

Memories of Dying: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney

Bernard Sharratt

Clive James, reviewing Seamus Heaney's third collection, remarked: 'Soon people are going to start comparing him with Yeats'. Which was characteristic of James, since he didn't actually make the comparison but could claim first credit for it if necessary. C. B. Cox, reviewing the second collection, was less circumspect: 'Major poets are as rare as the phoenix, and it is possible that since 1960 only one has emerged in these Islands. He is Seamus Heaney'. In the first Annual Yeats Lecture, in 1940, T. S. Eliot offered a variation on his own attempt to define the difference between a 'major' and 'minor' poet:

Where there is the continuity of such a positive personality and such a single purpose, the later work cannot be understood, or properly enjoyed, without a study and appreciation of the earlier; and the later work again reflects light upon the earlier, and shows us beauty and significance not before perceived.

This emphasis on the notion that 'a major poet is one the whole of whose work we ought to read, in order fully to appreciate any part of it' (Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?') is peculiarly apposite to Yeats—at least in Yeats's own view, since, despite Leavis's contrary judgement, Yeats intended his *Collected Poems* to be read together and ordered the poems accordingly: each was to find its place within the pattern of the whole. If we compare Heaney with Yeats at all, this might be a starting-point since a similar patterning intention seems to be at work in at least three of his collections so far. It is an overall pattern in Heaney's poetry that I want to present—which precludes any very close commentary on individual poems.

1. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)¹

The opening poem, *Digging*, is an elaboration of the Irish saying 'The pen is lighter than the spade': it presents the physical work of the poet's father and grandfather, only to conclude:

But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

¹Titles of poems are italicised; titles of collections are abbreviated to DN, DD, WO.

That turning away from the tie of the soil, established in this prelude poem, is traced in a number that follow, but the initial movement is the simpler, more familiar overcoming of childhood fear of alien, slimy things: frogs and rats:

The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it (p. 16).

I lay face-down to shun the fear above.
The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats (p. 17).

The child's *Advancement of Learning* is to forget panic and finally outstare a rat, 'This terror, cold, wet-furred, small-clawed', but even in the older boyish joys of *Blackberry-Picking* nature retains its alien, unfair rhythms: 'The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour' with 'A rat-grey fungus'. It takes human work to control and use fermentation, as in the 'rhythms that slugged and thumped for hours' on *Churning Day*. Human control of animals is established (with political overtones) in *The Early Purges*, tracking the move from fear aroused in a six-year-old watching kittens drowned, rats trapped and old hens' necks pulled, to the callous, shrugging rationality of 'But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down'. The next two poems hint, however, that the 'I' of these opening poems is not to inherit that well-run farm: in *Follower* he stumbles in the wake of his ploughing father, a nuisance, until 'today':

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

The taint of fear, irritation, rejection and entrapment in those lines balances breakaway and dependence, a kind of Oedipal attachment to the land itself, an urge to parricide as the Irish son awaits his own marriage to the earth. A more definite distance is achieved in *Ancestral Photograph* as the portrait of 'my father's uncle, from whom he learnt the trade' is consigned to the attic, 'Closing this chapter of our chronicle' and suggesting a new chapter in its echoing of 'squat pen': the cattle-pens of bygone fairs played against 'This barrel of a man penned in the frame' of his faded photo. *Mid-Term Break* marks a double break: the 'I' now lives in the world of pen and ink, 'the eldest/Away at school', returning for the funeral of a four-year-old brother, killed in a car accident, an intrusion from a world alien to that of horse-ploughing and bringing a sharper kind of death. An adolescent's world is shaped in *Dawn Shoot*, snipe-shooting for pocket-money on railway embankments, where death is only a sport and the only fear is the artificial thrill of an experience filtered through B-movie and *Boys Own* echoes of wartime snipers on patrol:

A corncrake challenged
Unexpectedly like a hoarse sentry
And a snipe rocketted away on reconnaissance.
Rubber-booted, belted, tense as two parachutists . . .

