“A Shaft Into Real Life”:
The Pastoral Tradition and Rural Experience
in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words: I felt that I had let down a shaft into real life.

—Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*
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INTRODUCTION

On the brick wall of Bellaghy Primary School, facing the street, is a mural that reads, “the squat pen rests’ Heaney.” The words are painted in the center of a flower, surrounded by colorful striped petals and framing the cartoon image of a child reading. Further into the town’s center lies a cafe called The Poet’s Corner; on the same block, the local pub, the Taphouse, boasts an imposing portrait of Seamus Heaney on the front door. When I first arrived in Bellaghy after an hour and a half bus ride from Belfast, I felt Heaney’s presence everywhere. I traced the artifacts of his legacy from the turf man sculpture made entirely of peat to the award-winning Homeplace museum celebrating his work. I heard his voice in the squelch my shoes made in the church mud and saw his face in the ghostly mists from off Lough Beg. In his poem “A Herbal” Heaney writes, “I had my existence. I was there. / Me in place and the place in me.”

I had come to visit Heaney at his omphalos.
Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 in County Derry, Northern Ireland. He had a self-described “hankering for the underground side of things” (*Preoccupations* 21) enriched by a love for words as portals, transporting him to the past and echoing into the present. The Bellaghy of Heaney’s childhood in the 1940s had a “medieval rhythm almost,” people ploughing with horses or building hay with forks. In a 1980 interview on *Afternoon Plus*, he relates that his earliest writings were informed by that “fire deposit of experience... almost hermetically sealed.” Inside the first edition of *Death of a Naturalist* the flap copy reads, “Seamus Heaney grew up on a farm in Derry; and it is in particular the acute observation of the countryside and its people that gives his poetry its distinctive strength.” Promoting an “acute observation of the countryside and its people,” Heaney’s publisher, Faber, associates the young poet with traditional pastoral imagery. But *Death of a Naturalist* is rife with disconcerting, even sinister portrayals of rural life.

Heaney’s poetic voice in *Death of a Naturalist* aligns more with what David Fairer terms the “compromised, or compromising, georgic” which provides “a glimpse of a nature that is less comprehensible and supportive than any benevolent system might suggest” (Fairer 207). While Heaney’s poetry distinguishes itself from the more instructional tones of the georgic, he remains aware of nature as an unforgiving force. He recalls that in between the idyllic glimpses of his childhood there was “a good deal of fear.” When the interview host asks him, “Is that fear because you were Catholics?” Heaney pauses before saying “Well that’s different. No... well I’m not thinking of that one now.” Instead, he recollects the fear of stomping horses and croaking frogs, an unplumbed rural unease. In “Belfast” Heaney recounts a warning from adults that “you shouldn’t go near the moss-holes because ‘there was no bottom in them.”’ (*Preoccupations* 35). His poetic voice derives from this bottomless
sound, the fearful excavation of what lies beneath. As Heaney’s canon expands, from the confrontations with political violence in *North* to the quiet restlessness of *The Human Chain*, he remains grounded in the local reality of Mossbawn and the intimate and agitated relationship with the landscape that underlies *Death of a Naturalist*.

Heaney’s work interprets the places where the rural and the literary intersect, from Virgil to Kavanagh. In this thesis, I explore how Heaney presents us with new ways of understanding the pastoral mode and, more broadly, our relationship to the natural world. Ultimately, I argue that Heaney’s distinctive approach to poetry and rural life allows him to craft a unique genre, distinct from, but always in conversation with traditions such as the pastoral or georgic. Coming from the Latin *pastoralis*, the word pastoral relates to the tending of animals or livestock (“pastoral, n.,” OED, def. II.). Implicit in the definition is a sense of care for the natural world, the shepherd’s patience for his flock. Over time pastoral has become a loaded literary term, allowing “a distinction between the ‘real’ and the literary” and presenting “a false vision, positioning a simplistic, unhistorical relationship between the ruling, landowning class,” as critic John Bull claims (Bull 4). In his essay “Eclogues, in Extremis,” Heaney counters this supposition, citing Virgil’s work in both the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* as complex examples. The *Eclogues* models itself on the idylls of Theocritus and derives its simplistic portrayal of rural life from this source. But in the *Eclogues* Virgil also contends with land dispossession and a country destroyed by civil war. Likewise, the *Georgics*, which offers agricultural instructions to farmers with the overarching belief that labor underpins a thriving civilization, illustrates the frightening reality of nature as an ungovernable force.
While the agricultural realities of the *Georgics* align more with Heaney’s own background, he chooses to translate an excerpt from the *Eclogues* in *Electric Light*, pairing it with his own “Glanmore Eclogue,” which addresses his restlessness as a writer. Both the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* are foundational in Heaney’s work, but he remains distinct from Virgil in the way he combines farming and poetry into one rhythm. Unlike the instructional cadence of the *Georgics*, in which Virgil asserts “I can present you with many old rules of thumb,” listing directions for how to level the “threshing floor” or how to “wet down seeds” (Virgil I, 176–194), Heaney does not focus on the how-to. Rather, he listens for the rhythms of rural labor and its symmetry with poetry. As a farmer, he recalls the layers of turf beneath him, and his immediate contact with the landscape allows him to unearth an imagined past. As a poet, he performs the same movement, allowing the sounds and structure of language to transport him to a metaphorical truth.

Heaney’s pastoral inheritance lies in what he terms the mode’s “staying power” (“Eclogues ‘In Extremis’” 2). He asks “What, after all, is the human value of the perfectly made-up thing?” (“Eclogues ‘In Extremis’” 5), making us consider the importance of poetry beyond the aesthetic potential. This importance lies for Heaney in “what is at stake” (“Eclogues ‘In Extremis’” 5), in poetry’s ability to convey truth better than fact. Heaney re-grounds the pastoral in the reality of rural life and labor, rather than a “false vision,” he emphasizes the mythic history and metaphorical potential of authentic moments. “The literary is one of the methods human beings have devised for getting at reality” he writes (“Eclogues ‘In Extremis’” 4). His poetry explores the places where the facts of rural life meet the imagination of the poet.
Virgil’s influence is largely mediated by Robert Frost, who maintains rural authenticity while “getting at reality” through imaginative power. In *Homage to Robert Frost*, Heaney recalls how, at first, he was drawn to the “inner evidence” of Frost’s farming knowledge and the “documentary weight” of Frost’s “Out, Out—” (*Homage to Robert Frost* 86). But more important than Frost’s “documentary realism” was what Heaney calls an “oversound,” the poetic transformation of the fact. This “oversound” exists in the declaration in Frost’s “Mowing”—“The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows”—and the imaginative power offered by the lines (*Homage to Robert Frost* 85). It is the authenticity of Frost’s “counterweight,” the “sweetest dream within the fact” (*Homage to Robert Frost* 86), that Heaney most admires. His own poems are reflected back to him in Frost’s attention to rural realities and his effort to preserve those realities in lines “poetically more rewarding than a record” (*Homage to Robert Frost* 86). The American poet inspires Heaney’s search for “the humus in humility... the fact of agrarian life in the dream of language” (Davis, 106), and his attempt to define “what is at stake” in the metaphorical powers of poetry.

If Frost shaped Heaney’s understanding of the dream in the fact, then Yeats helped him find “the human value of the perfectly made-up thing.” The epigraph of Heaney’s prose collection *Preoccupations* comes from Yeats’s essay “Samhain: 1905” in which he writes “If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about those others, but because all life has the same root” (*Preoccupations*). Yeats’s declaration insists that poetry comes from the need to express feelings otherwise concealed, and it is in this act of making contact with the hidden that Heaney embodies in his verse. In “A Municipal Gallery Revisited,” Yeats writes, “All that we did, all that we said or sang /
Must come from contact with the soil” (VI, 3–4). Heaney seems to take Yeats’s words both literally and figuratively. Throughout his poetry, Heaney emphasizes immediate contact with his home ground—the indentation his wife’s heel makes in the soft bogland, the smell of the fodder prepared for cows, the sound of drumming when he presses his ear to the rail line. But he also makes contact through poetry, metaphorically uncovering the meaning of words like “thole” or “bog” to reveal complex root systems of culture and identity. If Yeats insists on “contact with the soil” then Heaney takes us one step further, looking for the layers underneath. In this thesis, I demonstrate how Heaney excavates traditions to turn over new ground, finding his versus in the rhythms of the landscape.

Informing my research are several important works on Heaney, notably Helen Vendler’s comprehensive Seamus Heaney and Michael Molino’s Questioning Tradition, Language and Myth. Most relevant to my work is Sidney Burris’s The Poetry of Resistance, which provides a complex analysis of how Heaney “renovates” the pastoral mode. In this thesis, I will argue that Heaney’s distinct poetic voice forms a unique genre, one which honors the ordinary and actual while exploring the metaphorical power of everyday moments. Beginning with Heaney’s origins in Mossbawn, I explore the way the “nose-to-the-grindstoney place” (Stepping Stones 8) of his childhood informs his writing. Next, I interrogate Heaney’s pastoral elegies and the bog poems, uncovering how encounters with natural cycles of decay help Heaney grapple with Northern Ireland’s violent past and present. Exploring place-names and the Irish language in Heaney’s work, I analyze how Heaney forms his sense of identity from complex interactions with place and language. Finally, I connect Heaney’s poetry to crafts like farming and printing in the search for why we create, and in what environments our creative acts survive.


CHAPTER ONE

“Staying Power”: Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition

I. Heaney’s Pastoral Sense

“Certainly the secret of being a poet, Irish or otherwise, lies in the summoning of the energies of words. But my quest for definition, while it may lead backward, is conducted in the living speech of the landscape I was born into” writes Heaney in his essay “Belfast” (Preoccupations 37). As a poet, Heaney displays a particular expertise in the minute: tadpole eggs, aging pumps, the fungus growing on the inside of a well. In his language too, he opens up words into their parts, surveying the vowels and consonants in the same way a shepherd might survey his flock. In “Feeling into Words,” he relates poetry to divining, writing that “the diviner resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised” (Preoccupations 48). Heaney’s poetry involves a unique specificity to place and language, one which makes “contact” with the buried histories of Irish identity. But it is “the living speech of the landscape,” that informs his experiences with the world, and certainly with poetic tradition. The rural experiences of Heaney’s youth allow him to draw on pastoral and georgic poetic traditions while ultimately crafting a unique genre, one fitted to the specificity and the knowledge of rural, Catholic experience in Northern Ireland.

Heaney is intimately familiar with literary traditions, but his poetry often puts the spade on equal footing with the pen, or even privileges the work of farmers over the work of poets. In Sidney Burris’ book The Poetry of Resistance, he notes how pastoral poetry informs Heaney’s verse “unobtrusively,” writing that “Readers of his verse must continually remind themselves that Heaney,
perhaps more so than most other contemporary poets, is a deeply literary poet, one whose consolations often lie in the invigorating strains of the poetic tradition itself” (Burris ix). Heaney’s attention to traditions such as the pastoral allows him to explore authentic experiences of rural life while also relating the labor of the shepherd to the poet. In other words, he transforms pastoral verse into a genre distinctly more intimate and real, and one which can be lived in by people such as himself. In one of his later poems, “Whitby-sur-Moyola,” Heaney reimagines Caedmon, the English monk attributed with the invention of the English literary tradition, as one of his neighbors in County Derry. “Caedmon too I was lucky to have known / Back in situ there with his full bucket / And armfuls of clean straw” (1–3). With the word “too” Heaney places Caedmon among the “perfect yardman” (3) he has known in his life. He pictures Caedmon “in situ,” meaning original place (“in situ, adv.,” OED, def. A.), emphasizing how Caedmon, the father of English poetry, belongs to an even older, rural tradition. Henry Hart points out in “Seamus Heaney’s Gifts” how Heaney “sketches the genealogy of his own poetic gift” (Hart 233) in the poem. In aligning himself with Caedmon, a rusticus, or “tender of animals,” (Holsinger 149), Heaney articulates his own arrival at poetry, his “summoning of the energies of words” amongst a farming environment. At the same time, the poem is less a “genealogy of his own poetic gift” as it is an illustration of the ungifted and meticulous labor of his father and grandfather. Heaney notes in the poem that Caedmon is “Unabsorbed in what he had to do / But doing it perfectly, and watching you” (4–5). Caedmon’s labor is effortless, his “unabsorbed” but “perfect” execution of the work reveals the grace with which farming is performed. Caedmon’s labor parallels Heaney’s description of his father and grandfather in “Digging” whom he describes with equal admiration: “By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man” (“Digging”
15–16). Heaney observes his father “nicking and slicing neatly” (“Digging” 22), the poise of his father’s labor sharply contrasting his own: “Once I carried him milk in a bottle / Corked sloppily with paper” (“Digging” 19–20). Likewise, in “Whitby-sur-Moyola,” Caedmon’s work is his “angel stint” and his person “hard as nails” (5), emphasizing the dexterity and strength required of farmers. Heaney dismisses Caedmon’s contribution to the English poetic tradition in one line, favoring his impressive role as a farmer:

And all that time he’d been poeting with the harp  
His real gift was the big ignorant roar  
He could still let out of him, just bogging in  
As if the sacred subjects were a herd  
That had broken out and needed rounding up. (7–11)

Caedmon’s “epiphany artistry” (Holsinger 150) is consigned by Heaney as extraneous time spent “poeting with the harp,” overshadowed by his farm labor. Caedmon’s “real gift” is strength of voice in his rural occupation, something “ignorant” yet “sacred” (10). Heaney’s designation of “real gift,” shows how he views farming as an authentic origin for other arts such as poetry, distinguishing him from traditional pastoral forms in which poetry acts as an entryway into the rural world. Heaney draws on his own rural heritage when he says “just bogging in” and describing “a herd” that “needed rounding up,” inserting the specific Northern Irish countryside of his childhood and his father’s work as a cattle-herder into Caedmon’s story. Heaney emphasizes Caedmon’s role as a farmer over his roles as poet and monk, writing

I never saw him once with his hands joined  
Unless it was a case of eyes to heaven  
And the quick sniff and test of fingertips  
After he’d passed them through a sick beast’s water. (12–15)
In figuring Caedmon as one of his neighbors in rural Northern Ireland, Heaney privileges the role of animal tender above religious or literary power. The only praying motions undertaken by the Caedmon in Heaney’s verse are those associated with testing animal urine. Presenting Caedmon as a powerful farmer rather than a “humble, unpoetic man” (Holsinger 150) gifted with literary inspiration allows Heaney to illustrate farming’s importance as an origin point. He concludes the poem with “Oh, Caedmon was the real thing all right” (16), a casual yet deferential tribute to the authenticity of “the perfect yardman” (3). Heaney’s use of the word “real” throughout the poem emphasizes how the precision and awareness necessary to farming elucidates truth, something he searches for in the “quest for definition” of his poetry. Burris argues that Heaney “renovates” the pastoral tradition (Burris xii), but Heaney’s verse travels in a new direction. Rather than write from the perspective of a poet observing nature, Heaney writes from the perspective of the farmer, humbling the poet. For Heaney, poetry’s imaginative power lies in the realities of rural life. It is this emphasis on the power of the farming voice, like Caedmon’s “big ignorant roar” (8) and the specificity of his experience on a farm in Northern Ireland, that allows Heaney to craft a new, unique poetic genre out of many literary traditions.

II. Personal Experience and Rebirth

Throughout Heaney’s poetry he relates daily tasks on the farm to writing, carving out his own genre from the landscape around him. In “Personal Helicon,” he directly alludes to the site of the sacred Hippocrene spring, the source for all poetic inspiration. Yet his descriptions are of “old pumps
with buckets” (2) and “fungus and dank moss” (4). In an early draft, Heaney titled the poem “An Apprenticeship,” a nod to rural labor and the poetic training he received from “the rich crash” (6) of buckets or the “clean new music” (14) of echoes in the well (“Personal Helicon,” Seamus Heaney Literary Papers). Where traditional pastorals may overlook the more mundane features of farm life, Heaney looks to these moments as the source for his lyrical power. He takes note of the microbial, “fungus” or “moss,” yet demonstrates the infinite, the way looking down in the well reveals the “trapped sky” (3). His language throughout the poem is fitted to the serene, he “savoured the rich crash” (6) of a bucket hitting the bottom of the well, describing the fall with verbs and adjectives that are better suited to fresh fruit than rotted wells. Heaney activates all the senses in his imagery, “the smells” (3) of the mud, the feeling on fingertips when roots are “dragged” (11), hearing “echoes” (13), and the unsettling feeling of blindness when he “saw no reflection in it” (8). In the *Georgics*, Virgil takes notice of “the foul-smelling watersnake” and “fumes of resinous sap,” but these sensory experiences are offered as advice: “Grabs stones, herdsman” (Virgil III, 415–419). Like Virgil, Heaney’s portrayal is uncompromising. But his imagery serves as an authentic source for his poetry, for the metaphoric powers that take over in the “darkness echoing” (14). Heaney takes the time to document each well he would visit in his youth, building from “old pumps” (2) filled with “waterweed” (4) to the “scaresome” (15) wells that fractured his own image:

> Others had echoes, gave back your own call  
> With a clean new music in it. And one  
> Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall  
> Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection. (13–16)
Heaney communes with nature, personifying the well when he writes “gave back your own call / With a clean new music in it” (13–14). Sound remains a critical component to Heaney’s pastoral, both the “music” of the well echoes and the “slapped” sound of a rat pattering through a puddle. Fanny Quément artfully notes that “Heaney archives sounds that might disappear” (Quément 38). Sounds become Heaney’s method of documenting his place in nature, hearing his “own call” within the well echoes. There is something particularly striking about his description of the music as “clean” and “new,” adjectives that strongly contrast the “old pumps” (2) in the first lines. His description is peaceful, “out of ferns and tall / Foxgloves,” but the moment is quickly broken: “a rat slapped across my reflection,” revealing Heaney’s ability to see within the cracks of rural beauty towards the personal.

The poem’s conclusion once again alludes to classical myth, but this time Heaney takes greater ownership over his own craft: “To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring / Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (18–20). Heaney alludes to “some spring,” equating his childhood wells with Narcissus’ spring, asserting that these underground treasures are “beneath all adult dignity.” There is a contradiction in his dismissal of the well, the proclamation that his poetry is a way “to see myself,” is in many ways similar to his childhood chasing reflections in the water. And yet, locating his identity is a greater act than simply staring into the spring: “What’s water but the generated soul?” Yeats asks in “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” (8). The well water allows Heaney to peer deep into the ground, the echoes revealing how his own rhymes reflect various inspirations while remaining personal. Heaney’s desire “to set the darkness echoing” parallels Robert Frost’s “For Once, Then, Something,” in which Frost writes “so never seeing / Deeper down in the well than where the water / Gives me back in a shining surface picture” (2–4). Frost
suggests a “deeper” place in which the “shining surface picture” is no longer visible. In this undefinable space, known only as “deeper down,” there exists an unsettling truth, something which disrupts the “shining surface picture.” The final lines of “Personal Helicon” illustrate Heaney’s objective to occupy this space, to move beyond the surface in which Narcissus stares at his own reflection and into the ground, unearthing a possible truth. In the end, it is not the alluring clarity of a spring that ignites Heaney’s poetic voice, but the “darkness echoing,” viewing the actual—the shadows obscuring the well—as a portal into the imaginative world.

Heaney’s interest in the personal landscape underlies every poem in Death of a Naturalist. In “Anahorish,” Heaney writes about his specific childhood observations while also linking these moments to a larger poetic tradition. The opening stanza reveals a fascination with the immediate world:

My ‘place of clear water’,
the first hill in the world
where springs washed into
the shiny grass (1–4).

