

## Seamus Heaney, “Summer 1969”

*Over four decades, I turned from teaching contemporary literature to teaching older literature, primarily from the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.*

*Partly, it was because ‘contemporary’ works kept coming out, and it was hard to keep up when the ‘field’ was constantly changing.*

*More importantly: as crucial as it is to get a sense of perspective on our own times, it is also immensely difficult and at times even impossible. The most important Romantic poet? Wordsworth. The greatest second-generation Romantic? Keats. The most important poets in English of mid- and later nineteenth century? Whitman and Dickinson. The most important poets of modernism writing in English? Yeats, Williams, Eliot, Stevens, maybe Frost. The most important poets of the next generation? Auden and Bishop. The most important poets of the post-war era? Lowell and Plath.*

*See? It’s easy. And even if some might disagree, the disagreements can readily be accommodated.*

*But the best or most important poet of our times? Hard to say.*

*Well, not so hard. The best English-language poet of our times, one who has just recently died, is Seamus Heaney. (Though the fact that he is dead means he is not entirely ‘of our time.’) The reason I can state that so confidently is that he bestrode the English-speaking world like a colossus. Heaney’s command of language, his ability to speak to us about important things, was to my mind unparalleled, unequaled.*

*So it is probably no wonder that I eventually decided to write about a poem of Heaney’s. I used to teach him regularly, focusing on an astonishing book entitled Station Island. After Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem,” I think it the richest poetic sequence of the twentieth century, though at the back of my mind a re-reckoning with T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets hovers in the future.*

*Like Akhmatova, unlike Eliot, Heaney writes directly about the political catastrophes of an exceedingly violent century. For Akhmatova, it was the hard grasp of Stalinism, of the Gulag. For Heaney, it was the ever-present violence which resulted from British (and Protestant) oppression of the large Catholic population of Northern Ireland. “The Troubles,” as the Catholics there called it.*

*But with Heaney, unlike Akhmatova, the relation between politics and violence was not a clear matter, nor did he find clarity in responding to the questions of how to respond to violence, to politics, to the crises of twentieth and twenty-first century life. We will see this in the poem*

which follows, "Summer 1969." No one is a better guide than Heaney to the predicaments which face an ethical man or woman in our post-modern world.

The north of Ireland presents us, as readers, with an archetypal situation for our times, one which the American poet Robert Lowell foresaw in 1977 in the final lines of his "Waking Early Sunday Morning." "Peace to our children when they fall/in small war on the heel of small/war" he wrote:

Pity the planet, all joy gone  
from this sweet volcanic cone;  
peace to our children when they fall  
in small war on the heel of small  
war--until the end of time  
to police the earth, a ghost  
orbiting forever lost  
in our monotonous sublime.

*What to do about 'small wars'? How to respond to the need for liberation? What to think about violence in the service of a larger cause? How to be a citizen in a time when the nation is increasingly separate from 'the individual'? Heaney addresses these questions. That he does not come up with answers is part of his exceptional honesty and courage. He, as we shall see, valued the courage of the painter Goya, Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. Courage, not answers, is what he finally values. (Perhaps Heaney is no different from Akhmatova? What else can one do in the face of catastrophe but be unflinching and courageous?)*

*I met Heaney several times. He was unpretentious, unimpressed with his literary self, accessible. In his work, despite his great gifts as a poet, he remains "a man speaking to men," which is how Wordsworth defined the poet, and he is always, everywhere, determined to remind us that his own person and history and problems are not dissimilar to the situation of other men and women. In his poems we sense we encounter him, not a fictive Heaney. The connection between the self he presented to others and the voice of his poems seems remarkably strong.*

## **Singing School**

*Fair seedtime had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear;  
Much favoured in my birthplace, and no less  
In that beloved Vale to which, ere long,  
I was transplanted ...*

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, *The Prelude*

## **4. Summer 1969**

While the Constabulary covered the mob  
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering  
Only the bullying sun of Madrid.  
Each afternoon, in the casserole heat  
Of the flat, as I sweated my way through  
The life of Joyce, stinks from the fishmarket  
Rose like the reek off a flax-dam.  
At night on the balcony, gules of wine,  
A sense of children in their dark corners,  
Old women in black shawls near open windows,  
The air a canyon rivering in Spanish.  
We talked our way home over starlit plains  
Where patent leather of the Guardia Civil  
Gleamed like fish-bellies in flax-poisoned waters.

