

“Neither god nor ghost”: why does Seamus Heaney resurrect the Tollund Man?

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## Chapter six

# “Neither god nor ghost”

Why does Seamus Heaney resurrect the Tollund Man?



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**Abstract:** Seamus Heaney’s haunted poetry abounds in familiar spectres and family ghosts, tutelary spirits, presences and apparitions, visitations and resurrections, the most pregnant of which is the figure of Suibhne Geilt in the “Sweeney Redivivus” section of *Station Island*—a collection of poems inspired by Dante’s meeting with ghosts in the *Purgatorio*. Rising from the corpus of Seamus Heaney’s bog poems, the Tollund Man gradually becomes a central figure in the artist’s imagination. He first appears as a sacrificial victim in the eponymous poem, “The Tollund Man” (*Wintering Out*, 1972), hovers in “Tollund” (*The Spirit Level*, 1996), only to re-awaken ten years later in “The Tollund Man in Springtime” (*District and Circle*, 2006). In this last poem, he becomes a Sweeney-like alter ego for the artist.

This study aims at analyzing the reasons why Seamus Heaney chose to resurrect the Tollund Man at three key-moments in his poetic career: moving from the violent communal history of the 1970s to the relative appeasement of the 1994 IRA ceasefire, then to a confrontation with twenty-first century urban Ireland. Through the *persona*, perspective and voice of the revived “green man”, Heaney gives a haunting vision of the world we inhabit, while sharing his poetic experience of being “a parablist [...] / pinned by ghosts”.

**Keywords:** Seamus Heaney, The Troubles, 1994 IRA ceasefire, Bog poems, Ghost, Resurrection, Tollund Man, Alter ego, Parablist

[...] ghosts who'd walked abroad  
 Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning  
 And make a go of it, alive and sinning,  
 Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the spirit of these Shakespearean lines, Seamus Heaney's verse may be apprehended as haunted poetry. From *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) to *Human Chain* (2010), the writer's work is crossed by familiar ghosts, tutelary spirits, shades and apparitions, exhumed mummies, nightmarish figures, uncanny visitations and resurrections. In a chapter entitled "Ghost writing", Stan Smith equates Heaney's "apparitions" with W. B. Yeats's "Presences":

[...] spirits unappeased and peregrine between two worlds, between the order of signification and that of the immanent, absent referent. For "Presences" is another way of speaking about ghosts, whether those ghostly intertexts speaking through the language of the living, at once present and absent [...]; or those family ghosts, at once intimate and strange, who haunt so many of his lines. [...] They figure those absences which invest all discourse, making the familiar strange.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most uncanny revenants in Seamus Heaney's corpus is Suibhne Geilt in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of *Station Island* (1984), a volume inspired by Dante's meeting with ghosts in the *Purgatorio*. Yet, a decade before Sweeney's resurrection, Heaney introduced the revival motif in his "bog poems", a body of work triggered by his encounter with archeologist P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*— "a book with a power to haunt",<sup>3</sup> as the poet later explained. Much has been written about these controversial poems, published in 1975 in *North*, and about "The Tollund Man", published three years before in *Wintering Out*. This poem can be read as the prototype of Seamus Heaney's ghostly "bog poems", in which the writer exploits the uncanny potential of bog bodies as expounded by art historian Karin Sanders: "The uncanny 'flash of the past,' like Walter Benjamin's 'disinterred corpses of the ancestors,' will come back to haunt us. The latent uncanny potential [...] is implicitly tied to bog bodies in whatever cultural incarnations they embody."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the uncanny seems to be quintessential to the bog itself:

1. Seamus Heaney, "Tollund", *The Spirit Level*, London, Faber, 1996, p. 69.
2. Stan Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland between Fantasy and History*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2005, p. 102-103.
3. Seamus Heaney, "Revisiting an Old Friend", *The Times*, August 20, 2010.
4. Karin Sanders, *Bodies in the Bog and the Archeological Imagination*, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 2009, p. 45.

