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Seamus Heaney's *Wintering Out* (1972)

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Abstract

In the collection, *Wintering Out* (1972) Seamus Heaney's idea of foregrounding 'words' as a subtle ground for resistance comes into play. He charts out the intricate relationship between landscape and wordscape by bringing in Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas*. The intonation, lexicon and pronunciation distorted by historical intervention are reterritorialised to posit resistance to linguistic colonization. As he traces the collective history and memory he begins to voice his opinions about shaping of universal identity that has no specific religion, language and culture. The shift from the personal to the communal to the universal lands him on the global platform where he can totally reject the rigidities of Manichean binarism that creates fissure in the consciousness of the individual leading to the creation of 'otherness.' The binarism between the self and other, Irish and British, coloniser and the colonised diffuses in Heaney's work as he embraces alterity that paves the way for self-definition.

Keywords: polarization, identity, violence, colonised, politics

Following the footprints of Janus, Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) makes a backward look to the sources of consciousness harboring secret forces of creative energy that would shape his poetic identity. It is in the third collection of poems, *Wintering Out*, published in the year 1972, that, "the experience of authocthony- the feeling of belonging to a place cosmically, beyond family or ancestral solidarity," begins to shape Heaney's poetic consciousness.

Wintering Out as Michael Parker says is about finding a balance with the repercussion of the 'Troubles' of 1968. Seamus Heaney had tried hard not to be influenced by the 'politics of polarisation' that had developed as a consequence of the collision between Catholic Civil rights activists and police and the radical Protestants. The clash had become so grave that the then government of Northern Ireland had no alternative other than pleading for incursion of the British troops into their territory. Heaney who had kept his feelings at bay hitherto could not resist and he became an activist persona following the outbreak of violence of Ulster. He even participated in the civil rights marches of 1968 and expressed his infuriation in *The Listener*, "the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland at large, if it is to retain any self-respect, will have to risk the charge of wrecking the new moderation and seek justice vociferously."

In the year 1970, he surprised everyone with his decision to leave Belfast for a temporary job at University of California, Berkeley. His time in California led him to find an intricate relationship

between the primordial and the modern world. After his return from California in the year 1971, he was deeply hurt by the new bombing campaign of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary group, whose ideology was influenced by left-wing nationalism. Heaney, then decided to move to the South permanently. People in large thought that Heaney's *Wintering Out* published in the year of his shift from the North, that is 1972, was an escape. His play with words and poetic creation was just a mask to shield his 'political betrayal.' The 'politics of polarisation' forced him to embrace staunch Catholic position in order to evade people's critical remarks.

Heaney, as a poet was aware of the fact that he was being unethical in maintaining his deliberate Catholic stance. He even once confessed to Robert Druce, "I'm always thinking to myself-'when people are killing one another, what are you doing?'… And I came to this notion that, in a time of politics or violence, it wasn't the artist's function just to be liberal and deplore it, but if you believed in one set of values over the other, to maintain those values in some way. You needn't necessarily maintain that belief by writing political poetry or writing deploring the army… But I think you can write about, or out of a sensibility or a set of images which imply a set of values." Michael Parker points out, "rather than focusing directly on incidents from the present, he (Heaney) concentrated primarily on the origins and hinterland of the conflict in *Wintering Out*, through elegiac poems celebrating the identity, history, territory and tongue of his people, the Northern Catholic Irish." In the dedicatory poem, 'For David Hammond and Michael Longley,' Heaney traces out the political turmoil post introduction of internment without trial in Northern Ireland in 1971. Even though caught amidst the violence of Northern Ireland, Heaney's attitudes surpasses his ideological footing. As he describes the journey through the political crisis:

This morning from a dewy motorway

I saw the new camp for the internees:

a bomb had left a crater of fresh clay

in the roadside, and over in the trees

machine-gun posts defined real stockade. (For David Hammond and Michael Longley, Wintering Out)

