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From Ritual to Resurrection: The Exploratory Poetic of Seamus Heaney

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From Ritual to Resurrection:
The Exploratory Poetic of Seamus Heaney
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BY

Susan L. Morris

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Abstract

Heaney's poetry has grown and changed since the publication of his first collection of poetry, Death of a Naturalist. This paper is an attempt to present the development of Heaney's exploratory poetic which was created through his use of language and image, allowing him metaphorical vehicles for the examination of oppositions.

Heaney began his poetic exploration, or "dig," with the collections Death of a Naturalist and Door Into the Dark. The poetry presents nature images which represent Heaney's search into the unknown, the dark places. These images symbolize a searching for the imagination and for the purpose of art and beauty.

In Wintering Out Heaney continues his search into the sounds and meanings of words. North is a similar exploration with the emphasis on cultural images.

In both North and Field Work, Heaney is working within an established poetic which ritualizes the writing activity in such a way as to culminate in a renewing of cultural views. The views are connected to the traditional Irish culture, naming it lifeless.

Also included in the exploration of Heaney is an examination of his biographical background and as well as a brief reminder of the political realities of Ireland.

By the time Field Work is written, Heaney is able to express his political views directly. However, He never displays a poetic of gruesome violence and detail when working with the Irish troubles. Instead, he is able to integrate the political tensions into the language and image environments he has already established, allowing a more universal, more human approach to a specific political situation.

The resolution to the many oppositions raised by Heaney is a creation or recreation of views, or what Heaney calls "mind geographies," which suggest the support of that which is life-giving and life-supporting over that which is life-denying.

Most of the paper is dedicated to the analysis of Heaney's poetry, although much information has been included which was derived from book reviews, articles, essays written by Heaney, and interviews with the poet.

Dedicated to Seamus Heaney, of course,

for listening to his inner music

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Introduction

Since Seamus Heaney is a relatively new poet, few critical works dealing with his poetry have been produced. As a result, my analysis of Heaney's poetic and his individual works is original. I have relied on Irish history sources, interviews with Heaney, and reviews of his books for background information.

Heaney was born in 1939 in the small townland of Mossbawn, located in County Derry near Lough Neagh between Belfast and Derry. He was the oldest of nine children in a Catholic family living in the predominately Protestant Northern Ireland. Heaney's father worked in the Protestant-Catholic community as a farmer and cattle dealer. At the age of fourteen, Seamus was sent to a boarding school, St. Columb's College in Londonderry, then on to Queen's College in Belfast to study English language and literature. He gained teaching experience in the Belfast secondary school system and a teacher training school before entering Queen's College once again as an instructor. In 1972, Heaney left teaching, moving with his wife and family to a cottage in the Republic of Ireland, to pursue his career as a poet more earnestly. Having moved again to Dublin, he now teaches at Camfort College, a Catholic teaching school, where he serves as head of the English department.¹

In the structure of my paper, I have taken into consideration the possibility that the reader may be discovering Heaney for the first time. Therefore, I have begun with an overview of Heaney's major concerns and themes. The paper pre-

sents Heaney's attraction to the dark side of nature, suggesting that Heaney's struggle with the unknown and the repelling is a major theme in his work. The political tensions the poet faces are then discussed followed by his exploration of language. Finally, poems which represent Heaney as a fully developed poet are analyzed and the theme of renewal is presented. Furthermore, it has been my intention to present not only the poetic development of Heaney, but also to present a representation of his works and ideas. As a result, I have chosen to include many of his poems in full and to cite Heaney's own insights and ideas, quoted from his essays and interviews.

I. An Overview

Word and image have a fascinating relationship in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. He is able to respond to word sounds and etymologies in a way that creates images and cultures. Yet his images suffer no de-emphasis as a result of Heaney's interest in language. Indeed, the images are so visual that not one critic fails to observe Heaney's image-making abilities. But Heaney feels more entranced by the word, calling his poetry a "fondling of words," a "love-making to language."²

I have chosen as a symbol for Heaney's poetry-making, the water pump, an image to which he assigns a special name, "omphalos,"³ the center of the world. He calls upon a time when the water pump was that which stood at the center of many adjoining family lands. It was a thing shared, a thing needed for basic survival. It was that which brought people together. Heaney recalls one such survivor:

She came every morning to draw water
 Like an old bat staggering up the field:
 The pump's whooping cough, the bucket's clatter
 And slow diminuendo as it filled,
 Announced her. I recall
 Her grey apron, the pocked white enamel
 Of the brimming bucket, and the treble
 Creak of her voice like the pump's handle.
 Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable
 It fell back through her window and would lie
 Into the water set out on the table.
 Where I have dipped to drink again, to be
 Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
Remember the Giver fading off the lip.⁴

The poem, "A Drink of Water," is a consecration of the water and the ritual of going to the pump to partake, "Where

I have dipped to drink again, to be/Faithful...." This poem explains well the connection the people had with the pump and why Heaney viewed it as the center of life. The pump is better explained as a symbol for Heaney's poetry-making with the poem "Rite of Spring,"⁵ which displays the rich sexual and metaphorical possibility in the image of the penetrating pump:

So winter closed its fist
And got it stuck in the pump.
The plunger froze up a lump

In its throat, ice founding itself
Upon iron. The handle
Paralysed at an angle.

Then the twisting of wheat straw
Into ropes, lapping them tight
Round stem and snout, then a light

That sent the pump up in flame.
It cooled, we lifted her latch,
Her entrance was wet, and she came.

Here "omphalos" is the penetration of earth, woman, and imagination, which brings forth life, creation. The poem serves as an excellent description of Heaney's discovery of language in himself. The water, an important element as has been noted, is stuck inside like the child's imagination stuck in the throat of the man. The pump, penetrating the imagination, is caused to flow by fire, another element, another connection to earth. Heaney uses "fire" as that which contrasts the water, lending many possibilities for interpretation of the poem. The contrast to water as life-giver, water as imagination, is that which gives pain and destruction. In this case, the turmoil of Northern Ireland, the land which nurtured

Heaney, is the fire. His experience with the violence and horror of Ireland today has served as a powerful force in Heaney's writing, causing him not only to write about the situation, but to write out of the situation. In other words, he has learned to respond to the troubles not just as a spokesman but as an artist, a human being living among fears and killings and the abuse of life.

