
Seamus Heaney's Dream of Restoration

—Myth and Politics—

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As his early poems show, Seamus Heaney, a Northern Irish poet, traced the lost Irish memories piled in layers, turning his attention to the act of digging and to the act of writing as a corollary. The act of digging has some important meanings not only for the poet but also for the Irish; it is a central activity in the lives of the local people. They dig their food, their fuel, and their graves. Heaney marvels at the preservative qualities of Irish bog. Actually, the poet closes his second volume with 'Bogland', in which the objects encompass the animal world ("the skeleton/of the Great Irish Elk"), the human world ("Butter sunk under/More than a hundred years"), and the vegetable world ("waterlogged trunks/of great firs"). Many of the early poems are similarly concerned with 'bedding the locale', establishing his birthplace, Mossbawn, as a frame of reference from which he can map the Catholic past and present. In the pursuit of his poetic vocation, Heaney felt compelled to examine other modes of feeling and perception and the concept of 'home' now required a wider definition, and involved more than the close family characters depicted in his early volumes. The poet employed pre-Christian mythic material to enable him to confront and interpret the slaughter of innocence.

W. B. Yeats discovered a coherent mythology with the help of his wife's automatic writing; a system of symbols in which new ages are ushered in by the annunciation of the gods to men. Sometimes such gifts of informing principles occur and please a poet. In 1969 Seamus Heaney, in an archaeological study, discovered P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*.¹⁾ The entrancement Heaney experienced looking at photographs of the Tollund Man matched that of Professor Glob, who concludes that the bog people were participants in fertility rites and then sacrificed to a fertility goddess. Heaney was quick to recognize the poetic potential, and to utilize its anthropological insights in interpreting the present state of Ireland. The poet seizes on this in the poem 'The Tollund Man',²⁾ which is compiled in the third volume, *Wintering Out*.³⁾

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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 nearby
 Where they dug him out,
 His last gruel of winter seeds
 Caked in his stomach,

She tightened her torc on him
 And opened her fen,
 Those dark juices working
 Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
 Honeycombed workings.
 Now his stained face
 Reposes at Aarhus.

In the first line where the poet resolves to visit the shrine, Aarhus, no vowel or consonant is repeated. The language is simple and monosyllables predominate, as if music should be retained solely for the young victim. The reference to the 'mild pods of his eye-lids' emphasizes the gentleness of the face. Subsequently in the second quatrain a starker note has been sounded, partly by means of the diction, partly through the use of alliteration. We cannot but pity his nakedness, which stresses his defencelessness and establishes his ambiguous role as groom/victim. Here the marriage between the man and the goddess was arranged and his body was being wrapped up in the bogs's juices, hinting at vaginal secretions. As the alliterated 't' suggests, her embrace is very soft to the man and the waters of the fen do not devour their victim; rather, they turn him into a "saint's kept body". The poet considers that the Tollund man is transporting out of this life with the goddess of fertility, turning into a relic of worship. The pre-Christian pattern follows into a Christian, especially Catholic, form of belief. Here Heaney discovers a sense of kinship with the people of Jutland, another Northern race.

Compared to the magnetic, transcendent figure Professor Glob depicts, Heaney's Tollund Man seems at this stage a modest, unassuming saint. Part One of the poem ends, as it began, *pianissimo*. The succession of 'z' and 's' sounds establishes the quiet atmosphere of the place where the poet is going. The effect is achieved by placing

the strategic word 'Reposes' in the final couplet, and its near-rhyming with 'Aarhus'. In a brilliant sweep of imagery, the poem transports itself out of the present and into another past. The poet deftly conjures up the ancient past through the simple vehicle of place name, Aarhus, and suddenly we are taken out of the present troubles into the ancient holy place.

In the opening to Part Two, Heaney contemplates an appeal to the Tollund Man to intercede for Ireland. In contrast to the almost 'civilized' ritual killings of ancient Jutland, which at least could claim the dignity of a religious purpose, the poet cites an incident from the 1920s as an illustration of the barbarity, four young Catholic brothers massacred by Protestant paramilitaries.

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.

As we can see, the speaker of this poem comments on the present in an oblique yet forceful way. The bodies of four young brothers had been trailed along the railway lines, over the sleepers as a kind of mutilation. They were 'ambushed', slaughtered for no conceivable 'common good', their bodies broken and shredded. The answer in this poem, as in Yeat's poem 'Easter 1916', must be that it is a 'terrible beauty', a beauty from which every shred of innocence has been stripped away. Whereas the Tollund Man was forewarned of his death, perhaps accepted its justification, and was left physically intact by his 'executors'.

Here an extension and elaboration of the relationship between Ireland and Jutland discovered in 'The Tollund Man' provided Heaney with the basis for such a myth of Northern Ireland. These legendary figures, in a sense, influenced the subject matter, the literary theory and the style of Heaney's writings and enabled him to be at once conservative and innovative. Irish history associated with ancient Ireland and the gods and heroes of Celtic Ireland had become his major interest. The poet's sense of place is enhanced, his sense of himself as inhabitant not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. The metaphor of marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind can lead him a bit further in his exploration. The implications of this recognition are fully

pursued in the fourth volume, *North*.

