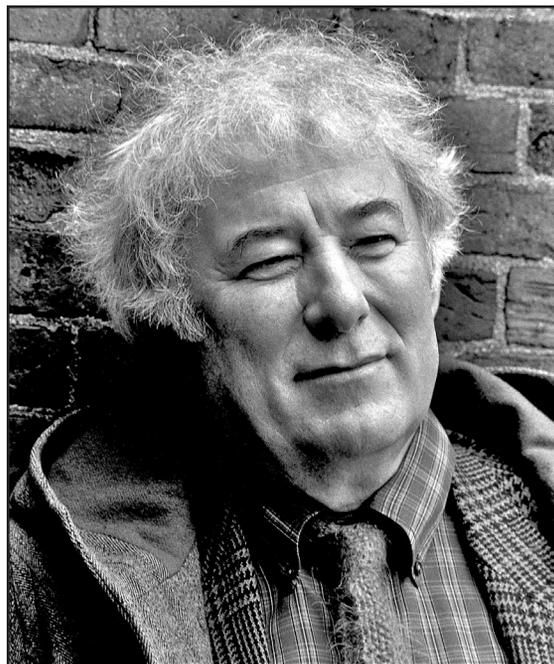

SEAMUS JUSTIN HEANEY



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SEAMUS HEANEY, the most famous English-language poet of his era and (as was often said) the greatest Irish poet since W. B. Yeats, was awarded in 1995 the Nobel Prize “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.” His public readings attracted large appreciative audiences not only in Ireland, Great Britain, and the United States but also throughout Europe. Heaney, although best known for his work as a poet, was also a prose writer of vigor and eloquence. He even ventured into the adaptation of Sophoclean tragedy when, in conjunction with the Field Day Theatre, he produced English “versions” (as he preferred to characterize them) of *Philoctetes* (under the title *The Cure at Troy*) and *Antigone* (under the title *The Burial at Thebes*). Heaney was a notable translator not only of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* but also (in “version” form) of the anonymous Middle-Irish narrative *Buile Suibhne* (rendered as *Sweeney Astray*) and the Middle-Scots *The Testament of Cresseid & Seven Fables* of Robert Henryson. Scattered in various volumes are translations of excerpts from Virgil, Ovid, and other poets, and at the time of Heaney’s death, a limited edition of his translation of Book VI of *The Aeneid* was in preparation. A book-length interview by Dennis O’Driscoll, published in 2008 as *Stepping Stones*, is the fullest rendering of Heaney’s own view of his life and work.

Heaney, born in Castledawson, County Londonderry, Northern Ireland, grew up as the first child of nine born to Patrick Heaney, a cattle-dealer, and his wife Margaret. Patrick’s sister Mary shared the house, and Heaney’s first memory (revealed in “Mossbawn”) was of his Aunt Mary making and baking scones: “And here is love / like a tinsmith’s scoop / sunk past its gleam / in the meal-bin.” After elementary school in Anahorish, Heaney won a scholarship enabling him to become a boarder at the Catholic St. Columb’s School in Derry, a period vividly recalled in the sequence “Alphabets,” in which Heaney traces his schooling in English, Latin, and Irish, a process by which the world is widened beyond his rural upbringing. During Heaney’s time at St. Columb’s, his 4-year-old brother Christopher was killed in a road accident; the tragedy is described in one of Heaney’s most famous poems “Mid-Term Break.”

It was at Queen’s University Belfast that Heaney began to write poems under the pen-name “Incertus”: “I went disguised in it . . . tagging it under my efforts like a damp fuse. Uncertain.” Heaney left Queen’s in 1964 with a First in English and, after a year at St. Joseph’s teacher-training college, was an intermediate school teacher for one year before being appointed to the staff at St. Joseph’s. At this time, he met the English critic and poet Philip Hobsbaum, who formed in

Dublin (as he had in London previously) a group of young poets who met regularly to read and critique each other's work. Hobsbaum forwarded Heaney's work to London where it was seen by Karl Miller, editor of *The New Statesman*, who in 1964 published three poems, including the well-known poem of vocation "Digging": "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." In 1965, Faber published Heaney's first volume of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, which was followed by 11 more collections. The most substantial collected edition, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*, was, by the time of Heaney's death in 2013, missing poems from the volumes published in 2001 (*Electric Light*), 2006 (*District and Circle*), and 2010 (*Human Chain*). In 2009, to celebrate Heaney's 70th birthday, Faber released a collection of CDs on which Heaney had recorded all of his published poems to that point, but no *Complete Poems* was ever issued. A bibliography of Heaney's work by Rand Brandes was published in 2008.

