

## Seamus Heaney's Poetics of Verbalization

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### ABSTRACT

Heaney scholars like Robert Buttel, M.R. Molino, Neil Corcoran, Steven Ratiner, and Terry Eagleton have tried to demystify Heaney's "poetics" from different perspectives. In the process, some schismatical/truncated analyses of this Nobel laureate's poetics, in terms of his art/craft/technique of poeticization, have been effected. Yet scholars like Michael Molino, Steven Ratiner, and Michael Cavanagh have effected some sort of holistic and intensive appreciation of Seamus Heaney's Poetics. However, till today, no serious effort has been made to critique Seamus Heaney's art of poetic articulation in the light of the *ars poetica* ascribed to Ernest Francisco Fenollosa and Nikolay Gumilyov. The principal aim of this demystificatory paper is to put Heaney's poetics of articulation under the Fenollosa-Gumilyov bi-focal critical lens. The subsidiary aim of this investigative analysis is to deconstruct Heaney's preference for pure verbal phrases in terms of the aforementioned Fenollosa-Gumilyovian technique of poetic verbalization. The Paper by Bikram Keshari Rout and Jayaprakash Paramaguru entitled "Seamus Heaney's Poetics of Verbalization" attempts to put Heaney's poetics of articulation under the Fenollosa- Gumilyov bi-focal critical lens. The subsidiary aim of this investigative analysis is to deconstruct Heaney's preference for pure verbal phrases in terms of the aforementioned Fenollosa-Gumilyovian technique of poetic verbalization.

### KEYWORDS

Seamus Heaney; Modern Irish Poets; Francisco Fenollosa; Nikolay Gumilyov; verbalization.

### 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Legions of Heaney scholars, to name a few Robert Buttel, M. R. Molino, Neil Corcoran, Steven Ratiner Terry Eagleton, and Henry Hart, have demystified Seamus Heaney's poetics from different perspectives. In the process, some sort of schismatical/truncated analyses of this Nobel Laureate's poetics in terms of his art/craft/technique of verbalization have

been affected. In contrast, scholars like Michael Molino, Steven Ratiner, and Michael Cavanagh have affected some sort of holistic and intensive appreciation of Seamus Heaney's poetics of articulation. However, till today no serious effort has been made to critique Seamus Heaney's art of poetic articulation in the light of the *ars poetica* ascribed to Ernest Francisco Fenollosa and Nikolay Gumilyov.

## 2. AIM OF THE PAPER

Against the critical background detailed above, the principal aim of this demystificatory paper is to put Heaney's poetics of articulation under the Fenollosa-Gumilyov bi-focal critical lens. The subsidiary aim of this investigative analysis is to exalt Heaney, the poet nonpareil of the post-modern, post-colonial, and post-literary Darwinism era, and to show that he is at least at par with William Shakespeare, the poet's poet of all the ages, justly for his Fenollosan-Gumilyovian preference for pure verbal phrases (i.e. transitive verbs).

### 2.1 Some of the key critical terms used in the paper: Re- critiqued.

In this paper, there has been a considered reference to the *ars poetica* ascribed to Ernest Francisco Fenollosa and Nikolay Gumilyov. Hence in the subsections to follow *ars poetica*, in general, the Fenollosan *ars poetica* and Gumilyovian *ars poetica* are demystified.

#### 2.1.1. Ars Poetica

Originally Horatian in its origin, *ars poetica* is a common critical term. Various interpretations, it is basically theoretical/ legislative in its tone and tenor. It deals with the art/craft/ technique of poetry. That is why, Seamus Heaney, in his polysemic critical works such as *Preoccupations* (1980), *Finders Keepers 1971-2001*, *Government of the Tongue* (1988), and *Redress of Poetry* (1995) has made some pointed references to it.

