

Some Thoughts on Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*

Question(s): Is digging possible for a dead-naturalist?; or: How to dig from above the ground?; or: How can Antaeus best avoid his “elevation, [his] fall”?; or: Can the work of poetry (“I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing”) turn up an imaginal ground when the poet himself is a physically-ungrounded, struggling Antaeus?; or: Can poetry catch the fleeting sound of a mythical *landscape* (“the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat”) when the poet’s ears are plugged by a *map* of sociopolitical categories?; or: How does poetry proceed in/respond to a climate of what Yeats calls “intellectual violence”?

Despite its ostensible status as primarily a volume of *ars poetica* – a kind of imaginative excavation that simultaneously investigates and demonstrates the craft of poetry – Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* reverberates with the above variously-articulated question. Though the violence in Northern Ireland to which Heaney would overtly respond in *North* was still a few years away when Heaney wrote *Death of a Naturalist*, latent political tension and a history of cultural dislocation were present in the soil worked in Heaney’s first volume of poetry. To put it another way: In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney is digging imaginary gardens of peat with real explosives in them. In response to a potentially volatile political situation, Heaney uses his squat pen to “dig” through personal and collective layers of memory in service of uncovering/creating a “personal Helicon,” a mythical Ireland that can serve as an imaginative ground for wandering – and increasingly threatened – Antaeuses: those for whom the oppositional, absolutist, grid-like logic of political ideology is not adequate for responsibly negotiating the contingencies of human life. As such, *Death of a Naturalist* reveals a characteristic of poetry missed by those critics who charge Heaney with irresponsibly shirking the political realm in some of his work: namely that, by creating

an order... true to the impact of external reality and... sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being... An order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew. An order which satisfies all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections (From "Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture, in *Opened Ground*, pg. 417),

poetry touches upon a fundamental human activity – *imagining reality* – antithetical to violent political movements that require fixed views of reality in order to proceed with their bloody work. In short, poetry *redresses* the falsely narrow vision of political ideologies that view the world in static us-them/right-wrong terms.

Many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist* both affirm the poetic vocation and express doubts as to its efficacy in a non-literary, gun-filled world. In "Digging," even as the poet's pen powerfully evokes three overlapping layers of time, bringing together in a single lyric moment three generations of diggers in the Heaney line (pardon the pun); and even amid the stunning onomatopoeia of "the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge" (note the placement of "edge" at the end (edge) of the slightly enjambed line), the poet hints that his work with words comes out of a felt lack, as if digging with a pen is somehow less "manly" than digging with a spade – "But I've no spade to follow men like them."¹ The crisis of the poem turns upon the spade-less poet's endeavor to find a way to "follow" ancestors at once personal and collective, ancestors who by digging into peat and bog are working a pre-political landscape, a mythical Ireland, an imaginal terrain. The final stanza provides an affirmation of the poet's ability to work this terrain with his pen so as to unearth images of sensual specificity that nourish the collective inhabitants of a landscape. The poet discovers that joining his ancestors in digging occurs precisely through his ability to commemorate their – and his – activity: the poet digs by

¹ Granted, this line could be read in other ways. Instead of revealing an insecurity, or at least an uncertainty, in relation to poetry's role(s) in the world, it may display the opposite sentiment. Much depends on how one reads the phrase, "men like them." Based on the poem as a whole, which appears to express a sense of awe toward these digging men, I reject a reading that would see a derogatory quality to the poet's assessment of his digging predecessors.

digging into the process of digging. The last three lines of the poem echo the opening stanza, with one change: “snug as a gun” in the first stanza gives way to “I’ll dig with it.” Thus at its end the poem both echoes its beginning and responds to it in such a way as to bring about a sense of resolution. One wonders: what else could the poet have done with his pen besides dig, and does the alternative to digging relate to the gun-like quality of the pen? In other words, is the declaration that “I’ll dig with it” a decision necessitated because the opening stanza obliquely raises a more violent alternative?

“Digging,” like *Death of a Naturalist* as a whole, poetically renders poetic craft. Part of this poetic rendering involves making thematic a tension concerning the role the poet can (should? must?) play when confronted with the threat of a form of violence that seeks to circumscribe personal memory and mythical landscape within reductive, factional categories. A distinction between, on the one hand, the attempt to dig into the reality-constructing wellsprings of the imagination, and on the other, the attempt to map reality rationally in the service of hierarchical sociopolitical projects (is this what a gun-like pen does?), is tentatively represented in *Death of a Naturalist*.²

² In order to develop this notion I would need to spend more time with the poem “Death of a Naturalist” in particular. Violence – both in the forced dislocation of the frogspawn and in the resulting vengeful response of the frogs – plays a more overt role in this poem. Removing the frogspawn into a classroom to observe the burgeoning tadpoles echoes the violence of constructing/ manipulating sociopolitical categories. Also, “Antaeus” appears to touch upon the incipient violence involved in the abstracting, lifting-off-the-ground movement of “map thinking.”