

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

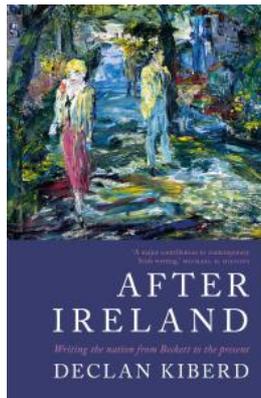
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10. Seamus Heaney: The Death of Ritual and the Ritual of Death

‘Wherever there is Ireland, there is the family’, wrote G. K. Chesterton, ‘and it counts for a great deal.’¹ The south Derry farm on which Seamus Heaney grew to young manhood offered a wholly secure world, in which everyone knew their place and in which every tree or flower had a meaning in the scheme of things:

The landscape was sacramental, a system of signs that called automatically upon systems of thinking and feeling... There, if you like, was the foundation for a marvellous or 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 force, especially if we think of the root of the word ‘religious’ in religare, to bind fast. The single thorn-tree bound us to a notion of the potent world of the fairies – and when the Blessed Virgin appeared in a thorn bush in Ardboe, a few miles up the country, the fairy-tree took on a new set of subliminal attributes.²

In May, buttercups flowered and the pagan goddess gave way to altars dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Members of the community ‘genuflected a million times, blessed ourselves a million times, never felt ourselves alone in the universe for a second’.³

Such a sense of security was rooted also in the life of an extended family. The intensity of religious ritual and of family living among rural Catholics in Northern Ireland was, to some degree, attributable to the fact that there was no larger social institution with which they might identify. The law, the army, the civil service, even local government itself, were all the preserve of the unionist majority, a group never slow to proclaim its superiority from the rooftops. Against that backdrop, the family was a haven, but a haven in a heartless world.

The poetry of Heaney has much to say of that childhood and of its subsequent loss. Early lyrics in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) record the decision of a bright young scholarship boy to ‘dig’ with his pen rather than his father’s spade, to record farm life and rural crafts before they die away. Many modern poets return to scenes of childhood in their fifties or sixties: but Heaney was writing with tenderness, exactitude and lyricism about that lost world in his early twenties. The eruption of political violence in Northern Ireland after 1969 complicated this task but never wholly distracted the writer from it; and the recapturing of childhood scenes took on a new urgency in *The Spirit Level* (1996), following the ceasefire by the Irish Republican Army. While other Irish writers of the 1990s offered bitter exposés of alcoholic fathers and abusive clerics, Heaney wrote moving lyrics in memory of parents, uncles and aunts, as well as celebrations of a brother who still farmed the land. The farm had seemed to the younger writer to have been filled with a poetry not yet conscious of itself as such: and,

even when reviewed by the sadder, older man, it was still capable of transforming people from prisoners of the dire political experience to possessors of it.

Like Mark Twain, Heaney looked back upon his childhood as upon a zone of radical innocence before a fall into civil strife. He understood that every child, in its phases of growth, relives the fundamental experiences of the human race. There is a distinctly evolutionary quality to many memories – of unwanted pups being drowned, of tadpoles taking the shape of complex life, of traditions passing from generation to generation. Inevitably, the adult poet will find in some childhood memories elements of that fear and loathing which led him, in some distress, to evoke them. The Wordsworth of *The Prelude* will be his guide through such moments, for he also had tried to bring the world of boyhood into alignment with that of the man he had become: ‘He feels like a traitor among those he knows and loves. To be true to one part of himself, he must betray the other part. The inner state of man is thus shaken and the shock waves in the consciousness reflect the upheavals in the surrounding world.’⁴ This conflict has been experienced by many poets in the aftermath of a failed revolution. John Milton was the first to attempt at the level of poetic practice a transformation no longer possible in his society, an effort that would be repeated by Blake and by Wordsworth. Each had supported a revolution in its early stages, only to be disillusioned by the cruelty later unleashed.

Born in 1939, Heaney was a beneficiary of the 1947 Education Act, like so many other supporters of the civil rights marches in Northern Ireland of the 1960s; and his subsequent experience of the ‘People’s Park’ movement in Berkeley, California, taught him that even his poetry could be ‘a mode of resistance’.⁵ By 1970 the uglier side of American radicalism had begun to manifest itself in shootings and bombings. ‘In contrast to the revolutionary language of America,’ he wrote somewhat naively in December of that year, ‘the revolutionary voice of Ireland still keeps a civil tongue in its head.’⁶ Within a short time, however, the brutality of the IRA and of British securicrats changed all that. If there was to be a revolution, it would have to happen – like Milton’s, Blake’s and Wordsworth’s – inside the head.

