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The Door into the dark: A door into Seamus Heaney's own self and Irish History

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Abstract

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney's second collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969), shows the reader a more confident Seamus Heaney who is prepared to take risks and to explore new areas. The final poem in the first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, Ends with the lines '*I rhyme/ to see myself, to set the darkness echoing*', which tells us his reasons for writing poetry. He continues the theme of searching the darkness in *Door into the Dark*. He searches into the art of writing poetry, the darkness of his own self and also Irish history and the Irish countryside. The bloody battle of Vinegar Hill is told in ballad form and is linked closely to the land itself in 'Requiem for the Croppies'. Seamus Heaney says that he sees the Bogland as '*the memory of the landscape*' and in 'Bogland' he '*set up-or rather laid down- the bog as an answering Irish myth*' (Preoccupations, 1980). This paper will explore the depiction of Seamus Heaney's own self through different poems and his deep rooted feelings for Irish past which keep on appearing in his poems in 'Door into the Dark'.

Key words: Personal Helicon, Insurrection, Nationalist cause, Heritage, Metaphorical Repository

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Introduction

Considered to be one of the greatest living poets, Seamus Heaney is an Irish poet, whose work is notable for evocation of events in Irish history and its allusions to Irish myth. A Catholic, Seamus Justin Heaney (b. 13th April 1939, Mossbawn, County Londonderry, Northern Ireland) was the eldest of nine children, he grew up in a rural landscape, his father was a farmer whose skill Heaney admired greatly, a point attested to in '*Digging*' (DN) [1]. Much of his early poetry derives from his experience of the farm and country life as a child. He attended primary school in Anahorish, where he won a scholarship to St Columb's in Londonderry, 1951-57. He later attended Queen's University Belfast and gained a first class honours degree in English Language and Literature. It was while he was at university that he was encouraged to write poetry by Philip Hobsbaum. After leaving university he followed a successful teaching career that would eventually lead to a lecturing post at Queen's University Belfast. It was whilst in this post that he

had his first collection of poetry *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966. He was just twenty-seven years old and already, being hailed as an outstanding poet.

In Heaney's second and third collections, *Door into the Dark* and *Wintering Out*, we find several poems in which he focuses upon the minute detail of the local, in order to expose within them, traces of a greater world. 'The Forge' from *Door into the Dark*, opens with the line 'All I Know is a door into the Dark' which, in addition to giving the collection its title, also resonates with the very last line of *Death of a Naturalist*, where, in 'Personal Helicon', Heaney proclaims that he writes poetry in order 'to set the darkness echoing'. The connection between the two poems is significant, as Heaney often ends one collection of his work with a piece which, in effect, will serve as a sort of 'manifesto' for the collection to follow. By contrast with 'The Barn', where the speaker in the poem is unwilling to enter into the darkness, afraid of what he might find there, the speaker in the 'The Forge' seeks to go into the darkness, to see what lies beyond, or within, the outside world. What he finds is the 'Blacksmith' working on a new horseshoe and juxtaposes past with present recalling 'a clatter / of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows'. The poem that follows 'The Forge' in *Door into the Dark*, 'Thatcher,' also deals with a dying trade threatened with extinction. Like the Blacksmith, the Thatcher is a figure for the creative intelligence, who although considered outmoded is nevertheless capable of producing from the ordinary ('straw...rods...a white-pronged staple...sods') something extraordinary. Heaney at this time was still concentrating on the rural imagery of Northern Ireland, but the growing tension in the Northern State was fast coming to a climax. His feelings at this time are recorded in 'Requiem for the Croppies' [2] (the story of the rebellion against the English in 1798).

Discussion

In the poem 'Requiem for the Croppies' the poet narrates the story of part of the rebellion of 1798[3]. The narrator is one of the groups of men who rebelled against the English. The men kept on the move through the fields, hiding when necessary, the priest and the tramp sharing the same ditch. It was not possible to plan ahead and strategy was decided on the run. They stampeded cattle into the foot soldiers and then attacked the cavalry from their positions in the hedges. But all was in vain. On Vinegar hills [3] the rebels were defeated and thousand met their deaths because they were ill-equipped. Their picks and scythes were no match for the cannons of the enemy.