Another possible interpretation concedes that water flows in the earth, the mother, which is Ireland. In this case, the fire would be England, that which is in contrast to Ireland. The English contrast would include Heaney's experience with the more sophisticated culture of England, as opposed to the rural culture of Heaney's Ireland, and the noises of English speech and English literature, as opposed to the absorbing silence and the speech of the Irish people. Whether the fire symbolizes violence or England, it was Heaney's facing up to the opposition that brought forth the thought, the life. The reality of violence in Ireland is what forced Heaney to question the value of his art. After his upbringing in rural Ireland, it was the literary language of Heaney's English education that lured him to write. His poetic, then, is an exploratory act, a searching in the dark, and, to use his own metaphor, a digging.

My task, then, will be to present the development of an exploratory poetic created through Heaney's use of language and image allowing him metaphorical vehicles for the examination of oppositions. The resolution to the oppositions is a creation or recreation by Heaney of views, or what Heaney calls

"mind geographies," which suggest the support of that which is life-giving and life-renewing over that which is life-denying.

In an interview with Robert Druce,⁶ Heaney states that the purpose of writing and being a poet is discovered in the writing process. Survey of Heaney's collections of poems reveals his fascination with this process of growth. His first collection, Death of a Naturalist,⁷ was basically imitative of the English literary heritage; Door Into the Dark was an exploration of the dark places, the underneath, the imagination; Wintering Out⁸ was Heaney's "pleasuring in the language,"⁹ of its sounds and mysteries. In North¹⁰ the poetic began to reach fruition, and a language-image integration supplied rich resurrection metaphors, and in Heaney's most recent effort, Field Work, he is working in an established poetic. To appreciate this process, it will be necessary to investigate works from various collection, to contrast and compare them, and to eventually speak in a language that is created by the understanding of Heaney's poetic.

II. Searching the Dark

What attracts critics most about Heaney is his ability to recreate nature images, particularly dark nature images. One critic calls this ability "Heaney's sense of touch," or his "perfect physical pitch."¹¹ Richard Murphy's comment, quoted by many critics, is probably the best summation of the critics' view: "His original power, which even the sternest

critics bow to with respect, is that he can give you the feeling as you read his poems that you are actually doing what he describes."¹² He seeks an "image, not an idea,"¹³ which produced in his initial efforts poems which rarely contained much more than images, although the images were constructed with clear language control.

"Digging,"¹⁴ the first poem "where" Heaney got his "feel into words,"¹⁵ serves as a good example of this "original power," that which showed possibility in the new poet. He establishes the metaphor of digging as searching, his tool being his pen, "Going down and down/for the good turf. Digging." Before ending the poem, though the metaphor be established, Heaney gushes out an example of the capabilities he feels incubating inside: "The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge/Through living roots awaken in my head." Convinced, the reader absorbs Heaney's vow, "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests./I'll dig with it."

In a review¹⁶ of Field Work, Roger Conover notes that an article by Charles Darwin on instincts observed that "some men...could with remarkable accuracy maintain a definite course, travelling long distances between ice-hummocks, continuously changing directions without being guided.... Seamus Heaney also has this wayfinding sense...he is expert as a mole at guiding us through regions of darkness." That instinct drew Heaney to the dark places in nature, underneath places. He recalls the excitement of reading John Webster's plays, "the

very dark and brooding violence in the imagery, very physical, scalding, foul images."¹⁷ These Webster images immediately bring to mind examples of Heaney's imagery as in the following passage from "At a Potato Digging," an early work from Death of a Naturalist:

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

The new potato, sound as stone,
putrefied when it had lain
three days in the long clay pit.
Millions rotted along with it.

Mouths tightened in, eyes died hard,
faces chilled to a plucked bird.
In a million wicker huts
beaks of famine snipped at guts.

A people hungering from birth,
grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth,
were grafted with the great sorrow.
Hope rotted like the marrow.

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:
and where potato diggers are
you still smell the running sore. (p. 32)

Detectable in this passage is what William Logan called the "stale smell of composition."¹⁸ Undoubtedly, this poem reveals Heaney responding to his traditional literary education. It is constructed in rhymed stanzas and voiced in an educated tongue: "putrefied where it had lain." And there is a sort of practical use of metaphor which, though sometimes effective, is detectably constructed: the famine becomes a bird whose "beaks" "snip," the people become plants which are "grafted" with sorrow. There is a personification of an emo-

tion, hope, which is a traditional English literary device.

However, it is important to note certain poetic elements in this passage which become increasingly important in Heaney's later work. Most noticeable is the use of nature and people dependent on or close to nature. Also, it is important that the poem includes the dark side of nature, the "brooding violence." Next, the poem is of his own country and the troubles of his own people. In Heaney's two most recent books, the provisional interest, concerned with the specific situation of Ireland, gives way to a more parochial interest, a universal concern for humankind. Stranger to his later efforts, however, is the negative tone of "At a Potato Digging" in which the famine victims have been resurrected, "hungering from birth," to a hell, "grubbing, like plants, / in the bitch earth." Unlike the use of land images in Heaney's later poems, this land has been "fouled."

In the last two stanzas, something more consonant with the developed Heaney, who has a better ability to view the world as both ugly and beautiful, emerges:

Under a gay flotilla of gulls
The rhythm deadens, the workers stop.
Brown bread and tea in bright canfuls
Are served for lunch. Dead-beat, they flop

Down in the ditch and take their fill,
Thankfully breaking timeless fasts;
Then, stretched on the faithless ground, spill
Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts. (p.33)

Though the ground be "faithless," the people still offer libations as they did in a time when the earth was more rewarding of their efforts, as expressed in an earlier passage from

"At a Potato Digging": "Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black/Mother...Make a seasonal altar of the sod" (p. 31). It is through ritual that the people are finally rewarded.

Another interesting element of the last two stanzas is that not until here does beauty finally emerge. The scenes of hunger are meshed with scenes of beauty. The meagre rations of food are offered in "bright canfuls" beneath a "gay flotilla of gulls." It is not to lighten the pain and horror of the situation that Heaney sets images of the "brooding violence" against images of beauty, but rather to place the scene in a new environment, to give a more complete picture of the ugly and the beautiful in the events of history which have been ingrained on the minds of the Irish, "hungering from birth" not only as the victims in 1845 were, but also as the people of today's Ireland are, hungering for purpose and beauty.

