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Seamus Heaney: From Belfast to Berkeley and Back

In the 1990s, I went to a lecture titled "Cultural Roots, Divided Identities, and Cross-Pollination in Contemporary Poetry." For about 45 minutes, the speaker focused on the way Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, Marilyn Chin, Cathy Song, and Li-Young Lee "made it new" by letting their different cultural identities—Caribbean, Indian, Asian—interact productively. A friend approached me at the reception afterwards and said, "You know—that lecture made me think of something my supervisor in graduate school said about Seamus Heaney."

"What was that?" I asked.

"He told me that Heaney was an American poet."

"Really? Didn't he know that Heaney grew up in Northern Ireland and that his best poetry was about the long history of Anglo-Irish conflicts?"

"I reminded my supervisor of that, but he just smiled and shook his head. 'No, no, no,' he said. 'Believe me—Heaney is an American poet.'"

"Was your supervisor playing around with alternative facts or something?"

"I wasn't sure, so I told him to give me proof. That's when he laughed and said, 'You don't need proof. Heaney's talent warrants the presumption.'"

"Oh, I get it," I said, laughing.

"Yeah, it's sort of funny, but I suppose Heaney was American in some ways," my friend remarked. Then he walked over to the wine-and-beer table.

While doing research and writing about Heaney over the last few decades, I've often thought about that joke and

wondered if a case could be made for Heaney's American identity. The concept of "identity," after all, is complex. Nobody really has one, monolithic identity. Identities are woven from many strands. Or, to use the metaphor from the lecture, they're pollinated from different sources.

Many of Heaney's poems certainly show the signs of cross-pollination. Their most obvious American sources are poems by Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, and Robert Lowell. As critics have occasionally complained, some of Heaney's work—like the Lowell imitations in *Field Work*—can seem too close to their sources. His most outspoken detractors in Ireland, such as the writer Desmond Fennell, accuse Heaney of being too American in other ways, too. In his long essay "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," Fennell argues that Heaney colluded with what he calls America's academic-poetic complex, which he compares to America's military-industrial complex and consumer-capitalist complex, in order to become a literary titan. To Fennell, powerful American critics—especially Heaney's close friend Harvard professor Helen Vendler—abetted this process by selling the Heaney brand to gullible audiences. Heaney's repeated denunciations of the American tendency to turn talented people into icons for marketing purposes has had little effect on detractors like Fennel.

To understand Heaney's ambivalent attitudes toward American culture, it helps to know something about the first time he spent a substantial amount of time in the U.S. This was in 1970–71 when he taught at UC–Berkeley. It's significant to note that he originally didn't want to teach in an American university, even though he had friends at the time migrating to the U.S. to earn academic salaries that were a good deal higher than those in Ireland and Britain. He told the Irish poet Padraic Fiacc in 1968, "I wouldn't like to teach in a U.S. university; you'd always be studying the other poet's work; everything would finally channel into the other person's poetry, even your own perceptions."[1]

Heaney rethought his opposition to an academic position in the U.S. when he met a Berkeley English professor, Tom Parkinson, after a poetry reading at the University of York in the late 1960s. Enchanted by Heaney's poems and the way he presented them, Parkinson told Heaney he should come to Berkeley. Parkinson may have talked up the vibrant literary community in the San Francisco Bay area and told Heaney he'd have an opportunity to introduce Americans to his poetry on reading tours. Heaney found his conversation with Parkinson interesting, but he doubted he'd qualify for a job at a prestigious American university without a Ph.D, and didn't have a Ph.D.

The social unrest at Berkeley was another concern for Heaney. The sectarian "Troubles" in Belfast, where Heaney lived and taught in the late 1960s, were bad enough; he didn't want to plunge into another community torn apart by violent factions. Parkinson probably discussed this with Heaney when they met in York, since he bore scars of Berkeley's political battles on his face. Known for speaking out on behalf of trade unions, women, students, and persecuted authors (he testified in support of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* at the famous San Francisco obscenity trial in 1957), Parkinson had been physically attacked for his activism. In 1961, a conservative student who suspected him of Communist sympathies shot him in the face and fatally wounded his teaching assistant.

At the end of the 1960s, though, Berkeley was more peaceful than it had been in the recent past. The campus demonstrations that had helped turn public opinion against the Vietnam War had diminished in frequency and intensity. The chaotic "Summer of Love," when 100,000 people flocked to the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco, had come and gone in 1967. The legendary Monterey Pop Festival performances by Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Grateful Dead, and other rock bands were also a thing of the past. Governor Reagan, who frequently railed

against Berkeley's "communist sympathizers, protestors and sex deviants,"[2] had called in the police and National Guard to quell protests in 1969. Now local residents generally tolerated the students' free-wheeling lifestyles.

