

Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
 On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
 The slap and hop were obscene threats. Some sat
 Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
 I sickened, turned and ran. The great slime kings
 Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
 That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

There is no acceptance here, no marvelling at an intricate and dangerous Nature for its own sake. On the contrary, the centre of Heaney's poetry is always human: the emphasis is on the boy's imagination, on the shaping of the natural world by increasing skill and understanding, in the end on the naturalness of man's centrality in his chosen environment. The two or three poems of fear are not based on the innate hostility of Nature: the imaginings are those of a child and ultimately erroneous. In 'The Barn', a particularly successful poem in this genre, inanimate objects—two-lugged sacks of corn, cobwebs that suggest bats, a "mouse-grey" concrete floor—work on the natural timidity of the child. Half-seen fixtures, bright eyes in corners, cobwebs clogging the lungs, are all potent in creating terror:

The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff
 To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.
 I lay face-down to shun the fear above.
 The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.

The hostility is not real, as with Hughes's thrushes, 'More coiled steel than living': it is the frightened boy who puts lugs on the sacks. Moreover, Heaney has no interest in a Nature whose systems, checks and balances, whose onsets of death and means of survival continue independently of Man. He is not concerned with the elucidation of any kind of biological order. The poet himself, and beyond him his family, his family's tradition in one particular place, and the terms on which that tradition has been hacked out, so to speak, from the natural environment—these are at the centre of Heaney's poetic intention. The poems of fear are no more than an expression of inexperience, of apprenticeship in that tradition. Some of them point to a state of mind that others, like 'An Advancement of Learning', show the power to depart from.

What Heaney owes to Hughes, then, is a subject-matter that is rural, ungentle and treated with force, not any kind of interpretation of that subject-matter. Indeed, where Heaney appears to come

closest to Hughes, as in 'The Early Purges' and 'Cow in Galf' there is a half-heartedness about his conclusion which of itself places a distance between them. For where Hughes is all idea—and it is in idea, in concept that the force really lies, with language some way after—Heaney is ultimately all language. By this I mean not empty rhetoric but a language which carries in itself the tough, the feel, the apprehension of a solid world which, if in no sense polite or academic, is a world in which the poet has slowly made his way, deeply conscious of its emanations (which are part of his inheritance) but also aware that his own powers and interests are taking him out of it. Ted Hughes in *Lupercal* is coming into the inheritance of his incredible, non-human world: Heaney has come out of his hard but essentially human one and turns back to recreate it before it begins to fade slowly from the forefront of living.

It is time now to look closely at the particular qualities of language that Seamus Heaney brings to the recall of the tradition from which he has moved away. Gerard Manley Hopkins, he tells us, was the poet who influenced his early style. His "ear", he says, "was educated" by Hopkins. In retrospect he believes that the peculiar regional characteristics of the Northern Ireland voice—perhaps, even more specifically, the County Derry voice—produced in him a natural affinity for "the heavily accented consonantal noise" of Hopkins. That is perhaps the more true because, while it may be the tautness of Hopkins's line and the inventiveness of his vocabulary that most quickly strikes another reader, it is certainly the battery of consonants that attracts Heaney.

The opening poem, 'Digging'— "a big coarse-grained navy of a poem", as its author calls it—was written in the summer of 1964. It was the first instance, Heaney believes, of his "finding a voice", the first poem in which his "feel had got into words". It also presents him as overtly determining his approach to the relation of past and present ways of life.

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

The consonantal mis-rhyme here perhaps suggests the gap between the hand, the symbol of family inheritance, and the newly acquired weapon. Whether that be so or no, the consonantal *gs* (with some help from *mb* and a number of onrushing *ns*) proclaim what the words *squat* and *gun* first announced, that an alien force is being applied to this older world and that there will be some squaring

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down and shaping too (beyond what the casual eye discerns). The concluding lines of the poem reiterate and strengthen this intention.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

This determination to force and reshape the remembered world is the more noticeable because in the heart of the poem there is quite a different feeling. The poet's father, the skilled digger, is at work. In old age he may present "a straining rump" but the prime, original memory is one of the rhythm of a precise technique:

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly . . .

