

to feel that he is a phoenix figure, stirring the embers of old feuds into a new conflagration.¹²⁴

Although the Ulster Hall in Belfast was not permitted to be used for religious or political meetings, Paisley preached from there each Sunday. The aim of his extremist movement was to destroy

any bridges that might exist between Catholic and Protestant; it would create its own Troubles and set the political and religious question back forty years. The atmosphere of the Troubles has been growing: there have been stabbings, shootings and bomb throwings. A month ago it was still possible to say 'hooliganism', but with the shooting down of three youths on Sunday, and the death of one of them nobody can ignore the threat to public safety. The government has since proscribed the Ulster Volunteers. Life goes on, yet people are reluctant to dismiss the possibility of an explosion.¹²⁵

At the foot of his article, a brief poem by Roy McFadden, 'I Won't Dance', appeared, as it to underline Heaney's scepticism about the political future of the 'rotten' state. It is a Northern riposte to the famous medieval Irish lyric, 'I am of Ireland'. Twenty years later, it retains its grim topicality.

I am of Northern Ireland, born
 Behind a mattress window, when
 The crossfire between love and hate
 Jerked a corpse across our wooden gate.
 Where introverted streets reflect
 Pains from a shattered past: where all
 My constitutinals end with
 The dead man on the gate and in the myth.¹²⁶

3

Pioneer, 1966-69

Our pioneers keep striking
 Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
 Seems camped on before.

The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage,
 The wet centre is bottomless.¹

1. *Mil.* One of a body of footsoldiers who march with or in advance of an army or regiment, having spades, pickaxes, etc, to dig trenches, and clear and prepare the way for the main body. 2. *gen.* A digger, an excavator: a miner -1640. 3. *fig.* One who goes before to prepare the way: one who begins some enterprise, course of action, etc.: an original investigator, explorer or worker; an initiator (of) 1605.²

DEATH OF A NATURALIST

Heaney's second volume, *Door into the Dark*, concludes with 'Bogland', a poem which embodies what had gone before and anticipates the future direction of his poetry, looking forward to the place-name and bog poems of *Wintering Out* and *North*. Like so much of his first book, it asserts the author's sense of affinity and continuity with his cultural forbears. It takes pleasure in the particularity of the Irish landscape, which seems full of resilience and fecundity, and transmutes Ireland's richest resource in economic terms into a symbol for the imagination's potential.

In *Death of A Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*, the young poet overcomes his unease at abandoning the 'slane' for the pen, by affirming his kinship with the humble diggers of ancestral turf within his own family, and within Gaelic and Irish literature. His use of the word 'pioneer' invokes memories of the spade-carrying poets of Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland*, such as Eoghan

Ruadh O Suilleabhain, but also of his most important precursor, Patrick Kavanagh, whose work, like Heaney's, raised "the inhibited energies of a subculture to the power of a cultural resource".³ From the outset, Heaney's poetic career began with acts of reclamation, as purposefully he dug 'inwards and downwards', recyng the border areas of the conscious and subconscious. While at first imitative of earlier explorers, even within his first volume he has begun to develop his own ways of saying, established his own 'patterns of perception'.⁴ Through them, with them, in them, he is able to achieve a poetic resolution to inner tensions as he confronts the familial, parochial and national past. Moving into these regions, in poems such as 'Docker', 'At a Potato Digging', and 'Requiem for the Croppies', he stumbles upon mines and myths left over from previous conflicts, which would prove impossible to defuse by literary devices.

