



REMEMBERING SEAMUS HEANEY: POETRY AND THE HISTORIANS

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The Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney,¹ died August 2013. He was one of the great poets of the past fifty years, and long before his death he had moved into a uniquely important place within Ireland's literary history, a place exceeded only, if at all, by his fellow Nobel laureate, the poet William Butler Yeats.

While Ireland has had more than its share of notable poets, this has been particularly true of Northern Ireland. Since its founding in 1922, this untenable province, torn by political and religious division since its birth, and the poorest, most conflicted, most benighted part of a formerly imperial Britain, has, despite the odds, produced a steady stream of poets of real distinction. The first to emerge were out of a generation anchored by Louis MacNeice, Frank Ormsby, Robert Graecen, and Patrick Fiacc. That wave was followed in the sixties by another led by Heaney and his contemporaries Derek Mahon and Michael Longley. A third generation emerged in the 1980's and 90s to include Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Sinéad Morrissey, and Paul Muldoon.

¹ Pronounced "Heenee."

Heaney found his voice as a student at Queen's and after graduating, and while still a schoolteacher, he began to publish his work. After taking a job in Andersontown, he fell in with a group of writers who met regularly to share and criticize each other's poems. This soon to become famous "Belfast Group," was led by Heaney, Longley, and Mahon, and led to the publication of Heaney's first collection in 1965, *Eleven Poems*. This started his career, and publications, critical acclaim, honors, and university teaching positions in Ireland, Britain, and the United States were to follow. He was already an international figure by the late 70's when Heaney became a director of the famous and controversial Field Day Theater Company of Derry founded by the playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea in 1980. With his fellow directors he published a series of pamphlets which stated Field Day's purpose was to explore the political situation in Northern Ireland. The project then took on a more pointed and political nature as a cultural phenomenon, the culminating event being perhaps the publication of the multi-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1992. The political complexities of the Irish situation had already led Heaney in 1983 to publish a critical response against his having been included as a British poet in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. "My Passport is Green" declared his identity as an Irishman and as an Irish artist. The essay was controversial, but it served as a post-colonial reproach to the then unquestioned practice whereby he and other Irish writers, but especially poets like Swift, Yeats, and Cecil Day Lewis, were taken over by the imperial subject of British literature.² In December 1995 Heaney was presented with the Nobel Prize for Literature for, as the Nobel committee put it, "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past." Four years later he published a much praised and best-selling translation of

² Many an English literature course at an American university co-opts Irish writers when useful. Yet no lit course would ever put Chinua Achebe or Derek Wollcott down as modern "English" literature. Well, maybe some.

Beowulf, for which he won an unprecedented third Whitbread Poetry Prize. In later years he suffered from the effects of a stroke as well as the undoubted embarrassment of being quoted by many others in public life, including Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Bono. When he died at seventy four it was as if the world of literature had seen that a “great oak had fallen.”³ His passing made the front page of every major newspaper in the Western World and his status is secure artistically and commercially: at his death he commanded thirty percent of all the sales of contemporary poetry in the United Kingdom.⁴

I am an historian and I can tell you that poetry is not an easy fit for most of our breed and it is a big problem for modern historians. To use it as source material, either in scholarship or in the classroom, is slippery and uncertain. We are sure that anything we might say about it is bound to be wrong, inadequate, or woefully inconclusive. More to the point, historians tend to see texts as concrete historical artifacts and poetry just does not comfortably fit the bill. In the end, the rich ambiguity of poetic language, fundamental to its art, is nerve-racking. It also exposes just how conservative and hidebound historical practice is; it upsets the historian’s faith in the security of written language.

Historians of the modern period frequently use novels. Long before Stephen Greenblatt, Orgel, and Mullaney turned to the “new historicism,” historians assumed that literary works were created in a historical context and that they could tell the reader something significant about authors, audiences, and the times when they were written. They got flack for it. The “new criticism” that dominated American and British literary criticism for two generations, committed to “close reading” of texts (especially poetry after T.S. Eliot), stressed the autonomous nature of the work, devoid of cultural and historical influences. They rejected what they viewed as the determinism

³ *The Economist*, September 7, 2013, 94.

