
The Early Poems of Seamus Heaney

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I

Seamus Justin Heaney was born on 13 April 1939 on a farm called Mossbawn in the townland of Tamniarn, Co. Derry, Northern Ireland. The locations of his childhood prove to be almost as important to the later development of the poet as the human landscape. In an essay 'Mossbawn', his birthplace is visualized through the eyes of the young boy. At the centre of his world was the thatched farmhouse, the family home until 1953, a place which he has transformed 'into a country of the mind'. There was a water pump behind his house. In his search for myth and symbol, he has frequently returned to the Mossbawn pump as a source for his creative energy, its 'falling music' nourishing the inner ear and eye much as the Derwent did for the young Wordsworth. Whenever the plunger of the pump went up and down regularly, it made the sound like 'omphalos', 'omphalos', 'omphalos'. This word means the navel, the stone that marked the centre of the world in the Delphi's Appollo. With its phallic shape and life-giving water, the pump symbolises the creative union of his parents, the male and the female, the mysterious fusion of fixity and fluidity which gives the world and art its shape.

On the other hand, there was an old willow tree at the end of the farmyard. It was a hollow tree, with gnarled, spreading roots, a soft perishing bark and a pithy inside. Once the boy squeezed himself in a hollow, he was at the heart of a different life, looking out on the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness. Above his head, the living tree flourished and breathed. When he touched his forehead on the core of the tree, he felt as if the tree were whispering something to him. He had a deep kinship with it and he considered himself as a 'little Atlas' shouldering it all, a little Cerunnos pivoting a world of antlers.

Mossbawn has proved an inexhaustible resource. Frequently it has been used to invoke images of Eden, with its beech and willow as trees of knowledge, feeding his 'appetite' for 'gravity'. The boy, listening to an oracle inside the hollow is mentioned in the poem, 'Oracle'.

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Hide in the hollow trunk
of the willow tree,
its listening familiar,
. . . .
small mouth and ear
in a woody cleft,
lob and larynx
of the mossy places.

In this poem, the boy becomes an oracle man, trying to listen to the words by making the whole of his body a 'lobe'. And then he tries to translate the words of 'larynx'. The boy's attachment to the willow tree (Wisdon Tree) is allegorically taken as the birth of the 'poet'.

In the Garden of Eden (Mossbawn Farm), the boy was nourished by having the water from the pump (Life Water) and the inspiration from the willow tree (Wisdom Tree). But innocent Adam (the young boy Heaney) could no longer stay there. It is a natural way for the boy to get accustomed to the outside world little by little as he grows old. The boundary of his world widened. Symbolically speaking, this was the beginning of the 'Fall' from 'innocence' to 'experience'. Outside the paradise, there waited the world of experience filled with danger. There was a long sanded way called 'Sandy Loaning' leading in off the road to a remote farmhouse. Those areas were rather dangerous for children. Especially, the lane leading to the Laugh Beg was said to be haunted. Children were prohibited to go there. But one summer evening, a nine-year-old Heaney and his friend put off their clothes and had a bathing in a 'moss-hole'. Heaney felt as if he were sexually initiated at that time. He thought he was betrothed to the swamp. The experience putting his foot into the mud meant some rituals letting the boy into an adult world. A boy's love for dirt, danger, sensation, is fashioned in retrospect into a ritual baptism in nature, a sexual initiation, an act with the literal 'matter of Ireland', before political crisis forced him into a more bitter and lasting union.

II

Heaney tried to invoke the atmosphere and experience of his childhood in language which not merely marked the muddied bucolic as a young apart but underlined the clumsy force of that natural world with which the child had had to come to terms. In the poem 'Death of a Naturalist', the title poem of his first volume, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), an innocent boy experiences the wonder of nature. In this case the 'sentenced naturalist', who is very sensitive to nature and can gain

pleasure from it, is Heaney himself. This poem opens in a setting familiar only to Irish readers, a flax dam.¹⁾ Close to Heaney's first home just such a dam was located, and his maternal grandfather was employed as a boiler man in a nearby linen works. On one level this poem simply depicts the country activity of processing flax, which is then made into linen. But in fact a flax dam serves the metaphoric purpose:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.

