Exposure
Seamus Heaney

Notes

In conversation with Henri Cole as published in *The Paris Review*, Heaney spoke about his move to Wicklow (south of Dublin) in 1972:

"… leaving the north didn't break my heart. The solitude was salubrious. Anxiety, after all, can coexist with determination. The anxiety in a poem like 'Exposure' is about whether the work that comes out of this move is going to be in any way adequate. The poem is asking itself, *Is there enough here to hold the line against the atrocious thing that is happening up there?* And the poet is saying, *What am I doing but striking a few little sparks when what the occasion demands is a comet?* … I suppose the corollary of being battened down is being a bit tensed up. At the time when I was writing the poems, I was putting the pressure on myself and feeling, well, exposed as in 'Exposure.'…"

Changes to his personal circumstances, particularly his family's move south, have led him to this point of anxiety - about his role and function, about society outside, and about current events. The poem seeks answers to fundamental questions about the poet's adequacy. Here he stands, an Ulsterman in his thirties, walking alone through the December landscape of the Irish Republic in Wicklow at dusk...

"The Troubles" in 1972

Nearly 4,000 people were killed in the north of Ireland between 1969 and 2001 during "The Troubles". But 1972 was the worst year by far in terms of fatalities. Of the 497 people killed that year, over half were civilians. The deaths were also concentrated on certain hotspots, namely west and north Belfast: while some people in Northern Ireland remained relatively untouched, others lost more than one member of their family. Nearly 5,000 people were injured in the violence.

"When people are telling you stories from that time, even the incidental details indicate how hellish it was," Susan McKay, a journalist and author who has documented the stories of all those who died in the conflict, told Channel 4 News. "There was a sense of a descent into terror. Many people didn't even get a visit from police when their relatives were killed. It just seems unbelievable now."

The tone for much of 1972 was set weeks beforehand, on 4 December 1971, when 15 Catholics were killed by a bomb at McGurk's bar in north Belfast – one of the single worst atrocities of the period. The UVF took responsibility years later, but at the time security forces maintained that it was an IRA bomb that had gone off by mistake, enraging the nationalist community. Later in December, four Protestant civilians, including two children, were killed by an IRA bomb on the Shankill Road. The next day, on 12 December, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) politician John Barnhill was shot dead in his home by the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) – the first politician to be killed in the conflict.

Almost two months after the McGurk's bar bombing, a civil rights march staged by the nationalist community in Derry descended into horror, and 13 unarmed civilians were shot dead by British Army. Another 13 were injured, one fatally. Tensions were further enraged when the army claimed those who died on 30 January were armed and when the initial Widgery enquiry upheld the army's account that they were fired on first. The event was called "Bloody Sunday". It wasn't until 2010 that a 12-year-long inquiry concluded that soldiers had in fact fired the first shot.

After numerous assassinations, bombings, arson and other violence, the 21st of July subsequently became known as "Bloody Friday". In response to the breakdown of talks with the British government, the IRA exploded around 20 bombs across Belfast in the space of approximately 80 minutes. The IRA said the intention had been to hit commercial centres, and said it had given notice about the explosions, but nine people were killed including two British soldiers, and an estimated 130 people were injured. The consequences of "Bloody Friday" were far-reaching. Ten days later, the British Army decided to enter those areas that had been taken over by republican paramilitaries in Belfast and Derry. Known as *Operation Motorman*, it was the biggest British military operation since the 1956 Suez Crisis.

December 1972 ended with the arrest of two prominent Sinn Fein members – Ruairi O'Bradaigh and Martin McGuiness under new provisional legislation passed by the government.

Glossary:

émigré: originally someone who fled abroad to escape the French revolution (1789); extended in 1920s, via the Russian Revolution to political exiles in general

tristia: personal griefs; 'things sad', drawn from a collection of letters written in elegiac couplets by the Augustan poet Ovid during his exile from Rome

wood-kerne: an Irish rebel who, during the earlier course of Irish history, took to the woods when defeated, to prepare for further resistance

bole: trunk of a tree

haws and rose-hips: fruits of the hawthorne hedge and rose plant respectively

portent: an omen