⁴ Patrick Crotty, *The Context of Heaney’s Reception, The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue, (Cambridge, 2009), pg. 44.

which lay in the historian's understanding of literature. Nevertheless, historians continued to believe that texts can reveal and provide historical viewpoints which can be tapped to make a point about the past. But poetry? Ah, there's the rub. Its snarly indeterminacy confronts the positivist bias that lies hidden in the heart of historical scholarship: better to avoid it and turn to the social sciences and avoid the murky depths of verse. When you have to come to conclusions about it you find yourself on shifting sand, and besides, you might have it wrong. Besides, who in the hell knows what Coleridge meant by that albatross? Did Blake really hate Newton? Is A. E. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad* devoted to his unrequited love for an Oxford roommate or is it a *fin de siècle* meditation on western degeneration? Does it presage the Great War? Really? Are you sure? No, you can't be serious, not that!

Poetry makes a couple of star turns in history classes but the results are scarcely reassuring. In western civ courses Rudyard Kipling, Matthew Arnold, and W. B. Yeats are all likely to make an appearance. One of the reasons for this is that all three have poems that have the seeming benefit of thematic clarity and obvious historical relevance. Kipling's work is rarely obscurantist, and his "The White Man's Burden" (1899), a bald exhortation of faith in imperialism, is also paternalistic and racist. Kipling believed in the value of empire's oft-touted "civilizing mission" and feared that the West would shirk its historical responsibilities, and the world would be the worse for it. Imperialism was a moral obligation for the white race.⁵

Decline and deterioration of a different kind can be found in Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" (1867). The poem is a mid-19th century Victorian lament about the secularization and materialism of modern culture. He believed that ancient values were being taken over by ideas of struggle and capital-

⁵ W. H. Auden later took him to task: most imperial poets worry about the internal deterioration of their empire, but Kipling worried about threats from the outside.

ism's faith in the cash nexus. Arnold shrank in horror before the Philistines of the newly triumphant middle classes who thought so little of art and the past. Their materialist culture was triumphing over the "sea of faith." For Arnold and other sensitive souls such as Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, progress was no sign of hope and its enthusiasts were dangerous: the world was darkening and its horizons were empty.⁶

Yeats continued along this line in "The Second Coming." The poem was written in 1921 on the eve of fascism and only four years after the Bolshevik Revolution. Yeats was shaken by what he now saw in the future. Ideology was taking control and was driving civilization further into the abyss created by mass politics, consumerism, and the Great War. Art and culture, were being replaced by a way of life centered on "science, the accumulation of facts, and democracy" In the process history was being unmoored, its legacies smashed and abandoned. Modern barbarians (techno-barbarians?) were taking charge. A banal world of commerce, technology, and violence was winning and the "center" was dissolving.

Each of these works yield seeming historical markers irresistible to historians, but the import of them is maddeningly elusive. Yeats had one advantage: in large part that Second Coming was indeed a disaster and turned out to be a lot like he thought it would be. Well, he might have been right, but that does not mean that any of these poems work in the history class where, from my experience, student reactions are rarely sympathetic. In the survey, where these poems usually make their appearance, the majority of students are there under sufferance plotting careers that not only accept the cash nexus but also the technological promise that now dominates our cultural imagination. They revel in these things, and the vast majority do not want poetry in a history class. Their prejudices, beyond "please just give us the facts," find that poetry is never a compelling historical "fact" that one could address with his-

⁶ All three of them, and many others as well, viewed the rise of America with dread.

torical certainty. It is bound to elicit the inevitable question, that question that consumes the time server, “I just wanted to ask, will this (really?) be on the exam?” If they are courageous, this is followed by, “I thought this was a history class.”

