Death of Logocentrism: Deconstruction in Seamus Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist"

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Irish poet, 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature winner, Seamus Heaney is described by American poet Robert Lowell as "the most important Irish poet since Yeats" (Bloom, 18). His first poetry collection Death of a Naturalist, published in 1966, is well-received and establishes him as a new talent. "For Death of a Naturalist, he won the Eric Gregory Award in 1966, the Cholomondeley Award in 1967, and both the Somerset Maugham Award and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1968." (Reisman, 85-86) The appearance of this collection, not only to Heaney himself, but also to Irish has significance. "Irish poetry seemed to its readers not only to be in a healthy state but to have entered a new era of vigour and professionalism." (Crotty, 38) Critics also speak highly of this collection: "In his New Statesman review of Death of a Naturalist, Christopher Ricks said, 'the power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection Death of a Naturalist is outstanding.'" (O'Donoghue, 2-3)

The title of this collection is taken from the poem "Death of a Naturalist". A title usually encapsulates the whole work; besides, Heaney's titles are all carefully...
considered and have their significance. (O'Donoghue, 1) So the poem “Death of a Naturalist” takes an essential position in Heaney’s poems and should not be ignored in the studies of Heaney’s poetry. The whole poem consists of 33 lines and is split into two stanzas. The first stanza depicts a child, may well be a young boy, who is fond of frogspawn and collects it every spring, waiting and watching “until / The fattening dots burst, into nimble / Swimming tadpoles” (Heaney, 13 – 15) [1]. A change happens in the second stanza, when one day the child sees “gross bellied frogs were cocked / On sods; their necks pulsed like sails” (27 – 28), he is “sickened, turned, and ran” (31) and thinks that “if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it” (33).

Although the title of this poem is “Death of a Naturalist”, in fact no one really dies in the poem. Except for the title, there is no “death”, or any synonym to “death”, in the poem. But as a title, it must have encapsulated the whole poem. So there must be something related to death in the poem, but this death, under Heaney’s pen, far different from the death we used to know, is just a metaphor. In “Death of a Naturalist”, death means a kind of transition, a change rather than the end of one’s life. The change happens here is quite clear, which is a child changing from liking frogspawn to disliking it, even feeling it sick and threatening.

The child’s change from liking to disliking frogspawn happens suddenly. From the words “every spring I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied / Specks [...]” (10 – 11), we can see that collecting frogspawn is an annual activity for the child, and spawn is something interesting to him. But on a hot day, when he sees it again he perceives it in a completely different way. The spawn is something disgusting and dangerous to him, and he knows “if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it” (33). There is no omen for this change, and the child doesn’t tell us the reason why he changes his attitude to the frogspawn. Does the spawn change? There is no such sign; the spawn “grew like clotted water / in the shade of the banks” (9 – 10) every year.

Then it maybe something else causes this change. In the second stanza, on a hot day, the child “ducked through hedges” (24) to the dam, where he used to collect frogspawn, in search for a kind of sound. It is “a coarse croaking that I had not heard / Before” (25 – 26). Maybe it is this crocking which has never been heard before that frightens the child, making him disgusted with the frogs which make such sound, because after he hears the sound, the words he uses to describe the frogs become negative and put a disgusting image on them: “gross bellied frogs were
cocked / On sods” (27 - 28), and “Some hopped: / The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat / Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting” (29 - 30). Then it makes the child feel sick about the frogspawn that will finally become the disgusting frogs which can make that kind of sound; “if I dipped may hand the spawn would clutch it” (33). But previously, the frogspawn in his eyes is quite adorable; it “grew like clotted water” (9); he collects “the jellied / Specks to range on window sill at home, / On shelves at school” (11 - 13) and watches them bursting into tadpoles. So it seems that it really is the croaking that makes the child suddenly change his attitude to the spawn.

