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FENTON'S WOODEN HORSE
HOW THE ENGLISH PRAISE THE IRISH

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In the eighth circle of Dante's Inferno there is a specific habitat for practitioners of a certain type of fraud. In this maleborge, or evil pouch, Dante the pilgrim discovers Master Adam, the counterfeiter of Florentine gold coins, bickering with Sinon, the Greek who persuaded the Trojans to open their gates to the enormous wooden horse the Greeks had constructed as supposed tribute to the besieged town. It was a difficult job, since Sinon had first to persuade the Trojans that he had sincerely abandoned the Greek army. We all know what happened to the Trojans (we are now aphoristically warned to be wary of Greeks bearing gifts), and Dante, in placing Sinon in the outermost niche in the circle of fraud, gives him his due. But what is one to do when the gift being offered is from the Professor of Poetry at Oxford to the Nobel Laureate of literature who, as it happens, was the previous occupant of his post?

In a recent essay entitled "The Orpheus of Ulster" in The New York Review of Books (July 11, 1996) James Fenton sets out to review three recent Heaney publications, The Redress of Poetry, the lectures Heaney gave when he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Crediting Poetry, the lecture he gave upon receipt of the Nobel prize, and The Spirit Level, Heaney's most recent volume of poems. The issues which Fenton chooses to focus on, however, have little to do with Heaney the poet. Instead, Fenton the Englishman takes it upon himself to defend, of all things, the Irishness of Seamus Heaney and Heaney's rightful place in the shifting

hierarchical sands of contemporary British poetry.

To do so, however, Fenton finds it necessary to rehearse every literary and political objection raised against Heaney's poetry since the publication of North in 1975, the volume which rocketed Heaney to international attention. In each case, Fenton takes the posture of the exasperated critic who, in the name of righting an obvious wrong, is forced to examine and almost refute each allegation, showing how the allegations, while having some merit in and of themselves, may even contradict one another. By essay's end, Fenton has recorded, as of course in all fairness he must, a great more about what is wrong with Heaney's poetry and politics than what is right with it. Fenton, however, finishes with a faint flourish for one of the poems in the new volume. Even here, alas, the eloquence expended on the single poem, placed in the context of the essay at large, smacks of a condescension which, given the national antagonisms he sets at play throughout the essay, one is tempted to describe as quintessentially English.

For openers, Fenton recalls the publication of Heaney's "An Open Letter," the 198-line verse letter (Field Day Pamphlet #2, 1983) objecting to his being labelled a British as opposed to an Irish poet in the Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry published the year before. The verse letter, which caused more smiles than anything else in the United States when it was reprinted in Harper's (March 1987), is something of a good-natured and good-humored reminder that Heaney

considered himself Irish, not British. At its most offensive, it might be seen as a reverse Irish joke, a funny reminder to those in power (at least in publishing) to review their premises.

Fenton, on the other hand, insists on a much more serious and literal reading. The poem is, he claims, a long-overdue righting of a terrible wrong. As he says, "Seamus Heaney exploded. He had had enough. He was not British, and he was fed up with being called British, or anything other than Irish." Still, while apparently applauding Heaney's principled stance in this now-solemnly principled poem, Fenton slips in a few razor slashes on the side, as in this explication of a passage he cites:

Heaney was unhappy with the Burns stanza he had chosen, which leads him into many awkwardnesses, as here where he seems to overlook the fact that there were also Gaels who made their last stand in Scotland. And do we imagine that, writing in prose, he would have distinguished Catholic from Protestant by calling one lot native and the other colon? It seems unlikely.

Again, while stoutly defending Heaney's right to speak as an individual, Fenton adds that the poem comes "close to flag-waving" (and that's a nationalist as opposed to a unionist flag) when Heaney reminds his reader that his passport is green and that "No glass of ours was ever raised/ To toast The Queen." For Fenton, the "vehemence of this refusal" has "an

aggressive Republican tone" which he notes with some relief Heaney modified considerably in his final lecture as Oxford professor three years ago.

One wonders why Fenton did not cite the stanza which follows the so-called vehement refusal, one which should have put his political and literary misgivings at ease:

No harm to her nor you who
deign

To God Bless her as sovereign,
Of crown and rose

Defied, displaced, would not
combine

What I'd espouse.

("An Open Letter," 85-90)

Be that as it may, Fenton, not letting the point or the poem go, flogs the expiring horse at several other points in the ostensibly laudatory essay. As he says, "Heaney was in a weak position, and knew it, which is one reason why "An Open Letter" is not a good poem (the other being that its versification is atrocious)." Still, Fenton adds with a burst of generosity, "'An Open Letter' was a poor poem, but an important event." Given Fenton's unwillingness to get the joke, one is left with the feeling that he might object to the contrived versification of a limerick.