The rotting, weighted-down flax stands symbolically for the repressed, vegetative sexuality and violence at the heart of his land. Flax and frog spawn are employed to trace the psychological gestation of the poet. As Henry Hart points out "the boy's instinctual life and the sexual and violent impulses in the society around him seem weighted down, repressed by religious codes, and as a result fester underground like the rotting flax."²⁾ From the poem's outset, the reader is subjected to a rapid succession of images of decay, 'festered', 'rotted', 'weighted', 'sweltered'. The claustrophobic oppressiveness is compounded by a burdened rhythm, in which monosyllables predominate, and by the accretions of alliteration and assonance. Heaney confessed Gerard Manley Hopkins was the poet who influenced his early style. In retrospect he believes that the peculiar regional characteristics of the Northern Ireland voice—more specifically, the County Derry voice—produced in him a natural affinity for "the heavily accented consonantal noise" of Hopkins.³⁾ This is more true of the following lines. From out a clot of sights, sounds and smells, images of tentative beauty briefly emerge:

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

and the pace quickens, "There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies", anticipating the climatic description of the frogspawn's "warm thick slobber". In a "gauze of sound" the ancient wound of sectarian strife seems to be wrapped; it is sanitized, bandaged, covered up.

Every spring the boy would fill 'the warm thick slobber of frogspawn' in jampot and observed it until 'the fattening dots burst into nimble'. Then one hot summer day when the frogs invaded the flax-dam, he heard a coarse croaking that he had never heard before. The air became thick with a bass chorus.

Some

hopped:

The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

In the poem's second half, fosterage in beauty gives way to fosterage in fear. In the first stanza, the innocent boy enjoys the touch of warm frogspawn and feels as if they were 'clotted' or 'jellied'. But in the second stanza, the familiar croak of a bullfrog became no less than the 'coarse' sound and its onomatopoeia 'slap' and 'plop' sounded as obscene threats for him. The boy became sick, turned, and ran. He thought the frogs were gathering for revenge against the man who stole the frogs spawn. Those animals he had been familiar with became dreadful ones for him. By means of that delightfully repulsive phrase, references to Miss Walls, to 'the daddy frog' and 'the mammy frog', and the information that "you could tell the weather by frogs", Heaney cleverly conveys a child's psyche, and the pleasure of his initiation into the mysteries of Nature; As we can see, the centre of Heaney's poetry is always human.

The child's feelings were impractical, but surely not false either in the sense of being counterfeited or of being superficial. At the end of 'Blackberry-Picking', the knowledge comes not in fantasy but in the forced acknowledgement of actuality when the picked blackberries ferment: "I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair/
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot./ Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." As we can see, the phrase "It wasn't fair" is the child's querulous, petulant recognition of inevitability, the stamped foot with which he responds to a world which will never measure his desires; and this knowledge, as the poem's metaphorical language intimates, is also heavy with the knowledge of his historical background.

In the process of becoming an adult, there existed the unknown 'darkness' in front of the young boy. Darkness resides in the crevices and recesses around the farm, in stable, forge and barn. One hot summer day the boy opened the door of the barn and found so many sacks of corn and farming implements in it. He deeply recognized 'the musty dark'. The fear of darkness recurred to his mind at night and the boy had a nightmare that night. ('The Barn') It was childhood fear of this dark, as much as subsequent education and urbanisation, that contributed to the poet's "death" not only as a "naturalist" but also as the kind of unthinking

accomplice of the earth. In short, his peaceful mind in 'Eden' was being menaced by the fear of darkness as well as the power of outer land.

Under these circumstances, how did the boy tackle the darkness, unknown world? At first sight, he seemed to be passive in many respects, but in fact he was trying to do something to console himself. Heaney has sought not to understand but to propitiate the fearful dark. Commemoration of the experiences of a rural childhood is also an attempt to exorcise. In *Death of a Naturalist*, fear was generated and exorcised inexpensively. The trouble began with the first couplet of the first poem, 'Digging'; "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun." Since the poem is about digging, the image of the gun introduces a piece of gratuitous menace. The words in the second-to-last stanza, 'smell' and 'cuts' evoke not only images of cutting turf, but of battles fought and lives lost throughout a history of violence. Digging itself is a form of violence, as the images of the gun implies. Digging is, then, both a productive and a destructive act. The poem ends as the speaker chooses to continue his digging, not with a spade but with a pen. Often with equal gratuity, as Jonh Wilson Forster points out, 'images of ballistics and detonation pepper the volume.'⁴⁾ Frogs are "mud grenades" in 'Death of a Naturalist'; crocks are "pottery bombs" in 'Churning Day'; 'Down Shoot' is about shotgunning foxes; when the poet slaps the animal in 'Cow in Calf' the blows "plump like a depth-charge"; the fish in 'Trout' is a gun-barrel and a bullet; sea explodes, wind strafes, and space is a salvo in 'Storm on the Island'. These words seem to indicate the vindication in the gunlaw of Ulster society.