Like haunted houses, bogs represent—to make use of an expression from the American art historian Anthony Vidler—exactly “that mingling of mental projection and spatial characteristics associated with the uncanny.”<sup>5</sup>

Rising from the corpus of Seamus Heaney’s bog poems, Tollund Man becomes a central “presence” in the artist’s creative imagination, walking in the steps of William Wordsworth’s “Apt Admonisher”, or T. S. Eliot’s “Compound ghost”, as “somebody who has entered the poet’s consciousness as a dream presence, an emanation or [...] an ‘admonition’.”<sup>6</sup>

Through Heaney’s archeological and mythologizing imagination, Tollund Man first appears as a sacrificial victim in the eponymous poem (*Wintering Out*, 1972), hovers as a “presence” in “Tollund” (*The Spirit Level*, 1996), and re-awakens in a twenty-first century environment in “The Tollund Man in Springtime” (*District and Circle*, 2006). Four years after the latter’s resurrection, the poet writes a self-reflexive essay entitled “Seamus Heaney on Being Haunted by the Bog Man”.<sup>7</sup> From “The Tollund Man” to “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, published more than three decades later, the “temporal arc of the Tollund poems”<sup>8</sup> has attracted critical attention, with an emphasis either on the metonymic relationship between the poet and the Tollund Man (Péter Dolmányos, 2012) or on the political implications of Heaney’s exploitation of the Danish bog (Juan Christian Pellicer, 2017).

Encroaching upon the field of spectrality, this paper aims at unearthing the reasons why Seamus Heaney chooses to revive the Tollund Man at three key-moments in his poetic career, while shedding light on the evolution of the poet’s empathic relation with his compound ghost, and disclosing the way in which he resorts to the spectral in order to face the paradox of the homely<sup>9</sup> and negotiate the dialectics of home and homelessness. We will thus invoke “The Tollund Man” as a Wordsworthian experience of “Apt Admonishment”, read “Tollund” as an epiphanic ghost-reviving experience, and shed light on Tollund Man’s resurrection and “spiriting into the street” in “The Tollund Man in Springtime”.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 7. The quote is extracted from Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1992, p. 11.
6. Seamus Heaney, “Apt Admonishment: Wordsworth as an Example”, *Hudson Review*, 61(1), 2008 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464796>), p. 22.
7. *The Times*, August 10, 2010.
8. Juan Christian Pellicer, “A Region in the mind, Heaney’s Jutland and the circumference of Nordic literature”, *Scandinavia – International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 56, 2017 (<https://www.scandinavica.net/article/12063>), p. 125.
9. We are indebted to Richard Kearney’s appendix “Heaney, Heidegger and Freud—the Paradox of the Homely”, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Dublin, Wolfhound Pr., 1988, p. 113-122.

## “The Tollund Man” as an experience of “Apt Admonishment”



“The Tollund Man” is Seamus Heaney’s first “bog bodies” poem. Dillon Johnston considers it as “a prototype of the bog poems of *North* and Heaney’s first creative response to the rich imaginistic mine of P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People*.”<sup>10</sup> This controversial poem was written during the Easter of 1970 in a context of violence and tension in Northern Ireland. In “Feeling into Words”, the poet recalls:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved [...] to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. [...] I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which [...] it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.<sup>11</sup>

Heaney further explains that the photographs of the sacrificial victims that he discovered in Glob’s *Bog People* “blended in [his] mind with the photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles.”<sup>12</sup> Described through an *ekphrasis* in the first quatrains of the poem, the photograph of the Tollund Man’s unearthed body triggers historical, religious and mythical associations. Edna Longley suggests that the three parts of the poem may be “tabulated as evocation, invocation and vocation.”<sup>13</sup>

