

Stepping Stones

Interviews with Seamus Heaney

Dennis O'Driscoll

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STEPPING STONES

INTERVIEWS WITH

SEAMUS HEANEY

Dennis O'Driscoll



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Introduction

‘A wise man’s wisdom needs to be extracted’, Bertolt Brecht remarks in his poem about the cross-examining Customs man who seizes on the knowledge which the sage Lao Tsu is smuggling into exile. On 9 September 2001, Seamus Heaney called to my office in the International Branch of Irish Customs, around the corner from Dublin Castle, once the centre of English power in Ireland and now the powerhouse of Ireland’s Revenue and Customs service. In my cramped room, at the end of the long, low, crepuscular corridor – resembling a smugglers’ tunnel more than the fifth-floor passageway of a modern office block – Heaney, having already agreed in principle to an interview book I had proposed by letter (citing auspicious precedents: *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*, Vaclav Havel’s *Disturbing the Peace*, Eugène Guillevic’s *Living in Poetry*), elaborated on his ideas for the project. It cannot have been easy for him to face an extensive series of interviews, knowing that this would add further pressures to a life in which literary acclaim has been accompanied by massive claims on his time.

Had he inclined towards refusal, I would not have pursued the matter. Having witnessed for myself the daily arrival by green An Post van of a sackful of requests, invitations, proofs, academic enquiries, personal letters, manuscripts-in-progress and glossy new books, to a house where neither phone nor fax enjoys a moment’s respite, I knew he had strong grounds for hesitation. His presence at a book launch, his speech at an art-gallery opening, his place at a Friday-night dinner table; his reading, his lecture, his review, his blurb, his oration, his nomination, his reaction to some public event – everyone has plans that involve snatching him away from his poems.

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Now here I was, embarking on a project which would encroach on his dream time even further. What I told myself in mitigation, and what I hope this book bears out, is that a volume of linked interviews with Seamus Heaney would be a substantial addition to his oeuvre rather than merely a subtraction and distraction. Moreover, I decided from the start not to propose, let alone impose, any deadline for completion of the book. The priority for the poet must be his poetry; and the poetry must determine the agenda and dictate the deadline. Happily, it was during the years in which this book was under way that Heaney wrote virtually all of the poems in *District and Circle* (2006). Some poems ('Anahorish 1944', 'Tate's Avenue' and 'Home Help', for instance) drew their initial inspiration from the ongoing interviews; others were excerpted directly from Chapter 8 as the opening sections of 'Found Prose' and 'Out of This World'. As more recent poems also began to emanate from these interviews, Heaney referred to the book as 'a potent stirrer-up of memories'. Poems apart, *The Burial at Thebes*, his version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, opened in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 2004; *Finders Keepers*, a generous selection from his lifetime's output of autobiographical and critical prose, was published in 2002; and translations, essays and lectures continued to appear. Not surprisingly, there were lengthy periods when no progress with this book was feasible.

At Seamus Heaney's own request, the interviews were conducted principally in writing and by post. But – at the risk of some small overlap with previous chapters (which are themselves not without unavoidable overlaps) – Chapter 15 combines the transcripts of two interviews we recorded (one publicly, the other privately) in Santa Fe, under the auspices of the Lannan Foundation, in October 2003; and several of the remarks relating to *District and Circle* in Chapter 13 originated on the spacious stage of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, in April 2006, where I interviewed Heaney before an audience. My original plan had been to visit the poet on a specific day each week to record material which I would then transcribe. However, given the relentless demands he already faced – and, until an illness in 2006, his frequent absences on foreign literary and academic travel – this was not a practical proposition.

I therefore began to prepare the written questions and observations which form the basis of these interviews. The questions provided

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'multiple choice' options in that Heaney could decide which ones to answer and which to ignore, and could rearrange the order in which he responded to them. It would have been unrealistic to expect responses to all of these countless questions: my first set, confined to the themes of childhood and the early writing years, consisted of sixty-two packed pages; many hundreds of additional pages – interlaced with question marks – would eventually reach the poet who, for all his unfailing patience with this project, must sometimes have questioned his wisdom in laying himself open to such a grand inquisition.