As he made his pitch about applying to Berkeley, Parkinson must have convinced Heaney that his two poetry books published by Faber & Faber—*Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*—were sufficient credentials for a visiting professorship. In the end, Heaney sent a letter inquiring about a job to Berkeley's English Department chair, John Jordan. Parkinson and another colleague, the scholar of Irish literature and novelist Tom Flanagan, provided recommendations. On February 11, 1970, Jordan offered Heaney a one-year job with a salary of $13,100 (worth about $90,000 today). Jordan promised to pay for round-trip travel expenses and assured Heaney that, with a graduate student to help him grade papers, he'd have more time to write than at his previous jobs.

Heaney accepted Jordan's offer and celebrated his good fortune with a big party in Belfast that he later mentioned at the end of "September Song," a poem that recalls how the guests "lifted the roof" off his house until dawn. As he got organized to move his family to California during the summer of 1970, he made sure to pack his new manuscript of poems, *Winter Seeds*, in a travel bag. The working title referred to seeds found inside the exhumed body of the Tollund Man, an Iron Age corpse sacrificed to a fertility goddess in Denmark that Heaney had read about in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*. "The Tollund Man" would eventually appear in his third book, *Wintering Out*, and it would be the first in a memorable series of poems about the "bog people."

Tom Flanagan met the jet-lagged Heaneys at the San Francisco airport and took them out for a meal. Tom's wife, Jean, later drove them around Berkeley to look at rental properties, including an attractive first-floor apartment in a three-story house at 2444 Carleton Street, only an eight-

minute walk from the English Department. Although the apartment was relatively small, renters had access to a grassy yard with a banana tree and peach tree. There was a House of Pancakes nearby that stayed open late into the night, where Heaney could buy the cigarettes he depended on for his nocturnal writing and reading. Marie liked the fact that the apartment was fully furnished, close to a supermarket, and surrounded by an ample yard where her children could play and she could sunbathe.

The quickest route to the Berkeley English Department, as Heaney soon discovered, was along Telegraph Avenue, a gathering place for those who continued to follow Timothy Leary's 1966 mantra: "Turn on, tune in, drop out." In a letter written on September 22, 1970, to his Ulster friend, the poet Michael Longley, Heaney expressed bemusement about the people he passed on his way to work: "[There are] hippies, drop-outs, freak-outs, addicts, black panthers, [and] hare-krishna American kids with shaved heads, begging bowls and clothes made out of old lace curtains." He added sarcastically,

> They're chanting Hare Krishna all the time but the most familiar chant is 'Got any spare change.' There's an overpowering reek of joss sticks and incense floating out of the gear shops and book shops and herb shops (notice on sunblind of herb shop—'All hail to the one cosmic mind'). Everywhere there are posters inviting you to 'personal exploration groups.' 'Lose your mind and come to your senses.' . . . It's lotus land for the moment."[3]

To Paul Muldoon, he wrote, "Imagine coming into Queen's [University] and finding it like some curious dream vision with people in the most unconventional of garbs."[4] Having grown up as a devout Catholic and member of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, Heaney sometimes felt as

out of place in the psychedelic dream-world of Berkeley as the Tollund Man who'd been dug from a bog and displayed in a Danish museum.

Eager to get back into a writing routine in Berkeley, Heaney set up a desk beneath a large wall map of the moon in his new apartment. (He alluded to this map at the beginning of "Westering" in *Wintering Out*.) As well as drafting new poems, he began writing short stories inspired by his fiction-writing colleague Leonard Michaels, who'd recently published the highly acclaimed book *Going Places*. Heaney read a lot of William Carlos Williams's poetry, too, and tried to emulate the famous modernist's compact, imagistic free verse. To sample the local poetry scene, he went to a reading by Robert Bly, who was living about ten miles north of San Francisco. The anti-Vietnam War activist and future Men's Movement guru was writing prose poems that intrigued Heaney and inspired him to try out the form. (He later collected his prose poems in the 1975 pamphlet *Stations*.)

As Heaney explored the genres and styles of his American contemporaries, American journals began accepting his poems. He was especially pleased when the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, Howard Moss, took his short lyric "Home" on October 6, 1970. (The magazine published it on May 1, 1971, and it became section II of "Summer Home" in *Wintering Out*.) Heaney had already placed poems in many of the best English and Irish journals, but *The New Yorker* acceptance signaled that he had "arrived" in America, and it marked the beginning of a long, rewarding relationship with the prestigious magazine.

"Summer Home" is a good example of the way Heaney adopted the styles of different American poets to see which ones suited him. When the husband-narrator in "Summer Home" wonders who is at fault in a dispute with his wife, he sounds like Sylvia Plath vowing to "scald, scald, scald" a marital wound that has just opened. When he laments that

his “children weep out the hot foreign night,” that his “foul mouth takes it out” on his wife, and that he and his wife “lie stiff till dawn” after their argument, he sounds like Robert Lowell in “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage.” When Heaney says about his weeping wife, “[Her voice] hoarsens / on my name, my name. // O love, here is the blame,” he sounds like Anne Sexton. When he tries to take the sting out of the “wound . . . / under the homely sheet” by having sex, and describes his love-making as “a final / unmusical drive” that forces “long grains . . . / to open and split,” he sounds like Theodore Roethke in his greenhouse poems.