‘Go back,’ one said, ‘try to touch the people.’  
Another conjured Lorca from his hill.  
We sat through death-counts and bullfight reports  
On the television, celebrities  
Arrived from where the real thing still happened.

I retreated to the cool of the Prado.  
Goya’s ‘Shootings of the Third of May’  
Covered a wall—the thrown-up arms  
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted  
And knapsacked military, the efficient  
Rake of the fusillade. In the next room,  
His nightmares, grafted to the palace wall—  
Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking; Saturn  
Jewelled in the blood of his own children,  
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips  
Over the world. Also, that holmgang  
Where two berserks club each other to death  
For honour’s sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.  
He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished  
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.

The poems I have sent out have been, for the most part, deeply personal and lyrical. In my previous letter I discussed two poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, “We Real Cool” and “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock,” that were

more social: the first, a presentation of a segment of society that is not often overheard or even understood; the second, a meditation on a central historical and political event, the attempt to integrate the public schools in the South of the United States.

We each have our values. Mine, as regards poetry, include the willingness – not always easy to enact, even though it is easy to say – to accept poems as a legitimate avenue into lives and feelings and views that are not my own. And, equally important but in some opposition to the first, to give a sort of ‘priority of value’ to poems that move beyond the personal, without in any way divorcing themselves from the personal, into a larger realm, that of the political and consciously historical.

I thought to discuss two longer poems, among the greatest poems of the twentieth century, by what are arguably the two most important Russian poets of the twentieth century, Vladimir Mayakovksy and Anna Akhmatova. And I likely shall send out those poems – though Akhmatova’s is so long I may have second thoughts – in the near future<sup>1</sup>.

But first I want to look, together with you, at what I think as the most resonant of all the poems written by Seamus Heaney, the fourth section, “Summer 1969,” of his six-part sequence “Singing School.”

Heaney died earlier August 30, 2013. It was a great loss: in my view, Heaney was the greatest poet to write in the English language in the second half of the twentieth century. Irish (from the North of Ireland), Catholic, prolific, at ease with words in a way that few poets have ever been, he wrote of many things. But his central concern was Ireland, and his central preoccupation was with the experience of being an oppressed member of a colonized state. For England controlled, and still controls, Northern Ireland, and despite their being a sizable minority of the population, Catholics in the north of Ireland have been and still are oppressed. Second class citizens in their own homeland.

“Singing School,” the sequence, follows (as the epigraph indicates) in the footsteps of William Wordsworth’s great epic *The Prelude*. *The Prelude*, subtitled “Growth of a Poet’s Mind,” was composed between 1798 and 1805, although it was published only in 1850 after the poet’s death. Wordsworth, who had huge poetic ambitions, wanted to write a great contemporary epic. The hitch was, he was depressed and therefore unable to approach that task. How to commence?

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<sup>1</sup> A long Mayakovsky poem follows. I earlier had sent out, without commentary, a Mayakovksy poem which is perhaps not so polticial.

What subject to choose? Wordsworth, in an act which prefigures psychoanalysis, decided to go back to beginnings and explain, to himself and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “with better knowledge how the heart was framed/ Of him thou lovest.” And so his journey back to beginnings contains the lines Heaney uses as his epigraph: “Fair seedtime had my soul.”

But Wordsworth’s journey back to beginnings is no sentimental trip into a “fair” and lovely land. “I grew up/ Fostered alike by beauty and by fear,” he continues.

Heaney’s childhood trajectory is the same. Part one of the sequence is about how Heaney and his poet-friend Seamus Deane grew up in a culture – he speaks of a boarding school in Belfast – that denied him any legitimate access to writing poetry in English: his education was under the cultural auspices of a “ministry of fear.” Part two recounts the visit to Heaney’s father by a constable empowered collect taxes on agricultural crops: the constable who is the close-up embodiment of the British state which with its many mechanisms of power keeps the Irish Catholics of northern Ireland in a state of fear. Part three is a brief chronicle of a parade in which the might of the Protestants is on display. Part four, I shall discuss. Part five recognizes one of his “teachers,” the Irish poet Michael McLaverty, who “fostered me” even as his own “buckled self” (a reference to Hopkins’ “The Windhover”) is “obeisant to their pain,” the pain in Hopkins’ poems. The final poem in the sequence is about being in Ireland, deeply sad, “Neither internee nor informer,/An inner émigré” who nonetheless somehow misses out on the major event of his lifetime, the Catholic rebellion against British rule.

