

Seamus Heaney  
**Death of a  
Naturalist**

by Peter Cash



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**Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)**  
**A SHROPSHIRE LAD (1966)**

by  
**Peter Cash**

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**SCOPE OF TOPIC**

*DEATH OF A NATURALIST* is the collection of 34 poems with which Seamus Heaney (then aged 27) announced himself in 1966. Ten of these poems *sound* as if they have already been written by Ted Hughes (1930-1998) or Ted Walker (1934-2004). Habitually, the voice makes declarative statements in the present tense; no effect is more frequently audible than assonance, created by enthusiastic clusters of monosyllables. In his lucid study of Heaney's work, published in 1982, my Nottingham contemporary Blake Morrison explains: "It is as a twin to the early Ted Hughes, as a demolisher of the *Golden Treasury* treatment of nature, that he has found his way into the school and university syllabus." Blake Morrison does not think much of *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*: "at best apprentice work and at worst clumsy and derivative." For instance, he points out that Heaney's **Trout**, his attempt to emulate Ted Hughes' **Pike**, is an unintelligent mixture of metaphors and he concludes tellingly: "To compare his work with the work it borrows from is a damaging exercise." Accordingly, I shall concern myself here with ten poems from the collection which best account for its inclusion in the syllabus.

**NOTES**

**DIGGING**

In the first poem, Heaney finds in the literal activity of 'digging' a metaphor for the contrasting activity of writing: in other words, he finds in a form of manual labour a metaphor for his intellectual labour; he perceives in the physical exercise of digging a potato-patch a parallel with the mental exercise of writing a poem. In this imaginative equation, 'the squat pen' of Seamus Heaney (son and poet) replaces 'the spade' of Patrick Heaney (father and farmer); whereas his father Patrick literally unearths potatoes, Seamus himself metaphorically unearths memories of his childhood/truths about himself. Cf. **Personal Helicon**.

Like most of the poems in *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, **Digging** starts immediately out of Heaney's own remembered past: in particular, his memories of his own childhood spent in rural Derry. For the purposes of this poem, Heaney – now in his mid-twenties – sits at a desk in an upstairs room of the family home and, on hearing his father at work in the garden below, is filled with a nostalgic affection for his formative years:

“I look down  
Till his straining rump among the flower beds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.”

As he literally ‘looks down’ on his father, he is having a struggle with himself not to do so metaphorically: that is, not (ironically) to patronise him. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that he feels a kind of guilt at having failed to maintain the honourable tradition in which both his father and his grandfather had been content to work:

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

His expletive ‘By God’ seems designed to compensate for this feeling of guilt; it sounds as if he is using a colloquial language – approximate to the ‘rhythm’ of his father’s spade – in order to convince himself that he is equally down-to-earth and feels nothing but admiration for his honest, hard-working forefathers.

The earnest tone in which he speaks their language (‘just like his old man’) is meant to show just how much he wishes that he could follow in the familiar footsteps of these ‘old men’ and so keep up a family tradition. But that repetition of ‘old man’ protests rather too much; in the event, it expresses an over-eagerness to be like them: in short, an admiration which – when one considers what activities are being compared – seems extravagant. Lest he betray them, Heaney must prove to himself that he sees no moral distinction between their manual dexterity and his intellectual ability.

The function of the sixth verse is to insist even more heavily upon the grandeur of ‘digging’. Here, Heaney lionises his grandfather for his superlative achievements with a spade; as a manual worker, who ‘cut more turf in a day than any other man on Toner’s bog’, he was without peer. Which of course he would be, wouldn’t he? Given the limited prestige attached to Irish navvies, Heaney can hardly consign him to the ranks of turf-cutters; there is no kudos in being an ordinary digger. Consequently, he gives this impression of an all-Ireland hero who, on the one hand, uses his spade with the precision of a machine-tool (‘nicking and slicing neatly’) and, on the other, is endowed with immense physical strength (‘heaving sods over his shoulder’). Heaney voices this respect so that no one can be in any doubt about his veneration of the previous generations of his family.

Heaney’s next strategy is to make much of the physical sensations which his forefathers were able to enjoy; he employs synaesthesia (‘the cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slop of soggy peat’) in order to suggest the unparalleled richness of an experience which combines first touch with smell and then sound with feel. Such description urges on us the superior quality of this sensory experience and persuades him to put his own, more cerebral aspirations firmly in a subordinate place:

“But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.”

