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Community and melancholy in Seamus Heaney's translation of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*

Abstract

The article attempts to demonstrate that the vision of a community as an entity suffused with melancholy is observable both in Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* and in Seamus Heaney's poetry and essays. It is reflected also in his translation of Henryson' *The Testament of Cresseid*, since as a translator he was interested in what his own poetry and the translated poems shared. The concept from which these considerations depart is the idea of *omphalos* as central to Heaney's work as a poet and a translator. The vision of the community as constructed on melancholy from Henryson and from Heaney may be read in the light of Klibansky, Saxl, and Panofsky's classic *Saturn and Melancholy*, as well as against the background of Roberto Esposito's theory of biopolitics, where the functioning of communities is thoroughly examined.

Keywords: Mid-Scots poetry, Seamus Heaney, community, melancholy, biopolitics

> I don't have a theory of it, no. I have done it different ways, and I know that there are different motives. One motive is the writerly motive, slightly predatorish. The writer hears something in the other language and says "I would like that, that sounds right, I need that."
>
> (Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass, *Sounding Lines: The Art of Translating Poetry* 1)

The quotation that forms an epigraph for this essay suggests that there must have been something in the Mid-Scots language of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* that Seamus Heaney wished to graft into his poetry since he felt that there were important elements that Henryson's work and his own verse shared.[1] I would argue that one of these elements is the vision of a community as an entity suffused with melancholy; and as melancholy-oriented, which in Henryson is allegorically represented in the sorrow that lepers feel at their own condition. In this discussion the ideas known from Heaney's essays, such as the *omphalos*,[2] will prove to be particularly useful, as well as

1 Henryson was not the first Scottish poet of interest for Heaney; Russell writes that also Sorley MacLean, Robert Burns, Hugh MacDiarmid, and other Scottish poets inspired Heaney and were analyzed in his essayistic work (336–339).

2 "The omphalos, which is, as Jarniewicz writes, "the word which in Greek means 'the navel,' [. . .] the name given to a semi-circular stone in [. . .] Apollo's Temple in Delphi, which to ancient

the philosophical considerations on community and melancholy that were formulated by Roberto Esposito, which may also be relevant to the text in question.

Heaney's early poem *Digging* (first published in *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966) (Heaney *New Selected Poems1966-1987* 1) was complemented by the poet when he reflected on his own digging and on that of the people who tried to put a pump into the ground at the time he was very young:

> I always remember the pleasure I had in digging the black earth in our garden and finding, a foot below the surface, a pale seam of sand. I remember, too, men coming to sink the shaft of the pump and digging through that seam of sand down into the bronze riches of the gravel that soon began to puddle with the spring water. That pump marked an original descent into earth, sand, gravel, water. It centred and staked the imagination, made its foundation the foundation of *omphalos* itself. (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 20)

The passage above may be read as one of Heaney's "meditations on everyday objects, which he sees as receptacles or embodiments of the past," to quote Jerzy Jarniewicz (*The Bottomless Centre* 8). Here the pump plays the role of an object that draws one towards the history of the place (Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre* 19). Labour combines here with the ambitious task of affirming one's place in the community that inhabits the *omphalos*. The *omphalos* is here "the immovable, extemporary centre," (Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre* 16), which, to quote Jarniewicz's formulation, "on the one hand stands for the source (the beginning), and, on the other, for the eternal pattern (as its guarantee)" (*The Bottomless Centre* 16). The meaning is, however, not only metaphysical, but it refers to "the truly human abode, the place of belonging, man's natural, spiritual dwelling" (Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre* 35).

In the case of Heaney himself the *omphalos* could obviously be the fifty-acre farm Mossbawn in the townland of Tamniarn, Country Derry. Elmer Andrews writes about Heaney's *omphalos* as "a hidden underground well of childhood memory" (58). Neil Corcoran's comments on the dedicatory poems from the collection *North* that figure under the title *Mossbawn* that they "evoke domestic and communal images of Heaney's first home, *of human love and agricultural community*" (55). In the prose excerpt above, the mundane activity of digging confirms the purpose of one's life in the place where one was born. Heaney claims that during the act of digging the everyday becomes the literary and human life acquires a more universal meaning.

If in the poem *Digging* such ideas are expressed as "pious devotion to inheritance, asserting continuity with the past, family, community; the desire for attachment and acceptance, a sense of guilt for departing from tradition," the scene described above reflects similar issues (Andrews 41). The life in the *omphalos* can be a source of melancholy not only for the individual, but also for the whole community. I would argue that both Seamus Heaney's own poetry and his translation of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* betray similar interests: those in the association between personal grief and

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Greeks marked the centre of the world" (2002 *The Bottomless Centre* 15); the word also symbolized the following connections: between child and mother, between human and earth, and also a place of origin and end (Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre* 15).

communal melancholy, which is endemic for the community. Richard Rankin Russell notes that the association between Heaney's own work and his translations consists in the topic of suffering: "Heaney's lifelong artistic emphasis on portraying suffering and injustice in his home region gradually broadened into his conviction to articulate the same regions of violence throughout the world" (311).