To underscore the importance of “Summer Home” in his stylistic development, Heaney sent sections II and IV to a young publisher, Peter Fallon, who had St. Sepulchre’s Press in Dublin print them as broadsides. Shortly before Christmas in 1971, Fallon gave Heaney fifty copies of “Chaplet” for him to sign. Over the next four decades, Fallon would publish broadsheets, limited editions, Christmas cards, lectures, and translations by Heaney at the Gallery Press, which he began at the age of eighteen at his family home in Dublin.

The marital squabble in “Summer Home” was not typical of Heaney’s home life in Berkeley, which for the most part was happy. Marie enjoyed the sunny weather, and her sons Christopher and Michael enjoyed the novelty of American culture. Heaney wrote Michael Longley and his wife Edna on September 22 that Marie was getting a good tan and the boys were playing with their model airplanes in the yard. On October 17, he told a musician friend in Northern Ireland, David Hammond, that his son Michael was showing off his familiarity with American ways by saying “Hi” rather than “Hello” to friends, and that Christopher was pretending to be a rich American businessman who wanted to buy his father a new car.

Despite his reservations about the motley denizens of Telegraph Avenue who confronted him each day on his

way to work, Heaney enjoyed meeting new people at the university. Not long after he got settled on Carleton Street, he began socializing with Bob Tracy, a professor who taught English and Celtic literature. Bob's wife, Rebecca, who was a Radcliffe graduate working in child-care services, befriended Marie. Michael and Christopher played with the Tracys' children at their home two blocks down the street. On one outing, the Heaney boys taught their American friends how to play "Black and Tans"—the Irish version of "Cowboys and Indians"—which dated back to the 1920–21 Irish War of Independence.

Of all the professors Heaney got to know in California, Tom Flanagan was one of the most significant for his writing career. Flanagan had grown up in Greenwich, Connecticut, served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and completed his education at Amherst and Columbia, but his maternal and paternal ancestors had lived in Ireland, and he was preoccupied with his Irish heritage. Heaney credited Flanagan with expanding his vision of "the wound and the work of Ireland as a whole."[6] Like many expatriates, Heaney got a fresh perspective on his homeland by living in a different country. In this case, it was an American scholar who helped him focus on and better understand his roots.

During long conversations about Joyce, Yeats, and other Irish writers, Flanagan convinced Heaney to shed his New Critical habit of concentrating on texts as aesthetic objects and to develop a greater appreciation of their biographical, political, and historical contexts. Deeply impressed by Heaney's imagination and intellect, Flanagan based a character—Owen McCarthy—on Heaney in his novel *The Year of the French*. Heaney repaid the debt by ending his poem "Traditions" with quotes from Shakespeare and Joyce that Flanagan had used in an epigraph to his scholarly book *The Irish Novelists*.

Another one of Heaney's close Berkeley friends was the future English professor David Wyatt, who served as a

grader in Heaney's large course on modern poetry. Wyatt admired Heaney's erudition, spontaneity, and friendliness. "Seamus would walk in [to the classroom], unclasp his briefcase, and begin talking," Wyatt recalled,

> He just began reading poems and commenting on them. . . . The syllabus was nifty, with titles like 'Snow and Moonlight in America,' for the day on James Wright. He gave us no direction on grading and let us just run. It was my first experience grading papers.

Wyatt and the other grader, Frank Cebulski, sometimes met their boss at Cebulski's apartment, where Heaney liked to drink beer, talk about poets he revered such as Robert Frost, and reminisce about Ireland. To show his approval of the assistants' work, he gave them gifts. On June 1, 1971, which was Wyatt's wedding anniversary, he presented Wyatt with signed copies of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*, and Marie treated Wyatt and his wife to a delicious dinner of boeuf bourguignon. On another occasion, noticing that Wyatt fancied his leather briefcase, Heaney said: "Here, it's yours. It was a gift to me from an old girlfriend."[8] Wyatt never forgot Heaney's generosity.

Berkeley's "elysian airs and incensed avenues,"[9] as Heaney called them in a letter to Muldoon, could be intoxicating, but never so intoxicating that he forgot his native country. He regularly exchanged poems and articles with friends in Northern Ireland. Fearing he might defect to America, some of his correspondents criticized what he wrote in the U.S., disparaged the American poets he esteemed, and made sardonic remarks about what they considered to be his California holiday. Michael Longley, who was stuck in a thankless job at the Belfast Arts Council, was especially caustic. In a letter written on January 8, 1971, he objected to the tone of a recent article Heaney had published in *The Listener* and dismissed Robert Lowell's sonnets in *Notebook*. (He compared Lowell's sensibility and style to the recent

"psychopathically narrow"[10] work of Ted Hughes.) Heaney responded to Longley's remarks with his usual equanimity, and later tried to line up readings for him in the U.S.

