

Hurt into Poetry: The Political Verses of Seamus Heaney and Robert Bly

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One of the stubborn issues in modern poetry is the question of its proper, or most effective, political role.¹ Since the time of the romantics, poets have tended by nature and habit toward inwardness, but certain exigent occasions, wars and revolutions, have continually “hurt” them into public utterance. Still there is always an uneasiness attending these public occasions, a sense that the true business of the poet lies elsewhere. Modern poets have only rarely played an active part in the public events surrounding them, and they have been likely to waver between Shelley’s injunction to act as “unofficial legislators” and Yeats’s more sobering advice: “I think it better that in times like these / A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right.”

The poets who followed the New Critical approach, at least, were unambiguous when it came to adjudicating the rival claims of poetry and propaganda on a poet’s loyalty: passionate commitment meant nothing less or more than passionate commitment to one’s art. Political poems were to be judged, not by the effectiveness of their discourse, but by their success as linguistic objects. The tense but relatively quiescent decade of the ’fifties helped to foster such an ideal. An era of outward calm produced a poetry of personal concerns, which could be considered political only by implication. The “well wrought” poem’s external, formal balance held in check its inward ironies, its seething and often paradoxical emotions. It is not surprising that modern Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton consider the New Critical approach “a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo”.² This seeming calm, of course, was shattered in the

¹Copyright ©1992 by Jeffery Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *The New Orleans Review* 19.3-4 (Fall & Winter 1992): 162-73.

²Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of

'sixties, when once again social violence and the violence of war stimulated the "unofficial legislator" in many a poet, while at the same time blasting the formal strictures of the New Critics in favor of what came to be known as open form. It is worth noting that political poetry in recent times, as the pun in my title may suggest, is almost certain to be adversarial rather than celebratory, a poetry of protest against one "political status quo" or another.

The poets I shall be concerned with here, Robert Bly and Seamus Heaney, embody very different approaches to the problem of a poet's social and political responsibility. Both began their careers writing personal, even pastoral lyrics, but turned because of what they perceived as political necessity—in Bly's case the Vietnam War, in Heaney's case the "troubles" in Northern Ireland—to poetry of overtly political significance. Both have remained devoted in their own ways to the craft of poetry. Their difference stems from the traditions to which they have allied themselves and the balances they have struck between the rival claims of dissertation and of craft.

More than most American poets this side of Ezra Pound, Bly has excited extremes of critical appreciation. He has been called, on the one hand, "a windbag, a sentimentalist, a slob in the language," dangerously imitable "by fledgling poets".³ Another view considers him a sort of poetic guru, comparable in his way with Blake, Whitman, and Lawrence, and concerned "to domesticate the sublime".⁴ What both of these appraisals remark from their different perspectives is Bly's persistent and rather calculated pursuit of a public and controversial role.

Bly's early poetry seems, if anything, rather too scrupulously personal. The lyrics in his first published volume, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), assiduously cultivate what came to be known as "deep images," autonomous moments of perception joined together not rationally but through the surreal syntax of the unconscious mind. The speaker is alone in nature, open to its invitations for communion, and perfectly free, therefore, to tamper with its constituents:

The small world of the car
Plunges through the deep fields of the night,
On the road from Willmar to Milan.
This solitude covered with iron
Moves through the fields of night

Minnesota Press, 1983) 50.

³Eliot Weinberger, "Gloves on a Mouse," *The Nation* 229.16 (November 17, 1979): 503.

⁴Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1979) 138.

Penetrated by the noise of crickets.
("Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River,")⁵

Bly's technique here is to seek the kind of excited and heightened awareness that the Russian Formalists and the Spanish surrealist poets sought in dislocated or estranged language. Aside from the fairly quotidian reference to "the road from Willmar to Milan," all the images subtly deviate from common usage. The inside of the car is a "small world," a "solitude covered with iron," which "plunges" rather than simply driving through "deep fields of the night." "The noise of crickets," surely something commonplace in itself, "penetrates" the speaker's solitude as if it were a sharp instrument. The word may even bear subtly phallic associations. The effort is to give ordinary, personal experience a mystical intensity by estranging the language used to describe it. The danger of such a technique is that the language, which has, after all, ordinary allegiances that antedate the poet's use of it, may resist his effort to make it do transformative work. The heightened experience may seem merely bizarre, a kind of solipsistic phantasy.

"Surprised by Evening," another fairly typical early poem, illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Although the poem makes use of the plural personal pronoun, it is clearly the speaker's solitary consciousness manipulating the imagery. "We," in this instance, suggests not so much that the speaker has taken a social or political stance, as a purely linguistic attempt to impose a kind of universality on what is very much a private experience:

There is unknown dust that is near us,
Waves breaking on shores just over the hill,
Trees full of birds that we have never seen,
Nets drawn down with dark fish.

