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Seamus Heaney: The Political Poet

Ireland is something beyond its corporeal self: an idea, a culture, a history, a country, a physical landmass that despite thousands of years of attempts to subdue it by various invaders, has always resisted—and more importantly—persisted. But over the last fifty years, poet Seamus Heaney has risen above the long list of prestigious writers native to Ireland and found himself claimed as its contemporary voice and representative, a genuine successor to W.B Yeats. Despite his reticence to take on this mantle, Heaney’s poetry collections allow us to trace the development of his political perspective as a reflection of history and a dynamic response to current events; most specifically in its illumination of the profound connection he felt to his most recognized trope—Ireland’s earth.

It is impossible to address Seamus Heaney as a representative of Ireland without explaining some elements of the country’s history. However, no mere research paper can do justice to the long history of the “Irish thing”. A brief overview is an insult to the struggles and hardship that generations of its citizens have gone and go through, but a quick rundown is necessary. Inevitably this means that we divide and define Ireland’s ancient and early modern history in terms of its conquerors.

The earliest history is mostly lost to us, with only archeological remnants (the burial sites and passage tombs of Brú na Bóinne as one of the most famous) of an aboriginal people who occupied the land in pre-1000 BC (Killeen 4). We cannot say that the Celts “conquered” Ireland, exactly, but they did slowly displace the people and occupied the island, starting in around 500 BC and then methodically continuing into 200 BC, when the *Gaeil* Celtic faction began to dominate and provided a “linguistic unity through the language that we call Gaelic or Irish” (Killeen 8-9).

An entirely new kind of “conquering” took place when Palladius Patricius –a former slave later to be known as St. Patrick, evangelized and played a large role in the spread of Christianity across the country, starting in at least 432 CE (Killeen 17-23). The importance of this event cannot be overstated. If Christianity, both Catholic and Anglican, are thought of as having incredibly deep roots in Ireland, St. Patrick was the seed. Of course, with that seed, came the earliest foreshadowing of religious violence. In his “Letter against Coroticus”, St. Patrick described the cruelties some converts experienced:

Newly baptized, in their white clothing—the oil still shining on their heads—cruelly butchered and slaughtered by the sword…Greedy wolves, they have gutted themselves with the congregation of the Lord, which indeed was increasingly splendid in Ireland, with the closest care, and made up of the sons of Irish raiders and the daughters of kings who had become monks and virgins of Christ—I cannot say how many! So may the wrong done not please you! And even into Hell may it give you no pleasure! (Bardon 915)

Via St. Patrick, the influx and spread of Christianity across Ireland would affect its political, social, psychological, and economic landscapes for a millennia, with religious splits, factions, and schisms shaping the Irish landscape into the present day. Heaney would mine this history, and the pre-Christian era prior to St. Patrick, in his reflections known as “The Bog Poems” in *North.* This violence that so often stems from religion, both of the pagan druids and Christian converts, would echo across the centuries in Heaney’s work, as religion’s violence found itself rising once again in his present day:

Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,  
Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings.  
Diodorus Siculus confessed  
His gradual ease with the likes of this:  
Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible  
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe  
And beatification, outstaring. (*Poems 1965-1975* 194)

Unfortunately, this “gradual ease” with which Heaney noticed that violence imbues itself into a society is a recurring theme, as we will shortly see. Post-St. Patrick, with Christianity firmly rooted in Ireland, a searing reign of terror was experienced on the arrival of the Vikings, who pillaged and raided along the island nation’s coasts; for the first time in 795, and continuing off and on for several centuries (Killeen 30-32). Longships were a terrifying sight to a country filled with vaguely-connected kings and rulers, who could not put up a unified front against the assaults. Jonathan Bardon writes of a dejected little poem discovered in a monk’s marginalia from around this time:

Fierce and wild is the wind tonight,

It tosses the tresses of the sea to white;

On such a night I take my ease;

Fierce Northmen only course the quiet seas. (1257)

This poem, a sad indication of early Irish life, shows just how feared and renowned the Vikings were.

