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“LOST, UNHAPPY AND AT HOME”  
– SEAMUS HEANEY’S NORTH

My paper deals with the work of Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), the most distinguished contemporary Irish poet, whose development as a writer is believed to reflect that of Ireland over the past fifty years. My paper is concerned with the themes that most frequently recur in Heaney’s work, namely, the past and the complex matters of ancestry, nationality, religion, history and politics. In my paper, I examine Heaney’s depiction of the conflict in Northern Ireland and I analyse two of his poems: “Casualty”, from a collection of poems called *Field Work* (1979) and “The Tollund Man”, from a collection of poems called *Wintering Out* (1972). In “Casualty”, Heaney makes a direct reference to the events of Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972) and in “The Tollund Man”, he draws a parallel between the sacrificial victims of Iron Age Jutland and the victims of the ethno-political conflict in contemporary Northern Ireland.

KEYWORDS: Seamus Heaney, poetry, Catholicism, the conflict in Northern Ireland, Heaney’s views on the Troubles

Out there in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home.  
 (“The Tollund Man” 1994: 46)

My paper is devoted to the work of Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), who is widely believed to be the most important Irish poet since W. B. Yeats and one of the finest contemporary poets (B. Morrison 1983: 11). Especially, since being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1995), he has come to be considered one of the most important English-language poets in the world.

In his writing, Heaney explores a wide selection of themes. In his earlier works, for example, in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), he concentrates on rural life and his rural upbringing as well as family life. Seamus Deane has commented on Heaney’s early poems by saying that, although “political echoes are audible in *Death of a Naturalist* and in *Door into the Dark*, there is no consciousness of politics as such, and certainly no political consciousness until *Wintering Out* and *North*” (S. Deane, as quoted in: B. O’Donoghue 2009: 3). In his later volumes, Heaney makes a thorough analysis of the past and the complex

matters of ancestry, nationality, religion, history and politics. Eugene O'Brian, in his book entitled *Seamus Heaney. Creating Irelands of the Mind*, draws the reader's attention to Heaney's development as a poet and shows how over the past fifty years Heaney's perception of his own identity has evolved. O'Brian contends that Heaney's progress parallels that of Ireland herself, and that he has moved from a homely and "relatively simplistic and conventional perspective into a far more cosmopolitan and complex view of his own identity" (2002: 4-5):

So, to return to the question with which I began: this book justifies itself by suggesting reasons for the importance of the work of Seamus Heaney in terms of the Ireland of today. I would suggest that Heaney's development, as I will chart it in this study, parallels and anticipates that of the Irish psyche over the past fifty years. [...] His developing writing, encompassing, as it does, influences from different cultures, languages and texts, enacts a movement from "prying into roots" and "fingering slime" to an embrace of different aspects of European and world culture which has strong parallels with the development of Ireland itself.

From being a backward, inward-looking country, obsessed with the past and with a sense of inferiority, Ireland has begun, in the words of Robert Emmet, to take her place among the nations of the earth. By this, I do not just mean in economic terms, as evidenced by the much-lauded Celtic Tiger phenomenon. I also mean in cultural, social and intellectual terms, as we become more confident of our place in Europe, and of our position as a bridge between Europe and America.

Collections of poems such as *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), *The Spirit Level* (1995) and *Electric Light* (2001) all belong to the second phase of Heaney's writing.

My paper examines Heaney's depiction of the ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland and I analyse two of his poems, namely, "Casualty", from a collection of poems called *Field Work* (1979) and "The Tollund Man", from a collection of poems called *Wintering Out* (1972). In "Casualty", Heaney makes a direct reference to the events of Bloody Sunday, and in "The Tollund Man", he draws a parallel between the sacrificial victims of Iron Age Jutland and the victims of the ethno-political conflict in contemporary Northern Ireland. In my paper, I also try to show how the poet understands the concept of evil. In Heaney's view, there is no connection between an individual's background, i.e. his or her place of origin, nationality, race and religion and his or her inclination to do evil deeds – wickedness is simply an inherent element of human nature.