The story is narrated in the style of a folk tale because Seamus Heaney is here attempting to communicate with ordinary people of the soil. The last five lines of the poem are a lament for all those who gave their lives:

Until, on Vinegar Hill, The fatal conclave.
Terraced thousand died, shaking scythes at canon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

He sees the seeds in the pockets of the dead rebels as the germ of further revolutions in the years to come, not unlike the aftermath of the Easter 1916 Rising and the huge wave of support that

was created as a result of the execution of the leaders. The final line suggests that the defiance of Vinegar Hill is the seed for future insurrection. Here he shows his support for the Civil Rights Movement of the time. The Story is narrated in the style of a folk tale, in keeping with the Irish oral tradition of recounting heroic deeds in song. The opening line suggests that the rebels carry with them the seeds of rebellion. *'The pockets of our great coats full of Barley,'* but it is not until the final line when all the rebels are dead that the seeds of rebellion come to fruition *'And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.'* Here he recognises the cyclical nature of Irish history and used this to reflect the contemporary political situation. Two months after *Door in the Dark* was published, Northern Ireland fell into chaos. History had indeed repeated itself, as the conflict in the province intensified, it progressively became more and more bloody. Seamus Heaney is here clearly showing his support for the nationalist cause. He wrote this poem on the anniversary of the 1916 uprising and he later wrote, 'I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeomen and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after *Door into the Dark* was published' (preoccupations, Faber and Faber, 1980). The poet recognized the cyclical nature of Irish history and of the Irish Troubles in particular.

In the poem *Bogland* the poet writes of the broad expanse of the prairies which does not hinder the eye and compares it to the narrowing of our focus when we observe the *Bogland*, the *Bogland* which has no fences. The turf dries to a hard crust under the baking sun. The skeleton of the bog and has now been removed and set up elsewhere where its huge antlers are on show. Butter has been preserved in the bog for more than one hundred years and the ground is like butter as it gives way underfoot. The rotting vegetation will never create coal and the turf cutters will only hit the soft trunks of trees as they dig downwards for turf. The poet feels that the bog holes are so deep that the water might have seeped underneath the peat from the Atlantic seepage.

The poem refers to the many rather than to individuals. The many include the people of Ireland's past, the people of Ireland's present and also the people of Ireland's future. The treasures of the past are yielded up to the present and will influence the future. The *Bogland* is the framework which preserves the past history and past treasures and allows continuity into the present and into the future.

The poet compares the wide vision that the prairie allows and the focused, concentrated vision that the *Bogland* demands. The 'horizon' narrows the vision and forces the poet and the reader to look closely at that which has been preserved from the past. The Great Irish Elk and the butter are metaphors for the whole of the Irish heritage and the great treasures that we must search for in *'... black butter / Melting and opening underfoot'*.

The ground Seamus Heaney says, is soft and inviting-the past calling to us to dig up its contents that will enrich our future. He tells us that the *'ground itself is kind, black butter'*. The land is 'kind' in the sense that it looks after people, but it is also 'kind' in the sense that it allows us to enter its hidden chambers to discover the limitless bounty from the past.

In the last two stanzas (see *Literary Terms*) the poet writes of the 'pioneers' who dig downwards and find layer upon layer of history, mythology and folklore. The pioneers are those who search for and find the Irish heritage and the bog is the metaphorical repository, and sometimes actual repository, of this heritage. He tells us finally, that 'The wet centre is bottomless' and this implies that the search is endless and that while the 'pioneers' go on looking they will find more and more that is valuable.

Anahorish is one of Seamus Heaney's place name poems. Anahorish is a townland, one of the areas in a local parish. The Full name is 'Anach fhíor uisce' which means 'the place of clear water', a phrase that occurs in the first line of the poem.

The poem begins with the spring wells gushing from the hill and onto the grass and cobbles. The poet speaks of the gentle, sloping lane and compares the gentle sounds of the word 'Anahorish' to the soft gradient. He remembers the winter evenings lit by the oil lamps of the farmers as they walked through the farmyards. The poet tells us that they are like the original inhabitants of the hill as they walk through the mist to break the ice of wells and dunghills.

The sound of the word 'Anahorish' is all important in this poem. Throughout he feels secure, comfortable in his environment and the softness of the vowels and the consonants help to emphasise this security. Seamus Heaney is almost obsessed with his '*sense of place*' and this poem is typical of his exploration. This townland is his place, part of his home and while writing about the area he takes the opportunity to explore his historical roots. They are obscured by the mists of time but, nevertheless, he sees the farm workers as direct descendants of those who inhabited the hill in ancient times.

The phrase '*... mound dwellers / go waist-deep in mist*' is evocative of Celtic mythology and of a time when Ireland was yet to be violated by successive hostile invasions. This concept connects nicely with '*My place of clear water*' /the first hill world' at the beginning. This was a place and a hill unpopulated by time or enemies. The phrase '*First hill in the world*' is, in one sense, childlike in its construction but it also creates an image of the vastness and emptiness of pre-history.

