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Corporeal Images: A tool to Aesthetics of Macabre in Seamus Heaney's poem Nagendra S Gangola

Research Scholar in M.B.G.P.G College, Haldwani, India

Abstract

Seamus Heaney is widely recognized as one of the major poets of the 20th century. A native of Northern Ireland, Heaney was raised in County Derry, and later lived for many years in Dublin. He was the author of over 20 volumes of poetry and criticism, and edited several widely used anthologies. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."

Corporeal images as cultural and historical critiques are often related to landscapes in Heaney's poetry. Land is imagined as a place where histories of atrocity and sacrifice are inscribed and preserved. In 'At a Potato Digging' for instance, the text shifts between a modern agrarian landscape and images from the famine of the 1840s. However, it can also be argued that although Heaney's work is full of images of death and dying, it is at the same time deeply rooted in life, endlessly metaphorical, it holds out an offer of endlessness, of cyclical history, of eternity. Heaney's poems are ultimately peace poems, intensifying the sense of beauty in contrast to the horror of violence and the pathos of needless death. This paper is an attempt to bring out the elements which give a sense of macabre at very first appearance but unfolds plethora of aesthetic beauty embedded in the poems of Seamus Heaney.

Key Words: Corporeal images, Aesthetic of Violence, Beauty, Landscapes, Metaphors.

Introduction: Although much has been said about bodies in recent social and post-colonial theory they continue to be problematic for literary criticism. Corporeality resists representation because experiences such as pain only affect individuals. Maud Ellmann proposes this when she says that 'it is impossible to feel another person's pain', the sensation is one which 'demonstrate the savage loneliness of bodily experience'. Representations of bodies are, then, inevitably ambivalent in literature and can be understood as another instance in which a gap between signifier and signified perpetuates. The importance of corporeality is embedded in Heaney's poetry from his first collections and a disparity between words and flesh prevails. 'This opposes the significance of Jesus' body in the Eucharist as understood by Catholicism. According to Scripture, Jesus is the word made flesh; during the sacrament of the Eucharist the Priest's annunciation of his words and body and the community's participation in communion marks an ultimate embodiment of them within Christ.

Corporeal images and Aesthetic of Macabre: An Analysis: In 'At a Potato Digging', for instance, the text shifts between a modern agrarian landscape and images from the famine of the 1840s. An image of 'live skulls, blind-eyed' is used firstly to describe the potatoes and then the starving: 'Live skulls, blind eyed, balanced on/ wild higgledy skeletons'. The text intersects victim and 'blighted root', and inscribes land with a permanent stench of that blight: 'and where potato diggers are, /you still smell the running sore'. Skeletal bodies of famine victims are repeated in 'For the Commander of the Eliza' (1966, 21), which follows 'At a Potato Digging' in *Death of a Naturalist*

"Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills.
Six wrecks of bone and pallid, tautened skin." [1]

Victims' bodies are often conflated with nature through metaphor. This is a common motif in Heaney, and is exemplary in his bog people poems. 'Requiem for the Croppies' from *Door into the Dark* continues this theme; an image of death becomes a metaphor of regeneration:

"Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave." [2]

Here Heaney draws on a popular history of the rebellion on Vinegar Hill, County Wexford, in 1798, playing on 'a reported fact that when the rebels died they were buried in common graves', and the barley which they carried in their pockets to eat subsequently grew out of those graves (O'Brien 2002,16). Heaney thus uses a reportedly literal historical moment and adopts it as a metaphorical image. This image reflects a common motif in Irish literature that is particularly notable from the Aisling tradition onwards: a rejuvenation of land through violence. Heaney engages with this tradition to suggest a need for continual reclamation and reinterpretation of history. The personification of nature in 'Requiem for the Croppies' posits the landscape in an attitude of judgement: the croppies' blood is incorporated into the landscape; humanising and affronting it ('The hillside blushed'). [3]

Wintering Out follows *Door into the Dark*; many poems in this collection contain corporeal images which point towards the bog body poems of *North*. Indeed, *Wintering Out* is prefaced by a poem which is subsequently integrated into 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' in *North* :

"This morning from a dewy motorway
I saw the new camp for the internees:
A bomb had /left a crater of fresh clay
In the roadside, and over in the trees

Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.
There was that white mist you get on a low ground
And it was *deja-vu*, some film made
Of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up
On a wall downtown. Competence with pain,
Coherent miseries, a bite and sup,
We hug our little destiny again." 49-60 [4]

Similar to the reference to internment in *Stations'* introduction, *Wintering Out* is underpinned by an uncomfortable despair invoked by Northern Ireland's Troubles. Andrews proposes that the last stanza questions the quality of life that is possible amid such conditions. The rest of the poems in the book have to be read in the context of this numbed despair.

