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SEAMUS HEANEY ŞİİRİNDE DOĞA VE TARİH

LAND, NATURE AND HISTORY IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY

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Öz

Seamus Heaney yirminci yüzyılın İrlandalı başlıca şairlerinden biridir. Birçok kıtada okuyucu kitlesi edinmeyi başaran şair, 1955 Nobel Ödülü dahil, birçok hatırı sayılır ödülleri almıştır. Şiir anlatısında kendi sesini bulmayı başaran şair, bu sesi kendine özgü üslubu ve anlatı tekniğiyle bir arada kullanmakta usta bir isimdir. Deneyim Heaney'nin şiirinde önemli bir rol oynar ve kafasındaki açık ve canlı resmiyansırken, detaylarıyla betimlenmiş bir imge oluşturmada esas kaynak olarak işlev görür. Kendine özgü bir ustalikle öz yaşamındaki toprağı, doğa ve tarihi evrensel öğeler içeren bir yoğunlukta okutucuya sunar. Kuzey İrlanda, Castledawson, CountyDerry'de dünyaya gelmesi hasebiyle, ününü kısmen bu bölgedeki çiftlikler, şehirler, özgün tarih ve dilin kültürel bağamlarına borçludur. Heaney sıklıkla, modern dönem öncesi dünyadaki William Wordsworth ve John Clare gibi isimleri andıran bölgesel bir şair olarak anılır. Yeats'in şiir geleneğinden esin alan şair İrlanda coğrafyasını şiirlerinde ustaca yansıtır. Bu makalede, Seamus Heaney'in şiirlerindeki yerli kültürel bağlam irdelenecek ve öz yaşamıyla ilintili toprak, doğa ve tarihi yansıttığı şiirleri örneklendirilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seamus Heaney şiiri, toprak, doğa, tarih, İrlanda kültürel bağlamı.

Abstract

Seamus Heaney is one of the major Irish poets of the twentieth century. He has attracted a readership on several continents and has won

prestigious literary awards including the Nobel Prize in 1995. He is a poet who has succeeded to explore his own voice of narration, and has mastered in using it with the collaboration of a personal style and technique. Experience plays an important role in Heaney's poetry to function as the basic source of creating an image with detailed descriptions as clear and vital as the picture in poet's mind. With a unique craft of his own, he manages to present biographical land, nature and history into a density that comprise universal aspect. Being born and raised in Castledawson, County Derry, Northern Ireland, he owes part of his popularity to cultural contexts of its farms, cities, original history and language. He is often described as a regional poet who deliberately gestures back towards the pre-modern worlds of William Wordsworth and John Clare. Taking Yeats' poetic tradition as an inspiration, Heaney consolidates Irish landscape into his poetry.

Illustrating his poetical reflections within his native cultural context; land, nature and history in Seamus Heaney's poetry will be the main focus of this paper.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney's poetry, land, nature, history, Irish cultural context.

Introduction

Heaney's first book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, (1966) was "seen as presenting a true and direct view of youth's response to the natural rural world" (Bloom, 2003:19). By 1969 his second collection appeared as *Door into the Dark* which "contained striking description of the physical world yet went beyond this to study myth, the unconscious, and the supernatural" (Bloom, 2003:19). When political violence reached intensity in Northern Ireland in 1969, Heaney's family welcomed a respite in California where he wrote as a "a driving political force" (Bloom, 2003:19). In 1972 he moved to a county cottage in the south of Ireland where he produced *Wintering Out*; poems in this collection "moved outside the personal and natural to the broader public sphere" and "received an ambivalent response." (Bloom, 2003:19) By 1975 his collection *North* appeared with "its first part emphasizing the mythic and the second focusing on the political Northern Ireland and the role of the poet" (Bloom, 2003:20). *Field Work* was published in 1979, and in 1980, two more books appeared as *Selected Poems 1965-1975*, and *Preoccupations: Selected Prose*, which contained "essays on poets as well as frank discussion of his own poetic growth" (Bloom, 2003:20). *Station Island* appeared in 1984, and in 1987 *The Haw Lantern* was published. In 1990 *New and Selected Poems, 1969-1987*, was followed by *Seeing Things: Poems* (1991) Additional publications include *The Midnight Verdict* (1993), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996* (1998) and his best-selling translation of *Beowulf*, which was

published in 2000. In 1995 Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize. (Bloom, 2003:20)

