

## *Introduction*

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In later life, the phrase ‘born on a farm in County Derry in 1939’ made Seamus Heaney roll his eyes. He had read it so often in the many thousands of ‘Notes on Contributors’ featuring his biography that it had become both overly familiar and unreal. In fact, the outline of Heaney’s biography is so well known that it has become part of his poetic mythology – the gifted son of Bellaghy elevated to winner of the Nobel Prize for literature and international acclaim. From the outset, Heaney’s work emerged from and merged into a complex set of historical and political contextual circumstances. The thirty-two original essays in this volume combine historicizing scholarship with critical depth and insightful new readings of Heaney’s work.

Over the course of a career spanning fifty years, Heaney became one of the most celebrated poets writing in the English language and was also a distinguished essayist, playwright, translator, professor and literary critic. His publications include twelve volumes of original poetry (plus four Selected Poems), three volumes of prose (plus one Selected edition), two plays, two anthologies (edited with Ted Hughes), thirteen translations (including *Beowulf* and the posthumous *Aeneid Book VI*) and numerous limited editions and broadsides.<sup>1</sup>

Unusually, Heaney’s poetry is both critically acclaimed and popular with the general reader, appearing on syllabi across the globe and translated into more than twenty-seven languages.<sup>2</sup> His work resonates with a wide readership outside of Ireland and has influenced poets around the world, from the United States (where he encountered and taught many prominent poets) to the Caribbean and Japan. During his lifetime, Heaney received many honours, culminating in the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995 ‘for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past’.<sup>3</sup> This citation acknowledges Heaney’s position not just as a pre-eminent international poet but also as cultural conservator and conscience of his society.

In the poem 'Traditions', Heaney recalls the scene in Joyce's *Ulysses* in which Leopold Bloom is challenged about his nationality – 'What is your nation?' – and replies, 'Ireland. I was born here. Ireland' (*WO* 21). Heaney inhabited and wrote out of the real island of Ireland – an island that can be mapped as a topographical, historical, political and cultural entity. Yet the map that dominated Heaney's schoolroom showed only the six counties of Northern Ireland (*SS* 246), the site of a bloody thirty-year conflict (1968–98) known as 'the Troubles'. This conflict, variously defined as a civil war, a sectarian conflict or a hangover of British colonialism, underpins much of Heaney's life and work. In Heaney's prose he describes 'the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation [that] followed the boundaries of the land' (*P* 20). This 'realm of division' is inscribed by place names drawn from the Irish, Scottish and English languages, such as Anahorish, Broagh and Castledawson, that mark it as contested territory. For Heaney, this territory is deeply connected to his sense of history – both ancient and modern – and of language as a tool of excavation.

Heaney's experience as a Northern Irish writer from a nationalist, Catholic background informed his work from the beginning. In the 'mud grenades' of the threatening frogs in 'Death of a Naturalist' (*DN* 3–4), the pen 'snug as a gun' in 'Digging' (*DN* 1), and the constable's bicycle that 'ticked, ticked, ticked' in 'A Constable Calls' (*N* 67), it is possible to sense the undercurrents of violence that would erupt in the late 1960s. Yet Heaney resisted the public's urge to look to him as a spokesman during the Troubles. He wanted neither to be co-opted to defend republican violence nor to be part of what he called 'the good news brigade' endorsing the status quo of the Northern Irish polity. In 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' (*N* 50–3), he captures the ambivalence expressed by many of his fellow poets about commenting on 'the Irish thing'. Echoing W. B. Yeats's search for 'befitting emblems of adversity', a decisive turning point for Heaney came when, as he writes in 'Feeling into Words', the 'problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (*P* 56). Although some critics ascribed to Heaney an unwavering stance of non-intervention on the subject of Northern Irish politics, he agonized over every incident and each political statement.

W. B. Yeats, the 'Everest' of Irish poetry, looms large in Heaney criticism, particularly after Robert Lowell's 1975 review of *North* anointing Heaney as 'the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats'.<sup>4</sup> Heaney engaged extensively with Yeats as an 'exemplar' in lectures and essays as well as in his Nobel lecture, 'Crediting Poetry'. Since Heaney's death in August

2013, there have been many more comparisons made between Ireland's two Nobel prize-winning poets (including the fact that 1939 was the year of Yeats's death and Heaney's birth). Both poets wrestled with the responsibilities of the artist to the demands of violent conflict, both resisted the call of propaganda and both became spokesmen for a civic and cultural agenda in public life. But examining the differences in biography, history, poetics and politics in Yeats and Heaney underscores the importance of contextual criticism in understanding their work. Heaney is not a 'Catholic Yeats' repackaged for troubled times and a new generation of post-nationalist Irish readers. His work is most fruitfully read in the context of the personal, historical and political circumstances of its composition.