Here it is the language that serves as a conduit to probe into the ongoing sectarian violence. As Declan Kiberd claimed that the quest for self-definition happens within the realm of language. The choice of the words such as 'internees,' 'bomb', and 'machine-gun' themselves create political and psychological impact on the mind of the readers. Heaney describes the contemporary political turmoil where people had to undergo continuous struggle adjusting with violence and terror. He writes, "We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart. And we have to live with the Army…It hasn't been named martial law but that's what it feels like. Everywhere soldiers with cocked guns are watching you." The post internment violence as described in the poem is compared to a Second World War films gesturing towards the 'collective fate' of the people:

There was that white mist you get on a low ground

And it was déjà-vu, some film made

of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound. (For David Hammond and Michael Longley ,Wintering Out)

Heaney echoes the Belfast Graffiti written in a nationalist area that says 'Is there a life before death?' His Catholic teaching of endurance and perseverance gets reflected in the encapsulation of 'we' into 'I.' It is here that Heaney aligns himself with the people of his community. He writes:

Competence with pain,

coherent miseries, a bite and sup,

we hug our little destiny again. (For David Hammond and Michael Longley ,Wintering Out)

By accepting their 'collective fate,' Heaney posits an "emotional and articulate response to centuries of political, military and linguistic domination." But the emotional response to the turmoil does not weigh down his political hold on the situation. He makes deliberate choice of those words, whose etymology itself contributes in making and un-making history.

Seamus Heaney himself comments that *Wintering Out* "tries to insinuate itself into the roots of political myths by feeling along the lines of language itself. It draws inspiration from etymology, vocabulary, even intonations- and these are all active signals and loyalties, Irish or British, Catholic or Protestant, in the north of Ireland, and they are things I had an instinctive feel for as a writer and as a native of the place."

'In Backward Look,' Heaney laments the deadening of the Gaelic language. He explores linguistic adulteration as a consequence of cross-breeding of cultures. The poem could also be interpreted as an allegory for cultural appropriation and abrogation. Daniel Tobin points out, "It derives its title from Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages':

the backward look behind the assurance

of recorded history, the backward half-look

Over the shoulder towards the primitive terror (The Dry Salvages)

The poem begins with echoing W. B. Yeat's *Leda and the Swan*. The sudden beating of wings of the Swan has been transposed on to the snipe. The divinity of Yeats's Swan has been brought down to a snipe. The terror the fluttering of swan's wings creates in the mind of Leda, the same terror has been echoed in this poem. Symbolically, it is the terror of torturous history that motivates the gradual progression of the poem. It talks about the repeated invasions that caused mass displacement of the native people. The historical dispossession as a result of gradual linguistic and cultural cross-breeding gets reflected in the suddenness of the snipe's flight and disappearance from the place of its 'roots.'

A stagger in air
as if a language
failed, a sleight
of wing. (In Backward Look ,Wintering Out)

The ominous silence that followed the defeat of a linguistic culture expressed in 'as if a language failed' initiates the poet's exploration into the origins of poetic language. The sudden flight of the snipe with a pleading voice reflects its helplessness. This helplessness is reflected by Heaney as he reduces the majestic beating of the Swan's wings to 'snipe's bleating'. The uprooting of the snipe from its habitat symbolizes extinction of the Gaelic language as a consequence of historical dispossession. The flight of the snipe registers the displacement from the place of its origins to an enculturated realm.

A snipe's bleat is fleeing
its nesting -ground
into dialect,
into variants,
transliterations whirr (In Backward Look ,Wintering Out)

The snipe no longer feels at home and it new habitat is of foreign dialects and variants. So, even its flight sounds strange: 'transliterations whirr on the nature reserves.' The call of the snipe laments the decaying of its native language as its:

drumming elegies
in the slipstream
of wild goose
and yellow bittern
as he corkscrews away
into the vaults
that we live off, (In Backward Look ,Wintering Out)

Heaney writes an elegiac piece for the decaying Gaelic dialect, hints towards the Battle of Boyne which resulted in unleashing of violence and terror as a consequence of suppression of Gaelic dialect. The cry for 'wild goose' also refers to the Irish patriots who were defeated by William III

at the Battle of Boyne. The defeated patriots were given an option. They were asked either to take oath of allegiance to William III and become members of English army to serve England or flee to France as expatriates to join the self-exiled James. As Daniel Tobin points out the lamentation of the uprooting alludes to "flight of the wild geese, the dispossession of the indigenous Irish chieftains and all those forced to emigrate throughout Ireland's long colonial history."

