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Seamus Heaney: 01-26-1984

Seamus Heaney

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Heaney: Between my finger.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up 20 years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft against the inside knee was
levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep to scatter new
potatoes that we picked, loving their cool hardness in our hands.
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.
My grandfather cut more turf in a day than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle corked sloppily with paper.
He straightened up to drink it, then fell to right away nicking and
slicing neatly, heaving sods over his shoulder, going down and down for
the good turf.
Digging. The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slap of soggy
peat, the curt cuts of an edge through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb the squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

[Music]

Host: Brockport Writers Forum presents another in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries. Today, the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Here to introduce the participants and guest as today's program host, Gregory Fitzgerald, Department of English, State University of New York, College at Brockport.

Host: Welcome to the Writers Forum. I'm Gregory Fitzgerald and the guest of the forum is Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet about whom Robert Lowell, our own American poet has said that he is the best Irish poet since William Butler Yeats. With me today to interview Seamus Heaney is our own poet, William Heyen of the State University College at Brockport's Department of English, and Earl Ingersoll, our expert on Irish literature. Welcome to the Writers Forum. I'm going to ask you the first question, which is this, what is it like to be a Roman Catholic poet among a hostile environment in Ulster?

Heaney: Well, I think that melodramatizes it, Greg, if you don't mind me saying so.

Host: All right.

Heaney: I grew up in Ulster as a Catholic and in minority. And, of course, in general the political climate and the cultural climate was generally hostile to the kind of attitudes and values that I would have espoused. In other words, the official Ulster union as a culture was British and it refused the idea of an Irish dimension. On the other hand, there's a great comfort in being the opposed one, you know. There is a kind of paradoxical security in feeling that you are the ill done by group. It gives you a sense of something, slight readiness, you know.

Host: A little extra energy perhaps?

Heaney: A little extra energy perhaps. I mean they -- so that -- I think that [inaudible] the word Catholic, I've been thinking about this Roman Catholic port, you know. That's Dante Alighieri, rather than me. The Roman Catholic equals in Northern Ireland minority Irish, possibly Republican. So there's a nexus of values that are related to Irish politics in the world of Roman Catholic also. More and more actually, I am beginning to think that the Roman Catholic thing per se is strictly a theological word, mystery, consecration, the whole -- the whole religious mystery that was part of the world I grew up in. More and more I think that's probably valuable and precious and I've probably underrated how much it has influenced my attitude [inaudible]. The belief in words themselves that [inaudible] magical spar of a word, that was partly in the -- in the strict Catholic words of consecrations that we say at mass. And it was also in the inherited subcultural pagan Irish fear of the ord, you know. I mean, the kind of people I grew up among had a fear of saying bad things in case they would come true. There was always a denial made if you said something bad in case it would -- in case it would come true. So I don't know, I've rambled far from your first question but.

Host: Well, you know, to carry on what you've just been saying, there is this tradition in Ireland that some -- a poet may come along who will rhyme you to death.

Heaney: Yes, Spenser makes reference to that. And the old -- the old Irish bard within the Irish speaking [inaudible], I mean, we're talking now about a culture and a language and a tradition which I suppose received its death blow in the early 17th century with the flight of the Earls. At the time of the triumph of English literature, at the moment of English definition, of Spenser, Shakespeare, Raleigh, all those people. But Raleigh and Spenser were in Ireland. Raleigh as a soldier. He's one of those -- one of the poets I admire very much in the English tradition. You can feel -- but you can feel the soldiering in him, in the ruthlessness of his writing, I think. But Raleigh massacred people in Munster. Spenser was there as a civil servant in Spenser's book, as you know in the present state of Ireland, is -- recommends genocide basically. These people were there as representatives of [inaudible] civility and the Irish were speaking the Irish language. They were barbaric in [inaudible] sense of that word because the Greeks called people barbaric who didn't speak the Greek language, they made a different noise. And the English simply regarded them as barbaric. And, I mean, from 17th century on that whole Irish language system, culture, shape world picture has been -- has been systematically -- systematically, first of all by the English who wrote it, but then inevitably in just -- in an exhausted way eroded by the Irish themselves. And a lot of the effort, I think, in the last 100 years in Irish writing and in Irish politics and imagination has been in some way to heal as far as possible, or to cover over as far as possible, or to bring together what was there up to late medieval -- through late medieval times into Elizabethan times. That tradition died. How can we link in English as native Irish writers back into that? And, I mean, there was a lot of -- a lot of the effort of the Gaelic group. Earl would know more about this than I do.

