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Seamus Heaney's *Door into the Dark* Opens up Vertiginous Possibilities

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Seamus Heaney, one of the finest Irish poets and next to Yeats, is a Nobel laureate. He shows his genre right from the publication of his maiden anthology *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966. *Door into the Dark* (1969) is his second anthology of verse where we find a marked progression of his technique. In the book some poems present some specific semantic suggestions which have decisive and determinate significations which apparently reflect the socio-political and cultural representations of Irish people but there are many poems in the book which are steeped in multifarious semantic suggestions. The meanings are almost obliterated from this second group of poems as they represent the vertiginous possibilities of meanings. In these poems there are no specific, concrete and determinate destinations but through symbols, images, metaphors and binary oppositions, the poems reflect innumerable layers and nuances of meanings and suggestions.

Introduction:

The second collection of Seamus Heaney's verse *Door into the Dark* (1969) is a surrealistic evocation of the physical and metaphysical world. Most of the poems of the anthology hang in between the two. Though most of the poems apparently represent nature with its landscape, seascape and the common people of the rustic world, there remain profound implications of a deeper idea relating to violent human history of Ireland. The poet feels and is drawn towards the mystery, fear, beauty, dread of the collective unconscious of his race. At the same time the horrible happenings of human world around him was too painful for him to give an account of it in detail. He is at a loss to get appropriate word to paint the picture of huge wastages and meaningless loss of human lives and human resources. He therefore, tries to evoke the darkness through subtle hints and suggestion, symbols and signs, images and allegories, myth and rituals of distant past. John Wilson Foster criticizes Heaney for this method of poetic voyage: "the dark remains unchallenged by the end of the book. Heaney has a marked reluctance to strike inwards, to cross the threshold, to explore the emotional and psychological sources of his fear."¹ Heaney thus opens up the door of 'undecided possibilities' of unnumbered implications through which his poetic imagination passes. It starts from nowhere and ends in an unending, impalpable labyrinth of ideas and images.

Heaney himself proclaims the strategy at this stage, 'I rhyme/ To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.' ('Personal Helicon', *Death of a Naturalist*). Whatever may be Foster's opinion, I think this strategy of Heaney helps him opening up innumerable avenues of semantic suggestions in poetry. He refuses to surrender either to any 'ism' or socio-political demand of the time. Moreover, the term 'dark' in the title of the book is steeped in multiplied suggestions. The 'dark' may hint at the mystery and horror of the unknown universe. It may also suggest the dark and distant archeological and anthropological past or the dark racial memory of the ancient forefathers. This may also imply the chaos and darkness of the disintegrated human psyche. The

darkness may also be the spiritual darkness of the faithless modern man. The darkness may also assert the dark and bleak state of Irish political perspective which has met plethora of cold-blooded murders and pogroms throughout centuries. Instead of making any easy political conclusions, Heaney keeps numerous possibilities hovering over the threshold. Heaney dips down to the primordial past to excavate the universal state of existence. In the poems of *Door into the Dark* the distinction between past and present is blurred. Most of the poems of the anthology move with ease and spontaneity in between past and present, conscious and unconscious, physical and metaphysical.

Heaney's idea of 'darkness' may have numerous religious and literary antecedents which shaped his idea to draw a unique paradigm of his own where pastoral background of simple life is presented to portray the collage of yet unexplored experiences. The 'door into the dark' echoes the Biblical pronouncement, "I am the door: by me if any man shall enter in, he shall be saved" (John, 10:9) where the Son of God promises salvation to all the sinners. Another Biblical connotation is found in St. John of the Cross's meditation, *The Dark Night*, in which the soul passes through a door into the dark 'store house of senses'. The souls' venturesome journey is explained by St. John:

When the house of the senses is stilled (that is, mortified), its passions quenched, and its appetites calmed and put to sleep through this happy night of the purgation of the senses, the soul went out in order to begin its journey along the road of the spirit, which is that of proficients and which by another terminology is referred to as the illuminative way or the way of infused contemplation.....2

