



“Vivid cast” and “opaque repose”: A Note on the Literary and Historical Consciousness in Seamus Heaney’s Bog Poems

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Abstract: The early poems of the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney can be perceived as fundamentally concerned with childhood, horrors of violence and the wonders of nature. They lure the reader into a world full of "the smells/of waterweed, fungus and dank moss". His enchantment with the hidden secrets of the earth reaches another dimension in his celebrated bog poems that look into places where 'there is no reflection'. These poems particularly deal with the metaphor of Bogland, a repository of power and mystery. The bog land, for Heaney, becomes a space of spiritual, historical and physical enchantment, an inextricable link between life and death, mobility and immobility, past and present. Bog poems are symbolic representation of death and deathlessness, endless violence and peace, the grotesque and the beautiful, the silences and the screams. In the bog bodies, victims of violent tribal sacrifice, Heaney seems to have found the metaphors of historical and literary consciousness of Ireland in particular and the world in general. This connection with the past lets him explore the present in an oblique, exquisite and forceful way. Sometimes the bog bodies become the means to mythologise the torture and violence they went through, sometimes they are the repositories of beauty and atrocity of the world, sometimes they are mere eulogies of Irish national consciousness, and sometimes they are the evocation of an exquisite ecofeminist ethos. This paper tries to explore a few selected bog poems of Heaney- Bogland, Tollund Man, Bog Queen, The Grauballe Man, Punishment, and Strange Fruit, through the light of the Irish history of death, violence, sacrifice, guilt and justice.

Keywords - Bog body, bog poems, consciousness, history, Irish, sacrifice, Seamus Heaney, violence

I. INTRODUCTION

From the eerie, swampy bog lands of the Northern Europe, emerges a series of sinister mummified human bodies, hundreds of years old. They all share the dark secret of an unknown and violent death. These bog bodies include men, women, children, adults, Kings, Queens and commoners who were violently killed and placed in bogs. Hence, bogs can be considered as curious tombs containing the victims of homicide. In his book *The Bog People*, Peter V. Glob, a famous archaeologist, elaborates that many bodies were brutally sacrificed in ritual killings to appease the Goddess of fertility. It is perceived by many experts that bogs for the people of Iron Age were the gateways to the spiritual world. This enigmatic space becomes the leading metaphor in the famous poetry collections of the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, widely regarded as one of the major poets of the twentieth century. According to Heaney himself, poetry is a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings as well as a vital point of exit. He transforms the silence and violence implanted in the bog bodies into his poetic drive that mirrors their grotesque persistence- sad and haunting, the representative of history and identity, the symbols of homecoming and estrangement. The bog land, for Heaney, becomes a space of enchantment, an inextricable link between life and death, mobility and immobility. The bog poems have become the windows into his oeuvre. His fascination towards the enigma of the bog bodies later encompasses his deeper understanding of the inherent violence in human nature that lies silently in the collective consciousness. Anthologized in the first four poetry collections of Seamus Heaney- *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) which communicates a strong physical sense of the environment in various vivid mimetic expressions, *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) that deal with the intense cultural and historical implications of words, the bog poems were later distinctively published under the title *Bog Poems* in an edition by Olwyn Hughes, the sister of Ted Hughes, another master artist of the age. Apart from the philosophical aspects of the bog bodies, the bog poems became a means for Heaney to express his thought-provoking perspectives regarding the brutality of the sectarian warfare between the United Kingdom and Ireland during 1968 to 1998, also known as "The Troubles". Endless occurrence of animosity and violence in this period has been utilised exquisitely by Seamus Heaney in his poems, especially those concerned with the bog bodies.

II. BOGLAND: A POEM THAT WEAVES THE PAST AND THE PRESENT TOGETHER

Appropriately titled, the first bog poem by Seamus Heaney is more nationalistic than the later poems that are more sincerely concerned with mythical associations, with the connection between life and death, between violence and religion. The symbol of the bog was first applied to its fullness in this poem as a response to the American myth of the frontier and as an image and expression adequate for the predicament of Northern Ireland. The beginning of the poem clearly sets the nationalistic tone with numerous uses of the possessive pronoun “we” in order to convey a sense of unity with the land. An apparently negative statement is transformed into a positive one with the first lines:

we have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening.

