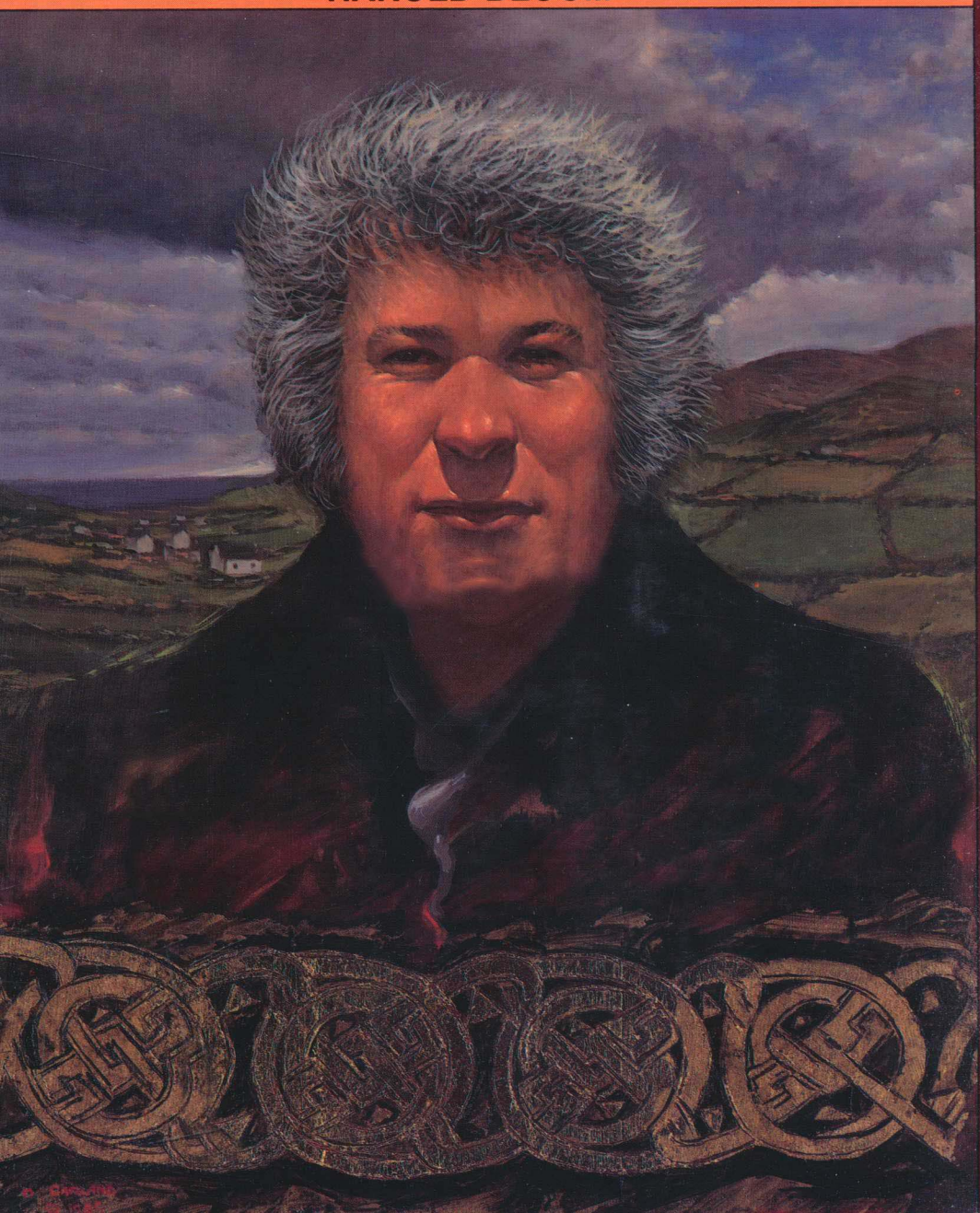
Modern Critical Views

SEAMUS HEANEY

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Edited and with an introduction by

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Modern Critical Views

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These and other titles in preparation

Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism so far devoted to the work of the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Except for the editor's introduction, originally published as an overview of Heaney's first five books (through *Field Work*), it is arranged in the chronological order of publication of these essays. The editor acknowledges with gratitude the assistance of his researchers, Peter Childers and Henry Finder, in helping to locate some of the critical material included in this book.

The introduction attempts to trace Heaney's development from his poetic origins through *North* and *Field Work*, while emphasizing the covert struggle with the dangerous influence of W. B. Yeats. William Bedford begins the chronological sequence of criticism in a shrewd review of *North*, which finds that Heaney's development away from a Yeatsian rhetoric is unfortunately also a falling away from an earlier passionate intensity. In an early consideration of Heaney's first three volumes, D. E. S. Maxwell more positively centers upon the poet's remarkable ability to enrich his tone by orchestrating it, without essentially altering his stance. Terence Brown, in another early survey, places particular stress upon hidden ambivalences in Heaney's work, especially in regard to that violence which has formed and continues to shape what might be called "the matter of Ireland."

