THE MYSTERY OF THE POET'S ART IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY

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Abstract
The paper will discuss Seamus Heaney's ars poetica in connection to the tension between poetic identity and Irish identity constantly present in his poetic creation. It will also attempt to examine various aspects of his poetry in the context of contemporary Ireland, taking into account the Irish tradition of the poet as a public figure - and audience's expectations - and Heaney's sense of being a poet in the first place, his creed being the mystery of the poet's art

Seamus Heaney has constantly been concerned with self-exploration as a poet. Poet figures and representations of the experience of poetic creation have evolved throughout his volumes around some patterns connected to the mystery of the poet's art. Thus, we could mention the desire to know the secrets of the world, curiosity and the mechanism of knowing, being and seeming, initiation and rites of passage, curiosi figures, could all be related to Heaney's approach to poetic creation, starting with his first volume *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966.

"Digging" (*Death of a Naturalist*) has been interpreted as the birth of a great poet-digger:

> Between my finger and my thumb
> The squat pen rests.
> I'll dig with it.

The analogy, almost commonsensical taking into account Heaney's childhood background, between digging potatoes and writing poetry shapes the poet's first artistic manifesto. The father's digging conjures up the image of the grandfather cutting turf and setting the rhythm of the poem

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge.
> Through living roots awaken in my head.
>
> ("Digging")

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The poem is illustrative of the way a poet's mind works ('my head') and also show how language can be worked into poetry. While Heaney's ancestors forced the land into crops, the poet, as their follower, has a duty to work words into artistic creation. Thus, "Digging" becomes 'an impression of utter concentration, as what is recollected from experience mysteriously stirs again in the *darkness* of <creative imagination>' (Corcoran, 1998: 3).

The phenomenon of sublimation in art, analysed by poets and theoreticians throughout the centuries from various perspectives, is described in the following terms: raw experience (places visited, people seen, events witnessed or lived or any other experience) is stored somewhere in the 'dark' of the artist's mind and under certain circumstances put to work and transformed into great poems, novels, sculptures, paintings or music. To reach greatness, the poet has to become a digger, who delves and mines into the depths of his mind. Heaney ponders in many of his poetic arts upon writing as digging and ploughing the lines similarly to the ploughman drawing his furrows.

Another meditation on writing, featuring this time a different type of digger- the diviner- calls for the reader's attention in *Death of a Naturalist.* Here, what counts is the mystery of the pre-verbal stage, involving vatic, oracular powers. The diviner/poet, almost an extinct village figure, serves the community with vital water/poetry. He seizes an inaudible and invisible world through his prophetic call. He seems to have 'a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released' (Corcoran, 1998: 8):

> The rod jerked with precise convulsions,
> Spring water suddenly broadcasting
> Through a green hazel its *secret* stations.
>
> ("The Diviner")

"Personal Helicon" closes *Death of a Naturalist*, offering the key, at this stage, to the interpretation of the mechanism of knowing involved in the process of poetic creation:

> As a child, they could not keep me from wells
> And old pumps with buckets and windlasses
> I loved the *dark* drop, the trapped sky, the smells

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Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it.

I rhyme
To see myself, to set the *darkness* echoing.

Water gives back a world of reflexivity as if to emphasise the narcissistic self-entracement of poetry. Defamiliarization in poetry ('a clean new music') - this is the process both the poet and even the poem are fully aware of. Water mirrors the poem and the poet's soul, and looking into water prompts inward contemplation, self-awareness and self-esteem.

According to Heaney, poems in his next volume, *Door into the Dark*, are intended as 'a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it. Words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning' (Heaney, *Preoccupations*: p 52). Neil Corcoran associates this definition to T. S. Eliot's '*dark* embryo' within the poet 'which gradually takes on the form and the speech of a poem' (Corcoran, 1998: 12-13).

There are, on the one hand, the creator's unconscious ('the *buried* life of feelings', 'roots and associations') like primeval darkness, formless matter and, on the other hand, the final product, the outcome ('a clarification of sense and meaning'), the poem conciliating between them. The role of the poet becomes crucial like that of the Romantics, only that Heaney's poet-god/maker do not undermine the role of the reader so much cherished by post(modernist)s.