*Ars Poetica* has a long history. Right from Philip Sidney to T. S. Eliot, many workshop poets have tried their critical skills in this branch of literary criticism. "The Preface to Lyrical Ballads" by William Wordsworth, "Biographia Literaria" by S.T. Coleridge, "The Study of Poetry" by Matthew Arnold, and "Selected Essays 1917-32", "The Use of Poetry & the Use of

Criticism", "On Poetry & Poets" by T.S. Eliot are some of the conspicuous Anglosaxonic *ars poetica* which have engaged the critical mind of both the poets and critics. Simply because of the constraints of space and time, the relative merit of none of the *ars poetica*, mentioned above, is assessed here. However, it is pertinent to note here that Ezra Pound, the mentor of T. S. Eliot, has himself taken note of Sidney's "Apologie", and the "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", and Shelley's "Defence" while critiquing E.F. Fenollosa's *ars poetica*. In his opinion and as summed up by Donald Davie in "Articulate Energy":

In its massive conciseness, Fenollosa's little treatise is perhaps the only English document of our time deserves to rank with Sidney's "Apologie", "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", and Shelley's "Defence", the great poetic manifestos of the past. Hence in the subsection to follow, Fenollosa's *ars poetica* is critiqued objectively. (33)

#### 2.1.2. The Ars Poetica of Ernest F. Fenollosa

Fenollosa's *Ars Poetica* has "never had the recognition it deserves" (Davie 33). Conspicuous by its "massive conciseness" (Davie 33), it has tremendous "intrinsic value" but not "historical importance" (Davie 33). If this *ars poetica* has caught the critical attention of literary theorists, it is principally because of Ezra Pound's selfless critical endeavor. Yet "it has not yet exerted the influence it deserves" (Davie 34). Yet this *ars poetica* remains "a great seminal work" (34).

If Horace has harped on concepts like "*in medias res*", *ab ovo*, technical errors, "*ut pictora poesis*" (line 361), "decorum", "*deus ex machina*" (line 191), *et al* in his epistle consisting of 476 hexameter lines (30 "maxims"), Fenollosa has put the emphasis on syntax, the silent

eloquence, things in motion, motion in things, transference of power, transitive verb, and avoidance of the copula “is”, essential “for poetry of the seen” (Davie 37). He has disapproved of the use of arbitrary symbols such as the ones used in algebra. A humanist in the truest sense of the term, Fenollosa has advised (to quote Davie, verbatim):

He delivers a number of precepts: that the good poet will use, wherever possible, the full sentence driving through a transitive verb, that he will avoid, where possible, the copula; that he will rearrange, where possible negations, so as to use a positive verb of negation; that he will avoid intransitive verbs; and that he will ..... Cut down as far as possible the use of other parts of speech”; that when he uses an abstract word he will draw attention, by his use of it, to its etymological growth out of concrete actions.... (39)

So if a serious analysis of Professor Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (Edited by Ezra Pound), is undertaken one can comprehend that Fenollosa’s “subject is poetry, not language yet the roots of poetry are in language” (Fenollosa & Pound 327). Hence, he has laid stress on the nature of poetry in terms of “a verbal medium” (Fenollosa & Pound 327).

### **2.1.3. The *Ars Poetica* of Nikolay Gumilyov, the Russian Poet-Critic**

Nikolay Stepanovich Gumilyov, one of the renowned poets of the USSR, was the co-founder of the Acmeist movement. A workshop poet with anthologies of poems such as *The Way of Conquistadors* and *Romantic Flowers* to his credit, Gumilyov established the Guild of Poets (in collaboration with Sergey Gorodetsky). Both of them have laid stress on the architectonics/ craftsmanship of the poet.

Gumilyov has expressed his theory of the craft of Poetry in *The Pearls* (1910) and *Alien Sky* (1912). Osip Mandelstam has carried forward the good works initiated by Gumilyov.

In the opinion of Gumilyov, “Thought is movement, and poets should use verbs and not adjectives” (Quoted in Slonim 214). Having studied *ars poetica* in its various forms, in the next section, the controlling hypotheses of this paper are spelled out.