The evening arrives; we look up and it is there.
It has come through the nets of the stars,
Through the tissues of the grass,
Walking quietly over the asylums of the water.

The day shall never end, we think;
We have hair that seems born for the daylight.
But, at last, the quiet waters of the night will rise,
And our skin shall see far off, as it does under water.
(*Selected Poems* 41)

⁵Robert Bly, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 45.

Once again, the method here is to produce a sense of mystery before nature by deviating significantly from the expectations of common usage, though Bly tries to ballast these deviations with some fairly ordinary sentences (“The evening arrives;” “The day shall never end, we think”). Grass is not usually described as being composed of “tissues,” hair is not usually “born,” nor does skin “see” in the usual sense of that word. And while the evening arrives fairly normally, Bly quickly personifies it as “walking...over asylums of water,” rather in the miraculous manner of Jesus. One can see why Eliot Weinberger, perhaps disingenuously, is moved to characterize Bly’s poetry as “a festival of pathetic fallacy”(504). Indeed, for Bly estranging language seems sometimes to constitute the essence of poetry itself. Insofar as such language does heighten our awareness, however, it is a valid technique, though perhaps not enough in itself to create a major poetry. One can well imagine the nets of dark fish, or the microscopic “tissues of the grass;” these images are disturbing in a strange, rather unspecific way. Perhaps the best approach to a poem like this is through free association, which, as George Steiner notes, “is a device exactly calculated to pierce the membrane between inner and outer speech, to deflect into the diagnostic light and echo-chamber the unpremeditated rush and shadows of self-colloquy.”⁶ The problem is the extent to which Bly’s images allow themselves to be deflected “into the diagnostic light” as publicly available referents, even as purely linguistic constructs, or simply reverberate in the hermetic isolation of the poet’s consciousness.

Bly himself is aware of the problem of isolation in such personal poetry, and admits as much in a comment on the *Snowy Fields* poems: “I don’t feel much human relationship in these poems, and the hundred thousand objects of twentieth-century life are absent also” (*Selected Poems* 27). He claims that his purpose was “to gain a resonance among the sounds,” as well as “between the soul and a loved countryside” (*Selected Poems* 27). This vein being worked, his solution was to follow Neruda toward the “impure” poetry of politics. The Vietnam War, of course, provided his occasion, though he notes that even before the war, he had begun writing a series of poems about business figures, poems “of judgment rather than of affinity” (*Selected Poems* 62). It was the “psychic urgency” of the war, however, that impelled him to write a full-voiced poetry of protest. In an essay on political poetry, Bly speaks of the need of a poet, once he has fully grasped his own concerns, to leap up to the “psyche” of the nation: “the life of the nation can be imagined...as a psyche larger than the psyche of anyone living, a larger sphere,

⁶George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 79.

floating above everyone. In order for the poet to write a true political poem, he has to be able to have such a grasp of his own concerns that he can leave them for a while, and then leap up into this other psyche.”⁷ This statement acts both as an apology for the poems of *Snowy Fields* and as a program for the poems of *The Light Around the Body* (1967) and *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last* (1970). Whether and how Bly was able to make such a “leap” remains, as we shall see, in question. It is certain, however, that he tried the leap and found it exhilarating. Bly comments interestingly on the effect of reciting political poetry aloud at protest gatherings:

I experienced for the first time in my life the power of spoken or oral poetry. A briefly lasting community springs to life in front of the voice, like a flower opening....The community flowers when the poem is spoken in the ancient way—that is, with full sound, with conviction, and with the knowledge that the emotions are not private to the person speaking them. (*Selected Poems* 62)

Bly’s last sentence is particularly interesting in its suggestion that political poetry offered him an escape from the solipsism of *Snowy Fields*.

It did not deflect him from his devotion to the “deep image,” however, nor did it suggest a radically new technique other than his adoption of what he calls the “Smart-Blake-Whitman line” (*Selected Poems* 194). Rather, the surreal technique of personal consciousness attempts to absorb, at whatever risk, the new political subject matter. As William V. Davis aptly remarks, “the private individual dream of many of the poems in *Silence* is extended and elaborated...until it becomes the public nightmare as the outer world impinges upon the inner individual consciousness.”⁸ We see this very clearly in poems like “War and Silence”:

The bombers spread out, temperature steady.
A Negro’s ear sleeping in an automobile tire.
Pieces of timber float by, saying nothing.
* *
Bishops rush about crying, “There is no war,”
And bombs fall,
Leaving dust on the beech trees.
* *

⁷Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1980) 100-01.