According to the analysis above, what Seamus Heaney wants to express in this poem would undoubtedly be a child’s growing pains: his opinions and preferences are subject to a sudden change. Rand Brandes also regards “Death of a Naturalist” as a coming-of-age poem. (Brandes, 20) Similarly, Stephen Regan thinks that “The elegiac impulse in Death of a Naturalist is evident in the book’s pervasive and plangent awareness of ineluctable natural processes and struggles for survival. It finds its simplest expression in the child’s knowledge of inevitable loss and decay.” (Regan, 11) Elmer Andrews claims that “there is a notion of discontinuity, a feeling of loss [...] lying deep in things” (Andrews, 22), because “in ‘Death of a Naturalist’ Miss Walls’ natural world is tamed, domesticated, made harmless and useful. But this is not at all the reality so vividly and directly perceived by the child” (Andrews, 23). So in these scholars’ eyes, the truth told in this poem is that accompanying the growth one will lose the childhood innocence. In this way, the title “Death of a Naturalist” can be explained as; a naturalist-to-be child who used to like collecting and observing frogspawn changes his mind when he learns more about spawn and frog, and his dream of becoming a naturalist is disillusioned, then a future naturalist dies before he enters into the field of natural history.

But is this really the case? From the first stanza we can see that the croaking is not completely new to the child. “Miss Walls” has told him “how / The daddy frog was called a bullfrog / And how he croaked” (15 - 17), so the child must have known about, if not be familiar with, the frog’s croaking. Thus, although it is the first time to hear this “coarse croaking”, the child, having learnt Miss Walls’ introduction beforehand, should not be influenced so much by the croaking. So the deduction above is not sound enough.

Surely there is a change happening on the child, but the reason to the change cannot be found in the poem. So, here Heaney presents readers a change with no
reason, and this is just the key point in “Death of a Naturalist”: a change without reason.

By depicting such a change happening on a child, what Heaney wants to express maybe like this: some changes in life are unreasonable. The main difference between the conclusion we have reached earlier and this one is that change is reasonable in the former but unreasonable in the latter. So the key word here is (un)reason, and it is sure that for most scholars and readers the first conclusion would be preferable to the second, because the first underlines reason while the second emphasizes unreason and that is why the existing interpretations mentioned above are all similar to the first conclusion.

It is no surprise that a reason-oriented explanation is favored by the majority, because we are all “slaves” to narrative. The universality of narrative can be best expressed in Roland Barthes’ words: “narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself” (Sontag, 252), even in the “so-called non-narrative genres, like, say, the lyric poem [...] you will still find narrative” (Abbott, 2). So this poem, “Death of a Naturalist”, is also a narrative, at least contains a narrative element, and we read this poem as a narrative. The process conducted by us to make meaning out of narrative is called “interpretation”, and there are three fundamental approaches to interpret narrative: “the intentional, the symptomatic, and the adaptive” (Abbott, 93). Among the three ways, intentional reading is the most widely accepted one.

When one reads a narrative intentionally, he is inclined to assume wholeness in it. Although not all narratives are whole, we still like to “find” some kind of coherence or wholeness in them, because it is “an old rule in the history of interpretation” (Abbott, 93). Strictly speaking, “wholeness is something that we impose on narratives, rather than something we find in them” (Abbott, 94). That is to say, back to the poem “Death of a Naturalist”, no matter it is really whole or not, we inveterately try to seek wholeness in it when we decode it intentionally, because only this wholeness can make the poem meaningful to us.

In order to fulfill our need for wholeness, one of the ways we apply is to look for causation. It seems that causation, or cause and effect, is something on which we can hardly make a mistake, but in fact, the causation we find usually is not as scientific and precise as we think. A convincing example would be what E. M. Forster has illustrated in Aspects of the Novel: there is a difference between “The king died and then the queen died” and “The king died, and then the queen died of
grief”, because the latter contains “the sense of causality”. (Forster, 86) But when we examine the first sentence alone, without the second as a comparison, we will interpret it as the king’s death results in the queen’s death. That is what Seymour Chatman argues: “We are inherently deposed to turn raw sensation into perception.” (Chatman, 46) We have the raw sensation that there may be a link between the king’s death and the queen’s death, and we turn it in to perception that there is causation between them.