A poem in a sequence occurs in context, which is why I have summarized the other poems in “Singing School.” To my mind, the fourth poem in the sequence, “Summer 1969” is a marvel of a poem, one that addresses, head on, the relation of the personal and the political: ostensibly for the poet, but in a larger sense for all of us.

First, the temporal setting. The British army was sent to Northern Ireland in 1969 to ‘protect’ Catholics from abuse by the (Protestant) Royal Ulster Constabulary. After the heavy hand of the British served to further oppress the Catholic population, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) began a guerilla campaign to free Northern Ireland of British rule and its attendant Protestant hegemony over Catholics. Heaney’s poem is set in the summer of 1969, when the British troops first arrived and the Constabulary showed its opposition to any effort to ‘protect’ the Catholic minority.

While the Constabulary covered the mob  
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering  
Only the bullying sun of Madrid.

“The Falls” refers to Falls Road, which is heavily Catholic and abuts a heavily Protestant section of Belfast. It was here that the British troops, sent to protect Catholic civil rights, arrived, and here where the Ulster Constabulary supported a “mob” of Protestants who opposed the extension of such rights to Irish Catholics.

Heaney reveals in the opening lines that he is far away from what came to be known as ‘the Troubles.’ He is summering in Spain.

Each afternoon, in the casserole heat  
Of the flat, as I sweated my way through  
The life of Joyce, stinks from the fishmarket  
Rose like the reek off a flax-dam.  
At night on the balcony, gules of wine,  
A sense of children in their dark corners,  
Old women in black shawls near open windows,  
The air a canyon rivering in Spanish.

This poem is an anguished meditation on what it means to be away from where history, the history of his people, is being made. Far off from struggle. Heaney reads the huge and magisterial Ellman biography of Joyce while outside his apartment the atmosphere of Spain surrounds him: the fishmarket (whose odors, tellingly, remind him the smells of Ireland), wine (“gules” is, in the vocabulary of heraldry, the color red), “old women in black shawls,” the sounds of spoken Spanish everywhere. (Pretty wonderful description, isn’t it, of Spanish in the streets of the city, “the air a canyon rivering in Spanish”?) A flax dam<sup>2</sup> is not a dam, but rather a pond in which flax is ‘fermented’ so its strands can be used to make linen:

We talked our way home over starlit plains  
Where patent leather of the Guardia Civil  
Gleamed like fish-bellies in flax-poisoned waters.

Here, in the “casserole heat” of Spain, reading, drinking wine, surrounded by Iberian culture, Heaney walks at night with friends. The lines, if we pay attention

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<sup>2</sup> An Irish flax dam is the subject of a later, great poem by Heaney, [“The Death of a Naturalist”](#).

to them, are fraught with police presence (the Spanish police, the “Guardia Civil,” reawaken the memory of Ireland – that flax-dam which the smell of the fishmarket also recalled. ) Only now the Ireland he recalls is one of rotting fish, an Ireland where uniforms (the second poem of the sequence was, as I have mentioned, about an Irish constable) enforce British and Protestant rule. The rotten fish in the waters of Ireland also prefigure the last of Goya’s paintings referred to later in the poem, where two brothers beat each other, mindlessly, to death while sinking into a bog.

Franco’s police state – Franco was in power in Spain until his death in 1975 – and the destructive colonizing power in Northern Ireland are then linked in these lines, referring to his conversations with friends in Spain:

‘Go back,’ one said, ‘try to touch the people.’  
Another conjured Lorca from his hill.  
We sat through death-counts and bullfight reports  
On the television, celebrities  
Arrived from where the real thing still happened.