After the Viking raids, the end of Ireland as an autonomous country ended somewhat like what brought about the end of Camelot, on the hinge of an affair. A local king’s wife was abducted by Mac Murchada, and the attempts by the cuckolded king to exact revenge required Mac Murchada to appeal to Henry II of England for assistance. This would set it all in motion. Richard Fitzgilbert, “known to history as Strongbow” was a Norman earl recruited to help Murchada, and who would eventually capture Dublin (42-44). This onset of the Normans in the 13th century would herald the beginning of centuries of colonization in Ireland. What was previously a back and forth conflict between local rulers who suffered collectively under raiders, most of whom never conquered large swaths of the island—the “Normans…established themselves on more than 60 per cent of all Irish land, including nearly all the fertile and productive land. These land holdings were governed by English feudal law and acknowledged the ultimate, if remote, authority of the English king. The conquest was not complete, but it was an unambiguous success” (Killeen 54). Beginning with Strongbow, an Anglo-Norman foothold was established in Ireland that is there to this day.

Later, in the early modern era of the 16th and 17th centuries, colonization by the British would ebb and wane, a constant drain on that empire’s resources, as they attempted to keep the island. But the Reformation, when Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, would complicate the Irish/British relationship more than any other event for the rest of history. As the Irish clung to Catholicism and the British became largely Protestant, it solidified an already antagonistic relationship between the Irish and their British colonizers, with the religious denominations falling staunchly on ethnic lines. Richard Killeen answers the inevitable question “Why did the Reformation fail in Ireland?”

First there is the question of language. There was no Irish language translation of the Bible…in a country where Irish was still the vernacular of the great majority…this absence alone subverted the possibility of a mass conversion. In addition, kinship ties between Gaelic lords and the clergy were very close…the remoteness from the Protestant centre in the south of England [was also] a factor…it was impossible to enforce religious conformity completely…in Gaelic Ireland it was a lost cause from the start. (76-77)

That schism in the religious convictions of the British and Irish would exacerbate differences between the two countries over the centuries, but an especially sharp wound that remains in Ireland to this day is the Plantation of Ulster, the systematic and protracted colonization of part of Northern Ireland, through particularly vicious means. In order to subdue the Irish people, Britain began confiscating land in the Ulster region from absent Irish nobles and giving it to British and Scottish colonists. In turn, the indigenous Irish were cast out and found themselves in a kind of manufactured poverty, unable to work the land or allow their cattle to graze. British loyalists would refuse to have them as tenants, and the Irish were suddenly trespassers on what had been their own land. This colonizing project, aside from assisting the British in maintaining control (and a tax base) in Ireland, was proposed to “be a civilizing enterprise which would ‘establish the true religion of Christ among men…almost lost in superstition’” (Bardon 3986). The “true religion” being British Protestantism rather than Irish Catholicism. Ominously, these colonists would come to be known as “undertakers” who “had to clear their estates completely of native Irish inhabitants. Undertakers had to…[take] the Oath of Supremacy—that is, they had to be Protestants—and having removed the natives, they had to ‘undertake’ to colonise their estates with British Protestants” (Bardon 4000). Of course, we now know that even four centuries later, this attempt at “civilizing” the Irish and weaning them from the chains of Catholicism to the “enlightened” British Protestantism failed tremendously. The vast majority of Ireland remained Catholic, with Protestantism being passed down through British settlers to their own later generations. Very little evangelizing of the Catholics actually occurred, and the dividing line between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland remains deeply tied to these original British settlements.

These elements of Ireland’s political and social history are important to the foundational aspects of Heaney’s work, but his true concerns for Ireland’s future are dominated by Republicanism and the events of Ireland’s fight for independence over the last 100 years. Later Republican efforts, including the Easter Rising of 1916, and The Troubles of the 1970-1990s, were largely focused on the “the use of military force to achieve an independent Irish republic,” specifically an wholly independent island (Killeen 246). Although this succeeded for Southern Ireland in 1922, Northern Ireland—the birthplace of Seamus Heaney—remains subject to the British. Because of this, internal violence between the British troops, the Ulster Defense Association, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) would continue for several decades.