This mixture reached fruition in Heaney's description of women buried in the bog for centuries and finally uncovered. He describes them with a beauty and love that revives their dignity and fills them with a warm human breath: "...the wind/ on her naked front./It blows her nipples to amber beads,/ it shakes the frail rigging/of her ribs./...her shaved head/like a stubble of black corn,/her blindfold a soiled bandage,/her noose a ring/to store/the memories of love."¹⁹

Before fully developing this mixture of violence and beauty, however, Heaney, trusting his instincts, had to allow himself to be drawn to the dark, the underneath. Basically all

of Death of a Naturalist and Door Into the Dark were images void of light or much chance for light. It is as if Heaney were helpless to the dark's seduction, the underworld. Heaney discloses how the attraction to the omphalos connected him to the nether side of nature in a passage from "Kinship" in North: "This centre holds/and spreads,/sump and seedbed,/a bag of waters/...I grew out of all this/like a weeping willow/ inclined to/the appetites of gravity."²⁰ Many examples of nature's gravity at work on Heaney are found in Door Into the Dark which deals with fishing, seeking below water, searching, perhaps the center of water, the beginning, the imagination's key. "The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon" serves as one such example:

The ridged lip set upstream, you flail
Inland again, your exile in the sea
Unconditionally cancelled by the pull
Of your home water's gravity.

And I stand in the centre, casting.
The river cramming under me reflects
Slung gaff and net and a white wrist flicking
Flies well-dressed with tint and fleck.

Walton thought garden worms, perfumed
By oil crushed from dark ivy berries
The lure that took you best, but here you come
To grief through hunger in your eyes.

Ripples arrowing beyond me,
The current strumming water up my leg,
Involved in water's choreography
I go, like you, by gleam and drag

And will strike when you strike, to kill.
We're both annihilated on the fly.
You can't resist a gullet full of steel.
I will turn home fish-smelling, scaly. (p 18)

The poem, structured in an in-and-out imitation of the lapping tide, is an attempt to hunt and face the dark imagi-

nation. The image of the artist casting in search of the imagination, "I stand at the centre, casting," is familiar enough that the poem might fail if more emphasis were placed on it. However, Heaney uses that image to establish the imagination-seeking activity and then places emphasis on the strange luring events, both in the fish and the fisher. What is interestingly de-emphasized is the catch. Even though the fisher reigns victor, the victory is undermined by the description, "I will turn home fish-smelling, scaly." It is as if Heaney were not willing or not able to disclose the catch. The poem explains the strange lure, attraction, but not the find. Perhaps Heaney is afraid or uncertain of what might be dangling at the end of the line. This tone of fear is not unique to the "Salmon" poem. Heaney, like the hunted beasts, is being lured by his own hunger for the unknown and the beautiful. Fellow poet Richard Murphy writes in a review²¹ that "Seamus Heaney brings both kinds of fear together--the creative awe and destructive horror." He is drawn to the "creative awe" just as the orbits, seasons, instincts and other structures of nature draw beings to their courses. Heaney recognizes nature in man and his desire to follow his instinctual cravings and orbits. Man structures his life in orbits and rituals with ties to seasons in farming and religious seasonal rites, as well as, unfortunately, the ritualistic repetition of history's brutality and destruction, as will become evident in Heaney's later poetry.

In a series of poems depicting the hunt of the eel, Heaney binds nature's orbits and lures to his own creative search.

In the seven poems of "A Lough Neagh Sequence" in Door Into the Dark (pp. 38-45), Heaney recreates the cycle of the life of the eel, binding the life of the hunters to the eel and, finally, using these cycles as a metaphor for Heaney's inner attractions, struggles, and fears of his creative search. Just as the salmon worked against the current to follow its instinct, the eel, being "true to his orbit," works "against ebb, current, rock, rapids" and upon his arrival, "Dark delivers him hungering/down each undulation" (p.39). The fishermen "Not sensible of any kyrie/...Pursue the work in hand as destiny" (p.41). Here, an image from "At a Potato Digging" is repeated: "The gulls fly and umbrella overhead,/...Responsive acolytes above the boat" (p.41). Again, an activity is being ritualized, made divine and, again, at the end of the sequence the poet enters. First the poet is combined with the hunted, that which follows its orbits and instincts: "In ponds, drains, dead canals/she turns her head back,/older now, following/whim deliberately...." Then the poet's search and uncertainty are echoed in the eel's life-giving. The poem is called "The Return":

Who knows if she knows
her depth or direction;
she's passed Malin and
Tory, silent, wakeless,
a wisp, a wick that is
its own taper and light
through the weltering dark.
Where she's lost once she lays
ten thousand feet down in
her origins. The current
carries slicks of orphaned spawn. (p.44)

The final poem, "Vision," switches perspective completely. No longer is the reader witness to a retelling of natural events, but witness to the poet structuring himself into the ritual, disclosing his fears and his unyielding attraction to the unknown:

Unless his hair was fine-combed
 The lice, they said, would gang up
 Into a mealy rope
 And drag him, small, dirty, doomed

Down to the water. He was
 Cautious then in riverbank
 Fields. Thick as a birch trunk
 That cable flexed in the grass

Every time the wind passed. Years
 Later in the same fields
 He stood at night when eels
 Moved through the grass like hatched fears

Towards the water. To stand
 In one place as the field flowed
 Past, a jellied road,
 To watch the eels crossing land

Re-wound his world's live girdle.
 Phosphorescent, sinewed slime
 Continued at his feet. Time
 Confirmed the horrid cable. (p.45)

The poet is finally drawn "Down to the water" by his working against the current, the oppositions at work within him.

III. The Move South

Oppositions--whether they were between Catholics and Protestants, rural life and urban life, or English and Irish--were becoming an increasing threat on the very existence of the Irish people in the 1960's. The Irish Catholics had lived

with generations of abuse and revenge; the whole of Irish history, taught to the Irish children in schools, was a series of repetitious acts of rebellion against the onset of English rule in the north. At the time Door Into the Dark was published, in 1969, a new outburst of violence had occurred in Heaney's resident city of Belfast and other major northern cities.²² Terence O'Neill had become the new prime minister of Northern Ireland in 1963 and had proceeded in efforts to bridge relations between Catholic and Protestant Ulstermen. But a strong voice from the Protestant community, represented largely by Rev. Ian Paisley, criticized O'Neill on the basis of a fear that "a rising Catholic population would eventually vote Northern Ireland into the Republic" (p. 112).

