

“My Eye at Turf Level”: Seamus Heaney’s Postmillennial Reconstruction of the Tollund Man

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney’s imaginative revival of the figure of the Tollund Man in his 2006 volume District and Circle reflects the poet’s shift of sensibility that aims to liberate the character from the earlier constraints imposed on it by the poet driven by a sense of communal responsibility. Heaney’s return to the figure indicates a broader change of emphasis in the poet’s understanding of his responsibility. Heaney’s perspective moves from the communally targeted mythic/historical framework of the bog to a personally meaningful historical relation through the scale of individual experience. This shift finally forms an actual basis for the possibility of shared heritage and thus real kinship with the figure.

Key words: Irish, poetry, Heaney, bog motif

Seamus Heaney’s “The Tollund Man” is one of the emblematic poems of the Northern Ireland Troubles due to its ingenious use of the bog motif to suggest a potential parallel between the past and the present. Although the poem was not the first one to expound on the idea of the bog as a spatial matrix composed of temporal layers superimposed on one another, it was Heaney’s pioneering attempt to employ a character found in the bog to create a pattern with which to address his own contemporary situation of violent civil unrest. That pattern was retained in a number of other bog poems concerned with different figures, and later the place of Tollund was evoked in a moment of historic significance, providing a self-reflexive allusion to the original poem, yet without the explicit presence of the figure. In the 2006 volume *District and Circle*, however, Heaney resurrected the character of the Tollund Man with a thorough revision of both the figure and its context, which in turn complemented and eventually completed the motif by shifting its focus onto the humanity of the character. The attribution of voice and personality to the Tollund Man allows the character to tell his own story and it also readjusts his significance for the community, both past and present ones, with a strong shift in their relation from a publically oriented cult-driven approach to a more personally informed, therefore more tangibly comprehensible status.

Heaney’s fascination with the figure originated from the vivid and captivating archaeological account by P. V. Glob of Iron Age bodies found in Danish peat bogs presented in the book entitled *The Bog People*. The status of those recovered bodies as remains of ritual sacrifice to a fertility goddess was seen as a potential link with the territorial element in the Irish Republican ethos, thus Heaney seized upon the opportunity offered by the figure to comment on his contemporary experience of the Troubles. The poem “The Tollund Man” puts the emphasis on this public function of the figure and with that a pattern is established in which the contemplated bodies become objective correlatives for victims of contemporary violence (cf. Kiberd 1996: 594); as Daniel Tobin (1999) notes, “‘The Tollund Man’ locates Irish political martyrdom within an archetypal pattern” (92-93). Heaney’s approach, however, was also inspired by a more direct and personal impression that the pictures of the figure yielded for him as an individual. As he explained it, “The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over

the Irish countryside" (Randall 1979: 18). This more immediate relation lends an increased degree of credibility to Heaney's use of the character as a hoped-for intermediary for his own community, involving the poet's brave move of risking blasphemy by labelling the remains of the Tollund Man "a saint's kept body" (Heaney 1990: 31) to forge a link between the past and the present along the religious axis and thereby assume his own communal role as well. The tripartite division of the poem into what Edna Longley (1987) labels "evocation", "invocation" and "vocation" (140) supports the importance of the religious discourse, but Heaney manages to find a delicate balance between explicit religious affiliation and the danger of blasphemy in the same context.

As the poem is principally concerned with the communal significance of the Tollund Man both in his own and in Heaney's contemporary context, the individual humanity of the figure is only intimated by a few physical details of the body that is now a museum object on display. The description of the figure therefore follows a particular poetic strategy and technique: the poem is written in what Bernard O'Donoghue (1994) calls the artesian stanza (6), a form composed of quatrains of short unrhymed lines that indicate a quick downward movement on the page. The remains of the body are outlined in a few sketch-like details and there is a brief account of the ritual in the name of which the man was sacrificed, moving by associations similar to those employed in the earlier poem "Bogland." As a result, no real identity is attributed to the figure beyond its sacrificial status as the intended saviour of the community, and the whole poem is a testimony of the poet's controlling posterior discourse that assigns the character a specific role of communal responsibility. The concluding section of the poem appears to lend some individual dimension to the figure by the speaker's tentative partial sharing of the victim's experience prior to his execution in the form of a slow-paced car journey through the same countryside. This motif eventually serves the purpose of the speaker's justification of his own role in relation to his community: the speaker's willingness to "risk blasphemy" (Heaney 1990: 31) by praying to the preserved body of the Tollund Man, a product of natural processes of benevolent outcome in the aftermath of human violence, likened to "a saint's kept body" (Heaney 1990: 31), to turn recent victims into meaningful sacrifice for future peace suggests a tentative parallel between the Tollund Man and the speaker in terms of their communal stance.

