

**Farming as a Poetic  
Process: A Study in  
Robert Frost’s “After  
Apple-picking” and  
Seamus Heaney’s  
“Digging”**

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## Farming and Poetic Composition

Every poet has his own conception of writing poetry. If we trace back the history of poetry, we can see that poets have been taking many roles and assigned themselves different missions. Sometimes they are introduced as teachers, moralists, educationalists and guardians of society. On other occasions, they appear as philosophers and prophets who are concerned with moral values and the good of society. While in some other times they act like leaders and politicians who take the responsibility to guide people to better future. As far as this paper is concerned, the poet appears as a farmer who plants and reaps ideas for his poems. Though Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney belong to different nations and cultures, they meet in this particular area. They are classified by critics as nature poets; as they reflect the rural experiences in their poetry. In some of their poetic works they tried to link poetry to farming, and the reader can see much of this by reading their poems.

For Robert Frost, poetry is life and throughout his literary career he tried his best to link poetry to life and life to poetry. He sees poetry as a combination between mind and emotion. Metaphorically, writing poetry is a marriage between mind and emotion. He once said:

If poetry isn't understanding all, the whole world,  
then it isn't

worth anything. Young poets forget that poetry must  
include  
the mind as well as the emotions. Too many poets delude  
themselves by thinking the mind is dangerous and must be left  
out. Well, the mind is dangerous and must be left in.<sup>1</sup>

This combination between mind and emotion is deepened, fathomlessly, in his own mind. According to Frost's conception of poetry, poetry must serve two purposes; delight and wisdom. He sees the poem in this way "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom"<sup>2</sup>. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost wrote, "A poem

begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, homesickness, lovesickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion finds the thought and the thought finds the words.”<sup>3</sup>

Frost has the advantage of being a poet-farmer. He picks his themes and then composes verse as a farmer picks the fruits from around. His ambition in writing poetry is similar to the farmer’s: “to lodge a few poems where they would be hard to get rid of, like pebbles.”<sup>4</sup> Frost, as Christopher Beach puts it, “was a nature poet, but not in the naively romantic sense of a poet who celebrates the beauty or pastoral simplicity of nature. Instead, he uses the rural world as a source of emblems and symbols”<sup>5</sup>. The act of farming allowed Frost to be close to nature, which in turn provided him with the inspiration to write poetry. Poetry itself made him feel, contemplate, imagine and dream perhaps more than a farmer, whose work demands practicality and desires. For Robert Frost, writing poetry is so similar to the farming process. The best example of this notion is revealed in his famous poem “After Apple-Picking”. It is a wonderful poem that was written in 1914, the poem appeared in his second collection of poetry “*North of Boston*”. It is one of the most anthologized of Frost’s poems. The poem describes his thoughts after a long day of apple-picking. The speaker of the poem had a rich experience as a farmer. He may be “overtired”, but it is a good kind of overtiredness that comes when a man has worked hard and long at a task he knows, loves and does well. He says that “I am done with apple-picking now”, but a close examination of the poem suggests something else. He left his ladder on the tree and it is pointing towards heaven. Moreover, there are several barrels unfilled and some apples are not picked. This indicates a feeling of incompleteness. It is true that there are few apples he has

overlooked, but he is wise enough to realize that no human task is done perfectly. The love he has felt for his job and the care he has put into doing it well are expressed in the following lines:

*There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,  
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.*

(L.30-31)

The poem is an exquisite metaphor that can be interpreted on different levels. The act of “apple-picking” is a metaphor for the process of writing poetry or the effort involved in this process. For example, the ladder which is pointed towards heaven is a metaphor of the author’s life and the apples are symbols of his poems. Thus, the apple-Picking is a symbol of writing poetry. The speaker of the poem is old now and he looks tired and ready to die. But there is something he wants to fulfill before death. The barrel is still not filled and some apples not picked that is why he uses the ladder to reach them. This poem can also be seen as an allegory of the art of poetry and of being a poet. The speaker has wished for a successful poetic career and has many poems that have marked his success. However, now, looking back, he sees how this career has made him completely exhausted:

*For I have had too much  
Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired.*

(L.27-29)

In literature the apple tree stands for the tree of knowledge, or it can be seen as a metaphor for the self-achievement and aspiration, both notions are derived from biblical origins. He uses the ladder to reach the apples which are growing on the very top of the tree. He mentions the ladder several times; he says that he has been working so long on it that its rungs have dug into the soles of his feet. The most recurrent image in this poem is the image of “apple-picking”. The apples on the top of the tree represent great ideas for his poems and he is

working hard on them to reach them to advance his career of poetry. Those high apples could be grand and supreme ideas which require fertile source of inspiration. This reminds us of Coleridge's concept of poetry; if the source of inspiration is great the poem would be great too:

*And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
Beside it, and there may be two or three  
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.*

(L.3-5)

Writing poetry is a very demanding job, Frost tells us how hard that labor is, how physically exhausting and even emotionally draining. It involves a sort of obligation and responsibility, Frost, here talks about his obligation as a poet to his readers. In spite of being "done with apple-picking" yet, he feels some obligation to fill "a barrel" that he did not. So, his apple-picking, metaphorically poetry writing, looks like an obligation and a great responsibility. The poem can be also read as a metaphor for the pursuit of worldly glory and success. The speaker is saying that he has been working hard, chasing these things. Frost's life was full of achievements which are symbolized by the hard work of apple picking. On the symbolic level, the great harvest that the speaker once desired refers to the fame and success in the world of poetry.

