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An Empire of Poetry

ADAM SMITH, the eighteenth-century political economist best known for his treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, described in "Essay on Colonies" the peculiar problem that confronted Christopher Columbus as he sailed into the uncharted territories that would become known as the West Indies. These lush, heavily forested islands bore little resemblance to the Eastern world that Marco Polo had described, but Columbus persevered in his illusion, confident that he had made landfall in the vicinity of the Ganges river. Eventually Columbus realized that Oriental wealth had eluded him; but he could not elude Isabella. Attempting to satisfy his Queen, Columbus faced a problem of marketing and advertising, one of the earliest instances of the socio-cultural practice that dominates our own century. Over two hundred years ago Smith precisely described its Columbian appearance:

But the countries which Columbus discovered either in this or in any of his subsequent voyages, had no resemblance to those which he had gone in quest of. . . . It was of importance to Columbus, however, that the countries which he had discovered, whatever they were, should be represented to the court of Spain as of very great consequence; and, in what constitutes the real riches of every country, the animal and vegetable productions of the soil, there was at that time nothing which could well justify such a representation of them.

Faced with an intractable dilemma, Columbus was forced to characterize the island culture in the most alluring terms that he could conjure, terms

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that neatly, prophetically encapsulate the informing structure of colonialist thought: "They [the islanders] exhibit great affection to all," Columbus wrote, "and always give much for little, content with very little or nothing in return." According to Columbus' rhetoric of profit, these islands offered good prospects for a sound investment.

Derek Walcott's sprawling new poem, *Omeros*, attempts to provide for his Caribbean homeland the definitive strengths and comforts of a national narrative, and it is keenly aware of the ways in which the Columbian perspective survives in the late twentieth century. Part of the poem's herculean ambition lies in its effort to counter the fragmentary representations encouraged by the colonial vision and emblemized briefly but pointedly throughout the poem by the camera, that simplifying tool of the tourist who comes to capture on film, as the saying goes, the exotic images that have been judiciously disseminated to titillate his Columbian wanderlust. The first tercet of the poem, in fact, finds Philoctete, one of the main characters, smiling for the tourists, "who try taking / his soul with their cameras," and as the poem closes, Achille, another of its main characters, is raging "at being misunderstood / by a camera."

Imperial culture in the West Indies, which Walcott does not consider an entirely pernicious one, practices an art of deception that can be psychologically debilitating to its subjects, and it is a deception as old as Columbus. Determined, often deceived by the argumentative strategies, even the visual imagery, of colonial promotion, village life occasionally fashions itself around this authorized narration, accepting in the process an imposed history. In his essay "What the Twilight Says: An Overture" (included in the 1970 collection *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*), Walcott addresses this problem:

Every state sees its image in those forms which have the mass appeal of sport, seasonal and amateurish. Stamped on that image is the old colonial grimace of the laughing nigger, steelbandsman, carnival masker, calypsonian and limbo dancer. These popular artists are trapped in the State's concept of the folk form, for they preserve the colonial demeanour and threaten nothing.

Speaking of one of the villages in which much of the poem takes place, Walcott develops this idea in *Omeros*, writing that the village "had become a souvenir / of itself," a degrading accommodation that ultimately sanctions a subliterate deemed quaint and a poverty deemed exotic, or "photogenic":

... Its life adjusted to the lenses

of cameras that, perniciously elegiac,
took shots of passing things—Seven Seas and the dog
in the pharmacy's shade, every comic mistake

of spelling, like *In God We Trust* on a pirogue,
BLUE GENES, ARTLANTIC CITY, NO GABBAGE
DUMPED HERE.

The village imitated the hotel brochure

with photogenic poverty, with atmosphere.

Walcott's poem immediately takes its place among those richly tessellated works of colonialism whose sense of cultural solidity is shot through with an array of diverse allegiances. But notes of severe skepticism and weariness now and again pervade the narrative, and even though they are largely resolved by the exuberant historiography that continuously engages the poet, they never entirely vanish from his score. The muscular persuasion of Walcott's line—overwhelming, exhausting—aptly reenacts, whenever it chooses to do so, the baroque *ennui* of island life.

