



AOSDÁNA

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Afternoon session

Address to the General Assembly by Seamus Heaney, Saoi

In his account of the exploits of the first century Roman general Agricola in Britain, the Roman historian Tacitus has a famous paragraph about a moment in the general's life, a moment that was critical for Ireland, and in particular for Ireland in Europe. Agricola had subdued the native British tribes as far north as modern day Scotland and then, according to Tacitus,

In that part of Britannia which looks towards Hibernia, he posted some troops, hoping for fresh conquests rather than fearing attack, inasmuch as Hibernia, being between Britannia and Hispania, and conveniently situated for the seas round Gaul, might have been the means of connecting - with great mutual benefit - the most powerful parts of the empire. Its extent is small compared with Britannia... I have often heard [Agricola] say that that a single legion with a few auxiliaries could conquer and occupy Hibernia, and that it would have a salutary effect on the Britons for the Roman arms to be seen everywhere, and for freedom, so to speak, to be banished from its sight.

Tacitus was married to a daughter of Agricola so he spoke with some authority about his father-in-law's exploits and opinions, and though scholarly doubts have been raised about early Ireland's immunity to Roman arms, the general consensus tends to credit the account given by Tacitus.

So in the first century of the Christian era, the island of Ireland escaped the domination of one empire and by the beginning of the twentieth century it had managed to escape, or partly escape from another, the one upon which the sun was just beginning to set. Still, while Imperial Rome and its legions declined and fell, there was of course a different ecclesiastical Rome which had conquered and occupied Ireland from the fifth to the twentieth century, a *magisterium* if not an *imperium*, ruled by the Bishop of Rome. And if imperial Rome had its foundation myth in Virgil's *Aeneid*, ecclesiastical Rome had its spiritual epic in the *Divine Comedy*, written by the man Yeats described as 'the chief imagination of Christendom', Dante Alighieri.

When the invitation came from the Toscairí to reflect upon the European dimension of something I had worked on, it was impossible not to think of Dante for I had read him avidly - and read about him - in the 1970s and early 1980s; and then on the crest of a wave of daring I had written a sequence of poems with a narrative structure that imitated the structure of his Cantos. But years before that work, I had made my first attempt at getting a transfusion from Dante by translating an episode extracted from Cantos 32 and 33 of 'The Inferno'. The inspiration for this came from reading a translation of *Canto XV* by the American poet, Robert Lowell. Lowell's version gave me a terrific charge and wakened me to the fact that you could lift a single episode from the great original and let it stand as a poem in itself.

The episode in question was one of the most celebrated in 'The Inferno', having been translated into English as early as the 14th century by Geoffrey Chaucer, but it was the contemporary Irish context that prompted me to try my hand. This was at the time of the dirty protest, as it was called, in the late 1970s, when the Republican prisoners were 'on the blanket', campaigning for political status, living in defiance and filthy conditions. The Dante episode was riveting in itself. It concerns the real life history of a man imprisoned with his children in a tower, all of them starved to death by his enemy, and the enemy now suffers forever for the crime frozen in the ice of the ninth circle of hell. The wronged man is

Count Ugolino, the cruel jailer is Archbishop Ruggieri, and in a typically Dantesque reversal, the punishment meted out to Ruggieri fits the cruelty of the starvation crime: Ugolino literally makes an eternal meal of Ruggieri, gnashing at the nape of his neck - like a hungry man, Dante says, chewing crusts of bread. But for the duration of his encounter with Dante, Ugolino refrains from his savage meal and tells the story of his imprisonment and the death from hunger of himself and his four sons. And it was this plain method of narration, where the writer allows the character to tell his own tale, a method which also allows the writer's persona to enter into dialogue with the character – it was this that eventually got me started on a much longer venture of my own.