In 1965, Heaney married Marie Devlin, a teacher and writer; three children, Michael, Christopher, and Catherine were born of the marriage. In 1966, Heaney became a lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, and in 1970, he accepted an offer to be a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, returning to Queen's in 1971. The California venture introduced Heaney to the United States and its contemporary poets, both native and foreign; Czesław Miłosz, the great Polish poet, was teaching at Berkeley and became for Heaney an example of the life of poetry lived at the highest level. (Heaney was later to write a poem about Miłosz titled "The Master.") In California, Heaney wrote the remarkable poems in *Wintering Out* (1972), in which his social canvas began to extend itself in several directions. Whereas in his first two books he had been chiefly occupied with his country childhood and its "calendar customs," he now began to write about social injustice, choosing (in a decision unusual in a man of his generation) to expose the cruelty of Irish society toward women who had borne children out of wedlock. In "Limbo," a frightened young mother drowns her baby rather than risk discovery, and in "Bye-Child," an "illegitimate" child, kept hidden alone in a dark hen-house and fed surreptitiously by his mother, is at last freed (he lacks the capacity of speech). The social canvas extends to a candid picture of marital smoldering in "Summer Home," and further afield, the poet reaches out to the first of the "bog bodies" described by P. V. Glob in *The Bog People*. "The Tollund Man," found strangled, his body preserved by the tannin in the bog, seems to the poet analogous to the murdered contemporary bodies of Northern Ireland. Revolted by the killing in his own country, the poet imagines visiting the Jutland of the bog bodies: "Out

there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home.”

After Heaney's return to Queen's in 1972, the political “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, which had increased in intensity and danger since the '60s, determined the move of the poet and his family to the Republic of Ireland, where they lived south of Dublin in Glanmore, County Wicklow, in a cottage that had served as the gatekeeper's lodge of the Synge estate. Heaney had given up his lectureship at Queen's, and the family lived frugally for 4 years on his freelance work and Marie's income as an elementary school teacher. It was at Glanmore that Heaney wrote his most famous volume, *North* (1975), which became (and remains) a site of controversy. In it, Heaney reflected the violence erupting in the North as the political and economic tensions between the dominant Protestant Unionists and the Catholic minority (suffering discrimination in employment and education) came to a head. Placing “the Troubles” in a larger geographical and historical context, Heaney imagined the long history of killing, of “neighborly murder,” in the northern regions of Europe. He recalled as well the Viking invasions and the savage execution of enemies: such cruelty was symbolized by the torture of an adulterous medieval woman whose body was found in an Irish bog. In such famous poems as “Bog Queen” and “Punishment,” Heaney indicts both himself and his culture.

After 4 years in Glanmore, Heaney moved to Dublin and accepted a lectureship at Carysfort College (a teaching college), where he served as Head of Department, a task leaving him little time for writing. He was invited to Harvard for a visiting appointment, arriving in 1981, and was then appointed to the tenured Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, committing himself to teaching at Harvard for one semester every year (and honoring the commitment even in the year he won the Nobel Prize). Marie, facing single motherhood of three children for 3 months a year, did not flinch but said to me, “All I want is for Seamus to be able to write his poems.” Backed by her support, Heaney embarked on a happy and successful career at Harvard, where he taught both Creative Writing and Contemporary Irish Poetry (a course that omitted his own work). He concluded his formal teaching at Harvard in 1997, but from 1998–2006, he visited for a few weeks each year as the Emerson Poet in Residence. In 1989, while at Harvard, he was elected to the 5-year, non-resident position of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, delivering three lectures yearly, some of which were collected under the title *The Redress of Poetry* (1995). *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* gives a broad overview of his prose works—autobiographical, biographical, and literary. His critical opinions were forthright but courteously offered. He wrote widely on Irish, English,

Welsh, and Scottish authors, but the years in the United States had also introduced him to the work of the postwar American poets, among whom he found Elizabeth Bishop especially sympathetic. He had, of course, known the work of Eliot, Pound, and Frost from his youth and once, in conversation with me, surprisingly named Frost as his favorite poet. Heaney's prose brought new energy to contemporary critical writing about poetry: brilliantly accurate, it was voiced in a tone of colloquial engagement with his audience. It assumed that poetry was an indispensable part of any culture, serving to bring current concerns to the fore but also to recreate, in free play, the fabric of language.