While the bog motif is used in a sequence of poems in the volume *North*, the figure of the Tollund Man is not present in any of those. The perspective also shifts as the hope of the earlier poem gives way to a more balanced assessment and eventual rejection of the validity of the parallel between the past and the present due to the increasing tension between the moral and the aesthetic aspects of the context. As a result, the motif of the bog is abandoned for its inadequacy to provide a satisfactory and maintainable analogue with the contemporary Northern situation, which also suspends the figure in that partially constituted form that was provided in the sparsely outlined description in "The Tollund Man." Heaney's tangible sense of ambiguity in relation to the bog motif led to Edna Longley's (1987) observation regarding the poems of *North*: "Heaney may have mistaken his initial epiphany for a literal signpost, when it was really a destination, a complete emotional curve that summed up profound feelings and wishes about the situation in Northern Ireland" (153).

Heaney returned to the Tollund motif in the eponymous poem on the occasion of the IRA ceasefire announcement in 1994. Heaney's own visit to Tollund Moss coincided with the announcement, which in turn suggests a moment of historic significance. While the poem "Tollund" has no explicit link with the earlier bog poems, the metonymic relation between location and character represents a strong allusion to the earlier poem in its entirety. There is,

however, a marked shift from “The Tollund Man” to “Tollund” in terms of tone and form as well as mood stemming from the profound difference in the conditions of composition. In sharp contrast to the quickly moving unrhymed artesian stanzas of “The Tollund Man,” the leisurely quatrains of pentameter lines with enclosed rhymes create a very different atmosphere in “Tollund”, which reflects the altered reality of Northern Ireland in the mid-1990s. This also manifests in the overall focus of the poem which is entirely on the present of the location, its violent past is only evoked through the intertextual reference of the title. The present sight of the place is that of a generic rural environment without any specifically distinctive element which allows the speaker to draw an explicit parallel with similar country locations in Northern Ireland. This manoeuvre links the poem with the earlier one, and that link is present in the conclusion as well: there is a subtle interplay between the speaker’s state of feeling “lost / Unhappy and at home” (Heaney 1990: 32) at the end of “The Tollund Man” and the later experience of the place as “user-friendly outback / Where we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe” (Heaney 1996: 69). Despite the significant shift in perspective between the earlier speaker’s imagined and the later speaker’s real experience of the place, the tension inherent in the two sets of phrases is retained due to the conflicting associations of their constituents. The conclusion of “Tollund,” however, includes a more promising dimension by regarding the moment as one “to make a new beginning / And make a go of it” (Heaney 1996: 69), intimating the possibility, and perhaps probability, of the reconsideration of the parallel of the earlier poem.

The possibility of return and reconsideration becomes an explicit occasion in “The Tollund Man in Springtime.” The sequence of six sonnets focuses on the reawakening of the figure and his assumption of a voice with which he becomes capable of telling his own story. As the shift in form and technique indicates, the emphasis of the poem falls on the character from a different point of view as Heaney makes him the speaker, allowing the character his own discourse and position to present his own experience, although this solution may also be seen as an act of the poet using the mask of the character for the purpose of recontextualising the motif. Heaney’s original account of the Tollund Man was based on a textual and pictorial representation of archaeological findings, whereas the return to the figure is a freer imaginative venture, thus his act of centring on the character is the constructive recreation rather than reconstruction of the figure, and the use of the persona allows for a more direct impression of the immediacy of the experience presented than the speaker’s filtered version in the earlier poem.

Heaney’s choice of the sonnet form indicates a sharp contrast with the narrow and constraining artesian stanza of “The Tollund Man,” however, neither the Petrarchan, nor the Shakespearean pattern is used. The pentameter lines represent a common feature with “Tollund” and there are occasional echoes of that poem in the rhyme patterns of the sonnets, but the sequence insists on its own formal features. The six sonnets constitute a narrative with an internal dynamism that stems from regular oscillations between the long dormant state of the character and his awakening and rise to a new existence; the regular shifts between the two states, however, do not disturb the reconstruction of the chronology of the speaker’s story. This approach suggests the control of the speaker and thus it adds a credible personal dimension to the earlier rather static concept of the character. The recreation of the figure involves a continuous reassessment of the earlier existence: the passivity of the buried body of the victim is gradually replaced by an active understanding of and identification with the role he was assigned to by his sacrifice. With the perspective of hindsight there is a gradual attribution of depth to the character who in turn becomes complete with understanding and intentions, and

acquires a more self-conscious perspective to interpret his own position. As a consequence, the character is liberated from the constraints imposed on him by the poet's interpretation and assumes a proper identity.