The late Robert Fitzgerald, eminent poet and translator, in a pioneering American appreciation of Heaney, celebrates the Irish poet's "unforced audacity" and "distant tenderness." More detailed criticism may be said to begin with John Wilson Foster's investigation of motifs and sources in "A Lough Neagh Sequence," in Rita Zoutenbier's historical view of Heaney's relation to the matter of Ireland, and in P. R. King's careful tracing of the development of personal identity, with all its daunting complexities, in Heaney's poetry from its origins through *North*.

In a strong instance of American appreciation, the poet Jay Parini joins himself to Robert Fitzgerald as a celebrator of Heaney's labor of reclamation of the English lyric for Ulster. The British poet Anthony Thwaite, summing up Heaney's first decade of achievement (1965–1975), suggests the larger context of Wordsworthian tradition as being deeply relevant to our apprehension of the Irish poet. With Blake Morrison's informed analysis of *Field Work,* Heaney's best single volume to date, a salutary emphasis is placed upon the way in which Heaney has altered contemporary English poetry, turning it back to a greater rhetorical richness after the thinning out of the tradition by Philip Larkin and his followers.

Carlanda Green, surveying what she calls "the feminine principle" in Heaney's poetry, with its optimistic view of marriage, implicitly commends the poet for holding on to traditional views that many now would judge to be archaic. This book concludes with three recent reviews of the latest work by Heaney. Douglas Dunn, briefly commenting on both *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island,* implicitly indicates his judgment that the poet necessarily remains distracted by the matter of Ireland, which thus interferes with his full development. In a commentary upon *Station Island,* our most eminent biographical critic, Richard Ellmann, writes out of the authority of being the definitive scholar of Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce. His judgment is that Heaney is more in Joyce's mode than in the line of Yeats, and he praises the "exfoliating and augmenting" of Heaney's "prodigious" talent in *Station Island.* Time must tell us if Ellmann is right, or if the editor's introduction, with its observations upon Heaney's inevitable agon with Yeats, will prove to be correct in the longer span. Helen Vendler, in the review of *Station Island* that concludes this volume, associates Heaney with Dante, thus following Heaney's own preference. Astute and subtle in her reading, Vendler, like Ellmann, may take Heaney too much at his own word, but that is another fitting critical tribute to Heaney's preternatural eloquence as a poet.

Contents

Introduction

At thirty-nine, Wallace Stevens wrote "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"; at about the same age Yeats wrote "Adam's Curse." Texts of the fortieth year form a remarkable grouping; I can think immediately of Browning's "Childe Roland" and Poe's "Eureka," and I invite every reader to add more (Whitman's "Out of the Cradle" and "As I Ebb'd" suddenly come to mind, but there are many others). I would not say that the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney, at forty, has printed any single poem necessarily as fine as "Adam's Curse," but the lyric called "The Harvest Bow" in *Field Work* may yet seem that strong, against all of time's revenges. There are other poems in *Field Work* worthy of comparison to the Yeats of *In the Seven Woods* (1904), and it begins to seem not farfetched to wonder how remarkable a poet Heaney may yet become, if he can continue the steady growth of an art as deliberate, as restrained, and yet as authoritative and universal as the poems of *Field Work*—his fifth and much his best volume in the thirteen years since his first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

That book, praised for its countryman's veracity and vividness of soil-sense, reads in retrospect as a kind of dark hymn of poetic incarnation, a sombre record of the transgression of having been a Clare-like changeling. Heaney's first poems hold implicit his central trope, *the vowel of earth*, and move in a cycle between the guilt of having forsaken spade for pen, and the redemption of poetic work: "I rhyme. To see myself, to set the darkness echoing." *Door into the Dark* (1969) seems now, as it did to me a decade ago, mostly a repetition, albeit in a finer tone, and I remember putting the book aside with the sad reflection that Heaney was fixated in a rugged but minimalist lyrical art. I was mistaken and should have read more carefully the book's last poem, "Bogland," where Heaney began to open both to the Irish, and to his own abyss. Reading backwards from *Field Work* (and the

two other, intervening books) I am taught now by the poet how he passed from description to a visionary negation:

> Our pioneers keep striking
> Inwards and downwards,
>
> Every layer they strip
> Seems camped on before.
> The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
> The wet centre is bottomless.

