kinsella, The Táin, Translated from the Irish Epic Táin bo Cuailnge (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 63.

²⁰Martin, p. 381.

²¹Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 35.

²²Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 35.

²³Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 35.

²⁴Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 35.

²⁵Caroline Walsh, The Irish Times, Dec. 6, 1975, p. 31.

²⁶Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 181.

Chapter Five

¹Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 19.

²Cline, p. 43.

³Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 18.

⁴Press, p. 674.

⁵Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 248.

⁶Julian Gitzen, "British Nature Poetry Now", Midwest Quarterly, v. 15, 1974, pp. 324, 326.

⁷Gitzen, p. 326.

⁸Terence Brown, "Four New Voices: Poets of the Present", Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 172.

⁹Haffenden, pp. 73-74.

¹⁰Brown, p. 172.

¹¹Robert Buttel, Seamus Heaney (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 19. The earlier college poems were signed "Incertus".

¹²Morrison, Heaney, p. 19.

¹³Haffenden, p. 74.

¹⁴Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes: A Critical Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 74.

¹⁵Heaney, Preoccupations, p. 54.

¹⁶Heaney, Preoccupations, pp. 132-133.

¹⁷Press, p. 682.

¹⁸Richard Gravil, "Wordsworth's Second Selves", Wordsworth Circle, v. 14, 1983, p. 198.

Conclusion

¹A. Alvarez, "A Fine Way", p. 16.

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