That was in digging potatoes. Out on the peat moor there was an equal rhythm.

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

Phrases like "the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat" alliterate the harsh intractability of the environment, but through that intractability skill makes its way: it is "the curt cuts of an edge/Through living roots" that echo in the son's mind. There is victory there, but not one that the poet can repeat. He has no such skill. Perhaps that is why, with the technique of words that he has acquired, he chooses to emphasise force rather than skill, to pick up a pen that is "squat" and to bludgeon out the shape of a durable and solid world. It is a world conveyed much less in essence or idea than in the sound and feel of its objective parts. Perhaps that is why 'Digging' has stanzas but no regularity of line or structure. It is not so much felt *in toto* as hammered together.

In the knocking-together of this world the texture of the writing is crucial. A battery of consonants is employed to communicate sound and solidity. ['Churning Day'] which begins with "four crocks . . . large pottery bombs" in the small pantry (again the imagery of force) continues like this:

After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder
cool porous earthenware fermented the buttermilk
for churning day, when the hooped churn was scoured
with plumping kettles and the busy scrubber
echoed daintily on the seasoned wood.
It stood then, purified, on the flagged kitchen floor.

Groups of consonants signal the various stages in the process. The *bs*, *gs* and *ds* of the first line are succeeded by the *cs*, *ps*, *bs* and *fs* of a cooler state: these are soon pushed out by words like *scoured*, *plumping* and *scrubber* and, despite a quieter interlude marked by the word *daintily*, the final impression is of the stilled buttermilk, signified by the consonant *p*, contrasted with *flagged kitchen floor*, the sound-symbol of incessant busyness and the hard to-fro of many feet. When peace returns and churning day is over, Heaney knows instinctively how to echo in miniature, in the minds of the participants, the sound and feel of that day: there remain

the pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps

Both sound and action scaled down.

This attention to texture, visible again in poems like 'Blackberry-Picking' and 'The Barn', is not merely unusual: it is a very considerable achievement. But it is an achievement that almost necessarily squeezes out other important elements in good writing. Despite the regular stanzas of 'The Barn', for example, structure gets less than its share of attention. Indeed, it is not until the consonantal hammering is modified and becomes more occasional that one can better tell whether Seamus Heaney has an ear for a finely crafted line. So long as the pen is "squat" and gunlike it has to be a deeply felt rhythm (like that of his father's digging) that is not overwhelmed by sheer noise and weight. As the book proceeds, however, the heaviness and cumbersomeness of the rural scene are less emphasised: the style that is deliberately attached to physical objects and the slow processes of the country begins to give way to another kind of durability, that of history and family tradition. The poem 'Followers' is transitional in this respect. While the picture of the poet's father ploughing is put together in the sharp, metallic-sounding manner that the chink and click of the process suggest to the ear, the control implicit in this weakens as the poet depicts his own failure ever to achieve the rhythm intrinsic to this "mystery". At the end of the

poem it is the father-son relationship, reversed, that holds the composition together, and the echoes are no longer the echoes of a set and understood rhythm but of "stumbling". Before the change began, "my father", the poet says

would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the heading, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land.

These lines are sharp with *ks*, interspaced with duller-sounding *ds* and *gs* to give the feel of the heaviness of the land and, in line five, some intrusive *ns* to simulate the team's freer running momentarily at the headland (or "heading"). Then, the son, the little boy, the follower, "was a nuisance, tripping, falling, /Yapping always". There is no control here, no rhythm.

But today

It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.

This is a totally successful and moving image that transforms the poem and sets the original control and expertise in its limited, past and essentially emotional place. Texture has been used effectively for contrast in the earlier poems, as we have seen, but the use of a concluding image to "top up" the incipient emotion in 'Follower' subordinates the textural changes to the overall intention of the poem in a new and effective manner.