### **3. HYPOTHESES**

It is hypothesized at this proemial point that Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, more under the thrall of the European-Euro- Asian Poetry in general, and of the poetry of the Acemist Osip Mandelstam in particular has intelligent access to the works of both Fenollosa and Gumilyov. It is quite logical to expect that because of Heaney’s poetic affinity with the American academia; his exposure to Ezra Pound’s prose works must have been quite persuading and sustained. So it is not preposterous to nurture the hunch that Heaney must have been in the know of the Fenollosa- Gumilyov bipolar *ars poetica*. It is perplexing why Robert Tracy fails to mention the name of Gumilyov while delineating the primary influences prevalent during Osip Mandelstam’s initial work, *Stone*. Since, “Shakespeare does all that Fenollosa says” (Davie 51) and Heaney, the poet, owes a lot to Shakespeare, one of his acknowledged “exemplars” it is safe to assume that Heaney also has done all that Fenollosa has said.

### **4. SCOPE OF THE WORK**

Since the poetry of Seamus Heaney has evolved quite naturally and resiliently, the illustrative material is drawn from the opening poem of the following collections of Heaney Poems:

- i) *Death of a Naturalist*
- ii) *District and Circle*

That is why; the following original poems are critiqued from the perspective of the *ars poetica* of Fenollosa and Gumilyov

- a) "Death of a Naturalist"
- b) "The Turnip Snedder"

Though other poetical anthologies of Heaney and other poems written by Heaney are also amenable to the intended statistical stylistical study, the poems, mentioned above, have been chosen because of the highest common factor among them: each one of them launches the very collection of poetry in which they appear. Hence, none of them is chosen arbitrarily.

## 5. INSTRUMENTS OF ANALYSIS USED

Both the poems, mentioned above are to be appreciated from the perspective of the *ars poetica*, ascribed to Fenollosa and Gumilyov. Hence, the instrument of *explication de text* is used with special emphasis on the use of the items prioritized by both Fenollosa and Gumilyov. That is why; no thematic, structural, ideological, imagistic, and cultural analysis of any one of the poems mentioned above is attempted. This limitation (self-ordained) does partially explain the inadequate critical references to be made (and made) to critical works on Heaney's poetics/ poetry. That is why; the prime area of critical concern in this paper is what Ezra Pound has called "systematization of product", in other words, the power to repeat certain effects regularly.

## 6. THE HEART OF THE DISCOURSE

### FENOLLOSAN-GUMILYOVIAN

#### APPRECIATION OF HEANEY'S POEMS

In this section, each one of the two poems specified at 1.4 is put on the chosen Fenollosan-Gumilyovian scanner. It is sincerely hoped that at the end of the last subsection of this thetical section, it shall be possible to come to a decisive conclusion as regards Heaney's propensity

for honoring the poetic precepts given by Fenollosa and Gumilyov and to reassess his poetic greatness in terms of the Shakespearean preference for transitive verbs.

### 6.1 "Death of a Naturalist" through the Fenollosan-Gumilyovian bifocal lens: A piece of practical criticism.

Since the principal object of this paper is more concerned with "manner" than "matter", Heaney's "faculty for systematization of (the poetic) product" (Eliot 49) as per the precepts of Fenollosa and Gumilyov in "Death of a Naturalist" is demystified here. The primary focus of this study on Fenollosan is to highlight Heaney's utilization of the Fenollosan-Gumilyovian technique to achieve a proficient verbal athletic exhibition in "Death of a Naturalist" by Seamus Heaney. This text-oriented analysis is not and cannot be done temerarily. So a close reading of "Death of a Naturalist" is undertaken to re-assess Heaney's "verbal luxury" (Reiss 32), and "syntactic correctness and semantic adequacy" (Reiss 71) in it.

#### 6.1.1 Intransitive Verbs, Be-Verbs, and Cupola used in "Death of a Naturalist"

"Death of a Naturalist" consists of 34 lines. If a detailed analysis of this poem is made, it becomes clear that Heaney has used some of the transitive verbs, intransitive verbs, and NPs. An item-wise syntactic analysis is effected below. To be specific, Heaney has used about 63 NPs, 25 Aps, and about 36 VPs. Out of the 36 VPs, 09 are Intransitive Verbs, to be specific "be" verbs like "were" (Line 7), "was" (line 8), was (1,16), "was" (1,18), "were" (Line 20), "were" (Line 29) & "were" (Line 33). What is quite important is Heaney's use of "be" verbs such as "is"/ "was"/ "were" for different poetic/thetical effects. Some of the uses are mentioned below:

- a) "There were dragon- flies" (1.7),
- b) "But best of all was the warm thick slobber" (1.8),
- c) "The Daddy frog was called a bullfrog" (1.16),
- d) "and this was frogspawn" (1,18),
- e) "When fields were rank" (1,20),
- f) "The air was thick with a ba,
- g) "The slap and plop were on scene threats" (1.27), and
- h) The great slime kings were gathered...." (1.33).

