

The Anti-Pastoral in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Hermeneutical Approach

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Abstract:

Hermeneutics as a research practice involves reappraisal and reinterpretation in relation to its cultural contexts. This article addresses these issues upon launching a study of Heaney's early poetry specially his first major volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The present paper focuses on the themes of fear, decay and death in the poetry of Seamus Heaney exposed through a hermeneutical approach practiced through Derrida's deconstruction as method.

Keywords: Anti-pastoral, culture, deconstruction, Derrida, hermeneutics, Gadamer,

Introduction:

Seamus Heaney is an Irish poet born in 1939 and brought up as Roman Catholic in Mossbawn, county Derry, a rural community in North Ireland. In 1957 he attended Queen's University in Belfast where he was introduced to Irish, American, and English literature. After graduation with a first class honours degree in English language and literature and a teaching certificate he held positions as a secondary school teacher and later returned to Queen's University as a lecturer. In 1975 he was appointed at Cary fort College in Dublin. From 1989 to 1994 he served as professor of poetry at Oxford and as professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. Heaney crowns his literary career with being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995.

Generally speaking, hermeneutics is the practice and study of interpreting and understanding. "Hermeneutics takes its name from the ancient Greek character Hermes, messenger of the gods, the one who protects thieves, travellers, and merchants, and the historical figure of ancient Egypt, Hermes Trismegistus, who was said to have written Hermetic Texts that contained cryptic messages that needed to be

deciphered in order to reveal their meaning" (William E. Smythe and Angelina Baydala, 2012:58). Hermes disrupts what is fixed and petrified by way of making connections and pilfering meaning 'he gives us a new view... liberated from the reductionism of preconceived theories' (L'opez-Pedraza, 2010: 8–9). Rather than providing centre and ground, Hermes is concerned with movement and encourages seeing through a text, idea, or situation. In this regard, hermeneutics is the closest to Derrida's theory of deconstruction, 'Hermes has no need to fight for his center; he does not have one' (L'opez-Pedraza, 2010: 24); like quicksilver, 'he eludes reduction by scattering himself all over the place' (L'opez-Pedraza, 2010: 35). Moving along the borderlines, he stimulates the imagination rather than secures a definite meaning.

With Gadamer philosophical hermeneutics has acquired three significant elements making up its practice; reflexivity, dialogue, and interpretation. Reflexivity in this tradition is close to Heidegger's concept of understanding believed to be "the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein, [the being there, or being in the world], itself" (Heidegger, 1962: 195). Gadamer elaborates on the concept of understanding to draw the attention to the dynamic relationship between the thing under consideration - literary texts for example- and the fore-structures of understanding that are already part of our being-in-the-world. In this he writes "working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as [one] penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there... [T]his constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation" (Gadamer, 2004: 269).

Dialogue, the second constituent, here means the encounter with another view or another facet of the object. This concept is close to the deconstructive idea of the interplay of generated meanings springing from the decentering of logos. Thus, "the result of dialogic encounter should be that *both* parties retire thinking in different and unexpected ways about criticisms made and received" (Davey, 2006: 19). The word "criticisms" here as being only one mode of "being able to shift in understanding; the introduction of new or unfamiliar ways of looking at something would be a more general description for what might emerge" (McCaffrey, 2012:5)

Interpretation in the hermeneutic has an ontological grounding calling into play our consciousness of being-in-the-world. Therefore, drawing on issues from culture, history, psychology and sociology in interpreting is part of that consciousness. On the other hand, interpretation also draws on a profound sense of language as mediating our being-in-the-world. Gadamer wrote that, "the light that causes everything to emerge in such a

way that it is evident and comprehensible in itself is the light of the word” (Gadamer, 2004: 478).