By the end of the poem, Heaney seems to feel that, if anyone in his family is morally inferior, then it is the clever writer; his emphatic placing of the conjunction ‘But’, together with the iambic certainty of the line, seeks to indicate that he can be only second best to ‘men like them’. Such self-abasement seems to verge on false modesty; such hero-worship risks over-compensation.

It is because he has grown up to share his elders’ work-ethic that Heaney is over-eager to identify with them. How, then, to resolve this tension between peat-cutter and poet? Even

though he does not dig 'the good turf', Heaney manages in the end to console himself with this poetic thought:

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

By way of meagre consolation, he picks up his pen and starts metaphorically to 'dig with it'. Whereas his ancestors dug peat-bogs literally, he – as a writer – can 'dig' metaphorically; whereas his father literally digs up potatoes, he labours metaphorically to unearth new truths. Although the tools of their trades are different, there is a mutual respect between generations; although there is a practical distinction between the manual worker and the clerical worker, between the blue and the white collar, Heaney manages to see both as labouring in the same tradition. He uses his imagination to construct a common genealogy to which both manual and mental dexterity can nobly belong.

### DEATH OF A NATURALIST

"The child's experience has affinities with the 'act of stealth' described in Book I of Wordsworth's **The Prelude**: as the boy Wordsworth receives Nature's retribution for his taking of the boat, so the boy Heaney connects his earlier taking of frogspawn with this noisy 'vengeance' of the adult frogs."

Blake Morrison (1982)

In *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, the title-poem of Seamus Heaney's first collection in 1966, his aim is to record a major change in his personal identity. **Death of a Naturalist** takes the shape of a metaphor: from the activities of his infancy, Heaney finds a metaphor for his state of innocence which he proceeds to extend in order to encompass his growth into adult sexual awareness. Heaney chooses his active interest in Nature Study: for this infant activity, the background is a flax-dam which – throughout the summer of 1950 – 'festered in the heart of the townland'. At the flax-dam, things are in an embryonic condition and being incubated by the 'daily' heat of 'the punishing sun':

"Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell."

The function of the gauze-image is to suggest the womb-like encasement of this breeding-ground in which 'dragon-flies, spotted butterflies' and 'best of all .... the warm thick slobber of frogspawn' can all be spotted by the young naturalist's microscopic eye. The onomatopoeia is significant: while his observations are innocent, the 'sound' that Nature makes – echoed by the nasal vowels of the verse – is 'delicate' and harmless. In this condition, he can continue to 'fill jampotfuls of the jellied specks' and to believe in the euphemistic account of sexual reproduction which he is given by his Primary School teacher. In Nature Study, Miss Walls –

"The daddy frog was called a bullfrog  
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog  
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was  
Frogspawn"

– evidently took a Jackanory approach to Biology and explained the facts of life in patronising tones which made them sound simple and innocuous; it is under this coded kind of tutelage ('croaked' for 'ejaculated') that Heaney, at the age of eleven, literally becomes an enthusiastic naturalist. Of course, such sweet and innocent enjoyment cannot last: meanwhile, back at the flax-dam, his embryonic masculinity is also being incubated.

In **Death of a Naturalist**, Heaney's aim is to dramatise this process of change; it is in the second half of the poem that he explains exactly how the metaphorical death of the naturalist in him took place. Naturally and inevitably, it was 'one hot day' – The Day of the Frogs – when the frogs altered character and 'invaded the flax-dam'. By 'a coarse croaking' which he 'had not heard before', the naturalist is scared to death:

"The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked  
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails."

As it happens, the frogs' mating season coincides with a surge in his sexual development. In order to illustrate the dramatic transition which he underwent, Heaney changes the sound of his verse. In the first half of the poem, the function of the onomatopoeia was to suggest the softness of innocence; in the second half of the poem, it is to suggest the harshness of experience: more precisely, the function of the gutturals and the plosives ('cocked on sods', 'the slap and plop were obscene threats') is to amplify the grenade-like explosion into adult sexual life of both male frog and male human being (whose voice has broken). On hearing the 'bass chorus'/the male-voice choir of bullfrogs, the eleven-year-old Heaney suffers a traumatic shock of recognition: that is, he is shocked out of childhood into adolescence. With this 'obscene threat' to his identity, he struggles to come to terms; by the sudden onset of puberty, he is disgusted ('heads farting') and 'sickened'. He turns and runs because – as Blake Morrison points out – he fears at first that Nature is intent on exacting retribution for his earlier crime against it in taking the frogspawn; in his adolescent confusion, this is how he makes sense not only of 'the angry frogs', but also of the physiological changes within himself.

