The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry

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WHEN HE SPEAKS of the feminine aspect of his poetry, Seamus Heaney is referring to both language and theme. Linguistically, the feminine element is evident in the richness of vowels, the masculine in the acerbity of consonants. In this essay, however, I am concerned with the feminine principle in Heaney's poetry as a thematic element. For Heaney the feminine is associated with the Irish and the Celtic, the masculine with the English and the Anglo-Saxon. The feminine is the emotional, the mysterious, the inspirational; the masculine is the rational, the realistic, the intellectual.[1] The best poetry, he believes, is achieved by a wedding of the two characteristics. In an essay for *The Guardian*, Heaney says:

> I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery. They certainly involve craft and determination, but chance and instinct have a role in the thing too. I think the process is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotion.[2]

My use of the term "wedded" and Heaney's reference to the bog images are particularly appropriate in discussing the feminine principle. As a young child Heaney and a friend stripped naked and bathed in a mossy bog. The event was a seminal experience in Heaney's life, so central that he says that he still feels "betrothed" to "watery ground."[3] His descent into the bog became the abiding metaphor of his poetry, and the female principle is inseparable from that metaphor whether he is delving into the depths of the earth, the bog, the womb, or the Celtic unconscious

of the Irish people. Ultimately, the feminine principle is that which pulls man toward the sustaining earth and encourages his participation in the domestic and religious rituals which give life continuity.

Long before Heaney read P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* and discovered the specific "feminine cluster of images" which became his mythology, he felt an innate kinship with the boggy earth of his native land.[4] The bogland held "the memory of the landscape" for him.[5] He felt an intense need to incorporate his sense of place with his sense of the poetic, to translate the present by viewing it from the perspective of the past. In speaking of John Montague's poetry, Heaney has said that "the ancient feminine religion of Northern Europe is the lens through which [Montague] looks and the landscape becomes a memory, a piety, a loved mother. The present is suffused with the past."[6] Heaney could well be describing his own work. Glob led him specifically to the cult of Nerthus, the fertility goddess of the bogs who was worshipped by the Germanic people of the Bronze and Iron Ages. Evidence of human sacrifice to the "loved mother" Earth has been found in Northern Europe and in Ireland, hence the actual physical connection between the two areas. For Heaney, however, the connection is less geographical than mystical. The cult of the Earth Mother is the "cultural matrix" out of which Heaney derives order and harmony sufficient to regenerate the blighted land of modern Ireland.[7]

The female principle derives, then, from the Earth Mother herself and from man's pull toward the land and toward woman. It is a principle establishing certain basic qualities associated with the female, whether human or animal, animate or inanimate. For Heaney, the feminine essence may be embodied in a woman, an otter, a cow, or a water pump. Wherever it is found, the feminine principle indicates an otherness about the female, an instinctive difference in the way she perceives life and reacts to it. Her actions are often intuitive; she senses, feels things to a greater degree than man so that the felt experience is a commonplace with her. Because he often cannot understand how she knows what she knows, man, chiefly rational, finds her mysterious and often mistrusts her. Without her, however, he is fragmented

and disoriented. In Heaney's poetry, man must learn to trust woman and to rely on her superior understanding of life's creative urge. Through union with woman, man finds rejuvenation, increased sensitivity to life's mysteries and self-completion. Because of the potential fulfilment in such a union, life may become a productive continuum rather than a linear frustration. Consequently, the ring or the circle is associated with both the Earth Mother and the feminine principle.

Throughout Heaney's work, the potential for regeneration and rebirth is associated with the ring, whether it be the golden ring of marriage or the cyclical round of the seasons, the harvest, or birth and death. Significantly, the ring, or more specifically the torc, was the single distinguishing characteristic of the earliest representations of Nerthus. Many of her victims wore neckrings or nooses, suggesting that they were consecrated to the goddess to insure fertility of crops, animals, and man as well.[8] Man's sexual union with or marriage to the goddess is a central aspect of the cult of Nerthus. Out of that nexus come regeneration and creativity. I should emphasize again, however, that the ring image, as well as the images of marriage, sexual union, and the bog appear in Heaney's earliest work, prior to his 1969 reading of Glob. The discovery of Nerthus merely gave order and coherence to his perception of the female principle.

In many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist*, his first book, Heaney pays homage to that principle. He is, in these poems, the questing, newly indoctrinated initiate into the mysteries of life. In "Poem for Marie," he is the child-man whom union with his wife perfects.[9] She expands the finite limits of his narrow, clumsy world to the "new limits" of the inclusive world of "the golden ring." Thus, he matures into completion. The potentially productive power of such a union is suggested in "Honeymoon Flight" in which the new couple are thrust out of "the sure green world" of youth and innocence into a roiling, chaotic world where the elements are unsettled. The couple are frightened of their voyage into a new life. They must trust their ability to achieve the perfection symbolized by "the golden ring" which binds them.