Perhaps all of this explains why so few historians discuss poetry. Intellectual historians are more likely to do so, but really, for most historians, poetry just doesn’t come up. Pre-modern historians have to use poetry. It is often the major source material available. Ancient Greece without Homer? *Beowulf* is our single best picture into the Anglo Saxon *Weltanschauung* and the Scandinavian context of their culture. It would be impossible to understand early Irish culture without the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and just try to think of medieval England without some nod to Chaucer and his pilgrims. Stephen Greenblatt is right: Tudor-Stuart England cannot be understood without Shakespeare, and no historian would disagree with him. But it is all so different in modern history. No historian would dare to argue that Goethe, Ungaretti, or Akhmatova, offers up to us the historical insights we can glean from Homer or Shakespeare, and frankly we are a little scared to try and do so. Because of it modern poets are relegated to the sidelines: we just don’t know what to do with them.

I think that the uncertainty about this goes deep. Historians will admit that any written source is open to interpretation, even while they write to the contrary. Perhaps even more revealing is the form of historical narrative: historians are slaves to the most conventional kind of prose. It seems to me that academic historians are now the most conservative defenders of traditional expository writing and from this beleaguered position we see the form of writing elsewhere has changed.

This raises a final issue: history writing ain’t very poetic. It was not always that way. Before the Germans recast history in the 19th century, it was truly a literary art. To read Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* (1837) or Jules Michelet’s *Histoire de la Revolution* (1847–1853) today is barely to recognize what history once was. These were literary works through and through, and their audience expected them to be. Michelet famously

admitted that his writing was an attempt to bring about “a resurrection of the life of the past,” something more novelistic than a slavish devotion to objectivity. On the other hand, T. B. Macaulay’s third chapter of his *History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1857) introduced the whole idea of “social history,” a school of analysis which is still given to believing that history is some kind of social science. It was a masterwork of drama and art, and it was one great piece of prose.

Before Macaulay passed on, history became a battleground where science, or at least social science, came to infect not only its methodology, but the ways in which historians wrote history. The results of that development are with us still and can be best seen in how academic history came to fetishize the monograph. Monographs are by definition narrow works based on some hitherto obscure body of written sources. They are most often the newly minted scholar’s proof of his/her mastery of the discipline. The result is usually a self-consciously modest book written in precise but inert language. The form’s dominance in the discipline has had a lamentable result: there are now few stylists in academic history. In fact, in the halls of history departments, stylists are almost always suspected of getting away with something, as if style were a cover for not having mastered the material, not having done one’s due diligence in the archives, or represents a crass attempt to reach the public. The result is that there are now very few “beautiful” histories.

I always loved history and I read it from the get go. The first book I can remember was a prosopography with various chapters on famous composers. I followed that by reading all the biographies I could lay my hands on in the school library. I grew up in a family of readers and we went to the library each week—I read greatly well before I got to high school. But I would have to say that the books that made the biggest impact upon me were not histories. I was bowled over by *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*. I fell in love with Tolstoy’s short stories. Literature ignited my interests. *The Grapes of Wrath* shaped my moral and political sensibilities when I was just 14.

I read it over the course of a summer, lost in the thoughts about Tom Joad and outraged at the inequities of American life. I spent part of another summer mowing lawns and reading *Gone with the Wind*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and the *Bounty* trilogy by Nordhoff and Hall. There was Sinclair Lewis, an early favorite, along with Jack London, Hemingway, Jane Austen, and of course, being male and adolescent in the early/mid-sixties, Ian Fleming and Alastair MacLean. But no single book before or since, more than ten thousand of them now, has had the effect of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

I was exposed to Dante in a college sophomore lit class at virtually the same time I discovered my love of ideas. The turning point in ideas came in a philosophy class and the man of that moment was Thomas Aquinas. The idea that the whole of creation could exist in an orderly, meaningful, and harmonious way, discernible by reason and faith, was a great intellectual discovery. But the Thomistic vision, so rationally and meticulously argued in Aquinas's *Summa*, was fleshed out in the *Inferno*, where Dante's verses set my mind free. *Commedia* captured that cosmology and its ontological implications in a breathtaking vision. Aquinas had captured my mind, but Dante had won my heart, and his verse, in the great John Ciardi translation, captured the ineffable. That great poet's work changed my life and no history, no matter how great, would ever do that.