Death of a Naturalist opens with 'Digging', the first of three poems in which Patrick Heaney is a dominant presence. Along with the unpublished poem, 'Boy driving his father to confession', these poems reveal the creative importance within his early career of the 'state of negotiation' between Heaney and his idea of Father.⁵ Although he has spoken deprecatingly of 'Digging', referring to it as 'a big coarse-grained navy of a poem',⁶ he has also described it as 'seminal', in that it "opened up a vein of experience which I afterwards explored."⁷ Like its kindred pieces, 'Follower' and 'Ancestral Photograph', it is a poem about blood, ancestry, roots, growing up and away, and expresses a deeply felt need to reconcile his new identity as a poet with that of his former boyish self. To switch metaphors, it reveals the poet putting down his foundations, building upon many layers of literary and personal experience. In an early article, Heaney recalls how he would tarry on the way to school talking to old men, like the road-surface man. "Leaning on his spade, this man once said to me, "The pen's easily handled. Aye, boy, it's a lot lighter than the spade, I'm telling you."⁸ Although the roadman may have supplied the antithetical images of the poem's beginning and ending, it is the figures of his father and grandfather who loom over the bulk of the poem. As in early Hughes poems such as 'Six Young Men', 'The Retired Colonel' or 'Dick Straightup', a tame domestic present is contrasted with an heroic, 'mightier-than-a-man' past.⁹ His memory swiftly carries him from the present tense and a picture of his now ungainly father, pottering with 'straining rump' amongst the flowerbeds,

to a past perfected, in which Patrick Heaney and his father wield their weapons like Byrhtnoth or Cuchulain, burying 'the bright edge deep'. The physical power and assuredness of these diggers is conveyed by means of vigorous verbs, alliteration, enjambed lines, and assertive diction, strategically placed at the end of lines. The poet's continuing sense of awe is conveyed by means of the heartfelt exclamation, 'By God', the rather stagey, colloquial repetition of the phrase, 'the old man', and the proud, but calmly factual assertion that

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.

Scenes emphasising the child's dependence on and subservience to adult action, such as where the children gratefully gather the scattered potatoes, or when the young Heaney acts as a rustic Ganymede,¹⁰ serve to reinforce the adults' heroic status. The poem strives to minimise change by attempting to marry the traditional labour of his forefathers with his newly discovered vocation, a reconciliation embodied in the image of the 'living roots' which 'awaken in my head'. However, in what will prove to be characteristically Heaneyesque *dénouement*, the poem ends commingling feelings of *humilitas* and regret with resolution and independence, the '*non servium* of his original personality'.¹¹

Two other poems, 'Churning Day' and 'Follower', also lay stress on the huge expenditure of physical energy involved in his parents' creative enterprises. In 'Churning Day', the magic, miraculous moment of change, when suddenly 'yellow curd' is transformed into 'heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight', is only achieved after an extended, exhausting 'bout', which leaves them 'bloodied'. The analogy between boxing and writing from 'Ex-Champ' reappears, as Heaney tells us how his mother 'slugged and thumped for hours'. The poem succeeds admirably marrying word to action in depicting a process with which few readers would be familiar, though it does suffer in places from Hughesian hyperbole.¹² Despite the mixed metaphors of its opening, in which Patrick Heaney's globed shoulders simultaneously resemble those of the Titan, Atlas, and a ship in 'full sail', 'Follower' constitutes an evocative record of his father's prowess as a ploughman, and a poignant record of the changing relationship between father and son. These initial images may be derived from Breughel's 'Icarus',¹³ which depicts a bowed

ploughman, preoccupied with his work, and a ship with rounded, billowing sails, which similarly ignores the fate of the fallen high flyer. Heaney's poem begins paying homage to a master craftsman, to a man able to control powerful horses merely by means of a 'clicking tongue' and 'a single pluck/ Of reins'. Surveying the land with mathematical precision, he is a Daedalus of the fields. Into this picture of integration and unity, Heaney introduces his boy self, a clumsy disciple, stumbling, 'tripping', 'yapping' like a puppy. Though at first the child's ambition is 'to grow up and plough' like his father, gradually he feels too conscious of his father's superiority, and living in a state of eclipse.

All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.¹⁴

Ultimately, as in so many father-son relationships, the hero of yesterday becomes tomorrow's encumbrance, a ghost, like Hamlet's father's, who can never be wholly exorcised. As so often in his work, Heaney reveals his capacity to transmute personal intuitions into universal insights.