In the process of working together towards a final text – reviewing responses, filling gaps, remedying omissions, adding narrative links, augmenting connective tissue – the conversational dimension of the material, though already evident (especially after the opening, orienting chapters), was further heightened. Each suite of questions was either bound by a thematic thread or – more usually – based around a specific collection of Heaney poems. I wanted to avoid a slavishly chronological approach; collection-centred questions fostered variety and flexibility, allowing for a blend of contemporaneous commentary and retrospective recollection. If this resulted in some anomalies – for instance much of Heaney's reminiscence about his secondary schooling precedes the detailed focus on his primary schooling (for which the *Station Island* chapter presented an appropriate context) – it seemed a quirky price worth paying, especially since the pay-off is more true to the manner in which normal conversation loops and meanders, advances and retreats, than any strictly chronological account could hope to be.

While this book does not therefore conform to biographical convention, the fact that Seamus Heaney has not been the subject of a biography was itself a stimulus to this work. But chronological biographies of famous writers almost inevitably become as predictable as the check-in routines at international airports once the author's gifts have been recognized and he or she is subsumed into the world of honours and awards and intercontinental literary travel. The adoption of a collection-based approach left me free at any stage to ask Heaney (whose books have all included eidetic evocations of childhood) about aspects of his growing up and his development as a writer. To avoid losing contact with the essential inner poet, especially when we touched on the periods in which the 'smiling public man'

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began striding the literary world, was a constant objective. I tend to think of Seamus Heaney as a poet whose childhood – notwithstanding its ‘sorrowing’ aspects, discussed in this book – had its Edenic dimensions: certainty and security, calendar customs and feast days, agrarian cycles and ecclesiastical rites. The wound of expulsion from that tried, tested and trusted world hurt him into a poetry of evocation, yearning and elegy.

Ian Hamilton, the English critic and poet, regarded Heaney as ‘the most over-interviewed of living poets’. Yet what initially prompted me to undertake this book was precisely the opposite view: a conviction that he was under-interviewed in more senses than one. It seemed to me that a major poet who has been a consistently engaging literary interviewee should be encouraged to expound his ideas and expand his recollections beyond the meagre word-counts of a newspaper or literary journal; also, that a broader range of themes should be explored than was usual in the past (when the contents of the latest Heaney publication, or the implications of the Ulster Troubles for his work, were the staple interrogative fare). Aside from a handful of exceptions – including the interview by his friend Karl Miller (*Between the Lines*, 2000) and the *Paris Review* interview (Fall 1997) by his fellow poet Henri Cole – Heaney interviews, though fascinating in themselves, have been too narrow in scope to present a comprehensive portrait of the man and his times.

Writers are not necessarily articulate simply because language is their stock in trade. If poets spoke poetry, they would not need to write it; if the poems they wrote in the heat of creation attained instant perfection, they would not need to be repeatedly revised, rethought and rewritten. But Seamus Heaney – as anyone who has heard him interviewed on radio, or who has been the fortunate addressee of one of his handwritten letters or postcards will know – has the rare capacity to improvise sentences which are at once spontaneous and shapely, playful and profound, beautiful and true. The same extemporaneous eloquence is a feature of these interviews.

While it took some years for the book as a whole to accumulate, the individual tranches tended to be completed very quickly, whenever an opportunity for tranquil recollection unexpectedly presented itself and Heaney could concentrate on a chapter over a few days in Glanmore Cottage. His remarks combine the swiftness and

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immediacy of an oral interview with the coherent and considered qualities of good autobiographical writing. Patrick Kavanagh – among Seamus Heaney’s early exemplars as a poet – was always tempted as oral interviewee (and indeed when cross-examined in the law courts during the libel action he inadvisedly pressed) towards the impetuous overstatement and the reckless generality; yet even the volatile Kavanagh appreciated the importance of more measured responses: ‘When we – or at any rate when I – speak impromptuously, we tend to speak on the surface, expressing the surface irritations of the moment. Out of repose the truth springs.’ A similar point about interviews was made by the more guarded J. M. Coetzee: ‘Truth is related to silence, to reflection, to the practice of *writing*. Speech is not a fount of truth but a pale and provisional version of writing.’

