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# 1

## Certus

When he first began to publish poems, Seamus Heaney's chosen pseudonym was 'Incertus', meaning 'not sure of himself'. Characteristically, this was a subtle irony. While he referred in later years to a 'residual Incertus' inside himself, his early prominence was based on a sure-footed sense of his own direction, an energetic ambition, and his own formidable poetic strengths. It was also based on a respect for his readers which won their trust. 'Poetry's special status among the literary arts', he suggested in a celebrated lecture, 'derives from the audience's readiness to . . . credit the poet with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit'. Like T. S. Eliot, a constant if oblique presence in his writing life, he prized gaining access to 'the auditory imagination' and what it opened up: 'a feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the levels of conscious thought and

feeling, invigorating every word'. His readers felt they shared in this.

The external signs of Heaney's inner certainty of direction, coupled with his charisma, style, and accessibility, could arouse resentment among grievance-burdened critics, or poets who met less success than they believed themselves to deserve. He overcame this, and other obstacles, with what has been called his 'extemporaneous eloquence' and by determinedly avoiding pretentiousness: he possessed what he called, referring to Robert Lowell, 'the rooted normality of the major talent'. At the same time, he looked like nobody else, and he sounded like nobody else. A Heaney poem carried its maker's name on the blade, and often it cut straight to the bone.

Fame came to him young, but when necessary, Heaney practised evasiveness, like the outlaws on the run who regularly inhabit his work, or the mad King Sweeney of Irish legend, condemned to live the life of a migrant bird, whom he chose as an alter ego. This literally came with his territory. He was born in Northern Ireland in 1939, grew up among the nods, winks, and repressions of a deeply divided society, and saw those half-concealed fissures break open into violence. He knew 'the North' (as residents of the Irish Republic call the six north-eastern counties), targeted it, eviscerated it, and left it to live

in ‘the South’. It gave him the title of his most famous collection, and he showed how ‘it’ could be written about. But the restraint which he generally practised when addressing politics, coupled with the spectacular internationalising and cosmopolitanising of his reputation, raised sensitive questions. If ‘Sweeney’ rhymed significantly with ‘Heaney’, ‘famous’ rhymed too readily with ‘Seamus’.

He was endlessly photographed and painted, but the portrait in oils by Edward McGuire commissioned by the Ulster Museum in 1973 is perhaps the most enduring image: ‘the poet vigilant’, in Heaney’s own description, expressing a ‘gathered-up, pent-up, head-on quality . . . a keep of tension’. The powerful, handsome head is placed against a densely interwoven thicket of leaves, suggesting the concealed bird-king or the watchful wood-kerne—but also, perhaps, the double-f repeat pattern of a Faber book cover. It is a complex picture of a poet whose complexities stretch far beyond the charm of his early poems—a charm which itself is never simply what it seems.

Seamus Heaney’s background has been immortalised in those poems as well as a large archive of interviews: a small Derry farmhouse, a cattle-dealing father, a much-loved mother and aunt presiding jointly over the domestic world;

the routines of beasts, crops, and land; horses and carts, candles and oil lamps, an outdoor privy, mice scrabbling in the thatch above the children's beds at night, a world already becoming archaic in his youth. (Smart alecks in Dublin used to refer to these poems, and their author, as 'pre-electric'.) There is a Proustian exactness in his evocation of the texture and detail of his early life, the unerring memory for the illustration on a tin of condiments or the name of an obscure piece of machinery, and he retained a novelist's perception of circumstance and psychology. He could also mock this aspect of his reputation: on a visit to the 'Tam O'Shanter Experience' at Robert Burns's birthplace, he was teased that there would one day be a 'Seamus Heaney Experience' and replied, 'That's right. It'll be a few churns and a confessional box'. Heaney was marked out early by his cleverness (in a family with its fair share of schoolteachers as well as farmers, and giving the traditional Irish priority to a good education). He progressed from the local primary schools, via success in the eleven-plus examination, to life as a boarder in St Columb's College, Derry. The wrench of leaving home and family at twelve years old in 1951 remained a sharp memory; the poems and autobiographical reminiscences which record it suggest the special position which he held in his family.

