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The Appetites of Gravity: *North* (1975)

> In Ireland at the moment I would see the necessity, since I'm involved in the tradition of the English lyric, to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before . . . like all the messy and, it would seem, incomprehensible obsessions in the North, and make it still an English lyric.
>
> Seamus Heaney in interview, 1973

1 Poetry and Politics

The decision to confront the crisis of Northern Ireland in a more rigorous way must have come to seem almost inevitable to Heaney after the publication of *Wintering Out*. Some of the poems he had published, but not collected, did handle the subject more directly; and his role as a public spokesman and commentator was increasingly demanding both a scrutiny of his own responses and position and a consideration of the kinds of language appropriate to the occasion. His move from Belfast to Dublin in 1972, particularly in the light of the media commentary it received, no doubt gave these scruples a sharper edge and urgency, while it also brought the perspective of at least geographical distance. Above all, however, his anxieties about confronting the subject had been mitigated to some extent by his discovery of P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* and, in 'The Tollund Man', of a way of using that material as analogy, of making it render what he calls, in 'Feeling into Words', 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament'. 'I felt it imperative', he writes there, 'to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane

reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its authenticity and complexity.'

Heaney was also reading at the time, as his critical prose of the period makes clear, some modern and contemporary long poems, or poetic sequences: David Jones's *The Sleeping Lord* (published in book form in 1974, but available much earlier) and *The Anathemata* (1952), Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971) and – a sequence developed out of, and responding to, the Northern experience – John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972). These are poems which, variously, set personal experience in a larger cultural and historical context and, as a result, display a studied and deliberate interest in archaeology and etymology. They are poems which retain, vestigially, some of the ambitions of 'epic' poetry and also attempt a kind of synthesizing historical myth, a form in which the confusions of the present may be articulated and understood with what will seem a more than merely individual authority. An extension and elaboration of the relationship between Ireland and Jutland proposed by 'The Tollund Man' provides Heaney with the basis for such a myth of Northern Ireland.

The sequence of 'bog poems' subsequently written out of this perception ('Come to the Bower', 'Bog Queen', 'The Grauballe Man', 'Punishment', 'Strange Fruit' and 'Kinship') lies at the centre of the meaning, effect and achievement of *North*; but the volume's myth is also developed from a variety of other sources. Separate poems meditate not only on bodies but also on objects retrieved from the northern ground (quernstones, a Viking longship, Viking trial-pieces – that is, pieces made as specimens for future designs – a white bone, a spade covered with moss, a turf cart), and on words retrieved from the language spoken on that ground ('moss', 'bawn', 'Dublin', 'bone-house' or 'ban-hus', 'bog'). These poems uncover a history of the conquest of Ireland first by the Vikings and later by the English. The myth is also advanced by poems in which territorial conquest is itself allegorized in terms of the Greek myths of Hercules and Antaeus and of Diana and Actaeon, and in sexual terms. Moreover, in

'The Digging Skeleton', the myth finds room for a translation from Baudelaire of a poem about anatomical drawings which imagines human misery persisting beyond the grave; in a pointed oxymoron, Heaney translates Baudelaire's word for the dead, 'forçats' (hard-labourers), as 'Death's lifers', which is chillingly appropriate to the bodies preserved for so long in the Danish bogs.

In the overall structure of *North*, however, the myth occupies only the first of its two parts, the second containing poems directly responsive to the Northern present, rather than to its past. In this sense, the book inherits the bipartite structure of *Wintering Out* and employs it to more radical effect. This duality has its correlative in Heaney's published responses as a citizen: in 'Belfast' in *Preoccupations*, for instance, he observes that 'At one minute you are drawn towards the old vortex of racial and religious instinct, at another time you seek the mean of humane love and reason.' However, its separation of the symbolic from the explicit is essentially the product of Heaney's sense of the varied, even contradictory ways in which matters of deep public perturbation might be articulated in poetry. In foregrounding possibility and difference in this way, *North* becomes a profoundly self-conscious book.

Such self-consciousness is apparent also in the way it places art itself, and Heaney's own art as a poet in particular, at its centre. The dedicatory poems under the title 'Mossbawn' evoke domestic and communal images of Heaney's first home, of human love and agricultural continuity, which recall Dutch and Flemish paintings. 'Sunlight', which remembers his aunt baking, has, with its composed stillness and its almost-archaism (dusting the board 'with a goose's wing'), something of the atmosphere of an interior by Vermeer. Robert Lowell, in 'Epilogue' in his volume *Day by Day* (1977), writes of 'the grace of accuracy / Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination', and Heaney's poem conjures a similarly accurate grace from its sunlight. 'The Seed Cutters', celebrating 'calendar customs', directly addresses a painter – 'Breughel, / You'll know them if

