

A perspective on modern Irish poetry.

This analysis examines the poetry of Yeats and Heaney within the context of 'The National Question'. I argue that opposition to British rule has informed much modern Irish poetry, but that current of petty-bourgeois nationalism reflected in Irish poetry although privileged by Lenin he also saw had inherent contradictions and limitations. I will show similarities, but also differentiate between Yeats and Heaney. Concluding that only a poetics expressed in the concrete conditions of international socialism can create a proletarian poetry of workers of all countries. Only once the chains of oppression have been cast off and hurled into the dustbin of history can the workers of the world write freely as sisters and brothers, comrades.

An English Marxist, Ralph Fox, writing in the 1930s described 'The National Question' in Ireland as follows:

*For seven hundred years Ireland
has been engaged in a struggle for
national liberty... that of struggle
for a free and independent Irish
Workers' and Farmers' Republic.*

Fox (1932), p 1.

Yeats as a young revolutionary prophet and disciple of theosophy wrote in 1893 as the Twentieth Century dawned, To Ireland in Coming Times:

*Know, that I would accounted be rue
brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten
Ireland's wrong,*

Yeats (2009) pp. 16-17.

He would controversially exclude Owen and other WW 1 poets from The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935 in his Introduction (1936) on the basis that:

*...passive suffering is not
a theme for poetry.*

Yeats (1936), section IX, pp xxi-xxii.

His rationale will become apparent. Although I see potential in Lenin Leo Tolstoy and his Epoch (1911), who was arguing that Tolstoy was ‘an ideological camera obscura’ (Eagleton+ Drew 2006, p. 42) of a pre-revolutionary society, for a persuasive reading of Yeats and specifically Heaney Punishment:

To identify the great artist with the revolution which he has obviously failed to understand, and from which he obviously stands aloof, may at first sight seem strange and artificial. A mirror which does not reflect things correctly could hardly be called a mirror... revolution, however, is an extremely complicated thing. ..Tolstoy's ideas are a mirror of the weakness, the short comings of our peasant revolt...Tolstoy reflected the pent-up hatred, the ripened striving for a better lot, the desire to get rid of the past—and also the immature dreaming of the countryside.

Lenin (1967) pp. 64-68

Lenin (1967) Tolstoy and His Epoch argued that great writers can describe complex pre-revolutionary circumstances up-side-down or camera obscura. Here Lenin made a major advance in modern aesthetics by showing that the dialectic, ‘the unity of opposites’ exists in literature but not merely as a straightforward reflection. The narrator may be ‘telling’ us about their ideology in the narrative but the very passivity of their beliefs can show the ‘pent-up’ (Lenin) revolutionary aspirations which he camera obscura “shows’ us. How is this pertinent to my discussion of Heaney and Yeats? I shall employ poetry by Bobby Sands to show the anti-imperialist poet ‘telling’ us what he believes and feels. However Heaney and Yeats are closer to Tolstoy in context of Lenin’s analysis in my reading. I shall illustrate this with Heaney’s Punishment. Firstly I shall position the poem within Heaney’s own narrative of his poetic development. In O’Driscoll (2009) Stepping Stones: interviews with Seamus Heaney Heaney stated when asked:

Was the difficulty with Punishment more political than literary?

Heaney replied: That’s not how I would put it, because that makes it sound as if I were ‘addressing

*the situation in Northern Ireland'.
Admittedly I 'addressed the situation'
when I introduced different bog
poems at readings...
What Anna Swir called 'the
right to biological life as the
point and remains the point.*

O'Driscoll (2009) p. 159.

The narrative of the poem and the poem itself like many of Heaney's 'skinny quatrains' is ambivalent. Also they cannot be assessed by a Kantian aesthetic. Copleston (1964) sums up Kantian aesthetic judgement as follows:

- a) Disinterested interest.
- b) Purposiveness without a concept of purpose.
- c) Expression of feeling rather than a concept.

Copleston (1964) vol six, part 11.

