Bloom's Literature

Heaney Seamus

Achieving critical respect and genuine popularity can be difficult at best; that Seamus Heaney managed as much, given the fractious coincidence of his poetic emergence and the deteriorating political situation in his native Northern Ireland, is nothing short of astounding. Heaney's poetry maintains universal scope as he interrogates all sides—political and personal, Catholic and Protestant—through mythological and allusive resonance. Heaney largely resisted the pressure to engage political and cultural situations directly, choosing rather to approach this tension implicitly through legendary and historical matter, informing the present through the past. Poems that focus on a mundane object or precise image of ritual intensify into a scene of mythic proportion and transcendent awareness; Heaney's work exploits the physicality of words, expends from them their layers of historical overtones. Written in the midst of turmoil, Heaney's poetry has been controversial and at times contentious, yet it has contributed significantly to the culture and politics of Ireland, inviting international interest unprecedented since the work of W. B. Yeats.

The eldest of nine children, Heaney was born on a farm called Mossbawn near Castledawson, county Derry, a rural area that remains "the country of the mind," Heaney says, and where he finds his poetic focus. He asserts the farm was "more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world," but that did not prevent Heaney from receiving a scholarship to St. Columb's in Derry at the age of 12; from there he attended Queen's University, Belfast and St. Joseph's College of Education, Belfast, where he was trained in Latin, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon. He taught at St. Thomas's Intermediate School, Belfast, one year before accepting a lectureship at St. Joseph's College, also in Belfast, and later at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), during which time he married Marie Devlin and participated in civil rights marches. In 1970–71 he accepted a one-year lectureship at the University of California, Berkeley, then moved from Belfast to Glanmore, county Wicklow, a year later to write full-time. He held a teaching position at Carysfort College, county Dublin, from 1975 to 1981, then began teaching at Harvard University, first as a visiting professor, then as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory (1984), and later as Emerson Poet in Residence (1996). Heaney also was named professor of poetry at Oxford (1988) and visiting Avenali Professor at the University of California, Berkeley (1999). It was while attending QUB that Heaney first published poems in Q and Gorgon, university magazines; while working at St. Thomas's, Heaney was encouraged by the headmaster and fiction author Michael MacLaverty and later was a member of "The Group," led by the poet and critic Philip Hobsbaum and whose members included Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, and Stewart Parker. Hobsbaum sent several of Heaney's poems to Karl Miller at the New Statesman, and in 1964 "Digging," "Scaffolding," and "Storm on the Island" were published.

Heaney's early work owes homage to the pastoral elements of William Wordsworth as well as the aesthetic of Patrick Kavanagh, in whose writing Heaney discerned the "unregarded data of the usual life." In early poems, moments from Heaney's childhood and youth are engendered with numinosity, everyday agrarian objects invested with significance and power. This is especially true of Heaney's first collection, Death of a Naturalist (1966), in which we find Heaney "tripping, falling" as he trails his father in the peat fields from "Bogland," appearing in Death of Naturalist, initiates one such metaphor to which Heaney will return time and again in his poetry: the peat bogs from which well-preserved objects are routinely unearthed. The Irish ground is a "kind, black butter" in which "every layer they strip / Seems capped on before." As the poet goes "inwards and downwards," he finds repeatedly the existence of prior cultures, and yet the "wet centre is bottomless," connoting Heaney's awareness of a geography that is rich in both history and metaphor, awaiting his excavation. Poems such as "Bann Clay" and "Relic of Potato Digging" reveal an Irish soil that claims the authority to fossilize the past and preserve the objects unearthed. In "Gifts of Rain," Heaney declares his "need / for antediluvian lore" is found in a "shared calling of the blood" of Ireland. "Tollund Man," which appears in Wintering Out (1972),
was inspired by a book on ancient bog sacrifices; Heaney said that, upon seeing photos of Tollund Man, it was "as if I had opened a chestnut and found a truth and palpable beauty hidden inside.... In a flash, I realized the connections between the mutilations of that long-ago epoch with the martyrs of the Easter 1916 uprising in Ireland and all the reprisals and repercussions visited on both communities." To reveal this link, Heaney, in the second half of "Tollund Man," relates an incident overheard in childhood of four Catholic brothers who were murdered by Protestant paramilitary fighters, the "stockinged corpses / Laid out in farmyards." The juxtaposition implicit is that the "ambushed / Flesh" of the four young men is akin to that of Tollund Man, who has "dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body." To establish further the metaphor's resonance, Heaney recognizes at the poem's end that "in the old man-killing parishes" of Iron Age Jutland, he would "feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" as he does presently in Northern Ireland.

