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Crediting the Poet: What Seamus Heaney Means to Me

Eugene O'Brien

In 2004, Seamus Heaney gave a reading at Mary Immaculate College. He spoke to an audience of some 400 people, and stayed on signing autographs for an hour after the reading. As a student said to me afterwards, "He made it seem like we were in Harvard", so positive was he in his interactions with these students of a small college in the mid-west of Ireland. As the person who brought him to the reading, I was amazed at the amount of people who smiled and nodded at him as we had lunch, or who told him how much they loved his writing. I was equally impressed at the graciousness with which he took all of this in his stride. He had a sense of comporting himself appropriately to his role as Ireland's greatest poet and he carried this through all of his dealings with people. I found that I was as impressed by the man as I was by his work, work which I began to study in 1985.

I began my academic life as a teacher, receiving my Bachelor of Education degree in 1980. I went on to do an MA qualifying exam in University College Cork in 1983, and was offered the chance to study for a travelling studentship. I worked for the year only to discover that because my primary degree was a Bachelor of Education, I was not eligible for such a studentship. Naturally I felt disappointed, and took a year off, feeling that perhaps postgraduate work was not for me. In 1985, feeling the weight of a wasted year, I went to meet the head of the English Department, Professor Sean Lucy, who suggested a research MA. He said that the two 'coming' areas were literary theory and Irish poetry. Given that John Montague was lecturing in the department, he was the preferred option, and I was sent to the library to look over his work and come back with an outline of a project.

As it was summer, all was quiet and that sense of tranquillity that one always finds in a library calmed me down. I looked along the shelves for books by and on Montague, and came across a familiar image. During my time studying English in Mary Immaculate College, Seamus Heaney was part of an optional module in contemporary poetry, but it was not a module which I took, as I was more interested in Modernism. I had seen his selected poetry, which had a picture of him standing on a beach in a duffle coat on the front cover. I too had a duffle coat, and I felt, with the insecurity and snobbery of youth, that this was somehow not appropriate attire for a poet, as I was familiar with the cravats, scarves and poses of W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound.

However, in a strange library and embarking on a research project which had not been part of my original plan, I found this image comforting, and sat down beside the shelf and began browsing through the book. It was my first exposure (no pun intended) to Heaney's poetry and as I read through the poems, the early ones dealing with work and country life in *Death of a Naturalist*, I was struck by the power of transformation at work in poems like "Thatcher" and "The Diviner", which seemed to show how the "real" gets "into the made up", to quote from a much later poem (*Electric Light* 21). I also found in "Digging" and "Personal Helicon" that fusion of familiarity and strangeness, of the *Heimlich* and the *Unheimlich*, the canny and the uncanny that has come to be almost a norm in Heaney's writing. His desire to maintain a relationship with his father in "Digging", and his attempt to situate himself in the Heaney family tradition of being "good with

a spade” is a familiar one for generations who are making the journey from blue-collar families to professional careers. However, the uncanny aspect was voiced in the image of his father “coming up twenty years away” (*Death of a Naturalist*, 13), something which made the poem less of a description and more of a revelation.

“Bogland” took the artesian inclinations of “Digging” and turned them into a mythos for the Irish sense of living in the past resonated as true in a lived sense. The initial line: “We have no prairies” (*Door into the Dark* 55), symbolically grasped the smallness and insularity that was a factor in Irish life and culture at the time. There were no frontiers in that Ireland, and hence “Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards” (*Door into the Dark* 56) was a strong metaphor of the introspection and obsession with the purity of the past and of tradition that were hegemonic in the Ireland of that time, during which I was growing up. It seemed to me that in these simple poems, far-removed from the verbal and formal complexity of the high-modernist work which I had been studying, there was a depth that voiced aspects of my own experience as someone not far removed from the country life of which Heaney spoke. I continued reading, on that bright summer’s day, progressing to *Wintering Out* and *North* and reaching the “Bog Poems”, which transformed the digging metaphor into a sustaining and slightly frightening trope for the way in which racial and sectarian hatred can simmer even when it seems to have been buried. As so many have done before me, I found that the phrase “lost, / Unhappy and at home” (*Wintering Out* 48) had a strong, if ambiguous, effect on me.

