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CONFLUENCE OF REALITY, HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY IN SEAMUS HEANEY: READING AT A POTATO DIGGING AND THE TOLLUND MAN

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Richard Murphy, an Irish poet, has described Seamus Heaney as "the poet who has shown the finest art in presenting a coherent vision of Ireland, past and present." (1348, *Major 20th-century Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Authors, Volume 2*) A general consensus among critics is that Heaney is one of the two great Irish poets, the other being W. B. Yeats. It is only natural and understandable that Heaney's works should have attracted relentless critical attention. However, the fusion of reality, history and mythology in "At a Potato Digging" and "The Tollund Man" has somehow escaped the critical dragnet. My paper is a modest attempt at providing a corrective to the situation. The paper tries to identify the specific strands of reality, history and mythology that are interwoven together to form the fabric of the poems and analyse how these three strands are seamlessly tied up together.

The celebrated British historian A. J. P. Taylor observes, "History gets thicker as it approaches recent times", (1, *The A-Z Guide to Modern British History)*. "At a Potato Digging" is a poem from Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* published in 1966, delineates a scene from a potato field, where the farmers are harvesting a potato crop. It also describes in great detail the process, the peasants standing in "higgledy lines", carrying the crop in their wicker baskets. Heaney merges the present into the past by bringing in the Great Potato Famine of 1845. Ireland is a country of potato producers; however, their relationship with the potato crop is an uneasy one. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were periodic crop failures and regular months of hunger each year as the poor Irish awaited the potato harvest. In 1845 the crop failed and it failed again in 1846, 1848 and 1849. Many poor Irish lived on a diet of potatoes and buttermilk. Since there were no alternative food sources, thousands of Irish died from starvation or famine-related diseases. Others fled to England and the United States of America. The population of Ireland in 1841 was nearly 8,175,000; in 1851 it fell to around 6,552,000.

Repeatedly, Seamus Heaney has admitted in his prose writings his indebtedness, as a poet, to Patrick Kavanagh. "At a Potato Digging" itself reflects, in its subtle and complex relationship, to two of Kavanagh's signature pieces- "The Great Hunger" and "Spraying the Potatoes." In the poem, Heaney looks at man's relationship with the land - the cultivation of the potato is a way into Ireland's social history, into its struggles and hardships. The first and last of the four sections in the poem depict the digging and gathering in of the potato crop of late. The second section looks more closely at the potato itself rather than at those who harvest it, and the third is an account of the great Potato Famine of 1845-1850.

Heaney describes an innocuous scene, a potato digging, and is able to express different noxious scenes from Irish history. Although the farmer uses a mechanical digger to turn up the soil in which the potatoes lie, the job of gathering in the potatoes still relies on human workers. The machine turns up the roots and the labourers, in a line, bend down to fill their wicker creels (baskets). As they fill their baskets, they leave the line to drop the potatoes into the pit, where they will be stored. Though the work is hard, and makes the workers' fingers "go dead in the cold", they work almost automatically ("mindlessly") made tough by their "Centuries of/fear and homage to the famine god". The folk memory of the great famine makes them ready for almost any hardship, in pursuit of full stomachs.

The second section explains how the potatoes sprout and grow in their native soil. Although the great famine, caused by blight, happened more than 150 years ago, still each year the potato harvest can be an anxious process, as the workers smell the potatoes and feel them for firmness - making sure they are free of the blight. (A fungus-like organism called Phytophthora infestans causes the disease). "Piled in pits", the potatoes seem like human skulls accrued in troughs.

In the third stanza, Heaney uses exactly the same phrases - "Live skulls, blind-eyed" - but this time referring to the people who suffered in the great famine of 1845. Poor people in Ireland at that time relied almost wholly on the potato as their staple food. This explains why they would even eat "the blighted root" - but there was no real crop to speak of, and the blighted potatoes could not feed the people. The "new potato", which seemed "sound as stone", would rot within a few days of being stored - and "millions rotted along with it". The phrase is ambiguous - it means that millions of potatoes rotted, but makes us reflect on the millions of people who passed away. The earth, previously called mother, has now been paralleled to a "bitch." The image of the

famine is very analogous to that of a scavenger that pecks at the dead. The idea is how tough life in Ireland was, as indicated by people "hungering from birth", and their "hope rotted like a marrow."

In the fourth and final section, the workers take their lunch break - they no longer depend on the potato for their own food (though they earn their pay by digging it). Instead, they have "white bread and tea", and their employer serves it, while there is no shortage, and they "take their fill". But they are not taking any chances - the earth is not to be trusted ("faithless ground"). As they throw away the dregs of the tea and their breadcrumbs, they make their offerings - "libations" - to this god whom they fear and must appease. Through all these, Heaney deftly and poignantly delineates the history of the sufferings undergone by the Irish; their struggle for survival; their dependence on good potato crops and the bounty of gods.

For Brooks Atkinson, the renowned American theatre critic and journalist, "the good old days were a myth." (24, *Telling It Like It Is*) In the bog people and among the victims of tribal sacrifice, Heaney seems to have found various images of similar crises and tensions, and develops the metaphor in drawing parallels with the political and social situation in Ireland. This connection to the past allows him to comment on the present in an oblique yet forceful way. The Tollund Man lived during the late 5 century BC or early 4 century BC, during the Pre-Roman Iron Age in Scandinavia. Ireland owes so much of its cultural origins to the raiders who sailed their long ships to Dublin and other Viking ports. The poem "The Tollund Man", the first poem about bog men by Heaney from *Wintering Out* and brought out in 1972, was inspired by the discovery of the corpse of the Tollund Man on 6 May, 1950. In Northern Ireland, the phrase, *to winter out*, means to see through something and solving a crisis. The carcass was found preserved in a peat bog and has been dated to more than three thousand years.

