



SEAMUS HEANEY: CRITICAL RECEPTION

Arindam Ghosh

M.A. English, Ph.D. from Visva-Bharati: Ecocriticism

ABSTRACT

In this article I explored the critical attention that Seamus Heaney got throughout his career. In this way we shall be able to gauge the progress of Heaney as a poet. In his early career he was reviewed as a simple bucolic poet of pastoral tradition. He was supposedly carrying forward the tradition of Wordsworth and Hardy. His primary focus was to present the simple bucolic nature images which will be mark of the agriculture based cultural heritage of his forefathers. But latter on he was very much disturbed by the nationalistic propaganda and the fractional feud going on in his country. This propelled him to explore the suitable objective correlatives in the realm of the violent and pristine natural forces. Along with this his interest was moving more towards the human domain and man's society. Nature appeared with its intrinsic value but not without its relation to the human world. The mature Heaney however managed to balance between these two objectives and truly advocated the cause both of human society and the natural world.

KEYWORDS : Bucolic, nature, man, society, culture, biocentric, nationalism, violence, tradition

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), often reviewed as a 'bucolic poet' (Perkins 481), intensified the traditionalist approach to poetry by connecting personal past with the national history of Ireland and by providing psychological and moral dimension to pastoralism and juxtaposing harsher images of contemporary world with the unsentimental, malevolent aspects of nature. Harold Bloom finds the deep influence of Robert Frost and Ted Hughes on Heaney. David Perkins draws our attention towards: Heaney's presentation of the 'alien, threatened and threatening nature' (ibid.); his 'symbolist' and alternative mode of psychological realism; feelings of guilt, turbulence of emotion in the context of religio-political violence; attempt of transcending personal anguish through the contemplation of Ireland as 'pilgrimage' (485). Despite Robert Lowell considering him 'the most important Irish poet since Yeats' (wiki web), and even despite Swedish Academy's fascination for his 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth' (PF web), one might feel surprise at the comparative scarcity of critical output on Heaney¹. Yet some illuminating critical works help us to apprehend the poetic strategies, images and symbols and metaphors, motives, socio-political framework, linguistic and technical avant-gardism, the trope of place in the formulation of personal identity and in the development of nationalistic politics. Blake Morrison is probably one of the earliest to conduct any serious study on Heaney; his *Seamus Heaney* (1982) skillfully captures the poet's biographical details and brief backgrounds attempts to reach out to his sources, situates him to the Anglo-Irish tradition and searches for explanation of his poetry's intricate deep connection with the contemporary political turmoil of Northern Ireland. The book clearly depicts Heaney 'breaking with rationalistic mode' (Blakemorrison web) and defines his perspectives of poetry making. Toni Curtis edited the volume *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (1982) which attempt to arrange Heaney's progress and development in his poetic career – both chronologically and thematically. Curtis introduces Heaney; speaks of his fascination for Hardy, Yeats; assembles multiple critical approaches on Heaney. The book with its illustrations on the origin, influences, development, theme and technique of Heaney's poems initiates a 'practical criticism' (Persee web); Hobsbaum's article gives an overview regarding Heaney's handling of the Irish verse form, his authentic themes and poetic craftsmanship. Prof. Hardy's concern lies mainly with Heaney's language – studying image, metaphors, allegory etc., yet she offers insightful commentary on Heaney's treatment of myth – defamiliarising personal experiences and 'congenial concerns, of large tragic myths' (ibid.)².

Harold Bloom's edited versions *Modern Critical Views: Seamus Heaney* (1986) and *Seamus Heaney: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* (2003): accumulate critical views on Heaney from some of the most prominent Heaney critics, such as Blake Morrison, Richard Ellmann, Terence Brown, Helen Vendler and others who comment on the poet's biography, thematic and structural elements; the precision and open endedness introduce readers to