‘I began as a poet’, Heaney later remarked, ‘when my roots were crossed with my reading’. At St Columb’s, his classmates included the future politician John Hume and the brilliant Seamus Deane, himself an apprentice poet but better known later as a powerful and excoriating literary critic. From early on, they would try out their poetic efforts on each other. The College’s conventional but thorough education gave a good grounding in Latin, which served Heaney well in later life, but also exposure to the English poetic tradition (discovery of Patrick Kavanagh’s work, which would mean so much to him, came later). The intensive interviews to which Heaney was subjected later in life, particularly those in Dennis O’Driscoll’s indispensable *Stepping Stones*, supply the framework for his emergence as a poet. ‘Just by answering’, Heaney himself remarked ruefully, ‘you contribute to the creation of a narrative’. Here as elsewhere, he was adept at controlling his fame.

His first poetic passion was Gerard Manley Hopkins, as is evinced in the lush and winsome wordplay of early poems submitted to local magazines during his time at Queen’s University Belfast (1957–61), which rightly remained uncollected. The lushness was eradicated fairly soon, in obedience to his mentor Philip Hobsbaum’s injunction to ‘roughen up’; winsomeness continued

to break out now and then. From Queen's, he proceeded to train as a schoolteacher, and rapidly attracted attention; the Inspector of Schools decided to haul him out of the schools and appoint him Lecturer in English at St Joseph's College of Education 'to teach the other teachers how to teach . . . he's as good a teacher as he is a poet'. This remained true, at several levels, all his life. It is illustrated by notes he made around this time for an anthology of poetry to be used for teaching purposes. His approach stresses the need to explore a poem's nature rather than simply evaluate it in terms of practical criticism, to address process rather than product, to intuit the direction of the poet's mind, and to map the hinterland behind a finished work; Hardy, Yeats, Lawrence, Kavanagh, MacNeice, Muir, Lowell, and Wilbur would feature. The anthology remained uncollected, but an academic life seemed on the cards. He had thoughts of writing a thesis on 'the repressed hero in modern Irish writing', but no-one in Queen's seemed interested in supervising it; he began an uncompleted thesis on Patrick Kavanagh, introduced to his work by the short-story writer Michael McLaverty, a colleague, mentor, and friend during his school-teaching days. And in 1966, Heaney joined the Faculty of English at Queen's University, a step up the academic ladder.

The cultural atmosphere of Belfast in the early 1960s is hard to recapture. Given what happened from 1968–9, when communal violence broke out, the British Army moved in, and three decades of murderous conflict commenced, images of a calm before a storm are inescapable. But it did not always seem like that at the time. Patterns of sectarian discrimination ran deep and were carefully negotiated; the representatives of state power were blatantly and often oppressively Protestant; the underside of violence sometimes broke through (as captured chillingly in a 1964 short story by the poet John Montague, ‘The Cry’). Much recent analysis, however, has represented life in Northern Ireland (particularly middle-class life) in the early 1960s in terms of the thawing of antagonisms and the hesitant beginnings of a more pluralist culture. Heaney’s own recollections are not inconsistent with this. But even if the advent of apocalypse after 1968 is seen as an avoidable lurch into violence rather than the inevitable bursting of a boil, it fed on ancient antipathies as well as recent injustices.

In some senses, the Queen’s University of the 1960s was at an angle to this universe. It certainly represented the Unionist governing class, and it was seen by some as a kind of colonial outpost. A large proportion of its teaching staff were British, and many returned to ‘the mainland’ when

teaching terms were over. But this detachment, while accompanied by a fair amount of condescension sharply noted by the locals, helped insulate the Queen's common-room life from more atavistic attitudes, as Heaney himself recalled. At the same time, the underlying realities of his native province were grist to his mill. A poem called 'Lint Water' was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 5 August 1965, though not reprinted in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, a year later (nor anywhere else). The quintessential Ulster industry of linen-making provided a metaphor for the poisoning of running water; Northern Irish readers would be well aware that historically, linen making was notably sectarian in its work patterns. 'Putrid currents floated trout to the loch, / Their bellies white as linen tablecloths'.

