

The World of County Derry: Metaphors in Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*

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Abstract

Images, abstracts and sonic expressions form an intricate yet clear pattern in the “weighty” relationship shared by the human “crowd” well connected to one another in *Human Chain*, the last collection of poems of Seamus Heaney. Another important partner in forming the chain is Nature. With all its “tousled verge” and “Midge veils”- the typical Irish flora and fauna – nature and her elements are represented as the ones “pinched and cinched” in order to attribute living qualities to them, so as to establish a live, inter-dependent relationship between human beings and nature. Further, the human consciousness and the self are manifested in the poems with the poet frequently drawing metaphorical allusions not only from the world of County Derry, Ireland but also, from the natural world of Antiquity. An interplay between the verbal images and the abstract qualities or states of being of the addressees is created to unfold the mysteries of the minds of “I” and “We”- the entities of the poems. Resultantly, what takes shape is a conversational link between them. In this paper, I argue that Heaney's metaphors from the source domain of nature explain the abstract target domains – life, death, self-exploration and realization, love for one's parents, solidarity among fellow human beings, social and political unrest, and yet, others. Essentially, Heaney's world of County Derry circumscribes the people, places, and plants and animals present in the immediate external environment. The investigation will be carried out by identifying and understanding the patterns of “systematic correspondences” – “the mappings” – existing between the source and the target domains. Metaphors, in Zoltan Kövecses model, are classified on the basis of their conventionality, cognitive function, nature and levels of generality. The paper will focus on the conventional conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY and thrust upon understanding the cognitive functions of conceptual metaphors – the structural, ontological and orientational (Kövecses' model) and thereafter, review how they have been deployed in the poems grouped under specific titles.

KEYWORDS: metaphors, nature, County Derry, verbal and psychological mappings, conceptual metaphor, metaphorical and linguistic expressions.

The field of Cognitive linguistics, since 1970s has been examining the relation of language structures to fields outside language. Although it was Noam Chomsky who first studied language in the background of cognitive psychology, the later linguists – George Lakoff, Michael Johnson and others differed from him on the point of studying the deeper structures and transformations of linguistic patterns. According to them, cognitive linguistics focuses on language in terms of the concepts, and it is interested in the meaning and the uncovering of a network with interconnected elements. Dirk Geeraerts offers a detailed classification of the subjects in which the study of language is carried out in the area of cognitive linguistics:

Because cognitive linguistics sees language as embedded in the overall cognitive capacities of man, topics of special interest for cognitive linguistics include: the structural characteristics of natural language categorization (such as prototypicality, systematic polysemy, cognitive models, mental imagery and metaphor); the functional principles of linguistic organization (such as iconicity and naturalness); the conceptual interface between syntax and semantics (as explored by cognitive grammar and construction grammar); the experiential and pragmatic background of language-in-use; and the relationship between language and thought, including questions about relativism and conceptual universals (1995: 111-112).

The use of metaphors then, in day-to day conversations or in literary genres then, could be examined by understanding the cognitive functions that have formed the metaphors which the speaker or the writer generally tends to adapt from the conventional conceptual frameworks prevailing in a particular locale or socio-linguistic community.

Lakoff and Johnson define the term “metaphor” in the light of cognitive linguistics as:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (1980:4).

This theory claims that the ordinary use of language is much dependent upon the ways “human beings perceive, what they know, and what they think” (Abrams 1999: 155). Metaphor, in turn, is the outcome of a cognitive mental process and the metaphorical structures are the linguistic expressions of those mental processes.

Metaphor, in cognitive linguistics, is further defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. Thus, Conceptual Domain A is Conceptual Domain B which makes what is called a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience. Further, these domains are named as ‘source domain’ and ‘target domain’. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called ‘source domain’ while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is called ‘target domain.’ (Kövecses 2010:6-8). Conceptual metaphors are expressed by using various metaphorical linguistic expressions in which the source domain is generally a more concrete or physical concept whereas the target domain is a more abstract concept. The metaphorical process typically goes from the more concrete to the more abstract but not the other way around.