### THE BARN

**The Barn**, the third poem in this collection, is the second poem in which Heaney reflects upon his boyhood and recollects his discovery that the adult world is a frightening place (where a range of phobias is just waiting to be awoken in him). As he explores the family farm in County Derry, so he explores the wider world and starts perceiving its potential dangers; it is in this sense that the death of the 'naturalist' [= the innocent boy] keeps taking place.

**The Barn** consists of five quatrains of iambic pentameter. Blake Morrison is not wrong to remark that Heaney is "distinctly unhappy in his use of iambic pentameters and quatrains, repeatedly wrenching rhythms and rhymes," for in this poem the poet preserves his contract with his alternate rhyme-scheme often by means of half-rhymes which do damage to the iambic rhythm.

In **The Barn**, Heaney imbues innocent objects with an air of menace. Outside, the boy inhabits a world on which the summer sunlight shines; once he sets foot inside the barn, he seems to enter an alternative dimension in which the sun does not shine and in which harmless farm-implements become deadly weapons:

The musty dark hoarded an armoury  
Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.

There is an oxymoronic reaction between the mundane gathering of the tools and the wild imagining of the boy: 'an armoury'. Consistently, the 'musty' barn ceases to be a farm building: as the boy depicts it, this out-house is not unlike a mediaeval stockade in which he struggles both to see properly ('no windows') and to breathe freely ('air-holes slit high in the gable'). It is very tempting to argue that he portrays himself as having entered a mythical underworld – except that the things gathered/stored there ("A scythe's edge, a clean spade, a pitch-fork's prongs") all remain commonplace and solid. In truth, it is only in his maturing imagination that they materialise in threatening forms, take on shapes which appear hostile

to him. Blake Morrison writes that “throughout *DEATH OF A NATURALIST* Heaney equates maturity (whether in blackberries, frogs or people) with corruption”. In this ‘chilly’ barn, the hoarded implements – imaginatively transformed into instruments of warfare – threaten to corrupt human flesh in a variety of ways: cut, chop, slice, pierce. Even if these tools do not come alive, there persists a good chance that the dank atmosphere will suffocate him:

“Then you felt cobwebs clogging up your lungs”.

Ultimately, the venturesome boy is afraid of claustrophobic incarceration in a subterranean chamber where he cannot breathe for the dense cobwebs. Such appears the danger of imminent asphyxiation that he re-surfaces ‘fast into the sunlit yard’ before it is too late.

Claustrophobia is not the only fear that the barn induces in the growing boy. At ‘nights’, he ventures there again and on his nocturnal escapades encounters both bats and owls. In the fourth quatrain, Heaney’s standard use of synecdoche (‘bright eyes stared’) gives us the ‘fierce, unblinking’ stare of the barn owls and prepares us for both the ornithophobia and the musophobia to which the vulnerable child finally confesses:

“The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff  
To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.  
I lay face-down to shun the fear above.  
The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.”

Whilst this quatrain (with its enjambment) is ‘clumsy’, the ideas are ‘derivative’. Given the composition-date of the poem, it is highly likely that it owes something not only to Winston Smith’s fear of rats in George Orwell’s **1984** (1948) but also to Daphne Du Maurier’s 1952 story **The Birds**, filmed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1963. Here, the ochlophobia of the fourth quatrain transforms itself into a more general fear of birds (which are ready to peck out his eyes) and expands to encompass a musophobic conviction that the barn accommodates rats as big as corn-sacks, rats which – according to his final simile – are also indiscriminately aggressive.