Besides this, we also misperceive causation in another way. We can hardly avoid thinking that if incident A follows incident B, then A is caused by B, because we have much empirical basis to prove that cause and effect is a sequential relationship. This fallacy is called “'post hoc ergo propter hoc' (literally: ‘after this, therefore because of this’)” (Abbott, 39). The reason why we are constantly trapped by this fallacy is that we always confuse consecution with causation. Consecution means that incident A follows incident B, but that is all, and there is no other relation between A and B besides this temporal relation. Causation not only indicates that B happens first then A happens subsequently, but also emphasizes that A can only happen on the premise that B has already happened. It is a “valid assumption that all effects follow their causes”, but it is a “false one that to follow something is to be an effect of that thing”. (Abbott, 39)

In terms of this poem, “Death of a Naturalist”, it is easy to misperceive a cause and effect relationship between the child’s change and his encounter with the frogs and their crocking. First, after reading this poem, we will get a raw sensation that there seems to be a link between the crocking and the child’s change; then, as mentioned above, we turn this raw sensation into perception that it is the frogs’ cocking that causes the child’s change, because it is true that external world can affect one’s inner world. Additionally, the child hears the crocking and sees the frogs at first, and then he changes from liking to disliking frogspawn. Because of this temporal relation, we are inclined to misread the consecution between the two things as causation.

Due to this “sound” causation, we can read the poem as a whole; due to this wholeness, we can fulfill our inveterate intention to seek coherence. That is why so many critics interpret the poem as one will mature at the cost of losing innocence. This kind of interpretation is “reasonable”, and can satisfy our inveterate needs.

But now we have known, as the second conclusion above has shown, that this explanation is not as reasonable as it seems to; the causation between the crocking
and the child’s change is not convincing enough. In fact, instead of reason, what Seamus Heaney underlines in this poem is unreason, and behind this unreason is Seamus Heaney’s challenge to logocentrism.

People has preferred reason to unreason since the ancient time, and it can be traced back to ancient Greek. Roughly speaking, Western thoughts all derive from, at least are influenced by, Plato and Aristotle. Finding truth is always the ultimate goal for philosophers. “Plato founded a philosophic tradition in which reason [...] became the highest and most desirable form of thought” (克拉吉斯, 12), and since then, following Plato, “philosophers use logic and reason to discover truth” (克拉吉斯 13). Aristotle, Plato’s disciple, although holds some different views against Plato, also inherits and develops Plato’s thoughts, emphasizing the importance of reason. Aristotle starts to use another Greek word logos to stand for “reason, rationality, particularly in an ethical context [...] and frequently in the combination ‘right reason’ (orthos logos)” (Peters, 111).

Accompanying the development of Western thoughts, logos is gradually endowed with an irreplaceable status and evolved into an overwhelming ideology, logocentrism, “which is at the core of Western metaphysics” (克拉吉斯, 55). Since logos denotes speech, account, reason, definition, rational faculty and proportion (Peters, 110), Western culture manipulated by logocentrism also highly values these factors. That is why presence, wholeness and reason are always preferred to absence, fragment and unreason in literary reading and criticism. Reading “Death of a Naturalist”, most readers and critics are also affected by logocentrism when they interpret it, and thus most interpretations are reason-oriented, like that the child is threatened by the frogs and loses his innocence.

But when it comes to Jacques Derrida, he argues that logocentrism is “Western philosophy’s greatest illusion” (Tyson 256). He tries to deconstruct the long existing logocentrism, and throw a new light on people’s perception of this world. Derrida points out that “most of the ways we think about the world are structured into binary opposites” (克拉吉斯, 54), like reason/unreason, and the term on the left of the slash is always valued over the one on the right (克拉吉斯, 54), so reason is given a higher cultural value than unreason in logocentrism. This is another reason why most critics seek reason, instead of unreason, in “Death of a Naturalist”.

