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Addressing Sectarianism: The Poetical Works of Seamus Heaney

Maurice Fitzpatrick

Seamus Heaney's earliest published poems expressed the toxic potentialities of his homeland: both those of his people (the Catholic minority corralled into living in the Northern Irish State) and of the Protestant community who had vice-like control of Northern Ireland and who were, for the most part, determined to maintain that vice "clamped." The following is one such poem from his first collection that encapsulates these concerns:

Docker

There, in the corner, staring at his drink.
The cap juts like a gantry's crossbeam,
Cowling plated forehead and sledgehead jaw.
Speech is clamped in the lips' vice.

That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic-
Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again;
The only Roman collar he tolerates
Smiles all round his sleek pint of porter.

Mosaic imperatives bang home like rivets;
 God is a foreman with certain definite views
 Who orders life in shifts of work and leisure.
 A factory horn will blare the Resurrection.

He sits, strong and blunt as a Celtic cross,
 Clearly used to silence and an armchair:
 Tonight the wife and children will be quiet
 At slammed door and smoker's cough in the hall. (1966)

“Would drop a hammer on a Catholic” was the phrase that unsettled the thick-skin of Northern Irish discourse. Heaney’s pointing up the potential for a slip into the vortex of violence at the drop of a hat – or a hammer – through his highlighting the sectarian structures of the Belfast docks (world-famous Harland and Wolff was one of the most notoriously sectarian of Belfast’s shipyards) and linking that sectarianism to the demonic behaviour of a head of a household was highly potent stuff before the Civil Rights Movement began in Northern Ireland in 1968. Heaney brilliantly depicts how the quasi-uniform – the Duncher (a dockers’ cap) was a certain feature of Belfast dockers’ apparel – induced patterns of behaviour in the subject of this poem: his paralytic mouth; his scarcely animate body which seems only to operate in shifts; his physical strength ready to murder a Catholic on the basis of an unquestioned set of assumptions. Viewing Catholics as outsiders is the most essential prerequisite of his make-up. In adhering to this view, he keeps caste with his co-workers.

Similarly, when a Protestant playwright, Sam Thompson, daringly wrote about the unconcealed sectarianism of the Belfast docks in his play

Over the Bridge (1957), his drama was predictably rejected in Belfast (see Parker's introduction to *Over the Bridge*). It took three years to find a theatre to commission a performance of it. In the 1960s to publish and perform work that exposed the fatal consequences of challenging Protestant privilege in Northern Ireland was almost to court both a hostile reception and malicious misinterpretation. These circumstances prevailed exactly because any glance at the history of Ulster shows that violence has been a major feature of its political landscape since the Plantation of Ulster in the 17th century; that this violence existed was commonly felt down the ages; that during the 1960s it began to receive articulation which always had the potential to be hijacked and distorted. In the 1960s Heaney lived and worked in Queen's University, Belfast. Heaney was aware – as few outside the province were – that sectarian violence was simmering and he made that awareness the subject of his early published work. The political suggestion in "Docker" was to become all the more inflammatory as violence was visited upon the Civil Rights Movement by the rushing-to-arm Unionist paramilitaries and the sectarian RUC police whose inept forces were assisted by the arrival of the British Army on August 15th 1969.

Recent Heaney publications and publications about Heaney have dwelt more than usual on his past and on his growth. Heaney has opened up about, for example, his personal role in addressing sectarianism in a hugely important book, *Stepping Stones* (2008). *Stepping Stones* is a linear charting of his development in a new-minted form – interviews that combine Heaney's spontaneousness and truthfulness captured in an exquisite epistolary record (Heaney insisted that the book consist in his letter replies to questions by the author of the book, Dennis O'Driscoll). In documentaries such as *Out of the Marvellous* (2009) and *The Boys of St. Columb's* (2010),

Heaney again looks to his early youth through to his schoolboy days to attempt to show “the growth of a poet’s mind” in a society slowly starting to reject its “caste system”. Heaney writes at length in *Stepping Stones* about the massive change occurring in Northern Ireland, mainly as a result of the 1947 Education Act. Speaking about the circumstances of the lives of Catholics in the Northern Ireland of his youth in *Out of the Marvellous*, Heaney said: “Sectarianism isn’t a great subject but it was in our lives: the sense of not having a voice in the community was there. I hate these kind of weepy, victim status remarks like second-class citizens and so on. It was a caste system basically. You were a different caste from the ruling caste.”

An important book tracing this sectarian tension by Andrew Boyd (*Holy War in Belfast*, 1969) gives the lie to the tendency in history writing to localise the conflict – the orthodoxy that violence erupted in Northern Ireland as a result of agitation by Catholics who were disgruntled due to their status since the foundation of the Northern Irish State (1922). Sectarian violence had occurred routinely in Northern Ireland since the Plantations of the 17th century and Heaney knew well that it “could happen again”.