At this stage, I went to the shelves again and found Blake Morrison’s book on Heaney, which traced some strong postmodern motifs in his work, and also Terence Brown’s book *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster*, which had a good discussion of the bog poems, and of their value as symbols which encapsulated very complex feelings and reactions. I stayed in the library until five o’clock, went back to Sean’s office, and told him that I was going to do an MA on the work of Seamus Heaney. In that afternoon, in UCC library, I made an aesthetic and intellectual connection that has lasted for some thirty years, and which I know will last until the day I die. I went on to do an MA thesis on his first four books, which I found to be an enjoyable experience as I delved into the poems and looked for connections and cross-references within these books. The more I studied his work, and the more secondary sources which I consulted, the more aware I became of the complexity of the whole corpus and of his ethical and political nuanced responses to Irish life. Some years later, finances permitting, I studied for a PhD on his work with Brian Coates, in the University of Limerick. Brian was keen to use literary theory as a mode of critique, and after one meeting, I knew he would be a guide and mentor for my academic career, and I was not mistaken. I went on to complete a PhD on Heaney and to write three monographs on his work. I also started to read the prose more carefully and found myself discovering strong lines of connection between Heaney’s writing on poetry, politics, ethics and the aesthetic and that of these European thinkers. I found his writing and thinking very influential, and this was especially true in the context of Northern Ireland.

For those of us who lived through the thirty years of violence in Northern Ireland, it was an ever-present reminder of how suddenly, and how violently, the civilised veneer of life could be shattered. Given that most Irish people, myself included, had been through an education system which was avowedly nationalist, Catholic and republican in the Irish sense of that word, there were a lot of mixed sympathies at work here. We had been taught that there were connections

between the different generations who rebelled against the British. In 1969, several members of the government of the Republic of Ireland were sacked or resigned because money for the relief of victims in Northern Ireland had been diverted to purchase arms, and this was seen as a founding act of the Provisional IRA. The Provisional movement argued that they were the latest link in that revolutionary chain, and given that many of the earlier 'risings' were hardly democratic, or were only retrospectively sanctioned in the case of 1916, it seemed a valid argument to make. A lot of people, whose views were formed by a nationalist, Catholic and republican education and formation process, found this a difficult ethical space, and attitudes tended to be fluid. That there was an ambivalence in the Republic of Ireland was clear in the erratic emotional responses to the conflict: horror at an IRA atrocity like Omagh or Enniskillen; anger at the deaths of hunger strikers or at the murder of Catholics.

For some time, people seemed to be ambivalent about how to react, and in all of this, the moral and ethical compass of Seamus Heaney shone steadily. I do not mean that he was vocal or certain, far from it. Instead what the continuum of Heaney's work offers is a sustained meditation on the complexities of the relationships between Ireland and Britain, within which the connections and relationships between Catholic and Protestant; unionist and nationalist; and republican and loyalist could be contextualised and situated. He teases out confused and shifting loyalties, and to read his work on this topic was to rehearse one's own dilemmas and doubts about the correct ethical nature of affiliation.

One of his most enduring maxims was that poetry should be "a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify" (*Redress of Poetry* 8), and in his own ethical teasing out of his position on such issues, he adhered to this perspective. As a Catholic and nationalist, his writing offered a mirror through which people could see their own concerns. As someone who maintained a notion of himself "as Irish in a province that insists that it is British" (*Preoccupations* 35), Heaney embodied the conflicts and contradictions inherent in notions of identity. Famously, he saw this in the etymology of his own native place:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and *ban* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster. (*Preoccupations* 35)

His response to this split culture is nuanced and complex, and the conditional tense of "might not the thing mean" is significant, as it points the way to coming to terms with that split culture. One of the things I admire about his thinking on issues of politics and division is that he never looks for the simplistic answer or for the easy or trite quotation.