A proper understanding of Heaney's poetry requires a reference to his life and for that reason, I shall provide the reader with a few biographical details from his life. Heaney was born and grew up on a small farm called Mossbawn, which is located between Castledawson and Toomebridge in County Derry, Northern Ireland, and there was little to suggest that his career would take him in the direction it did (B. Morrison 1983: 13). Heaney's parents did not have any formal education (Heaney's father was a cattle dealer and farmer) and they were Catholics in mainly

Protestant Ulster, which meant that they were underprivileged and discriminated against by the Protestant majority. In the days when Heaney was growing up, most Catholics in Northern Ireland were poor, they did not have access to good education, and consequently, their prospects for the future looked bleak.

It should be mentioned here as well that Heaney came from a (pacifically) nationalist family who supported the idea of a united Ireland and he had always strongly underlined the fact that he was Irish and not British although he was born and grew up in Northern Ireland, which is politically part of the United Kingdom. One of the most direct statements he had ever made about the issue occurs in his pamphlet, *An Open Letter* (1983), which was published by the Field Day Theatre Company of which Heaney was a director. In the letter, Heaney strongly protests against his poems being included in the Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), a prestigious anthology, in which his work was given a special place (D. O'Driscoll 2009: 56). To some critics Heaney's adamant refusal: "My passport's green./ No glass of ours was ever raised/ To toast *The Queen*" (Heaney 1983, as quoted in D. O'Driscoll 2009: 56) has "an aggressive Republican tone"<sup>1</sup>, to some it is "a reverse Irish joke, a funny reminder to those in power (at least in publishing) to review their premises"<sup>2</sup>.

Although Heaney sometimes comes close to "flag-waving", as he does, for example, in the above-mentioned letter, he never advocates any forms of violent resistance. In fact, in his poetry Heaney speaks against all forms of fanaticism and intolerance, and the poem entitled "Casualty" seems to illustrate his views best. In the poem, Heaney makes it clear to the reader that he is well-aware of the fact that fanaticism and the spirit of intolerance appear on both sides of the conflict. Blake Morrison in his book entitled *Seamus Heaney* explains that the escalating political crisis in Northern Ireland compelled Heaney to take a stance on the problem, however, he adds as well that the poet had always asserted his right to remain "private" and "apolitical", and that he had always said to those who had urged him to declare his beliefs that they should look for the answers to their questions in his poetry (1983: 15-16):

A final example of Heaney's ambivalence concerns his response to the recent history of Northern Ireland, the crisis of which has placed poets under the compulsion to 'respond'. Heaney has written poems directly about the Troubles as well as elegies for friends and acquaintances who have died in them; he has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest; and he has taken on the mantle of public spokesman, someone looked to for comment and guidance. Yet he has also shown signs of deeply resenting this role, defending the right of poets to be private and apolitical, and questioning the extent to which poetry, however, 'committed', can influence the course of history. His own ambivalence has been reflected by that of his critics: some have praised him for

<sup>1</sup> K. Murphy (1996). "Fenton's Wooden Horse. How the English praise the Irish", <<http://faculty.ithaca.edu/murphyk/docs/Fenton.pdf>>, accessed on 20.11.2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

remaining outside the political arena, others have applauded his participation; some have accused him of not siding sufficiently with Northern Catholic Republican aspirations, others have complained that he has not come out decisively enough against the IRA. There are, in short, important questions to be asked about Heaney's role as a historical witness. His response to those who have urged him to declare his beliefs has been to say simply 'Read the poems': this is not mere evasiveness, for as we shall see Heaney's poetry has quite unmistakable leanings and loyalties, and it is there, as he implies, that we should begin.

Before I analyse the poem "Casualty", I would like to draw the reader's attention to its title. The title of the poem reminds us of a press release or a piece of radio or television news and it sounds cold and dry. The word "casualty" is often used by the mass media to report incidents, such as road accidents, train crashes or bomb attacks. Moreover, in the word "casualty", the etymological echo of the adjective "casual" can be heard: "casual" means resulting from chance, as in "a casual meeting".

As I have already mentioned in my paper, "Casualty" is directly related to the events of Bloody Sunday<sup>3</sup> during which British soldiers fired at a crowd of people who were protesting against the policy of interment (putting people in prison without a trial if they were believed to be members of the IRA) in Derry, Northern Ireland. This is how Heaney describes the incident:

After they shot dead  
The thirteen men in Derry.  
PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said, BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday  
Everybody held  
His breath and trembled.