With Gadmer's concept of interpretation in mind, it becomes clear that hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction have grown from common soil. For, hermeneutics offers the philosophy of understanding while deconstruction offers the method of salvaging the understood. Therefore, the bond proposed by Saussure between the *signified* and the *signifier* in demonstrating the *sign* is broken or at least opened. Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language system distinguishes between *la langue* (language system and structure), and *la parole* (word or the speech-event). More clearly, "The *parole* is impossible without the support- the structural validity, generation, meaning- conferred upon it by the *langue*, the source of grammar, phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics" (Guerin et al, 1999: 333). *Parole* appears as phonetic and semantic signs. A linguistic sign joins a signifier, which is a conventional sound construction, to a signification which refers to the semantic value or meaning. In post-modern thought especially with Jacque Derrida's deconstruction the idea of "difference" has overshadowed negation. Derrida has opposed the privilege of the *logos*, a privilege affirmed in the structural legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure. The spoken word, as a phonemic structure and its correlative assigned identity as a signifier whose meaning is fixed and enhanced by such oppositional structures as the minimal pairs, has given way to the written mark.

The same as Deleuze's reference to difference as productive, Derrida has insisted that "*differance* is literally neither a word nor a concept. Instead, it can be marked as a wandering play of differences that is both a spacing of signifiers in relation to one another and a deferral of meaning or presence when they are read"(Deleuze, 1982:3). It questions the presence of any objective structure or content in a text. Thus, Heaney's poems concerned are to interpreted and read as a text in light of hermeneutic understanding and deconstructionist practice.

Fallen Eden of fear and death:

Heaney emerges as an archetype of Adam who has fallen from an Edenic life down to a troubled world having decay as its law. The poet starts a process of childhood reminiscence recording memories of close contact with the immediate environment in which the pastoral significance of the place is severely countered by the antipastoral realizations of erupting sectarian troubles. Therefore, the Edenic memories shall be countered by frustrating realizations of fear, decay, and death. "Death of a Naturalist", elaborating on the theme of fear, registers Heaney's overture

of such a process, the poem also is a statement that marks Heaney's true-to-fact vision about his world, or rather the "being in the world":

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland, green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by the huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
I would fill jampotfuls of jellied
Specks to range on window-sills at home,
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
The fattening dots burst into nimble-
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by the frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through the hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose neck pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

(Heaney, 1988: 5-6)

At the level of ontological interpretation, the poem introduces an oedipal Heaney attracted to mother-Ireland by a bond of Lacan's "Mirror" stage of oneness with the mother. This stage suggests two forms of the ego: the imaginary and the speaking. Lacan describes them as the specular other and the symbolic other. Heaney opens the poem with the phase of the imaginary other: "a unification of the self, a unification in fantasy on the model of other people or the mirror stage, before full control of the body is established"(Jackson, 2000:135). The ideal model for the child at that stage is his mother, in Heaney's case it is his Ireland, "the flax-dam" "festered" oedipally in "the heart", that assumes that maternal position:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland, green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by the huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun. (Heaney, 1988: 5)

In breaking the structural sign-signifier link in favour of Derrida's concept of " *differance* ", the "flax-dam" stands for maternal Ireland, for the word "dam" besides meaning a barring object, it means a female of a species. In turn the trauma of the oedipal child echoes a "festering in the heart" symbolizing a troubled unconscious. For, "the poem begins seemingly matter-of-fact description... But the description prepares for the grotesque initiation the young boy would undergo later on"(Buttel, 1975: 41).

The hidden sexual desire of the child takes the form of a downed rotten "flax" half floating on the surface of the unconscious, water. Then comes the role of the social check, hence the "huge sods" a metonymy for the Irish community working to make that desire "weighted down". At this stage, the child feels as separated other or a specular other and thus "moves from the mirror stage to a social stage of development, by way of the Oedipus complex: 'the drama of primordial jealousy' that produces the dialectic that will henceforth link the "I" to socially elaborated situations"(Jackson, 2000:140). The society, playing the role of the castrating father, forces the child through fear to hide that desire "in the shade" of the unconscious, Heaney recalls, "I sickened, turned, and ran" (Heaney, 1988: 6).

In the second stanza, Heaney refers to another father: the English control over Ireland. The "frogs" are a metonymy for the English who "invaded" the "flax-dam" or mother Ireland. The "slime kings", a direct reference to the English crown, are ready for their military threats in the act of separating the mother, the "dam" representing the abode of the child's joy. Here, Heaney moves away from the trauma of the individual

to that of a whole culture facing the control of another one that dialectically has fostered Heaney the poet and lecturer of the English literature. Consequently, Heaney resolves that dialectic by working to become identified with the oppressing father, for this reason no wonder to find Shakespeare, becoming an objective correlative of the English culture, looming large in Heaney's poems, at least on the hermeneutical level.

