

# Seamus Heaney: The Redress of Poetry

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Seamus Heaney 1939 - 2013

Seamus Heaney was born in County Derry in 1939. He was perhaps the finest lyrical poet of his generation and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. He had a popular and loyal readership. In the year before he died, Heaney's books made up two-thirds of the sales of living poets in the UK.<sup>1</sup> He was an adept, even charismatic, reader of his own poems at the many public readings he gave all over the world. He understood from very early on the mechanisms involved in the creation and maintenance of a successful public reputation. But fame came with a price, in the last decades of his life the Famous Seamus' tag was wheeled out on occasion by a sometimes envious literary world, particularly following upon the 2008 publication of *Stepping Stones* in which Heaney discussed his life and career with his friend and fellow poet Dennis O'Driscoll.<sup>2</sup> But, whenever he encountered envies, resentments or hostilities, Heaney appeared to handle them with equanimity and aplomb, even if the eventual dissolution of some friendships and old allegiances caused him distress. At times, the burden of fame weighted him down. Despite his natural reticence to be spokesperson for any cause, or his disinclination to be celebrated as Ireland's

national poet - he felt a duty to repay the many honours bestowed upon him. Much to the disquiet of some of his old friends in the Field Day project, he felt obliged in the last years of his life to speak at a number of state occasions alongside the likes of Bill Clinton or the Queen of England. This was despite the fact that as a young man he was proud to say that 'no glass of ours/was ever raised to toast the queen'.

His work often deals with the local surroundings of Northern Ireland, where he was born. Speaking of his early life and education, he commented 'I learned that my local County Derry experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to the modern world was to be trusted'.<sup>3</sup> This experience permeates most of his early work; *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969) mostly focus on the detail of rural, parochial life.

He grew up in the deeply divided landscape of Northern Ireland where the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land. He lived through the demise of the ancient rural world into which he was born, and the emergence of a globalised modern Ireland.

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

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.<sup>4</sup>

The world of his childhood to which he returned so often in his poetry had not changed in generations: horse drawn ploughs, thatched

<sup>1</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seamus\\_Heaney-cite\\_note-bbc\\_faces\\_of\\_the\\_week-5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seamus_Heaney-cite_note-bbc_faces_of_the_week-5)

<sup>2</sup>O'Driscoll, Denis, *Stepping Stones*, (Faber & Faber, London, 2008).

<sup>3</sup><http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/seamus-heaney>

<sup>4</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *Death of a Naturalist*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1966), p. 28.

roofs, and the hammer ringing on the blacksmiths anvil. He could have continued to live imaginatively in that world as a purveyor of nostalgic metaphors for an Ireland long gone. Instead, he worked to make his poetry contemporary. He turned dry clichés into questioning eloquence; the dull metal of age-old metaphors into words that sparkled with possibility. His work was a door into the dark that had almost overwhelmed us; as he reminded us in a speech just before he died; ‘we are not simply a credit rating or an economy but a history and a culture, a human population rather than a statistical phenomenon.’<sup>5</sup> Few writers have done so much to make us feel like inheritors of an ancient imagination rather than figments or puppets of the market.

He struggled with contradictions, paradoxes, and conflicting impulses. But he was never afraid to face those contradictions - because he understood more than most that this is how we arrive at an understanding of the complex world in which we live. Almost two hundred years ago, Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, explored the effect of poetry on society in troubled times and suggested that poets are ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world’.<sup>6</sup> This was a challenge that Heaney and his contemporaries accepted, and may explain why some of the best poetry in the English language over the last fifty years has emerged from the political turmoil of Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Michael Longley, and Paul Muldoon did not write as a movement, or in the same style, but as a group they reflected the convulsions of their time and place. Heaney’s poems do not stand or fall on the themes of justice or oppression, but such themes are worthy of the wonderful lyrics in which he frames them. Heaney, particularly in his early poems, speaks about and for those whose voices are lost to history. The image of his cousin

Colum McCartney, murdered in a sectarian attack, haunted him: ‘blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes’.<sup>7</sup>