Anahorish is the name of a surrounding town near Mossbawn (and the name of Heaney’s primary school), and he refers to the town as “forgotten Gaelic music in the throat” (Preoccupations 36). Heaney translates the Irish word, asserting that Anahorish is “My ‘place of clear water’” (1). The quotations indicate the way a word provides an entryway, in this case a place of understanding. His use of the pronoun “My” specifies his experience, this place is his “personal helicon,” and also points to a larger ownership of the word ‘Anahorish.’ Anahorish does not appear on official maps of the area, which largely contain Anglicized versions of historically Irish place-names. But Heaney reclaims the
power of the language and the land’s Irish heritage. Anahorish symbolizes Heaney’s own version of paradise, “the first hill in the world” (2). In some ways this designation is literal, Anahorish was Heaney’s primary school, his first challenge of sorts, and the first feeling of uphill movement towards something greater. At the same time, his description—“where springs washed into / the shiny grass” (3)—echoes Biblical stories of the Garden of Eden, the water from the spring washing over the farmland like a baptism. As in “Personal Helicon,” in which Heaney connects his environment to the Hippocrene spring, in “Anahorish” Heaney again threads literary tradition through his childhood observations. The natural features of his home ground have the power to transport him to imagined stories. He emphasizes the sound of the Irish word, illustrating the significance of the language itself and its connection to nature: “Anahorish, soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow” (7–8). When reading the poem aloud, the word Anahorish mimics the sound of the spring washing over cobblestones, and Heaney’s descriptions of the letters themselves reflect pastoral images. He describes the repeated consonants as a “soft gradient,” a categorization not usually given to language driven by repeated consonant sounds. Often, vowels are soft and effortless, whereas the -sh of the Irish word forces the speaker to close their teeth, the same action as the word harsh. But to Heaney, the word is a “soft gradient,” (7) a “vowel-meadow” (8). His crafting of vowel and meadow into one, hyphenated word reveals the linkage in his poetry between language and rural life. Poetic inspiration and nature are so intertwined they become one word. “Vowel-meadow” points towards the idyllic “meadow,” without leaving behind the history of the place. By linking the “meadow” with the vowels of Anahorish, Heaney reclaims the land as something intrinsically tied to language and to Irish histories. In the second half of “Anahorish” he transitions to images of the farmers from whom he was raised, “those
mound-dwellers” (13) of his childhood. The conclusion of the poem emphasizes farm labor and reveals the realities of the nature around him: “go waist-deep in mist / to break the light ice / at wells and dunghills” (14–16). He began the poem with “springs” and “shiny grass,” but he ends with “wells and dunghills,” reminding us that his “personal helicon,” is not only clear and peaceful but buried and acrid.

Adolescent songs in Northern Ireland also played a significant role in shaping Heaney’s poetic voice. In “Anahorish” he emphasizes the salience of the consonant and vowel sounds, and the way in which the Irish word is critical in establishing a sense of place. The songs he sang as a schoolboy hold similar value, and Heaney recounts them in “Mossbawn” as not the most musical verses but memorable nonetheless in introducing him to poetry. “They constitute a kind of poetry, not very respectable perhaps, but very much alive on the lips of that group of schoolboys, or ‘scholars,’ as the older people were inclined to call us” (Finders Keepers 10–11). In these youthful songs there exists an authenticity and an attention to place and heritage not unlike Heaney’s writing decades later. In “Mossbawn” he recalls a rhyme about Ned McGuigan, who is importantly “from a district called Ballymacquigan”:

Neddy McGuigan,
He pissed in the Quigan;
The Quigan was hot
So he pissed in the pot;
The pot was too high
So he pissed in the sky. (Finders Keepers 11)

The schoolboy rhyme about the unfortunate Neddy McGuigan is adolescent and crude, but the lines nevertheless “stuck” (10) in Heaney’s memory. The chant’s graphic honesty is far from Lyrical Ballads,
but Heaney’s recollection does parallel Wordsworth’s *Preface*. Wordsworth refers to poems as an “experiment” to determine “how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart” (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads* 1). Heaney’s introduction to the “real language” of his peers shapes the development of his poetic ear. His pastoralism is neither wholly idealistic nor childishly gross, but the importance of place-names like “Quigan,” and farming realities, “So he pissed in the pot,” persist from Heaney’s childhood experiences with schoolboy ‘poetry’ to his later reflections in poems like “Anahorish.”

Heaney points out that the language of his youth came to him naturally in ways many canonical poems did not, and the musicality in schoolboy chants sharpened his understanding of poetic rhythm. “The literary language, the civilized utterance from the classic canon of English poetry, was a kind of force-feeding. It did not delight us by reflecting our experience; it did not re-echo our own speech in formal and surprising arrangements” (*Finders Keepers* 13). Unlike Irish schoolboy chants, canonical English poetry could not excite children like Heaney. The separation between English traditional pastorals and Heaney’s own writing becomes evident in the fact that idyllic verses about the countryside fail to “re-echo” his rural experiences. Heaney recounts that he had memorized Keats’ “To Autumn,” but the only line that was “luminous” to him as a child was that which referred to apples, because his uncle owned an orchard (*Finders Keepers* 12). Heaney’s poetic voice was shaped by both the land around him and his specific knowledge of the labor, language, and occupation of that land. His cutting authenticity and his serene descriptions coexist precisely because those elements coincide in the world around him. He neither writes directly within the pastoral and georgic traditions
nor subverts them, his voice is something singular and unique to the experience of rural life in Northern Ireland.

Rural life in Northern Ireland was something described in contradictions, peaceful in image yet underscored by violence; filled with bogs and fields charming and serene but which constituted difficult labor and messy work. Heaney was not unfamiliar with these contradictions. In his “Mossbawn” essay he says “It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard” (Finders Keepers 3). Born at the cusp of World War Two and writing as a poet during the Troubles, Heaney’s language reflects the political violence framing his lived experiences. However, it is not only political conflict that informs his poetry, but “the rhythms of the yard,” the everyday surprises and fears of rural life. Heaney’s childhood world in Mossbawn could be “a silky, fragrant world” that was “quilted with moss and primroses” where “cattle munched reassuringly” (Finders Keepers 4). But nature could also be dark and violent, something Heaney notes in childhood reflections:

But gradually those lush and definite fields gave way to scraggy marshland. Birch trees stood up to their pale shins in swamps. The ferns thickened above you. Scuffles in old leaves made you nervous and always you dared yourself to pass the badger’s sett, a wound of fresh mould in an overgrown ditch where the old brock had gone to earth. Around that badger’s hole there hung a field of dangerous force. This was the realm of the bogleys. We’d heard about a mystery man who haunted the fringes of the bog here, we talked about mankeepers and mosscheepers, creatures uncatalogued by any naturalist, but none the less real for that. What was a mosscheeper, anyway, if not the soft, malicious sound the word itself made, a siren of collapsing sibilants coaxing you out towards bog pools lidded with innocent grass, quicksands and quagmires? (Finders Keepers 4)

Heaney shifts from idyllic scenes to a perversion of pastoral images, depicting the realities of the peat bogs surrounding his home. The trees themselves are “pale” with fear, and sounds become something
that makes you “nervous” rather than something that makes you feel assured. He describes the badger’s dam as “a wound of fresh mould,” reminiscent of the flax-dam in “Death of a Naturalist” which “festered in the heart / Of the townland” (“Death of a Naturalist” 1–2), or the blackberry flesh containing “summer’s blood” in “Blackberry-Picking” (“Blackberry-Picking” 6). Death of a Naturalist is filled with disturbing images, and not necessarily as a way of speaking about sectarian violence, but as a way of exposing the inherently vicious elements of nature which shaped his childhood. In “Mossbawn” he recalls how as children they identified a “dangerous force” in the marshland, which they attributed to the “bogeys,” mysterious monsters who occupied the land. These childhood tales were “none the less real” because they were not cataloged scientifically, what mattered was that the “bogeys” represented how he felt in the bogland and portrayed his true feelings in much the same way poetry can. He refers to “a mossheeper” and the “soft, malicious sound the word itself made,” a sound contrary to the “soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow” (7–8) that he describes in “Anahorish.” Heaney’s shift from serene to repulsive in his writing reflects contradictions inherent to his home ground. He notes in “Mossbawn” that “Like the rabbit pads that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land” (Finders Keepers 6). The natural world both embodies and reflects violent contradictions, and Heaney’s language responds to this complexity. He employs classical and biblical allusions to recreate nature’s beauty while also depicting the everyday labors and fears of the people who called Northern Ireland home. To refer to Heaney’s poetry as either pastoral or georgic would be an oversimplification, and to reject their influences entirely would discount Heaney’s own reclamation of those traditions. Instead, Heaney’s lines are, as Quément writes, “an attempt at embalming their
specific soundscape” (Quémént 38). He writes to represent the contradiction in the senses, the soft
harshness of the language and the land.

Returning to “Personal Helicon” and “Anahorish” reveals that neither poem truly reflects
classical images of poetic inspiration or traditional pastoral experiences. In “Personal Helicon” Heaney
introduces a grimness within the first lines: “I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells / Of
waterweed, fungus and dank moss” (3–4). He draws attention to the frightening nature of the “dark
drop,” much like the “darkened cobbles” (5) in “Anahorish.” The adjectives “dark” and “trapped”
sound like they belong to the “realm of the bogeys” he describes in “Mossbawn.” Emphasizing fungus
is particularly interesting because of the role fungi play in death and decomposition. His description of
the bucket crashing to the bottom ends with a solemn observation: “So deep you saw no reflection in
it” (8). His childhood fascination with wells is undercut by a truly terrifying state of blindness or being
“trapped” in the dark. In “Personal Helicon,” Heaney also emphasizes farm labor, and not as
something simplistic or peaceful. He writes “When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch / A
white face hovered over the bottom” (11–12). He depicts the revelation of seeing one’s reflection
buried deep in the earth, uncovered when roots are “dragged” away, the verb illustrating the labor’s
effort and force. The “white face” could be the present viewer, or a relic from the past, unearthed by
“long roots” that capture how the land preserves memory. Later he asserts that “to pry into roots, to
finger slime,” (17) “is beneath all adult dignity” (19). Heaney’s imagery remains repugnant even while
he inserts classical allusions to Narcissus.

In “Anahorish” Heaney also acknowledges farm labor in County Derry, this time with a more
direct emphasis on the importance of land and heritage. Following his description of “Anahorish,” the
word itself, as a “vowel-meadow” (8) he suggests the word is also an “after-image of lamps / swung through the yards / on winter evenings” (9–11). “Anahorish” represents both the connection between place and language as well as the driving force people and their labor play in Heaney’s poetics. He refers to the farmers as “mound-dwellers” (13) who “go waist-deep in mist / to break the light ice / at wells and dunghills” (14–16). Like the hands that “dragged out long roots” (11) in “Personal Helicon,” the “mound-dwellers” break the ice to reveal what remains buried underneath. Designating the farmers as “mound-dwellers,” Heaney ascribes mythical power to their work; they are submerged by “mist” and “dunghills,” monuments to a specific place. Heaney’s ending line, “at wells and dunghills” illustrates how his homeland remains both a Garden of Eden and a pungent marshland. Both elements must coexist because these conflicts represent the truth of his experiences: troubling farming and political realities and moments of natural music and joy. The murkiness of the pastoral is precisely what allows him “to set the darkness echoing.”

Heaney’s work is consistently underscored by violence, not only political and religious conflict in Northern Ireland, but nature’s brutality as well. Violence is a process by which nature both destroys and creates, manifesting in everyday farming realities, like churning milk. In “Churning Day,” Heaney reveals that nature cannot be understood without accepting its most gruesome aspects, and that the place of humans within natural spaces is characterized by a violent tension. On a plot level, “Churning Day” vividly describes a rural family processing milk products. Heaney was raised on a dairy farm, and draws on his childhood experiences with cows and milking. Cows are also critical to Irish folklore and often symbolize fertility and prosperity in the Celtic tradition (MacKillop). “Churning Day” emphasizes rural prosperity in depicting how milk becomes butter, but also undermines that
prosperity with violent imagery, making us question what is sacrificed to the process of creation.

Heaney’s language moves beyond the practical georgic and into imagery intensely graphic and sexual. Sounds are essential, and his alliteration in “Churning Day” emphasizes an aural bombardment in rural spaces. The first line reads “A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough cast, / hardened gradually on top of the four crocks” (1–2). Describing the fermenting milk as “limestone rough cast,” Heaney reinforces the sharp and ragged repeated c- sounds. The blasts indicate the violence in rural labor, underscoring the contradiction that creation is inherently destructive. By beginning with a description that could be applied to an image of Earth’s formation, Heaney reveals how nature is born out of a roughness that quite literally underlies all living things. He describes the containers of buttermilk as “large pottery bombs” (3), recognizing the additional threat of political violence in his own life. Heaney notes the processes leading up to the explosion:

After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder,  
cool porous earthenware fermented the butter milk  
for churning day, when the hooped churn was scoured  
with plumping kettles and the busy scrubber  
echoed daintily on the seasoned wood. (4–8)

The language in “Churning Day” is intensely rich, and each word invokes sound and touch as well as sight. Typographically the stanza appears filled to the brim, like the fermenting buttermilk. The contrast between the “hot brewery” and “cool porous earthenware” makes the scene overwhelming, as though the process is happening all too fast. Heaney’s verbosity, marking out the “gland, cud and udder” and describing the churn as “hooped” and the kettles as “plumping,” reinforces the sense that the process really is going to burst, building towards inevitable “bombs” (3). However, there still exist moments of peace, even though that peace seems contradictory in its existence: “the busy scrubber /
echoed daintily on the seasoned wood” (7–8). Portraying the “busy scrubber” as echoing “daintily,” is ironic, a fleeting moment of quiet amongst the crash of activity. “Daintily,” also evokes a weakness, one which is quickly exploited:

Out came the four crocks, spilled their heavy lip
of cream, their white insides, into the sterile churn.
The staff, like a great whiskey muddler fashioned
in deal wood, was plunged in, the lid fitted. (10–13)

Attributing violence to farming processes, Heaney perverts the georgic scene, moving beyond matter-of-fact farming tasks. He describes the “heavy lip” and the “white insides” spilling into “the sterile churn,” and “the pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps” (34), evoking a disturbingly sexual image, one which continues in the account of “the staff” being “plunged in, the lid fitted.” Later Heaney writes “Their short stroke quickened, suddenly / a yellow curd was weighting the churned-up white, / heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight,” further emphasizing sexual intercourse. After the churning process, the laborers’ bodies “moved with gravid ease” (31). Heaney’s use of the word “gravid,” which is defined as “pregnant, heavy with young” (“gravid, adj.,” OED), is a deliberate illustration of the violence involved in creation. He draws on Irish folklore, such as in the Lebor na hUidre, or the Book of the Dun Cow, which tells the story of a woman who guards a magic spring in Ulster. The woman is raped, causing the spring to flood. In the story, the only survivor is the King’s daughter, who transforms into a salmon before emerging three hundred years later as the Goddess of Morrigan. As Walter Brenneman Jr. points out regarding the myth, “the flood is a creative event, bringing about the renewal of the world” (Brenneman 350). Heaney’s use of violent sexual imagery draws on Irish myth to illustrate how the act of creation is fraught with exploitation and violence. By
using such graphic imagery Heaney breaks down illusions of natural purity, revealing how the natural world is something inherently vulgar. As a result, our role in natural spaces too takes on an obscene quality.

Importantly, the process is labor intensive, the stirring stick being “plunged in” by working hands. In the interaction between nature and laborer, Heaney extracts violence and disruption intrinsic to the processes of making. To create, the ground must be opened, and disturbed. He describes the rhythmic stirring of the churn as a sound which “slugged and thumped for hours” (15), verbs which convey the exasperation of the characters who must do this work. The process results in physically painful effects: “Arms ached. / Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered / with flabby milk” (15–17). The translation of the violence done to nature into violence experienced by the people who occupy and labor within rural spaces reveals the ruthlessness inherent to our experience of the natural world. The enjambment of “Cheeks and clothes were spattered” nearly fills in the word blood, leading us to an image of destruction not unfamiliar to Northern Ireland. Even though the process creates something—the buttermilk—it also involves the act of breaking down. Though death is not mentioned explicitly, the death of the narrator’s own innocence, and the death of pastoral illusions, are present in the results of the churning process. Heaney describes a smell akin to the odor of bodies: “The house would stink long after churning day, / acrid as a sulphur mine” (27–28). Like death, the smell of the churning process conveys permanence, remaining long after the initial violence. And yet, among all of this brutality, there still exists beauty: “finally gold flecks / began to dance” (18–19). The violence present in “Churning Day” can only be understood alongside the very real beauty that Heaney also experiences, and which he writes about in poems like “Personal Helicon” and
“Anahorish.” To exist in nature requires engagement with its most brutal aspects, especially for those whose labor relies on the land. Heaney’s poetry remains important because his appreciation for the countryside is built on observations of the most mundane and the most revolting. It is within these spaces of truth that he finds beauty. By describing not only the idyllic, but also the most painful, Heaney reimagines how we can live in and learn from the natural world.
CHAPTER TWO

“Befitting Emblems of Adversity”: Heaney and the Bodies in the Bog

I. Violence and Identity in the Irish Landscape

From the “obscene threats” and “mud grenades” in “Death of a Naturalist” to the everyday fears of the “tanks’ advance” in “In the Beech,” Heaney forge a connection between the ritual violence of nature and that of human systems, each “an archetypal pattern” (*Preoccupations* 57). In his bog poems, Heaney reveals how the land remembers violence, conflict continuously buried only to be uncovered again. Like the bodies of Irish people fighting for freedom, the bodies of people sacrificed to the bog feed the decomposition process—a renewal promise that relies on decay. Heaney articulates this in “Feeling into Words”:

...A number of these [bog people], and in particular the Tollund Man, whose head is now preserved near Aarhus in the museum at Silkeburg, were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern. (*Preoccupations* 57)

Heaney traces a sacrificial tradition from the Mother Goddess to Kathleen Ni Houlihan, showing how both the events that led to the bog people’s death and discovery, and those which lead to the deaths of Irish people, are present in a collective memory. Like the destructive making in “Churning Day,” Heaney’s exploration of the bog people as what Yeats termed “befitting emblems of adversity” begins with understanding the agrarian promise of renewal in the Mother Goddess’ “barbarous rite.” His use
of images from the landscape to understand conflict in Northern Ireland introduces the specificity of
his genre; speaking on the Troubles through rural imagery makes Heaney’s voice singular.

Heaney’s emphasis on fertility and birth reveals how violence is translated into the hope for
new growth, the ability to create out of sacrifice. In “Bog Queen” he directly links the human with the
natural, creating ambiguity between human qualities and the unforgiving, violent forces of nature. The
opening lines are an eerie description of the body:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone. (1–4)

The beginning of the poem is an ambush: “I lay waiting” (1). The sinister declaration makes us
question what she is waiting for—to be excavated again? To be uncovered once more in this
“archetypal pattern?” Heaney’s repeated “between” emphasizes the connection shared by the body and
the bog, a proximity which allows what is human and what is decaying peat to murkily join together.
The “turf-face” and “glass-toothed stone” illustrate this linkage. In this way the limits of the pastoral
are broken down, the image of sacrificed bodies as part of nature threatens the insulating ability of the
genre. As Paul Fussell writes of pastoral elegies, “Skulls juxtaposed with roses could be conventionally
employed as an emblem of the omnipotence of Death, whose power is not finally to be excluded even
from the sequestered, “safe” world of pastoral” (Fussell 267). When skin and bog are enmeshed in one
line—“turf-face”—death becomes a way in which people are connected to natural cycles. At the same
time, the ritualized death of the bog people is inherently unnatural, they are surrendered to an “archaic
barbarous rite.” When Heaney joins “turf” and “face” together, he dehumanizes the body by making it
a bog image, similar to the way individual deaths in Northern Ireland became symbols for “that cause” (Preoccupations 57). Inserting the word “demesne,” he illustrates the divide between legal possession of the land by colonial powers abroad and the connection to the land shared by those closest to the Earth, such as farmers. The ritual sacrifice of the “Bog Queen” speaks to the exploitation of the land and its rural occupants:

My body was braille  
for the creeping influences:  
dawn suns groped over my head  
and cooled at my feet (5–8)

The woman’s body becomes language only available by touch, “the creeping influences” taking advantage of her presence as fuel for natural processes. Heaney’s language is sexually violent, “creeping” and “groped” echo the sexual imagery in “Churning Day” only more exploitative—“the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis” (23–24). The sexual violation represents the “creeping influences” of Britain in Ireland, the robbing of identity and country. As Donna Potts points out in Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition, the sexually violent and exploitive imagery was often employed by Irish poets writing in the pastoral tradition (Potts 7). Pastoral resistance to industrialization and urbanization allows Heaney, as an Irish poet, to resist the exploitation of Irish land by British forces and the violence done to the Irish landscape by war. Drawing on the contextual evidence of civil war in Virgil’s Eclogues, Heaney crafts his own version of pastoral in the bog poems, one which emphasizes the genre’s powerful resistance and foregrounds Irish identity. At the same time, Heaney depicts a mutual violation between humans and nature generally, in “Bog Queen,” the body and the land become possessed by one another, and the Bog Queen is “barbered” (42) in the same movement in which the
land is beaten by the “turf cutter’s spade” (44). In “Churning Day,” Heaney highlighted the process by which people insert themselves into natural spaces but here the body serves the natural world in the process of decomposition: “the seeps of winter / digested me” (10–11). The body becomes recognizable only by rural images, the brain is “a jar of spawn / fermenting underground” (19–20). “A jar of spawn” recalls “Death of a Naturalist,” when the “frogspawn that grew like clotted water” (“Death of a Naturalist” 9) would “fill jampotfuls” (“Death of a Naturalist” 11). “Death of a Naturalist” ends with a promise for “vengeance” (“Death of a Naturalist” 32), similar to the Bog Queen’s threat: “I lay waiting” (16). Like the ruined child in “Death of a Naturalist,” the Bog Queen too loses something to the persistent cycles of rural life. The romanticized view of nature and rural labor is broken down by the reality of the work:

Which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turf-cutter’s spade

who veiled me again
and packed coomb softly
between the stone jambs
at my head and my feet. (41–48)

The body is violated, “barbered / and stripped” by an instrument of rural labor. The interaction between the farmer and the soil unearths the threat that lies in wait: a violent cycle continually renewed. As the farmer works the land, the Bog Queen is uncovered and “veiled,” symbolizing the “archetypal pattern” of violence in Northern Ireland, in which death becomes prominent, useful, acted on, and repeated. Like in the poem’s beginning lines, the body is again inserted “between” the earth, as in a grave. However, where the cycle should repeat itself, it is instead broken by “a slimy birth-cord / of
bog (51–52),” which allows the Bog Queen to rise “from the dark” (53) in “small gleams on the bank” (56). The Bog Queen overcomes her peat grave through birth, illustrating the possibility for new life from violent processes. Heaney draws on pastoral images of abundance and fertility while maintaining that these natural cycles are inherently violent. And yet, there is hope in the renewal process. No longer the ambiguity of childhood hope in Death of a Naturalist, but a specific longing for Irish rebirth, the chance for Northern Ireland to live a new life “from the dark” (53). In this way, his pastoral “nostalgia” is reversed and forward-looking, as Sidney Burris points out when he says that the bog poems “do not display the wistful remembrances typically associated with poems given to the backward look, the nostalgia vision” (Burris 74). Nevertheless, the rebirth in the “Bog Queen” threatens to repeat the violent cycle in the form of revenge. The “slimy birth-cord” (51) indicates that this renewal process will be disturbing, and painful. Yeats’s words, “a terrible beauty is born” (“Easter, 1916”), are reflected in Heaney’s unnerving birth imagery. Hope is tainted by reprisal, the possibility that lives may be avenged is undermined by the repetition of violence. The bog poems are an excavation of violent histories, and they serve to push these stories to the surface and thrust them into the present. They are, as Heaney articulates, “...an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past...” (Preoccupations 60). By relating the Troubles to the violence in natural cycles, like death and birth, Heaney is able to craft a pastoral vision uniquely Irish, and one which unearth destructive histories to see what can be made from them.