Heaney's own emphasis on the *omphalos* of existence and the community's role in maintaining the stability of this "navel" is reflected in the choice of medieval poetry that he translated. Jarniewicz summarizes all these endeavours as "Heaney's journey back in time in search of the omphalos" (*The Bottomless Centre* 70). Not only does his translation of *Beowulf* focus on the communal life, but also Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* does this.[3] The fifteenth-century Mid-Scots poem centers on the woeful condition of both individuals, Cresseid and Troilus, but also on the suffering of the whole community of lepers. Landscape is very important in *Beowulf* as it is both characteristic of and vital for the community's functioning. Heaney once indicated the "rural background," as he called it, as crucial for his formation (Deane). Yet, even if Heaney's own work is "rooted in his native Ireland, in the unforgiving landscape of its fields and bogs and rocky shores," as Michiko Kakutani once claimed, it also remains universal, to evoke her formulation of Heaney "reflecting on mankind's strivings" (Kakutani). The strivings are seen against the background of the landscape, which for Heaney was "an image, and it [was] almost an element to work with as [much as] it [was] an object of admiration and description" (Heaney, *Poets on Poetry* 629). This shows that the distinction between the early Heaney as a "farmer's boy, lyrical, local and familiar" and the later Heaney as "the global poet," translating *Beowulf* and *The Testament of Cresseid* with the awareness of the universal import of landscape, is artificial, as Boyd Tonkin points out in his review of *New Selected Poems: 1966–1987 and 1988–2013* (Tonkin). There is a continuity in presenting landscape as the site of a community and a place for the individual within it and writing about individuals and their functioning in the community against the background of the dreary landscape that surrounds them in *Beowulf* and in Henryson's poem.[4] As Heaney writes in his *Introduction* to *Beowulf*, in the Old English poem there are "three encounters [. . .] in three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night-house, the infested underwater current and the reptile-haunted rocks of a wilderness" (*Beowulf* xii). The landscape is suffused with communal nostalgia and the gloom of the place pervades also the hearts of the individuals. A similar perspective is noticeable in *The Testament of Cresseid*, where the adverse weather conditions become the background for an account of personal and communal suffering, with the individual torment that ends with the death of the central heroine. There is a temporal gap between the publication of *The Death of a Naturalist* and that of Heaney's translation of *The Testament of Cresseid*. In-between there come

3 Carla de Petris calls Heaney's translation of the Hugolino episode in *Fieldwork* "a turning point in his poetic career" (162) and Heaney refers to himself "staying with *Beowulf*" (Heaney et al. 1), which shows the importance of his translation for his own verse.

4 Russell focuses on three translations that "bespeak Heaney's continued attempt to recover a full range of regional voices in Britain and Ireland outside the dominant influence of London", *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Beowulf* (2000), and *The Testament of Cresseid* (2004) (324); it is therefore highly possible that he found some connections within the group of texts.

Door into the Dark (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972) with its turn to Ulster violence (Russell 131–145), regionalism of *The North* (1975) (Russell 145–161), the focus on the personal and the particular in *Field Work* (1979) (Jarniewicz, *W brzuchu wieloryba* 190), and inspirations from Joyce, Dante, and Eliot in *Station Island* (1984). All these were followed by *The Hawn Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Electric Light* (2001), *District Light* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010). The translation of Henryson, however, appears to continue the focus on the *omphalos* and the role of the communal for the private.

Like Heaney's poetry, which departs from life in Ulster before and during the Troubles in order to construct a trans-historical vision of existence in that place and of the universality of misery, Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* also puts together the world of literature and the hardships and suffering of real life. The literary tradition in the poem translated by Heaney is signaled at the very beginning, when the narrator presents himself as the one who "chose a book – and was soon absorbed in it – / Written by Chaucer, the great and glorious, / About fair Cresseid and worthy Troilus" (*TC* 5).[5] The literary image of woe-stricken Troilus is devastating:

> And there I found that after Diomede
> Had won that lady in her radiance
> Troilus was driven nearly mad
> And wept sore and lost colour and then, once
> He had despaired his fill, would recommence
> As memory and hope revived again.
> Thus whiles he lived in joy and whiles in pain.
> She had promised him and this was his consoling.
> He trusted her to come to Troy once more
> Which he desired more than any thing
> Because she was his only paramour.
> But when he saw the day and the due hour
> Of her return go past, a heavy weight
> Of care and woe oppressed his broken heart. (*TC* 6–7)

The description of Troilus's condition is that of individual melancholy, even though the word does not appear here yet. After all, melancholy is a Renaissance word that was preceded by the medieval "acedia," more related to sloth as a vice.[6] If the feeling of lack is a common denominator for representations of melancholy, then Troilus suffers from this lack and it transforms him. The literary and generally cultural tradition (since it included visual arts as well) that is alluded to when Troilus's despair is mentioned is that of Saturn's influence on humans and the astronomical and astrological idea that the saturnine mood is that of melancholy. Klibansky, Saxl, and Panofsky's magisterial *Saturn and Melancholy* lists the ancient discussions of the subject as essential for

5 The quotations from Heaney's translation of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (2009) will be followed by the abbreviations *TC* and page numbers in brackets.