Door Into the Dark establishes the feminine principle as the matrix, the dark fertile womb which brings increase to the earth. "The Rite of Spring" describes the process by which a frozen plunger is freed by fire from a pump: "Cooled, we lifted her hatch, / Her entrance was wet, and she came." The consummation of fire and water, of the masculine plunger and the feminine pump, brings forth the life-renewing spring waters. Similar images are evident in "Mother," a poem about a pregnant woman pumping water for her husband's cows. She is weary of her task and her burden, the baby which she describes as the plunger within her. She is also discouraged over the state of her intimate life with her husband. Looking at a "bedhead" which her husband has used as part of the pasture fence, she notes that "it does not jingle for joy any more." Yet she is the Earth Mother, and she finds joy in the winds that blow her skirts about her thighs and "stuff air down [her] throat."

For the first time, the real Earth Mother appears in the last poem of *Door Into the Dark*. By the end of that volume, Heaney had read *The Bog People*, and Nerthus makes her appearance in "Bogland" as the womb of earth, her "wet center . . . bottomless." Her womb gives forth increase of grain and life, but it also sucks into itself great beasts, trees, and men who feel compelled as Heaney does, to dig "inwards and downwards" to learn its secrets.

The impact of Heaney's discovery of the myth of the bog goddess is increasingly evident in his third volume, *Wintering Out*, which has numerous poems concerned with her. "Nerthus" is a brief poem depicting the simple wooden images of the goddess discovered in the bogs. Glob describes a slender branch having a natural fork in it with no markings except the sign of its sex gashed into the wood where the fork begins.[10] The image is headless and armless. Heaney's Nerthus is "an ash fork staked in peat, / Its long grains gathering to the gouged split; / A seasoned, unsleeved taker of the weather."

Further images of the bog goddess appear in "The Tollund Man." The best of Heaney's bog poems, it is about the most famous of Nerthus' victims.[11] The Tollund Man was exhumed in 1950, two thousand years after his consignment to the bogs.

He was found in extraordinarily well-preserved form, his face peaceful, his last meal still in his stomach, his throat encircled with the goddess' torc, the sign of his consecration to her. The head of the Tollund Man, all that was preserved of the body, is on display in Aarhus, as Heaney says in his poem. He also describes the cap and girdle worn by the victim as he was cast naked into the bog to join Nerthus, "bridegroom to the goddess." In his emphasis on marriage and rebirth, Heaney captures the sexual and sacred implications of the ritual: "She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body."

The Tollund Man is a good example of Heaney's treatment of the myth. He is not content with exploiting the myth for its sake alone, but must relate it to the Irish land which shares topographical and cultural characteristics with the home of the goddess. Thus, the Tollund Man is not an isolated figure from the Iron Age, but a saint who might be implored, though he were pagan, to restore the ritual significance of death in contemporary Ireland. In his essay, "Feeling Into Words," Heaney talks about what the Tollund Man and his sacrifice to Nerthus mean to him. He says that there is "an indigenous territorial numen" in Ireland, a feminine numen referred to as Kathleen Ni Houlihan or the poor old woman. Her authority has been usurped by a violent male cult which he identifies with modern violence and historical English violation of Ireland. The sacrificial victims of Nerthus become, for Heaney, "an archetypal pattern" inspiring awe and fear.[12] The fertility ritual of death and consequent rebirth becomes the symbol of a people guided by a feminine sense of place which Heaney believes must be renewed if the present is to be tolerated.

The difference between the present and the past is suggested in "The Last Mummer." Modern man is threatened by physical violence, but in that, he is not unlike ancient man. He is unlike ancient man, however, in that he lacks the sustaining rituals, like that of the mummer, which give life richness and death significance. In contrast to the mummer's celebration of the return of summer, Heaney's modern family celebrates the television set. The "charmed . . . ring" of their gazing faces is a denial of the

regenerative cycle symbolized by the mummer at their backs and the mystical significance of "the moon's host elevated in a monstrance of holly trees." The images of the moon, the monstrance and the holly suggest the joyous, fertile principle of the old rites. It is a sacred, female principle which Heaney fears is becoming less intrinsic to the lifestyles of his contemporaries.

Though much of the sectarian violence of Ireland fills *Wintering Out*, Heaney perseveres in his faith in the Earth Mother. To establish a new sense of relevance and spiritual coherence in his life, man must return to the ancient mother. He must again join himself to the land, a "woman of old wet leaves," "her breasts an open-work of new straw and harvest bows" ("Land"). In "her loop of silence," he will find his senses awakened and sensitive to the sustaining "soundings" of the past. For modern man, the common earth becomes a bulwark against chaos.