In “Bog Queen,” the line “I lay waiting” promises resistance, in “The Grauballe Man” the promise is realized in the martyrdom of the fallen warrior. “Bog Queen” and “The Grauballe Man” present two gendered paths of resistance, the bog queen derives her power from cycles and fertility,
while “The Grauballe Man” is powerful as a fallen soldier. Neither figures are passive, they rise with the land in opposing each threat. Heaney describes the Grauballe man with potential, “The head lifts, / the chin is a visor” (17–18), but part of that potential is derived from his death, the following lines being “raised above the vent / of his slashed throat / that has tanned and toughened” (19–21). In his martyrdom, the Grauballe man becomes powerful because he is symbolic. Critic Andrew Foley argues “that by discovering, or uncovering, perhaps, appropriate symbols, or images, or analogues, it is possible for poetry to make clear the historical, even archetypal, antecedents of political violence” (Foley 62). Illustrating the staying power of his emblem, Heaney says “he lies / perfected in my memory” (37–38). He references “the Dying Gaul / too strictly compassed / on his shield” (43–45), evoking images of the fallen warrior, strong in his defeat. Heaney asks us:

Who will say ‘corpse’
to his vivid cast?
Who will say ‘body’
to his opaque repose? (25–28)

Heaney emphasizes the impossibility of not making symbols out of the bog body. He remains too powerful in his “opaque repose,” so clearly reclaiming power in death, the return to a mossy kingdom. The symbolism of a dead body is complex, to weaponize a person’s death for political gain was a tactic Heaney condemned in “Frontiers of Writing” after the death of a hunger striker whom he knew. But that is not what Heaney does with the Grauballe man, in fact he challenges the tendency to remove markers of identity to make someone representative. We must see the Grauballe man not as an overarching symbol but as a specific one— “Who will say ‘corpse’ / to his vivid cast?” The description of the Grauballe man is not only laden with warrior imagery, but that of farm tasks. The slash in his
throat is a “cured wound” which “opens inwards to a dark / elderberry place” (22–24). Natural processes are emphasized, specifically the process of preservation. The Grauballe man is an opening into tradition and history, an opening in the ground. Throughout the poem his image reminds Heaney of the power in tradition, in preservation of land and identity. His body is described in terms of the most ancient natural features, his wrists are “like bog oak” (7) his heel “like a basalt egg” (9), to illustrate his buried status. At the same time, he rises “out of the peat” (35). The body is likened to a “foetus’s” (31) and Heaney writes that his head is “bruised like a forceps baby” (36). By presenting the Grauballe man as both ancient and newly born, Heaney illustrates the cycle of war and death. Renewal is marked as painful, “bruised,” and the Grauballe man’s positioning as a warrior, “hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity” (41–42) furthers an “archetypal pattern.” This violence is remembered and preserved by the bog, a symbol of Irish identity, and exists within gruesome natural cycles. While “Bog Queen” concludes with the woman rising from the Earth with “small gleams” (“Bog Queen” 56) of hopeful reclamation, “The Grauballe Man” ends with a darker outlook. The man’s body holds “the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped” (46–48). By measuring the atrocity of the past, Heaney looks toward the “actual” future for Northern Ireland. His investigation of tradition and history in “The Grauballe Man” rejects pastoral nostalgia and illustrates the enduring cycles of violence and sacrifice inherent to the natural world.

In both “Bog Queen” and “The Grauballe Man” the central figures display some level of agency within the violent ritual cycles in which they must exist. The Grauballe man’s death is one of resistance, he dies a hero. Likewise, although the bog queen is exploited and injured, she rises from her grave with power. “Bog Queen” is narrated from the first-person perspective of the woman, giving her
a greater sense of individual agency in the events that have led to her sacrifice. In “Punishment,” Heaney does not attribute power to the victim, only pity; the original title for the poem was “Shame” (“Punishment,” Seamus Heaney Literary Papers). He does not look towards rebirth, but instead looks into the past. Unlike the other bog poems, which interrogate the past to hope for a different future, in “Punishment” the central focus is on what has been lost and cannot be reclaimed. The poem’s final word is “revenge” (44), and we know the act has already taken place. The speaker can “see her drowned / body in the bog” (9–10) and says, “Little adulteress / before they punished you” (23-24). In the fall of 1971, two women were tarred and feathered in Derry for dating British soldiers. Another young woman was seized from her home and had her head shaved, with the threat that she would be “shot or tarred and feathered the next time” (Weinraub). In “Punishment” Heaney directly links the bog body with the young women in Ireland who faced the same ritualistic violence.

Her shaved head
Like a stubble of black corn,
Her blindfold a soiled bandage,
Her noose a ring (17–20)

Speaking directly to the 1971 events, Heaney addresses the victims’ “shaved head,” their “blindfold,” and the wedding “ring” that damned them. Like in “The Grauballe Man,” in which the bog body holds the “actual weight” (“The Grauballe Man” 46) of violence, in “Punishment” the “body in the bog” (11) is “the weighing stone, / the floating rods and boughs” (11–12). “Punishment” centers the “revenge” of women who tarred and feathered their neighbors, but also addresses the larger issue of moral judgment Heaney faces in the bog poems. In these cycles of violence, who is not culpable? Only
nature, specifically the bog, can hold the “actual weight” of history, preserving events until they will inevitably resurface. Heaney writes:

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur. (29–32)

Heaney cannot admit forgiveness, the “almost” qualifying his love for the “poor scapegoat” (28). Realizing his own participation in the atrocity by staying silent, he can only watch, tragedy’s “artful voyeur.” He speaks to our fascination with violence and cruelty, watching the “brain’s exposed / and darkened combs” (33–34) and the “muscles’ webbing / and all your numbered bones” (35–36). The grisly details are not unlike Heaney’s rural scenes, and the body becomes part of that landscape: “She was a barked sapling / that is dug up / oak-bone, brain-firkin” (14–16). Like the Bog Queen’s “turf-face” or the Grauballe man’s “bog oak” wrists, here the young woman is a sapling, delicate and “frail” (7), the construction of her body intricately tied to nature: “oak-bone.” Hyphenating “brain-firkin” connects the body with farming processes, like churning milk. These processes are repeated and messy, as well as violent. Heaney’s use of the past tense further emphasizes the poem’s hopelessness. The “brain-firkin” becomes the “brain’s exposed,” the “oak-bone” becomes the “numbered bones” as the body loses its connection to the land and therefore the possibility of rebirth. The verbs emphasize the past: “you were flaxen-haired” (25) “and your tar-black face was beautiful” (27). Unlike the Bog queen, who escapes—“I rose from the dark” (“Bog Queen” 53)—the woman in “Punishment” is frozen in the past. She is an emblem of “the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge” (43–44). Heaney has “stood dumb” (37) because there are not words fit for the atrocity. As the poem
continues his metaphors are stripped away and we are left with only anatomical realities. While the bog poems as a whole interrogate the efficacy of symbols for violence, especially natural symbols, “Punishment” remains unsure of the metaphor. The poem questions how symbols of ritual sacrifice can articulate truth when the actual “tribal, intimate revenge” takes place in the present reality. In “Punishment” the lines between past and present become meaningless, and the possibility for a third, future space, inconceivable.

II. *Pastoral Elegies*

In Heaney’s pastoral elegies, he exposes both the genre’s necessities and its inherent limits. In pastoral elegy, nature can be a source for consolation and remembrance, but it can also constrain the deaths of real people to an imagined, literary place. The “bitter constraint and sad occasion” (“Lycidas” 6) which compel Milton to elegize his friend Edward King in the well-known pastoral elegy “Lycidas” are present in Heaney’s own attempts to understand violence in Northern Ireland. But where Milton relies on the pastoral to memorialize his friend, calling him “Lycidas,” a common name for shepherds in classical pastoral, and invoking the muses, Heaney breaks away from the literary in search of the actual. In the face of loss, poetry becomes “incomprehensible” (“Casualty” 22), and instead Heaney relies on immediate and specific realities: barley in pockets, the slant of an outhouse roof, the packed cathedral after Bloody Sunday. Heaney’s well-known pastoral elegies are situated during some of the Troubles’ most violent years. In 1975, the year *North* was published, the Ulster Volunteer Force, a Loyalist paramilitary group, committed several atrocities, including the Miami Showband killings and a
series of October attacks in which twelve people died. In 1979, when Heaney published *Field Work*, IRA bombs killed nineteen people in Warrenpoint, and nine people in Newry (Hayes 21). In *North* and especially in *Field Work* Heaney moves beyond “befitting emblems of adversity” to confrontations of the adversity itself, without need for representation. Even earlier than *North* and *Field Work* however, he interrogates the opposition set up by pastoral elegy in “Requiem for the Croppies” from *Door into the Dark*. “Requiem for the Croppies” emphasizes death’s cyclical nature but also rejects the idea that the death of rebel Irishmen is something natural. Thus the conflict in Heaney’s pastoral elegy emerges: to mourn an identity inherently tied to rural life one must grieve their death through the lens of nature, and yet doing so may naturalize violence in a way that continues the cycle. Iain Twiddy argues that “Using the natural to mourn makes violent death seem natural to the land, or violent death natural to Northern Ireland” (Twiddy 135). And yet, in “Requiem for the Croppies” Heaney makes it clear that the Irish rebels are farmers, not soldiers, and that the battle represents their effort to preserve their rural identities in the fight against British colonialism and industrialization, even while taking on paradoxically unnatural roles in battle.

The opening lines of “Requiem for the Croppies” pervert the rebels’ identities from farmers into soldiers. Heaney writes “The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley— / No kitchens on the run, no striking camp— / We moved quick and sudden in our own country” (1–3). The poem follows the sonnet form, but from the first line the form is disturbed. The opening line has one extra syllable, ending awkwardly on the unstressed second syllable of “barley” (1). Disrupting the sonnet form emphasizes the unnaturalness of the rebels’ role in battle. Their physical movements are disjointed, “quick and sudden,” and the rebels are underprepared. Lacking a “striking camp,” their pockets are
“full of barley,” indicating they are farmers, not soldiers. Distorting the role of farmer to soldier, Heaney repeats the same imagery in “The Toome Road.” The battle between rural life and colonial violence plays out through the perspective of a farmer:

I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. (“The Toome Road” 7–10).

The overwhelming presence of farming livelihood must face the “convoy” (“The Toome Road” 2) and “headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets” (“The Toome Road” 4) who encroach on rural life. He asks “How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?” (“The Toome Road” 5–6) to highlight land dispossession and the Irish fight for reclamation. Likewise, in “Requiem for the Croppies” Heaney emphasizes “in our own country” (3). The farmers are “A people, hardly marching” (5), a scattered group of rural laborers in a battle to create, out of that indefinite article—“A people”—an Irish identity. The rebels “found new tactics” (6), each underscored by rural life. They “cut through reins and rider with the pike / And stampede cattle into infantry” (7–8). The battle is described in rural terms, both because the rebels are fighting to reclaim the Irish landscape and because their identities are inherently tied to rural livelihood. Heaney draws on the pastoral’s roots, evoking Virgil in his depiction of a countryside plagued by civil war. The Irish rebels that occupy Heaney’s verse are the shepherds, farmers turned martyrs by the threat of colonization to identity and landscape. Like farmers forced to conscript in the Georgics, whose “curved pruning hooks are beaten into unbending swords” (Virgil I, 508), Heaney’s Irish rebels are “shaking scythes at cannon” (11), illustrating the opposition between rural, Irish identity and the colonial, industrial forces which
threaten that life. They are “Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones” (“The Toome Road” 14) he writes in “The Toome Road,” indicating how farming and death become related when war violates pastoral spaces. Laying seeds in the ground becomes an act like burying bodies, each promising to reemerge in different forms and continue the cycle.

“Requiem for the Croppies” is a depiction of broader violent cycles, and though they are bound by the pastoral they are not necessarily natural. Rather, they are ritualized, made traditional, like the sonnet form, by repeated occurrences. “Requiem for the Croppies” was published in 1969, documenting the Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1798, at a time when many Irish poets were memorializing the 1916 rebellion. Two months after Door into the Dark was published, brutal divisions would again take place in Northern Ireland. Heaney writes “I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again” (Preoccupations 56). Heaney both predicts the future and forces us into history, emphasizing repeated patterns of violence. The conflict in doing so is that the dead are tied “essentially and immovably to a place” (Twiddy 135), confined to the rural landscape in a defining way that seems to naturalize their deaths. The ending of the poem promises a rebirth, much like the promise at the end of “Bog Queen”:

Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave. (11–14)

Heaney emphasizes a confinement to place that mourning the rebels in pastoral elegy necessitates, the thousands dead are “terraced,” limited by their ruralness and the futility of their fight: “shaking scythes at cannon” (11). The land absorbs their grief, preserving the dead like the bodies in the bog, and in a
much more horrifying non-metaphorical sense, soaks up their blood. The land “blushed,” an innocent word to describe gruesome violence. In the sheer number of lives lost, death becomes insignificant, and they are buried “without shroud or coffin.” Instead, they become symbols of renewal: “in August the barley grew up out of the grave.” Farming is linked to war, the barley crop promising a continuation of conflict, one which is realized in the 1916 rebellion and during the Troubles. “Requiem for the Croppies” exposes the necessity of pastoral elegy for Heaney in understanding the distinction between rural violence and violence against rural lives and spaces. At the same time, the poem enforces cycles of violence, linking pastoral imagery with conflict, and suggesting that the two are inseparable.

Heaney published many pastoral elegies during the 1970s, moving from historical reality to present atrocities. He writes that “From that moment,” the summer of 1969 when violent divisions were ignited, “the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament” (Preoccupations 56). In many ways, the bog people are the “symbols adequate to our predicament” that Heaney searches for. But Heaney’s publications during this time also reflect an even greater intimacy with atrocity, moving beyond “emblems” towards real victims of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, who become, once elegized in poetry, a representation themselves. Following the January 1972 attack in which British soldiers shot twenty-six unarmed civilians, killing thirteen, in the Bogside area of Derry, Heaney published “The Road to Derry,” documenting his journey from Belfast to Derry to attend the funerals. Like “Requiem for the Croppies,” “The Road to Derry” consigns the deaths to a specific, rural place, inserting local town names and land markers to emphasize the landscape as critical to the mourning process.
Along Glenshane and Foreglen
And the cold woods of Hillhead:
A wet wind in the hedges and a dark cloud on the mountain
And flags like black frost
Mourning that the thirteen men were dead. (1–5)

The poem is framed by place names, “Glenshane,” “Foreglen,” and “Hillhead,” situating the speaker in a present place and time. The environment itself is dressed like a mourner, with “a dark cloud on the mountain / And flags like black frost” (3–4). The verb “mourning” remains ambiguously situated, attributing the action to the landscape. By making the mourning process an action taken by the land itself, Heaney illustrates how the Northern Irish countryside becomes entrenched in grief. He personifies the rivers running through Northern Ireland, writing “The Roe wept at Dungiven and the Fyole cried out to heaven, / Burntollet’s old wound opened and again the Bogside bled” (6–7). The countryside and Irish identity are so enmeshed that the land becomes another weeping person, or another victim. The “old wound opened” suggesting an ancient injury, like “the cured wound” (22) which “opens inward”(23) in “The Grauballe Man.” The violent cycle continues: “again the Bogside bled” (7). Like the hillside absorbing the blood of fallen soldiers in “Requiem for the Croppies,” the “Bogside”—suggesting either the Bogside area of Derry or the bogland more generally—reflects the violence done to its rural occupants. Heaney “had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness” (Preoccupations 54). He emphasizes how the lives of Northern Irish people are tied to Northern Irish soil, and the threat of war contributes not only to the death of people but the degradation and mutilation of land. The exploitative practices of colonization and industrialization become threats to rural livelihood and the countryside on which those lives depend. Just as the victims in “Requiem for
the Croppies” are buried “without shroud or coffin” (“Requiem for the Croppies” 13), Heaney struggles to locate the burial site of the thirteen men killed in Derry: “I enquired / Where I might find the coffins where the thirteen men lay dead” (8–9). Instead, he “walked among their old haunts / the home ground where they bled” (11–12). The phrase “their old haunts” suggests a shared joy, a communal adolescence, but also reminds us of their ghostly status. Heaney further emphasizes the relationship between the land and the fallen civilians in “the home ground where they bled,” tying identity to a violent place. The ending of “The Road to Derry” parallels “Requiem for the Croppies,” perpetuating violent cycles and the hope for rebirth: “And in the dirt lay justice like an acorn in the winter / Till its oak would sprout in Derry / where the thirteen men lay dead” (13–15). Heaney asserts that “justice,” now dormant, will soon rise from the Earth and avenge the thirteen men. The Irish countryside is “a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it” (Preoccupations 54). In Celtic folklore, the oak tree was sacred to the Druids, and thus symbolizes power and resilience in Ireland. In this way, Heaney reclaims Irish traditions that center connections with the land to assert the strength of Irish people. However, the imagery of the oak tree sprouting from the soil is not necessarily new, but rather a repetition of the “barley” that “grew up out of the grave” (“Requiem for the Croppies” 14). In tying nature so closely to war—the oak tree grows directly from the bodies of victims—Heaney exposes a central flaw in pastoral elegy. His call for “justice” and warning seem to endorse natural cycles of violence. The conflict, as Iain Twiddy articulates, “is to mourn without betraying an allegiance to the dead, but to mourn and establish a personal or wider sense of peace without creating a call for continued conflict” (Twiddy 135). A “wider sense of peace” becomes difficult within the bounds of the pastoral tradition. “The Road to Derry” confines the dead to “the
home ground” (12), asserting a specificity of place necessary to understanding the thirteen men’s Northern Irish identities. In the “rural” and “ritualized,” as Heaney describes the divisions in a 1999 interview with C4News, conditions of conflict in Northern Ireland, a “wider sense of peace” becomes unimaginable.