Whereas the poems of *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* relished the freedom and joy of poetic creativity as revealed through portraits of locals known to Heaney in rural county Derry, *Wintering Out* grows bleak in its forbidding wariness of the sectarian violence unleashed in Ireland. The persons who inhabit the poems of *Wintering Out* are cloaked in "mizzling rain" and "smoke," vaguely distinguished, and often the forgotten specters of ages past. These are silenced figures with simple lives, resurrected, as it were, by poetry itself, such as in "The Last Mummer," "Cairn Maker," "Navyv," and "Servant Boy." Silenced language also finds voice in the poems "Anahorish" and "Broagh," written in the tradition of Irish *dinnshenchas*, or placename poems, where legends are affixed to define an etymological space, thus binding language, history, myth, and landscape. *Anahorish*, deriving from the Gaelic *Anach Fhior Uisce*, which means "place of clear water," leads Heaney to the "mound-dwellers," the first inhabitants of the land, who "go waist-deep in mist / to break the light ice" that separates the Anglo-Cized *Anahorish* of the present from the Anach Fhior Uisce of the past.

*North*, Heaney's most controversial collection, appeared in 1975. It drew upon another Irish poetic convention, the *aisling*, or female personification of Ireland, in poems such as "The Bog Queen," "Bone Dreams," and "Come to the Bower," which depict torture and rape and posit colonial violence and current social conflict in mythopoetic terms. Beyond "The Bog Queen," the bog motif continues in "Grabaulle Man," "Punishment," and "Kinship," the connection between Denmark of two millennia ago and contemporary Northern Ireland established as present-day atrocity that is but part of a enduring continuum. "The Bog Queen" most notably authenticates Heaney's connection between Ireland and Denmark; the body of Moira, an aristocrat of the Viking culture that occupied much of Ireland in the 10th century, was retrieved from Belfast peat beds in the 18th century, the plait of her hair "a slimy birth-cord / of bog," suggesting the intermingling of cultures that occurred during these invasions. The Viking sequence continues in the poems "North," "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," and "Funeral Rites," where the pillaging, plundering Danish and Norse cultures are recognized as being absorbed eventually into the Irish landscape.

The poems of *North*, entangling culpability and misery, were, according to Heaney, "grimly executed. And I really like them because they're odd as odd and I think hard and contrary." The collection is Heaney's most overtly political and received polarized criticism. Martin Dodsworth, for instance, considered *North* a "testimony to the patience, persistence and power of the imagination under duress," while Ciarán Carson referred to Heaney as "the laureate of violence—a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing." Heaney himself noted in an interview the problem of "having to conduct oneself as a poet in a situation of ongoing political violence and public expectation—a public expectation, it has to be said, not of poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups." In the second half of *North*, "Singing School" relates the difficulties of the artist who creates amid cultural crisis; Heaney apparently took this to heart, for *North* marks a notable turning point in his career. Stylistically Heaney notes the "denser" forms that are "more force-fed with words" in his initial four volumes, whereas later writing—*Field Work* (1979) and beyond—has more "plain-speaking lines" with line breaks used "more as a pacer, a timer." Heaney's short-lined quatrains give way to a longer line that provides more sustained syntax, and he appears more attentive to the spoken as opposed to printed word. Rhythmic sustenance remains focused on alliteration, assonance, and consonance, and there continues to be an emphasis on the understated association of visual and phonetic imagery.

