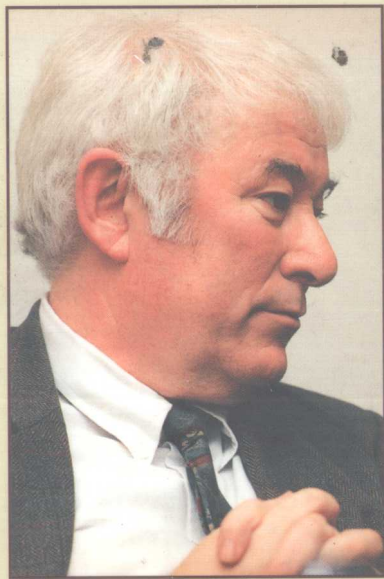


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SEAMUS HEANEY



HELEN VENDLER

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Seamus Heaney

HELEN VENDLER

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My interest in Irish poetry arose first from a course in Victorian Poetry (including early Yeats) by Professor Morton Berman of Boston University; it was deepened by courses in modern Irish writing given at Harvard University by Professor John V. Kelleher, who directed my dissertation on Yeats and has generously supported my intellectual efforts ever since. I am also indebted to the Yeats Committee and the Directors of the Yeats International Summer School of Sligo, Ireland, where I first heard Seamus Heaney read his work in 1975.

Professor Frank Kermode, General Editor of the Fontana Modern Masters series, commissioned this book, which without him might not have existed in its present form. I am indebted to the editors of the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, the *Cambridge Review* and the *Harvard Review*, who, by inviting me over the years to write on Heaney's work, have helped me in the preparation for this longer effort, though I do not quote here any of my earlier essays on Heaney. For my opportunity to write on Heaney in my Ellmann Lectures, *The Breaking of Style*, I thank Professor Ronald Schuchard of Emory University. In 1995, as the

Charles Stewart Parnell Lecturer at Magdalene College, Cambridge, I lectured on Heaney in the welcoming atmosphere of the Irish Studies Colloquium, and participated in a public conversation with Seamus Heaney under the auspices of the college, where my kind host was Professor Eamon Duffy.

I am sincerely grateful for the work of the bibliographers, scholars, critics, editors of collections, journalists and interviewers who have discussed Heaney's writing since he first began to publish. They have not only laid the basis for tracking Heaney's allusions, his intellectual and poetic sources, and his development over time; they have also helped to create the terms – literary and political – in which his work has been hitherto discussed. Whether agreeing or disagreeing with them, I have found them serious and stimulating.

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I am grateful to Faber & Faber for permission to quote at length from the poetry of Seamus Heaney, and to Farrar, Straus and Giroux for American permissions.

My sister and brother, and my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, named on the dedicatory page, have warmly supported me in my writing, and have been happy for me in the results of that work. I thank them for their life-long affection and encouragement.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1939: Born to Patrick Heaney and Margaret Kathleen Heaney, 13 April, in County Derry, Northern Ireland, at family farm, 'Mossbawn'. Eldest of nine children.
- 1945-51: Attends Anahorish School, a 'mixed' elementary school of Catholic and Protestant children. Master Bernard Murphy, who taught Latin to Heaney, is commemorated in 'Station Island' V.
- 1947: Northern Ireland Education Act enables access to higher education for children of poorer families; it enables Heaney to attend St Columb's College in Derry as a boarder on scholarship, and, later, to attend Queen's University on a 'State Exhibition' bursary.
- 1951-7: At St Columb's, where he meets Seamus Deane (poet and critic, later to edit the Field Day Anthology).
- 1953: Younger brother Christopher, four years old, killed by car on road near house (recalled in poem 'Mid-Term Break').
- 1956: Heaney passes A-levels in English, Latin, Irish, French and Mathematics with A grades; wins bursary to study at Queen's University, Belfast.
- 1957-61: At Queen's, where he takes First Class Honours in English, and is awarded McMullen