Heaney's translation of one of the kernels of St. John (" Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God through Faith") in *Station Island* that takes after the 'dark' of St. Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg. The darkness in Heaney thus may be used as metaphor for imagination and meditation strongly illumined that is, 'burning bright', "in the forest of the night" ("Tyger", William Blake), the spiritual darkness of the binary opposition of creation and destruction. Heaney may have been influenced by Dante's famous divine comedy where the portal of the Inferno was inscribed thus:

Through me the way to the eternal city

Through me the way to eternal sadness:

Through me the way to the lost people.

Justice moved my supreme maker:

(The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto III. ll.1-4)

Heaney's metaphor of 'door' and 'darkness' may be imbued with Joseph Conrad's "door of Darkness" and "door opening into a darkness"³ in *Heart of Darkness*. Eliot's reference to 'darkness' in *Four Quartets* is a widely discussed episode which may support Heaney. In *East Coker* Eliot philosophically utters:

O dark dark dark . They all go into the dark,
 The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
 The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
 The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
 Distinguished civil servants, chairman of many committees,
 Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
 And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha
 And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the directory of directors,
 And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.
 And we all go with them into the silent funeral,
 Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.

(‘East Coker’ – III, *Four Quartets*)

The idea presented here is aptly illustrated in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

“There is grandeur in the humility of the English religious poets, but there is a lack of their ecstasy in ‘East Coker’. Where Vaughan, whose days were as troubled as our own and little less violent, saw eternity the other night and bright shoots of everlastingness, Mr. Eliot sees only the dark. ‘They all go into the dark’, all the people in his vision of a world of bankers , men of letters, statesmen, committeemen, contractors, labourers, who eat and work and go to bed and get out of bed. All are for the dead, ‘*And we all go with them, into the silent funeral/ Nobody’s funeral, for there is no one to bury*’. This is a hymn of humility, but a sad one, and somewhat incongruous. For in spite of the animation of his powerful incantations there is more satire than poetry in Mr. Eliot’s head-shaking over a terrible, bleak, meaningless world of hollow men, with smell of steaks in passage ways, and satire and humility go strangely together. This is the confession of a lost heart and a lost art.”⁴

Benedict Kiely locates Heaney’s mysticism to Catholic Christian roots. According to him “the negative dark that presides in the Irish Christian consciousness...the gloom, the constriction, the sense of guilt, the self-abasement,” from what come his muse, he contends: “I think this notion of the dark centre, the blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts, the hidden core of the self – this notion is the foundation of what viewpoint I might articulate for myself as a poet.”⁵

The idea of shutting the door of senses to experience precarious dark existence of spiritual self as well as God is the way of the medieval mystics, ancient Hindu ascetics as well as the Catholic saints. Heaney takes after the tradition to express his views and visions of ‘door’ into the ‘dark’ where both the terms are used as symbols and metaphors. His use of archetypes renders meaning into infinite possibilities. The poetics of Heaney thus ascends epical height and grandeur. He shows ocean in a drop of water and world in a grain of sand. Herein lays his uniqueness as a poet.

The first line of the poem “The Forge” is used as title of the anthology. The sonnet celebrates the simple, everyday hard work of a blacksmith who undertakes the strenuous task of turning the rough metals into fine work of artifices. Apparently, the poem is on a simple, common, theme of the works of a blacksmith. The blacksmith says, ‘All I know is a door into darkness’. Heaney says that he knows the door, but the darkness remains unseen and impalpable. The ‘anvil’ is turned into an ‘altar’ which is set at ‘somewhere in the centre’, ‘horned as a