Even in his most politically-quoted phrase: "and hope and history rhyme", from *The Cure at Troy*, there is a far more nuanced and thoughtful context at work. The previous stanza of this translation from Sophocles speaks anachronistically of the "innocent in goals" and of a "hunger-striker's father" standing in "the graveyard dumb", and of a "police widow in veils" fainting "at the funeral home" (*Cure at Troy* 77). The singular number, and the use of the definite article signify personal knowledge here: it is if these are real memories from his life, and the personal and individual aspect of the violence defamiliarises the normal nameless statistics to which many

people no longer react with empathy as the numbers had become numbing. This is the context for that quotation, and, like the rest of the stanza from which it is taken, it very much lessens the sound byte quality of the phrase, and instead sets it out in the optative mood:

History says, *Don't hope*

On this side of the grave.

But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme. (*Cure at Troy 77*)

Here is the extension of that “might” that we saw in his *Preoccupations* piece about the dual meaning of “Mossbawn”. In the first line of the stanza, “hope” and “history” are connected negatively by the imperative “don’t”, and this refers back to the brutal experiences of the three instances in the previous stanza. The reality of life in Northern Ireland is that of sad fathers, grieving widows and people imprisoned when they should not be, and this catalogue leaves little room for hope. But poetry, or poetic thinking, allows for the singularity of an event, of a happening, of a “once in a lifetime” occurrence, where something longed for “can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme”. The next stanza again makes it clear that this new rhyme, this sudden conflation of hope and history is not a given, nor, crucially, has it yet happened. It asks the audience to “hope for a great sea-change”, and to “believe that a further shore / Is reachable from here” (*Cure at Troy 77*). In this contextual reading, the phrase is not a declarative comment on something that has actually happened, but instead is an injunction to believe that it might: it is a comment which is focused on the future as possibility as opposed to the past as certainty.

Heaney has always been wary of a reified past, seeing it as typical of Irish people that they “looked back at their own history” rather than forward towards the future. He went on to explore the ramifications of this: “The word ‘remember’ is a potent word in Irish politics . . . Remember 1690 if you’re an Orangeman . . . Remember 1916 . . . if you are a Republican” (Broadbridge 9). Heaney had good reason to be aware of this. He lived in Belfast at the beginning of the Troubles, and issues of identity and political allegiance were played out, not in journal articles and academic discussions, but on the streets. Here, politics was very much something experienced in the lived life, the real, of Heaney and his family: “we survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart” (*Preoccupations* 30). Heaney speaks of living on the “wrong side” of the Lisburn Road, near a loyalist area called The Village, and of frequenting a fish and chip shop which was “on the outer edge of what was still strongly loyalist territory”. He tells of being recognised by a young English girl, working behind the counter, from an arts television show on which he had appeared the previous evening, and being addressed as follows: “Aren’t you the Irish poet?”, and he goes to add that before he could answer, the owner interjected “Not at all, dear. He’s like the rest of us a British subject living in Ulster!” Heaney ends that anecdote with the following, telling sentence: “And Irish and all as I was I’m afraid I hesitated to contradict her” (*Finders Keepers* 367).

However, he has contradicted this perception of being British in other texts. In *An Open Letter*, the *Field Day* pamphlet, Heaney takes issue with his inclusion in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. Here, on first reading, he would appear to be voicing a nationalist objection to being called “British”, thus placing Heaney firmly within the mindset of the Irish nationalist, republican tradition. As he puts

it, "My anxious muse...Has to refuse // The adjective" (*Open Letter 7*), and he goes on to highlight the historical opposition between "Britannia" a "united England, Scotland, Wales" and "Hibernia" [*italics original*] where:

. . . the Gaels

Made a last stand

And long ago were stood upon—

End of simple history lesson. (*Open Letter 7*)