Daniel Xerry evaluates “Heaney’s poetry” as “the self’s voice, the voice of consciousness and the unconscious” (Xerry, 2010: 1). For Harold Bloom “the intensity of the Irish experience is portrayed in much of the work of Heaney” (Bloom, 2003: 18), while Helen Vendler identifies his poetry as “a poetry in which readers can recognize profound family affections, eloquent landscapes, and vigorous social concern” (Vendler, 1998: i). Heaney’s biographical landscape of Northern Ireland, particularly the land details of his upbringing are vividly pictured in his poetry. He specifically focuses on rural figures, such as; turf-cutters, thatches, potato farmers, water diviners, blacksmiths, and fishermen, which can be considered as anonymous figures as to be located almost anywhere in the world and any time in history. Likewise, the child’s voice that narrates many of his early poems is anonymous though we know it belongs to young Heaney. So a lyric speaker is perceived in Heaney’s primary poetic mode that functions as a paradigmatic figure whose poetic utterance expresses universal values. David Lloyd evaluates that his choice of poetic form “is not simply the verse form, the melody, or what-not, that [Heaney] takes over; it is the aesthetic, and the ethical and political formulations it subsumes, that the Romantic and imperial tradition supplies” (Lloyd, 1993: 23). Heaney creates detailed slices of life that shed light on a continuous traditional way of living which often flashbacks into the ancient historical pages, for he is identified as an “anthropologist of his own culture, but doesn’t let the culture exist within late colonial Northern Ireland” (Vendler, 1998: 18).

Identifying Self with Land

His first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* deals with loss of innocent childhood and his transitions into adulthood. In this collection, there are reflections of his admiration for his ancestors, his own distorted view of nature and why he became a writer. ‘Digging’ (Heaney, 1991: 1) and ‘Personal Helicon’ (Heaney, 1991: 44) the first and last poems of *Death of a Naturalist*, address both the agrarian memory and the speaker’s role as a writer. These early poems have consent with traditional poetic conventions, which contain metaphorical political implications. Heaney exemplifies cultural differences and undermines the illusive stability of the hegemonic structures of traditionalism. His early work can thus be read as moving towards poetics which refuses a fixed and stable origin. He had a keen curiosity for searching underground which turned into a special area

of ancestral research. "Personal Helicon" is one of the sample poems that reflect his allegiance with archeological history:

Personal Helicon (1966)

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
and old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch,
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (Heaney, 1991:

44)

The first two stanzas reflect the poet's childish wonder for what the wells contain and how they make him happy to deal with history, while in the third stanza his wonder turns into a more serious research for "long roots" of his ancestors. In the fourth stanza the poet is able to find answers to his questions by "echoes" which contain "a clean new music" implying the exploration of the unknown history buried under "foxgloves" where "rat" like animals live. The last stanza demonstrates that the poet, in the end, is able to get information by 'prying into his roots' and that new learning makes him happy like "big-eyed Narcissus" opening buds "into some spring". As an adult he is proud of searching and learning about his ancestors; he feels he has

“dignity” to ‘see himself’ as a successor of his roots in “the darkness” of history.

Land is an inevitable setting of Heaney; it is the ground for living, working, relaxing, playing, happiness, and quarreling which is worth to spend time and energy for. In ‘Digging’, (Heaney, 1991: 1) the opening poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, the thematic emphasis is on an artist who will not follow his ancestors’ footsteps as a common laborer, but who has a keen admiration and respect for his father’s and grandfather’s skill of digging’:

Digging
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it. (Heaney, 1991: 1-2)

The poem symbolizes the life-struggle within the rich geography of Ireland, particularly focusing on tiresome peasant work in rural counties. As Irishmen are well known for digging; Heaney exemplifies the skill and dignity in their labor, giving reflections of their working ethics. Vendler proposes that “‘Digging’ is part of his ancestral occupation and so part of his family history that comprises the conflict causing the intolerable stresses of fear, betrayals and murders” (Vendler, 1998: 2). It begins with the following lines: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun” (Heaney, 1991: 1). The reference to a ‘gun’ reminds the reader the political problems in Ireland and the violence that has had a heavy impact for many years. The place where they dig is not far from where the poet lives, it is ‘under his window’ which implies that he shares his life with the process of digging task. The detailed descriptive image of the “rasping sound” of digging lets the reader hear the sharp, clear sound of the spade, and where they dig is a “gravelly ground” which reminds the “looking” child that it is not an easy ground to dig. The diggers have to reach a suitable depth appropriate for planting, and this chore takes years until the peasants get the crop. But the end pleases the laborers when they feel ‘the cool hardness of potatoes in their hands’. ‘God helps’ and this hard labor is transferred from the old to the young generations. The poet witnesses and participates in it while his ancestors work, competing with fellow laborers. The digging chore with its hard labor and fatigue makes an unforgettable memory in poets’ life, but he cannot follow his ancestors because he has not got a spade, instead he has a pen. In the last stanza Heaney repeats the opening lines “Between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rest”; however “snug as a gun” is replaced by “I’ll dig it” (Heaney, 1991: 2). So, his pen becomes a metaphorical spade and his skill with a pen is comparable to that of his forefathers with a spade. He concludes that he can continue with the work of his ancestors through his writing. The word ‘digging’ also stands as a metaphor for Heaney’s calling back his past and unearthing the hidden memories. Comparing the poet’s pen to a farmer’s spade allows us to see Heaney’s early struggle to define himself as a poet.

