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Seamus Heaney and the Role of the Political Poet

Alex Coleman

In 1950, Denmark's gutty boglands belched forth a man whose life had long since been absorbed into peat. His legs were tucked up against his chest, and a rope was discovered with him, tied around his gray neck. He is a "bog body," a mummified corpse preserved by the unique conditions of the boglands found in Northern Europe. So well-preserved are his face, body, clothing, and hair that he was at first mistaken for a murder victim more recent than his actual death in the fourth century BCE (Silkeborg). He became known as the Tollund Man, and one prominent theory to explain the cause of his death was a source of inspiration to a poem by one of Ireland's most prominent poets, Seamus Heaney. The Tollund Man was theorized to be a victim of human sacrifice to the ancient goddess of growth and fertility. Heaney uses the Tollund Man, as well as subjects in many of his other bog poems, as a symbol for the modern political martyr in order to illustrate the continuity of a violent Irish psyche and to process the despair and destruction inflicted upon the Irish people during his lifetime of political instability; in addition, a consideration of the poet's role in society demonstrates that Heaney allows problems to exist in his poetry, thus creating a space for the Irish people to process their own pain.

Heaney was a political poet, and “The Tollund Man” is a reflection of that role: through this poem, Heaney makes the Tollund Man bog body into a symbol of ancient tribal violence and launches the reader into questions of Irish identity. The critical conversation around Heaney’s poetry demonstrates that poetry became something of a personally therapeutic method that Heaney used to deal with his frustrations about the violent politics and seemingly unnecessary deaths that occurred during the Troubles. The full extent of both of these conversations is vital in understanding the important ethical question that many scholars have raised in response to Heaney’s bog poetry: whether or not Heaney was ethically sound in contributing to these conversations in a way that made an art of violence. Collins suggests that in the creation of the bog poems, including “The Tollund Man,” Heaney granted the “sectarian violence a historical respectability it had not received elsewhere” (107). This being said, I would argue that a consideration of the poet’s role in society allows us to condone his poetry for what it is. It is not a solution to political crises, but it is a reflection of the reality of pain and the struggle to make sense of a world in which people lay down their lives for purposes that may never come to fruition. As a poet helping to reflect a national heritage, Heaney’s role in Irish culture is to create a space for the Irish to coexist with their issues and problems in a way that can help them to truly move past their trauma.

This question of ethics must be approached through an understanding of what defines Heaney’s role in a larger context. It is important to recognize Heaney as a human being who suffers from fear of uncertainty the same as every other member of the human race. In addition, Heaney is a poet, and it is by answering the question of what a poet’s role is that the ethics of his work can be appropriately labeled. Those who have challenged his morality have done so on the basis of the ethics of making art of a deceased and mummified remnant of life. They have challenged the ethics of both photographing and viewing a being that offends the senses, and which inspired much of his bog poetry. The largest argument against Heaney’s bog poems, however, lies in the aforementioned fact that he would make such an emotionally disturbing topic—Ireland’s Troubles—vastly more approachable.

From 1968 to 1998, Northern Ireland was saturated by a cultural-political conflict between the Protestant unionists and the Roman Catholic nationalists that escalated to bombings, shootings, and other violent aggressions (Wallenfeldt). This era became known as “The Troubles.” At the

beginning of this season of Ireland's history, Heaney lived in Belfast, Ireland, which was one of the particularly intense centers of violence. *Wintering Out*, published in 1972, was released during Heaney's residence in Belfast. Heaney experienced great violence firsthand, and his poetry was majorly influenced by these seemingly meaningless deaths. These tragedies haunted him for the next thirty years of his life and left both Heaney and the rest of the Irish people with emotional trauma that they would have to endure for years to come. His reflections on that time are bleak: "We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart" (Heaney). Heaney published "The Tollund Man" in this collection, and the poem serves as a record of the massive emotional toll he paid during those years living in terror. His take on the hopeless sacrifice of human life is mirrored in the last line of "The Tollund Man": "I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (lines 43–44). Though Heaney is a companion to Mother Ireland, the future is bleak, and with no direction he is, essentially, lost. This was an era when the Irish nation was completely ravaged by both a war of words and a war of physical violence, destruction which contributed to the anxiety that prompted Heaney's exhausted confession. As the years passed, it seemed to be a war without end and without a true sense of good versus evil. It was a conflict that has been mirrored by many nations before and since; rather than good versus evil, it was a battle of a conflict of interests. Heaney felt lost without a moral compass to direct him to good or evil, even as he consistently felt the tug of his national loyalty pulling him back into the war.

