

Rooted Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the Poet in Seamus Heaney's North

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The brute ferocity of Viking raids gives way to the sheer terror of cultist ritual killing. This would seem ancient history, if not followed by memories and visions of living in an anxious, terrible present. Such stands the structure of Seamus Heaney's collection *North*. While one of Heaney's earlier collections, it arouses scholarly interest for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates what Jaime Olson, borrowing a notion from the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, calls "rooted cosmopolitanism."¹ Second, while Heaney describes the process of writing *North* as singularly intense, perhaps one that could have been "more measured, in both formal and emotional terms," *North* shows, so to speak, a poet in full.² The poet there bears witness to a number of conflicts, doubts, and tragedies, all of which weigh directly on the poetic task, making it seem almost impossible. In what follows, I want to briefly sketch the notion of "rooted cosmopolitanism" as it makes itself manifest generally in *North*. This will enable us to consider poetic maturity as inextricably linked with "rooted cosmopolitanism." From there, I want to look at *Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication for Mary Heaney*, a Preface of a sort to *North*. Are they simply a dedication, or indicative of a larger poetic vision?

ROOTED COSMOPOLITIANISM AND *NORTH*

"Rooted cosmopolitanism" has the highest import for those scholars interested in what exactly core texts do. Olson, writing about Appiah's definition, shows how it involves a movement from the particular to the universal, how respect for one's roots or traditions becomes a precondition for "cultivating a cosmopolitanism that... affirms our shared humanity:"

"A cosmopolitanism with prospects," he writes, "must reconcile a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of at least some forms of partiality." Indeed, for Appiah, the terms "partial" and "rooted" cosmopolitanism are interchangeable. He argues that cosmopolitans must acknowledge that they are, in fact, partial to certain places—specifically, to their native countries and other places where they might have spent a considerable amount of time. Appiah believes that it is possible to retain one's roots while cultivating a cosmopolitanism that does not efface the cultures of other places, but instead affirms our shared humanity. The two ideals that he identifies as the foundation for rooted cosmopolitanism are "universal concern" and "respect for human difference." Building this sort of cosmopolitanism, as it happens, practically requires strong partiality

¹ Jaime Olson (2008). *Rooted Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and Joseph Brodsky*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/60800/olsonjl_1.pdf?sequence=1

² Seamus Heaney, quoted in Henri Cole's "The Art of Poetry No. 75," in *The Paris Review*. (1997). Retrieved from <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/seamus-heaney-the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney>

to one or two places, since loyalty to one's own culture—or to another culture held close to one's heart—enables compassion for other, foreign cultures.³

The application of this idea to core texts programs is direct. Creating a core texts program, ideally, concerns creation of a group of students who share an experience and dialogue over the same texts. In creating such a community, one hopes they will appreciate the richness of the world, as this community is markedly intellectual. However, note that Appiah holds that “universal concern” and “respect for human difference” are the foundation of genuine cosmopolitanism. Whereas some might worry that a core texts program can be made insubstantial through too much universalism, Appiah sees a universal sense of value as primary in receiving value from love of one's own traditions. However, this does not denigrate such particular love: in fact, it is the authenticity of such love that enables one to love that much more.

One can argue whether “rooted cosmopolitanism” makes much sense, but it is an attempt, however flawed, to grasp how a spirit of appreciation can be developed. It is certainly characteristic of something, as Olson has amply demonstrated its presence all throughout *North*, a collection struggling to make sense of a people being torn apart. Heaney identifies not just with a local, rural, almost ahistorical Ireland of country folk, but with the poets Ovid and Osip Mandelstam, both poets, in a sense, of exile.⁴ In discussing the discovered corpses from ritual killings of Ireland long ago, he wonders about bodies pulled from the bog in other countries, such as Denmark.⁵ His reflection on his own bloodline involves extended engagement with Viking artifacts and questioning what kind of life Vikings led. Of course, in writing more directly about the Troubles, encounters with the British and Loyalists are inescapable.⁶ Heaney does his best in these poems to give voice to as many as possible. Quite frankly, his is a stunning achievement: “compassion for other, foreign cultures” stands side-by-side with seeing your own kin abused and killed.

