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Poet and Artist in Seamus Heaney's North

by PATRICIA BOYLE HABERSTROH

FOR SOME writers, social issues often create a struggle between the desire to respond in a public voice to the problems at the heart of their society and the need to withdraw to the sometimes quieter and more controllable world of art. Fundamental to this struggle are long-debated questions about the value of art in addressing social problems. For a poet like Seamus Heaney, raised in the midst of a continuing war in Northern Ireland, this struggle takes on greater significance. The day-by-day violence of Ulster, the complexity of a centuries-old conflict, sometimes generates a deep-seated response which cannot be ignored. On the other hand, Heaney, as he explains in *Preoccupations*, knows the pitfalls: "We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes."¹

From his earliest work, autobiographical material about home, family, and race provided fertile ground for Heaney's poetic imagination. But in *North*, Heaney chose to confront directly the political crisis in Ireland. Like Yeats' "Easter 1916," *North* gives us a poet's perspective on social problems, and Heaney's own life, like Yeats', makes him an invaluable observer. The confusion and frustration that a poet feels in the face of overwhelming social chaos are the subjects of *North*. However, while the poems reveal one poet's struggle to come to terms with a specific political problem, they also transcend these boundaries to focus on the role of the poet, and more broadly the artist, in social crises. The poet as artist is the predominant persona in these poems.

Using images culled from mythology and quotations from Yeats, Wordsworth, and others, Heaney emphasizes his relationship to other writers, but he moves beyond literature to the visual arts as well. The link between writer and visual artist is the image, which can embody both idea and feeling. While *North* does not offer solutions to the problems in Ulster, its images describe them in graphic terms. The opening line of "Fosterage" in Part Two, "Description is revelation," gives us the key to these poems and to the bonds between writers and other artists. Detached but still involved, committed to a cause but not necessarily narrowly par-

1. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), p. 219.

tisan, an artist can create images to describe the complexities of a problem. The work of art offers an imaginative vision which detaches events from the ordinary world of everyday social affairs to place them in a more universal context.

As Edna Longley has noted, quoting several of Heaney's phrases, "a number of his comments on poetry nudge it towards the visual arts."² In *North*, Heaney often focuses on painters who faced problems similar to his, thus showing how the imaginative vision created in European works of art survives as a response to social unrest. If we examine *North*, we can see how this theme continually links individual poems and the two parts of the volume, but this would require an extensive study. An analysis of the two dedicatory poems, however, where Heaney connects the poet to painters and painting, will illustrate his belief in the value of the artist to society. Though not always seen as integrally connected to the themes and structure of the rest of *North*, these dedicatory poems introduce images and ideas developed throughout the volume.

A relationship between Ireland and Northern Europe is established in "Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication." The first of these, "Sunlight," dedicated to his aunt Mary, is in many ways a typical Heaney poem. Set in a kitchen in Mossbawn, his boyhood home, the poem describes the afternoon ritual of a woman baking bread. The poem ticks off minutes: "Now she dusts the board / with a goose's wing, / now sits, broad-lapped," but Heaney suggests the timeless nature of this work. Presenting an image of a localized setting, the poet evokes its broader applications. The poem begins with a description of a "sunlit absence" and ends with an image comparing love to a "tinsmith's scoop / sunk past its gleam / in the meal bin." Drawing on the symbolism of light, Heaney exposes the virtue of love, here buried beneath the ordinary activities of a country afternoon.

As a poem of dedication, "Sunlight" may not at first appear to be closely related to the poems in Parts I and II, but such is not the case. Those familiar with Heaney's work will see the scoop as a variation of the digging image repeated in his poetry, associated first with the relationship between farmer-father and poet-son, and later with the bog bodies, suggesting not only different kinds of work but also a treasure uncovered in digging. Heaney shows over and over again in his poetry that beneath the ordinary, transient, minute-by-minute life of the Irish people and landscape, one can find the permanent. In "Sunlight," the image of Mary Heaney and her bread embody a love that radiates to fill up the afternoon. In the context of the rest of *North*, where we see so much of the darker side of human nature in the violence and hatred of Ulster, this poem establishes the importance of love as a permanent human value, not

2. Edna Longley, "North: 'Inner Emigre' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Chester Springs, Pa.: Dufour Editions, 1985), p. 80.

always recognized. Significantly, it contrasts the stillness and peace of a private Mossbawn afternoon to the guns and bombs of the public Belfast streets.

