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Caught between Tradition and Education: The Necessarily Political Problem in Seamus Heaney's Poetry

As the watchman saw the chain of beacons light from Troy's direction, he broke apart. The war at Troy ended in victory and spoils, but what did Agamemnon truly achieve? Heaney analyzes the watchman's rage and sorrow in *Mycenae Lookout*: the greed of a city sacrificing the next generation in war, the adulterous, bloody fall of the royal house, the loss of innocence by nearly all parties involved. Certainly, *Mycenae Lookout* is a political poem. Helen Vendler sees Heaney's voice breaking through the watchman's lines, as his reimagining of the *Oresteia*'s opening ends with an image of a simple well of "our own," the speaker himself emerging, appreciating those who search for clean water.¹

However, identifying the exact nature of Heaney's engagement with the theme of politics requires us to grasp his understanding of what role a poet plays in the world. In his prose, Heaney has been quite forward about his task, displaying both bravery and honesty. To wit, from his Nobel lecture, *Crediting Poetry*:

I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing - as we have learnt to say - the local. I wish instead to suggest that images and stories of the kind I am invoking here do function as bearers of value....

Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in an ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, our vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous per se. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage us to credit the

¹ Helen Vendler, "Seamus Heaney and the Oresteia: "Mycenae Lookout" and the Usefulness of Tradition," in *The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2015).

possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space.²

Heaney is forthright: he thinks the local, the traditional, is necessary for us to show respect. With a plurality of beliefs, mankind can pride itself on its open-mindedness, issue a "salubrious political space." Still, we must be vigilant against descending into fascism, using one system of value to exclude and oppress other people.

For me, Heaney's remarks are powerful, possessing an atypical earnestness. It is an earnestness of which the classics seem dismissive, whether we are speaking of Socrates banishing the poets in the *Republic*, Herodotus' poet saving himself from pirates on a dolphin's back, or Thucydides' possession for all time depending on the Trojan War not being as large a "motion" as the Peloponnesian. To be sure, each of these classical sources evinces skepticism about poetry precisely because they recognize the full power of the poet. The poet commands nothing less than belief, as he sings, divinely inspired, by and of the gods. Replacing the poet might involve unconditional trust in reason, *ad hominem* attacks on the power of music and poetry, or a lonely trust in one's own experience. These Greek thinkers, at least, are aware of their limits.

As we shall see, Heaney does engage some of these themes rather directly, even if he does not write a poem entitled "Thucydides" and give voice to being a general and an exile. Still, the warrant for comparing classical thought concerning poetry with Heaney's musings on becoming a poet primarily relies on the man all Irish poets lie in the shadow of: Yeats. Yeats actually lived out the crazy, Nietzschean task of being a poet who tries to found a nation. *Easter 1916* merits comparison with the Gettysburg Address: those who died, not allowing too long a suffering to make a stone of the heart, are the honored dead from which we take increased devotion. *Among School Children* is not shy about politics, nation, and myth, the poetic past and his vision's future. It does not quite matter if Yeats' grip on the Irish mind seems not to have the reach that "all men are created equal" and "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" have on American politics. The Declaration of Independence, in a way, gives birth to nearly all sides of current debate in America: do we ground our rights in our love of freedom, or the need for equality?

² Seamus Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," in *Opened Ground: Collected Poems 1966-1996* (FSG: New York, 1998), 425.

Heaney's Nobel remarks and Yeats' mythologizing deal more with that third of the French Revolutionaries' demands: fraternity. How to speak Ireland, how to speak to the Irish as a diversity and unity? We must turn to Heaney's poetry, because the tensions dividing the Irish are not simply external, and one's sense of identity ultimately has to come from some sense of rootedness. No number of prose pronouncements examined will suffice.

How one becomes a poet is very strange. A poet sings a people, but also brings music to his own life. In that vein, consider the poetizing of *1.1.87*, a short, epigrammatic poem about the loss of a father:

Dangerous pavements.
But I face the ice this year
With my father's stick.³

On the one hand, tradition and education fuse beautifully here. The father has lent his whole life to an object. As he used it for years with knowledge to overcome the elements, so will the speaker. Through memory, knowledge is inherited, and a statement of loss is actually a statement of gain: the speaker will not forget his father, and will in fact become him through his activity.

Yet we see already this is a problematic fusion: it requires no less than one's father to color the concept of tradition, to see the past as an uncomplicated inheritance. The personal is not the same as the traditional; tradition has ways of coercing us into doing what it wants. A more involved comment on tradition lies in *The Biretta*, which invites us to imagine a young altar boy as speaker, wondering about the priest's cap and whether it would make a good boat if turned upside down:

Now I turn it [the biretta] upside down and it is a boat -
A paper boat or the one that wafts into
The first lines of the *Purgatorio*
As poetry lifts its eyes and clears its throat.