The imagery of Punishment Heaney ([1972]1998) pp 71-72) is derived from a dual narrative emanating from Heaney's reading of Glob (1969) *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* and the contemporary 'punishment' beatings being carried out or encouraged by the I.R.A. to enforce their ideological hegemony in Republican areas. Tarring and feathering was a method used mainly by Republican sympathizers rather than the I.R.A itself, Farrell, M (1976) and McCann, E (1974) give accounts of the structural causes and realities of conflict in the Northern Irish Statelet. Heaney's poem continues:

I can see her drowned body
in the bog,

This references both the history of ancient sacrifices and undercurrent of 'land' for the Irish:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,
...
who would connive

in civilized outrage yet understand
the exact and tribal, intimate revenge.

Heaney (1987).

This is not the product of a writer of Tolstoy's stature, but exemplifies both the brutality and revolutionary zeal of the masses in a period of revolutionary turmoil, like Jacobean France or the North of Ireland after the smashing of the Civil Rights movement in Derry. It achieves a dialectical 'unity of opposites' in a world which is 'up-side-down'. Also note Heaney's, 'civilised outrage', as he moved to the Republic 1972 and a disturbing sensuous voyeurism is present in Punishment.

Importantly Fox (1932) Marx, Engels, Lenin on the Irish Revolution introduced the revolutionary proletariat. He maintained that Lenin understood the mass strike in Dublin during 1913 led by James Larkin as a pivotal moment in Ireland in that it introduced the organized proletariat into the Irish Question:

Lenin emphasises that the Dublin strike, the organisation of a the political party of the Irish workers, completely changed the situation in Ireland, where the bourgeoisie have got their "home rule," ...and are now looking forward to "freely ruling' their own' land with 'their own' Irish priests.

Fox (1932) p. 12.

Hence we are able to perceive within the Marxian understanding of the Irish Question an anti-imperialist orientation with its suspicion of petty-bourgeois nationalism which manifest itself in Ireland in its most developed form as Fenianism. The Irish Marxist James Connelly argued 'only Marxism provides the clue to Irish history.' Fox (1932, p 28). Connelly was executed for leading the 'Citizens Army' faction during the 1916 Easter uprising. Lenin (1916) Discussion on Self-Determination Summed-Up commented on this insurrection:

It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had had time to mature.

Lenin (1964) p 364.

The sacrificial nature of the Easter Uprising is huge in comprehending a modern Irish poetics and because of this Yeats's Easter 1916 reverberates.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart

Yeats (2009) pp 60-62.

These lines anticipated much as do:

Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith

And what excess of love bewildered them till they
died?

I write it out in verse –
MacDonald and MacBride
And Connelly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Whenever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats (2009) pp 60-62.

Yeats in *Easter 1916* uses both iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The poem's rhyme scheme revolves around ABAB. The last line impacts, it is repeated three times in the poem, because 'terrible beauty' is an oxymoron and therefore it creates a sense of 'estrangement' as understood by the Russian Formalists. The final line employs alliteration of sounds beauty/ born to effect and plays with notions of conception/revolution and beauty/terror.

By contrast, I now examine the writing of Bobby Sands composed while in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh prison (Sands ([1983] 2001 *One Day in My Life* for a prose account of the dehumanizing conditions experienced by the Republican prisoners), we see the consequences of 'England may kept faith', (Yeats, *Easter 1916*, 2009 p 62). In Sands poem *The Rhyme of Time* (1998, pp. 177-79) we may locate what Yeats *Easter 1916* (Yeats 2009, p 62) called 'terrible beauty'. The last stanza of Bobby Sands' poem, after describing the struggles of the oppressed throughout history, concludes:

It lights the darkness of this prison cell,
It thunders forth its might,
It is "the indistinguishable thought," my friend,
The thought that says "I'm right!"

Sands (1998) p 179.

