

Memories of Dying: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney II

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3. *Wintering Out* (1972)

Two months after the publication of *Door into the Dark* (DD)¹, the Six Counties began slowly to erupt. The dedicatory poem of Heaney's third volume registers the new context:

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

but at first sight the poems that follow seem to bear no relation to this new windscreen discovery. Nor does the poem, *Servant Boy*, from which the book's title is taken, suggest at first any reason for the volume's clear division into two parts:

He is wintering out
the back-end of a bad year,
swinging a hurricane-lamp
through some outhouse;

--until we realise that the year in question could be any within the past few centuries: the experience of the servant boy has a permanent air to it, just as the search for *Fodder* and warmth in the opening poem is timeless:

These long nights
I would pull hay
for comfort, anything
to bed the stall.

The vagueness of historical location is still more explicit in *Bog Oak*:

The softening ruts
lead back to no
'oak groves', no
cutters of mistletoe
in the green clearings.
Perhaps I just make out
Edmund Spenser

but perhaps too 'I might tarry/with the moustached/dead', ghosts of a past that the bog oak itself once witnessed long ago, perhaps in the time of 'those mound-dwellers' who 'go waist-deep in mist/ to break the light ice' in *Anahorish*. *The Last Mummer* is more definitely dated, contemporary with the TV that ousts him, but contemporary in a curiously evanescent way, almost a ghost, almost a dream, but

¹Titles of poems are italicised; titles of three collections are abbreviated to DN (*Death of a Naturalist*), DD (*Door into the Dark*) and WO (*Wintering Out*). All these and *North* published by Faber and Faber Ltd., London.

with a real existence in the poem and in the past. *Land* suggests the appropriate words: 'phantom ground'—but leaves us puzzled; is the ground 'phantom' only because of the poacher's dark night or because the poet *creates* the ground and the scarecrow ('This is in place of what I would leave'—the description in lieu of the reality?) and the worked-on land itself, yet may almost be surprised by the realness of what he creates. *Gifts of Rain* presents vivid images of flood—'A man wading lost fields/ breaks the pane of flood'—but such fields are perhaps also 'lost' in the same ghostly way as those men, knowledgeable about local floods, now only 'soft voices of the dead' and conjured back into reality only by the poet's 'need/for antediluvian lore'. The last section of the poem suggests what power is at work:

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

bedding the locale
in the utterance.

The river's sound enacts its own name, but equally the sound of the name creates the river in the poem; and we recognise that this was true also of 'Anahorish, soft gradient/ of consonant, vowel-meadow' and that the odd shift from title to opening lines in *Fodder*

Or, as we said,
fother, I open
my arms for it

creates the dialect voice of the 'I' and the reality of his experience. We realise that the lines in *Gifts of Rain*

He fords
his life by soundings.
SOUNDINGS.

are exact description for the 'stepping stones' involved. For it is sounds, the stuff of language, that take us back to lost worlds and assert our continuity with them, as the next poem, *Toome*, makes clear

My mouth holds round
the soft blastings,
Toome, Toome,
as under the dislodged

slab of the tongue
I push into the souterrain
prospecting what new
in a hundred centuries'

loam, flint, musket-balls,
fragmented ware,
tores and fish-bones
till I am sleeved in

alluvial mud that shelves
suddenly under
bogwater and tributaries,
and elvers tail my hair.

We are back to the bogs and eels ('elvers') of dark knowledge. But this linguistic depth has its own pitfalls: in *Broagh* 'that last/ *gh* the strangers found/ difficult to manage'—perhaps strangers who say 'Fodder' when they offer it to servant boys whose speech is different. We recall that the Last Mummer picked his dangerous way through bloody feuding because 'his tongue went whoring/ among the civil tongues'. Perhaps there is a common root to speech, lost in the time when trees were oracles, 'lobe and larynx/ of the mossy places' (*Oracle*) but now only the 'fieldworker's archive' can hope to recover the point, past dialect and variants, at which 'a language failed'—and that may be, as this poem's title, *The Backward Look*, reminds us, beyond the 'assurance of recorded history' (Eliot, *Dry Salvages*).