Heaney's experience of fear and his rejection of a hostile reality continue in "The Barn", a poem that gives a description of an enclosed place perhaps taken as a shelter securing the child from the fear undergone close to the "flax-dam":

Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory
Or solid as cement in two-lugged sacks.
The musty dark hoarded an armoury
Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.

The floor was mouse-grey, smooth, chilly concrete.
There were no windows, just two narrow shafts
Of gilded motes, crossing, from air-holes slit
High in each gable. The one door meant no draughts

All summer when the zinc burned like an oven.
A scythe's edge, a clean spade, a pitch-fork's prongs:
Slowly bright objects formed when you went in.
Then you felt cobwebs clogging up your lungs

And scuttled fast into the sunlit yard.
And into nights when bats were on the wing
Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared
From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking.

The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff
To be picked up when birds shot through the air-slits.
I lay face-down to shun the fear above.
The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.

(Heaney, 1988: 7)

"Deconstruction looks upon texts as abortive to an apparent or single meaning. Deconstruction denies any final explication or statement of meaning" (Guerin et al, 1999: 340). Therefore, viewing "The Barn" from a hermeneutical perspective of ontological interpretation, the poem

suggests an oedipal Heaney suffering repression of a sexual drive directed to the mother. Both the mother and the "barn" are sources of nourishment, the former by breast-feeding, the later by "corn". Consequently, the "barn", representing Northern Ireland, becomes identified with the mother. Thus, the sectarian troubles having the role of the patriarchal dominance practise a check on the son's keeping of a peaceful company with the mother. That is why the "barn" becomes unsafe, the place sought for protection turns dangerous and leading to the feeling of fear: an indication of the child's reaching of the phallic phase that is checked by "the child's sexual development and inserts the baby into the cultural order: the order of law"(Jackson,2000:145). In Northern Ireland it is violence that puts the child in the cultural order.

The text, according to Derrida, "in spite of itself purports to have something that calls us to remember, to move what needs to be remembered from forgetfulness to immediacy" (Faulconer, 2007). Guided by this principle, in "The barn" the reader finds a description of stored "corn" in "chaff", and a child, taken as son to the mother-barn, running away in fear: an experience directing the mind "to remember" the biblical story of Joseph. A striking clue to support that conclusion is the word "scuttled" meaning to escape away. In fact, the word has originated from the Germanic root '*escata*' meaning "the cutting out of cloth"(Thompson, 1995:1245). Thus, Heaney, in fear and on the verge of committing incest, escaped away out of the "barn". An oedipal complex in a situation reminiscent of Joseph, must have troubled Heaney, when Potiphar's wife has invited him saying: "come to bed with me, but he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house" Genesis (39: 23 – 11). In "The Barn", Heaney echoes these biblical verses:

And scuttled fast into the sunlit yard.
And into nights when bats were on the wing
Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared
From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking.
(Heaney, 1988: 7)

"Deconstruction looks upon texts as abortive to an apparent or single meaning. Deconstruction denies any final explication or statement of meaning" (Guerin et al, 1999: 340). Thus and in practice, Heaney runs to the "sunlit yard" of factual reality that is matched by the imprisonment of Joseph (a decision taken by Potiphar, the foster father), however Heaney's torture results from the troubles or "the fear above" issuing from a patriarchal authority of the violent society, and it is the fear correlated to the suppression of the incest desire. Fortifying this

suggestion is the word "pecked" whose meaning combines desire fulfillment and consequent punishment. For, to "peck" informally means "to kiss hastily", thus it indicates a sign of love made rapidly. On the other hand, the same word could mean "to bite". Moreover, the word "peck" could also mean to "nibble at" or to "bite with a peak", both meanings refer the poem to the story of Joseph. For, the same word, "pecked" reminds, in Joseph's story, of the dream of the baker carrying bread "pecked" by birds. Moreover, the image of the "sacks" brings to the mind the prospect of a bakery store housing flour sacks. In reference to the dream, Heaney writes:

.....I was chaff
To be picked up when birds shot through the air-slits.
I lay face-down to shun the fear above.
The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.
(Heaney, 1988: 7)

The poem ends with the depiction of the "two-lugged sacks", very well representing the two fighting sects in rural Northern Ireland, as "two great blind rats". For, the word "lug" has the Swedish root '*lugga*' meaning "to pull a person by the hair"(Thompson, 1995: 811). Thus, both fighting sects are seen as oedipal in their relationship to North Ireland, they are introduced in a metonymy as "blind rats": "they play the role of a rat-like Oedipus blinded for his tragic flaws"(Hart, 1993: 25). Consequently, Heaney identifies the practice of violence in Northern Ireland as manifestation of a troubled relationship with mother-Ireland seen as a fame-fatal. In art, rather than violence, Heaney, refusing that reality, shall soar above differences to continue his own quest of self-discovery as dear value worth toiling for. Art has become a stimulus of living energy." It becomes clear that "Heaney is intensely conscious of the awesomeness of living energy...[and] has come to recognize living energy as a positive force countering the ruthlessness of existence and the inevitability of death"(Gitzen, 1974: 329).

Passing by an experience of fear in "The Barn" and near the "flax-dam" in "Death of a Naturalist" Heaney counters pastoral tradition by stressing his rejection of a violent reality through examining the theme of death and decay in two other poems; "The Blackberry-Picking" and "The Early Purges". In the former, the glorious natural scene builds up until it becomes heavily occupied with other anti-pastoral forces leading ultimately to the experience of frustration in face of decay:

Late august, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the black berries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk-cans, pea-tins, jam-pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

(Heaney, 1988: 10)

The poem, as far as interpretative hermeneutics is concerned, could be referring to a point in literary history and criticism, namely the argument concerning literary affiliation to Neoclassicism as opposed to Romanticism. The poem proves to be about the process of classical artistic creation countered by the romantic one. This suggestion is based on what Dr. Enani finds as "the practice of a reader's consciousness of the differences and divergences among words, hence the transference of some of their meaning to other sets of meanings in the reader's mind"(Enani, 1997,147). In this Enani is rephrasing Derrida who has gone against "Western tradition of logocentrism ... which represses thought by repressing the limitless vitality of language and moving some thought to the margin"(Guerin et al, 1999: 341). For, "Late August" could stand for late Augustans whose poetry has flourished during an age

of abundance, exploration, and prosperity preceded by a period of political turmoil:

Late august, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the black berries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot. (Heaney, 1988:
10)

Derrida has insisted that "*differance* is literally neither a word nor a concept. Instead, it can be marked as a wandering play of differences that is both a spacing of signifiers in relation to one another and a deferral of meaning or presence when they are read"(Derrida, 1974: 3).Applying Derrida's the concept of "*differance*", the poem thus, could be about the transitory period preceding the romantic age. The "blackberries" should, thus, refer to late Augustans who should be ripened before fully managing their craft. Consequently, the "rain" alludes to the period of troubles that has given the age its endeared respect for order, while the "sun" refers to the organizing of consciousness into reasoned thought. Supporting this conclusion is the word "glossy" that besides meaning "shiny" it also means a "glossary" or diction. In the light of the poem's new meaning, "glossy" refers to Augustan poetic diction that should come out of a "shiny" or bright mentality and of renewed freshness. Moreover, the phrase "purple clot" bears a reference to "blood" in this Heaney echoes the classical ideal of poetic creation for the perfection of which the poet must exert both sweat and blood.

However, Heaney has also referred to the romantic movement, for the "red" ones or the new social revolutionists are about to get maturer. Then comes to the surface the romantic concept of poetic creation as essentially inspiration reached in a state of losing consciousness: the one similar to that of falling under the influence of a drug. John Keats in his "Ode to a Nightingale" has referred to that method of poetic inspiration: "O for a drought of vintage! That has been / Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth", (qtd. in Perrine and Arp, 1991:297). These lines are echoed in "Blackberry-Picking" in which Heaney writes:

You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for

Therefore, the "stains upon the tongue" must be the influence of the new language of the romantics: quoting Wordsworth "a language really used by men". Consequently, a violation to the concept of poetic creation and diction occurs and a new trend of poets start to "ink up" to mark a new school of poetic creation preaching a different language, thought, and forms. In turn, a subjective tone starts to assert itself, for this reason the "plate of eyes" could thus be interpreted as a plate of "I(s)".