Out of these 09 lines with "was" & "were" the cupolas at "a", "d", "e", & "h" are identitarian cupolas, hence; they are least judgemental like Shakespeare's sleep is "Nature's soft nurse". So the lines are full of energy. That is why; Heaney has been able to suggest more than what the lines themselves articulate. Among the other 04, "c", "g" and "i" are passivized verbal constructs, hence variants of the related transitive verbs, namely "call", "cock" and "gather" respectively. So only two, i.e. "b" and "f" are evaluative/qualified statements with the syntactic pattern "NP+ "Be" Vb + Complement + Adjunct". What is important is the poet's careful attention to the complexity involved in the use of the " is / "was"/ "were" "cupola"- Besides this fact, the poet has also used only 03 intransitive verbs. Hence, so far as this criterion is concerned; Heaney is Fenollosan in his poetic use of intransitive verbs/ "be" verbs/ "cupola".

### 6.1.2. Noun Phrases used in "Death of a Naturalist"

As the title of the poem "Death of a Naturalist" indicates, it is basically about an actant and "what" happens to a "naturalist". The "actant" is the "Naturalist" and he dies a "death". That is why, to understand what has happened to him is to understand the phenomenon

actified. That is perhaps why; the poet has to use a long train of NPs. What is remarkable is not the occultism in the nounizations used in the poem under study. Out of the near about 60 NPs, used in this action and motion-based poem, only 11 are related to what the naturalist has done in this poem of "action" and "reaction". Hence, in "Death of a Naturalist", the naturalist plays a secondary role, that is why, what he does is less important than what he sees, what he experiences, what is explained to him, and what he understands. Hence "Death of a Naturalist" is a poem of the unseen, not a poem of the seen. In other words, it is not, a poem on/about any lofty thought, spiritual awakening, and obscure dialectics. So, in this poem, truth has been expressed syntactically. So well-constructed and cohesively connected sentences in this poem cause transference of power from the agent to the object.

Out of the remaining 49 NPs, 14 numbers of NPs paint the locale and 35 numbers paint the frogs and the frogspawn. Like a fabulist, the poet has *localized* the action to be articulated in a specific place, painterly detailed out with a good combination/ magic mix of NPs and APs. Against the 14 NPs used such as, "Year", "flax-dam", "heart", "town land", "flax", "Sods", "Sun", "bubbles", "bluebottles", "sound", "gauze", "smell", "dragon-flies" and "butterflies", there is a string of APs such as "green", "heavy headed", "weighted down", "huge", "daily", "punishing", "delicately", "strong", and "spotted". So, against 14 NPs, the poet has used only 09 APS (including adverbial phrases). However, to vehicle the poetic expressions made, the poet has used verbs like "festered", "had rotted", "sweltered", "gargled", "wove" and all are "powerful" transitive verbs. Obviously, the poet has emphasized the actions that take place in the locale. Some bundles of flax have been allowed to rot in the festered and festering flax dam in the scalding sun. And the place

is effervescent with budding sprouts of gas and is marked by the playful antics of dragon flies and butterflies. And all these are being seen by the naturalist. Evidently what the naturalist sees has been picturized by the landscapist- observer of the facts observed. The locale is also the site in which the frog-spawns grow “like clotted water” in the “shade of the banks”. So in the festered and festering locale, the

presence of something creepingly living is palpably felt.

What the naturalist has felt and gained has been pictorially presented *vis-à-vis* the actions of Miss Walls, the “daddy frog”, the “mammy frog”, and the frogspawn. So the poet’s choice of noun phrases is based on poetic exigency. That is why, in the table posited below, the noun -phrases are put under five columns.

