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The Politics of Silence: Seamus Heaney's Poetry

PROBABLY the most important Irish poet since Yeats, Seamus Heaney is often admired for not being "modern" in the conventional sense. Critics have described Heaney as a sturdy, traditional craftsman whose eyes are firmly fixed on the past. Ever, a critic like A. Alvarez termed Heaney's poetry "victorian" and claimed that it "works comfortably in a recognizable tradition" "Challenges no presuppositions," "does not advance poet "amphibious between his own silence and the unignorable noise of the world." Poetry of Northern Ireland has often shown this curious fusion of noise and silence, of the political and the aesthetic. For the poets of the Belfast Group (of whom Heaney is one) this is particularly true.

Heaney's ambivalence about politics has made him sharply controversial. Some have praised him for his shunning of politics, others

by Khondakar Ashraf Hossain

into unknown territory". But yet Heaney occupies an unassailable place in the post-war British poetry although the poetic creed he professes is full of ambivalence and contradiction. "He has embraced the role of Romantic poet, drawing his theories of composition from Wordsworth... Yet his poetry has also been shaped by the modes of post-war Anglo-American poetry : it comes after the 1950 'rationalism' of Larkin, Gunn, Davie, Wilbur, Roethke and Nemerov on the one hand, and the 1960 'extremism' of Hughes, Plath, Redgrove, Lowell, Berryman and Sexton on the other, taking something from both the camps while going forward into a new domain."

But the most glaring example of Heaney's ambivalence is manifest in his response to the recent history of Northern Ireland. He is a Catholic nationalist living in the Protestant-dominated Belfast. Heaney's ambivalence has its roots in this peculiar situation. Sensitive as he is, he has to respond to the time and events around him, although, he is not a 'political poet' in the conventional sense. The political turmoil in his native country has thrown on the poet the mantle of a public spokesman although he deeply resents the role. There is an inevitable tension between his personal predilection for 'private', apolitical, reflective kind of art and the hullabaloo of an unending revolution. In an interview with Newsweek, he complained that he was placed in a critical time when "the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes." Heaney is against such an utilitarian role for poetry. He says elsewhere: "I have written poems which are (politically) explicit. But a part of me says, 'Forget that'. The function of great poetry is to rejoice and show us the possible riches of the spirit. I can do that writing about a leaf. Forget Belfast. Get me to the leaf."

Blake Morrison calls him a have applauded his participation, while others have condemned him as an opportunist who has not actively sided with the IRA. His unsure stand regarding the Belfast situation has baffled many. Yet, as we shall see, Heaney's poetry has a strong political undercurrent that quietly and subtly addresses the political situation.

Heaney's first two books, Deaths of a Naturalist (1966) and Door into the Dark (1969), are mysteriously silent about the Ulster politics. Living in the midst of the activities of the IRA and the brutalities of the British army in his native London Derry, Heaney is seemingly unconcerned. One is persuaded to think this silence to be a very subtle poetic design of saying a lot by saying nothing. This reticence is not unexpected of Heaney considering the community in which he was brought up. The Catholic community in Northern Ireland is wellknown for reticence, inwardness and reserve. There are some political reasons in addition to be ethnic ones. It is a culture of "siege-mentality": Catholics have always been suspected and persecuted for abetting the IRA activists. Silence is thus one strategy for self-defence and self-preservation. Young Heaney was taught by his mother this practical wisdom: "whatever you say, say nothing." Heaney in a later book *North* describes this silence:

O Land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,
Of open mind as open as a trap,
Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,
Where half of us as in a wooden horse
Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,
Besieged within the siege, whispering morse. (North, pp. 59-60)