ROOTED COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE POET HIMSELF

The poetic voice sings, but does not directly sing himself. A strange irony, for people talk about themselves too much, no? Not quite – they try to talk about themselves, repeatedly failing. For the poet, who dares imitation, this is an especially cruel irony. He can introduce others to a multitude of forms, but not his own. The Muse, then, could be interpreted as this inability. A poet must be divinely inspired, not because his words come from god, but because he could not speak truly otherwise.

Heaney confronts his Muse directly in the title poem. There, an encounter with the “hammered curve” of Hephaistos, the ugly god who crafts, who employs art, does not subtly recall that poetry, for the Greeks, is simply making, making anything:

³ Olson (2008), p. 7

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 83

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 73

⁶ “Singing School,” a sequence of six poems ending *North*, contains two shorter poems detailing direct encounters: “A Constable Calls” and “Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966.”

I returned to a long strand,
the hammered curve of a bay,
and found only the secular
powers of the Atlantic thundering.

I faced the unmagical
invitations of Iceland,
the pathetic colonies
of Greenland, and suddenly

those fabulous raiders,
those lying in Orkney and Dublin
measured against
their long swords rusting,

those in the solid
belly of stone ships,
those hacked and glinting
in the gravel of thawed streams

were ocean-deafened voices
warning me, lifted again
in violence and epiphany.
The longship's swimming tongue

was buoyant with hindsight—
it said Thor's hammer swung
to geography and trade,
thick-witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behind-backs
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

It said, 'Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

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.⁷

“North” begins confronting one’s own origins: “I returned.” The attempt to find the Muse, to find clarity on the poetic task, has led him to a “hammered curve of a bay.” At first, there are only “the secular powers of the Atlantic thundering,” but then his vision expands a bit more, he comes to see what he wanted to see. “I faced the unmagical invitations of Iceland, the pathetic colonies of Greenland,” and in facing one’s Norse origins, one wonders whether they also stood at the edge of land, looked abroad, and made their decision to go based on exactly what he presently sees.

When the Muse strikes, she strikes suddenly -- now there is everything and anything to talk about. Earlier in the collection, Heaney develops the idea that the Norse are a problem. For better or worse, Heaney can come to terms with his English and Irish roots. His learning of his home’s connection to Norsemen, though, might sound on initial impression no less than traumatic.⁸ Here in “North,” reasons for such trauma are depicted: these invaders, his ancestors, are “measured against their long swords,” lie “hacked and glinting.” His bloodline glorifies violence – “those fabulous raiders” – with no seeming respect for home or hearth, only wealth and triumph. But Heaney softens almost immediately, realizing that even stone-cold killers live human lives. It is a grudging, though lovely sounding, concession. “Thor’s

⁷ Seamus Heaney, “North,” from *North*. New York: FSG (1996). 10.

⁸ I am thinking principally of Heaney’s “Belderg,” where Heaney discusses an excavation with another, and the topic shifts to Heaney’s own knowledge of his home:

So I talked of Mossbawn,
A bogland name ‘But *moss*?’,
He crossed my old home’s music
With older strains of Norse.

I’d told how its foundation
Was mutable as sound
And how I could derive
A forked root from that ground,
Make *bawn* an English fort,
A planter’s walled-in mound.

Or else find sanctuary
And think of it as Irish,
Persistent if outworn.
‘But the Norse ring on your tree?’
I passed through the eye of the quern,

Grist to an ancient mill,
And in my mind’s eye saw,
A world-tree of balanced stones,
Querns piles like vertebrae,
The marrow crushed to grounds.

“Belderg,” from *North*. New York: FSG (1996). 4-5.

hammer swung to geography and trade," but after that, all is bloodlust: "couplings," "revenges," political hatreds and betrayals, "spilled blood."

Can he learn from imagining this part of his heritage? No wonder Heaney finds the Norse a deep problem. How could one possibly learn by reflecting, say, on a serial killer in your ancestry? The potential for getting things wrong is enormous; the poet can inadvertently glorify the worst sort of carelessness, dehumanization, violence. Still, the past speaks, especially those in the past who indulged bloodlust precisely to be remembered in song. The imagined Norse raiders, the butchers of the coast and so much more, tell him to "lie down in the word-hoard." They tell him to "burrow the coil and gleam" of his own brain.