To the poet, poems are like apples, they have otherworldly appearance as they are "magnified" in his mind. He sees them float like little orbs or stars across his vision. They "appear and disappear", similar to how the real apples, on the tree, would disappear into the barrel after he picks them. The elevation of the apples indicates a grand source of inspiration. Writing poetry is similar to gathering apples, and Frost, here, establishes and achieves perfect fusion between pastoral farming and poetic labor. He becomes both physically and mentally exhausted as the apples are gathered and the poem is written<sup>6</sup>:

*Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,  
And every fleck of russet showing clear.*

(L.18-20)

The speaker's labor as a poet is similar to the labor of a farmer. The farmer's labor functions as a tool of self analysis and self discovery. The work allows the speaker to understand himself and the world around him. This implies that the connection between the speaker and his farm can be achieved actively through the positive communion between them. So is Frost's writing poetry; it offers him a deep knowledge and understanding of himself. He learns about himself through exploring poetry. Once he said "I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering."<sup>7</sup> This supports the idea that writing poetry is not putting on papers whatever comes into the mind; it is rather a complicated process similar in many aspects to farming; it requires patience and toil. All in all, we can sum up Frost's perception of poetry as follows; he believes that writing poetry is similar to reaping; it requires toil and labor as well as an exertion of the body and mind to bring something new into existence.

Similarly, Seamus Heaney has his own conception of poetry. Throughout his career Heaney wrote many essays and delivered many lectures to present his idea of poetry. In his essays and lectures such as: "The Government of the Tongue", "The Redress of Poetry" and "Crediting Poetry", he talked about the responsibility of the poet. He suggests that a poet should deeply concern himself with the correct use of his gifts. The poet must confront himself or being confronted by his readers with his responsibilities as a man and a poet. He sees poetry as a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony, he affirms that poetry needs to be both socially responsible and creatively free. Heaney's focus is on

poetry's ability to redress "all of life's inadequacies, desolations, and atrocities."<sup>8</sup>

As far as poetry and farming are concerned, Heaney produced many poems about farming implements, from early poems like: "Digging", "The Forge", "Churning Day", "The Pitchfork" and "The Harrow-Pin". The most famous among these poems is "Digging". Digging, the first poem of his first collection, "*Death of a Naturalist*" (1966), is referred to in almost every discussion of Heaney's work. As stated by Adam Kirsch, "its prescient statement of the themes that would dominate his poetry: his sensual love of his native ground; his fascination with work and all kinds of tools; his vision of poetry as a traditional, laborious, and sustaining craft, like farming."<sup>9</sup> The poem is an interesting metaphor through which he makes comparisons between his career as a poet and his father's as a farmer. The comparison extends to include the difference between his pen and his father's spade. The poem begins with the speaker sitting on his writing desk looking at his father digging the "flowerbed". What separates them is only a single pane of glass:

*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.*

*Under my window a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down*

(L.1-5)

Although their careers are seemingly different yet philosophically, they share many things. Both of their tools, pen and spade, have a sense of action. Once untouched they can be passive, but when used they can be so productive. Both of them offer life in a larger sense of the word. The ground the father is cultivating is gravelly and thus requires an extra physical prowess that corresponds to the poetic prowess Heaney needs to

cultivate his own ground, that is, poem. Heaney feels the physical competence of his father, and hopes that his skill at physical labor can be translated in him into competent literary labor.

For Seamus Heaney, the writing of poetry is an act of digging, the act of creating a space, of removing the accretions of time and decay, the erosions of the hard ground and grounding of present experience. What is formed within this space is not a piling, but pure language, with its inherent images and effects. Heaney's concern is with the production not of the emptiness of the hole itself, but of the creation from that emptiness that is poetry. He claims ancestral rights not to this hole, but to this process. The emptiness that the act of digging creates is not the point of his father's exercise, but rather the necessary by-product of the operation. His father serves as his alter-ego, to complete his journey into memory, so, he is his manifesto.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, one can easily notice the analogy between farming process and the act of writing poetry:

*He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked*

(L. 12-13)

*My grandfather could cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.*

(L. 17-18)

Heaney, like William Wordsworth, believes that the rural experience and an intimate contact with nature can provide the poet with many sources of inspiration which can be drawn upon in other times and other circumstances. Though Heaney doesn't engage in a direct physical farming activity, he reflects it on his father and draws on a series of analogies between that and poetry composition. Consequently, Heaney finds many analogies in rural experience for the art of poetry. The poem, according to Suzana Stefanovic:

not only memorializes the cycles of manual labor on his families farm – digging up potatoes and cutting turf on the bog – but also shows the poet discontinuing with that tradition as he replaces the spade with a pen, a tool he will try to "dig " with as he attempts to explore his inner self and his origins, tradition and history.<sup>11</sup>

In this poem Heaney conceives of art and poetry as labor, a craft and a production, on many levels analogous to manual labor.