This kind of commentary is puzzling in at least two respects. First, Fenton of all people should have been able to pick up on the political ironies and genial satire informing the poem. After all, a good portion of his own poetry is filled with irony and satire, and at times what starts out as high-camp high jinks lapses into cutting

ridicule. Consider this stanza from "Poem Against Catholics" which he co-authored with John Fuller:

"Not now," cries Mrs Macnamara,
 "later!"
When leapt on by her husband (what a
 beast).
"It says so on my Catholic calculator.
It also says so on my Catholic priest."
She'd do much better with a mortal
 coil
To spoil the child and spare the
 husband's rod.
Why don't they put a bill through in
 the Dail?
God we hate Catholics and their
 Catholic God.

The poem goes on to send up psychotic saints, Catholic confession, Anglicans ("High Anglo-Catholics"), and communion as cannibalism, all with undaunted irreverence and elaborately contorted rhyme. Fenton, the son of an Anglican vicar, can doubtless claim some kind of hereditary expertise in these matters. Still, while English critics were amused by the wit and irreverence (Ian Parker characterizes the collaborative poems as "rather donnish whimsical verse"), it's easy to imagine an Irish literary critic such as Seamus Deane reaching for a different set of adjectives. In any event, one would think that the strategies of "An Open Letter" would be right up Fenton's alley.

The second question that this commentary raises is its relevancy to Fenton's task at hand. Why would Fenton, in a review which sets out to address the recent publications of Heaney, spend over a third of his essay

selectively explicating a verse letter written 13 years ago and never collected in a volume? What American readers saw as a genial but well-deserved rejoinder to the condescending assumptions of British publishers has apparently simmered inside Fenton's head these past thirteen years (With Dante in the air, one is reminded of Heaney's version of the Ugolino section of The Inferno in which the Count gnaws away at the skull of the Archbishop as he recounts his tale).

Initially, it seems Fenton wishes to unsully the reputations of Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, the two editors of the anthology, to whom the verse letter was addressed and whom Heaney's poem made "look a little foolish." Blake Morrison in particular was one of Fenton's avid supporters in his election to the Oxford Professorship, comparing Fenton's poetry with that of Wilfred Owen and W. H. Auden. In addition, last year Penguin brought out a combined selection of poetry by Fenton, Morrison, and Kit Wright in their Modern Poets series, further linking the two.

As it happens, though, Fenton's defense of Morrison leads him to introduce a lengthy objection to Heaney's poetry which was lodged by A. Alvarez two years earlier than either the Motion/Morrison anthology or Heaney's subsequent verse-letter response. Morrison and Motion, in compiling their anthology, were hoping to indicate that British poetry had taken forms other than those Alvarez had promoted in his 1962 anthology The New Poetry. Morrison/Motion had held up Heaney as an example of these

new forms. Fenton goes on to quote at length from an 1980 Alvarez review of Heaney's Field Work, in which Alvarez indicts the admiration which many British critics have for Heaney's poetry as an indication of what is wrong with British culture. Heaney's poetry (at least back in 1980) illustrated a preference on the part of the British reading public for "safety, sweetness, and light" as opposed to the "whole, troubled exploratory thrust of modern poetry." The implication for Fenton from these passages (which must "have stuck in Heaney's craw," says Fenton) is that Heaney is simply "an Irish entertainer on the British cultural scene," [Fenton's phrase, not Alvarez's] and again Fenton speculates: "It must have been exasperating to Heaney."

What's going on here? Why is Fenton dealing with A. Alvarez and his comments on Heaney's Field Work 16 years ago in an essay which Fenton is supposedly devoting to Heaney's recent publications? I guess it would help to know that Fenton's never taken kindly to Alvarez's advocacy of the confessional/on the verge/intensely personal poetry associated with Robert Lowell, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath (Fenton's 1972 "Letter to John Fuller" is a merciless verse-letter mockery of Alvarez's criticism). And so one might assume that anything Alvarez rails against might find some favor with Fenton (and vice versa). But even here, Fenton gets it wrong. In light of the kind of poetry Alvarez had called for, Fenton says querulously, rather than dismiss Heaney as an entertainer, "One might have predicted that North would appeal to him." As it happened, though,

North did appeal to Alvarez, and appealed to him in the same essay review which Fenton cites to Heaney's disadvantage.

Here's what Alvarez says on that volume in the essay:

The exception is North, his fourth and best book, which opened with an imposing sequence of poems linking the grim Irish present with its even grimmer past of Norse invasions and ancient feuding. The tone was appropriately stern, but also distanced, the language spare, as though stripped back to its Anglo-Saxon skeleton. For the space of these dozen and a half poems Heaney seemed to have found a theme so absorbing that charm and rhetoric were irrelevant. The poems were as simple, demanding, and irreducible as the archaic trophies from the bog which they celebrated. And like an archeologist, he pared away the extraneous matter and kept himself decently in the background.