The first section of the poem opens on a pledge: “Some day I will go to Aarhus”. Neil Corcoran observes that “Heaney’s ‘mythologized’ ‘I’ appears twice in the poem’s opening section, in the repeated solemnity of a promise of pilgrimage; and the section lovingly disinters the man’s body, carrying him from the photograph into language.”<sup>14</sup> Fusing the human, animal, vegetal and mineral realms, the initial quatrain focuses on the dead man’s “peat-brown” head, “the mild pods of his eyelids, / His pointed skin cap”, before recreating his exhumation (“Where they dug him out”) and ritual sacrifice (“Naked except for / The cap, *noose* and girdle”). The following lines raise an ambiguity as to who will “stand [...] naked [...] Bridegroom to the goddess”. As J. Hufstader observes, “some curious tricks of syntax contrive to substitute the poet for the man.”<sup>15</sup> The fourth quatrain evokes

10. Dillon Johnston, “Violence in Seamus Heaney’s Poetry”, *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Matthew Campbell (Ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2003, p. 116.
11. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980, p. 56-57.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
13. Edna Longley, “‘North’: ‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’?”, *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, Tony Curtis (Ed.), Chester Springs, Dufour, (1982) 1994, p. 67.
14. Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, London, Faber, 1986, p. 79.
15. Jonathan Hufstader, “Coming to consciousness by ‘Jumping in Graves’: Heaney’s Bog Poems and the Politics of *North*”, *Irish University Review*, 26(1), Spring/Summer 1996

a pagan fertility rite, the sacrificial bridegroom's strangulation ("She tightened her tork on him"), his burial and miraculous preservation in the bog ("And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body). The corpse turns into a relic, a "trove" now "reposing" at Aarhus: the first section of the poem circles back on itself, yet the focus is no longer on the victim's head but on the Christ-like "stained face". The second section stages the poet's sacrilegious invocation of the heathen figure. He appeals to the exhumed scapegoat to intercede and put an end to violence and barbarity in the "cauldron bog" of modern-day "unholy" Ireland:

I could risk blasphemy  
 Consecrate the cauldron bog  
 Our holy ground and pray  
 Him to germinate  
 The scattered, ambushed  
 Flesh of labourers,  
 Stockinged corpses  
 Laid out in the farmyards,  
 Tell-tale skin and teeth  
 Flecking the sleepers  
 Of four young brothers, trailed  
 For miles along the lines

These shocking images refer to the Irish war in the 1920s, during which a farmer's four sons were "ambushed" and slaughtered by paramilitaries, and their bodies trailed along railway lines. Modern barbarity colludes with prehistoric violence as the poet "meditates on these sacrificial and ritual killings."<sup>16</sup> In an empathic projection, the final section fuses the state of mind of the Iron Age victim being led to sacrifice and the pilgrim-poet's prospective feelings as he mentally travels through Jutland: "Something of his sad freedom / As he rode the tumbrel / Should come to me, driving". The second quatrain points at his disorientation and feeling of estrangement ("Watching the pointing hands / Of country people, / Not knowing their tongue."). The concluding lines indict murderous violence and voice the subject's disillusionment and despair:

Out here in Jutland  
 In the old man-killing parishes  
 I will feel lost,  
 Unhappy and at home.

As Péter Dolmányos observes, these paradoxical lines offer "a disillusioned closure in which the concept of 'home' is revisited along the

(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25484649>), p. 62.

16. Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

complicated confines of the conflict-ridden home province of the poet”.<sup>17</sup> In “Apt Admonishment”, Heaney evokes his encounter with the prehistoric figure as a “poetic recognition scene”, one of these meetings “bathed in an uncanny light, [...] when the poet has been [...] unhomed, has experienced the *unheimlich*:

It was as if the Tollund Man and I had come from far away to a predestined meeting [...] where there was something familiar between us yet something that was also estranging and luminous. [...] I gazed with complete entrancement at my familiar ghost, as if he were indeed “a man from some far region sent / To give me human strength by apt admonishment.”<sup>18</sup>

Admonishment—as the earnest expression of warning or reprimand, the giving of solicitous advice, and the indication of duties or obligations—plays a crucial role in the poem on both a national and a personal scale. On the collective level, the poet is drawn to the archetypal dimension of the Tollund Man’s fate, in which he finds a “befitting emblem of adversity”.<sup>19</sup> Heaney re-reads the ritual violence of the Jutland past in order to understand the present Irish predicament, his distressful sense of “home” bearing comment on the similarities that he draws between archaic and modern-day violence—an analogy which has fueled vivid critical response. Yet, as Neil Corcoran observes, the connection which gives the poem its emotional intensity is not that between Ireland and Jutland, but between the Tollund Man and Seamus Heaney himself:

In placing its emotional weight [...] on the relationship between poet and evoked human figure, “The Tollund Man” [...] dissolves its more ambitious mythical elements into something sharply immediate: the pain of personal incomprehension, isolation and pity.<sup>20</sup>

In the victimized figure of the Tollund Man the poet finds an objective correlative. In “Apt Admonishment”, he acknowledges the affective dimension of his identification with the Tollund Man: “Here [...] were the features of [...] a man of sorrows, one whose outer looks seemed to be an inviolable image of the inner state I and others shared silently in those days, “lost, unhappy and at home”. Twenty-four years later, “Tollund” may be read as a paradoxical resolution of the dialectic of home and homelessness.

17. Péter Dolmányos, “District and Circles”, *Eger Journal of English Studies*, 12, 2012, p. 32.

18. Heaney, “Apt Admonishment”, art. cit., p. 28.

19. “The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’. Some of the emblems I found in [...] *The Bog People*.” (*Preoccupations*, p. 57-58).

20. Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 79-80.

## “Ghosts unfazed by light”



“Tollund” was composed in September 1994, twenty-one years after Seamus Heaney’s first visit to Jutland, and a few days after the cease-fire in Ireland. As the IRA Provisionals and the Ulster paramilitaries agreed to a truce, the spectre of violence and murder in Northern Ireland seemed to be on the wane. In this context, while fulfilling the promise made to the Iron Age victim in the opening lines of the preceding poem, “Tollund” can be read as “the revisiting of old haunts in a new light”,<sup>21</sup> as Stephen Regan points out.

Throughout this poem, the subject, standing on the site where Danish turf-cutters excavated the Tollund Man in the 1950s, registers the changes that have occurred. The process of change is immediately made clear through the speaker’s initial *double entendre*: “That Sunday Morning, we had travelled far” – “we” referring both to the poet, his wife and friends, and to the Irish people. Sacrificial “Tollund Moss” (*moss* is a synonym for bog) has turned into well-groomed farmlands and fields. The speaker equates the site with the topos of John Hewitt’s “Townland of Peace”,<sup>22</sup> a pastoral “poem of dream farms / Outside all contention”. The speaker in Heaney’s poem emphasizes the familiarity of the “outback” (an Irish name for bogland): discovering “The low ground, the swart water, the thick grass”, the “willow bushes; rushes; bog-fir grabs”, the latter remarks: “It could have been Mulhollandstown or Scribe”.

Yet, the subject perceives the site as both “hallucinatory and familiar”, thus re-introducing uncanniness in the midst of a bright and homely Sunday morning. As Juan Christian Pellicer observes, “when Heaney revisits the bog near Silkeborg [...], he describes the scene by the trope of the uncanny.”<sup>23</sup> Several features may account for the “hallucinatory” – that is phantasmagoric, imaginary or illusory – dimension of the experience. The first is the resonance of the prehistoric site, “a liminal place, poised between the ancient and the modern, the natural and the cultural, the actual and the virtual, as well as between separate cultures.”<sup>24</sup> The second may be the intimately familiar character of this far-away place. The third is the changes brought in by modernity and tourism in an Iron Age site, encompassing “light traffic sound”, “the satellite dish in the paddock”, “the standing stone resituated and landscaped”, “the tourist signs