In “Casualty,” also about Bloody Sunday, Heaney draws attention to violent rituals, only here poetry itself is called into question for its role in memorializing atrocity. Poetry becomes another barrier, “Incomprehensible / To him, my other life” (22–23). In times of life or death, poetry seems futile, struggling to break out of metaphor, to move from “befitting emblems” to real images capable of translating grief. Heaney says, “Words themselves are doors” (Preoccupations 52), illustrating the power of language to act as a loophole into the imagination. But loopholes can also be traps, or openings for missiles (“loophole, n.1,” OED, def. 1.a). In “Casualty” Heaney travels further into the abyss, getting lost in a darkness unfamiliar to him. “Casualty” is one of his longer poems, split into three parts, and in this way the poem arrives at the limits of poetry, especially pastoral poetry, to reach beyond symbolic spaces and into real life. Because the atrocities are so horrifying, to describe them with truth feels inadequate; incomprehensible violence necessitates metaphors to understand the gravity of the situation. But in “Casualty,” Heaney struggles to find the words, constantly searching for “doors” to escape his own grief:

But my tentative art
His turned back watches too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry. (37–47)
First describing his struggle to converse about poetry, “my tentative art,” he follows the image with an immediate description of his companion’s death. The man’s “turned back” becomes a method for seeing into the concealed, observing atrocity as it happens. This sense of sight is exactly what Heaney’s “tentative art” seeks to accomplish but fails to grasp in the face of violence. Where he once reveled in the “darkness echoing” (“Personal Helicon” 20), the unobservable has now become a threat. The images he previously used to understand repeated violence—barley, oak trees, bogs—are not seen here. He describes the events with minimal language, “he was blown to bits,” and only mentions the strictly factual timeline: “three nights / After they shot dead / The thirteen men in Derry” (41-43). Heaney’s description in “Casualty” differs immensely from poems like “The Grauballe Man” or “Punishment,” in which violence is figured in natural metaphors of decay and rebirth. Here, Heaney’s “tentative” language is not “a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings” (Preoccupations 52), it is abrupt and straightforward, the lines can only reach so far. Heaney is searching for new symbols, or new ways to express truth. Yeats’s words “I sought a theme and sought for it in vain” (“The Circus Animals’ Desertion” 1) are echoed in Heaney’s own struggle to depict the events of the Troubles honestly while also writing organically. The conflict for both Irish poets, but especially Heaney as a Northern Irish Catholic poet, is to write from the self while also paying close attention to tradition and collective memory.

Pastoral images no longer feel adequate, and so in “Casualty” Heaney cuts himself off from the land. The man in the poem is not a farmer, but a fisherman, familiar with the “showery dark” (13) and wielding a “quick eye” (19). Poetry is “incomprehensible” to him, he is “a natural for work” (15),
dedicated to the labor of fishing. In “Lycidas,” Milton’s friend drowned after his ship sank off the coast of the Irish sea. Milton asserts that he “must not float upon his wat’ry bier” (“Lycidas” 12) and chooses to memorialize him as a shepherd, tying him to the landscape and that “selfsame hill” (“Lycidas” 23) from their shared childhood. In “Casualty” Heaney rejects pastoral ground, turning towards the sea and the “mile by mile” (108) of ocean he deems the “proper haunt” (109). The man in “Casualty” also resembles the “wise and simple man” (“The Fisherman” 8) in Yeats’s “The Fisherman.” Heaney’s struggle in “Casualty” to find “the right answer” (85) in poetry echoes “The Fisherman,” in which Yeats writes “What I had hoped it would be / To write for my own race / And the reality” (“The Fisherman” 10–12). In both poems, the figure of the fisherman represents “the reality,” or the truth of the conflict in Northern Ireland. For both Yeats and Heaney, he signifies the poet’s struggle to write “for” Ireland and the actual people living there. At the same time, unlike the bog people, the fisherman in “Casualty” is not a remote symbol used to understand violence in Ireland, but a real person who was killed. His role as a fisherman reveals his distinctness from Heaney’s previous pastoral metaphors; he does not rise from the land but works out on the sea. In “Casualty,” fishing replaces poetry, pulling at depths which poetry cannot reach. In this way Heaney creates a unique version of the pastoral, one which not only portrays rural livelihood but sees acts of rural labor as entryways into understanding poetry. Heaney echoes Scyld Sceing’s funeral in Beowulf, describing the coffins like boats on the water:

Coffin after coffin
Seemed to float from the door
Of the packed cathedral
Like blossoms on slow water. (52–55)
Heaney alludes to Viking age boat burials, in which the dead were carried out to sea and symbolically transported to the afterlife. “The grave holds multiple meanings, nuanced by the experiences and knowledge of the observers, and subject to dialectal variation... burial ritual is now, more than ever, seen to be a tool for the creation of memory within a society” (Halstad-McGuire 166) writes Erin Halstad-McGuire in her study of boat graves and migrant identity. The funeral for the men murdered on Bloody Sunday is a “tightening” (58) act for the community, the observers “were braced and bound / Like brothers in a ring” (59–60). The boat burial emphasizes how ritualized violence in Northern Ireland becomes embedded in community consciousness. The “common funeral” (56), the repeated deaths, are untethered boats, floating out towards a collective grief. Using water to illustrate shared memory is unusual for Heaney, the bog is typically his symbol for shared experience in Northern Ireland. Here, the boat burial emphasizes his persistent search for adequate symbols relevant to rural Irish life.

Like others, the death of the fisherman is ritualized: “How culpable was he / That last night when he broke / Our tribe’s complicity?” (80–81). But unlike other pastoral elegies or the bog poems, Heaney remains unsure of his metaphor. The violence is repeated and ritual, but Heaney hesitates to make “violent death natural to Northern Ireland” (Twiddy 135) in portraying his death as another “tribal, intimate revenge” (“Punishment” 44). He questions the ability of language to represent violence at all:

‘Now you’re supposed to be
An educated man,’
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me
The right answer to that one.’ (82–85)
Heaney is confronted by the limits of his own question, “The right answer to that one” is a direct response to his question of tribal complicity. His literary education fails him, to represent violence with language is already a removal from the real thing. Heaney says, “I missed his funeral” (86), the funeral a memorializing event much like writing poetry. In the end, only fishing offers Heaney a “point of entry” (Preoccupations 52), allowing him to experience life outside the confines of ritual violence. He writes “I tasted freedom with him / To get out early, haul / Steadily off the bottom” (103–105). Heaney’s role observing labor parallels “Digging,” a poem which also questions the value of writing poetry in comparison to rural work. He tastes “freedom” in the “haul,” an act that relies on the imagined senses, seeing “the bottom” in an ocean that appears bottomless. He describes “Somewhere, well out, beyond” reaching towards a future, only this time the prospects move beyond the land and out towards the ocean. What Heaney cannot reach within the confines of pastoral poetry he is able to grasp on the fisherman’s boat: a sense of truth, of connection to a reality not obscured by memorial or pastoral metaphor. He does use the ocean metaphorically, describing how the man was “swimming towards the lure” (74) of the bar, but his transition to water moves beyond previous symbols derived from the ground. The limits of landscape, and language that confines death to landscape, parallels Robert Frost’s poem “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep”:

The land may vary more;  
But wherever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,  
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.  
They cannot look in deep.  
But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep? (9–16)
Truth is a liminal space, “wherever” it exists, the act of looking for it will never cease. There are limits to the search, as Frost repeats “They cannot,” but that does not stop the writer: “But when was that ever a bar / To any watch they keep?” Heaney ends “Casualty” with the request “Question me again” (113). He longs for answers, but more than that, he longs for the act of asking. As Heaney searches for “befitting emblems of adversity,” he also uncovers what language and poetry can truly depict, and where metaphors reach their limits. Just as the pastoral confines life and death to a restricted scene, poetry confines truth to a representation, and in that derivative process poetry becomes a “tentative art.”

Heaney continues to question his role as a poet in “Exposure,” published in North and situated during the time Heaney writes most of his pastoral elegies. The title of the poem recalls Wilfred Owen’s elegy written during the First World War, in which Owen writes, “Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles / Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war / What are we doing here?” (8–10). Owen’s words echo in Heaney’s mind as he considers what is happening “Northward” in Ireland. Owen asks, “What are we doing here?” speaking as a disillusioned soldier. Heaney asks the same question, only as a poet writing during wartime: “How did I end up like this?” (17). Heaney constantly seeks to understand how poetry can act, and specifically how his role as a rural poet can provide an entryway into speaking on the Troubles. Speaking is compelled by the atrocities he witnesses but at the same time the scenario for speaking is broken down, damaged by language’s limiting factors. Heaney writes in “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” “Yet for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable. / The famous Northern reticence” (“Whatever You Say Say Nothing” 31–33).
He says that “Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared to us” (“Whatever You Say Say Nothing” 37), illustrating the way that violence overpowers the ability to speak. During the Troubles, “the stones of silence” (“Punishment” 31) are powerful weapons in dismantling language. In the same way farmers are forced into soldiers to defend their land, Heaney’s role in speaking is necessitated by his rural Irish heritage: “Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing” (“Whatever You Say Say Nothing” 16). In order to “live here” Heaney must “sing.” Sense of place, and heritage, compel Heaney’s poetic voice. “As a citizen and a poet, Heaney wanted to address the schism in Ulster society and the continuing problem of violence and repression, both of which had created and perpetuated an underclass of Catholic citizens, though he did not want to advocate the violent retaliation practiced by the provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army” (Molino 53–54). While he did not want to be a political poet, Heaney was nevertheless speaking at a time when political violence was present in every facet of life. He had to find the “point of entry” and the “point of exit” (Preoccupations 52) for commenting on the present atrocities. The pastoral functions for Heaney as a way of making us understand the opposition between rural life and colonial violence, but also illustrates a much more ambiguous struggle between humans and the landscape which puts the Troubles in a broader context.

In “Exposure” Heaney frames his interrogation of poetry with pastoral images, reinforcing his role as a rural poet. Just as he does in other pastoral elegies like “The Road To Derry,” in the first line he ties the reader to a time and place: “It is December in Wicklow: / Alders dripping, birches / Inheriting the last light” (1–3). Heaney positions the reader at the moment of change, it is the last month of the year, and the trees are “inheriting the last light” like a final tradition before death. He longs to be a lost comet, external to the Earth but pummeling towards it, a “million tons of light” to brighten the
darkness of the day, of the season. Heaney remains aware of the contrast between farming and poetry even as his poetic genre allows him to connect their experiences. He writes “If I could come on meteorite! / Instead I walk through damp leaves, / Husks, the spent flukes of autumn” (10–12).

“Exposure” is a poem about slow change, the gradual decay and renewal of seasonal rituals. But in a time characterized by explosive, violent events Heaney longs for the instantaneous. Poetry as a “meteorite” that could light the darkness and upend ritual events. However, he remains consigned to Earth, limited by a specific pastoral space, “damp leaves” and “the spent flukes of autumn,” reminders of his past attempts to speak. In this environment Heaney imagines “a hero” (13) who is not a poet, but a farmer “on some muddy compound, / His gift like a slingstone / Whirled for the desperate” (14–16). The hero belongs to a rural space, a “muddy compound,” and “his gift” is something unhesitating, “whirled” like a comet through the air. “His gift” is the opposite of the “tentative art” of poetry. Like Caedmon’s “real gift” in “Whitby-sur-Moyola,” “his gift” is something rural. Heaney’s poetry centers ritual processes and tradition, but during this time answers were needed immediately, in the moment. He questions his role as a poet—“How did I end up like this?” (17)—wondering when he chose poetry over the “muddy compound.” In addition, he doubts the power of language to portray the actual:

As I sit weighing and weighing
   My responsible tristia.
   For what? For the ear? For the people?
   For what is said behind-backs? (21–24)

Heaney alludes to his bog poems, to the “actual weight / of each hooded victim” (46–47) in “The Grauballe Man” and “the weighing stone” (11) of the drowned bog body in “Punishment.” The
“actual weight” of atrocity is unreachable by language. Heaney’s role as a poet becomes futile: “For what? For the ear? For the people? / For what is said behind-backs?” Conversation “behind-backs” parallels the fisherman’s “observant back” (“Casualty” 38) in “Casualty.” In an environment in which everyone is watching, in which the rural world becomes occupied, Heaney retreats into ambiguity: “I am neither internee nor informer; / An inner émigré” (30–31). His role as a poet does not fall into defined categories of sectarian conflict, “neither internee nor informer,” and so he is displaced, the “inner émigré” who moves from Northern Ireland to the republic. Traveling between identities, he attempts to find an “inner” self that captures the complexities of his heritage and trajectory. Heaney moves from a pastoral characterized by civil war to one where he can take “protective colouring / from bole and bark” (34–35). Yet he still feels the comet’s heat, the power of poetry:

Who, blowing up these sparks  
For their meagre heat, have missed  
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
The comet’s pulsing rose. (37–40)

Heaney alludes to the “glimmer” (8) of the comet’s light from the beginning of the poem, the “rose-hips” (8) that are now a “pulsing rose” (40). The natural processes of growth never cease, despite attempts to remove ourselves from the ritual. Like the barley growing out of the graves in “Requiem for the Croppies” or the oak tree sprouting from the murdered men in “The Road To Derry,” the “pulsing rose” reveals how there is always an aftermath. An aftermath which is beating and bloody, the “pulsing rose” like a pulsing heart, sustaining life. Moving beyond the ground from which traditions are recycled, Heaney pushes the limits of the pastoral towards the comet hurtling through space. “No poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong / Inflicted and endured” he writes in “The Cure At
Troy” (The Cure at Troy 77). And yet, poetry can push identity’s limits, forcing us to examine ourselves and the places by which we are defined, as Heaney does in “Exposure.” Heaney’s “point of entry” is rural, it is Caedmon’s “big ignorant roar” or an imagined hero on a “muddy compound.” But poetry is the “point of exit,” the opportunity to escape the rituals which confine us.
CHAPTER THREE

“Me in place and the place in me”: Language and Sense of Place

I. “Living Speech” and Home Ground

Heaney once described “two ways place is known” (Preoccupations 131). “One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious” (Preoccupations 131), he writes. The verb “is” reminds us of the movement from buried to uncovered; Heaney’s poetry occupies the liminal spaces of these movements. The first poem in his first publication, Death of a Naturalist, is titled “Digging.” “Digging,” in the gerundive form, represents a moment between the above- and the under-ground, and Heaney remains preoccupied with this transience throughout his poetic career.

Always caught in the act, digging, divining, sensing what exists above and beneath. When he describes place as something that becomes known through opposing processes, he shows how poetic voice emerges from the space between identity and tradition. In another essay from Preoccupations titled “Belfast,” first published in the Guardian in 1972, Heaney articulates how his “unconscious” and “conscious” feelings of place interact. Recalling Mossbawn’s neighboring lands, he refers to “Grove Hill” and “Back Park,” names which “insist that this familiar locale is a version of pastoral” (Preoccupations 36). Alluding to Empson’s 1935 book of criticism, Some Versions of Pastoral, the “version of pastoral” to which Heaney refers is a distinctly British fantasy. He is reminded of Sir John Davies’s idyllic description of Fermanagh and asserts “Grove is a word that I associate with translations from the classics... The literary word and the earthwork sentried by Scotch firs sit ill together” (Preoccupations 36). He continues “My illiterate ear isn’t totally satisified, as it is by another name, The
Dirraghs, from doire as in Derry, also usually Englished as ‘oak grove’” (Preoccupations 36). He again alludes to the British pastoral tradition, and specifically the iconic English oak, symbolic of an enduring British empire. The processing is complex, and his conscious, literary knowledge locates the place-names within the pastoral tradition. But this knowledge does not strike him the way the Irish name, “The Dirraghs,” stimulates his “illiterate ear.” Of course, Davies’ cruel presence in Ireland and British colonial violence also influence Heaney’s aversion to the English place-names. Apparent in his use of the word “sentried” is the pressing conflict taking place in 1972 when “Belfast” was published. But more broadly, Heaney pieces out the ill-fitted “grove” and “park” from the satisfying “Dirraghs” with only his “illiterate” ear. The word “doire” is inherent to his unconscious knowledge of place. Heaney writes that “grove and park” “do not reach me as a fibre from a tap-root but remind me of the intricate and various foliage of history and culture that I grew up beneath” (Preoccupations 36). Moving in two directions, below and above, he distinguishes between words which reach him “as fibre from a tap-root” and those which belong to a “various foliage.” The Irish place-names are intrinsically tied to the landscape, and they excite Heaney’s “illiterate” ear through their connection to the ground. The unconscious knowledge of place is buried. By contrast, the English words, “grove and park,” representing a “version of pastoral,” come from above. They are a “foliage of history and culture” known to Heaney through a literary sense. Importantly, Heaney “grew up beneath.” His sense of self as a poet exists between the underground “fibre” of his childhood and the complex “foliage” of literary tradition.

The relationship between poetic identity and landscape is especially crucial in Ireland, a fact that Heaney ascribes to “the peculiar fractures in our history” (Preoccupations 136). Heaney’s term
somewhat ironically captures how British colonization in Ireland has left Irish writers urgently searching for the union between physical place and cultural identity. During the Irish Literary Revival, Irish poets, most notably Yeats, evoked a sense of place tied to both physical locales and mythological traditions (Murphy 136). Heaney writes in “The Sense of Place” that Yeats’s goal was to “bind the people of the Irish place to the body of their world” (Preoccupations 135). The connection between place and identity is not, however, distinctly an Irish concern, as Heaney points out. Questions of belonging emerge in Dante, Wordsworth, Auden, and others. The farming instructions in Virgil’s Georgics are undercut by land dispossession and identity loss. Inherent to the pastoral tradition is the question of our relationship to the places we are from and occupy. However, Heaney’s poetry differs from Yeats’s vision in his specific locality and experience. The Irish Literary Revival concerned cultural consciousness and the grander political purpose behind uniting Irish identity and place. Virgil’s Georgics too serves a similar aim in its civil war setting, tying rural revival to national aims. While Heaney’s poetry certainly speaks to Northern Ireland’s “predicament,” his own sense of self emerges not alongside cultural nationalism but from his rural childhood. Once, at a poetry reading a student remarked that Heaney’s poetry “didn’t sound very Celtic,” to which Heaney responded: “the verb was probably more precise than he intended” (Preoccupations 36). When he writes that “my quest for definition, while it may lead backward, is conducted in the living speech of the landscape I was born into” (Preoccupations 37), Heaney attributes a dynamic music to the land. The “living speech of the landscape” reflects the intersection between agrarian language and poetic metaphor. Heaney uncovers this “living speech” in words like “versus,” which contain both a rural meaning—to turn the plough—and a poetic one. Like the landscape, language contains artifacts from which Heaney draws
connections between his rural ear and his literary voice. The phrase “conducted in” indicates how the speech is living but still comes from the past, Heaney must lead it to the surface. His “quest” then involves this responsibility: to uncover “the living speech,” to turn the rhythms of the land into the music of poetry. The “living speech” of Heaney’s rural upbringing shapes his understanding of identity and place, an understanding that may involve “backward” motion. His specific childhood experience serves as the “illiterate” or “unconscious” knowledge of place. Rather than attempt to move strictly forward with the literary tradition inherited from Yeats, Heaney traverses both directions. His poetic voice relies on the “literate” rhythms of Yeats and Virgil and their respective landscapes, but what distinguishes Heaney is the excavation of his own past.