Heaney lived in a time of accelerated judgement and instant celebrity. Arguably, he faced greater scrutiny in his own lifetime than any other Irish writer. His reputation for generosity and affability fed a relentless appetite for public readings, media appearances, openings and lectures. As Bernard O'Donoghue points out in his comparison of Yeats and Heaney in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, when Yeats won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, there was no critical study of his work in existence.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, since his 1966 debut *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney's work has emerged into the full glare of critical attention and when he won the Nobel in 1995, there were countless monographs, articles, edited collections, interviews and reviews extant. Indeed, when the *Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* was published in 2009, no other living poet had ever been the subject of such an appraisal. Attempts to sum up his achievement and legacy will soon mirror the industrial scale of critical evaluations of his work during his lifetime.

At the time of publication, there is as yet no official biography of Seamus Heaney,<sup>6</sup> although *Stepping Stones*, the linked interviews by the late Dennis O'Driscoll published in 2008, is as close as the poet came to writing an autobiography. Many of the essays in this collection include insights gleaned from *Stepping Stones*, but it is important to remember that these are Heaney's (written) reflections, composed in hindsight. In fact, Heaney guided perceptions and assessments of his own work not only in this invaluable collaboration with O'Driscoll but also in the many interviews given over the course of half a century of a writing life, almost all of it in the public eye.

Heaney's poem 'Exposure' highlights his own ambivalence about living in the public eye and perhaps hints at one of the tropes of Heaney criticism – that he was over-exposed. The title also suggests the revelation of hidden things while the poem itself explores the need for artistic

camouflage, 'Taking protective colouring / from bole and bark, feeling / every wind that blows' (*N* 73). Heaney was of course much photographed and in the early part of his career was also a regular television presenter on BBC NI and later on RTÉ. Over the course of his life, he also sat for at least ten portraits. The first, Edward McGuire's 1974 portrait (now in the Ulster Museum), appeared on the back cover of *North* in 1975, breaking Faber and Faber's house style which Heaney reminds us 'had never featured author photographs or jacket art'. Of the artists who followed McGuire, Heaney said, they were confronted with an older face and 'a sitter more used to being inspected' (*SS* 329).

*Seamus Heaney in Context* occupies a unique moment in Heaney criticism. Appearing just over seven years since the poet's death, and eleven years after the *Cambridge Companion*, it considers the contexts of Heaney's work while his literary reputation is not finally settled. This is not to suggest that Heaney's reputation will fluctuate wildly; rather, it is to draw attention to the relationship between the works in print, the writer's archive and future publishing projects. The unpublished correspondence acquired by Emory University in 2003 and the vast literary archive donated by the Heaney family to the National Library of Ireland in 2011 will continue to change the landscape of Heaney criticism. *Seamus Heaney in Context* joins the critical conversation at what might be called Heaney's archival moment, a moment that contributes to the formation of the writer's afterlife in print. As his work enters its posthumous phase, new projects like a collected poems, prose and letters will inevitably shape our understanding of Heaney's place in the pantheon.<sup>7</sup> The essays published here offer intersecting themes and critical concerns in the current terrain of Heaney studies while suggesting new directions for reading Heaney's poetry in future contexts.

In seven overlapping sections, *Seamus Heaney in Context* establishes the historical, conceptual and literary criteria through which Heaney's work can be usefully understood. The first two sections, 'Mapping' and 'Influences and Traditions', develop Heaney's much-quoted line that he became a poet when his 'roots were crossed with his reading' (*P* 37). These essays map the places that featured most prominently in Heaney's imaginative landscape as well as the literary influences that shaped his development. Sections III and IV, 'Poetics' and 'Publishing', feature discussions of the poet's craft and the contexts of his literary production in print. Sections V and VI, 'Frameworks' and 'Critical Contexts', explore the intellectual frameworks and ideologies that informed his writing and reception. The final section, 'Legacy', examines the material traces of Heaney's legacy in

public exhibitions, contemporary Irish poetry and the paper trail of the archive itself.