**Details of “Nounizations”**

The Naturalist	Miss Walls	Daddy Frog	“Mammy Frog”	Frogspawns
“fill jampotfuls” “to range on window sills at home” “ducked through hedges”	“tell how....”	The “daddy frog croaked”, the angry frogs invaded the flax-dam”	“laid hundreds” of little eggs”	“grew like clotted water” “The fattening dots burst into nimble swimming tadpoles”

However, the “you” in this poem “could tell the weather by frogs.... “Yellow in the sun” and “brown in rain”. Again as much impersonally as the action is done by the “you”, mentioned above, some cocked the “gross-bellied frogs on sods”. So “their loose necks pulsed like sails”-Hence some of the frogs which were cocked on sods “hopped” and some “sat like mud grenades”. Some gathered “the great slime things” and the naturalist- narrator had flinched from dipping his hand out of the fear that the spawn would clutch it. As is evident, in the poem “Death of a Naturalist”, Heaney has beaded together different activities. To suggest the activities he has to use and has used a vast range of pure verbs and transitive verbs

since intransitive verbs cannot suggest activities as succinctly as the transitive verb does.

**6.1.3. Verbal Phrases Used in “Death of a Naturalist”**

Heaney, as suggested above, has to use and has used a string of transitive verbs in "Death of a Naturalist" because in this poem of activities, motion is prioritized as motion is an action and the verb suggests action. As per the rubricalization effected in respect of the nounizations made by Heaney in the poem “Death of a Naturalist”, the verbs used in the poem are also put under the above-mentioned five rubrics (with some additions).

**Verbal Patterns in “Death of a Naturalist”**

The Naturalist	Miss Walls	Daddy Frog	Mummy Frog	Frogspawn	Flax & Flax-dam	Others
“fill” “wait” “watch” “ducked” “heard” “sickened”	“tell”	“croaked” “invaded” “pulsed” “hopped” “sat”	“laid” “pulsed” “invaded” “hopped” “sat”	“grew” “brust”	“festered” “rotted” “sweltered” “gargled” “wove”	“called” “tell” “cocked” “gathered”

“turned” “ran” “knew” and “dipped”						
Total-10	01	05	05	02	05	04
Grand Total	32 (Thirty Two)					

As it is evident in “Death of a Naturalist”, Heaney has used 32 transitive verbs and the corresponding figures with respect to the NPs and Non-Transitive verbs used are 35 and 11 respectively. Furthermore, it is obvious that Heaney has been able to create a more effective poetic effect by using arresting NPs like “a strong gauze of sound around the smell” (line 5), “warm thick slobber of frogspawn” (Line 8-9), “clotted water” (line-9), “jampotfuls of the jellied/ Specks” (Line 11-12), “bullfrog”, “daddy Frog” (Line-16), “mammy frog” (Line-17), “a course croaking” (line 25), “a bass chorus” (Line 26), “necks” pulsing “like sails” (line 29) and “The slap and plop” (line 30). And it is so because of his ability to use grammatical items like NPs, VPs, and APs dexterously.

The title of the poem is justified because of the use of verbs like “sickened”, “turned”, and “ran” in the poem. The naturalist is not dead in “Death of a Naturalist” till he has not run in a panic at the site of frogs spawning. He has responded to the strangeness in the topography. He has “ducked though hedges “but” the coarse croaking” he has heard and the sight of the hopping slapping & plopping frogs (imaging the fretful stir made by the Republicans of Ireland) dampen his spirit. Furthermore, when he finds the frogs squatting and sitting like “mud gremades”, the pacifist in him shudders. “The great slime king” (line 32) gives him a theodician shock; he sees the Evil in the frogs/toads/tadpoles and the naturalist in the poet is/gets sickened. So he has “turned” (off) and “ran” away

from the spot. If the frogs tell him the story of the Satanic troubles, the frogspawn tell him upfront all about the mad sway of threat in the violence-vitiated Ireland. In the light of the facts mentioned above it is quite evident that Seamus Heaney has paid sufficient attention to the *ars poetica*, mandated by Fenollosa.