Therefore, if *Death of a Naturalist* envisaged the poet as digger and diviner, *Door into the Dark* imagines him in the shape of an ancient craftsman, the blacksmith.

All I know is a door into the *dark.*
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting,
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in the water.

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("The Forge")

The blacksmith working at 'the horned as a unicorn anvil' is described as invested with mysterious and mythological powers. He works marvellous transformations through his skills. His labour bears a sense of release, discovery and expansion like freedom obtained from constraint. Similarly, the act of writing poetry would mean forcing language to release its suppressed energies.

The 'door into the *dark*' defines the poetic universe of the volume as an enclosed, dark space housing intense life, the truth being 'buried, *dark*, probably frightening, immanent rather than transcendent'; the poet forays 'with the trouvere' instinct for a yielding way into *darkness*' (Curtis, 1985: 32). "In Gallarus Oratory" (*Door into the Dark)* evokes such an experience. The poet places a group of monks in Gallarus Oratory (on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry -a tiny monastic chapel from medieval period) in an atmosphere of isolation and oppressiveness, an almost Gothic background:

A core of old *dark* walled up with stone
They sought themselves in the eyes of their king
Under the *black* weight of their own breathing.

It is more to this 'darkness' than the mystic night preached by Christianity through St. John of the Cross, who advocated the necessity of the darkness before light -a state of the soul in which it attains union with God. This is not penitential darkness, but rather some mysterious, concealed, universal beauty. Witness to this mystery is another of Heaney's poet-figures, the poet-driver in "Night Drive" and "The Peninsula" (*Door into the Dark*).

The smells of ordinariness
Were new on the *night* drive through France.

I thought of you continuously
A thousand miles south where Italy
Laid its loin to France on the *darkened* sphere.
Your ordinariness was renewed there.

("Night Drive")

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Somehow, the poet is aware that his survival as a creator depends on the ability to defamiliarize, to veil and transform the ordinary, the loved one's commonness, in this case, into something new. The solitary, nocturnal reflection while driving helps in the process.

"Peninsula" is about the necessity of peregrinatio and the virtues of 'the backward look':

> When you have nothing more to say, just drive
> For a day all around the peninsula.
>
> And you are in the *dark* again.
>
> And drive back home, still with nothing to say
> Except that now you will encode all landscapes
> By this: things founded clean on their own shape,
> Water and ground in their extremity.

On the contrary, in "North", the title-poem of Heaney's next volume, the poet gets instructed to:

> Compose in *darkness*
> Expect aurora borealis
> in the long foray
> but no cascade of light.
>
> Keep your eye clear
> as the bleb of the icicle
> trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
> your hands have known.

The Vikings' advice for the poet is to be true to himself, to work with the language, to use his mind and rely on what he knows from his own experience. When the poet lies down and burrows in the word-hoard to pursue the poem,

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he is engaged, according to Neil Corcoran, 'like the Vikings, on a foray; a hostile or predatory incursion, a raid' (Corcoran, 1998: 59).

North contains two other poetic arts: "Antaeus" and "Antaeus and Hercules", the two mythical heroes standing for different kinds of poetic sensibility:

Girded with root and rock
I am cradled in the *dark* that wombed me
And nurtured in every artery
Like a small hillcock.
("Antaeus')

Hercules lifts his arms
in a remorseless V,
his triumph unassailed
by the powers he has shaken,

the cradling *dark*
the river veins, the secret gullies
of his strength,
the hatching grounds

of cave and souterrain,
he has bequeathed it all
to elegists.
("Hercules and Antaeus")

and lifts and banks Antaeus
high as a profiled ridge,
a sleeping giant,
pap for the dispossessed.
("Hercules and Antaeus")

Antaues, the mythological Greek hero defeated only if removed from the contact with the ground, and Hercules confront each other in a kind of local Irish battle. Hercules wins keeping Antaeus off the earth; hence, the importance the poet attaches to black mother-earth and his own resemblance to Antaeus. Hercules leaves the dead native/Irish Antaeus in the earth, in the shape of 'the sleeping giant' that will, one day, wake to lead its people out of servitude. In the end, typically for Heaney, the postmodernist writer, the myth that keeps the oppressed Irish hopeful but puerile is undermined by being described as 'pap for the dispossessed' (Corcoran, 1998: 57-58).