unicorn'. Here Heaney touches upon the God's work, artist's art and a blacksmith's work and weaved them together as in a garland. But the term 'altar' attaches asceticism of saints and surrender of the artists for knowing the unknown beauty of knowledge beyond sense perceptions. Horn of unicorn alludes to the mythical creatures which evokes both beauty and dread after which the artist always hankers. Heaney thus highlights the binary oppositions of surrender and escape, working out and entering deep inside, the simple life of a blacksmith as well as the strenuous, difficult task of a devotee or an artist or a saint. This he does, as enunciated by him in *The Makings of a Music*, in terms of Wordsworth and Yeats' poetry. In Wordsworth's poetry, he says, "what we are presented with is a version of composition as listening, as a wise passiveness, a surrender to energies that spring within the centre of the mind."⁶ Here Heaney and his persona remain passive and silent. But he follows Yeats too, to whom "composition was no recollection in tranquility, not a delivery of the dark embryo, but mastery, a handling, a struggle towards maximum articulation... Thoughts do not ooze out and into one another, they are hammered into unity." "All reality," Yeats observes, "comes to us as the record of labour."⁷

Blake Morrison asserts, "what links the various traders, labourers and craftsmen who fill his first two books is that, unlike him, they are lacking in speech"⁸ and that Heaney, often embarrassed by the linguistic sophistication of formal education, "found himself in the position of valuing silence above speech, of defending the shy and awkward against the confident and accomplished, of feeling language to be a kind of betrayal..."⁹ But the community Heaney came from, and with which he wanted his poetry to express solidarity, was one on which the pressure of silence weighed heavily. This idea is finely matched with the idea expressed in another poem of Heaney's *North*, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"

In "The Peninsula" too, Heaney does not specify anything, though apparently the emphasis is on the aspect of the binary opposition of speech and writing. And here, too, Heaney scores as a poet, philosopher, linguist and priest and may be many other. The poem recounts the experience of split Heaney – of which one is inarticulate, passive and silent surrendering to instinct, inner voice of soul and another one literate, vocal and vibrant. The clash continues between the two without resolution. The unmarked land is unnamed and therefore indeterminate destination is the journey's course which the persona passes through. The voyager is mystified with the experience of 'horizon' drinking 'down sea and hill' and 'ploughed field' 'swallows the whitewashed gable' and yet reaching to the dark again. Initially, the landscape seems to be an open text that gradually vanishes. New landscape reappears with new words that replaces the past and will be replaced by the next, and new darkness would descend again. The process would continue.

His "The Plantation" upholds the historical cycle, the gyre where himself plays the destroyer as well as creator. In it he observes the eternal cycle of creation and destruction which at first bewilders him. As he withdraws from the dreadful present, but silent meditation of past draws him near to its own circularity. The poem represents the historical cycle of invasion and domination as recurrent phenomena. He thus invokes the archetypes of master and slave, colonizer and colonized and the ruler and the ruled. Here too, the meanings specific are erased and shows the vanishing entity of text.

One of Heaney's famous poems in the second anthology is 'Requiem for the Croppies' which deals directly with a historical event of war and violence. The terrible battle of 'Vinegar Hill' (1798), fought between Irish rebels and the English colonial rulers is the subject of the poem. Although the poem upholds determinate political perspective, much against the obscurity and ambivalence enunciated elsewhere, it nevertheless has layers of meanings and suggestions. One cardinal theme, of course, is the barbarity, brutality and bloodshed of the meaningless and unwanted war and violence. One major achievement of the poem is that it craftily conjoins the centuries of Irish violence and political struggle and achieves an organic, indeed germinal resolution: 'And in August the barley grew up out of the grave'. Heaney himself gives an elaborate account of the composition of the poem, its historical and political relevance:

"[It] was written in 1966 when most poets in Ireland were straining to celebrate the anniversary of the 1916 rising. That rising was the harvest of seeds sown in 1917, when revolutionary republican ideals and national feelings coalesced in the doctrines of Irish republicanism and in the rebellion of 1978 – itself unsuccessful and savagely put down. The poem was born of and ended with an image of resurrection based on the fact that sometime after the rebels were buried in common graves, these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing up with the barley corn that that the 'croppies' had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march. The oblique implication was that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called 'the right rose tree' of 1916. I did not realize at the time that the original heraldic murderous encounter between protestant yeomen and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published."¹⁰