Silence has been exploited by a number of modern writers to portray the pointlessness of speech in an absurd world. Beckett's Waiting for Godot or Pinter's The Caretaker can be cited as examples of literacy work where inarticulacy has been shown to be as potent as articulation, and silence to be as vociferous as speech. Heaney's Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark show his preoccupation with silence and inarticulation. In these books we come across and number of people who are typically Irish in their tight-lippedness. These traders, labourers and country craftsmen go about their daily businesses without fuss and avoid speaking in such away that one might think them to be mute. The water-diviner in the poem 'The Diviner' works "without a word". The fishermen on the sea whisper wisely, "better not clatter now" and break the silence of the surrounding by one or two occasional epigrams or ominous prophecies — "we'll be the quicker going down", "the lough will claim a victim every year." In 'Wife's Tale' the haymakers are seen "smoking and saying nothing." The blacksmith as he works his forge only "grunts". The docker is described as "strong and blunt as a celtic cross/used to silence." In 'The Outlaw' the speaker brings a cow to be serviced by the "unlicensed bull" kept by Old Kelly. (The description of Irish farm life and its daily activities is typical of Heaney in these early poems.) Old Kelly makes only a half utterance from the back of the throat while the bull itself goes about its business with the "unfussy ease of a good tradesman.":

In Heaney's first two books the articulation of language is reduced to the enunciation of some common sounds only — grunts, yelps, sighs, whispers, and sometimes the pure silence of mute open-mouthed gasping. The inarticulate degenerates

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File photo dated 14 February '95 of Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who was awarded October 5 the richest ever Nobel prize for literature, over US dollar one million. — AFP/UNB photo

The following "bog poems" were inspired by some photographs in PC Glob's book, The Bog People, which showed the bodies of some men and women who lived in the early years of Christianity. The bodies were unusually well preserved and looked as if they had died only recently. Seamus Heaney was deeply impressed by the photographs in Glob's book, which he called "unforgettable," and said that they blended in his mind "with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles."

The Grauballe Man

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.
The grain of his wrists
is like bog oak,
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.
His instep has shrunk
cold as a swan's foot
or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge
and purse of a mussel,
his spine an eel arrested
under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts,
the chin is a visor
raised above the vent
of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened.
The cured wound
opens inwards to a dark
elderberry place.

Who will say "corpse"
to his vivid cast?
Who will say "body"
to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair,
a mat unlikely
as a fetus's.
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,
a head and shoulder
out of the peat
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies
perfected in my memory,
down to the red horn
of his nails,

hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

Punishment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PROFILE

Born: April 13, 1939, near Bellaghy in County Londonderry, Northern Ireland.
Education: Degree in English Language and Literature from Queen's University, Belfast, 1961.
Married: Marie Devlin, 1965.
Children: Michael, 1966; Christopher, 1968; Catherine Ann, 1973.
Academic life: Lecturer, Queen's University, Belfast, 1966-72; visiting professor at University of California-Berkeley, 1970-71; Carysfort College, Dublin, 1975-81; professor of poetry, Oxford University, 1989-94; Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, Harvard University, since 1985.
Published works: *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966; *Door into the Dark*, 1969; *Wintering Out*, 1972; *North*, 1975; *Field Work*, 1979; *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 1980; *Selected Poems 1965-1975*, 1980; *The Rattlebag, co-edited with Ted Hughes*, 1982; *Station Island*, 1984; *Sweeney Astray*, 1984; *The Haw Lantern*, 1987; *The Government of the Tongue*, 198; *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*, 1990; *The Cure at Troy*, 1990; *Seeing Things*, 1991;*Sweeney's Flight*, 1992;*The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, 1995. — AP/UNB

ARCHITECTURE

From the Earth: The Legacy of Adobe Architecture

THOUGH I had lived in the United States for six years, my stay had been confined to the north east. I therefore looked forward to my trip to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and I was not disappointed. Our official programme did not begin till the next day, so we had a whole day to ourselves. While much of the commercial district was like any other city in the United States, a tour around the residential area, the old part of the city, and a visit to the University of New Mexico opened my eyes to the beauty of adobe and how even contemporary buildings were enriched by the regional architecture. A later, one-day visit to Santa Fe on the last day of our stay in New Mexico, reconfirmed my impression.