My own role here is that of prompter rather than interrogator – the book was in no sense envisaged to be a ‘tell all’ account of Seamus Heaney’s life. I can think of no compelling reason why writers should feel obliged to discuss publicly the more private and intimate details of their lives or to air material which they plan to explore artistically. Yet never during my interviewing did I sense that he had withheld or suppressed anything that would be of significance to readers; and this is very much a book for readers of his oeuvre, on whose behalf I hope to have asked the kinds of questions which they might themselves have wished to pose.

The only stipulation made at the outset by the poet was that he would not engage in detailed analytical discussion of individual poems. In this respect, one is reminded again of J. M. Coetzee and also of another Nobel laureate, George Seferis. Alluding to the latter, his translator Edmund Keeley wrote: ‘However accommodating a poet may feel toward a student or critic or interviewer, if he is as wise as George Seferis, he will be reluctant to allow the richness of his work to be restricted by the kind of detailed commentary on specific poems that seems to carry the imprint of the poet’s approval, especially if this comment is meant for public consumption . . .’ J. M. Coetzee, having observed in an interview that the author of his novels ‘either isn’t me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me’, warned that any comment he might make on his own work would be ‘said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written’.

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This book does not pretend to be an authorized ‘reader’s guide’ to Seamus Heaney’s poems but rather a survey of his life, often using the poems as reference points. It offers a biographical context for the poems and a poetry-based account of the life. It reviews the life by re-viewing it from the perspective of Heaney’s late sixties: a life which has itself been monitored – sometimes almost as closely as his books have been reviewed – by critics and journalists. Seamus Deane, a friend since their schooldays, recalled – in his *New Yorker* memoir of Heaney – that he once sent a letter to the poet ‘with his name in quotation marks on the envelope – “Seamus Heaney”’: ‘He liked that’, Deane went on. ‘But Heaney was aware, too, of the chemistry that alters a writer who has gained fame and transforms him from what he is to what his reputation is.’ My hope is that this dialogue will go some distance towards unshackling the poet from the quotation marks and releasing him back into an unhampered life of his own:

And there I was, incredible to myself,
among people far too eager to believe me
and my story, even if it happened to be true.

Little wonder that Seamus Heaney identifies with ‘Borges and I’, a ‘parable’ by Jorge Luis Borges which begins: ‘It’s the other one, it’s Borges, that things happen to . . . News of Borges reaches me through the mail and I see his name on an academic ballot or in a biographical dictionary.’ In this book, the ‘other’ Heaney, the mythologized public figure, is reunited with the Heaney of the first person singular; the ‘intended, complete’ poet sits down to breakfast with the husband and householder; the artist of *Field Work* demonstrates the art of saving hay. We see how haphazard the writing process can be for a poet who does not immure himself in an ivory tower, how much the writing has had to compete with the living and breadwinning.

Seamus Heaney is himself given to the interrogative path to wisdom, in both prose and poetry, never shying from the big existential questions. One of the deepest sources of his profundity as a writer, and one of the characteristics which (along with a gift for recreating childhood epiphanies) he shares with Czesław Miłosz – the poet he identified as the ‘giant at my shoulder’ – is the need to respond to an insistent inner voice which asks ‘What did you do

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with your life, what did you do?' In *The Spirit Level*, he wonders aloud of an antecedent, the 'journeyman tailor' of 'At Banagher': 'Does he ever question what it all amounts to / Or ever will?' Similarly, he imagines his brother asking 'is this all? As it was / In the beginning, is now and shall be.' Questions hovering over other collections include 'What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?'; 'Where does spirit live?'; 'who's to know / How to read sorrow rightly, or at all?' And central to Heaney's endeavours have been the 'preoccupying questions' he raises on the first page of his first volume of prose, *Preoccupations*: 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?'

These are among the questions which recur here, explicitly and implicitly, as we follow in Seamus Heaney's footsteps on what he called, in his Nobel Prize speech, 'a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival – whether in one's poetry or one's life – turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination'. This book aims at a stocktaking, not a summing up: it retraces the stepping stones; but the stream itself is in full spate.

Dennis O'Driscoll

I

BEARINGS

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I

From Home to School



You've said that, having so often read that you were born on a farm in County Derry in 1939, you scarcely believe it any more. Can public life as a prominent writer rob you of your private life? If so, does poetry restore that missing life or at least provide some recompense?