Host: Well, don't you feel that in your own choice of using English rather than native Irish to write in that you're participating in this healing process that you were describing?

Heaney: Well, I mean, I speak -- I speak English. I spoke English from the cradle. English is my mother tongue. Yates once made a distinction, which is a fine one, he said Irish is my national language but English is my mother tongue. I think you write poetry of all things in your mother tongue. But, I mean, everybody in Ireland with the except of a few thousand people on the west coast speak English naturally from the cradle. Now, and I think a writer like Joyce and a writer like Yeats prove, you know, absolutely that there is no abdication from Irishness [phonetic], there's no reneging on your nativeness to use the English language. I mean Joyce and -- Joyce's achievement in one way can be regarded as a postcolonial act of revenge almost upon the English language for making him feel that he was inadequate at it. I mean, there's that wonderful, classical moment in the portrait of the artist where there's confusion over the word for a funnel, the -- remember the --

Host The tundish.

Heaney: Yes, the English -- the Englishmen calls it the tundish. And Stephen [inaudible] -- no, no, no, it's not the Englishmen. It's Stephen call it the tundish and the English Jesuit calls it the funnel. And there's this moment of prickly condescension. You know, where the Englishmen says to Stephen, oh tundish, oh that's a very interesting word tundish. And Stephen says it is the word we use in [inaudible] where the best English is spoken. But then he thinks in his head, the language we are speaking that is the English language. It is his before it is mine. I cannot speak or write his language without unrest of spirit. So you have that expression of linguistic inferiority complex, which is to do with history, it's to do with invasion, it's to do with colonialism, all that. So Stephen expresses that at that point through this wincing over a word. But, in fact, the most important thing comes later in the book when Stephen looks up the word tundish, which he uses as the inferior colonized word. And he says, I've looked up the word tundish, I find its English and good old English. He said, why the hell did they come here to teach us our own language [laughter]? And from that moment, I mean, the whole question of language is obliterated.

Heaney: Right.

Host: You begin by reading the poem Digging. I've never dug turf in that way but you make me feel the squelch and slap of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge through living roots. In your prose you use the phrase you use the origins of a poet's characteristic music. What kinds of things go into a poet's characteristic music? How does it?

Heaney: Well, I don't know.

Host How does it build?

Heaney: That's something that for a good while I was very, very involved in thinking about that. And part -- it is partly to do with what we have just been speaking of. One of the obsessions in Irish tradition over the last 100 years or so has been to define a note. Now, I think that can become problematic, it can become propagandistic, but it was also clearly an obsession within certain aspects of the American poetic tradition. How do we make our sound that is our sound and not the sound of English inherited poetic line? So thinking on those as it were, thinking on the question of national traditions, what's the Irish tradition versus the English tradition, and what's my voice rather than their voice, I came down to a very notion that it -- that you had to be faithful to the sound you made yourself, naturally within yourself, almost your dialect voice.

I don't necessarily mean dialect, core dialect, but your own -- your own intonation. And that -- it seems to me that poetry is linked very deeply to the melodies that lie below the common speech of a culture. I mean, you draw a line in the British Isles from say northeast England say somewhere up around north of [inaudible] maybe Northumberland, you cut down across Scotland and you even, well then you take in most of Ireland. South of that line grief may be expressed instinctively in one way, I don't know what way it is, but north of the line is expressed in grunt that goes something like [grunting]. I mean, the illiterate, the illiterate self-cries out in that rhythm. Now south of that line is a bit different, a bit different intonation. I believe that poetry has something to do with that first primal sound pattern, the message that comes out in the voice that is way back in the secret of the voice. So that's only my own little mythology of the thing. When you're writing a [inaudible] of course you don't know how you're measure -- how you're fitting that illiterate music to the literate line. And you shouldn't think too much about it either, I think. But definitely I recognize in say in Anglo-Saxon beat, in that thump and grunt of alliteration and stress lines, I recognize something more akin to where I came from and the sounds that I make naturally, to the illiterate voice that I have than I do in iambic pentameter, although I read the [inaudible] a lot myself.