The idea of a poisoned terrain (also used by John Montague for his landmark collection, *Poisoned Lands*, in 1961) was both irresistible and significant. So is the powerful authorial stamp carried by the poem, which signals the way that Heaney would choose to approach and unpick the tensions of his native province. His own family's relations with neighbouring Protestant farmers were amicable and equable; there was a sense of difference rather than superiority or exploitation. (With Unionist grandees such as the

Chichester-Clark family in the neighbouring Big House, Moyola Park, the gap would be much wider and more definitive, both socially and politically.) Heaney's father, according to his son, possessed the cattle-dealer's wide franchise of moving easily through different circles of rural life, while his mother retained a stronger sense of historic grievance.

The poems which Heaney was planting out in Irish newspapers and magazines in the early 1960s made him a name to watch; a cyclostyled sheet of a poetry reading around 1963–4, including several of his first published poems, records him as 'Seamus Heine', which may or may not be a joke. But he was one of an extraordinarily talented group of Belfast-based writers who assembled to discuss their work under the aegis of the academic and poet Philip Hobsbaum, from 1963. They included the playwright Stewart Parker, the novelist and short-story writer Bernard McLaverty, the critic Edna Longley, and the poets Michael Longley, Joan Newmann, and James Simmons. Later commentators have queried the extent to which these writers formed a self-defining 'Group', and so have some of the writers themselves. But studies by Heather Clark and others suggest an undeniable esprit de corps, if not of joint endeavour, at the time. There was certainly a remarkable 'coincidence of talent', in

Michael Longley's phrase, and a practice—as Heaney put it—of ‘doing committee work’ on each other's poems. This much-mythologised ‘Group’ was undeniably important to Heaney's poetic development, but so were other poets then based or partly based in Northern Ireland such as John Hewitt, Derek Mahon, and John Montague, the painters Terry Flanagan and Colin Middleton, and the musician David Hammond. Longley, Mahon, and Heaney would become the great triumvirate of Northern poets, with Montague their bridge to an older generation; members of a formidably accomplished younger generation would follow in their wake, such as Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson. Between their elders, an inevitable rivalry was maintained, but there was also a certain difference of influence and ethos. Queen's kept Heaney and his school friend Deane within the Northern habitus (though it was praise from the South African poet Laurence Lerner, then on the faculty, that helped spur Heaney towards the literary life). In a later barbed reminiscence, Deane recalled that when he and Heaney discussed their own writing, they adhered to given roles: Deane excitingly experimental, Heaney imitative, modest, and careful. This memory reflected divergences on several levels over the intervening decades. But more generously, Deane also recalled

his realisation that Heaney's precision was the mark of someone who was writing poems rather than (as in his own case) attempting 'poetry'.

Other kinds of difference can be charted too. Both of the Longleys and Derek Mahon were products of Trinity College Dublin, a distinctively different culture; Heaney later recalled their superior sophistication at this stage. In particular, Mahon's authoritative irony carried the impress of that peculiar institution. The concentrated slow burn of Longley's poems, engineered for the long distance, also differed from Heaney's occasional dramatic effects. For Longley and especially Mahon, Louis MacNeice was a vitally important precursor; Edna Longley would become the most incisive authority on this other 'Northern poet', who left Ireland far behind him but whose Irishness haunts his autobiographical magnum opus 'Autumn Journal' and much else.

MacNeice, son of a Church of Ireland bishop, was also enduringly conscious of his Protestant inheritance of difference: 'banned forever from the candles of the Irish poor'. It is questionable how far this muffled his influence over Heaney, who was at this stage still semi-immersed in a traditional Catholic background (making a pilgrimage to Lourdes when he was nineteen, abstaining from alcohol under the influence of a devout Pioneer aunt until the age of twenty).

More immediately, the question of Longley's and Mahon's Protestant backgrounds cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, either to their own poetic consciousness or to their relation to Heaney's. Heaney admitted that MacNeice did not—at this stage—'speak' to him; he would later stress that his immersion in Catholic theology and practice at St Columb's, 'living the liturgical year in a very intense way', instilled an atmosphere which attuned him to Hopkins—a Catholic priest—as his 'main man'. 'What you encounter in Hopkins's journals—the claustrophobia and scrupulosity and ordering of the mind, the cold-water shaves and the single iron beds, the soutanes and the self-denial—that was the world I was living in when I first read his poems'.

