

## POETRY

### *Seamus Heaney*

*Selected and introduced by Helen Vendler*

In October 1995, Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, a gesture that recognized the remarkable international appeal of his writing, which originates in that small subsection of Europe called Northern Ireland. Although Heaney, born in 1939, has lived in the Republic of Ireland since 1972, the conflicts in the North (only recently brought to a precarious cease-fire) continue to make up one of the themes of his work— most recently in a sequence called “Mycenae Wavelengths,” which will appear in his forthcoming volume *The Spirit Level*. Yet Heaney’s poetry— though it may be best known for its profound meditations on political strife— began with Wordsworthian and Keatsian lyrics about his rural childhood. As his parents’ eldest son, Heaney stood to inherit the family farm, and in the first poem of his first book, “Digging,” he struggled to reconcile his calling as a writer with his family’s expectations. His grandfather dug turf, his father digs potatoes. And himself?

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it.

Heaney has dug far with his pen, deep into his own soul and the soul of his nation. The titles of his books offer a quick review of his concerns. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) showed the young country boy coming into adolescent knowledge of sexuality, of Catholic-minority status in the Protestant-majority North, and of a poetic calling; *Door into the Dark* (1969) continued the exploration of Ireland from a more speculative and objective standpoint; *Wintering Out* (1972) pulled away, in part, from autobiographical scenes into a fiercely inward exploration of Irish English— its sounds, its place-names, its rhythms. *Wintering Out* also investigated minority status itself— not only in the religious terms in which it was usually described in the North, but also in a servant, an unwed mother, or a child kept out of sight for years in a henhouse. In *North* (1975), one of the greatest volumes of poetry of the 20th century, the inner storm that had been brewing in Heaney since 1968 (when British troops quelled Catholic civil-rights marchers, setting off 25 years of killings ) burst into voice. Seeing ritually murdered medieval bodies found in bogs in Ireland and Jutland as evidence of a chthonic drive to violence, Heaney became the most articulate witness to the tragic history of the North.

In *Field Work* (1979), Heaney reflected on his move to Wicklow, south of Dublin, (where he supported his young family as a free-lance writer, since

he had left his lectureship in English at Queen's University, Belfast, when he made the move). He entered a lacerating period of political and artistic self-scrutiny in the long title poem of *Station Island* (1984), a Dantesque set of encounters with crucial figures from the past, including the writers William Carleton and James Joyce as well as family members and teachers. In 1984, Heaney also published *Sweeney Astray*. This translation of a medieval Irish poem gave Heaney a new persona, and, in a sequence called "Sweeney Redivivus," Heaney "became" that king who was transformed into a bird, able to comment on his earlier life and his fellow scribes.

In confronting political issues, Heaney was drawn to such Eastern European writers as Osip Mandelstam, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Miroslav Holub. Their influence is visible in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), a series of memorable parables such as "From the Frontier of Writing" in which Heaney considers the predicament of the lyric poet under political pressure. In *Seeing Things* (1991), Heaney included a 48-poem sequence called "Squarings," in which many of his former concerns are sketched in quick, elusive glimpses grounded in natural settings—watercolors, one could say, rather than oils. *The Spirit-Level* (1996) casts a retrospective look, by analogy to the Trojan War, at the undeclared war that has so devastated Northern Ireland, and includes many unsparing stock taking poems of the poet in his fifties.

**T**his formidable set of books—including four volumes of occasional prose—has compelled the attention of the world from Japan to Finland, from Germany to Australia. The poems above all attest to a range of powers—of description, of social analysis, of intellectual momentum, of moral reflection, of architectonic construction, of phonetic rasp and lull. These powers have been spent always with extraordinary conscience. Heaney put in James Joyce's mouth (in "Station Island") the most internal command of the writers's ethic as he is beleaguered by fellow countrymen demanding poems of victimage and political propaganda. Joyce says to the poet (who is participating as a non-believer in the Irish pilgrimage to Station Island at Lough Derg) the following bracing words:

You lose more of yourself than you redeem  
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.

