

The Revival of Old Certainties □ in Seamus Heaney's Poetry

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney is considered as one of the most popular poets, writing in English today. Although he wrote in a traditional simple style, his poetry is endowed with a special interest with the past, which was one of continuity for him. Thus, he refers recurrently to his childhood in County Derry, where he was born and to Irish history in general. He tells the Catholics in Northern Ireland to stop contemplating their wounds and start thinking of the future.

Never move an old boundary mark that your ancestors established. (The Old Testament: "Proverbs", 22:28)¹

(I)

Seamus Heaney (1939-) is one of the most popular poets, writing in English today. Robert Lowell (1917-1977) has considered him as: "the most important Irish poet since Yeats".² Although he writes in a traditional simple style, his poetry is endowed with a special interest with the past, which was one of continuity for him. He derives this active concept of the past from T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) who says that poets should be aware of history and of past achievement. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot claims that the real poet must understand his culture and his history, and he must understand his role not as an individual who is separate from others, but as a continuation of certain tradition.³ Eliot defines tradition, saying:

It involves in the first place, the historical sense,... which involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence... This historical sense, which is a sense of... the timeless and temporal together,... makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.⁴

Following this theory, Heaney's poetry is rooted deep in the past time of his childhood and in the dark primitive eras of Celtic history. Heritage, writes the Noble Foundation Web Site, "has always been part of Heaney's reference and remains culturally and politically central to the poet and to his work".⁵ His interest with the past allows him to comment on the present in a bleak but forceful way.⁶ Thus, the past and present of Northern Ireland are linked together in his poetry.

(II)

Heaney was born, the eldest of nine children to Margaret and Patrick Heaney, at the family farm, Mossbawn, about thirty miles northwest of Belfast in County Derry. In his lecture, "Crediting Poetry" (1995), he describes this time of his life, saying:

I was the eldest child of an ever growing family in rural Co. Derry, we crowded together... and lived a kind of den-life... It was an intimate, physical, creaturely existence... We took in everything that was going on... as if we were in the doze of hibernation. Ahistorical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern.⁷

In 1953, his family left the farm where he was reared. He describes this journey as a removal from "the earth of farm labour into the heaven of education".⁸ Since then his life has

been a series of moves farther and farther from his birthplace. However, the departures have been geographical more than psychological: "rural County Derry", reads the Presenting Speech of the Noble Prize in Literature (1995), "is the country of the mind where much of Heaney's poetry is still grounded".⁹

His early poetry, Eleven Poems (1965) and Death of a Naturalist (1966), was full of the personal, sensuous remembrance of things past, drawing on Heaney's childhood in Derry.¹⁰ In "Digging", the first poem in his Death of a Naturalist, he says that he still makes his living from the land metaphorically. Where his father dug with spades, he digs with his pen:

**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. (17-23)¹¹**

For him, words are also things or instruments that the poet uses to reflect on his fate and the fate of his country. Thus, he repeats saying at the end of the poem: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests: snug as a gun".

Heaney utilizes the successful metaphor of digging again in the last poem of Death of a Naturalist, "Personal Helicon". The poem presents an interest with that which lies deep within the earth, meaning both personal and classical past. Mount Helicon is a mountain in Greece that was sacred, in classical mythology, to Apollo and the Muses. From it flowed two fountains of poetic inspiration.¹² Heaney exposes here his own source of inspiration, the "dark drop" into personal and cultural memory, made present by the depths of the wells of his childhood. He recollects his childhood, saying:

**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 dank moss. (1-4)**

In a nostalgic moment, he remembers when he scrambled about on hands and knees, looking into the deep places of earth. But, now, he is too mature to do this. He has his poetry, which stems from his own personal Helicon, his own source of inspiration. It is a place where "there is no reflection", but the sound of a rhyme, which echoes in the dark silence of the present time.

**Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult digging. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (17-20)**

(III)

Starting with Door into the Dark (1969), Heaney begins to move beyond himself into the cycle of human life.¹³ Although his poetry is no longer self-centered, yet he is still fascinated with the metaphor of burial and digging. In his Bog Poems: "Bogland" and "The Tollund Man", he acknowledges an attachment to the soil that is the source and subject of his poetry.¹⁴ In the soil of the "Bogland", there buried for centuries vegetables, animals, and human beings that "our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards". He uncovers layers of Irish history, Gaelic, Viking, and pre-historic:¹⁵

They've taken the skeleton

**Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.
Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white. (9-15)**

Heaney's metaphor is derived from P.V. Globe's book, *The Bog People*, which shows the discovery of a series of bodies over two thousand years old in the bogs of Denmark.¹⁶ In this metaphor, Heaney presents the consummation of his descent into the bottomless earth, saying:

**Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes be Atlantic Seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless. (25-28)**

In "The Tollund Man", there is a progression towards the bog's highest preserved body, a human being. The Tollund Man is a male Iron Age body found in a fen at the small village of Tollund.¹⁷ Heaney promises at the beginning of this poem to visit one day Silkeborg museum in which the remains of the Tollund Man are kept. He makes use of an archeological discovery to celebrate the history of the common man who is neglected.

**Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.
In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach. (I, 1-8)**

This man wore only a leather cap with a small amount of hair on his head: "Naked except for / The cap, noose, and girdle". He had a rope around his neck, which makes some speculate that he may have been an executed criminal, a political prisoner, or a sacrificial figure. His face looks very humble, simple, and common like any labourer or peasant one meets in everyday life. Obviously, no one knows his proper birthday, but his discovery in the bog of Tollund means a kind of re-birth. It supplies knowledge about the way Heaney's ancestors lived in the early Iron Age. The corpse of the Tollund Man looks like a piece of art, which is revived from a very old time. He adorns it with great love and respect, saying: "I will stand a long time / Bridegroom to the goddess". He worships it as "a saint's kept body". The revival of the Tollund Man's figure allows the poet to deal with the political and social situation in his native Northern Ireland. The Tollund Man becomes a symbol of the regular Irishman.

**The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,
Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines. (II, 5-12)**

For Heaney, the past is living and poetry is "a force capable of transforming culture and the self".¹⁸ He states, in his series of lectures at Oxford "The Redress of Poetry", that poetry is essentially an answer to the conditions of the world.¹⁹ It is not necessary for the poet to be aiming deliberately at social and political change, which, of course, does not mean the

poet escapes from his civic responsibilities, only that "poetry reconciles two orders, the practical and the poetic, the former teaching us how to live, the latter how to live more abundantly".²⁰ Thus, the Tollund Man enriches the poet's imagination to link the past with the present situation of Northern Ireland and shows the way the poet feels about it.

**Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home. (III, 9-12)**

Finally, the poet is identified with his Tollund Man. He is not strange to the ordinary person Seamus Heaney seems to be in reality. "Throughout Boston and Cambridge", claims Kevin Cullen, "stories about Heaney's lack of pretense and his down to earth accessibility, with students and working stiffs alike, are legion".²¹ He does not act as a famous man, and does not want to be detached from his readers: "he is a poet of the people".²²

Heaney's poetry is filled with the richness and danger of Derry farms and peat bogs, and with people who worked, loved, fought, and were buried there. For him, their lives represent the true history of his homeland. Thus, He celebrates common heroism in his poetry rather than individual heroism.

(IV)

In Wintering Out (1972) and North (1975), Heaney feels violence in Northern Ireland passionately and he writes of it often, but usually closes up with elegies to slain friends and relatives he has lost. His "Casualty"; for example, is about a Catholic friend who was murdered by a bomb set by the Provisional Irish Republic Army in a Protestant pub.²³ The poet describes three moments in this poem. The first moment belongs to the past time when he and his friend were conversing around cubs of wine about poetry and politics.

**Sometime on the high stool,
Too busy with his knife
At a tobacco plug
And not meeting my eye,
In the pause after a slug
He mentioned poetry.
We would be on our own
And, always politic. (I, 23-30)**

This moment reflects the poet's feeling that what remains to the living are only memories and sadness. It brings the recognition of a second imaginative moment of an event the poet does not witness, but he envisions it, the moment of the explosion.