The ethics of Heaney's bog poetry is unfolded in his creation of the Tollund Man metaphor, which demonstrates a cultural tendency toward human sacrifice for the good of the whole that is deep-seated in the psyche of the Irish. Alan Shapiro commented that "The Tollund Man" "is an exploration into Irish past and relation to Irish present" that "symbolizes the Celtic past, its legacy of violence, and its tradition of political martyrdom" (21). Heaney's poetry unpacks Irish history and establishes a pattern that he comes to observe in modern political history. According to *Glob's Boglands*, the Tollund Man, who was found in Irish peat with a rope around his neck, was a sacrificial victim who was made bridegroom and payment to persuade the ancient Celtic nature goddess to "germinate" the ground and allow the community continued survival. "By virtue of 'The Tollund Man,'" Floyd Collins comments, "Heaney traces contemporary sectarian

strife in Ulster back to the cult of a pre-Christian earth goddess, Nerthus, who was worshipped throughout northwest Europe" (105). Shapiro points out that this man, sacrificed to save his own people, is turned into a symbol of political martyrdom by Heaney. This is clear throughout the poem. It is evident in lines like, "pray / Him to make germinate" (lines 23–24), where Heaney pleads with the powers that be to give fruition to the Tollund Man's sacrifice, the same way the nation would plead that those who have died for the cause would not have died in vain. Heaney's role as a poet is to create a space for the Irish people to observe and reflect on what the cultural pattern revealed in Heaney's Tollund Man metaphor might mean for them in the context of their suffering and in view of the future they must build.

In order to understand the "hunger of the culture for its own image and expression," it is of value to also include a discussion of how Heaney's participation in Irish culture through his insinuation of cultural motifs in his poetry demonstrates his own hungering after expression (Collins 76). According to Heaney, there are certain lines of the poem that are informed by his own interaction with the culture as an Irishman (*Preoccupations* 162). Indeed, bogland had been an important part of Heaney's personal history since his childhood, when he lived in close proximity to it. For example, Floyd Collins comments on how the second and third stanzas of "The Tollund Man" are derived from the folklore of the area where Heaney grew up: in an incident when "four Catholic brothers were killed by Protestant paramilitaries, their bodies 'trailed along the railway line, over the sleepers as a kind of mutilation'" (75). Collins goes on to say that Heaney allayed "his personal crisis of identity by locating himself within a larger cultural milieu" in his writing of "The Tollund Man," though he "failed to consolidate his thematic and aesthetic gains." This point brings up questions of the purpose of Heaney's writing and thus engages the reader in questions of ethics. If most critics agree that the poems articulate a certain violent streak inherent in the psyche of the Irish mentality, what is Heaney's role in expressing his own lived experiences and interaction with the conflict, as a part of the culture that is being portrayed? This, of course, is not to contribute to the stereotype rooted in English colonialism and anti-Irish racism. However, as an Irishman, Heaney does not fail to observe the connection between Ireland's Celtic tradition, which brought about the demise of the Tollund Man hundreds of years prior, and the modern-day Irish Troubles. Heaney's poem creates space for the Irish to honestly inspect whether or not this violent tendency really

exists in the Irish psyche. Heaney illustrates the “disquieting continuum between modern Irish culture and ritual executions in Iron Age Denmark, the familiar feeling of being ‘lost, / Unhappy and at home’” (Collins 97). Can it be incorrect for Heaney to draw upon personal feelings generated by a conflict that has made such feelings familiar? What is the reader’s role in deciding this? For indeed, “the linguistic and cultural excavations of *Wintering Out* . . . reflect Heaney’s desire to come to terms with the initial outbreak of violence and the continuing cultural crisis” (Collins 97). Things like place-naming Aarhus, where the stained face reposes, represent a “desire for continuity” and an attempt to recover a “surrendered identity of cultures that have been colonized or absorbed” (Collins 105). Heaney brilliantly navigates the space between blame and mutual suffering that permits him and his fellow Irishmen to have their eyes opened to the nuances that exist within the Irish culture they are striving to resurrect and also to sit with their despair at its loss.