Heaney’s poetry does not attempt to redefine Irish identity to the degree Yeats does, but he is not parochial in his sense of place either. Within the modern Irish poetry tradition, Heaney aligns himself most with Patrick Kavanagh, whose inward and local regions parallel Heaney’s interest in a specific past. When he introduces Kavanagh to the discussion in “The Sense of Place” he writes, “But I want to turn the plough back into the home ground again and see what can be turned up in Co. Monaghan. Patrick Kavanagh’s place was to a large extent his subject” (Preoccupations 127). Inserting the phrase “turn the plough back,” the classical and local in one image, signals a shift from Heaney’s discussion of the Revival writers and illustrates the intimacy between his experience and Kavanagh’s perspective. He points out that Kavanagh, despite rejecting “any national purpose,” reached most Irish people “more immediately and more intimately than most things in Yeats” (Preoccupations 137). For Heaney, Kavanagh represents the “living speech of the landscape,” rejecting idyllic renderings of the Irish countryside and favoring the “unspectacular” (Preoccupations 137). Andrew Murphy writes that
Kavanagh gave Heaney “a sense of locatedness with which he could identify in a direct and immediate manner” (Murphy 136). Murphy refers to a young Heaney, in his early twenties and just beginning his career. Later, Heaney moves outward from the “locatedness” offered by Kavanagh, both literally in his move away from the North and poetically in his search for adequate symbols to write about the Troubles. Nevertheless, Murphy illustrates how Kavanagh provides Heaney with an immediacy that appeases his unconscious sense of self. In the poem “Epic” Kavanagh proclaims “I have lived in important places, times / When great events were decided” (1–2). The “events” in question are the “pitchfork-armed claims” (4) of neighbors’ disputes. He writes “I heard the Duffys shouting ‘Damn your soul!’ / And old McCabe stripped to the waist” (5–6). His language is immediate and authentic, portraying unremarkable events in County Monaghan. “Pitchfork-armed claims” locates his language along the rough edges of rural life. Inserting family names like the “Duffys” and “McCabe” alongside place-names like “Ballyrush” and “Gortin” (11), Kavanagh places the poetic consciousness within a rural one. He remains aware of literary tradition—the poem is a sonnet and alludes to Homer’s Iliad—but he situates them among Monaghan’s boundaries: “Till Homer’s ghost came whispering to my mind. / He said: I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance” (12–14). The phrase “such a local row” captures Kavanagh’s insular voice. He rejects the Yeatsian idea that poets and poetry should carve out a national consciousness and focuses on the individual. “I rather than we is his preferred first person” (Preoccupations 144). Where Kavanagh asserts the parochial, Heaney combines the local with the national. He does not present “a picturesque idiom” (Preoccupations 138) of rural Irish life, like the Revivalists, but throughout his career he spoke on national terms, even if his symbols were immediate and specific. Especially during the height of the
Troubles, the relationship between Heaney’s personal identity and his sense of place became compressed under the weight of political violence. In “Strange Fruit,” he inserts the local: “the wet fern of her hair” (3), “a turf clod” (7), and “pools in the old workings” (8). But the poem grapples with national identity and global violence through the bog symbols. First titled “Severed Head,” then the French version “Tête Coupée,” Heaney finally chose “Strange Fruit,” alluding to the Billie Holiday protest anthem about racist lynchings in America (“Strange Fruit,” Seamus Heaney Literary Papers). Heaney connects his childhood landscape to violence in the past—the ritual murder of bog bodies—and present—sectarian killings in Northern Ireland and white supremacist violence across the world. Unlike Kavanagh, Heaney is on the search for “images and symbols adequate to our predicament” (Preoccupations 56). His sense of poetic identity relies on the “living speech” of the landscape, requiring him to understand his own specific experience while connecting that experience to evolving traditions.

In August 1972, six months after British soldiers killed thirteen unarmed civilians in Derry, Heaney moved south. After resigning from Queen’s University in Belfast, he rented a cottage from Ann Saddlemoyer in Glenmore, County Wicklow. He writes that Glenmore was “a far cry from Ashley Avenue and the Ashley Arms at the corner where the landlord, Mr Lavery, had been blown up as he tried to carry a parcel bomb out of the lounge bar” (Stepping Stones 199). In Glenmore Cottage, while working as a freelance writer, Heaney penned many of the poems included in North and Field Work. The move from Belfast to the Republic led to a shift in his poetic voice and his sense of identity in relation to the landscape. He refers to Glenmore as a “hedge-school,” and writes “after a couple of years in the cottage, it changed from being just living quarters to a locus that was being written into poems”
(Stepping Stones 198). At Glenmore, Heaney wrote from an immediate relationship with the landscape around him. It was a “locus,” like locus amoenus, Latin for “pleasant place.” Heaney alludes to an idyllic pastoral while also connecting the local to the literary. During his time in Belfast, his poems were “memories of older haunts” but in Glenmore he “gathered blackberries off the briars and ate them, as if I were back on the road to school” (Stepping Stones 198). The “Glenmore Sonnets,” which are dedicated to Ann Saddlemeyer, are some of Heaney’s most intimate reflections on his inner life. They illustrate his commitment to his family and marriage but also his commitment to writing. Heaney’s sense of self as both a person and a poet emerge from the environment around him.

The Glenmore sonnets open with the relationship between rural life and poetry, merging Heaney’s unconscious and conscious knowledge:

Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground.
The mildest February for twenty years
Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound
Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors. (1–4)

The word verse comes from the Latin versus, meaning ‘to turn’ as a ploughman does. In the second sonnet, in which Heaney repeats the first line of sonnet “I,” the connection is more explicit: “Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round” (“II” 13–14). “Opened ground” introduces Heaney’s excavation and the buried, “illiterate” sense of self and poetry. But he does not restrict himself to the past, and the poem operates in both the past and present. The mild February “is mist bands” and the road “is steaming” (5). His verbs switch tenses as he recalls childhood experiences while viewing the woods and farmlands around Glenmore cottage. The landscape and language are intimately connected, vowels dig into the ground and the mild air is “a deep
no sound” that remains “vulnerable” to disturbances. The phrase “a deep no sound” plays with absence in the way Heaney later explores in the “Clearances” sonnet sequence, and parallels Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which he writes “No light, but rather darkness visible.” In the absence of light, one can still see, or feel, the darkness. The “deep no sound” Heaney feels at Glenmore is an absence made tangible. The sound is threatened, the landscape is “vulnerable” to distant civilization. In a broader sense, landscape and language are endangered by the same force: colonization led to land dispossession in Ireland and the Anglicization of the Irish language. As a result, both the environment and speech are made “vulnerable.” Heaney alludes to pastoral idealism but rejects its simplicity: “Now the good life could be to cross a field / And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / Of ploughs. My lea is deeply tilled” (6–8). The ironic tone in “the good life could be to cross a field” illustrates the tension between what Heaney sees as “a picturesque idiom” (*Preoccupations* 138)—“cross a field” is deliberately simplistic—and the type of pastoral consciousness he is trying to achieve. In Glenmore he is confronted with a rural past and a rural present, and the divide between the “literate” and “illiterate” sense of place is no longer as distinct. He is on the cusp of realization, his “lea,” meaning grassland or a meadow for grazing, “is deeply tilled” and prepared for growth. “Old plough-socks gorge the subsoil of each sense,” he writes, “And I am quickened with a redolence / Of farmland as a dark unblown rose” (9–11). The language comes from Mossbawn, “old plough-socks” recalls specific plough parts used for cutting turf, but describes his poetic restlessness in County Wicklow, rather than his childhood in County Derry. Heaney’s rural inheritance becomes a poetic one. Uncovering the rootedness of language and the different senses of a word, layers of turf become the “subsoil of each sense” made visible by poetry. Poetry is the act of feeling the hidden, divining. But unlike in other poems and prose
in which Heaney favors the diviner as a metaphor for the poet, here the ploughman and poet are linked. He is awaiting a harvest: “Wait then... Breasting the mist, in sowers’ aprons, / My ghosts come striding into their spring stations. / The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows” (12–14). Poems are “ghosts,” emerging from the past but affected by the present, suspended in time. In “Belfast” Heaney writes that poems come “sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery” (Preoccupations 34). This “touch of mystery” is evident in “Spring stations,” which recalls the stations of the cross as well as “The Diviner,” in which “spring water” suddenly broadcasts “its secret stations” (“The Diviner” 7–8). The “mist” connects to “the literary mists of a Celtic twilight” Heaney finds in the names Broagh and Anahorish (Preoccupations 36). Poetry is an immediate act, arriving from buried places unforeseen and mythical, the “mildest February for twenty years” (2) and “freakish Easter snows” illustrate this strangeness. But poems are also gradual, future “dream grain” that will be harvested after the labor of ploughing.

During the four years spent at Glenmore cottage Heaney immersed himself in the immediate landscape around him. In addition to writing poems, he was raising three children with Marie and carving out his own adult life from new soil. He was no longer residing in the farmland of his youth, but Glenmore was its own version of a pastoral livelihood. While at Glenmore he recalled Dorothy and William Wordsworth’s move to Dove Cottage in the Lake District of England, during which Wordsworth wrote many of his well-known odes. Wordsworth’s prolific period at Dove Cottage in some ways mirrored Heaney’s time in Glenmore, with both poets turning not towards literary tradition, but towards the landscape of their youth. In sonnet “III” Heaney attempts the comparison
while walking with Marie: “Dorothy and William—’ She interrupts: / ‘You’re not going to compare us two...?’” (11–12). Heaney’s poetic voice remains distinct from Wordsworth’s, but he is nevertheless aware of Wordsworth’s presence while writing at Glanmore; not as a literary heritage, but as a parallel example of revisiting one’s past experiences while experiencing the present. The first line of sonnet “II” alludes to Wordsworth’s writing at Dove Cottage: “Sensings, mountings from the hiding places, / Words entering almost the sense of touch” (1–2). The “hiding places,” recalls Wordsworth’s Prelude, in which he writes “the hiding places of my power / Seem open; I approach, and then they close” (Wordsworth, Book XI 279–280). Poems exist in buried places, Heaney describes poetry as “divining,” an inherently mysterious process. In “hiding places of my power” Wordsworth illustrates the fleeting nature of childhood memories and the poet’s attempt at bringing those recollections into the present. “Sensings” and “mountings” also echo Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” completed while at Dove Cottage, in which he writes:

But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature (141–144)

Heaney’s word “sensings” mirrors Wordsworth’s use of the gerund form to articulate ephemerality while decelerating the moment in time—“fallings” and “vanishings” feel infinite. The plural form of “sensings” also emphasizes the poetic technique “that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art” (Preoccupations 47). “Sensings” operates as the middle-ground between the senses and the feelings, and that middle-ground is where Heaney’s interest lies. The line “Words entering almost the sense of touch” is a journey into
the “subsoil” (“I” 9) of buried feeling, expanding the senses. The adverb “almost” and the main verb “entering” are flipped, amplifying the effect of “almost” and forcing a pause. The idea that words can enter the senses, or the “sense of touch” being a place of arrival, is consistent with Heaney’s belief in poetry as both craft and technique. Words operate according to a rhythm and form that can “almost” reveal the senses, but to uncover what’s buried the poet must rely on some element of magic, or divination. Heaney writes “‘These things are not secrets but mysteries,’ / Oisin Kelly told me years ago” (4–5). The artist requires some mythological assistance. The word “mystery” is a theological term—misterie—a spiritual truth only accessible by divine revelation. Elmer Andrews writes that “Poetry is essentially a mystery, a corpse from the bog, a whispering from the dark, a gift from the goddess. The poet is passive receiver before he is an active maker” (Andrews 375). As a poet Heaney oscillates between these roles of “passive receiver” and “active maker.” In the first Glenmore sonnet he writes “Old plough-socks gorge the subsoil of each sense” (“I” 9). But in sonnet “II,” words “almost” reach the senses, and the method is a mystery. Contrasting the sharp plough blades that “gorge” the ground with hesitant “sensings,” Heaney illustrates the divide between his “older haunts” (Stepping Stones 198) and the Glenmore locale.

As he continues to connect identity to place, he transitions between an understanding of poetry as rural craft and the recognition of a more mythological, undefinable poetic knowledge. He “landed in the hedge-school of Glenmore” (9), he writes in sonnet “II.” A “hedge-school” was a secret place where Irish language and traditions were taught, rejecting English law. There, Heaney wanted to create a poetic voice that reflected the Irish landscape and culture: “And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise / A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter / That might continue, hold,
dispel, appease” (10–12). Hoping “to raise / A voice” that comes “from” the landscape, Heaney emphasizes continuity—“continue, hold, dispel, appease” are the verbs of tradition. The voice reflects music, specifically the “slug-horn,” a trumpet, and the “chanter,” the pipe of a bagpipe. But “chanter” can also mean enchanter, or magician (“chanter, n.1,” OED), and so Heaney’s poetic voice comes from both landscape and myth. The final couplet repeats the sequence’s opening: “Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round” (13–14). Writing is a continuous tradition, each line of verse “returning” with the poet’s labor. Vowels become tools with which to open the ground and look beneath. “We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories,” Heaney writes. “And when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced... that it is to the land itself, that we must look for continuity” (Preoccupations 149). Heaney finds his “sensings” and the ability to cultivate “a voice” from the landscape around him. In “The Loose Box” he writes “By pacing it in words that make you feel / You’ve found your feet in what “surefooted” means / And in the ground of your own understanding—” (9–14). Poetic identity for Heaney will always be intimately related to landscape: “the ground of your own understanding.” Words must “enter” the senses through the soil, and so the poet’s role in uncovering buried feelings relies on an intimate knowledge of the landscape.

II. Language as a Loophole

Sense of place is important to Heaney’s poetics not only in “illiterate” and “literate” ways but in specific, actual representations. The relationship between language and place is not metaphorical
but real, it can be heard, seen, and felt. Place and vocabulary become one, the landscapes of his poem are a “vowel-meadow.” Heaney does not romanticize Irish place-names or Irish words, instead he breaks them down into their component parts: vowels and consonants, sounds and silences. These elements are then understood through their connection to place. In “Belfast,” Heaney writes “I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished on English consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience” (Preoccupations 37). For Heaney, the Irish language is sacred. Not in the idolizing way of the Revivalists, but consecrated in the landscape, inseparable from place. In “The Stations of the West” he recalls a trip to the Gaeltacht, writing “The visionaries breathed on my face a smell of soup-kitchens, they mixed the dust of croppies’ graves with the fasting spittle of our creed and anointed my lips” (5–8). Like most of the poems in Stations, poetic structure is inconsequential. Heaney is concerned with the event of speaking and the sound of a place, the arrangement of those sounds into stanzas becomes less important. The word “visionaries” is ironic, like he is mocking the Revivalists and their characterization of the Irish language. Here, native Irish speakers smell like “soup-kitchens” and occupy a “fasting spittle.” Like the “croppies” they are mound-dwellers turned martyrs by the threat to their land and language. Speaking Irish is revolutionary because it was forced to become so, like the perverse rebels “shaking scythes at cannon” (“Requiem for the Croppies” 11). In the phrase “the dust of croppies’ graves with the fasting spittle of our creed” Heaney identifies centuries of rural Irish struggle and resistance. Yet, even in the “spittle” he recognizes the “Irish pieties,” the language is sacred and his lips are “anointed.” The consecration comes from the place to which the language is indelibly connected. Heaney writes that
“all around me seemed to prophesy” (11) as if the space is charged with a mythical energy. Even though he leaves without “any gift of tongues” (10), the place is seared into his memory:

But still
I would recall the stations of the west, white sand, hard rock,
light ascending like its definition over Rannafast and Errigal,
Annaghry and Kincasslagh: names portable as altar stones, un-leavened elements. (11–15)

The Gaeltacht are regions in Ireland along the western coast where Irish is the predominant vernacular; they are Heaney’s “stations of the west.” The word “stations” combines place with sacredness. The stations of the cross are fourteen pivotal moments in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, prayed to by Catholics as part of a spiritual journey. Heaney’s “stations” are equally holy: light ascends over the western coast in an impossible way. Place and language are linked in Heaney’s use of “definition,” to define a place requires language. In “Bogland” he writes that the land is “missing its last definition / By millions of years” (“Bogland” 18–19). The relationship is reciprocal as place fosters language and language defines a place. But in Ireland the relationship is complex, particularly for Heaney who can only manage “a few words” (9). In “A Lost Tradition,” Irish poet John Montague writes “The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read” (“A Lost Tradition” 16–17). Ireland is made up of “shards of a lost tradition” (“A Lost Tradition” 1) according to Montague. For Heaney, the Irish language is a “buried shard,” closely tied to the personal. In the Gaeltacht he listens “through the wall to fluent Irish, homesick for a speech / I was to extirpate” (3–4). The word “extirpate” means “to pull or pluck up by the roots” (“extirpate, v.,” OED, def. 2.a) but also, more violently, to suppress. Heaney associates the “Irish pieties” with the “personal” because they are buried roots, requiring his “illiterate” ear to process and uncover. But the Irish language is also “a speech” split from its soil, and so Heaney is
left grasping at a collective memory. He lists each place-name like a prayer: “Rannafast and Errigal, / Annaghry and Kincasslagh” (13–14). They are sacred, “unleavened elements,” like the body of Christ or the unleavened bread consumed during Passover. The language cannot be separated from the place, they are “names as portable as altar stones.” To divide the “stations” from their “definition” would be to separate the soul from the body. In “Bogland” Heaney writes “They’ve taken the skeleton / Of the Great Irish Elk / Out of the peat, set it up / An astounding crate full of air” (“Bogland” 9–12). When the “Great Irish Elk” is removed from the peat it loses part of its mythology, becoming a “crate full of air.” Likewise, the staying power of the Irish language is preserved in the ground. Language is an immovable piece of the landscape.

If the “personal and Irish pieties” are vowels, Heaney’s “English consonants” are a stark contrast. In “A Peacock’s Feather” Heaney illustrates the divide between the English countryside and his own rural locale. Dedicated to his niece, Daisy Garnett, he writes “You, Daisy, Daisy, English niece” (6). Turning the English name “Daisy” over, Heaney settles on “English niece” to characterize the baby. In the next stanza he inserts the English place-name, the description unfamiliar:

Gloucstershire: its prospects lie
Wooded and misty to my eye
Whose landscape, as your mother’s was,
Is other than this mellowness
Of topiary, lawn and brick,
Possessed, untrespassed, walled, nostalgic. (7–12)

The word “Gloucstershire” hangs at the start of the stanza as Heaney searches for its definition, referring to “its prospects” and evoking eighteenth century British poetry. The word “lie” emphasizes his distrust, the place embodying an artificial appreciation of the landscape.
Gloucestershire is “wooded and misty” from his perspective and reminds him of his own otherness. 

Daisy’s mother is Polly Devlin, Marie Heaney’s sister. Her father, Andrew Garnett, is from a well-off English family, as indicated by the stately “prospects” of Gloucestershire. Heaney’s Northern Irish heritage is a “landscape,” whereas the English countryside is simply “this mellowness.” His description contains only unnatural elements: topiary, bricks, and walls. The words “possessed, untrespassed, walled, nostalgic” serve to contrast Northern Ireland, which is characterized by dispossession, British trespassing, and an “unfenced country” (“Bogland” 6). “Possessed” recalls the complex issue of land possession that underscores the Georgics, and the word “nostalgic” alludes to one of the main conventions in the English pastoral tradition: the “backward look” as Sidney Burris writes (Burris 74). Heaney is invested in the past, but he is not nostalgic. He comes from “scraggy farm and moss, / Old patchworks that the pitch and toss / Of history have left dishevelled” (13–15). Ireland consists of “old patchworks,” much like John Montague’s “shards of a lost tradition.” For the sake of his niece, Heaney levels his “cart-track voice to garden tones” (17) and “cobbled the bog with Cotswold stones” (18). The Irish vernacular is described in its relation to the landscape, his “cart-track voice” is suspended for the English “garden tones” and he cobbles his own identity—“the bog”—with Cotswold stones. The rhythm contrasts his usual tempo, inserting a Yeatsian tetrameter. While the past has been scarred by the “pitch and toss” (14) of history, the future is “not our own” (21) Heaney writes. The Irish landscape will always preserve Irish history and culture, but in the future the divide between Irish and English is more ambiguous. When Heaney leaves the “ordered home,” he invokes a prayer: “May tilth and loam, / Darkened with Celts’ and Saxons’ blood, / Breastfeed your love of house and wood” (32–34). Growth from bloody soil is a familiar image in Heaney’s canon; he often uses the cyclical
nature of the growing season to represent the cyclical nature of violence in Northern Ireland. But here the tenor is different, he hopes that from fertile soil, “darkened” with English and Irish blood, will grow a split love, of both “house and wood,” the constructed English home and the Irish wilderness.

Heaney’s own upbringing as a Catholic in Northern Ireland reflects this cultural assemblage: the word “Mossbawn” comes from the Scots word moss, the English colonists’ word bawn, and the Gaelic bán.

“In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster” Heaney writes in “Belfast” (Preoccupations 35). In language’s vowels and consonants Heaney uncovers a distinct sense of place. The piecing apart and together of words and phrases makes his voice unique; the poems are “buried shards” sounding out a varied existence.