With an emphasis in the 1960's on civil rights, a strengthening Catholic civil rights movement left O'Neill "trying to hold a precarious position" (p. 112), and when violence broke out on October 5, 1968, over the banning of a civil rights march, O'Neill resigned. Although the ban had been established, largely against the activities of the Catholic community, a Protestant march commemorating the 1690 Siege of Londonderry was allowed which triggered an attack by angry Catholics in August, 1969, in Londonderry and other Northern Ireland cities. Eventually the British army was brought in "to prevent further sectarian conflict" (p. 113). The Irish Republican Army, established generations ago but at that time relatively inactive, moved in defense of the Catholic people in Belfast and Londonderry.

In 1971, the British government instigated internment of Irish Catholics suspected of any connection with resistance, resulting in a campaign by the IRA to bomb commercial premises. As had been the case in generations past, there was fighting in the streets and daily supervision of the movements of Catholic civilians. As a result, "The Catholic population as a whole was alienated" (p. 113). In 1972, the governing system of Northern Ireland, the Stormont parliament, was suspended by the British government and a "conservative minister" (p. 113) named William Whitelaw became Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This is the year Seamus Heaney and his family moved to County Wicklow, south of the border which girdled the violence.

"People keep asking me what it's like to be living in Belfast and I've found myself saying that things aren't too bad in our part of town: a throwaway consolation meaning that we don't expect to be caught in a crossfire if we step into the street.... I am fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung one moment by the long tail of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror.... We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart." Heaney continues in this essay, entitled "Christmas 1971" and written for the Listener,²³ to recount the experiences of living with the British army, roadblocks, and even bombs, one of which exploded just as Heaney's wife got out of range.

Events such as these were destroying any hopes the poet

may have had for a commitment to his art and were destroying as well his hopes for a normal life. The following quote from the "Christmas" article expresses the kind of fear Heaney was harboring: "Last Sunday at an interdenominational carol service in the university, I had to read from Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech. 'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the full meaning of its creed'--and on that day all men would be able to realize fully the implications of the old spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last, Great God Almighty, we are free at last.' But as against the natural hopeful rhythms of that vision, I remembered a dream that I'd had last year in California. I was shaving at the mirror of the bathroom when I glimpsed in the mirror a wounded man falling towards me with his bloodied hands lifted to tear at me or to implore."

Caught between the hopeful dream and horrific nightmare, Heaney found himself unable to set his writing at the center of his life. He was being forced into a position as spokesman for the Catholic community, and he felt very unwilling and unable to accept that responsibility. He explains: "I felt and still do feel a tension within myself between the given part of whatever talent I have and the work it might be put to. I don't think my intelligence is naturally analytic or political. But I feel that the gift for surrender...of listening and rejoicing in language, was rebuked and challenged by another part of myself that recognized the world around me was demanding something more."²⁴ In fact, Heaney decided to

leave Belfast and attempt to pursue what he felt he was most capable of: a career as a poet.

A friend, Ann Saddlemeier, offered a cottage which suited Heaney and his family in Southern Ireland, and though he worried about the implications of moving south, he chose to take the offer. Again he was in a position of following his instincts against the demands of opposition. If he were to have stayed, he would have had to face up to the daily violence and the dangerous position of spokesman. In leaving, he had still to face the accusations of being a traitor, running. This inner war, too, materialized in Heaney's poetry as in Field Work in a poem (IX) from a series of sonnets dedicated to Ann Saddlemeier:

Outside the kitchen window a black rat
 Sways on the briar like infected fruit:
 'It looked me through, it stared me out, I'm not
 Imagining things. Go you out to it.'
 Did we come to this wilderness for this?
 We have our burnished bay tree at the gate,
 Classical, hung with the reek of silage
 From the next farm, tart-leaved as inwit.
 Blood on a pitch-fork, blood on chaff and hay,
 Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing--
 What is my apology for poetry?
 The empty briar is swishing
 When I come down, and beyond, your face
 Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass.
 (p. 41)

The rat is an image of fear taken from Death of a Naturalist, Heaney's first collection of poetry. In this poem, he is in the process of review, trying to justify his activity of writing when others were living with violence. What is his apology for art? To overcome fears and discover a place

for art and beauty, Even though the ones he loves may not fully understand: "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."²⁵

And how is he to go about discovering this place for beauty? Heaney finds his concerns echoed in a quotation from Shakespeare: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea/Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" Heaney's answer, in his essay, "Feeling Into Words" is, "by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity'."²⁶

He continues: "I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time grant the religious intensity of violence [sic] its deplorable authenticity and complexity."²⁷ What Heaney discovered to fulfill this role were the preserved bodies found in the bogs of Jutland of men and women who had suffered in the act of human sacrifice "to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring."²⁸ Heaney explains that "taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than archaic barbarous rite: It is an archetypal pattern."²⁹

Here is an example of a bog poem, called "The Tollund Man":

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus
 To see his peat-brown head,
 The mild pods of his eye-lids,
 His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country nearby
 Where they dug him out
 His last gruel of winter seeds
 Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
 The cap, the noose, the girdle,
 I will stand a long time.
 Bridegroom to the goddess,

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

Trove of the turfcutters'
 Honeycombed workings.
 Now his stained face
 Reposes at Aarhus.

II

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,

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

III

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

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,
 Watching the pointing hands
 Of country people,
 Not Knowing their tongue.

Out there in Jutland
 In the old man-killing parishes
 I will feel lost,
 Unhappy and at home.³⁰

Heaney has stated that he wishes to somehow encompass both "human reason" and "the religious intensity of the violence." The obvious response to the poem would put forth the question concerning how well Heaney has fulfilled his goals. The Tollund Man was offered as a sacrifice to the Mother Goddess who was the goddess of the ground. She "needed new bridegrooms each winter to be with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring."³¹ Even though Heaney has paralleled "Irish political martyrdom" with these bog occurrences, in actuality, there is a very significant difference between the two. Though barbaric, the Jutland sacrifice was motivated by the belief that continued life would result from the action, so it was seen as a life-giving activity. The Irish situation, however, has been much different. It has been an endless repetition of killing in the name of political ideologies. The British killed to take, the Irish killed to defend. Certainly both the Irish and the Jutland situation represents Heaney's emblems of adversity, but where in the comparison does the poet make a plea for humane reason?