Some of Heaney's dispatches to friends and family back in Ulster were motivated by homesickness. Remembering the simple pleasures of childhood on his family farm, Mossbawn, he sometimes bristled against the narcissism of his American students and self-destructive excesses of the city's counterculture. Berkeley, he told Muldoon, was "an amazing and exciting place to be," but it had been overrun by "freaks, drop-outs, drug-addicts, [and] revolutionaries." The island of Alcatraz in the Bay, which Heaney could see from his house on clear days, epitomized the revolutionary *zeitgeist* that could turn violent. Although its famous prison had been shut down in 1963, Native Americans had occupied the island since November 1969, and skirmishes with authorities were common. In a poster proclaiming: "ALCATRAZ IS NOT AN ISLAND . . . DIG IT . . . ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE,"[11] which Heaney sent to Muldoon, militant students expressed solidarity with the Native Americans who wanted to turn the place into a cultural and ecological sanctuary.

To a certain extent, Heaney shared the ideals of the Native Americans and their advocates, and so did Muldoon, who in April 1970 published "The Indians on Alcatraz," a poem highlighting similarities between persecuted minorities in America and Northern Ireland. In *The Listener* article, "Views," which Longley had criticized, Heaney expressed sympathy for the students' protests against American commercialism. He was especially repelled by the way local businesses during the Christmas season turned everything—no matter how sacred—into commodities. He preferred the non-commercial gift-giving of his boyhood Christmases at Mossbawn, and scoffed at the cardboard Santas around hamburger joints and gas stations, over-priced Christmas trees on used-car lots, and television

programs full of commercials for expensive children's toys.

Heaney was especially turned off by the way money and religion went hand in hand in the U.S., even for young people who'd supposedly disavowed capitalism. He had little patience for those who begged on the street and stole from shops while claiming that "blissful, eternal spiritual life is available to anyone who sincerely chants the name of God." The California "commune mores," he confessed, were "an irritation to the Celt." The hate speech of radicals also bothered him. Citing a statement from *The Black Panther* newspaper that advocated a "shoot to kill" policy against all white "fascist" oppressors, he wrote, "The violence of the Panthers' rhetoric is shocking. . . . In contrast to the revolutionary language of America, the revolutionary voice of Ireland still keeps a civil tongue in its head." The grim irony, however, was that

> While Berkeley shouts, Belfast burns. Very little property has been destroyed here, even at the height of the campus violence, during the People's Park episode or the Cambodian aftermath. Nobody, to my knowledge, has lost a home and far fewer lives have been taken in the upheavals. It has been the police versus 'the people'; establishment versus emergence. But in Belfast the unproductive blood continues to be spilled and the heraldic oppositions hold.[12]

Heaney should have known that plenty of blood had been spilled during the 1960s in the U.S., and plenty more would be spilled in the years to come. Some of the bloodshed was politically motivated and some wasn't. In 1970 alone, 16,000 murders and 738,000 violent crimes were committed in America. By contrast, there were only twenty-six deaths in Northern Ireland caused by the Troubles that year.

Around New Year's Day, an incident made Heaney revise his comments about agitators only shouting in Berkeley. He

learned firsthand how violence could erupt in the haze of drugs, Hare Krishna chants, and strident political rhetoric. One evening, while Marie was walking to the Tracys' house to pick up her children, a mugger hit her so hard on the head that she blacked out. When she came to on the sidewalk, she realized that her assailant was dragging her to a van and telling her that if she said anything, he'd kill her. Rather than comply, she screamed, kicked, and bit the man.

The commotion got the attention of some tennis players on a nearby court, and the mugger let go of Marie, jumped in his van, and sped down the street. Marie staggered to the Tracys' house with bloody cuts on her legs and a swollen black eye. In pain and tearful, she kept her distance from the front door so her children wouldn't see her and panic. Bob Tracy accompanied her to the police station and the emergency room at Herrick Hospital, where doctors treated her wounds. Rebecca Tracy, who also visited the hospital, remembered how her "strong and determined spirit . . . carried her through this nasty episode," but added: "she was very lucky she was not abducted."[13]

Several days after Heaney returned to Berkeley from a Las Vegas wedding where he'd been best man, the police brought a suspect to the Carleton Street apartment for identification. Marie was unable to say for sure whether the person in custody was the one who'd attacked her, so he was set free. The Heaneys now feared the suspected mugger would get revenge because he knew their address. Marie was even more frightened when she spotted him on the street several weeks later. To protect them from possible future assaults, the Heaneys' elderly landlord, whose son was a warden at San Quentin prison, gave them a file that an inmate had ground into a razor-sharp blade. "It was a huge trauma and gave us a glimpse of the darker side of hippy-land,"[14] Heaney remarked years later.

While Heaney and his wife recuperated, they heard from friends back home about the worsening situation

in Ulster. On November 3, 1970, Heaney's boss in the Queen's University English Department, Mark Roberts, wrote that revenge killings had spiked and students were now demanding a complete overhaul of the university's organization and operation. On November 29, John Cronin reported that a bomb had exploded at the Finaghy branch of the Northern Bank, waking him in the middle of the night. He also mentioned that a bomb blast in the city had thrown a teacher out of an armchair in her house. On January 12, 1971, an *Irish Times* journalist explained that the Provisional IRA had started sending guns to local Catholics, and that the IRA had carried out executions and tar-and-feather punishments against Catholics they considered to be traitors. Heaney would soon incorporate details of these brutal acts in poems like "Punishment."

