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978-0-521-83882-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney

Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue

Excerpt

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I

BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

Introduction

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, the citation famously paid tribute to his combination of 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past'. This captures with remarkable economy not only Heaney's pre-eminent strengths, but also the two imperatives between which his own commentary and the criticism of him have fluctuated. In the Preface to *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* Heaney described the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic again, quoting from his Foreword to the prose collection *Preoccupations* in 1980: 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?' By quoting the earlier Foreword verbatim, Heaney was making it clear that his abiding concerns have remained unchanged.

The Nobel citation also summarises the issues that this book aims to account for. Heaney's most recent collection of poems *District and Circle* (2006) – and Heaney's titles are carefully considered, as Rand Brandes's essay here shows – marks a point, forty years on from his first full-length volume *Death of a Naturalist*, at which he circles back to the local district in which that highly localised volume was placed. In those forty years Heaney has published at least twelve major individual volumes of poems, three series of *Selected Poems*, several dramatic translations and a large body of critical prose. Not surprisingly, taking stock is not a simple matter: by now, in 2008, there is a very considerable bibliography on him to account for, as well as his own works, and several critical approaches of varying schools of thought and degrees of approval.

A comparison with Yeats is revealing (indeed it has been found hard to avoid): Heaney is now the age Yeats was in 1934, twelve years after he had won the Nobel Prize (it is thirteen years since Heaney's) and a year after the publication of *The Winding Stair*. At the corresponding stage Yeats too was a major international figure, and he still had a significant body of poetic work ahead of him. Yet there was no study of Yeats in existence, though a number

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of important shorter discussions had appeared, such as in Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*. By now the number of specialising books on Heaney is too large to itemise because it is likely to be out of date as soon as it is published. For example there are at least sixteen books whose title is simply *Seamus Heaney*, as well as many others with titles in which the poet's name occurs. If it is suspected that this is merely a change in the times, and that there are simply more books published, this quickly proves not to be the explanation. No other current poet is nearly as much written about as Heaney has been, since the appearance of the first book devoted to him, Blake Morrison's in 1982, the same year in which the introduction to Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* saw the emergence of Heaney as one of the factors that made a new anthology timely.

In this introduction I will principally be tracing the poet's own poetic writings and his reception, in keeping with the emphasis of the book. In this connection another Yeats comparison might be made: Heaney has been a busy career-teacher of literature as well as writer, rather than 'a man of letters' in the way that Yeats was (the term is no longer current, nor is the lifestyle). While a large body of critical prose work survives from the 1880s at the very beginning of Yeats's writing life, nothing of comparable substance exists in Heaney's case, despite the fact that he is recognised as a major critic-practitioner nowadays (his distinctive gifts as a critic are established by David Wheatley in his chapter here; John Wilson Foster paid lavish tribute to those gifts too, calling Heaney's 'the best Irish literary criticism since Yeats'¹). But, while Heaney was a regular reviewer, especially for the *Listener* from 1966 onwards, it was the late 1970s before any more extensive critical writings appeared, culminating in the publication of *Preoccupations* in 1980.² And 1977 has significance as the year when he first published critical work of some length and when he first gave one of the many interviews which emerged over the years.

So, although Heaney's status as critic-practitioner is of undoubted significance, the emphasis in this book is on him as poet, and to a lesser extent as poet-translator engaging with other poets. Heaney was twenty-six when *Death of a Naturalist* appeared in 1965: young, but not prodigiously so. The reception of that book quickly established him as a major new talent, writing with brilliant linguistic fidelity and evocativeness, mostly about his country upbringing in County Derry. The next book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), confirmed this reputation, in some poems even enhancing it. From the first his gifts were recognised as being of a very specifically poetic kind, founded on an alert eye and linguistic precision. In his *New Statesman* review of *Death of a Naturalist*, Christopher Ricks said, 'the power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection *Death of a Naturalist* is

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outstanding'. C. B. Cox in the *Spectator* said the poems give us 'the soil-reek of Ireland'. This tactile accuracy continued to be noted as Heaney's particular strength in reviews of the next book: sometimes the praise sounds a shade stereotyping, but the purport is clear. In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Douglas Dunn said of *Door into the Dark* (1969) in a much-quoted effusion that the poems were 'loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the stink of turned earth'. Ricks continued in his previous vein in the *New Statesman* by saying – perhaps with a glint of warning – that Heaney would 'have to reconcile himself to the fact that *Door into the Dark* will consolidate him as the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking'.