With the outbreak of the Troubles in the late 1960s, the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of writing a satisfactory line or lyric to being a search for images and symbols adequate to his community’s predicament. Great poets speak for themselves but they also create a space where other voices can find expression. Heaney never wrote to a political agenda or allowed his work to be appropriated for any purpose. He gave each side of a political or personal equation its full weight, and proper due, without becoming a prisoner of either. He was not, in that sense, a national poet. He knew too much about the dangers of tribalism and the foolishness of slogans to ever want to be a spokesperson for the movement. However, this stance was to be tested during the dark days of the Troubles in Ireland when an IRA sympathiser’s demand for political commitment was refused by Heaney:

For fuck’s sake, are you going to  
write  
Something for us?  
If I do write something,  
Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for  
myself.<sup>8</sup>

References to the political and sectarian difference in Northern Ireland can be found in all his poems. Many of the poems collected in *Wintering Out* (1973) and *North* (1975) tried to weave a commentary on the Troubles into a historical context that also contained a comment on the wider human experience. Many of his right-wing critics accused Heaney of being an apologist and a mythologizer of the violence in the North. But while Heaney has written poems directly about the Troubles they were usually incorporated into elegies for friends and acquaintances who had died in

<sup>5</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *Irish Times*, 31 August 2013.

<sup>6</sup>Shelley, Percy Bysshe, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *Essays, Letters from Abroad*, (Edward Moxon, London, 1852), p.49.

<sup>7</sup>Heaney, Seamus, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, *Field Work*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1975), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Heaney, Seamus, ‘The Flight Path’, *The Spirit Level*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1975), p. 26.

them. During the Troubles, Heaney was almost forced to take on the mantle of public spokesman - that of a writer who provided comment and guidance. This was a role that troubled him, and he steadfastly defended the right of poets to be private and apolitical, and he went on to question the extent to which poetry, however 'committed,' can influence the course of history.

Heaney, particularly in his later poetry, pulled back from political purposes, and he resisted any attempt by the Republicans appropriate his work. *Station Island* (1984), despite its emblems of savagery, gives little rhetorical comfort to Republicanism. *Station Island* is less about a united Ireland than about an autobiographical quest which leads him back into the world which formed him, and then looks forward to face the troubled world that confronts him.

Heaney used 'The Tollund Man', and similar poems about ancient corpses found in bogs<sup>9</sup>, to comment on the Troubles in his own part of the world. Heaney found ways of exploring the many disturbing issues thrown up by events in Northern Ireland, and did not flinch from putting his 'own side', the Catholic minority, under the microscope. His follow-up collection, *North* (1975), offered much more direct commentary on the conflict. His poem 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' became a Northern Ireland catch phrase for the art of concealing one's loyalty - whether Irish Catholic or British Protestant - in response to strangers' probing questions:

I'm writing just after an encounter  
 With an English journalist in  
 search of 'views  
 On the Irish thing'. I'm back in  
 winter  
 Quarters where bad news is no  
 longer news.<sup>10</sup>

He reflected on the Troubles in Ireland in the course of a lecture at Oxford University

in November 1993. He explained that Francie Hughes, a neighbour, had died on hunger strike during the H-Block protests in 1981. Heaney said that at the time he had doubts as to whether he should attend the funeral, or not. On one hand the domestic rite of mourning implied he should be there as a neighbour, but on the other, this implied a political solidarity with a tactic that he believed had become by then 'a propaganda war'. He was clear that the British Government was responsible for the deaths of these young men. But he also felt that the tactic of the hunger strike left those, who chose to go down that road, little option except death, in the face of the total intransience of the British government. For Heaney, this was the terrible logic of Terance McSwiney's position during the War of Independence: Victory will come to those who can 'endure the most' not those who can 'inflict the most'. He never sought to glorify war. For him, a hunger striker or the victim of an IRA bomb was also a son or a daughter. His most quoted and in some ways controversial work, beloved of warmongers such as Bill Clinton, was a few lines from *The Cure at Troy*, a 1990 adaptation of a Greek play by Sophocles set in the Trojan War. His version, rooted in Northern Ireland, sought to draw a line under a conflict that featured the hunger strikes and the IRA military campaign:

A hunger-striker's father  
 Stands in the graveyard dumb.  
 The police widow in veils  
 Faints at the funeral home.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this ambivalence or uncertainty over the armed struggle, he was clear about whose side he was on, and his work is deeply rooted in the people and the nationalist community of Northern Ireland. He refused the position of poet laureateship from the Britain government, and he also objected to being included in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* in 1982. His response was delivered in *An Open Letter*:

<sup>9</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *Wintering Out*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1972)

<sup>10</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *North*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1975), p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Heaney, Seamus, *The Cure at Troy*, (Field Day, Derry, 1990), p. 32.