In **The Barn**, Heaney’s aim is to confirm that growing up is a terrifying experience. Growing up induces neurosis: in particular, familiar objects and creatures, previously friendly towards the boy, become animated and ferocious, realising his worst nightmares – quite literally, he becomes prone (‘face-down’) to attacks of paranoid apprehensiveness. To begin with, *DEATH OF A NATURALIST* (certainly, fourteen of the first 21 poems) busies itself with a narrative in which Heaney’s native world, on Mossbawn Farm, becomes suddenly unrecognisable and untrustworthy.

### **BLACKBERRY-PICKING**

In *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, Heaney registers his adolescent realisation that Nature, far from being innocent and idyllic, has a dark and disturbing side. In the title-poem, the boy Heaney becomes aware of the sex-life of the frog; in **Blackberry-Picking**, he monitors a similar process of recognition. During the first paragraph of half-rhyming couplets, his aim is to recapture the childhood excitement of blackberry-picking: innocently, he celebrates the wholesome ripeness of blackberries. His language –

“At first, just one, a glossy purple clot  
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot”

– insists upon the natural plenitude of ‘late August’; his metaphor ‘glossy purple clot’ and his simile ‘hard as a knot’ appeal with a physical vitality to the senses of sight and touch. The first verse-paragraph, then, records an observation: that is, it describes in detail the boy’s uncritical enjoyment of blackberry-picking.

Heaney's descriptive writing is colourful: here, it is especially adept at conveying the sensuous pleasure that children can take in their everyday experience. With appropriate gusto, he proceeds to record the sensational moment when the first blackberry burst upon his tongue:

"You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it  
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
Picking."

His vivid diction is energetic in suggesting that the 'sweet' blackberry-juice ('like thickened wine') contains Nature's life-blood; he compares the insatiable appetite that children can conceive for picking sweet blackberries to a blood-lust. He attributes their urge to keep on 'picking' to a primeval desire: once they have tasted blood, they cannot stop and fill 'milk-cans, pea-tins [and] jam-pots' with the 'big dark blobs'. Not for the first time, Heaney's insight into child psychology is strikingly accurate: for a short while, the boys, their 'palms sticky', enjoy seeing themselves as Viking raiders or serial killers of Bluebeard's fame.

Sadly, Heaney and his school-friends have been playing a game that ends in tears. During the second paragraph of iambic pentameters, his aim is to explain that their delight in 'the fresh berries' did not last: in fact, it ended in a shocking discovery. The language in which he describes the overnight transformation –

"But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
A rat-grey fungus, glutting our cache"

– conveys the boys' disgusted realisation that, far from being preserved in the bath, 'the sweet flesh would turn sour' and begin to smell ('stinking'); it is this acquired understanding [= of mortal flesh] that accounts for the melancholy tone of the verse. Heaney comprehends that the beautiful blackberries begin to go rotten almost as soon as they are picked. He feels cheated and registers a child-like protest:

"I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not."

It is significant that he 'always felt like crying': in particular, his oxymoronic statement that 'the lovely canfuls smelt of rot' laments his discovery that all things must pass/decay/die. The second verse-paragraph, then, records a sombre reflection: that is, it charts the boy's growing realisation that the luscious blackberries come to fruition *only in order to* decay and 'rot'. In the end, he resigns himself mournfully to this inevitability.

**Blackberry-Picking** provides a record of Heaney's adolescent coming to terms with the natural process of decay: in other words, it charts an experience of growing up. In the end, his blackberry-picking becomes a metaphor for this experience: in growing up, he must learn to accept that life is not sweet.

## THE EARLY PURGES

As the title suggests, **The Early Purges** is about a one-man pogrom: in this case, a Stalinesque slaughter of those creatures considered obstructive to the smooth running of an animal farm. During Heaney's youth on a farm in County Derry, cats and dogs were systematically put down in order to ensure that the regime of the yard was not interrupted:

"I was six when I first saw kittens drown."

The poem (which – ironically – has the dignified shape of a villanelle) charts the career of Heaney's attitude to the indiscriminate drowning of kittens and puppies. To begin with, the boy Heaney is horrified by the gruesome spectacle that these executions present:

"Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced  
Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead."