In a fashion which is typical of his complex perspective, there is a strong ambiguity in the final line; it could be read as meaning that this is a simple history lesson which is now concluded because it is so blindingly obvious. However, the rest of the pamphlet, following on the end of the "simple history lesson" proceeds to complicate the context of that history, to the extent that any simplistic reading of this pamphlet as Heaney voicing an anti-British sentiment is rendered incorrect. He traces the complexity of his position with clarity. He has been called a "British" poet before and "acquiesced" (*Open Letter 7*). For "weeks and months" he has "messed about / Unclear, embarrassed and in doubt" as to whether to "write it out / Or let it go" (*Open Letter 8*). Indeed, he readily admits that there are good reasons for classifying him as a British poet: he publishes in "LRB and TLS, / *The Listener*"; his audience is "Via Faber // a British one" (*Open Letter 9*).

Having spelled out the British context to his writerly subjectivity, a context which is positive in terms of its influence on his work, and which has clearly benefited his production of texts, Heaney goes on to enunciate another context within which he exists, and which also permeates and penetrates his subjectivity and his texts:

But 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*. (*Open Letter 9*)

Here, we see the further transformation of the "simple history lesson" into a far more complex weave of influence and intersection. His sense of Irishness does not preclude any connection with, or influence by, the British tradition: it does, however, preclude any subsumption by that tradition which attempts to hegemonically suppress all other strands and strains. It is the relationship of the two contexts, the contextual intersection, which will eventually transform both texts and subjectivities into a new openness of identity, an openness which is presaged in the title of the pamphlet. Consequently it is significant that in the next stanza after that just quoted, he goes on to stress: "No harm to her nor you who deign / To *God Bless* her as sovereign" (*Open Letter 10*). The phonetic half-rhyme here between "deign" and "sovereign" is thematically significant as in writing, it is a full rhyme, whereas when spoken, it is not, and one could see this as encapsulating the Irish / British relational dialectic, which sometimes rhymes but sometimes does not. It is an oscillating dynamic, and one which Heaney seems to favour as opposed to the fixity of position that is validated by making the past seem to be monolithic. If poetry is to be of value, then it must avoid the "consensus and settlement of a meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket" (*Government of the Tongue* 122). His oscillation between different positions is an attempt to avoid this consensus and settlement of meaning.

The problems with such ‘consensus and settlement’ are that the very complexity and ambiguity that is part of the force of poetry is denied and etiolated. If the security blanket of a consensual meaning is seen as something to be avoided, then perhaps the best way to proceed is not by throwing off the blanket altogether, but instead, to examine more closely the weft and weave of the textile of the blanket in order to bring out the intersections, joins and interfusions that create the blanket in question. Hillis Miller’s description of literature as composed of ‘crossings, displacements, and substitutions’ (Miller 7) is relevant here, as the context of *An Open Letter* is more literary than political: the references are broad in the extreme with overt or covert gestures towards the writing of Shakespeare, Eliot, Synge, Yeats, Wilde, Larkin, Davie, Lawrence, Houghton, Jordan, Joyce, Milton, Holub, Foucault, Horace, Livy, and Middle English lyrics (this is by no means an exhaustive list). The crossings and penetrations of such a broad range of writers, languages and contexts form the intellectual and ethical basis of Heaney’s reading of the relationship of Englishness and Irishness. Perhaps the most important point of the poem is the stress on the singularity of the subjectivity that is enunciating its opinion, and also how this subjectivity has been influenced by the complex interaction of these different cultural texts. Similarly, *An Open Letter* is focused on an individual: there is no group or proto-nationalist agenda here: ‘I’ll stick to *I*. Forget the *we*’ [*italics original*]. He goes on to cite the example of Horace, the Roman poet who fought at the Battle of Philippi in November, 42 BC which ended with the rout of Brutus’s army and the suicides of both Brutus and Cassius. Heaney’s reference to Horace who ‘threw away his shield to be/A naked *I*’ (*An Open Letter* 9) as ‘exemplary,’ speaks volumes for his sense of the role of the poet in such a political situation.