The polarities of the conflict had by then become clear to the young man in coded but troubling ways. While he was reading the writings of the anticlerical Joyce at college, he might also find himself driving his mother to attend May devotions in the local church. He might confess to sins of impurity, yet find himself studying the novels of D. H. Lawrence. He had to relocate his Pioneer Total Abstinence medal inside his lapel before attending sherry parties at university. One effect of the divided society was to give a defiantly conservative cast to northern Catholicism. It is most unlikely that a southern student moving, say, between a Wicklow farm and Trinity College Dublin would have felt so acutely the sort of strain recalled by Heaney:

As a northerner, my sense of religion and my sense of race or nationality or politics were inextricably twined together. If you have ever walked through a Belfast street on Ash Wednesday, your forehead badged with the mortal dust, you will know how this sense of caste is enforced by the sectarian circumstances. If you have ever blessed yourself in a city bus (or, more piercingly, not blessed yourself for fear of being noticed) you will know it too.⁷

Over the years, that religious practice was eroded, partly due to ‘problems with some central mysteries’,⁸ but the poet also recognized that the cultural conflict between Catholic ritual and secular art might be more apparent than real. Insofar as it was real, it had value as one source of poetry, but what was at stake was a crisis in the very status of ritual itself. By the mid-1970s, as political scientists pronounced Northern Ireland ‘a problem without a solution’,⁹ some of the better-publicized explanations of the Troubles began to wear a little thin. The socialist analysis, which cast the problem in terms of the economic oppression of a minority by a majority, lost traction as the memories of the student radicalism of the previous decade faded. The purely political accounts did not seem to explain the appalling intensity of feeling on all sides. The official churches had repeatedly condemned the gunmen, to no palpable effect. Against that bleak backdrop, people began to look to the poet for the sort of vatic wisdom once expected of the *filí*. For some years, Heaney had been compelled to make statements in prose as to why he was making none in poetry. Then, in 1975, he published *North*, a work of epic scope which seeks, like Milton, Blake and Wordsworth, to solve an irreconcilable conflict by outgrowing it, by developing a ‘new level of consciousness’.¹⁰

Previous volumes of his had contained the usual accumulations of poems over a three- or four-year period. *North* was shaped, however, around a set of linked themes. Throughout the volume, central, if never directly expressed, was a diagnosis so surprising that it was not noticed by those commentators calling for a solution: to the effect that the death of rituals in modern life had led to rituals of death. Marxists might complain that such analysis attempts to solve at the level of ritual problems which can only be treated in the body politic. But it was his application of the methods of comparative anthropology that permitted Heaney to take the longer view; this ‘solved’ the question not so much by changing it as by extending it right back in time. He excavated the meaning of the present not by going back twenty years but 2,000.

The poet suggested that to understand the strange clash, the 1600s were scarcely more helpful than the morning newspapers: better to re-read Tacitus. The mythical was reasserting itself in a world stripped of useful ritual. Such an analysis shocked left-wing nationalists, able to quote hard-and-fast statistics of discrimination on housing and jobs. To them it seemed like a culturalist over-interpretation rather than a true account of the psychology of the killers, most of whom were lapsed members of their respective Christian churches. But Heaney could see that those who thought of themselves as having stripped away all pointless rituals were submitting, unconsciously, to a repetition of some of the oldest rituals of all. Such a diagnosis had much appeal for anti-materialist intellectuals, since it secured their role in any ensuing debate – and in any possible solution. Many overseas intellectuals found Ireland fascinating, because (in the words of Bernard Shaw) the laws of economics seemed to stop at Holyhead (the embarkation point for the sea journey to the island).¹¹

In *North*, a line of anthropological writing about Ireland that began with Edmund Spenser and continued through Swift comes full circle. Such a writing asked (in Spenser’s case) where the ferocity of rebels came from and (in Swift’s) what the cruelty of the official response told the planters about themselves. The main focus in *North*, however, is on the sufferings and sins of those on the nationalist side. Whether through courtesy or a decent reticence in the face of the unknown, the poet has surprisingly little to say about the unionists.

It begins with a domestic scene: the poet's aunt Mary baking in the farm kitchen, a gesture of creativity in a broken, breaking world. Yet a companion piece, 'The Seed Cutters', suggests a violence even in domestic ritual. The aunt dusts the floor with a goose's wing and the cutters bisect every root. Like those seeds split in half, *North* is divided into two parts. The first is mythical and ancient-seeming, concerned with the meaning of bodies dug out of old bogs. The second is documentary and apparently contemporary, about the challenges that current affairs pose for language. Splitting might seem a fitting response to a divided society, but the artist's real concern is to align mythical and mundane, a technique derived from Joyce's *Ulysses*. In that book a Homeric grid was brought down on the characters from above, its arbitrariness being part of its point, a contraption which in its attempt to impose order on the chaos of modernity might seem more real than the experiences on which it was being imposed. Heaney's bog myth is, by comparison, overt and earned and slowly evolved in response to the pressure of experience.

The woods had once marked the frontier between native and planter, and so became an image of the unconscious, as in American culture. But now they were gone, and so the earth itself became a symbol of a world once populous and noisy, to be contemplated by the silent poet-archaeologist, striking in and down.¹² These zones would, like the American frontier, be a place where the theory of original innocence and the facts of human corruption are confronted. The pioneers celebrated in Heaney's bog poems, unlike the Americans, were less interested in subduing the land than in studying it; they were interested in learning from it rather than measuring it out. Unlike the American frontier, the bogs could never disappear. Far from being erased by an encroaching civilization, they were augmented by each development. Ever since the time of Spenser, the Irish had been depicted as bogmen, dwelling in softlands and luring imperial soldiers clothed in heavy armour into such terrain. For centuries 'bogman' had been a term of racist abuse, but it was now occupied by Heaney as a term of defiance, complication and resistance not just to colonialism but to the effects of time itself. The man had been taken out of the bog but he had no desire to let the bog be taken out of the man. For the bog preserves not only bodies and objects but also consciousness.