That leads me back to Seamus Heaney and poetry.

In the bookstores of Dublin, in a country that still has great bookstores, one cannot help but notice how much Irish literature sits on the shelves. The sheer volume of this defies explanation. How is it that an island with the population of the Detroit metropolitan area could have produced, and still produces, so much literature? It is as if the entire population has been cranking the stuff out, words tumbling, page after page, into volume after volume. A psychiatrist might suspect it: in Ireland, writing is a perseveration that is almost pathological as the Irish write as if feeling compelled to do so. In the end, it is

a monumental result: so many Irish men and women following the call of so many writers before them.

If this dazzling wealth of words is true of Irish prose, it is even more so when it comes to Irish poetry—so many poets. In Ireland poets actually sell their work and appear on the evening chat shows sitting next to movie stars and comedians as if it is the most normal thing in the world. The fact is that poetry is more than normal in Ireland, and it has always been important. The place of the poet in ancient Ireland was an exalted one; poets of the bardic/learned classes, known as the *filid*, were members of a privileged class patronized by kings and nobles. Gaelic culture held that having a poet's voice was to have the greatest of gifts and in a way the poet was the essence of what it meant to be Irish. They were feted, rewarded, and maintained by the nobility. They were loved and feared, admired and respected as political warriors whose praise and scorn meant everything. Satire was the weapon of choice in Ireland long before Swift mastered sarcasm's sweetest tool. Yes, the Irish have loved words all along and the love of words, the love of talking, and the appreciation of the ability to use language cleverly and well, remains a part of Irish life even now.

One of the greatest wordsmiths of the modern age was Yeats. Yeats is often cited as the twentieth century's greatest poet. Yet his place in the history of Ireland goes well beyond versification. He was **the** cultural figure of modern Ireland, serving as point man in Ireland's intellectual revolt against English cultural imperialism. He was the key figure in Ireland's "Celtic Twilight," that amazing Irish literary renaissance of the late 19th and early twentieth century. He also made his mark in Ireland's rich history of theater. There is no doubting his standing, but that has not inhibited Irish poets who followed after him. While Beethoven famously intimidated composers like Brahms and Sibelius when it came to writing symphonies, Yeats only seemed to represent a challenge to his successors to get on with it, and many have done so.

No historian ventures into the swampy depths of literary

criticism and analysis comfortably. Suffice it to say that I have loved Heaney's work for long time and a variety of reasons, but I have few rational reasons I can offer for this. Fintan O'Toole wrote upon his passing that "Heaney was surely the English language's last great Arcadian poet, the last whose memory cells contained personal images of a pastoral life" as well as being "the last who could regard Virgil as a contemporary."⁷ I think that these two observations might get to the heart of his appeal for me: the mundane and the elevated in one place.

Heaney's connection to physical stuff, to farm implements, tools, and physical labor, was born in his growing up as the eldest of thirteen children on a small farm outside of Castledawson, Co. Derry. That place established his connection to the world, a world where real people live and labor, a world that grounds his work and gives it a vivid substantiality. The family farm was named "Mossbawn", a word that seems so quintessentially Heanean to me, so resonant and true. His early work has echoes of England's greatest Arcadian poet, Wordsworth. Heaney readily admitted to his influence, but went beyond that, incorporating elements from classical poetry and using them to take that very real world, in all its seeming permanence and yet obvious temporality, to lead the reader to a far more complex and often ambiguous place, the place where our ontological certitude lies unexamined—he suggested that our certainties are not what they seem. Death, impermanence, morality, violence, regret, and loss, all sit within that concrete world, and it is this complex world out of which we are forged and shaped. He did it in words that are both clear and immediate. I could be wrong, but that is how it all works for me.