Host: You've spoken about you've thought of your poems sometimes as having Irish vowels and English consonants.

Heaney: Yeah, yeah.

Host: Hopefully the poem would be the integrated experience.

Heaney: That's right. Well, you see, everything in a sense I was writing in those [inaudible] those come from about the early '70s and they go back to Greg's first question about Irish, English, Catholic, Protestant, unionist, nationalist. I mean, those dualities, I really want to marry them in a way that they don't matter anymore, they aren't a problem. But that's impossible to do that. But I got into the habit of thinking in twos, you know, there's this kind of poet, there's. I mean, I know the English tradition and there's another part of me that is out of -- out of someplace completely different, so that's [inaudible] the vowels and the consonants. And to me the consonants are more dominant, you know. They're kind of military kind of presence in the word and the vowel is the shrinking secrets end.

Host: The consonants of the [inaudible] then.

Heaney: Yes, that's right, sloped arms of consonants.

Host: I'm going to take you back to the concern with yourself as an Irish poet and with Irish writers in this century. You know, we've -- your nation has produced a disproportionately large number of great writers. You're still a nation of 4 million or so, I think, and yet you produced men who are monuments in our literature. How do you explain that phenomenon, so many writers from a small country?

Heaney: Well, I don't know how to explain it. I mean, to go -- there are writers out of -- also out of two different traditions. I suppose Joyce, you see, is the first native Irish, Gael Catholic writer from that tradition. Yeats, wild, showoff taking the -- just keeping to that generation. They're from the Protestant descendants. They're very -- they, again, were a minority within English culture generally.

Host: Yes.

Heaney: They were self-conscious. They were -- the Anglo-Irish, even the within Ireland they were the bodies, they were the landlords, and absentee landlords, and they sold away the Irish parliament, the active union, and this, that, and the other. But nevertheless, they had a very conscious sense of themselves and they dramatized themselves as representatives of a tradition that was slightly more rakish and not English. So there was within the culture that produced them a self-dramatizing and, it wasn't contemptuous but there was a slight superiority and at the same time inferiority to the English center. So I think maybe Shaw and Wilde, see Wilde really is there to show off. I mean, Wilde is the master of winning the game. And he goes -- he goes to England and I mean he wins by words, by speech. Shaw also wins. But there's something -- there's something about punishing the English in both of those writers, you know. I mean, that's overstating it but Shaw and Wilde negotiate with the English culture on its own terms and play for it -- play it down against itself. Joyce is completely different. I mean, Joyce really refuses it. If you read Joyce's letters there's -- what's very thrilling is a kind of intellectual disdain, you know, for the whole -- for the whole contemporary English writing. You know, he's writing to [inaudible]. This is a fellow of 17, 18, 19's, hey. Good God George Meredith, you know, he's a writer? You know, they're terrible at, he can't write. Anything of Dante and he's -- as he said himself in the portrait, he's working out an aesthetic in terms of the monkish inheritance that he has with Dante and Aquinas and Aristotle and so on. But he is -- he is working an alternative system, I mean, to the Protestant humanist liberal English tradition. He refuses it and starts from his own nature and his own, as the English would see it, deprived situation, Catholic, you know, medieval. But he never relents and he, through force of genius, I mean, he -- why did it come about in Joyce? I mean, there is -- there's just that quality of genius, but there's also the neediness, the whole of the unexpressed world, the sub world of the -- that was in the head of the Irish Catholic soul. I mean, Joyce really opened it. He did so much it's almost impossible now to write anything new. You know, he covered like a vast factory ship moving over, you know, the whole bottom of the very psyche and [making noise with mouth] just sucking it all up, you know, and anybody who comes along now is really looking for a little tip that maybe was left [laughter].

Host: That's a great image.