Gallarus oratory on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry is a tiny monastic chapel built in the early medieval period. When the poet enters it in 'In Gallarus Oratory', he senses a '*core of old dark*': and in '*whinlands*', '*shoreline*', '*Bann clay*' and '*Bogland*', this '*Old dark*' of history and prehistory begins to be read out of the Irish landscape, in a way that points forward to some of the central poems in the two subsequent volumes, *Wintering out* and *North*. '*Whinlands*' and '*shoreline*' may owe something to another element in Ted Hughes, the kind of effect he produces in 'Thistles' in *Wodwo*(1967). There, Hughes imagines his thistles as a kind of vegetal persistence of the spirit of Viking invasion:

Every one a revengeful burst
Of resurrection, a grasped fistful
Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up

From the underground stain of a decayed Viking.
They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects.
Everyone manages a plume of blood.

Heaney's whins ('gorse', in England) are similarly, if rather less impressively, the emblematic inheritors of values attached to the history of a specific landscape:

Gilt, jaggy, springly, frilled,
This stunted, dry richness
Persist on hills, near stone ditches,
Over flintbed and battlefield

The 'whinlands' characteristic of Northern Ireland become here- as Hughes's thistle do- the name for the persistence of a particular kind of culture and character.

' *For the Commander of the "Eliza"* ' and '*Requiem for the croppies*' are both dramatic monologues, the former spoken by the captain of a ship who sights a rowing boat of starving Irish off the coast of Co. Mayo, and the latter, posthumously, by one of the rebels killed by the English at Vinegar Hill, in Co.Wecford, in 1798.It is significant both that Heaney's early attempts at the dramatic monologue- a form he has used in variously inventive ways since- should include these emphatic recreations of characters involved in crucial Irish historical events, and that Heaney's first use in his work of an Irish word should be, in the 'Eliza' poem, 'bia', repeated three times in desperation: the word for 'food'. Both poems also adapt to their own purposes pre-existent documentary sources-Cecil Woodham-Smith's study of the Famine, *The Great Hunger*(1962) in 'Eliza', and an impassioned and harrowing account of 1798 published by a survivor,P.O'Kelly, in Dublin in 1842, his *General History of The Rebellion of 1798*, in 'Requiem for the Croppies'. A use of documentary source material is later essential to the procedure of *North*, where Heaney constructs his own myth to articulate the 'Sectarian Problem'. A comparison between poem and source for 'Eliza' reveals Heaney powerfully transforming the bleak original into a testimony to the humane but hopeless decency of the commander who speaks. In his report of the sighting-

O my sweet Christ,
We saw piled in the bottom of their craft
Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills

The desperation of the apostrophe to Christ and the grotesque, quasi- expressionist simile are Heaney's own, as in the numerical particularity of that 'six' (the original has merely 'a boat-load').When subsequently, the men are said to haunt the ship 'like six bad smells', the repeated precision conveys a kind of eerily discriminating accountancy not inappropriate to the English treatment of Ireland during the Famine.

'At a Potato Digging' is artfully constructed, in its four sections, to uncover how, to the eye of the historical imagination, the Irish Famine ,when the potatoes disastrously failed, remains as a 'running sore' infecting and blighting the contemporary activity of harvesting the potato crop. The present is made transparent to the past by the minatory and chilling puns which describe the diggers' fingers going '*dead in the cold*', and their feeling 'Dead -beat' before lunch; and in the deft cinematic dissolve between the second and third sections, where the metaphorical description of potatoes in their pits as '*live skulls, blind eyed*' of those starving to death in the nineteenth century. The continuity between past and present is enforced too by the figuring of the relationship between Irish agricultural labourer and the land as a religion propitiating 'the famine god'. Potato digging becomes a ritual of appeasement (with '*professional stooping*', '*humbled knees*' and the labourers making '*a seasonal altar of the sod*') to the earth as '*the black/mother*', the beneficial provider of food. When the crop fails during the famine, the black mother becomes the 'the bitch earth'; and, although this mother is subsequently partially demythologized as 'the faithless ground', the workers still spill their sacrificial 'Liberation of cold tea'. The poem's quasi-Catholic rituals make it clear how deeply the sufferings of Irish historical experience are

inscribed in the landscape itself and in the human psyche; and that 'black mother' will reappear in Wintering out and North, in a newly mythologized form, as the goddess Nerthus.