The delicate and impressive achievement of most of these opening poems provides a basis for an unexpected approach to Irish history and the poet's possible role. *Traditions* compresses Irish literature from mediaeval to Joyce into a question about its relationship to England and answers, in Bloom's words, 'I was born here. Ireland'. But can Ireland create its own *New Song*, considering its divisions? A fanciful idea emerges:

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

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

The *sounds* of 'Derrygarve' and 'Castledawson', in Ulster mouths, are an index to a deep divide which *The Other Side* presents in simultaneously economic, religious and linguistic terms: 'that tongue of chosen people' pronounces a 'fabulous biblical dismissal' of poor Catholic land, 'It's poor as Lazarus, that ground', while the Catholic reacts to his Protestant neighbour's friendly scorn by retreating into the mourning cadences of rosary and litany while surreptitiously rehearsing 'each patriarchal dictum'; though 'now', after 1969 or after 1798 or 1689 or 1641, does even such tentative conversation cease or become merely guarded exchanges about 'the price of grass-seed'? Such speech divisions have their economic roots: *The Wool Trade* recalls

square-set men in tunics
Who plied soft names like Bruges
In their talk, merchants
Back from the Netherlands

but notes that such differences are 'Fading, in the gallery of the tongue' and even the Catholic 'must talk of tweed/ A stiff cloth with flecks like blood'. The tentative optimism of this convergence is celebrated in *Linen Town: High Street, Belfast 1786*: in the mid- 1780s, after all, some Protestants in the volunteer corps and the early Defender bands were petitioning and fighting for the Catholics—

It's twenty to four
On one of the last afternoons
Of reasonable light.

Smell the tidal Lagan:

Take a last turn
In the tang of possibility

—a last turn because 'In twelve years' time/ They hanged young McCracken' and because, in this volume, there follows *A Northern Hoard*:—five poems that break the restrained pattern, with searing, surrealist images of pale snipers, 'tidal blood', 'smeared doorstep', 'lumpy dead', Gomorrah and plague, 'black stump of home', 'red dog's eyes in the night' and a return to the stone age—the nightmare imagery of Northern slaughter. The effect is the more powerful for having been held back so long; but the rhetoric is over-strained, a loss of control in the immediacy of reaction, with (deliberate?) echoes of Great War poets' failed attempts at directness. The real bite comes in the bitter, controlled ice-anger of *Midnight*:

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

In Ireland.

Tonight though

The old dens are soaking.
The pads are lost or
Retrieved by small vermin

That glisten and scut.
Nothing is panting, lolling,
Vapouring. The tongue's
Leashed in my throat.

There is a silent howl here, as powerful as Helene Weigel's in *Mother Courage*; the wolf is re-created as werewolf, the human voice changing at midnight into a snarl of revenge, its victims the 'small vermin/ That glisten and scut'; the Nothing that is panting, lolling, vapouring, in the darkness, takes us back to the elemental force of the 'huge nothing that we fear' in DN. This sense of canine reversion ('canine'

is the last word of *A Northern Hoard*) gains force from the tentative hope previously placed in human language: animality revives, even older than the backward look, reaching towards the primitive terror; the tongue, leashed in the throat, is choking and threatening. Yet the poem, detached from this context, can certainly be read quite differently: as the almost sad nostalgia of a tamed dog, descendent of the 'wolfhound . . . crossed with inferior strains', left with nothing to hunt except small vermin, inheritors of the soaking wolf-dens. But I find it difficult to read it in that tamed, harmless way, placed as it is between the nightmares of *A Northern Hoard* and the poem which follows, *The Tollund Man*.

The Tollund Man takes its title from one of the astonishingly preserved corpses dug up in recent years from the bogs of Jutland: curled, naked and foetus-like, on a 2,000-year-old bed of protective peat, the Tollund Man seems calmly sleeping—except that the strangling rope still biting into his throat betrays the savage sacrificial ritual which dumped him there, an offering to the fertile goddess of the earth. The poem vows a pilgrimage to visit his remains, this 'saint's kept body', 'bridegroom to the goddess', since

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

At home, because across the millenia his corpse chimes with those other victims of a savage and almost ritual practice of the present:

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards.