"A Northern Hoard," the longest poem of *Wintering Out*, clearly establishes Heaney's view of the crisis of modern times. Man is uprooted. Having lost his connection with the earth, he is isolated from woman. "The touch of love" is helpless in the encroaching, terrifying war just beyond the "curtained terrace / Where the fault is opening." Faced with losing a sense of the past and the coherence of ancient rituals, the poet searches for the tinder that will "strike a blaze from our dead igneous days."[13] For Heaney, the tinder is that which reaffirms life and hope in the face of the yawning chasm of violence. The strife common to Irish life threatens death and obliteration. Man must turn from violence so that the creative spark may be kindled. Only then will the "moonstruck" body of the Earth Mother thaw and the warmth of "the touch of love" return.

Heaney's concern over rekindling the vital spark in the twentieth-century female counterparts of Nerthus takes particularly modern expression in Part II of *Wintering Out*. Colin Falck has said that Heaney's later writings lack significant emotion and that he seems unable to deal with "modern areas of the modern world."[14] To the contrary, Heaney is poignantly aware of the difficulty of cultivating faith in marriage and in other rituals in the face of today's anarchic confusion. Beset with so much that is negative, men and women find difficulty in holding

on to each other and to the faith that their union is, in fact, the only means to fulfilment. He does not take a simplistic, idealistic view of the modern dilemma whether personal or political.

Heaney returns to the bridal theme in "Wedding Day," a poem which establishes man's dependency on woman because she has the strength to see the ritual of the wedding through to its end in spite of his doubts and her own fears. In this poem, the intrusion of reality into the idealized love of the newlyweds is poignantly depicted in a bit of graffiti on a toilet wall: "a skewered heart / And a legend of love." Man's union with woman is necessary and rewarding, but it is not an easy coexistence. The groom's independence and freedom chafe under female supervision, but eventually, he acknowledges his need for her sustenance. Thus, the new husband seeks comfort at his wife's breast as they leave for the airport.

"Summer Home" is a painful exposé of the couple's ensuing difficulties. The air is fouled by the odour of an insect-infested mat, which can be easily taken out and scalded. The marriage itself cannot be so easily rid of the unpleasant smell of "something in heat / Dogging us, the summer gone sour." The husband blames himself and makes an offering of summer flowers; he is the suppliant to his lady. The flowers and the sex act are the "chrism" to heal and annoint the couple's wounds. Their union, like the ripeness of the summer, is blessed with increase. But children are no magical cure for the difficulties of two people living together. Wounds leave scars and arguments are inevitable. Heaney suggests that only in the fecundity of the "old, dripping dark" of the womb/cave is there hope to find solutions to the difference between them. The cave, like the womb and the wife's breasts, which the poet describes as "stoups" holding the living waters, are images associated with the Earth Mother's regenerative potential.

The bog goddess is explicitly recalled in *North*, Heaney's fourth volume, one in which his concern grows over the contrast between the ritual and ceremony associated with bog worship and the violence and anarchy of his times. In poems such as "Kinship," Heaney reaches downward and inward in order to find a context in which to view modern chaos. "Kinship" is a

fine poem which establishes the racial kinship of the Irish with the "hieroglyphic peat" and its secrets of the past. The bog is "the lovenest in the bracken" where Heaney finds the bog goddess, but she appears less attractive than in the earlier poems.[15] Once again, Heaney confronts the complexity of espousing a mythology which condones human sacrifice. As he gets more deeply mired in the politics of Northern Ireland, he sees the victims of the religious strife of his day in an increasingly personal light. He cannot, on one hand, preach the virtues of the bog goddess as the giver of life, without, on the other hand, acknowledging her as the taker of life. In "Kinship," she is "the insatiable bride," both beautiful and terrible. It is necessary to know both aspects of Nerthus if one is to know either. The poet accepts that responsibility, but he refuses to ignore the human, personal tragedy of her insatiable lust.