Such a center indeed could not hold, and Heaney was poised upon the verge of becoming a poet of the Northern Irish Troubles, a role he now wisely seeks to evade, but in a morally rich sense of "evade," as I will try to show later. *Wintering Out* (1972) seems stronger than it did seven years ago, when it began to change my mind about Heaney's importance. It is a book about nearing the journey's center, and takes as its concern the poet's severe questioning of his own language, the English at once his own and not his own, since Heaney is of the Catholic Irish of Derry. Few books of poems brood so hard upon names, or touch so overtly upon particular words *as words*. No single poem stands out, even upon rereading, for this is the last volume of Heaney's careful apprenticeship as he works towards his deferred glory. *North* (1975) begins that glory, a vital achievement by any standards, perhaps a touch dimmed for American critics by the accident of its appearance so close to Geoffrey Hill's *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom*, which gathered together in America Hill's first three volumes. But the power of *North* is that four years of reading have enhanced it, while *Field Work* seems to me the only recent British book of poems worthy of sustained comparison to the magnificence of Hill's *Tenebrae*, published in 1978.

Heaney's first three books sparred gently with local and contemporary precursors; the alert reader could find the colors and flavors of Kavanagh and Montague, of Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas. Like the deliberate touches of the late Robert Lowell in *Field Work*, these are all "screen-memories," of interest only as tactical blinds. What emerges in *North*, and stands clear in *Field Work*, is the precursor proper, the middle Yeats, with whom the agon of the strong Irish poet must be fought, as much by Heaney in his maturity as it is by Kinsella, with the agon itself guaranteeing why Heaney and Kinsella are likely to become more memorable than Kavanagh and Clarke, among the Irish poets following Yeats.

I hear behind the poems of *North* the middle Yeats of *The Green Helmet* and of *Responsibilities,* a hearing reinforced by *Field Work*. This is the Yeats of a vision counting still its human cost, and so not yet abandoned to daemonic presences and intensities:

> I passed through the eye of the quern,
>
> Grist to an ancient mill,
> And in my mind's eye saw
> A world-tree of balanced stones,
> Querns piled like vertebrae,
> The marrow crushed to grounds.

That is Heaney's "Belderg" from *North,* but I do not think Yeats would have disowned it. The enduring poems in *North* include the majestic title-piece, as well as "Funeral Rites," "Kinship," "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," and, best of all, the sequence of poetic incarnation with the Yeatsian title, "Singing School." The poem "North" gave and still gives Heaney his poetics, as a mythic voice proclaims what must be this new poet's relation to the Irish past:

> It said, 'Lie down
> in the word-hoard, burrow
> the coil and gleam
> of your furrowed brain.
>
> Compose in darkness.
> Expect aurora borealis
> in the long foray
> but no cascade of light.
>
> Keep your eye clear
> as the bleb of the icicle,
> trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
> your hands have known.'

The reader of *Field Work* comes to realize that Heaney's eye is as clear, through discipline, as the air bubble in an icicle, as clear, say, as the American eye of the late Elizabeth Bishop. "Funeral Rites" inaugurates what seems doomed to be Heaney's central mode, whether he finally chooses Dublin or Belfast. "Kinship," a more difficult sequence, salutes the bog country as the "outback of my mind" and then flows into a grander trope:

This is the vowel of earth
dreaming its root
in flowers and snow,

mutation of weathers
and seasons,
a windfall composing
the floor it rots into.

I grew out of all this
like a weeping willow
inclined to
the appetites of gravity.

Such inevitability of utterance would be more than enough if it were merely personal; it would suffice. Its grandeur is augmented in the last section of "Kinship" when Heaney acquires the authentic authority of becoming the voice of his people:

Come back to this
'island of the ocean'
where nothing will suffice.
Read the inhumed faces

of casualty and victim;
report us fairly,
how we slaughter
for the common good

and shave the heads
of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror.

The problem for Heaney as a poet henceforward is how not to drown in this blood-dimmed tide. His great precedent is the Yeats of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and it cannot be said in *North* that this precedent is met, even in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," where the exuberance of the language achieves a genuine phantasmagoria. But "Singing School," with its queerly appropriate mix of Wordsworth and Yeats, does even better, ending poem and book with a finely rueful self-accepting portrait of the poet, still waiting for the word that is his alone:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood–kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose.

That is true eloquence, but fortunately not the whole truth, as *Field Work* richly shows. Heaney is the poet of the vowel of earth and not of any portentous comet. In *Field Work,* he has gone south, away from the Belfast violence, heeding the admonition that Emerson addressed to himself in the bad year 1846, when the American slaveholders made war against Mexico:

Though loath to grieve
The evil time's sole patriot,
I cannot leave
My honied thought
For the priest's cant,
Or statesman's rant.

If I refuse
My study for their politique,
Which at the best is trick,
The angry Muse
Puts confusion in my brain.