The snipe in the new enculturated space is surrounded with etymologically stronger linguistic inhabitants 'in the slipstream/of wild goose/and yellow bittern.' The snipe's time travel to the place of its origins is reflected in the lines 'as he corkscrews away' into the 'vaults' of Irish history and culture. Heaney maps the trajectory of colonial culture in:

… his flight,

through the sniper's eyrie

disappearing among

gleanings and leavings

in the combs

of a fieldworker's archive. (In Backward Look ,Wintering Out)

The term 'fieldworker's archive' captures special attention as it makes Heaney's intention in writing the poem very clear. Heaney had read the philological work of John Braidwood. He was highly inspired by Owen Barfield and Braidwood. He writes, "'I did own Barfield, but the more important imprinting was a first arts course in the history of the English language, given by Prof. John Braidwood at Queen's University. That covered the ground from Anglo-Saxon up to Ulster English, and wakened something in me' (letter to the author, 4 June 1987) … John Braidwood explains, 'Some of the most imaginative bird names are translations from Irish—*Little Goat of the Evening* [gabhairin oidhche] or *Air Goat* [mionnan aeir] for the snipe, from its plaintive call (in Munster it is called *gonreen-roe* [gabhairin reo, little goat of the frost])' (1969, 26) … Braidwood shows how the three main dialects in Ulster conform to a pattern of invasion by land-hungry Scottish and English pioneers, and how 'dialect, or local accent, is the mark of our history on our tongues'(4) causing sympathy or suspicion depending on the allegiances of those addressed."

In tracing out the work of Braidwood, Heaney using etymology as a history reveals the "poetic fossil within the linguistic ore." In envisaging the disappearing snipe into the 'fieldworker's archive' Heaney points out that as a result of enculturation or cross- breeding of culture, the

Gaelic terms have been modernised to suit to the convenience of British speakers. As a consequence of which, the entire Gaelic phonetic register gathers dust in the obscure archives which is accessible only to scholars and researchers. In mapping the colonial plight of the Gaelic, Heaney affirms with John Montague's statement "the Irish landscape…is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read'…and that poets need to reread it so that the old mystical bond between sacred word and sacred place is reaffirmed."

In 'The Other Side,' Heaney depicts how uprooting impacts the lives of both the coloniser and the colonised. Heaney addresses the sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland dating back to the era of 1940s. It presents the benign encounter between Heaney's family and their Protestant neighbor, Johnny Junkin. Heaney charts out a time-period when Protestants and Catholics lived in solidarity but as Michael Parker points out their solidarity was based on hate. The strained relationship between the Catholic Heaney and Protestant neighbor hints at inability of the communities to forge a reconciliatory ground to settle their distrust for each other. Urban Protestantism posed itself as a threat to the rural Catholics. Their self-righteousness is too much to handle. The way in which Heaney talks about the frontier separating them it depicts that the feelings of distrust and religious conflict could not be easily sidelined. The language of the poem is very much attuned to creation of the binary opposition. Heaney begins the poem:

Thigh-deep in sedge and marigolds,

a neighbor laid his shadow

on the stream, vouching (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

From the very start, the narrator presents stark contrasts between his family and the Protestant neighbour. The poet undercuts the presence of the Protestant neighbor by rendering his presence as 'shadow'. Heaney seems to be disdainful of his arrogant Protestant neighbour and so he writes:

'It's as poor as Lazarus, that ground,' (The Other Side,Wintering Out)

The declaration: 'It's as poor as Lazarus foregrounds not only the neighbor's land as menacing but also deems the presence of the neighbor as 'ominous.'

I lay where his lea sloped

to meet our fallow,

nested on moss and rushes, (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The neighbour possesses 'promised furrows' rather than 'scraggy acres' and this is the reason why he describes his own land as land of plenty while that of Heaney as barren. It is the language, religion and culture that separate the Protestant neighbour and Catholic Heaney. He overwhelms Catholic Heaney, who is all endearing, with:

his fabulous, biblical dismissal,

that tongue of chosen people. (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The Protestant neighbour take pride in the fact that he is one of God's 'chosen people.' He has the authority to speak his own 'tongue.' This authority has been granted to him by the book, i.e. The Bible.