In connection to the two types of poets, Antaeus-like and Hercules-like, Heaney states: 'To me Hercules represents another voice, another possibility; and actually behind that poem lay a conversation with Ian Crichton Smith, a very fine poet but essentially different from the poet I am. He's got a kind of Presbyterian light about him. The image that came into my mind after the

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conversation was of me being *dark* soil and him being a kind of bright-pronged fork that was digging it up and going through it...' (Corcoran, 1998: 57-58). The light that Heaney evokes is complementary to the dark imagery in many of his poems, especially in later volumes, such as, *Seeing Things*. But again, 'darkness' underlies light. For Heaney, it is the perfect symbol of raw language worked into poetry and of the Irish scared psyche. Thus, the confrontation between Antaeus and Hercules can be read as an allegory of the Irish colonisation by the English and as an account of the genesis of Heaney's poetry itself.

"Exposure" (*North*) represents the beginning of Heaney's loss of his Antaeus strength:

> Imagining a hero
> On some *muddy* compound
> This gilt like a slingstone
> Whirled for the desperate
>
> As I sit weighing and weighing
> My responsible tristia.
>
> I am neither internee nor informer;
>
> An inner émigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful, a *wood-kerne*

The poet is engaged in a profound self-searching, in an inward examination of his priorities as an artist. Confronted to the violence in Northern Ireland, Heaney feels as David challenging Goliath, a role he cannot undertake because that would be no more than a brief and inefficient display of political bravado. It is like a refusal of the previously cherished native dark soil.

Instead, Heaney chooses to move South, to leave like the wood-kernes of ancient times that took to the dark wood when defeated, to prepare for further resistance. The forest (Glanmore) as the mysterious home of fairies, supernatural spirits and the scene of fertility rites provides the artist with the necessary location to pursue his interests. The woods also hide perilous monsters standing for the poet's vulnerability and anxiety about the place and function of his writing in relation to an ideal of civic responsibility.

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With *Field Work* and more precisely the Glanmore Sonnets sequence, Heaney resumes his poetic definitions of art as labour and craft, furthering the insight into the process of writing. Similarly to the diviner ("The Diviner", *Death of a Naturalist*), the poet, in Oisin Kelly's view, experiences some sort of stirrings somewhere in the '*dark* hutch' of the subconscious, sensings which seek a shape, a form and eventually, achieve an incarnation in words:

> Sensings, mountings from the hiding places
> Words entering almost the sense of touch
> Ferreting themselves out of their *dark* hutch
> 'These things are not secrets but *mysteries*'
> Oisin Kelly told me years ago.

'An impenetrable mystery lies behind the creation of any work of art' (Parker, 1993: 168). The poet prays that he will be tutored in song to 'continue, hold, dispel, appease' his epiphanies and fears.

In "Nesting-Ground" (*Stations*):

> The sandmartins nests were loopholes of *darkness* in the riverbank. He could imagine his arm going in to the armpit, sleeved and straitened, but because he had once felt the cold prick of a dead robin's claw and the surprising density of its tiny beak he only gazed (…). As he stood sentry, gazing, waiting, he thought of putting his ear to one of the abandoned holes and listening for the silence under the ground.

The poet now is a kind of sentry guarding an underground visionary world of poets. Fascinated with zoological splendours, the speaker listens to the sandmartins' nests in a riverbank. It is like a gruesome fantasy of death; frightened by touching the dead robin, he just listens and imagines. A plunge into a new consciousness of things follows. The evolution of the prose-poem is from sensuous nature towards artistic interests. The proper darkness of the nests in the ground causes the poems -the sandmartins of the poet's imagination- to hatch out.