Because the old balance between life and death has been upset, the victims of the Earth Mother have lost their serenity. So much blood has been spilled on the "mother ground" of Ireland, that it is soured ("Kinship"). The poems of *North* which describe victims of Nerthus reflect a loss of consecration and peacefulness, a condition Heaney relates to the victims of the Irish strife. The face of the "Grauballe Man," for instance, has none of the Tollund Man's peacefulness; it is anguished and strained.[16] Many female sacrificial victims have been beheaded, their golden hair clipped short.[17] In these poems, the poet identifies with the victims; he refuses to become accustomed to the horror of death, for to do so would be to become less than human and no better than those who are untouched by the nameless dead of Ireland.[18]

Despite the grimness of death, Heaney does not give up his faith in the creative aspect of the Earth Mother. He rejects the violence associated with her worship, yet he continues to see potential only in man's union with her. Without woman, man is cut off from the earth; he is lost, as is Ge's son, Antaeus, when he dies at the hand of Hercules. "Hercules and Antaeus" concludes the first part of *North*, and it is significant that there are no poems governed by the female principle in Part II of that volume. The ring is evident only in such images as the stockade

of "machine gun posts" or the Orange drums beating out the rhythms of violence ("Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"). The braided torc of the goddess is "the braid cord looped into the revolver butt" of a constable's gun holster ("Singing School"). Circles are evident in the "dark cyclones" of a violent Goya painting, but they imply destruction, not continuity ("Singing School"). These poems reflect Heaney's confrontation of the Irish problem from a political standpoint and less from a mythical one.

In *Field Work*, Heaney returns to the fields and bogs of the Earth Mother and to the significance of myth and ritual in modern times. In this volume, the poet's childhood and the cultural past of his people are the lens through which Heaney looks at the present. "Triptych" illustrates Heaney's quest for rejuvenation. He asks of a young "Sibyl," a youthful Nerthus laden with fruits of the earth, "What will become of us?" She advises him to turn from the worship of the helicoptering cycles of death and violence to the worship of the ancient mysteries. The poet must "go barefoot, foetal and penitential and pray at the water's edge" for the revitalization of his people. Heaney turns from the killing to the living waters which he has always associated with the Earth Mother. Earlier, in "Kinship," he referred to her as the "seedbed, a bag of waters, and a melting grave." Giver and taker of life, she is the source of understanding for the poet and the source of renewal for modern man. The edge of the bog, lake, or stream is holy ground for Heaney. To learn the mysteries of its ancient language, he must revert to a simpler, more innocent posture.

A similar turn back in time is evident in the "Glanmore Sonnets," which depict a ritualistic return to Heaney's youth. The way back is a journey through the darkness of the twilight and dusk. In the light of the risen moon, ancient symbol of the female, the potential restoration of the poet's skill and the quickening of the people are represented in the image of the flight of "a wild white goose / Heard after dark above the drifted house." Out of the "midnight and closedown" comes the possibility of light. The poet is joined with the woman, but she forces him to confront the dreaded rat, long a symbol for Heaney of untold

horrors. Once he faces the grim reality of life and passes the ceremonial test of strength and maturity, he is ready for renewal with the moon-faced woman who lies down by his side in a dream reunion of ritualistic love. Thus, the cycle of life is renewed, and peace and hope are once again evident in the "dewy dreaming faces" of the couple.

The four volumes of Heaney's poetry are marked by a strong consciousness of the earthiness of life and the female principle which enunciates it. His discovery of the myth of Nerthus and her symbolic neck ring was a fortuitous event which gave form and substance to the concept of that principle as Heaney saw it in his earliest work. The continuous nature of the life cycle is evident in both the fruition and the death associated with the goddess' cult. For the poet, however, and the times in which he lives, the deathliness of the cycle has become predominant and the balance needs restoring. Important in overcoming the violence and fear of the Irish troubles is faith in the union of male and female. The male must ally himself with the female principle because it is the regenerative, spiritual principle of life. To lose touch with that principle is to lose the cohesion and order of the rituals which sustain life, and thus, to allow the nihilism of war to destroy its potential. Heaney is essentially an optimistic poet, and he draws much of his inspiration from his faith in such rituals and their timeless connection with the female principle.

NOTES

[1] Seamus Heaney, "Belfast," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), pp. 34-37.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[3] *Ibid.*, "Mossbawn," p. 19.

[4] *Ibid.*, "Feeling Into Words," p. 54.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[6] *Ibid.*, "The Sense of Place," p. 141.

[7] Arthur E. McGuinness, "'Hoarder of Common Ground': Tradition and Ritual in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," *Eire*, 13, ii (Summer 1978), 71.

[8] P. V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 156-59.

[9] McGuinness, p. 77.

[10] Glob, p. 180.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 18-36.

[12] Heaney, pp. 57-60.

[13] See McGuinness, pp. 71-92.

[14] Colin Falck, review in *The New Review* (August 1975), p. 61.

[15] See Simon Curtis, "Seamus Heaney's *North*," *Critical Quarterly* (Spring 1976), pp. 81-88. See also Rita Zoutenbier, "The Matter of Ireland and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney," *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 9, i (1979), 4-23.

[16] See Glob, pp. 37-62.

[17] See Glob, pp. 91-100.

[18] See David Lloyd, "The Two Voices of Seamus Heaney's *North*," *Ariel*, 10, iv (October 1979), 5-13.