A Catholicism of the imagination would remain. But the austere privations of St Columb's were a world away from the atmosphere of literary Bohemian Belfast a decade later: the poetry workshops, the blossoming of short-lived journals, convivial parties around Queen's, the acting world based on the Lyric Theatre where Heaney first saw Yeats's plays. (Heaney himself had a brief fling at acting in 1959–60, later rather lost from the record, but much praised in the local press: 'Never has there been a more true characterisation [of the nationalist hero Robert Emmet] than that which is now being given by Queen's

student Seamus Heaney. His movements and gestures are perfect while his diction leaves nothing to be desired'.) He also at this time met and became close friends with David Hammond, the charismatic folk musician, filmmaker, and educationalist, whom Heaney described as 'a natural force masquerading as a human being'; Hammond, as Heaney saw it, was immune to Belfast's constricting ideologies and 'knew the codes of a divided society so well that he knew exactly how to break them, tactfully yet deliberately'.

In other ways too, the mid-1960s set out future patterns of Heaney's life. In 1965, he married the dazzling Marie Devlin; after pursuing her for some time, he realised (he told Deane) that she was 'not so much a quarry, more a way of life'. This was prophetic. From a large and talented family which also produced writers and musicians, she was beautiful, clever, a teacher and editor, a close reader of poetry, and as strong-minded as himself. Their marriage formed the rock-like foundation of his private life. Three children followed: Christopher, Michael, and Catherine. The Heaney household was a centre of gregarious social life, especially when they moved into 16 Ashley Avenue, where meetings of the poetry group shifted after Hobsbaum's departure from Belfast in 1966. The house was a hub of activity and conviviality. Hammond would recall

it elegiacally long afterwards, when the Ashley Avenue house was scheduled for demolition, in spite of efforts to preserve it in view of its now-famous previous owner. Walking past the shuttered and vandalised house, Hammond recalled parties, music sessions, the constant to-and-fro of neighbours in the late 1960s, local friends such as the Longleys and the painters Colin Middleton and Terry Flanagan, visiting Americans, the poet Ted Hughes and the playwright Trevor Griffiths from England, all contributing to an unforgettable atmosphere; the house throbbed with energy, he recalled, and the door was always open. By a strange poetic transference, later still, Heaney would use that same image—a house with the door standing open—for ‘The Door Was Open and the House Was Dark’, a plangent elegy in memory of Hammond, who died in 2008.

Heaney’s explosive sense of humour, energetic *joie de vivre*, and legendary dispensation of hospitality created a focus of warmth and life, and a resonance that remained long after the family left Belfast; but he was simultaneously putting in hard work at poetry, often late at night. In a student magazine of 1961, he had described himself as an ‘ex-poet’, but he was now committed to his craft. Though the early spell of Hopkins wore off, it remained true that up to this time, as

he put it himself, 'the linguistic experiences that threw my switches were English'. Fittingly, his early poems, and his first collections, repeatedly if implicitly invoked Wordsworthian 'spots of time', though Kavanagh's influence was increasingly clear as well.

His breakthrough to a wider audience than Belfast came early on. In late 1964, the literary editor of the *New Statesman*, Karl Miller, published three Heaney poems, which attracted the attention of Faber and Faber, the premier British publishing house for poetry. A pamphlet of eleven poems was published in 1965 by the Queen's University Festival; Dolmen Press in the Republic was offered a potential collection by Heaney, but given the generally shambolic organisation there, its fate was uncertain. A letter from Liam Miller in the Heaney archives suggests that with Faber in prospect, Heaney reclaimed the poems and constructed a slightly different selection. This was swiftly accepted by Charles Monteith, whom Heaney had met when he visited the publishers' office on his honeymoon trip to London. Monteith was a fellow Northerner, from a conspicuously different background but with a sharp eye for talent and a rapid comprehension of the heft and originality implicit in the poems that Heaney sent him. *Death of a Naturalist* was published on 19 May 1966, costing

eighteen shillings. It would prove as vital a point in Faber's history as in Heaney's.