After discussing these terms, I now move on to classifying the conceptual metaphors in terms of their “conventionality, function, nature and level of generality” (Kövecses 2010:33). The term ‘conventionality’ in relation to metaphors means how often or generally a metaphor is used by people in day to day or ordinary life. Equally

important it is to understand the linguistic expressions that correspond with these metaphors in order to examine the conventional nature of the metaphors used in every day usage. To quote examples from *Metaphors We Live By*, the conventional conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is well conventionalized in the linguistic expression “I defended my argument”. An unconventional linguistic expression for the conventional conceptual metaphor could be an unusual linguistic expression as used in this line: “Sam and Mary on the table, the platter flung apart” (my example). The cognitive function of metaphor means what ordinary people think about and see the world based on their understanding or perception. It involves structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors (Kövecses 2010:37). Structural metaphors give an elaborate structure as source domains to understand the target domains. Here, the source domain provides a relatively rich structure of the target domain. For example, the concept of time is structured according to motion and space : “the hour passes by” or “ we are meeting somewhere close in March.” Ontological metaphors comparatively enable us to see more sharply delineated structure where there is little or none. Personification is a form of the ontological metaphor. Orientational metaphors are the ones that include human-spatial orientations e.g. ups and downs, ahead and back, centre-periphery and others. The nature of metaphors could range from image-schemas to image metaphors and one-shot images. The levels of generality of metaphor are further classified according to the levels of generality at which they are found- at specific and at generic levels. For example, TIME IS MOTION is a generic metaphor for which we use metaphorical linguistic expressions such as “He is ahead of time” or “He is behind time.”

Based on these theoretical implications, I propose to restrict my studies for the present paper to examining the cognitive function of the metaphors deployed in the poems in Seamus Heaney’s *Human Chain*. The collection was published in 2010. In his review in *The Guardian*, Colm Toibin, a Heaneyian critic comments:

Human Chain is a book of shades and memories, of things whispered, of journeys into the underworld, of elegies and translations, of echoes and silences. It conjures up the ghosts of three painters – Colin Middleton, Nancy Wynne-Jones, Derek Hill – who spent their lives working with Irish light and Irish weather (21 August, 2010:np).

Heaney has been labeled as a ‘regionalist’ by critics like Eugene O’Brien and Richard Russell who, in their articles on Heaney, reiterate that Heaney’s poems are modeled upon those of his predecessors Patrick Kavanagh, John Montague and other poets from Northern Ireland. While commenting upon Heaney’s poems and quoting Eugene O’Brien in the following lines, Richard Russell states:

Heaney's ongoing regionalism project retrieves unifying cultural elements, particularly dialects and languages, from the landscapes of his long-divided province and other regions. “His descriptions of place,” as Eugene O'Brien argues, thus become “gestures towards an ethical revelation or unveiling”(Place of Writing, 159). Heaney's artful geographic explorations, that is, carry an implicit ethical charge: landscape function as a repository of cultural and religious signifiers that must be read closely to determine how regionalism has powerful and potentially liberating effects on cultural consciousness (65).

Human Chain is a book of reminiscences and recollections of the past, ponderings of the present and the mysteries of the times beyond – into a time zone that belongs to neither of the two phases, but somewhere - “in the elsewhere world, beyond / Maps and atlases,/Where all is woven into/And of itself”(‘A Herbal’, 43). Reviewing the collection, Dave Lordon, another Heaneyian critic suggests:

Human Chain is a book of ghosts and goodbyes, a late masterpiece full of poignant farewells to family and friends among both the living and the dead. Populated by vibrant monuments to the most meaningful people and places of his existence, it is Heaney’s sepulchral version of paradise, what the resurrection might look like for him. It is also a book that is aware of a certain redundancy, a certain futility in its efforts to contact and conjure the dead, and to preserve their memory in the form of a putatively immutable and ever-living [art] (2011: np).

The collection comprises of single as well as multiple sets of poems. The set of poems comprising of two or more poems under one group or title will hereafter, be addressed as ‘Part.’ Quite a few poems are further divided into sub-sets in which there are at times more than two areas of County Derry enlivened not only by a human, but also by an ecological chain formed by the presence of the local animalistic, vegetative, climatic and cartographic elements.

The conventional conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is the recurring metaphor in *Human Chain*. However, the metaphorical and linguistic expressions used for conveying this conceptual metaphor are strikingly unconventional. Heaney’s passion for Ireland and her rich historical, social, political and cultural past (and the present, too) finds a clear cut way in *Human Chain*. But more importantly, it is the nature along with her “lush/Compliant dialect” that is used as the predominant metaphor for some of the abstract notions such as birth, life, heredity, death and soul. The self-renewal quality of nature and its cyclical movements correspond with the Eastern or oriental philosophy of birth-life-death-afterlife and rebirth or succession.