His gifts could be summarised in a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins, passed on to Heaney by the teacher-writer Michael McLaverty, of which he is fond: 'description is revelation' (N 71). And, while several commentators made even grander claims for *Wintering Out* in 1972 (Neil Corcoran calls it 'the seminal single volume of the post-1970 period of English poetry'³), Heaney's characteristic strengths were mostly seen as the same: exactness of description and evocation. In *Wintering Out* the descriptive precision was put to further purposes: to evoking the places of his upbringing, often through a semantic dismantling of their etymologies, in the 'placename poems' such as 'Broagh' and 'Anahorish'. But there is another perspective which always has to be considered in describing the development of any Northern Irish writer in the current era. The most significant departure from the previous volumes in *Wintering Out* was a more developed sense of a political context. The poet was writing in a fraught period of history in Northern Ireland. Having grown up as the young 'naturalist' on a farm in County Derry, in a world where the country poet might trace at leisure the Wordsworthian 'making of a poet's mind', Heaney had moved to Belfast as a gifted student of English at Queen's University in 1957. But the last third of the twentieth century, when Heaney's work attained major status, was the most violent period in Northern Irish history. He was a member of a remarkable poetic generation who lived it, at least to begin with, 'bomb by bomb', in Derek Mahon's famous phrase.⁴

Seamus Deane observes that, although 'political echoes are audible in *Death of a Naturalist* and in *Door into the Dark*, there is no consciousness of politics as such, and certainly no political consciousness until *Wintering Out* and *North*'.⁵ What soon came to be a matter of controversy was the use to which Heaney put – or should put – his undoubted gifts. The change from the descriptive bucolic in the relatively untroubled anti-pastoral of the early poems happens somewhere across the two volumes *Wintering Out* and *North*. The challenge now was to represent the wider public context as well as to evoke locality. Heaney found, to repeat a line of Yeats which Heaney has often drawn on himself, a 'befitting emblem of [the] adversity'⁶ in the

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riven Northern Irish community when he read in 1969 *The Bog People* by P. V. Glob, a study of what seem to be ritual killings in Iron Age Jutland. Glob's book was illustrated by dramatic photographs of the victims of the killings, whose bodies had been preserved in the bog water. The first Heaney poem to reflect on these images was 'The Tollund Man' in *Wintering Out*, in which he imagines visiting Aarhus where the bodies are kept. There, in 'the old man-killing parishes' of Jutland, the poet will recall recent brutal killings in Northern Ireland and he will feel 'lost, / Unhappy and at home' (WO 48).

This poem is a trailer for what is seen as the first substantial change in Heaney's poetic corpus, with *North* in 1975, at once his most admired and most controversial single volume. The dilemma for the Northern Irish writer has often been noted, by Michael Longley and others: if they wrote about the violence, they were accused of exploiting suffering for their artistic purposes; if they ignored it, they were guilty of ivory-tower indifference.⁷ Heaney said in his interview with John Haffenden, 'Up to *North*, that was one book' (*Viewpoints*, p. 64), in an attempt perhaps to escape the two-stranded stereotyping of the early work, from the bucolic to the symbolising of violence, by bracketing off together the four volumes that between them manifested the two stereotypes. Certainly the more or less unanimous chorus of critical praise becomes less certain after *North*. This sense of uncertainty extends to Heaney himself; several critics, including Seamus Deane and Terence Brown, see guilt as a major factor in the poet's self-characterisation from this point onwards. One of the reviews of *North*, by Ciaran Carson in the *Honest Ulsterman*, has been endlessly quoted as a representation of the case against 'the Bog Poems', as they were called from the first. According to Carson, Heaney had laid himself open to the charge (in fact Carson did not literally level it himself) of being 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing ... the world of megalithic doorways and charming noble barbarity'.