On the heels of *North'*s burgeoning myths, the poet's voice in *Field Work* grew more direct and engaging, allowing Heaney to be subject of the poems. There remained but modest separation from Irish issues, even so. In "After a Killing," Heaney evokes the image of "two young men with rifles on the hill, / Profane and bracing as their instruments." Drawing on a memory from his childhood in Mossbawn, Heaney recalls in "The Toome Road" meeting "armoured cars" that were "all camouflaged," transporting "headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets." Unlike the extended metaphors of *North*, the interface between poet and reader in *Field Work* is highly personal, such as in "The Strand at Lough Beg," which envisions the last minutes before death of Heaney's second cousin, Colum McCartney, who was executed while returning from a Dublin football match. Numerous of the poems are elegiac, evoking the personal loss of friends and other community members from county Derry during the extreme violence that
followed Bloody Sunday in 1972. Awareness of life's entangled issues more ironically appears in the "Glanmore Sonnets," a sequence of love poems principal to the collection. Here, the earth again draws Heaney's attention as "vowels plowed into other" and "opened ground" that is "steaming"; as these "turned up acres breathe," the poet perceives "my ghosts come striding into their spring stations."

Ghostly figures haunt Heaney's succeeding collection, *Station Island* (1984), only here the spectral personages—from the hunger strikers Ciaran Nugent and Francis Hughes and Heaney's deceased cousin McCartney to the Irish novelists William Carleton and James Joyce—offer advice and evoke a sense of plurality of the self. Carleton offers the injunction "Remember everything," even as he affirms that life "is a road you travel on your own." Joyce, however, has the last word—"let go, let fly, forget"—and so permits Heaney to surpass the demands of community and tribe and so not be diverted from his own path. This transcendence is reified in the poem "Unwinding," where a ball of twine unwinds "backwards through areas that forwarded / understanding of all I would undertake," ostensibly providing Heaney new consideration of the self in relation to the nation. Succeeding works—*The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), and *The Spirit Level* (1996)—offer a poetics of loss that prompts a spiritual enlightenment, one engendered in *Station Island's* remaking of a poetic identity. Heaney's poems celebrate life's mutability. In *Haw Lantern's* "Alphabets," the poet perceives language with childlike desire: "The letters of this alphabet were trees. / The capitals were orchards in full bloom." "Settle Bed," in *Seeing Things*, affirms that "whatever is given // Can always be reimagined." These volumes imply an imaginative power that grows ever fuller and richer—one that may even transcend the cultural legacy Heaney has confronted in earlier collections.

*Heaney's Electric Light* (2001) and *District and Circle* (2006) are largely informed by translations undertaken in the prior 15 years, including *The Cure at Troy* (1990, a version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), *Beowulf* (1999), and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004, a version of Sophocles' *Antigone*). Heaney said that "translations have more glamour as poems in the new language when there's more disobedience going," and that even as he pays "homage to the original," there remains the impulse "to go for a new workable poem," one that yet will "honor the original." What Heaney gained from these translations is the ability to appropriate the Greek, Roman, and Anglo-Saxon, making problematic the association between place and poetry. In "Desfina" the poet gazes upon Mount Parnassus, in Greek mythology the home of the Muses, and yet a transformation obscures the source of poetic inspiration: "Mount Parnassus placid on the skyline: / Slieve na mBard, Knock Filiocht, Ben Duan," Heaney recites, culminating with the line "We gaelicized new names for Poetry Hill." Even as Heaney returns to the rural subject matter of his first four collections, the "I" of these poems is far more mature than ever before, and the "home" of writing continues to be interrogated, not justified and romanticized. The same holds true in *District and Circle* (2006), where, although Heaney returns to earth-centered evocations and visions, reminisces of the rural Ireland of his youth, and even revisits of the Danish bogs that were the site of "Tolland Man," the inclusion of Latin and Irish words, the allusion to Dante and Greek myth, and the ecoawareness of his worldview rupture rather than sustain, any connection to Heaney's earliest work. The diverse forms within this collection—quatrains, prose poems, lyrics, free verse—as well speak to Heaney's expanding perception of the universal significance of his poetic vision. In 2010, Heaney published *Human Chain*.


Seamus Heaney died in Dublin in 2013.

**Further Information**


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