There is both a transference and containment of horror in this analogue, a timelessness of terror, a recognised repetition of outrage; the themes of petrification and continuity, of a dark hell-hole of knowledge ('She tightened her torc on him/ And opened her fen') and a conjuring of ancient present reality by incantation ('Saying the names/ Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard') are fused in this poem, and the resonating reference to the Northern violence is now explicit. The idea latent in the final poems of DD is beginning to take shape.

But though Heaney has here found his major image, his direction remains unclear as yet. The last five poems of Pt I still grope towards appropriate reflection: the four-line poem *Nerthus*

For beauty, say an ash-fork staked in peat,
Its long grains gathering to the gouged split;

A seasoned, unsleeved taker of the weather,
Where kesh and loaning finger out to heather

is apt but unintelligible without the photo it transmutes: a picture, in P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*, of the stark forked stick, upright in the bog, that is the goddess Nerthus, recipient of these sacrifices.

Cairn-maker comes nearer home, exploring the obscure guilt aroused by disturbing another ancient practice: the adding of a stone to those strange pyramids scattered on the hillsides; we assert a link with unknown, perhaps neolithic, predecessors when we add our contribution though the act's significance is partly lost to us; yet to disturb, dislodge, such cairns is to break a code, to violate a language, with mysterious but potent and guilty consequences. Such indifference to the past is dangerous since the earth, the bog, like Eliot's river, retains its power, though the *Navvy*, like the potato-diggers of DN and the fishermen of DD, may not fully know it:

The morass
the macadam snakes over

swallowed his yellow bulldozer
four years ago, laying it down
with lake-dwellings and dug-outs,
pike-shafts, axe-heads, bone pins,

all he is indifferent to.

The bog has a destructively retentive power, tenacious and potentially eruptive, like our personal dreams and memories: the Great War remains nightmarishly present in the *Veteran's Dream*, but human devices ('the last cavalry charge', 'the first gas') fade before the permanent natural threat of disease, the 'white magic' of maggots from 'cankered ground', working gangrene into 'the trench of his wound'. These images of buried fears, of lurking forces, suggest the fragility of our human control, and the last poem of Pt I, *Augury*, contains an obscure threat: the diseased fish of poisoned lakes warns us, but of what? If the boy of DN could finally learn to face and stare down the slimy rat, the adult here recognises the inadequacy of such taming:

What can fend us now
Can soothe the hurt eye

Of the sun,
Unpoison great lakes,
Turn back
The rat on the road.

Pt II of *Wintering Out* signals a sharp transition to private poems and concerns: recording, registering the domestic moments of marriage and raising a family, capturing fragments of travel and farm-work, reacting to newspaper items and local incidents. There is pain, anguish, even tragedy, in this dimension, but the annotation of such experiences is a suspectly familiar mode: as in DD, the poet makes the diary-entry or human interest story verbally precise, but the significance he invests in the mundane points to no wider ordering or

locating of the ordinary. Except that here the *contrast* with Pt I seems to give these fragments of ordinary living a poignancy they would not generate of themselves: a retreat from terror into domesticity is a different kind of assertion from the mere building of unthreatened privacy. A walk in the country, witnessing a calving or nostalgically seeking a favourite spot, an evening swapping stories round the fire, a child lost and found on a cold night, become significant in this explicit division of Pt I and Pt II as a way of emphasising a different permanence, another and human timelessness and continuity. When the internment-camp has become a familiar landmark on a motorway journey and the hooded, dumped corpses are numbered in round figures, the insignificant, the ordinary, the domestic take on the compelling attraction that home has for the exile or the imprisoned.

4. *North* (1975)

The political overtones of the title are obvious, but the collection actually begins, as *WO* ends, on a softer note, with two dedicatory poems to Mary Heaney, the first a celebration of homely chores and quiet sunlit love, the second a depiction of Brueghel-like rusticity, the work of seed-cutters contained in the regular calendar of custom. The first echoes *DD*'s exploration of marriage, with a fleeting reminder ('The helmeted pump in the yard') of a major chord in that collection; the second links *DN*'s field of reference with the recognition of timelessness ('They seem hundreds of years away') presented in *WO*. These prelude poems operate, as did Pt II of *WO*, as context and contrast for a larger inquiry, a political brooding that, in different ways, both Pts I and II of *North* pursue.