While "Sunlight" details one of the beautiful daily rituals of Irish country life, the domestic scene has broader applications. In the larger framework of Northern Europe, we should see Mary Heaney as one of a long line of European peasants whose daily survival depends on the kitchen rituals Heaney describes. Picturing the passage of minutes on a long afternoon, the poem freezes an image of local life into a timeless picture of love quietly given and understood.

The companion dedicatory poem, "The Seed Cutters," reinforces Heaney's message. While "Sunlight" describes one woman's afternoon baking, "The Seed Cutters" opens with an image of Irish potato farmers and a centuries-old custom: "They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel, / You'll know them if I can get them true." The allusion to Breughel, whose paintings of sixteenth-century Flemish life represent an earlier "Northern" attempt to express in art the beauty and ritual of peasant life, is an address to a mentor, a kindred spirit. When Heaney calls upon an artistic ancestor to witness his description of Irish peasants carrying out their "calendar customs," we can link this poem to "Sunlight" and see Mary Heaney and the seed cutters as links in a long line of country people, and as figures out of a Breughel artistic tradition as well. Noting in Heaney's images the minute details of color and form ("whitened nails," "reddening stove," "helmeted pump"), it is not hard to imagine the same Mossbawn scene as a painting. Keeping Breughel in mind, we can appreciate Heaney's statement that the poetry he loves is "some kind of image or visionary thing."³

While one might argue that the allusions to Breughel deal with technique and are not directly related to the social themes of *North*, the address and dedication to Breughel are significant in many ways, particularly in the links that can be made between him and Heaney. With his emphasis on native landscape, Breughel pioneered the Northern artists who painted from nature rather than borrowing landscape scenes from the work of earlier masters. More specifically with regard to Heaney's poem, among Breughel's most innovative and successful paintings is a series depicting Flemish peasants in naturalistic landscapes at different seasons of the year. These paintings focus on the interaction of the human and natural worlds, a predominant emphasis in much of Heaney's work as well. The Flemish painter was criticized for making peasants the subjects of his paintings, especially since his travels to Italy and exposure to the masters of the Southern Renaissance might have influenced him to adopt the classical ideals and more "elevated subjects" of the Italian painters. True to his own experience, however, Breughel painted what he saw

3. John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 61.

in his own country, immortalizing in the process the peasant class not considered proper subjects for art. In so doing, Breughel revolutionized painting and became the leading Northern painter of his age, a true progenitor of the Northern Irish poet who calls upon him hundreds of years later, struggling to create his vision of the Irish people's relationship to the land and the seasons. "Sunlight" and "The Seed Cutters," two of Heaney's most beautiful poems, testify to the same kind of trust in native experience and the value of the local image to express universal themes.

Heaney often records, in *North* as well as in poems that precede and follow this volume, the peculiar problems of an Irish writer working within the English literary tradition. Breughel's willingness to hold his own against the tradition of the Italian masters, while still benefitting from what they had taught him, parallels Heaney's numerous attempts to introduce the language and imagery of Ireland into poems written in English. In the many poems in *North* which explore the etymology of Irish words and place names, Heaney exposes the beauty of the Irish language. But "The Seed Cutters" is a Shakespearean sonnet, modeled on a form developed in Elizabethan England, during a time in which many of the contemporary problems described in *North* took root. Heaney's choice of the Shakespearean sonnet, juxtaposed with other poems in which he complains about the assault of "iambic drums of English" on the Irish language, demonstrates the complexity and ambiguity of his response to the problems in Northern Ireland. More importantly, it contrasts artistic sharing with the political divisiveness portrayed in many other images in *North*.⁴ The relationship between Heaney, Breughel, and Shakespeare lies in the realm of art; born five years before Breughel died, Shakespeare gave Heaney the poetic form just as Breughel taught him the power of the visual image. These two legacies from the Renaissance counteract the terrible political inheritance from Elizabethan England which a good many of the poems in *North* describe. While on one level *North* illustrates the political differences that divide people and races, on another, particularly as this is revealed in Heaney's allusions to and borrowings from his artistic ancestors, the poems show how shared values bind them together.