- Medal for academic achievement. In 1959 first poems published in Queen's literary magazine.
- 1961-2: Studies at St Joseph's College of Education, Belfast, for Teacher's Training Diploma.
- 1962: Teaches at St Thomas's Intermediate School, Belfast. Headmaster Michael McLaverty, fiction writer, is commemorated in 'Singing School'. Heaney reads the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, and undertakes part-time post-graduate study at Queen's during 1962-3.
- 1963-6: Teaches at St Joseph's College of Education; attends Belfast Group meetings led by poet and Queen's University lecturer Philip Hobsbaum, where poets (including Michael Longley and James Simmons) read and critique each other's work.
- 1965: Marries Marie Devlin of Ardboe in County Tyrone, graduate of St Mary's College of Education in Belfast, 1962.
- 1966: Son Michael born. *Death of a Naturalist* published. Heaney becomes lecturer at Queen's.
- 1968: Son Christopher (named for dead brother) born.
- 1968-9: Catholic civil rights marches, countered by state police.
- 1969: *Door into the Dark* published. In August British troops sent into Belfast and Derry (commemorated in 'Singing School'). Heaney spends two months in Europe during the summer in fulfilment of the requirements of

Somerset Maugham Award.

- 1970-71: In United States as visiting professor at University of California, Berkeley.
- 1971: Internment without trial permitted in Northern Ireland.
- 1972: 30 January: In Derry, 'Bloody Sunday' (so-called in reference to earlier 'Bloody Sunday' of 21 November 1920, when the IRA killed eleven unarmed British officers in Dublin, members of the Dublin Castle Intelligence Unit, and in reprisal the British Army shot 21 members of a crowd watching a football match in Croke Park, Dublin). Paratroopers from the British army kill thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers and wound twelve. Heaney recalls his participation in protest march at Newry, 1972, in 'Triptych' III. The Heaneys move to Glanmore Cottage, near Ashford, County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland; cottage (former gate-keeper's cottage on Synge estate) rented to Heaneys by Professor Anne Saddlemyer, editor of Synge's letters. (Several years later, the Heaneys buy the cottage.) *Wintering Out* published.
- 1973: Daughter, Catherine Ann, born; event remembered in 'A Pillowed Head'.
- 1975: *North* published. W. H. Smith Award and Duff Cooper Prize. Heaney begins teaching at Carysfort Teacher Training College, Dublin, where he becomes Head of Department. Friendship with Robert Lowell.

- 1976: Heaneys move to Dublin, living near Sandymount Strand.
- 1979: *Field Work* published. Heaney returns to the United States as a visiting professor for one term at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1980: *Preoccupations* (essays and articles) published. *Poems 1965–1975* published.
- 1980–81: Ten Republican prisoners die in hunger strike protesting criminal status, claiming political status. One (unnamed) appears in ‘Station Island’ IX, perhaps Francis Hughes of Bellaghy. Other deaths from sectarian causes commemorated in ‘Station Island’ are those of Heaney’s cousin Colum McCartney (VIII) and Heaney’s friend William Strathearn, a pharmacist who was murdered in a sectarian killing by two off-duty policemen (VII).
- 1981: Heaney receives offer of professorship from Harvard; resigns from position at Carysfort College. Joins Field Day, group founded by Brian Friel (playwright) and Stephen Rea (actor) to mount theatre in Derry.
- 1982: Begins five-year term contract with Harvard, teaching one semester per year. Teaching includes workshops in creative writing and lecture courses in modern poetry, both British and Irish.
- 1983: Translation of medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* published as *Sweeney Astray*. *An Open Letter* published as Field Day Pamphlet #2, objecting to being included as ‘British’ in *The*

Penguin Anthology of Contemporary British Poetry, edited by Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison.

