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Heaney's Spiritual Archaeology and the Poetic Promise of Political Memory

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Abstract

Poetry for Seamus Heaney has an 'archaeological' function. Much of Heaney's poetry engages with the cultural amnesia that the atmosphere of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland threatens with. Against this distortion of historical memory by contemporary events and also by the forces of globalization, Heaney works with the belief inherited from Wordsworth that poetry 'enshrine[s] the spirit of the past / For future restoration.' Rather than the factual correction of distortions, poetry, hence, is more intent at preserving the 'spirit' of the past – which is not to say that facts are treated as redundant, but that in poetry facts lead us to the spirit of the past. With reference to specifically poems from the collection *The Haw Lantern*, the paper shall enquire as to what form of memory does poetry then engage with.

This is spiritual archaeology since poetry is conceived as response towards spirits of the past, like that of Diogenes or the mud vision. Poetry is the call of responsibility when the past is being 'dissipated in news'. Memory in poetry is also spiritual in the sense that it has a spiritual purpose – it preserves the sense of justice and a promise for future within a reality of violence. The possibility of 'restoration' is held out by a past that is itself strung with violent

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incidences. The paper shall interrogate poetry's ambivalent dealings with memory and violence that occur in the process. Poetry and literature in general, we will see, shares a radical relation with history, but a radicalization that is politically an antidote of that other form of radicalization that potentially leads to terrorism. The paper shall discuss where these two radical trajectories concerning history vitally differ.

Key Words- *Memory, History, Spirit, Violence, Terrorism, Poetry.*

The conflict during the Troubles in Northern Ireland was as much physical as mental- alongside the violent events during the three decades of the Troubles, the conflict was continued and supported by the circulation of propagandas that exploited public sentiments through the strategic manipulation of cultural memories. And this manipulation was carried on by both sides involved. During the period of this conflict that lasted roughly from 1960 to 1998, the operations of the British forces and their Protestant loyalists in Ireland, on the one hand, and of the Irish Republic Army and their Catholic sympathizers, on the other, willfully induced or callously inculcated a great degree of cultural amnesia concerning Northern Ireland or Ulster, and much of this function was furthered through manipulations in news. The Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney's poetry engages and resists these tendencies for Heaney finds among one of poetry's functions that of 'restoration of the culture to itself' (Heaney FK 14). Our paper will explain how the operations of memory in poetry work for a spiritual restoration of culture, and how this process stands contrary to the manipulations of memory that come to justify violence from any political standpoint.

The expression "cultural amnesia" would likely come from the lips of someone who bemoans the tendency of some people to forget about their roots, particularly the set of values, customs, mores, taboos, and ideals which once defined the bedrock of that culture. The phrase also 'points to the obscuring of human history through hiding or re-translating key historical events that threatened to overwhelm humanity' (Fitts). Those who have read

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‘Digging’ will know that with Heaney the archaeological act of excavation is essentially similar to the act of writing poetry. Heaney’s efforts stand against the threats of amnesia since he seconds Wordsworth’s motive from *The Prelude*: ‘I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration’ (Heaney FK 14). He shares Eliot’s belief in the ‘auditory imagination’, and therefore holds ‘word as etymological occurrence, as a symptom of human history, memory and attachments’ (77).

History, for instance, is associated with the word ‘Mossbawn’, the name of the place where the Heaneys lived. The name is a combination of ‘moss’ – the Norse word for bog, and ‘bawn’ an English or Scottish word for foot (Rowe 1). His bog poems hence are archaeological excavations into his communal and personal history, expressions of his ‘kinship’ with the bog:

I step through origins
like a dog turning
its memories of wildness
on the kitchen mat. (Heaney OG 120, lines 5-8)

The memories that are evoked by treading the vast bog gets a gushing outlet at the opening of ‘Kinship’, where Heaney’s ability to decipher the sacred hieroglyphics and evidences of spade marks drives him to a kindred spirit buried deep within the bog. Elsewhere the poet has referred to the bog as a memory-bank, a ‘dark casket where we have found many of the clues to our past and to our cultural identity’ (Heaney and Broadbridge 40). While enshrining the past buried under, the poet as a dog also makes the memories homely in the present world. The bog itself is brought to life – ‘water cheeps and lisp’ (Heaney OG 120, line 9).