As they walk, as they drink wine in the evenings, Heaney and his friends talk about the relation between the poet and the history that is being made in Northern Ireland. One tells him to go back and be a poet for his Irish compatriots; another suggests the model of Federico Garcia Lorca, whose social concerns likely led to his execution by Nationalist forces at the start of the Spanish Civil War. In Franco’s Spain, as in much of the world, the struggle for justice is subsumed, although occasionally on television a ‘celebrity’ steps forward in the media – some figure such as those who struggle for civil liberties in Belfast, or such as Martin Luther King in America – “from where the real thing still happened.”

Before we leave these lines, as Heaney will leave his apartment and friends, make sure you note the passing reference to television newscasts. The numbers of the dead (a connection to Ireland) is laid against “bullfight reports.” At the end of the poem, imagery of the bullfight will come back with stunning power

Heaney does not want to go back to Ireland, to “where the real thing still happened.” He is in Spain to get away from the cold rain of Ireland, to move from Guinness to red wine, to be buffered by a language that is not his own and which protects him (except for those reports on television) from his own country and culture. Heaney leaves the safe confines of his daily life to go a seemingly even

more safe – distanced – place, Madrid’s famous Prado Museum to look at art. Art, though, will turn out to be far less safe than daily life.

I retreated to the cool of the Prado.

Thus the final long stanza of the poem commences by recounting how the poet retreats from the “bullying sun” of the streets into the cool of the great museum. We understand, I think, that he is also trying – trying – to retreat from life into art.

That retreat was, of course, prefigured by William Butler Yeats<sup>3</sup>. The critic Harold Bloom has pointed out that poets write with an ‘anxiety of influence.’ They are engaged with their strong predecessors, seeking a place from which to write that is their *own*, a place and space that is not already ‘occupied’ by the great writers who came before them. No aspiring poet wants to be a pale copy of someone who came before. The poet must carve out a space different from the space carved out by his or her forebears.

This poem, “Summer 1960,” is exactly this sort of attempt. ‘No, William Yeats,’ it exclaims, ‘I cannot walk in your footsteps. You got it wrong. There is no retreating into art. The greatest artists [this poem will proclaim] do not long for

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<sup>3</sup> Yeats: The retreat into art, difficult if not impossible, was the central subject of Heaney’s great and therefore at once guiding and frightening predecessor.

A modest digression which does not really digress: Yeats, Anglo-Irish in a time when a portion of Ireland, including many of Yeats’ best friends, was in rebellion against the British, wanted desperately to find a way to retreat from politics. Yeats tried art, he tried superiority to the political fanatics, and he tried to escape history by universalizing it into a grand theory that operated independently of human action. To his credit, Yeats’ struggle with politics and history was foregrounded in his work. He knew that out of the revolutionaries (whom he looked down on) “a terrible beauty is born.” He knew that in the tension between art and life, art sometimes wins – but not always. He constantly sought escape, as his late poem, “Politics” so eloquently illustrates:

#### **Politics**

How can I, that girl standing there,  
My attention fix  
On Roman or on Russian  
Or on Spanish politics?  
Yet here's a travelled man that knows  
What he talks about,  
And there's a politician  
That has read and thought,  
And maybe what they say is true  
Of war and war's alarms,  
But O that I were young again  
And held her in my arms!



retreat into youth and a woman's arms. The greatest artists' – ah, but let us return to the poem.

Heaney has retreated to the Prado. But there he finds none of the escape he anticipated. He immediately encounters what he sought to evade.

I retreated to the cool of the Prado.  
Goya's 'Shootings of the Third of May'  
Covered a wall—the thrown-up arms  
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted  
And knapsacked military, the efficient  
Rake of the fusillade.

In the Prado, Francisco Goya's great painting, a more than eloquent outcry against the tyranny of an imperial power<sup>4</sup>, confronts Heaney.



In the 'Shootings of the Third of May' the white-shirted peasant is helpless, wide-eyed, cognizant of what is about to happen because three of his dead, bloodied compatriots are at his feet. Other compatriots indicate the horror: they can neither watch nor hear what is about to transpire, covering their eyes and their ears. Two of them want to resist, one with raised fist, one with both fists in front of him. Another is speechless, his hands before his mouth. Others look downward in despair. The firing squad looks like a machine, their postures exactly similar to one another, their rifles aligned in a level plane that is about to issue in a fusillade. The soldiers are uniformed ("the helmeted/And knapsacked military"), their hats,