But schooling offers more than such filters for perception : a new kind of awareness, a self-locating in history, is signalled in the first poem-sequence in the volume. The four poems in *At a Potato Digging* move from the familiar if modernised scene of today—

A mechanical digger wrecks the drill,
Spins up a dark shower of roots and mould.
Labourers swarm in behind, stoop to fill
Wicker creels. Fingers go dead in the cold.

—through a precise evocation of the uncovered spud, to a bitter grasp of history :

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

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

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

For the first time the 'I' is present at the scene only in the impersonalised anger of a group-consciousness, a representative memory of the grotesquely cruel past; but the stance which sees this is also a distance :

Processional stooping through the turf
Recurrs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

It is the poet who sounds these ritual resonances, and to partake of them only casually is, by contrast, to remain mindless :

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

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

There is a kind of arrogance in this implied distinction between what the workers actually feel (mindless, fear, humbled, dead-beat) and what they ought to feel (the overarching power of the famine god) but

which only finds articulation in the poet. It is an outsider's insight which both falsifies the experience ('To fish a new load from the crumbled surf', 'served for lunch', 'timeless fasts'—all betray genteel traces of a Pastoral Tone) and occludes at least some of the historical actors in the interpretation: landowners and government shared responsibility with deified blight. Some awareness of those human agents is certainly present in *For the Commander of the 'Eliza'*, a dramatisation of the dilemma of an English patrol boat captain who 'had to refuse food' to dying Irish during the famine; the poem's epigraph (from Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*) and the historical persona (the 'I' is now the captain) suggest a shift in poetic strategy, historical specificity replacing myth, the involved inwardness of standpoint rather than impersonal horror. But *The Diviner* re-asserts both a vatic version of the poet and his apartness:

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.

It is an appropriate moment in the collection to explore directly an analogue for the poet: the point of vocation has been reached and childhood, boyhood, schooldays, make no more appearances. But for a time old themes resume: four poems explore the interaction of human and natural worlds: dead Xmas turkeys observed with sad but accepting sympathy ('He is just another poor forked thing'—no longer mere pest or prey); a cow in calf recognised with amazement and pity; a trout allowed its peculiar power, left intact though metaphorised into a torpedo; a waterfall registered in human terms whose inadequacy is apparent before the waterfall's own force. The fine poise of these poems marks the poet emerging from the egoism of earlier responses to tamed or fearsome nature, and opens the way for the first two attempts really to penetrate the experience of contemporary ordinary people. In *Docker* and *Poor Women in a City Church* representative inner worlds of Ulster are captured and conveyed with alert understanding: the Protestant worker in his pub—

Mosaic imperatives bang home like rivets;
God is a foreman with certain definite views
Who orders life in shifts of work and leisure.
A factory horn will blare the Resurrection.

—the Catholic dispossessed seeking solace in soft rituals:

Old dough-faced women with black shawls
Drawn down tight kneel in the stalls.
Cold yellow candle-tongues, blue flame
Mince and caper as whispered calls
Take wing up to the Holy Name.

The male/female, Protestant/Catholic allocations of this contrast begin to be suggestively explored in the four poems that follow, a tenta-

tive optimism hinting compatibility and mutual need, conveyed through metaphors of exile (*Gravities*), the shyness of wary courting in Derry's divided city (*Twice-Shy*) and the coast-defining collision of sea and land (*Lovers on Aran*), with a hopefully temporary absence of the lover in 'simple tartan skirt' (*Valediction*) disturbing the hopes. To suggest a link between these poems of love and loss and the divisions in the North is perhaps to see an attempt where there was only a possibility: the exploration of courting-relations in Ulster would certainly provide both analogue and example of sectarian tensions and I see that possible tactic in these poems, perhaps wrongly (though it's worth recalling that 1965/66 was the time of the Lemass/O'Neill courtship and the Free Trade Agreement). Certainly the rest of this volume does not develop that option: attention moves to actual marriage and to the privacy of a constructed domestic world where the poet is perfected both as craftsman and as parent (*Poem: For Marie*):

Love, I shall perfect for you the child
Who diligently potters in my brain . . .