21. Stephen Regan, “Door into the Light: The Later Poems of Seamus Heaney”, *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances*: *The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Eugene O’Brien (Ed.), Notre Dame, Notre Dame U.P., 2016 ([doi:10.2307/j.ctvpj77d1](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj77d1)), p. 298.
22. John Hewitt’s poem was published in 1944. The first line of the poem, “Once walking in the country of my kindred”, relates to the dialectic of familiarity and estrangement developed in Heaney’s own poem.
23. Pellicer, art. cit., p. 126.
24. *Ibid.*



in *futhark* runic script / In Danish and English”, triggering the speaker’s ironic and potentially disillusioned comment: “Things had moved on.” The uncanny is also enhanced by what Pellicer calls the “hypothetical mode”, which enables the poet to present the scene “at not one remove but two”: “Tollund ‘could have’ also been a scene *out of a scene* from someone else’s poem.”<sup>25</sup> Above all, the hallucinatory nature of the experience may be related to the eponymous figure’s absence. Indeed, the spectre of the sacrificial victim hovers upon the modern-day site as a Yeatsian presence, endowing both the place and the poem with a spectrality emphasized by the term “hallucination”. Ironically, the persona of the Tollund Man invoked in the title is a missing apparition.

Multiple references and resonances point at the former poem, like the echoes between the “swept and gated farmyard” and the “Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards”, between “the names in black / And white” and “the names / Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard”, between “Where we stood [...] at home” and “I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home.” Indeed, the conclusion of the poem can be read as an explicit response to the subject’s ambiguous feeling of disorientation in “The Tollund Man”—things having “moved on” for the better. Yet the uncanny still resonates in the paradoxical last five lines, which combine the perception of familiarity (“at home”) with a sense of freedom (“footloose”) and the suggestion of potential exclusion (“beyond the tribe”), while equating the visitors with both scouts and spectres:

More scouts than strangers, ghosts who’d walked abroad  
 Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning  
 And make a go of it, alive and sinning,  
 Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.

The concluding quatrain is a master-piece of ambivalence, since it can be read both as a message of hope—the promise of the “new beginning” ushered by the IRA Ceasefire—or an “apt admonishment”—a warning against the chimerical nature of over-optimism. The roles have been twice reversed: flesh and blood beings (the poet and his wife) have turned into ghosts only to be resurrected, “alive and sinning, / [...] not bad”, in the new morning light. In the *Stepping Stones* recording, Seamus Heaney comments on the (inverted) Shakespearean dimension of this process:

One of the most beautiful passages in Shakespeare has to do with an old belief about the spirit walking abroad after death but having to return to purgatory at dawn when the cocks crow and the light brightens. In [“Tollund”], however, I will revise this superstition and

25. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

end with an image of ghosts coming back to life, re-entering the light and managing to begin again with a new energy and resolution.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on the last line, the poet adds: “It was like a world restored, the world of the second chance, and that’s why there’s an echo of that Shakespearean line, ‘Richard himself again’, in the last stanza.”<sup>27</sup> Helen Vendler encapsulates the resonances of this spectral quatrain:

Released back into light, freed into autonomy, sinners but without the strain of civil strife, they can once again be domestic and private. “Tollund” can stand for a poem of Afterwards, marking [the poet]’s response in a post catastrophic moment.<sup>28</sup>

## Tollund Man Redivivus

Meditating upon “The Tollund Man”, Helen Vendler wonders: “What would the corpse say posthumously about his own state?”<sup>29</sup> As an answer to this question, “The Tollund Man in Springtime” stages Tollund Man’s resurrection in a dramatic monologue which reverberates both the revenant’s and the poet’s voices. In the first sonnet, the resurrected bog man finds himself immersed in a twenty-first century technology-driven environment, caught in an age of consumerism and surveillance. There he wanders undetected, “unregistered by scans, screens, hidden eyes”. Addressing an unidentified “you”, the speaker recalls his sacrifice (“when they chose to put me down / For their own good”), his burial and wait (“lost [...], / out under seeding grass”), his re-awakening and confrontation with an altered world. The second sonnet evokes the bog, the materiality of peat, the buried man’s predicament (“I knew that same dead-weight in joint and sinew”), his exhumation (“and the levered sod got lifted up”) and rebirth. His re-creation is conjured in biblical terms:

I was like turned turf in the breath of God,  
Bog-bodied on the sixth day, brown and bare,  
And on the last, all told, unatrophied.

