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Vol. VII, No. 4: A Raid Into Dark Corners: The Poems of Seamus Heaney

Benedict Kiely

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The Hollins Critic

Volume VII, No. 4

Hollins College, Virginia

October, 1970

A Raid Into Dark Corners: The Poems of Seamus Heaney



Seamus Heaney's native country, the country of his early years that has stamped several clear images on his poetry, begins not in Belfast City where he now lives but at the Bridge of Toome. That's where the lower Bann, a deep slow river, goes northward through water meadows out of Lough Neagh which is the largest lake in Britain or Ireland and thus reasonably easy to find on the map.

Rody McCorley, the patriot boy renowned in balladry, was hanged at the Bridge of Toome in 1798 and was attended on the scaffold by a priest called Devlin, which is a great name in those parts. Seamus Heaney married a girl

The Hollins Critic

EDITORS—John Rees Moore, George P. Garrett

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS—Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Daniel Hoffman, Howard Nemerov, Walter Sullivan, Benedict Kiely, Robert Scholes, R. H. W. Dillard, William Jay Smith, William Peden

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called Devlin from further south on the Tyrone side of the loughshore, from a place called Ardboe where there was an ancient monastic settlement and where there still stands a stone carven cross that is all of a thousand years of age. Another girl called Devlin, Bernadette from the nearby town of Cookstown, has become the first student protester to be elected to any legislative assembly, and the Mother of Parliaments at that; elected as a socialist by the votes mostly of the descendants of men who would have given their allegiance to the Great O'Neill in his wars against Elizabeth the First.

About fifteen years ago a priest called Devlin made the speech when a section of those voters raised a memorial to Rody, the rebel boy of 1798. About fifteen months ago the memorial was blown up by some unknowns, almost certainly descendants of the Scots and English planters, pushed in there by James I of England to grab and hold the lands of the people of the Great O'Neill.

That should be enough to show that this is an old twisted land. It has a deceptively quiet, slumbrous face but it is a land as thraven as the tough slow-spoken men it breeds. They cultivate small farms, deal in cattle, fish the lough, with baited lines often ten miles long, for the rich harvest of eels for the market in Billingsgate, London. They carry on their own war with the company who work the ell-weir at Toomebridge, and that war goes regularly to violence and the law-courts. For you might say that the claim to the ownership of the eels has been in dispute since the defeat of the Great O'Neill at the Battle of Kinsale.

To the west of the loughshore are the Sperrin mountains to which O'Neill withdrew between Kinsale and his final flight to Europe. Glanconkyne, where he stayed for a while, has a complicated mythology associated with the autumn festival of Lugh, the father, in the mythologies, of Cuchullain. The mountains are plentifully marked by pre-Celtic standing stones and stone circles.

North of the loughshore is the hump of Slemish mountain where, it is said, a slaveboy, who was afterwards to become Patrick the Christian apostle of Ireland, herded sheep.

By tradition, enamelled in the words of Thomas Moore, Lough Neagh is

a place for reflections and sunken shadowy images:

On Lough Neagh's banks, as the fisherman strays
In the clear, cool eve declining,
He sees the round towers of other days
In the waves beneath him shining.

The past has been profuse with images. But the coming and going of the eels, the dark secrecy of their lives, their nocturnal journeys from pond to river over wet grass, provide the poet with a symbol of the relentless continuity of the know of eternity. It is a long way from the round-tower, the wild harp of Erin to the dark, echoing wells, the an oratories, oppressive and cold with ancient search for meanings. Poetry, he has said, He remembers himself as a boy searching the corners of the farmhouse and its buildings, the priceless gold to the young imagination. The peatbog cutting deeper and deeper with that would burn brightest on the farmhouse which is at the bottom of a well. He looks out like the men of his family before him—had the roctoring and colourful life of the cattle-fairs and the clay-digging in a flower garden.

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It cuts of an edge
awaken in my head.
follow men like them.

d my thumb

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course onward to the lake.