While the subject matter was pastoral, Ulster-style, the tone was resolutely anti-pastoral, and the language arresting and even violent—notably in the title poem but also in the evocations of such pastimes as blackberry-picking and butter-making. Blackberries are bloody (and their pickers become stained like the wife-murderer Bluebeard), jars full of cream are 'pottery bombs', frogs are potentially explosive grenades, images of armouries, sentries, and reconnaissance recur. Above all, in the opening poem 'Digging', which would become canonical, the poet's pen nestles in his fist, 'snug as a gun'. Heaney would later remark that this particular simile was inspired by phonetic euphony rather than a deliberate imagery of violence, but detonations and explosions recur throughout the volume. Elsewhere, he called 'Digging' 'a big cross-grained navy of a poem'—perhaps implicitly referring to the conversation that originally inspired it, when a road worker told the young Heaney on his way to school that handling a pen was lighter than a spade. 'Navy' or not, the poem certainly had the stamina to become Heaney's 'Lake Isle of Innisfree', pursuing him for decades.

The poems that followed it in *Death of a Naturalist* were ferociously accomplished, sharply

honed, and tightly structured; along with images of violence, themes of decay, rot, and rat infestation recur. The title poem is a nightmare vision which moves from a child collecting frogspawn to the invasion of a flax dam by ‘great slime kings’, sexually voracious and intent on vengeance. None of the poems published in student magazines were included; the earliest dates from 1962. One of these, ‘Turkeys Observed’, sees the dead birds on a poulterer’s slab as a squadron of fighter planes—the kind of visual metaphor later called ‘Martian’. (‘Turkeys made him a poet’ proclaimed the headline of an *Ulster Tattler* interview in May 1966.) But the direction of Heaney’s poetry was distinctly un-Martian. The poems about family are gentler. ‘Follower’, first published in the Queen’s pamphlet, is a kind of companion piece to ‘Digging’, where the son recalls his father ploughing a field, ending with intimations of age and mortality. There are love poems, one of which—‘Scaffolding’—would become a staple for reading at weddings (not always a good sign). More strikingly, there are reflections on Irish history at its more traumatic, the potato famine of the 1840s (‘At a Potato Digging’, ‘For the Commander of the *Eliza*’); while ‘Docker’ is a portrait of a Protestant proletarian in brutally reductionist terms. (As Heaney later ruefully recognised, it should have been called ‘Shipyards

Worker': in the sectarianised world of Belfast labour, dockers were Catholic.)

That fist would drop a hammer on a  
Catholic—  
Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again.  
The only Roman collar he tolerates  
Smiles all round his sleek pint of porter.

Perhaps the most powerful poem in the book is 'Mid-Term Break', a deceptively simple recollection of his younger brother's death in a road accident outside the family home, when the fourteen-year-old Heaney was away at boarding school. The atmosphere of the mourning house, and the viewing of the dead child's body, is evoked in brief tercets, ending with a ringing single line—an effect all the stronger for being restrained and unshowy.

Next morning I went up into the room.  
Snowdrops  
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him  
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,  
  
Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,  
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.  
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him  
clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Perhaps this reflects the speedy way that the poem came to him; Heaney wrote it in February 1963, sitting in an armchair in his shared flat in Wellington Park, waiting for a flatmate to cook supper. It was first published in the *Kilkenny Magazine* later that year. Late in Heaney's life, Michael Longley would refer to these early poems as 'little miracles', and the last poem in *Death of a Naturalist* was dedicated to Longley: it is an envoi of astounding self-confidence.

#### PERSONAL HELICON

As a child, they could not keep me from  
wells

And old pumps with buckets and  
windlasses.

I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the  
smells

Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.

I savoured the rich crash when a bucket  
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.

So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch  
Fructified like any aquarium.

When you dragged out long roots from the  
soft mulch,

A white face hovered over the bottom.

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.

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

The confidence was not misplaced. *Death of a Naturalist* was widely reviewed by major critics and won four prizes, including the Somerset Maugham Award, which provided a grant to a young writer that had to be spent on foreign travel and would help bring the Heaneys to the French Pyrenees and Spain a couple of years later.