The idea of a “naked I” recalls the image of the final poem of *North*, where the speaker sees himself as neither “internee nor informer”, but as someone whose complex position has made him almost an internal exile, an “inner-émigré” who feels “every wind that blows” (*North* 73). This uncertainty mirrored that of many Irish people, and was developed by Heaney throughout his career, and especially in times of crisis. The complexity of this position is encapsulated in his account of his giving a lecture at Oxford University on the same night as a funeral of a dead IRA hunger striker, Francis Hughes was taking place in County Derry. So while Heaney “circulated” with his “glass of sherry” through the crowded reception room in Oxford, he could imagine “the press of a very different crowd outside and inside the house in mid-Ulster” (*Redress of Poetry* 186). This complex position is one which has been occupied by a number of people in terms of their sympathy with an individual while remaining wary of the cause.

The specifics of this particular instance are significant. He recalls that Charles Montieth, Chairman of Faber, had brought him, as a guest, to the “Chiceley dinner in All Souls College”, and Heaney had been assigned a fellow’s Room which belonged to “Sir Keith Joseph, the then Minister of Education in the Thatcher government” (Heaney and O’Driscoll 260). The naming of the people involved, and the very clear binary between urban, urbane, Oxford and rural, grieving Bellaghy, in Derry, sees Heaney as pulled in opposite directions. He is also very alive to the nuances of the situation, to the difference between the political and the personal: Francis Hughes was a neighbour’s child, yes, but he was also a hit man and his Protestant neighbours would have considered him involved in something like a war of genocide against them rather than a war of liberation against the occupying forces of the crown. At that stage, the IRA’s self-image as liberators didn’t work much magic with me. But neither did the too-brutal

simplicity of Margaret Thatcher's "A crime is a crime is a crime. It is not political." (Heaney and O'Driscoll 260)

He is also aware that even had he been in Ireland, he would not have gone to the funeral because even though he would "have been susceptible to the traditional sense of obligation", he would also have "been wary of the political implication of attendance" (*Redress of Poetry* 187).

Yet he was also aware that there were elements of right on the side of the struggle, even if he could not support the methods of that struggle. The notion of the republican lineage as being one that connected generation after generation, as I have noted, is one with which most Irish people were familiar. And while he is capable of seeing such ideological positions as offering that consensus of the security blanket, he is also capable of understanding the need for these positions in a group of people who had long felt their own identity etiolated and attenuated. Thus in 1966, when poems were being written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1916, Heaney wrote "Requiem for the Croppies", about how 1916 could be seen as the "harvest of seeds sown in 1798". The poem, and its aftermath are, I would contend, seminal points in the development of Heaney's complex and plural position on politics and culture. He notes that the poem was born of and ended with "an image of resurrection based on the fact that some time after the rebels were buried in common graves, these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing up from barley corn which the 'croppies' had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march" (*Preoccupations* 56). This idea that Pearse, in 1916, drew sustenance from previous rebellions such as 1798 and 1848 was one which was an orthodoxy in Ireland; so, could not the Provisional IRA make the exact same point? Could they not see themselves as the flowerings of seeds that had been sown by previous generations? Certainly there was a symbolic and emotional truth in the lines quoted by Heaney above, especially when the content of this poem is taken into account:

Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.

Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.

The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

They buried us without shroud or coffin

And in August the barley grew up out of the grave. (*Death of a Naturalist* 24)

The symbolism is clear—out of 1998 grew 1916, and the poem could certainly be seen as implying that the same process could hold true for the contemporary IRA, who commemorated the death of Wolfe Tone, leader of 1798 and the 1916 Rising religiously every year. Could Heaney be seen, then, as part of the myth-making process, or as a weaver of one side of that security blanket of which he spoke? The simple answer would be in the affirmative, but like the simple history lesson of *An Open Letter*, this is not the whole story, and poetry, we remember, should not simplify.