indulge in various threads of Heaney's poetry; and capture a mature poet rooted in his Irish experience. Critical stances include concerns with biographic elements; 'dismantling of heroic myth' (in the content page 2003); connection of agrarian field works with poetry making; the impact of violence, place itself, identity crisis, suffering and trauma on Heaney. Daniel Tobin and S. C. Greer speaks of the 'transcendent(al) aspects of Heaney's poetry; while Helen Vendler explore Heaney's 'widened gaze' (ibid.). Henry Hart in the introduction to *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* argues that Heaney is generally considered as – "a pastoralist whose homely portraits of rural Irish life attracts both curiosity and sympathy but are ultimately sentimental" (1); some others discover in him 'romantic poetry of transcendence' (2) or 'principled social engagement' (ibid.). Hart also commandingly comments on – Heaney's 'pastoral and anti-pastoral attitudes', his meditative qualities, and his use of 'history, myth or apocalypse' (content page) etc. One of the most celebrated critical works on Heaney, Michael Parker's *Seamus Heaney: the Making of a Poet* (1993) provides us with background informations, his Ulster Catholicism, personal relationships, possible sources of his poems, including drafts and photographs. The initial chapter provides us with his childhood influences that so often went to the making of his symbols, images and allusions. Regarding *Station Island* he observes Heaney's struggle for self-identity, the attempt at reconnecting to 'the watery land which bore him' (99), the shadow of civil war, and the progress towards 'stillness, longing for a Wordsworthian tranquility and assurance of continuities' (ibid.)³.

Michael Allen is the editor of the *Seamus Heaney: New Casebook* (1997) which introduces various theoretical approaches to Heaney's poetry. The book, however, has a suggestion that often Heaney's own critical stances have provided parameters for reading his poetry. Critical commentary includes: Edna Longley's article 'Artful Voyeur' (content page); modernity and representational elements; dispossession and the formulation of poetic identity; feminist elements; postmodern aspects and the representation of the landscape; and so on. Eamonn Hughes' article takes its conceptual elements from formalism and postmodernism in approaching Heaney's *North*. Sidney Burris, author of *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition* (1990) explores the weight of social injustices and turbulence over the poet and examines the social purposes and responsibilities of his poetry. In the time of social problems and conflicts of nationhood the poet's response was through the development of his poetic craft which focused on bucolic, pastoral past for resolving the constricting dilemmas. Burris argues that pastoral poetry, in Heaney's craft is essentially reformed, modernized – "refurbishing its traditional capacity to proffer trenchant social and cultural criticism while honouring the aesthetic demands of art" (The poetry of Resistance web). *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: a Critical Study* (1998) by Neil Corcoran offers detailed account of some of his most famous poetic volumes.

Besides the close reading of the volumes it also includes Heaney's own activities in literary criticism which is preoccupied with the act of 'listening... to the poem's sounds' (209). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews edited *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (1998) [also edited *Seamus Heaney: a collection of Critical Essay* (2003)] which enables us to grab the real critical reception Heaney's poetry got and therefore maps his place within the canon of English poetry. Besides it identifies the issues most relevant regarding Heaney's poetry, such as, 'place', 'identity', 'language', 'politics', 'gender', 'colonialism', 'nationalism', connection with the 'earth' (content page) and accumulates critical attention on them ranging from: cultural and canon theory, deconstructionist analysis, poetry in the light of 'Jungian individualism', 'anti-revivalist' strategies, mythic interpretation of the poetry of Seamus Heaney (ibid.) etc. Bernard O' Donoghue authored *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (1998) which solely concerns itself with Heaney's language so that to reveal his theory of poetry; in the more recent edited volume, *The Cambridge Introduction to Seamus Heaney* (2008), O' Donoghue gives perhaps the most detailed, comprehensive and inclusive overview of Heaney's poetry, combining and modifying theoretical approaches, critical receptions and analysis of poetical voice. The volume attempts to establish the authenticity of Heaney as a world poet.