(The New York Review of Books, March 6, 1980, 16)

If anything, Alvarez faults Heaney for turning away from the kind of poetry he sees in North to what Alvarez considers the more rhetorical and ornamental poetry he finds in Field Work. In short, Alvarez's commentary and criticism focuses on questions of literary style.

Toward the end of the essay, Fenton will parenthetically admit that he didn't like the first part of North ("I don't care much for what he fishes out of bogs"), but at this point Fenton's empathy with what he imagines to be Heaney's exasperation and outrage with Alvarez's review takes another, somewhat convoluted twist: "Most exasperating of all, though, would be to feel that these misapprehensions about your nationality [my italics] were, in part, your fault. For it would never have been so easy for the British to take whatever they liked from Ireland and call it British if a protest had been lodged a little earlier."

But something very strange occurs in the thinking here: Heaney writes "An Open Letter" in 1983, which embarrasses Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison. Three years earlier Alvarez had criticized Seamus Heaney's Field Work (but not North) on matters of literary style and content, which Fenton sees as having primarily to do with Heaney's being Irish. Now if only Heaney had written "An Open Letter" a few years earlier than he did, Alvarez would not have been able to criticize Heaney's poetry as British, because everyone would now agree that British and Irish poetry are separate. Whether Heaney's poetry, in 1980 or 1996, has any literary merit is pushed to the margin, if not off the entire page, and Fenton can, at last, proclaim what he sees as closure to the controversy started with Heaney's "Open Letter" back in 1983.

Fenton cites the last of Heaney's Oxford lectures, given in 1993, in which

Heaney expands on the poem's implications. Heaney explains that he spoke about the greenness of his passport in "An Open Letter" "not in order to expunge the British connection in Britain's Ireland but to maintain the right to diversity within the border, to be understood as having full freedom to the enjoyment of an Irish name and identity within that northern jurisdiction." For Fenton, this ecumenicalism constitutes a "considerable rewriting" of the earlier poem, and Fenton's impatience with Heaney's conciliatory description of Irish and British multiculturalism in Northern Ireland momentarily flares, "as if," he says, "for the Northern Irish Catholic, his Irishness were a kind of wheat germ which he sprinkled every morning on his--what would it be? on his Britishness?"

Fenton's intrusive habit of placing himself inside Heaney's head to imagine what might have, or must have, been Heaney's intention or reaction to a variety of literary acts here reaches its culmination. For Fenton, Heaney's final Oxford lecture should be seen as nothing short of an embarrassing repudiation of the earlier, unjustified outburst in "An Open Letter." As Fenton says:

The embarrassment behind the rewrite, so many years later, of a poem which he published only in pamphlet form, is indicative perhaps of a lingering sense that, though he had no alternative but to make his stand, the stand itself was some kind of betrayal, or some kind of slap in the face of

people to whom he was, in various ways, obliged.

"Embarrassment"? "Betrayal"? Just as it would be difficult to detect the explosive, nationalistic outrage Fenton ascribes to "An Open Letter," anyone reading Heaney's final Oxford lecture would be hard pressed to discover some trace of the chagrin Fenton plants there. The lecture instead concludes on a note of tolerance, advocating a multicultural flexibility in matters of national identity, especially as concerns Northern Ireland. Using his own formation as a case in point, Heaney draws both a literary and political lesson for all sides to learn:

There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances. The British dimension, in other words, while it is something that will be resisted by the minority if it is felt to be coercive, has nevertheless been a given of our history and even of our geography, one of the places where we all live, willy-nilly. It's in the language.

(The Redress of Poetry, 202)

What Fenton would have us understand, though, is that Heaney's

final Oxford lecture brings to the fore a motif of betrayal which, Fenton will claim in the remainder of the essay, has dogged Heaney's entire poetic career.

So who is this James Fenton, and why does he wish to recast Seamus Heaney's career from this volatile, nationalistic point of view?

In many respects, James Fenton is a privileged, if somewhat typical, product of the English educational system. He was born in Lincoln in the north of England in 1949. His father, as mentioned above, was an Anglican vicar (and is currently Honorary Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford). One of four children, Fenton was sent as a boarder to Choristers' School, Durham, an English prep-school, and later to public school at Repton, near Litchfield. Fenton went on to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read psychology, philosophy, and physiology. As an undergraduate, he won the Newdigate poetry award and published his first book of poems, Terminal Moraine, in 1972.