Simply speaking, Derrida’s main idea is that all the binary opposites are not as stable as we think. That is to say, reason and unreason don’t “stay neatly on their proper side of the slash” (克拉吉斯, 59), and the opposite relationship between
them is not stable. What Derrida and other post-structuralist thinkers want to do is to remind us that “meaning is unstable, and that makes us aware of the constructed systems” (Derrida, 59). They apply different structures to express this opinion; “For Derrida, this structure is deconstruction; for Heaney it is poetry.” (O’Brien 66)

In Derrida’s work, binary opposites are considered as an inadequate metaphor for the complexity of language (Rapaport, 27), and Heaney’s sense of transcending the binary opposites “has strong theoretical resonances with the work of Derrida” (O’Brien, 180). Heaney says that “poetry has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify”, and “this desire to express the complexity” is similar to Derrida’s deconstruction. (O’Brien, 3) So both Derrida and Heaney have a desire to destabilize the seemingly anchored logocentrism which governs our thinking. Thus we have enough convincing grounds to interpret Heaney’s poems via the lens of deconstruction.

“Death of a Naturalist” is an appropriate example to show Heaney’s deconstructive thought. As mentioned above, most readers and critics will inveterately interpret this poem in a logocentrism way, and draw a reasonable conclusion that the crocking and frogs make the child change his attitude toward spawn. But as I have illustrated, that kind of interpretation is a deficient reading, if not a misreading; you will find how untenable the interpretation is, and how it contradicts itself if you reexamine it and reread the poem scrupulously. A preconceived reason can hardly be found to explain the child’s change; in fact, Heaney doesn’t give us the reason to explain the change in the poem.

Telling a child’s life change and its reason is definitely not Heaney’s aim in “Death of a Naturalist”. If one read this poem in a narrative-oriented or story-oriented way, he will find it an awful poem and its writer Heaney a unqualified poet, because this poem cannot satisfy a reader’s need of a reasonable narrative or story, and the awkward narrative can only make one feel confusing and uncomfortable. But commenting in this way just undervalues Heaney and this poem. “Death of a Naturalist” should be appreciated from a philosophical level rather than from a narrative level. Behind this “crappy” narrative is Heaney’s deconstruction to logocentrism, showing us how unstable the binary opposite reason/unreason is. At first sight, it seems that “Death of a Naturalist” tells a reasonable story, but after a second or a third reading, you will find it seems not.

Heaney’s philosophy expressed through this poem is that we are used to see the
world in binary opposites, like reason/unreason, but this dichotomy is flawed. Some people should criticize that this philosophy is too abstract and it doesn’t offer a solution to the issue it focuses on. But we should not excessively demand of Heaney, of deconstruction; just like Derrida insists; deconstruction “is not a ‘theory per se, but rather a set of strategies or ways of reading’” (克拉吉斯，53); deconstruction doesn’t aim to solve the problem it finds or provide any suggestion, and its most significant function is to help people know how they used to see the world and how unreliable the way is. So Heaney’s contribution is to make people realize that reading a poem or perceiving the world in a reason/unreason opposite or in a dichotomous way is unreliable; he has touched the matter of world-view. It is undeniable that Heaney’s philosophy is abstract, not as concrete as “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”. But just like what Emerson has said, “the most abstract truth is the most practical” (Emerson, 20), Heaney’s philosophy can evoke people to rethink about literature, even the world, from a new dimension; after internalizing this abstract philosophy, one can apply it to deal with more practical matters.

Heaney says that “poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on pages” (Heaney, 1995: 8). Like Horace’s opinion that poetry serves the didactic purpose and also provides pleasure (克拉吉斯，17), Heaney’s poetry can not only satisfy readers’ needs of entertainment, but also, and more importantly, enlighten readers on a philosophical level. “The moral and aesthetic education of the poet is at the heart of Heaney’s Death of a Naturalist” (Brandes, 21), and “Death of a Naturalist” calls readers attention to the imperceptible manipulation of logocentrism and shows people the deficiency of it.

Notes:
[1] The poem is cited from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/247814>, and the following in-text citations of the poem are marked only by the line number(s).

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