Pt I begins with *Antaeus*, ends with *Hercules and Antaeus*: the suggestion of pattern is clear, but the choice of this particular classical theme can remain unclear for now. *Belderg* begins to weave now-familiar music: the discovery of ancient quernstones in the bog, and the sense of connection they prompt—the continuity of practices and of setting:

A landscape fossilized,
Its stone-wall patternings
Repeated before our eyes
In the stone walls of Mayo.

'Neolithic wheat' was no different from today's and the labour of grinding corn remains a constant in the 'congruence of lives' across centuries. Other traces persist also: 'Mossbawn', a current name, has buried in it Irish, Norse and English elements, traces in the language of a sequence of repression, invasion and bondage, hinting a different crushing: bones are ground by quernstones to make fertilizer, but a people crushed may not revive. The bones of the dead are humanised by honour, respect and ritual: *Funeral Rites* con-

trasts the calm but telling ceremony that once served as initiation into awareness of one's dead (the first time the youth shoulders a coffin) with the casual callousness of each news bulletin's latest casualties; adequate respect in the face of these numerous 'neighbourly murders' would require a ritual on a megalithic scale:

I would restore
the great chambers of Boyne.

The poem imagines a great funeral procession, a cortege of thousands winding across the whole country; only in death and burial are feuds placated and pass into the kinder light of legend. But the poem can only *imagine* this resolution and the actual present fact of dying reacts back even on the distancing of legend: in *North* even

those fabulous raiders,
those lying in Orkney and Dublin
measured against
their long swords rusting

those dimly dead Vikings of almost-forgotten invasions, come vividly alive again, their revenges and hatreds brutally real as again-familiar acts like our own. The poet can celebrate ancient death in the epic glitter of false glory; but in the present he will twist and turn to find a space of peace in which to compose:

'Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain'

But even in practising his trade he finds traces of continuity and death: a poetic exercise on a museum exhibit (*Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces*) drives his thoughts back into a too-real past—the incised line on a piece of bone is recognised as a Viking child's attempt to draw the longship whose remains have yielded up the museum's exhibit's, including the decorated bone itself; in that sinuous line is found the 'foliage, bestiarities/ interlacings' of Celtic art, while in the great English literary model of hesitation and withdrawal from action is recognised Hamlet, also a Dane, ineradicably linked with skulls, graves and murders, and the line of associations leads back inexorably to the Viking skulls in the same museum, perhaps the skull of that artist-child itself. A poetic exercise cannot keep the preoccupation with present death at bay, nor ignore Hamlet's question; Baudelaire's answer (*The Digging Skeleton*, adapting *Le Squelette laboureur*, but also recalling the skulls and skeletons of *At a Potato Digging* in DN) horrifies: the anatomy-books that illustrate ordinary human actions in skeletal diagrams offer an image of an endless Sisyphean Hell of work:

are you emblems of the truth,
Death's lifers, hauled from the narrow cell
And stripped of night-shirt shrouds, to tell:
'This is the reward of faith

In rest eternal. Even death
Lies. The void deceives.

Perhaps when death has lost its sting, become casual, an 'acceptable' political price for those not personally involved, the poet can only reactivate its unutterability by reviving old deaths and old disturbing legends. Death too is a darker knowledge, a door into the dark, we too easily become indifferent to. A piece of bone found on the grass (*Bone Dreams*) can jolt us, make present the bone even beneath the flesh of the lover, like feeling the fragile bones of a dead animal; when present words have lost their real import, impact, we need to revive an older hold on death—find, perhaps, in 'ban-hus', a word of 'benches/ wattle and rafters', an awareness of the desparateness of death that we have lost. The sympathetic imagination can react with horror when faced with old barbarities, recoil from Glob's photos, in *The Bog People*, of a young girl buried alive in a bog 2,000 years ago, a bitter sacrifice to futile customs, preserved by the crushing weight of earth that suffocated her; a strange kind of love can go out to that small victim. Yet a report today of the latest Ulster 'atrocities' leaves us unmoved. In a number of poems which dominate this collection and are based on those bog-preserved corpses, Heaney evokes and transfers the energies of pity and anger that move us from the remoter past :

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin :

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

The application of these poems—*Come to the Bower*, *Bog Queen*, *The Grabaulle Man*, *Punishment*, *Strange Fruit*—needs little prompting, though Heaney offers it at times, not allowing us to escape :