The dominant image, "Digging", functions as an analogy for the writing process. The poet digs into past, memories, culture and history. The poem points to Heaney's preoccupation with his origin. The poem presents his vision of poetry as a traditional laborious and sustaining craft, like farming. The most important thing about "digging" is that it takes the form of a promise, a commitment from the poet to his father and grandfather whose lives were spent literally digging the soil<sup>12</sup>:

*The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.*

(L.25-27)

The speaker has chosen a different life path than that of his father and ancestors. He is digging into his memories with his pen to convince himself that he has made the right choice. His choice to become a writer is a reflection of his inspiration from his forefathers, but in a very different way. Heaney acknowledges that he is not a farmer, and will not follow their vocation. But at the start of his career, he vows to translate their virtues into another kind of work<sup>13</sup>. Heaney is still the poet of labor, of contact with the earth. His father and grandfather are dead, but he has kept his promise to them. He likens the work of poetry to physical labor, inviting the reader to see his portrait of an aging farmer as a veiled self-portrait:

*But I've no spade to follow men like them.  
Between my finger and my thumb*

*The squat pen rests.  
Ill dig with it.* (L.28-31)

The physical labor of digging brings with it cultural significance. Indeed, delving into the soil not only is an exploration of emptiness, it brings forth life and the artifacts of previous lives. But one must go deep in order to uncover the treasure that the land holds. Heaney's grandfather was capable of plumbing such depths, of taking what the land gave to those strong enough to work for it. When one digs a hole, one creates a space which is taken up by the digger<sup>14</sup> :

*Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, digging down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.*

(L.22-24)

So is writing poetry, the poet digs deeply with his memories to reap the fruits. Heaney's creative abilities as well as his cultural and personal memories are like the soil that must be constructed and shaped into something useful. He believes that "the act of poetry is a participation in a cleansing, affirming ritual that progresses through abnegation in order to achieve completion. For Heaney the process must necessarily start in the present and move down into memory in order to return to the present."<sup>15</sup> The depth of the mind must be plumbed and brought to the present in order to complete the process. He, at certain moments, makes his strong connection with the land:

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head*

(L.25-27)

The poem, on a large scale, is a metaphor for writing. The author reflects on his father and grandfather as hardworking laborers. The author writes down the page while his ancestors went deep into the dirt. Moreover,

when you have to dig deep for the good stuff, you have to dig deep for the good stuff for writing something well.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the author is suggesting that hard work is important, no matter what line of work you do, just do it well. Heaney recognizes that his skill with a pen is comparable to that of his forefathers with a spade. He also realizes that he can continue the love for skilled work with the land through his writing. Just as his grandfather was "digging down and down for the good turf" so will Heaney dig down and down for the good stuff that makes his poetry so exquisite. His pen becomes the spade with which he digs his ideas to give life to new experiences. Thus, Heaney sees writing poetry is similar to planting and cultivation.

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**Conclusion**

It is noteworthy that in spite of the fact that Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney belong to different nations and cultures, they share many ideas concerning poetry and farming. Both of them were brought up in farms and were involved in farming activity. Both of them wrote about nature and rural experience. They link the art of writing poetry to the farming experience. They think that both farming and writing poetry deal with life. The farmer digs, plants, grows, and reaps. Similarly, the poet thinks, meditates, and then writes, the outcome of both would be a new creation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Faggen, *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: University Press, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Neena Sharma, "Robert Frost Conception of Poetry" in *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, Vol. 2. Issue 3, September 2011, page 1.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost and Louis Untermeyer, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Faggen, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), P.19.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Meyers. *Robert Frost: A Biography*. (Boston : Houghton Mifflin 1996), p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: University press, 2009), p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Kirsch, "Seamus Heaney, Digging with the Pen", [www.harvardmagazine.com](http://www.harvardmagazine.com). Retrieved May 12,2012. Page 2 Of 8.

<sup>10</sup> Joe Pellegrino, *Seamus Heaney's Proleptic Elegies*, (published in *Kentucky Philological Review* 13 (1998): 17-23.), p2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Suzana Stefanović, *Seamus Heaney: The Poet and His Tradition*. Series: Linguistics and Literature Vol. 2, No 8, 2001, p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kirsch, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *Seamus Heaney: A Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p.58.

<sup>14</sup> Joe Pellegrino, p.4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue, p.21.

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