Myth and history are utilized to greater effect in the poem 'Funeral Rites'. In this poem, Heaney muses on contemporary deaths especially from political violence and the ancient Viking murders. The opening lines refer to the poet helping lift the coffin.

I shouldered a kind of manhood,
stepping in to lift the coffins
of dead relations.

The reference to "shoulders" suggests responsibility, as does 'a kind manhood'. The poet conveys a funeral march, mourning over the dead. As the word "stepping in" suggests, the speaker of this poem adds his shoulder to lift the coffins. The shifting meaning in the opening lines identifies not only the living's obligation to bury the dead and their funeral rites, but the living's obligation to see that the dead do not die in vain. The poet contemplates a mythic baptism on a cultural level after burying someone who died, a victim of "neighbourly murder".

And always, in a corner,
the coffin lid,
its nail-heads dressed

with little gleaming crosses.

A coffin lid in a corner is redeemed by its symbols of Christian consolation and the likening of the funeral cortege to a 'black glacier' pave the way for the Viking allusions. The funeral procession makes a long black line, a metaphor of continual murders. Atrocities have become such frequent and familiar events. The funeral glacier of memory, transformed into a serpent in the violent present, also suggests the presence of evil in the current events, as does the oxymoron, "each neighbourly murder". A breach separates the recent past from the present and the part two begins:

Now as news comes in
of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms:

of a cortege, winding past
 each blinded home.
 I would restore

the great chambers of Boyne,
 prepare a sepulchre
 under the cupmarked stones.

Here the stark adverb, 'Now', ushers in a mournful succession of resonants. Particularly, the word 'neighbourly'⁴⁾ has a special meaning. This bitterly ironic word, actually, refers to Christ who commanded his followers to 'love thy neighbour'. The founder of the Catholic and the Protestant religions preached not to fight against each other. Heaney's use of 'we' and 'our' indicate that the poet's dream of restoration embraces both communities. The poet imagines a mass funeral procession snaking its way out of the North. The funeral goes away from its 'blinded' home, blinded by prejudice, blinded by grief. Then the mourners would arrive at the ancient tumuli of New Grange, in the valley of the sacred river, Boann or Boyne, the fountain of the inspiration of knowledge. According to *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*,⁵⁾ Aonghus, the son of the Dagda and Boann, was the god of 'love' and there was his palace at this place, New Grange. Skillfully, the poet takes us to this place where the bereaved of both communities could perform a joint act of contrition at a new 'sepulchre', and find relief and renewal. Suddenly, the poet shifts scene from the 'great chambers of Boyne' to the 'emptied kitchens' of Belfast. Through such fertility rites, the island could be freed from spiritual paralysis after all, in times past, at these tombs, the barren had hoped to find a cure.

The third part of this poem begins with the sealing of the sepulchre and concludes with an image of resurrection.

When they have put the stone
 back in its mouth
 we will drive north again
 past Strang and Carling fjords,

the cud of memory
 allayed for once, arbitration
 of the feud placated,
 imagining those under the hill

disposed like Gunnar

who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

The poet of this poem imagines a nonsectarian funeral cortege to the great chamber of the Boyne, in which both sides bury their hatchets with their dead. We are taken back into the Icelandic saga, *Njal's Saga*, where Gunnar's unavenged death broke the cycle of blood feuds and internecine retribution.⁶⁾ The poet, however, can only envision the recent dead lying, like Gunnar, 'joyful' in their tombs; only as an act of imagination can the current cycle of vengeance be broken. Heaney's elegiac visions are tendered with less credulity than his critics imply. Actually, the poem that envisions the end of the revenge cycle with Gunnar's happy lunar gaze implies its bloody perpetuation. The Viking past in this poem becomes not only an analogous situation to the present, but one from which contemporary combatants could learn a valuable lesson. The poem urgently desires an end to the terrible cycle. The deeper function of this poem lies in Heaney's desire to bring about the political and cultural repossession of Ireland after centuries of English occupation. What may have begun as a funeral scene has developed into a conscious endeavour to articulate the Irish Catholic identity.

We understand Heaney's historical approach allowed him to explore Ireland's various traditions. Poems on objects retrieved from the Northern ground⁷⁾ and on words retrieved from the language spoken on that ground⁸⁾ uncover a history of Ireland's conquest, first by Vikings and later by the English. The poet's wish to the bottom of mysteries of blood, origin, and tribe also combines with a wish for an enabling transcendence, a Joycean desire to go beyond the constraints of blood, origin, and tribe in order to elucidate the mind of one's nation, create its conscience.