Here therefore is presented the way poetry makes use of memories. While archaeology is a discipline devoted to the derivation of facts and information out of historical evidences, poetry seeks to enliven through languages the living roots of memory. It is ‘a dig for finds that end up being plants’ (Heaney FK 14). The botanical image adequately sits for

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poetry's dual motion – both upwards and downwards, excavating the soil and erupting out to address the future. The bog mummies poetically appealed to Heaney because in them the spirit of the past came up through sedimented layers of soil and time to connect with the present times. The botanical image returns when in 'Poet's Chair' Heaney again describes the interaction of poetry with past, present and future:

...the poem as a ploughshare that turns time

Up and over. Of the chair in leaf

The fair thorn is entering for the future. (Heaney OG 427, lines 40-42)

This is not unlike the Benjaminian blasting of the homogeneous course of history (Benjamin 272). In 'Sibyl', the 'forgotten water' (Heaney OG 148, line 3) would speak up like 'an explosion in morning' (148, line 4), and that is how the 'fair thorn' of past enters 'for the future' (427, line 42). The bog is not firm and unchangeable, just like history itself. It is soft beneath the poet's feet, it is unsteady and under constant alteration. The bog hence comes to represent the condition of language in 'Kinship' – both the bog and language are considered as living and transmuting entities in the fourth section of the poem. Language therefore is the medium through which the past gets the mobility of imagination, thereby resisting homogenization of history and forgetting of roots. Here is also the opposition between poetry and scientific archaeology. Poetry does not strictly follow the relation between observation and inference; imagination intervenes in the process.

We realize the political nature of the poetic act when we ask what kind of history it is that is being blasted. The discourses of history that Heaney's poetry runs against are themselves motivated. In Ulster, the interests of the British and the Nationalists coloured the dominant historical consciousness. The Provisional IRA, in their ploy for a united Ireland, would base its claim on the evidences of geographical, cultural and historical unity (Adams 88). Their narrative would draw upon the likes of Patrick Pearse who argues for a unified Gaelic identity that lay in the origin of Ireland, and the IRA therefore would equate becoming free with becoming Gaelic again (Wright 4). In the name of revival this is but a reduction of

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historical multiplicity, and therefore a forgetting that Heaney would find regressive. If the IRA was utilizing their selective reading of history for self-justification, the British side was drawing assistance from the same cultural typification. The British would broadcast news of black magic and witchcraft performed by the IRA as well as the Loyalist paramilitary (Thompson). The government would go so far as to set up the Information Policy Department and the Information Research Department in 1948 to monitor the circulation of information. What such interested manipulation would do is provoke misunderstanding and distance between the two parties.

The mobility and innate conflicts in history that Heaney draws attention to work against such ethnic localization of sympathies. The fundamental difference is that ‘the discovery and deployment of [poetic] language allowed us to talk of Planters and Gaels’, but ‘to speak of different heritages rather than launch accusations and suspicions at one another, to speak of history rather than the skullduggery of the local government’ (Heaney FK 117). Thus, in his Nobel acceptance speech ‘Crediting Poetry’ Heaney speaks of the way in which indulgence in history can turn away from entrapments of ideologies:

Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in an ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, our vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous per se. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage us to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space. In spite of devastating and repeated acts of massacre, assassination and extirpation, the huge acts of faith which have marked the new relations between Palestinians and Israelis, Africans and Afrikaners, and the way in which walls have come down in Europe and iron

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curtains have opened, all this inspires a hope that new possibility can still open up in Ireland as well. (Heaney OG 460)

While Heaney's prose on multiple occasions has pointed out the promise, Heaney's poetry points out the difficulty of the function. Poems like 'Punishment' indulge in a form of 'fetishizing... of the local' (460) although it is the fetisization that Heaney warns against.

I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones.... (Heaney OG 118)

Benjamin's blasting of history cannot occur without a certain deal of violence. As the equating of the pen with the gun in 'Digging' or the reference to explosion in 'Sibyl' indicate, certain deal of violence is necessary for memory to erupt in the present. In case of poetry this violence is done by imagination upon reality – this is the violence of poetic manipulation. Poetry implies subjective involvement. Dianne Meredith therefore uses the phrase 'geographies of the mind' (Meredith 1) in order to describe the bogs in Heaney. While not creating any imaginary locale like Hardy, Marquez or R.K. Narayan, a real geographical location in Heaney's poetry is altered according to the convenience of poet. These manipulations have made Heaney's poetry controversial among critics, and the tension is felt within his poems only.

Much of the attraction of the bog poems after all is in the past violence that these mummies bear testimony of. Their history is connected by Heaney's imagination to 'the secret centre of violence' (Blanchot 42) that is language. Maurice Blanchot explains the essence of violence in language:

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[W]hen I speak, I recognize very well that there is speech only because what "is" has disappeared in what names it, struck with death so as to become the reality of the name; the life of this death. (Blanchot 36)

This realization is not foreign to Heaney, but can be integral to the understanding of his poetry right from *Death of a Naturalist*. Speaking of the death of his parents, he says:

[E]xperiencing my parents' deaths restored some of the verity to that vocabulary. These words [- *soul* and *spirit* -] I realized, aren't obfuscation.

They have to do with the spirit of life that is within us. (The Paris Review)

Our paper chooses to call the poetic process that is equivalent to archaeology 'spiritual archaeology' because poetry has to do with the after-life of presence, when the spirit of what is past and absent is presented in poetry. Such is the Sibyl or the Mud Vision that rose up 'as if a rose window of mud / Had invented itself out of the glittery damp' (Heaney OG 321, lines 15-16).

