

Heaney and the catharsis of freedom



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In 'Requiem for the Croppies', Heaney presents the reader with a stark image; the 'broken wave' that 'soak[s]' the 'hillside'. The 'broken wave' evokes a sense of an anti-climax, as a wave may gather momentum, reach its peak, and eventually roll over, possessing a great power and destructive force. Here however, this wave is 'broken', cleaved and interrupted before it attains its full potential. This conveys a bitterness, a disappointment, and a sense of wasted opportunity, as the effort that went into generating this underground movement, or 'wave', against the oppressive British rule in Ireland in the late 18th century, is nullified by one terrible, contrastingly sudden 'final conclave'. The sibilant assonance of this same line ('the hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave'), is an aural image that captures the onomatopoeic sloshing sound of the 'wave' of blood, and this presents the reader with a confronting image; of soldiers splashing around in the blood of their own comrades, continuously being slaughtered, to emphasize the true horror and scale of this disaster. The reader is peppered with many other shocking images, such as the bodies that are 'terraced' in their 'thousands', which suggests that the battleground is so teeming with corpses that from afar, the sloped hillside would instead resemble a jagged, stepped cliff, made up of multiple 'terrace[s]', bodies piled on top of one another to clear the battleground for more of this same atrocious bloodshed, highlighting the disturbingly inhumane and unrelenting nature of the battle. Through these images, Heaney depicts a desolate landscape, as the momentum and the hope of the soldiers (implied by the 'wave') is cruelly and mercilessly savaged and violated. It seems as if all hope is lost.

However, as the poem finally moves away from the battleground in the last line, a shift occurs. Time has moved on, the poem is now 'in August', and the monstrous battleground scene is allayed a little, calmed by this separation of time. Now the audience is presented with a starkly contrasting image, as 'the barley gr[ows] up out of [the soldiers'] grave[s]'. This 'barley' is in contrast new, vulnerable and just germinating – it represents a tenderness and a weakness of which this battleground – now field – was so previously devoid, the brash and savage destruction contrasting with this uninterrupted growth. The spirit of the fallen croppies, whose agricultural 'scythes', unprepared for a bloody war, were painfully mismatched by the military, staunch 'cannon', is captured perfectly by this crop, which parallels the agricultural origins of the revolution. This 'barley' therefore acts both as a symbol of new life, and of perseverance, but also as a memorial, a testament to the tenacity and bravery of the makeshift soldiers who had nothing to live on except the few grains which they carried in their 'pockets'. In this way, Heaney is depicting that while the scale of the disaster at 'Vinegar Hill' may seem to obliterate any sense of hope or purpose to the revolution, the new 'barley' negates this; life prevails over death, and this experience, be its immediate effect one of physically torturous pain, becomes one of growth, and of everlasting memorial, that commemorates the powerful sacrifice and bravery of these men who did not waver, even in the face of such monstrous, overwhelming opposition. In this way an idea is introduced; the idea that intense suffering can also confer a knowledge, experience and power that lives on.

In 'A Transgression', the reader is introduced to two presences immediately; 'the teacher' and the 'big boys'. The notion of a 'teacher' is one of supervision, and the 'big boys' have connotations of power, dominion and maturity; the voice of this poem is hence child-like, in awe of the responsibility these 'big boys' are given to go out and 'gather sticks', trusted by this controlling and older 'teacher' figure. The pursuit of the big boys, 'to gather sticks', is decidedly adult – they are providing for others, collecting the tinder for a fire, which symbolizes life, protection and comfort, but is also very patriarchal. The young Heaney's view of the 'teacher' and the 'big boys' is in this way almost a form of idolatry, and as a result he yearns to be old, to be trusted like the 'big boys' ('I wanted out as well').

Then, paralleling the instantaneous nature of the 'final conclave' in 'Requiem for the Croppies', 'one afternoon' the boy is given access to this tantalizing, mature world; he is 'at large' under a 'raggedy, hurrying sky'. The description of the boy as being 'at large' is telling; this action, amongst the euphoric 'escape-joy', is prophetically wrong, almost criminal; he is ominously 'at large', as if a convict escaped from a prison. These words capture the sense of rebellion that permeates this entire escape, it is 'dar[ing]'; an ostentatious, immature outpouring of bravado that pales in comparison to the 'big boys' who do not have to work to attain this trust; they are simply 'let' 'out'.

As consequence, a ream of consistently dread-filled images are presented to the reader; the 'black spot' of the 'gypsies' fire', the 'rags' on the 'stripped hedge', the 'magpie' that 'r[i]se[s]' and flies away. Where fire, just like the 'sticks' symbolises life and survival, all that remains of the nomadic, free

gypsies, is the 'black' charred remains, deathly dull and disappointing. The description of the grass as 'roadside' implies that it is encroached upon by the industrial tarmac and is hence devoid of nutrients and weedy, not lush nor vibrant. This is mirrored by the 'stripped' hedge who has similarly been robbed of life and interest, and as a result this world is stark and drab; the freeness the boy was seeking (the exciting, strange 'gypsies') has either moved on, or does not live up to the boy's expectations. This is summated by the 'magpie', again a symbol of freedom, who flies away, exhibiting an unparalleled movement, to leave the boy only with an 'emptiness' that does not suffice. The reality that confronts the boy, is that the outside world is not the paradisiac kingdom which had been conjured in his imagination, but rather that he is trapped under 'heaven's dome', cruelly segregated from this utopia by an impenetrable, unreachable firmament, to which only the 'magpie' who deserts him, can come close.

The lexical complexity of the final line, especially the 'ado', is in contrast to the childish, basic language of the opening stanza ('teacher', 'big boys') that restricts itself to narrative, storytelling that sticks to concrete facts such as the date and time ('at two', 'in scanty nineteen forty six'). This transition in language is emblematic of the series of realizations the boy has undergone; there has been a gain in experience. He is more mature, and is able to recognize the emotional cues and nuances of his parents – despite his 'transgression', the boy is received by his parents with a 'gaze'. This language imparts a sense that the parents are glassy-eyed, contemplative, and still overcome with an unrelenting love for the boy, in spite of his truancy. Similarly to the soothing denouement of 'Requiem for the

Croppies’, this nullifies what the boy has done, and all is made good again. In the two poems, the harrowing events that take place forge a new power, a set of new skills in those who are brave enough to dare for freedom. This idea is echoed at other points in Heaney’s collection, such in ‘Act of Union’ and the rape of the feminine Ireland, with its onomatopoeic ‘gash’ and ‘bog burst’. This language conjures up violent sexual imagery, and a sense that Ireland is being torn apart and destroyed beyond repair by England both physically and metaphorically. However, from this rape springs a child, whose ‘heart beneath [Ireland’s] is a wardrum mustering force’, imparting a new strength and power to Ireland who has been so terribly violated, and left ‘raw’.

For Heaney, striving for freedom, whether it be from oppressive British rule, or simply a childhood temptation, is a pursuit that births a hope, a sense of experience, despite the hardship this taste of freedom and power may demand.