Both 'Churning Day' and 'Follower' bear a sub-text of guilt over his rift with tradition, his less physically exacting labour as writer and teacher. Though in *Preoccupations*, he attempts an etymological reconciliation, pointing out how

'Verse' comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of a field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another.¹⁵

some five years later, he acknowledged the reality of the break, recalling a conversation he had had with Dan Jacobson,

who said to me once, "You feel bloody well guilty about writing" and indeed there is indeed some part of me that is entirely unimpressed by the activity, that doesn't dislike it, but it's the generations of rural ancestors - not illiterate, but not literary. They in me, or I through them, don't give a damn.¹⁶

These initial acts of 'piety to the terrain of his childhood'¹⁷ and its giants are followed by many others incarnating archetypal experiences from the Mossbawn world, that 'green valley' and 'golden

world'¹⁸ which can only be reprocessed imaginatively. In digging back into the past, however, he also uncovers layers of fear and dejection, recovering moments which exhibit what Lawrence calls 'the terrified helplessness of childhood'.¹⁹

The title poem begins with a fall from innocence into experience, a movement repeated in 'Blackberry Picking', 'The Early Purges', and 'Mid Term Break', and opens in a setting familiar only to Irish readers, a flax dam. In *Irish Folk Ways*, E. Estyn Evans vividly describes the harvesting of flax:

When grown for fibre, flax is harvested after the pale blue flowers have fallen, but before the seed ripens, and because it is the stalk that is being harvested it is not cut, but pulled up by the roots. . . . The beets (sheaves) are carried as soon as possible to be steeped (drowned or dubbed) in the flax dam or 'lint hole' where soft peaty water has been standing for some days to warm up. . . . The process of retting (rotting) takes from seven to twelve days and is soon advertised by a foul and penetrating odour as the core or 'bone' of the stalk decays.²⁰

Close to Heaney's first home just such a dam was located, and his maternal grandfather was employed as a boiler man in a nearby linen works.²¹ From the poem's outset, the reader is subjected to a rapid succession of images of decay, 'festered', 'rotted', 'weighted', 'sweltered'. The claustrophobic oppressiveness is compounded by a burdened rhythm, in which monosyllables predominate, and by the accretions of alliteration and assonance. From out a clot of sights, sounds and smells, images of tentative beauty briefly emerge

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

and the pace quickens, "There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies", anticipating the climactic description of the frogspawn's "warm thick slobber". By means of that delightfully repulsive phrase, references to Miss Walls, to 'the daddy frog' and 'the mammy frog', and the information that "you could tell the weather by frogs", Heaney cleverly conveys a child's psyche, and the pleasure of his initiation into the mysteries of Nature. In the poem's second half, fosterage in beauty gives way to fosterage in fear, when the easy, cosy domesticity of Mossbawn and Anahorish is displaced forever. The innocence of childhood is 'invaded' by the violent outer

world, and penetrated from within by the emergence of a darker, daemonic self. Many critics have pointed to the Hughesian 'shock' diction and war imagery. P. R. King is surely correct in identifying the 'submerged sexual associations'²² within the description of the frogs, a 'bass', 'gross-bellied' chorus, 'cocked/ On sods', whose 'slap and plop were obscene threats', whose blunt heads seemed to be 'farting'. Though on one level 'Death of a Naturalist', like Hughes's 'Pike', articulates a recognition of what Camus has called "the primitive hostility of the world . . . facing us across the millennia",²³ at another it exposes the adolescent's "revulsion at his own sexuality", his "smutty embarrassment at his body."²⁴ Innocent delight at the 'warm thick slobber' has been replaced by disgust at his body's 'spawn'.

Several other poems, 'The Barn', 'An Advancement in Learning' and 'The Early Purges', similarly explore the child's initiation into fear, tapping into awful/awe-full memories from his earliest experiences. In 'A Poet's Childhood', after celebrating the snugness and security of the byre, he acknowledges the draw of the dreadful.