Other highly influential voices read *North* differently. Anthony Thwaite in *The Times Literary Supplement* saw it as a superior continuation of the linguistic and descriptive virtues in the earlier books, with 'all the sensuousness of Mr Heaney's earlier work, but refined and cut back to the bone'. Even more momentously, Robert Lowell, in the London *Observer*, called it 'a new kind of political poetry by the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats'. The parallel with Yeats (Clive James and John Wilson Foster had prophesied it in 1972) in fact applies equally to Carson's accusation and to Lowell's tribute. The case against *North* was primarily what has been called 'the aestheticisation of violence', a charge most famously made in Irish poetry against the conclusion of Yeats's 'Easter 1916', that, in the bloody fighting in Dublin, 'a terrible beauty is born'. And if the sentiment of guilt, seen in Heaney by Deane,

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Brown, Heaney himself and others, seems like the inevitable confessional product of a Catholic upbringing, we might recall that Yeats, coming from a very different background, shared it in precisely this context, rendered sleepless (at least poetically) in old age by wondering 'did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot'. In an admiring but dismayed review of *North* in the *Listener*, Conor Cruise O'Brien made the same charge against Heaney as he had made in a brilliant and influential essay against Yeats ten years earlier.⁸ Heaney, according to O'Brien, has used his exceptional capacity for exact description of 'the thing itself' to evoke in an unbalanced way the suffering of the Catholics of Northern Ireland: 'there is no equivalent Protestant voice'. In each case the poet is being accused of using fraught public events to serve a personal cause.

By the late 1970s, when Heaney was a much more noticeable prose commentator and interviewee, the poet himself wished to change course, away from the political, or at least to be recognised as doing so. If 'up to *North*, that was one book', his new book *Field Work* was attempting a different kind of style and subject. Partly that book can be seen as a delayed accounting for a major change in Heaney's life, his moving with his family to Wicklow in the Irish Republic in 1972. His departure from the North of Ireland had been pursued by insults from extremist opponents on the Unionist side (recalling for some readers the Citizen's catcalls after the departing Bloom in the 'Cyclops' chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*), and even with some misgiving by his friends (a state of affairs lamented in the powerful poem 'Exposure' at the end of *North*: 'my friends' / Beautiful prismatic counselling / And the anvil brains of some who hate me'). The publication of *North*, three years after the move to Wicklow, meant he could hardly be accused of abandoning the issues of Northern Ireland. But by 1979, he wished to make a new beginning, one which he described in an interview with James Randall in formal terms but with the reminder that 'a formal decision is never strictly formal': 'in the new book *Field Work*, I very deliberately set out to lengthen the line again because the narrow line was becoming habit ... I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out ... a return to an opener voice and to a more – I don't want to say public – but a more social voice.'⁹ The antithesis then is not so much between public and private as between two kinds of public position: the political and what he calls the social.

From this point onwards Heaney's writing is increasingly linked to this kind of self-commentary. It is clear now that the public-local opposition interlocks with the political-aesthetic in a complicated way, and the critical discussion of him has centred on that since. But, if *Field Work* is seen, as the poet pleads here, as the start of a post-*North* era in the work, it is in significant ways a continuation of the established previous concerns too. Amongst the

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most admired poems in *Field Work* – indeed in the whole corpus – are two great elegies for victims of the Northern violence, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ and ‘Casualty’. These are the poems which address with the greatest directness the questions of guilt and involvement raised in the most unflinching of the Bog Poems, such as ‘Punishment’ where the poet – ‘the artful voyeur’, in the poem’s terms – admits to understanding the ‘tribal, intimate revenge’ of the people who barbarically tarred and feathered Catholic girls who went out with British soldiers. ‘Casualty’ returns to that issue, or stays with it: was Louis O’Neill, the fisherman who was blown up by a bomb after he ignored the curfew imposed by the IRA after Bloody Sunday (seven years earlier than *Field Work*, it should be noted), guilty of some breach of local piety? ‘Puzzle me / The right answer to that one’ is what O’Neill’s voice in the poem says (*FW* 23).