The poet's eels are not simply eels. John Clare's harried and slaughtered badger was not just a badger.

*A Thoughtful
Way To
Remember
Your Friends
At Christmas...*

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The cold smell of potato mould, 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.

The seven poems, "A Lough Neagh Sequence," are to be found in his second collection: "Door Into The Dark." They have also been published separately by the Phoenix Pamphlet Poets Press, and to that separate publication he prefixes two interesting quotations from Francis Day's "The Fishes of Great Britain and Ireland," published in London in the 1880s.

This is the first:

At an early period in the summer it is an interesting sight (at the Cutts near Coleraine, on the lower Bann) to mark the thousands of young eels then ascending the stream. Hay ropes are suspended over rocky parts to aid them in overcoming such obstructions. At these places the river is black with the multitudes of young eels, about three or four inches long, all acting under that mysterious impulse that prompts them to push their course onward to the lake.

The poet's eels are not simply eels. John Clare's harried and slaughtered badger was not just a badger.

Last year so many of our subscribers took advantage of our Christmas offer, that we are repeating it this year.

For only \$2.00 (\$3.00 in Canada and elsewhere) we will send all five issues of *The Hollins Critic* for 1971 to anyone you designate, together with an attractive gift card. And . . .

If the recipient isn't already a Critic subscriber, we'll also send, at no additional cost, the December issue of *The Critic*.

Won't you, therefore, list the names and addresses of friends you'd like to have receive *The Hollins Critic* during 1971? And send them along, with a check for \$2 for each subscriber, in the attached self-addressed, postage-paid envelope?

The sequence moves from the myths of the lake, the virtue of the water that will harden wood into stone, the legend of the "town sunk beneath its water," the fable that the vast cavity or crater holding that water is a "scar left by the Isle of Man" when some Titan tossed his two-hands-full of earth against a foe and formed a new island; moves to the doom of the eels hooked on baited lines as long as eternity, or to a more modern and less dignified doom at the weirs where five hundred stone of eels can be lifted out in one go; moves to the fatalism of the men who fish for them and never learn to swim:

"The lough will claim a victim every year."

In one poem "Beyond Sargasso," that has the glistening muscular unity of the eel's body, the poet brings him, a hungry gland, from the utmost deeps to the belly of the familiar lake. By pointed lamplight in the loughshore fields the fishermen pluck the worms, "innocent ventilators of the ground," for bait. Then, with the gulls above them, an "umbrella of responsive acolytes," the fishermen conceal in the worms the murderous bouquet "of small hooks coiled in the stern." The lake is a hungry goddess that demands a life a year. The whole process is somewhere outside time, set going by something in the dark infinity beyond Sargasso:

And when did this begin?
This morning, last year, when the lough first spawned?
The crews will answer, 'Once the season's in.'

Quoting again from Francis Day:

Aristotle thought they (the eels) spring from mud . . . while Helmont gives the following curious recipe—'Cut up two turfs covered with May dew, and lay one upon the other, the grassy sides inwards, and then expose them to the heat of the sun; in a few hours there will spring up an infinite quantity of eels.'

Horse-hair from the tail of a stallion was asserted to be a never-failing source of young eels.

A common experiment with children in that part of the world: steeping a hair from a horse's tail in water overnight and hoping it would turn into an eel. Once, of a morning, my own research was rewarded with the sight of an elver, nimble in a baking-bowl of water where I had sunk the hair from the horse's tail. It was some time before I found out there was a practical joker, or an atheist, in the vicinity.

What were once the speculations of wise men groping for meanings remain as the fantasies of children which, in turn, shadow forth images of the life of the grown man. The little boy is told that unless his hair is finecombed the lice will coagulate and make a rope and drag him down to the water. Years afterwards, and in the seventh poem of the sequence, the grown man watches by night the mysterious movement of eels over wet grass, as Francis Day watched them on the hayropes at the Cutts near Coleraine, and sees there that inex-

Young Horse Breaking Loose a Chinese painting

The art is old
and these hands,
but neither does my thinking.
It is in my thoughts
that youth resides:
the spirit unbroken and breaking loose,
the traces broken and leaving no trace.