A strong suggestion all through *North* is that the dead themselves may not recognize that they are dead but think of themselves as translated into a new dimension. The emphasis, however, is steadfastly on the community which unites at a wake rather than on the departed: hence the rather stately, dignified diction. The grave honour done to the dead at wakes attended by the teenage boy contrasts utterly with the randomness of contemporary slaughter in the north:

I shouldered a kind of manhood
Stepping in to lift the coffins
of dead relations.
They had been laid out...¹³

For a young man in an unjust state there will always be a question as to where 'manhood' is to be found. This will be exacerbated if he chooses a career as a writer, since (in the words of an Italian proverb) words are feminine, deeds masculine. Heaney's own frequent characterization of unionists as masculine and the colonized Catholics as feminine suggests that a degree of

sexual anxiety attended a literary career in a place where Protestant schools took pride in their profile in the sciences (leaving Catholic ones to stake claims in arts). Hence the occasional assertions by Heaney of a masculinity which the very act of becoming a writer may have thrown into question.¹⁴ Newsreel footage through the 1970s featured teenage boys (less likely than older men to be arrested) shouldering the coffins of dead IRA comrades; and he knew that many nationalist males, emasculated by decades of unemployment, were turning to the IRA to assert a jeopardized virility. Writing, however, was Heaney's alternative to violence, his way of taking power.

Nothing in Heaney's world seems as remote as the recent past: and his language deliberately distances funerals of corpses with 'dough-white hands' and 'igloo brows' until they seem like glaciers moving into prehistory. The long-familiar is presented as the ever-distant:

Now as news comes in
of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms... (N 16)

The problem is acute. Between the 1950s and 1970s the world around the Derry farm has been disenchanted and its ceremonial elements all but lost; and this has happened all over Europe – Bologna has its car bombs as well as Belfast. What little ritual remains has been stripped down to the level of routine. Even the flag-draped, glove-topped coffins at IRA funerals – so patently modelled on those of the British army – are a belated attempt to restore that sense of ceremonial dignity lacking in the lives of those who are mourned. Deprived of ritual, people had grown disillusioned with political leaders, whom nevertheless they accused of acting false roles all the time. Northern Ireland, far from being aberrational, simply poses an intense version of the common problem.

So the poet proposes a healing ritual, a funeral to end all other funerals, a pilgrimage of forgiveness in which past grudges will be buried in the Neolithic chamber of Newgrange. Standing by the Boyne, a river sacred in memory to loyalists whose ancestors triumphed there in 1690, it will now provide a locale which transcends such divisive moments with an appeal to a shared pre-history. The great house of the Celtic dead is also the vault into which the sun shines every winter solstice, on 21 December, the shortest day of the year. The old imagery of loyalist marching or of nationalist martyrs will be subsumed into a pilgrimage affirming a common life. The appeal made to a pre-Christian, pagan bedrock of values by W. B. Yeats is now amplified by Heaney, who emulates his predecessor by using painfully paradoxical phrases ('neighbourly murder'), in order to show that sacrifice is not at all remote in a community at war with itself. In doing this, Heaney also follows in the tracks of Synge, who went to Aran in the poet's account 'to put on the armour of an authentic pre-Christian vision which was a salvation from the fallen world of Unionism and Nationalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, Anglo and Irish, Celtic and Saxon – all those bedevilling abstractions and circumstances'¹⁵ The objective embodiment of a subjective consciousness which Synge found among the stones of Aran was discovered by Heaney amid the boulders of Newgrange:

Now I would restore
the great chambers of Boyne,
prepare a sepulchre
under the cup-marked stones.
Out of side-streets and bye-roads

purring family cars
nose into line.
The whole country tunes
to the muffled drumming

of ten thousand engines.
Somnambulist women,
left behind, move
through emptied kitchens

imagining our slow triumph
towards the mounds.
Quiet as a serpent
in its grassy boulevard

the procession drags its tail
out of the Gap of the North
as its head already enters
the megalithic doorway. (*N* 16–17)

The resolution is merely imagined, but the search is for a ceremony equal to the suffering of ‘each blinded home’ (blinded by grief, even more than prejudice, with its curtains down). The image is of the old *péist* of Gaelic mythology, one serpent not yet banished by St Patrick from the nearby hill of Slane; and the vaguely threatening animal recalls Yeats’s own rough beast slouching to a holy place as another ceremony of innocence is annulled.