Joyce's impatient counsel is only one of the voices besieging the poet, but it is one the poet has heeded. Heaney has never forgotten that poetry must be a thing of allurements as much as searches, gleams as much as probes. The texture of his poems is a constantly changing fabric: not content to rest in the rich pentameter orchestration of his early work, he invented (drawing on poetry written in Irish) a "thinner" music and thin stanzas to convey the bleak evidence of the preserved bog corpses he had seen in photographs.

The masterpiece among the bog poems is “The Grauballe Man,” in which Heaney reacts angrily to those who would denominate a dead human being by the crudely denotative words “corpse” or “body”:

Who will say ‘corpse’  
to his vivid cast?  
Who will say ‘body’  
to his opaque repose?

In a violent wish to be true to the majesty and horror of human death, Heaney writes his magisterial succession of descriptions of the Grauballe Man—but admits that art cannot equal, in its too-strict compassing of death into the stylizations of form, the “actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped.” In its anguished look at the final insufficiency of art to atrocity, Heaney’s poem speaks to the predicament of every artist daunted by the grimmest onslaughts of experience.

**Y**et Heaney’s poetry offers many concerns other than political ones. There are poems about family (including “Clearances,” the notable sonnet sequence in memory of his mother), about marriage and children, and about intellectual growth. One of these, “Terminus,” explains the formation of Heaney’s own mind, which, he realizes, is never satisfied with one side of any question: “Is it any wonder when I thought / I would have second thoughts?” As Heaney said in an interview with the critic Neil Corcoran, “I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start.”

“Terminus” extends that in-betweenness to its ultimate description, as the boy grows up between the rural and the industrial, Aesopian prudence and Christian asceticism, rigidity and fluidity, farm bounty and mercantile trade, secular baronies and Catholic parishes. In the last image of the poem, the boy replays the crucial scene of the “Flight of the Earls” to France in the 18th century, when the civil compact between English invaders and indigenous Irish landowners broke down for good. In the boy’s fantasy, there might still have been room for negotiation, and he pauses, midstream, in earshot of his peers, still parleying with the English. Though the end of the poem has political implications, the import of the whole is intellectual and psychological: how is it that some people tend to see both sides of a question, and are inclined to negotiation, while others of equal intelligence and sincerity attach themselves fiercely to one side? To be brought up in in-betweenness is both rewarding and isolating, and the poem presents, in its tight couplets, and their inner division, a form matching its binocular gaze.

**A**nother such exploration of mind arises in Heaney’s Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem “Alphabets”: it is concerned to show how successive languages—from English to Latin, from Latin to Irish, from Irish to Greek—expand the child’s understanding of the world. Eventually, the Irish youth becomes a professor, lecturing in a replica of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre:

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.  
He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.

The poet's model for expansion of knowledge becomes the Renaissance necromancer who hung a globe in his house so that he would think of the whole universe and "not just single things." Intellectually speaking, the poem suggests, we can all be the astronaut who sees

all he has sprung from,  
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O  
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—

while, at the same time, not forgetting our origins (the poet recalls watching, as a small child just learning the alphabet, the family name spelled on the gable by the plasterer, "letter by strange letter"). Because Heaney's poetry ranges from the local to the global, and from origins to ends, it has wide appeal; but though readers may not always realize it, they are fundamentally drawn to his accounts of experience by the "assonance and wood-notes" that drew him too, as he says in "Alphabets," to poetry.

**H**eaney has shown exemplary stamina in facing up to the unrelenting demands of poetry for personal and social accuracy. Many of the poems recount episodes of faltering, dryness, self-doubt—not least "Exposure," the most stricken of the poems following his move to the Republic. There he weighs the pros and cons of his self-exile from the North, and wonders whether by moving his young family away from violence he has evaded his responsibility as an artist, missing "The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose." In another such poem ("On the Road") in which "the dumbfounded spirit" cannot see where to turn, the poet finally flies to the most primitive source of art in the West, the cave paintings of Lascaux:

There a drinking deer  
is cut into rock,  
its haunch and neck  
rise with the contours,

the incised outline  
curves to a strained  
expectant muzzle  
and a nostril flared

at a dried-up source.