## I Mapping

Mapping the world of Heaney's poetry involves real places, mythical timeframes and the spaces of the imagination. We move from Mossbawn to the 'man-killing parishes' of Jutland to the utopian 'Republic of Conscience'. Images of the real and the imagined Ireland permeate Heaney's work; one critic estimates that three quarters of his poems are set within a 10 mile radius of his birthplace. Heaney's places of writing, from Bellaghy to Belfast, and from Glanmore to Dublin, each mark a stepping stone in claiming his poetic territory. Since Ireland as a location and a theme has been covered so thoroughly in Heaney criticism, it is not treated as a discrete chapter here. Instead, the opening sequence of chapters situates Heaney's work in four other important geographical contexts. Heaney's description of his life as 'a series of ripples widening out from an original centre'<sup>8</sup> is reflected in essays that move beyond Ireland to Scotland and England before considering Eastern Europe and America.

Looking across the Irish Sea to Scotland, Patrick Crotty accounts for Heaney's intense linguistic engagement and personal empathy with Scottish writers. Apart from Heaney's admiration for Robert Burns, Robert Henryson and the anthologized Jacobite poems of his youth, Crotty explores his close ties to contemporary Scottish poets, especially Hugh MacDiarmid. In fact, shortly before his death, Heaney was working on a translation (and animation) from the Scots of Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables*. Continuing south, John McAuliffe examines how England figures in Heaney's work and the continuing applicability of his 1976 essay 'Englands of the Mind' (*P* 150–69). McAuliffe discusses how Heaney's poems engage with English places and poets, as settings and exemplars for younger poets such as Simon Armitage and Alice Oswald. Moving outside the framework of Britain and Ireland, Margaret Greaves contextualizes Heaney's fascination with Eastern Europe in the intersecting political climates of the Cold War and the Troubles. She demonstrates how Heaney turns to Eastern European poets to sketch crucial differences between the 'Irish' lyric and the 'Anglo-American' lyric – a move that chimes with a broader Cold War-era tendency to justify lyric poetry in political terms. Finally, Sarah Bennett considers the profound effect of Heaney's academic sojourns in America – initially at Berkeley in California in 1970–1 and then for several decades as a distinguished

visiting professor at Harvard. She shows that, despite the dearth of overt references to America in his poetry, Heaney's American experience is reflected in his assessment of American poetics together with his public statements and personal relationships.

## II Influences and Traditions

'Influences and Traditions' challenges Richard Ellmann's famous assessment of influence that 'writers move upon other writers not as genial successors but as violent expropriators . . . they do not borrow, they override'.<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom later adds Freudian psychodrama to this model of misreading that informs his theory of the anxiety of influence.<sup>10</sup> The chapters that follow show Heaney less as a 'violent expropriator' than as an intertextual 'corroborator' with his precursors in the construction of his own literary pedigree and in his exploration of form.

In Heaney's essay 'Something to Write Home About', he talks about growing up 'in-between' not just the two traditions in Northern Ireland but also between the English and Irish literary traditions (*FK* 53). Heaney created his own lineage of ancestral poets offering sustaining models of form, rhythm and subject matter. This section is necessarily selective, and difficult editorial decisions had to be made. For example, Heaney's endorsements of Patrick Kavanagh's affirmatively parochial stance and Robert Frost's veneration of nature are well established and therefore not revisited here. I also excluded the influence of Heaney's friendships with contemporary poets such as Lowell, Hughes, Longley, Miłosz, Walcott and Muldoon (although many of these poets feature in other chapters). Instead, the essays examine Heaney's construction of his own heritable poetic tradition through a consideration of the poetics of Wordsworth, Hardy and Eliot as well as new assessments of Yeats and MacNeice.

Matthew Campbell begins by assessing Heaney's poetic chain of continuity with (mainly male) literary precursors through what he called a 'primal reach into the physical'. Focusing on Wordsworth as Heaney's indispensable figure of Romantic poetics, Campbell's chapter compares their gendered poetry of origin and selfhood. Ron Schuchard goes on to show how Thomas Hardy helped Heaney to define and redefine his own aesthetic of the ordinary world against the magical and religious traditions of Yeats and Eliot. Heaney's full engagement with the moderns was accompanied by what Schuchard calls 'regular retreats into his Hardy haven'. Stephen Regan looks at the ways in which Heaney learns from Eliot, including how he is alerted to his own complex relationship with

tradition and later develops an acute appreciation of what Eliot memorably termed 'the auditory imagination'. In Margaret Mills Harper's consideration of Heaney and Yeats, she moves away from the idea of influence to one of poetic confluence, tracing the connections between two surprising poem pairings. She proposes that intertextuality moves in multiple directions so that we now encounter Heaney's Yeats as much as we consider Yeats as a precursor to the younger poet. Catriona Clutterbuck concludes this section with her close reading of Heaney's engagement with the poetry of Louis MacNeice, particularly in its renewal of the relationship between immutable reality and the alterity of dream life.