The byre was not the only outhouse on the farm that I hung about. There was the barn, but the barn was not as safe a place, somehow. I was always afraid in its dark heat that something was going to jump out of its corners – a rat, an owl, anything. And sometimes at night I'd be afraid too, if I remembered that place.²⁵

The Gothic menace of 'The Barn' is conveyed through its sounds – 's', 'p', 'c', 'g', 'b', 'sh' feature prominently – and its imagery. His hot and cold shivers are recreated by the references to the oppressive atmosphere inside the barn, one minute like an oven, the next a place of 'chilly concrete'. It was a space in which sharp objects and frightening creatures conspired together, the 'scythe's edge' and the devilish 'pitch-fork's prongs' ganging up with cobwebs, bats and unknown, staring, fierce 'bright eyes'. The nightmare ends with the metamorphosis of harmless 'two-lugged' sacks into 'great blind rats'. Only in later life, as 'An Advancement of Learning' shows, was he able to overcome his revulsion at the sight of rats, and learn to outstare and outface the enemy.

'The Early Purges' again sees Heaney contrasting the bewilderment and terror of childhood with adult knowledge and 'sophistication', but contains a much more questionable, disturbing outcome. It

begins baldly with the statement, 'I was six when I first saw kittens drown'. When Heaney goes on to describe their fate, he maintains a detached, hard-bitten, boyish tone, recalling how Dan Taggart 'pitched' and 'slung' them, how he heard 'Soft paws scraping like mad', how he watched the bodies turn 'crisp' and 'mealy'. Though sensing something wrong has happened, as the adverb 'sadly' and the adjective 'sickening' reveal, he remains 'dumb'.²⁶ Since most reader's sympathies throughout will have been with Dan Taggart's victims, Heaney's 'practical', countryman's conclusion comes as an affront to legitimate 'liberal' sensibilities.²⁷ By dismissing these as 'false sentiments', he appears to be collaborating in cruelty, unless one is meant to take the poem's ending ironically. The Stalinist associations of the title word, 'purges', might lead one to suspect a political dimension in the poem, and to expect a refutation of any argument in support of 'justifiable violence'. One suspects that the young, relatively unpolitical Heaney of this time did not consider sufficiently the freight borne by some of his images. If he had, he might have thought twice about that flat final line, with its reference to 'pests' and 'well-run farms', and its sentiments worthy of Beria, Himmler, or Orwell's Squealer.

Far more successful and sensitive in their use of language are two very different poems, 'Blackberry Picking' and 'Mid Term Break'. Each presents early intimations of mortality, and the incomprehension of a child confronted by injustice and grief. For the autumnal custom of 'Blackberry Picking', Heaney employs traditional forms, decasyllabic lines, arranged in half-rhymed couplets. Initially the poem forages, like a child, for sensual delight, relishing Nature for its sights ('glossy purple clot', 'red ones inked up', 'wet grass bleached our boots'), sounds ('the tinkling bottom'), tastes ('its flesh was sweet/ Like thickened wine'), and touch ('briars scratched', "our hands were peppered/ With thorn pricks"). The authentic voice and world of childhood are cleverly recreated through the use of the second person plural pronoun ('You ate that first one'), the deceitful trick of covering the bottom of the can with 'green ones', the melodramatic allusion to Bluebeard, the lamenting cry, 'It wasn't fair'. Although the motive for these expeditions was principally pecuniary, the poet dramatises and elevates the activity so that it takes on a sacramental significance. Allusions to 'flesh', 'wine', 'summer's blood', look forward to the fusion of religious and sexual imagery in depicting landscape which one finds in subsequent volumes. Whereas the first sixteen lines rejoice

in 'what Nature is willing to give'²⁸ of her abundance, the final eight articulate the child's unhappy recognition of the laws of mutability. Change and loss arrive in the shape of a 'rat-grey' fungus, and the missing fifth sense, smell, makes its appearance ('The juice was stinking too.'). The poem concludes on a cruel rhyme ('not'/'rot'), anticipating the longings and disappointments of adult life, and the future struggle between faith and a consciousness of 'the large brutal scheme of things'.²⁹

I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair

That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.

Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Though one of his first published poems, 'Mid Term Break' shows a remarkable degree of poetic maturity and control, dealing as it does with the death of one of his younger brothers, Christopher. Isolated from the rest of the school 'in the college sick bay' – as if death itself might be contagious – the boy narrator waits for neighbours to take him home, and listens to the 'bells knelling'. The familiarity, predictability of home, however, is immediately violated when by the sight of his crying father and the sound of his mother's 'angry tearless sighs'. Once more Heaney is deft and delicate in handling the double perspective, the reader being simultaneously aware of the child's embarrassment in suddenly becoming the focus of strangers' sympathy, and the adult writer's irony describing how 'The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram', and how Big Jim Evans referred 'a hard blow'. After the inadequate stock phrases proffered by the community – understatements that cannot bear grief – the poet chooses apposite images to move us. The snowdrops and the candle imply innocence and fragile beauty, qualities reiterated when Heaney talks of the 'poppy bruise on his left temple', and how how the child still slept in a 'cot'. The mathematical preciseness, the tragic equation within the final line – "A four foot box, a foot for every year" – deepen the pathos of the poem's ending. After the alliterative density of 'Death of a Naturalist', 'The Barn', 'Blackberry Picking', 'Churning Day', the decasyllabic tercets of 'Mid Term Break' seem fittingly austere and spare in sound, while vivid in image. Though the form is derived from Montague,³⁰ the voice is clearly Heaney's.

These autobiographical poems dealing with childhood may in part represent an attempt to assuage those feelings of guilt identified

in 'Digging'. *Death of a Naturalist* includes also 'public' poems of considerable merit – 'At a Potato Digging', 'For the Commander of the *Eliza*' and 'Docker' – which reveal the burgeoning confidence of the young poet, addressing himself to national as well as personal history, serving his community by preserving its sense of the past. The first of these, 'At a Potato Digging', is a particularly ambitious piece, recalling as it does the Great Hunger of 1845–49. While from *Door into the Dark* onwards Heaney was to elevate the bog into a symbol of Irish identity, this poem renews a received symbol, the humble potato, as an emblem for his race's suffering. In the years which were to follow the 1798 Rebellion and the 1800 Act of Union, the impoverished and rapidly increasing Irish population were totally dependent on the potato crop. In Estyn Evans's *Irish Folk Ways*, Heaney would have read how each member of an Irish family would have consumed on average eight pounds of potatoes per day. Corkery quotes a poem written out of despair at the monotony of this diet of potatoes and buttermilk.

Prátaí istoidhe,

Prátaí um ló

Agus dá n-eireóchainn

i meadhon oidhche

Prátaí gheobhainn!

Potatoes by night,

Potatoes by day,

And should I rise at midnight

Potatoes still I'd get.³¹

The killer fungus, *phytophthora infestans*, struck in September 1845, and by February of the next year three-quarters of the crop had been destroyed and typhus raged in twenty-five of the thirty-two counties. The inadequate and inept responses of the British Government to the crisis are well documented in Cecil Woodham Smith's book of 1962, *The Great Hunger*.³² The famine left the Irish psyche permanently scarred. Approximately one million people died as a direct result of its ravages, and one and a half million emigrated. In the years after the famine, Gaelic language and folk customs fell into disuse and decline, and "the once proverbial gaiety and lightheartedness of the peasant people seemed to have vanished completely."³³ No wonder that Heaney comments that wherever "potato diggers are/ you still smell the running sore."

In the opening quatrains of 'At a Potato Digging' one detects significant echoes of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*. Both poets describe the potato gatherers in reductive terms; Heaney