Meanwhile, Heaney's poetry flourished in North America. He gave readings at Beaver College on November 20, 1970, Trenton State College on November 23, Canada's University of Victoria on December 3, the University of Calgary on December 11, the University of Washington on March 3, 1971, and New York's YM-YWHA's Poetry Center in late March. He appeared at a dozen venues in and around the University of Michigan during the spring of 1971. He spoke at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver while visiting his friend George McWhirter, who had been undergraduate with him at Queen's University in Belfast. All the touring improved his book sales, but not enough to please Oxford University Press or to entice another American publisher to give him a new book contract. Oxford was especially disappointing because it made Heaney pay for publicity copies of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*, and it refused to send copies of the books to Berkeley's bookstores. On September 26, 1970, he wrote Matthew Evans at Faber about his frustration. Two weeks later, Evans replied that he'd contacted all the main American poetry publishers, but to no avail.

The mugging in January, the hectic reading schedule in March, and the ongoing grim news from Northern Ireland contributed to Heaney's low spirits at the start of Berkeley's spring quarter on April Fool's Day in 1971. He confided to Michael Longley on April 26 that his attitude toward teaching had changed. His large creative-writing class (forty-three students) had become "an exhausting assignment" with a lot of "stupid, illiterate, long-haired, hippie, Blake-ridden, Ginsberg-gullible" students "wanting to hear they're the greatest thing since, say, Charles Olson."[16] His large Introduction to Modern British and American Literature class was full of needy, egotistical students as well. He looked forward to the end of term in June, but then he had to teach two summer-school courses (from June 22 to August 4) before returning to Northern Ireland.

The prospect of going home didn't offer much comfort, primarily because there was no foreseeable solution to the Troubles. He told Longley: "I've given up politics. . . . I'm beginning to think of our ever-loving community as a good starting point for personal redemption, but damned little else." In his disillusioned state, he wanted to write private, confessional poems that "risk the open self . . . rather than public poems."[17] His new poems, he explained, would be "drills and augers" burrowing into repressed memories. His focus on the "open self" was Janus-faced, though, since he vowed to make "wider connections, public connections."[18] Some of his paradoxical statements—like his new prose poems—were influenced by Robert Bly, who had recently argued in an influential essay, "Leaping Up Into Political Poetry," that

> [t]he writing of political poetry is like the writing of personal poetry. [It requires] a sudden drive by the poet inward. . . . Once inside the psyche, he can speak of inward and political things with the same assurance. . . . The political activists in the literary world are wrong—

> they try to force political poetry out of poets by pushing them more deeply into events, making them feel guilt if they don't abandon privacy. But the truth is that the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy.[19]

Heaney agreed with these assertions.

Heaney's dialectical way of delving into private and public matters in his new book, *Wintering Out*, which Faber published on November 20, 1972, garnered mixed reviews. Even the poems about Northern Ireland's recent IRA bombings and Loyalist reprisals, which he added to his new manuscript after submitting it to Faber on October 14, 1971, did little to appease the critics.

The Scottish poet Douglas Dunn, in an anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* review, scolded Heaney for being evasive about the Troubles, and called *Wintering Out* a transitional book. The English writer Stephen Spender also faulted Heaney in *The New York Review of Books* for not confronting the Troubles more directly. The English poet Gavin Ewart, in *The London Magazine*, added his voice to the hostile chorus, advising Heaney to be more candid about the current realities of Ulster and stop writing about his rural roots, which he found uninteresting. Seamus Deane took a similar position:

> The poems express no politics and indeed they flee conceptual formulations with an almost indecent success. Instead they interrogate the quality of the relationship between the poet and his mixed political and literary traditions. The answer is always the same. Relationship is unavoidable, but commitment, relationship gone vulgar, is a limiting risk.

Deane wanted Heaney to jump on the political bandwagon. "Commitment is demanded during a crisis,"[20] he said. Many of the Irish and British reviewers implied that Heaney

had abandoned his commitment to his troubled Ulster community and gone astray in America.

Heaney made it clear in interviews following the publication of his book that he had neither the desire nor the gift "to start plying the pros and cons of the Ulster situation in an editorializing kind of way." In *Ploughshares*, he told James Randall that he resented the presence of Unionist politicians and paramilitary forces in Ulster, but he also resented those in his nationalist community who demanded he act as their spokesman:

> Apart from the politics of the thing, I was incapable, artistically, of breaking with my first ground and my first images. So *Wintering Out* tries to insinuate itself into the roots of the political myths by feeling along the lines of language itself. It draws inspiration from etymology, vocabulary, even intonations—and these are all active signals of loyalties, Irish or British, Catholic or Protestant, in the north of Ireland.