A portion of the fundamental structure of this historiography derives from the two classical epics popularly attributed to Homer. In "What the Twilight Says," Walcott stated categorically that the writers of his generation were "assimilators" and that they "knew the literature of Empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics." Walcott, who grew up on St. Lucia, received a sound colonial education, and in interviews he has expressed his gratitude to the system that carried this literature to a small island in the Caribbean. Commentators on *Omeros*, then, will understandably busy themselves in tracking down the Homeric parallels in Walcott's poem—after Joyce, there are many practiced hands waiting in the wings—but this seems a particularly ill-fated approach because part of the poem's task, its attempt to recreate the original authenticity of Walcott's Caribbean culture, lies in its deliberate deflation of analogy.

Central to much contemporary Irish poetry, for example, the analogical imagination searches for similitude in the historical events that have given rise to other political structures in other countries, hoping to find there a conceptual basis for its own response to its own dilemma. Walcott, on the other hand, often sets up an obvious parallel between one of his characters and its Homeric equivalent only to punctuate

it with a kind of slapstick disregard—a Joycean technique—as when Machaon, who heals Philoctete's wound in the *Odyssey*, becomes Ma Kilman, who heals Philoctete's ulcerous wound in *Omeros*. Or in Book Seven, the last book of the poem, the narrator cavalierly confesses to *Omeros* that he never read the *Odyssey* "all the way through." Finally, the narrator's ultimate pronouncement on Helen, who stands at the center of the narrative, arrives late in the poem and encapsulates the most trenchant commentary on the enticing but frustrating, even fruitless business of tracking down the Homeric parallel:

... Names are not oars

that have to be laid side by side, nor are legends;
slowly the foaming clouds have forgotten ours.
You were never in Troy, and, between two Helens,

yours is here and alive; their classic features
were turned into silhouettes from the lightning bolt
of a glance. These Helens are different creatures,

one marble, one ebony. One unknots a belt
of yellow cotton slowly from her shelving waist,
one a cord of purple wool, the other one takes

a bracelet of white cowries from a narrow wrist;
one lies in a room with olive-eyed mosaics,
another in a beach shack with its straw mattress. . . .

Here is Walcott's deft revision of what Eliot identified as the "mythic method" in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses* (the work that in all likelihood will emerge as the most generous sponsor of *Omeros*). Instead of advocating the contemporaneity of mythic structures, thereby establishing the linear clarities of a tradition, Walcott gradually reveals the failure of such structures to represent adequately the multifarious tensions of his own culture, thereby establishing its sovereign integrity. The most persuasive approach to Walcott's mythic method would find, particularly in Helen, the gradual sloughing of the Homeric associations until, in the case of Helen, for example, she stands at the end of the poem, a figure, fully Caribbean, of ebony.

Walcott's deepest organizational structures, both formal and conceptual, lie buried in his developing sense of the theater, and like Yeats

before him, his poetry and plays participate in a fecund network of cross-fertilization. Walcott published his first collection of verse in 1948, and two years later, *Cry for a Leader*, one of his earliest dramatic pieces—there is still some question concerning the bibliography—was produced in St. Lucia. Since that time over thirty plays have been staged, and Walcott continues his involvement in the dramatic arts, a genre whose engaged social function Walcott acknowledged when he established the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959. In “What the Twilight Says,” Walcott speaks to the two ingredients that informed his colonial boyhood, two perspectives that, when combined, lead directly to the world of the theater:

Colonials, we began with this malarial enervation: that nothing could ever be built among these rotting shacks, barefooted backyards and moulting shingles; that being poor, we already had the theater of our lives. . . . In that simple schizophrenic boyhood one could lead two lives: the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect.

Action and dialect, balanced by a sustaining poetic sensibility, provided Walcott with the basis for his notion of a Caribbean theater that would legitimate the life and language of his people, and *Omeros* represents an elaborate extension of this project.