- 1984: *Station Island* published. Appointed Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. Margaret Heaney dies, commemorated in 'Clearances'.
- 1986: Patrick Heaney dies, commemorated in 'The Stone Verdict'.
- 1987: *Haw Lantern* published. Whitbread Award.
- 1988: *Government of the Tongue* (essays) published. Elected to five-year term 1989-94 as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, to give three public lectures each year.
- 1989: *The Place of Writing* (Richard Ellmann Lectures) published.
- 1990: *The Cure at Troy* (a version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*) published, and performed by Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. *Selected Poems 1966-1987* published.
- 1991: *Seeing Things* published.
- 1994: Tentative ceasefire in Northern Ireland, commemorated in 'Tollund'.
- 1995: 10 December: Heaney awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm, Sweden. *The Redress of Poetry* (Oxford lectures) published.
- 1996: *The Spirit Level* published. Commonwealth Award. Heaney resigns Boylston Professorship at Harvard, is appointed Emerson Poet in Residence to visit Harvard in non-teaching status every other autumn for six weeks.

- 1997: *The Spirit Level* named Whitbread 'Book of the Year'. In July, renewed ceasefire in Northern Ireland after Labour victory in Britain.

ABBREVIATIONS

(See Bibliography for publishing information.)

CP	<i>Crediting Poetry</i>
DD	<i>Door into the Dark</i>
DN	<i>Death of a Naturalist</i>
FW	<i>Field Work</i>
GT	<i>The Government of the Tongue</i>
HL	<i>The Haw Lantern</i>
N	<i>North</i>
P	<i>Preoccupations</i>
RP	<i>The Redress of Poetry</i>
SA	<i>Sweeney Astray</i>
SI	<i>Station Island</i>
SL	<i>The Spirit Level</i>
SP	<i>Selected Poems 1966-1987</i>
ST	<i>Seeing Things</i>
WO	<i>Wintering Out</i>

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Chronology</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	I
1 <i>Anonymities: Death of a Naturalist, Door into the Dark, Wintering Out</i>	13
2 <i>Archaeologies: North</i>	38
3 <i>Anthropologies: Field Work</i>	58
4 <i>Alterities and Alter Egos: From Death of a Naturalist to Station Island</i>	78
5 <i>Allegories: The Haw Lantern</i>	111
6 <i>Airiness: Seeing Things</i>	136
7 <i>An Afterwards: The Spirit Level</i>	155
<i>Notes</i>	179
<i>Bibliography</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	185

INTRODUCTION

'Reality is not simply there, it must be sought for and won.'

PAUL CELAN, in answer to a questionnaire from the
Librairie Flinker

In the following pages, I trace Seamus Heaney's development as a poet from 1966 to 1996. It was in 1995 that Heaney (who was born in 1939 in Northern Ireland) was awarded the Nobel Prize for this body of work, composed during what he called, in his Nobel Lecture, 'a quarter century of life waste and spirit waste' (CP, 24). Heaney was referring to daily life in Northern Ireland, disturbed by internal strife since the late 1960s. The Catholic civil rights marches of the sixties (protesting discrimination in jobs and housing, and gerrymandering of political districts), followed by police repression, led to disturbances that the Ulster government attempted to quell in 1971 by the internment without trial of thousands of citizens; in 1972 the (British) army killing of fourteen unarmed Catholic marchers on 'Bloody Sunday' provoked direct rule of Northern Ireland from Westminster. Terrorist actions on the part of both the Provisional IRA and the Ulster paramilitaries escalated, and – though motions towards a cessation of violence have been put forward since 1994, a permanent ceasefire is not yet securely in place. These conditions forced Heaney (who had been raised a Catholic) into becoming a poet of public as well as private life.

Heaney's poetry has reached a large public in Ireland and abroad, and that public extends to all classes. It is a poetry

in which readers can recognize profound family affections, eloquent landscapes, and vigorous social concern. It tells an expressive autobiographical story reaching from boyhood to Heaney's present age of sixty, a story which includes a childhood at home with parents, relatives, siblings; an adolescence with schoolfellows and friends; an adulthood with a marriage and children; a displacement from Northern Ireland to the Republic; travels; sorrows and deaths. As each decade of poetry unfolds, it illuminates and corrects the previous ones. Within its autobiographical circuit, it is also an oeuvre of strong social engagement, looking steadily and with stunning poetic force at what it means to be a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland – at the intolerable stresses put on the population by conflict, fear, betrayals, murders. Heaney has made one imaginative cast after another in an attempt to represent the almost unrepresentable collective suffering of the North, yet he has tried, equally consistently, to bring intellectual reflection to the emotional attitudes that too often yield the binary position-taking of propaganda.