6 For an account of acedia in the female character in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* see Czarnowus.

understanding of the phenomenon also in the later epochs (Klibansky et al.). Yet, the three scholars discuss only individual melancholy. Such could be our interpretation of Troilus's predicament, since despair was codified as an important element of human condition under the influence of Saturn (Thritemius, quoted in Klibansky et al. 97). Yet, perhaps we should see the whole world that the literary characters of Henryson's poem inhabit as stricken with melancholy and observe the effects of this condition on the functioning of the community. After all, Roberto Esposito notices the inadequacy of discussing melancholy only in the individual context, since there exist essential links between community and melancholy, as will be discussed below.

The first confrontation with the real world in Henryson's poem are the adverse weather conditions that the narrator observes from his study in Scotland, here described as a Northern country both in terms of its climate and of the spiritual atmosphere, which is austere and gloomy. People who live in the North suffer because of the weather, since

> [. . .] the weather went
> From close to frosty, as Aries, mid-Lent,
> Made showers of hail from the north descend
> In a great cold I barely could withstand. (*TC* 3)

Such weather must be physically disturbing, but also brings about associations with the tradition of Saturn's influence, which causes calamities resulting from bad weather, such as flooding or violent wind. Hostile weather conditions may cause melancholy thoughts. The narrator resists these thoughts and places his "trust in Venus", to whom he vowed to remain obedient (*TC* 5). He intends to "arm [himself] against the bitter cold" (*TC* 5) and write about tragic love that ended in suffering and death. His account is that of Cresseid's fall and subsequent leprosy, which evokes his sympathy. After being abandoned by Diomede Cresseid probably becomes a prostitute, "completely destitute, / Bereft of comfort and all consolation" (*TC* 9), but it does not end her misery. The ultimate blow comes when she curses Cupid and Venus, Saturn's daughter, since the seed of love sown in her heart "is killed / And [she] from lovers banished forth and exiled" (*TC* 13). The "assembly of gods," if we quote the title of another fifteenth-century poem about classical deities (since Saturn is accompanied by Jupiter, Mars, Phoebus, Venus, and others), decides to pass sentence onto Cresseid, which is the following:

> She would live in painful torment from then on,
> By lovers be despised, abominable,
> Beyond the pale, diseased, incurable. (*TC* 25)

From the merry life of an individual making her own choices, Cresseid is moved into the sphere of penury, the "life beyond the pale", as Heaney translates it, typically for him resorting to the vocabulary valid in the Gaelic-speaking world, and into leprosy as a stigmatizing disease.[7] So far she lived just as an individual, even though she had some lovers. From now onwards she will join the community of lepers and will have to live

7 Another example of his strategy as a translator is the word "clan" that he uses to translate "Cain's kin" in *Beowulf* (*Beowulf* 6).

on the margins of the society. The poem gives us insight into the situation in which an individual becomes part of the community of lepers due to a disease. It appears that Henryson stresses her physical condition along with its social consequences in order to formulate an allegory of the communal melancholy and not only of the individual one.[8]

For Henryson, Cresseid's predicament may be an illustration of not only individual melancholy, but also of the idea that community is an entity for whose functioning melancholy is essential. Turned into a beggar, Cresseid focuses firstly on her individual experience. Her first shock is caused by her diseased state. The first confrontation with her own changed physicality in the mirror brings about her despair: "when she saw her face in it so ruined/ God knows if she was not heartsore and stunned" (*TC* 27). The disease comes in as a shock for her and she bids farewell to her equally devastated father, who still would "sen[d] in victuals to her every day" in the leprosarium. Other lepers accepted her as superior to them, since:

> [. . .] they assumed from grief so mildly borne,
> And yet so cruel, she was of noble kin
> And with better will, therefore, they took her in. (*TC* 31)

The above testifies to the existence of communal feelings among lepers themselves, who recreate the social hierarchy within their small community. Cresseid's "downcastness" is a quality that she shares with other members of this community, but she also benefits from her father's continuing care. Importantly, she cannot be accused of living a dissolute life any longer, so if there was something verging on the criminal in her life as a prostitute, paradoxically Saturn, the symbolic father of criminals, freed her from it. She abandons her life of a spoilt individual and takes up the existence of a group member. Lepers are those members of the society whose misery may lead others to show their better selves. Like Cresseid's father, others may show their commiseration, care and support for the diseased, which has the force of integrating the community.