Over twenty-five characters, each varying considerably in importance, appear throughout this poem comprising seven books, sixty-four chapters, and roughly eight thousand lines. Achille and Philoctete, two fishermen, occupy the foreground of the narrative with Hector, another fisherman who abandoned his career to become a taxi driver and who “paid the penalty of giving up the sea” by losing his life in a wreck; the English Empire is represented by Major Dennis Plunkett, who fought with Montgomery’s Eighth Army in North Africa and who, when we first meet him, is drinking a Guinness and wiping away “the rime of gold foam freckling his pensioned mustache / with a surf-curling tongue.” His wife, Maud, is Irish in the old style, “framed forever in the last century,” and her association with Glendalough in County Wicklow further connects her, as does her Christian name, with the Gonne family (Iseult lived at Laragh, a few miles away) and with Yeats’s lyric “Stream and Sun at Glendalough.” And Helen heavily influences the lives of these five characters, even when she is not present in the poem.

the tutelary spirit of her home, “selling herself like the island, without / any pain.”

The poem tracks these characters through their daily lives, sometimes hinting at their varied relationships, sometimes describing baldly the arc of each biography. Monologues are unimportant to Walcott, unless we consider the narrator’s voice monologic, because the essence of his technique involves the steady revelation of character through dialogue with other characters, real or imagined, and this is a technique fundamental of course to dramaturgy. But even dialogue for Walcott is fraught with social and historical implication. The linguistic fragmentation of the Caribbean islands, caused by the various colonizers imposing their native languages, has in turn created the kind of cultural *insularismo* that has led each island group to become, as David Lowenthal has argued in *Social and Cultural Pluralism in the Caribbean*, “a museum in which archaic distinctions [are] preserved.” Walcott’s verse marshals these fencing energies effectively, as in the following passage when the narrator meets Major Plunkett in the bank soon after Maud’s funeral. The passage cries out to be staged:

“Our wanderer’s home, is he?”

I said: “For a while, sir,”

too crisply, mentally snapping to attention,
thumbs along trousers’ seam, picking up his accent

from a khaki order.

“Been travellin’ a bit, what?”

I forgot the melody of my own accent,
but I knew I’d caught him, and he knew he’d been
caught,

caught out in the class-war. It stirred my contempt.
He knew the “what” was a farce, I knew it was not
officer-quality, a strutting R.S.M.,

Regimental Sarn’t Major Plunkett, Retired.

Not real colonial gentry, but spoke like
them from the height of his pig farm, but I felt as tired

as he looked. Still, he’d led us in Kipling’s requiem.

The deeply ceremonial nature of this confrontation, reminiscent of the "tundish" episode in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, derives its definitive energy from the spoken language's ability to demarcate cultural hierarchies and political allegiances, and Walcott's insistence on situating these verbal exchanges within heavily plotted contexts aligns one predominant strain of this poem's structure with the renovative Caribbean theater that has engaged him for years.

Walcott's deepest hopes for the artistic enfranchisement of his community are bound up in his concept of a local theater that gradually assumes international acceptance. "The future of West Indian militancy," he wrote in "What the Twilight Says," "lies in art." These are large claims, but not unrealistic ones as long as the stage continues to define itself as resistive, as continually aligned against an indigenous diffidence that arises from the native inhabitants who are uncertain about their abilities to participate in the grand ritual of theater: "there was in the sullen ambition of the West Indian actor a fear that he lacked proper weapons, that his voice, colour and body were no match for the civilised concepts of theater." Walcott's new poem, with its deep fund of history inflected through its melodious and regional song, deploys in great abundance an array of proper weapons.

But the consoling grace of theater lies in the simple reconciliation of the falling curtain, in the sense that the social environment of the stage has reached its purposeful conclusion. However revolutionary the intention of the play, the last word of the last scene of the last act envisions more than an audience, it imagines a community, and it is from this deeply felt resolution that some of the most stirring scenes of *Omeros* derive. In Book Two, Plunkett and Achille, each moving through their radically different social spheres, pause to look at the night sky. The discursive dimension of language requires, of course, that we view these episodes sequentially, but Walcott has typically conceived the two vignettes dramatically, as if they took place on a split stage. As in the first scene of the fourth act in *Othello* where the Moor is allowed to overhear Cassio and Iago, with both parties in plain view of the audience, and with each party unaware of the other, so Plunkett "counted the stars / like buttons through the orchids," while Achille in another part of the village is viewing the same sky:

From night-fishing he knew the necessary ones,
the one that sparkled at dusk, and at dawn, the other.

