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Roundtable - Seamus Heaney: A Tribute

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Seamus Heaney and Shaun O'Connell, January 2012.

Seamus Heaney: A Tribute

Ellen Scheible

On August 30, 2013, Seamus Heaney died in Dublin, Ireland at the age of 74. A Nobel laureate in literature and the most prominent Irish poet from the second half of the twentieth century, Heaney changed the way teachers and scholars of Irish literature and poetry think about the inherent hybridity of partitioned Irish culture. Heaney was born and educated as a Catholic in Northern Ireland during some of the most tumultuous times in modern Irish history. He later relocated to the Republic of Ireland and taught at various institutions in both Ireland and the United States. His reluctance to position himself or his writing on either side of the Irish Troubles allowed Heaney to speak about the nature of violence and struggle rather than critique the overt manifestations of those experiences in modern Ireland. While his poetry often addresses openly many sources of tension in Ireland, such as violent disagreements between Protestants and Catholics and the long history of British colonialism mapped onto the island, Heaney used his prolific talent to illustrate essential human experiences, such as love, loss, anger, and regret. He was able to underscore the humanity of the Irish experience in the face of a long history of dehumanization and colonial destruction. Bridgewater State University has a direct connection with Seamus Heaney, as he visited the university on different occasions and developed relationships with faculty and administrators. Orson Kingsley, our library archivist, has been working diligently to build a Seamus Heaney collection based on a large amount of memorabilia that has recently been donated to the University. In consideration of the many ways Seamus Heaney has changed classroom discourse about poetry and Irish studies and his long friendship with our university, I asked two local Heaney scholars, Kelly Matthews (Assistant Professor of English at Framingham State University) and Shaun O'Connell (Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Boston) to describe their thoughts on Heaney's poetry and politics.

ES: In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1990), Declan Kiberd refers to Seamus Heaney's poetry as "excavatory in every sense, reaching down into the ground and back into the past." How do you think the act of excavation manifests in Heaney's work?

Kelly Matthews: Kiberd's comment brings to mind Heaney's poems about the "bog people" discovered in Denmark and elsewhere in Europe in the mid-twentieth century, and how Heaney used them to approach the violence of the Northern Ireland conflict from an oblique angle, rather than taking an overtly political stance. In "Punishment," for example, he describes the body of a young woman executed in pre-modern Europe for her role in an adulterous affair. When teaching this poem, I often share with students my husband's experience of seeing a young woman, tarred and feathered, tied to a lamppost outside the local Catholic church as he and his parents drove by on a Sunday morning. Heaney used this experience, common to many people in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, to connect the body of the bog woman to ordinary people who were horrified by the brutality they saw unfolding around them. "My poor scapegoat," Heaney writes, "I almost love you, / but would have cast, I know / the stones of silence." In a concise and economical use of words, the poet condemns bystanders' passivity even while he both empathizes with the victims – the bog woman with the noose around her neck, young Catholic women tarred and feathered for consorting with British soldiers – and empathizes with the bystanders themselves, positioning himself among them. The poem is excavatory in multiple ways: it unearths the bodies of the bog people in order to explore the multiple layers of violence among and between tribal groups, and the traumatized consciousness of everyday people in Northern Ireland who were forced to become witnesses to the Troubles.

Shaun O'Connell: "Excavatory" makes sense when we recall that in 1964 Seamus Heaney published "Digging," his first and ultimately his signature poem. "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it." Later, in "Feeling Into Word,"

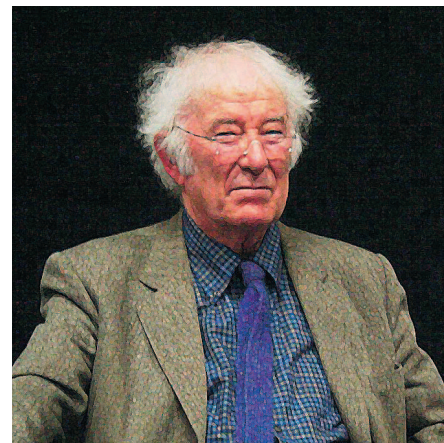
Heaney said of this poem “I dug it up” from what was “laid down in me years before,” in Mossbawn, County Derry. But we should note that in “Digging” it is his father who actually digs, while Seamus looks down, pen in hand, from his window—or, more likely, pen in hand, he remembered and poeticized that epiphany. Yet there is no denying his digging. After reading P.V. Glob’s *The Bog People* in 1970, Heaney’s pen dug into Jutland’s preserved corpses, vowing that “Some day I will go to Aarus,” but it is important to note that he imagined these “old man-killing parishes” into poetry long before he saw them. So, then, we should not limit Heaney to the role of excavator. *Cavare* means to make hollow, according to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, but Heaney filled empty spaces and places. That is, he ascends as much as he descends, as his Hercules is “raised up” after his fall in “Hercules and Antaeus.” Seamus Heaney, though a poet of his dear perpetual place, is also a transcender, a border crosser from here to there, a figure in flight or on a quest—from Jutland, to Station Island, from the bog to the spirit level or the Republic of Conscience; that is, to wherever he can find fitting emblems for poetic expression. By 1995, at his Stockholm Nobel Prize address, Heaney even allowed himself “the luxury of walking on air,” crediting poetry “for making this space-walk possible,” instructing himself, perhaps instructing readers of his poetry to “walk on air against your better judgment.”



Kelly Matthews

ES: Should we read Seamus Heaney as a political poet?