In the third sonnet, the bog body recalls his exhibition in Silkeborg Museum; while the description of his head, ear, eye, lid, cheek and brow is in keeping with the *ekphrasis* in “The Tollund Man”, the focus is on the persona’s sensations (“My cushioned cheek and brow. My phantom /

26. Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, Faber Audio Cassette.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 2000, p. 156.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Hand and leg and arm and shoulder that felt pillowed”). The sacrificial victim remembers his body’s communion with the peat and his long wake. He highlights his paradoxical status (“Faith placed in me, faithless as a stone”), before recalling past perceptions from the Danish bog (“I’d hear soft wind / And remember moony water in a rut”). In the fourth sonnet, Tollund Man challenges history and asserts the power of mind and word over matter:

I gathered [...] my staying powers,  
Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,  
My old uncallused hands to be young sward,  
The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored  
By telling myself this.

As Péter Domanyos points out, Tollund Man’s resurrection is “a tentative rejuvenation course based purely on the power of the word. The self-empowered *logos* ushers in the return of sensation”.<sup>30</sup> The reborn persona perceives the pastoral quality of the environment: “Late as it was, / The early bird still sang, the meadow hay / Still buttercupped and daisied, sky was new.” Yet the mood darkens as he perceives the alterations affecting both earth and air.

In the next sonnet, the Tollund Man recalls his former immersion in nature: “Cattle out in rain, their knowledgeable / Solid standing and readiness to wait, / These I learned from.”). He evokes of his weird sensations after his resurrection (“My head as washy as a head of kale”), in terms reminiscent of the pagan bird-king in “Sweeney Redivivus”. Tollund Man then contrasts the ecosystem of his origins and the twenty-first century urban *milieu* that he now discovers, “In check-out lines, at cash-points, in those queues / Of wired, far-faced smilers”—a world of “Newfound contrariness.” The last lines of the sonnet highlight both the subject’s feeling of alienation in this modern day environment, and his resolution to keep apart: “I stood off, / Bulrush, head in air, far from its lough.” In the final sonnet, the resurrected man recalls his uprooting a bunch of rushes from the Tollund bog and his smuggling it “through every check and scan”. Yet the transplantation fails, the rushes “bagged in their own bog-damp” having turned musty in the broom-cupboard where he had stored them. The poem ends with a dilemma, whether to “shake the dust” of the desiccated rushes and of the bogland past, or literally and metaphorically “mix it in with spit in pollen’s name”. Both Tollund man and the poet opt for the second stance:

30. Dolmanyos, art. cit., p. 37.

As a man would, cutting turf,  
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt the benefit  
And spirited myself into the street.

“The Tollund Man in Springtime” is a liminal poem in many respects. Through the use of the future perfect tense (“I’ll have passed”), the opening line ushers in an equivocal handling of time. Just as the persona goes through the city “lapping [himself] in time”, numerous time shifts occur between different layers of the past (Tollund’s man former life, the time of his sacrifice, his long wait “Between when [he] was buried and unburied”, his being displayed in Jutland, his resurrection and contemporary “presence”), provoking the reader’s disorientation. Moreover, in the central line of the sequence, the subject asserts: “‘The soul exceeds its circumstances’. Yes.” The quote refers to Leon Wieselter’s tribute to Czesław Miłosz: “Miłosz’s teaching was that history was no more to be granted the last word. One does not live entirely, or even mainly, for one’s time. The soul exceeds its circumstances.”<sup>31</sup> Heaney’s persona supports this contest of historicism while expanding Wieselter’s statement: “History not to be granted the last word / Or the first claim.”