Fearing that he'd lose himself in partisanship and propaganda, Heaney told Randall, "[I heeded] an early warning system telling me to get back inside my own head."[21]

Not all the reviews were negative. One of the most laudatory assessments of the book came from the American poet, critic, and editor Jonathan Galassi, who wrote in the journal *Poetry* that Heaney was "undoubtedly the most talented younger poet writing in the British Isles."[22] Before long, Galassi would become Heaney's editor and publish his books at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. For Galassi and a number of other American critics, *Wintering Out* benefited from Heaney's immersion in American culture during his year in the Bay Area.

One of the California poets who had the most impact on Heaney's aesthetic and ideological development was

Gary Snyder. Heaney greatly admired the way Snyder combined a scholarly understanding of myth and religion with a down-to-earth knowledge of manual labor and the natural environment. Heaney may not have shared Snyder's "Beat" propensities for wife-sharing and bow-and-arrow hunting on his Native-American-style commune in the Sierra Nevada Mountains (Heaney once signed his name facetiously in correspondence, "Gary Snyder, West Gulch, Ballyscullion, Big Sur"),[23] but he emulated Snyder's concise, imagistic poems in *Wintering Out* and *North*. And he embraced Snyder's enlightened, ecological view of the world.

In his *Ploughshares* interview, Heaney said: "I could see a close connection between the political and cultural assertions being made at that time by the minority in the north of Ireland and the protests and consciousness-raising that were going on in the Bay Area." American poets protesting the Vietnam War, such as Snyder and Bly, resembled Ulster poets protesting the latest iteration of the British-Irish War. "Probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley," Heaney claimed, "[was] that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance."[24] Most of the poets he got to know during his year in Berkeley were determined to move away from the conservative stylistic and political agendas of the New Critics who had dominated literary culture in the middle of the 20th century. Heaney, at least for a while, moved in step with the progressive Californians.

Although he became more American as a result of his year in Berkeley, Heaney in *Wintering Out* continued to examine his British-Irish heritage. He told one interviewer that his new poems "harked back to the Irish language underlay" that existed in "the hidden Ulster" beneath the British "Plantation and the Siege."[25] Perhaps thinking of the way Glob's bog bodies represented gifts to and from the underworld, he said his place-name poems "felt like pure

gift[s].” Like most gifts, they were supposed to establish civil bonds between people. He didn’t intend them to be “mouthpieces for a party line,” but catalysts “devoted to melting down the old categories of difference.”[26] Having spent a year among democratic idealists in the Bay Area, he wanted *Wintering Out* to persuade his Ulster countrymen that they should pursue the American ideal of a democratic “melting pot.”

Heaney’s poems about places familiar to him as a child in Northern Ireland, such as Anahorish, Toome, and Broagh, which were close to Mossbawn, remember ethnic clashes in the past and point to a future when they might be peacefully resolved. “Anahorish” harks back to the Eden of his elementary school that has turned dark and wintry. “Toome,” the name of a town on Lough Derg, evokes fertile sources of life (“alluvial mud”) and weapons that destroy life (“flints, musket-balls”). The name “Toome” may have derived from the Scottish word “toom,” which means “waste ground” or “rubbish heap.”

Following Eliot’s lead in *The Waste Land*, Heaney in *Wintering Out* traces journeys through past and present debacles toward signs of fertility and regeneration. Sometimes he entertains the idea that a common language can bring about peace in a future Ireland. Perhaps thinking of the biblical story of the one language that existed before builders of the Tower of Babel were scattered around the world, Heaney looks back to Gaelic as Ireland’s common language that was shattered and displaced by the British Empire. In “Traditions,” Gaelic Ireland’s “guttural muse” is a latter-day Eve who was “bulled”—both bullied and sexually assaulted—“by the alliterative tradition” of imperial, Anglo-Saxon England. To redress this violation and fall from grace, Heaney’s “New Song” calls for a “gift of tongues” spoken by a Gaelic Mother Ireland. His singer yearns for an apocalyptic Second Coming in which the Gaelic language returns in triumph. Sounding like an anti-imperialist prophet, Heaney declares:

Our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts,
To flood, with vowelling embrace,
Demesne staked out in consonants.

The vowels on Gaelic tongues, in other words, must overpower the consonantal Anglo-Saxon words that were imposed on Ireland like boundary markers by British imperialists.

When not speaking like an Old Testament prophet, Heaney adopts the voice of a military recruiter who proclaims,

And Castledawson we'll enlist
and Upperlands, each planted bawn—
Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass—
A vocable, as rath and bullaun.

With regard to the linguistic and political aims of *Wintering Out*, Heaney once said: "My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience."[27] His "vocables" in "A New Song" combine different vowels and consonants, but the two words at the end of the poem have distinctly Gaelic referents. *Rath* is a Gaelic hill-fort and *bullaun* is a ritual Gaelic basin stone. In his combative mood, he wants the sites of old British plantations (Castledawson, Upperlands) and the enclosed British estates (the "bawns" with "bleaching-greens" for the planters' linen industry) to undergo an Irish greening.