Earth is summoned in terms of bog in this poem which, through its position, seems consciously intended to broaden the perspective of Personal Helicon through its suggestions of an entire past preserved intact in the unconscious ocean of the Irish mind. Heaney’s use of the saying “The wet centre is bottomless” ambivalently evokes a sense of the limitless resources of memory, somewhat undermined by a sense of hollow lack of achievement. The poem emphasises the layers of the land as well as that of history itself in a continuous process of expansion. The land seems to stretch forever, perpetually endless in both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The bog is in layers, each layer representing a page of history yet a page that is absent, erased, or is apparently so. The poem links the present to the past through the presence of the land:

butter sunk under
more than a hundred years
was recovered salty and white.

The ground is the preserver rather than a destroyer. It is not the realm of fire but of water that is contained in there. The land is “itself...kind, black butter” which is like a pulp, where one can get lost, like a quicksand, into the tunnel of a dark, forgotten past. The poem ends with a suggestion of an enrichment that is never ending, as “every layer they strip/seems camped on before”, emphasizing once more the cyclical nature of the metaphor of the bog as history, the memory of the landscape, and also one that helps Heaney access the feelings long buried.

“Bogland” gives no entrance to the poet as an individual, rather he writes as an impersonal, slightly ironic if not passive, representative of Irish historical consciousness, connecting generations. It is a vehicle for the national, literary, political, social and cultural memory. According to Malcolm McKenzie, “Bogland” seems to be a poem that helped the later tendency of Heaney to offer himself an explicit and active role concerned with political and historical consciousness in his poems.

III. TOLLUND MAN: VIOLENCE AND DEATH DURING “THE TROUBLES”

The well-preserved body of Tollund man was first dredged up in north-central Denmark from the Bjældskovdal peat bog, in the year 1950. The remains of his body were so intact that it was initially suspected that he was a victim of a recent murder. This body becomes an inspiration for Seamus Heaney for his poem “The Tollund Man” where the narrator, who ‘will stand a long time’, calls himself a ‘bridegroom to the goddess’.

The Tollund Man is a poem that portrays the endless haunting appearances of the past promises of a pilgrimage: “Someday I will go to Aarhus”. In the first few stanzas the tone of the poem is determined but at the same time there is an implicit indication of the remoteness of the poem itself from the time it portrays. It is true that the poem never wanders in conviction, yet there is an element of defamiliarisation and distance that is reinforced by the names of the foreign places like ‘Aarhus’, and in the later poems ‘Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard’.

“The Tollund Man” enacts a process of gathering awareness while the man himself is unnamed. The tone of the poem is passive and impersonal. The Tollund Man’s eye-lids are “mild pods”. Heaney enlists our fascination with what fascinates him and coopts our sense of reverence before the numinous. At the end he asks us to feel what it is like to ride a tumbriel, to know that the sacred grove is actually a fearful place simply because it is the place where corpses are piled. According to Edna Longley, the prototype developed by “The Tollund Man” is a “scapegoat, privileged victim and ultimately Christ-surrogate”.

There is a sad beauty, even sweetness, in the description of the bog body- from the “peat-brown head” to the “turfcutters’ honeycombed workings”, the sweet and wonderous portrayal distances the readers from the horror that they are observing. A sense of shock comes forth in the second part of the poem when Heaney refers to a much more recent violence:

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

Recollection of the incident tempts Heaney to “risk blasphemy”. In the third part he returns to a tone more sincere and melancholic when he empathises with the plight of Tollund man on his way to execution:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbriel
Should come to me, driving,

...
Out here in Jutland

In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

The poet compares "the old man killing parishes of Jutland" with his own land by means of linking religion with the ordering of atrocities. The general mood of the poem is that of passive reflection on the inhumanity and apathy of human existence, the fate of the four brothers being nothing but an example of the recurrent and inescapable violence of Ireland.