But Heaney knows that he can never be a Yeats. Facing the collapse of ceremony, Yeats called for its renewal, but went further and created in *A Vision* an entire philosophical and religious system that would give it a claim on people’s attention. It is possible, of course, to laugh at this as the ‘southern Californian element’ in Yeats,¹⁶ but at least it offered a positive theory of the world and not just a diagnosis of its limitations. Heaney, born over seven decades later (in fact in the year of Yeats’s death), is too honest to simulate belief when he feels none and so he is at the mercy of the finality of early death. The act of terrorism takes away the only life many members of the community believe that they will ever have. There is here no Yeatsian faith that can look through death, but rather the funeral offers a way of controlling grief until it is slowly purged in this life.

The model for such renewal is Gunnar of *Njal’s Saga*: a warrior who managed to smile and sing of ancient heroes in his burial vault, even as his own killing went unavenged. If the first

part of 'Funeral Rites' made the familiar farm world seem remote, this third and final section makes that ancient saga world seem familiar. The restoration of a true sense of community demands fortitude and forgiveness, as well as the dismantling of current names (always insisted on by recent winners) down to their source meanings ('Strang and Carling fjords'). Gunnar is himself literally re-membered, a warrior whose body did not rot. So he is transformed into a sort of saint, who learned how to praise the world as he found it:

Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon. (N 18)

Despite his sweetness of temper, the old warrior sickness (chanting verses about honour) asserts itself, but on this occasion is cured by the four votive lights that turn the verses into a prayer to the moon, symbol of love and beauty. The corpse which sings is an ancient motif, from Gaelic lore to the poetry of Blake, but rarely has it such poignant force.

'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' considers objects taken from the bog and displayed in the National Museum in Dublin, itself a Viking settlement. On the bones of dead people artists doodled, in search of a convincing line (much like the poet himself, who wonders whether a child attempted to trace on one just the sort of longship out of which the relics came). The longship drawn by the ancient child 'enters my longhand' in an act which is at once repetition and translation of the original impulse into a new element. The subtle calligraphy has to be 'magnified on display', like the poet's tabulating, noun-centered art; and he is amazed that it is on the jaws and ribs of the dead that images of vibrant life, 'foliage, bestiaries', are inscribed (N 22). The process is both reassuring and barbarous (rather like the cuff-links made of 'genuine human molars' worn by a businessman in *The Great Gatsby*).

Thoughts of Scandinavian founders lead to that Denmark which produced not only the bog-preserved corpses, on which many poems here focus, but also the tale of Hamlet, the intellectual unfitted for a bloody act in the rotten state. The implication seems unavoidable:

I follow into the mud.
I am Hamlet the Dane,
skull-handler, parablist,
smeller of rot

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

murders and pieties,
coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering. (N 23)

Yeats, in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', had turned upon the stairs of his tower to ask whether he could have proved his worth in a direct action 'that all others understand or share'. By the end he had settled for 'the half-read wisdom of daemonic images'.¹⁷ So does Heaney. By his day Percy Shelley's definition of the poet as unacknowledged legislator of the world had been reversed in a famous quip by W. H. Auden that 'such a description better fits the secret police'.¹⁸ *North* will record injunctions by admirers to 'be the poet of your people', but when the Royal Ulster Constabulary fire at his former schoolmates in Derry in 1969, Heaney will find himself suffering 'only the bullying sun of Madrid' outside the Prado, which houses Goya's painting of a revolution bringing forth monsters (N 69).

Hamlet is a figure in whom many Irish writers have seen a version of themselves. Yeats's Hamlet was a deployer of masks, feigning madness; Joyce's a man intent on becoming his own father; and Heaney's a man who stands in graves, dithering and blathering. There is more than barren self-accusation or self-justification at work: for Hamlet, like Heaney, expended his greatest energy in trying to realize the state of being dead. His jump into Ophelia's grave is a logical part of that investigation. The analogy is quite pressing: a man in his thirties who, after a protracted education, is about to come into his proper inheritance but then is confronted by a ghost and must thereafter defer that moment when he would have become his destined self. The role of people's avenger is one to which Heaney is ill-suited by temperament, and so he becomes instead a troubled soliloquist, obsessed with ritual, role-play and acting. Hamlet coaches Polonius and the players in the actor's art; he tells the queen to assume those virtues which she does not have; he punctures the facile disguises of others; and he develops a boundless gift for mimicry, until in the end he can play virtually every part except his own. When he appears among the graves in Act V of the play, following a period of withdrawal (much like Heaney's move from Belfast to Wicklow in the 1970s), he is a sort of revenant, back from the death intended for him, but expected to simplify himself for the sake of a revenge tragedy. Heaney, of course, will deviate from the ur-plot as Shakespeare's hero could not do: and he will seek instead a line of escape in the figure of Sweeney, the visionary man-bird who fled the field of battle to live among the trees. For he knows just how little words of his can do but how vitally important it is that they do it: soothe a community's pain by describing it so well. In doing as much and as little, he may raise the consciousness of some people to a level of understanding at which the currently irreconcilable positions seem ill-conceived, even meaningless. If you cannot solve a question, that may be because of the silliness in which its terms are put: and your words can at least discredit those terms.