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

Nor can we escape, tourist-like, into the aesthetic attitude of awe :

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.
Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth.
They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair
And made an exhibition of its coil,
Let the air at her leathery beauty. . . .
Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible

Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

Reverence, like beatification, like legend, like poetry itself, can distance us; these poems, by colliding a dead but vivid past into present unregarded death, try to jerk us into response; they succeed because in them Heaney himself is touching his own accumulated areas of private response—to bog-holes, to the past as petrified memory, to sexual exploration of the dark: *Come to the Bower* and *Bog Queen* both have an air of betrothal, of tryst, about them, and the young girl of *Punishment* was, we know from *Glob*, an adulteress. In these poems the various strands in DD, of fertility goddesses, non-human mating, crop-resurrection in spring rites, are brought together, while the specific details derived from *Glob* prevent a merely speculative reconstruction of the past: these explorations powerfully combine history and imagination.

The poem-sequence *Kinship* closes this movement and begins to suggest another: the poet reaches back into the past, in the relics of the bog itself, in the litany of resonant titles given to the bog, in finding and recognising the age-old hoard of the bog; but his stance is only ambiguously in the present. As in the opening poems of *WO*, the past and present occupy the same timeless space: the man with the turf-spade confronts the neolithic goddess (Nerthus reappearing from *WO*), the boy following the cart could be a memory of the poet's youth or a deeper echo of the sacrificial waggon of old fertility rites;

the last section can appeal to Tacitus (who recorded the Jutland rites) in a timeless present :

report us fairly,
how we slaughter
for the common good

and shave the heads
of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror.

The sectarian martyrology of the present takes its sordid place in an older pattern of sacrifices to Earth goddesses and Virgin Queens, Nerthus and Mother Ireland. But such de-historicising reduction to mythic patterns is not offered as the whole story: the reference to Tacitus and to the legions that 'stare/ from the ramparts' reminds us of the specific peculiar history of Ireland even before its tragic phase as Viking victim. Though it escaped the orbit of the Roman imperium, it could not escape that of England and the last few poems in Pt I explore that colonial history. *Ocean's Love to Ireland* is a poem of rape

Speaking broad Devonshire,
Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree
As Ireland is backed to England
And drives inland

Raleigh unites the Munster Plantation and the defeat of Spain, Ireland's intermittent hope in the 16th century ('The Spanish prince has spilled his gold/ And failed her'). The references are both classically general and historically specific: the conjuncture of a bloody incident like Smerwick in 1580 and the cultural-imperial hegemony of Elizabethan England. The later Enlightenment, the 'last afternoon of reasonable light' of WO, has its echo here in the tentative encounter of Diana and Actaeon, in true 18th century guise (*Aisling*) and then the *Act of Union* extends the sexual metaphor: England and Ireland's joint progeny threatens both parents

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with the pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.
The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column
Whose stance is growing unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum
Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
At me across the water.

The Betrothal at Cavehill makes explicit part of that threat :

Gunfire barks its questions off Cavehill
And the profiled basalt maintains its stare
South : proud, protestant and northern, and male.
Adam untouched, before the shock of gender.

and finally completes that movement which remained only a possibility in DN : the Protestant/Catholic relationship has finally been presented in terms of male/female relations, but whereas the delicacies of courtship seemed then a possible tactic, in *North* the analogues have been of rape, sacrifice and fertility cult. The last stanza of the poem reverts to the metaphor of private marriage but now under ominous omen :

They still shoot here for luck over a bridegroom.
The morning I drove out to bed me down
Among my love's hideouts, her pods and broom,
They fired above my car the ritual gun.

The last poem in Pt I, *Hercules and Antaeus*, echoes the first, *Antaeus*, but the point here of the Hercules-Antaeus fight is not made precise, for me at least. *Antaeus* is the only poem in Pt I given a date of composition : 1966, prior to the present 'Troubles' and from the period when Heaney seems to have been puzzled about his direction as a poet (cf DN). Antaeus's drawing of renewed strength from the earth at each fall in a fight is an apt image of the poet whose roots are in the real soil of a real mother country; but it is Hercules who passes 'into that realm of fame', by defeating him. In the later poem Hercules achieves that victory but the poet is identified with neither victor nor vanquished : in tone, the exultation of Hercules is celebrated, his power applauded, but Antaeus's 'dream of loss', his sense of 'the cradling dark/ the river-veins, the secret gullies', is still present and attractive : the poem is elegy for Antaeus as well as victory-hymn, and perhaps premature—Antaeus remains a 'sleeping' giant, wrested from the earth but eventually to return to it; Hercules's arms cannot lift him for ever. Perhaps in wresting a political resonance from his concern with the 'bog people' Heaney has achieved only a temporary standpoint, one he cannot and perhaps does not wish to sustain.