IV. BOG QUEEN: SPEAKING OF LIFE, DEATH, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Bog Queen presents a space that leans towards life and death, and also is spread across the space in between. From the poem erupts a sense of decay in the way Heaney describes the processes the body had been through until it was found and excavated. In this poem the excavated body becomes the voice and asserts the agony of futile waiting. There is a sense of restraint that creates a haunting suspense. The body of the bog queen lies "between heathery levels", the levels of life and death, and this existence suggests an overgrown world in between the two extreme nodal points of existence that is rotting.

In the poem, the process of decay can be deconstructed as an apparent symbol of Irish history, and the gradual decay of Irish culture as a result of English intervention:

the seeps of winter
digested me, the illiterate roots
pondered and died.

The phrase "My body was braille" successfully creates a vision of communication between the body and the land. The fact that she asserts her act of waiting proves that though she is powerless in the hands of time her voice is not destroyed, rather she is altered, and has become an organic part of the land.

The accelerating images of death and silence represent the tiring act of waiting until the persona is frozen to death. This poem is different because this poem gives voice to the excavated body that was not murdered but, much like the transformation of mythical Daphne, has been mingled into nature. The voice of the woman grows more distinct and forceful towards the end, as she asserts:

My sash was a black glacier
wrinkling, dyed weaves
and phoenician stitchwork
retted on my breasts.

The monologue of the queen brings a sense of anger which turns to triumph in the last stanza where, like the rising of a Phoenix, the bog queen rises from the dark, breaking the unfathomed oblivion, evoking her past and glory. With the rising of her body, the poet offers a hope for the rise of Irish cultural identity and nationalism from the slumber of pessimism. The woman's awakening is not a resurrection, because she was never dead, but was turned to an existence between life and death, "heathery levels" and "glass-toothed stone".

The poem, on a more intricate metaphorical level, is related to the incarnation of goddesses who demand and await sacrifice, related to the categorization of land as a feminine identity in Tollund Man, and perhaps to the image of the Mother Ireland demanding new sacrifices as well.

V. THE GRAUBALLE MAN: THE VIOLENCE, THE VICTIM, AND THE WORK OF ART

Like a ferocious volcano, animosity and violence erupted with the socio-political crisis and warfare that took place in Northern Ireland during the time of The Troubles. Beautifully noted by a critic, if Tollund Man is considered as the pilgrimage, Grauballe Man is the arrival and the celebration of the pilgrim's existence there. There is a new dimension, a certain sense of immediacy that is palpable from the very first line.

As if he had been poured
in tar he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself.

The Grauballe man is mingled with the turf, depicting the inevitable union between the human body and the body of the earth. Apparently, the image is still, stagnant, but if read between the lines, from that stillness oozes a sense of harmony, a sense of tension, an edge of suspense created by the language that builds a world of darkness, mystery and death. The victim is not presented as a victim, rather a work of art. This echoes Keats' eulogy of the Grecian Urn, the ultimate representation of the chiasmus of beauty and truth, the only difference being the thread of darkness and agony that is present in Heaney's poem. In "The Grauballe Man", human emotion and empathy are surprisingly absent, leaving an attempt to minutely and accurately juxtapose the beauty and the horror which also is the truth, the viewers see. The bog body of the man is represented as a work of art. The image of the Grauballe man is not violent and terrifying as that of the Tollund man, rather it evokes a sense of peaceful retreat from the hustling world of violence.

However, the Grauballe Man is not passive, there is nothing 'mild' about the way he is portrayed. He is alive through the vivid existence of his body, more alive even than the decaying knife of war and death:

the chin is a visor
raised above the vent
of his slashed throat.

Heaney re-establishes the very meaning of the bog metaphor when he dauntingly throws the question:

who will say 'corpse'
to his vivid cast?
who will say 'body'

to his opaque repose?

The poem is a living example of the dichotomy between life and death, imagination and reality, beauty and atrocity. These words serve as a justification for the description, but they also prompt us to consider the poem as a work of art as the dread it depicts asserts itself:

I first saw his twisted face
in a photograph

This line confidently undermines the notion of sublime art. The image of the bog body of the Grauballe man is now more evenly balanced, creating a complex sculpture while also arousing an up until now suppressed ethical response. The poem attempts to understand the horrors of life in the form of art and after futile attempts of beautifying the horrors at last returns to the reality of it as it climaxes in a brusque expression of death and decay of "each hooded victim" who is "slashed and dumped".