At the beginning of the sequence, the figure is seen as a liminal one without proper definition as he is "neither god nor ghost, / Not at odds or at one" (Heaney 2006: 55), echoing Heaney's view of the undefined and undefinable condition of the bog in the early poem "Bogland" in which

The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.

(Heaney 1990: 17)

The awakening of the character is already present in the first sonnet, with the sole reference in the poem to his violent death for the benefit of his community towards which he bears no apparent harsh feelings. The accidental discovery of the body by the turf-cutters is presented in a way that it reconsiders the tension of the original poem in terms of the character's status: upon being uncovered he is "like turned turf in the breath of God, / Bog-bodied on the sixth day" (Heaney 2006: 55), tentatively falling within the scope of the Christian myth of creation. The idea, however, retains its ambiguity as the discovery of the figure is resurrection rather than original creation, and the body only seems identical with the material surrounding it but on closer look retains its difference.

The description of the dormant state of the character is composed of temporally unmarked words at the beginning of the third poem, which creates the impression of suspended time. What was intended as a final state for the body by the act of burial becomes a temporary one due to the act of discovery, and this allows for the recognition of the mutual relationship between the body and what surrounded it: "the bog pith weighed / To mould me to itself and it to me" (Heaney 2006: 56). This also includes the possibility of self-reflection for Heaney concerning his own assessment of the character as his return to the Tollund Man is an analogue of the figure becoming "unburied" (Heaney 2006: 56). The recognition of the temporariness of his burial strengthens the character's awareness of his function as the time span of "Between what happened and was meant to be" (Heaney 2006: 56) indicates a grander underlying pattern of design for his position. The recognition of this larger pattern leads to the proper act of rising, in contrast with the accidental discovery, of the Tollund Man from "the display-case peat" (Heaney 2006: 56) by which act his resurrection becomes an active and willed one.

The recognition of temporariness also alters the nature of the dormant state from the point of view of its ultimate benefit for the character: what appeared as waiting is now seen as learning. The temporal gap between the Tollund Man's original world and the modern one into which he enters by his reawakening is too big to overcome as the character faces "another world, unlearnable, and so / To be lived by" (Heaney 2006: 57). This renders the figure an outsider as he is no longer related to his own community and is likewise separated from the contemporary one, which ultimately questions his role as an intercessor intimated and wished for by the poet in "The Tollund Man." The character's intention of planting some seeds he brought with him from his own time fails as those go musty, in sharp contrast with the figure's preservation, which also denies the poet's tentative parallel between past and present as a

workable notion with practical consequences. This creates a new situation, for character and poet alike, which opens another possible role of the Tollund Man for the community:

Dust in my palm
And in my nostrils dust, should I shake it off
Or mix it in with spit in pollen's name
And my own? As a man would, cutting turf,
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit
And spirited myself into the street.

(Heaney 2006: 57)

The allusion to the turf-cutter evokes Heaney's grandfather from the poem "Digging" as well as a broad range of representatives of the profession from the rural population, which forges a different type of relation between the figure and the community: he assumes ties with others through a personally oriented direction instead of the earlier imposed myth-framed one, offering a more tangible and therefore direct link than the one in "The Tollund Man." The character's setting off for the street completes the resurrection of the figure by following up his rise from the museum position which also forms a contrast with the passive moment of his accidental finding as deliberate action that presumes self-conscious agency. This eventual resurrection is at once the completion of Heaney's recontextualisation of the Tollund Man as the character is allowed to complete his reconstruction on his own terms.

The revival of the figure raises a number of questions both in terms of the character's status and the poet's understanding of the character. Richard Rankin Russell (2014) contrasts the two versions of the figure by regarding his earlier position as a standing for "the deadly, sacrificial nature of tribal societies past and present" (346), whereas his new status is that of "a positive figure of local resistance to globalisation" (346). The contrast, however, is not fully adequate as Heaney's original parallel was based on the fundamental paradox of the necessity of individual sacrificial death for the presumed continuity of existence for the individual's community, which is eventually overlooked in that particular opinion. Moreover, the revived figure is no longer related to his own past community by virtue of the temporal gap, nor is he affiliated to the current one into which he ventures, and thus his resistance is individual rather than local in the absence of a proper communal context. Russell's observation on the recreation of the Tollund Man, however, points to a significant dimension of the poetic act as the character's "resurrection comes from his poetic utterances to himself" (346) which is in accordance with "Heaney's belief in the continuing incantatory power of poetry even in our globalised age" (346). This presumed power is the basis of the poem "The Tollund Man" in which Heaney mobilises his sense of responsibility towards his community to respond to expectations formulated towards him as an intellectual in a time of conflict. In "The Tollund Man in Springtime" this sense of responsibility has an altered focus, centring on the autonomy of the character, which hands control over to the figure from the poet by endowing the speaker-character with speech acts of creative, or at least re-creative, power to define his own context.