All in a night's work he saw them simply as twins.
He knew others but would not call them by their given
names, forcing a silvery web to link their designs,

neither the Bear nor the Plough, to him there was heaven
and earth and the sea, but Ursa or Plunkett Major,
or the Archer aiming? He tried but could not distinguish

their pattern, nor call one Venus, nor even find the
pierced holes of Pisces, the dots named for the Fish;
he knew them as stars, they fitted his own design.

Although the divisive histories that stand behind these two misaligned characters have resigned them to their hierarchical positions in Caribbean culture, their passing engagement with the constellations, their beguiling ignorance of their astronomical names, briefly unites them in their vision. Theatrically conceived, such moments never entirely assuage the conflicts—linguistic, social, political—that Walcott addresses in this poem, but they do assert the prominence of the Caribbean's locale, its overwhelming environment. It is in this alone that Walcott often locates, perhaps paradoxically, much of the trenchant interrogation that sustains this national narrative. In Chapter XXII, Walcott finds for Plunkett a peculiar attraction, "something unexpected," in the colonial experience, and it adumbrates the final words of the poem where the sea, like the two opposing histories represented by the Major and Achille, is "still going on":

... The Plunketts quietly continued,

parades continued, cricket resumed, and the white feathers
of the proconsul's pith-helmet, and the brass and red
of the fire engines. Everything that was once theirs

was given to us now to ruin it as we chose,
but in the bugle of twilight also, something unexpected.
A government that made no difference to Philoctete,

to Achille. That did not buy a bottle of white kerosene
from Ma Kilman, a dusk that had no historical regret
for the fishermen beating mackerel into their seine,

only for Plunkett, in the pale orange glow of the wharf reddening the vendors' mangoes, alchemizing the bananas near the coal market, this town he had come to love.

Plunkett has become absorbed by the diurnal rhythms of life on the island, but even more than his absorption, he relishes the colonizer's freedom, the oddly liberating sense of displacement that strengthens him whenever he realizes that he has fallen in love with a town whose welfare he can, if the need arises, safely disregard. Now and again, uneasy truces are worked out in Walcott's poem between the native inhabitants of the island and the governing class, but these are truces whose terms have historically misrepresented the magnificent biographies of islanders like Achille, Philoctete, and Helen. Recording the evidence to correct such a misrepresentation is one of the most fundamental purposes of *Omeros*, and in this endeavor Walcott has succeeded wildly, providing for his region a deeply assimilative work that immediately becomes essential to further assessments of the Caribbean literary tradition.

Seamus Heaney's new volume of verse, *Selected Poems: 1966-1987*, resonates with the same sort of regional authority—although differently inflected—that distinguishes Walcott's new poem. His selection, his implicit judgment of his own corpus, represents one of his most sustained acts of criticism to date, and his preservation in this collection of the early parish vision where he is king of banks and stones and every blooming thing tills the ground for the later, more cosmopolitan vision where, as Walcott has observed, Heaney has begun to use "the abstract noun as a whole territory." From the specificity of "Death of a Naturalist" to the allusive abstractions of "The Mud Vision," Heaney's selection showcases those poems where the inscrutable detail is forced to give up its secret, to reveal its larger significance. This technique, fundamental to Heaney's art, has yielded diverse and memorable results, but it is essential to realize that Heaney is attempting to loosen what he has called the "tight gag of place," and this strategy commands a myriad of perspectives, ranging from the affectionate whimsicality of "Anahorish" to the sustained keening of "Station Island." Heaney's is a poetry of intoned implication, and his insistent search for the means to manage this narrative method has indelibly, though often subtly, shaped his career.

The early verse has sustained the severest casualties. Gone from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) are "The Early Purges," the poem that caused a national brouhaha when it was set for an examination in Ireland, complete with its salty phrase, "the scraggy, wee shits." "At a Potato Digging," heavily indebted to Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger," has been

excluded, as has both "Trout," with its Hughesian evocation of tooth and claw, and "Churning Day," a rambunctious gathering of monosyllables that heralded the arrival of a poet listening to an old yet inventive metronome. The title pieces for the next two volumes, *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972), do not appear in this collection, but "Digging," the poem of epigraphic prominence in Heaney's career, is where, one hopes, it ever shall be—at the head of the collection.