However, the same phrase "plate of eyes" could very well refer to the classical ideal of poetic creation as a conscious process of open "eyes" on the world that suppresses man in a chain of determinations. Thus, Heaney asserts his classical objective inclination, for he ends the stanza with shocking realizations: "...Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's"(Heaney, 1988: 10).

Moreover, classical artistic excellence is indicated by the word "palm" which also reminds of the palm as "a symbol of victory and supreme excellence"(Thompson, 1995: 985) that is gained after passing through the thorny path of craft perfecting. In addition to this, Heaney's perfection of his craft might originate from a special relationship with mother-Ireland, this possibility is indicated by the mentioning of "Bluebeard", a wife killer due to a falling under the dominating influence of the mother figure that spoils all marriage relationships. Thus, the same as Ireland has ached Yeats into poetry, it has ached Heaney, surrounded by frustrations and decay.

"The Early Purges" develops the theme of decay to focus on rejecting a reality in which former innocent joys end up with death as inevitable in a violent environment:

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.
Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din
Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout
Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure isn't it better for them now?' Dan said
Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced
Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung

Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cut the ice in town
Where they consider death unnatural,
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.
(Heaney, 1988: 13)

Summoning again the hermeneutic interpretation in approaching "The Early Purges" introduces aggressive surroundings of chaos and decay as result of a historical obligation of the "Irish Troubles". This time Heaney wants to escape his "being in the world" to reach the imaginary world of art. In application of Derrida's deconstructions the poem turns to be a detailed examination of the concept of tragic catharsis in ancient Greek drama. Deconstruction gives literature "the power to extend boundaries by destroying conventional frames of reality, revealing thereby their historically transient nature.[For,] Great literary texts, with or without the awareness of their authors, always deconstruct their apparent message by introducing an *aporia* (undecidable) which the deconstructive reading unravel"(qtd. in Enani 1997: 147). Therefore, the action starts near to the end of the story: the boy named Taggart (tag-art) reminds of the tag-speech or the closing speech at the theatre. Thus, he "pitched" with a shrill voice "the scraggy wee shits". Moreover, stage directions are indicated by the primitive method of the "metal sound" resulting from continuous beating on a "bucket". Following is the "scrape" or the "awkward predicament as result of escapade"(Thompson: 1995: 1241) resulting of a reckless behaviour. Recalling, Heaney writes:

Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din
Was soon soused. (Heaney, 1988: 13)

Those facing that predicament, being "mad", should be of a high social status as the word "gloves" indicates, the word is a clever reference to aristocracy. The tragic predicament achieves its effect by arousing pity and fear, in turn Heaney gets "frightened" and he "sadly" considers the tragic prospect of death:

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung
Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung
Until I forgot them. (Heaney, 1988: 13)

Heaney develops to refer to the three unities or the "three soggy remains" almost forgotten with the pass of time as too restrictive. Moreover, in the performing of the action there should be "prevention of cruelty". Finally, catharsis is effected by purgation as the title of the poem indicates. Consequently, the audience, readers, are left purged as a step for a healthy social life: "on well-run farms pests have to be kept down." (Heaney, 1988: 13)

Conclusion:

Through a hermeneutic ever-present human activity of linking the world of the literary work to the reader's own world with all its personal, social, and historical features forming the reader's thought and orientations, Heaney's poetry has been approached through the practice of deconstruction. In the present study Heaney has developed the theme of decay and death until he reaches a conclusion endowing the concept of death with a cathartic character hoping to ground a purgational effect on his troubled society. However, he has provided nothing but art as capable of rendering that effect forceful, therefore starting his first steps towards the discovery of Heaney the poet negotiating between opposites. Perhaps Heaney is now prepared for accepting the immediate reality he happens to live. He has learned that fear, decay, and death are the inevitable laws of nature, and man has to accept that law and abide by it.

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