In Irish writing, the dinnseanchas tradition, the lore of places, relates the meaning of place-names to the cultural landscape, establishing a “mythological etymology” (Preoccupations 131). The term originally refers to eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscript materials related to place (Denvir 108), but also plays a significant role in modern Irish poetry. For Heaney, dinnseanchas helps to establish a “felt knowledge” of place. The knowledge can only be obtained if “the features of the landscape are a mode of communion with a something other than themselves, a something to which we ourselves still feel we might belong” (Preoccupations 132). Without language, the landscape is only a “picturesque idiom.” The aesthetic of natural beauty common in pastoral poems is merely “a visual pleasure” (Preoccupations 132). Heaney works to understand the “communion” between the landscape and language, culture and identity. His word choice indicates holiness; place and language are sacred elements. In the pastoral tradition, nature is a visited place. In Heaney’s poetry, the landscape represents belonging. Place is both real and mythical, language translating the landscape into
something which can “live in the imagination... instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry” 
(Preoccupations 132). The dinnseanchas tradition forms a “country of the mind” as Heaney terms the marriage between place and feeling. The relationship between landscape and language is instinctual, “implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities” (Preoccupations 132). Gearoid Denvir writes that “Poetry of place in this sense is not a grid map with specific locations cartographically located... It is a metaphoric allusion to another reality—psychic, aesthetical, cultural—a perspective offering meaning, and sustenance in a subjective rather than an objective sense” (Denvir 117). In Heaney’s poetry, the metaphoric does not so much “transport” the poet and reader to “another reality,” but exposes a new system for understanding the actual roots beneath the ground. The inherent metaphorical qualities of language allow Heaney to understand the reality of his place. His vowels plough into the ground—language connects to place through metaphor, but this metaphor depicts the realities of rural life and what it means to belong to a specific locale. Heaney “discovers the fact of agrarian life in the dream of language” writes Wes Davis (Davis 106). The relationship between language and landscape relies on the metaphorical powers of poetry but establishes a real sense of belonging to a specific place.

The specific place to which Heaney belongs is a “bog that keeps crusting / Between the sights of the sun” (“Bogland” 7–8). In “Bogland,” Heaney illustrates the mythical yet concrete qualities of the Irish landscape:

Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,
Is wooed into the cyclops’ eye
Of a tarn. (3–6)
In an early draft of the poem Heaney describes the horizon as “fungoid” rather than “encroaching” (“Bogland,” Seamus Heaney Literary Papers). “Fungoid” implies decomposition, like the “flax-dam” that “festered in the heart / Of the townland” (“Death of a Naturalist” 1–2) in “Death of a Naturalist.” The “fungoid horizon” is a landscape in decay. But the “encroaching horizon” illustrates the movement and power of place while also alluding to land dispossession and Ireland’s colonization. Metaphor helps Heaney understand the physical realities of his landscape: the small mountain lake encircling the “cyclops’ eye,” the shape of which is an ‘o,’ a entryway or loophole to another world. The past and the present collide as Heaney recovers traditions from the bog: “Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years / Was recovered salty and white” (13–15). Irish bog butter was often unearthed by turf-cutters, made from milk fat buried in the bog for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, the butter remains “salty and white,” and edible. The traditions of the past are living elements. He describes “the ground itself” as “kind, black butter” personifying the landscape and the murky soil of his home ground. Preserving centuries of Irish history, the ground responds to the present by opening up the past: “Melting and opening underfoot, / Missing its last definition / By millions of years” (17–19). In the Glanmore sonnets, Heaney required an instrument—the plough—to turn over opened ground. Here however, the land melts away under the pressure of his foot. Underneath are “millions of years” undefined. Heaney feels closest to the past when interacting with the landscape in the most childlike way, directly pressing his body to the ground. In Squarings “xl” he writes, “I was four but I turned four hundred maybe / Encountering the ancient dampish feel / Of a clay floor. Maybe four thousand even” (Squirings “xl” 1–3). The sense of time slipping into the past results from Heaney’s childhood experience with the tangible ground beneath him. In “Mossbawn” he writes “All children want to
crouch in their secret nests,” recalling the time he spent in “the throat of an old willow tree”

(Preoccupations 17–18). Squeezing into the narrow mouth of the tree, Heaney writes that once
through it “you were at the heart of a different life” (Preoccupations 18). Heaney is always on the search
for openings, and just as his natural surroundings allow him to imagine alternate realities, words too
function as portals. Wes Davis makes the precise observation that “Throughout his career Heaney has
emphasized this metaphoric contact with the ground of local reality” (Davis 103). In “Incertus”
Heaney writes, “Oh yes, I crept before I walked” (“Incertus” 4). Just as words transport Heaney
metaphorically into the past, the physical presence of a “clay floor” can bring him back in time. He feels
the “Ground of being. Body’s deep obedience / To all its shifting senses” (Squarings “xl” 7–9).

Merging body and earth, the distinction between self and place is ambiguous, becoming “ground of
being.” The personal is lost in the sensory experience; the body exists without an identifying feature or
pronoun, displaying a “deep obedience” to the ever-changing senses. In “Bogland” he illustrates how
sensory experience has the power to transport the viewer back and forth through time. Dedicated to
Northern Irish landscape artist T.P. Flanagan, the poem implies that art—poetry or painting—has a
similar power. Heaney asserts that “They’ll never dig coal here” (20), opting instead for the striking
image of the “Great Irish Elk” (10) or rotted trees pulled from the peat:

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards (21–24)

The trunks are “soft as pulp,” a description Heaney originally phrased “soft as a banana” (“Bogland,”
Seamus Heaney Literary Papers). The word “pulp” reinscribes power to the “waterlogged trunks” by
implying that from the rotted wood something can be created, like wood pulp ready to become paper.

As in the “Squarings sequence,” immediate contact with the land sends one “inwards and downwards” into the passage of time. When digging, an “inward” and “downward” motion appear nearly the same. But Heaney separates the actions, implying that for each downward cut into the peat there is a reciprocal inward movement into identity and tradition. He clarifies that “Our pioneers keep striking,” contrasting the “They” who remove the Irish elk from the peat. The distinction illustrates that it is not only contact with the landscape which yields a transformative power, but a preexisting sense of belonging and identity—the turf-cutter is more at home on the bog than someone looking for coal.

The concluding quatrain in “Bogland” captures the cyclical nature of time:

Every layer they strip
   Seems camped on before.
   The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
   The wet centre is bottomless. (25–28)

Each layer the turf-cutters, or “pioneers” (23), remove appears previously discovered. The “bogholes” are portals, they “might be” residual ocean waters—“Atlantic seepage” evocative of an oozing threat—but the qualification hints at something more mythical. Heaney recalls his childhood fascination with the nearby well in “Personal Helicon” when he writes “So deep you saw no reflection in it” (“Personal Helicon” 8). Like the “deep no sound” (“I” 3) in the Glanmore Sonnets, or the “loopholes of darkness” (“Nesting-Ground” 1) in “Nesting-Ground” the “bottomless” center of the bogholes is an absence so palpable it feels like a presence. “Bogland” concludes by reinforcing the mythical powers of the Irish landscape, and the bog specifically; forces that remain unknown to Heaney but nevertheless grant him an imaginative power.
The persistent “o” vowel sound in “bottomless” and “bogholes” and its porous shape, the letter itself an entrance, illustrate the relationship between landscape and language. Heaney’s understanding of the “personal and Irish pieties as vowels” reflects sound’s transitory power as he travels “downward” into the bog and “inward” into Irish identity and tradition. In “Toome” and “Broagh,” Heaney invokes the dinnseanchas tradition of poetry and place-names and pushes the relationship even further, directly linking the sounds of the names with the surrounding landscape. “My mouth holds round / the soft blastings, / Toome, Toome” (1–3) he writes. His contradictory phrase “soft blastings” captures the soft yet powerful shape of the word. Like the bogland, the Irish vowels are “soft,” giving way to an infinite center. “Blastings” reinforces the power of the place-name and also the violent history behind the Anglicization of the Irish language. The word has the power to transport him to new places and times: “under the dislodged / slab of the tongue / I push into a souterrain” (4–6). The motion is made possible by the physical act of speech, not only the sound and shape of letters but the movement of the tongue in pronouncing the word. Speaking allows him to travel into “a souterrain,” an underground passage. The Irish word is a buried sound, uncovered by his “illiterate” ear. But once below, he finds himself in “loopholes of darkness” (“Nesting-Ground” 1), an endless mosaic of landscape and history.

The idea that the bog preserves Irish traditions becomes clear and immediate as he uncovers centuries of Irish history beneath the ground. This archeological act is only possible through the sounding out of language. Like the “pioneers” in “Bogland” he is “prospecting” (7), sorting through “a hundred centuries’ / loam, flints, musket-balls, / fragmented ware, / torcs and fish-bones” (8–11). The materials Heaney uncovers in the word “Toome” span everything from ancient Celtic jewelry to eighteenth century weaponry. “A great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was ‘found in
a bog’” writes Heaney in “Feeling into Words” (Preoccupations 54). Also present are living elements, the “loam” being fertile soil, and the carcasses of once-living creatures: “fish-bones.” Centuries of Irish history are captured simply in “Toome,” the double “o” like an elongated journey inward. The bog’s “bottomless” quality, and language’s transportive power, is illustrated by Heaney in “Broagh” as well.

In “Broagh,” however, he makes more explicit the relationship between Irish and English, and the County Derry vernacular of his childhood, which lands somewhere in between. “Broagh” comes from the Gaelic Bruach, meaning riverbank, and beneath the poem’s title Heaney immediately defines it with his own vernacular.

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Riverbank, the long rigs
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford. (1–4)
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The words “rigs,” “docken,” and “pad” come from Heaney’s Northern Irish dialect: “rigs” being patterns left by ploughs, “docken” a dock plant or dock leaf, and “pad” meaning path (Johnston 41). Heaney punctuates the ends of each line with these words, illustrating the landscape on his own terms.

In “Toome,” it was the feel and taste of the word that connected the name with the land, in “Broagh” sense of sight provides the metaphor. Heaney finds “the black O / in Broagh” (8–9) in “the shower / gathering in your heelmark” (6–7). Like the “bottomless” ground in “Bogland” and the “round” shape of “Toome,” the circularity of the “o” sound is like a portal. The ‘O’ appears throughout Heaney’s canon, in “Alphabets” he reflects on the “globe in the window” that “tilts like a coloured O” and refers to the “risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O” from which the astronaut, or poet, springs (“Alphabets” 16, 59). Heaney makes clear that the “black O” in “Broagh” is not an imagined feature of the landscape but
a permanent, inseparable one: a “low tattoo / among the windy boortrees” (11–12). The “low tattoo” refers to the drumming sound of the rain, but his positioning of the phrase directly after “in Broagh” (9) implies a double meaning. The rain “ended almost / suddenly” (13–14), although the distance Heaney puts between “the shower” and “ended”—six lines—adds ambiguity to the phrase. This ambiguity is satisfied in his simile: “like that last / gb the strangers found / difficult to manage” (14–16). The word’s ending coincides with the end of the shower, the environment and speech sharing a stretch of time. Heaney’s subtle phrasing, “the strangers,” suggests the Anglicization of Irish place-names and the violent loss of the Irish language. This violence is felt by the landscape too—“the garden mould / bruised easily” (5–6). Again, the relationship between language and place for Heaney involves a complex assemblage of English and Irish, colonization and revival. In “At Toomebridge” he describes the landscape as “Where the flat water / Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh” (“At Toomebridge” 1–2) but also “Where the checkpoint used to be. / Where the rebel boy was hanged in ‘98” (“At Toomebridge” 7–8). An important aspect to Heaney’s poetry is uncovering many specific moments, some peaceful and some violent, in creating single phrases. Like the centuries of buried Irish history he finds in the word “Toome,” in Heaney’s poems he attempts to illustrate the complicated forces at work in the Irish landscape. It is a place “Where negative ions in the open air / Are poetry to me” (“At Toomebridge” 9–10).
III. Understanding the Farmer-Poet

In addition to linking language and place through specific names and locations, Heaney connects poetry with farming in the act of cultivation. Wes Davis asserts that “however much the tradition of rural poetry might emphasize its physical roots—the poet’s digging is at best an ornamental cousin of the sustaining work of the plowman...” (Davis 100). Heaney resolves this pastoral anxiety by connecting language and farming directly, uncovering poetic music in the rhythms of the land. In “Broagh” or “Toome” the ground opens underfoot and there are literal artifacts beneath, but these buried relics also represent intangible beliefs about history and culture. For Heaney, words have a similar structure—consisting of actual etymological layers while conveying metaphorical power. Davis aptly points out Heaney’s approach in the etymological analysis of the word verse, writing that “agrarian language is the field on which the facts of rural life and the poetry of the pastoral tradition converge” (Davis 101). This is certainly true throughout Heaney’s poetry, in which his rural, Northern Irish dialect allows him to explore literary tradition in a way both akin to pastoral poetry and reliant on a “recognition of rural hardship” (Hart 87), cutting through picturesque nostalgia. But Heaney also does more than interpret literary tradition through an agrarian lens—like Virgil in the Georgics—or rely primarily on the “facts of rural life” like Kavanagh. In Heaney’s poetry, the “poet’s digging” transforms from a “cousin of the sustaining work of the plowman” to identical motions; just as the plowman unearths new ground, Heaney digs for “buried shards” in his poems, turning over words to uncover meaning. Even before he became a poet, he recognized the rhythmic sound of the landscape. In “Fosterling” he writes
I can’t remember not ever having known
The immanent hydraulics of a land
Of glar and glit and floods at dailigone.
My silting hope. My lowlands of the mind (5–8).

The landscape’s “immanent hydraulics” are the words that form both Heaney’s Northern Irish vernacular and his poetic voice. He refers to “a land” but the following line immediately specifies the place of which he “can’t remember not ever having known.” The words “glar” and “glit” both come from his Northern Irish dialect, meaning thick mud and slime, and “dailigone” translates to dusk (Johnston 24). Interestingly, the word “gloaming”—also from this dialect—means dusk as well, but Heaney does not opt for the alliteration, perhaps because the cadence of “dailigone” aligns with the poem’s meter, or because the ending syllable on “gone,” captures the transformative power of the flood. The “glar” and “glit” are word sediments, filling him with a “silting hope.” His “lowlands of the mind” allow him to hear the innate poetic rhythms in the landscape. In excavating these sounds, he works not as a farmer, but a poet, specifically a Northern Irish one digging through “glar” and “glit.” In “Land” Heaney writes

if I lie with my ear
in this loop of silence

long enough, thigh-bone
and shoulder against the phantom ground,

I expect to pick up
a small drumming (25–30).

Positioning himself close to the landscape, he listens for the ground’s meter. Like raising a shell to the ear, a “small drumming” emerges from the looping sound of his heartbeat in his ear. The act is a sonic one, but his ear lies in a “loop of silence” against a “phantom ground.” Within this absence, he hears a

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small drumming,” the sound expected. The shaping of poetry, the foundation being that “small drumming,” begins with an intimate relationship to the land. As a poet, Heaney is not necessarily converging on a point where the pastoral tradition and rural tradition meet, but merging the two, metaphorically turning the plough with language. In Lightenings “vi” Heaney writes “Once, as a child, out in a field of sheep, / Thomas Hardy pretended to be dead / And lay down flat among their dainty shins” (Lightenings “vi” 1–3). He asserts that Hardy “experimented with infinity” (Lightenings “vi” 5), experiencing a “ripple” (Lightenings “vi” 10) that would become poetic voice. But in the next almost-sonnet (the poems being twelve line, perfectly square ‘sonnets’), Heaney corrects himself, the entire poem a parenthetical: “(I misremembered. He went down on all fours...)” (Lightenings “vii” 1).

Heaney amends the record, altering Hardy’s posture from observer to farmer. In Lightenings “vi” he lies flat against the land, passively listening to the sheep, a perfect pastoral image. But in Heaney’s corrected “vii” Hardy assumes a farmer’s form, “down on all fours” with his hands pressed against the ground as if in preparation for digging. The change illustrates the parallel between cultivation of language and the cultivation of land. In Heaney’s poetry, the poet is a type of farmer, the pen is a spade for digging. By directly linking language with farming, he transforms our understanding of pastoral poetry as a uniquely literary act. Rather, poems are cultivated by the farmer-poet in the ground of a unique rural and linguistic past.

Heaney once remarked in an interview that “the line and the life are intimately related” (Hart 88), emphasizing the connection between poetry and the body. But “the line” points towards another type of work in which the body’s proximity is relevant—farming. In Glenmore Sonnet “IV” he writes “I used to lie with an ear to the line / For that way, they said, there should come a sound” (1–2).
Recalling his childhood in Mossbawn, he pictures himself waiting for faraway train sounds on the rail line. But “the line” functions more generally, as both a poetic fixture and a topographical one, an “encroaching horizon” (“Bogland” 4). His posture—ear pressed to the surface—recalls other poems, such as “Land” and sonnets from the Squarings sequence. In each instance, his body makes direct contact with the ground, like a farmer digging. “The line” is ambiguous as either poetic verse or plough indentations, suggesting a relationship between the literal imprints of the plough or pen and their respective symbolism: the allegorical power of the land in preserving identity and history and the figurative power of poetry. His disappointed tone reveals the failure in “that way,” asserting “But I never heard that” (5). The sound of the approaching train represents an unattainable poetic voice; a poetry suggested by a “they” who are separated from Heaney’s moment. The phrase “escaping ahead” (3) makes the train feel unreal, “escaping” and “ahead” are disjointed, like losing time in the future. The sounds Heaney does hear reflect his own rural landscape, not a faraway train but “a horse swirled back from a gate” (8) or “Struck couplings and shunttings two miles away / Lifted over the woods” (6–7). He recalls a nearby marshalling yard, but “couplings” also sounds like “couplets,” which conclude the sonnet. The verb “struck” parallels the opening to his Clearances sequence in which he asks his mother to help him “face the music,” writing “Teach me now to listen / To strike it rich behind the linear block” (8–9). The sounds of horses and “couplings” are only made accessible by connection with the landscape, they are “Lifted over the woods” (7) to his ear. The train’s passing sound is felt in the home:

Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
Silently across our drinking water
(As they are shaking now across my heart)
And vanished into where they seemed to start. (11–14)
The act is repetitive, the ripples shaking silently in a glass of water. The same ripple effect is present in Lightenings “vi” in which Heaney imagines Hardy’s presence in the field of sheep as “a ripple that would travel eighty years / Outward from there, to be the same ripple / Inside him at its last circumference” (Lightenings “vi” 10–12). The distant poetic voice represented by the train is “a ripple that would travel eighty years,” carrying Heaney into the present. The ripples of poetry are “shaking now across my heart” he admits, what he feels in that moment is what still sustains and shakes him. The final line illustrates how Heaney’s poetry always travels outward “eighty years” or more but comes back to rest on his specific home ground— “And vanished into where they seemed to start.” This looping idea is present in the specific circular shape of the ripple and across Heaney’s canon: in “Nesting-Ground” birds’ nests are “loopholes of darkness” (1) and in “Land” he waits in a “loop of silence” (26). “Loophole” can relate both to fortification and war defenses or simply an “opening to look through” as in Milton’s Paradise Lost: “Tends his pasturing Herds / At loopholes cut through thickest shade” (“loophole, n.1,” OED, def. 2.a). For Heaney, words and sounds act as loopholes that “cut through thickest shade” to expose endless meanings.