The motif of the sandmartin is the central symbol of "Homecomings" (*Field Work*):

> I
> Fetch me the sandmartin

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skimming and veering
breast to breast with himself
in the *clouds* in the river.

IV

Mould my shoulders inward to you.
Occlude me.
Be *damp clay* pouting
Let me listen under your eaves.

The sandmartin may stand for the artist/poet. He seems to feel the need to deliver a prayer for the self-occlusion that will lead to a luminous revelation. This is a self imposed downwards flight from the diurnal ego towards a oracular, night self, a sort of creative unconscious. Here, the role of the woman is crucial as she acts as the earth-mother and muse attending the poet in his underworld journey.

"Making Strange", included in Heaney's next volume, *Station Island*, describes a different mystery and the poet as a mediator between two worlds. According to Michael Parker, the occasion for the poem was a guided tour of Heaney's home-ground for the Jamaican born poet, Louis Simpson. Visiting together a local pub, the two run into someone Heaney knew from childhood. The poet is suddenly placed in the role of mediator between the two men, one, a self-assured American, the embodiment of 'travelled intelligence' and, the other, a shy countryman, embarrassed 'in the tubs of his wellingtons' (Parker, 1993: 189).

The title "Making Strange" alludes to the different worlds and languages of Heaney's two acquaintances. Also for an academic public, it conjures up Shklovsky, the Russian formalist theoretician who asserted that art sharpens our perception of the world by making objects 'unfamiliar'- a process he coins as 'ostranenie' (defamiliarization). Mystery would take the shape of a veil thrown by the poet over the commonness and familiarity of reality. Thus, the task of modulating between two worlds reminds the poet that his role is to preserve native speech, private and parochial experience but also to extend his range beyond country or personal boundaries. This going beyond is a rediscovery of familiar features, a 'making strange':

Going beyond what's reliable

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in all that keeps pleading and pleading
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how bold you were
through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride

in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at the same recitation.

Heaney's parables in *The Haw Lantern*, among which one could mention "From the Frontier of Writing", "From the Republic of Conscience", "From the Land of the Unspoken" and "From the Canton of Expectation", are designed as fictional messages from a correspondent travelling to mysterious places. Actually, the real interrogation of the driver by the British troops is a mere pretext, in "From the Frontier of Writing", for a meditation on writing as a space in which the poet manages to free himself from repression. Creating a poem sets the frontier past which you are aesthetically and ethically free, it is a way of 'getting through', of going beyond darkness:

And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed
as if you'd pass from behind a waterfall
on the *black* current of a tarmac road.

"At the Wellhead" (*The Spirit Level*), featuring a really blind persona, makes us aware of a truth that might be easily overlooked: poetry lives through music. Just like the speaker's blind neighbour, the loved one together with the reader are urged to taste music and go beyond 'darkness', symbolising here blindness and lack of power of insight or superficiality:

Night water glittering in the light of the day.

Her hands were active and her eyes were full
Of open *darkness* and a watery shine.

Several conclusions impose. This paper has attempted to discuss chronologically instances of ars poetica in connection to 'the secret and the known' in Seamus Heaney's poetry. Thus, mystery and darkness enrich with

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new meanings throughout Heaney's poems: the poet's unconscious and its role in the poetic creation ('out of the *dark* hutch'), the mystery of the creative process itself and of the world it releases ('to set the *darkness* echoing'), the darkness of words themselves seen as primeval matter before being shaped by the poet ('All I know is a door into the *dark*'), the poet's wisdom given by withdrawal and contemplation ('Compose in *darkness*'). Among the poet's avatars embodying the ideas mentioned above one could mention the digger, the diviner, the blacksmith of the Inferno –Vulcan, the driver, the wood-kerne and the blind piano-player. Violence and repression ('Under the *black* weight of their own breathing') may accompany poetic creation. Night facilitates poetry writing, night in the proper sense ('Breathing in the *dark*'/ Sounded like an effort in another world') but also blindness, associated from ancient times with visionary powers ('Flawed the *black* mirror of my frozen stare').

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