As an Irish poet from Northern Ireland, Heaney's books *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) reflect upon the political struggles that plagued the country during the poet's adulthood. He desires for a brighter future and seeks to weave the ongoing Irish troubles into a broader historical frame by embracing the general human situation. In *Wintering Out* Heaney goes through mental and physical changes presented with a poetic style of 'dialogism'. To understand the shift to dialogism that occurs in *Wintering Out*, Jamie Olson compares two of Heaney's earliest bog poems; "Bogland," (Heaney, 1972: 41) the final poem of *Door into the Dark*, (1972) and "Bog Oak," (Heaney, 1972: 4) the second poem of *Wintering Out*:

[...] when read in sequence, these poems describe a movement from a monolithic, ahistorical Irishness to an Irishness in conversation with its hybrid origins. In "Bogland," the landscape is clearly Irish... One might read this earlier poem as a kind of national myth-making, where the bog signifies the Irish past and functions as a depository for Irish history. (Olson, 2008: 62)

Both "Bogland" and "Bog Oak" integrate his biographical as well as national history that includes various exploitations with his Celtic, Pagan and Catholic beliefs, besides his affinity of bog soil, and concern for free land:

Bogland
We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening---
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless. (Heaney, 1972: 41-42)

It is significant that the poem starts with the first person plural “we”; which stands for a nation who owns a country. The first two stanzas describe the geography of Ireland which has “no prairies” but is an “... unfenced country / Is bog that keeps crusting / Between the sights of the sun.” The third stanza starts with “they” which represents those who are hostile and do not respect the richness of the land; so they have plundered the wild animals such as, “Great Irish Elk”, however it is a land that recovers itself, because “the ground itself is kind, black butter.” The enemy has been trying to make it a nameless country for “millions of years” but they will never be able to use underground mines. In the sixth stanza, the poet gives the message that on and under-ground working belongs only to the owners of the country. And in the last stanza he concludes that the enemy tries to reach goals every year, but is not possible, because “the wet centre is bottomless.” which reminds the reader that the numbers of those who will always defend their land is ‘endless’.

“Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” (Heaney, 1990: 61) also demonstrates Heaney’s search for the historical background of his country. In the first part of the poem, not included here, the narrator is speculating on a calligraphically drawn shape; “conjured in” “acage” or “trellis” (Heaney, 1990: 58) which obviously have referential information of the history of that particular land. In the next

four stanzas, some clues are given about the mysterious shapes; as the narrator informs us, they are “trial pieces, ...as the netted routes / of ancestry and trade” mapping a route for “a migrant” passing from “Liffey” a river in Ireland. (Heaney, 1990: 59) In the third part, the route becomes clearer as the reader is informed; “this trial piece” is “incised by a child” and it is “long ship, a buoyant migrant line” (60). The route goes on in the next episode till the reader reaches a scene of “murder”; “murders and pieties, / coming to consciousness / by jumping in graves, / dithering, blathering” (60). Here the poet is sharing the historical realities of a land that witnessed “murders” for religious conversion; ironically underlining the argument that the visitors came to make the inhabitants conscious or save them from disbelief, but they murdered them to reach their goals. In the fifth section the narrator invites the reader to join him and “fly with” him, “with the expertise / of the Vikings” to explore the historical realities of his Land. (60) And while doing this discovery, he calls for his ancestors’ guidance; “Old fathers, be with us. / Old cunning assessors / of feuds and of sites / for ambush or town” (61) The last part of the poem gives a historical report of Dublin by James Farrell (1803-1869) an Irish Cleric:

Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces (1975)

...