I can get them true.' These painterly images of beneficent tranquillity, of home-keeping and community, remain, as it were, outside the frame of *North*, implicitly commenting on the images of barbarism within the frame, particularly those derived from other, harsher artworks: the Viking longship incised by the child as a trial-piece in 'Viking Dublin'; the anatomical plates of 'The Digging Skeleton'; the Roman marble copy (after a lost Greek bronze) of a conquered Celtic warrior dying on his shield, known as *The Dying Gaul*, which is alluded to in 'The Grauballe Man'; Goya's 'Shootings of the Third of May' and his image of 'that holmgang / Where two berserks club each other to death / For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking' in 'Summer 1969'; and, indeed, the bog people themselves, iconically static in the frames of Glob's photographs.

These allusions to the plastic arts are accompanied in *North* by a very high density of reference to other writing; literary, historical and political. Occasionally very obviously signalled by quotation marks or italics, or by their use as epigraphs, but usually embedded more invisibly in Heaney's own texts, these allusions include, among many others: the Norse *Njal's Saga*; the Roman historian Tacitus's accounts of the Northern tribes in his *Germania* and *Agricola*; *Hamlet*; Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*; Bede's *History of the English Church and People*; Yeats's poems and *Autobiographies*; Walter Ralegh's 'Ocean's Love to Cynthia' and John Aubrey's accounts of Ralegh; Lord Grey's account of the Battle of Smerwick, as dictated to Edmund Spenser; the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*; Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*; Horace's odes; R. H. Barrow's *The Romans*; Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; Patrick Kavanagh; Hopkins's *Journals*; Osip Mandelstam. Given the nature of its primary subject – Northern Ireland in crisis after 1969 – *North* is an astonishingly literary book which foregrounds the way it turns its material into text: literally so in 'Bog Queen', where 'My body was braille / for the creeping influences' and in 'Kinship' with its 'hieroglyphic' peat.

The allusions are integral and organic, not merely ornamental. They are made partly, no doubt, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's striking, scandalous and probably now too-often-cited observation that 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism';[1] but they are also made because *North* is a book almost as much about poetry itself as it is about Northern Ireland. The Greek myth of Hercules and Antaeus which encloses Part I in two separate poems seems primarily an allegory of colonization. In 'Hercules and Antaeus', Hercules is the stronger aggressor breaking the native Antaeus, son of Earth, by removing him from his source of strength in the soil and leaving him in the land in the shape of that persistent Celtic motif, the 'sleeping giant' who will one day wake to lead his people out of servitude. The myth which keeps an oppressed people hopeful but puerile, this figure is scathingly described as 'pap for the dispossessed'. In an interview Heaney acknowledges 'Hercules and Antaeus' as an allegory of Ireland, but describes its genesis in terms of poetry itself:

> To me Hercules represents another voice, another possibility; and actually behind that poem lay a conversation with Iain Crichton Smith, a very fine poet but essentially different from the kind of poet I am. He's got a kind of Presbyterian *light* about him. The image that came into my mind after the conversation was of me being a dark soil and him being a kind of bright-pronged fork that was digging it up and going through it.... Hercules represents the possibility of the play of intelligence, that kind of satisfaction you get from Borges, the play and pattern, which is so different from the pleaures of Neruda, who's more of an Antaeus figure. That kind of thinking led into the poetry of the second half of *North*, which was an attempt at some kind of declarative voice.[2]

Heaney is clearly inviting here a reading of the poem as at least as much an allegory of poetry as of politics, as much an allegory

1 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (1970; Fontana, 1973 edn.), 258.

2 John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (Faber and Faber, 1981), 69–70.

of the bipartite structure of *North* itself as of the relationship between England and Ireland, even if we are of course intended to take the weight of the denominational adjective 'Presbyterian' in this approbatory context. The two allegories are, we might say, coterminous.

Indeed, the poetic and the political are frequently coterminous in the book. The figure of the poet is present in Part I not only in the centrality of his 'I' (all those personal pronouns and possessive adjectives which open poems or sections of poems: 'I shouldered', 'I returned', 'Come fly with me', 'My hands come', 'I can feel', 'I found'), but also in the way the poetry discusses or exposes its own processes of composition. In the audacious conceit of the title poem 'North' itself, the Viking longship's 'swimming tongue' is one of the earliest, and strangest, of the exemplary voices which counsel Heaney in his own poetry, those voices sometimes coming out of nowhere in a radicalization and revision of the ancient poetic trope of prosopopoeia:

> It said, 'Lie down
> in the word-hoard, burrow
> the coil and gleam
> of your furrowed brain.
>
> Compose in darkness.
> Expect aurora borealis
> in the long foray
> but no cascade of light.
>
> Keep your eye clear
> as the bleb of the icicle,
> trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
> your hands have known.'