Matthews: I think both Heaney’s and Michael Longley’s achievement during the Troubles was to document and delve the human response to violence, especially to the tit-for-tat murders that characterized such a long stretch of the Northern Ireland conflict. In poems like “Casualty” or “The Strand at Lough Beg” or “Keeping Going,” Heaney explored the effects of violence on those left behind, both the victims’ loved ones as well as those who witnessed the sudden loss of human life. Rather than comment on the political actions of elected officials, Heaney used his poetry to represent the human impact of political violence. So many murders during the Troubles depended on an intimate connection between perpetrators and victims, whether they took place in a country pub, along a deserted road, or in the early-morning silence of a town square. In “Keeping Going,” Heaney makes a personal connection to his brother Hugh, who “stay[s] on where it happens,” holding



O’Connell: Heaney as a political poet? How could he—to paraphrase Yeats—his attention fix on Republican or Unionist politics, with that girl, standing there, with flowers in her hair? The “girl,” of course, is poetry, that sly beauty who “makes nothing happen,” as Auden said after Yeats died, but also makes everything matter. Yeats, dead at 74 in 1939—the year Heaney, now dead at 74, was born—was “hurt into poetry,” says Auden, by Ireland’s inescapable political troubles.

The poet condemns bystanders’ passivity even while he both empathizes with the victims ... and empathizes with the bystanders themselves, positioning himself among them.

himself up between two cows in the milking barn as he struggles to come to terms with the assassination of a part-time soldier in the village diamond. In these circumstances, the personal becomes political, and the act of “keeping going,” as well as the act of writing about it, becomes a statement of resilience and resistance.

As was Heaney, for he was accused when he moved from Belfast to Wicklow in 1972 of being a “well-known papist propagandist” by the Paisleyite *Protestant Telegraph*, which claimed Heaney would find “his spiritual home in the popish republic.” Though Paisley caricatured Heaney, we all recall that Seamus, in refusing to be included in a Penguin collection titled *Contemporary British Verse*, did declare that

“no glass of ours was ever raised” in the Heaney household “To toast The Queen.” But Seamus—ever fair-minded, balanced and generous—immediately added that he wished “No harm to her nor you who deign/ To God Bless her as sovereign.” His pen may have fit “snug as a gun,” but Heaney used neither gun nor pen to further political ends. This is

Matthews: I was a student in Seamus’s lecture class on modern British and Irish poetry during my senior year at Harvard, and I was fortunate enough to have Seamus appointed as a reader for my honors thesis on Yeats . . . For such an accomplished and erudite man, he was always tolerant of others’ lack of knowledge, and as a teacher, he was unfailingly

bright-eyed, faintly-amused, young students. Afterward, I apologized for my somewhat hung-over performance, but he reassured me all was well. “Ah, they loved hearing your accent,” he said, laughing. Heaney often laughed with exuberant joy during in his readings, which were in a way also his classes, for he surrounded his readings with prefatory and follow-up comments which took his audience in on the poem’s making, its shaping and its implications. He set his poems in informing contexts, poetic and personal. Reading at Deerfield Academy in 1996, Heaney reflected upon his move with his family to the small house in Wicklow in 1972, “when I became committed to poetry and my wife became committed to my commitment.” He and Marie, he said, visited nearby Glendalough, the site of his poem “St. Kevin and the Blackbird,” from *The Spirit Level*. This led him to read “At the Wellhead,” a tribute to his wife, who sings with her eyes closed. Heaney compared her with a Mossbawn blind neighbor, Rosie Keenan, who played the piano all day. “When I read/ A poem with Keenan’s well in it, she said,/ ‘I can see the sky at the bottom of it now.’” As could Heaney’s students, his listeners and his readers. I can see him now—a voice and a vision in my head, in my heart.

Rather than comment on the political actions of elected officials, Heaney used his poetry to represent the human impact of political violence.

clear in Heaney’s 1979 encounter with IRA leader Danny Morrison on a Belfast-Dublin train. There Morrison pressured Heaney to write something in support of the IRA’s struggle against British rule, but Heaney refused “to be a party spokesman,” as he recalls in *Stepping Stones*. “If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for myself,” Heaney recalls saying in “The Flight Path.” That era of the IRA prisoners’ dirty protest and Hunger Strike stretched Heaney between his sympathies for the suffering prisoners, his anger at the implacable Thatcher government and his disagreement with the IRA’s terrorist policies. However, though Heaney’s poetry, like that of Yeats before him, was intensified and dramatized by these political and personal conflicts, it was never politicized. “The end of art is peace,” he wrote in “The Harvest Bow.”

ES: What is your strongest memory of teaching or interacting with Seamus Heaney?

generous and good-natured. He gave so much of himself to everyone he met, so it really is true, as Michael Longley remarked, that there must be tens of thousands of people who feel personally bereaved by his passing.

O’Connell: In his Harvard creative writing class, 1983, Seamus occasionally went silent—brief broodings, caesurae—inviting students to fill the empty air with words. He was at once playful and instructive, letting poems “loose like a squirrel among you,” then telling one student a line was “a little otiose,” but laughing at himself for his own pretentious word choice. Once at a Yeats Society meeting in Cambridge he read Yeats’s “The Collar-bone of a Hare” three times, pausing between each reading until we all could see, as had Yeats, “the old bitter world. . . through the white thin bone of a hare.” Another time, while he was teaching at Carrysfort College in Dublin, Heaney suggested—need I add we had had a few drinks?—that I teach his class on *The Catcher in the Rye* the next morning. I did so, still a bit bleary-eyed, before an array of



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