To an American audience, it is difficult to understand the deep mistrust that existed (and still continues) between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. Those involved were fighting about current political, social, and religious disputes, but the wounds of their grievances, namely Ulster and its continued status as a province of Britain, ran deep and had festered for too long. In his “Making Sense of the Troubles”, David McKittrick explains:

Most of [the Catholics] regarded Northern Ireland as an unsatisfactory and even illegitimate state, believing that an independent united Ireland was the natural political unit for the island. The heart of the Northern Ireland problem lies in this clash between two competing national aspirations. This basic competition is complicated by issues of power, territory, and justice...the roots of that problem lay deep in history. (2)

It is important to note that prior to 1916, the political energies of nationalists were not just spent fighting to gain independence and reclaim Ulster. Many people simply wanted recognition of the civil rights of Catholics, who were systematically passed over for jobs, promotions, and full participation in society. They primarily advocated “Home Rule” a concept where Ireland would rule itself, while still under Britain’s dominion (Killeen 212). However, with the establishment of the IRA, and the culmination of the Easter Uprising in 1916, retaliatory violence between Protestants and Catholics began to go into freefall into an all-out Irish war of independence. Additionally, the IRA’s loose method of management meant that there was often a haphazard bent to their attacks: “There was no sense in which [the IRA] were firmly under civilian control or direction…the war of independence was a series of sporadic regional guerrilla conflicts.” Attacks prompted counterattacks, and the British “responded with a mixture of regular troops and auxiliaries, the infamous Black and Tans…many [of whom] were rootless veterans of the western front, brutalized by their experiences” and difficult to reign in when set loose (Killeen 250-251).

By the time centuries of anger had piled up between the two parties, and then with the unsatisfactory partition of Southern and Northern Ireland, there was an “orgy of sectarian violence…the war of Independence spread north and became entangled with the trauma of partition. The IRA attacked police and army as in the south; Protestant mobs drove Catholic workers from the Belfast shipyards; the IRA retaliated by burning businesses” (Killeen 252). The IRA felt their fight was unfinished and believed they had no other options but violence to achieve their ends—a free and independent island—and the UDA followed a similar mentality in “protecting” their British citizens and clinging to their provincial status. Ironically, both groups marketed themselves as protecting their own and promoting their respective denominations interests—while largely operating as pseudo-criminal organizations that ran outside of the law and enacted their own forms of “justice” for any grievances they saw fit. This would continue for decades.

Which finally brings us to Seamus’ era. Heaney’s formative years were sandwiched in between these violent bouts of Republicanism from the 1920s and the Troubles of the 1970s. Born in 1939, he would be the eldest of nine children, and spent his childhood working on the family farm before he won a scholarship to a Catholic boarding school at age 12 (O’Driscoll 137). But surprisingly, he makes clear in an interview that his home was refreshingly free of the sectarian hate that dominated the area: “My father had a kind of trans-sectarian license to roam, through being in the cattle trade. Then too there were old friendships going back between neighbor’s families for generations…our house was happily open” and he went on to embarrassedly mention how he felt uncomfortable talking about his Protestant neighbors in this fashion, saying “It even feels slightly demeaning for me to be talking in these terms” (132). According to Heaney, his family maintained friendships across the religious and political divide, and found the Troubles to be a unifying factor, something painful that everyone had to endure together, rather than a divisive battle line (132).

By the time the disputes between the British government and the IRA came to a head around 1969, Heaney was barely 30 years old, a young lecturer starting to make a name for himself as a particularly gifted poet. Although he personally supported the Northern Irish push for independence and the Catholic civil rights movement, he clearly became disenchanted with the IRA’s methods in the ensuing years. Many of his poems during this period were less political statements, and more of archeological and memorial tombstones. He wrote elegies and portraits, poems in remembrance of friends and neighbors who had been caught up in the violence against their will.

Fascinatingly, we can trace the development of Heaney’s political leanings and maturity by chronologically analyzing his poetry collections. His first (and most well-known), *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966, was largely free of politics. It concerned itself with a world that was more about small-scale tragedy and Heaney’s personal psychological development—appropriately so as it reflected on a time on Heaney’s life that was somewhere in a middle-ground of politics. There was certainly unrest and dissatisfaction during the time period that *Death of a Naturalist* reflects on, but the 1940s were more broadly concerned with WWII than the violence that had occurred against Irish revolutionaries in the early 20th century, and it was still prior to the intensification of guerrilla IRA tactics in the 1970s.