The links between Heaney and Breughel do not end here, however, for the religious strife that Heaney highlights in *North* echoes the sixteenth-century Protestant-Catholic conflict revealed in the iconography of some of Breughel's paintings. Ironically, the Protestant Breughel's suspicions of Catholic Spain's crusade against the Northern Protestants counterpoints some of the Catholic Heaney's descriptions in *North* of Ulster Protestants. Helen Gardner, discussing Breughel's famous painting "The

4. In "Ocean's Love to Ireland," Heaney borrows again from the Renaissance when he uses the tercet form of Raleigh's "Ocean's Love to Cynthia," for an ironic poem about the English domination of the Irish. Discussing his admiration for poets like Spenser and Sir John Davies, who was "Elizabeth's Attorney-General with special responsibility for the Plantation of Ulster," Heaney says: "Obviously, these incidental facts do not interfere with my responses to their poetry" (*Preoccupations*, p. 35).

Peasant Dance,” suggests that if we examine the “rustic paradise” of this work carefully, we can read the painting as Breughel’s commentary on the lack of religious fervor at the celebration of a saint’s festival.⁵ In some of the poems in *North*, Heaney likewise portrays the immoral behavior carried out in Northern Ireland under the banner of religion. When Heaney addresses Breughel, then, the hundreds of years and the different cultures and religions that separate them become less important than the many threads that link them. While both struggle to express in images a vision of their own time and place, Breughel appropriately witnesses Heaney’s efforts to “compose the frieze / With all of us there, our anonymities.”

Imitating Breughel, Heaney describes the Irish seed cutters with beautiful visual images in Renaissance-inspired language:

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. . . .

The image of the buried potatoes reminds us of the tin scoop buried in the meal bin, reinforcing the need to see beyond the surface to the meaning of these age-old rituals. In a wonderful variation of the light imagery of “Sunlight,” “The Seed Cutters” describes the milky gleam of the white potato with a “dark watermark” at its center. If “Sunlight” shows us a gleam of light in the center of the darkness of the North, the dark watermark in the white potato suggests the darker side of the history of the Irish peasant which the potato has come to symbolize. Like Breughel’s, Heaney’s images offer multiple meanings. We can connect the dark watermark with other images throughout *North* which describe violence and hatred not only in Northern Ireland, but also in Northern Europe. Heaney develops the light and dark symbolism throughout *North* to establish links between the poems and create a structural unity. The light we see in the first poem is carried through *North* to the “sparks” described in the final poem, “Exposure”; the imagery of darkness reappears often as well.

These dedicatory poems, then, focus on the artist’s ability to create images that transcend the limitations of time. The slow motion action of the seed cutters reminds us of the minutes ticking off in “Sunlight”: “With time to kill / They are taking their time.” While this image describes the pace at which the seed cutters work, it also suggests that they are “taking their time” in another sense, playing out their short scene in the long historical drama of European peasant life. Like their Irish forebears and those Flemish peasants Breughel painted hundreds of years before, the seed cutters and Mary Heaney work to the “tick of two clocks”: the daily

5. Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 619. This painting was also the inspiration for William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Dance.”

routine of “lazily halving each root” or hands scuffling over the bakeboard are moments in the long history of time within which Heaney sets them. But if he can, like Breughel, “get them true” in his image, the poet can make the particular universal, the local image revealing “our anonymities.”

The value attributed to the artist’s image in these two poems in dedication recurs throughout *North* where Heaney juxtaposes images of violence and hostility drawn from his personal experience with those from the art and artifacts of the past. The funerals for “neighbourly” murders, the sound of the Orange drums in Tyrone, the punishment of young girls in contemporary Ulster all testify to the distrust between people in Northern Ireland. These, however, have their precedents in European history, many expressed in works of art. In “Summer 1969,” Heaney alludes to Goya’s terrifying masterpiece, “Shootings of the Third of May,” a painting which depicts the Spanish response to Napoleonic invasions in the first years of the nineteenth century. Again Heaney’s choice of painter and painting is relevant. Not only is Goya addressing the political problems of his day, but also “Shootings of the Third of May” graphically portrays the brutality of the French suppression of resistance in Madrid, an obvious parallel to the numerous Irish risings put down by the English.

In another poem about invaders, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” the artifacts in a Dublin museum recall the early Scandinavian invasions of Ireland but also give evidence of a Viking artistic tradition: drawings incised on a piece of bone preserved into modern times. Here the poet identifies with a young child who had tried to create images on “trial pieces, / the craft’s mystery / improvised on bone,” even though the artifact reminds him clearly of the Viking assault on the Irish. The speaker imagines an artistic line from that early carver to the modern poet, the carver’s line inspiring the poet’s line, both working on artistic “trial pieces” in the midst of raids and political violence. “Trial” here yields various suggestions, from the Northern artist’s to the Northern prisoner’s world.