The phenomenon is also spiritual because poetry provides its messianic promises out of the dead, because '[t]he fair thorn is entering for the future' (427, lines 42). The poem 'The Mud Vision' opens with the image of Christ and the 'exposed hearts' (321, line 1) and 'barbed-wire crowns' (321, line 1) of the statues speak of an ancient act of violence. The most brilliant case of oxymoron takes place when Heaney portrays the identical treatment reserved for holy idols and corpses killed by violence. It *is* a poem embedded in memories of former life in an ancient Ireland, but it also gestures towards an Ireland that is still coming into being. The memory of violence enables Heaney to frame the hope for future possibilities. 'Casualty' from *Field Works* similarly seeks to attain solidarity through the memorial of Louis O'Neill, who was killed during what in Irish history is known as "Bloody Sunday," though he is unnamed in the actual text. Heaney switches from descriptive narratives of past dealings with O'Neill to graphic facts about the bombing or descriptions of the tension present in Ireland as he did with the reference to the graffiti in stanza three, which compares

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the death toll to soccer score, "PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said, / BOGSIDE NIL" (Heaney OG 154).

The use of the language of reportage is significant here. The personal touch of the poem seeks to redeem memory from the dulling of senses that media representations create. In 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', Heaney therefore writes against 'media-men', 'stringers', 'politicians', and 'newspapermen' (131) 'Who proved upon their pulses "escalation", / "Backlash" and "crack down", "the provisional wing", / "Polarization" and "long-standing hate"' (131, lines 13-15). It is under the string of such abstractions that not only the actuality of things and events but the life in history is curbed. Poetry laments that 'What might have been origin / We dissipated in news' (322, lines 57-8). But, as a project against cultural amnesia, poetry registers not just the tension of media manipulation but also of poetic manipulation.

Just as with Louis O'Neill in 'Casualty', Heaney commemorated the death of his cousin in Colum McCartney 'The Strand at Lough Beg'. But, in 'Station Island', the ghost of McCartney returns to accuse the poet of taking advantage of the death:

You saw that, and you wrote that---not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio
and saccharined my death with morning dew. (261, 69-76)

The section problematically poses the fact that poetry cannot claim innocence – 'No such thing / as innocent / bystanding' (415, lines 1-3), as Heaney would write in 'Mycenae Lookout'. The ghost even sees the poet as on the same side as the assassin. Then how can

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poetry claim to perform the restoration when it is using the same language that politically interested parties use for manipulation? What differentiates the two?

It is this very 'self-diagnosing frame of reference' (Heaney FK 117) that differentiates poetry from political discourses. The violence is original in the sense that it can turn against itself, a movement that would compromise any political ideology. In fact, this self-diagnostic movement is the most essential component that lets the spiritual promise in Heaney's poetry to be alive. Rather than settling for any interpretation of history, poetry provides interminable movement for it finds that '[t]he wet centre is bottomless' (Heaney OG 42, line 28). 'The Haw Lantern' shows the spirit of an indigenous Diogenes rising out of the 'small light for small people' (299, line 2), 'seeking one just man' (299, line 7). A botanical image is again used to express the tentative motions of trail – 'it pecked-at ripeness that scans you' (299, line 12). The 'you' of the poem, who is likely the poet himself, gets no affirmative response as the figure 'moves on' (299, line 12). But, this failure also suggests that the act of seeking of justice has not ended here. Paradoxically, therefore, the guilt that appears in 'Station Island', as it again does here, keeps alive the pursuit and desire for justice. This, further, keeps alive the spirit.

Poetry therefore takes to manipulation, but that manipulation affirms nothing with finality, not even itself. It invites every form of language, but the sense of inadequacy is kept alive. As such, this violent negation becomes the affirmation of more things to come, as opposed to the termination intended by political violence.

[W]e well know that when we are having words we are not fighting. Language is the undertaking through which violence agrees not to be open, but secret, agrees to forgo spending itself in a brutal action in order to reserve itself for a more powerful mastery, henceforth no longer affirming itself, but nonetheless at the heart of all affirmation. (Blanchot 42)

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The spirits in ‘Sibyl’, ‘Kinship’, ‘Station Island’, ‘The Mud Vision’ or ‘The Haw Lantern’ keep up this differing negation that ensures that we should always go back to the past to look for promises of a better future. As Heaney writes in *Place and Displacement*,

The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable. (Heaney OG 119)

The spiritual archaeology of poetry does not provide facts, but supplements factual archaeology in an essential way to combat the congealing of cultural consciousness with accepted notions and forgetfulness. It does so through the weight of responsibility that the spirits of the past and the requirements of the present impose upon poetry. In this way poetry never settles for any specific version of truth but articulates the positive in every aspect, while registering and even mirroring the violence upon spirits that some assertions of truth do cause. Poetry then is spiritual but not redemptive – it looks to the future and retains the spirit of the foregone, and it also makes use of the forces that disrupt both.

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