The earth-coloured, soft contoured masses of Albuquerque and Santa Fe with their rough-hewn wooden beams are a world away from the sky-scrapers of New York, the Grecian columns of Washington DC, the gables of New England. From he pueblos of Acoma — touted as the "oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States" — to the University of New Mexico and several old and new buildings in between, the architecture of New Mexico is not only strikingly different from the other cities in the United States but also an inspiring example of how an ancient architectural style can lend itself to contemporary uses.

The architecture of New Mexico ranges from plain adobe, through Spanish Pueblo, territorial, Victorian, and Santa Fe styles to the contemporary which combines adobe and frame construction. There are also examples of a couple of Spanish style buildings — a reminiscence of the Spanish heritage of this part of the United States.

When the Spaniards came to central America in the sixteenth century, they found well-established communities living in towns. The Spanish word for town is "pueblo," and the people of these communities became known as the Pueblo Indians to distinguish them from the Plains Indians who were nomadic. Pueblo Indian villages were composed of house built

by Niaz Zaman

of adobe — bricks formed of mud and straw and sundried. The Indian pueblo villages — which have become tourist attractions today — contain many adobe homes, many of them several hundred years old, long preceding the arrival of the Europeans in the southwest. Generally one-storey high, the houses have recessed doorways and few and small window openings. Vigas, long wooden poles, support the flat roofs of the pueblos. Though the typical pueblo dwelling is one-storey high, adobe buildings could often be up to three storeys high. Wooden ladders planted out side led to the upper levels. At Taos Pueblo, just north of the town of Taos, is the largest multi-storeyed adobe structure in the United States.

The Spanish-Pueblo style of New Mexico evolved from a fusion of the pueblo community houses and Spanish influences. The Spanish used local artisans and local material — adobe — to construct their buildings, including their churches of which there is a fine example at Acoma: the Church of San Esteban del Rey built in 1610. The fusion of the Pueblo and Spanish styles created what is known as Spanish-Pueblo. John Gaw Meem, the architect who designed the University of New Mexico, explains the origin of style he used for the university buildings:

[The Spanish-Pueblo] style has its origin in the remote antiquity of the arid regions of our American Southwest. When the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century, they found a well developed Pueblo architecture, probably a thousand years old, typified by great terraced community houses, built of stone or earth. The Spaniards, on the other hand, especially the Franciscan friars, brought with them the rich building traditions of the Spanish renaissance, then at its height in Europe, and these they used in devising the plans and details of their structures. But they had to utilize the Indians and their building techniques for their construction and as a result of these two influences, there emerged the unique style known as Spanish-Pueblo.

In the nineteenth century the architecture of New Mexico underwent some modification in what is called the territorial style. With the opening of the Santa Fe Trail and then the arrival of the railroad in 1861, brick and wooden decorative trim could be transported to New Mexico. Buildings in the territorial style have larger doors and window openings, and feature doorways supported by ornately carved columns.

The Santa Fe style of architecture combines the lines of the Spanish-Pueblo with territorial windows and broad, wooden doorways. The Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, for example, was one of the first buildings made in this style.

In the 1920s the regional style of architecture was revived in New Mexico. One of the most influential proponents of the regional architecture was John Gaw Meem. It was almost by chance that Meem developed an interest in the Spanish-Pueblo style. In 1920, Meem contracted tuberculosis and was advised to move to a dry climate, such as Santa Fe. For six years he was in and out of a sanatorium at Santa Fe. During this period he discovered the regional architecture of New Mexico. When he regained his health, he launched into his career as an architect devoted to the regional New Mexico style. In his designs Meem was motivated by a personal philosophy which incorporated a sense of availability of material with a sense of historical identity. In a paper on Southwestern architecture, Meem summed up his ideas on regional architecture:

It may be said that any style is regional that employs suitable, available materials, adapted to the climate and to local requirements of living and is expressive of certain spiritual values such as conscious recollection of history and joy in evocative forms and elements and necessarily found in a strict interpreta-

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University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Multi-storeyed adobe dwelling, Taos Pueblo