

Our Mother Ground: Seamus Heaney's use of Myth in *Wintering Out* and *North*

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Seamus Heaney, the Northern Irish Catholic poet, has spoken eloquently both in prose and in verse, of the political problems in Northern Ireland. The political turmoil of the 1960s and 70s was exacerbated by England's persistent colonial hold, and the violent reaction of the IRA to this regime created a situation that saw changes and upheavals across the country. The Catholics in Northern Ireland were particularly affected, as, being in a minority in a predominantly Protestant state, they were at the receiving end of England's oppressive measures to control this area.

Heaney approaches the problems of his time obliquely, by using what Kearney calls 'utopian myth', i.e., that which challenges and transforms the status quo, as opposed to 'ideological myth', which maintains the status quo. In doing this, Heaney shuns the Yeatsian use of Celtic myth, which looked to traditional and sacred myth as a story of continuity which history denied the present. Other modern writers like Samuel Beckett and James Joyce had also disagreed with Yeats's mythologizing, and sought a more secular, or disruptive myth to express the predicament of their times. All these gave voice to the emergence of a different kind of philosophy in the twentieth century, one that opposes sacred myth, and tries to demythologise western culture.

Different as their expressions of strife may be, the common idiom that emerges from these writers is the myth of the motherland. The concept of the motherland in Ireland would include the mother church of the Catholic revival, the motherland of the national revival, and the mother tongue of the Gaelic revival. These ideas were strengthened by the 1916 Rising, particularly after the signatories were executed. Before the colonization of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the perennial significance of the mother goddess rested on her intimate connection with the pivotal institution in ancient Irish society, that of sacral kingship. The king, on whom the moral condition of the land depended, must be ritually sacralized. This took the form of a sacred marriage with the goddess who represented both the abstract sovereignty and the physical substance of his kingdom. After the advent of Christianity in Ireland, the actual rite was purged of its blatantly physical aspects, but the sexual element remains deeply ingrained in tales and poems, which provide endless variations on this basic theme of king and goddess.

With the colonization of Ireland, however, the idealized myth of Irish womanhood was reinforced in the late nineteenth century by a cult of the Virgin Mary in the Irish

Catholic church. Ireland came to be identified as a virginal motherland which could best be served by safeguarding a native purity against the evil influences of alien cultures. To quote Kearney in "Myth and Motherland", "The more dispossessed the people became in reality the more they sought to repossess a sense of identity in the realm of ideality (76).

The most important factor in the development of the myths of the motherland is the political colonization of Ireland. After the "plantations" or colonization of the seventeenth century, when protestant England established its dominion over Catholic Ireland, the latter became more frequently identified with a vulnerable virgin ravished by the aggressive masculine invader from England, the *Sasannach*. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the passive daughter seems to assume the more militant guise of a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the invader. Through the sacrificial shedding of their blood, the goddess might be redeemed from colonial violation and become free and pure again, that is, restored to her pristine virginity of language, land and liturgy.

Heaney's use of myth, and his portrayal of mythical women have the characterization of both the pre-colonial past, and the colonial present. For the poet, the term "myth" included all the ways in which he can "interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past..." ("Feeling Into Words," *P* 60). Besides traditional stories from Greek or Irish mythology, Heaney's mythopoeia includes Catholic ritual, pre-Christian history, and Irish history both ancient and modern. For the purpose of this paper, I will be focussing on the pre-Christian myths, with their excavations and bog motifs which are central to Heaney's poetry of the 1970s.

After the Civil Rights Movement, and the confrontation between Catholics and Protestants in 1969, Heaney felt that his poetry had to make a definite statement: "From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (*P* 56). It was at this time that Heaney came across P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1969), with its account of propitiatory Iron Age ritual killings in Jutland. Glob speaks of finding victims of sacrifice to the Mother Goddess to ensure the renewal and fertility of the land. These bog people offered the poet an imaginative parallel to the Irish situation, with its brutalities and killings in a tense political situation. Most importantly, the bog could be associated with the woman figure, and could be imaged as Earth Mother or Ireland, as the Voice of History (local, national and personal), the storehouse of racial memory, and as sacrificial victim

It is the goddess Nerthus who dominates Heaney's poetry for the next few years. Nerthus was a fertility goddess to whom some of the Iron Age people in Jutland were

ritual sacrifices. They were murdered in winter and their bodies disposed of in bogs sacred to the goddess, so as to ensure the fertility of the land the following spring. Nerthus is glossed as “Earth Mother” (Terra Mater) by Tacitus, and the name may be of Celtic origin, Welsh *nerth* and Irish *neart* both denoting strength or power. In the poem “Nerthus”, the grains of the ash-fork are described as “gathering to the gouged split.” This is reminiscent of a photograph in Glob’s book of the representation of the goddess as a long, slim wooden branch with a heavy incision, symbolic of the female sexual organ. The sexual imagery of the poem takes on greater emphasis as Heaney extends the goddess out of ancient Jutland to modern day Northern Ireland. The landscape she stands in is defined in terms of the Northern dialect; “Kesh” is causeway (the Long Kesh of internment camps), and “Loaning” is an uncultivated space between fields. Heaney is suggesting that Northern Ireland is, at present, a barren land, which needs its symbolic, ritual sacrifice to Nerthus, so as to ensure a new beginning.