Don't be surprised if I demur, for,  
be advised  
My passport's green.  
No glass of ours was ever raised  
To toast The Queen.<sup>12</sup>

In 1966 Heaney published 'Requiem for the Croppies' a poem that commemorates the Irish rebels of 1798, on the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. He frequently read the poem to both Catholic and Protestant audiences in Ireland during the Troubles. But he insisted that reading 'Requiem for the Croppies' wasn't to say 'up the IRA' or anything like that. For Heaney, this was 'silence-breaking' rather than 'rabble-rousing'.

He was concerned, as a poet and a translator, with the English language as it is spoken in Ireland, but also as spoken across the world, and in other times. The Anglo-Saxon influences in his work are strong. Heaney examined the genetic structures of English, trying to discover how it has served, in all its changes, as a bearer of culture. Heaney's first translation came with the Irish lyric poem 'Buile Suibhne', published as *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (1984). Heaney's prize-winning translation of *Beowulf* (2000) was seen as ground-breaking in its use of modern language without losing any of the original Anglo-Saxon rhythm and music. This was one of the ways he resisted being categorised as an 'Irish Poet' or being boxed into an Irish literary past. Often overlooked and underestimated in the direction of his work is his profound poetic debt to, and critical engagement with, 20th-century Eastern European poets, and in particular the Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz.

He was a proficient dramatist who looked back to the political drama of ancient Greece as a source for his work. These include *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles'*

*Philoctetes* (1991) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) which draws parallels between Creon, the king of Thebes, with the foreign policies of the Bush administration in the aftermath of the Gulf war in 2003.

Heaney, in his many essays reflected on the role of poetry as an engine for political and personal change. He suggested that when a poem rhymes or when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures or forms - it is already on the side of life. In this respect he set out his own values in an essay in 1988:

In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil - no lyric ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.<sup>13</sup>

Heaney believed that to 'effect the redress of poetry' it was not necessary for the poet to be aiming deliberately at social or political change, but what poetry does offer is a 'glimpsed alternative' of what is possible.<sup>14</sup> The Ulster poet Louis MacNeice captured this concept beautifully when he wrote that, 'poet and reader both know, consciously or unconsciously the rest of the truth which lurks between the lines'.<sup>15</sup> In the post-colonial world of the late twentieth-century Heaney understood that 'poetry is understandably pressed to give voice to much that has hitherto been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual and political life' of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> At same time he recognised that in discharging this function, poets are in danger of slighting another imperative - to 'redress poetry as poetry'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, he was suggesting that a work of art has to work on its own terms before it can be political.

<sup>12</sup>Heaney, Seamus, 'An Open Letter', *Ireland's Field Day*, (Hutchinson, London, 1985), p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *The Government of the Tongue*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1988), p. 107.

<sup>14</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *The Redress of Poetry*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1995), p. 192.

<sup>15</sup>See Longley, Edna, *Louis MacNeice*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1988), p. IX.

<sup>16</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *The Redress of Poetry*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *The Redress of Poetry*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>Eagleton, Terry, *London Review of Books*, 11 November 1999.