Many of the poems are doing something like that. You end up dropping back through your own trapdoors, with a kind of 'they-can't-take-this-away-from-me' feeling. There's a paradox, of course, since the poems that provide the recompense are the very ones that turn your private possessions into images that are – as Yeats once said – 'all on show'. Yet a poem saves as well as shows. The remark about not believing I was born on a farm comes less from the poems than from reading too many 'Notes on Contributors' . . .

Before we talk about your books and how you came to write them, could I take a guided tour around your first place, Mossbawn?

We're talking about a one-storey, longish, lowish, thatched and whitewashed house, about thirty yards in from the main road. Parallel to the road. Somebody riding past on a bike would have seen it through a thorn hedge and a screen of young alder trees growing on a bank just behind the hedge. Beyond the alders was what we called 'the front garden' – a mini-field of sorts – and between the front garden and the house was a boxwood hedge. The lane, or loaning, went straight in from the road and formed one end of that front garden. So you walked down the lane, with

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beech trees on either side of you, and turned left on to 'the front street'. Then, if you stood facing the front door, you had on your right the front window of the 'kitchen' or living room; farther along on your right was the front window of the 'upper bedroom'. On your left, you had the front window of the 'lower bedroom' and, beyond that, the stable door – since the stable was 'under the roof' with the dwelling house.

What kind of traffic is on the road in the forties?

Cars, now and again. Buses, backwards and forwards, morning, noon, afternoon, evening, night. We were on the main route between Belfast and Magherafelt, Belfast and Cookstown, Belfast and Derry, and were very conscious of the buses since there was a bus stop at the end of the Broagh Road, not far from the end of the lane. There were bicycles too, a few regular pedallers and the occasional traveller from farther up or down the country. Kathleen Garvin going to her job in Castledawson. Paddy McNicholl going to do yardwork in Gribbin's of Anahorish. RUC men now and again. But the most spectacular was definitely Master Pollock, a schoolmaster, a recreational cyclist in shorts, pelting along on his 'racer' – he always created a bit of a stir. Then there were the lorries – coal lorries, cattle lorries, quarry lorries, sand lorries, door-to-door grocery vans and butchers' vans. Horses and carts, donkeys and carts even, though they were rare enough.

Was there a family car?

We never had a car when we lived at Mossbawn. All that had to wait until we moved to The Wood farm in the 1950s. At that stage my father learned to drive and we had a succession of big heavy saloons – big because the family was big, but also because he needed a big boot for ferrying bales of hay and bags of meal and newborn calves. At different times there was an Austin 16 and a Vauxhall Victor and a Humber Hawk, all second-hand. And of course all of them ended up hard to start and needing to be pushed, so that was one way the Heaney family used to come together, shoulder to shoulder, gathering momentum, waiting for the engine to fire.

How did your father manage to conduct his cattle-dealing business – travelling to farms and cattle fairs – before becoming a driver?

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He got a lot of lifts. When I was very young, his partner in the trade was another farmer-dealer called Patsy McWilliams, who lived three miles down the road at Toomebridge. Patsy had a car and was always pulling up on the front street or tooting his horn at the end of the lane. A bit later on, my father teamed up with another dealer from Maghera called Jim McKenna, who had a car I remember very well: a Triumph Mayflower – a rather smooth, well-polished grey saloon; classy for a cow-man. Jim drove me and my parents in the Mayflower when I went for the first time to St Columb's College, forty miles away in Derry. He also drove me home from college on the day I got the news that my brother Christopher had been killed in a road accident – at that bus stop, incidentally, at the end of the Broagh Road . . .

. . . which must have tainted the stop dreadfully for the family.

It did. But what was to be done? My mother still had to get to Castledawson.

That's where she did the shopping?

Yes. She was a bus-taker – whether for the mile and a half to 'the town', as we called the village, for the main weekly shopping, or to the larger shopping centres of Magherafelt or Cookstown. In each of those towns she had houses to call in: my grandfather and grandmother's place in New Row in Castledawson; my uncle Peter's – her brother's – in Magherafelt; and her sister Sarah's in Cookstown. So there was a social edge to the shopping outings, and a place to wait for 'the service bus', as it was called. It also meant that, as children, we could travel with her and then be left off in those family houses while she made her purchases.

Did your mother cycle sometimes?