Heaney’s use of the metaphor that connects the ancient Tollund Man’s sacrifice to the sacrifice of the lives of his comrades communicates his yearning for peace and demonstrates his recognition of the reality of the destruction that is already irreversible. At first, this view disregards the question of ethics by its very personal rendition of a specific lived experience, but it then provides for space to consider his responsibility to the public. His expert weaving of the portrait of the death of the Tollund Man elevates the dead man into sainthood, thus demonstrating admiration and respect for his passing. Heaney begins the poem with an obsessive, almost zealous description of the Tollund Man’s traits and an expression of his desire to go see him in his temple at “Aarhus” (line 1), an almost desperate search to grasp the physical concept of the mummified body. He then launches into a description of the body becoming “saint-ified,” as “bridegroom to the goddess, / She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint’s kept body” (lines 12–16). The second stanza is then the prayer mentioned above that links this sacred vision for the Tollund Man to the deaths of Heaney’s Irish comrades—“I could risk blasphemy,” he dares (line 21). “The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards,” or those Irish common men who gave up their lives for the cause, he prays will be “germinated” by this same theme of sacrificial victimhood for the growth of the same cause—the security, prosperity, and continuity of the Irish culture (lines 24–28). In

a personal expression of the hope that he has for his country, Heaney reads into the conflict of a divided people with a plea for things to be made right in the end. Here opens another opportunity for an investigation of ethics. While some would claim that Heaney's artistic acknowledgment of the violence of the Troubles era could be considered a breach in ethics, the argument is made void in the face of the fact that Heaney's poems never were meant to romanticize the violence or the death. Rather, the bog poems were intended to romanticize the motivations behind all of it and recognize the complexity of human suffering through the dichotomy of his hope and apprehension for the future, which bears only the certainty, he fears, of a continuation of the pattern that he has already acknowledged. This pattern he demonstrates first in the death of the Tollund Man and again in the death of his fellow Irishmen. It is a trade—death for life. But at what cost? Heaney pleads.

Allowing the death and violence a place in literature was a personal outlet for Heaney: "There's something genuinely consoling in the articulation itself, in the ability of the intelligence to face up to and define the barbarism that persists within the psyche and the culture, just as it was once preserved in the bog" (Shapiro 22). Blake Morrison offers up a similar viewpoint: "'The Tollund Man' shows that Heaney believed from the beginning that some kind of connection exists between Iron Age sacrifices to the Mother Goddess of Earth and the violent history of Northern Ireland" (47). Morrison continues to comment that this poem helped establish Heaney as a poet who would overlap and interpenetrate "historical, political, linguistic, and mythological material" (47). "The Tollund Man" demonstrates Heaney's knack for this: "Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (line 45–47). These lines specifically connect the sacrifice that is incurred by a historically religious fanaticism to the modern-day suffering and sacrifice that is political in nature.

The allusion that connects modern political violence with the bog people is also uncannily ironic. John Wilson Foster, who also found that the poem was Heaney's attempt to impersonalize his feelings, wrote that "the encouragement of fertility through violent death is an ancient irony, and one senses in 'The Tollund Man' its appropriateness for contemporary Ulster" (33). The irony lies in the fact that it is through death that one would hope to find life. In his own words, Heaney describes the bog bodies as sacrificial victims to the Mother Goddess in order to "ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political

martyrdom . . . this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern." (*Preoccupations* 57–58). David Lloyd comments that "Heaney here posits a psychic continuity between the sacrificial practices of an Iron Age people and the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing" (127). Evident again is that same theme of historical irony, along with the mental continuity evident in the political intersection of modern-day Irish violence and the sacrificial passage of the dead into new life for a community. This irony brings a new reading to the poem as a whole and thus a new perspective on the soundness of Heaney's ethics. It allows the reader to be drawn in to Heaney's own need to process and deal with the pain of the situation and thus recognizes him as a common man who must work through the effects of civil war the same as his fellow Irishmen. Death and violence were rampant; thus, while the rhetoric surrounding the conflict was charged with ideals of liberation and hope, Heaney could have seen it all as a mask at some points, when the suffering was too great to justify a lack of progress—and herein lies the irony of sacrificing life for the betterment of another's continued existence. Heaney begs the reader to question where our justification lies when, even while we are still in the Irish homeland, we feel "lost, unhappy" (Heaney, *Opened Ground* 48).