In 1973, at the age of twenty-four, he flew to Cambodia and settled in Phnom Penh, supported partly by a poetry grant and partly by freelance essays he submitted to The New Statesman. He was, as he indicates in his 1988 book of travel writings, All the Wrong Places, an opponent of United States imperialism in the region and therefore an idealistic supporter of both the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the

Vietcong in Vietnam. In 1975 Fenton was evacuated, along with all foreigners, from Phnom Penh, and moved to Saigon, where he witnessed the fall of that city to the North Vietnamese army. Therefore, in addition to the victories, as he saw them, of the indigenous armies over foreign imperialism, he was witness as well to the subsequent Stalinization of Saigon, which included the extermination of the South Vietnamese officer corps, and the systematic genocide of Cambodia under Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. His experiences in Southeast Asia, as well as other journalist assignments in Germany, were incorporated into The Memory of War and Children of Exile: Poems 1968-1982 (1983), which in many ways propelled Fenton to national recognition. The book was hailed by English critics as a breakthrough, and Peter Porter, the English poet, called Fenton "the most talented poet of his generation."

He continued to work as a literary journalist in a number of capacities throughout the late 70's and 80's, as a political writer for the New Statesman, as correspondent to Germany for The Guardian, as theater critic for the Sunday Times, and as Southeast Asian correspondent for the Independent, the newspaper for which he presently writes a column. In 1988, he co-authored, with John Fuller, Partingtime Hall, a collection of poems lampooning a range of targets, among them Catholics, literary critics, and life in Belfast. His most recent collection, Out of Danger, was published to mixed reviews in 1993.

In addition to poetry, journalism, and travel writing, one other aspect of Fenton's literary work has turned out to be enormously profitable for him. In 1983, after Fenton translated "Rigoletto" for the English National Opera, Cameron Mackintosh asked him to work on a musical version of Victor Hugo's Les Miserables. Even though Mackintosh fired Fenton a year later, the severance deal allowed Fenton a small percentage of the world-wide receipts. As it happens, the musical has gone on to gross over 600,000,000 pounds, and it has made Fenton a millionaire several times over. This windfall has allowed him to purchase, among other things, a shrimp-farm in the Philippines, an apartment in the fashionable section of central London, and a 150-acre estate near Oxford.

For all the enthusiastic recognition that Fenton's war poems and travel writings have brought him in England, others have expressed sharp reservations about the prose and poetry, as well as the point of view, if that's the right term, which he presents in his writings. On the one hand, in his political reporting from southeast Asia, Fenton, rather than assuming the "objective" stance of the detached reporter, much prefers to embed his sense of the historical events he witnesses in terms of his personal, and at times whimsical, response to the chaos and violence occurring around him. Bill Buford, the editor of Granta who published Fenton's essays on Vietnam and the Philippines, calls his prose "a breath of real pure oxygen" and has nothing but praise for this kind of "narrative reportage." On the other

hand, Benedict Anderson, the Indochina scholar and human rights activist, finds fault with this subjective whimsicality. In a withering analysis of Fenton's "The Snap Revolution" [in the Philippines] and "The Fall of Saigon," Anderson rebukes this posture as an example of what he calls "political tourism." As he says, "What both these texts perfectly demonstrate is that, for the Fentons of this world, politics an sich are wholly unimportant and uninteresting. They become interesting only insofar as they produce brief, torch-lit spectacles in exotic places" ("James Fenton's Slideshow," in New Left Review, July/August 1986, 81-90).

The poetry presents a different kind of complexity, since Fenton writes, as Julian Symons suggests, at least three kinds of poems, only one of which Symons considers significant. He says, in his 1983 review of Children of Exile, "There are three poetic Fentons, two of comparatively minor interest. One offers botanical, psychological or medical "exempla" taken from books or other printed works as poems, rather in the whimsical manner of the surrealists exhibiting 'found objects' as art. Another produces light verse that is always lively, sometimes funny, and often marked by a deadly topicality...The third Fenton, however, has fulfilled what 'Our Western Furniture' promised, in a dozen magnificent poems. It is notable that almost all of them have their origins in his Cambodian and German experiences." (The Times, London, November 20, 1983, 38).

At times, though, not everyone is willing to follow Symons' taxonomy and embrace of one part of Fenton's poetry, while dismissing the rest. Arjuna Parakrama, in his 1994 review of Out of Danger, comes down hard on what he sees as the political and cultural assumptions running through Fenton's poetry. While he applauds (and agrees with) Fenton's criticism of U.S. world hegemony, he finds Fenton unable or unwilling to subject his own "maleness and cultural specificity" [that is, his Englishness] to the same kind of self-reflexivity and radical questioning found in the opening personal poems. Even further, at the conclusion of an explication of "Jerusalem," Fenton's quite serious meditation on the mutually destructive antagonisms of the Middle East, Parakrama charges, "The poet's ability to literally divorce and isolate Jerusalem from the urgent and catastrophic political realities of the area is symptomatic of the unquestioned privilege that he enjoys as classed-gendered-raced-regioned outsider." (Critical Quarterly, Summer 1994, 111-114).