'Ancestral Photograph', one of the most successful poems in the book, demonstrates further how bucolic heaviness can be quickened and enlivened by a more effective personal and emotional element. It opens with a portrait of the poet's great-uncle:

Jaws puff round and solid as a turnip,
Dead eyes are statues and the upper lip
Bullies the heavy mouth down to a droop.
A bowler suggests the stage Irishman
Whole look has two parts scorn, two parts dead pan.
His silver watch chain girds him like a hoop.

In the first three lines of this stanza the dominating *ps*, *ds* and *bs* create the impression of a rather forbidding solidity, but in the next

three the *ns* flatten it into the photograph again and the *hoop* of the last line is just enough, with its reminder *p*, to *gird* (as one line itself declares) the two parts of the impression together. The second stanza has more *ns*, is fainter because the photo is no longer in place on the wall, and when the remainder of the poem settles to a recollection of uncle and nephew (the poet's father) smacking hands over a bargain at fair-days, the language has a forthright rough-and-readiness but no consistent consonantal hammering. Indeed, in this poem, as in 'Follower', the stanzas are regular: the rhyme-scheme *aabccb* is equally so, except in stanza three where *aab* is followed by *ccc*, justifiable perhaps because it is in these lines that the fair-day bargain is struck (the repeating rhyme suggesting unity). One becomes aware, too, of the kinds of rhymes which, though in no sense outrageous, are sufficiently unusual to obviate the smallest feeling of rhythmic dullness and predictability. *Cattle/Wall*, *them/bargain*, *still/chronicle*, *stick/attic*—these help to maintain wayward, stumbling movement in the poem, a movement entirely in keeping with cautious farmers and hesitant cattle.

A more flexible, less emphatic style appears more and more as the book proceeds. But it must not be too readily inferred that success necessarily follows this development. Where the sheer thickness of texture held up poems like 'Blackberry-Picking' and 'Churning Day' whether or not there was a conclusion that could be felt neatly to end the theme, poems where words count less for their own sake and more for the development of the idea need to be more certain of their ultimate point. 'The Early Purges', for example (though this has a thicker texture than some) falls to an unimaginative, even prosy, ending, and 'Honey-moon Flight', too, does not know how to conclude. 'Dawn Shoot', again, is so rough and ready, the language so subordinated to the structure of the narrative, that it barely avoids, in parts, the rhythms natural to prose. It becomes plain, in fact, that the later poems of the book are as uneven as one might expect of apprentice work (observation of which inclines me, on no deeper examination, to the belief that many of them are *earlier* than the return-to-childhood poems with which the book opens). But here and there are pieces where the conclusion is as deft and satisfying as idea and verbal organisation have been throughout, poems like 'Synge on Aran', 'Saint Francis and the Birds' and 'Trout'. Even 'Docker', which falls away a little, opens superbly, despite the annoying ploy of making the title work within the poem:

There, in the corner, staring at his drink.
The cap juts like a gantry's crossbeam,
Cowering plated forehead and sledgehead jaw.
Speech is clamped in the lips' vice.

But the impression given by these later poems collectively is of a desultoriness, of a lack of cohesion. There are only two indications of a future direction. The first lies in the two historical poems, 'For the Commander of the Eliza', well turned and neatly ironic, and 'At a Potato Digging', where a recall of the famine of 'forty-five' is stitched a little uneasily (as one section) into the sharp visual description of the present which constitute almost three-quarters of the whole. Both these pieces arise naturally from the heritage of the poor on the land: they carry with them an ineradicable memory of what it is to be hungry, starving even, when the meagre harvest fails. They point a way forward, when the scenes of childhood no longer occupy the forefront, to the poet's more developed sympathies. The second indication of direction, however, is perhaps the more important in the short term—that is, within the context of *Death of a Naturalist*. There are four poems here which sketch in the poet's more mature autobiography, two in terms of emotional and psychological development, two in the more pregnant ambience of the poetry which may come to be written. 'An Advancement of Learning', one of the most mature and finished poems in the book, shows the poet overcoming his fear of a rat, and 'Twice Shy' embodies a very uncertain victory over nerves in dealing with a woman. The association of *rat* and *woman* in the last sentence sounds excessively uncomplimentary to the latter, but this essay is not an exercise in male chauvinism of the bitterest kind. Seamus Heaney does link the two poems, well separated as they are in the book, with a single symbol. In 'An Advancement of Learning' the poet takes the embankment path: he establishes "a bridgehead" when he turns to outstare the rat and his crossing the bridge is the mark of ultimate victory over his fears. In 'Twice Shy' (a title whose ambiguity makes it of less use than it might be) the two potential lovers cross the river to take the embankment walk (no doubt a firm declaration of intent on the part of both) but fail, out of tenseness and uncertainty, to consolidate that declaration. In the end the crossing is not what is important, because the would-be lovers have more in common with the river—