These would seem to be the achievements of Heaney's poetry; and most of his readers, if asked, would cite the autobiographical and the political as aspects drawing them to his poems. But these thematic elements do not by themselves make for memorable poetry, and the powerful symbols Heaney has found for his poetry are responsible for much of its effect. His commentators find themselves talking not merely of but within those powerful symbols – the exhumed bog bodies in *North*, the Lough Derg pilgrims in *Station Island*, the political parables of frontiers and islands in *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney has made out of his symbols a shorthand for his era. Yet even adequately-imagined symbols do not suffice for memorable work: poetry needs words and syntax as strikingly expressive as its themes and its symbols, and it also requires internal structures that 'act out'

the emotions they exist to convey. Heaney's language is unusually rich in simplicity as well as in ornateness, each where it suits; his syntax is sinuous and expressive, whether it is sternly terse or restlessly mobile; and his highly-developed sense of internal structure gives his poems a satisfying musical 'rightness' as they unfold. Each of his volumes ambitiously sets itself a different task from its predecessors; each takes up a new form of writing; and just when one thinks one knows all of Heaney's possibilities of style, he unfurls a new one. His readers, even when they do not notice technique in any explicit way, are being persuaded into the poem by words, by syntax, by structures, as well as by themes and symbols. 'Feeling into Words', the title of an early essay by Heaney, can be taken as the motto for all his work.

My own acquaintance with Heaney's work began in 1975. I was lecturing at the Yeats School in Sligo in the summer of that year, and at the school's annual poetry reading a young man in his thirties named Seamus Heaney, wholly unknown to me, stood at the lectern and read some of the most extraordinary poems I had ever heard. I approached him afterwards, and asked whether these poems were to appear soon in a book as I wanted to write about them. Heaney replied that in fact he had galleys with him, and lent them to me. They were the galleys of *North*, which I thought then – and still think now – one of the crucial poetic interventions of the twentieth century, ranking with *Prufrock* and *Harmonium* and *North of Boston* in its key role in the history of modern poetry.

I reviewed *North* for the *New York Times Book Review* a few months later, and have been writing about Heaney ever since. My startled and wholehearted response on first encountering Heaney's writing was by no means unique: his poetry has now been translated and appreciated all over the world, and the Nobel is only one of several foreign

prizes (in addition to many from English-speaking countries) awarded to his work. The purpose of this book is to explain, as much to myself as to others, the power of his extraordinary poetry. It derives – as all poetry does – from the inspiration of predecessors, and the most important of these for Heaney have been (in the English/Irish/American tradition) the *Beowulf*-poet, the anonymous author of the Middle Irish poem *Buile Suibhne*, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Robert Frost, Patrick Kavanagh and Ted Hughes. Among classical poets, one should mention Aeschylus and Virgil; among foreign poets, Dante, Osip Mandelstam and Zbigniew Herbert. Heaney has written about many of these authors in his essays on poetry; and scholars have begun to trace specific instances of intertextual connections in Heaney's poetry. I cannot – for reasons of space – treat influence here, but Heaney is among the most learned of contemporary poets, and has brought together influences not often found conjoined in creating his own unmistakable style.

Nor can I describe, here, the generational context in which Heaney appears, though I can at least list a portion of it, giving the more celebrated names. Heaney was preceded by John Hewitt, John Montague and Thomas Kinsella, and followed by Seamus Deane, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. He has been followed by (among others) Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and Ciaran Carson. Each of these poets – some Protestant, some Catholic, some Northern, some Southern – has brought a distinctive voice to the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland; each has also been part of a new wave of Irish writing of linguistic variety and imaginative depth. Literary historians have already begun to chart this period, and literary critics to dispute positions concerning it. Heaney's influence on his successors has been almost as intimidating