There is no pretence of superiority or objectivity. If there is poison in the state, the poet also is 'infused' with it. He knows that his is a carrion art. The word 'blathering' is borrowed from Synge, who never forgot the bones beneath the skin and who insisted that 'before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal'.¹⁹ Living in the gate lodge of the Synge family estate in Glanmore must have reminded Heaney of that duty to record the violence at the heart of man's

sense of beauty. One section, indeed, ends with a quotation from Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* – 'did you ever hear tell of the skulls they have in the city of Dublin?' Synge often reminded himself, as he held the actress Molly Allgood in his arms, that one day she would be whitened bone: he was as excited as Webster by thoughts of 'the skull beneath the skinne'.²⁰ In 'Bone Dreams', however, the gesture goes beyond mere frisson to a slow, steady consideration of such ossification:

Come back past
philosophy and kennings,
re-enter memory
where the bone's lair

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

and ossify myself
by gazing: I am screens
on her escarpments,
a chalk giant

carved upon her downs.
Soon my hands, on the sunken
fosse of her spine
move towards the passes. (N 29)

The word 'ossify' suggests drunkenness as well as a measurement of bones; and the hint of necrophilia is deliberate, for the poet knows that the pornographic imagination may in extremity seek the ultimate fulfilment in death. Synge had said that all poetry, though a tender flower, has strong roots among clay and worms.²¹ The necrophilia is invoked here in the attempt to achieve a fuller understanding of tradition, for the bog preserves not just bodies but consciousness; it is not only a graveyard but a house of love:

And we end up
cradling each other
between the hips
of an earthwork. (N 29)

Many of these themes achieve a most complex articulation in 'Bog Queen'. Up until this moment in his bog poems, Heaney had been willing the dead bodies to speak, and now at last one does. Unlike Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, this one is feminine, dug out of an Irish rather than a Danish bog:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone. (N 32)

Caught between the native boglands and the compounds of the Ascendancy, this queen bore the cultural history of the island on the shorthand of her body.

The opening line will be repeated, as if to echo the old republican motto (*éireoimíd arís*: ‘we will rise again’), but also as an emblem of that condition known by the destitute tramps of Samuel Beckett – ‘My body was braille/for the creeping influences’ (N 32) – because the bog has preserved not only her body but her consciousness. Every level of earth has a particular history, translated into the facts of a geography; and, like all who make the desperate bargain to live in a culture, she has been preserved by the sheer weight of that earth which also suffocated her:

the illiterate roots

pondered and died
in the cavings
of stomach and socket.
I lay waiting

On the gravel bottom
My brain darkening... (N 32)

She is assimilated back into nature from culture, yet some recessed part of her causes her to resist and persist; as in the case of Beckett’s protagonists, the more her body fades, the more defiantly active is the mind which records that fading. Here is an inversion of the sky-woman or *spéirbhean* of Gaelic tradition, now found not on high but deep in the earth, as a reminder of how a tradition will always be reborn in the lament for its disappearance. The dead, though forgotten, are never truly gone; and since they do not recognize death, they must be just wintering out:

My skull hibernated
in the wet nest of my hair,

which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turfcutter’s spade,

who veiled me again
and packed coomb softly
between the stone jambs

at my head and at my feet. (*N* 33)

Literally, the kind turf-cutter (who accidentally dug her out) re-membered her, reassembling her bones in proper order before the discreet 'veiling'. This was the very moment for which, all along, she had been waiting, that instant when she would re-enter human minds and come forth as a challenge.

The facts, however, record otherwise: that when she was dug out on Lord Moira's estate in 1781, her body was not accorded the dignity deserved by such patient, prayerful waiting. The cutter was given cash and Lady Moira plundered the corpse, which might better have been respectfully restored to its resting-place:

Till a peer's wife bribed him.
The plait of my hair,
a slimy birth-cord
of bog, had been cut

and I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-wave,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank. (*N* 34)

The grave decorum of the earlier stanzas is turbo-charged at the close: and some readers hear in its defiant rhythms an echo of Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus': the rocking, metronomic movement of a reborn woman, back from the dead, protesting the insult to a body reduced to mere exhibit. Deeper still is the sense of the anonymity of pain, as suffering erases all trace of the individual, while past wars are waged in new ways in the present. Even the dead, as Walter Benjamin warned, may not be safe from an enemy who wins.²²

Yet, by contrast with some earlier bog poems, there are no suggestions here that a pornographic imagination might find its ultimate satisfaction in the extinction of the other party. Nor does the Bog Queen resemble Plath in experiencing her own slow-motion disintegration as the ultimate aesthetic experience. There is no sense of the vengefulness to be found in Plath's closure:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.²³

Rather, what is asserted, more in the rhythms than in the statement ('I rose') is a dignified margin of possible hope. This Cathleen Ni Houlihan is not the 'bitch' with a 'surly gob' lamented by Sean O'Casey,²⁴ but a figure of perfect poise and patience. The greater the humiliation of her body, the surer her mind's recovery from it. Although she feels violated by the planter's wife, even in this abjection she finds a sweet vindication of all her waiting, sure in the knowledge that she would rise. Her plight may be similar to that of the later Plath, but her thought is closer to the later Yeats:

A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.
Though grave-digger's toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.²⁵

