

Mythologising History: Archetypes and Irish Identity in Seamus Heaney's Poems "Punishment" and "Tollund Man"



Literature

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ABSTRACT

Seamus Heaney considers Irish identity as a product of binaries. That difference is again complicated with its links to place, past and the communal consciousness as seen in his poems "Tollund Man" and "Punishment". All these formulations of differences in his poems actually lead to integration. There is an integrating principle which lies ahead of all differentiations of oral, feminine, unconscious v/s cultured, masculine and conscious. History is reduced to myths and archetypes synthesize both past and present. Both "Punishment" and "Tollund Man" has such archetypes either that of violence or that of martyrdom.

Seamus Heaney's popularity lies in the way he articulates his Irish Identity. Irish identity for him is the product of binaries. That difference is again complicated with its links to place, past and the communal consciousness as seen in his poems "Tollund Man" and "Punishment". Difference is registered throughout Heaney's work and these divisions are, furthermore, embraced within sexual difference. This comes to provide political, national and cultural difference a matrix of the most elementary, dualistic kind. All these formulations of differences in his poems actually lead to integration. There is an integrating principle which lies ahead of all differentiations of oral, feminine, unconscious v/s cultured, masculine and conscious. History is reduced to myths and archetypes synthesize both past and present. Both "Punishment" and "Tollund Man" has such archetypes either that of violence or that of martyrdom.

Punishment is the penalty given for the wrong doers. But who decides what the wrong doings are and its punishments? Heaney connects this question to the body of a girl found in the bog and the bodies of women who were punished during much of turmoil and war in Ireland for having relations with the British. When the girls are being tarred and stripped in the streets these men are actually partaking the age old "tribal, intimate revenge." The bodies of bog people have become an archetype of violence which stretches itself to the present through the victims of violence in Northern Ireland. The Windeby girl is regarded as a sister of the young woman punished by the IRA for consorting with British soldiers.

Heaney here posits a psychic continuity between the Iron Age people and the bankrupt psychology of the Irishmen and the Ulsterman who do the killing. This effectively reduces history into myth by rendering disparate events symbolic moments expressive of underlying continuity of identity. Heaney uses this racial archetype as a means to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. By projecting violence as something which transcends sectarian divisions, Heaney renders it symbolic of a fundamental identity of the Irish race. This status of violence as a part of national identity instills a tension between both communal and individual values. This dilemma is quite expressive in the lines of "Punishment"

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.(37-44)

Here, Heaney is asking a hard question to himself. Is he running with the hare and hunting with the hounds? He is confused as to which his loyalty should be given: the outrage or the revenge. Even though he admits his participation in the fallen culture, he cannot resist that desire to identify himself with Windeby woman. This is quite evident in the opening lines "I can feel the tug/ of the halter at the nape / of her nape". This feeling of oneness with the experience of Windeby woman arouses many ques-

tions in his mind. Should he accept the intimate tribal revenge of his community or react against this injustice as learned from his modern upbringing. The answer would seem to be that imaginatively, he is with revenge, morally with the outrage. The avatars of his community is in conflict with the humanism. Even when he comprehends his tribe's ritual code, he is still aware of the cost that it entails. Naturally, this portrays the real situation of Irish people who are caught between their communal values and modern values.

Tollund man refers to an almost perfectly preserved Iron Age corpse discovered in a Danish Peat-Bog in 1950. He is a victim of Nordiac fertility ritual who had been hanged to appease mother goddess to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in spring. His corpse was naked expect for the cap, the hangman's noose and girdle. There is a psychic continuity in operation between the sacrificial practices of Iron Age people and the martyrdom of the Irish people. As Heaney admits:

The Tollund Man seemed like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those mustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish Countryside. I just felt very close to this. And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to make a connection between the sacrificial, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible religious thing in The Bog People". (Randall, 2009, p.47)

Heaney takes the image of Tollund Man in relation to the tradition of Irish martyrdom. Then this image of Tollund man comes to signify something more than a mere archaic barbarous rite. It develops itself into an archetypal pattern.

