

Hope and History: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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Seamus Heaney is the most widely read poet writing in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. This lecture will examine the significance of his legacy, exploring the development of his work from early nature poems, through texts that grapple with political violence in Northern Ireland, to later, more meditative poems. Yet Heaney's body of work isn't shaped around unambiguous progression, rather it continually revisits and advances key themes. For this reason, there are important continuities in his poetry especially surrounding representations of place and community, and their persistence as literary themes from classical times to the present.

Heaney grew up on a farm in County Derry, and his early work reflects the labour of agricultural and domestic life that he observed as a boy, connecting this to his own experience of making poems. The everyday activities of childhood memory, and the care with which they were executed, acquire an almost spiritual dimension yet also prioritize action over shared speech. The increased levels of civil unrest and of paramilitary and state violence in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s onward soon began to exert a moral pressure on writers to articulate political realities. The poems of *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979) reveal Heaney's understanding of the deep historical roots of tribal conflict yet, at the time, these poems divided readers. In 1972 Heaney had moved south to County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland but remained imaginatively engaged with the crisis in his home place, often through subtle yet detailed description.

Heaney's essays from this period exemplify the process of careful reflection he undertook, as well as emphasizing the important role that poets from other traditions, past and present, played in his understanding of the place of art in situations of political conflict. Heaney's friendships with British and European writers, such as Ted Hughes and Czeslaw Milosz, and with American writers Joseph Brodsky, Robert Lowell and Thomas Lynch kept his horizons broad. For a period of almost thirty years, he maintained close ties with American academic and literary communities, through his position at Harvard University and visits to other parts of the country. The award of the Nobel Prize in 1995 affirmed his international standing and the larger importance of his body of work, as well as greatly increasing his prominence at home and abroad. After a decade of intense engagement with readers and scholars around the world – and the publication of a further three books of new poems, Heaney began to experience health problems. His final book, *Human Chain*, appeared in 2010 and he died unexpectedly three years later.

Key Themes

Origins: family as the centre of Heaney's imaginative world – early interest in acts of making – domestic spaces as routes to discovery – sense of identity and belonging.

Place and Landscape: landscape as a bearer of history – ideas of continuity in place – spaces between (borders and coasts) – landscapes uniting intellect and emotion.

Histories: continuities in human history – the presence of the past in landscape – the function of memory (personal and cultural) in poetry.

Violence and Conflict: the Troubles and its impact on ordinary people – the role of art in representing political conflict – the immediacy of violence against the body.

Global Networks: Heaney as an international poet – networks of influence across linguistic and cultural traditions – individuality vs universal meanings.

Timeline

1939. Born on 13 April, the eldest of nine children. Spends his childhood on the family farm at Mossbawn in Co. Derry, Northern Ireland.

1951. Wins a scholarship to St Columb's College, a Catholic boarding school in Derry, around 40 miles from his home. John Hume and Seamus Deane are also pupils.

1953. His younger brother Christopher killed in a road accident, aged four – later memorialized in the poem 'Mid-Term Break'. The family moves to a new farm, near Bellaghy.

1957. Begins his undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature at Queen's University Belfast. Publishes his first poems in student magazines.

1961/2. Graduates from Queen's University. Completes a teaching diploma and joins staff of St Thomas's Secondary Intermediate School In Ballymurphy, near Belfast.

1963. Appointed lecturer at St Joseph's College of Education. Involved in 'The Group' – a poetry workshop in Belfast initiated by Philip Hobsbaum.

1965. Marries Marie Devlin. *Eleven Poems* published as a pamphlet.

1966. First major poetry volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, published by Faber and Faber, beginning a life-long relationship with that publisher.

1968. Takes part in 'Room to Rhyme', a poetry and song tour with Michael Longley and David Hammond. Attends Civil Rights marches.

1969. *Door into the Dark* published. First visit to the United States of America.

1970. Moves to the University of California at Berkeley for a one-year lectureship.

1972. Resigns from his post at Queen's University Belfast and moves to Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland to write full time. *Wintering Out* published.

1974. Family relocates to Sandymount, Co. Dublin. Takes up lectureship in Carysfort College, a teacher training institution.

1975. Publishes *North*, a controversial volume that engages with the unfolding violence in Northern Ireland. His second cousin Colum McCartney is killed by Loyalist paramilitaries in a random attack – this event inspired the poem 'The Strand at Lough Beg'.

1979. *Field Work* published. Spends spring semester lecturing at Harvard University.

1980. Field Day Theatre Company founded by playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea, to foster artistic and intellectual engagement with the political crisis in Northern Ireland.

1982. Begins arrangement with Harvard University which will see him teach for a period annually for more than twenty-five years.

1984. Appointed Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University.

1989. Elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, a five-year appointment.

1990. Play *The Cure at Troy* produced by Field Day. Receives the Lannan Literary Award.

1991. *Seeing Things* published. Begins collaboration with uilleann piper Liam O'Flynn.

1995. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1996. *The Spirit Level* published. Resigns as Boylston Professor and is appointed Emerson Poet in Residence at Harvard.

1999. Translation of *Beowulf* published. Wins the Whitbread Prize the following year.

2001. *Electric Light* published. Three-day programme on his work at the Lincoln Center.

2006. *District and Circle* published. Goes on to win the T.S. Eliot Prize and the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award.

2010. *Human Chain*, his final collection, published.