As I mentioned earlier, Heaney wrote in suspension between the English and Irish traditions and culture. He especially avoided the temptation of the instant response to the latest atrocity and was not prepared to turn his poetry into "an offensive".⁹⁾ While avoiding the extremes of political activism and political escapism, he explored a form of poetic "resistance". These ideas reflect, for instance, on the poem 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'. This title seems to encourage recalcitrance, contraposing the serious political problems facing Ulster and platitudes that constitute the views 'on the Irish things'.

I'm writing just after an encounter
With an English journalist in search of 'views
On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter

Quarters where bad news is no longer news,

Where media-men and stringers sniff and point,

Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads

Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint

But I incline as much to rosary beads

With the cliché 'The times are out of joint', the poet, seriously or ironically, alludes to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As we all know, this line occurs when Hamlet understands that he is bound to avenge his father's murder and set things right.¹⁰⁾ Heaney is, in a sense, an unwilling Hamlet trapped by a multitude of Poloniuses who keep the violence and trouble with words. Everybody expects the poet to comment firmly on his feelings of race and resentment, and on the agony and injustice of events. Rather than focusing directly on incidents from the present, Heaney concentrated on the elegiac poems celebrating the history, identity, and tongue of his people, the Northern Catholic Irish. As for political propaganda, it had to present ideas in a simple, easily intelligible form. One point Heaney criticized was its incredibly weak content. Even at its best it offered no richness and complexity of thought, no startling perceptions. Entirely lacking in psychological penetration, it paid no attention to 'the spiritual part of life'.

Heaney's experience in America,¹¹⁾ however, accelerated the 'politicisation' of his poetry and we can detect subtle shifts in Heaney's style. At that time, Blacks, Hispanics and Indians were increasingly demanding their say 'in American affairs', and Heaney was inevitably reminded of the political assertions being made by the minority back home. The experience in Berkeley convinced him that poetry could become a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance. Political development at home had forced him to re-evaluate and reinterpret his formative years. Even in the frame of myth, which has its consoling aspects, the atrocities become unbearable for Heaney. He sometimes acknowledged his guilt for implicit participation in such terrible deed. Now the poet begins to doubt his own reverence and is forced to reevaluate his sanctification of the unspeakable on politics. This understanding endowed Heaney with the renewed power and the victims of violence are no longer distanced: their mythological beauty has gone, the contemplative distance has vanished. Heaney has begun to consider his literary heritage more carefully, to interrogate it in relation to his Northern and violent experience. In poems in *Field Work*, experience is intensified and the distance of words from actuality is compensated for by the revival of the actual in the words. They penetrate personal feelings about death and suffering. Out of the irritations of sand

and grit, the oyster makes a beautiful pearl.

[Note]

- 1) Professor Glob, the distinguished Danish archaeologist, describes an Iron Age man, who twenty millenary before, had been deposited in the bog as a sacrifice, to the fertility goddess, Nerthus, a North European equivalent of the Mediterranean earth goddess Ishtar and Aphrodite.
- 2) Clearly the poet sees the Tollund man in the connection to the current reference to the four young brothers and to the 1798 slaughter of Croppies, from whose pockets, as he tells in 'Requiem for the Croppies', the barley they carried sprouted in August.
- 3) In Ulster, the verb 'to winter out' means to see through and survive a crisis, and is derived from a farming custom which involved taking cattle to a sheltered area, feeding them on a minimum diet throughout the winter, before fattening them in the spring and summer. Heaney also connects the title of his collection with *Richard III's* famous opening, "Now is the gesture towards the distresses that we are all undergoing in this country at the moment."
- 4) The Orange Day marches every 12 July, celebrating the defeat of Catholic James II by Protestant William III, are also "customary rhythms" associated with the Boyne.
- 5) *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*, by Peter Berresford Ellis Oxford Univ. Press 1991 p. 33-34.
- 6) According to Henry Hart, in the middle of *Njal's Saga*, after Gunnar is buried, a shepherd and housemaid find him "in good humour and chanting verses inside the mound". Later, Njal's son, Skarp-Hedin, and Gunnar's son, Gogni, stand outside, to the south of Gunnar's burial mound, illuminating the whole chamber. They can see Gunnar is exultant. These two incidents are based on Heaney's poem, 'Funeral Rites'. Then Skarp-Hedin, son of Njal, refuses to acquiesce to Gunnar's unavenged death and thereby stop the feuding. Then he and Hogni set off to murder four of his father's enemies, and the terrible, ludicrous cycle of butchery and futile attempts at reconciliation at the Althing continues. (Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney Poet of Contrary Progressions*, p. 85.)
- 7) Viking long-ship, Viking trial pieces, a white bone a turf cart quernstonesm, a spade covered with moss.
- 8) 'moss', 'bawn', 'Dublin', 'bone-house' or 'ban-hus', 'bog'.
- 9) *Preoccupations*, p. 219-20.
- 10) The time is out of joint; O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right' (I. v. 189-90).
- 11) From the autumn of 1970 till September 1971, Heaney could take up the post of Guest Lecturer at the University of California, having been granted a sabbatical from Queen's Belfast.

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