The poems in *Field Work* that attempt a new beginning – a new bucolics, it seems, circling back to the home district of *Death of a Naturalist* – are outweighed by the public poems: something that the complex claims in the Randall interview seem to concede in the terms ‘public’ and ‘social’. We might remember too that as early as 1972, in his brief introduction to his anthology *Soundings ’72*,¹⁰ Heaney had made a strong bid for artistic freedom, three years before *North*:

I am tired of speculations about the relation of the poet’s work to the workings of the world he inhabits, and finally I disagree that ‘poetry makes nothing happen.’ It can eventually make new feelings, or feelings about feelings happen, and anybody can see that in this country for a long time to come a refinement of feelings will be more urgent than a reframing of policies or of constitutions.

There is something forced though about this inversion of the normal understanding of Auden’s phrase about Yeats, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, which is usually taken to mean that poetry cannot be politically effective. Heaney is saying ‘poetry can make something non-political happen’; but that is not an obvious sense of ‘nothing’ in this context. Clearly the urgency of policies and constitutions in Northern Ireland in 1972 could not be so easily dismissed, as we have seen. And the wish that *Field Work* in 1979 should mark the starting point of a similar new freedom was equally doomed. As it happened, the late 1970s, followed by the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, was one of the worst periods of the Northern Troubles: hardly a point at which a guilt-inclined and socially aware commentator like Heaney could avoid public attitudes, however much he wanted to escape the ‘responsible *tristia*’ weighed in ‘Exposure’. Unsurprisingly, Heaney’s next books, the linked works *Station Island* (1984) and *Sweeney Astray* (1983), are again deeply concerned with issues of public answerability and guilt. The central section of *Station Island* – which is much the longest single volume of

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Heaney's – shares the volume's title, describing a Dante-influenced purgatorial pilgrimage to Lough Derg in County Donegal, a demanding penitential programme that Heaney undertook three times when he was young. The question of guilt is obviously central here as the narrator/poet encounters figures from his own past life and the literary past.

By this time too criticism of Heaney is not simply a matter of reviews of individual volumes, laudatory or disapproving as the case might be. There is now a more wide-ranging criticism of Heaney whose work is seen in more general terms, as the exemplary instance of the Yeatsian conflict between artistic freedom and public responsibility. Often the criticism in this area has been remarkably simple-minded: strikingly more so, it might be said, than the poet's own subtler, well-weighed deliberations. Heaney has often praised Yeats for his ability to live in doubt, between stark alternatives, and Heaney has himself been praised for the possession of this modernist virtue (by Ian Hamilton for instance, or in *The Sunday Times* by John Carey – one of Heaney's most consistent and most perceptive advocates). But Declan Kiberd argues in a crucial essay that a virtuous political standpoint is not simply a matter of claiming to be in doubt:¹¹ something we will hear Heaney claiming later on in *The Spirit Level* and *Electric Light*. Principally dealing with the poetry of this period, Neil Corcoran published an acute essay on this recognition of Heaney as the test case for such issues for poetry in English.¹² It becomes increasingly clear over the next decade that this responsibility – one, as we have seen, that he would have liked to evade from the first – weighed heavily on Heaney. The dialectical, dramatic framework of the 'Station Island' sequence is a useful medium for the discussion of this. Heaney returns to 'The Strand at Lough Beg' in a fiction in which Colum McCartney, the murdered cousin addressed in that poem, accuses the poet of a failure to take his social and familial pieties seriously enough, choosing rather to stay in Jerpoint 'with poets' while his 'own flesh and blood / was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews' (*SI* 82). Worse, the attempt to escape the Troubles had made him 'confuse evasion and artistic tact', whitewashing ugliness and drawing 'the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*' to saccharine McCartney's 'death with morning dew' in the great elegy. So, just as artistic freedom wishes for its own jurisdiction, social and familial responsibility claim their rights too.