The thought is old
and these hopes,
but neither is my action.
It is through my hands
that sight is born:
the breaking of new ground,
the leaving of traces.

—ELLIOT ABHAU

orable continuity of life:

To stand
In one place as the field flowed
Past, a jellied road,
To watch the eels crossing land
Rewound his world's live girdle.
Phosphorescent, sinewed slime
Continued at his feet. Time
Confirmed the horrid cable.

I.

On the title-page of my copy of his first book, "Death of a Naturalist," Seamus Heaney has written: "Our poesy is as a gum which oozes from whence 'tis nourished." Poetry begins in the search in dark corners, by old well-sides, in the hammering forge with the smell of fire and old iron, in the love-bed. Poetry goes out to the world by way of the next door neighbour: in this case, and in Belfast City, a veteran of the Battle of Passchaendaele, who will march in Heaney's next book. "The metal and material of the outside world has to ring on the inner anvils of the brain."

Poetry begins in the childhood country with pastoral sights and sounds, the dead summer smells of hay, purring of milk in the milker's pail, water hens on the mossholes, the carpenter in his shop making a joint as the poet makes a rhyme; with the thatcher following his ancient and scarcely-surviving craft and coming to give new golden life to the farmouse roof.

He sees the thatcher as a musician, a fiddler testing the strings:

Next the bundled rods: hazel and willow
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.
It seems he spent the morning warming up.

He sees the thatcher as artist: writer, poet, storyteller: "finning down his world, handful by handful."

He sees him, in the end of all, as a magician, turning old straw to new gold: "And left them gaping at his Midas touch."

There's a whole rural culture, as old as measurement, in the poem, and an ancient magic.

Further on along the roadway from the farmhouse where he had watched the thatcher at work is the village of Castledawson where there was a man who once upon a time kept a bull who, like Squire Shandy's bull went about his business with a solemn face, but without the compulsory license and permission of the department, or ministry, of agriculture. The poet has written a poem about that bull, lawless love on four solid feet, and called the poem and the bull: "The Outlaw."

The door, unbolted, whacked back against the wall.
The illegal sire fumbled from his stall
Unhurried as an old steam engine shunting.
He circled snored and nosed. No hectic panting,
Just the unfussy ease of a good tradesman;
Then an awkward, unexpected jump, and
His knobbed forelegs straddling her flank,
He slammed life home, impassive as a tank

The act of life has been performed by Europa's lover. Then, "in his own time," the snorting god who has just broken the laws of man resumes "the dark, the straw." A poem to set a man wondering whether the Castledawson bull didn't actually know that his love-making was unlicensed, unblessed; and wondering, too, about other laws, licenses, and blessings. The "Outlaw" brings back to my mind a vision of the big bulls, terrifying as trumpeting elephants, that I saw some years ago in the big breeding-station attached to Mitchelstown Creamery in the County Cork. They were chained giants led, literally, by the nose, contributors to the process of artificial insemination and, by appearances, most irritably aware that civilization had played a trick on them. For them, cloistered involuntarily and without vows, no blazing hearth would burn nor busy housewife ply her evening care, nor would the children know their sire from the brown bull of Cooley. Modern life has tampered with the god and chained him by the nose.

The outlaw of Lough Neagh, in Heaney's poem, had a happier time. There is here an amiable bawdy acceptance of life, but also a knowledge of the conflict between law and love that is dealt with compassionately, tragically (as we shall see) in the poem about the unlicensed mother drowning her unwanted child in the saltwater where the River Erne meets the sea.

Seamus Heaney

Born in 1930 in County Derry, Ulster, near the Bridge of Toome, and raised on a farm there, Seamus Heaney has become one of Ireland's most important younger poets. His poems have gained an international audience, and he has been compared favorably with such diverse poets as Rolfe Humphries, Robert Graves and Ted Hughes. *The New Statesman* went so far as to call him a member of "the tribe of Ted." But Heaney's voice is distinctly his own, and his books have received almost unanimous praise. He now lives in Belfast where he is working on a new book.