⁸William V. Davis, “Defining the Age,” *Moons and Lion Tails* 2.3 (1977): 88.

One leg walks down the road and leaves
The other behind; the eyes part
And fly off in opposite directions.

* *

Filaments of death grow out.
The sheriff cuts off his black legs
And nails them to a tree.

(*Selected Poems* 72)

In spite of the new subject matter, the style here is of a piece with that in *Snowy Fields*. The language similarly estranges itself from everyday usage, presumably with the intent here of suggesting the chaos of modern war. The effect, however, is still of mystical, personal revelation. To see this more clearly, one has only to compare “War and Silence” with war poems by Wilfred Owen or Keith Douglass. Bly’s surreal, alienated images, his “Negro’s ear” and amputated leg evaporate like the images of a dream upon waking when one considers Owen’s soldier “yelling out and stumbling / And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime” or Douglass’s dead German, “mocked at by his own equipment / that’s hard and good when he’s decayed.” The problem may lie in the nature of the “deep image” technique itself. In one of the *Cantos*, Pound jokes about Yeats pausing “to admire the symbol / with Notre Dame standing inside it.” Commenting on these lines, Denis Donoghue notes that Yeats’s “Symbolist imagination” tends “to dissolve the external object” in its own favor.⁹ The symbolist can only achieve his desired effect by a certain “vacancy,” taking his “eye off the object, or looking through it” (Donoghue, *We Irish* 49). The surrealist of Bly’s stripe works with a similar disadvantage. His calculated dislocation of ordinary language and syntax tends to dissolve external objects or reduce them to fragmentary projections of the self. The poems of *Snowy Fields* openly disintegrate natural objects and reform them as objects of a mystical consciousness at one with nature. Such a strategy has obvious limitations, however, for political poetry, as it can only reluctantly allow the external world—and it is here that political events take place—an independent existence.

One of Bly’s answers to this problem derives from his new role models, Smart, Blake, and Whitman, and involves incorporating into his work certain syntactical devices of formal rhetoric, particularly anaphora, to articulate an external world resistant to the importunities of his imagination. Syntax, as it is allied with gram-

⁹Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986) 49.

mar, is by its nature rational and conventional in a way diction is not. In a poem like “Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” (*Selected Poems* 73) it offers a quasi-logical structure for Bly’s phantasmagorical imagery:

Let’s count the bodies over again.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
the size of skulls,
we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the
moonlight.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
maybe we could fit
a whole year’s kill in front of us on a desk.

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
we could fit
a body into a finger ring, for a keepsake forever.

A good part of the effectiveness here derives from the disturbing clash of syntax and diction. The repeated syntax of conditional sentences suggests a kind of reasonableness very much at odds with the poem’s flux of horrible images and taking no notice of these images. The effect is ironical, rather in the manner of Swift’s “Modest Proposal.” It touches on Bly’s favorite protest theme, the insulating distance and insensitivity of the war’s directors to the particular horrors of the war itself. This irony contributes a new note to the scale of Bly’s effects, and it resists what might otherwise spoil the poem, the insistently private and sentimental nature of surreal imagery. As it stands, one of the most disturbing elements of the poem is the aesthetic quality of the isolated, “deep” images (“a whole plain white with skulls in the moonlight”). The dreamscape of *Snowy Fields* has indeed turned to nightmare in this poem, but the weightlessness of the unconscious still attaches to it. Even Molesworth recognizes the “crux” of writing political poetry in a language that “must be hushed or ecstatic”:

Part dream-vision, part diatribe, the [political] poems seem laughable to anyone who is unsettled by all-embracing pathos or all-damning bile. Satire and ecstasy make strange bedfellows and often produce a tonelessness, a cancelling out of effect, in the service of an ineffable wisdom. (118-19)

“Counting Small-Boned Bodies” resists such tonelessness largely because of its formal syntax and the balance of irony and pathos which it affords. Bly is not often able to achieve such a balance however.

“Hatred of Men with Black Hair” (*Selected Poems* 75) asserts a link of racial hatred between Americans’ behavior toward the Vietnamese and their infamous treatment of the Indians. The effort is to render the presumed racist violence of Americans at once threatening and absurd:

We fear every person on earth with black hair.
We send teams to overthrow Chief Joseph’s government.
We train natives to kill the President with blowdarts.
We have men loosening the nails on Noah’s ark.

State Department men float in the heavy jellies near the
bottom Like exhausted crustaceans, like squids who are confused,
Sending out beams of black to the open sea.
Each fights his fraternal feeling for the great landlords.