Heaney goes on to paint the character sketch of his protestant neighbour to highlight the stark differences between them. He takes notice of the rigid standing posture of the man. This rigidity of the posture also refers to the rigidity of differences that separates the two communities. This rigidity is a psychic condition that makes the sectarian conflict stronger to break. The notion of the indigenous and the foreign gets reflected in the following lines:

When he would stand like that

On the other side, white-haired, (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The neighbour makes a prophecy that Catholic Community will be at a disadvantage in the near future. He refers to plentiness of his own land against the untilled fallow of Heaney. Heaney writes:

swinging his blackthorn

at the marsh weeds

he prophesied above our scraggy acres,

then turned away

towards his promised furrows

on the hill, a wake of pollen

drifting to our bank, next season's tares. (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The neighbour's ironic prophecy that 'the wake of pollen' from his 'promised furrows' would drift to the bank of his neighbour leading to 'next season's tares.' This engenders threat to the 'unchosen' people. Michael parker comments, "Despite this unintentional act of agricultural 'vandalism', and despite his abrupt manner, his 'fabulous' archaic turns-of-phrase make him an object of wonder for the young of the family, rather than a potential source of menace."

In the second part of the poem, Heaney discusses how he and his siblings rehearsed their Catholic teachings of notable male figures:

For days we would rehearse
each patriarchal dictum:
Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon

and David and Goliath rolled
magnificently, like loads of hay
too big for our small lanes,
or faltered on a rut- (Wintering Out)

The allegation on the Catholics by the Protestants that they ignore the lessons of the Bible stems from his narrow-understanding of the religious text. As the neighbour declares:

'Your side of the house, I believe,
Hardly rule by the Book at all.' (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

Eugene O' Brien observes, "the identity of the neighbour is …couched in the language of an established order, both in terms of his own speech, and also in terms of how Heaney envisions him and his identity." Interestingly, the binary opposition is depicted from both hostile communities. The 'your side of the house' refers to the Catholic neighbours. This shows that the idea of an "'other side' presupposes a figure where there is also a same side: the very title of the poem sees the protestant neighbour as relationally connected to the 'I' of the poem." [1]Heaney reacts to the allegation of the Protestant neighbour with all civility and endurance, he observes:

His brain was a whitewashed kitchen

hung with texts, swept tidy

as the body o' the kirk. (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

In the third section of the poem, Heaney reiterates his neighbour's prejudiced mind-set by uncovering his susceptibility:

Then sometimes when the rosary was dragging

mournfully on in the kitchen

we would hear his step round the gable (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

Here the 'we' is not used to symbolize collective unity rather it marks exclusion of the Protestants against the Catholics. The 'rosary' evoked here is significant "as culturally and semiotically this precise form of langauge exercises a defining imperative in terms of what constitutes selfhood and alterity."[2]

His casual nature would be exposed in the 'casual whistle' 'on the doorstep:'

… 'A right-looking night,'

he might say, 'I was dandering by

and says I, I might as well call.' (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The youngster ignores the rituals of the family to 'stand behind him/in the dark yard, in the moan of prayers.' Embarrassed with himself he finds himself suspended between either to return to the family rituals or forge a common ground for the reconciliation, peace process to happen. The only reaction to the sectarian difference that Heaney could possibly imagine is the realm of silence. This silence reflects his catholic uobringing which gives utther primacy to 'primmed-lips.' But Heaney uses this silence of dilemma to posit a common ground for the two communities:

Should I slip away, I wonder,

or go up and touch his shoulder

and talk about the weather

or the price of grass-seed? (The Other Side ,Wintering Out)

The poem ends with an unresolved dilemma. Heaney rather than attempting to blur the difference between the communities actually teases out the limits of binaries that formed the building blocks of such an inimical relationship. The 'grass-seed' indicates at reconciliatory ground for their strained relationship. The poem "reverses the expectation in which 'otherness' is constructed by 'the imperial discourse' to maintain its authority over the colonized."

Thus, for Heaney the trope of silence is important. As silence helps achieve ethical step towards politics, religion and culture which are fundamental to the shaping of identity, 'The Other Side' creates a transcendental realm oriented towards the future.

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