Heaney: But also, I mean, I was saying the postcolonial thing, Finnegans Wake is finally an act of vengeance upon the man who said funnel. You know, it just takes -- make the English language self-conscious. It says, there's the old Indi European scene boys that you've forgotten. You know, and there's a linguistic punishment being meted out to the standard English almost in that. This is a very metaphorical way of talking about Joyce, but I think that there's something in it, you know, resentment of some kind at work.

Host: Well, essentially much of this has some kind of political cast to it, it seems to me. And, but one is always hearing negative things about political poetry in quotes, but I don't see how it's possible to be apolitical about anything of this sort. And I was looking at some of your poems about some of the unfortunate occurrences in Ulster and you -- the poet tries apparently to stand back a little bit from it, but one that struck as the poem moves on that you can't really divorce yourself from it altogether. Now, would you comment on that?

Heaney: Well, I love, there's a -- there's a quotation which I have been reaching for like a life belt when I'm in situations like this. It comes from this Polish poet I mentioned last night, Czeslaw Milosz, who has gone through it all. You know, he was in -- he was native Lithuania and then it was kind of sucked up and exhausted. And then he went to Germany -- you know, he was in Warsaw in the '30s. He was involved in Marxism, he survived the Nazi invasion, he survived the war. He became member of the -- well, I'm not sure he ever became a member of the party but he ended up working as a first secretary in Washington for the People's Republic of Poland after the war. But he was exposed to the 20th century desolations. He was also exposed to ideological choice and he was also constantly through all this a lyric poet with all the uncertainty. So he has written a couple of autobiographies, intellectual autobiographies. But the phrase that sums up, that strikes me as a recognition [inaudible] he says, describing one point in his [inaudible] he said, I was -- "I was caught between the contemplation of emotionless point and the command to participate actively in history." And I think every artist feels that at certain times. The pure serene, which really is the function of the artist to contemplate the emotionless point, there are moments in history when that seems like an affront to human life or human suffering around you. And what did you do during the last war, daddy? You know, I wrote Ulysses, Joyce says [laughter]. Joyce happens to be -- to be proved right. I mean, that is [inaudible] political book but. Of course I was brought up with an aesthetic, well, brought up with it is putting it too strongly, but at university in the '50s in Northern Ireland, it was essentially a British university, the Orthodoxy, which I supposed in some ways is still the Orthodoxy, is that committed writing, writing with a message is necessarily disabled and propagandist and without possible force. And I mean I accept that. On the other hand, I mean, having -- I think that there's nothing wrong with anger and resentment as a motive. I think there's a confusion between writing which has a message, which is a message coming from somewhere else, and the wound that a writer might bear within herself or himself coming out of a situation and expressing that wound in some way artistically. I think anger, political anger is all right in writing as long as you're sure it's your own anger. You know, as long as it belongs inwardly to you in the first places of your feeling. How you -- how you express that is another thing. I mean, it isn't necessary to express anger through invective or scolding, I mean, it can come out indirectly. It can come out as a -- as an intonation or as a cunning or something.

Host: Subject matter, content, theme, these things that seem to be overt are terribly important, but in the end, as you've said a couple of times last night, art in some way does seem to be about itself. And it's about -- it's about the human heart and conflict with itself as Faulkner said, and it's the music that subsumes these other things finally, isn't it?

Heaney: Well, I think that's beautifully said. I mean, that is true. And, of course, what we try to do is to subvert the Orthodoxies. I mean, there are several Orthodoxies [inaudible] you shouldn't be writing this kind of poem, and that's the kind of poem that for some perverse reason you want to have a go at. I mean, I have written this long, heavy, thumping narrative thing about the pilgrimage, locked out pilgrimage. I read a piece out of it last night about the man who comes and tells a story. And, you know, people say to me, this isn't you, you know. You're very good at rich vowel sounds. This is so -- this is not you. And in

some ways that perversity you want -- you want to be able to do things that aren't you. You want to do more. There is a -- there is a problem also, I think, with subject matter and with themes which you -- which you have discovered and you recognize to be the proper ones for yourself. Then if you continue within the garden, which you have plucked out of the wilderness, you begin gardening your own patch in it and it's no longer pioneering, it's something -- there's something maybe perfect about it. But it's -- I mean, you can perfect certain things within the themes that you have established. But there's some kind of excitement and larger work stops happening then. Well you know all these problems yourselves, Bill, but the question of subject matter is an unfashionable word nowadays. I mean, but I think it's one of the -- it's one of the great -- one of the great gifts of an artist to know what the right subject, you know, I mean, when [inaudible] you know, militant or which is the right subject, there's going to be [inaudible] going to be Heaven, or it's going to be whatever. The right subject draws it out of you.