In such lines (Bly would term them Smart-Blake-Whitman lines), anaphoric rhetoric reins in but cannot completely control the hysterical excess of the images. Bly would obviously like to enlarge his occasion by offering a historical dimension (the Indian connection) and by hinting at apocalyptic consequences (our tinkering with “the nails on Noah’s ark”). Still there is something merely jejune about his suggestion that the State Department and by metonymic extension the government of the United States act with the energy and intelligence of squids. The poem has the force and the severe limitations of a paranoid fantasy. Its estrangement from the normal terms of discourse is not such that it renders its object more perceptible or compels us to view its object with heightened awareness. Rather the poem’s fantastic nature limits its articulations to the fragmented consciousness of Bly himself. There is certainly a great deal of “Indian blood” that Americans cannot forget or wash away, but it is definitely not, as Bly asserts, “underneath all the cement of the Pentagon / ...preserved in snow.” Lines like these seem merely bizarre in a way that does no justice to the Indian cause. In effect, “Hatred of Men with Black Hair” is as personal a poem as anything in *Snowy Fields* and cannot but fail as propaganda. But even if we take it as a form of pure poetry, its success is questionable.

It may be that surrealism (the Spanish example notwithstanding) cannot offer Bly a fitting decorum for poetry about war. Surrealism is adept at exposing the absurdity or irrationality lurking beneath ordinary experience, the quiet life in

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Minnesota, for instance. The experience of war, however, is itself manifestly absurd, as Paul Fussell notes on more than one occasion (See especially “My War,” *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* and *Wartime*). In dealing with war, the irrationality suggested by surreal techniques is distractingly superfluous. Out of touch with the real absurdity of war, Bly often appears merely inebriated with protest, as in these lines from “Asian Peace Offers Rejected Without Publication” (*Selected Poems* 68):

These suggestions by Asians are not taken seriously.
We know Rusk smiles as he passes them to someone.
Men like Rusk are not men only—
They are bombs waiting to be loaded in a darkened hangar.

The title is meant to suggest a newspaper headline, and thus the poem wishes to invoke something of the public nature and objectivity of American journalism, but it succeeds neither as journalism nor as poetry. “Men like Rusk,” whether one agrees with them or not, are precisely “men only;” this is the essence of their humanly tragic fallibility. Denying them humanity in such a glib manner, Bly makes no valid contribution to our understanding of the war in Vietnam. Even his “Asians” are not granted a *realized* existence. Bly takes them no more “seriously” than as props in his unconscious. The second part of the poem, which succeeds better than the first, does so by forgetting the “politics” of the opening lines altogether and returning to the safe, interior landscape of “deep imagery”:

Lost angels huddled on a night branch!
The waves crossing
And recrossing beneath—
The sound of the rampaging Missouri—
Bending the reeds again and again—something inside us
Like a ghost train in the Rockies
About to be buried in snow!
Its long hoot
Making the owl in the Douglas fir turn his head...

Bly’s “lost angels” are more real than his “Asians,” and the owl turning its head in the last line is the most vividly realized image in the poem. The ending of the poem could have been written for *Snowy Fields*. But isolated images do not make for effective discourse in a political poem; simple contrast does not necessarily create coherence.

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Occasionally, however, Bly's contrasts of American peacefulness and Asian violence are effective, as in "Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings" (*Selected Poems* 74). Here the surreal juxtapositions reflect something less arbitrary than the jumble of Bly's unconscious: the jarring and uniquely modern experience of war reported electronically in a peaceful environment.

We drive between lakes just turning green;
Late June. The white turkeys have been moved
A second time to new grass.
How long the seconds are in great pain!
Terror just before death,
Shoulders torn, shot
From helicopters. "I saw the boy
being tortured with a telephone generator,"
The sergeant said.
"I felt sorry for him
And blew his head off with a shotgun."
These instants become crystals,
Particles
The grass cannot dissolve. Our own gaiety
Will end up
In Asia, and you will look down your cup
And see
Black Starfighters.