The very first artist, the poet realizes, knew what it was to strain at a dried-up source. Heaney has persisted, as all major writers do, in seeking new sources—from the sonnet to terza rima, from James Kavanagh to Czeslaw Milosz, from the Dordogne to Mycenae. No one of his volumes replicates a past one: in each, effort and ease balance and critique each other. No other poet sounds remotely like Heaney; his harmonies and dissonances are his own. It is this stylistic originality and aesthetic stamina, as well as the crucial ethical concerns of his poetry, that the Nobel Prize has recognized and rewarded.

## *Digging*

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.



*"Digging," "The Grauballe Man," part XIII from "Station Island" and other excerpts from Selected Poems, 1966-1987 by Seamus Heaney. Copyright © 1990 by Seamus Heaney. Part XXIV from "Settings" from Seeing Things by Seamus Heaney. Copyright © 1991 by Seamus Heaney. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. All rights reserved.*

## *The Grauballe Man*

As if he had been poured  
in tar, he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.  
The grain of his wrists  
is like bog oak,  
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan's foot  
or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge  
and purse of a mussel,  
his spine an eel arrested  
under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts,  
the chin is a visor  
raised above the vent  
of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened.  
The cured wound  
opens inwards to a dark  
elderberry place.

Who will say 'corpse'  
to his vivid cast?  
Who will say 'body'  
to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair,  
a mat unlikely  
as a foetus's.  
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,  
a head and shoulder  
out of the peat,  
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies  
perfected in my memory,  
down to the red horn  
of his nails,

hung in the scales  
with beauty and atrocity:  
with the Dying Gaul  
too strictly compassed

on his shield,  
with the actual weight  
of each hooded victim,  
slashed and dumped.

## From *Station Island*

*xii*

Like a convalescent, I took the hand  
stretched down from the jetty, sensed again  
an alien comfort as I stepped on ground

to find the helping hand still gripping mine,  
fish-cold and bony, but whether to guide  
or to be guided I could not be certain

for the tall man in step at my side  
seemed blind, though he walked straight as a rush  
upon his ash plant, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Then I knew him in the flesh  
out there on the tarmac among the cars,  
wintered hard and sharp as a blackthorn bush.

His voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers  
came back to me, though he did not speak yet,  
a voice like a prosecutor's or a singer's,

cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite  
as a steel nib's downstroke, quick and clean,  
and suddenly he hit a litter basket

with his stick, saying, 'Your obligation  
is not discharged by any common rite.  
What you do you must do on your own.'

The main thing is to write  
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
that imagines its haven like your hands at night

dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.  
You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.  
Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,

so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.  
Let go, let fly, forget.  
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.'

It was as if I had stepped free into space  
alone with nothing that I had not known  
already. Raindrops blew in my face

as I came to and heard the harangue and jeers  
going on and on: 'The English language  
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,

rehearsing the old whinges at your age.  
That subject people stuff is a cod's game,  
infantile, like this peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem  
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'  
The shower broke in a cloudburst, the tarmac  
fumed and sizzled. As he moved off quickly

the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk.



## From *Settings*

xxiv

Deserted harbour stillness. Every stone  
Clarified and dormant under water,  
The harbour wall a masonry of silence.

Fullness. Shimmer. Laden high Atlantic  
The moorings barely stirred in, very slight  
Clucking of the swell against boat boards.

Perfected vision: cockle minarets  
Consigned down there with green-slicked bottle glass,  
Shell-debris and a reddened bud of sandstone.

Air and ocean known as antecedents  
Of each other. In apposition with  
Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim.



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