For the answer, it will be necessary to look closely at section II of "The Tollund Man":

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

The blasphemy Heaney speaks of is the acting as a deity. There is a sacred nature Heaney is assigning to the bog people which could be labelled "blasphemy" in that Heaney is doing the consecrating, he is acting as the deity rather than sacrificing to the deity. Heaney "consecrates" by writing, reviewing the situation of the Jutland bog people and making the connection between the bog people of Jutland and the Irish of today. Heaney, by reviewing the Tollund man, allows the bog man image to "germinate" or recreate the images of Irish people in the minds of the readers. This forces a review or a viewing anew of the old images, a facing up to the darkness and the ugliness in a way that Heaney has been doing in his poetry. The Irish images are then made new by having them paralled with a "sacrifice" which glorified rebirth rather than death.

IV. Language

In order to see how these images are integrated with Heaney's language system, it will be necessary to back up a bit, to follow Heaney's language evolution. In a recent article on Heaney in

Newsweek, it is stated that "Heaney adores words; as you read his poetry you can sense him handling words like wine, like earth, like flesh. He knows that poetry is an electric circuit between body, mind, and spirit." In fact, Heaney claims that it was the sounds of word that first attracted him to language: "The poet who had most affected me early on was Hopkins, and I wanted to make noises like that."³²

As with the contrasts Heaney found in nature, there was in his language world a contrast of lives between the rural Irish voice and the educated English voice. And, again, it was the contrast that excited Heaney into action. In the essay "Belfast, 1972" in Preoccupations, Heaney explains how the very names of his environment reflected the contrasts. "Our farm was called Mossbawn. Moss, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and bawn, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss barn, and ban is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cottod? In the syllables of my home I see the split culture of Ulster" (p.35).

This passage is particularly important in that it signifies the beginnings of Heaney's search into the culture of words, the way people are bonded to and formed by language and how the etymologies of words disclose cultures. In Wintering Out, Heaney's collection which explores the sounds and meanings of words, the language and the nature images begin to merge as in "The Wool Trade":

'The wool trade'--the phrase
 Rambled warm as a fleece

Out of his hoard.
 To shear, to bale and bleach and card

Unwound from the spools
 Of his vowels

And square-set men in tunics
 Who plied soft names like Bruges

In their talk, merchants
 Back from the Netherlands:

O all the hamlets where
 Hills and flocks and streams conspired

To a language of waterwheels,
 A lost syntax of looms and spindles,

How they hang
 Fading, in the gallery of the tongue!

And I must talk of tweed,
 A stiff cloth with flecks like blood. (p. 37)

Here the culture is being meshed with the very sounds of words. The speaker in the poem is being seduced and delighted by the noises just as the reader is being seduced and delighted by the noises of the poem. The images of the scene are entwined with the sounds spoken: "Unwound from the spools of his vowels," "Hills and flocks and streams conspired/To a language of waterwheels." Sometimes, even the images are confused by the mesh as in this excerpt from "A New Song":

But now our river tongues must rise
 From licking deep in native haunts
 To flood, with voweling embrace,³⁴
 Demesnes staked out in consonants.

Heaney recognizes a power in the language to separate and categorize people by cultures and allow changes to strange the archaic voice, where it survives "in native haunts." He makes his point in a beautifully understated fashion by ending the poem with the line "A vocable, as rath and ballaun," a line which has no meaning unless the reader scurries to discover the forgotten meanings of the final words.

In "Traditions" he describes how the English speech-culture slowly quiets the Irish speech-culture:

Our guttural muse
 was bulled long ago
 by the alliterative tradition,
 her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten
 like the coccyx
 or a Brigid's Cross
 yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that'most
 sovereign mistress',
 beds us down into
 the British isles. (p. 31)

Heaney cleverly and understatedly brings in the images of nature and religion, as they too are being forgotten, with the lines "forgotten/like the coccyx" which used to be a tail "or a Brigid's Cross."

It can be surmised at this point, then, that Heaney sees himself as resurrector of past culture through image and word and the creation of a language which integrates the two. The purpose of integrating the two is to investigate the bond between man and nature, past culture and present culture, the "baggage" a

language injects in our cultures and concepts. The words which best lend themselves to this mesh are the words of places. Words have histories, people have histories, people live in places which are named by words. Heaney doesn't hesitate in exploring the possibility there. Consider, as a case in point, the poem "Toome":

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

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

 loam, flints, musket-balls,
 fragmented ware,
 torcs and fish-bones
 till I am sleeved in

 alluvial mud that shelves
 suddenly under
 bogwater and tributaries,
 and elvers tail my hair. (p. 26)

Heaney is suggesting an analogy between the way the tongue behaves in the production of the place-name "Toome" and the downward, searching movements his interests have taken in Door Into the Dark. "Fishbones," "bogwater" and "elver" (baby eels) make connections with images Heaney has established in his more image-oriented poems. "Flints" calls back the fire, "musket-balls" the violence, and "loam" the very mixture he is creating.

In "Belderg"³⁵ and "Anahorish,"³⁶ both names of places, this poetic of image-language integration can be observed:

Belderg

'They just kept turning up
 And were thought of as foreign'--
 One-eyed and benign
 They lie around his house
 Quernstones out of a bog.

To lift the lid of the peat
 And find this pupil dreaming
 Of neolithic wheat!
 When he stripped off the blanket bog
 The soft-piled centuries

Fell open like a glib:
 There were the first plough-marks,
 The stone-age fields, the tomb
 Corbelled, turfed and chambered,
 Floored with dry turf-coomb.

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

The "subject" of "Belderg" is the poem, " a landscape fossilized." Heaney is recreating the lost culture of his people by renewing archaic images, especially rural images, and archaic language. He is the "pupil" (presented as a pun) "dreaming of neolithic wheat," dreaming of his cultural past. A quern is a hand-operated, and therefore still personal, mill for grinding grain. The grain is the basic substance, that which is from the earth as are Heaney's images and language. The milling of the grain created the poem as he digs into the past, "When he stripped off blanket bog/The soft-piled centuries fell open like a glib." Part of the delight of Heaney's poetry is in being able to say, "There were the first plough-marks,/The stone-age fields, the tomb." These images have been structured into language, "Corbelled, turfed and chambered," creating a

"landscape fossilized."