These lines are chilling in the way certain televised reports of the war were chilling. A horrible act of war is depicted simply, in this case through the sergeant's reported speech. Bly does not insist on its absurdity, but it seems absurd because it intrudes on the peaceful sanctuary of life in America, where people go about their ordinary lives, farming, enjoying a spring day, drinking coffee. Both events are real but appear surreal precisely because they do not belong together. The estrangement of our perception does not seem so much a contrived linguistic event as a natural outcome of our bombardment with electronic information, and it prepares quite naturally the hallucination of looking down a coffee cup and seeing war planes. As in the television reports, Bly brings the war home to us and makes us uneasy at its intrusion. But even this approach is not without its problems. As Phillip Knightley suggests in *The First Casualty*, the bizarre phenomenon of war scenes broadcast continually on television, far from hastening the end of the war through a change in national consciousness, had the effect of numbing us and

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making the war seem less real.¹⁰ Paradoxically, it is this kind of numbness that a reader senses in Bly's poem, rather than horror or the righteous indignation of protest. The poems where Bly is righteously indignant tend to slip over the line into bathetic propaganda. A poem like "Driving Through Minnesota," on the other hand, leaves us helpless, numb, and hallucinant before events.

Paul Fussell has argued that it is extraordinarily difficult, though not impossible, to describe modern warfare with real adequacy.¹¹ It is perhaps even more difficult for Bly. The Vietnam war is not, after all, his personal experience, except as he may experience it second-hand. As we have seen also, his allegiance to the traditions of international surrealism, an approach deeply rooted in personal consciousness, makes it problematic for him to achieve a level of universal as opposed to personal significance. This question, of course, is not as simple as it seems, for in a sense nothing is free from history. Terry Eagleton would point out that all writers, whether they wish to do or not, represent certain "*ideologies*—the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times."¹² Thus in one sense Bly's poetry is politically suggestive even when it is most personal and perhaps in ways contrary to his overt intentions. On a common sense level, however, Bly's poetry wrestles with the problem of achieving public significance. Bly himself is scornful of poets who "do not bother to penetrate the husk around their own personalities, and therefore cannot penetrate the husk that has grown around the psyche of the country either"(Quoted by Davis 78). As we have seen, however, such penetration is not really so easy. It is very risky and involves struggling with one's surrounding language, culture, and society to strike a balance between local, political objectives and the provisionally universal objectives of literature. As we shall see, Heaney achieves such a balance more often than Bly. Bly's effort, increasingly, is to find mythical, or pseudo-mythical, analogies for his essentially personal consciousness, ritual enactment for his mystical intuitions. His glibly "Jungian" references to a supposed national "psyche" are telling in this respect. His attempt to propound an apocalyptic myth based on the opposition of masculine and feminine consciousness, fitful though it is, reflects this need.

The long poetic sequence known as "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" (Se-

¹⁰Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975).

¹¹Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) Chap V.

¹²Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) viii.

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lected Poems 76) reprises and to an extent sums up Bly's various approaches to political poetry. As such it often seems a jumble of "deep images," anaphora, "television" news clips, and protest hysterias:

B-52s come from Guam. Teachers
die in flames. The hopes of Tolstoy fall asleep in the ant heap.
Do not ask for mercy.

* * * * *

The room explodes. The children explode.
Blood leaps on the vegetable walls.

* * * * *

Marines kill ducks with three-hundred-dollar shotguns
and lift cigarette lighters to light the thatched roofs of huts.
They watch the old women warily.

* * * * *

As soon as the President finishes his press conference,
black wings carry off the words,
bits of flesh still clinging to them.

* * * * *

It is a desire to eat death,
to gobble it down,
to rush on it like a cobra with mouth open.
It is a desire to take death inside,
to feel it burning inside, pushing out velvety hairs,
like a clothesbrush in the intestines—

That is the thrill that leads the President on to lie.

Lines like these show Bly risking all the weaknesses we have discussed, and they suggest various reasons why the poem as a whole cannot succeed. But the breadth of a poetic sequence offers Bly the opportunity to succeed quite powerfully, if provisionally, in individual passages:

If one of those children came toward me with both hands
in the air, fire rising along both elbows,
I would suddenly go back to my animal brain,
I would drop on all fours screaming;
my vocal cords would turn blue; so would yours.
It would be two days before I could play with one of my own children
again.

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These lines were suggested obviously by the famous photograph of a child running down a road covered with burning napalm. They record an objective scene along with Bly's outraged response, a guttural response that for once he shared with the majority of his countrymen. And here at last he rises to the role of the political poet at his best: that of the private man impelled to be a public spokesman, hurt into poetry of more than private significance. Still the best moments in "The Teeth Mother" are such isolated passages. The "mythology" Bly would use to knit his sequence together is of a rather puerile sort and will not bear comparison with the more rigorous mythologizing of Robert Graves. It is really in passages like the one about the burning child, rather than any pseudo-mythological reference to the "Teeth Mother," a matriarchal goddess who devours "hairy and ecstatic men," that Bly succeeds as a political poet, but as we have seen his success is at best troublesome and provisional.