Heaney has salvaged only seven poems from each of the first two books, and those chosen strive to present a balance between what one of his earliest reviewers called his "mud-caked fingers" and the less provincially focused poems that seem now most valuable for their clairvoyant sense of Heaney's highly original achievement in *North* (1975). Heaney's carefully trained awareness of the natural metaphor, an awareness exercised, for example, in a poem like "Blackberry-Picking," is offset by the more ingrained sensibility that infuses a poem like "Relic of Memory" or "Bogland," poems where the poetic appropriation of an entire landscape begins to take on the coherence and strength of an ideology. Yet these represent the two strains of Heaney's art, the one insisting on the circumspect vision of the anecdote, the other on the broader, more adaptable wisdom of the parable, and they are entwined together throughout the volume.

In his third collection, *Wintering Out*, Heaney has been more generous with his admissions—there are thirteen poems here—but he has not been indiscriminate, and in this spartan environment "The Tollund Man" stands in highest relief, pointing inexorably toward the austere accomplishment of *North*. In "Exposure," the closing lyric of that volume, Heaney is living in the Republic, having abdicated his role as the poet of Northern Ireland who dared to live in Northern Ireland, and he has depicted himself in that poem as an "inner émigré . . . escaped from the massacre." But this perspective of the domestic exile makes its first appearance in the closing section of "The Tollund Man":

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out there in Jutland
 In the old man-killing parishes
 I will feel lost,
 Unhappy and at home.

Several poems in the original volume of *Wintering Out* softened the hard edges of alienation that riddle the final section of "The Tollund Man," but Heaney has excluded these often satisfied pieces—"Shore Woman" is a good example—and has chosen instead to point up his most dramatic line of development, the line that will culminate in the abstract and parablelike engagements of *The Haw Lantern* (1987).

Much has been made of Heaney's political sympathies, particularly of the ways in which they have engendered his own Irish *ars poetica*. Typically, the early work has been less amenable to such bluntly political analysis, and the poetry from *North* and beyond more susceptible to it. Heaney's illuminating selections will do much to remedy this simplicity, suggesting the kind of persistent focus that shifts and sharpens according to the subjects traversed. Recently Heaney has addressed in his essays various topics that bear directly on our understanding of his sense of political literature, and they have been gathered together in his most recent collection of prose, *The Government of the Tongue* (1989). Of special importance is "The Impact of Translation," an essay that originally appeared in the *Yale Review* and addressed several issues worth considering when reading Heaney's selected edition.

Heaney argued in that essay that the translation of verse into English from the Eastern European countries has excited, as he wrote in the *Yale Review* version, "two main lines of reaction which might be characterized as 'envy' and 'identification.'" By "envy," Heaney means, as he explains later, a "kind of admiration" for those poets of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries who have suffered or died for the prosecution of their art. But he sees other, more substantial changes taking place:

What translation has done over the last couple of decades is to introduce us not only to new literary traditions but also to link the new literary experience to a modern martyrology, a record of courage and sacrifice which elicits our unstinted admiration. So, subtly, with a kind of hangdog intimation of desertion, poets in English sense the locus of poetic greatness shifting away from their language.

Suddenly, Eliot's separation of the person who suffers and the mind that creates vanishes; suddenly, the old "impertinence" that Heaney had felt

whenever he spoke of the "excessively vehement adjectives and no in Wilfred Owen's poetry is ratified ("Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and Knocker"). By comparison, American poets, submerged in their "persive, centrally heated, grant-aided pluralism of fashions and schools have begun to yearn, almost subliminally, for the extreme condition which the poetry of the Eastern Bloc writers has survived admirably. The reason for this yearning is not difficult to fathom. Artistic expression within a repressive, totalitarian regime mounts an eloquent argument for what Heaney characterizes as "the continuing efficacy of poetry as a necessary and a redemptive mode of being human."