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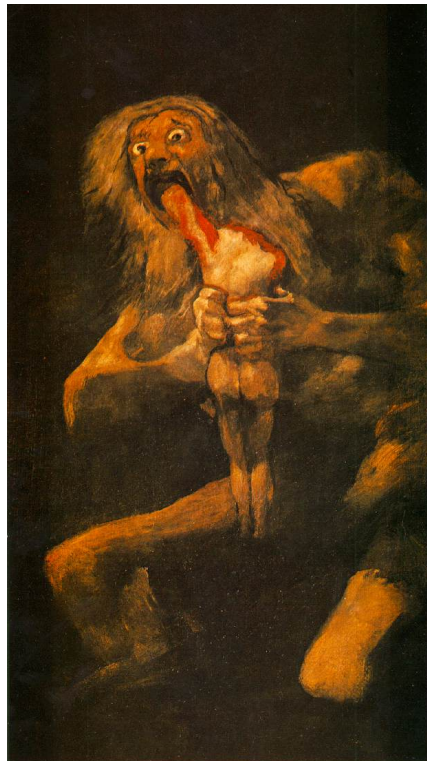
<sup>4</sup> Napoleon had invaded Spain. Goya's painting shows the harsh penalty for those who resisted his invasion: death by firing squad, the resisters powerlessness before military might.

coats, scabbarded swords so similar that each is turned into a part of a faceless whole: for though we see the lit face of the white-shirted peasant, and some of his fellows, we do not see a single soldier's face.

The tension – executioners and victims confronting one another – is remarkable. There is, in this painting, no Yeatsian escape, no “O that I were young again/And held her in my arms!” There is no place of retreat or evasion in this painting. The horror of engagement, of the powerless set upon by an authority that enforces its power through the barrels of guns, is inescapable. “The efficient rake of the fusillade.”

Oh, there is truly no escape from “the real thing,” for as Heaney leaves (flees?) this gallery he encounters more of Goya's paintings.

In the next room,  
His nightmares, grafted to the palace wall—  
Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking; Saturn  
Jewelled in the blood of his own children,  
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips  
Over the world.



The painting above is “Saturn Devouring his Son.” It is an outcry against the cruelty with which creatures – divine but more particularly human – devour their own: not just their own species, but their own offspring. And ‘devour’ is the operative term: Saturn is eating his own child: having eaten his head and one arm, he is now mutilating the second arm<sup>5</sup>.

Goya’s “nightmares” are both dark dreams and a savagely realistic<sup>6</sup>. There is no doubt, in this poem, that the paintings stun Heaney, and overwhelm him.

Nor can there be any doubt that the painting which speaks to him most directly is the last one he cites: he gives it an entire sentence, and describes it more fully than any of the other paintings he refers to after his first encounter with the “Shooting of the Third of May”:

Also, that holmgang  
Where two berserks club each other to death  
For honour’s sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

First, vocabulary. A ‘holmgang’ was a medieval form of duel. ‘Greaved’ refers to armor of the lower leg, although the combatants in the painting are so deep into the bog that the greaves are not seen and must be imagined. Probably, they are symbolic and not actual: the men are sheathed in a sense of righteousness which is meant to protect them from the murderous folly in which they are engaged.

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<sup>5</sup> Having recently reread Homer’s *Odyssey*, it seems to me that Goya’s imagery draws upon Homer’s story of the Cyclops Polyphemus devouring Odysseus’ men, two at a time. True, Goya’s image of Saturn is two-eyed. But one recalls that Polyphemus was fathered by the God Poseidon, and that the Cyclops were instrumental in the age of Saturn, having helped Zeus overthrow the Titans, and in particular their leader Kronos – father of Zeus. Saturn is the Roman name of Kronos.

<sup>6</sup> They portray with great both the horrors men inflict upon one another (thus, realistic) while they also use imagery that cannot be found in courage the actual details of the ‘real’ world.

Goya’s “[The Disasters of War](#),” a series of 80 prints, mostly etchings, is the most sustained and outraged indictment of war and the catastrophes it visits on human beings and their spiritual selves that has ever been created. These prints are, unlike some of the paintings, ‘realistic’ in their attentiveness to actual detail,. For those interested, the series can be seen online. On the computer screen is not like seeing the real thing, but then, the web can take us places that time and space preclude us from going at any given moment...