“The Tollund Man” is the first of the bog poems that connects the bog with ritual sacrifice. In the poem, Heaney is responding to a photograph in Glob’s book of an Iron Age sacrificial victim, unearthed from the bog thousands of years later. The ritual killing in Jutland is seen as a marriage between the man and the goddess. He is “Bridegroom to the goddess” who “tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen” (WO 47). This overtly sexual image of the goddess is carried through the poem, connecting past and present in a fertility ritual; it is also extended to the poet himself, who is a victim of violent upheavals that punctuate Irish history. When the poet asks the Tollund man to “make germinate // The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers...,” (WO 48), it is as though Heaney, the modern man and Druid-poet, merges with the pre-Christian ethos, presupposing a belief in a fertility ritual that will bring alive the four young Catholic brothers who were massacred by Protestant para-military forces. The poem also introduces the poet as voyeur, one who is both outside the poem as observer, and inside as one who participates in the historical life of the country.

The female figure is further explored in the bog poems in *North*. Here, too, the bog is imaged as the Earth Mother demanding her sacrificial victims – though the fertility ritual does not always result in fructification or growth; on the contrary, the poems end in primal feelings of revenge or pessimism. In “Punishment”, Heaney expresses a politically ambiguous sentiment, as he imagines the Windeby bog girl of Glob’s account, possibly punished for adultery, as the “sister” of those Catholic girls tarred and feathered in Northern Ireland during the early 1970s as a punishment for going out with British soldiers. The poem, with its voyeuristic, love-like sentiments and its compassionate feelings for the punished girl, ends with:

I who stood dumb
 When your betraying sisters,
 cauled in tar
 wept by the railings,
 who would connive
 in civilised outrage
 yet understand the exact
 and tribal, intimate revenge. (*N* 38)

These lines have given rise to much critical debate about Heaney's position in relation to IRA tactics. Some critics have felt that the word "understand" implies Heaney's condoning of the crime. Others, like Neil Corcoran, have pointed out that the poet's silence before the tarred and feathered "sisters" is "itself implicitly criticized by the poem's biblical allusions which bring a third religion, Christianity, into the reckoning, along with the Iron Age territorial religion and the religion of Irish Republicanism" (116-117). Christ tells the crowd gathered to stone the woman taken in adultery, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." No one does, but Heaney, like all the others, remains dumb and casts the equally blameworthy "stones of silence"; at this point, neither "connivance" nor understanding" can excuse the poet's silence.

The self rebuke is carried on in "Strange Fruit," where the girl's blank eyes and "leathery beauty" chide the poet for trying to make a myth out of her:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
 Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
 And beatification, outstaring
 What had begun to feel like reverence. (*N* 39).

Heaney has said that "the fury of Irish republicanism is associated with a religion" like that of the Iron Age in Europe, a religion that has the same fervour and commitment to a cause as has an established one like Roman Catholicism. Indeed, several scholars have spoken about the vital connection between the ancient goddess of Druidism and the Virgin Mary, and of the connection between Mary, the Holy Virgin, and the older fertility goddesses like Ceres or Demeter. If the Great Goddess was nurturing, yet demanding, possessive and bloodthirsty, then Mary in her pagan, more primitive form must be so as well. If Mary in her primitive form is the presiding deity of Irish Republicanism, she too demands sacrifices from her devotees, so that the blood of the faithful can germinate a new order in Ireland. Though Heaney sees the connection between Irish Republicanism and mariolatry, he has an ironic vision of the violence it perpetrates, of "how the goddess swallows/our love and terror" (*N* 45).

For Heaney, then, Woman, as the Voice of History connects the past and the present, time and space. She belongs to a primitive past as well as to an equally primitive present; she spans the geographical spaces in ancient Jutland, as she does in modern Ireland. More importantly, she fills the spaces in the poet's mythic imagination. She is the womb that holds and gives birth to individuals and to historical cycles, but she is also the death-dealer, as seen in her depiction as the rapacious goddess. In this respect, within the figure of the woman lies the womb-tomb dialectic that forms the basis of all cyclical views of history and philosophy. The woman or the land gives birth, and it is to her that all things return when they die or decay. As Eliade has said in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*:

...when the Earth becomes the goddess of Death, it is simply because she is felt to be the universal womb, the inexhaustible source of all creation... The frightening aspect of the Earth-Mother, as the Goddess of Death, is explained by the cosmic necessity of sacrifice, which alone makes the passage from one mode of being to another and also ensures the uninterrupted circulation of life. (188-9).

References

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Abbreviations Used

- N* *North*
WO *Wintering Out*
P *Preoccupations*