He is haunted by the 'frail metal sound' of their 'soft paws scraping' the inside of Dan Taggart's bucket. Both in appearance and in purpose, the water-pump begins to resemble a guillotine. The interest which he takes in

"watching the three sogged remains  
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung"

becomes morbid until an unexpected transition takes place and he forgets them. As the boy ages, as he goes on 'living', his attitude towards drowned kittens, snared rabbits and 'shot crows' hardens; his 'sentiments' about death toughen. By the end of the poem, he seems to have adopted an adult attitude towards the drowning of troublesome litters. He even talks Dan Taggart's language –

"And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown  
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups' "

– and seeks by the use of a swear-word to find the necessary bravado. At best, the boy Heaney has grown to appreciate that the putting down of puppies is expedient, a necessary evil; at worst, he has fallen for the propaganda with which Josef Stalin sought to justify his 'purges':

"It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town  
Where they consider death unnatural,  
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down."

In this last tercet, he has begun to talk in euphemistic tones without realising how hypocritical they are. Raised on an animal farm, the young Heaney has undergone an Orwellian indoctrination in adult attitudes. At the end of the poem, there is an ironic sense in which we feel that the boy was originally right to be squeamish; this, indeed, is the point of the poem.

## **FOLLOWER**

"Last scene of all .... is second childishness" – Shakespeare: **As You Like It** (Jaques, Act II Scene 7). In this poem, Heaney's interest is in the ironic effects of time upon the relationship between his father Patrick and himself: in particular, his aim is to illustrate the dramatic reversal of roles between his father and himself that the passage of time has brought about. To signify the universal application of this role-reversal, Heaney writes in ballad quatrains.

In this ballad, Heaney's strategy is to compose a memoir of his father in the mid-1940s when his manhood was in its prime. The first quatrain pays tribute both to his father's physical grace ('his shoulders globed like a full sail') and to his physical strength (shire-horses 'strained' at the mere click of his tongue); the second and third quatrains testify both to his manual dexterity (which could command a team 'with a single pluck of reins') and to his expertise as a ploughman ('an expert') whose trained 'eye' was adept at 'mapping the furrow exactly'. The function of these three quatrains is both to convey an impression of the ease with which Patrick Heaney could exercise physical control and to express his ungainly son's admiration of this mastery.

Out of this situation arises the double meaning of the title: for his son Seamus' ambition to be a metaphorical 'follower' in his father's footsteps, his awe-struck pursuit of his father up the ploughed land supplies a literal context. No wonder that Seamus wished to emulate such a man. No wonder that, being only small, he often 'stumbled' in the 'wake' of his father as he sailed up the diagonal furrow; a further measure of his father's prowess is that he would then take the burden of his little son 'on his back' as he continued to plough. Time, however, embarrasses this natural and laudable ambition 'to grow up and plough'/to follow in the footsteps of this role-model:

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

In those days, Seamus (aged five/six) was a little 'nuisance' who kept 'falling' over his own feet in his eager struggle to keep up with the team which he was literally following; because he kept falling over the shining sillion, he became a hindrance that his father – being a kind parent – learned to tolerate. With the passage of time, a dramatic transition has taken place: 'today', it is Patrick Heaney who – having gone into physical decline – is the one too clumsy and frail to keep up/ who – suffering from senile decay – 'keeps stumbling' behind his son. Heaney is no longer in his first childhood; but by poignant contrast, his father, now old and infirm, has entered his second ('second childishness'). In this final quatrain, Heaney brings this reversal to our attention by writing as if he and his father are still ploughing the land and leaving us to realise that they are not; in this changed context, the same words ('nuisance', 'tumbling' and of course 'follower' itself) take on a different and more sombre meaning .... Not least because we feel that Heaney does not have the patience with his 'stumbling' father that his father had with his stumbling son; rather than take pity on his geriatric father, Heaney – now that the burden is his – seems to wish that this irritating 'follower' could 'go away'.

### **MID-TERM BREAK**

Seamus Heaney is the eldest of nine children, one of whom – his four-year-old brother Christopher – died in a road-accident when Heaney himself was in his first term at St Columb's College in Derry. The occasion for the poem is Heaney's return 'home' for the funeral; ironically, this tragic home-coming constitutes his first 'mid-term break' from his new school. The irony is that this solemn occasion in October 1953 is nobody's idea of a 'break'.