Host: Well you seem to have -- your subject matter seems to have begun in the earth. I notice that very much, especially about the early poetry to [inaudible] into the dark, full of these rich, earthy images of land, sea, sky, swamp, bog, and the like.

Heaney: Well that was partly through reading and partly just through inevitability. I mean, I just was -- that's all the experience I had really, the experience that was most generative in me and regenerative to go back was that childhood world. But there is that kind of [inaudible] given quality of your life which nobody can do much about, that's it. But then there's the kind of -- there are the things which enable that to come out or can make us signify, and that's usually other writers that you read. And the fact of the matter was when I started to write, I mean, I read Patrick Kavanagh, who is also an Irish poet of tremendous influence and significance, who comes out of a kind of hidden life that I came out of and expressed it and the great hunger. And reading Patrick Kavanagh to me wasn't like reading a book. You know, I wasn't putting on my good clothes and putting on my good manners and sitting down and reading a book. When I read this book I was reading my life, and this was a new excitement. And at the same time I came across some poems by Ted Hughes in the early '60s, which again seem to me to delve into a secret that I thought I only I knew about. I mean, I didn't realize that anybody in England, shall we say, knew about pigs that had been cut up and pegged apart and stripped and that anybody could use language with such relish anymore. Another thing that I had accepted and, you know, properly in my literary education was that the alienation, irony, disenchantment, post wasteland, all that, that was modern poetry, and I felt archaic with my liking for rich sounds and Hopkins. And there was some kind of permission given. I think that's what a writer really needs to some extent, the permission to go ahead with your own thing. And reading, as I say, Hughes and Kavanagh and other Irish like John Montague and Scottish poet like Norman McCaig, and them amplifying that into Frost and seeing different exemplars, the permission was given to go ahead with your own subject matter. And so I ended up bogging into that country.

Host: You said at some point that you came to Yeats late.

Heaney: Yeah.

Host: That you had read some of the early poems but that it wasn't until you had established your own style that you read Yeats more seriously. Well, in the sense that you were [inaudible] things.

Heaney: Well, that's absolutely true. I don't think Yeats had anything to do with my noises, you know. He wasn't an influence on the genesis of the sound of my writing. He couldn't have been for some reason. There's just something in his music that isn't -- I mean, I admire it. I mean, it's a wonderful, ringing classic, bare music, but it serves some tactical and so athletic. I mean, the kind of musics that assisted me were more brooding. I mean, they were more, in terms of rock formation they'd be sedimentary kind of sounds, whereas Yeats is much I think more igneous, you know, it's kind of hard. But I -- when I went to live in Wicklow, I was -- I resigned a job in a university in Belfast in '72, trying to commit myself as a writer, and I use that phrase, I didn't quite know what I wanted to do but I knew I wanted to find out what it was to be -- to expose yourself to your own inadequacies and your own challenge to be a poet. At that time I began reading Yeats in particular with a certain avidity, you know, eagerness to see how he conducted himself, how he negotiated the world. And, I mean, he's just awesome. I mean, you learn that narrative. I guess you have to be Yeats, you have to have all that energy, all that intelligence, all that stamina, not only to write poetry but to write plays, to move people along. He had a vision of how things should be in the society. And he had a vision of how things were in the metaphysical or in the spirit life. And he had a vision of what he might try to do with a dramatic society, what he wanted to do with his plays. He could deal with public men. He could cut -- Yeats was very skillful and then he would say in times like these we have no gift to set a statesman right. I'll write a little poem, on being asked for a war poem during the 1914, '18 war. And it's often quoted as a poem -- as a corroboration of this opinion, that writers should have nothing to do with public causes, you know. But my God, if you look at Yeats' poetry, it's absolutely full of monumental statements about public things. What he was saying is, Dennis Donoghue points it out, right, we have no gift to talk to an English statesman. We can talk to [inaudible] we give them instructions, you know.