Heaney's fascination with the Irish myth and the people of the bog commenced with the publication of *The Bog People*, by P.V. Glob, who describes the significance of the people buried under the peat. The English translation of his book appeared in 1969, the year the killings began. The book explained that the bodies of men and women recovered from the peat, buried since the Iron Age times, were sacrifices to the Goddess Nerthus. The belief was that she needed new bridegrooms each winter, to ensure fertility of the crops next spring.

"The Tollund Man" presents a complex statement of the renewal of communal violence in Ulster. Heaney compares the modern-day killings to the "old man-killing parishes" in Jutland, placing the conflict in a timeless context, and trying to make sense of it. Heaney deifies him, calling upon him to nullify the evil stirring in the "cauldron bog" and sow the seeds of peace for the citizens of Ireland to reap. Rather than playing down the unfamiliar myths surrounding the bog people, Heaney uses folk rituals in an attempt to take the people of Ireland back to their roots. He resurfaces old customs in his belief that only by rediscovering their cultural heritage could the Irish people hope to find a way out of the impasse.

"The Tollund Man" is a poem that promises a pilgrimage:"Someday I will go to Aarhus." Jonathan Bolton notes that the poet begins the poem with gestures toward pilgrimage. This is reminiscent of Chaucer's pilgrims moving towards the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett. As a victim of a religious belief much older than Christianity, Heaney seeks in the Tollund Man the icon required to replace the inadequate symbols of contemporary religion.

The Tollund Man is unnamed. The pilgrim will go "to see his peat brown head"; the speaker goes to worship, in a way, yet the tone remains impersonal. Heaney describes the man with fanatical obsession, with the minutiae of his external appearance —his head, eye-lids shaped like pods, and his cap. Heaney makes a reference to the legend of his dying in the winter, "last gruel of winter seeds" The Tollund Man's own journey begins when "they dug him out", destroyed and elevated at the same time. The meticulous observations of the narrator are again, detached and unbiased. Towards the end of the first section, the phrase "bridegroom to the goddess", indicative of the sacrifice for Nerthus, takes on a more ominous, forceful and sexual tone as the bog itself is personified and equated to Ireland, female and overwhelming. It also evinces the impuissance of the victim in the midst of greater, unplumbed powers, yet simultaneously insists on his quasi-divinity, worked "to a saint's kept body", bringing in religious aspects and relating them to violence and ritual submissions. In effect, The Tollund Man, here, assumes almost the figure of surrogate Christ.

The second sector of the poem is more emphatic in its tone as the narrator says "I could risk blasphemy." The segment directly connects religion to violence; religion derives its power from the land, as the land demands propitiatory oblation. Continuing the analogy of the sacrificial victim, Heaney juxtaposes the Tollund Man with a saint whose body is incorrupt; a saint to whom the poet prays to, with the hope that it will make the deceased Irish "germinate." The Tollund Man's paradoxical survival and repose enable him to elevate others.

A sense of sorrow and despair fills the closing section of the poem that foretells Heaney's feelings when he visits Jutland. The speaker maintains that the 'sad freedom', an ambivalent mood of seclusion and empowerment, of the Tollund Man "should come" to himself. A vehement mood of isolation is brought sharply through the idea of being 'lost' in a distant land. The element of foreignness and distance is reinforced by the place names 'Aarhus', and later by "Tollund", "Grauballe", and "Nebelgard". The poet's sense of divided

culture is derived from the fact that he writes in English, and not in Irish, his mother tongue, which is identifiable with his native culture. However, the poet somehow feels at home in a state of homelessness, and welcomes the sensation of being lost, of not belonging to society or to religious forces, a sort of 'sad freedom' he shares with the Tollund Man. The reader is left to work out why Heaney will feel both lost and" at home" in the savage history of Jutland. The only logical answer, it seems, would be because the current Irish tensions and violence are not so dissimilar from the brutal Jutland memoirs.

Heaney has noted that writing at the time of the Troubles meant that "the problem of poetry moved from a matter of finding the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to predicament." However, this does not imply that Heaney's poetry necessarily became entirely political. Critics have pointed out that his work is less an ideological statement than an effort to generate historical and political awareness, and that while his themes contain both resistance and defiance, they do not make an active political statement. Instead, he speaks of political realities through his description of the land, the use of mythology and history and the religious atmosphere, the images of prejudice, violence and intolerance. His pastoral style uses images of rural Ireland to suggest greater universal ideas. As John Byrne has rightly observed: "Heaney staked out the boundaries of his poetic, devoting himself to even deeper excavations of his chosen land." (63, *The Crane Bag*)

Seamus Heaney is fond of saying that words themselves are doors. The words of the two poems discussed in this paper function as the doors to a brave new world where borderlines are blurred. For most people, reality, history and mythology are three entirely different entities. For them, reality is solid and concrete, and present here and now. And same is the case with the perception of history that it was reality and is no longer so. The understanding of mythology is that it never was, it never is, and it never will be reality. However, the perceptions of Heaney are quite different; his imagination blends and incorporates all the three aspects into his poetry. He is conscious of the inevitable continuity between the past and the present, and the mythical and the real. In the world of Heaney, the borderlines separating the past from the present and factual truths from myth are blurred. This can be paralleled to T.S. Eliot's notion of the presentness of the past. Where does history and reality begin? What fundamentally distinguishes reality from mythology? The poetry of Seamus Heaney decrees that there are no definite and determinate answers to these questions. To sum up, the words of John Lennon, the legendary English musician, would come handy here: "I believe in everything until it's disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it's in your mind." (271, *The Dream Recorder*)

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