Heaney described his politics as ‘off-centre’ while the critic Terry Eagleton referred to him as ‘an enlightened cosmopolitan liberal’.<sup>18</sup> Heaney’s major public commitment in Ireland was to the Field Day Theatre Company. Field Day was founded in 1980 in Derry by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea. Formed initially to stage contemporary plays outside the commercial theatre, Field Day developed, through various publications, into a controversial agency of agitation in Irish cultural politics. In 1983 Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, David Hammond, and Seamus Deane were invited to join the project. Seamus Deane was the intellectual driving force behind the project and the most politically engaged. Field Day set out to reappraise the political and cultural situation in Ireland in the light of the crisis in Irish society. They espoused an explicit and interventionist cultural politics under the banner of Field Day. Starting in 1983 they published a series of pamphlets in which the nature of the crisis in Ireland could be explored. Heaney’s contribution was *An Open Letter* in which he explores what it means to him to be Irish. In the same year Field Day also published Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray*, a translation from the medieval Irish tale ‘Buile Suibhne’, and in 1990 it staged *The Cure at Troy*, his version of *Philoctetes* by Sophocles. Both make clear, even if in a coded way, that Heaney meant these works to be read as a metaphor for contemporary Irish political life.

Field Day never defined itself politically - it was a collective that came together at a particular time in Irish history in an attempt to provide an intellectual and cultural response to the Irish crisis. The publication of the three volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991 was an attempt to provide a totalising canon of Irish Literature and writing over the last 1,500 years. The publication was criticised on a number of fronts. Feminists were outraged because it underrepresented woman

and Field Day had to agree to publish two further volumes to correct this omission. It was also attacked by Northern literary critics who suggested that it was a ‘compilation that suspects the aesthetic and favours the political’.<sup>19</sup> The Belfast critic Edna Longley was one of the most forceful in arguing that the anthology in attempting a totalising view of Irish History did not take account of the distinctive Loyalist contribution to literature in both Ireland and Britain. Heaney was appreciative of the Northern poet John Hewitt’s attempt to break out of the loyalist intellectual ghetto by creating a cultural space that could that could command the allegiance of both nationalists and loyalists. But, he understood better than most that Ulster Regionalism was just an attempt to evade the border while ‘recognising and affirming the colonial nature of the Ulster Protestant experience’.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the 1990s many of the original founders of Field Day, including Heaney had drifted away from the project. Undoubtedly, political tensions existed within the group, but in many ways Field Day had run its course. The ending of the Troubles left it without a coherent reason for its existence, though it still continues to publish some of the most interesting cultural analysis in Ireland today. In a previous issue of this journal the Derry poet and musician Connor Kelly writing about the new generation of ‘slam poets’ said, that for his generation the ‘old guard’ of Heaney, Muldoon, and Longley had little meaning for them. He went on to say: ‘I’m from the city, from an estate... I could only imagine this world of his, not imagine myself in it’.<sup>21</sup> For Kelly and his generation it was Patti Smith reading poetry over music or the performance poetry of Alan Ginsberg that spoke to him: ‘It seemed that I had more in common with this New York poet than I had with poets like Heaney who lived just down the road’.<sup>22</sup> Every generation has to throw off the past - just as Heaney had to step out of

<sup>19</sup>Longley, Edna, *The Living Stream*, (Bloodaxe, Newcastle, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>Heaney, Seamus, *The Redress of Poetry*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1995), p. 195.

<sup>21</sup>Kelly, Connor, *Irish Marxist Review*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup>Kelly, Connor, *Irish Marxist Review*, p. 72.

the shadow of Yeats and Kavanagh. Heaney wrote out of his own experience but he was always prepared adapt and change his work in response to the world around him. Today, writers and poets have to find ways to tell their truth about the chaotic urban world that we live in. But, they cannot do it in the borrowed clothes of a previous generation. Heaney was aware of this and loved the idea of letting a 'thousand flowers bloom'. In 2003, when asked if there was any figure in popular culture who aroused interest in poetry and lyrics, Heaney praised the rap artist Eminem, saying 'He has created a sense of what is possible. He has sent a voltage around a gen-

eration. He has done this not just through his subversive attitude but also his verbal energy'.<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney was a precious voice, amongst many, that flowered over the last fifty years. The distinctiveness of Heaney's poetry is unmistakable: his poetry carries its maker's mark on every page. So is the immense effort that went into the deceptive simplicity of his early work. That this was often done by implication made it no less effective and at times shocking. Seamus Heaney will be missed because he showed what poetry is capable of. His poetry is simple, readable, and accessible - yet every word carries meaning below the surface.

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<sup>23</sup>*BBC News*. 30 June 2003.