In his article ‘Seamus Heaney’s Regionalism,’ Richard Rankin Russell comments briefly upon the “imaginative efforts of a series of Irish writers beginning in the early twentieth century that have led to the establishment of the regional, bicultural, and finally trans cultural literature that has devolved aesthetically, albeit as a special case, from the British and Irish literature”(2008:65). The reasons, Russell notes, for Heaney turning to regionalism were “to unify the region’s divided inhabitants” (48) and to cherish what Patrick Kavanagh had written in his essay ‘The Parish and the Universe(1967)’ about “the ordinary, the actual, the known, the unimportant” (quoted in Russell, 48). Heaney’s efforts move beyond the mapping of physical landscapes and capture the mindscapes of these personae inhabiting the region of County Derry.

The poems grouped under the title ‘Route 110’ dedicated to Anna Rose, the poet’s first grandchild are autobiographical and unfold one after the other the events taking place at various stages in the life of the poet. The title seems to have been taken from the Route 66, the well known American bus route during the 1930s, also known

as the Mother Route- from Great Lake to Los Angelus that paved the way for prosperity to those who migrated to the West in search of a better lifestyle and stability. Parodied on the model of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the events and the spatio-temporal orientations are locally contextualized. The journey taken up by Virgil's Aeneas to the underworld in search of his lost father is reversed, with the speaker returning home- presumably, the poets endless longing for a return from his teaching assignment at the Oxford and Harvard to Ireland - from "Cookstown via Toome and Magherafelt" (50).

The structural metaphor "Etruscan slopes" from Virgil's *Aeneid* is localized, with the metaphors now shifting to the streets, shops, houses, roads and paths of County Derry. Not the "Etruscan slopes" but the "dustbreath [in] the cubicle mouth" is the starting point of the speaker's journey; a shop at the bus station selling used books from where he picks up a used copy of "*Aeneid IV*." The counter sales girl with the "slack marsupial vent/ of her change pocket" (48) sprints to and fro attending the customers at the counter. The choice of the word "marsupial" - an adjective to the mammal whose offspring are born incomplete and are typically carried and suckled in the pouch of the mother animal - seems to signify motherhood, its warmth and protection that the child experiences soon after the birth- the first stage of the human life. The acquisition of the "*Aeneid IV*" (it is this epic that Heaney is going to follow for crafting his poems for *Human Chain*) is a step further, a plunge into the world of learning and knowledge- the making of the poems. The walk towards the bus-station through the Smithfield Market on that "Saturday" is "silent" with the knowledge that the market was once upon a time throbbing with pet and other consumer goods shops, but is now as quiet as Virgil's "birdless Lake Avernus"(48). Heaney here, dissolves the distance between the mythical and the personal, setting out the Aeneas-like journey of his own- the journey of life as well as that of a poet. The twelve parts of the poem poignantly portrays almost each stage of human life right from childhood to adulthood ending with the last stage of

The speaker not only travels through the places that he refers to but also across various time zones, including the mythological and the present times. The movement of time does not take place on a linear but spherical route -the psychological path - the way ideas crawl in the speaker's mind. The Smithfield Market Sundays is now at a standstill. There is no market there because historically speaking; the market was burnt during the silence now prevailing there is metaphorically compared to the quietude prevailing at the mythological Lake Avernus. In the epic, the lake falls on the way to Elysium Fields in the underworld, where Aeneas will meet his long lost father. The stalls at the bus station that once stuffed clothes and other wares are now deserted. The metaphor "Charon's barge" is used to suggest the mass transportation of "racks of suits and overcoats." The barge in the epic ferries the souls of the deceased "closely packed" across the river Styx to the underworld whereas the metaphor is used in the poem to refer to poet's walk down the market that was evacuated after the market had been burnt in the violent clashes between the Protestants and the Catholics in the Ulster during the sixties and seventies of the last century.

The description of the bus station from where the speaker takes a bus home is compared to a "rookery" and the crowding passengers are "agitated rooks", with the inspector described as the one "who ruled the roost in bus station." Thus the

structural metaphors used in this collection- the “marsupial vent” and “birdless Lake Avernus” explain various target domains of life, journey, period of struggle and silence with the help of metaphorical expressions “birdless Lake Avernus”, “slack marsupial vent” and “agitated rooks.”

While on his way back home, the speaker stops at McNicholl’s kitchen for a meal. The metaphor “Venus’ doves” is twice used in the poem. In Part IV, the softness of a coat is metaphorized. Venus being the mother of Aeneas, and her doves stand for tenderness, gentleness and innocence. In its second usage, In Part V, “Venus doves” are replaced by the old Mrs. Nick McNicholl’s pigeons, the local County Derry woman who ran a low –budget kitchen feeding hundreds of Derrians with a humble meal. The return to Mrs. McNicholl’s kitchen - “out of their pigeons but homing still?/ They lead unerringly to McNicholl’s kitchen” (52) also marks the speaker’s return to his mother at home.