The prototype developed by "Tollund Man" is that of a scapegoat. He was sacrificed for the well-being of fellow beings which hails his position to that of Christ-surrogate who can redeem the 'scattered, ambushed/ flesh of labourers'. Second stanza of "Tollund Man" says he could risk of blasphemy and pray to Tollund man for making his land germinates with the scattered:

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate
The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards, (20-28)

Here, the victims of rituals like Grabualle, Tollund and Nebelgard are identified with the pain and torment gone through by the Irish labourers. Tollund man alludes to the Catholic victims of sectarian murder in 1920s. For Heaney, Tollund man, is an ancestor of the Irish people, a reduction of ancestral dispossession and oppression. This image is paralleled to the sacrifice of Cathleen Ni Houlihan who lost life in Irish political and religious struggles. Thus he becomes an archetype or idol for the Irish fight against the injustices.

As a sacrificial-goat to the goddess of germination, the Tollund Man carries the potential of germination ('gruel of winter seeds'). The goddess tightened the noose around his neck and the bridegroom was sucked by the fen or the bog. The sacrificed men thus became the fertilizers of the land. 'The Dark Juices' symbolize the transference of the sacrificed man to the earth. To Heaney, in such custom, he becomes a martyr whose death is the life of others and whose blood works as the fertilizers for the land. The poet then compares these martyred bodies to the bee hives, the cells of which are full of honey and that face still exists in the museum of Aarhus. When the workers sacrifice their life for fellow men, the archetype of Tollund man who is hanged for the fertility of land is finding an echo in that instance.

But this very aspect of martyrdom also entails the same confusion as felt in the poem "Punishment". This very aspect of martyrdom is a formative part of Irish national identity as well communal consciousness. In "Tollund Man" the persona is caught between the sacrificial demands of his allegiance to the soil of Ireland "our holy land" and the loss of human life it entails. "Tollund man" also suggests execution and necrophilia where the bridegroom becomes the passive object of the goddess's desire. Tollund Man is not venerated as king or martyr, but as victim. To the poet, he stands for the Irish people killed for their allegiance to Ireland, a suggestion which is symbolically rendered as the embrace of the earth-goddess. The gold 'torc'(collar), worn by Celtic royalty, is likened to the arms of the goddess encircling the bridegroom's neck, but the metaphor reminds us that this embrace is a strangulation, the noose of the victim-bridegroom. Just the same way, political martyr can be seen as a sacrificial, oedipal and castrated victim of nation's need for integration and freedom. Even when the persona is having a communal comprehension of his tribe's ritual code he recognizes the cost it entails. He is caught between communal values and humanistic values.

Heaney uses the trope of motherland to present the mythic version of history in which the loss of Gaelic language signifies exile from a true cultural and emotional home. This effort of returning 'home' or cultural repossession is achieved through the employment of the archetypal Tollund man. The feminine becomes the sign of secure national identity, the body of the woman is

both the site where a breach in national continuity and tradition has been effected but also the place where the breach may be healed, through a return 'home' from linguistic exile. This concept of home coming is strong in Tollund man. The very archetype of Tollund man is feminine as it is a location of marriage and engendering. The quest for national identity is here a quest to find the ancestry.

The poem is more a linguistic search for historical identity or an effort to recover a sense of belonging to an ancestry, a history or culture. Here, he counterpoints the ritual act of returning home with a critical scruple of exile and distance. He is conducting an imaginary pilgrimage northwards to pay homage to an ancestor recovered from bog still intact after thousands of years and attired in his sacrificial garb of cap, noose and girdle. But the contradiction is that the northern bog is not in fact in Ulster but in Jutland. That is, the ancestor is not an Irish man but a Tollund man. In other words, Heaney is returning to a home away from home. In this image of the sanctified scapegoat from the far north, Heaney finds an objective correlative for the near north his own homeland in Ulster.

In both these poems, Seamus Heaney creates a fusion of Irish past and Irish present, as well as creates for himself an Irish poetic persona that exists across time, and can dwell simultaneously in the Irish past and the present. Present Ireland in "The Tollund Man" becomes fused with an ancient Irish persona, as the poet sees himself as one with the remains of an ancient Celtic man. Present and past Irish history become one as the poet envisions himself watching different generations of Irish adulteresses condemned to death in bogs in "Punishment" and the archetype of martyrdom finds echoes in the present Irish struggles in "Tollund Man". The very of situation of Irish who is unable to comprehend much of the rituals of community as it seems to be irrational from the perspective of their modern values is expressed in the confusion of the persona. Their inability to leave tradition and need for ancestry and anxieties regarding its relevance are echoed in the poems. In that sense, both "Tollund Man" and "Punishment" belong to the category typical Irish poems

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