Host: You know, I was Richard Elman [assumed spelling] on Yeats the other day, and he says that Yeats is always at pains to tell the literal, unmasked truth about himself, that even when he's wearing masks he lets you know. On the other hand, Whitman makes believe he's telling you everything about himself but he's hiding a great deal. How about Heaney, what is your sense of your own poetry? Is there a lot of -- is there a lot of secret underneath and -- or are you pretty much open in a literal way --

Heaney: I think I'm open, but of course that could be self-deceptive.

Host: Yeah.

Heaney: I mean, I have thought of the poetry I've been writing on and off for the last few years as a kind of self-rebuke in public, you know, saying this is what I'm like and this is what the whole bloody place is like, you know. And that's the only public service I can do, is show my own meanness and weakness. But, of course, that may be an utterly self-deceptive business, you know.

Host: When you say that, and I'd like to hear you read another poem, when you say that I think of your poem Punishment in which you talk about yourself. I wonder if you'd talk about that poem a little bit maybe and read it. And there are those lines in it in which you said that you would have been awfully weak --

Heaney: Yes, that's right.

Host Back then.

Heaney: That's right. Behind this poem, to some extent there are Christ's words to the people around the woman taken in adultery where he says he who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone. No stones are thrown. And the subject, the direct subject of this poem called Punishment is -- well, there are two images in it. The subject is about what? Guilt, I suppose. The girl is dressed in the opening statement [inaudible] the focus of the poem onto the end is she's from the Iron Age and she was found naked and buried under stones and it would seem that she was an unfaithful young wife. She was punished with these rods that were cast across her. But I link her up as a -- as a betrayer with the girls who are tarred and feathered in [inaudible] in the -- in Belfast in the ghettos in [inaudible] Belfast. And I had really ambivalent feelings. I thought that was terrible, of course, a violation of the girls. But some, you know, unregenerate tribal part of me felt, or couldn't disassociate myself from the thought that they shouldn't have been out with those British soldiers anyway. I mean, I'm not saying that I felt it was right to tar and feather them, but deep down I had twisted feelings about the whole thing. And I felt at that time, and I felt since on other occasions, I felt that perhaps as a writer I should have made some public statement. I didn't make any public statement. I just chased my own worries and recognitions around the room of my own head and sat tongue-tied, and this is a rebuke to myself really for all that.

I can feel the tug of the halter at the nape of her neck, the wind on her naked front. It blows her nipples to amber beads, it shakes the frail rigging of her ribs. I can see her drowned body in the bog, the weighing stone, the floating rods and boughs. Under which at first she was a barked sapling that is dug up oak-bone, brain-firkin, her shaved head like a stubble of black corn, her blindfold a soiled bandage, her noose a ring to store the memories of love. Little adulteress, before they punished you, you were flaxen-haired, undernourished, and your tar-black face was beautiful. My poor scapegoat, I almost love you but would have cast, I know, the stones of silence. I am the artful voyeur of your brain's exposed and darkened combs, your muscles' webbing and all your numbered bones. I who have stood dumb when your betraying sisters, cauled in tar, wept by the railings, who would connive in civilized outrage yet understand the exact and tribal, intimate revenge.

Host: Well that beautiful poem, Punishment, can be found in this Poems 1965-1975, if anyone cares to look it up, but I like the way you bring together the two elements there, the modern and the -- and the ancient, which is what I think most of your poetry does anyway.

Heaney: I would hope so, yes.

Host There's another poem, and I can't remember the title at the moment, it may be Exposure in which you use the imagery of sparks and your fear that in blowing up these sparks that you may have missed the comet.

Heaney: Yes, that's round about the same time. It's a kind of self-worrying poem. It's about -- it's set at the time when we moved to Wicklow, which was leaving the north of Ireland. Now, I didn't leave the north of Ireland because of fear of the violence or anything. I mean, we lived in Belfast quite casually and normally through all that, bombs and explosions and [inaudible] checkpoints. Everybody was together in that. It wasn't that it was a sensitive sort of wising out of the intolerable.