Inevitably, in some less talented Northern writers, notably James Simmons, a pulse of envy began to beat. Simmons was six years older than Heaney and midway through an erratic career as a teacher, balladeer, and determined hellraiser. His undisciplined poetry shared some of these characteristics. Always keen to assume the role of literary entrepreneur, in 1968, Simmons started an influential magazine called *The Honest Ulsterman*, with the intention of challenging the

Northern Irish ‘establishment’ and what Simmons and some of his contributors saw as the ‘clique’ of Longley, Mahon, and Heaney. It also provided a showcase for his own work. Heaney contributed poems to it, but the journal also became an outlet for critiques and parodies of his own work. In 1969, the journal ran a competition for a poem ‘written in the Heaney manner’, allegedly to be judged by Heaney himself.

*Death of a Naturalist* inaugurated what became a remarkable connection between Heaney and his readership. The book sold well for a first poetry collection, but more significantly, it created a following which would grow. Heaney’s public profile was coming into focus. Personal charisma had something to do with it, and an ability to read his own work to riveting effect (unfortunately, an ability not given to many poets). His voice could also be heard (from 1968) on a recording issued by Garech Browne’s Claddagh Records. (Later, living in Wicklow, the Heaneys would encounter the glamorous and rather rackets world which Browne gathered around himself at Luggala, his legendary house in the mountains.) With Longley and Hammond, Heaney organised a trailblazing poetry tour of Northern Ireland, called ‘Room to Rhyme’, in May 1968. His unforced skill as a lecturer made him much in demand. But all this was secondary

to a poetic voice which, on one level, connected immediately with what many Irish people knew: a rural past slipping away, a violent and traumatic history, a social integument based on mutually observed avoidances. Reading him, they felt they were in good hands. On another level, that voice was heard and understood by readers far beyond Ireland, not only for its extra-sensory powers of observation, its humanity, and its generosity of vision, but also for its ability to craft language with an unerring economy and to hit on the utterly unexpected, yet utterly appropriate, word.

Early on, this was what drew him to the attention of major critics such as Christopher Ricks, John Carey, and Helen Vendler, while continuing to alienate those invested in a more restricted enterprise, such as Al Alvarez and Ian Hamilton. ‘What I was after’, he would later recall, ‘was a way of making the central tradition of English poetry, which we’d observed in college and university, absorb our own particular eccentric experience’. From 1969—the date of his next collection, *Door into the Dark*—the ‘eccentric experience’ of Northern Ireland would come into international focus, as what Heaney often termed the ‘noxious’ elements of life there were released into the ether. And this too would affect the contract between Heaney and his readership.

Many of the poems in Heaney's second collection were written before the violent assault on marchers for civil rights which sparked off the Northern crisis in 1968, but the volume is full of explosive little epiphanies which read presciently and prophetically ('Dream', 'The Forge', 'Thatcher'). Along with memorable evocations of country life, love, and music, such as 'The Given Note', there was a strong sense of Northern self-consciousness, notably in 'Lough Neagh Sequence'. (Eels, like frogs and rats, became a haunting presence in Heaney's poetic world.) Above all, the collection ended with the prophetic 'Bogland', a step into the metaphor for the memory of historical violence which would become famous, and controversial, when he published *North* six years later. Looking back from the standpoint of the interviews published in *Stepping Stones* in 2008, he would describe it 'like opening a gate'.

We have no prairies  
To slice a big sun at evening—  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Encroaching horizon,  
  
Is wooed into the cyclops' eye  
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up  
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks  
Of great firs, soft as pulp.  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.  
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless.

Writing to Michael Longley after the publication of *Door into the Dark*, Heaney described it as an effort to tap into the self via 'secret rather than public poems': a search to find a mode of expression that 'blends discipline and disarms disciplinarians'. But there was more to it than that.

Heaney's notebooks for 1969 show a preoccupation with history, particularly the 1798 Rising, when a Republican enterprise briefly brought Northern Presbyterians and Catholic radicals together; it is the subject of a much-worked-upon but never broadcast radio play, among other things.