Unlike Bly, Seamus Heaney seems hardly to have worked at becoming a political poet. The role was virtually thrust on him as a resident of Northern Ireland, and with it a remarkably early fame that some critics have begrudged him. But like Bly's, Heaney's first books, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), were essentially personal. The poems in *Death of a Naturalist* are absorbed in concrete imagery without being particularly surreal. Perhaps in reaction to Yeats, Heaney easily accepts the existence of an external world with its plurality of independent objects. Many of these poems deal specifically with farming, though farming has never held the central position in Heaney's poetry that it does, say, in the poetry of R.S. Thomas or Wendell Berry. Farm culture provided the furnishings of Heaney's youth, and it is as such that farm imagery pervades his first book. As Helen Vendler perceptively remarks, "at first, Heaney aggrandized and consecrated his infant world."¹³ Heaney's effort seems to be to come to terms with this world before attempting to explore its wider resonances. A number of the early poems deal with his father's activities as a farmer. These poems are at once caressing and distancing; they register the child's awe before his father and the young man's stock-taking and separation. In "Follower", Heaney pictures his father at work behind a "horse-plough":

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

¹³Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) 150.

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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.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.¹⁴

These are lines that would have pleased the New Critics with their craft, the balance of the sound system, as well as the carefully controlled paradox that forms the center of the poem's essentially internal discourse. Like most of Heaney's farm poems, it is retrospective, pitting the speaker's present state of awareness against his innocent consciousness as a child. Something quite similar is at work in the famous "Digging" (*Selected Poems* 10-11), where Heaney quite explicitly compares his own work as a writer with the traditional labor of his father and grandfather.

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

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

* * * * *

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

* * * * *

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.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

¹⁴Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems 1965-1975* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1980) 18-19.

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Though its perspective is interior (it is clearly what Steiner would call “inner speech”), this is a beautifully *realized* lyric. Heaney’s language, which can be seen as literary and “estranging” in its own way (the pen is described earlier as being “snug as a gun”), is nonetheless on easy terms with the external world, trusting to the concrete otherness of things to which it may refer. Having established this relation, it is free to luxuriate in others: internal, linguistic, “musical” relations, which do not have the effect of isolating the experience in Heaney’s consciousness. Instead, we are given free access as readers to the experience that consciousness manipulates.

As we shall see, Heaney accomplishes this in part by submitting to a number of traditions which are compatible with the decorum of personal poetry. Like “Digging,” many of the early poems place the child’s point of view, which the speaker assumes, in opposition to the point of view of adults, the “I” against the “they”.

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.

* * * * *

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.
(“Personal Helicon,” *Selected Poems* 27)

Here the child is explicitly solipsistic, a Narcissus essentially alone in nature and alive to its invitations. But unlike Bly, Heaney is not tempted to tinker with the constituents of nature. A poem like this establishes Heaney’s relation to a number of strains in British and European Romanticism. The perspective of the child, “big-eyed” and “beneath all adult dignity,” is reminiscent of the Rilke of *Das Buch der Bilder*. On the other hand, the rather luxurious diction (Consider the wealth of association, as well as the alliterative and assonant sound structure in “I savoured the rich crash when the bucket / Plummeted”) suggests Keats and Hopkins. If

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Heaney has not yet set out to define himself as part of a specifically Irish linguistic tradition, there is, perhaps, something of Patrick Kavanagh's parochialism in the early poems.

The problem for Heaney is how to assimilate these influences and convert his "big-eyed" childhood and "big-eared" youth into a maturity capable of exploring the deeper and wider resonances of his experience. Not all critics would agree that he has done so. The English critics in particular have their reservations. A. Alvarez, who considers Heaney "an intensely literary writer," argues that his work never escapes the traditional British discomfort with modernism.¹⁵ Because of this, it "challenges no presuppositions, does not upset or scare, is mellifluous, craftsmanly, and often perfect within its chosen limits. In other words, it is beautiful minor poetry"(17). Calvin Bedient takes a similar position, asserting that "Heaney scarcely projects a point of view. Most of what he writes is no more, if no less, than potato deep—earth-bound if earth-enriched, placidly rooted in top soil, far from unfathomable."¹⁶

I would argue, on the other hand, that when Heaney does turn to political poems, his rootedness acts as a check on the tendency of political poetry to drift toward propaganda. It offers a balance of craft and discourse that is so often lacking in Robert Bly's work. One reason may be that Heaney has never given himself over as completely as Bly to the dictates of the "cause". Though he lived for years in the midst of terrorist violence, the poet in Heaney stubbornly refused the notion that his role be identified wholly with the public cause. The poet's "*raison d'être*," as Heaney puts it, is primarily "involved with marks on paper."¹⁷ It is also essentially a matter of private consciousness. The violence of the public world may force itself at times on such a consciousness, though not necessarily to predictable effect. In an essay entitled "Belfast," Heaney tries to put his finger on the poet's ambivalent relation to public events:

On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in

¹⁵A. Alvarez, "A Fine Way with the Language," *The New York Review of Books* 27.3 (March 6, 1980): 16.