Both in his verse and in his public endorsement of nationalist causes, Heaney was, at the start of his career, a willing agent in movements that sought to establish equality in Northern Ireland. It is in this context that his celebration of the 1798 Wexford rebels in his poem “Requiem for the Croppies” (1966) and his valorisation of their bravery in the face of superior arms can be understood. When guerrilla warfare predominated in Ulster, Heaney became understandably cautious in his use of such phrases as “would drop a hammer on a Catholic.” Moreover, Heaney stopped reading “Requiem for the Croppies” in public as the IRA’s campaign intensified in

the 1970s. The fact that Heaney had written the poem to commemorate the 1798 Rising resulted in some groups reading his work as a signal of Irish Republicanism's ever rejuvenating impulse to fight for Ireland's freedom. The Republican tradition with its Phoenix rising from the ashes mythology jarred with Heaney's politics so he withdrew the poem from his public reading selections. When Heaney did adopt expressions suggestive of violence and sectarianism in his middle and later writings it is, therefore, noteworthy that he had encountered negative criticism, reprobation and even harassment for delving into such matters.

Heaney's art being associated with his locale, his language being so connected to his "hearth language" and his personality being so much at home with straightforward country people, meant that he couldn't abandon South Derry even when the poisonous political situation in which he grew up became violent. As a writer, he felt he needed to take a position. Hence his poetry collection, *North*, created a stir when it was published in 1975, partly because Heaney addressed the violence in the North in a more revealing way than he had since the Troubles began. Two poems hold a particular resonance for the question of potentially sectarian (or tribal) violence. In the poem, 'Punishment,' Heaney deftly describes an adulteress from The Iron Age whose body had been preserved by a bog in Jutland, Denmark; evidence of the crime for which she was hanged also survived. The vividness of detail in the poem showed – for many people – a contour of the current affairs of 1970s Northern Ireland almost like a myth elucidating a perfect parallel between the ancient and the modern.

Punishment

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store

the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Any suggestion that Heaney understood – dangerously close to condoning – the custom of tarring and feathering Catholic women who consorted with the RUC, the British Army etc. was certain to cause consternation. The parallel between the punishment of the bog-body and punishments of Catholic women in Northern Ireland assailed by the IRA was too obvious to be ignored; and some Northern Irish critics, including people who had been friends of Heaney, reviewed *North* scathingly. Heaney has been at pains ever since to maintain that when he wrote about the exciting discovery of ancient bodies in the peat bogs of Jutland he was not suggesting that Northern Irish tribal punishments were analogous: “How to take a stand between the tar-black face of the peat-bog girl and the tarred and feathered women in the news reports” (*Stepping Stones*, p. 159). That the second sequence of poems in *North* described events in Northern Irish society (even occasionally in journalistic idiom) made his publicly maintaining that there was a separation between his sentiments about the hanged bog-body and vengefulness in Northern Ireland all the more complicated. It was a tightrope walk too far for some critics.

However, the last two stanzas of this controversial poem cannot be forgotten: Seamus Heaney from South Derry who had shouted, jocularly and as a member of his group, tribal chants at Protestant boys and girls which were reciprocated heartily, understands schism between tribes. It is true that Heaney cast a scholarly eye on P.V. Glob’s anthropological study (*The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*); it was Glob’s book that sparked Heaney’s interest in the bog-bodies in Jutland; Heaney was subsequently inspired to write about Iron Age bog-bodies creatively; but when he admits to understanding “the exact and tribal, intimate revenge”, Heaney is very close to the hearth language and ideas and very close to the tribe. How, as a

civilised man living away from Northern Ireland, could he deal with the question except by identifying its poisonous roots:

Orange Drums, Tyrone 1966

The lambeg balloons at his belly, weighs
Him back on his haunches, lodging thunder
Grossly there between his chin and his knees.
He is raised up by what he buckles under.

Each arm extended by a seasoned rod,
He parades behind it. And though the drummers
Are granted passage through the nodding crowd,
It is the drums preside, like giant tumours.

To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,
His battered signature subscribes 'No Pope'.
The goatskin's sometimes plastered with his blood.
The air is pounding like a stethoscope.

The Orangeman here resembles a toy-drummer, semi-comatose, being led by an inanimate object. In the poem Heaney manages to animate him – the ingenious implication is that poetry heroically survives as a form of energy possible in such a dissected and devitalised society. The key insight is that the Orangeman, far from being triumphant, is buckling under the domination of his tribe, happy not to interrogate the sectarian premise of the Orange Order. The claw-jawed docker and the drummer are brethren: the spiritless docker finds spiritual expression in the drummer's activity yet

something is wrong. The drummer's spirit cannot fully inhabit the role, being deprived of full consciousness of himself. This poem has the assurance of Heaney's later style. He is no longer the voice of nationalism – as in “Docker” and “Requiem for the Croppies” – but rather his own voice, knowingly protecting his work against appropriation yet articulating a deep sense of tribal affiliation. At once being of the tribe and transcending it.

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