Heaney's day begins in the 'college sick bay' where a bereaved brother listens to the bells which announce the beginnings and the ends of 'classes'. In his present state of mind, those 'bells' sound like the knells of church bells before a funeral. On his arrival home, Heaney encounters his father Patrick who is in tears ('my father crying'). He is taken aback by his father's lachrymose reaction to his brother's death: previously, his father had taken 'funerals in his stride'; now, he is reduced to tears, grief-stricken to such an extent that his eldest son can hardly recognise him. Only 'Big Jim Evans', resorting to the cliché that his brother's death 'was a hard blow', seems able to keep any composure.

Heaney contrasts the various reactions to the child's death. Whereas grown men cry or (like Jim Evans) are reduced to platitudes ('hard blow') the baby in the pram 'cooed and laughed', ironically indifferent to the fact that she too has lost a sibling. For his part, Heaney (an adolescent, a student) is embarrassed when members of the older generation attempt commiserate with him and to express their condolences in more adequate language ('sorry for my trouble'). He himself does not know how to respond to the variety of the adult actions around him: as the 'eldest', is it his responsibility to mourn more deeply than the others? Is his mother holding his hand 'in hers' to comfort him or herself? The outcome of this 'mid-term break' is Heaney's realisation that the respected elders in his life are themselves

suffering acute difficulty in finding appropriate reactions to the tragedy; neither in their gestures ('held my hand') nor in their words ('sorry for my trouble') are they at all comfortable. Aged fourteen, Heaney makes the discovery that grief can be intractable/that there are no ways to assuage it.

Heaney takes us through the stages that lead up to the funeral. The language in which he describes the arrival of his brother's body ('corpse, stanced and bandaged') is tough and uncompromising, describing the deceased child with a graphic realism. On the next morning, Heaney discovers how undertakers attempt to palliate the shock of this graphic spectacle: 'snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside'. It is as if the paraphernalia of the funeral parlour ('snowdrops and candles') can somehow dress up death in ways which will ease both the pain and the sense of loss. For a moment, Heaney's own image for his brother's fatal injury ('a poppy bruise') seems itself to be making death look flowery, pretty. It is only in his rhymed conclusion –

"No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year"

– that Heaney rejects the fanciful idea that his brother, like the cooing baby, is still 'in his cot' and registers that the little boy has been smacked on his 'left temple' by a 'bumper' and 'knocked' unceremoniously along the road. Heaney's iambic conclusion is poetic; its alliterative repetition of 'foot' confronts the grim fact that a four-year-old is in a coffin. It is this unsentimental ending to the poem which makes it powerful.

### **HONEYMOON FLIGHT**

In August 1965, Seamus Heaney married Marie Devlin: significantly, the dedication of *DEATH OF A NATURALIST* is *For Marie*. **Twice Shy**, the twenty-second poem in the collection, is the first of seven poems in which Heaney annotates this courtship; **Poem**, the twenty-fifth poem, is also specifically *For Marie*. These poems may be said to tally loosely with the theme of the collection in that they refer to the mature relationship of which the 'naturalist' has become capable. Foremost among them are **Honeymoon Flight** and **Scaffolding**.

In **Honeymoon Flight**, Heaney's aim is to imply a parallel between aeroplane-flight and marriage. For this reason, his opening description –

"Below, the patchwork earth, dark hems of hedge,  
The long grey tapes of road that bind and loose  
Villages and fields in casual marriage"

– is not purely descriptive: here, his artist's impression of the Irish countryside is designed to supply us with his first metaphor for the institution of 'marriage'. As Seamus and Marie fly off on their honeymoon, they see 'below' them a landscape which relates comfortingly to their new estate.

**Honeymoon Flight** is another poem that consists of four quatrains of iambic pentameter. Although Heaney's handling of the form is no more accomplished, this third quatrain –

"And launched right off the earth by force of fire  
We hang, miraculous, above the water,  
Dependent on the invisible air  
To keep us airborne and to bring us further"

– is memorable for Heaney's ability to compare the miracle of flight and the miracle of marriage; air-travel becomes his second metaphor for the equally 'miraculous' phenomenon

of marriage. By the organisation of his language, he suggests that these twin miracles rely equally upon a combination of the four elements: 'right off the earth', 'by force of fire', 'above the water', 'the invisible air'. In this equation, air and air-travel are seen as complementary: that is, 'dependent' upon each other in much the same way that husband and wife are; one needs the other in order to remain 'airborne' and make 'further' progress.