This first collection is fraught with unexpected truths that startle the young Heaney. With poems like “Mid-Term Break”, where he devastatingly recounts coming home from college to attend the funeral of his four-year old brother, or the titular “Death of a Naturalist”, where he is a boy on the cusp of puberty, understanding the physicality of the natural world while observing copulating toads in a bog—Heaney uses this opening collection to explore his own mind in an intimate and friendly setting, primarily the Mossbawn family home in Northern Ireland (*Poems 1965-1975* 18, 5). Mossbawn itself is likely a product of the 1903 Wyndham’s Land Act, which bought out the old landlords who had dominated Catholic Irish tenants for generations, and transferred the land to the people who worked it, allowing “the independent family farm [to come] to pass” (Killeen 225).

The final poem of this collection, “Personal Helicon”, continues the childhood theme to contemplate the sense of wonder that Heaney experiences towards poetry. He describes himself as a young boy who “could not be kept from wells,” who constantly looked down into them because he “loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells/of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.” He develops the narrative, describing the richness of the image and explains further that he was fascinated by the how “others had echoes, gave back your own call/with a clean new music in it.” And then, he allows us to understand that this young, fresh poet is embarking on a poetic career not just out of fascination with the medium, but because of fascination with how that medium helps him to understand himself, allowing him the opportunity “To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring.” Heaney tells us clearly why he does what he does in his final lines: “I rhyme/to see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (*Poems 1965-1975* 40)

If *Death of a Naturalist* seemed apolitical, *Wintering Out* was the emergence of a different kind of poet. On a broader (and more historical) scale, Heaney began examining the plight of Ireland’s suffering by dredging history for the ancestors of his people, and by not so-subtly comparing the violence of ancient Gauls and converts with the terrors that the Protestants and Catholics visited on each other in poems like “The Tollund Man”. The collection starts out familiarly enough, with the classic farm and natural imagery that helps us to recognize Heaney’s work from afar. However, as the collection progresses, we realize Heaney has grown older—and colder. The volume is quite appropriately titled, as it comments on the author’s spiritual state of exhaustion, as someone who must endure a long winter, keeping their head down and slugging on. *Wintering Out* suggests a Heaney that seems significantly more exhausted with sectarian violence than his earlier collections would imply.

As previously stated, the collection does not jump right into politics. Its first explicit mention is approximately mid-way through, in a poem titled “Traditions”. There, he writes of how the British empire subjugated the Irish tongue, suppressing and inhibiting the natural pitches and creativity of the language: “Our guttural muse/was bulled long ago/by the alliterative tradition/her uvula grows/vestigial, forgotten/…while custom, that ‘most/sovereign mistress’,/beds us down into/the British isles. He mentions the instructional and commanding aspect of the rulers of the Irish, and how the Irish are told “We are to be proud/of our Elizabethan English,” rather than their original Irish language. The reader can feel the schoolteacher aspect to this command to appreciate the language Britain had given Ireland, with the collectivity of “our” Elizabethan English. And we sense the resentment in the all-encompassing nature of the statement. The poem goes on to reference the MacMorris of Shakespeare’s Henry V, one of the first examples of a stereotyped version of an Irishman that would be perpetuated in the ensuing centuries. The MacMorris of Heaney’s poem roams the Globe (a reference to Shakespeare’s theatre and the physical earth), asking the famous “What ish my nation?” line. Heaney explains that “sensibly, though so much later, the wandering Bloom/replied, ‘Ireland,’…’I was born here. Ireland’” (*Poems 1965-1975* 109) Heaney clearly and pointedly declares Ireland his nation. Not Britain, not Northern Ireland. Ireland.

We can begin to understand the Heaney of *Wintering Out* as the embodiment of Irish spirit and morale in the late 1960s, early 1970s. And if Heaney’s writing represents the feelings of many of his countrymen, then they seem frustrated, tired, enduring, and proud all at once. The violence at this time between the IRA and the British was heating up—but had not reached its full tilt. According to Heaney, They are still officially in a period between “the professional wars--/corpse and carrion/Paling in rain--/The wolf has died out/In Ireland” (*Poems 1965-1975* 123).

Heaney’s dogged pursuit of the spirit of Ireland, the “wolf” of *Wintering Out*, and Irish independence reached its peak in his most fiercely political volume, *North*. It opens with a poem titled “Sunlight”, where everything seems to be in suspension. It starts by noting that “There was a sunlit absence” blanketing Mossbawn, the home of his youth. Where work and action dominated earlier poems, this one suggests a stasis: “Now she dusts the board/with a goose’s wing,/now sits, broad-lapped,/with whitened nails.” The fondness for his old home is there, but the aging nature, stillness, and distance of it all from his current state is clear in the final lines: “And here is love/like a tin-smith’s scoop/sunk past its gleam/in the meal-bin” (*Poems 1965-1975* 161). The simpler world of Mossbawn barely exists anymore, though Heaney still holds it dear to his heart.