As 'A Northern Hoard' unfolds, it shifts away from bodily metaphors, focusing instead on archaeological motifs, however, the first three poems specifically point to a corporeality of violence. Interestingly, because he is not directly involved in any physical conflict, it is primarily the speaker's body that is foregrounded. In 'Roots' he is haunted by sounds of atrocity: 'the din/ Of gunshot, siren and clucking gas' (6-8) [5]. The final two stanzas relate this to physicality:

"I'll dream it for us before dawn
When the pale sniper steps down
And I approach the shrub.
I've soaked by moonlight in tidal blood

A mandrake, lodged human fork,
Earth sac, limb of the dark;
And I wound its damp smelly loam.

And stop my ears against the scream.” (13-20) [6]

The speaker describes making a barricade. By appropriating natural materials and ‘tidal blood’, he imaginatively blocks out the external world from his body. The body thus becomes a place of sanctity where the speaker can attempt to protect himself from ‘the scream’.

‘No Man's Land’ is the second poem of ‘A Northern Hoard’. In it the speaker’s attempted escape is further disrupted. An image of shelter is introverted to become part of that which the speaker wishes to transgress:

“I deserted, shut out
Their wounds ‘fierce awning,
Those palms like streaming webs.” (1-3) [7]

Because wounds are described as having a ‘fierce awning’ an image of covering is projected onto them. Thus there is a twofold image of exclusion: the speaker shutting these images out and the wounds sheltering themselves. Imagery of an inverted shelter is emphasised by a reference to hands in which an allusion to Christ's sacrifice reminds the reader of the Troubles’ religious hypocrisy. At the same time, the stigmata points ironically to a communal redemption which sacrifices supposedly secure. Thus a denial of victims’ individuality, which Parker criticises Heaney for, is central to the social critique foregrounded in ‘A Northern Hoard’. It is the communal significance of victimage itself which voids victims of their individuality.

Paradoxically, by metaphorically projecting the whole space of violence as an image of personal injury, the second stanza furthers this emphasis:

“Why do I unceasingly
Arrive late to condone
Infected sutures
And ill-knit bone?” (4-7) [8]

The speaker’s relationship with this violence is imagined as an attempt to resolve or mend a rift. Corporeality is personalised through images of ‘infected sutures’ and ‘ill-knit bone’ which localise the space of damage. The use of ‘their’ in the first stanza affects a note of specificity. However, there is no implication of who exactly these men are, so they do not explicitly represent any particular side of the conflict in which they are caught up. These factors allow the text to shift its focus onto a description of a single body; the plurality of ‘their wounds’ is conflated into an image of one body, prefiguring a similar conflation in ‘Act of Union’. ‘Suture’ is pertinent here because it suggests not only a surgical joining of a wound, but also a junction ‘forming an immovable articulation’. Thus ‘No Man's Land’ renders victims of violence as belonging to one and the same body, the injuries are self-contained and self-inflicted: one social body attacking and violating its own margins.

Heaney's concern with violence is fundamentally engaged with relationships between victims and spectators. In the third poem of ‘A Northern Hoard’ – ‘Stump’ - the speaker imagines himself as both part of the social body projected in ‘No Man's Land’, and as external to it: ‘What do I say if they wheel out their dead? / I'm cauterized, a black stump of home’. Here, the speaker distances himself from the dead by using the third-person plural, yet aligns himself with violence by describing himself as 'cauterized'. The act of cauterising implies a surgical operation which deadens infected tissue in a wound; the speaker thus projects himself as both part of the infected wound and absolved from it through the cauterising process, his place within 'home' is passive and thus impotent. The influence of this dilemma is prominent throughout *Wintering Out*.

Corporeal union is also an explicit part of the imagery in ‘Mother of the Groom’ from *Wintering Out* in this poem, the speaker imagines the emotions of a groom's mother. Her son's development into manhood is metaphorically History and Union captured within an image of his mother bathing him as a baby, thus evoking a sense of maternal care still permeating her feelings for the groom:

Hands in her voided lap,
She hears a daughter welcomed.