Is Heaney's speaker delusional? Not quite, for in imagining the dead voices of the Norse, he can imagine their regret. In that regret is his promise, and something more. The quest for glory, whether by barbarian or poet, reveals their shared humanity. The Norse have direct relevance for the poet. They are not wrong in telling him to "compose in darkness," that the only light he will get is the majestic "aurora borealis," but none of the most useful clarity for which he yearns. A lack of ability to see means that what is most trustworthy is at hand, can be grasped and touched. One must keep one's eye clear, unclouded by prejudice, but one must also understand one's own experience to be one's treasure. The poet is who the Norseman would want to be: with knowledge and experience reconciled, song stands perfectly natural, no trappings necessary. Perhaps this is the ultimate in "rooted cosmopolitanism," to understand an inimical other as a guide, worthy of love and respect, while rejecting their way of life entirely.

MOSSBAWN: TWO POEMS IN DEDICATION

In "North," then, Heaney professes hearing the call to having the courage to write. His own doubts, his own ambivalence about his own work is serious subject matter for poetry. Is there something more positive, though, that he can offer his readers? I lean to the idea that the *Two Poems in Dedication* complete more than introduce his collection. The last lines of "Exposure," the last poem in *North*, speak to the first poem of the collection, "Sunlight:"

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.
So, her hands scuffled
over the bakeboard,
the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat

against her where she stood
in a floury apron
by the window.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose's wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitened nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.⁹

"Sunlight" opens with a familiar, powerful, but often overlooked beauty. "A sunlit absence" in the yard evokes the image of a sunny day highlighting green grass. From this image, Heaney builds his tribute. A "helmeted pump," in its iron ordinariness, gives "water honeyed," water gleaming with the sparkle of the sun. This primal fusion of art and nature is made possible by blacksmithing, a no less than divine art. It leads from the outdoors to the indoors: an iron griddle provides sun-like heat, flour and a goose's wing turn the natural into nourishment. "Broad-lapped," "with whitened nails and measling shins," she will of course be a sunlit absence herself. But her labor is more than simple participation in something divine. She creates "space" both physically and temporally in waiting for the scone to rise. Human being does not just observe divine or natural orders. It perfects them, placing love, "like a tinsmith's scoop sunk past its gleam in the meal-bin," into each moment of our lives. Again, the last lines of the collection hearken to this poem. Witness the movement in "Exposure" from a poet confronting the terror of his time to what we have just spoken of:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,

⁹ "Sunlight," from *North*. New York: FSG (1996).

The comet's pulsing rose.¹⁰

The "sparks" for meagre heat, the feeling of every wind blowing, the coloring from the objects around one: these recall the labors in the kitchen of "Sunlight," only they are fragmented, incomplete. The Irish experience, even in terror, owes its being to this more fundamental sense of home.

I conclude with a look at "The Seed Cutters," Heaney's explicit attempt to create a painting, a museum-worthy work, in speech:

They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel,
You'll know them if I can get them true.
They kneel under the hedge in a half-circle
Behind a windbreak wind is breaking through.
They are the seed cutters. The tuck and frill
Of leaf-sprout is on the seed potatoes
Buried under that straw. With time to kill
They are taking their time. Each sharp knife goes
Lazily halving each root that falls apart
In the palm of the hand: a milky gleam,
And, at the centre, a dark watermark.
O calendar customs! Under the broom
Yellowing over them, compose the frieze
With all of us there, our anonymities.¹¹

"The Seed Cutters" can be considered in isolation, but for this reader, it best makes sense when considered as the formal end of *North*. The poem renders a painting because truth, in truth, is not spoken but shown. The seed cutters, Ireland's rural poor, take advantage of the natural protection of the landscape in order to labor. Labor, however, is not its own reward. It encompasses birth and growth ("leaf-sprout"), leisure ("they are taking their time"), art ("each sharp knife"), and rich, natural rewards ("a milky gleam, and, at the center, a dark watermark"). Why are these anonymities worth putting in a frieze? The suggestion of violence ("with time to kill"), the suggestion of the imperfect soul ("a milky gleam" is stained by "a dark watermark"), completes this image of what could be Eden. Everything is there – including sight of a beautiful, peaceful world – if one will only look.

¹⁰ "Exposure," from *North*. New York: FSG (1996). 68.

¹¹ "The Seed Cutters," from *North*. New York: FSG (1996).