Still waters running deep
Along the embankment walk.

'Death of a Naturalist'

Their final state, indeed, is not *across* the bridge at all. Noticeable, in passing, are the short lines of this poem: full of movement as they are, they are held tight (and taut) in closely-rhyming six-line stanzas. The nervousness of the two participants is admirably conveyed in the structure of the poem: once again meaning comes as much out of sound and feel as what is overtly said.

Of the two poems that are intended to map the path the poet (rather than the man) has followed, one, 'Poem (for Marie)' has been briefly discussed already. From within the fold of the love he has found as an adult he intends to *perfect* "the child/Whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking". In other words, he will look back and settle that small world with his own poetic order (as he does in the early poems of the book) before attempting to order the world of his maturity. The other poem, 'Personal Helicon', seeks to *link* his childhood experience, compelling but "scare some" too, with the adult experience of writing poetry. The image Heaney uses is that of Narcissus outgrown.

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

One well afforded a "rich crash" when the bucket hit the bottom but had no reflection: in another he could see a white face hovering on the water, but only after dragging out "long roots from the soft mulch":

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it.

All these wells were the scene of juvenile attempts, under a particular compulsion, at self-discovery—the long roots at the bottom and the sound of the voice with the clean *new* music in it.

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

This is an opaque but exhilarating conclusion. The poet does not know where he is going or what he will find, but the writing of poetry is itself a kind of compass: it is by examining himself, as he does in writing, that he begins to know direction. And the "sky" is no

longer "trapped". Childish, limited explorations, perhaps Narcissistic in ultimate explanation, will no longer serve: "To see myself" is not to admire but to learn, to discover that 'I' who has to shape the darkness round about.

'Personal Helicon', its accomplishment apart, unites the poems of childhood with those of a greater maturity in an expanded image which is both subtle and poignant. It also concludes the book in another sense. The self-examination it suggests has produced little of direction as yet. Poetry has been discovered as an instrument: it has the power to move its creator fast and far but has so far engaged no more than a low gear in its departure from that first "trapped sky". And that is an apt comment on *Death of a Naturalist* as a collection. Its technical quality is already high: as against occasional miscallations, such as 'Poor Women in a City Church', where two-syllabled, moving, balancing words are supposed to "still" the "Old dough-faced women with black shawls" one can point to passages of great virtuosity, like the description of the rat in 'An Advancement of Learning':

He clockworked aimlessly a while,
Stopped, back hunched and glistening,
Ears plastered down on his knobbed skull. . . .

The feeling for different kinds of language is already well developed: texture and structure are seen as aids to meaning. But as Heaney's comparative youth would suggest, the poems that represent his early manhood, however well formed, do not cohere sufficiently to draw the poet's 'character' and the volume makes its mark on the reader far more because of the decision to go back and hammer out the relative simplicities of childhood in a language which, whatever criticism may be made of it, is unmistakably loud and confident. The Seamus Heaney of *North* is barely hinted at and 'divided Ireland', as a theme which must necessarily thrust itself into the poet's consciousness, is still, in 1966, in the future. But the talent, and the force with which it is used in the poems of childhood, gave immediate notice to the literary world: Northern Ireland had a new and promising young poet.