In *North*, Heaney had continued to use the "thin" stanza he had explored in his second and third volumes, deriving it from slender forms of poetry in the Irish language and contrasting it, in later remarks, with the broad pentameters of Wordsworth, Keats, and Hopkins, poets who had first inspired him. With increasing frequency, Heaney prolongs his subject matter by composing sequences, gathering a series of short poems under a single title. These, beginning with the seven-member "A Lough Neagh Sequence" in Heaney's second volume, *Door into the Dark*, take on more and more weight over time until, in 1984, the poet publishes the 12-member autobiographical sequence "Station Island" (the title poem for his sixth volume of verse). In another autobiographical sequence, "Sweeney Redivivus," Heaney exposes himself under the guise of Sweeney (the bird-hero of *Sweeney Astray*) to ironic questioning of his own history. He has now exhausted, as a primary subject, the earlier narratives of his childhood life and its religious observance; he has left behind the North and its troubles; he has taken a period of seclusion in Glanmore (recorded in his 1979 seventh volume, *Field Work*), and he now finds himself in "On the Road"—the closing poem of "Sweeney Redivivus"—seeking a new source of poetry. Leaving Christianity behind, he migrates (still in the bird-persona of Sweeney) down to the "deepest chamber" of a prehistoric cave, finding there, incised in the rock, "a drinking deer" with its "nostril flared // at a dried up source." He resolves to wait there "until the long dumbfounded / spirit broke cover / to raise a dust / in the font of exhaustion."

The new energy that seemed unattainable in "On the Road" arose from an unlikely source: a Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, and his contemporaries. These poets, writing under censorship, often turned to allegory as a vehicle of moral meditation, and *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Heaney's eighth volume, betrays their influence in such allegorical poems as "From the Republic of Conscience," "From the Frontier of Writing," "From the Canton of Expectation," and "The Mud Vision."

The Haw Lantern's sequence "Clearances," an elegy for the poet's mother, represents a new venture in Heaney's poetry, as his next

volume, *Seeing Things* (1991), takes as its subject invisible things. The invisibles include the dead, who remain only as absences; the interior (but invisible) sensings and mountings of which Wordsworth spoke; the abstract geometrical forms living in the architectural space of the mind; and the measures of mathematics, perceived even when merely imagined. In "Song," a poem from the earlier Glanmore period, Heaney had described himself as a poet of the everyday: "There are the mud-flowers of dialect / And the immortelles of perfect pitch / And that moment when the bird sings very close / To the music of what happens." Now, in *Seeing Things*, Heaney resolves to leave poetry that is "Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens" and turn to those intellectual and emotional invisibles that contend against a material concept of the real.

Heaney's father had died in 1986, completing the erasure of the poet's childhood experience (elegized in "Clearances" as "a space / utterly empty, utterly a source"). Patrick Heaney's death lies under Heaney's longest sequence, "Squarings," included in *Seeing Things*. This series consists of 48 12-line poems, each consisting of four broad-lined tercets, making a square shape on the page. The sequence itself is subdivided into four groups of 12 poems, each representing a perfect square: 12 (lines per poem) x 12 (poems). In the tenth poem, as the poet contemplates a flooded quarry, he isolates his theme—the irreconcilable confrontation of the invisible and the material: "Ultimate // Fathomableness, ultimate / Stony up-againstness: could you reconcile / What was diaphanous there with what was massive?" Heaney confronts the insufficiencies of both art and nature to human existence: "How habitable is perfected form? / And how inhabited the windy light?"