Objections to Heaney's notion of a redemptive poetics pale in comparison to the gravity of his observation. We must be as clear as Heaney is committed. If there are redemptive modes of "being human," then clearly the pursuit of untrammelled artistic expression within a totalitarian regime satisfies the requirements for such redemption. The engagement of literature with the conditions that would extinguish it, the attempt to explore the psychological, emotional, and formal ramifications of such engagements, the ability to turn these issues into subject matters, thereby frustrating the most noxious aspects of censorship and silence—these issues more and more have engaged Heaney, and it is under this rubric that many of the selections for this volume seem to have been made. The volume, then, records Heaney's growing awareness of the nature of art's efficacy, an awareness that finds its first and clearest crystallization in the poems of *North*.

Heaney first encountered the bog people that populate *North* in a book on the subject by P. V. Glob. A genealogical recognition seized him as he viewed the photographs of the Iron Age corpses that had survived centuries in the preserving peat: "The Tollund Man," Heaney has said, "seemed like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of the moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside. With its heightened awareness of the redemptive human sacrifices that organized Iron Age culture in northern Europe, *North* addresses many of the issues that would later engage Heaney in his prose. Of the thirteen poems that he has chosen to include, eight of them treat specifically the matter of Ireland's ritualistically violent prehistory, and several of them have become hallmarks of Heaney's accomplishment: "Bone Dream," "Bog Queen," and "The Grauballe Man," to name three. The essential purpose of these and several other poems like them—a purpose that Heaney has freely acknowledged—concerns the construction of an analogy between the practice of human sacrifice during the Iron Age and the sectarian violence of contemporary Northern Ireland. The poetry of

North grimly locates the barbarities of life in Northern Ireland within the fertility rituals of Ireland's distant ancestors; political violence becomes genetic in origin. Poetry of this sort, or something like it, successfully transforms the dull malaise of secular martyrdom, a condition hostile to traditional notions of the vigorous imagination, into subject matters for poetry. This, presumably, is a model of the imagination susceptible to the adjective "redemptive." This, certainly, is the model of the imagination that becomes more and more visible in Heaney's selection.

The "inner émigré" that appeared in the last poem of *North*, "the wood-kerne" who had escaped from the "massacre," closed Heaney's *Poems: 1965-1975*, but here in this new volume, we move swiftly into *Field Work* (1979), which begins with the voluptuous ritual of eating oysters and "toasting friendship, / Laying down a perfect memory / In the cool of thatch and crockery." The harsh doctrines of *North* yield to the sudden surprise of hedonistic pleasure, so much so that *Field Work* seems now in its new context to inaugurate the second stage of Heaney's development. But always in this volume Heaney insists on the irreconcilable tug of a loyal guilt that chastens, however slightly, the pleasures arising in a country plagued by violent partitions. Yet Heaney's early loyalties have lost their monolithic stridency, and their loss has given rise to a poetry more oblique in its announced intention, but more straightforward in confronting the essential issues of homeland and nationality. Here are two stanzas from "The Badgers":

And to read even by carcasses
the badgers have come back.
One that grew notorious
lay untouched in the roadside.
Last night one had me braking
but more in fear than in honour. . . .

How perilous is it to choose
not to love the life we're shown?
His sturdy dirty body
and interloping grovel.
The intelligence in his bone.
The unquestionable houseboy's shoulders
that could have been my own.

The anecdotal story line of "Singing School," the poem that ended *North*, is replaced in this poem by the less determined narrative of the

parable. Renunciation of "the life we're shown," and the conviction that must attend such a renunciation, are the subject matters of this poem and they have obvious implications for anyone who has moved from Belfast to Dublin. But just as significant are the two narrative functions that structure the poem: the nearly Dickinsonian ability to focus on the essential quandary of the poem in a slanted representative image; and the casual efficiency with which Heaney depicts a consciousness inured to violence by the single phrase "to read even by candlelight." Heaney develops here a shorthand of political engagement, but one that with its parablelike command of implication quickly transgresses its own limitations.