That love, while never completely gone, certainly becomes harder to remember in *North*. The Troubles are in full swing by this point in 1975, and Heaney is becoming all too acquainted with death and destruction in his homeland. The poem “Funeral Rites” resonates with our new view of a sadly mature Heaney, who does not have the energy to be fascinated by “frogspawn” and “fructified aquariums” of his youth. Instead he “shouldered into a kind of manhood/stepping in to lift the coffins/of dead relations” (*Poems 1965-1975* 170). Heaney in *North* is certainly an adult, but we would be wrong to assess him as someone who is simply fascinated by the bodies of the dead instead of wells. Although he describes the bodies of his countrymen in strangely distant ways: “in tainted rooms,/their eyelids glistening,/their dough-white hands/shackled in rosary beads.” These are obviously Catholic men, most likely victims of sectarian violence, whose religious convictions chain them to unhappy fates. The use of the word “shackled” suggests the emergence of an angrier writer, who is refusing to accept these deaths as the natural order of Ireland’s suffering that its history would imply is inevitable. In this poem, we see the quiet effects of violence on the home, but it is clear that Heaney is refusing to categorize this into the way things must be.

Other poems in the collection subtly address the issues of living in Northern Ireland, where the government positions are perpetually dominated by British Protestants. In “A Constable Calls”, Heaney develops the tension of his subordinate figure answering the questions of a local police officer:

Arithmetic and fear.

I sat staring at the polished holster

With its buttoned flap, the braid cord

Looped into the revolver butt

Simply helping his father with farming and ledger work, Heaney answers the questions of the constable while alarmingly fascinated by the weapon resting on his hip. When the constable asks about the root crops they are growing, he “assumed/small guilts and sat/imagining the black hole in the barracks”—a tacit allusion to the unofficial policy of the time of making unwarranted and undocumented arrests of Catholic suspects in IRA investigations. Those arrested often disappeared without warning, and were tortured using the infamous “five interrogation techniques” that were approved by the British military for use. The entire exchange between the constable and Heaney only appears to take a few minutes, yet Heaney’s fear and anger is palpable:

A shadow bobbed in the window.

He was snapping the carrier spring

Over the ledger. His boot pushed off

And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked. (*Poems 1965-1975* 221)

The constable pedals off, and Heaney carefully watches him go. The repetition of “ticked” clearly resonating with a time period threated by the possibility of bombs that could go off anywhere, at any time. Heaney’s own persona resonates too, his explosive anger ticking away. Although the whole poem is quiet and no harsh words are exchanged, you can hear the fury a young Heaney (presumably in his early thirties) feels at having to answer the constable’s questions. He is fully aware of their different stations, and knows that the constable is aware of his power over Heaney. This poem resonates particularly well against the context of Northern Ireland’s “[obsession] with security” around the time of this writing. The “police were augmented by the Ulster Special Constabulary…an armed local militia, who were effectively the UVF in another guise. Many were Great War veterans…few were squeamish about violence” (Killeen 258). If Heaney is writing of the same type of USC constable, then it is clear that this imposition to “casually” inspect a young Catholic’s farm has infuriated him. He resents the constable for every action because his “small talk” is not small at all—it is a threat. Most importantly, the push of his boot and the snapping of the carrier spring have an air of menace about them because the person who enacts them has an authority that Heaney cannot defy without consequences.

Part of his increasing stature as a poet around the world meant that various organizations tried to hijack Heaney’s persona for their own ends. Heaney mostly humbly accepted how the world---particularly Ireland—embraced him as a representative voice. But in some poems, we start to wonder if Heaney resents the responsibility thrust upon him. In *North*, one poem opens in an unusually self-aware style:

I am writing just after an encounter

With an English journalist in search of ‘views

On the Irish thing’. I’m back in winter

Quarters where bad news is no longer news. (*Poems 1965-1975* 212)

Then after he trades empty talk with a man who clearly wants a soundbite from a semi-public figure that can generate newspaper sales and be taken out of context, he jumps to his internal thoughts that the journalist cannot and will not hear, of how “Men die at hand…I sit here with a pestering drouth for words at once both gaff and bait.” And gives us a sense of his conviction that “I believe any of us could draw the line through bigotry and sham/Given the right line, aere perennius.” This poem, with its separations between internal and external dialogue, mirror the constant struggle Heaney had in his poetry. He was not just a poet, he was becoming Ireland’s poet, and too many people saw him as a tool they could take advantage of. Perhaps that is one reason why the poem is titled “Whatever You Say—Say Nothing”. It seems like a safe bet—or so I thought.