Death of a Naturalist (1966) his first poetic volume immediately achieves critical favour for linguistic brilliance, and for enlivening the country experience in County Derry. Many influential critics like C. B. Cox, Peter Marsh, Elizabeth Jennings, and Christopher Ricks appreciated Heaney's artistic presentation of places, objects and memories and his evocation of the Derry childhood. C. B. Cox argues that the poems offer the 'soil-reck of Ireland' (qtd. in O' Donoghue 3). The automatic acclaim continues with the *Door into the Dark* (1969) which also confirms Heaney's affinity to the bucolic tradition: in Rick's opinion he became 'the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking' (Andrews 12); similarly Douglas Dunn commented that the poems were 'loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the stink of turned earth' (qtd. in O' Donoghue 3). *Wintering Out* (1972) compelled Michael McLaverty to apply Hopkin's phrase to Heaney: 'description is revelation' (ibid.). Although the volume incorporated a political text, Heaney's descriptive qualities, childhood references, characteristic poetic intelligence can be discernible. Robert Buttle's *Seamus Heaney* (1975), first monograph on the poet enthusiastically captured the 'naturalist' (ibid.) poet with cultural and political preoccupations. The publication of *North* (1975) produced raucous and tensions not only because of its sustained political interest, but also it takes Heaney's poetry from the narrative, bucolic towards the anti-pastoral. Heaney's catholic upbringing left undeniable marks on his poetic volumes and O' Brien charged Heaney for evoking 'unbalanced' (4) sentimentality towards the Catholic suffering.

Christopher Ricks quoted Heaney's lines from the *Field Work* (1979) – 'the end of art is peace' (Qtd. in Andrews 13) – and hailed Heaney as the poet of 'civilization', a 'source of comfort' during the time of emergency and crisis (ibid.). The volume reenters 'a new bucolics' (O' Donoghue 6) despite its under-lying sense of guilt and turbulence and violence; here Heaney arouses human sympathy, gives ingenuous social details and shouts for artistic freedom. Alvarez, the English critic was impressed by Heaney's 'fine way with the language' (qtd. in Andrews 18). Blake Morrison found in Heaney's poetry 'a concern for poetry itself' (23), but in his volumes like *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and *Station Island* (1984) the poet returns to his concern with society, guilt and responsibility. Some critics like Michael Allen, Denis Donoghue at this stage considered Heaney as puzzled, 'unanchored artist' (O' Donoghue 7) but Heaney's 'Dantesque' (ibid.) power of narrative salvages him. *Sweeney Astray* is the Heaney's version of the Irish myth, while Barbara Hardy discovers in *Station Island*, 'a new structure for complex experiences of childhood and adolescent recall, an ironic religious sense, and a deep political unease' (Bloom 83). Michael Molino, however, finds that in the volume Heaney is bending on doing justice to 'a number of voices' (87) who suffered victimization. *The Haw Lantern* (1997) is imbued with 'a typically post-modern self-consciousness' (Andrews 25) in which he explores his dubious relationship with 'the linguistic,

discursive and ideological systems' (24); John Carey's concern is on 'objects and textures' and he finds the poet 'quest(ing) for silence' (qtd. in ibid.). Bernard O' Donoghue thinks that *Seeing Things* (1991) is based on 'the celebration of the marvelous by invoking artistic license' (11). Helen Vendler and others are of the opinion that it is also obviously motivated by Dante's *Inferno* and consider the volume as 'the representation of (the) visionary perspective' (ibid.) of the poet. The *Spirit Level* (1996) is endowed with considerable amount of pessimism; Nicholas Jenkins is impressed by 'a greater subtlety and fluidity' (Andrews 162) – 'give and take' (qtd. in ibid.) activity; others concentrate on the poet's insight of a 'savage' (164) peace, his rendering of and 'groping after half-sensed, airy realities, mysterious states of mind and the things of the spirit' (ibid.). O' Donoghue again conceives of *The Electric Light* (2001) as 'pastoral genre' (12), perceived by 'grim politics' (ibid.). The volume full of allusion from Homer or Virgil mixes – memory, pastoral ad elegy; according to an American critic the poetic volume is 'a Janus-faced book, elegiac' (PF web)⁴. The 2006 volume *District and Circle* is pervaded by 'chthonic and the transition to the afterlife' (O' Donoghue 12-3). The poet's such response must have been due to the imperial domination and oppressive activities. Another American critic Bard Leithauser commented that the volume bears the mark of Heaney with its 'authenticity and believability and plainspoken(ness)' (PF web).