At this point historical and political violence of Ireland is transacted into poetry. Heaney thus endeavours to present the ideological state of Ireland, then and now, coalesced into an organic whole. There is, of course, a complex interplay of voices and points of view in the poem which displaces the reader and introduces several levels of indeterminacy regarding context, identity of the personae and the poet and the complex relationship among them. The readers, while going through the poem are assimilated with the 'requiem'. The deep attachment and bond between the soldiers (or the Irish republican patriots) and the readers is established immediately with the very close and intimate voice of agony, pathos and nausea of the butchered and buried rebels. The poem's patriotic fervour, humanitarian zeal is noticeable. The first person narrator is a killed rebel who hails their uprising as resurrection. The rebels may be killed, but the struggle for justice and liberty would continue. The Jesus-like resurrection of the Irish struggle for independence from the divisive foreign force is heartily welcomed by the poet. Although, in many occasions he is accused of remaining passive and detached from the cause of Irish independence, this poem is a fitting reply to the unjust criticism of Heaney. Although the topicality of the poem reduces and restricts its poetic nuances, it shows amazing linguistic resourcefulness of plurality of ideas.

But in 'Bogland' Heaney just reverses his approach and method of presentation. He gives up monologue and refuses to refer to particular historical-political event. Instead he takes recourse to symbol, metaphor, allegory and myth. He enters deep into 'the matter of Ireland'. 'Bogland' stands as metaphor for Ireland. Person, place and action are thus one step removed from direct history. The poet speaks of voyage 'inwards', 'downwards': 'Our pioneers keep

striking/ Inwards and downwards.’ (‘Bogland’, *Door into the Dark*). This journey may suggest many possibilities. The foremost, of course, is the strenuous receding back to the primordial Irish past, its folk history and myth, its hoary tradition, its honour and glory and its savage rituals and barbarity. The inward journey may indicate the psychic self-searching of person and people of Ireland. The psychic residue or the racial memory of a great people is excavated through the journey of the poet. This inward journey may also suggest a spiritual exploration of a plundered nation. It is noteworthy that the poet uses plural term for the great journey to ‘inwards’ and ‘downwards’. This subtle suggestion keeps us hovering over the indeterminate and inconclusive state of history and memory. The antithesis of first person ‘we’ and third person ‘they’ reveals the subversive state of a subdued nation. Through the allegory of ‘bogland’ the poet simultaneously lays bare the greatness and beauty as well as the suffering and agony of his motherland. Here text becomes an arena of expressing his anger and protest against foreign aggression and exploitation. The idea is manifested through the expression:

Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,
Is wooed into the cyclops’ eye
Of a tarn.

(‘Bogland’, *Door into the Dark*)

The ‘encroacher’ is definitely the alien colonial power who plunders, rapes, kills and makes slave of a free people. The allegory of ‘cyclop’s myth further intensifies the aggressor’s mindless, brutal and violent physical force. In Homer’s great epic the *Odyssey* ‘Cyclop’ is the giant son of the Greek god Poseidon whom Ulysses blinded inside his own cave. The suggestion hints at the imperialist aggression of England. The poet predicts that the predator nation will not excavate minerals for the prosperity of the country. On the contrary, the poet says:

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

(‘Bogland’, *Door into the Dark*)

‘Great Irish Elk’ is symbolically used. It implies beauty, innocence, purity and soul of Ireland. ‘They’ have killed the ‘Great’ deer and then stolen its skeleton. The ferocity and underlying violence is excavated out of the dark swamp. Through the metaphor of ‘bogland’ Heaney posits the binary opposition of nationalism and imperialism. His sympathy definitely goes with justice, liberty and humanism as he fondly speaks of the beauty and treasure of the bogland and makes a veiled attack on the imperialist aggressors. Here violence lies deep into the dark history of distant past as well as present and in the dark recesses of human psyche. As regard to the linguistic and textual usages, Heaney’s frequent use of native and Anglo-Saxon jargon gives his verse an exotic appeal. The syntax is compressed with the help of symbolic and imagistic shorthand. The lines have irregular metrical scheme within very short stanzas. The expressions are short, crisp but solid and suggestive. They bear the weight of serious and ponderous theme which Heaney excavates by roaming through the dark and unknown passages of history, myth and rituals.