At another point, Parakrama finds no humor whatsoever in "On a Recent Indiscretion by a Certain Fulbright Fellow in Upper Egypt," a 36-line exercise in forced alliteration which Fenton presents as a light-verse send-up of the Fulbright Program and, I guess, American foreign policy. The poem's final quatrain sums up the poem's method and intent:

And the moral of this episode
May be set forth forthrightly
Don't go fellating fellahin!

You're a Fulbright Fellow!
It's unsightly!

For Parakrama, the subject matter and the manner of presentation are "palpably guilty of racism, homophobia, insensitivity, bad taste, cultural stereotyping and so on and so forth, but the bigger indictment is perhaps that the poem is puerile, even silly." What bothers Parakrama about this and other poems in the collection is that Fenton is willing to ridicule France, the U.S., Emily Dickinson, and Helen Vendler, but he is not willing to direct his ironic barbs against the home country and culture in the same way.

Since Fenton only takes on what Parakrama calls "non-home" topics for ridicule, he falls prey to "the tendency to oversimplify and distort, which is the very devil to resist when one doesn't have to put one's money where one's mouth is." In these poems of political and cultural satire, Parakrama suggests, "You are never sure whether the poet is playing with you and this has its obvious strength in complicating the reader's response, but also its weakness because he can always get himself off the hook, if challenged." The upshot of this kind of poetry presents, for Parakrama, its own kind of subtle irony: "Fenton has placed himself 'out of danger' from mainstream local (he's a jolly good fellow of the Royal Society) critique. He recuperates, therefore, in effect, a troubling Tory English nationalism without having to say one word about it."

Clearly, Parakrama's objections did not carry much weight two years ago when the voting was conducted at

Oxford for the five-year post of Professor of Poetry. Ian Parker, in a New Yorker essay (July 25, 1994) which reviews Fenton's multifaceted career and the events surrounding the election, sees Fenton as "Auden's Heir" (the title of the essay) and provides a colorful portrait of Fenton in relation to his contemporaries.

For Parker, Fenton's elevation to the Oxford post marks a shift in England's sensibility to the "New Recklessness," a term Fenton coins in Out of Danger indicating a willingness to test established limits and conventions and to jump from genre to genre. As Parker reports, "In the New Recklessness, Fenton told me, poets should yodel or write sonnet sequences, as they see fit. They should be suspicious of the free-verse consensus and any pull toward autobiographical pathos. Poets should reserve the right to do what Fenton, for example, has done, which is to avoid the confessional and to take metre into new and marvelous places of public and private alarm while keeping an eye on Byron, W. H. Auden, Lewis Carroll, eighteenth-century satire, and the music hall."

As part of the droll portrait he draws of the new Professor of Poetry, Parker recounts Fenton's patience and determination in his candidacy for the post, which Fenton had kept his eye on for over a decade. As Parker says, "Ten years ago, Fenton stood against Peter Levi, who won. Five years ago, he did not stand against the Irishman, Seamus Heaney, who won. This year, in a field with three rivals, including the Australian Les Murray, he was determined to win." Parker goes on to

describe the tactics the candidate employed in his campaign for the post, and, since these tactics include Fenton's shrewd understanding of the uses of literary journalism, it's worth quoting in full. Parker says:

James Fenton tells me that he made two key contributions to his campaign for the Oxford preferment. One was to plan a party, in his garden, to be held on the second, and final day, of voting. ("Of course it was a vote-rigging exercise," he says, "You think I don't know how to vote-rig?") The other was to allow himself to be interviewed in the Times. The interview included this vote-winning exchange:

Q: Les Murray, who I suppose is your main rival, told another paper that he had heard that the duties of the professor of poetry were not particularly onerous. Is that your impression?

A. I saw that article....I have to say that it made me think that Les Murray had been very badly advised. First of all, it seems insulting to imply that the job you are standing for is a doddle. Secondly, it is very much in my mind that the task of writing 15 worthwhile lectures on poetry is not to be taken lightly.

It is important to know that the questions as well as the answers were Fenton's. The Times was somehow persuaded to allow Fenton, quite openly, to interview himself. This was a "filthy trick," Fenton says merrily. He's capable of making the display of avidity seem endearing.

Whether the stratagem was merry or malicious, it proved quite effective with the elite electorate (only Oxonians with M.A.'s are allowed to cast ballots). In the final tally, Fenton received 228 votes, with Les Murray as runner up receiving 98). As Parker concludes, "James Fenton was the chief poet of all England."

With these credentials in mind, let's return to the remainder of "The Orpheus of Ulster." Fenton, having speculated about Heaney's conversion from outrage to embarrassment concerning "An Open Letter," now shifts the venue of Heaney criticism from London to Northern Ireland. Fenton first rehearses the charge James Simmons, the Protestant Ulster poet, made concerning the unfair preference Heaney received early on from Philip Hobsbaum. Simmons had said: "Certainly, it began long ago. In those old gatherings under the auspices of Philip Hobsbaum it was obvious that Seamus was being groomed for stardom." Rushing to Heaney's defense, Fenton says, "I would put this differently....The fact is that no poet gets 'groomed for stardom.' What on earth would that process be? But that he was *tipped* for stardom, that he gave, somehow, warning of the talent to come--that I can believe." Even though Fenton italicizes "tipped," the term he prefers to "groomed," both words have a clear implication of Heaney being picked out of a group of poets, and of Heaney being given special preference, before his poetry actually warranted

such distinction. Under the guise of defending Heaney, Fenton simply puts the criticism in more precise language.