The 'similes' used in *Door into the Dark* connect with the structural circularity or reflexivity in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence'; with that disconcerting instance of metaphorical and syntactical reflexivity in 'Bogland', 'the eye...../Is wooed into the Cyclops' eye/ Of a tarn'; and with those epigrammatically reflexive lines in the reticent and difficult poem 'The Plantation', 'Though you walked a straight line/it might be a circle you travelled', 'And having found them once/ You were sure to find them again', and its concluding stanza:

You had to come back
To learn how to lose yourself,
To be pilot and stray-witch,
Hansel and Gretel in one.

'The Plantation', indeed, even more thoroughly than 'Bogland', is a poem about itself, its Janus-face looking both at the wood (which is, presumably, that of a landed estate, since the poem's title is a political nod in the direction of the 'Plantation' of Ulster in the seventeenth Century) and at the poem, all its statements held in an unresolved tension between the literal and the metaphorical. The stanza could be regarded almost as the philosophy of this reflexivity in Heaney. Both pursuer and pursued, both in control and in surrender, the poet finds himself by losing himself in the language and in the form of his own poem. Poetic tradition and intersexuality is desolation as well as a comfort, both envy and self assertion: 'someone had always been there/ though always you were alone'.

'Bogland', which concludes *Door into the dark*, is very much a new beginning rather than an ending, appearing to contain within itself the excitement of the capacity for further extension and development, a different rhythm. In an interview, Heaney says that it 'was the first poem of mine that I felt had the status of symbol in some way; it wasn't trapped in its own anecdote, or its own closing-off: it seemed to have some kind of wind blowing through it that could carry on, through the sequence of 'bog poems' initiated by 'The Tollund Man' and 'Nerthus' in *Wintering Out*, and brought to fulfilment in *North*. *Bogland* may be regarded as a kind of answering, Irish poem to Theodore Roethke's *American in Praise of Prairie*, in which 'Horizons have no strangeness to the eye' and 'distance is familiar as a friend./The feud we kept with space comes to an end'. That American pioneering spirit, which looks outwards and upwards, to fulfilment through movement, advance exploration, openness and, of course conquest is countered by Heaney's negative definition of Irish Topographical experience: 'We have no prairies/To slice a big sun at evening'[4] 'We' look 'inwards and downwards', into the bottomless centre of our own history, recovering there the traces and treasures of previous cultures and people, just as the Bogland of Ireland literally preserves historical and prehistorical deposits which may be released by archaeology.

The sense of exited possibility in 'Bogland', however, derives not only from Heaney's first use of the figure which is to act so powerfully in subsequent poems, but also from the fact that this poem itself describes its own lack of closure or containment, in the act of describing its overt subject:

The ground itself is a kind, black butter
 Melting and opening underfoot,
 Missing its last definition
 By millions of years.

Describing the grounds here, the poem is also describing itself; its own falling rhythms and constantly enjambed lines 'melt and open' too, in a notification that the symbol of the bog itself will melt and open again. In embedding within itself a commentary on itself in this way, 'Bogland' initiates that process of almost constant –commentary in Heaney's later work; and initiates therefore, a more sophisticated and subtle kind of Heaney Poem.

Hence with the publication of the *Door into the Dark* Heaney marked his next step towards poetic imagination. He on one hand is still exploring his own self to have a vice like grip over his imagination, on other hand he find himself helpless in resisting the description of Irish political upheavals. He colours Irish History with the unique voice which depicts a closer to himself Seamus Heaney with His horizons Flying more high now.

Notes

[1]. DN – "Death of a Naturalist" by Seamus Heaney.

[2]. Croppies- the 'croppy boys', who were so called because they cut their hair in the style of the peasants of the industrial Revolution.

[3].The battle of Vinegar Hill saw the rebels' greatest and bloodiest defeat. Twenty thousand men died in May 1798.The rule of law had almost completely broken down and this encouraged the authorities to set up the Act of Union to unite the English and Irish governments. When the bill was passed in 1800 many of the big landlords who opposed the union moved to England and allowed their managers to run the estates.

[4].In 'The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America,1969-1987', *The Southern Review*, vol. 31 no.3 (July 1995),726-38,Michael Allen reads 'Bogland' in a subversive spirit as a first indication of the way Heaney's poetry includes America, alongside Ireland and England, as an 'intermittent presence'. This 'suggests' he says, 'that the verse is searching out some empathy and support there'; the narrator of 'Bogland', 'despite the static Kavanagh aesthetic he claims to be promoting , has itchy feet'.

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