**I see him as he turned
In that bombed offending place,
Remorse fused with terror
In his still Knowable face,
His cornered outfaced stare
Blinding in the flash. (II, 18-23)**

At the end, Heaney accompanies his friend in almost a mystical timeless moment in which they experience the meaning of ultimate freedom. They become part of the Infinite.

**.....That morning
I was taken in his boat,
The screw purling, turning
Indolent fathoms white,
I tasted freedom with him. (III, 14-18)**

Together in the boat, they discovered a rhythm “slow mile by mile, / Into your proper haunt”. Their journey continues “somewhere, well out beyond...”, into a sacred place unknown in the present time for the poet. This apocalyptic moment is on the progress.

(V)

It can be concluded that Heaney's evocation of his personal and cultural past is recurrently done. Even when his poetry encompasses subjects of contemporary experience, he alludes to personal history or Irish myth. This tendency to revive the past is gradually culminated in his poetry until 1999 when he translated the timeless epic, *Beowulf*. In the ancient heroes of this poem, he finds tangled continuities with the whole matter of Ireland. He draws images from different parts of the Northern European experience. The idea of the North allows the poet to contemplate the violence of his home ground in relation to memories of the Scandinavian invasions, which have marked Irish heroic history.²⁴ His revival of ancient heroism does not mean that he believes in violent change, rather his political message is one of peace. “The end of art is peace”, says Heaney in his poem, “The Harvest Bow”. He tells the Catholics in Northern Ireland to stop contemplating their wounds and start thinking of the future.

الخلاصة:

يعتبر شيمس هيني اليوم أشهر شاعر معاصر يكتب باللغة الإنكليزية. على الرغم من أنه يكتب بإسلوب تقليدي بسيط، إلا إنه معروف باهتمامه الواسع بمسألة الماضي ودوره في بعث الحاضر والمستقبل. لذلك نرى إشارات متكررة في قصائده لماضية الخاص في قرية ديري التي ولد فيها في أيرلندا الشمالية وكذلك للتراث الأيرلندي القديم وكأنه يريد إخبار الأيرلنديين من خلال شعره أن يتناسوا جراحاتهم وأن يفكروا بمستقبل أفضل مبنياً على ماضيهم البطولي وأدبهم العظيم.

Notes :

¹Good News Bible, (London: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 1994).

²Joe Pellegrino, “Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, URL: <http://www.Yahoo.com>. 8/12/2005. n.p.

³T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, from *History of Literary Criticism: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Adnan K. Abdulla, (Mosul: University of Mosul Press, 1989), p.265.

⁴Ibid., p.268.

⁵“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography” (last modified 2005), from *The Noble Foundation*. URL: <http://www.Nobleprize.org>. 8/12/2005. n.p.

⁶Pellegrino, n.p.

⁷Seamus Heaney, “Crediting Poetry” (1995). URL: <http://www.Nobleprize.org>. 8/12/2005. n.p.

⁸“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, n.p.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry (1960-1984)*, (London: Longman, 1985), p.110.

¹¹Unless elsewhere mentioned, all quotations from Heaney's poetry are taken from Debbie Weil (ed.), *Wordbiz Report*. URL: <http://www.Yahoo.com>. 9/12/2005. n.p.

¹²“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, n.p.

¹³Thwaite, p.110.

¹⁴“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, n.p.

¹⁵Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p.375.

¹⁶“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, n.p.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Seamus Heaney, “The Redress of Poetry”, from *Boston Globe Online* (1997). URL: <http://www.Boston.com>. 8/12/2005. n.p.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Kevin Cullen, “Boston Hails ‘Local Boy’ Heaney” (1995), from *Boston Globe Online*. n.p.

²²Ibid.

²³“Seamus Heaney: Bibliography”, n.p.

²⁴“A Poet of Ireland and Peace” (1995), from *Boston Globe Online*, n.p.