Fenton then goes on to the more serious charges of betrayal which Simmons sets out in his essay. For Simmons, Fenton duly notes, Heaney had not addressed the troubles of Northern Ireland as forthrightly or as neutrally as he should have. Instead, he "seemed to be retreating into his tribe" [i.e. identifying too closely with the Catholic minority] and therefore fostering resentment in the North rather than addressing the issues from a more universal perspective, one which Simmons identifies with a "positive left-wing movement." After lamenting that poets throughout this century have been accused of betrayal, Fenton links this charge to a more specific accusation leveled by Ciaran Carson based on a reading of "Punishment," one of the poems in North.

The poem, in which Heaney closely identifies with a young girl who had been presumably drowned for adultery in prehistory and whose body had been preserved in the Jutland bog, closes with the past act of retribution providing a commentary on the present violence of Northern Ireland. Drawing an analogy between the girl killed in prehistory for adultery and the young Catholic girls who had been tarred and feathered for going out with British soldiers, the speaker concludes on a note of self-revelation and accusation:

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.

Heaney, for Carson, is a "laureate of violence" since the poem's ending, rather than protesting the conditions which bring such acts into being, provides these conditions with a kind of inevitability which mystifies rather than resists their origins. Fenton then suggests that Carson's remarks "might be fair criticism"--adding that the same passage has caused "numerous" other critics such as Blake Morrison and Edna Longley "consternation." But when Simmons goes a step further, and here Fenton provides another long citation from Simmons, and accuses Heaney of being "on the side of the torturers," well, that's just too much for Fenton.

The easiest way for Fenton to have dealt with these charges, of course, would be to illustrate the misreading upon which they are based. When Simmons asserts in his accusation that "He does not seem to be confessing or apologizing" in this passage, he is simply wrong. In the two stanzas preceding the controversial conclusion cited above, the speaker makes quite clear the moral circumstances under which he has reached his impasse:

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:

The poem confesses as much the guilt of the artist exploiting an act of violence as the guilt of a partisan harboring secret resentments. But guilt it is, and Fenton clearly knows the passage (John 8: 1-11) to which Heaney alludes in his phrase "but would have cast, I know,/ the stones of silence." The compassion Jesus reminded the Pharisees of as they picked up their stones to kill the woman taken in adultery is linked here to the "stones of silence" the speaker imagines he would have cast in the past and has cast by standing dumb in the face of the present outrages. But unlike Jesus, the divine moralist writing out the sins of the Pharisees in the sands, the speaker is instead the human sinner, implicated in the very sins he writes out on the page.

Rather than provide this refutation, though, Fenton, having elaborated these accusations and agreed with them in the main, halts at Simmons' excess with, "Simmons knows perfectly well that Heaney is not on the side of the torturers." He finishes his defense of Heaney with a sentence that is more convoluted than exculpatory:

If the poems in the first part of North were worrying to his genuine (as opposed to his ironical) admirers, it must be because they sometimes failed to reassure the reader about the difference between understanding the processes at work (understanding them, with a full sense of the terror involved)

and understanding-as-forgiving
or even as conniving.

At this point one has to wonder exactly who the "ironical" admirers of Heaney being alluded to here are, the Ulster poets making the charge of partisanship or "the chief poet of all England" innocently citing one accusation after another.

Even though Fenton points out that the extremity of these accusations about violence is at the other end of the spectrum from Alvarez's portrait of Heaney as a safe entertainer, he does not tell his reader that the Heaney-as-extremist role in which Fenton cast the Irish poet in the first part of the essay is here being played out, and reinforced, from a different perspective. But to be sure that this train of association is not derailed, Fenton immediately goes on to quote in its entirety a ballad Heaney wrote early in his career, but never published, satirizing William Craig, the head of the Black & Tans. Fenton's purpose in quoting this ballad is to demonstrate that Heaney might have put his poetic muse in the service of the IRA, but did not. The commentary Fenton provides at the end of the ballad, though, allows the dorsal fin of his sarcasm to break the surface:

Stirring stuff. One can almost smell the rain on the Aran sweaters of the protestors who would have sung it. And I hope that when Heaney produces his collected poems he will allow us to see more of his work in this vein, including the song he

wrote after Bloody Sunday in Derry, January 30, 1972, which has apparently never seen the light of day. But the point was that times changed, changed and grew worse, until to write that sort of stirring stuff was no longer an option.