Part IV of the poem reiterates the notion of journey of life- from boyhood to youth. The school boy finds his “Tarpaulin-stiff, coal black.....long coat” scourging. Immediately thereafter, there is a reference to the “finest weave, loose fitting, summery, grey/ As Venus’ doves,” the soft, expensive one that he acquires when he is a grown up. On his way back home, he finds himself “a creature of cold blasts and flap-winged rain.” There is a mixed feeling - one of the “dismay” because of the late night arrival at home and at the same time the pleasure of “hotfooting” towards the home that is not on the “Etruscan slopes” but near the “small brick chapel” in County Derry.

The nature metaphors run across the spatial-temporal grid wherein events take place simultaneously on varied time zones. The timelines and zones intersect to form different stages of life for people of different ages- “the age of ghosts, ” the nay-saying age of impurity” and the “age of births. The time factor is not restricted to a stipulated period but spreads across a vast time line covering an age. A similar pattern of is found in ‘Hermit Songs’ where the schoolboy experiences the “age of lessons” to be learnt by a primary school student and the “age of wonders for a school boy who successfully tries out the older boys’ experiments on rubbing with “bread-pith, transferring pictures from one paper to another by colouring and stamping them.” On the same grid, the spatial web ”runs through the Etruscan slopes and Elysium fields in the mythological context while they are used to describe the Smithfield Market, the riverbank fields and Ashley House in the local/regional context of County Derry. “The age of ghosts” marks the ”Troubled Thirties’ – the period from 1930s to 1960s in Ireland when the Protestants and Catholics warred against each other. The “nay-saying age of impurity” is referred to the Catholic parents during the 1950s-1960s who still insisted upon virginity for their unmarried grown up-children. The “age of births” stands for the birth of Heaney’s first grandchild, an occasion that ended the “long wait on the shaded bank” of life, while slowly moving towards the end of life.

While the structural metaphors are deployed in most of the poems in ‘Route 110’, the poems under the title ‘A Herbal’ has more of ontological metaphors to convey the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The metaphor further exists in two special cases in this collection of poems: DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE. The local Irish plants-grass, bracken, broom,

mare's tail, whins, nettles, dock and vetch- are personified as human beings who take birth, live, survive, die and the soul sets out on an eternal journey of reaching the final destination. The birth of human life is signified by the flourishing of plants. The "roots" of the plants are sunk "In all the dynasties /Of the dead"(35) suggesting the continuity of the human race. The irony of the human race with all its diversities has till date like the plants, not "arrived at any settlement./Not the mare's tail/Not the broom or whins (35)."The plants mentioned here represent different races. At the root of all man-made disasters are the ideological differences –"It must have to do/with the wind." However, there are exceptions. The "grass" that bears witness to the plants flourishing among the graves stand for the history that witnesses the revolutions that have taken place in different ages and have subsided, is expressed as:

Not that the grass itself
Ever rests in peace.

It too takes issue,
Now sets its face

To the wind,
Now turns its back"(36).

The wisdom lies in the fact that it is better to be with the politically powerful rather than go against them- "the wind/ has me well rehearsed /in the ways of the world"(36). The political submission is metaphorized by calling the citizens of the nation as "citizen / of the wind/ Go with the flow"(36). The "bracken" is the one who is "less boastful" and contributes to the cause of mankind and yet prefers to remain behind the scene- "it closes and curls back/ On its secrets,/The best kept? Upon earth"(37). They have full faith in humanity which is compared to "sun" and "morning sunshine" that stays for "all day long."The "bracken" or the righteous ones "are sometimes tempted/into trust."(38).While the bracken "closes and curls back," the "grass is all a-tremble" when the "funeral bell tolls" and "not every time any old bell rings"(38). The " grass" is a metaphor used for the ones in the community that does not respond to events unless and until there are issues that are seriously fatal.

"Broom," a down-land plant is compared to the disregarded in the community who have "to keep going" These "unglorified" figures eventually appear in Part IX of 'Route 110'- Mr. Lavery, a Catholic; Louis O'Neill, the man wrongly killed ; and other thirteen "who'd been shot in Derry" (38)during the riots in 1970s. The grass, broom and bracken co-exist with the "nettles/malignant things" and "nobody seemed able to explain/ But that had to be /put up with"(38). On the other hand, "there would always be dock leaves /To cure the vicious stings" – the "dock leaves" being the ones who are the mentors or pillars of strength. A dialogue with the nature or being one with nature- "because you 've laid your cheek /against the rush clump," is an invocation to the reader where one has one's 'existence. I was there./Me in place and the place in me." The journey that began with "flourish" continues further with death as the beginning of yet another journey -"the dead here are borne/ Towards the future"(38) - to "an elsewhere world, beyond,/ Maps and atlases " which is compared to "a nest/ of crosshatched grass blades"

