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## Poetry's Power Against Intolerance, by Seamus Heaney

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### Poetry's Power Against Intolerance

By Seamus Heaney

Some lines from a poem called "Incantation," by the Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz, express the fundamental beliefs upon which the fight against racism must be based:

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.

No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,

No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.

It puts what should be above things as they are.

It does not know Jew from Greek nor slave from master.

It is thrilling to hear the ideal possibilities of human life stated so unambiguously and unrepentantly. For a moment, the dirty slate of history seems to have been wiped clean. The lines return us to the bliss of beginnings. They tempt us to credit all over again liberations promised by the Enlightenment and harmonies envisaged by the scholastics, to believe that the deep well of religious and humanist value may still be unpolluted.

And yet there is also something problematic about what is being said. While the lines do have original force, the evidence of the ages is stacked against them. So it comes as no surprise to be told that in the original Polish, there is a certain frantic, even comic pitch to the meter and tone of "Incantation." Mr. Milosz's irony saves him and his poem from illusion and sentimentality; the tragic understanding that coexists with the apparent innocence of his claims only makes those claims all the more unyielding and indispensable.

In the course of the past century, imaginative writers have grown more and more conscious of the darker levels to which human beings can descend, yet their art remains answerable to "what should be" as well as to "things as they are." And this means, I believe, that the example of writers has something to say to all who campaign against racism at the present time. Activists have different priorities than artists do, but they, too, are forced to acknowledge the prevalence of the atrocious while maintaining faith in the possibility of the

desired. As the United Nations Conference Against Racism meets this week in Durban, South Africa, perhaps the artist's voice can contribute to the dialogues of activists.

Such campaigners would be in total sympathy with another famous utterance by Mr. Milosz. "What is poetry," he asks, "which does not save nations and peoples?" It is a question that concerns the redress of poetry, by which I mean the need poets feel to align themselves with those who have been wronged, to repair and compensate for injustices suffered, to stay mindful of the miseries of the world. It is the serious artist's question to himself and the question he will usually hear when he comes in contact with the activist. And it is a question he will answer by posing another one: What is poetry that does not address itself to the individual consciousness, that does not convey an experience of verification at the personal level?

The fight against racism certainly must be waged by governments, as a highly organized, internationally coordinated, deliberately pursued effort of education and legislation. Nations and peoples must be recognized and represented equally, must be saved by just laws and civilized treatment, by actions. Nevertheless, the fight is also helped by every statement that strengthens an individual's moral sense and gratifies his or her sense of right, every utterance that reawakens the feeling of personal dignity or promotes a trust in human solidarity.

Much of the literature of the past century is a *de profundis* on behalf of the desperate and the deprived in gulag or ghetto or township or camp, but in spite of its desolate content that literature has been a positive influence: it has had the paradoxical effect of raising spirits and creating hope. We need only think of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to remind ourselves how the integrity of an individual writer can underwrite a whole culture of resolution and resistance. It can even underwrite a new idiom of affirmation, like the one employed in the United Nations declaration "Tolerance and Diversity: A Vision for the 21st Century."

The document is direct: "The horrors of racism -- from slavery to holocaust to apartheid to ethnic cleansing - - have deeply wounded the victim and debased the perpetrator. These horrors are still with us in various forms. It is now time to confront them and to take comprehensive measures against them." The document further declares that "we all constitute one human family" and asserts a new scientific basis for this belief by invoking the proof afforded by the mapping of the human genome. Yet the scientific reinforcement of the argument remains just that: reinforcement. Its primary strength comes from moral and philosophical sources, from the witness of heroic individuals to the belief that human reason is indeed beautiful and invincible.

When we see the signature of Nelson Mandela at the bottom of the declaration, it immediately acquires a kind of moral specific gravity, for the name Mandela, like the name Solzhenitsyn, is the equivalent of a gold reserve, a guarantee that the currency of good speech can be backed up by heroic action. There is nothing loose-mouthed involved. When Mr. Mandela's writing rises to a noble statement, that statement has been earned. It has behind it the full weight of a life endured for the sake of the principles it affirms.

Consequently, there is genuine healing power rather than mere rhetorical uplift in Mr. Mandela's espousal of the aims of the Durban conference, and the conference could well adopt as its sacred text something he wrote in his book, "Long Walk to Freedom": "It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, black and white. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken away from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

These lines, like those from "Incantation," have a radiance that is only enhanced by the tragic knowledge behind them, including the knowledge of how the oppressor is not free. With such personal, individual empathy, Mr. Mandela shows himself to be an artist of human possibility. He might well be called an activist, but he has a visionary understanding and would surely agree with the conviction that sustains Mr. Milosz's poem. It, too, could be adopted as a text by all who travel to Durban. For there is nothing improbable about the poem's luminous conclusion:

Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia

And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.

As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth.

The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.

Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.

Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

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