II.

Not so long ago, when I was travelling with the poet on beyond Castledawson, on the road to a new house on a hill where his people now live, we overtook and gave a lift to a neighbour woman walking home from the village: on along narrowing country lanes to her house, with a clump of bushes to one side of it, and hidden in the bushes a fine example of an old windlass well—which Heaney was most anxious to show to me and to talk about. You could say that he has a thing about wells.

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 dark moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

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.

He called the poem "Personal Helicon," and dedicated it to a fellow-poet in Belfast, Michael Longley. Weed-grown well, the spade cutting the ground are transformed into living images. But the new house on the hill has all the windy freedom of the cattle-fairs that his father and his father's people followed—and much preferred to any close grappling and wrestling with the clay. They turned from the dark earth to bright airy places. The great fairs are gone, with the saga of the brown bull, into the past. He speaks to his father:

And watched you sadden when the fairs were stopped.
No room for dealers if the farmers shopped
Like housewives at an auction ring. Your stick
Was parked behind the door and stands there still.

The cattle-dealer's stick was his lance, his sabre, his staff of office. Civilization, law, has disarmed him, deprived him. Just as the law and modern laboratory methods now lead the roaring god by the nose. The open markets, with dung and the din of bargaining, and hand slapping, and drink to clinch the bargain have been replaced by roofed-in marts where matters are conducted in an orderly fashion by one auctioneer.

III.

Seamus Heaney says that the first poet who ever really spoke to him was Robert Frost, a strong voice speaking from the land north of Boston to a young Irish poet north of Bannfoot: which is a tiny place where the upper Bann empties itself into the southern shore of the big lake. Frost's wall, menaced by an undefined Something, may show up again in Heaney's poem: "Scaffolding." Masons spend so much time on the building of a scaffolding, so much care in testing it to see if it is secure. But when the wall is built "of sure and solid stone" the scaffolding is taken down:

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.

That is the confident note of the young dealer in love, walking out in the bright airy market. But on his first great love-journey, his honeymoon after other "mushroom loves already had puffed and burst in hate," he has, incidentally, the dark vision of the God that can be both builder and wrecker of walls.

Far from the flat loughshore and on the mountainous Dingle peninsula, which is one of those long arms that reach out from southwestern Ireland into the Atlantic, he walks into the early-Christian stone oratory of Gallarus. The experience seems to have meant a lot to him and its significance will increase, I feel, as his poetry, and the years, advance. It has linked itself with other moments of epiphany; with the smith or the poet hammering in the dark smithy, the forge red, the anvil horned like a unicorn, and the world on soft wheels

Books by Seamus Heaney

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRAMENTALITY OF MARRIAGE
FROM ANSELM OF LAON TO THOMAS AQUINAS

Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963. \$3.50.

DEATH OF A NATURALIST

London: Faber & Faber, 1966. 18s.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1966. \$3.75.

A LOUGH NEAGH SEQUENCE

London: Phoenix Pamphlet Poets Press, 1969. 3s.

DOOR INTO THE DARK

London: Faber & Faber, 1969. 15s.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1969. \$3.75.

passing at his door; with the bright laughing girls, defying the edict of the dark bishop, and coming like Aphrodite out of the Galway sea; with the lovers isolated on an island where rock and sea are eternally wedded in conflict. This is the poem: "In Gallarus Oratory."

You can still feel the community pack
This place: it's like going into a turfstack,
A core of old dark walled up with stone
A yard thick. When you're in it alone
You might have dropped, a reduced creature
To the heart of the globe. No worshipper
Would leap up to his God off this floor.

Founded there like heroes in a barrow
They sought themselves in the eye of their King
Under the black weight of their own breathing.
And how he smiled on them as out they came,
The sea a censor, and the grass a flame.