I ended up in Wicklow on a personal quest for what it was to be a writer. It was an inner compass I was following. But, naturally being there Wicklow was 100 miles, 120, 130 miles I was from Belfast. A lot of people felt that I had let them down by leaving. In a situation like that people require solidarity. There's a kind of pride in being at the deprived center, you know.

Host: Yes.

Heaney: And if you leave it looks as if you've reneged on the on the deprivation and that you have become affected and want to be yourself, you know, which is kind of a sin in certain situations. Also, there are two different -- two different attitudes in Belfast. A lot of my friends were from the unionist imagination if you like, Michael Longley, Sir James Simmons, various other people, who had a kind of an investment in making it seem that Belfast and the north was just being disrupted a little bit, but there was nothing really changing. Everything was the same. Now, for the nationalists, the Catholic imagination to go back to the beginning, there was something slightly apocalyptic at that moment. History might begin, you know, at that moment. Certainly some big change that would initiate a new era might be possible. For the unionist Protestant imagination it was only an irritant, it was to be stopped and things would come back to normal. I mean, history has been established. Time is set up. The world is ratified for the unionists' imagination in the north. For -- the time has not come yet for the nationalist imagination. Ireland isn't united. Someday it will start. On a deep level, you know, at the level of structure of thinking and feeling, the Catholics, myself included, felt there was crisis there. And I was living down in Wicklow and I was away from the action. Some part of me knew that was perfectly all right, that, you know, you leave -- you leave and you know more about where you left, you know. You're really at the center the further away from it you move yourself. That poem was about, again, a search for certainty, the comet equaled the big flash of history of the north. And then I was in Wicklow with these little sparks of poems.

Host: May I say that I think that what you did when you went to Wicklow was join your other poets in a sort of exile from your homeland the way so many Irish poets have done historically. So in a sense you're fitting yourself into the tradition just the same even if you left.

Heaney: Well that's right. In fact, I use the phrase inner [inaudible] in that poem, an idea of exile in it all right.

Host: A [inaudible].

Heaney: A [inaudible], a Sweeney type really, yeah.

Host: Would you talk about your Sweeney poem that you're working on?

Heaney: Well, the Sweeney material, actually, when I went to Wicklow I was living among trees and bushes and some kind of primitive rejoicing occurred in me again, looking out a window at eye level with buds in the month of May. And, you know, some just pure delight was there. And this little Irish poem would -- in which the central figure is a wild man of the woods, came back to me, and I thought he could house a lot of my delight in these things. In 1984 in Ireland it may seem an odd destiny to be sitting praising buds with -- when people are bombing. But maybe Sweeney could praise buds. So in a sense I use the translation of Sweeney as a vehicle that could use some of the pleasures and some of the images and some of the nurture of living in the country in [inaudible]. So, I mean, my favorite section of it is the section [inaudible] the trees,

which I was mentioning last night, which came partly from living in the country in [inaudible], but also from the Irish itself.

Host: Could you give us a little more of the actual background of Sweeney and what it means to the Irish?

Heaney: Well, it doesn't, Sweeney is from a manuscript called [inaudible], the madness or the spasm of Sweeney. It's set in the seventh century, and some of the events are historical events around which the story occurs. The Battle of Moyry around 637 is a battle at which this King Sweeney appears. And at the battle he misbehaves himself and he is cursed by a saint, Saint Ronan. He has already been cursed by Ronan once before because the story begins dramatically and arbitrarily, Sweeney hears the ringing of the bell of the saint. He says, who's that? What's that? They say it's Ronan the Saint, he's making out a church in your land, he said. Sweeney was suddenly angered and went to hit -- went to go for the [inaudible]. His wife tried to restrain him. She held his cloak but the cloak fastener broke, Sweeney got away and landed naked with the [inaudible] and began to attack him. So it's a kind of primitive connection with the old Christian versus the old Celtic energies [clapping].

Host: I see.

Heaney: And from that -- from that on Sweeney is cursed, cursed, and then turned into a kind of feathered creature living in the trees.

Host: Well, that's a beautiful account. And I want to thank you very much for being the guest of the Writers Forum, Seamus Heaney. And thank you Earl Ingersoll and William Heyen.

Heaney: Thank you.

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