2013. Dies in the Blackrock Clinic after admission for a heart operation.

Poems

From *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)

PERSONAL HELICON

for Michael Longley

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
 And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
 I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
 Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
 I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
 Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
 So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
 Fructified like any aquarium.
 When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch,
 A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
 With a clean new music in it. And one
 Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
 Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

From *Wintering Out* (1972)

WESTERING

in California

I sit under Rand McNally's
'Official Map of the Moon' -
The colour of frogskin,
Its enlarged pores held

Open and one called
'Pitiscus' at eye level –
Recalling the last night
In Donegal, my shadow

Neat upon the whitewash
From her bony shine,
The cobbles of the yard
Lit pale as eggs.

Summer had been a free fall
Ending there,
The empty amphitheatre
Of the west. Good Friday

We had started out
Past shopblinds drawn on the afternoon,
Cars stilled outside still churches,
Bikes tilting to a wall;

We drove by,
A dwindling interruption
As clappers smacked
On a bare altar

And congregations bent
To the studded crucifix.
What nails dropped out that hour?
Roads unreeled, unreled

Falling light as casts
Laid down
On shining waters.
Under the moon's stigmata

Six thousand miles away,
I imagine untroubled dust,
A loosening gravity,
Christ weighing by his hands.

From *North* (1975)

PUNISHMENT

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brains exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

From *Field Work* (1979)

THE STRAND AT LOUGH BEG

In Memory of Colum McCartney

All round this little island, on the strand
Far down below there, where the breakers strive
Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.
– Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 100-3

Leaving the white glow of filling stations
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields
You climbed the hills toward Newtownhamilton
Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars—
Along the road, a high, bare pilgrim's track
Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,
Goat-beards and dogs' eyes in a demon pack
Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.
What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights

That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down
Where you weren't known and far from what you knew:
The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,
Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew.

There you used hear guns fired behind the house
Long before rising time, when duck shooters
Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes,
But still were scared to find spent cartridges,
Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected,
On your way across the strand to fetch the cows.
For you and yours and yours and mine fought the shy,
Spoke an old language of conspirators
And could not crack the whip or seize the day:
Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground.

Across that strand of ours the cattle graze
Up to their bellies in an early mist
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in dew. Like a dull blade with its edge
Honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze.
I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

From *The Spirit Level* (1996)

ST KEVIN AND THE BLACKBIRD

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

From *District and Circle* (2006)

THE AERODROME

First it went back to grass, then after that
To warehouses and brickfields (designated
The Creagh meadows Industrial Estate),
Its wartime grey control tower rebuilt and glazed

Into a hard-edged CEO-style villa:
Toome Aerodrome had turned to local history.
Hangars, runways, bomb stores, Nissen huts,
The perimeter barbed wire, forgotten and gone.

But not a smell of daisies and hot tar
On a newly-surfaced cart-road, Easter Monday,
1944. And not, two miles away that afternoon,
The annual bright booths of the fair at Toome,

All the brighter for having been denied.
No catchpenny stalls for us, no
Awnings, bonnets, or beribboned gauds:
Wherever the world was, we were somewhere else,

Had been and would be. Sparrows might fall,
B-26 Marauders not return, but the sky above
That land usurped by a compulsory order
Watched and waited – like me and her that day

Watching and waiting by the perimeter.
A fear crossed over then like the fly-by-night
And sun-repellent wing that flies by day
Invisibly above: would she rise and go

With the pilot calling from his Thunderbolt?
But for her part, in response, only the slightest
Back-stiffening and standing of her ground
As her hand reached down and tightened around mine.

If self is a location, so is love:
Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,
Options, obstinacies, dug heels and distance,
Here and there and now and then, a stance.

From *Human Chain* (2010)

‘HAD I NOT BEEN AWAKE’

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,
A wind that rose and whirled until the roof
Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore
And got me up, the whole of me a-patter,
Alive and ticking like an electric fence:
Had I not been awake I would have missed it,
It came and went so unexpectedly
And almost it seemed dangerously,
Returning like an animal to the house,
A courier blast that there and then
Lapsed ordinary. But not ever
After. And not now.

Quotations

He struggled with contradictions, paradoxes, conflicting impulses. His genius lay in his ability to hover between them, to give each side of a political or emotional equation its full weight and proper due without becoming the prisoner of either.... Heaney humanised uncertainty, made ambiguity rich with possibilities.

Fintan O'Toole, 'Comfort is best found in Seamus Heaney's poems', *Irish Times*, 31 August 2016.

The myths of identity are only one domain of reality. The facts of lived experience are equally important, though, oddly enough, sometimes they are harder to establish... these deeply lodged intimacies, this phenomenological conditioning of the personal life, is as crucial to the salvation of our human souls as the conditionings we undergo from our myths of identity. And it is ... the artist's special task to reveal to himself and to others the vitality of this inner personal world, and to testify to its fundamental value.

Seamus Heaney, 'Among School Children', *Signal* 49 (1986): 13-14.

If any photograph [of the Moyola sandbed] appeared or map that gave access, I would be devastated. It is one of the most intimate and precious of the places I know on earth, one of the few places where I'm not haunted or hounded by the 'mask' of S.H. It would be a robbery and I would have the cruel knowledge that I had led the robber to the hidden treasure and even explicated its value.

Seamus Heaney to Michael Parker, 12 July 1988, *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Christopher Reid. Faber and Faber 2023, p.296

For years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu... knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for a meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. Attending insufficiently to the diamond absolutes, among which must be counted the sufficiency of that which is absolutely imagined. Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous.

Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*. Faber and Faber, 1998, p.458.

Further Reading

R. F. Foster, *On Seamus Heaney*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture*. Gallery Press, 1995.

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Geraldine Higgins, editor. *Seamus Heaney in Context*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*. Harvard University Press, 2000