The tentative politics of *Door into the Dark* took a more decided form in a celebrated poem about the 1798 Rising, 'Requiem for the Croppies', with its powerful closing image of the pocketfuls of barley seeds buried with the slaughtered rebels and sprouting from the ground a year later. After 1969, with the British Army on the streets of Belfast and the birth of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, this could look like an invocation of blood sacrifice in the style of Patrick Pearse, and Heaney was acutely conscious of this—so much so that he stopped reading it in public performances. From 1969, the question of the public stance of the poet became pressing—an issue that would separate Heaney from some of his contemporaries. A supporter of the civil rights movement (he had been on those early marches) and fiercely conscious of the injustices under which the Catholic population lived, he was not actively involved in politics. But a good deal of unpublished work from these years suggests an angrier commitment than appeared

in public—or in retrospect. ‘For the Catholic writer’, he remarked to Seamus Deane ten years later, ‘I think the Troubles were a critical moment, a turning point, possibly a vision of some kind of fulfilment. The blueprint in the Catholic writer’s head predicted that a history would fulfil itself in a United Ireland or something. These are very fundamental blueprints’. Heaney’s own blueprint was to emerge as less cut-and-dried than this, and he was unprepared to see violence as a necessary preliminary to any long-desired political outcome. But a draft poem in his notebook for this time called ‘Ulster Politics’ uses Swiftian images of blocked bowels and necessary ruptures, while a series of interrogative verses about his own political commitment rehearses imagined slights and accusations against himself as a ‘smiling public man’ unprepared to align openly with his ‘tribe’.

Significantly, this was also a juncture when his outlook was widening in all sorts of directions. With two Faber collections in print, he was writing for main-line journals in Britain, such as *The Listener* and the *New Statesman*, rather than local outlets such as the *Honest Ulsterman*; though Heaney placed occasional pieces there, his enterprise was consciously international. Simmons, among others, would not view this ambition generously. More surprisingly, corre-

spondence from Brian Friel with other writers in the 1970s, before his close friendship with Heaney, suggests a certain asperity about Heaney's 'consciously cultivated' approach to his work and easy manipulation of a new audience in England.

But the horizons were widening beyond Britain. The year Heaney spent, with his young family, as a visiting lecturer in Berkeley, California, in 1970 was a vital broadening of opportunities, both personal and intellectual. It was not merely a question of—as he put it—'silence, exile and sunning'. Given his formalist literary aesthetic, he found the laid-back students, the free-wheeling academic culture, the radical politics worn on multicoloured sleeves, and the novelty of Californian life in the late hippie era unimaginably different from Queen's and Belfast. The excitement is tangible in letters he wrote to friends at home. He was experimenting with writing fiction (never published), revelling in the intellectual camaraderie of people from all kinds of backgrounds, shaking off 'northern clay'. Nonetheless, Irish connections were important: Thomas Parkinson, a distinguished Yeatsian, and Robert Tracy, who wrote incisively about Irish literature from the eighteenth century on, were on the faculty, as was the critic and (later) great historical novelist Thomas Flanagan, who became one of Heaney's closest friends. Flanagan

and Heaney would in subsequent years spend much time making summer expeditions to historic Irish sites; it was a stop-off with Flanagan at Moran's pub and restaurant at Kilcolgan, County Galway, en route to Yeats's tower at Ballylee, that inspired Heaney's celebrated poem 'Oysters'.

Through the Flanagans the Heaneys met the controversial critic and politician Conor Cruise O'Brien and his wife, the poet Máire Mhac an tSaoi, and many others. But there were also American poets in the vicinity, such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly. Oddly, though Heaney was already familiar with Czesław Miłosz's poetry in translation, and the Polish poet was in residence at Berkeley too, they did not meet at this juncture; his friendships with Miroslav Holub and Zbigniew Herbert would also come later. The literary culture of Berkeley (which also took in the short-story writer Leonard Michaels, a friend of Heaney's) acted as a kick-start for the next phase of Heaney's writing life, but in terms of approach rather than opening up new material; as he put it himself, 'what the Californian distance did was to lead me back into the Irish memory bank . . . origin and the inward path'. Even more significantly, Flanagan's powerfully historicised approach to Irish literature had given him 'a more

charged-up sense of Yeats and Joyce . . . I was starting to see my own situation as a “Northern poet” more in relation to the wound and the work of Ireland as a whole’. This recognition infuses and penetrates the poems in his next two books.

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