Heaney's final stanza is where this turning point from prayer to the goddess on behalf of peace for the Irish people into the reality of questioning justification and dealing with the deaths of too many takes place. For as the Tollund Man is dug up and carted away to be pointed at and observed by a people he no longer understands, the "man-killing parishes" of Ireland will inevitably be a setting of a lack of that germination of prosperity that Heaney had prayed for (line 42). The Tollund Man receives a "sad freedom" (line 33) from his earthy tomb and joins ranks of others sacrificed for the sake of the people: "Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard" (line 37) becomes another list of the dead, lives sacrificed in hope and lost in tragedy. Heaney's final heave of despair—"I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home"—rings out as a witness to the tragedy of civil war (lines 43–44). Drawing on a rich Irish cultural heritage and an immense attachment to the earth that has existed for centuries, Heaney's heart-wrenching plea for aid from the ancestors ends in despair.

In a way that is forlorn and revelatory, Heaney's poem connects the murder of ancient sacrificial victims to the slaughter of Irishmen in the Troubles era. However, Collins comments that while "Heaney's journeys,

both literal and imagined, through northwest Europe may explain the problem of contemporary sectarian strife in Ulster, they do nothing to alter it; the awareness of an 'archetypal pattern' does not dispel the violence" (106). Thus, in large part the portion of the conversation that is yet to be decided upon is whether or not Heaney's ethics are sound in the creation of his art. Morrison remarked on the "necrophiliac tendencies of the bog sequence" (Collins 107). He and others have suggested that in the creation of the bog poems, including "the Tollund Man," Heaney granted the "sectarian violence a historical respectability it had not received elsewhere." However, Thomas Foster contributes the idea that especially in matters such as this "Irish Question" of nationalism and calls for Irish independence, "Artistic 'seeing' is not the same thing as sanction" (55). Recognizing something in a way that unites beauty and atrocity does not mean that Heaney was granting political and cultural turmoil any sort of permission.

Heaney's use of the bogland as a metaphor for larger Irish conflict, and particularly the way that metaphor recognized the conflict rather than solved it, does not qualify as a breach in ethical conduct. An important concept to consider in order to answer this question fairly is what defines the ethical code. Is it the nation, the culture, or the era? Within the context of the international culture that established the ethical sphere that Heaney writes in, is it religion, or credibility in the public eye? At least within the context of European literature in the Postmodern era, this brings us back to that all-encompassing question: What exactly is the role of the poet? While some would claim that it must be Heaney's place as potentially the collective representation of Irish culture to direct or perhaps assist the people in progress toward peace, I would argue that, especially because he is a leader in the articulation of Irish culture, it is Heaney's role to allow the population to come to terms with the here and now of that culture.

The legitimacy of Heaney's claim to cultural articulation is supported by a side-by-side comparison to William Butler Yeats's poetry. Yeats has been hailed as one of the greatest poets of all time and praised as an articulator of the Irish narrative. Heaney is very often compared to Yeats as a result of their mutual genius and mastery over the Irish aesthetic within their work, and thus, a comparison of the two in terms of ethics establishes Heaney's correct claim to discuss topics of political turmoil. Heaney "remarked on the resilience of Yeats's poetics in seeking new ground, finding new ways, developing new voices, and avoiding the repetition of old material" (Garratt

2). Hazard Adams specifically discusses Heaney's great respect of Yeats's commitment to the absolute validity of the artistic process and Yeats's "large-minded, whole-hearted assent to the natural cycles of living and dying" (88). A poet who early on in his career disagreed with those who wished to use poetry for political ends, Yeats gradually became a poet who "wished for poems that did not reach for disembodied beauty but that could 'carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole'" (Norton 210). Hence, Yeats gradually came to see that poetry needed to discuss topics that are very real and present and that affect the individual, including politics and violence. He was also concerned with issues of both Irish nationalism and antinationalism, English colonization, and revival of Irish consciousness. More important to the critical conversation surrounding Heaney's ethics is the issue of Yeats's own ethics. Yeats and Heaney, both quintessentially Irish, wrote about similar topics, including politics, violence and prophecy, historic myth, and nostalgia. To claim a strong sense of morale in one but not the other would be a logical fallacy.