What makes this kind of selectivity, distortion, and guilt-by-implication [that must have been some outrageous song!] so discouraging and fundamentally unfair is that Heaney has written, and written powerfully, about Bloody Sunday, and Fenton knows it.

"Casualty," a poem included in Field Work (Alvarez missed that one in his review), speaks directly to the killing of the 13 civilian protestors by the British paratroopers that day in 1972. But more importantly, the poem focuses on the counterbalancing example of the Catholic fisherman Heaney knew from his father-in-law's pub, the loner who defied the Catholic curfew and was blown to death by an IRA bomb. The speaker of that poem, caught between the constrictive "swaddling band" of the victimized group and the maverick example of the fisherman, comes down on the side of the alcoholic artisan who, at his own risk, places his need, his desire, before that of his community. If anything, the vernacular craft and manner of the fisherman provide the speaker with an exemplary ethic and aesthetic and place him (and Heaney) well beyond the partisan nationalism Fenton is so loudly hinting at.

Instead of pointing to this poem (or the many different ways the speaker

plays out the same dilemma in Station Island (1984)), Fenton simply leaves his reader with the insinuation that Heaney wrote as a partisan nationalist early on in his career, then came to disguise that nationalism more and more when it became less expedient, in light of his growing audience in Britain and elsewhere, to write that kind of "stirring stuff." In short, Heaney has tailored his poetry to the popular political sensibility of his expanding audience.

All this dredging up of accusation and insinuation from 15, 20, and 25 years ago prepares Fenton, finally, to consider briefly Heaney's Nobel address and the last of Heaney's Oxford lectures. From the Nobel address, Fenton chooses, predictably enough, to cite Heaney's sense of shock when, for a single moment, he found himself considering justifications for the political violence in the North. Fenton responds to Heaney's repudiation of such a momentary lapse with the following: "Only a moment, and if it was the only such moment then Heaney was lucky, since the situation was such as to provoke many such moments in many such people." Note the "if," which questions rather than affirms Heaney's statement.

From the final Oxford lecture, Fenton highlights the passage in which Heaney, comparing himself to John Hume, finds himself in the "classic bind of all Northern Ireland's constitutional nationalists": on the one hand, having cultural and political ideals which are fundamentally Ireland-centered; on the other, insisting on distinguishing the goals of such ideals from the violent means employed by the IRA. Rather

than address this political and ethical dilemma, Fenton reminds his readers that Hume has devoted himself to shuttle diplomacy between Ulster and London throughout the Northern troubles while Heaney was making his reputation elsewhere. As he says, "And just as it turned out recently that one part of the solution to the Ulster peace process (assuming that is what it is) lay in the United States, so it has turned out, for Heaney, that an important part of his becoming a major Irish poet took place in the environs of Harvard Yard." The implication is clear: Hume has done the work in Ulster, while Heaney has advanced his career in Cambridge.

Again and again Fenton raises accusations and troublesome issues not so much to refute or even address them, but rather first to call attention to them, then to arrange them in such a way that they present their own consistency. Heaney the betrayer, Heaney the equivocator, Heaney the grandstander all make their appearance in this essay simply, Fenton purports, so that he can sympathetically illustrate the difficulty attendant to fame and notoriety, especially to one in the peculiar political and cultural circumstances which Heaney has experienced. It's a strategy which drags Heaney through the thorns while Fenton, Heaney's literary compatriot, frowns compassionately from the sidelines.

Having jerryrigged this rhetorical context, Fenton at long last turns to Heaney the poet. First Fenton reminds us that Heaney is interested in the figure of Orpheus, having recently translated two sections of Ovid's Metamorphoses dealing with that mythological

character. Fenton tells us that, at a reading he recently attended at which Heaney read the section dealing with Orpheus's death, he had the odd sense that Heaney was "utterly outraged that Orpheus (as if this had happened yesterday) had been torn to pieces." Again, when one actually reads the translation in the After Ovid collection (1994) put together by Michael Hoffman and James Lasdun, it turns out that Bacchus, rather than Heaney, is the figure outraged by Orpheus's death. Fenton, however, has his own speculative explanation for Heaney's resentment: "Perhaps the feeling is that if you possess the power, you are going to pay for it." What first appeared as rage turns out to be self-pity.

And what follows that speculation is a marvelous double-take on Heaney's power and excitement. Fenton says, "Certainly he possesses that power. I went to the reading he gave in Oxford, with Ted Hughes, at the end of his professorship and thought it the most exciting reading I had heard. It was exciting before it began, and it just went on from there." But what can "before it began" mean? The excitement of the event is very carefully separated from the excitement of the poetry, transforming Heaney and Hughes (whom Fenton has never thought highly of) from powerful poets into celebrity entertainers.