Liminality characterizes the subject himself, defined by Seamus Heaney as “a life on the side of life. [...] A bit in and out of the world.”<sup>32</sup> Tollund man presents himself as a hybrid being, “neither god nor ghost”, “nor at odds nor at one”, half-man half-spirit. The revenant’s mention of “[his] phantom hand / And arm and leg and shoulder that felt pillowed / As fleshily as when the bog pith weighed” is ironic when one knows that the Tollund Man’s body was not preserved after his exhumation in the 1950s: it was given to scientists and was later re-created in order to be displayed with his mummified head. The persona appears as both pagan–“Faith placed in me, me faithless as a stone” reads as an ironic response to Heaney’s original stance–and Christian. As J. C. Pellicer observes, the last sonnet combines two biblical allusions, to “God’s forming man from dust and breathing life into his nostrils” (Genesis 2:7) and to “Jesus mixing dust and spittle to anoint the blind man’s eyes”<sup>33</sup> (John 9:6). Yet the main source of liminality lies in the superposition of the poet and his alter ego, a process reminiscent of Yeats’s theory of mask and rebirth.<sup>34</sup> In “Seamus Heaney on Being Haunted by the Bog Man”, the poet equates his fusion with the Tollund Man to a trans-fusion:

31. Leon Wieselter wrote an obituary essay to Polish-Lithuanian poet Czesław Miłosz: “Czesław Miłosz 1911-2004”, *New York Times*, 12 September 2004 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/12/books/review/czeslaw-milosz-19112004.html>).
32. Sam Leigh, “Return of the Naturalist”, interview with Seamus Heaney, *Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 2006.
33. Pellicer, art. cit., p. 132.
34. “All happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a rebirth as something not one’s self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed.” William Butler Yeats, *Mythologies*, New York, Macmillan, 1959, p. 334.

I returned to a figure who had given me rare poetic strength more than 30 years earlier. I began a sequence of sonnets in the voice of the Tollund Man; this Iron Age revenant was [...] ‘discovered’ in a new setting [...]. He functioned as a kind of guardian other. [...]. The convention is to call such a figure a ‘persona’ but in this case it reads more like a transfusion.<sup>35</sup>

The metaphor of the transfusion is in keeping with the ambivalence of the sequence as to the respective nature of revenant and poet. Just as the “transfusion” process occurs between a ghostly revenant and a flesh and blood writer, “The Tollund Man in Springtime” blurs the frontier between spectral creature and embodied being, shedding doubt both the extent of the revenant’s re-incarnation and on the poet’s physical presence. In the very last lines of the poem, the spectre strengthens himself “as a man would” while the poet “spirits himself” into the street. In this perspective, Heaney’s choice to resurrect the Tollund Man responds to impulses that are both individual and global. In “Revisiting an old friend”, the poet explains that Tollund Man’s resurrection echoed a feeling of personal renewal. On a more intimate level, the resurrected Tollund Man also voices Heaney’s feeling of alienation and homelessness when confronted to a dehumanized modern urban environment:

Newfound contrariness.  
In check-out lines, at cash-points, in those queues  
Of wired, far-faced smilers. I stood off,  
Bulrush, head in the air, far from its long lough.

“‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ imagines the Iron Age man [...] coming out to walk like ‘a stranger among us’ in the new world of virtual reality and real pollution”,<sup>36</sup> Heaney explains. In this poem, the Tollund Man turns into a green force: “In a 21<sup>st</sup> century of polluted air and oil-slicked seas, melting icebergs and denuded forests, Glob’s slightly magical evocation of him as a green life force makes good ecological sense.”<sup>37</sup> The bog man’s resurrection thus serves an environmental agenda. Indeed the sequence juxtaposes the natural, pastoral world of the bog (with its seeding grass, kesh water, sphagnum moss, dead bracken) and of the fields (with the heavyweight cattle’s “solid standing”)—a world equated with patience, knowledge and intuition,—and twenty-first century environmental degradation. The resurrected Iron Man first perceives the “six-sensed threat” of pollution: “Panicked snipe offshooting into twilight, / Then going awry, larks quietened in the sun, / Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain.”

35. Seamus Heaney, *The Times*, March 25, 2006.

36. Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 409.