Like Emerson, Heaney has learned that he has imprisoned thoughts of his own which only he can set free. No poem in *Field Work* is without its clear distinction, but I exercise here the critic's privilege of discussing those poems that move me most: "Casualty," "The Badgers," "The Singer's House," the lovely sequence of ten "Glanmore Sonnets," "The Harvest Bow" (Heaney's masterpiece so far), and the beautiful elegy "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge," for the Irish poet killed on the Western Front in 1917. All of these lyrics and meditations practice a rich negation, an art of excluded meanings, vowels of earth almost lost between guttural consonants of history. Heaney's Irish sibyl warns him that "The ground we kept our

ear to for so long / Is flayed or calloused." The muted elegy "Casualty," which cunningly blends the modes of Yeats's "The Fisherman" and "Easter 1916," concludes in a funeral march giving us the sea's version of Heaney's vowel of earth:

> They move in equal pace
> With the habitual
> Slow consolation
> of a dawdling engine,
> The line lifted, hand
> Over fist, cold sunshine
> On the water, the land
> Banked under fog: that morning
> I was taken in his boat,
> The screw purling, turning
> Indolent fathoms white,
> I tasted freedom with him.
> To get out early, haul
> Steadily off the bottom,
> Dispraise the catch, and smile
> As you find a rhythm
> Working you, slow mile by mile,
> Into your proper haunt
> Somewhere, well out, beyond . . .

Even as the slain fisherman's transcendence fuses with Heaney's catch of a poem to send the poet also "beyond," so Heaney has revised Yeats's ambition by having written an elegy as passionate as the perpetual night of the Troubles. Even stronger is "The Badgers," an oblique poem of deepest self-questioning, in which the elegiac strain is evaded and all simple meanings are thwarted. Sensing "some soft returning," whether of the murdered dead or of the badgers, Heaney places upon his reader the burden of difficult interpretation:

> Visitations are taken for signs.
> At a second house I listened
> for duntings under the laurels
> and heard intimations whispered
> about being vaguely honoured.

The first line of this passage does not reach back to Lancelot Andrewes through Eliot's "Gerontion" but rather itself boldly revises John 4 : 48,

"Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" and perhaps even Matthew 12 : 38–39. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." The duntings are at once the dull sounds of badgers and, more crucially, the Wordsworthian "low breathings" of *The Prelude* I, 323. Though an external haunting, testifying to the laurels of poetic election "vaguely honoured," they are also Heaney's hard-drawn breaths, in this text and out of it, in a murderous Northern Ireland. Heaney, once so ruggedly simplistic in his only apparent stance, has entered upon the agonistic way of a stronger poetry, necessarily denser, more allusive, and persuasively difficult.

I read this entrance as the triumph of "The Singer's House," a poem I will forebear quoting entire, though I badly want to, and give only the superb three stanzas of the conclusion, where Heaney laments the loss of everything in his land that should be "crystal," and discovers an inevitable image for his audacious and determined art that would reverse lament and loss:

> People here used to believe
> that drowned souls lived in the seals.
> At spring tides they might change shape.
> They loved music and swam in for a singer
>
> who might stand at the end of summer
> in the mouth of a whitewashed turf-shed,
> his shoulder to the jamb, his song
> a rowboat far out in evening.
>
> When I came here first you were always singing,
> a hint of the clip of the pick
> in your winnowing climb and attack.
> Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear.

The verve of that final line is a tonic even for an American reader like myself, cut off from everything local that inspires and appalls Heaney. Closer to ordinary evenings in New Haven are the universal concerns that rise out of the local in the distinguished "Glanmore Sonnets" that open, again, with Heaney's central trope: "Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground." Confronting an image of the good life as field work, with art redeemed from violence and so "a paradigm" of new-ploughed earth, Heaney finds even in the first sonnet that his ghosts come striding back. Against the ghosts he seeks to set his own story as a poet who could heed Moneta's admonition to Keats, or Nietzsche's to all of us: "Think of the earth."

Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore
And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:
Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
Each verse returning like the plough turned round.

Yet the ninth sonnet is driven to ask with true desperation: "What is my apology for poetry?" and the superb tenth sonnet ends the sequence overtly echoing Wyatt's most passionate moment, while more darkly and repressively alluding to the Yeatsian insight of the perpetual virginity of the soul: "the lovely and painful / Covenants of flesh; our separateness." More hopeful, but with a qualified hope, is the perfect lyric "The Harvest Bow," which I quote in its entirety:

As you plaited the harvest bow
You implicated the mellowed silence in you
In wheat that does not rust
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist
Into a knowable corona,
A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
Until your fingers moved somnambulant:
I tell and finger it like braille,
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,

And if I spy into its golden loops
I see us walk between the railway slopes
Into an evening of long grass and midges,
Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,
An auction notice on an outhouse wall—
You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick
For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick
Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes
Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes
Nothing: that original townland
Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.