("Casualty" 1994: 84)<sup>4</sup>

The poem is often perceived by the critics as an elegy for those who died on Bloody Sunday. In the second part of the poem, the countrymen of the men who died on Bloody Sunday organised a funeral, a manifestation for them:

It was a day of cold  
Raw silence, wind-blown  
Surplice and soutane,  
Rained-on, flower-laden  
Coffin after coffin  
Seemed to float from the door

<sup>3</sup> Bloody Sunday (Irish: *Domhnach na Fola*), sometimes called the Bogside Massacre, was an incident on 30 January 1972 in the Bogside area of Derry, Northern Ireland, in which 26 unarmed civil-rights protesters and bystanders were shot by soldiers of the British Army. Thirteen males, seven of whom were teenagers, died immediately or soon after, while the death of another man four-and-a-half months later was attributed to the injuries he received on that day. Two protesters were also injured when they were run down by army vehicles. Five of those wounded were shot in the back. The incident occurred during a Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association march.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, all quotations from Heaney's poems come from S. Barańczak (ed. and trans.) (1994): *Seamus Heaney. 44 wiersze*, Kraków.

Of the packed cathedral  
 Like blossoms on slow water.  
 The common funeral  
 Unrolled its swaddling band,  
 Lapping, tightening  
 Till we were braced and bound  
 Like brothers in a ring.

(“Casualty” 1994: 84)

But perhaps more importantly, the poem is also an elegy for the accidental death of a single person, and it seems that this very death is the concern of the poet. To the crowd, the death of an individual does not matter, as an individual does not fit into any of the following categories: “us and they”, “fellow countrymen and foreigners”, “friends and foes”, “the faithful and traitors”, “community members and apostates” (S. Barańczak 1994: 11). This is how the poet describes the title casualty in the opening lines of the poem:

He would drink by himself  
 [...]
 A dole-kept breadwinner  
 But a natural for work.  
 I loved his whole manner,  
 Sure-footed but too sly,  
 His deadpan sidling tact,  
 His fisherman’s quick eye  
 And turned observant back.

(“Casualty” 1994: 83)

The title casualty is, on the one hand, part of his community, as he is an Irishman and a hard-working fisherman, however, on the other hand, he can also be perceived as a dissenter, as he ignored the curfew that was imposed by his fellow Catholics. As a result, the local community meted out justice to him and he died in a blast when they bombed the pub in which he was drinking. It seems that the fisherman violated the curfew to pursue his thirst for alcohol, “For he drank like a fish/ Nightly, naturally/ Swimming towards the lure/ Of warm lit-up places.” It might also be of interest to the reader that the poem speaks of a drinker that the poet knew although he remains unnamed in the text. He was called Louis O’Neill (J. Jarniewicz 2002: 141) and was killed during the conflicts surrounding the events of Bloody Sunday.

Jerzy Jarniewicz in his book entitled *The Bottomless Centre. The Uses of History in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* makes an interesting comment about the casualty’s, that is, Louis O’Neill’s relationship with his fellow countrymen. He states that although, at a first glance, Louis O’Neill is presented in the poem as an outsider and a person who keeps himself away from public affairs, he is in fact capable of communicating very well with the members of his community using easily recognisable gestures, such as the raising of a thumb or the lifting of the eyes to order a drink:

He would [...]
   
 raise a weathered thumb
   
 Towards the high shelf
   
 Calling another rum
   
 And blackcurrant, without
   
 Having to raise his voice
   
 Or order a quick stout
   
 By a lifting of the eyes
   
 And a discreet dumb-show
   
 Of pulling off the top

(“Casualty” 1994: 82)

Jarniewicz argues that the “silent idiosyncratic gestures” (142) which Louis O’Neill uses to communicate with his community reveal familiarity and adds that such communication can take place only when “there is strong integration between the two, the individual and the community” (142). Consequently, Jarniewicz questions the commonly accepted opinion that Louis O’Neill was a social outcast, and he sees him rather as another victim of the Troubles.

In 1969, Heaney read a book entitled *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* (1969) by Peter Vilhelm Glob (1911-1985), which was a study of ritual killings in Iron Age Jutland (B. O’Donoghue 2009: 4). Peter Vilhelm Glob was a Danish archaeologist who was most noted for his investigations of Denmark’s bog bodies such as the Tollund Man and the Grauballe Man. These were mummified remains of Iron and Bronze Age people found preserved within peat bogs. The book has made a profound impression on Heaney and has, to a large extent, affected his development as a writer: it inspired him to draw parallels between the sacrificial victims of Iron Age Jutland and the victims of the ethno-political conflict in contemporary Northern Ireland.