Door into the Dark

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"Fear is the emotion that the muse thrives on. That's always there". Seamus Heaney in conversation with John Haffenden.

The child in *Death of a Naturalist* is educated by moments of sickening fear; "I sickened, turned, and ran" (the title poem), "My throat sickened so quickly that I turned down the path in cold sweat" ('An Advancement of Learning'), "the fear came back/When Dan . . . / . . . with a sickening tug, pulled old hen's necks" ('The Early Purges'). Nausea, fear and insight are intimately tangled: an unsuspected darkness opens before the child and threatens to engulf him ("I knew/That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it"). In these poems the darkness is associated with an uncontrollable fecundity, a pullulation of alien, secret, absorbing life—rats, frog-spawn, even the familiar cat suddenly produces a litter of kittens that makes its unnerving demands of responsibility and murder on the child. The speaker of the poems in Heaney's first two books is like the father in his poem 'Follower', "His eye/Narrowed and angled at the ground,/Mapping the furrow exactly"—his vision is held largely at ground level, tracing the contours of earth and the ways in which it will open before the feet to give on to pond, lough, well, clay-pit, bog, shore-line. In each case solidity gives way to what is viscid, liquid, ungraspable, untrustworthy.

Two remarks from Heaney's interview with John Haffenden seem relevant. One is concerned with a distinction between what he calls the "Antaeus" sensibility and the "Hercules" sensibility. Hercules and Antaeus wrestle; Antaeus is the son of Gē, the Earth-mother, and whenever he is thrown he gains renewed strength from his contact with the earth. Hercules can only overcome him by lifting him away from the earth, into the air. If the latter, "the possibility of the play of intelligence", becomes a shaping factor in his later books. *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* are both moulded by the

poet as Antaeus—"a native, an earth-grubber, in touch with the ground". But this suggests that the poet is at home with the ground in which he grubs and from which he draws his strength; it does not account for the fascinated nausea, that sense of being hypnotised by the alien and bestial (like the child in Richard Wilbur's 'Beasts' who feels himself sucked downwards by "the degradation/Of the heavy streams") which haunts the early poems. The other remark concerns his Catholic upbringing; "The reality that was addressed was maternal, and the posture was one of supplication". If the reality here indicated is supernatural the description applies equally to the gross material reality of his poetry—which is a fecund, breeding darkness at which the child stares in supplicatory horror.

One who is intimate with this principle risks that absorption the frog-spawn threatened; "Bridegroom to the goddess./She tightened her torc on him/And opened her fen". The earth presents itself as both mother and lover; the sexual implication of "and opened her fen" is unmistakable, as is that of the closing line of 'Bogland', *Door into the Dark's* last poem, "The wet centre is bottomless" (the reader is reminded of Lawrence's fig and its 'moist conductivity towards the centre', though Heaney's verse never has the overbearing male aggression which femininity seems to awaken in Lawrence). If the natural world is seen as feminine in Heaney's poetry—a fecund, pullulating maternal principle, an all-absorbing, threatening lover—the male poet's attitude towards this world is well described as "one of supplication", a mingled need and fear, erotic in its intensity and at times almost necrophiliac in its bewitched obsession.

The impulse of the child in *Death of a Naturalist* when confronted with such, to him obscene, fecundity is to run ("I sickened, turned, and ran") and the poems that deal with such encounters can be seen as on one level acts of private exorcism; but the adult's—the poet's—reaction is firstly to outstare the darkness (the transition is recorded in 'An Advancement of Learning' as the crossing of a rather neatly symbolic bridge, "I stared him out/Forgetting how I used to panic/. . . I stared a minute after him./Then I walked on and crossed the bridge") and then to attempt to come to terms with it, to explore it, to—to use an archaic word Heaney employs more than once—"tent" it. This exploration, this peering down wells, digging, fishing, exhumation, rescuing from oblivion, probing of secrecy and inwardness, concern with the subaqueous and subterranean which is so typical of the poems in Heaney's first three books, is not carried out in a spirit of explication and explanation but of a communion

with mystery. Again the archetype of Marian devotion seems apposite—his tentings of the obscure are less an attempt to bring to light than to allow the author to enter the feared, maternal darkness—or at the least receive some confirming intimation of its potency. The very title of his second book, *Door into the Dark*, suggests a determination to find a way into that darkness, to conquer the child's terror, by communion with its source.