The silent infinity where his poems are made is centered in Mossbawn, but Heaney’s childhood home contrasts with his literary upbringing. He writes in Clearances “IV,”

So I governed my tongue
In front of her, a genuinely well-
Adjusted adequate betrayal
Of what I knew better. (9–12)

He remembers how he would “naw and aye / And decently relapse into the wrong / Grammar” (12–14). Inside the house, Heaney’s relationship with his mother is based on silences, broken only by
splashing potatoes or the sound fresh linen makes in the wind. But at the same time, within this place, “small ripples” of poetry take shape. In his introduction to Beowulf, Heaney recalls how the Anglo-Saxon word polian, meaning to suffer, was familiar to him through his childhood: polian relates to “thole,” a word “older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up” (Beowulf xxv). Remembering his aunt using the word “thole” to describe a family who had suffered bereavement, Heaney feels connected to a “historical heritage” (Beowulf xxv). This connection creates a place “where the spirit might find a loophole” (Beowulf, xxv) for Heaney, an etymological opening into the rich blending of linguistic traditions. While Mossbawn was a place where farming was privileged over the pen—“Of all implements, the pitchfork was the one / That came near to an imagined perfection” (“The Pitchfork” 1–2)—Heaney discovers a “loophole” in which poetry and rural life become one source. In “The Pitchfork” he transforms his father’s work “in the chaff and sweat” (6) to a poetic labor:

And when he thought of probes that reached the farthest,
He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past
Evenly, imperturbably through space,
Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless. (13–17)

The word “probes” alters the farming instrument to be a tool for boundless exploration much like poetry, metaphor transporting us to imagined places in the past and future. Heaney’s otherworldly, “starlit” description recalls the “comet’s pulsing rose” in “Exposure,” the powerful, “once-in-a-lifetime” (“Exposure” 39–40) force behind poetry. Again, the moment is imperceptible, “absolutely soundless” like ripples in drinking water. The final lines in “The Pitchfork” unite poetry and farming completely: “Where perfection—or nearness to it—is imagined / Not in the aiming but the opening hand”
(20–21). The principal moment is the release, “the opening hand” allows the pitchfork to sail “past its own aim, out to an other side” (19). The “other side” is imagined, and the pitchfork becomes a poetic instrument capable of traveling to a metaphorical place. In this way, Heaney aligns poetry and farming directly, making the tools and the labor of the craft one device. The same interaction with the landscape that takes place in farming is present in the arrangement of language to make meaning.
CHAPTER FOUR

“The skill of making”: Poetry the Craft Tradition

I. Digging for Buried Shards

Poetry exists in two realms: the collective and the secret. For Heaney, the poet must be in touch both with a communal tradition and a buried one. Emerging from a complex literary tradition, he speaks to the poets before him while unearthing poetic music only he can hear. Buried sounds discovered in the place where ploughs shift, spades meet turf, and the hammer strikes the block. Heaney introduces us to new dimensions of pastoral, and even more broadly, environmental poetry by centering the art of making and bringing people and nature together in inseparable ways. Rather than reflecting on his past with warm pastoral nostalgia, Heaney reminds us that beneath the beauty of the Earth remain substantial destructive and creative forces. “The source of his imaginative power,” writes Elmer Andrews, “lies in his rural childhood experience... Its rhythms are the elemental rhythms of nature itself” (Andrews 369). Heaney’s foundation is rooted in the archiving of rural music. Writing from a place in which labor and craft contribute to the art of making, Heaney’s poetry builds on the farming traditions most familiar to him. The rhythms are immediately perceptible, though not always immediately poetic. In “Hailstones” he writes

    and everything said wait.
    For what? For forty years
    to say there, there you had
    the truest foretaste of your aftermath. (29–32)
As a child experiencing hail, he makes “a small hard ball” (8) of ice. When looking back on the memory as a poet, he recognizes the creative act—“out of the melt of the real thing / smarting into its absence” (11–12). Recalling tradition involves both past and future movement, he must travel back into memory to recognize what he “had” and the “foretaste” his experience gave of his “aftermath.” The making process relies on the tension between the materials that make themselves known to the poet, in Heaney’s case the buried sounds of his childhood, and the crafting of those materials into poetry.

In a 1977 Danish radio interview Seamus Heaney discussed the ways in which the local surroundings of his upbringing influenced both his poetic voice and his understanding of what poetry does. In the interview, he recalls his neighbor Joe Ward, a carpenter, and the shapes and sounds he created in his work: “He worked among the smells and the paints and the woods that he loved, and he made shapes out of them that were a joy to look at. And I sometimes think of his craftsmanship when I’m trying to get words to rhyme” (Skoleradioen 1977 5). Heaney’s poetry is masonry, the construction of parts into a meaningful whole. Making poems is “like making a joint in carpentry” (Skoleradioen 1977 5) for Heaney, they require skill and craftsmanship in the joining of words together. Heaney also reflects on the musicality of craft as a parallel to the rhythm of a poem: “...Joe used to make a rich satisfying noise as his saw zoomed through a piece of seasoned wood or his hammer made a sturdy rhythm as it drove home a row of nails” (Skoleradioen 1977 5). In his poetry, Heaney recreates the rural labor of his youth, emphasizing the work of those who occupy the countryside. The tradition of craft becomes an entry point for understanding the construction of poetry and finding the music in everyday tasks.
“Generally speaking, my poems come from things remembered, quite often from away back, or things I see that remind me of something else. Sometimes the thing has an aura and an invitation and some kind of blocked significance hanging around it” (Stepping Stones 445). For Heaney, poems are an arrival to memory, memories often buried and scattered among the landscape of County Derry. Heaney unearths these rural memories as a means for making words into poems. At the center of his work remains his attention to labor, particularly farm labor. Heaney’s father was a cattle-herder, but like most people living in rural Ireland, he was also a turf-cutter. Cutting turf was, and remains, a “living human tradition” as Heaney articulates in a 1972 essay in The Listener (Skoleradioen 1977 40). The work involves strength, willpower, and attention to form: peat blocks are cut into square slices and stacked to dry in the sun. In this way, the labor of cutting turf reflects the labor of a poem. Heaney remembers his father cutting turf or digging potatoes to understand the role poetry plays in life and imagination. His poetry remains distinct from the works of many other poets recalling rural life because he excavates rural traditions and brings them in conversation with literary tradition. Rather than simply reflect in a way that imagines the beauty of the countryside where he grew up, Heaney re-enters his own memories to unearth ancient form and heritage.

In “Digging,” the first poem in Death of a Naturalist, Heaney investigates the intersection between two converging traditions: farm labor and poetic craft. “Heaney is primarily an explorer, charting his ground, then excavating and reinscribing tradition” (Molino 8) writes Michael R. Molino. As an “explorer” Heaney travels into the past, uncovering childhood memories. Heaney wrote “Digging” in his childhood home in “The Wood” (Stepping Stones 68), and the poem remains one of his most popular pieces. Heaney writes about “Digging”: “...I wrote it down years ago; but perhaps I
should say that I dug it up, because I have come to realize that it was laid down in me years before that even” (Preoccupations 42). “Digging” finds the young poet occupying the space between two traditions—the rural heritage of the men in his family and the writing profession. The poem reflects this liminality in Heaney’s consistent prepositional phrases; “Digging” begins with the word “Between”:

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

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down (1–5)

Heaney emphasizes the specific placement of the pen, repeating the pronoun “my finger” and “my thumb” as he asserts his own poetic authority. Poetry belongs to Heaney in a way that farming does not, by choosing the profession of a poet he diverges from the tradition laid out for him. The pen is “snug as a gun,” a comparison that separates writing distinctly from farming, aligning poetry with something more explosive and powerful. Heaney’s description “snug as a gun” reads as ironic, the young poet is as uncomfortable with his role as he is with a gun, still in the process of understanding the poet’s power. Despite Heaney’s rejection of the farming profession, the pen aligns itself with his father’s work. “The squat pen rests” mirrors his father’s angled posture as he digs: “Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds / Bends low, comes up twenty years away / Stooping in rhythm through potato drills” (6–8). His father squats, “straining” as he labors. The act of digging follows a form Heaney can identify clearly in memory, and the cutting motion of the spade creates a “rhythm” much
like poetry. That “rhythm” has the power to transport Heaney back in time, “twenty years away” (7).

The poem shifts from the present to the past tense as Heaney recalls his father digging potato drills:

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands. (10–14)

The act of digging potato drills is a finely-honed craft filled with poetic movements. Heaney can easily identify from memory the specific placement, form, and pattern of his father’s labor. Later in the poem he writes “Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging” (22–24). The labor-intensive process involves the uncovering of something valuable, digging in search for “the good turf” (24). Like a poet honing his craft, Heaney’s father must travel “down and down” into the ground, uncovering and making something out of the dark soil. The form becomes an image separate from the laborer as Heaney writes “The coarse boot nestled” and “the shaft / Against the inside knee” (10–11). He does not insert the pronoun “his,” separating his father from the archetypal pattern of digging that he inhabits. Instead, he refers only to “the coarse boot” or “the inside knee,” generalizing his father’s form. Heaney’s alliteration in “rooted out tall tops” and “buried the bright edge deep” emphasizes the rhythmic music of his father’s work and evokes Gerard Manley Hopkins’, an important influence, and his poem “The Windhover,” which prioritizes the immediate sounds and arrangement of words. The memory activates all of the senses, and the tactile nature of the moment—“Loving their cool hardness in our hands”—contains both a poetic potential and a natural one: the scattered drills will grow into a new potato crop alongside Heaney’s growing
realization of himself as a writer. Heaney’s poetry becomes a method to excavate memory and bring the sounds of his past into the present. As he remembers, he sees, smells, and hears his father’s labor:

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.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them. (25–28)

In his language, Heaney crafts an aural landscape. His alliterative lines—“squelch and slap / Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge”—constitute a labor song, a poetic meter crafted from the sound of the spade meeting the earth. In the poem “Song” from Field Work, Heaney talks about the sounds of nature as “the music of what happens” (“Song” 8). In “Digging,” too, the intersection between farming and poetry occurs in the rhythmic sounding out of the act. The “curt cuts of an edge” move “through living roots” that “awaken in my head” (27). Heaney’s enjambment of the line isolates the “living roots” within Heaney’s realization, making them a metaphor for poetic craft. Alongside his father’s digging are the “living roots” of poems being shaped in the mind, reflective of the spade’s metrical movements. The ending of the poem is a promise: “The squat pen rests. I’ll dig with it” (30–31).

Heaney is clear that he has rejected the spade for poetry, but the motion remains the same. In “Feeling into Words” Heaney referred to this process in his description of poetic craft: “...poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants” (Preoccupations 41). Just as his father unearths ground in search of “the good turf” (24), Heaney’s poetry is a dig for buried truths.
“Digging” emphasizes the rural tradition of Heaney’s family, particularly a distinctly masculine craft. The word “craft” comes from the Old English “craeft,” meaning “strength, might, power” (“craft, n.”, OED, def. I.1). Heaney, reflecting on the process of writing poems, said “They certainly involve craft and determination, but chance and instinct have a role in the thing too. I think the process is a kind of somnambulist love-act between masculine will, skill, and intelligence and feminine clusters of image, word, and emotion.” He differentiates the “masculine will” as English, and the “feminine element” as the “matter of Ireland” (Skøleradioen 1977 34). His rather unnerving distinction between the masculine and the feminine relies on his understanding of the English language as formal and masculine, and the Irish as intimate and sacred. In “Digging” he writes “By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man” (15-16), reflecting on the masculine tradition of the act. In “Follower,” he expands on his father’s craftsmanship, detailing his labor with attention to skill and mastery. As his father drives the horse-plough, the “horses strained at his clicking tongue” (4). Digging “into the land” (10), his father unearths layers of soil to map “the furrow exactly” (12). Heaney refers to his father as “an expert” (5), displaying a level of precise craftsmanship, and remains aware of the tradition which shapes him:

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm. (17–20)

Heaney’s awareness of the tradition centers around his father’s movement and form. He wants “to grow up and plough,” the verb acting as more than a motion, but as a reward. His father’s outline becomes a structure to follow, “to close one eye, stiffen my arm” describes the physicality of artistic
form. Thirty years after “Digging” and “Follower” are published in *Death of a Naturalist*, and one

Nobel prize later, Heaney remembers his father’s poetic movements in “A Call”:

So I saw him
Down on his hands and knees beside the leek rig,
Touching, inspecting, separating one
Stalk from the other, gently pulling up
Everything not tapered, frail and leafless,
Pleased to feel each little weed-root break,
But rueful also... (5–10)

The image in “A Call” parallels that of “Digging:” his father is hunched over, his movements experienced. “Touching, inspecting, separating” are the careful patterns of an expert. His labor is practiced, and the tactile nature of the work makes the moment more immediate. As in “Digging,” in which Heaney experiences “their cool hardness in our hands” (“Digging” 16), here his father is “pleased to feel each little weed-root break” (9). His father’s work remains intimate, much like a poet “inspecting” and “separating” words into form and meter. Heaney’s poems about his father’s labor are intensely specific, detailing each unique farming practice. The standard form, the rhythmic movements, and the musicality of farm labor are reflected back in the language of poetry.

While craft remains integral to Heaney’s poetry, there remain important differences between the craftsman and the poet. Poetry intersects with the tradition of farming, but also with a more spiritual tradition: divining. In his essay “Feeling into Words” Heaney differentiates between craft and technique as two critical but distinct forces in poetic voice. “Craft is the skill of making,” he writes, articulating that “learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry” (*Preoccupations* 46). Craft is poetic movement, a tradition of rhythm, form, and the making of words. By contrast, technique “entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and
thought into the touch and texture of your lines” (*Preoccupations* 47). Technique relies on the poet’s internal, unique voice. This cannot, in Heaney’s view, be taught. Rather, technique is a “a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real” (*Preoccupations* 47), like divining.

Divining was a common occurrence in Heaney’s childhood, but did not fascinate him until he began writing. In “The Diviner” Heaney recalls the act as something both mythical and precise. The diviner is, like his father in “Follower,” an expert: “Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck / Of water, nervous, but professionally” (3–4). His movements are practiced, but the moment of realization is spontaneous. The description “nervous, but professionally” indicates that the diviner is filled with nerves, precisely aware of all the senses and displaying acute perception. The diviner appears “unfussed” (5), his labor requires no extraordinary effort but remains exact. Like Caedmon, the diviner is “Unabsorbed in what he had to do / But doing it perfectly” (“Whitby-sur-Moyola” 4–5). Both are wholly receptive, being led by the senses and the unknown rather than reaching after fact. Poetic technique involves anticipation for what remains buried, but the excavation of what is hidden requires a gift, “unfussed” in certainty. The moment the diviner finds the hidden spring is sudden and overwhelming:

The pluck came sharp as a sting,  
The rod jerked with precise convulsions,  
Spring water suddenly broadcasting  
Through a green hazel its secret stations. (5–8)

Heaney’s language borders on the violent and sexual, with the pull of the dowsing rod “sharp as a sting” as it “jerked with precise convulsions” (5–6). The diviner senses the spring, but the force of the spring’s energy acts on him, moving the rod he holds with intensity. Heaney’s language is
contradictory, “precise convulsions” captures the exactness of the diviner’s work with the
unfathomable mystery of the act. The diviner’s “technique” lies in his ability to feel the moment when
what remains hidden swells beneath the surface. His instrument, the hazel stick, is charged with
meaning in Irish tradition and Celtic mythology. The word hazel comes from the Old English hæsl,
meaning “rod of power,” and the nuts from the hazel tree were thought to grant you wisdom. Notably,
hazel bushes or trees are considered fairy trees, and thus sacred to poets and protected from harm
(MacKillop). Heaney’s diviner plays the role of a magician, getting in touch with “secret stations”
beneath the ground. The mythic and spontaneous quality of the act parallels Wordsworth’s description
of poetry in Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in which he writes “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow
of powerful feelings” (Preface to Lyrical Ballads). For Heaney, the labor of the diviner involves both a
“spontaneous overflow” as well as a professional exactness: “precise convulsions” (6). Divining is a gift
that cannot be taught, and Heaney articulates the unique talent of the diviner in the final stanza:

The bystanders would ask to have a try.
He handed them the rod without a word.
It lay dead in their grasp till, nonchalantly,
He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred. (9–12)

Magic exists subtly, “nonchalantly” in Heaney’s rearranging of letters from “rod” to “word.” The
diviner plays a godly role in the poem, as if he is the only person in the moment. Others are reduced to
“the bystanders,” omitting a pronoun, while the diviner is simply “He” (10). He also does not speak,
but is all movement, handing the others the hazel stick silently. Once again, his work is “unfussed,”
moving “nonchalantly” even while the action is charged with intensity: “He gripped expectant wrists”
(12). Only the diviner’s touch can unearth the “secret stations” below, “stations” evoking military posts
as well as the stations of the cross and divine mysteries. In the hands of others, the hazel stick is powerless, but once touched by the diviner’s grip, “the hazel stirred” (12). In this way Heaney illustrates how both divining and poetry require a unique gift. The pen, like the hazel stick, becomes powerful in the hands of those who can uncover what remains buried.

In “Digging” poetry stands in opposition to rural labor; writing is the path chosen by Heaney instead of farming. Poetry is a resistance to his father’s craft as well as the method by which, throughout his life, he remembers that labor and how it shaped him. In “The Wife’s Tale” Heaney says his father was “as proud as if he were the land itself” (29), but Heaney cannot share in the profession, resigning “So I belonged no further to the work” (32). The masculine tradition presented in “Digging” does not appeal to Heaney, but he nevertheless aligns himself with rural craft. The zone of craft he enters however, is a traditionally feminine one. Whereas in “Digging” the sounds and shape of his father’s work unconsciously parallel the formation of poetry, in Heaney’s “Clearances” sequence, he addresses how his mother’s labor seemed to him a type of poetry. The word craft, as a verb, centers on making, meaning simply “to make or devise (something) with skill” (“craft, v.1,” OED, def. 1.a).

Creation, especially in Celtic mythology, is associated with the power of the Mother Goddess. Women were often referred to as homemakers. In “Poem, for Marie” Heaney compares his love to farm labor, the making of both the literal and figurative home involves attention to craft. He promises “Love I shall perfect for you the child / Who diligently potters in my brain / Digging with heavy spade till sods were piled” (1–3). The labor takes place inside Heaney’s head, the child “who diligently potters” works away at “small imperfect limits” (14). Emphasizing the perpetual cycles of hope and disappointment, Heaney admits his defeat:
Yearly I would sow my yard-long garden
I’d strip a layer of sods to build the wall
That was to keep out sow and pecking hen.
Yearly, admitting these, the sod would fall. (5–8)

The quatrain is a neatly arranged time capsule, depicting the cycles of Heaney’s labor. The cdcd rhyme scheme illustrates the child’s structured attempts to protect himself against uncontrollable forces.

Every year, he attempts to fortify the garden against scavengers, but they nevertheless break through. Aware of the inevitability, his tone is resigned and straightforward. Likewise, his attempts to “dam the flowing drain” (10) with “bastions of clay and mush” (11) fail. “Poem, for Marie” illustrates the contrast between structure and messy work. Heaney’s verbs in the first stanza—“potters,” “piled,” “puddling”—depict the noisy, filthy labor performed. He plays in the “sucking clabber” (9), a thick mud formed from cattle churning the ground, and splashes “delightedly” (10). The child’s fascination with his surroundings coexists with his fear of the overflow. Despite his attempts, the “small imperfect limits” (14) keep breaking. Heaney relies on Marie to “arrange the world” and create new boundaries around his childish hopes and fears. She is both the inspiration for his poems and the maker, instructed to “square the circle: four walls and a ring” (16). “Poem, for Marie” intertwines Heaney’s writing profession with the farm labor of his childhood, he “diligently potters” in the brain and with the spade. The intersection between poetry and farming takes place in his request of Marie to help him “arrange the world” (15). Within these traditions, and their respective disappointments, lies the making of a relationship and a home.

Heaney’s mother was an important figure in his understanding of poetry, shaping his early ear for poetic music. In “Clearances,” a series of eight sonnets dedicated to his mother, Heaney remembers
their intimate, ordinary moments together. The sonnets are as much about Margaret Heaney as they are about her absence. Heaney remembers the china without markings, the “unchipped set” (“II” 3), and the “utterly empty” (“VIII” 2) yard where a chestnut tree once grew. He circles “a space” (“VIII” 1), undefined. His memories are of habitual, everyday acts: “as if nothing had happened / for nothing had that had not always happened” (“V” 9–10). After Margaret’s death, “the space we stood around had been emptied” (“VII” 10). The word “Clearances” means the “action of clearing” (“clearance, n.,” OED, def. 1.a), or carving out empty space. Losing his mother forces Heaney consider not only the memory itself, but the space that memory occupies.