The dead bodies that Glob describes in his book were very well preserved although they were around 2000 years old. Their mummification was a self-acting process, which was triggered by the specific chemical properties of the peat bogs. Morrison in his book entitled *Seamus Heaney* underlines the fact that it was Glob’s imaginative style of writing and the “excellent” quality of the photographs rather than the Danish museums, which the poet later visited (1973) that made a lasting impression on him and inspired him to write the series of the bog poems (1983: 46):

Glob’s account, though diligently scientific (full of carbon dating, radiographs, and analysis of stomach contents), is vivid and powerful, and Heaney admired its ‘piety towards objects’: ‘When I read [Glob]... I experience feelings normally evinced by the charms of poetry itself.’ Heaney has said that it was the photographs in Glob’s book, rather than the prose, which made the greatest impact on him, but seven of the eight bog poems he wrote are closely related to passages from *The Bog People*: ‘The Tollund Man’ (pp. 21-32), ‘Nerthus’ (p. 26), ‘The Grauballe Man’ (pp. 33-48), ‘Come to the Bower’ (pp. 58-63), ‘Bog Queen’ (pp. 77-8), ‘Punishment’ and ‘Strange Fruit’ (pp. 83-4 and 114). Of the Tollund Man Heaney writes, ‘Some day I will go Aarhus/ To see his peat-brown head’ (*WO*, p. 47): interestingly, it was

not until 1973 that he made this journey, by which time his bog poems were written. It was the skilful narrative and excellent photographs in Glob’s book, rather than the Danish museum exhibits, which fired his imagination.

And indeed in the pictures that illustrate Glob’s book, one can see that even the hair and the fingerprints of the bog people have been preserved to this day (S. Barańczak 1994: 12-13). Moreover, the dead bodies show signs of a brutal death, for example, the Tollund Man had a noose tightened around his neck and the Grauballe Man had his throat cut. Some of the bog people were the victims of ritual killings, some were the victims of assault and robbery, and some were sentenced to death for the offence that they committed. However, the exact reasons for the death of the bog people were not very important to Heaney: the dead bodies of Denmark simply reminded Heaney of the numerous corpses of the “casualties” found in the streets of Belfast and Derry, similarly the peat bogs of Jutland reminded the poet of the peat bogs of Ireland. A ritual killing conducted in Iron Age Jutland was in fact something very similar to an execution carried out on an alleged traitor (“Casualty”) or to the drowning of a woman accused of adultery (“Punishment”<sup>5</sup>) in contemporary Northern Ireland. It seems as well that the deeds were performed with the same amount of sadism on the part of the persecutors.

Heaney wrote his poem entitled “The Tollund Man” shortly before setting off on his trip to Denmark (13). In the first part of the poem<sup>6</sup>, Heaney imagines his visit to the local museum in Aarhus, Denmark, in which the remains of the Tollund Man are on exhibition<sup>7</sup>:

Some day I will go to Aarhus

To see his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eye-lids,  
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country nearby  
Where they dug him out,  
His last gruel of winter seeds  
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for  
The cap, noose and girdle,  
I will stand a long time.  
Bridegroom to the goddess,

(“The Tollund Man” 1994: 44)



Preserved corpse of the Tollund Man on display at the Silkeborg Museum, Denmark

<sup>5</sup> The poem “Punishment” comes from Heaney’s collection of poems called *North* (1975).

<sup>6</sup> Heaney’s poem, “The Tollund Man”, is divided into three parts marked as I, II and III.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Tollund Man is on exhibition at the Silkeborg Museum, Denmark.

In the third stanza of the poem (Part I), we are presented with a description of the Tollund Man's physical appearance from which we learn that he must have been hanged before he was buried in the bog: "Naked except for/ The cap, noose and girdle".

From the simple physical description of the Tollund Man, Heaney moves to more poetic imagery, in which he compares the Tollund Man to the "bridegroom" and the bog to a "goddess". The goddess has taken complete control over her chosen one: "[s]he tightened her torc on him/And opened her fen", yet the result is that his body has remained intact, it has been preserved to this day.