But Heaney never forgoes his gift for anecdote and his love of the densely textured line; now, however, one of his standard styles corrects its genealogy. The English resonances of blank verse have not gone unheeded by Heaney: " 'I won't relapse / From this strange loneliness brought us to. / Dorothy and William—' She interrupts: / 'You going to compare us two . . . ?' " But the comparison has been marked by a faint note of duplicity, even of heresy, that attends Heaney's description of his retreat to the Republic finds its representative figures in Dorothy and William Wordsworth. Heaney has included two elegies in *Field Work*—the one for Robert Lowell is omitted—and "Casualty" re-examines sectarian murder, but the elegiac sensibility of the volume is assuaged by the kind of domesticities that resonate from the intensely personal of the sonnets. A burnished familiarity warms Heaney's lines notwithstanding the austerities of *North* have vanished—and they serve as the formal occasion framing the dire occasions that more and more engender his poetry.

From the beginning of his career, however, Heaney has insisted on the note of veneration, holding up for his praise everything from the crocks of reeking milk to a chip of granite, and finally in *Station Work* Heaney comes to terms with what has been for him a reflexive reverence in his writing. There are consequences, perhaps even a price, affixed to his obsession, as evidenced in "Sandstone Keepsake"; here are two stanzas:

Anyhow, there I was with the wet red stone
in my hand, staring across at the watch-towers
from my free state of image and allusion,
swooped on, then dropped by trained binoculars:

a silhouette not worth bothering about,
out for the evening in scarf and waders

and not about to set times wrong or right,
stooping along, one of the venerators.

The freedom of the poet, if there is such a thing, lies in veneration, in teaching us how to praise, as Auden had it, but the trained binoculars—they seem almost canine—introduce the neurotic voyeurism of the state, and although Heaney is “stooping along” harmlessly, it is a posture that momentarily seems as crippled by the invasive observation of the guard as it does reflective of the hallowing curiosity of the poet.

The vignette of “Sandstone Keepsake”—the poet going about his seemingly useless business as the state looks on—returns, variously disguised, in many of the poems that Heaney has written during the past decade. Much of his work seems drawn by a subliminal gravitation toward the figure of the citizen and state, and none has so dramatized the protean relation between the two as “Station Island,” Heaney’s most ambitious poem to date. The twelve sections of the poem glitter with that particular clarity that Joseph Brodsky has found in Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and memorably labeled the “lucidity of despair.” Based on the penitential vigil of fasting and prayer that still constitutes the pilgrimage to Lough Derg in County Donegal, the poem seizes the occasion to confront the ghosts that have influenced the poet’s life—the Dantean parallels are pronounced, acknowledged, and informing. This confrontation often elicits from the figure in question the voice of self-counsel and mediation, a technique that Heaney used in the short lyric “North” and “Making Strange.” In “Station Island,” this summoning of advice reaches a fever pitch, establishing as one of the dominant notes of the poem a purgative ritual of scrutiny.

The roster of advisors and their collective wisdom effectively locate the poem within a larger catechistic tradition. Here are the principal advisors and a snippet of their counsel: Simon Sweeney: “Stay clear of all processions!” William Carlton: “Remember everything and keep your head.” A young priest: “And the god has, as they say, withdrawn.” Heaney’s second cousin: “You confused evasion and artistic tact.” A monk: “Read poems as prayers . . . and for your penance / translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.” And most dramatically, James Joyce:

“. . . Your obligation
is not discharged by any common rite.
What you do you must do ou your own.

The main thing is to write
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust . . .
You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note.”

The second stanza in this quotation had begun in the original version with the admonitory phrase, “so get back in harness,” and Heaney’s decision to drop it from this selection does more than simply streamline narrative; it allows the poem to end on a pronounced note of correct even rehabilitation. Writing as redemption—as we saw earlier, Heaney’s latest criticism has begun to explore the redemptive paradigm that he finds structuring the Eastern Bloc writers, and although he is vulnerable as are all apologists for poetry, to the sober-minded political theorist who would see the dissident poet as a recalcitrant citizen who happens to write poetry, Heaney’s argument for the essential efficacy of the art arrives at a time when simplistic notions of poetic form too often pass for critical engagements of intellectual integrity. His dogged insistence on posing the unwieldy question of efficacy, a question that tolerant and well-received theories of poetic form will certainly help to answer, refocuses much of the purposeless debate that now constitutes many discussions about traditional poetics.