The journey of a poet that began in 'Digging,' the first poem in *Death of a Naturalist* rests in "the much tried pens" of the 'Hermit Songs.' Although the journey is about to finish -"As I age and blank on names/As my uncertainty on stairs is more and more"('The Attic', 84), there are moments in which he still imagines the "slight untoward rupture and world tilt" experienced by a ship that has just embarked for a long voyage, in this case, the metaphor of the ship reflects the poet's wish of undertaking of a new literary journey -"My small runny pen keeps going/ Through books, through thick and thin /To enrich the scholars' holdings" ('Colum Cille Cecinit,' 72). The journey does not end but take a new course. There is a reference to rebirth:

"All these presences
Once they have rolled time's wheel a thousand years
Are summoned here to drink the river water

So that memories of this underworld are shed
And soul is longing to dwell in flesh and blood
Under the dome of the sky" (The Riverbank Filed', 46)

The metaphors that he uses to describe that "elsewhere world, beyond maps and atlases" is nowhere but a return to County Derry where he feels "I had my existence/I was there/ Me in place and the place in me" ('AHerbal,' 43). Once again the Virgilian landscapes are replaced with Derrian ones: River Lethe is the local Moyola; the "moths on evening water" replace the "bees in sunlight"; and the "lily beds" are replaced by the "midge veils" ('The Riverbank Filed,' 46)

'Had I not been awake,' the first poem in the collection operates on the plane of the orientational metaphor CONSCIOUSNESS IS UP, UNCONSCIOUSNESS IS DOWN. The extraordinary moments of sudden realization or for that matter, the moments of poetic impulses are metaphorized with the upward orientations- "a wind that rose," "got me up" or "came and went." The same kind of orientation finds a repetition in the 'The Attic', the penultimate poem. In spite of the advancing old age-"as I age and blank on names"(84), there are certain moments wherein the poet admits that he experiences of "a wind freshened and the anchor weighed." However, the metaphorical expressions in 'A Kite For Aibhin,' the last poem are more bent towards the decline- "The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall" (85) The "megametaphor" LIFE IS A JOURNEY is further, extended to the "micrometaphors" -DEATH IS AJOURNEY TO THE WORLD OF UNKNOWN and DEATH IS A BEGINNING TO A NEW LIFE. The structural metaphor "air from another life and time and place/ pale blue heavenly air is supporting/ a white wing" although used for a kite also refers to the onset of the journey of Aibhin's life. The "briar hedges and stripped thorns" metaphorize the troubles and challenges of the life the child will have to face during the course of her life. "I take my stand again/To scan the blue" refers metaphorically to the poet himself who has once again acquired the status of being a grandfather. While birth is associated with the spatial orientations such as "lift," "rises," "launch" "climb" or "carrying farther, and higher" and death is metaphorized as the "wind fall," "breaks" and "separate." The image of "kite" that "takes off, itself, alone, a windfall" refers to the journey to the unknown after the string of the kite "breaks and-separate, elate-."(85). The oxymoronic effect of "breaks" and "takes off," "separation" and "windfall" seem to suggest the journey

beyond death – the journey to the underworld, the one that is the theme of the collection much influenced by the journey of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*. The echoes of life after birth and death are reflected in the illusionary scene that the poet creates of by describing the wedding of his parents in the poem 'Album' – "And I am at the table,/ Uninvited, ineluctable" (6). The past, present and the future intermingle in the poem creating the metaphor TIME IS A PLANT with the words "prime," "webby," "stem," 'one-off' used to represent the movement of time-ahead and before.

Conventional as well as novel conceptual metaphors exploited by the innovative use of novel linguistic expressions for new metaphors go into the making of the poems. Other than nature metaphors, there are metaphors powerfully employed from the register of machines, automobiles, household objects and accessories connect people, objects, places and various temporal sequences to bring out a comprehensive picture of the local life of people in the region of County Derry in Northern Ireland. The personal is connected to the regional and the other way around so as to make the human chain attain a full cycle of existence. I conclude with the following lines by John Carey who wrote his reviewing comments in *Sunday Times*:

The poems are short, unpretentious, and often about quite humdrum things. But they are a jubilant display of unfaltering and seemingly casual mastery.....this collection is almost a mini-biography, but made of poetic wonders not career stepscomplete, brilliant and assured, reminding us once more that as a poet Heaney is on his own." (2010,np)

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