Or maybe that small boat out of the Bronze Age
Where the oars are needles and the worked gold frail

³ Seamus Heaney, "1.1.87," in *Seeing Things* (FSG: New York, 1991), 22.

As the intact half of a hatched-out shell,
Refined beyond the dross into sheer image.

But in the end it's as likely to be the one
In Matthew Lawless's painting *The Sick Call*,
Where the scene is out on a river and it's all
Solid, pathetic and Irish Victorian.

In which case, however, his reverence wears a hat.
Undaunting, half-domestic, loved in crises,
He sits listening as each long oar dips and rises,
Sad for his worthy life and fit for it.⁴

Heaney's altar boy has a grand imagination. He first wonders about the biretta resembling a paper boat, or better yet, the boat of the *Purgatorio*. In other words, he already sees what some might consider the highest significance of boat imagery, that the poet can sail to no less than heaven and hell with the power of his words. He then wonders about small, ornamental boats that were ancient crafts. Again, the idea of the soul journeying by boat is at work here, just as it was with his Dante reference above. The Bronze Age craftsman also could create amazing images: both *Purgatorio* and the small golden boat are infused with the power of belief.

The descent lies in the last two stanzas, which are nowhere near as resplendent as those previous. "Solid, pathetic and Irish Victorian," a priest wears a hat while on the river. That priest attends to others: his life is tedious sacrifice, belief made incarnate. Heaney's childlike narrator does not hate the priest - far from it. The lack of shine and glimmer on the scene makes the priest's virtue loom that much larger. Dante poetically arrived in Purgatory; the priest actually dwells there. Still, one can sense an unmistakable break between the speaker and the priest. "Undaunting, half-domestic, loved in crises, / He sits listening as each long oar dips and rises, / Sad for his worthy life and fit for it." The speaker does not want this life, as he is much more fascinated by poetry and art. Turning the priest's hat upside down opened both possibilities *and* allowed appreciation of the religious life.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

Heaney thus presents the poetic life as breaking with tradition in some way, despite singing the virtues of rootedness, of the "indigenous per se." The poet, however, does not simply become educated through completely rational means. When he arrives in the classroom, he makes of it what he will. Yet again, the audience encounters boat imagery:

My handsewn leather schoolbag. Forty years.
 Poet, you were *nel mezzo del cammin*
 When I shouldered it, half-full of blue-lined jotters,
 And saw the classroom charts, the displayed bean,

The wallmap with its spray of shipping lanes
 Describing arcs across the blue North Channel...
 And in the middle of the road to school,
 Ox-eye daisies and wild dandelions.

Learning's easy carried! The bag is light,
 Scuffed and supple and unemptiable
 As an itinerant school conjuror's hat.
 So take it, for a word-ward and a handsel,

As you step out trig and look back all at once
 Like a child on his first morning leaving parents.⁵

The Schoolbag is a dense apostrophe. As Heaney (more properly, Heaney's speaker) addresses it, he moves effortlessly from past to present to future. For forty years he carried this bag, which once carried his classroom scratchings. To recall them is to recall the map on the wall. The lines of his jotters blend into classroom charts, and his focus wanders to the bean that was one wallmap, showing arcs that cross the ocean.

The metaphor in question is a literal carrying across. The wallmap shows the poet how to become Charon, how to cross the uncrossable. It is a seed, a bean, which turns lines into arcs, words into firmaments. His is a creative blooming, attended by "ox-eyed daisies and wild dandelions." No wonder "Learning's easy carried!" None of this, on the poet's part, means to demonstrate hubris. Rather, the childlike imagination at the heart of poetry makes learning an inexhaustible - dare I say erotic? - joy. The bag cannot be emptied; the speaker is not a Muggle; the apostrophe is prelude to a passing

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

on. This poet gives away his schoolbag to another: "So take it, for a word-hoard and a handsel." The bag itself is a gift given directly into another's hands, the "word-hoard" that allows the other to step out "trig," smart and neat and confident that one can learn, and learning will be freeing.

At this point, it is possible to see quite a difference between at least one of Heaney's prose pronouncements about the poetic task and his poetic understanding of poetry. The latter is infinitely richer, deepening and somewhat contradicting his former remark. The poet he presents in his becoming does not simply sing the indigenous. He sings change, transformation: a new landscape with an appreciative morality, a learning to see what is there in front of one. The old becomes the new. That, in sum, is the heart of politics itself. The chief gods before Zeus, Ouranos and Kronos, could not abide their children. The mere possibility of change was unacceptable. Zeus, initiating the Olympian order, created a political order.⁶ He solved time, as it were, and it is as laughable a concept as the world we live in.

⁶ Credit for this insight goes to David Sweet and Seth Benardete.