We are lucky that Heaney actually addressed this poem directly, because many people, including myself, misread it. It became relatively well known, and was picked up as a general idiom, somehow being traced to an attitude of his mother:

I suppose this should go on the record once and for all. My mother’s attitude was not at all expressed by the phrase ‘whatever you say, say nothing.’—nor, I should say, was mine. Her use of it and my use of it put it very much in inverted commas. The phrase was a knowing acknowledgement of the power structure, a Catholic nod in answer to the Protestant wink that got the jobs and the houses. It was ironical rather than instructional. It was fundamentally an expression of anger, rather than of acquiescence. (O’Driscollm 134)

Heaney tells us here that although he is writing poetry and expressing his natural voice in a controlled and artificial form—he is often writing within a controlled rage. “Whatever you say, say nothing” is not advising that the Catholic Irish carry on with their lives, suffering the burden of discrimination and violence as uncomplaining martyrs, he is ironically pointing out saying nothing is the “safest” thing one can do, because speaking out is rife with danger. The Protestant’s “wink” at the Catholics as though the discrimination they experience is a friendly joke between the two groups. Heaney takes it as an affront.

For Heaney, it’s a dangerous thing to be a poet. People want to use him for their own ends, and often hijack his poems into meanings he did not intend. In 1979 he had a confrontation on a bus when a Republican party-leader accosted him for his lack of support to the party’s cause. Heaney had apparently considered dedicating his poems to a group of political prisoners, but changed his mind after this encounter (O’Driscoll 256-257). He was already a voice for Ireland and himself, but allowing himself to be a proponent of propaganda – even propaganda he supported – could only end badly. In his *Redress of Poetry*, Heaney explained his thoughts on poetry as propaganda:

If you are an English poet at the Front during World War I, the pressure will be on you to contribute to the war effort…if you are an Irish poet in the wake of the 1916 executions, the pressure will be to revile the tyranny of the executing power. If you are an American poet at the height of the Vietnam War, the official expectation will be for you to wave the flag rhetorically. (3)

Of course, he rejected being anyone’s source of propaganda, not just the Republicans. When he received an award from the British Sunday times, he took it as an opportunity to denounce British xenophobia (O’Driscoll 258). Additionally, he was well known for his tart response to his inclusion in a book of the best British poets:

‘Be advised, my passport’s green

No glass of ours was ever raised

To toast the Queen. (“Seamus Heaney: His 10 Best Poems”)

So Heaney does not want to be the de facto voice for any group that would seek to use him, and he uses poetry as a means to an end, an expression of his own feelings and an expression of Ireland’s overall voice – but only when he *wants* to be Ireland’s voice.

Yet, in his later years, after the peace accords of the 1990s, Heaney seemed to pull back slightly from the “Irish thing”. The historic violence at home was winding down to some extent, and he started reflecting on how the world was full of problems, not just Ireland alone:

Northern Ireland did have its coherent miseries, but what we have to deal with now are the disorders of the world. From the “Republic of Conscience” is a little parable about the answerability of each and every one of us. We are all citizens of the Republic of the Conscience…to quote ‘Mycenae Lookout’, there is “no such thing/as an innocent/bystanding…you cannot distinguish between your condition as a creature of the times and your action as a scribbler. (O’Driscoll 409-410)

Later on, in commenting on why he published a poem in response to the September 11th attacks (he was living in America sporadically around that time) and donated the money to Amnesty International, Heaney replied simply: “Ongoing civic service I suppose…what happened on September 11th meant that the whole condition of the world was altered henceforth, the spirit of the age had darkened” (O’Driscoll 422). In comments like these, we are able to understand what kind of public figure Heaney sees himself as. He is not merely a writer, and he knows his words are not wholly his own. As an established and gifted poet, his writing often has an air of public service about it. He clearly sees poetry as a tool to “redress,” something that can be there to comfort people spiritually and emotionally in the times when the ages have “darkened,” and for him, this poetic balm is just as important as a medic or priest.