Writing in *Preoccupations*, Heaney located the time of composition of that poem very accurately, noting that, having described the final battle of that rebellion in Vinegar Hill, in Wexford, in the poem, he had not realized that the "original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published" (*Preoccupations* 56). It is important to note that the IRA was not operative at this time (the Provisional IRA only came into being in December 1969), and that "there was an element of transgression in celebrating the Croppies in official Ulster in 1966" (Heaney and O'Driscoll 90), and his aim was to "make space in the

official Ulster lexicon for Vinegar Hill as well as the Boyne and the Somme” (Heaney and O’Driscoll 118). What is at work here is the opening of a space in the official cultural tradition of the English lyric, and the beginnings of an attempt to “take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before”, and by this he means the “messy and, it would seem incomprehensible obsessions in the North and make it still an English lyric” (Cooke 8). He realises that this might seem to be “subversive” but goes on to explain that unless people in Ireland can forge “some sort of community”, then there will be no solution to the political and cultural divisions. So, even at this early stage of the conflict, Heaney is already looking towards some form of solution, and he has a strong sense that “the writers here have some sort of role here. I think there has to be some act of comprehension and synthesis” (Cooke 8).

It is far from a simplistic position, but Heaney has continually stressed that he has little interest in positions of ideological fixity. So when the poem was written, it was written for a specific reason; however, in the wake of Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday in 1972, he was aware of a “dismaying hardness and ruthlessness in the violence all round”, and he was also aware that in those altered times, “a reading aloud of the poem would have been taken as overt support for the Provisionals’ campaign. So that’s when I stopped” (Heaney and O’Driscoll 118-19). Here, the security blanket is being cast off for good, as Heaney is willing to take a complex and dynamic view of the interaction of text and context. What was a gesture of literary and cultural emancipation in 1969 can become a symbol of support for violence in 1972; from “being a ‘silence-breaker’ it would have turned into a propaganda tool, something inflammatory” (Heaney and Miller 20). Heaney takes this on board, and is willing to make the necessary changes, changes which are motivated by a desire for some sort of mutual understanding and synthesis. For him, the work of art raises “the historical record to a different power” (*Place of Writing* 36), and they are different modes of expression. So, his response to the decision of Belfast City Council voted on 3 December 2012, to fly the Union Flag at City Hall on designated days only, was similarly complex. In an interview with Erica Wagner, Heaney made the point that loyalists should be allowed to fly the flag as ‘each side is entitled to its pageantry’ (Wagner).

So, what does Seamus Heaney mean to me? I would summarise by first quoting his remarks on the value of poetry in his Nobel Address: “I credit poetry, in other words, both for being itself and for being a help” (*Crediting Poetry* 11), and then by transposing them. So, Heaney means a lot to me as a person. After writing three books on his work, he invited me to his home for a visit. I am not ashamed to say that I was never more nervous in my life, nor that I arrived at Sandymount road some two hours early, sitting in a garage café and making phone calls to pass the time to such an extent that I was getting strange looks for the people working there. I was nervous because my relationship with Seamus was uncanny—I had only met him formally in person, yet his thoughts, words and images had been in my head for some thirty years. It was a bizarre sensation. I arrived on his doorstep promptly at two o’clock, and I stayed for three hours with him chatting about everything, being given a tour of the house, exchanging stories, some academic, some personal, and all the time realising that sometimes it is good to meet one’s heroes because they turn out to be as decent as one had hoped. He also means a lot to me as an intellectual and aesthetic presence: as a gifted poet who has created some of the most beautiful and resonant poems in the English language, and as someone who has been able to make poetry adequate to the experience of twentieth and twenty first century life. A Nobel prize-winner who will chat with students about their poetry after a long day embodies the qualities of poetry in a

very special way. He has also been a help: as a poet and thinker whose life and work mirrored and explained and pondered so much of the Irish experience for people of my generation. In a country where there is very little intellectual activity in the public sphere, Seamus Heaney was precisely that: a public intellectual concerned with expressing emotions and sensations through his poetry, as well as indulging in what one might call poetic thinking about matters political and ethical.

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