In Clearances “VIII,” Heaney’s movements are hypothetical; he is the opposite of present, entrenched within his own mind. “I thought of walking round and round a space” (1) opens the poem. Heaney’s action forms an infinite circle, “round and round,” within his head. The space is “utterly empty, utterly a source” (2), filled with nothing, but that nothing still occupying space. From this absence is the “source,” the buried memory of a chestnut tree long since chopped down. He recalls “the decked chestnut tree” that had “lost its place” (3) in his front yard. As the memory takes shape, we envision a scene that is not “utterly empty” but packed with movement and sensation: “The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high” (5). The repeated verb “jumped” calls attention to the sheer size of the tree as well as the action taking place. He can hear “the hatchet’s differentiated / Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh / And collapse” (6–8). Time becomes circular, moving “round and round a space” occupied by the memory:

Deep- planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for. (10–14)

Heaney moves both inward and outward: “deep-planted and long gone” expresses how the real events of a memory become buried and historical, replaced by “a space” we circle around. His emphasis on seeing what does not exist, or hearing “silence,” recalls Robert Frost’s “Directive”: There is a house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm / And in a town that is no more a town” (5–7). In “Directive” Frost hones in on spaces that once were, making discoveries out of the nonexistent. Likewise, Heaney searches for the “bright nowhere,” discerning nothing and everything all at once. The prepositions “from a jam jar” and “in a hole” compress the memory, rapidly moving through time. The tense is unclear, we are in the past, but watching the seed “become a bright nowhere,” growing into a tree that is then cut down. In the sonnet’s final lines, Heaney illustrates how the absence of something can allow for boundless possibility. His mother, in death, becomes immortal: “A soul ramifying and forever” (11). Her presence lives on in the silences, or the “clearances,” of memory. In Helen Vendler’s Seamus Heaney she writes “An absence, one might say, becomes realer than presence. Heaney reverses himself: his aim is now to turn the crystalline, or virtual, absent realm into a material one—to make it visible by metaphors so ordinary as to be indubitable” (Vendler 114–115). Within the “utterly empty” (“VIII” 2) lies the most minute traces of memory and voice. The absence of his mother forces Heaney to look inward and find the music she has instilled in him. As Heaney writes at the end of Clearances “VIII”: “Silent, beyond silence listened for” (14). The work done by “beyond” in the final line is significant. Silence becomes a thing heard, a way of speaking through remote memory. In a “Personal Helicon,” Heaney writes “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the
darkness echoing” (“Personal Helicon” 19–20). The “darkness” is what allows Heaney to see himself, the “echoing,” like “beyond,” is a promise to continue.

In Margaret Heaney’s absence remains a world of feeling and movement, memorialized by Heaney’s poems. After her death, her children sense the transition of a life into memory. In Clearances “VII” Heaney writes “The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open” (11–13). Diffusion takes place, Margaret Heaney’s life travels “into” her children. Her life penetrates “clearances that suddenly stood open,” activating memories previously buried. The sequence is Heaney’s way of unearthing the “clearances” of his memory and celebrating the unremarkable moments of his childhood. He preserves the traditions he shared with his mother, emphasizing the craft and music of her work. Within these everyday tasks he discovers the rhythms of labor which shaped his poetic voice. The sequence begins not with the first sonnet, but three italicized tercets. Unlike the rest of poems in the sequence, which follow Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet conventions, the three opening stanzas have no particular form. They are unrhymed except for the slight “blow” (4) and “echo” (5) or the parallel “block” (7) and “black” (9). The beginning poem centers the tradition of cutting coal, passed down from Heaney’s great uncle to his mother: “She taught me what her uncle once taught her” (1). The labor requires strength and precision, “the biggest coal block split / if you got the grain and hammer angled right” (3). The word “taught” appears five times in the poem, emphasizing the passing down of tradition between family members. Unlike in “Digging,” in which Heaney rejects the spade in favor of the pen, in “Clearances” Heaney accepts the hammer from his mother. The distinction lies in the expectation. As the eldest son, Heaney is expected to follow in his father’s footsteps, to literally pick up the spade and dig. By contrast,
he will never become his mother. They share an intimate knowledge that the hammer will become the pen. She teaches him how to find the music within these movements: “The sound of that relaxed alluring blow, / Its co-opted and obliterate echo, / Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen” (4–6). By sharing in the rhythms of the work, Heaney’s mother shows him how to “hit” and “loosen” words into poems. The musicality of labor is more important than the labor itself, as Heaney searches “between the hammer and the block” in order to “face the music” (7–8). The ending of the poem transitions to the present tense, with Heaney asking his mother for her guidance in crafting poetry: “Teach me now to listen, / To strike it rich behind the linear black” (8–9). Introducing the sonnets, Heaney calls on his mother to “teach” him how to “listen” to his memories. Critic Thomas O’Grady writes “Words have an almost tactile quality for Heaney... the artist needs to tap into that medium to liberate the work by separating it from its raw material” (O’Grady 358). The poems in “Clearances,” in their structured sonnet shape, allow Heaney to take the “raw material,” lessons learned cutting coal, and convey his artistic voice. They are his attempt to “strike it rich” and “hit” on the right words in the making of music.

Each sonnet in “Clearances” opens up a memory. They are moments of routine labor in the home, filled with sensations that have persisted through many years. In Clearances “III,” the most well-known sonnet from the sequence, a childhood memory of peeling potatoes exists alongside the memory of Margaret Heaney’s death. Heaney’s family members become “all the others” “away at Mass” (1), and only he and his mother remain in the moment. “I was all hers” (2) he writes, “as we peeled potatoes” (2). Peeling potatoes exists adjacent to the labor performed in “Digging,” once dug up the potatoes must be washed, peeled, and shaped. The work parallels Heaney’s crafting of the
“Clearances” sonnets. First, he must listen for the buried memory, next his poems peel away the layers. Comparing the dropped potatoes to “solder weeping off the soldering iron” (4), Heaney blurs the boundary between the domestic sphere and outside labor. The divide between feminine and masculine work traditions is obscured. Heaney and his mother never speak, but communicate through the rhythms of their shared labor:

Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other’s work would bring us to our senses. (5–8).

Both removed and intimate, Heaney’s tone remains matter-of-fact. The potatoes are “cold comforts” dropped into the bucket. The description reflects Heaney’s account in “Digging,” in which he scattered potatoes on the ground, “loving” the “cool hardness in our hands” (“Digging” 6). Linking the memories, and the indoor and outdoor labor traditions, is the potato. Potatoes symbolize both loss and survival, the power to feed one’s family or the brutal reality of hunger. In both “Digging” and Clearances “III,” the potato represents the tactile forces of memory. Heaney’s recollection relies on the sensation of the potato in his hands. The potatoes “gleaming in a bucket of clean water” also draws on Heaney’s memory in “Personal Helicon.” The sounds of the bucket crashing into the well and the “clean new music” (“Personal Helicon” 14) are restated in Clearances “III.” Bringing Heaney and his mother “to our senses” are the “little pleasant splashes” of the water. But sensation fills the stanza, the sounds of the splashing potatoes or the feel of cold potato skins dominate Heaney’s memory. The lines themselves are overflowing, extra syllables push the bounds of the sonnet’s form. He is “borrowing the available scaffolding of the sonnet” (O’Grady 355) in order to push against the rigid shape. Despite the
moment’s vividness, Heaney and his mother are “brought” to their senses, as though they were absent. Performing rural labor requires a mindlessness, an attention to form and rhythm without being fully present in the act. In “Whitby-sur-Moyola” Heaney refers to Caedmon’s “real gift” as his “big ignorant roar” (8), asserting that he was “Unabsorbed in what he had to do / But doing it perfectly” “Whitby-sur-Moyola” (4–5). Like Caedmon, Heaney and his mother are “unabsorbed” in their labor, made aware of the present moment only by the occasional sonic disturbance. Underlying craft is the ability to work absently, to turn one’s awareness inward.

Heaney shifts into the present at the sonnet’s volta, capturing the moment his mother dies. While the priest “went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying” (10) and “some” (11) of the family members cry, Heaney reflects inward. He enters the “clearances” of memory, returning to the original moment: “I remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives— / Never closer the whole rest of our lives” (12–14). The memory’s formative power is evident in Heaney’s assertion: “Never closer the whole rest of our lives.” The “whole rest of their lives” is reduced to a passing phrase, but the memory is preserved with perfect clarity. He can recall their posture, the exchange of their breath, and the swift movements of their dipping knives. The artistry of their labor is evident in Heaney’s use of perfect iambic pentameter, capturing the poetic rhythms of their household chores. While everyone else is at Mass, Heaney and his mother perform their own communion. Recalling “her head bent towards my head,” Heaney illustrates their shared act of prayer. In “Whitby-sur-Moyola,” Caedmon’s hands join in prayer only for a “quick sniff and test of fingertips” (“Whitby-sur-Moyola” 14). Likewise, Heaney and his mother’s movements reflect their devotion to
small moments of communal labor. More significant than Mass is the space they share, speaking only through the fluency of “dipping knives” and the occasional splash of water.

II. The Poet as Maker

Heaney writes that his sense of “crafting words” and “words as bearers of history and mystery” first began when his mother would recite rhymes from her schooling, lists of affixes, suffixes, Latin roots and English meanings (Preoccupations 45). Words fell to him in pieces, from eclectic sources like the BBC weather forecast or lines from the catechism, each “a kind of linguistic hardcore that could be built on someday” (Preoccupations 45). Later, when he began to craft poems, he referred to his early verses as “only word-play” (Preoccupations 45). While Heaney quickly learned technique, discovering his “sense of a poem as a whole structure”—an early fascination with words as building blocks—is foundational in his work. The craft of building words, attaching affixes and suffixes, is consistent with the labor he saw his mother and father perform. But this “word-play” is also reminiscent of the print tradition and the balance between craftmanship and artistry that produces books. Poetry and printing involve similar motions; at a basic level both piece together sounds to make meaning. But more broadly, both poetry and printing have rich, intertwining traditions, especially in Ireland.

During the Irish Literary Revival, print culture played an active role in the establishment of Irish modernism and in the material realization of Irish nationalism. The work of the private press tradition in producing fine editions of Yeats, Kavanagh, Pound, and other leading poets cannot be overstated. Robin Skelton writes that “it is only in Ireland that the private press has, during this
century, been the main champion and vehicle of imaginative literature” (Skelton 368). One of the most important presses in the twentieth century was the Dun Emer, later called the Cuala Press. Run by Elizabeth Yeats, the press had two missions: to produce finely made editions of modern Irish poetry (principally W.B. Yeats) and to educate rural Irish women. While history has overshadowed Elizabeth Yeats’s role in favor of her brother, W.B. Yeats was not involved in the labor or production of the press—only in the creation of the poetry printed. The Cuala Press was unique both because it was run entirely by women and because it produced contemporary works rather than reprintings of classical ones. In printing new works by Irish poets like Yeats, the press fulfilled the Literary Revival’s goal of de-Anglicizing Irish production and emphasizing Irish identity. Despite some central ties to the British Arts and Crafts movement, such as the use of Caslon typefaces, the Cuala press was committed to incorporating Irish materials. “Everything as far as possible, is Irish” asserted the press’s first prospectus (Linnie 50). The hope of the press was to revive the Irish print tradition and celebrate Irish craftsmanship in all aspects—from the paper made by Irish hands to the linen woven from Irish flax.

“Designs are also of the spirit and tradition of the country” declared the prospectus, professing “a wish to find work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things.” Recruiting young women from the Irish countryside was important to the press’s goals as well: “The education of the workgirls is also part of the idea; they are taught to paint and their brains and fingers are made more active and understanding. Some of them, we hope, will become teachers to others, so that similar industries may spread throughout the land” (Skelton 369). The language of the 1903 prospectus focuses on the relationship between the physical—“brains and fingers”—and the metaphorical powers offered by language, the “making of beautiful things.” This “making” was conducted entirely by women, a
gendering of labor that recalls Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse,” in which he writes, “To be born woman is to know— / Although they do not talk of it at school— / That we must labour to be beautiful” (19–21). In this case, the women working at the Cuala Press “must labour” to create art that is beautiful and powerful, capable of transforming their lives and the lives of others. In its goals, the Cuala Press created a pastoral ideal, illuminating the rural with a dreamlike intention of spreading “throughout the land.” The word “workgirls” recalls factory labor, suggesting the press worked against industrialization and invested in reclaiming ancient crafts and the ownership of beautiful things: the women are taught to “paint” and to make their “brains and fingers” active. The Albion press they acquired was bought from an advertisement in an Irish paper, arriving “from a little country town where it had probably printed the local weekly paper for many years” according to Lily Yeats (Linnie 47). And the house they occupied was “on the side of the mountain near Dundrum” (Linnie 44), situated in the perfect bucolic setting. While the press evoked romanticized pastoral ideals to emphasize rural Irish life, much of the labor performed mimics not the passive shepherd, but the active farmer—labor more akin to Heaney’s portrayal of craft.

In the 1903 Dun Emer prospectus, the type reads, “the idea is to make beautiful things; this, of course, means materials honest and true and the application to them of deftness of hand” (Skelton 369). The language is immediately applicable to Heaney’s understanding of craft and technique, focused on the act of making, the “deftness of hand.” Making “beautiful things” also requires “materials honest and true,” a phrase which could mean authentically Irish or simply crafted by hand. Traditionally, poetry shares this aspiration, “materials honest and true” can elevate poetry above artifice. The idea that beautiful things emerge from “true” materials aligns with Heaney’s insistence
that poetry is a dig for “buried shards,” materials with the “aura and authenticity of archaeological finds,” each with their own significance apart from the “buried city” (Preoccupations 41). For Heaney, those shards are often memories, either specific (his mother peeling potatoes), or collective (ancient Celtic artifacts encased in the bog). The portrayal of labor in his poems also parallels the labor performed by printers like Elizabeth Yeats and the women running the Cuala Press. Printing translates the tangible “shards” of language into “beautiful things” that have meaning beyond their materiality. Likewise Heaney takes the concreteness of rural life and imagines it in the metaphorical terms offered by poetry. In “At A Potato Digging,” Heaney describes unnamed “labourers” (3) digging, who “swarm in behind, stoop to fill / Wicker creels. Fingers go dead in the cold” (3–4). The motion as the labourers “stoop” reflects the tilted posture of the type compositor, reaching hands into the case until their “fingers go dead.” Moving with rhythmic purpose, Heaney pictures the “processional stooping through the turf” (12) writing

Tall for a moment but soon stumble back
To fish a new load from the crumpled surf.
Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black
Mother. (9–12)

Heaney emphasizes a frenzy—“hands fumble towards the black Mother”—but asserts that the work “recurs mindlessly” (13), as though the labourers are entranced, bound to a “seasonal altar” (16). While the poem contains a dark urgency, the urgency of hunger, Heaney’s portrayal of the labourers is similar to that of printers: the Cuala Press trained the “brains and fingers” of the “workgirls” to be “more active and understanding” (Skelton 369). Like the labourers, compositors setting type have their “heads bow” and their “trunk bend” as they fish for type cases. His enjambment of “the black /
Mother” recalls ink, and the drive to transform metal shapes into “the black” printed forms which hold meaning.

Heaney recognized the relationship between poetry and printing, frequently collaborating with makers and artists to produce limited editions of his work. His affinity for booklets and broadsides ranged from small pamphlets with minimal design to stunning and intricate fine-press editions. Books like A Boy Driving His Father to Confession or Night Drive, both produced in 1970 by small, independent presses, are simple structures meant only to showcase the poems. On the last page of Night Drive Heaney’s handwriting appears in brown ink, noting the copy number and the date and including his signature. The text is small and centered on a large white page, and the book is bound in a plain pamphlet structure. But in other instances, Heaney collaborated with printers and artists to produce complex editions that use design elements to interrogate and intensify his poetry. In 1975, he worked with the Rainbow Press and artist Barrie Cooke on a book entitled Bog Poems. Including eight poems directly related to the bog, the book opens with an epigraph from Heaney on the origins of the word “bog,” which is “one of the few borrowings in English from the Irish language: the Irish word means ‘soft’” he writes (Bog Poems). The handmade paper conveys this etymological weaving, and feels soft to the touch, reminiscent of the wet pulp from which it was made. Bound by famous English binders Sangorski & Sutcliffe in half red morocco with gold-flecked paste papers, the book is ornately decorated. The title is gold-stamped in a Celtic-inspired typeface, the ‘G’ in bog looping into an infinite descent. Everything about the book is expansive, printed on a British press with a Dutch Baroque-inspired typeface on handmade Italian paper (Bog Poems). Unlike Night Drive, Bog Poems places Heaney within many traditions, emphasizing fine craftsmanship alongside the precision of
Heaney’s work. In the epigraph, Heaney states that “the poems raised their heads out of my own
ground but gained a confidence in themselves through the matching and nurturing interest of Ted
Hughes, Barrie Cooke and Olwyn Hughes to whom this book is dedicated.” In collaborating with
other poets and artists, Heaney began to see his poems not only alongside rural tradition, but a larger
tradition of craft and artistry.

Four years after *Bog Poems*, Heaney collaborated with the Canadian-born artist Claire Van
Vliet in *Hedge School*, a fine-press book of his Glanmore sonnets. Unlike *Bog Poems*, which strongly
evokes Celtic symbols and ornate designs, *Hedge School* portrays the pastoral restlessness of Heaney’s
time at Glanmore with rustic undertones. The book is bound in brown paper wrappers, with the title
embossed on the upper board, barely visible against the grain (*Hedge School*). Blending in with the
earthen handmade paper, Heaney and Van Vliet’s signatures are written in pencil below the colophon.
Van Vliet’s woodcuts correspond to the even-numbered sonnets, portraying simple landscape scenes.
Above sonnet “VI” is a snowy barn, inked in purple and blue hues, for sonnet “IV,” Van Vliet prints in
the soft greens of Heaney’s childhood. Above the final sonnet, in which Heaney dreams that he and
Marie “slept in a moss in Donegal / on turf banks under blankets,” is a striking woodcut of two faces
side by side, forming a horizon. Van Vliet’s woodcut makes the sleeping couple appear as resting giants,
sacred figures that become part of the landscape. *Hedge School* embraces pastoral themes, even while the
sonnet’s explore Heaney’s rural fears. Both *Bog Poems* and *Hedge School* illustrate how Heaney’s work
fits into a larger print tradition, building on the work of Irish printers like Elizabeth Yeats to global
collaborations in making fine-press books. More intimately, Heaney understood the relationship
between poetry and printing in the Christmas cards he had made for family and friends. Employing
Peter Fallon, a founder of The Gallery Press and literary scholar, Heaney would send his loved ones a poem for Christmas, printed letterpress on a small card.¹ He referred to Fallon as someone with a “care for planet earth and the poetry of earth, for the values espoused in Virgil’s *Georgics* which he has translated... and the seriousness of that caretaking has developed over the years to a point where the artistic and the moral have converged.” Heaney’s collaboration with Fallon constitutes the intersection of poetry, print culture, and the rural. Combining the labor of farming and printing with the crafting of poetry, Heaney locates himself within a unique and specific genre.

¹ Referring to *Heaney Family Christmas Cards for 1978* at Ulysses Rare Books, Dublin, Ireland. [https://www.rarebooks.ie/books/literature/christmas-eve-heaney-family-christmas-cards-for-1978/](https://www.rarebooks.ie/books/literature/christmas-eve-heaney-family-christmas-cards-for-1978/)
CONCLUSION

When he first started publishing poems, Heaney wrote under the pseudonym ‘IncERTUS,’ Latin for ‘uncertain.’ Heaney claimed that the name never really left him, even after publishing award-winning poetry volumes and winning the Nobel Prize. He remains ‘uncertain,’ always searching for openings into language and identity. His work is an effort to enter bottomless mossholes not looking for a way out, but a way in. Writing as an attempt to “set the darkness echoing” and discover new sounds, places, and histories. In “The Forge” he writes “All I know is a door into the dark” (1), recalling the blacksmith’s shop in his hometown. But the declaration, “All I know,” reminds us that Heaney is most fascinated by what remains concealed. At the sonnet’s conclusion he describes the blacksmith’s work: “To beat real iron out, to work the bellows” (14). The labor involved in getting at the “real,” working the powerful “bellows,” is precisely the kind of labor Heaney performs as a poet.

Re-grounding convention-ridden traditions like the pastoral in the realities of rural experience, Heaney transforms the way we think about literature. Everyday, ordinary activities in County Derry, like peeling potatoes or cutting turf, become the rhythms and music that animate his poetry. Words like “thole” or place-names like “Broagh” are broken down into their etymological parts and connected to their complex histories as Heaney works to beat a real poem out. His experiences are singular, and his position as a Northern Irish Catholic writing during the Troubles complicates and compels his work. At the same time, Heaney is able to connect his specific experiences to a past existence, sacrificed bodies in a bog or ancient Celtic torcs beneath his local turf. His ability to traverse time and place is made possible by the “living speech of the landscape” (Preoccupations 37), the rhythms and music of his home ground. The “living” is what makes him ‘IncERTUS,’ dwelling in the dynamic moment, the active
darkness. He once wrote that poems should be “elements of continuity” (*Preoccupations* 41), somehow mythical and imagined while simultaneously authentic and real. When I visited Heaney’s grave, hidden in a shadowy corner of the graveyard at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Bellaghy, I wondered at the fact that his words had brought me there. The epitaph reads, “Walk on air against your better judgement.” Even though I knew his body was underground and the words were engraved, not spoken, I felt, against my better judgment, that he was speaking to me. Heaney’s “living speech,” his ability to speak to both the past and future and ground them in the reality of his moment, set me echoing. I had put my ear to the line and heard the sound “escaping ahead.”
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