In Heaney’s hands this debate has moved in an unexpected direction. In *The Haw Lantern* (1987), there is evidence to suggest that Heaney’s patterns of social behavior cohere in the broad categorization of nouns and verbs, and as he has written in “The Impact of Tradition,” abstractions and “conceptually aerated adjectives” had long been part of a forbidden word hoard, one that spoiled the vigorous particularity expected of poets who matured under authoritative strictures against generality and didacticism. Yet his admiration of Czeslaw Milosz is based on just this quality: “[Milosz] seemed . . . to know exactly what he wanted to say before he began to say it, and indeed the poem aspired to deliver what we had once long ago been assured it was not any poem’s business to deliver: a message.”

But abstraction for Heaney, particularly in *The Haw Lantern*, tends beyond the framework of diction, ultimately positing a lyrical function that has, as I have indicated, much in common with the parable (the poem of the original volume significantly does not appear in this selection—it is accurately titled “The Riddle”). Heaney’s anecdotal talents are much in abundance here, and his sonnet sequence “Clearances” rivaled the earlier sequence in *Field Work*, but nothing prepares us for the compassing obliquities of a poem like “The Mud Vision” which, at

numerous readings, creates a generalized and abstract sense of torpor and indolence, but does so by attending to the old particularities that are Heaney's stock-in-trade:

One day it was gone and the east gable
 Where its trembling corolla had balanced
 Was starkly a ruin again, with dandelions
 Blowing high up on the ledges, and moss
 That slumbered on through its increase. As cameras raked
 The site from every angle, experts
 Began their *post factum* jabber and all of us
 Crowded in tight for the big explanations.
 Just like that, we forgot that the vision was ours,
 Our one chance to know the incomparable
 And dive to a future. What might have been origin
 We dissipated in news. . . .

A richly allusive idiom, slightly reminiscent of the memorable forebodings of early Auden and much of Muir, the poem maintains a more stolid demeanor than Auden's "The Watershed," for example, or Muir's "The Interrogation." Heaney's willingness to experiment with poetic strategies that might further extend the "efficacy" of his art has obviously brought him a measure of equanimity, and even though selections from *The Haw Lantern* regularly address the kinds of social conflicts that have engaged Heaney for most of his career, their resolutions now rest more in the fictive patternings of narrative than—to use one of Wilde's phrases—in "the violence of opinion." Heaney's new parable is fraught with advice, however, a sure sign of his continuing engagement with a social poetics, but his new parable is prophetically intoned, an even surer sign that his legislations will go unacknowledged. The last section of "From the Canton of Expectation" italicizes two lines of epigraphic pith: "*What looks the strongest has outlived its term. / The future lies with what's affirmed from under.*" In their iconoclastic model of the imagination, these lines enthrone the autocratic changes that have invigorated and sped Heaney's development; in their quiet insistence on hope as the bellwether of emotions, they situate his work within the perfectly human community where its citizens still speak of redemption and efficacy.

LEWIS NORDAN

Cabbage Opera

THERE WAS A MAN NAMED MCNEER who live town of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi. I saw him only infreq I knew his wife and two children. Mr. McNeer worked Rose Oil service station in a town ten miles away, and s visible around the house. The four of them lived near th end of a cottonfield in a prefab shack with peeling yell McNeer was a tall, dopey-looking woman who operated : the same property. The store had a gas pump and a few she made pimento-cheese sandwiches to sell to schoolchi time. I was eleven years old.

The McNeers had a son a year younger than myself, named after the founder of Methodism—and a daughter a older. Her name was Dixie Dawn. Their conspicuous n part of their tragedy. John Wesley looked like his moth say he looked like a gorilla, with almost no forehead. Th overweight and wore heavy makeup and had a pathetica about her. Although she was only thirteen she had lar sang in the Methodist Church choir and said she wanted "at the Met" when she graduated from high school.

I was embarrassed by the family's appearance. In a w for it, and yet I felt a certain sorrow as well and wished things. Often I wondered how a person lives his life as : family. I grieved for Dixie Dawn, and though she sang l one I had ever known, I knew that she would get no clos politan Opera than a gas pump and a plate of cheese sa end of a cotton row.

I rarely thought of the father at all, he was so seldo
 And then one day as I was walking to the lot where I
 I noticed that he was in the side yard, working in the ve