Even if we abandon any Christian interpretations of the poem, which should not altogether be done due to the text's allegorical dimension, what is left is the vision of Cresseid finishing her selfish pursuit of pleasure and starting to participate in the suffering of the world. She has to bid farewell to her previous life perhaps best symbolized by the garden full of ephemeral flowers. Cresseid warns other courtly ladies that "the rot will fester in your cheek's red rose" (*TC* 35), but the readers may notice how superficial her life used to be. In Bernardus Silvestris' *De universale mundi* Saturn appears as "the reaper, whose sharp sickle destroys all that is lovely and bears blossom: he lets no roses or lilies flower, and cannot bear fructification" (Klibansky et al. 185). Cresseid's life changes due to this influence.

In *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* Roberto Esposito argues that the "tradition [from church fathers to Heidegger] has always grasped that melancholy is not an occasional illness [. . .] but instead something that concerns community

8 Nevertheless, if we adopt the now classic distinction into the static and dynamic allegory, even the communal melancholy in the text in question appears to be a part of the dynamic type; see Hicks (73).

much more fundamentally, to the point of constituting its very form" (28). The condition "resembles a fault and a wound that community experiences not as a temporary or partial condition but as community's only way of being" (Esposito 28). The place where community resides is its *omphalos*, to use the term adopted by Heaney. It is a place to which collective memory is attached and which will always connote nostalgia and the feeling of loss or lack, themselves phenomena traced in Heaney's poetry.[9] As Esposito writes after Kant, "melancholy is the traumatic experience of limits, of the inclination to overcome them and the impossibility of doing so" (33). Community is "the condition, both singular and plural, of our complete existence" (36) and it would remain incomplete without the suffering that melancholy entails and visualizes. Communities, which in the Mid-Scots poem is not only that of lepers but the entire community inhabiting the place, are constituted by both externalizing the others and maintaining their existence on the margin, where they paradoxically remain part and parcel of the social structure. The lepers in *The Testament* materialize the idea of the corporeal as transitory and of minor importance as compared to the spiritual. Cresseid is more rooted in the place in which she lives among lepers than it happened before, when she moved from one lover to another. Her existence illustrates the theme of communal life and the transformative power of pain. The melancholy quality of community demonstrates itself in its being both incomplete, as it is pervaded with the feeling of loss, and complete through the existence of others on its margins. For Esposito community is not so much "a locus of identity, belonging, or appropriation" as "a locus of plurality, difference, and alterity" (55). The lepers, one of whom Cresseid becomes, illustrate that alterity and its role for the community's functioning.

Obviously this is not the only interpretation of Cresseid's melancholy. As Esposito reminds his readers, Heidegger classified melancholy into two types, the first of which is "*tristia* or *acedia,*" which he calls negative but it is historically explained by the medieval monastic theory (Esposito 34). The other, positive, type is "the profound consciousness of finitude" (Esposito 34) and such is our interpretation here despite the possibility of Cresseid herself suffering from *acedia*. Nevertheless, even if she experiences her own melancholy in a negative way, the communal melancholy is positive since it indicates the real nature of the community as that marked by a break and a fissure which paradoxically allows the community to exist along with those who are marginalized. The positive results of Saturn's intervention are Cresseid's new thoughtfulness and the integration of the community through reemphasizing melancholy as its central condition. Saturn could "[endow] the soul both with slowness and stupidity and with the power of intelligence and contemplation" (Klibansky et al. 159), with the latter qualities important for entire communities.

Elmer Andrews states that postmodern literature in Ulster can be characterized by "the alienation of the individual from his community" (64). This is a theme that Heaney's poetry, from *Death of a Naturalist*, through *Field Work* (Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre* 135), to *Human Chain*, and Henryson's *Testament* undoubtedly share, which is

9 For an account of Heaney writing about loss, here "history's loss and gain," see, for example: Ratiner.

proved by his translation of the Mid-Scots poem. In his introduction to *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, Robert F. Garratt states the following: "As recent critics have pointed out, 'translation' for Heaney becomes a complex activity of fidelity to the text, identification with an author, and the application of historical narrative to contemporary experience" (6). In the case of *The Testament of Cresseid* again we get a combination of all of these elements. Nevertheless, what Andrews terms "atrocity and poetry" in Heaney's work (116) finds a more subtle equivalent in Henryson's poem: it is a study of individual suffering against the background of communal life, which is perennially suffused with melancholy. After all, Heaney's own art, to cite Russell again, "displays a deep vein of imaginative sympathy toward suffering that refuses the saccharine and instead instills a radical view of our common humanity in the reader" (342).

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