This is instrumentalist poetry, but tempered by concluding with the first-person speaker, we are given access to Sands psyche. Sands show how the certitude and single-mindedness of the anti-imperialist urban guerrilla almost shouts at his oppressor with the rhyme of 'might/right'. The anaphora of 'It' either inspires or intimidates the addressee. And the final trimeter ends after two iambic feet ends with an emphatic and steeled spondee 'I'm right!' As Frantz Fanon (1965) *The Wretched of The Earth* had noted:

*The native intellectual who takes
up arms to defend his nation's
legitimacy, who is willing to
strip himself naked to study the
history of his body, is obliged to
dissect the heart of his people.*

Fanon (1965), p 211.

For the Orthodox Marxist the Irish Question and its literature are contradictory because its petty-bourgeois nationalism is incapable of casting off the shackles of imperial domination and creating socialism. These concrete and contradictory forces, I argue, formed both the poetry of Yeats and Heaney providing an explanation for their similarities and differences and their ultimate failure to provide a poetics of Irish liberation (indeed neither did Sands). So we can read Auden ([1940] 1985) *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* in a similar ideological fashion to Ralph Fox (1932), they both went to Spain with the International Brigades, Fox died. In his poem upon the death W.B. Yeats Auden makes a Marxian ideological as well as aesthetic point on the limitations of Irish nationalism and poetry to change society:

*Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and
her weather still, For poetry makes
nothing happen: it survives*

Auden (1981) pp.141-3.

Here is Heaney's response to Auden's position on Yeats in the early 1970's:

*I am tired of speculations about
the relation of the poet's work
to the workings of the world he
inhabits, and finally I disagree that
'poetry makes nothing happen.' It
can eventually make new feelings,
or feelings about feelings happen,
and anybody can see that in this*

*country for a long time to come
a refinement of feelings will be
more urgent than a reframing
of policies or of constitutions.*

O'Donoghue (2009) p 6.

Yeats whose class orientation was from the Protestant Ascendancy embraced Republicanism and occultism and Heaney was from a working class Catholic background. They both wrote in the first-person singular and within the Irish nationalist poetic narrative 'aestheticize' (Danson Brown, 2005, p. 26) violence and do so from distance unlike Sands. As Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote:

*Poetry is as unfair as history. Seamus
Heaney takes his distances –...
but his Derry is always with him.*

Gupta and Johnston (2005) p 264.

I argue that Yeats engaged with politics but did so with a 'Romantic inspirationalism and irrationalism'. We can understand Yeats in 'an aesthetic of visionary spontaneity' rather like William Blake (Eagleton pp 102 -3) while Heaney's 'art is about craft and production (ibid). It is worth remembering that both W.B. Yeats and Heaney were awarded the Noble Prize for Literature. While Sands poetry has attained secular canonization amongst the Republican literati.

Lenin (1979) The Right of Nations to Self-Determination here privileges the oppressed:

*Insofar as the bourgeoisie of
the oppressed nation fights the
oppressor, we are always, in
every case, and more in favour,
we are the most consistent
enemies of oppression.*

Lenin (1979) p 23.

However Modern Irish poetics was not only formed by nationalist discontent but in often bloody circumstances. Brecht encapsulates this enigma:

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.

Brecht (1976) p.320.

James Connelly maintained that petty-bourgeois nationalism could not solve 'The Irish Question' but that only through collective activity:

*The Irish working class
must emancipate itself,
and in emancipating itself
free its own country.*

Bambery (1986) p.26.

I argue that a necessary prerequisite for the solution to the National Question is the building of Proletarian Internationalism, which achieves fruition as international communism. Then the National Question becomes an irrelevance, wherever it had occurred, allowing the world's diverse poetic voices to thrive in a rainbow of harmony. For it is because, in the words of the great novelist Maxim Gorky, only:

*The proletariat and the proletariat
alone that will create the all
the conditions required for
the free development of the
armonious personality.*

Gorky (1983) p 213.

And only the proletariat can create communism as Marx makes absolutely clear and consequently any group or cell must guard against substituting themselves for the conscious revolutionary self-activity of the international masses:

*That the emancipation of the
working classes must be conquered
by the working classes themselves.*

Marx (1974), p.82.

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