37. Seamus Heaney, “Revisiting an old friend”, *The Times*, August 20, 2010.

He contrasts his perception of nature at the time of his rebirth (“the meadow hay / Still buttercupped and daisied, sky was new.”) with his discovery of environmental degradation (exhaust fumes, silage reek, thickened traffic, “transatlantic flights stacked in the blue”), before finding himself stranded in the technological environment of a “virtual city”, in which people are registered by “scans, screens, hidden eyes” and stand in check-out lines in queues of “wired, far-faced smilers”, thus encountering a new form of homelessness. Asked by Jody Allen Randolph why he writes of “a re-germinated Tollund Man moving almost from place to placelessness”, the poet answers:

Bewildering is exile into a universe with [...] no internalized system of moral longitude or latitude [...]. That is the larger placelessness which the Tollund Man encounters. [...] He wagers his earthly creatureliness against consumerist vacuity.<sup>38</sup>

The poet adds: “What you have is not a documentary record—that is not what poetry delivers—what you have is a symbolic rendering of change.”<sup>39</sup> The conclusion to Heaney’s poetic “rendering of change” remains ambiguous, as the sixth sonnet navigates between defeat and defiance. Is the Tollund-Heaney persona fleeing or resisting change in the last lines of the poem?

Dust in my palm  
And in my nostrils dust, should I shake it off  
Or mix it in with spit in pollen’s name  
And my own? As a man would, cutting turf,  
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit  
And spirited myself into the street.

According to Péter Dolmányos, these lines offer “a dilemma as to the possibility of continuity.”<sup>40</sup> For Juan Christian Pellicier, they stage a mutation, “an elemental transition from the earth and water of the body and the bog to pure air and [...] spirit”,<sup>41</sup> thus endorsing a drive towards escapism or renunciation. However, they can also be read as the expression of a resolution and a message of hope: “The ancient figure is once more resurrected to proclaim a message of springtime renewal and hope”,<sup>42</sup> Eugene O’Brien affirms. This perspective is confirmed by the poet: “The Tollund Man in Springtime” [...] is poetry, a heft of language, a lift and lay of energy, intimation of possibility in spite of the negative circumstances”.<sup>43</sup> Asked

38. Jody Allen Randolph, *Close to the Next Moment*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2010, p. 205.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

40. Dolmányos, art. cit., p. 37.

41. Pellicier, art. cit., p. 143.

42. Dolmányos, art. cit., p. 37.

43. *Ibid.*

whether the changes that the Tollund Man embodies mean a world changed or a world destroyed, the poet answers:

His world is changed but not destroyed. At the end he spits on his hands like a labourer ready to venture out on the jobs and in that way he stands for much that has been resolute in the country.<sup>44</sup>

In the closing sonnet of “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, both the poet and his compound ghost “straighten” to face the changes brought about by modernity. Infused with the resilience of Heaney’s turf-cutting ancestors, the lines resonate with the resolution ingrained in the earlier poems.

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“The Tollund Man in Springtime” brings to a close the Tollund tryptic. Within three decades, the figure of the resurrected bog man, enforced as the poet’s compound ghost and admonisher, comes to incarnate the resilience and the power of poetry. Asked by Dennis O’Driscoll whether “the sequence where [he] resuscitates the Tollund Man [is] primarily an environmentalist protest or lament”, Seamus Heaney answers: “I think it has more to do with what is implied in your use of the verb ‘resuscitate’”:

‘environmental lament’ is a good way of describing it, but the charge in the actual writing came when identifying with the man as somebody who had ‘gathered his staying powers’. He gets [...] back into the living world by an act of will that is equally an act of imagination. Basically, he’s the voice of the poet repossessing himself and his subject. At the same time, he’s still the Tollund Man who was put down in the bog in order that new life would spring up. A principle of regeneration. A proffer [...] made in the name of pollen and Tollund.<sup>45</sup>

In “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, pollen and Tollund are thus brought to rhyme in a text that, just like its central figure, is both an offer and a proposal—a “proffer” in the spirit of Gerald Manley Hopkins. The arc of the Tollund poems thus culminates in a vision of poetry resonant with offering and sacrifice, challenge and dedication, exposure and consecration.

44. Randolph, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

45. Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 409.

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