A good lesson also carries warnings, as do these lyrics. The figures of Bog Queen and others are made available for contemplation by their status as prized exhibits in museums, but the very principle of museumization is discredited in the poetic enactment. Denying the Bog Queen's fixity as an exhibit, Heaney prefers to return her to a world of process and transformation. The imagining of the fuller details of her story is a refusal to connive in the common curatorial desire to present everything old as an artwork. That curatorial effect is usually achieved by removing objects or human remains from their proper contexts: estrangement and defamiliarization seem to confer on them the arbitrary qualities of a modern work of art. The danger here is that a discourse of connoisseurship (such as Lady Moira's) will take the place of the turf-cutter's honest workings. The impulse to adore may carry an undertow of prurient curiosity and titillation (as Heaney had conceded in 'Punishment', by dubbing himself an 'artful voyeur').²⁶ There is indeed something savage at the heart of some acts of apparent veneration. Better by far to return such objects to the bog which will preserve them more fully than any museum. The primary forces of nature in Ireland seemed to conspire in such a natural process, providing the wood for making works of art and the rains which dissolve them. As Chinua Achebe has observed of somewhat similar issues in Africa: 'When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised.'²⁷

The 'melancholy of the collector' is a phenomenon well known among both modernists and Irish revivalists. Collection is one way to bolster and ratify a self felt to be in jeopardy, and that self may respond with demonstrations of its power to tabulate 'numbered bones'. But that is a one-way transaction, affording the dead no chance to answer back. In *North*, that unilinear anthropology is disrupted by a poet who warns repeatedly against fetishism and who refuses to possess objects, which seem instead to possess him. The personation of the dead in the politics of Northern Ireland had always been legendary and continued so into the years covered by *North*. After a narrow victory by a very few votes in the 1969 election in Belfast, the socialist MP Gerry Fitt received a telegram: 'Congratulations Gerry. Can only quote Pearse: the fools, the fools, the fools – they have left us our Fenian dead.'²⁸

The anthropologist in Heaney sees the crisis in cultural rather than economic terms, as the vestige of an ancient battle between devotees of a goddess and a god. Protestantism is male, imperial, English; Catholicism is female, nationalist, Irish. Some might consider the division vulgar for such a subtle poet, but it was hardly of his making. 'I think that the Hail Mary is more of a poem than the Our Father', he told an interviewer: 'Our Father is between chaps, but there's something faintly amorous about the Hail Mary.'²⁹ In a benchmark lecture written during the work on *North*, Heaney offered the Royal Society of Literature a completely cultural explanation of the northern wars:

There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Cathleen ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange or Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a Rex or Caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail-end of struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power.³⁰

So in poems he explores analogies between the male victim of an ancient fertility rite and those modern youths who sacrifice lives to appease Mother Ireland – or between a sacrificed Scandinavian woman and the tarring and feathering of a woman who mixed with British soldiers. The typology, however, is never quite as pat as that makes it seem: the deeper analogy in ‘Punishment’, for instance, is with the poet who pursues his own instinctual desires above and beyond the code of his tribe. The poems summon up feeling for the ancient victims, which flows like a tributary back into the flood of emotion felt for current sufferers.

If present horrors seem too much and journalism inadequate, then one way of realizing current atrocity is through ancient experience, to measure what Helen Vendler has tellingly called ‘the insult of the actual’.³¹ That technique may (again) owe something to Synge, who wrote that the profoundest moments in poetry are achieved when the dreamer is reaching out to reality. Each lyric here protects itself from sounding too pleased with its own conclusions by raising the essential criticisms of the code to which it adheres. Lest ancient image seem beguiling, the poet weighs it against

the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped. (N 36)

Yet, along with the ethical need to make an inventory of the present is a desire to remember the future: as the ancient victims seem to us, so shall we seem to people 2,000 years from now.

‘*Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*’? Not quite. The risk is that culturalist explanations might seem to absolve murderous activities; and even one of Heaney’s staunchest admirers was worried that the method might accord ‘sectarian killing in Ulster a historical respectability which it is not usually given in day-to-day journalism’.³² It is a measure of how dreadfully the IRA campaign and British army response impinged on even the most intrepid minds that such speculations could even be entertained.³³ For many decades, what had been lacking from most Irish cultural debate was the sort of comparative dimension that Heaney applied. A revivalist myth of national exceptionalism had left generations of political scientists, folklorists and literary critics indifferent to (or unaware of) analogies with the outside world. In later decades, Heaney would multiply the comparisons, with eastern Europe, rural England, St Lucia, as part of his ‘nostalgia for world culture’; and others like Brian Friel would do the same. It would, however, be difficult to overstate its liberating effect on young Irish readers in 1975, exhausted by the conflict yet anxious to make sense of it in terms of a wider Europe suffering its share of car bombs, street disturbances and police atrocity. The method was not wholly new, since Joyce had used Homer to suggest a mythic parallel. What was new was that

a sponsor of such an analysis might be accused of conniving with the very chaos his myth sought to bring to order and control. It may seem banal to repeat the point: *North*, in seeking to understand sacrificial myth, does not propose its re-enactment. Heaney's implicit allegation against the killers is that they have degraded sacred ritual to the level of a killing routine and so done the work of the colonizers in further disenchanting the land.