The first poem of the book, 'Night-Piece', takes us into the darkness with the child's reluctance still clinging to the words, it begins as a return to nightmare or shame—"Must you know it again"—and the hint of nightmare and nausea lingers in other poems which suggest a fear of inward, psychological darkness, a fear of going too deeply into the self as much as a fear of external threat—"The next stroke/Found a man's head under the hook". But though the ground beneath the feet is still characterised as a glutinous, absorbing matrix, the poet is more even-toned in his exploration, more in control of his circling fascination; this is apparent if we compare the end of 'Death of a Naturalist'—"The great slime kings/Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew/That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it"—with the end of 'Bann Clay' from *Door into the Dark*;

Under the humus and roots
This smooth weight. I labour
Towards it still. It holds and gluts.

The poet's connection with his subject is willed—"I labour towards it"—rather than forced upon him as an unwelcome revelation, and the language records not only the immediacy of a single experience but a whole attitude of mind, so that digging for the clay that 'holds and gluts' becomes a metaphor of wider and more general exhumations, a deliberate search for a "door into the dark". The darkness that the clay is and implies is the darkness of the unfathomable past, "Above it, the webbed marsh is new,/Even the clutch of Mesolithic/Flints" and the door into the dark which Heaney seeks is not only a way into the ahistorical mystery of birth and fecundity, of the landscape's feared maternal presence, but into the obscurity of its past. The past is buried but persistent in the land and this paradoxical presence of what is gone is the subject of 'Relic of Memory', an evocation of wood petrified by the waters of a lough, of past life held as if by an act of the landscape's memory. This is a darkness the poet can explore without that frisson of fear which haunts his poems on the

darkness of the natural world—it seems an altogether more scholarly, antiquarian foray into night, prompted as much by *pietas* as terror. The last poem of *Door into the Dark*, 'Bogland', looks forward to the ways in which Heaney later used the preserving waters of the bog as an image of "the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that had happened in and to it"; in the poems on the Bog people, prompted by Glob's book, this sense of *pietas* and wonder mingles with the maternal/erotic fear that ghosts Heaney's apprehension of the natural world.

The evocation of the subterranean and subaqueous in Heaney's poetry is then in part an exploration of that alarming potency of the natural world revealed to him as a child—a potency both destructive and fecund (in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' we begin with simple destruction, "The lough will claim a victim every year" and end with a typical image of life as an obscene, devouring force: "The lice, they said, would gang up/Into a mealy rope/And drag him, small, dirty, doomed//Down to the water".) and it is also an attempt to enter into the quiddity of the past, to record and evoke "the memory of the landscape". But it is impossible to read these poems on the poet's wary, inquiring, fascinated probings of darkness without also being aware of them as presenting paradigms for the nature of the poems themselves. Heaney is no aesthete, and the inward source of his work is clearly something far more pre-literate, pre-intellectual, in his make-up than the production of artefacts. Nevertheless the "door into the dark" of the title has undeniable implications of a door into that uncharted darkness of the subconscious from which the material of poetry surfaces with the silent importuning insistence of Glob's Tollund Man exhumed from his bog. As with the image of the bog itself, Heaney develops the notion of a poem as the discovery of what is buried. In his books subsequent to *Door into the Dark*—particularly in *Wintering Out* and in *North*—the language itself is seen as a repository parallel to that of the poet's consciousness, preserving, petrifying, shaping experience in its own dark medium.