The Spirit Level (1996) praises stoic endurance in the person of the poet's brother Hugh, who, living among the armed outbreaks in the North, kept the family farm ("Keeping Going"). But against that patience, Heaney sets the corruption of both kingship and marriage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. It was only after the subsidence of the quarter-century of conflict in Northern Ireland that Heaney could allow his language a violence corresponding to the political violence he had seen and felt. In the bitter poems comprising "Mycenae Lookout," Heaney takes on the persona of the Watchman, who observes, at the return of Agamemnon and his sexual captive Cassandra from Troy, the obscene fantasies of the crowd followed by the murder of both Agamemnon and Cassandra by Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The sequence concludes with a fatalistic view of the perpetual persistence of aggression, of "besieger and besieged," but its most memorable lines are those reporting terror and slaughter. And although *The Spirit Level* closes with the Northern Irish cease-fire and a "postscript" of light, water, and swans in County Clare, the inhumanity

of “the Troubles” is not entirely routed. As the poet realizes the metamorphoses of self over time, he describes his identity, so solid in childhood, as a phenomenon in perpetual flux: “You are neither here nor there, / A hurry through which known and strange things pass.”

Heaney’s next two volumes, *Electric Light* (2001) and *District and Circle* (2006), continued in an elegiac atmosphere, with moving vignettes of past and present; *District and Circle* contained “Anything Can Happen,” Heaney’s poem on the 2001 destruction of the Twin Towers (adapted from an Horatian ode in which human destiny is governed not by a benign Providence but by a malign Fate). A new note was struck in *Human Chain* (2010), in which poems written in the wake of Heaney’s 2006 stroke celebrated, with marked tenderness, family and friends, “the ones who have known him all along.” The volume culminates in a long autobiographical sequence called “Route 110,” in which Heaney draws parallels between episodes in his own life and events in *The Aeneid*, especially Aeneas’s sojourn in the underworld and his meeting there with the ghosts of his father and Dido.

In 2013, Heaney was hospitalized in Dublin for treatment of an aneurysm. After his departure for the operating room, Marie Heaney, to her sudden surprise, received a text message sent by Seamus to her cellphone as he awaited the operation. The text included the Latin *Noli timere*, “Do not be afraid”: Heaney was quoting from his own poem “The Master,” in which the neophyte seeking knowledge finds, after an arduous climb to the tower of the Master, “just the old rules / we all had inscribed on our slates . . . // *Tell the truth. Do not be afraid.*” Heaney died just before the operation was to begin, instantly and with his faculties intact.

Heaney’s work was awarded numerous prizes in Ireland, England, the United States, and Europe, from his first book (which won both the Gregory Award and the Geoffrey Faber Prize) to his last (which won the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection), with the 1995 Nobel Prize (and many others) coming in between. His poetry attracted a large readership, beginning with those in Ireland who remembered rural childhoods and customs resembling his own and widening over time to the world audience that read him in English or translation. The poetry was reassuring in its compassion and understanding of human sadness, hostility, and loss; it was nostalgic in its reconstruction of a vanished pre-industrial Ireland; it was honest in refusing political ideology and political propaganda; it was humane in its candid depictions of married dissension and married love; and (after a long period of holding back) it allowed itself an outburst of rage at human cruelty and the indifference of fate. Like its author, the work was at home in allusion and etymology, but both were so deftly touched on that they

could glide easily into mind or recollection. Heaney's wonderfully modulated rhythms could be angular or lulling, martial or dance-like, melodic or staccato; and his alert revisions of the subgenres of Western lyric—the epithalamion, the christening poem, the pastoral, the elegy, the erotic poem, the homage, the journey poem, the eclogue, the hagiography—have yet to be described fully. His work gave courage to other poets who, remaining within the tradition, could dare as he did to alter it by their individual talent.

In person, Heaney was welcoming, generous, and witty; his household in Dublin was the site of warm welcome to visitors from all over the world. His humor arrived in a quip or in repartee rather than in any bravura display. His natural posture was a modest one, from his young days onward, and he remained firmly grounded in the body that never forgot the muscular life of spades and pitchforks. He had a sense of duty that he took only too seriously; he could not dismiss any genuine inquiry or any obligation to family and friends, to whom he was sturdily loyal. He was not sentimental, although he was brimming with sentiment; he gave the appalling its due. His elegy for his sister Ann, who died of cancer, included the full hospital ghastliness of the fright in her face, just as his poem about washing his dying father included his own revulsion from the slack skin of the aged flesh. His high intelligence compelled throughout his work second thoughts that queried his first ones; as he said himself in "Terminus": "Is it any wonder when I thought / I would have second thoughts?" Like Chekhov writing about the prison on Sakhalin, he strove—in an atmosphere riddled with dogma, declaration, and threat—"To try for the right tone—not tract, not thesis."

Elected 2000

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