But the sequence begins and ends with powerful pleas for artistic freedom. The opening poem meets another Sweeney, the old sabbath-breaking tinker Simon Sweeney, who memorably advises the poet to 'Stay clear of all processions!' (*SI* 63). The last encounter is with the ghost of James Joyce who also thinks this peasant pilgrimage is 'infantile', adding that 'you lose more than you redeem / doing the decent thing' and urging the poet to 'fill the

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element / with signatures on your own frequency' (*SI* 93–4). Some critics (such as Michael Allen in the *Irish Review* and Denis Donoghue) have reacted to this in puzzlement, noting, reasonably enough, that this is what Heaney was doing anyway. A surprisingly large number of other critics have taken Joyce as having the last word here, indicating that Heaney will hereafter abjure 'the decent thing' and become the unanchored artist. This view ignores the well-balanced dialectic of the sequence: the Dantesque power and anger, for example, of the great narrative of William Strathearn who was treacherously gunned down in his shop ('Station Island', VII) – the most fully Dantesque piece Heaney has ever written. Joyce may have the last word, urging Heaney to forget about the 'decent thing'; but it is not the only word, or even, in my judgement, the most persuasive word. And of course, like the figure of Colum McCartney in 'The Strand at Lough Beg', this Joyce, we should remember, is Heaney's invention.¹³

The volume twinned with *Station Island* was the translation of the medieval Irish epic *Buile Suibhne*, the story of an Ulster poet who is exiled for sacrilege. The issues of poetic vocation, religious duty in the loosest sense, and public responsibility could hardly be more effectively staged; Heaney saw immediately that 'there was something here for me', as he said in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll in the Irish periodical *Hibernia* in 1983. Sweeney in the Irish poem achieves a kind of freedom, with a profound topographical knowledge of the whole of Ireland, but at the price of an increasing rootlessness; the need for a sense of place now usurps the sense of self, recalling the placename poems of *Wintering Out*. Successful as Heaney's version, *Sweeney Astray*, was mostly thought to be (there were a few dissenting voices), many commentators have felt that the best product of this encounter with the medieval text was the curiously personal and intricate series of poems called 'Sweeney Redivivus' – Sweeney reborn – which was section three of *Station Island*. We can take it that the revived Sweeney figure in that sequence was what Heaney himself described Sweeney as: 'a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance', adding that 'it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation'.¹⁴ In later volumes, Heaney replaces Sweeney with the Tollund Man as his alter ego, as we will see.

The Sweeney poems, then, have the same art theme as before, but from this point on there is a slightly different, more defiant emphasis. There is still the guilt, but the poet (through the figure of Sweeney) is getting impatient with the old accusations against him as 'a feeder off battlefields'. This impatience will be sounded most loudly in *The Spirit Level* in 1996. More generally, the 'Sweeney Redivivus' poems are a sustained reflection on writing itself, and its

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relationship to the experiences (such as those of Heaney's childhood) on which it is founded; many review headings seized on the significant rhyme 'Heaney's Sweeney'. These poems also deal for the first time with a different idea of escape (another Yeatsian term): not into art but into a kind of liberating scepticism. In Neil Corcoran's words, in this section Sweeney 'becomes the opportunity for Heaney to voice contrary and hostile emotions of his own, emotions exhilaratedly free from what he appeared to value in much of his earlier work as his deepest attachments, obligations and responsibilities'.¹⁵