If we see the patterns developed in these images, we can begin to understand the larger framework of *North* and the connections established between the dedicatory poems, the two major divisions, and individual poems. The descriptions of the bog bodies in Part I remind us that the situation in Ulster has a precedent in early Northern religious rites. Heaney’s images, however, emphasize these bog bodies as works of art. In “Punishment,” the speaker calls himself an “artful voyeur” fascinated by the preserved body of the young girl from Windeby whom he had first seen in a photograph in P. V. Glob’s book.⁶ This young girl, the Grauballe Man, and the Bog Queen have become beautiful artifacts, hardened into statues, as it were, images from another age. Their

6. P. V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, R. L. Bruce-Mitford, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969).

transformation into works of art embodies the horror of their deaths; the Grauballe Man, like another artistic masterpiece, the Dying Gaul, "hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity." The statue of the Dying Gaul, a brutally realistic portrayal of the suffering inflicted on the Gauls by barbarian invaders, we know only through a Roman copy, the image passed on from one artist and to another. Both the Dying Gaul, significantly the victim of invaders, and the bog bodies are fitting emblems for the poems in *North* where the poet struggles to create a work of art, an image to express the beauty and the horror of the North that he sees.

In another description of the bog people, "Strange Fruit," Heaney, as he has done in "Sunlight," creates a poem which suggests a painting. A decapitated head reminds us of a still life with its emphasis on color, shape, and texture: "Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd. / Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth." This head, in many senses of the word, a still life, is a fitting subject for an "artful voyeur" experiencing "What had begun to feel like reverence." Heaney's response here is not, as some might maintain, a confusing attraction to violence; it is admiration for a beautiful human head which has become, through time and nature, an emblem generating strong feelings indeed. The effect of the head's beauty on the poet is as significant a theme as the historical cause of the decapitation, and, as Dillon Johnston has suggested, Heaney is as "fascinated by his own embalming powers as by the mummified victim, who also provides a metaphor for his art."⁷

The head in "Strange Fruit" is part of a larger pattern of imagery dealing with art and artistry. In his images of skulls and skeletons, Heaney created emblems for the violence in Northern Ireland and the broader historical Northern culture within which Ireland fits. Typically, Heaney also found many artistic precedents for these images. Included in *North* is a translation of Baudelaire's poem, "The Digging Skeleton," which begins with a description of drawings in books found in "forgotten crates" on "dusty quays." The poem compares these books to corpses rotting in graves, revealing their images when passersby pick them up. Heaney's description of the books, "yellow like mummies," links them to the bog people, the metaphoric fusion of books and humans suggesting the value of uncovering a buried image.

The illustrations of skeletons that the speaker has seen, the poem tells us, are "touched with an odd beauty." Prototypical images, they inspire Heaney, whose translation connects them, in the context of *North*, to the Irish farmers he introduced in "The Seed Cutters":

Your skinned muscles like plaited sedge
And your spines hooped towards the sunk edge
Of the spade, my patient ones

7. Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 149.

Tell me, as you labor hard
 To break this unrelenting soil,
 What barns are there for you to fill?
 What farmer dragged you from the boneyard?

If the seed cutters of the dedicatory poem illustrate the ritual of preparing for a new harvest, the digging skeletons show us the other side of this body-bending labor, the daily drudgery of hard work which in the long history of Ireland has produced a good number of skeletons. The illustrator, Baudelaire, and Heaney preserve these images for us, refusing to let them and what they represent, die.

While Heaney emphasizes the beauty of country life in his allusions to Breughel, his tribute to Baudelaire draws upon the ugly, urban realism of *Fleurs du Mal* with parallels to Belfast. At the same time, there are echoes here of the images of the bog bodies and of the effect of the illustrations in Glob's book on Heaney's images. The message we get from Heaney's translation of Baudelaire's description of illustrations in an old book is that human suffering never ends, small consolation for those seeking to solve the problems in Northern Ireland, but a truth that the artistic images of the past reveal to us. Thematic implications suggest a social commentary on a long history of unrewarded hard work, but the emphasis here is also on the skeletons as "emblems of the truth" passed on from one artist to another. "Some traitor breath revives our clay," the skeletons complain, as Heaney, translating the French poet's words, highlights the universal significance of their plight.