Heaney's most recent published poetical work *Human Chain* (2010) crowned with many prestigious awards, is about 'inheritance' (the Guardian web); chain meaning 'man hand(ing) misery to man' (ibid.). Kate Kellaway wrote in the review for *The Observer* that the 'collection muses upon heredity and absent friends with restrained and rich imagery' (ibid.). Colm Toibin wrote for *The Guardian* that the volume 'brilliantly enacts the struggle between memory and loss' (ibid.). Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in the Introduction to the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) observed that Heaney does not represent anything innovatively new, but he is the key figure in 'a movement away from the Movement' (Andrews 24): the immensely popular – *place poems, bog poems, Glanmore sonnets* represent the primacy of the imagination of the 'new poet' (qtd. in ibid.). The theme of Heaney's prose collection – *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) – is that it talks about self-justification, in balancing artistic license and moral responsibility. *Finders and Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001* (2002) assesses the value and social purpose of poetry that constantly pricked Heaney: John Carey thinks that it embodies 'Heaney's thirty year struggle with the demon of doubt' (PF web)⁵.

That Heaney is critically no less privileged, and that he has the rightful fame of being – 'probably the best known poet in the world' (*The Independent* 2013) (wiki web) are justified by the ever growing critical interest and still burgeoning critical volumes on his poetry. Despite the brief account I have given above some other critical works not bound to provide judgment but for the purpose of elucidation bring out remarkable threads and direction in reading Heaney and are valueless for perceiving the poet's works. To mention a few: Thomas C. Forster's *Seamus Heaney* (1989), *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* (1995), edited by Robert F. Garratt, *Seamus Heaney* (1998) authored by Helen Vendler, Eugene O' Brien's two volumes *Seamus Heaney: Creating Ireland of the Mind* (2002) and *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing* (2002), Rand Brandes and Michael J. Durkan's attempt *Seamus Heaney: a Bibliography* (2008), Danniss O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (2008), *Seamus Heaney (Writers and their Work)* (3rd ed.) (2010) by Andrew Murphy, "Mirror upto Nature": *Fourth Seamus Heaney Lectures* (2010) edited by Patrick Burke, Floyd Collins' *Seamus Heaney: the Crisis of Identity* (2003), Michael R. Molino's *Questioning Tradition, Language and Myth: the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (1994), *In Gratitude for all the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe* (2012) by Magdalena Kay – are fascinating and essential as Heaney criticism. Numerous journals and periodicals and certain websites like: www.poetryfoundation.org, www.nnetb.com, www.nobleprize.org, <http://en.wikipedia.org> are very much of help in providing latest information, publication details, select bibliographies etc; www.jstor.org offers some critical articles and

Google Books (<http://books.google.co.in>) allows portion of books of convenience.

1. Heaney was like most of the Irish writers and poets of the time inspired by the nationalistic ideals. But his approach to nationalism was certainly different from the previous poets.
2. Unlike Ted Hughes' Heaney's interest in myths were due to their rootedness to the Irish soil. Myth was in his hand a medium for connecting his personal self with the cultural past of Ireland.
3. "Station Island" embodies symbolic mythic journey for the purpose of the regeneration of the self. Here he encounters the spirit of the dead and great men of the yore. He learns from them about how to rectify his own relationship with nature and his own country.
4. Regarding the details of Heaney criticism I am enlightened by the volumes of O'Donoghue and Elmer Andrews and portions of it I took from the *Poetry Foundation Website*. I rigidly believed the authenticity of the information and am indebted to them for their elucidating purposes.
5. Heaney's prose works are valuable contribution to the cause of nationalistic ideals. They try to preserve the cultural heritage of Ireland.

REFERENCES

1. Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
2. Blake Morrison. <http://www.blakemorrison.com/books/sh.htm>. Web. accessed on 21.03.2014, at 9pm.
3. Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Seamus Heaney*. United States of America: Chelsea House Pub., 2003. Print.
4. Hart, Henry. *Seamus Heaney: Poet of contrary Progressions*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993. Print.
5. O'Donoghue, Bernard. *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*. UK: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.
6. Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: the Making of a Poet*. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1993. Print.
7. "Seamus Heaney". Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/seamus-heaney>. Web. Accessed on 18.05.2014, at 9 pm.
8. "Seamus Heaney". Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seamus_Heaney. Web. Accessed on 24.05.2014, at 9 pm. (Cited as PF)