I loved *Death of a Naturalist*⁸ and read it about the same time as I found Dante. In 1970 my philosophy mentor, the late Ed MacDowell, a working poet, gave me a copy of Heaney's

⁷ Fintan O'Toole, "Seamus Heaney (1939–2013)," *The New York Review of Books*, October 10, 2013, pg. 10.

⁸ *The Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966).

first major work. Ed told me that since I was Irish I needed to “know Heaney.” I still have that book today, cherished and well annotated, its pages torn, and its binding falling apart. Heaney followed that book with others, and in the end he wrote twelve volumes of poetry—each of them a gem.

The two that just slew me were *Station Island*⁹ and *The Haw Lantern*.¹⁰ Dante’s influence hangs all over *Station Island* and I am sure that the connection played a role in my love of the work. Heaney admitted that Dante was a major influence in this work that locates its poems around the famous St. Patrick’s Purgatory. This pilgrimage site resides over a cave on a small island in Lough Derg, Donegal, not far from where the poet grew up. Legend has it that it was there that Jesus led St. Patrick to a cave, believed to be an entrance to hell. Pilgrims have been going there since the late 5th century to fast, pray, and spend two whole days circling the island barefoot in rigorous penance for their sins. It was a spiritual place long before the coming of Christianity, and like so many pagan places in Ireland, it fit in easily with the unique spirituality of the Gaelic church. Twenty thousand pilgrims make the journey even today. It is a very Irish place.

Family and domestic devotion played a major role in his work. He wrote his children and siblings. Much of *The Haw Lantern* is a meditation on life and death brought on by the passing of Heaney’s mother. That book spoke deeply to me about the loss of both my parents over a single terrible summer and in a year full of personal difficulties. His sonnets on his mother were a deep consolation to me. Some of the other poems explored marital relations and these consoled me in the midst of divorce.

There is of course the role of Heaney as a public figure, the most famous man from an infamous place during a difficult time. Heaney’s work has taken that conflict on but never in an ideological way. He was an Irish nationalist but never an

⁹ *Station Island* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984).

¹⁰ *The Haw Lantern* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1987).

aggressive one and his work is wholly without propaganda. Nevertheless, he saw Ireland and the world through the eyes of one of the colonized and oppressed and recurred often about the lamentable effects of empire. In a country where religion has played such a major role, Heaney's poetry, while not specifically religious, is unmistakably that of someone raised in the rhythms and rituals of the Catholic Church and betrays the historical awareness which is everywhere in Heaney.

Through investigation history serves a role as a means of cultural preservation and this would seemingly align well with Heaney's work. Ireland's past looms over the background of these poems and serves to remind the reader of that island's unresolved history. Such things lie deep within his writing and reflect the nature of Ireland: a boggy country within which are the remains of people, cultures, hopes and sorrows, the living and the dead. The bogs, and the bogmen within them, preserve that past. Digging in the peat inevitably brings up the residues of Ireland's complex and tragic history, a central theme in his work. Heaney reflects that history and its legacy as well as any Irish writer ever has. There is not a hint of romantic Ireland in any of his work, yet the love for Ireland is there, a love of Ireland as it really is and has been.

Heaney's work as translator has yielded great things. His version of the Irish medieval poem *Buile Suibhne* (*Sweeney Astray*) was a landmark event, the first translation of that work since 1913.¹² His translation of *Beowulf*¹³ was a critical and commercial success and sells well even now. He also translated poetry by medieval Scotsman Robert Henryson,¹⁴ the Russian Alexander Pushkin,¹⁵ the Polish Renaissance poet Jan

¹¹ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), pg. 234ff.