"Westering," which was first titled "Westering: Easy Rider" and placed at the end of *Wintering Out*, gives more direct evidence of how Heaney's year in the Bay Area Americanized his outlook. At the beginning of the poem, the expatriate poet sits in his Berkeley apartment beneath the Rand McNally map of the moon. His perspectives alternate between America, the moon, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. Recalling a trip from Belfast

to Donegal on a Good Friday during a more peaceful time, he implies that his homeland is as alien to him now as the moon. “The moon’s stigmata” on the map reminds him of a wounded Christ and his homeland wounded by embattled Christian sects “six thousand miles away.” Will Ulster citizens ever enjoy the happiness and stability he experienced as a boy on his family farm? Will they ever be able to live like the easy-going motorcyclists Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, who travel happily across the American Southwest in the 1969 movie *Easy Rider*? Will they ever be able to transcend their worldly troubles like the American astronauts who rocketed to the moon’s Sea of Tranquility in the summer of 1969, a year before Heaney arrived in California?

Heaney concludes his poem with a vision of future tranquility in which the moon, California, and Northern Ireland merge: “I imagine untroubled dust, / A loosening gravity, / Christ weighing by his hands.” It’s almost as if this Christ floats in a spaced-out, drug-enhanced California dream or in the “loosening gravity” on the surface of the moon. Like Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace*, a book Heaney would allude to in future poems and essays, the traveler in “Westering: Easy Rider” searches for a gift of grace that will offset the gravity weighing people down in places like Ulster.

As the end of his California adventure approached, Heaney had to face another fall and winter in the “troubled dust” of Belfast. To prepare himself, he tried to adopt the attitude of his persona in “Servant Boy,” who resolves to persevere and “outwinter” the adversities in his environment. But after a year in California, Heaney was tempted to declare his independence from Ulster’s Troubles and hit the road again like the free-spirited American rebels in *Easy Rider*. Around this time, he wrote his literary friend James Simmons that he was tired of serving what he called “the Ulster team.” In the unpublished poem “Ulster Poetry

Circus," which he mailed with his letter to Simmons, he declared, "I just don't want to be parading out / With the team. I want a solo run."[28] "Parading" was a loaded term in Ulster, since it was usually Unionists who went "parading out" to show their antipathy for Irish Catholics and support for British Protestants. Heaney preferred avoiding all parades, no matter what their sectarian affiliation.

In his article "Belfast's Black Christmas," which the *Listener* published on December 23, 1971, several months after he returned home to Belfast and began teaching again at Queen's University, Heaney gave an update on Ulster's deteriorating conditions: "We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart."[29] He blamed the British Army, which had entered Northern Ireland during the summer of 1969 to protect Catholics from belligerent Protestants, for aggravating the violence. The Provisional IRA, which had split off from the official IRA on December 28, 1969, had become more combative. He asked: "Who's to know the next target on the Provisional list? Who's to know the reprisals won't strike where you are?" The good cheer that normally accompanied the season of gift-giving was hard to find. Ordinary routines—like going to a pub or a grocery store—were getting more dangerous. A security guard stopped Heaney's wife Marie in a department store, suspecting the clock she carried in her shopping bag was a bomb. A few days before she was interrogated, a bomb exploded close to where she was walking on University Road. In California, Heaney had a vision of "a wounded man falling" towards him "with his bloodied hands lifted;"[30] he now realized that his daydream might become a reality at any time.

In Londonderry/Derry on January 30, 1972, a march to protest the government's anti-Catholic policies ended with British soldiers firing at a crowd that approached barricades near the city square. Thirteen protestors were killed (some

were shot in the back) and a fourteenth died later. Numerous others were wounded. "Bloody Sunday," as the shooting came to be known, was the worst assault on civilians by the British military in the U.K. since the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. Deeply upset by what had happened, Heaney joined a march on February 6 in Newry, a city about 20 miles south of Lough Neagh, to express solidarity for the victims and contempt for the murderous soldiers.

The English prime minister in office during Bloody Sunday, Ted Heath, realized that he had to do something about the crisis. In a bold gesture, he suspended the Stormont government in March 1972, appointed William Whitelaw Secretary of State, and put the English government in charge of North Ireland. Whitelaw tried to be a peace-maker, but the violence continued. Bloody Friday—July 21, 1972—followed Bloody Sunday. On that day, the IRA detonated twenty-two bombs around Belfast during an eighty-minute period, killing nine and wounding 130. The bombings were among 1,300 carried out by the IRA in 1972. During the IRA's offensive, Catholics were often the victims. (The IRA would kill more Catholics than the Protestant paramilitary groups, security services, and the British Army combined.)