Another technically accomplished poem in the series of *Door into the Dark* is 'Relic of Memory'. Textual and linguistic application is a *tour de force* in the poem. The poem is like an ancient stone – solid, permanent, beautiful. Language itself is condensed in the text. Almost all superficial traditional linguistic tools have been shorn off to give language and the ideas it endeavours to bring within its purview, an original shape sans ornament, for its readers. The poem has very few punctuation marks. And it almost abandons the most important linguistic tool, verb too, to play any role at all. He uses only a few weak verbs. The poem looks like the naked shape of the most original state of art. Tough dictions are tightened together with diverse symbolic suggestions and nuances of meanings. 'Relic of Memory' is a metaphor for the 'lough', the bog peat and the storehouse of images which unearth the universal state of physical and metaphysical universe as well as human soul and psyche. Let us have a look at the concrete linguistic matrix of the poem:

The lough waters
Can petrify wood:
Old oars and posts
Over the years
Harden their grain,
Incarcerate ghosts
Of sap and season.

('Relic of Memory', *Door into the Dark*)

Absolute abstraction leads to many undecided possibilities. Each noun in the extract is a prismatic symbol. 'Lough', 'water', 'wood', 'oars', 'years' render semantic suggestions into many undecided possibilities. The lake water, like the bog, preserves evolutionary history of creation and creatures.

In Heaney's poem a single theme, idea or event is condensed and then transcended to the supreme form of art by the poet's keen observation and thoughtful representation of dialectical representation of world around and within. 'Relic of Memory' is such a short poem comprising of four stanzas of six lines only but it has a tight, compelling, construction. The connecting link among ideas, events and themes are remote, impalpable and unintelligible. The symbols and images carry forward readers to grope into the treasure house of semantic suggestions but without any specific search result. The multifarious suggestions enrich the appeal of the poem. The poem is like a piece of diamond - solid, dazzling, bright and beautiful. A unique technique is employed in the poem to bind all four stanzas into a meaningful whole. Last line of each stanza runs into the next stanza to connect sense and thus all four stanzas form the rosary out of the bead as they are. Heaney dives deep into the mythical and cultural past and unearths the underlying violence and brutality of dark human psyche. He connects past atrocities and violence to the contemporary. The last five lines of third stanza uphold cosmic view of violence:

Dead lava,
The cooling star,
Coal and diamond
Or sudden birth
Of burnt meteor
Are too simple,

('Relic of Memory', *Door into the Dark*)

The images of Heaney in the above extract are superb in his use of pure abstraction. The expression is solid, concrete, and condensed. In a sense, the lines express the maturity of the poetic craft of Heaney. Through these lines Heaney not only goes back to his cultural past but also reaches to the era of creation of our mother earth. His vision is here more symbolic and scientific than pure abstraction. He reveals the truth of how the wheels of time, beyond history, move forward and how life on earth survives by fighting against all sorts of oddities and adversities.

Door into the Dark is the superb creation of Heaney which keeps readers hovering over the threshold of darkness. The door is open and recognizable but the darkness remains mysterious and inaccessible. Now and then Heaney endeavours to look into it but his journey ends in the fathomless bottom of darkness. Both the door and darkness metaphorically present numerous aspects, ideas and elements of myth, religious texts and literature. And very often the ideas and apparent meanings remain impalpable and indeterminate. The texts remain open-ended and inconclusive.

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