¹² *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry: Field Day Publishing, 1983).

¹³ *Beowulf* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

¹⁴ *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009).

¹⁵ *After Pushkin: Versions of Poems of Pushkin by Contemporary Poets* (London: Folio Society, 1999).

Kochanowski,¹⁶ and even a song cycle by the Czech composer Leos Janáček based on poems by the Wallachian Ozeš Kalda,¹⁷

The prodigious output and praise did not seem to go to his head. Even as he became almost bedizened by awards, he remained balanced to the last. He counted amongst his closest friends some of the greatest poets of the late twentieth century, people like Ted Hughes, Phillip Larkin and Czeslaw Milosz, and yet he always responded quickly to offer help with other people's works in progress and always did so with encouragement. Poets are often a combative and competitive lot, but by all accounts Heaney was wonderfully supportive of the work of others. In the end, he was aware of his place in history and so were others, and while he did get criticized by a number of his Irish contemporaries, it left few marks upon him and did not sour his disposition towards them.¹⁸ He wrote extensively as a critic, but the tone of it was invariably sympathetic and constructive. And Heaney had perhaps that most prized of Irish gifts: a quick and pointed wit. He stayed often in New York with the novelist Thomas Flanagan, and Flanagan once told me that Heaney was one hell of a great dinner companion—I am sure that it was true.

Heaney believed in the power of poetry: he believed it could help us to concentrate upon the human condition. In a widely influential essay "The Government of the Tongue" he

¹⁶ Jan Kochanowski, *Laments* (London: Noonday Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Heaney maintained a deep connection with artists in Eastern Europe. At one point he wrote about: Milosz, Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub. The situation in Northern Ireland, in what has come to be known as "The Troubles" beginning in the early 1970s, was a major factor in his interest and advocacy of these poets behind the Iron Curtain. Along those lines see Justin Quinn, "Heaney and Eastern Europe," in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 92–105.

¹⁸ It is an age old story in Ireland: the successful invariably get turned on by the Irish. In *Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen Dedalus says "—Do you know what Ireland is? asked Stephen with cold violence. "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow." James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 1977), 185.

examined the life changing concentration which resides in every poem:

This is what gives poetry its governing power. At its greatest moments it would attempt, in Yeats's phrase, to hold in a single thought reality and justice. Yet even then its function is not essentially supplicatory or transitive. Poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly approached and constantly departed from, at which reader and writer undergo in their different ways the experience of being at the time summoned and released.¹⁹

That transformative potential is not the usual subject of history courses but it is the thing which makes art compelling. There is much in his work that dwells on the unique problem of being Irish. He had to confront head on the question of his identity, with Ireland's history ever so present and he concluded that he was Irish in the face of being told over and over again that he was British. Because of this his art had to have a political context, revealed not necessarily in the subject matter, but in the language and images that he used, or as he called them, the "under ear activities."²⁰ Poetry apparently had transformed his sense of himself and he thought it could do the same for all of us.

To me Heaney's poetry is a kind of grace. This is not the kind of judgment historians make very confidently and I say this as a simple reader. His poetry faces the nature of life and is thankful for the experience of it: the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, the living of it and the dying as well. He celebrated all of this as a writer, but also as a man with a family and a home. Heaney seemed at ease with life at the same time that his poetry called the reader to take life seriously, and to take it in every form that comes to you, and to think always of what is right and what is just. Life is a gift and Heaney's art gave it its due.

¹⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001* (New York, 1977), 208.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 405.