#### 6.1.4. Use of APs in “Death of a Naturalist”

As regards the Gumilyovian *ars poetica* Heaney has used verbal phrases more liberally and more copiously than other parts of speech. As empirically established, transitive verbs used in “Death of a Naturalist” shadow other parts of speech used in this poem. Even the TVs outnumber the APs. As against 36 Transitive Verbs (TVs) used in “Death of a Naturalist”, the poet has used 25 APs in it. If one scans how Heaney has used the APs, it becomes quite understandable that the APs used in “Death of a Naturalist” do not simply make it a specimen of *ut pictora poesis*, they do also make it properly mounted on the verbal wheels of motion.

#### 6.2 Sectional Recapitulation

On the basis of the foregoing, it is concluded that in “Death of a Naturalist”, Seamus Heaney has given more priority to the use of transitive verbs than to the use of the intransitive verbs and ‘be’ verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections, negations, interrogations, abstractions, and adjectives. So, he has not deviated from the theorization of *ars poetica* by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa and Gumilyov.

To do justice to the thesis of the paper, in the section that follows this section, "The Turnip Snedder" in Heaney's "District and Circle" is put under the chosen Fenollosan-Gumilyovian biofocal lens.

#### 7. "THE TURNIP SNEDDER": A FENOLLOSAN- GUMILYOVIAN ANALYSIS.

Consisting of 20 lines of asymmetrical metricalization and odd line length, the whole of the poem "Turnip Snedder" is only two sentences divided into 10 independent but interconnected poetic rungs steps. So structurally it is a poetic simulacrum of the hour-glass with an invisible neck/conduit.

In the first part of the poem there is only one transitive verb, i.e., "dug" and no helping verb, no "is" cupola, no negation, no intransitive verb, and no interrogation. So far the Heaneyan "articulate energy" (Davie 1955 6) in the first part of "The Turnip Snedder" is concerned; it is part Fenollosan and part Gumilyovian.

In the Second flask/ cusp of the poem the main verb is "said" (line 14) and it is in the company of another transitive verb, i.e. "turned" (line 15) and two "is" cupolas, namely: "This is the way that God sees life" (line 13) and "This is the turnip-cycle" (line 18). And in both instances of the "is" cupola", the expressions are within quotation marks. Besides this fact, in both the clausal expressions, the poet has thematicized two pieces of universal statement, one in each. So it is quite natural and logical for the poet to use the "is" verb in the aforesaid declarative statements. Hence in this poem, the poet has used 03 transitive verbs, namely "dug", "said", and "turned" and that is why, while showing the objects these verbs carry along with them, the poet has used NPs going naturally with them based on

the foregoing discussion about the "is" cupola. In spite of these two instances of – "cupolas", "The Turnip Snedder" becomes a transitive-verb vehicled poetic articulation. And, therefore, in it, the poet has been able to make a display of his verbal mettle. In the light of the facts mentioned above it is concluded that in "The Turnip Snedder", Seamus Heaney has abided by the *ars poetica* crafted out by both Fenollosa and Gumilyov.

#### 8. CONCLUSION

As it is evident in the sectional analyses at 1.6 and 7 in both the poems namely "Death of a Naturalist" and "The Turnip Snedder", Seamus Heaney has preferred the use of Transitive Verbs to the Intransitive verbs and "Helping Verbs". He has used, in these two poems, pure verbs more copiously than other parts of speech, such as Adjectives, Prepositions, Conjunctions, Interrogations, Exclamations, Negations, and others. He has not also resorted to the use of abstract nouns and etymologies. That is why, in these poems of visible thisness, motion/action has been given more importance. It is also concluded that by emphasizing motion and action, the poet has honored the Fenollosan-Gumilyovian joint mandate. Considering the very importance of these two poems in the history of the evolution of Heaney's poetry, it is concluded that not only in the earliest phase of his poetic career but also in the culminating phase of his poetic career, Heaney has adhered to the *ars poetica*, mandated by Fenollosa and Gumilyov. Hence Heaney's adherence to the *ars poetica* of both Fenollosa and Gumilyov is perdurable and incontrovertible and hence is one of the abiding nuances of Seamus Heaney's Poetics.

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