However, the following volume, *The Haw Lantern*, even if it is – as Michael Allen says – a continuation of what Heaney was doing already, does mark a move into a different area for his next 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (Heaney's version in his essay 'Feeling Into Words' of the Yeatsian 'befitting emblem of adversity', P 56–7). A contributory factor was Heaney's move to Harvard in 1984 which had brought him into contact with a wider contemporary literary community than the Irish or English milieu to which he had previously been largely attentive. In particular he became more intently aware of a world where the literary and public imperatives did seem to come together, and where it was respectable – even obligatory – to take sides: the Cold War world of repression and samizdat. This same awareness was prominent in the contemporary critical work *The Government of the Tongue*. In Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia, political poetry could be written and the writer could proudly claim to be an 'internal exile', a term which might seem extreme and over-glamorising in an Irish context without the validation of a wider political world. 'The Master' in 'Sweeney Redivivus' was the first major tribute to one of these exiled protest poets, Czesław Miłosz (described, just before the end of his life, by Heaney as the greatest living poet). Significantly, even as authoritative a Heaneyist as Neil Corcoran understandably 'presumed' that the subject of 'The Master' was Yeats; the literary ground was still assumed to be Ireland.¹⁶

There were other major events in Heaney's life to be taken into account: in the early 1980s he joined the board of Field Day, the theatre company founded by the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. Field Day was a very successful venture, designed to take dramatic performances on tour throughout Ireland; involvement in it was seen as a move into a more public artistic arena, one whose aspirations were linked to notions of republicanism in various senses (the 'sweet equal republic', imagined by Tom Paulin in the long poem 'The Book of Juniper' at the end of *Liberty Tree*).¹⁷ Involvement in the theatre, particularly in prompting two major Sophocles translations, *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*,¹⁸ has an important place in Heaney's life thereafter, even if it did not distract him from his primary poetic purpose in the way that Yeats complained that his engagement

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with 'theatre business, management of men' did.¹⁹ Still with his major concern, the publication in 1988 of *The Government of the Tongue*, his most concentrated critical book, offered a sustained exploration of the rights and obligations of the writer, whether in the East or the West. The celebrated prefaced essay begins with an anecdote that dramatises the artistic/social choice with tact and precision: in 1972 Heaney and his friend David Hammond were on their way to a recording studio in Belfast to make a tape of songs and poems when a series of exploding bombs filled the air with noise and sirens. Hammond could not sing, 'the very notion of beginning to sing at that moment when others were beginning to suffer seemed like an offence against their suffering ... and we both drove off into the destroyed evening' (*GT* xi).

Generally speaking, the volume from the year before this political book of essays, *The Haw Lantern*, was (apart from 'Clearances', the wonderfully lucid sequence of elegies for Heaney's recently dead mother) less enthusiastically received than any other single Heaney volume up to that point. Before, critics had sometimes agonised about Heaney's place as poet: whether he ought to take a more or less committed stance towards Irish politics. The question was how his gift ought to be used; the gift itself was unquestioned. John Bayley had declared the poems in *Station Island* (a volume whose politics have sometimes been questioned) to be 'as beautiful as anything he has written, and wider in breadth'; Paul Muldoon, a reader who has sometimes been readier than most to scrutinise Heaney's achievement with a degree of friendly scepticism, called *Sweeney Astray* 'a masterful act of repossession'. But the reaction to *The Haw Lantern* seems to be questioning in a new way. Michael Allen, in the review I have mentioned already, assumes a tone of exasperation: 'What has happened to Heaney? It is as though James Joyce let him off the hook when he told him at the end of *Station Island* "to fill the elements with signatures of your own frequency".' J. D. McClatchy has an odd explanation, in an oddly militaristic metaphor, for his impression that this book is 'something of a disappointment': that the poet (like the Arthurian Lancelot) is doing badly on purpose: 'I would say that it had been written with damp powder, except for my lingering suspicion that the poet himself may deliberately have wanted at that point in his career, by means of this rather slight book of mostly occasional poems, to defuse again the megaton reputation many had made for him' – in marked contrast to Muldoon's acerbic scolding in a review of *Station Island*: Heaney 'should resist more firmly the idea that he must be the best Irish poet since Yeats'.

McClatchy's view can hardly be the explanation, since the occasional poems were the most admired in the book. But the new questioning does seem to be linked to an overall view of what might be called 'the Heaney