I was fortunate in having met Seamus Heaney three times. The first time it happened I was staying in an apartment in Sandymount in the late 1970s. It was a glorious evening and I was walking along the famous strand, and like many an overeducated soul who has strolled down that beach, I surveyed Howth Head across Dublin Bay and pondered the meaning of Joyce's imponderable line in *Ulysses* about the "Ineluctable modality of the visible . . ." set in that very place. A man approached from the opposite direction. He wore a loose tweed jacket with no tie and was built like a stevedore, with a large mop of hair and an even larger pair of hands. We passed, I nodded to him, and he to me, and he made the usual Irish comment "fine day." As luck would have it I encountered him again the next afternoon as I was walked down Seafort Avenue towards my local. He was struggling to get some things into the boot of a car, when he spied my approach down the walkway. He smiled at me, acknowledging our brief encounter earlier. I walked away thinking his face was familiar. It was only to come to me a week later that it had been he, as my cousin Patrick would say, he "himself."

The second meeting was in 1995. Heaney was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies being held for the first time at Queen's College, Belfast. Just months before the IRA had called for a halt to military operations and the city basked in summer heat and peace. Heaney spoke of his poetry, of being an Irish artist, and the situation in Ulster. He also talked of his days in "the Group" and was joined on stage by his old comrades Michael Longley and the singer David Hammond. It was just months before his winning of the Nobel Prize and rumors abounded that he was a leading candidate. The atmosphere was rich with anticipation and he delivered a wonderful talk: warm, gregarious, witty, engaging, and deeply moving as well. At a reception held later I went to shake his hand and told him how much I loved his work even though I was, just a historian. Spying my name tag, he asked why I was there, "being so very far from the Bay area." I explained (for the hundredth time) that Oakland University

was not located in northern California, and I told him that I had just published a book on Patrick Pearse.

Pearse was an Irish nationalist, writer, as well as a poet, teacher, and revolutionary. He helped lead Dublin's Easter Rising of 1916 against the British and essentially wrote Ireland's declaration of independence. His rebellion was doomed, but Pearse embraced a martyrdom that he believed would win its case in the end, and he was shot by firing squad. He is very probably the most controversial figure in Irish history. The major issue today is his role as one of the founding fathers of modern Irish republicanism and his belief in the redemptive power of political violence. He was also a poet and his nationalistic poems are the stuff of any anthology of modern Irish poetry. I cannot tell you how many Irish men and women, when the lights were down and the Guinness was flowing, have recited Pearse for my benefit.

As I talked a bit about my work, Heaney nodded and asked me some probing questions. He had not heard of my book, but with a handshake of goodbye, he said he would look into it. It was a gracious thing to say. If only that it were to happen!

I last saw him in New York some years later at yet another reception, and after yet another speech. I was up at the bar asking for whiskey when he sidled in next to me and put in his order. We locked eyes and I started to introduce myself again. He interrupted with a smile, "Ah, now I remember, the Pearse man." I confessed as much and then he stunned me by saying he had read my book. He wondered if I was going to do more on Pearse and went on at some length that he found my ideas about Pearse's psyche and Irish politics persuasive. He spoke about Pearse's faith and the links between Irish nationalism and Catholicism, and the discomfiting nature of Pearse's political ideas.

My head was swimming with the interest and praise. The historian in me was being approved of by a great artist, a world cultural figure who towered over the work of me or any person I knew. It was like getting Swift or Beckett's approval! My lowly

state as an earthbound historian had taken wings and soared into sunny uplands. The world was suddenly warmer, its colors were more dynamic, and I swore a celestial choir was warming up somewhere. Beethoven was smiling at me! I took a long draft—Bushmills had never tasted so good and yes, all was well with the world. But then, just then, his heavily hooded eyes twinkled. With a paw wrapped around his glass, Heaney pointed his index finger at me, and with a trenchant smile said, “I liked the book but I think you missed something about Pearse.” My heart skipped a beat. I asked him to explain. He continued, “Well, I think you captured how his life and beliefs, ah, intersected with politics, and your insights into his life were interesting, but you know . . .” His voice trailed off, he looked to the side.

He took a long swallow, moved closer and looked me right in the eye, shook his head for emphasis, and said, “I think you should have done more with his poetry.”