On a television talk, broadcast both from Belfast and Dublin, he has made his own interesting and revealing statement about the Gallarus experience, how he felt that if all churches were like this one, "congregations would feel the sense of God much more forcefully." That would seem to be an odd idea to such latter-day saints as prefer to worship God in the open-air, but Heaney does remember that the ancient Irish monks wrote some of the brightest, most observant and most delightful of the world's nature poetry; and his poem notes how, when the monks stepped out of the contemplative darkness, their God smiled on them in the swinging sea and the burning blades of grass. George Russell (AE) wrote: "I begin through the grass once again to be bound to the lord." The ancient Gaelic bardic poets, by the rules of their rigorous schools, found their theme and brooded on it, and in their minds made lines upon it,

all in the darkness of their stone or wooden sleeping-cells. The Wordsworthian tranquility, another after-dinner use for Cowper's sofa, seems a middle class compromise, yet Wordsworth had the same idea as ancient monks and bards. Heaney sees the monks emerging from their "hutch of holiness," experiencing the shock of daylight after the "compression and constriction" of such oratories: "Their vision was rinsed and renewed by their retreat out of the light."

An image closer to his own time and his own home place is the smith in the roadside smithy, outside the door of which old axles and iron hoops, discarded remnants of his craft, lie rusting. The door leads "into the dark" in which the hammer rings "short-pitched" on the anvil that is horned like the white, virgin, mythical animal and also solid like an altar on its black iron base. Off and on the smith leans out of the door, looks at the roadway, remembers that hooves once clattered there where traffic now goes "flashing in rows." For his image of the poet Heaney has not yet gone as far as Byzantium but to the smithy of his boyhood and to an Atlantic headland and, in time, back for fifteen hundred years. It may be of interest to see what he will find next year when he goes to California.

Since the time of the monks, he notes, the "circumstances have changed and writing is usually born today out of the dark active inner centre of the imagination. The metal and material of the outside world has to ring on the inner anvils of the brain: good writing, like good smithy work, is a compound of energy and artifice."

He says: "I think this notion of the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts, the hidden core of the self—this notion is the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet."

IV.

He talks about the cloud of unknowing, about what Patrick Kavanagh, an older Irish poet who died a few years ago, called the fog, "the fecund fog of unconsciousness." Kavanagh said that we have to shut our eyes to see our way to heaven. "What is faith, indeed, but a trust in the fog; who is God but the King of the Dark?"

What is acceptable in aesthetics may be a little off-putting in theology, if, that is, one at all desires a theology, and Heaney here may be a conscious victim of an Irish obsession which he can describe so well. For his childhood and adolescence, the equivalent of the dark Gallarus was the confessional, the Irish Catholic sense of sin, "a negative dark that presides in the Irish Christian consciousness," and, "the gloom, the constriction, the sense of guilt, the self-abasement." Every creed has its own creepy methods and for Irish writers, as witness O'Connor and O Faolain, the confessional, for facetious and other purposes, has, so to speak, paid its way. "Penance," says Heaney, "indeed was a sacrament that rinsed and renewed—you came out light-footed and alert as those monks—but although it did give a momentary release from guilt, it kept this sense of sin as inseparable from one's life as one's shadow."

Waking or sleeping that King of the Dark would be just as uneasy a companion, or a master, as the capricious Something that Alexander Kuprin sensed at work, a spirit neither of good nor of evil, just an irresponsible and sometimes nasty Sense of Humour, writing at its worst moments Newman's scroll of lamentation. In a poem, "Against Blinking" (not yet collected) Heaney meditates on the folk-belief that an ill-disposed person could, merely by looking at it, yield no butter. Is God the Blinker, Ku-

ney is perfectly aware with the strong, says in poetry, in talk and in comment. reflected in the scaresome well, the grain-e shadowy barn and added a terror to s, become as pitiful if not as endearing when the poet, in his advancement of nd sees the poor fellow in a drain, and Rat? Just so the ancient monks had to see the glory of the world; and the in beauty and pity. The sad unlicensed ay be the fearful obverse to the picture mitigated by human compassion. There ghing girls by the Galway sea.

