**The Forge**

The Forge appears in Seamus Heaney’s second volume of poetry ‘Door into the Dark’ (1969). Like many other poems by Heaney this poem explores and glorifies country crafts, many of which are now redundant. Here in this poem he describes the forge that he used to pass by everyday on his way to school. The poem drags us back into the earliest reaches of civilization. However, not too long ago, the forge was an essential part of Irish rural life and farmers, in particular, used the services of the blacksmith to shoe their horses and make and repair their ploughs and iron gates and other farm utensils. Indeed in harsher, more troubled times the forge doubled as an ‘armaments factory’ where ancient pikes, and rudimentary spears and swords were forged and tempered in a clandestine way and often ‘hidden in the thatch’. Thus blacksmith was one of the most important members of an agricultural community.

The central idea of the poem seems to be the mystery and holiness of the process of creation itself. The speaker as an onlooker is outside the forge, peering in at the ‘unpredictable’ mystery. One may catch a glimpse of the beauty in the making or hear bits of its elegant sound, ‘the short pitched ring’ or ‘hiss’. But the creation of art still remains a mystery, beyond the reach of the non-artist. The Forge is a sonnet with a clear division into an octave and a sestet. The first eight lines of the sonnet focus solely on the inanimate objects and occurrences inside and outside the forge. The sestet shifts the focus on the blacksmith himself, and what he does. This division allows the ‘anvil’ as an ‘altar’ to be emphasized at the crucial part of the poem.

The poem can be read as an elegy to the past, and a lament to the lost tradition of the blacksmith. The anvil is constructed as an altar, and the blacksmith is beating out ‘real iron’, which the world in 1969, was beginning to dispense with, as cars and tractors began to whizz by ‘flashing in rows’. In another way of reading the poem, the blacksmith’s figure can also be compared to the creative role of the poet as one who opens ‘door into the dark’, ‘expends himself in shape and music’, and who, ‘grunts’ with the exertion of forging his poems. The effect of the comparison is to enable the reader to experience the anvil or altar as a magical point of transition between the material and immovable world of objects and the fluid, musical world of human consciousness. In the church the altar is where the transformation from sinner to forgiven happens and so the blacksmith transforms raw materials into a useful tool in his forge. Thus the blacksmith’s shop is compared to a church.

Heaney’s blacksmith reminds us of Vulcan, the Roman God of the forge. He does not speak- he only grunts. He is described as ‘leather- aproned, hairs in his nose’. He is powerful as well, able ‘to beat real iron out’. Even the ‘door into the dark’ in the opening line recalls the caves of Etna in which Vulcan was to have made Achilles’ shield as well as the movement back into the darkest parts of human development. But the poem is not overtly religious. It is about a man whose craft is gradually disappearing as the world changes around him.

The poem is a sonnet where the rhyme scheme is: abba cddc efgfef, which is a departure from the standard, Shakespearean (abab cdcd efef gg) or Petrarchan (abba abba cde cde). The poem abounds with examples of alliteration and assonance, ‘a door into the dark’, ‘outside old axles’. Another grace note used by the poet is the combination of repeated long syllables with assonance, as in ‘new shoe’ ‘beat real iron out’. The noisy, boisterous forge is also brought to life by numerous examples of onomatopoeia: ‘hiss’, ‘clatter’, ‘grunt’, ‘slam’, ‘flick’. The precise and unadorned diction of the poem represents as honest a piece of craftsmanship as the subject Heaney describes is accurate, it comes alive as it records the last moments of a dying craft and after it has been read it lingers in the mind.

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