Three poems in *Door into the Dark* are concerned with enclosed dark spaces which house an intensity of concentrated life; there is 'The Forge', from which the book's title comes—the poet is outside and can only dimly make out the violent, noisy labour within; there is 'The Outlaw', concerned with a stud-bull kept in a dark shed which the child of the poem cannot enter; and there is 'In Gallurús Oratory'—here the poet is able to enter the darkness because the community that packed it has gone. In each case the poet sees or

imagines this life emerging from the darkness into light as a sense of expansion and release—"The sea a censor and the grass a flame"—though bull and smith must re-enter their stifling cells. These man-made darkneses, oratory, byre, forge—though their violence and potency seem to exclude the poet—act as symbols of a desired intensity of labour and authenticity, as if the poet takes as heroic paradigms the bull's potency, the smith's strength and skill, the religious community's passion and commitment. And what are such potency, skill and commitment to be used by a poet for but to make poetry? To similar effect 'Rite of Spring', 'Undine' and 'Bann Clay' utilise images of blocked or clogged water-channels—pump, ditch, drain—to suggest a pent-up energy suddenly freed; again the descriptions of released vigour suggest parallels with the act of poetic creation, a freeing of impulse or inspiration, a welling up of language, so that Undine seems like Heaney's feminine Nature made benign, an intimate chording muse.

Heaney's use of explorative forays into darkness (and the release from darkness) to suggest a poetic strategy implies that he sees the poet largely as a *trouvère*, a finder, rather than as the Greek maker. But 'The Forge', if we take it as being in some degree a poem about poetry, indicates that he is also concerned with the poet as craftsman. The forge is a "cave of making", and as Auden wrote on that subject:

For this and for all enclosures like it the archetype
is Weland's stithy . . .

Similarly, 'Thatcher' can also be read as a submerged poem about poets—the poet's regard for the thatcher is a regard for a laconic, unfussy skill, for a "mystery" in the old sense, as is his regard for the smith of 'The Forge'; both carry with them the glamour of the maker which we feel the young poet anxious to emulate. If he will dig with his pen, in the words of *Death of a Naturalist*, he will also forge, twist, sharpen and stich.

"Twist", "sharpen" and "stitch" are words taken from 'Thatcher' and there are many more such verbs in the piece—"poked", "flicked", "honed", "snipped", "Flushed"—all of them concerned with what is immediate, physical, tangible. One of the chief reasons for the tang of authenticity which so much of Heaney's poetry brings with it is the fitness of the language he uses for the vision he has to record. His subjects—the fecundity of the landscape, the packed density of darkness, (geological, mythical, historical) that

awaits the poet's exploration, the intimately visceral emotions of fear, nausea and sudden wonder—are presented in almost wholly physical language. It is a cliché of modern poetic theory that the language of poetry should not be abstract—a cliché that has closed off vast areas of our experience to poets and led to the ignoring of poets who have chosen to address such areas in appropriate language—but it is a cliché which in Heaney's case has a local validity. His early poetry seeks not to understand but to evoke, not to put into perspective but to see in tranced close-up. It is visceral rather than intellectual, making its effects by the exploration of image rather than by discursive argument, precision of syntax or metrical dexterity; it seeks density rather than clarity. Things, not ideas, particularly living things and their textures (slimy, shaggy, scaly, creamy, tacky, jellied, mealy, jaggy—all adjectives from *Door into the Dark*) haunt Heaney's imagination in this book, and his language is relentlessly physical, packed, dense with what he has called "the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self"; when he says of the Bann Clay that "it holds and gluts" the function of the word "glut" is as much onomatopaeic as semantic, it communicates as much by sheer physical sound as by meaning. This is a poetry which asks us to believe that truth is buried, dark, probably frightening, immanent rather than transcendent, and that when it is discovered it brings something of the smothering airless underground with it.

Certainly this is not the only possible kind of poetry—and some critics have written, foolishly enough, as if it were (as though the words "concrete" and "disturbing" were an automatic Seal of Good Poem Making)—but it is a kind of poetry clearly at one with Heaney's temperament when he wrote *Door into the Dark*, and a kind he writes with a maker's sure skill, the *trouvère's* instinct for a yielding way into darkness.



The Art of
SEAMUS
HEANEY

Edited by Tony Curtis