¹⁶Calvin Bedient, "The Music of What Happens," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 8.1 (Fall-Winter 1979): 110.

¹⁷Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 34.

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internment camps—destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air. (*Preoccupations* 34)

What is perhaps most interesting here is Heaney's confession that in some paradoxical sense the poet may find such events "deeply exhilarating." The poet is, first, a fallible human being, and only second, if at all, the proponent of a political cause. (Of course, in Terry Eagleton's sense, this attitude can be said simply to reflect a particular "ideology.")

Heaney has never embraced political poetry with the single-minded enthusiasm of Bly. Political poetry is only one of a number of strategies Heaney uses to deepen and broaden his personal experience. Heaney's political poems take several distinct forms, of which we may isolate the three most important: poems that directly refer to the political situation in Northern Ireland, poems that refer to the situation by implication, and poems about linguistic imperialism, the problem of the Irish writer forced to use the English language as his vehicle of expression.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first group of poems (which most nearly approximates Bly's sense of the political poem) has been considered by critics the most questionable of success. Even such sympathetic readers as Denis Donoghue and Donald Hall have openly expressed their preference for the "long perspective"¹⁸ of the so-called "bog poems," which in Hall's phrase, tease Heaney "into the truest poetry."¹⁹ I would agree about the "bog poems," but I think it is arguable that even in the most overtly political of his poems about Belfast, where, as Donoghue notes, "the only vantage points are held by soldiers" ("Poets Who Have Learned Their Trade" 45), Heaney never slips as precipitously as Bly into rancorous propaganda. Perhaps this is because he is never willing to risk as much as Bly on the occasion. A poem like "Casualty"²⁰ lacks the hard edge of Bly's politics; when Heaney does not succeed, he is likely to fall into sentimentality:

Sometimes, on his high stool,
Too busy with his knife
At a tobacco plug
And not meeting my eye,
In the pause after a slug
He mentioned poetry.

¹⁸Denis Donoghue, "Poets Who Have Learned Their Trades: 'Field Work'," *The New York Times Book Review* (December 2, 1979): 45.

¹⁹Donald Hall, "The Nation of Poets," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 6.1 (Fall-Winter 1977): 158.

²⁰Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 21-24.

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This story of a pub-crawling friend, “blown to bits / Out drinking in a curfew / Others obeyed,” while it verges on being maudlin, is still full of what Heaney calls elsewhere “the music of what happens” (“Song,” *Field Work* 56). It is this “music”, in all its dense particularity, to which Heaney is ultimately loyal. Because of this, Heaney is more sure of his personal perspective than Bly, even as this makes him more ambivalent in his discourse.

The poem, “Stump,” for instance (*Selected Poems* 75), seems to present quite plainly a tragic, northern Irish scene, and yet it keeps much of its mystery, especially in its ambiguous suggestions of the speaker’s consciousness:

I am riding to plague again.
Sometimes under a sooty wash
From the grate in the burnt-out gable
I see the needy in a small pow-wow.
What do I say if they wheel out their dead?
I’m cauterized, a black stump of home.

The perspective, interestingly, is the same as that in “Digging”: the speaker looks down from a window, suggestive perhaps of his “literary” viewpoint, privileged at once and confined. What he sees below is the “real” world of people who labor and suffer and whose relation to himself he would, however difficultly, construe. The first line is quite ambiguous. Is the speaker “riding to plague” in the sense that he is venturing imaginatively to encounter the plague of sectarian violence, or is he somehow, in his literary role, plaguing the “needy” sufferers, who may not need the words he has to offer? The speaker’s hesitance in the penultimate line to present himself as their spokesman might suggest the latter interpretation. In either case, however, the experience is one of searing, cauterizing sympathy for their plight. It transfigures the speaker (a neatly surreal touch) into “a black stump of home,” gravely wounded and alienated from his own surroundings and certainties. Even this image involves the amiguities of a possible pun. Is the speaker, perhaps, “stumping” in a *political* sense, and if so, does the context suggest his awareness of its ineffectiveness? Both senses exercise claims on our attention. Clearly, the poet is troubled into his protest, and there is nothing of Bly’s rather smug satisfaction in it.