Heaney's year in California had given him a new perspective on Ulster and his job at Queen's University, and also a sense of what it was like to make "a solo run" in a new place. He told O'Driscoll in an interview: "The Berkeley experience meant that I was seeing . . . [my homeland]—and the university—with new eyes." [32] As bombings and shootings continued, and Heaney began to get death threats on the phone, he applied for a fellowship to work in England, thought about returning to Berkeley (he had an open-ended offer from the university), and scouted out places to live in the Republic of Ireland near his friend the painter Barrie Cooke. According to Heaney, Cooke, who had lived in the U.S. with his American mother and English father, transplanted "the Buddhist-oriented,

environmentally conscious culture of Californian poets such as Gary Snyder"[33] to the Irish countryside, where for a time he'd lived with no electricity or running water, fished and hunted for food, and pursued his career as an artist. When Heaney visited him in County Kilkenny in the early 1970s, Cooke encouraged Heaney to move to the Republic and let the politicians sort out the mess in Northern Ireland.

Cooke's close friend Ted Hughes also played a crucial role in convincing Heaney to move south. On March 19, 1972, Heaney wrote Hughes that his advice about resigning from Queen's "was one of the first things to bring the decision out of daydream into possibility." (Hughes had originally suggested that Heaney support his family by becoming a professional eel fisherman on Lough Neagh.) As luck would have it, Heaney heard about an opportunity to rent a stone cottage in the Wicklow Hills about 25 miles south of Dublin. On the same day he wrote Hughes that part of him was "sorry to leave Belfast at the moment of truth,"[34] he told his Faber editor Charles Monteith that he planned to go to Wicklow for a year, and maybe longer, if he could make a decent living as a freelance writer.

There were numerous reasons for Heaney's departure from Belfast. In his *Ploughshares* interview with James Randall, he explained that he resented "being interviewed as, more or less, a spokesman for the Catholic minority during this early stage of the Troubles." He also felt that his social and academic responsibilities were distracting him from his poetry:

> I didn't feel that my work was sufficiently the center of my life, so I decided I would resign; and I now realize that my age was the age that is probably crucial in everybody's life—around thirty-three. I was going through a sort of rite of passage. . . . I wanted to leave Belfast because I wanted to step out of the rhythms I had established; I wanted to be alone with myself.[35]

Heaney's rite of passage had started in California. His "solo run" to Wicklow was a recapitulation of his "solo run" to Berkeley. He was also returning to his rural roots. Like many other young Americans at the time, he was "getting back to nature." This may have been encouraged by his sojourn in California as well. The year before he arrived in Berkeley, Joni Mitchell had composed "Woodstock," the wildly popular anthem for the free-spirited, get-back-to-nature generation. She first sang it in September 1969 at the Big Sur Folk Festival on the California coast not far from Berkeley. Heaney no doubt heard it during his period of "westering."

In Mitchell's song, "a child of God" declares he's "going to camp out on the land" and set his "soul free." He repeats the refrain:

> We are stardust
> We are golden
> And we've got to get ourselves
> Back to the garden.

Heaney in "Westering: Easy Rider" had referred to a summer that had been "a free fall" and he'd "imagine[d] untroubled dust" on the moon rather than on the sun. It was obvious, though, that he too wanted to get back to an Edenic garden of love and peace. He may not have been an American poet, as my friend's supervisor had maintained in his joke, but he was significantly influenced—or "pollinated"—by his interactions with American culture.

Endnotes

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3. Heaney, letter to Michael and Edna Longley, Emory Univ., September 22, 1970.

4. Heaney, letter to Paul Muldoon, Emory Univ., September 30, 1970.
5. Heaney, Stations (Belfast, Ulsterman Publications, 1975) 3.
6. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 143.
7. letter to Heaney from Berkeley students, Emory Univ., circa 1971.
8. David Wyatt, letter to Henry Hart, private collection, March 11, 2009.
9. Heaney, letter to Paul Muldoon, Emory Univ., September 30, 1970.
10. Longley to Heaney, Emory Univ., January 8, 1971.
11. Heaney, letter to Paul Muldoon, Emory Univ., September 30 1970.
12. Heaney, "Views," *The Listener*, December 31, 1970, 903.
13. Bob Tracy, letter to Henry Hart, private collection, March 20, 2009.
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15. Bob Tracy, letter to Seamus Heaney, Emory Univ., November 4, 1972.
16. Heaney, letter to Michael Longley, Emory Univ., April 26, 1971.
17. Heaney, letter to Michael Longley, Emory Univ., April 26, 1971.
18. James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney," *Ploughshares*, No. 3, 1979, 16.
19. Robert Bly, *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990) 246–247.
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22. Jonathan Galassi, "Dealing with Tradition," *Poetry*,

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23. Heaney, letter to Michael Longley, Emory Univ., June 14, 1971.
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26. Heaney, "Turning Points," *The Age*, Melbourne, Australia, October 15, 1994, 1.
27. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 37.
28. Heaney, letter to James Simmons, Emory Univ., "Ulster Poetry Circus," circa 1971.
29. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 30.
30. Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 33.
31. Seamus Deane, letter to Seamus Heaney, Emory Univ., February 22, 1972.
32. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 148.
33. Heaney, "Total Absorption," *Barrie Cooke Profiles*, edited by John O'Regan (Oysterhaven: Gandon Editions, 1998) 5–7.
34. Heaney, letter to Ted Hughes, Emory Univ., March 19, 1972.
35. Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney, *Ploughshares*, 7–8.

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