The common miracle, of course, is that both stay 'airborne' without any visible means of support; somehow, both manage to defy the law of gravity. When the aircraft on which the honeymooners are flying encounters some turbulence, Heaney can conveniently extend his metaphor:

"Travellers, at this point, can only trust."

The moral of the poem is that 'travellers' – whether through air or through life – can do no more than 'trust' each other.

### **SCAFFOLDING**

**Scaffolding** is a metaphysical conceit: that is, an extended metaphor in which Heaney compares building to marrying with an allegorical precision. Across five rhyming couplets, he sets out the precise correspondence between builders and lovers, between masonry and marriage:

"Masons, when they start upon a building,  
Are careful to test out the scaffolding".

Because the poem is one extended metaphor, Heaney can speak about 'a building' and a marriage in one and the same breath – not least because both structures may be said to remain upright for the same reason: namely, that the 'bridges' between the parts of a building and the partners in a marriage involve 'careful' construction-work. What works to the poem's advantage is that its central hypothesis –

"So *if*, my dear, there sometimes seem to be  
Old bridges breaking between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall  
Confident that we have built our wall"

- is self-evidently sound: once the scaffolding 'comes down'/is dismantled, the edifice [= the marriage] will be able to withstand all weathers [= all trials and tribulations]. Accordingly, Heaney feels entitled to the tone of the self-confidence that his final couplet exudes: if he is right, then his marriage to Marie, not unlike a building erected in 1965, will still be standing after 45+ years for all to see.

### **PERSONAL HELICON**

**Personal Helicon**, the thirty-fourth poem in *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, is the poem with which the collection concludes. With **Digging**, it book-ends the collection because Heaney is concerned in both poems with the craft of his own writing. The poem (which, significantly, is dedicated to fellow Irish poet Michael Longley) derives its title from Mount Helicon in Greece: according to Greek myth, there flows from this mountain the Hippocrene Spring (named after the winged horse, Pegasus) beside which the 7<sup>th</sup> century Greek poet Hesiod was originally inspired and into which the handsome youth Narcissus is said to have gazed and seen his own reflection. For these reasons, the spring became sacred to the Greek Muse of Lyric Poetry, Euterpe; its water was said to be a source of poetic inspiration. Conscious that Heaney is drawing upon this classical association, Blake Morrison reprimands him for

"narcissistic self-consciousness". On the other hand, it is well worth considering what 'personal' use Heaney makes of the connection:

"As a child, they could not keep me from wells  
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.  
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells  
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss."

He devotes so much energy to the description of wells that **Wells** would have made an equally appropriate title for the poem; what is more, his description of the wells (recorded in rugged iambic pentameters) is so unromantic that the writing sounds ironic at the expense of his own poetic development. Quite candidly, Heaney is admitting that the springs/the wells of his inspiration are to be found not on sunlit slopes, but in dark places which smell strongly of mildew ('fungus and dank moss'). Ireland's Hesiod looks not up a sunny mountain, but down a dismal well. Heaney's sources of inspiration are desert places; his 'personal Helicon' is most likely to be located outside a disused shed in County Derry.

From his childhood, Heaney has sensuous reminiscences of a number of wells: for instance, a deep 'one in a brickyard', 'a shallow one under a dry stone ditch' and a 'scaresome' one. In each case, Heaney assays the well for the clarity of the literal 'reflection' that he sees there: respectively, 'no reflection', 'a white face' and 'a rat'. To this extent, Heaney, 'as a child', was narcissistic. This said, the point of the final quatrain is to explain that, these days, following his acquisition of 'adult dignity', he is no longer interested in running his hands through 'soft mulch'; he has understandably grown out of the urge to cover his fingers in 'slime'. These days, he is interested in a less literal/far more philosophical kind of reflection. The final quatrain –

"Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing"

– explains that, as an adult poet, he is engaged in self-analysis. If he is 'to pry into roots', then they will not be the literal roots of the 'ferns and tall foxgloves' at the bottom of a well, but his metaphorical roots: that is, his family history (as in **Digging**). In short, Heaney's narcissism takes the form of the thirty-four poems which we have just read: in order to see himself, he looks not literally into dark wells, but into the resonant 'darkness' of his own past, his own being.

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