In *The Renewal of Literature*, Richard Poirier makes a valuable distinction between literature of “difficulty” and literature of “density”. The first suggests the modernist propensity for difficult surfaces, a literature of puzzles that would “perpetuate the power of literature as a privileged and exclusive form of discourse.”²¹

²¹Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random

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According to Poirier, the second kind of writing “gives, or so it likes to pretend, a fairly direct access to pleasure, but which becomes, on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable”(130). Pound and the Joyce of *Ulysses* are paradigms of difficulty; Stevens, Frost, and George Eliot are paradigms of density. I would suggest also that Bly and Heaney are distinguishable according to these terms. Bly, as a surrealist self-consciously posing in the modernist tradition, is difficult. Heaney, writing such deceptively accessible political poems as “Stump,” is dense.

The “bog poems” have an exquisite density. This series of poems from *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) was suggested by the discovery of a number of ancient bodies preserved in the peat bogs of Denmark. At the time scientists speculated that the bodies, some of which had their throats slashed, were those of sacrificial victims. The “bog people” offer Heaney various possibilities for poetic treatment. In one sense, they are art objects, presented like Keats’s Grecian Urn or Rilke’s Torso for imaginative contemplation. As such, their objective presence acts as a tease and a check on the poet’s subjective imagination. At the same time they function as symbols of the deep racial experience of the north, to which Heaney, as an Irishman, feels himself allied. They allow him, as it were, a further digging, more than “potato deep,” into his own consciousness, conceived here as a product of continuous history. As Gregory Schirmer notes, “Heaney has developed the image of the bog into a powerful symbol of the continuity of human experience.”²² The bog people, tangible products of this continuity, appear as virtual message carriers of the unconscious. In fact, they *suggest* a mythology closer in spirit to Jung’s than the one Bly insists upon. At the same time, they offer, as ancient “victims,” telling parallels to the situation in Northern Ireland. “The Tollund Man” (*Selected Poems* 78-79), one of the earliest of the “bog poems,” is typical of Heaney’s indirect approach to political writing. Heaney contemplates the body first as an object, at once fascinating and horrible:

In the flat country nearby
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,

House, Inc., 1987) 98.

²²Gregory A. Schirmer, “Seamus Heaney’s ‘Salvation in Surrender’,” *Eire-Ireland* 15.4 (Winter 1980): 143.

I will stand for a long time.

Adroitly mixing Christian and pagan traditions, Heaney now teases out what one might call the Tollund Man's mythological features. He is a "bridegroom to the goddess" of the bog, who "tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's body." Only at this point does Heaney "risk blasphemy" by considering the Tollund Man's political implications. He will "consecrate" the bog and "pray" to the Tollund Man to "germinate / The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards." The Tollund Man becomes, for Heaney, a "saint" of political victims. The political effect Heaney seeks here is not obvious, nor is it especially hopeful. One important aspect of the "continuity of human experience" is its violence, which leaves the poet mournful and ironic: "in the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home." Yet as Helen Vendler points out, these poems "lift [Heaney] free from a superficial piety that would put either sectarian or national names to the Ulster killings" (155-56).

Perhaps the poet's gift, if not "to set a statesman right," is to register a human grief, complex and indirect, at his excess. This is what Bly does too on the rare occasions of his best political poetry, such as the passage on the burning child. That Heaney succeeds more often and more richly is attributable to a number of factors. Unlike Bly, he has not allied himself to a tradition which is essentially inhospitable to public utterance. Heaney's writing has always displayed a becoming humility before the external world. The depth of the bog establishes a continuity between the personal and the cultural which enables Heaney to speak at once personally and as a representative of his culture; it is an external depth, not a personal abyss. At the same time, Heaney has never allowed public utterance to become the *raison d'être* of his work. When he addresses public issues, it is because they have hurt him into a poetry which seeks always a return, even if only provisionally, to sanity, the strange benignity of living. (Indeed, one hopes that Heaney's recent comments envying the eastern European poets their stressed political situation do not signal a significant shift in his own poetic practice.) Speaking of Yeats's later poems, Heaney notes that "they ask, indirectly, about the purpose of art in the midst of life and by their movements, their images, their musics they make palpable a truth which Yeats was at first only able to affirm abstractly, in those words which he borrowed from Coventry Patmore: 'The end of art is peace'" (*Preoccupations* 112). Like Yeats, Heaney has been a poet first, with a poet's interest in the tangle of language, and aware always of a poet's decorum. This may seem like an old New Critical judgment; it may suggest simply a necessary

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prejudice of the liberal-humanist ideology. But we need to take stock of our recent poets, claiming what may be lasting or valuable in their additions to our culture and discarding what is misguided or inept.

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