The skeleton, in many variations, recurs frequently throughout *North*: bog bodies, decapitated heads, old bones, sleeping giants in the landscape, the confined victims of the Ulster war. In this framework, a translation of Baudelaire's poem, and the effect of images the speaker had seen in a book, cannot be overemphasized. Heaney's depiction of Baudelaire's "Flayed men and skeletons," "Sad gang of apparitions," "Death's lifer's, hauled from the narrow cell" appear again and again in *North*. The narrow cells in which these skeletons live suggest Northern Ireland's prisons, but the cell image also shows up in "Bone Dreams" in the etymology of a word, "Bone-house: / a skeleton / in the tongue's / old dungeons," and again in the nightmare cell of the poet-speaker in "The Unacknowledged Legislator's Dream." Even the "small outline" of the young carver in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" might be a "cage / or trellis to conjure in." On the most obvious levels, these cages and cells graphically describe the war in Northern Ireland, but they also suggest the poet or artist's plight in trying to make sense of social disorder. The image borrowed from *Hamlet*, "skull-handler, parablister, / smeller of rot / in the state," acknowledges the value of Shakespearean imagery while it also allows Heaney to express the difficulty of writing about Northern Ireland. These images help to connect Part I of *North* with Part II where Heaney tests his own experiences against Shelley's defense of the poet as the unacknowledged legislator of the world.

The skeletons in Heaney's translation of Baudelaire lament that they "do not fall like autumn leaves / To sleep in peace" but are revived again and again to tell their story. These words should be kept in mind when we read the last poem in *North*, where the poet walks through fallen leaves, "Escaped from the massacre / Taking protective coloring / From bole and bark." Like the skeletons, however, he is not at peace, "neither internee nor informer." The title, "Exposure," yields multiple meanings, not the least of which leads us back to the initial address to Breughel: "You'll know them if I can get them true." Getting them true represents a type of exposure. Though the speaker here suggests that he has missed "The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose," we need to be careful about dismissing what has been achieved. Strategic retreats do not always signal defeat, and one often needs to become an "inner emigre." When the poet here contrasts "blowing up these sparks / For their meagre heat" with the comet's "million tons of light," we are aware of Heaney's frustration at not being able to offer a solution for the problems that he sees. But part of the "exposure" here involves the realization that there are no easy answers to the problems *North* describes; the poet cannot see the "diamond absolutes." We must, therefore, place "Exposure" in the context of the rest of *North*. While at the end the speaker is looking for the light of comets and meteorites, he has suggested at the beginning that the "gleam" of the simple tinsmith's scoop can help us understand the meaning of love.

In "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," near the end of *North*, Heaney deplores the television generation's perversion of image and language, declaring "for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable." Yet in a later poem, Heaney says of Goya, "he painted with his fists and elbows, flourished / The stained cape of his heart as history charged." Such images are crucial to our understanding of *North*; with a paintbrush in his hand, rather than a weapon, Goya made his feelings known and still, in 1969, hanging in the Prado, the beauty of his work and the terror of his message are clear. In discussing the poetry of George Mackay Brown, Heaney claims that "the beauty of the art stands against the mess of the actual, its timeless images and archetypes, its corn and wine and waves and furrows are sacramental, cyclic alternatives to the profanity, vulgarity and decay he sees in contemporary life."⁸ There is probably no better description of what Heaney himself has tried to do in *North*. In "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," the speaker recoils on being asked for his "views / On the Irish thing." While he argues that the cliches and the zoom lenses of television cameras distort life in Northern Ireland, *North* shows us other images to give a truer picture, and is ultimately a very artistic but ambivalent answer from a poet who could not say nothing. Most importantly, in his own image patterns and in his interrelated images of other poets and the visual arts, Heaney illustrates that description can be revelation.

8. Seamus Heaney, "The Poetry of Richard Murphy," *Irish University Review*, 7 (1977), 18-30.

Mary Brown argues that, in *North*, art “loses out to life” because Heaney has doubts about himself and his own art. In “Grauballe Man,” she says, “Heaney places art and moral judgment in opposite pans of the scales; the corpse is either an object of beauty out of which a work of art is made or it is a human creature whose fate arouses our compassion or indignation.”⁹ But the major theme of *North* is that art and life are bound together and that the Grauballe Man is both an object of beauty and a human creature, art and moral judgment fused. The poet persona in *North* continually confronts such basic truths which explains the questioning and doubting voice which surfaces throughout the volume. On the other hand, Heaney’s images in *North* counterbalance the tone of the doubter’s voice as the poet, like Breughel, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Yeats, Goya, and other artists with whom he identifies, combines the “beauty of art” with the “mess of the actual.”

9. Mary P. Brown, “Seamus Heaney and *North*,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, LXX (Winter, 1981), 289–96.