In the fourth stanza of the poem (Part I), Heaney says that the bog has been "working/[the Tollund Man] to a saint's kept body", and it seems that Heaney assigns certain attributes of a saint, such as holiness, innocence and perfection to the Tollund Man. In the next stanza (Part I), the poet refers to the Tollund Man as the "[t]rove", a real treasure, a find for those collecting peat. Perhaps it should be mentioned at this stage that in Catholicism, saints are assigned a special role, they are held in deep veneration and there is a tradition of displaying their dead bodies to the public (e.g. Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, Saint Padre Pio). Interestingly, to the end of the first part of the poem, the connotations of perfection and holiness are replaced by those of sin, as we learn that the Tollund Man's face is "stained": "Now his stained face/ Reposes at Aarhus."

Heaney begins the second part of the poem by saying that "(he) could risk blasphemy" by comparing the bogs of Iron Age Jutland with those of contemporary Northern Ireland. The use of the word "blasphemy" reveals that the poet is aware of "the doctrinal dangers that such an act would entail" (J. Jarniewicz 2002: 75), as for most people it would not be possible to draw any parallels between pre-history and history, paganism and Christianity. Heaney goes on to say that the "cauldron bog" of Iron Age Jutland should be consecrated to become "[o]ur holy ground", perhaps implying that the Irish could make good use of the old tradition in a world governed by Christian values. The above-quoted lines could also be interpreted as an expression of Heaney's identification with paganism and even his readiness to reject Christianity in favour of the Tollund Man's "sad freedom".

The Tollund Man shows that Heaney believed from the beginning that some kind of connection exists between Iron Age sacrifices to the Mother Goddess of Earth and the violent history of Northern Ireland. The description of the corpse in Part I of the poem is followed by a reference in Part II to an outrage committed by Ulster Special Constabulary (USC, commonly called the "B-Specials" or "B Men") during the Anglo-Irish war in the 1920s (75). Ulster Special Constabulary was a British reserve police force in Northern Ireland, which operated between 1920-1970, and they were known for carrying out revenge killings of Catholic civilians in the 1920-22 conflict. The second and third stanzas of Part II describe the killing of "four young brothers" by Protestant paramilitaries; the brothers "had been trailed along the railway lines, over the sleepers" (75) and their remnants had been scattered around:



The scattered, ambushed  
 Flesh of labourers,  
 Stockinged corpses  
 Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth  
 Flecking the sleepers  
 Of four young brothers, trailed  
 For miles along the lines.

(*"The Tollund Man"* 1994: 46)

It should be mentioned here as well that the killing referred to in the above quoted lines might have taken place in contemporary Northern Ireland, as Heaney does not provide us with any historical details that would reveal the circumstances. What is also worth paying attention to is the fact that in Part II of the poem, Heaney conjures up an image of a fragmented world which consists of the scattered parts of the victims' bodies and their belongings: "skin", "teeth" and "stockings". There is a clear implication that the Yeatsian centre has been lost and that the surrounding world is falling apart (76). One could risk saying that in the poem, Heaney contrasts the disintegrating world of the four brothers of Part II, who naturally should have symbolised the unity of fraternal ties, with the integrity of the excavated body of the Tollund Man of Part I. The Tollund Man seems to have grown into the earth and been accepted by it: the Tollund Man's head is "peat-brown", his eye-lids are "mild pods", "winter seeds [had] [c]aked in his stomach".

The poem ends with the famous lines in which the poet speaks of the "old man-killing parishes" in Iron Age Jutland. The use of the word "parish", a symbol of institutionalised Christianity, is a clear indication that the poet is hinting again at the troubling familiarity of ancient violence and the violence of his own place:

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

(*"The Tollund Man"* 1994: 46)

In conclusion, I would like to say that although Heaney had written extensively on the Troubles and had a very emotional attitude to Northern Ireland, he was not a nationalist. In fact, in his poetry Heaney speaks against all forms of fanaticism and intolerance, and he makes it clear to the reader that he is well-aware of the fact that strong prejudices and feelings of hostility are widespread both among the English and the Irish. And it seems that it is precisely this element of eternal evil, deeply rooted in human nature, that makes the poet feel "lost/ [u]nhappy and at home" regardless of the land or the epoch in which he happens to find himself. To end my paper, I would also like to make a personal statement and say that Heaney's

recent and unexpected death (30<sup>th</sup> August 2013) must have left his family and friends as well as his readers in Ireland and abroad feeling personally bereaved. Hopefully, he will always remain to us not only a huge figure internationally, a great ambassador for Ireland and literature, but also a great and generous man.

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