Much is contained in the lines "...stone-wall patternings/
Repeated before our eyes." Stone walls, famous in Ireland for their display of political chants, are also where the written language was born in the form of images constructed in patterns to convey a message. This is, of course, exactly what Heaney's poetic does and by repeating the ritual he is bringing back the primal experience of language and image. It is interesting that he chooses the phrase "Repeated before our eyes," because he has already established the quernstone as a big eye, describing it as "One-eyed" which draws an analogy between our eyes and the quernstones. Quernstones grind grain and Heaney has already established grain as a symbol of past culture and language. Therefore, our eyes become the stones, and by Heaney's activity of repeating the patterns or images, our reading becomes a grinding, a making or remaking. In other words, through our experience of reading Heaney's poetry, we are remaking the culture and language of the past. This serves, certainly, as a reviewing of the culture. So, it can be stated that Heaney has chosen to deal with the ugly and destructive aspects of his present Ireland not by denunciation of the present horrors, but by consecration of the past culture through new images to represent that culture, through resurrection. With this view, Heaney is able to support his instinctual desire to connect to the omphalos, the imagination, that which is life-giving and life-supporting.

V. The Established Heaney

By the time Heaney was working on North, published in 1976, violence in Northern Ireland had become established as a way of life. Although Heaney had moved out of the north, he still had friends who had decided to remain. Also, he'd had time to think through the experiences he'd lived through, spent time in California in a completely new environment, and returned to remain in the south in an environment that better allowed him his writing schedule. It is interesting to observe how Heaney, having established the makings of a poetic with his first three collections, then chose to become more vocal about the Irish troubles in his poetry. Rather than indulging in a gruesome, graphic display of poetic violence, as he was most capable of, considering his ability to create image and work with the darkness, he continued to rely upon the images and metaphors he had established. As mentioned before, one way Heaney deals with the "ugly" or dark side of the world is to denounce it by emphasizing the "beautiful." Also, it was mentioned that he works with myths and histories which harbor political emotion and recreates an environment or mind geography for them so as to lend them depth and beauty that the political world does not allow. Analysis of the remaining stanzas of "Belderg" will reveal how Heaney also uses resurrection as a central motif in his poetry.

Before I turned to go

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

Certainly, the "persistence" here refers to the struggle the Irish have had with Britain to remain a unified nation. The famous Easter Rising, which launched Republican military violence as a proclamation of support for and commitment to a unified Ireland, occurred in 1916. Here the Irish Republican Army emerged, a force which survives today on the same basic commitments of the Easter Rising. In 1690, William of Orange, defeated French and Irish troops in the Battle of the Boyne, an event still commemorated by the northern Protestants, whose representative color is orange. Even earlier, in 1649, were the repressive activities of Cromwell who massacred townspeople and instigated laws against Catholics. The Irish, then, are fighting a struggle that has lasted at least 300 years. Furthermore, the language of the poem suggests a more lengthy period of resistance, pain, and hatred, for "iron, flint, and bronze," refers back to the Norman invasion which began in 1169.

The phrase "stubbed and cleared of stones" ultimately refers to the home, which supports the superficial visual image. But the way the lines are constructed, with "home" coming after, "stubbed and cleared of stones," seems, initially, to refer to "lives." The lives are stubbed by the violence and destruction. As established, stones are the grinders, the makers. Consequently,

the lives "cleared of stones" are the lives unable to make, create. As the reader continues, the emphasis is shifted back to "stubbed and cleared of stone" describing "home," which is, of course, Ireland, which shows the wear of her troubles.

Here is the final part of the poem:

So I talked of Mossbawn,
 A bogland name. 'But moss?'
 He crossed my old home's music
 With older strains of Norse.
 I'd told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound
 And how I could derive
 A forked root from that ground
 and make bawn an English fort,
 A planter's walled-in mound,

Or else find sanctuary
 And think of it as Irish,
 Persistent if outworn.
 'But the Norse ring on your tree?'
 I passed through the eye of the quern,

Grist to an ancient mill,
 And in my mind's eye saw
 A world-tree of balanced stones,
 Querns piled like vertabrae
 The marrow crushed to grounds.

Here Heaney presents the dualism he discovered in his homeland and expressed in the essay mentioned before. After disclosing the dualism to his companion, he is asked, "But the Norse ring on your tree?" "Ring" is an important word here, for it, again, interweaves the image with the language. Literally, a ring in a tree tells the tree's age and its hardships, but a word also has a "ring" to it, in this case a Norse ring which

tells of its history. How does Heaney respond to this mark, this undeniable sound? "I passed through the eye of the quern,/ Grist to an ancient mill." Heaney is describing the penetration into the imagination, the eye, the center, the omphalos. Through his creative activity, his imagination, he becomes the grain (past culture) to the mill (creating). His final image in the poem expresses the destruction of the Irish peoples's creativity or life-making. The quernstones become vertabrae, undeniably human, crushed to grounds. This forms two images--one is of broken pieces as the grounds left after the grinding of grain, and the other is of the people becoming part of the ground, the soil they worship as in the poem "Kinship": "mother ground/ is sour with the blood/of her faithful."³⁷ This image is religious in nature, imitating a sacrifice which reminds the reader of the religious rituals which were derived from the repetitions in nature. The poem seems to end with an image of destruction until analyzed carefully. The "world-tree," synonym for "omphalos," center of the world, is a vision of inactive querns, piled in a manner that resembles the bones found in archeological digs. These bones represent views of Ireland as the ones expressed by Heaney's companion in the poem, talk about "persistence,/a congruence of lives." In other words, the views are of another time, they are without life. The marrow, the lifestuff, has been "crushed to grounds." But isn't the grinding of grain into grounds for the purpose of making something new, bread or cakes? Heaney is suggesting here

that new views must be created, the old views are lifeless.