Heaney's focus may be on his own side, but he is hardly a doctrinal adherent. Its codes shaped him but he in turn reshaped them:

I grew out of all this
like a weeping willow
inclined to
the appetites of gravity. (N 43)

If Catholics over time had tended to impatriate through memories of history (all those lost battles, rebel songs and so on), Protestants in search of their Irish identity had found it most often in geography (landscape, the lore of place). The bog poems, however, offer a point at which history and geography meet. The attainment of a higher level of consciousness, beyond the terms of current conflict, is to be found at the lowest levels of the earth.

The final poem of Part One might easily but glibly be read as a celebration of Hercules' holding aloft of the body of Antaeus, a way of preparing for the more discursive, willed and pragmatic poems of Part Two. Heaney had long contended that there were two kinds of poems: the one given and received by sheer instinct, and the sort knowingly shaped by force of will. Antaeus, with his feeling for the artesian wells beneath, is a sponsor of the first kind; and Hercules, impelled by an urge to order and control, seems to phase in the second. The poet had been wary of becoming excessively self-analytical, lest the element of risk and surprise which bless any creative process be lost, as will exceeded imagination: 'A poem always has elements of accident about it, which can be made the subject of inquest afterwards, but there is always a risk in conducting your own inquest: you might begin to believe the coroner in yourself rather than put your trust in the man in you who is capable of accident.'³⁴ There has been a tendency to see the sections in *North* as replicating that dualism; but the structuring is not so straightforward. The first section will, of course, expose the shallowness of many journalistic clichés about the conflict in the second section, yet many of those clichés will repeat earlier points. The very looseness of some of the poems in the follow-up section suggests an ease, an instinctual element in the writing, whereas Part One, though filled with depth and suggestion, is arguably the most knowingly assembled of all of Heaney's poetic sequences.

Part Two is less dense and difficult. Much of it is slack and conversational in the ad-lib manner favoured by Patrick Kavanagh. Confronted by journalists seeking views on 'the Irish thing' (a phrase Kavanagh often used to disparage Yeats and the Revivalists), the poet considers the various languages by which people evade a full awareness of current atrocities. Journalists with their talk of 'polarization' and 'long-standing hate' may be no worse than cautious neighbours:

‘Oh, it’s disgraceful, surely, I agree’,
‘Where’s it going to end?’ ‘It’s getting worse’.
‘They’re murderers’. ‘Internment, understandably...’
The voice of sanity is getting hoarse. (N 58)

Against these clichés, heartfelt but threadbare, must be pitted the unanswerable facts: ‘Men die at hand. In blasted street and home / The gelignite’s a common sound-effect...’ (N 58), and the poet seeks the ‘right line’ to expose the bigotry beneath sham platitudes.

The impulse here is Orwellian in the good sense: based on the conviction that an inadequate language reflects a prior corruption in politics, which can only feed off it. The ‘famous Northern reticence’ may be just an excuse for refusing to referee between two sides, one of which may actually be worse than the other:

Of the ‘wee six’ I sing
Where to be saved, you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing. (N 59)

The childhood idyll is now thrown into question, with memories of a ‘land of password, handgrip, wink and nod’, by which names and addresses reveal sectarian affiliations. In ‘The Ministry of Fear’ Heaney recalls his early experiments as a secondary school poet with Seamus Deane, his friend at St Columb’s College:

I tried to write about the sycamores
And invented a South Derry rhyme
With ‘hushed’ and ‘bulled’ full rhymes for ‘pushed’ and ‘pulled’.
Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
Were walking, by God, all over the fine
Lawns of elocution. (N 63–4)

The same sense of being invaders of an ‘English’ space might be felt in later years at a police roadblock, where the very name ‘Seamus’ was enough to prompt the constable to read the letters sent by his poetic collaborator:

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn’t named it, the ministry of fear. (N 65)

The poetic problem mirrored the wider social one: somehow the rights of British freemen to jobs, housing and ‘one man, one vote’ had not been extended to nationalists. ‘A Constable Calls’ honestly locates this troubled recognition back in the beloved farmhouse in which Heaney’s Aunt Mary did the baking in the opening poem: but now it is darkened in memory by the presence of a policeman, suspicious that the tillage returns might be incomplete. Only as the constable cycles away does the full menace of state power become apparent: ‘And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked’ (N 65).