VI. PUNISHMENT: THE TORMENT AND THE GUILT

"Punishment" can be referred to as the culmination of bog poems. Quite similar to the poem "The Grauballe Man", it starts with anatomical description of her preserved and tormented body, but this time there is an essential element of empathy that was not present in the previous poem. The persona looks at the body of the woman as a passive onlooker and scrutinizes her part by part. Though sacrificed at the hands of the oppressors, her presence contains endless information regarding her roots, her culture. The punished body of the woman still is a means to look through the storms at the historical past that otherwise might be inaccessible. The poet here implicitly accuses himself of the banality of the good, first by limiting itself to distant and suspect statements about the appearance of the girl's corpse, and then with biblical references, by the act of turning description into parable. The next stanza sets the tone of a more violent image by describing "her blindfold" as "a soiled bandage" but the atrocity is softened when, with a more empathetic lament and elegiac immediacy, Heaney describes the noose as:

a ring
to store
the memories of love

Heaney however feels a sense of guilt while he works as a mere onlooker, a loyal representative of his tribe. As an audience of a work of art, as in "The Grauballe Man", Heaney here is both inside the scenario and outside of it. He is an "artful voyeur", not apathetic, but without the power to change the atrocity that was imposed upon the "poor scapegoat", as he both claims and admits. The poet demonstrates double allegiance in the poem to comment on the fact that the silence of moments becomes an act of survival. He confesses the guilt of this silence and connivance that he shows. He wisely compares the violence of tribal men to the violence and brutality of the Irish Revolutionary Army. He condemns the eternal barbarism of human beings, whether in the Iron Age or the contemporary times, whether in Northern Ireland or in the world in general, and the endless brutalities of the nationalists. There is a cyclical view of history and time, springing from an Eliotian sense of the past, present and future being equally and eternally present in the existence of time itself. The poem "Punishment" states that the past operates as a scapegoat, taking the blame for social ills which are our responsibilities, yet we do not feel that sense of responsibility as we do not feel it is our fault. The poet's role is to redeem the past. Thus, the eternal connection between the past, present and future becomes the driving force behind the poem, a connection that is strong enough to withstand the ravages of time itself.

VII. STRANGE FRUIT: BODY AS THE DOCUMENT OF ANCIENT VIOLENCE

The last bog poem, "Strange Fruit" is astonishingly written in a form and style that are different from all the other bog poems and should be read as a sort of sequel to the poem "Punishment". It contains deliberate missing of rhymes, inconsistency of its lengths of lines and deliberate breaks of patterns in the resolution of an intricate, long and complex metaphor. In contrast to the poem "Punishment", its description puts emphasis on all that is repulsive. This girl is not compared to a ship that withstands a storm, or storing memories in a noose, but is "an exhumed gourd". The reader is recurrently horrified with the description of her eyeholes, broken nose and wet hair. She is "oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth". Her nose is broken and is "dark as a turf clod". This body is no more than a repulsive yet true document of ancient atrocity, devoid of any mythical charm or artful mystery. The poet's overwhelming attempt to elevate the bog people to a mystic and mythic level is entirely destroyed here. The last bog poem thus portrays the acceptance of violence and death as they are- terrible and outrageous, silent and abrupt, repulsive and horrifying:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible,
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The bog poems undertake to overcome the atavistic savagery of ritual sacrifice by re-enacting it in a conscious mode. According to the poet, aesthetic configurations of the rituals would make him the beholder who is well aware of not only the real savagery within those forms but his own part in the contemporary, unconscious and political celebrations of the old sacrifices as well. The bog bodies become powerful symbols of national consciousness of Ireland as well as Heaney's literary consciousness. The Northern bog is a layered space, a place that is placeless, bottomless, dark and deep with endless memories of lost cultures and forgotten names. The bog bodies are the examples of endless violence that mingles with doubt, guilt, sacrifice and self-annihilation in the Irish context. It is in the bog bodies that Heaney seems to have found the metaphors for a novel consciousness that represent the endless thread of time and place, the perpetual consciousness of Ireland, historical, social and political, and the literary consciousness of himself.

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