Seamus Heaney: beauty, atrocity, and poetry

Let’s now look at two particular poems by Seamus Heaney. These were inspired by a book of photographs of corpses from prehistoric times that had been preserved in the peat bogs of Europe. Heaney’s poems are brilliantly attentive to the extraordinary mummifying effect which the bog produced: the bodies are astonishingly well preserved, but also half-transformed into something else altogether, with a strange aesthetic quality. Here is a photograph of ‘the Grauballe Man’, subject of one of the poems.

The other remarkable thing about these bodies is that many of them suffered a violent death, seemingly victims of ritual or judicial execution. The Grauballe Man’s throat has been slashed:
Heaney wrote these poems during the violence of the Troubles in Ulster; reflecting on these bodies allowed him the possibility of making connections with the violence and killings going on around him.

One more photograph: a famous classical statue, 'The Dying Gaul', which the poem also refers to. This is another victim, of violence and of empire, turned into a moving and exceptionally beautiful work of art. (You can just see, on his ribcage, his death-wound.)

Now, here is Heaney’s poem. Read it more than once before you go on to what follows.

The Grauballe Man

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself.
The grain of his wrists
is like bog oak,
the ball of his heel
like a basalt egg.
His instep has shrunk
cold as a swan’s foot
or a wet swamp root.
His hips are the ridge
and purse of a mussel,
his spine an eel arrested
under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts,
the chin is a visor
raised above the vent
of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened. The cured wound
opens inwards to a dark elderberry place.

Who will say 'corpse' to his vivid cast?
Who will say 'body' to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair,
a mat unlikely
as a foetus's.
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,
a head and shoulder
out of the peat,
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies
perfected in my memory,
down to the red horn
of his nails,

hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

The first part of the poem vividly evokes, and marvels at, what the mummifying process of the peat has done to the body. A series of daring similes and metaphors (the similes giving way to metaphors after the third stanza) strive to register this quality of transformation. Similes and metaphors – the ability to see things differently or to make connections – are the
poet’s trade; here the poet’s work seems to duplicate the action of the bog. As does the poet’s memory, turning what was poignantly, humanly vulnerable (‘bruised like a forceps baby’) into something ‘perfected’ and hard as nails.

A successful artwork might be just such a perfected thing. Yet of course such a way of describing the process also calls it into question, makes us wary or uneasy. The ‘slashed throat’ may have tanned and toughened, can even be described as ‘cured’ (as skin is cured on the way to becoming leather), but it’s a shock when it enters the poem, and after that I think we feel it waiting for us, until ‘slashed’ returns, almost as it had to, in that brutal final line. What we feel at the end is the ‘actual weight’ of the human victim – in prehistoric times, but now also among Heaney’s contemporaries. (Notice how the word ‘each’ moves us from the single figure in the photograph to evoke a long series of those who suffer violence.)

The hooded victims seem to be contrasted with the Dying Gaul. The poet describes the Gaul as ‘too strictly compassed / on his shield’. If you look at the illustration you will see how perfectly the dying warrior is, at this moment, contained within the circle of his shield. It is sometimes said that the value of tragic art lies in the way it gives form to suffering. Yet Heaney says the Gaul is ‘too strictly compassed’ (whereas the Grauballe Man is poured out like a river.) Why do you think he says this? What kind of criticism does it imply? The statue is an instance of the beauty which appears in the line above, while ‘each hooded victim’ is an instance of atrocity: Heaney says that his image of the Grauballe Man (which we can perhaps identify with the poem we are reading) is ‘hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity’. These are old-style scales, where you weigh one thing against another, around a pivot; it’s an image that can easily suggest an idea of balance, and we might say that Heaney wants to strike a balance between beauty and atrocity, between the claims of art and the actuality of violence. The statue gets three lines, and the hooded victims get three lines: there’s a kind of symmetry. But we might feel that the ‘actual weight’ of those victims is such a heavy closing of the poem that it outweighs what comes before. (Would the poem still work if the sets of three lines were switched round?) And if we look at Heaney’s image of the scales, he hasn’t written between beauty and atrocity, but with beauty and atrocity. It’s a less definite image, but one that asks us to imagine beauty and atrocity in the scales together with the poem, brought together in the poem, or at least not opposites in the way we elsewhere find them.

We can step back a little.

- If Heaney’s poem is so alive to the actuality of atrocity, what does he gain by moving so far away in time, and by spending so much of the poem describing the mummified body?
- Is the poem itself a beautiful artwork – or does it refuse to be one – or how would you more helpfully rephrase that question to yourself?

The second Heaney poem we’re looking at is also one of the ‘bog poems’, and raises some similar issues. Again, he has a particular mummified body in mind, sometimes called ‘the Windeby girl’:

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Archaeologists speculated that she might have been executed for adultery, and Heaney picks up this idea in his poem, ‘Punishment’. The title refers also to the punishments inflicted by republican extremists on those seen as betraying the Irish cause. The poem moves from the bog body to women who, for dating British soldiers, were shaved, tarred and feathered, and exposed to public humiliation. (Heaney calls such women the ‘sisters’ of the girl in the bog.) You can read a BBC report of one such incident, with an arresting photograph, here. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8381652.stm

Here is the poem. (It has a couple of uncommon words; look them up if you don’t know their meaning.)

**Punishment**

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:
her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring
to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur
of your brain’s exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles’ webbing
and all your numbered bones:
I 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.

- How would you describe the poet’s attitude to the women at the end of the poem? ‘Civilised outrage’ would condemn such punishments as barbaric, and Heaney ‘would connive / in’ such an attitude (what does that phrase imply?), but he also understands the ‘tribal’ desire for revenge on those whose actions betray the tribe. What is the effect of the words ‘understand’ and ‘intimate’ there? Is Heaney’s refusal, or inability, to take sides, a strength or a weakness?

- Such a complex or conflicted attitude has made him ‘dumb’, an acquiescent onlooker (compare the passers-by in the background of the BBC photograph), and this makes him feel himself as complicit in the action. Although he ‘almost’ loves the bog girl, he would still have cast ‘the stones of silence’. This is a reference to Jesus and the adulteress in the Bible (John 8: 1-11), which you can read, for instance, here.
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8:1-11 What is the effect of reading that next to this?

- ‘Dumb’ is a terrible thing for a poet to call himself. Yet we have the poem. Would you describe it as an expression of Heaney’s dumbness before atrocity, or as an overcoming of that dumbness?

- The poem links the prehistoric act of ‘punishment’ with contemporary events. How does this affect how we see these events and their historical specificity?

- The poet calls himself ‘the artful voyeur’ of the girl’s body. (A voyeur is someone who finds pleasure in looking, rather than participating; ‘artful’ suggests ‘cunning’, ‘skilful’ and ‘artistic’.) Do you hear this as a confession of perversity, or as the artist’s proper and inevitable position? Must all art which re-presents a painful world for our pleasure inevitably tend to make us into voyeurs? Must it therefore be a guilty pleasure? Or is that precisely not what this poem gives us?