Actually, the idea of the Irish being meshed with their land is very important to Heaney and opens the opportunity for a whole new area of discussion. Heaney explains in the essay "The Sense of Place," that the land and its names and histories form the person, an idea on which we've already speculated. But via the process of explaining this connection he makes a very important statement which suggests a new area of speculation:

Irrespective of our creed or politics, irrespective of what culture or subculture may have coloured our individual sensibilities, our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture or from a savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation.³⁸

Politically, this means that the "inhabitant" is bonded to the place by reacting to the name of the place. The language surrounding a place reflects a history that forms a "country" or idea which forces emotions, loves, and confidences to be interwoven with the place. Separation from the place is more than a physical occurrence, it is a threat to the "inhabitant's" sense of self.

Artistically, it means there is a way of thinking about

and talking about the people of Ireland by the use of place names which evoke a mental geography instead of an image. By the use of word sounds and word meanings, then, new images which comment on or connect to the geographical country can be created or recreated. This idea needs to be explored in more detail before it can be appreciated.

In Heaney's statement, he explains that this "country of the mind" is reinforced either by the "shared inherited culture," which in his case is Irish, or the "savoured literary culture," which is English, or both. For Heaney, it is certainly both influences at work but, uniquely, these two influences, in the "real world" are at each others' throats. The tension is more than political for Heaney, so his poetic must reflect a consideration deeper than the political or with a complication that is not only political but also artistic. In other words, language, to Heaney, is a basic influence on his view of himself. The language with which he has been formed and now makes his living is involved in a struggle which in the "real world" is a political concern. It is to him, however, also a struggle of self.

What he has done, since he can't alleviate the tension in the political world, is to create a "mind geography" which both contains the vocables of the two influences as well as meshing, as has been explored, the Irish landscape with the English word. What this results in is the renaming and re-making of the Irish "mind geography" as a way of reordering the manner in which the political world is viewed. The new

"mind geography" acts as a resurrection in that an old image or idea is given new life or seen in a new light.

It is important to make note of a distinction about Heaney's use of English-Irish vocables before examining his poetic in full bloom. For, although Heaney recognizes the meshing of Irish and English sounds in his poetry, he makes a distinction about his own intentions as compared to the intentions of other poets.

Recently at a poetryreading in Cork, a student remarked, half reproachfully, that my poetry didn't sound very Celtic. The verb was probably more precise than he intended. His observation was informed by an idea of Irish poetry in English, formulated most coherently by Thomas McDonagh, a professor of English at University College, Dublin, who was shot for his part in the Easter Rising of 1916. In his view, the distinctive note of Irish poetry struck when the rhythms and assonances of Gaelic poetry insinuate themselves into the texture of the English verse. And indeed many poets in this country, notably Austin Clarke, have applied Gaelic techniques in the making of their music and metres. I am sympathetic to the efforts gained but I find the whole enterprise a bit programmatic. 39

What this serves to emphasize is that Heaney's poetic is not so much a system as it is an exploration. Heaney's interests in the Irish-English mystery in language is an exploratory concern rather than a function which he, as an Irishman, has been destined to fulfill. The mesh between Irish and English already exists in the language; it is his job to explore the meanings and possible metaphors inherent in the language. In this way he is remaining true to his digging metaphor; he is poet-archeologist. He explains, "I think of the personal and

Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished on English as consonants."⁴⁰ He is talking about much more than sound here. First of all, he acknowledges that the language he knows, loves, and uses to create is a language of both Irish and English influences, but it is more the way he views the two influences in harmony that is important. The Irish influences are more personal, more pleasurable, as in the pleasure of the sounding of a vowel, the natural pleasure in rounding the lips around a sound as in, "My mouth holds round/the soft blastings,/Toome, Toome."⁴¹ It is the vowel that is vocalized, the sound which, though it be guttural, is formed inside the speaker. In contrast, the English influences are the consonants, formed with the mouth, more surface than the sounds of the vowels. The consonants are what constrict but are also what give form. They are the abrasives, the jabs, but they are also what change the vowel from sound to word.

A poem which can be examined as working within the established Heaney poetic is "Anahorish." In many ways, it is a remaking of the poem "Rite of Spring," which was explored in a much earlier section of this paper, before Heaney's poetic was developed.

My 'place of clear water',
 the first hill in the world
 where springs washed into
 the shiny grass.

and darkened cobbles
 in the bed of the lane.
Anahorish, soft gradient
 of consonant, vowel-meadow,

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.

What is important to note immediately is that "Anahorish" is the name of a place. The sound of the word and the meaning of the word are what instigated the writing of the poem. Heaney begins with the meaning in a stanza describing the beginning, a childhood memory, his "first hill in the world." The whole first stanza contains an undeniable birth image, "the first hill" being the pregnant belly, the "place of clear water" being the womb from which he is "washed into the shiny grass...in the bed." Also it contains the beginnings of language, and expression, as in the "Rite of Spring," surrounded by the very sounds that seduced him. The emphasis is on the name "Anahorish," on its sounds, and on the ability the word has to create a landscape in Heaney's mind. The main landscape image is of a hill, a mound. Heaney shows how the word suggests not only a meaning, "place of clear water", but an image, "soft gradient of consonant." The first consonant is soft and light followed by the "h" which requires more force to emit and then the "sh", the strongest sound in the word. With the word's suggestion of water and mound, Heaney creates a landscape of cycles or mirrored images. The water is from below, the hill reaches above. The first stanza contains a

birth image and the last a death image. The event takes place in the "winter evening"; winter and evening or dark are both times when the world seems like death, cold, dark, inactive. The people go into this death world with pails and barrows. A "barrow" is, of course, a wheelbarrow for hauling, but it is also a mound where the dead are buried, an image which supports the original mound image. In the next line the people are called "mound-dwellers" referring both to the way the rural Irish created mounds of stone around their lands, called hedges, and how they are living through this winter, this place of death. They go "to break the light ice/at wells and dunghills."

They break the ice to get water for survival and for renewal. This relates to the birth or life-giving image of the first stanza. The "dunghill" refers to an ancestral line of activity associated with death. Norman O. Brown explains, "And in the magic-dirt complex we can discern the fear of death and the fantastic wish for an immortal self-replenishing body. Hence the rituals of scatophagy, and that close homologue of scatophagy, necrophagy, and the more generally constant association of dirt with funeral ceremonies. Priam, on the death of Hector, rolled in the dung heap; primitive tribes smear themselves as a sign of mourning, and we wear black; the Tonga Islanders raised a pious mound of ordure on the grave; our Indo-European ancestors raised a mound of stones."⁴² Then too the dung is what is used to fertilize, to encourage life. Water and dung are tools of life; the seed is buried and a new

life emerges, as is happening in the first stanza.