Aunt Mary, my father's sister, who lived with us, was the bicycle woman. She would ride to Mass in Bellaghy on a Sunday. My mother might have used the bike very early on, but she was physically a heavier woman, more encumbered, less lightsome than Mary. When it came to shopping, there was a fair amount of walking involved. I suppose there were three ratings in the shopping experience: first of all, 'wee shops' out on their own in the country, like Biddy Gribbin's in Anahorish, or Kealey's at Hillhead, where

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the ad hoc shopping was done. Sweets and cigarettes. Tide-me-over purchases of cooking stuff. Then in Castledawson there were the fuller scale provisioners, places where – as I've said – the rations were bought week by week. Farther afield, in Magherafelt and Cookstown in one direction, and Ballymena in the other, there were the exotic drapery emporia and larger shoe shops. Suits of clothes for the children, new 'rig-outs' for the women, materials for curtains, purchases like wedding presents or finer household goods – those things usually involved special trips by bus.

But sugar, tea, bacon, lard, self-raising flour, dried fruit and other desultory things – wool or thread or pot-menders or shoelaces or the local papers – were shopped for closer to home. I often walked to Gribbin's and Kealey's and for that matter to Castledawson. My aunt Mary occasionally went on her bike, but never for the full rations. Her domain was more yard and dairy, milking and baking.

What about the travelling shop? Was there barter of any sort – trading of eggs, for example?

I'd forgotten about the eggs. Our travelling grocery van came from County Antrim and was run first by a man called McCartney, but 'the egg man' was our name for him. It wasn't a case of barter: he bought and paid for the eggs every week and my mother bought and paid for whatever she needed. I remember dry goods and tinned goods on little narrow shelves that ran round the inside of the van, fitted with laths to retain the cans and jars and bottles.

In latter days, incidentally, when people had their own cars and the mobile shop was being knocked out of business, some shopmen diversified by turning themselves into poteen distributors – their most faithful clientele would anyhow have included old bachelors living at the end of long lanes, ideal customers for a drop of the clear stuff. There was a big illicit trade going on in those days.

Any brand names – of groceries I mean, not poteen! – that continue to resonate?

Colman's mustard, in powder form, say; Camp Coffee – liquid 'essence of coffee', with a wonderful illustration on the label of a British officer in full regalia, kilt and all that, being served his coffee by an Indian batman. HP sauce. Tate and Lyle's Golden Syrup

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in broad round tins. Biscuits: Arrowroot and Rich Tea, a great luxury when buttered. Saxa Salt and indeed Carrick Salt, from Carrickfergus. The Carrick Salt packet used to have this great illustration of a woman running after a hen, trying to throw salt on its tail – the belief being that salt on the tail would halt a hen in flight.

*Maybe we should store away the groceries and resume the tour . . .
When I reach the farmyard, what outbuildings do I see? What's
inside them? What's in the yard?*

Well, as you come down the lane, you're looking into the first farm building, the one we called simply 'the shed'. It stood at the gable end of the house, a wooden-framed, zinc-roofed job, open at one end, the other walls made from flattened-out tar barrels. Old tar barrels, for some reason, were in plentiful supply. They'd had the bottoms knocked out of them and were unriveted and unrolled so as to make a tin panel that could then be nailed up on a wooden frame. Inside the shed there might be some bags of grain or potatoes or fertilizer or a farrowing crate. It had a clay floor. A smell of old meal. Implements in the corners. Swallows' nests up on the rafters.

And besides the shed?

Walk on with the gable of the house on your left and the shed on your right and you're into the back yard. One side of that is defined by the dwelling house and opposite, on the other side, say fifteen yards away, you have the byre and – later on – a pig house. The byre was an old structure, a cow house, no windows; cow stalls on your left when you went in, with room for four cows; stalls again on your right, although these weren't used for cattle in my time, more for storage of fodder. Beast smells and manure smells. A 'groop', as it was called, a sunk trench in the concrete floor running to a back outlet, to drain the piss and catch the cow dung. Cleaning the byre involved barrowing out the contents of the groop, sluicing it down and rebedding it with clean straw. Then wheeling that barrowful of stuff out to the dunghill, or the *duchull*, as we pronounced it – to rhyme more or less with Ahoghill, except that that won't be much of a help to anybody who doesn't know the pronunciation of Ahoghill . . .