It's as if he kicked when lifted
And slipped her soapy hold. (5-8) [9]

The final stanza carries over this soap imagery and again conflates temporalities, but the focus shifts from parental to marital relations:

Once the soap would ease off
The wedding ring
That's bedded forever now
In her clapping hand. (9-12) [10]

Once young, the mother was able to take off her wedding ring, and could, therefore, imaginatively evade the union that it symbolises. In age, the ring is 'bedded forever now/ In her clapping hand'. This can be interpreted as suggesting marriage entails constraint and entrapment. Alternatively, this image can be read as a shift in the ring's signification. Initially it symbolises union, as it will for the new bride and groom. But for the mother of the groom her ring has become an extension of herself, embedded in her finger. This inscribes onto the poem a temporal development from marital union as an ideal of physical union (as well as a union of two souls) to an embodiment and extension of each individual's corporeality.

In North the relationship between stasis and action is engaged with more explicitly, and this becomes a central and recurring theme in Heaney's poetry to date. 'The Unacknowledged Legislators Dream' projects the poet's work as a physical struggle in which his efforts are imagined as a physical attempt to dislodge 'state and statute'. However, the reference to dreaming, and the poet's eventual jailing undermine his potential physicality:

In the cell, I wedge myself with outstretched arms in the
Comer and heave, I jump on the concrete flags to test
Them. Were those your eyes just now at the hatch?

North closes with 'Exposure', a poem which emphasises a relationship between the speakers internal confrontation about his relationship with Northern Ireland and 'the massacre':

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,
The comet's pulsing rose. (29- 40) [11]

Ending North in this way frames the whole collection within a context of guilt about complacency. This focus continues into Field Work where the will to act is set in tension with a conscious awareness of the violence and violation action would augment. The framing poems of this collection, 'Oysters' and 'Ugolino' foreground the significance of this tension throughout Field Work. 'Oysters' ends with a will for action that is marked and undercut because it renders that desire through a grammatical designation for a linguistic expression of action rather than action itself: 'I ate the day/ Deliberately, that its tang/ Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb' (24-26) [12]. It is, however, in relation to the bog people poems of North that this dilemma is most thoroughly explicated and opened up to a self-referential critique. Through their emphasis on victims' bodies and voyeuristic speakers, these poems engage with questions of social passivity, and render what is active within this.

Conclusion: Seamus Heaney carves out a multilayered presentation of Aestheticism through his varied corporeal images. In 'Act of Union' the male female bodies are presented as Britain and

Ireland. The image of pregnant woman depicts Ireland and its conflicts. Corporeal union is also an explicit part of the imagery in 'Mother of the Groom' from *Wintering Out*. In this poem, the speaker imagines the emotions of a groom's mother.

On one hand Heaney represents the executed bodies in 'Bog Poems' stripping out the macabre happenings with them connecting with the essence of Ireland. At the same time the corporeal images used by Seamus Heaney connects past with the present exploring beautifully the real conflict of Northern Ireland. No doubt on the surface the poems seem to radiate sense of macabre but there lies a great aesthetic value beneath the lines of his poems.

Notes:

- [1]. 'At Potato Digging' by Seamus Heaney, lines 15-17
- [2]. 'Requiem for the Croppies' by Seamus Heaney, lines 10-14
- [3]. 'Requiem for the Croppies' by Seamus Heaney, line 12
- [4]. 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing'(North) by Seamus Heaney , Part IV lines.49-60
- [5]. 'Roots' by Seamus Heaney,lines .6-8
- [6]. 'Roots' by Seamus Heaney,lines.13-20...last stanza
- [7]. 'No Man's Land'('A Northern Hoard') by Seamus Heaney,lines. 1-3
- [8]. 'No Man's Land'('A Northern Hoard') by Seamus Heaney,lines. 4-8
- [9]. 'Mother of the Groom'from *Wintering Out* by seamus Heaney , lines. 5-8
- [10]. 'Mother of the Groom'from *Wintering Out* by seamus Heaney , lines. 9-12
- [11]. 'Exposure' (North) by Seamus Heaney, lines. 29-40
- [12]. 'Oysters' by Seamus Heaney , lines . 24-26

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- 15)Heaney,Seamus *North*, London, Faber & Faber.1975.Print
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- 17) www.google.com