VI. One Last Look

In Field Work, written in the years following Heaney's move from Belfast, the poet is better able to concern himself directly with the growing political outrage that surrounded Ireland. Importantly, his efforts do not prove him to be a poet concerning himself with specific political situations, but rather, human situations inflicting themselves on a poet who is then compelled to integrate these images and experiences into his established poetic. Heaney's efforts are not what he would call "political." He is aware that political poetry can fade with the changing political scene. What Heaney concentrates on are the human situations within a political reality, using the same poetic that he had established in Wintering Out and North. It will be necessary to review an example from Field Work to understand this premise.

In a trilogy of poems in Field Work, entitled "Triptych," Heaney discloses his fears for Ireland, revealing a very real situation of killings and uncertainty in the bleak images and careful language that has marked Heaney's poetic growth. "Triptych" is an ancient word which recalls both Roman tablets of three waxed leaves bound by a hinge and an altar made of three panels. The word carries with it images of ancient man, a primal state of writing and the connotations of divinity, with the suggestion that the poems are altar-like,

that has been a part of Heaney's imagery and poetic philosophy. Heaney seems to have accepted poetry as that which will be his salvation. Poetry is Heaney's medium for giving beauty a chance to "hold a plea" among all the horrors of Irish politics.

Here is the first poem from the trilogy, "After a Killing," for examination:

There they were, as if our memory hatched them,
As if the unquiet founders walked again:
Two young men with rifles on the hill,
Profane and bracing as their instruments.

Who's sorry for our trouble?
Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?
Basalt, blood, water, headstones, leeches.

In that neuter original loneliness
From Brandon to Dunseverick
I think of small-eyed survivor flowers,
The pined-for, unmolested orchid.

I see a stone house by a pier.
Elbow room. Broad window light.
The heart lifts. You walk twenty yards
To the boats to buy mackerel.

And to-day a girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them. (p. 12)

What is at work in the poem overall, is a picture of contrasts. The first two stanzas describe the killing and shooting that goes on, with the last three recalling an older time and a time which somehow survives in the quiet moments of today. There is an Ireland that survives, an "unmolested orchid" alive in both the memory of the people and in the hopes for the future.

The poem begins with the description of the ritualistic in history, the repetition of past images of rebels, "as if our memory hatched them." This memory is paralleled with other places in the poem, each stanza having a "place." The second stanza describes a dream image, the third a birth image that is dark, the fourth a vision that is light, and the last stanza, which describes "today," chooses an image of growth, production, newness and freshness. Although the first stanza describes an image that is a reality today also, there is an unreal quality ascribed to it by calling it a memory. Strangely, though, the last stanza seems less appropriate as a description of the political reality in Ireland, which makes the last stanza seem more like a dream image. What is happening is that Heaney is attempting to imitate the confusion in Irish life, both in the mixture of violence with calm and the mixture of reality with a kind of unconscious Ireland.

There is a good example of Heaney's precision with words in the second stanza, "Basalt, blood, water, headstones, leeches." Heaney is playing a game of balance here. "Basalt," a stone, has a connection with "headstones." "Blood" has a connection with "leeches", because leeches suck blood. The connections are supported by some metaphorical considerations: Britain can be seen sucking Ireland of its blood, and/or the violence, as mentioned before, may be sucking the life out of the people. "Basalt" comes from the Greek word "basanos" which means "touchstone." A touchstone was used to determine the true identity

of a metal, by rubbing the metal on the stone. It has since come to mean "a test or criterion for determining the quality of a thing."⁴³ What I'm suggesting is that the relationship between "headstones" and "basalt" includes a "testing" of the Irish people through the killing and violence. Lives are being used, by both British and Irish, to determine the truthfulness of the political ideas of unity versus separation, Catholic versus Protestant control, etc. In the poem, what is positioned at the center of all of these loaded words, is "water," the purifier, the life-source, the imagination.

As Heaney has shown the reader in other poems, the creativity, the life-supporting is what has a chance against the violence and rage, poetry not as propaganda, but poetry as archeology to discover what is hidden in the culture and the language. And by discovery, Heaney reconstructs the myths and histories into language environments and cultural environments which offer insights into the established view of the political situation. Heaney stated that his purpose as a value of poetry is to present "emblems of adversity." It is more accurate to say that what Heaney does is to attempt to inflict upon an established society a set of ideas, a "mind geography," a new view of an old world always in an effort to establish or re-establish dignity, life, and human compassion. With the bog poems, Heaney has reestablished into the Irish society religious ritual, order based on seasonal change, and such human concerns as love, offering, loneliness, and the hope for change and growth. With the repetition of the metaphor

of digging, into earth, into language, into culture, into meaning, Heaney re-establishes a belief that the human is influenced and ordered by ritual. This ritual is one of bringing to surface that which has been lost. There is a hope that this ritual will lead, in a somnambulist fashion, the people into a "mind geography" which believes that the lost Irish artifacts of human dignity and compassion can once again be brought to the surface. Heaney's poetry serves as the human breath to revitalize the lost pulse of Ireland.

Notes

1

The bibliographical information in this section was derived from two sources: Richard Murphy, "Poetry and Terror," New York Review of Books, 30 Sept.: 38-40 and Rita Zontenbier, "The Matter of Ireland and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney," Dutch Quarterly Review, 9: 4-23.

2

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- 16 Conover, p. 149.
- 17 James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney," Poughshares, 5, iii: p. 14. Hereafter referred to as Randall.
- 18 William Logan, "An Irish Poet Finds Mystic Force in His Alienation," Chicago Tribune, April 19, 1981, Section 7, p. 6.
- 19 "Punishment" in North, p. 37.
- 20 Section IV of "Kinship" in North, p. 43.
- 21 Murphy, p. 38.
- 22 The political events in this section are taken from two sources. All quotes are from the second source: Rona M. Fields, Society Under Siege (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), Chapter 1 and Martin Wallace, A Short History of Ireland (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), pp. 112-14.
- 23 Preoc., pp. 30-33.
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