### III Poetics

Heaney's mastery of the lyric form and his distinctive poetic style evolved from the narrow stanzas of the bog poems through the longer, agricultural rhythms of the 'Glanmore Sonnets' into 'a poetics of airy listening' in his later career. This section explores the stylistic innovations – the forms, sounds and shapes of Heaney's poetry – that have contributed so much to his wide critical readership. John Redmond reads the formal evolution of Heaney's poetry as a partial return to the kind of poet he was in his early career. Devoting most attention to the final two collections, *District and Circle* and *Human Chain*, Redmond argues that in returning to the 'weight' of his early work, Heaney is in search of a style that is 'universal and permanent'. Bernard O'Donoghue picks up his incisive discussion of Heaney's poetic language where his 1994 book, *The Language of Seamus Heaney*, left off, just after *Seeing Things*. Here he recognizes a shift in Heaney's use of linguistic terminology in the later work to show how the instinctive observation of objects and experiences underlies language: what he calls 'raids on the prearticulate'. Heaney's work as the master elegist informs Brendan Corcoran's piece on how the elegiac poems represent and comprehend the ways in which loss defines the contours of human life. Starting with Heaney's childhood intimacy with death, Corcoran considers how the ordering principle of 'grief and metre' allows Heaney's poetry to engage and challenge death's rupturing force. Discussing Heaney's deployment of music and its cognate terms – song, chorus, rhythm, note – Simon Kress explores how Heaney adopts the figure of music to reckon with what it means to be an Irish lyric poet. Vona Groarke throws down a trail of fairytale breadcrumbs in her piece on Heaney's nouns. From anvil to underground, from Conway Stewart to harvest bow, from skylight to tinsmith's scoop, she shows how these

nouns in their respective poems resonate as a kind of linguistic and imagistic tuning fork in Heaney's work.

#### IV Publishing

Shortly after Karl Miller published three of Heaney's poems in the *New Statesman* in 1964, Heaney received a letter from the editor of Faber and Faber, Charles Monteith, inviting him to submit a manuscript. Heaney later said that it was 'like getting a letter from God the Father'. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney describes the moment when he received his six free copies of *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966: 'The actual book looked very good: a lime-green and solid-pink dust jacket, and on the back a list of the Faber poets. Fabulous names: Auden, Eliot, Hughes, Larkin, Lowell, MacNeice, Spender' (SS 61). This section examines the literary and material publishing contexts of Heaney's work, beginning with Heather Clark's account of collaboration and competition in Heaney's earliest writing group: Philip Hobsbawn's loose confederation of poets known as the 'Belfast Group'. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma deepens our understanding of how Heaney's engagement with the publication of his own books in material form both expressed and furthered his faith in literature. Drawing extensively on archival material, Marilyn Richtarik's essay on Field Day takes us back into the 1980s with a renewed sense of how Brian Friel, Seamus Deane and Heaney conceived of Field Day's intervention in the Irish cultural landscape. Aidan O'Malley examines Heaney's theory and practice of translation across texts and languages, suggesting how Frost's notion of the 'sound of sense' lay both at the root of his poetry and his mode of 'impure translation'. As a result, translational fidelity, for Heaney, privileged the uncovering of echoes that might capture and recreate the sound of the original text.

#### V Frameworks

These chapters consider the wider social-historical frameworks that were often experienced simultaneously in Heaney's life and work. As such, the discussions here of Heaney's Catholicism, and his multiple roles as a teacher, broadcaster and translator, subtend the predominant context of the political situation in Northern Ireland from the Troubles to the peace process. Kieran Quinlan follows Heaney's progression from faithful and engaged Catholic to a more sceptical stance in the years following Vatican II. Reading *Station Island* (1984) as the key volume in which Heaney's



disbelief is fully acknowledged, he nevertheless shows that Heaney remained steeped in the language, rituals and transcendental mysteries of Catholicism even when he was no longer a believer. Florence Impens examines Heaney's fifty-year engagement with classical texts, whether as adaptations or as intertextual allusions in his own poems. Ultimately, Impens argues that Heaney revisits Ireland as a classical and secular space reflecting political, social and cultural changes on the island. In an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977, Heaney described how the poems in *North* 'arose out of a necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form' to the 'urgency' he felt regarding Northern Ireland's political complexity in the mid-1970s.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Allison explores Heaney's alert awareness of sectarianism and the different kinds of political poems that form his aesthetic response to thirty years of the Troubles. A professional teacher before he was a professional poet, Heaney was acutely conscious of different kinds of learning. Rosie Lavan's essay considers the interaction between Heaney's roles as broadcaster and as educator as well as his enduring commitment to the 'advancement of learning'. Finally, Richard Rankin Russell evaluates Heaney's interest in both war and peace in poems that address the two world wars as well as the conflict in Northern Ireland. He concludes with the Heaney of reconciliation in the elegiac and affirmative poems of his last volume, *Human Chain*.