As a reasonable critic, however, Fenton does not want to appear to be too much on Heaney's side. He therefore, in a deft stroke of apparent evenhandedness, concedes that he had

his own reservations about Heaney's writing:

I don't feel obliged to take all Heaney (for instance, I like part two better than part one of North; my loss, no doubt, but I don't much care for what he fishes out of bogs). I didn't like what I conceived to be writing as if living under an Eastern European censorship. But 1989 seems to have put a stop to all that.

But what appear to be modest enough reservations about Heaney's writing contain their own acid implications. Remember it was Fenton who chose to highlight the poem "Punishment" (from part one of North) in rehearsing the accusations against Heaney. And Fenton's defense of Heaney against the most extreme of those accusations left open the possibility that Heaney did not in fact make his own opposition to the nationalist violence clear enough.

Further, Fenton's defensiveness as an Englishman bristles when Heaney writes about the political and literary oppression in Northern Ireland (those poems, interestingly enough, are to be found in part two of North). The last sentence, however, seems to make no sense whatsoever. Did Heaney stop writing about censorship in Northern Ireland because Eastern Europe as such came to its literal and metaphoric end in 1989 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Or did Heaney change his tune about the conditions of being Northern Irish the moment (in 1989) he became Professor of Poetry at Oxford?

Whichever the case, Fenton will finally turn in the last few paragraphs of his essay to The Spirit Level, where Heaney "keeps up the provision of pleasure." But before he gets to the single poem he wants to praise, Fenton lets us in on a delicious secret he discovered when "The Errand," the poem from which the collection takes its title, arrived in proof form with an erratum slip. Fenton realizes that the poem originally had only its first stanza, in which the father's command to find a bubble for the spirit level provides a metaphor for writing a poem. But when Heaney adds a second stanza, because, as Fenton speculates, that "rest of us would not be able to intuit" Heaney's intent with the first stanza alone, he changes the focus of the poem from poetic inspiration to the boy's relation with his father. (One wonders whether Fenton has read Seeing Things (1991), in which Heaney elaborates the complex relation between his father and his poetry). Either way, one is left with the question: does Fenton make this observation to emphasize Heaney's genius, or to indicate that Heaney, in the name of reaching a wider audience, has dumbed down a good poem?

No matter what the ambiguity which informs the essay up to this point, a reader would surely, at first blush, be persuaded that the final paragraph is laudatory. After all, Fenton cites the poem "The Butter Print" in its entirety and says that it "went straight into my personal anthology of the best of Heaney." But what are we to make of the essay's closing words which sum up both the individual poem and

Heaney's position as a poet? Here are Fenton's closing remarks:

When I look at a poem like this for the first time, I ask myself: How did it do that? How did we get from the butter-print to heaven and back down to the "awn" so quickly? It's like watching the three-card trick in Oxford Street. Suddenly the table is folded up under the arm and the trickster vanishes into the crowd – excepting that, when you tap your pocket, you find you have something valuable you could have sworn wasn't there just a moment before.

Now, from one perspective, this surely seems a tip of the hat to Heaney in exchange for the unexpected pleasure Fenton derives from the poem. But the metaphor is very strange indeed. Having watched a street trickster perform his act, you "tap your pocket" presumably to see if you still have your wallet. Is the "something valuable" you find in your pocket the unexpected pleasure of the poem, or is it simply your wallet that hasn't been stolen? In either case, Fenton obliquely casts Heaney as a street slicky, a role which draws a not-so-pleasant parallel between Heaney's recent tenure as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (for which he gave three lectures a year) and the three-card hustler who works Oxford Street. Having interpreted for us Alvarez's characterization of Heaney back in 1980 as "an Irish entertainer on the British cultural scene," Fenton now leaves us with a Heaney who, if

anything, has degenerated from cultural entertainer to sidestreet charlatan. Be that as it may, the Orpheus of Ulster puts on quite a show; we have Fenton's word on it.

In his last year at prep school, James Fenton was head boy, the senior overseer who traditionally tyrannizes the younger students. Fenton notes archly that Tony Blair, M.P., the leader of the British Labour Party, was four years his junior at the exclusive school and was therefore addressed by Fenton as "Blair," or rather "Blair!" He imagines that, should Blair become the next Prime Minister, he could stand outside 10 Downing Street and say "Blair!" and the new Prime Minister would still be forced to humbly heed his grammar school superior.

The editor of The New York Review of Books, headlining what he thought an essay of tribute and appreciation, placed the banner "James Fenton on the Genius of Seamus Heaney" on the July 11 cover. But had the editor probed this horse at the gates, so to speak, the banner may well have read "James Fenton Hollers 'Heaney!'" Even though it's unlikely the essay will either enhance or diminish Heaney's reputation in Ireland or the United States, Fenton has, with a sly wink, let the dons at high tables know that there's a new head boy of poetry at Oxford, and this time he's one of England's own.