ing he sees, "heads bow, trunks bend, " They are slaves at prayer before the amine can also be the god of fertility. form:

while wind dives
pace is a salvo,
the empty air.
nothing that we fear.

also not yet collected) he sits, perhaps ventional pious statue of St. Patrick, in er, herding the chagrined serpents out ensoring Irish bishop. The unfortunate vil. The crozier could also be the spade

1:
k
serpents,
ils flared

He has staked a cluster
One of which slithers
Its head up the staff.
Still from low swamps

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IV

He talks about the cloud of unknown older Irish poet who died a few years ago unconsciousness." Kavanagh said that we heaven. "What is faith, indeed, but a truth of the Dark?"

What is acceptable in aesthetics may that is, one at all desires a theology, and of an Irish obsession which he can descend adolescence, the equivalent of the dark Catholic sense of sin, "a negative dark unconsciousness," and, "the gloom, the constriction." Every creed has its own creepy man O'Connor and O Faolain, the confessor has, so to speak, paid its way. "Penance," indeed was a sacrament that rinsed and renewed—you came out light-footed and alert as those monks—but although it did give a momentary release from guilt, it kept this sense of sin as inseparable from one's life as one's shadow."

Waking or sleeping that King of the Dark would be just as uneasy a companion, or a master, as the capricious Something that Alexander Kuprin sensed at work, a spirit neither of good nor of evil, just an irresponsible and sometimes nasty Sense of Humour, writing at its worst moments Newman's scroll of lamentation. In a poem, "Against Blinking" (not yet collected) Heaney meditates on the folk-belief that an ill-disposed person could, merely by looking at it, "blink" a cow so that its milk would yield no butter. Is God the Blinker, Kuprin's law of logical absurdity?

Of all this, as I've indicated, Heaney is perfectly aware with the strong, balanced, humorous mind that he displays in poetry, in talk and in comment. The rat that slapped across his image reflected in the scaresome well, the grainbags with lugs that took rat-forms in the shadowy barn and added a terror to childhood, that dark oratory of past ages, become as pitiful if not as endearing as any sleekit, cowerin', timorous beastie when the poet, in his advancement of learning, walks the embankment path, and sees the poor fellow in a drain, and stares him out of countenance. Brother Rat? Just so the ancient monks had stepped out into a Franciscan brightness to see the glory of the world; and the law of logical absurdity could also result in beauty and pity. The sad unlicensed mother drowning her unwanted child may be the fearful obverse to the picture of the bawdy lawless bull, yet horror is mitigated by human compassion. There are also the lovers on the island, the laughing girls by the Galway sea.

Seeing labourers at the potato-digging he sees, "heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black Mother." They are slaves at prayer before the god of famine of 1847. But the god of famine can also be the god of fertility. The lovers on the island on a night of storm:

. Sit tight while wind dives
And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo,
We are bombarded by the empty air.
Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

In another recent poem, "Icon" (also not yet collected) he sits, perhaps kneels, in a church and looks at the conventional pious statue of St. Patrick, in full regimentals and complete with crozier, herding the chagrined serpents out of Ireland. There goes any thundering censoring Irish bishop. The unfortunate snakes could be the embodiment of all evil. The crozier could also be the spade digging for the sowing of the sense of sin:

Here is Patrick
Banishing the serpents,
The gold nostrils flared
On his crozier.

He has staked a cluster
One of which slithers
Its head up the staff.
Still from low swamps

And secret drains,
the drenched grasslands,
Luxuriant growths
Beside dunghills and wells

Their sphincters quietly
Rippling, snakes point
and pass to the sea.
Crusty with sand

They dirty and fatten
The lip of the wave.
The whole island
Writhes at the edges.

Here is Patrick
Ridding the country,
A celtic worm-clot
Paralyzed round his staff.

"Certain life forces," he comments, "have been paralyzed," and he reflects comically that because of the profound implications of this statue, there are people in Ireland who will never eat eels.

— BENEDICT KIELY

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