VI

'Did you ever hear tell,
said Jimmy Farrell,
'of the skulls they have
in the city of Dublin?

White skulls and black skulls
and yellow skulls, and some
with full teeth, and some
haven't only but one,
and compounded history
in the pan of 'an old Dane,
maybe, was drowned
in the Flood.'

My words lick around
cobble quays, go hunting
lightly as pampooties
over the skull-capped ground. (Heaney, 1990: 58-61)

Heaney is not only concerned with violence-free lands but also with the dependence of the people on the land for its crops. In his poem "At a Potato Digging" (Heaney, 1991:18) he expresses his feelings regarding the misfortunes happened with the Irish famine disasters around 1845; when the crop failed and many people starved. In this poem he depicts the cultivation of the potato which is a way challenging living in the Ireland's social history. In the first and last parts he depicts the digging and gathering of potato crop, while in the second part he looks more closely at the potato, and the third is an account of the Potato Famine:

...
Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in "forty-five,"
wolfed the blighted root and died. (Heaney, 1991: 19)

Focusing on the potato crop as a life giving and life-taking element, detailed description of suffering and the extent of misery caused by the famine is illustrated. To make connections between the past and present is the central point in the poem. Heaney suggests that the Irish laborers have a pagan fear of an earth God whom they must appease with their offerings. A pagan image of the "bitch earth" in part three is striking:

...
A people hungering from birth,
grubbling, like plants, in the bitch earth,
were grafted with a great sorrow.
Hope rotted like a marrow. (Heaney, 1991: 19-20)

Superstitious and pagan apprehension of conservative belief and tradition is stressed with a religious terminology throughout the poem. For example, the 'bowed heads' of the potato pickers suggest respect for the gods, so they offer "libations of cold tea" and "scatter crusts":

...
Down in the ditch and take their fill,
Thankfully breaking timeless fasts;
Then, stretched on the faithless ground, spill
Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts. (Heaney, 1991: 20)

With both local and universalized tone of his language and authentic style, Heaney proves the craft of poetic reflections throughout his life. Remaining loyal to his ancestral boundaries, land, nature and history, he stands as a sample poet to be envied both in character and poetic craft.

Conclusion

Heaney uses poetry as “a tool of exploration and discovery” (Xerry, 2010: 1) to reflect different aspects of life, nature and history of Ireland with constant references to various perspectives of human emotion. He designs his poems with a unique speech of his own and proves to his readers that a communication of connecting personal with national and personal with the universal is possible. His poems bond love, death, nature and emotion in a comprehensive circle. “Heaney has also found a new argument for poetry as a servant of reality” (Cavanagh, 2009: 63). Heaney writes about what he observes, feels and lives with brilliantly descriptive details, and builds a bridge offlash backs to his historical memory. In Heaney poetry creates a transition “between what is going to happen and what we would like to happen, between the actual and the desired, it focuses our attention on ourselves” (O’Brein, 2003: 62). “He suggests that words are the carriers of psychic elements that originate in the unconscious and slowly flow up into the poet’s consciousness” (Xerry, 2010: 1). His familiarity with country life goes along with his stylistic accomplishment and sophisticated allusiveness. Space and time function as collaborative partners of presence and absence, action and stasis to focus on individual consciousness. While exploring the channel between the personal and the national consciousness the poet’s empirical reflections serve the reality. Both the conscious and the unconscious experiences portray the pace of human existence, and Heaney praises “any existing harmony between man and the earth; decry the intrusion of the rational, linear, and patriarchal when achieved at the expense of the intuitive, cyclic, and marginal; and bow in prayer beside the water’s edge” (Moloney, 2007: 2).

Michael Allen argues that Heaney’s poetry is “crucially concerned with landscape and a particular kind of eco-relation to the land” (Allen, 1997: 207). Land and history are inevitable partners of the individual memory for Heaney to explore and discover self among daily facilities. Helen Vendler deduces that the poetic plot of Heaney comprises an “autobiographical story reaching from boyhood to Heaney’s present age of sixty, ... a displacement from Northern Ireland to the Republic; travels; sorrows and deaths” (Vendler, 1998:

i). We can conclude that matching with the “insight and authority of Yeats” (Cook, 2004: 566), Heaney’s landscape poetry proves a poetic skill which investigates an identity of self relation to nature and cultural heritage; including the elaborated descriptions of rural laborers, their working images, the culture and countryside.

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