Yeats indeed has an ethically appropriate claim to poetry grounded in making a space for the Irish to sit with their political dilemmas. This concept is illustrated well in Yeats's poem, "Easter, 1916." While Heaney wrote about themes of Irish political turmoil at the end of the twentieth century, Yeats mirrored him at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yeats's era saw similar violent outbreaks in the form of civil war. The year 1916 marked the beginning of those outbreaks, and a crushing defeat of the Irish insurrectionists by the British saw the execution of fifteen of the movement's leaders, many of whom had been good friends of Yeats. While Yeats had been drifting away from his Irish roots in the years prior to the beginning of the political unrest, the uprising snapped him startlingly back to remembrance of his Irish heritage. It was a difficult time for him, as recorded in the poem, whose title reflects the event he memorializes: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice? / ... Was it needless death after all?" (lines 56–59, 67). These emotions echo in Heaney's pain almost eighty years later: "Out here in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (lines 45–47). Both poems discuss specific incidents of death of people that both poets felt a closeness with, either personally or culturally. Both poems allow the poet to be present with the pain of civil war and all the atrocities that come with it. Yeats offers no solutions to political turmoil, though he was a respected politician and

served for a time as an appointed senator of the newly established Irish Free State. For this instance, Yeats allows himself to sit in his pain out of respect for his fallen comrades and in understanding of the fact that mourning is a process that requires acknowledgment and time. Parallel to this, of Heaney the Norton Anthology of English Literature reads:

In the bog poems Heaney reflects on the poet's responsibilities to write about the dead, yet to do so without prettifying or exploiting them. He probes the vexed relations between lyric and historical suffering. . . the need to be true to his calling as an artist, but also to represent the irredeemable carnage of modern political violence. . . . The result is a tough-minded witnessing, an ethically scrupulous and self-aware mourning of collective loss and sectarian murder. (1094)

The close inspection and comparison of both of these poems demonstrate the poetic tradition that was critically established by Yeats, a poet who dealt with issues of a modern society and wrote in that context, and was carried on in the work of Seamus Heaney, who operated under the same pretenses.

Another of Yeats's most critically acclaimed poems is "The Second Coming." This poem does not offer solutions for the fear he feels at the future, which can no longer be predicted and which has rejected all essence of a pattern. Yeats simply observes that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" (29). Yeats recognizes fear. He nods in acknowledgment to a looming future and to an analytical process within him that just doesn't know how to deal with his present issue. In "The Second Coming" there is no feigning a plan of escape, no semblance of authority to be able to fix the world's problems, which Yeats recognizes he knows nothing about. He simply allows the problems to exist, and he allows his readers also to coexist with their fears and problems. That is the role of the poet, a tradition established by many poets before Yeats and continued by Seamus Heaney and countless others.

Ultimately, it is because of the poet's ability to create this space for his or her readers to coexist with their fears and problems that the poet ends up playing an extremely important role indeed in determining solutions. By allowing himself to process his pain, Heaney gives the Irish people permission to process theirs. There must be a space to grieve and observe. Issues must be understood before they can be corrected, and some of the most complex and nuanced issues that can be faced are those that deal with the internal workings of the human spirit in the most realistic way possible.

Heaney was tired. Specifically, he felt “lost, / Unhappy and at home” (lines 47–48). It could be construed that it is an unethical reading of his poems to question Heaney’s morals in giving the Irish people a place to observe their grief and find a certain brotherhood in the shared Irish experience. It is only in this way that the Irish people could heal, comprehend the pattern of their communal Irish consciousness, and move forward as a community.

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