This more universal theme to Heaney’s work, more focused on humanity as a whole rather than Ireland specifically, is best encapsulated in *Human Chain*, the final collection published before his death in 2010. In that compact final book, the first poem reminds us that Heaney is still startled and amazed by poetry:

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

A wind that rose and whirled until the rood

Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore

And got me up, the whole of me a-patter

Alive and tickling like an electric fence:

Had I not been awake I would have missed it. (3)

He goes on in the volume to reflect on a recent medical scare. The titular poem recalling how he was moved around when he was unable to walk by physicians and nurses, comparing them to aid workers who slung sandbags, creating a chain of people that work together to alleviate suffering (17). His connection to the world as a whole is crystal clear, and frankly (although it might be convenient) it seems as though Heaney has come full-circle to the wide-eyed boy of *Death of a Naturalist*. He is full of wonder again, and the anger of his 30s and 40s has dissipated into—if not acceptance—then maybe understanding and acknowledgement of the way people are, and the ways that some people always will be. Despite the frustration he has felt with the continuing struggle for lasting peace in Ireland, he finds comfort in the persistence of people who assist each other—the human chain that keeps the world moving forward.

Over and over again, we realize that Heaney, probably without meaning to—managed to build a metaphor for his entire life’s work by his constant return to the literal earth of Ireland. In his most famous poem, Digging, the dirt trope looks back in time to his father and grandfather:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sings into gravelly ground:

My father, digging, I look down

Till his straining rump among the flower beds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging. (*Poems 1965-1975* 3)

Then later, in the Glanmore Sonnets:

Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground.

The mildest February for twenty years

Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound

Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors…

Each verse returning like the plough turned round (*Field Work* 25)

People see Heaney as “Ireland’s poet” because he so strongly connected himself with the actual physicality of the country itself. He did not just write about the “idea” of Ireland, or its culture. He reminded people what was taken from them – the land. In a spiritual sense, he imbued his poetry with the earth of Ireland. Digging and the Glanmore Sonnets are not just nice poems, they are grounded in his family’s history as “turf-diggers”, manual laborers for the valuable peat in Irish and bogs, and farmers at his childhood home of Mossbawn; for the too long history of suffering in Ireland during potato famines; and grave-digging during the wars for independence. They speak to everyone in Ireland because everyone feels the land belongs directly to them. He anchored his poems in the ground of Ireland, and there is an extensive history that can be found in the unusual topology of the country, with its preservation of the past in the bogs and long timeline of attempts at conquering.

In fact, one historian explains that the mythology of Ireland is intricately tangled with the many attempts to conquer it:

Invaders. The freedom narrative imagines an ancient Arcadia that has been violated by Vikings, Normans, Cromwellians, and others in successive waves…it is the way with islands: they are both open to conquest and skilled at absorbing the invaders….The key point here is that the freedom narrative occludes as much as it illuminates. If the story of Ireland is simply the rejection of foreign rule and control and the recovery of autonomy, the whole set of relationships between it and the rest of the world (not just Britain) is reduced to a static tableau. Without invaders, immigrants, and the influences they have brought over time, modern Ireland is literally unimaginable. (Killeen 132)

We realize that the Ireland that Heaney represents is the product of centuries of foreign influence, and he knows and accepts that fact. He tells us that “Writers have to start out as readers, and even before they put pen to paper, even the most disaffected of them will have internalized the norms and forms of the tradition from which they wish to secede” (*Redress of Poetry* 7). And although he looks forward towards Ireland’s future freedom, he is also aware that the digging metaphor looks to the past, through layers of history, both happy and sad, that made Ireland the country he loves so dearly. Despite the danger of losing control over his voice as a poet of politics, Heaney managed to thread the needle and come out unscathed. He followed the traditions of his father and his father’s father, but with a pen instead of a spade—or a gun, like the Troubles might have tempted an angry young man into picking up. He found new ways of carrying on old traditions. The most powerful aspect of poems is that they allow the reader to fill in their own voice, in place of the disembodied one that is on the page. Heaney’s voice became everyone’s voice as his poems were read, again and again.

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