New adult fears emerge (*Honeymoon Flight*: 'Travellers, at this point, can only trust'; *Storm on the Island*: 'We are bombarded by the empty air./Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear') and grounds for steady hope asserted (*Scaffolding*: 'Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall/Confident that we have built our wall'.), but these—as the emphasis on walls, bastions and shelter underlines—are private hopes and fears, representative only in their generality. Moreover, the fusion between poet and parent suggested in *Poem: For Marie* is unravelled, separated out into a group of poems on marriage and another group on the arts (drama, poetry, painting, folk-song, pp. 52-55). These are competent but unmemorable exercises and seem to reflect a professionalisation of the poet, a knack for versifying subjects. Only their placing retains better possibilities: as the volume closes, that professionalisation has a searching air, the poet created but waiting for a subject to go beyond the bildungsroman theme of this first collection, in the meantime polishing his instruments and putting others onto the same path—*The Play Way* of teaching music to schoolkids:

Working its private spell behind eyes
That stare wide. They have forgotten me
For once. The pens are busy, the tongues mime
Their blundering embrace of the free

Word. A silence charged with sweetness
Breaks short on lost faces where I see
New looks. Then notes stretch taut as snares. They trip
To fall into themselves unknowingly.

The final poem, *Personal Helicon*, recapitulates the liberating move from farmer's son to teacher, from spade to pen, from child peering into dark wells concealing rats, to adult poet:

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.

2. *Door into the Dark* (1969)

The pattern of the first collection is coherently chronological and it ends in both achievement and expectation. The second volume seems to have no pattern, though groupings of poems linked by semi-fortuitous echoes are apparent: *Requiem for the Croppies* ends with barley-corn growing from the corpses' pockets, *Rite of Spring* follows, transforming a water-pump into a fertility goddess, that idea is then picked up in *Undine*, the river as fertilising mate. But there is a kind of unity, indicated by the linking of Narcissus and darkness in the final lines of DN and echoed in the line which provides the new title: 'All I know is a door into the dark' (*Forge*). The poet has already partly learned to penetrate the world of others, to overcome mere projected self-reflection; but now marriage and sexual love are a more intimate exploration of the darkness of the other which is both a crucial instance of and a rich analogue for the necessary knowledge of complex experiences not directly our own. In *The Wife's Tale* the overlapping, only partial mutual comprehension of the different worlds of husband and wife is directly presented in an exchange over harvest-bagging:

'That looks well.'

(He nodded at my white cloth on the grass.)
'I declare a woman could lay out a field
Though boys like us have little call for cloths.'
He winked, then watched me as I poured a cup
And buttered the thick slices that he likes.
'It's threshing better than I thought, and mind
It's a good clean seed. Away over there and look.'
Always this inspection has to be made
Even though I don't know what to look for.

Other poems present the poet clearly on the outside of specific circuits of living (*The Forge*, *The Thatcher*) or trying to become inward to lost experiences (*In Gallarus Oratory*: 'You can still feel the community pack/This place'; *Requiem for the Croppies*). But these attempts can jar when speculative imagination replaces sympathy, as in *Victorian Guitar*, which takes off from an inscription 'Belonged to Louisa Catherine Coe before her marriage to John Charles Smith, March 1852', and concludes, without further evidence:

I believe he cannot have known your touch
Like this instrument—for clearly
John Charles did not hold with fingering—

Which is obviously a lady's:
The sound-box trim as a girl in stays,
The neck right for the smallest span.

Did you even keep track of it as a wife?
Do you know the man who has it now
Is giving it the time of its life?

