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A Congruence of Lives

This article explores the idea of ritual and custom with reference to the sense in which excavations from bogs in Denmark prompted Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate poet from Northern Ireland, to respond to the evidence of sacrificial rites and customary punishments which they revealed in Iron Age Denmark. Furthermore Heaney's poetry draws parallels with similar punishments and human sacrifices pertinent to contemporary Northern Ireland and its troubles, and, in doing so, re-imagines the concepts of loyalty, sacrifice and belonging. A selection of Heaney's 'bog poems' were re-enacted through drama, music and speech in a place of great historic and legendary significance in Northern Ireland, and so, in an important sense, interesting connections and unusual relationships were made between one place and another, one era and another and one civilisation and another. As such, a kind of common humanity emerges in Heaney's poetry – a humanity which spans time, place and context, which challenges too narrow a concept of belonging and which invites us to think about the transformative potential of ritual and sacrifice.

A Congruence of Lives

Some years ago a colleague and I were invited to visit Aarhus in Denmark to meet two Danish tutors with whom we were to collaborate on the creation of a piece of Drama which would focus on the poetry of Seamus Heaney, our Nobel Laureate. This dramatic presentation would take as its inspiration the poetry which emanated as a result of Heaney's response to photographs of the excavated remains of sacrificial victims in Iron Age Denmark. The ritualistic punishments and sacrifices

of many centuries ago prompted Heaney to respond to them, not merely on their own terms, but also in relation to the punishments meted out and the sacrifices offered in the contemporary world of the Northern Ireland 'troubles'. So began a fascinating and illuminating journey - one which placed past and present rituals in stark relief, and one which led to some surprising and ultimately challenging perspectives on our notions of ritual, sacrifice and tradition.

Heaney's 'bog poems' as they are generally known, are interesting for a variety of reasons. First and foremost boglands represent a common geographical feature of both Denmark and Ireland prompting the possibility of a connection between those countries - secondly, because of their unique chemical and vegetative properties, they are capable of preserving human remains and historical artefacts for centuries or even millennia. Thirdly, they correspond perfectly to Heaney's poetic method in the sense in which they invite digging and discovery, exploration and excavation, recovery and recognition, and, in doing so, are capable of revealing fascinating truths about our lives and our shared humanity. As Heaney describes it when considering a sense of the past evoked by an object or an artefact from the past, 'it is a point of entry into a common emotional ground of memory and belonging. It can transmit the climate of a lost world and keep alive in us a domestic intimacy with realities that might otherwise have vanished' - they also challenge, he asserts, 'a too narrow conception of loyalty and solidarity.' Heaney goes on to say that the past 'gives us our cultural markings' and that a sense of the past is, as William Wordsworth asserted, 'a primary law of nature.' (Heaney, 1993)

Archaeologists believe that some of the bodies excavated from the Danish bogs were, in fact, victims of sacrificial rituals intended to appease the Goddess Nerthes, the Mother God of earth and fertility. It has been argued that the customary offering of such sacrifices was in order to 'ensure the fertility of the land for the coming year' and that such a view is supported by the presence of a wide range of 'ancient artefacts, including gold and other jewellery, weaponry, battle armour, drinking vessels and musical instruments retrieved from peat bogs and widely interpreted as votive offerings to the spirits and divinities associated with the bog.' (Mc Lean, 2008) Some of the excavated bodies are thought to be those of young men who offered themselves as human sacrifices to the Gods, but others, however, appear to have met violent deaths more associated with punishment than sacrifice.

These excavations were a source of great inspiration for Heaney who saw in them, not only a window to another world and another time, but also a way in which he could connect them to more contemporary happenings in Northern Ireland and to a poetic method which has become his hall-

mark. Heaney was always a poet who resisted an overtly political or militant stance and as Denis Donoghue notes, ‘the kind of poetry he wants to write can’t be written by accepting the public terms in which a tribal conflict is foisted on him. He must make space for himself, come to terms with his own sense of life.’ (New York Times, 1979) So the discovery of the ‘bog bodies’, as they are known, opened up for Heaney a world which allowed for the consideration of some of his dominant thematic concerns: the sense and sensuality of nature, the importance of the past, the idea of a shared humanity of belonging, and the role of the artist in responding to these. They also offered a poetic method which resonated with his sense of what he wanted his poetry to be – revelation, recognition, discovery, excavation, connection and congruence. These themes and these artistic methods often assert themselves in Heaney’s poetry as apparent dualities or possible dichotomies; closeness and distance, sameness and otherness, recognition and non-recognition. Heaney articulates the complex duality of closeness and distance when he says that, ‘my emotions, my feelings, whatever those instinctive energies are that have to be engaged for a poem, those energies quickened more when contemplating a victim, strangely, from two thousand years ago than they did from contemplating a man at the end of the road being swept up into a plastic bag.’

In an interesting twist of good fortune, the poems selected for exploration and dramatisation were performed in a place called Navan Fort, a place of legend and mystery, intimately connected to our Celtic past. Navan Fort or Emain Macha as it is called in Irish is the place where high kings ruled, where heroes and knights contested and where legendary Celtic figures such as Cuchullain and the Red Branch knights perfected their skills and extended hospitality to kings and poets. It was there too where the skull of a Barbary ape, an ancient status symbol – the gift of one head of state to another, was found among the excavations. So, as in Denmark, the Celtic people who dwelt there kept their secrets well. Wise beyond their own civilisation they took no chances on grave robbers and cast their sacrifices and their offerings into deep pools, safe from recovery. So, in an important sense we were ‘tapping into’ many different layers of history and legend, and, in doing so, were challenged into a renewal, a reconstruction and a redefinition of our notions of memory and belonging.

The visit which brought my colleague and I to Aarhus entailed a visit to the museum in which the Tollund man, the subject of one of Heaney’s poems is encased in glass. The poet himself starts the poem with a statement which is somewhere between an aspiration and a prayer:

*Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat brown head,
The mild pods of his eyelids,*

His pointed skin cap.'

This sense of Heaney's journey as a kind of pilgrimage is underlined later in the poem when he says:

*I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate*

*The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,*

There is a sense of ritual here, a notion that ritualistic steps are being taken, that a liturgical rite is taking place which involves both recovering and articulating aspects of national consciousness. It is as far away from the thoughtless, mimetic kinds of actions which sometimes characterise rite and ritual as it is possible to get. Here the focus is on purposeful activity, on a kind of pilgrimage of devotion in which there is the possibility of discovery and revelation, not only in terms of the ancient cultures and memories which are being unearthed, but also in relation to our own time and place. Heaney concludes:

*Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.*

The poet locates the 'historical and contemporary continuities', and in doing so, may be suggesting that the sacrifices made by some of those in the 'troubles' of contemporary times might be a means of preventing greater tragedy and 'worse carnage.' (Bolton, 2001) Mc Lean (2008) spoke of the relationship between 'preservation and transformation as a constituent of collective memory' and proposed that since memory is a 'continuously unfolding process, collective memory is indissolubly linked to transformation and to inspiring new cultural imaginings.'

So, when we gathered some years ago in the museums of Denmark and in the legendary places of our Celtic past, our notions of tradition, custom, memory and belonging were given new perspectives and fresh imaginings. In the reconsideration of the congruence of lives which Heaney unearthed, we began to catch a glimpse of what he meant when he spoke of the sense in which a sensitivity to the past can contribute as 'a fundamental human gift that is potentially as life-enhancing and civilising as love itself.'

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