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1939 and the Road beyond Coleraine: An Introductory Meditation

Thomas Dillon Redshaw

Just after settling into New York in 1939, W. H. Auden bade farewell to Europe and to Britain in two great poems: “September 1, 1939” and “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” Yeats had died at age seventy-three in 1939, a year younger at his passing than Seamus Heaney. In his eulogy Auden responded to this sudden gap in his firmament in several ways. He ended with an invocation: “In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise.” He got there through the allegory of these slippery but often quoted lines: “Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry, / Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still, / For poetry makes nothing happen....” And he started off with the proposition that, at his death, such a poet as Yeats becomes the readers of his words—that “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.”

Seamus Heaney was born in Co. Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1939, just on the cusp of World War II. He passed away early in the morning of September 1, 2013, having told us and his wife Marie “Noli timere,” or “Do not be afraid.” At that point, he became his readers. And he became what he had become but modestly forbore to claim Ireland’s national poet. Indeed, going by the name “Incertus” at the outset of his writing life, Heaney continued to shy away through the 1970s and 1980s from being an Irish nationalist and from becoming a national poet, a role too many expected him to play. But now, with his passing, we may talk plainly about his stature as Ireland’s national poet—a stature encouraged by the Swedish Academy’s bestowal on him of the 1995 Nobel Prize. For Heaney, the Nobel Prize was an encouragement, not a duty.

The media in Britain, Northern Ireland, and the Republic have responded to Heaney’s passing with articles, interviews, and pictures—sorrowfully, warmly, generously. We cannot help but see that they express a confirmation of Heaney’s presiding presence in Ireland’s hierarchy of social, cultural, and idealistic feeling and thought. With Ireland’s difficult decades in mind, Mary MacAleese, the former president of the Republic, observed that Heaney and his poetry had “made us so much prouder and taller and proud of ourselves, through him.” Writing in the *Irish Times*, Fintan O’Toole characterized Heaney’s public role as “reading, opening, presiding, blessing.”

We recall that Heaney played a leading role in the arts councils of the North and South, becoming a Saoi of Aosdána. We recall his partnership with Brian Friel in the long theatrical and critical project of *Field Day* in Derry. We recall his easy willingness to be patron to projects like the Centre for Poetry at Queens University Belfast and the healing institution of the Ireland Chair of Poetry. We recall his encouraging presence at performances, lectures, and readings throughout North America, Europe, and especially Ireland, among them his last reading with Michael Longley this past August at the Merriman Summer School in Lisdoonvarna. We recall, as so many have done, that Heaney was a teacher.

Of course, he spent hours in tutorial and at the seminar table in Queens University Belfast, Carysfort College, and Harvard. He led his near-handed readers young and old through the

English poets, through the Irish poets from the old bards to Eavan Boland and Paul Muldoon; into the Classics and the East European Moderns like Milosz and Szymborska; and the midcentury British like Ted Hughes or Americans like Elizabeth Bishop. He was in the academy, of course, and served last as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard University.

But he was not of the academy. Published under these resonant titles *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue*, *The Redress of Poetry*, his commentaries and criticism are collected in *Finders Keepers* (2001). They are the second-best guide to his poetry, but the easiest guide to his ethos and aesthetic. They are plainly written, uncluttered by theory, and underscored by patient observation and faithful intelligence. In the *Irish Times*, a Dublin poet of the generation after Heaney, Peter Sirr, suggested that Heaney's essays and poems had the effect of "establishing a consensus" of trust. Sirr echoes a purpose earlier stated by Heaney:

I did want to clarify something about the way poetry persists and operates as a mode of redress, the way it justifies its readers' trust and vindicates itself by setting its 'fine excess' in the balance against all of life's inadequacies, desolations, and atrocities....

Peace to Heaney's many able explicators and commentators in the academy. The best way into Heaney's poems—and in to the living pulse of his thought and feeling—is the late Dennis O'Driscoll's suite of interviews with the poet tellingly arranged and collected under the title *Stepping Stones*, published in 2008. Reading Heaney's interested and interesting responses to O'Driscoll's suggestive questions, we get almost to hear Heaney confiding to us details of his childhood in Bellaghy, his education in Derry City and Belfast; of his evolving writing life; of his communion with other poets—Irish and not; of his perplexity at the contours of strife in the North and the fading of prosperity in the South; of his engagement with the modern condition we all share. And one of Heaney's enduring kindnesses was shown to Julie O'Callaghan, O'Driscoll's widow. When O'Driscoll collapsed and died at home in Kildare on Christmas Eve, 2012, Heaney and Marie drove straight to Kildare to bear the burden of Julie's immeasurable shock and grief. This, despite the increasing frailty of his own health.

What readers return to are, of course, the poems—the substance that, in Auden's Protestant turn of phrase, "are modified in the guts of the living," in us. Starting with *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966 and signing off with *The Human Chain* in 2010, Heaney offered his readers thirteen collections published by Gallery Press, Faber and Faber, and Farrar Straus and Giroux—the leading literary printing houses of Ireland, Britain and the United States. But three collections are necessary.

The first is *North*. Published in 1972 after Derry's Bloody Sunday, for readers away or at home in Ireland *North* posed manners of understanding the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland in the stripped-down verse of the decade. Consequently, whether he volunteered for it or not, Heaney inherited for the run of his writing life the moral burden of the North that so dominated Irish feeling and thought from 1969 through 1998.

The second is *Field Work*. Published in 1979, *Field Work* has elegies and sonnets that start with the immediacy of the North and begin to move beyond them into—dare one say it?—into the

English Metaphysical line of spiritual enquiry. And this, of course, is the line of enquiry and invention that gives Heaney's poetry its capacity for, in the words of Chaucer, "sentence" and "solace," especially solace.

The third is *Seeing Things*, from 1991. When they put a page down, pause, and gaze off out the rainy window, Heaney's persistent readers will rightly feel that the latter third of his poetry descends from *Seeing Things*. This is to say that Heaney's allegories of the ordinary and parables of the present all constitute one gentle but insistent pursuit of the liturgical shape of living, of the increasingly hard-to-fathom presence of the sacred, of the simple numinous spirit—all this as a counter to scandal and secularization and an answer to credit and globalization. And in *Seeing Things* we should harken to the meditative sequence that Heaney titled "Squarings," forty-eight poems lined out in four three-lined stanzas each. It is not numerology that Heaney is after here. Let us read together the last poem in "Squarings."

Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed,
Convert to things foreknown;
And how what's come upon is manifest
Only in the light of what has been gone through.
Seventh heaven may be
The whole truth of a sixth sense come to pass.

At any rate, when light breaks over me
The way it did on the road beyond Coleraine
Where wind got saltier, the sky more hurried

And silver lamé shivered on the Bann
Out in mid-channel between the painted poles,
That day I'll be in step with what escaped me.