This was a poem in twelve sections, in each of which the apparition of a character I've known either in life or from history speaks and tells his story. Among the ones I had known personally, for example, was the shade of a neighbour of ours who had died in the 1981 hunger strike, an IRA hit man whose family I knew well at home in Co Derry. The whole sequence was set on Station Island in Lough Derg in Donegal, and it used the setting and shape of the Lough Derg pilgrimage to give order and utterance to the voices of other victims of the Troubles. And not to the victims alone, but to the ghosts of writers who act as instructors and challengers, moral and artistic, including William Carleton, James Joyce and Patrick Kavanagh.

To invoke Dante, of course, is to raise the stakes to a heavenly altitude, and the difference between the genius of his masterwork and the homages of those who follow is like the difference between a nuclear device and a child's catapult. But he is there as the poet with an almost solar influence on the European tradition and I count myself lucky to have got to feel even a very slight ray of that influence.

If there was something southern and solar about Dante, there was something northern and cooler about an earlier and even more abiding European visitation. In the summer of 1969 I published a book that concluded with a poem called

Bogland; then at Christmas in the same year I bought a book called *The Bog People*, about Iron Age bodies found preserved in the bogs of Denmark and Germany; and in the summer of 1970 I wrote a poem about the most famous of those bog people called 'The Tollund Man'. And another year later, in 1971, the American poet Louis Simpson published a lyric entitled *The Peat- Bog Man* which was a condensed version of the Tollund Man story that we were all reading about at the time in P. V. Glob's book.

Glob, who was a Danish archaeologist and head the Copenhagen Museum, suggested that the man died as the sacrifice in a fertility rite, that he was chosen to be the bridegroom for an earth goddess, was ritually married to her and put down with her in the bog, so that from their union life would return to the earth or – as Louis Simpson puts it in his little rhapsody – so 'that in Spring the flower comes forth/with a music of pipes and dancing.'

Simpson's poem has a lyric lightness about it, a touch of 'summer is icumen in', a buoyancy that is pleasant in itself and helps the lines to glance off and more or less gloss over the facts of human sacrifice.

He refers to a wound in the Tollund Man's head as being squashed like a pumpkin, a simile trailing a hint Halloween merriment, and then at the end there are those flowers and pipes and the dancing.

My own poem was more a matter of 'winter is icumen in'. It was, after all, the year 1970, and we were living in Belfast - a Belfast where the explosions had begun to rattle the windows, the British army had begun to patrol the streets, and republican and loyalist paramilitaries were engaged in their different destructions and desecrations. In the circumstances, flowers and dancing would have been hard to summon.

In the Tollund Man scenario, the only sign of spring was in the winter seeds found in his stomach, and these were presumed to be the remains of a wedding

meal that was also his last meal before he was ceremonially married and murdered. Yet there was a mildness about his face which was in stark contrast to the murderous evidence of the noose at his throat.

When I wrote the poem in 1970, I knew the face from a photograph only, so the first lines are a statement of intent to go to Denmark to see 'his peat brown head,/The mild pods of his eyelids,/His pointed skin cap.' But when I eventually got to Jutland I saw not only the Tollund Man, but the more horrifying body of the Grauballe Man, beautiful in that the texture and peat-coloured gloss of his skin was like a work of art, but barbarous in that the cause of his death was directly exposed. There was a dark, deep gash in his throat, and no mildness in the face. I spent time around the display case where he lay, making notes like a pathologist in a police procedural, and when I came home wrote a poem about him 'poised,' as one line goes, 'between beauty and atrocity.'

For five or six years, between 1969 and the publication in 1975 of a book called *North*, I was in thrall to those images out of the place Tacitus called Germania. I wrote about them in an attempt to make a connection between the reactions they inspired and the predicament we were in during those cruel early years of the troubles. Northern Europe and Northern Ireland commingled in my head to the point where I felt, as the last line of the Tollund Man poem put it, 'lost, unhappy and at home', both in the old man-killing parishes of Jutland and the more familiar man-killing parishes of the Irish north. So in spite of Agricola's decision to spare Hibernia the privilege of Roman arms, the traffic between Hibernia and Europa has proceeded apace, culturally as well as economically, and the exchange is both productive and ongoing.

Thank you