Yet that experience, which left Heaney the poet of two traditions, was what would in time bring him global fame as a representative instance of the postcolonial poet. It would explain and enrich his collaboration with Derek Walcott, a native of St Lucia, who would write in similar vein: ‘Mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word ASHANTI as with the word WARWICKSHIRE, both separately indicating my grandfather’s roots, both baptizing this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian.’³⁵ The double structure of Walcott’s *The Arkansas Testament*, dedicated to Heaney, with its division between Here and Elsewhere, is a homage to *North*:³⁶ and so also is its determination to embrace the language of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Auden as of right:

In the rivulet’s gravel
light gutturals begin,
in the valley, a mongrel,
a black vowel barking (*AT* 21)

‘Even the most imposed-upon colonial’, Heaney would say years later in one of his Oxford Lectures on poetry, ‘will discern in the clear element of Herbert’s ‘The Pulley’ a true paradigm of the shape of things’,³⁷ and his nostalgia for world culture will lead him to imagine a free space ‘where one will never have to think twice about the cultural and linguistic expression of one’s own world on its own since nobody else’s terms will be imposed as normative or official’.³⁸

The affinities between Heaney and Walcott are a useful reminder that theirs is a vernacular modernism, quite different from that of a Proust or an Eliot writing at the metropolitan centre; and that what looks like pastoralism or archaism in their works is usually framed by some more radical, modern consciousness. ‘Act of Union’ by Heaney is not just a traditional Gaelic attempt to imagine the Anglo-Irish relation in terms of a marriage which has come under dire strain: it is also an account of a New Age father apprehensively watching over the birth of a child who will bring unprecedented challenges into the world.

The closing poem of *North*, ‘Exposure’, places the book’s two modes, the mythical and the documentary, into a dynamic equilibrium. Written in his new exile in Co. Wicklow, it shows a poet surrounded by woods into which Irish rebels traditionally retreated for cover until the next fight. He has made a separate peace, like previous exiles, through literary history from Ovid (‘weighing / my responsible tristia’) to Mandelstam (‘an inner exile’) (*N* 73). The old temptation to be the people’s hero has been passed up: but the writer is not wholly satisfied with his Yeatsian choice, fearing that he may have missed a potentially defining moment. The title is ironic, for the poet, having fled from the northern violence, must expose himself to a different set of dangers, the quarrel with himself. He had followed the example of the mad king Sweeney in seeking an exposure to nature, away from the noise of battle, a line of flight made possible to those who abandon the territorial imperative and take to the air:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose. (*N* 73)

Edmund Spenser had described the wood-kernes as emerging from the trees, famine-stricken, on hands and knees, 'like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves'.³⁹ But, akin to the Bog Queen and to Yeats's buried men, they had already found in poetry a force 'analogous to the immunity system of the human body', and so, like all of them, the speaker, denied illumination but expecting the aurora borealis, can lie patiently, waiting for his next moment to arrive, ensuring that there will be a life before death.

Europeanization

In the early years of the twentieth century, the playwright John Millington Synge had written caustically of certain Irish nationalists who feared to be Europeans lest the huckster across the street call them English. Yet it was in Paris that Synge had his fateful first meeting with W. B. Yeats, who advised him to write about the Aran Islands. The book that ensued was full of European comparisons, notably between Irish and continental folk tales; but it also treated the island community as a version of the anarchist commune, not unlike the one established at Montmartre in 1870–1. It was in Paris, also, that Synge argued aesthetics with the young James Joyce and politics with the militant republican Maud Gonne. That city was not just ‘the capital of the nineteenth century’ (in the words of Walter Benjamin), but also the crucible in which many elements of the Irish Revival were tested. The scholarly writings of Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville on the Irish heroic cycle were translated for use by a rising generation of Irish artists and activists, some of whom wrote essays reminding readers that the fame of Ireland had once extended across the educational centres of early Christian Europe, which had looked to its north-western outpost as ‘the isle of saints and scholars’.

In some respects, the nationalist outpourings of writers of English in the mid-nineteenth century had represented an interruption of this more expansive and less introverted tradition. The earls and clerics who fled the onslaught of occupying armies in 1607 had fanned out across the cities of Europe, in which their men of learning were as likely to write poems and tracts in Irish as in Latin or Spanish. Catholic universities such as Louvain and Salamanca maintained strong intellectual ties with Ireland. The leaders of the defeated Jacobite armies at Aughrim in 1691, and subsequently at Limerick, became the famous ‘wild geese’ who enlisted with honour in the armies of Catholic Europe. The young James Joyce felt himself an upholder of that tradition when first he arrived as an exile in Paris in 1902.

These historical connections were often invoked in the early 1970s, as the country faced a referendum on the possibility of joining the European Economic Community. Some radicals feared that joining would compromise Irish sovereignty for the sake of a merely economic arrangement. Others pointed to a strong element of Catholic social thinking in much EEC legislation. The British (Ireland’s largest market) seemed about to join anyway; and membership of the wider community would open newer markets to Irish exporters.

It was also hoped that a wider European perspective might help to bring the antagonists in Northern Ireland to a sensible compromise. The religious wars of the 1600s were long forgotten on the continent. The EEC, itself founded in 1957 as an attempt to make an economic peace between belligerents of the much more recent world war, was intended to bring an affluence to impoverished regions that would help to dissolve old resentments. Educators on both sides of the border hoped that, with the softening of cultural differences, it might be possible to offer integrated courses in Irish Studies, outlining how deep and comprehensive were past interactions between the cultures of Irish and English languages. A playwright such as Brian Friel, in retelling the story of the Sons of Usna, sought to excavate a common Scottish

and Irish substratum in the ancient story, even as his fellow dramatist Tom Murphy explored the deeper meanings of the Anglo-Irish relationship.