Heaney's original construction of the figure of the Tollund Man and by extension of his whole bog myth was based in the poet's quasi-religious fascination with an archaeological account of an Iron Age fertility cult. The act of transferring the discourse of evocative scientific prose and haunting photographs to the discourse of contemporary poetry was essentially a postmodernist one in terms of approach, yet Heaney's attempt of finding a potent objective correlative for the contemporary violence of the Northern Ireland Troubles turns it into an

enterprise with a modernist striving for the “solace of good forms” offered by the tentative historical parallel he found in the motif. Despite the rich potential of the image of the bog as a matrix of temporal layers with both preservative and transformative capabilities including both ecological and cultural dimensions, Heaney eventually found the parallel inadequate for his artistic purposes due to the irreconcilable clash of morals and aesthetics that emerged on closer and more profound scrutiny of the whole motif. A brief later return to the story of the Tollund Man in the form of an allusion in “Tollund” hinted at the possibility of the poet’s partial belief in the earlier suggested parallel but it also involved a pronounced revision of the original analogy, which ultimately did not reopen the motif for methodical assessment and use.

Heaney returned to the figure of the Tollund Man after the turn of the millennium in an act of “reenchanting the world” by placing the Tollund Man as the central character of a sequence of sonnets. The revival of the figure is an imaginative recreation of the character rather than a reconstruction based on historical terms, echoing the postmodernist distrust of history as a grand narrative as well as acknowledging the originally textual basis of his motif as “The Tollund Man in Springtime” focuses on the character’s presumed experience rather than the communal role assigned to him by the poet in the earlier poem. By transferring the initiative to the character to become the speaker of his own sequence the poem resettles the figure as well as his context, his acquisition of the right for self-definition is at once the restoration of his humanity and individuality, removing the constraints imposed on him earlier by the controlling discourse of the poet, in line with his sense of communal responsibility, in the framework of the myth. This act of liberation and the restoration of humanity to the character indicate a broader change of emphasis from the communally targeted mythic/historical framework of the bog to a personally meaningful historical relation through the scale of individual experience that forms an actual basis for the possibility of shared heritage and thus real kinship with the figure.

With the return to the figure employing a new approach, the relation between the moral and the aesthetic aspects of the motif is also addressed and reconsidered. The bog poems of the volume *North* witnessed a clear shift of assessment from “beauty” to “atrocious” (Heaney 1975: 29), undermining the adequacy of the motif and thus denying the ethical validity of the invocation set out in the poem “The Tollund Man.” “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, however, can also be understood as a tentative post-Belfast Agreement defence of poetry, taking encouragement from the altered conditions of Heaney’s own historical and cultural context. The resurrection of the character achieved by his performative speech acts suggests power for words, and consequently for poetry, to constitute reality, which in turn testifies to the necessity of the awareness of the poet’s responsibility. As Heaney’s handling of the Tollund motif indicates, this sense of responsibility is a major element of the sensitive balance between morals and aesthetics since it manifests in two, on occasion conflicting, directions. Heaney’s revival and recontextualisation of the Tollund Man embodies the poet’s recognition of his responsibility not only for his community but towards his poetic subject as well, which eventually creates the balance that the earlier bog poems missed. The postmillennial recreation of the figure is thus not only the completion of the Tollund motif but a final act of reassurance of Heaney’s own verdict on his earlier admittance of the dilemma inherent in the foundation of his bog myth. On a more personal level, the tentative identification with the Tollund Man in the final section of the early poem involves what Tobin marks as a displacement of home and the subsequent imaginative mobilisation of the centre of identity (cf. Tobin 1999: 94-95). The resurrection of the Tollund Man as the presenter of his own experience readdresses this act of displacement and the figure’s act of entering the modern world is an assertive acceptance of

the necessity of self-definition in a world with no ultimate fixed centre, which is at once a perplexing and a liberating recognition.

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