The nudging suggestiveness of the last line, which insinuates an equation between possession of guitar and of wife and implies that 'I' would have given more rousing pleasure than any Charles Smith, strikes me as a failure both of historical imagination and of tact, a kind of fantasy male chauvinism which is also insidiously present in the metaphoric substructure of *Rite of Spring*:

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

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

The 'plunger' metaphor of this poem re-appears, disastrously, in *Mother*, where a woman's sexual experience becomes a kind of awkwardly physical burden:

I am tired of walking about with this plunger
Inside me. God, he plays like a young calf
Gone wild on a rope.

It is the deflection of attention onto the elaborated simile in the whole poem that reveals cleverness rather than inwardness as the source of the exercise: the reason for probing another's close experience seems to be poetic effect rather than genuine compassion or celebration—as, again, in *Elegy for a [friend's] Still-Born Child* ('A wreath of small clothes, a memorial pram') or *Cana Revisited* ('Virtue intact is waiting to be shown . . . As when the water reddened at the feast'). *Elegy* perhaps indicates one source of this coyly tasteless exploring:

On lonely journeys I think of it all,
Birth of death, exhumation for burial

That note is echoed or implied frequently: *Night Drive*, *At Ardoe Point* and *Girls Bathing, Galway 1965* all have an air of originating in rather aimless reflection, later worked up into a poem during a car journey or holiday. *The Peninsula* makes the method explicit:

When you have nothing more to say, just drive
For a day all round the peninsula.

On returning, you will still have 'nothing to say' but you can re-create the landscape in four stanzas and add a vague conclusion. It is having 'nothing to say' that haunts this collection: the experiences of other people seem to stimulate only his 'craft' not his 'technique', his genuine voice (the distinction is Heaney's own, in a recent lecture). Only a 'dark' that retains its real alien mystery excites him, as in the first few poems: two that convey the awesome presence of a horse, one on the

coupling of bull and cow, and a surreal dream-poem. In the only poem-sequence in the volume, *A Lough Neagh Sequence*, the different levels of engagement can be clearly felt. The mating is again non-human, the return of eels to the breeding-waters providing the opportunity for eel-fishing on the Lough. But the fishermen are alien only in their obstinacy and fatalism, never learning to swim because

‘We’ll be the quicker going down’, they say—
And when you argue there are no storms here,
That one hour floating’s sure to land them safely—
‘The lough will claim a victim every year.’

Their lack of concern with the kind of knowledge the poet demands recalls the spud-pickers of DN :

And when did this begin?
This morning, last year, when the lough first spawned?
The crews will answer, ‘Once the season’s in.’

But the eels have a deeper, darker, timeless knowledge that arouses not irritation but Heaney’s involved identification :

A gland agitating
mud two hundred miles in-
land, a scale of water
on water working up
estuaries, he drifted
into motion half-way
across the Atlantic,
sure as the satellite’s
insinuating pull
in the ocean, as true
to his orbit.

Against
ebb, current, rock, rapids
a muscled icicle,
that melts itself longer
and fatter, he buries
his arrival beyond
light and tidal water,
investing silt and sand
with a sleek root.

Dark
delivers him hungering
down each undulation.

Seeking this darker region of old knowledge, the drive-in method finally pays off : a guide-book fact begins to germinate a major pre-occupation :

The lough waters
Can petrify wood

—the opening of *Relic of Memory*. *Bann Clay* also suggests a centuries-sunken world to be re-found :

Above it, the webbed marsh is new,
Even the clutch of Mesolithic
Flints. ...
Under the humus and roots
This smooth weight. I labour
Towards it still. It holds and gluts.

The final poem, *Bogland*, unites these themes of petrification and ancient buried memories, sparked off by a specific childhood memory :

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 ...

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

The disparate explorations of DD are not unified in that volume, but they suggest an underlying congruence, a resonance that chimes the wet holes of the bog with the sexual plunge into a dark that touches a desired but alien knowledge. That connection, linking back to the fear of slime and wells in DN, is later to yield strange fruit.

(To be concluded next month)