Certainly Pt II remains concerned, and in one sense more directly, with the conflict in the North, but there is also an urge towards withdrawal. *Whatever you say, say nothing* presents satirically, even wryly, the poverty of the journalese of 'backlash', 'crack down', 'polarization', and of the available vocabulary of daily response 'where's it going to end', etc. etc. It also notes the

Maneuvrings to find out name and school,
Subtle discrimination by addresses
With hardly an exception to the rule
That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod
And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape.

Living within such distorting, inadequate and dangerous uses of

language, what can the poet do? His own resources and origins are tainted, even at the linguistic level: 'Memento homo quia pulvis es' is resonant and true, but also a sectarian memory-mark from which he must fight free (*Freedman*). *Singing School*, a six-poem sequence that ends the volume, re-traces the poet's trajectory in a different way from DN: swapping adolescent poems with Seamus Deane at St Columb's College in Derry; recognising the 'Ministry of Fear' that surrounds the Ulster Catholic, marked by a Catholic name:

The muzzle of a sten-gun in my eye:
'What's your name, driver?'

'Seamus . . .'

Seamus?

The visit of an RUC constable to the home and the beating of the Orange Drums punctuate the memory of a minority, until in *Summer 1969* the question of conscious identification, choice, commitment is posed:

While the Constabulary covered the mob
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering
Only the bullying sun of Madrid. . . .
'Go back', one said, 'try to touch the people'.
Another conjured Lorca from the hill.

One response, perhaps more complex, is to recognise an example in Goya: it is not only the 'Shootings of the 3rd May' that speak to us of Goya's period; his 'nightmares, grafted to the palace wall', his private horrors of imagination, may speak even more plainly of the terrors of his time. Pt II had begun with an ironic reference to Shelley, *The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream*—a fantasy of poet-hero-liberator, who fails even in fantasy. Pt II, the poem-sequence and the volume end with the very different, more private, reality, a poem entitled *Exposure*:

It is December in Wicklow:
Alders dripping, birches
Inheriting the last light,
The ash tree cold to look at.

The poet is removed from the conflict, wondering

How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?

Perhaps the most he can claim is limited:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner emigré, grown 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.

To have missed the meteorite, not to have produced the work appropriate to the occasion, would be failure. There is regret and guilt at the edges of this final poem. But the volume as a whole presents a richer, more complex and more anguished stance than one of mere retreat. By a major and unexpected act of imagination Heaney has linked and fused a number of his earlier preoccupations: the fear and fascination of sucking slime, the urge to overcome and penetrate into the dark otherness of alien experiences, in both sexual encounter and historical and natural apartness, the insight into the connection between petrification, preservation and memory; in attaching these concerns to the ancient sacrificial rituals of the Jutland 'bog people' he has simultaneously reactivated a sense of barbarous horror and transferred it to the present savagery of Ulster; he has created an aching sense of the utter reality of death, embracing a 2,000-year continuity of murder, and yet refused to merely mythologise that pattern into a safely distancing metaphor. A reading of the Northern struggle in the timeless terms of religious ritual and sacrifice or of sexual violation would be disablingly naive if offered as an immediate political analysis; but Heaney's work has its impact at a pre- and post-political level: it suggests the tap-roots of fear, the primal terror, and insists that death is not an event in politics, though murder and murderous oppression are.

Heaney's concluding sense of failure and marginalisation may be premature. Whatever the differences, it is worth returning to our opening comparison: Heaney was born in 1939, the year Yeats died; had Yeats died after his fourth collection, at Heaney's present age, in 1901, he would have published only *Crossways* (1889), *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Heaney, and the North, may have to wait some time for another Easter 1916.