The paintings in the Prado echo, and in the case of the “Saturn” painting, go beyond the prints I have just referred to. I suspect, having seen the prints in their actual form but unfortunately not the paintings, that the large scale and the use of color has an impact more immediate than the overpowering accumulation of the “Disasters” prints with their astonishing horrors.



The parallels to Northern Ireland are hard to miss. In “Two Men with Cudgels” the two men, in appearance similar, are trying to beat each other to death. They are crazed – “berserks” is the term Heaney uses – in pursuit of “honour.” A word which, in this context, is certainly meant ironically. Nothing seems at stake here but for each to destroy the other. For what? “Honour.” Right: that justifies exactly nothing. They are in a muddy swamp (the “bog”) and the comma and the rhythm of the line emphasize what is, in actuality and somehow unbeknownst to the two combatants in their rage at one another, they are “sinking.” “For honour’s sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.”

At this point, we arrive at the poem’s conclusion, a final couplet which presents us with what I think are among the greatest lines anyone has ever written. We recall in that the opening stanza of the poem Heaney presented himself as bookish, imbibing and walking with friends, and then seeking retreat from the “bullying sun” in “the cool of the Prado.”

What he discovers in Goya’s paintings, which he cannot avoid even though he seeks a “retreat,” is that we must face up to history. The bullfight, which we encountered only momentarily in the middle stanza in the mention that “we sat through...bullfight reports,” returns in the final line as metaphor.

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished  
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.

Whew. Goya, despite the artistry of which he is capable, paints not as we imagine painters paint, with his fingers and wrists, but by bringing his body to the work. “He painted with his fists and elbows” – we are back in some fashion to the two figures to the left of the man with upraised arms who is about to be killed by the firing squad in “Shootings of the Third of May.” There, if we look closely, we see the pugilistic stance of the man on the left with downward facing fists and

beside him the upraised clenched hand of his comrade<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps they are the only proper response to the outrages of history.

Before we move on to the final line, I want to focus once more on how stunning the penultimate line is. “He painted with his fists and elbows.” It is, of course, not possible to paint this way (unless one is an abstract expressionist) yet we know exactly what Heaney means. Goya does not accept the world as given, nor does he “retreat” into some world of finely made art. He will engage history with his entire bodily being.

More. In the poem’s final line, Goya is portrayed as a matador, not retreating from violence and the difficult world, but urging the world to come right at him. He “flourished/The stained cape of his heart as history charged.” Unafraid of the world and its terrifying destructiveness, Goya puts his heart in front of him, “flourishing” it to urge history to charge directly at him and into his painting. I love the “*stained* cape of his heart:” that word, “stained,” indicates fully that Goya will not be, has not been, untouched by the pain and difficulty of life and of human history<sup>8</sup>.

In the poem, Heaney presents us with a situation – he, far from “where the real thing still happened,” working on his poetry while having retreated into foreign travel, big books, wine, camaraderie, discussion – that is untenable, since ‘retreat’ and ‘art,’ while they seem compatible, are deeply antagonistic. Going to the Prado, his ultimate retreat from the “bullying sun” of the real world, is not the escape he had imagined, because in confronting Goya’s paintings he comes face to face with what an artist can be and what an artist can accomplish.

Did Heaney ever become the fully engaged artist Francisco Goya was? I think he did not. But out of his awareness that engagement is what art must strive after, out of his need to recognize the insufficiency of art when it is confronted by the demands of the living world, he makes his poems. If Heaney is ultimately not a bullfighter like Goya, neither does he long for escape like Yeats.

In this poem, despite his desire for retreat, Heaney chooses to “flourish the stained cape of his heart” before contemporary historical crisis and to allow us

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<sup>7</sup> However, these fists may be totally ineffective against the “helmeted and knapsacked military,” as ineffective as the outraged arms of the target of the firing squad

<sup>8</sup> The “stained” is also realistic, in that matadors water down their capes to give them weight, and the water attracts the dust of the bull ring. In addition, capes are reused, so the blood of former bullfights also stains them. Metaphorically, our hearts are stained by the difficult and often wounding experiences we encounter, as our actual hearts are reddened by the blood they continually pump.

watch as he tries to face up to that crisis. Out of his conflicting stances toward how to respond to history, he makes his poetry.