The 'birth' of the poet was also allegorically told in 'Personl Helicon'. Here Heaney pushes what might have been simply another convenient, homely analogy into something like a personal myth. This poem begins with the past, memories of a childhood fascinated with wells. As a child, the boy savoured looking into the darkness of the well. When he uttered a word to the darkness 'a clean new music' echoed, and loved his own reflection. Indeed, the attraction is largely narcissistic; The young Heaney tried to find some other avenue of self-study, and that avenue is, predictably, poetry. Here the affirmative meaning was given to the darkness once feared by the boy. We can say the darkness was his 'Helicon' which gives him the inspiration for making new poems.

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.

The word Helicon, a Grecian mountain range that was the mythic home of the

Muses, is used synonymously for artistic inspiration. The muse's well is a tunnel into himself, a place for solipsistic soul-searching. The well water in which he sees his reflection marks his initiation into a knowledge of the "other" – the otherworld or unconscious. A helicon is also a musical, –something that must be played, and whose musical qualities only exist in the present moment. Thus, a personal helicon is both the source of inspiration and the instrument for that inspiration. A poet claims to "rhyme/To see myself." A rhyme is an echo, and rhyming is the act of poetic creation. The speaker wants "to set the darkness echoing," to create a text in which all the elements of consciousness, one's cultural consciousness in conjunction with one's personal experience, reverberate or echo, which is an act of seeing one's self, of self-creation. Thus Heaney's pastoral dialectic moves from a childhood Eden of repressed awareness to its antithesis, a self-conscious, narcissistic relishing of antipastoral slime and desolation, and finally to a candid appraisal of "things as they are" beyond the pasture's walls.

Here we can detect subtle shifts in Heaney's style, in that alliteration is used more sparingly, and more weight is transferred to the music of the vowels and to the images themselves. The poem opens with the kind of matter-of-fact tone he employs, the 'adult' voice, but, by the third line, the child's sensual delight has been re-animated in a quick succession of nouns and simple adjectives. Poet and reader relish together the melodramatic diction – 'the dark drop', 'the rich crash', and those pleasuring verbs, 'loved' and 'savoured'

III

Searching himself into the darkness, a poet has gradually shifted his interest to the darkness of his ancestry and Irish race. He realized that the laid open turf-bank, the forbidden bogland, was also a memory-bank, permitting us to read an approximate chronological sequence of landscapes and human cultures in Ireland going back several thousand years. Take the poem 'Digging' for example once again. It is the first of three poems in which Patrick Heaney (the poet's father) is a dominant presence in *Death of a Naturalist*. These poems reveal the creative importance within his early career of the 'state of negotiation'⁵⁾ between Heaney and his idea of Father. Like its kindred pieces, 'Follower' and 'Ancestral Photograph', it is a poem about blood, ancestry, roots, growing up and away, and expresses a deeply felt need to reconcile his new identity as a poet with that of his former boyish self. To switch metaphors, it reveals the poet putting down his foundations, building upon many layers of literary and personal experience. The physical power and assuredness of these diggers is conveyed by means of vigorous verbs, alliteration, enjambed lines, and assertive diction.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.

In digging back into the past, however, he also uncovers layers of fear and dejection, recovering moments which exhibit what Lawrence calls 'the terrified helplessness of childhood'.⁶⁾ Digging in one form or another remains the archetypal act in Heaney's poetry. What is found when the earth is overturned is sometimes good, such as the cream-white healthy tubes in 'At a Potato Digging', where the "gravid" earth is both pregnant womb and rotting grave, a mound of fallen refuse and the compost heap for new life. We are reminded that "wild higgledy skeletons /scoured the land in 'forty-five, /wolfed the blighted root and died". The poem is a pastoral elegy for the famine victims of 1845 that places the human deaths into the larger context of nature's ineluctable, regenerative rhythm. The ground remains "faithless," unreliable, despite the intervening century or so between the famine and the composition of the poem. Even when the labourers take their lunch break, their motions suggest the deaths brought on by the famine.

Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the
black
Mother. Processional stooping through the turf

Rekurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

We can see Heaney employs the line break brilliantly in delaying the key word "Mother." This poem stands as mother-goddess-lover, demanding tribute, worship, sacrifice, as it is of kneeling or stooping as a characteristic Irish position. Still the act of obeisance acts not to break the spirit or the body but to "Thoughen the muscles behind their humbled knees." As Henry Hart points out "Their communion at the end is as secular as it is sacred, pagan as it is Christian, and impelled by a recognition of nature's cruelty as well as by a religious desire to appease nature's wrath and bless its fruitfulness."⁷⁾ Heaney recognizes the dignity in the humility, and throughout his career he maintains a fascination with a respect for those who practice the timeless rituals of work and faith.

Deeper down, finds are liable to be more interesting. Because of the strange power in bog water which prevents decay, much of Ireland's past has been preserved

within the three million acres of bog—utensils, jewellery and most characteristically the wood from Ireland's vanished oak forests.

In regard to the land, the speaker in 'Bogland' proffers a connection between Irish archaeology and Irish identity: "Every layer they strip/Seems camped on before. //The wet centre is bottomless." The word camped is used to describe the various cultures laminated on top of one another that constitute the archaeology and history of Ireland. The word also has a military connotation, the camps of invaders who have crossed the Irish shorelines over the centuries. These invaders did not remain for just a short time but stayed long enough that their arrival and their occupation blend into the tradition of the country. The bottomless centre of 'Bogland' and the darkness 'Personal Helicon' complement each other, the former referring to the seemingly endless levels of history and tradition that constitute the Irish consciousness and the latter referring to the space in which the utterances of the poet exist.

Then by digging the bogland with a pen, Heaney traced the lost Irish memories piled in layers. But these works made him realize the loss of the second 'paradise'. The poet was informed that his birthplace 'Mossbawn', which he had considered as a holy place, was colonized in the past and it had a bitter history. The name 'moss' had literally been taken by the settlers from Scotland. The latter word 'bawn' was the name of the fortified farmhouses which the colonists from England gave to. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, natives of Ulster pronounced it Moss bann, and ban is the Gaelic word for white. So the word literally means the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton. In the syllables of the word 'Moss bann', Heaney has to see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster.⁸⁾ In the west of Mossbawn, there lies the village of Castledawson and the English demesne Moyola Park. In the east, on the other hand, there lies the villages of Toome, where the bog widens and hoards of flints and fishbones have been found, reminding him that the Bann valley is one of the oldest inhabited areas in the country. Heaney noticed he was symbolically placed between the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experiences, between 'the demesne' and 'the bog'. We can say his origin as a poet comes from the point where the complicated two cultures crossed. He began as a poet when his 'roots were crossed' his reading. He thinks "of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants."⁹⁾ Heaney may well have recalled this image in 'Terminus' from *The Haw Lantern*, where he asserts "Two buckets were easier carried than one/I grew up in between". The evocation of the subaqueous and subterranean in Heaney's poetry is in part an exploration of that alarming potency of the natural world revealed to him as a child and it is also an attempt to enter into the quiddity of the past, to record and evoke "the memory of the landscape".

During the years from 1961-66, Celtic and Catholic influences in his personal life—such as Michael McLaverty, Marie Devlin,—and in his literary ‘discoveries’—such as Patrick Kavanagh, John Montague, James Joyce—helped him find and ‘found’ his sense of himself as an Irish poet, but did not prevent him from drawing water from English and American wells. These personalities and literary experiences furnished Heaney with a second anchor strengthened his craft, and enabled him to undertake over more ambitious and testing voyages unto himself.

Note

- 1) In *Irish Folk Ways* (Routledge), E.Estyn Evans vividly describes the harvesting of flax: When grown for fibre, flax is harvested after the pale blue flowers have fallen, but before the seed ripens and because it is the stalk that is being harvested it is not cut, but pulled up by the roots... The beets (shaves) are carried as soon as possible to be steeped (drowned or dubbed) in the flax dam or ‘lint hole’ where soft peaty water has been standing for some days to warm up...The process or retting (rotting) takes from seven to twelve days and is soon advertised by a foul and penetrating odour as the core of ‘bone’ of the stalk decays. p.157.
- 2) Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), p.23.
- 3) Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p.44.
- 4) John Wilson Foster, *The achievement of Seamus Heaney*, (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995), p.8.
- 5) cf. Ted Hughes, *A choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, London: Faber, 1971. “The poetic imagination is determined finally by the state of negotiation in a person or people between man and his idea of the Creator” p.181.
- 6) D.H.Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949, p.222.
- 7) op.cit., p.28.
- 8) *Preoccupations*. p.35.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p.37.

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