## VI Critical Contexts

Turning to the critical reception of Heaney's work in several key areas, this section begins with Laura O'Connor's contextualization of Heaney's gendered poetry and feminist responses to it. O'Connor places Heaney in the Irish patrilineal canon and then examines the *aisling* (dream-vision poem) as a flashpoint both for the critical controversy surrounding *North* (1975) and for the ensuing feminist critique of patriarchal poetry and of gendered nationalist iconography. Kevin Whelan's essay complicates readings of Heaney's poetry that divide it into two phases of bog and body and later, air and spirit. He examines a third phase of late Heaney poems that no longer treat body or spirit as a binary but explore the catalytic relationship between them. Justin Quinn draws attention to the dynamic of Heaney's different constituencies (Irish, British and American), and the ways in which these critical audiences affected his work. Quinn also considers how the Cold War conditioned the postcolonial reading of Heaney's poems, especially in the United States. Expanding the context of contemporary theories of postcolonialism, Deepika Bahri's essay situates Heaney's

work in theories of transnational poetics ranging from the border to the broader world of global politics. Finally, Nicholas Allen argues for a reconsideration of water and liquidity in Heaney's work as a counterbalance to the familiar trope of earthiness. Reading a series of texts across the breadth of his career, Allen engages Heaney's work with critical conversations in archipelagic literature.

## VII Legacy

This section traces Heaney's impact as a 'smiling public man' in Ireland's cultural life and begins to consider his legacy. Fintan O'Toole opens this discussion by remembering Heaney in the National Museum of Ireland in 2013, speaking as a public figure who wished 'not to be part of "Irish heritage", not to be "inherited" as an asset but to be "handed down" with the sensation of human contact'. In a close reading of an early poem, 'The Last Mummer', O'Toole examines the tension in Heaney's work between the public need for a response to the political crisis and the private need to be true to his poetic impulse. In showing the importance of Heaney's archive to new interpretations of his work, Rand Brandes follows the paper trail of the archives from the prenatal attic to the postmortem reading room and into the afterlife of textual studies. Geraldine Higgins draws on the experience of curating two exhibitions on Heaney to chart the transition from the private space of the writer's room to the public place of the exhibition while probing the relationship between texts, contexts and objects in Heaney's work. The final essay in the volume, by Chris Morash, considers Heaney's legacy as a poet and global public figure. Moving from the outpouring of grief in newspapers and elegies written by his poet-peers, Morash discusses 'Clearances 3', better known as 'When all the others were away at Mass', voted in 2015 Ireland's favourite poem of the past one hundred years.

The central questions of *Seamus Heaney in Context* are Heaney's own, raised in his first volume of prose, *Preoccupations* (1980): '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?' (*P* 13). Heaney spent his writing life wrestling with these questions, but as the essays here demonstrate, the answers are flexible rather than fixed. The manifold contexts of Heaney's 'life and times' enrich our understanding of the poetry and ultimately, it is as poet or *file* that he asks to be judged. In the title essay of *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney sets out the terms by which poetry itself must be measured:

The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event . . . In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed. (GT 107)

### Notes

- 1 Rand Brandes and Michael J. Durkan, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography 1959–2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008.) Brandes and Durkan list over 2,000 items in this bibliography (Brandes is currently updating this edition). See also Rand Brandes, ‘Secondary Sources: A Gloss on the Critical Reception of Seamus Heaney 1965–1993’, *Colby Quarterly*, 30/1 (March 1994), 63–77.
- 2 See the website of the Seamus Heaney estate: [www.seamusheaney.com](http://www.seamusheaney.com).
- 3 Swedish Academy, ‘The Nobel Prize in Literature 1995’, press release, 5 October 1995.
- 4 Robert Lowell, ‘Books of the Year’, *Observer*, 14 December 1975, p. 19.
- 5 Bernard O’Donoghue (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 6 In November 2017, the *Irish Times* announced that Faber and Faber had appointed Fintan O’Toole to write Heaney’s official biography.
- 7 Forthcoming publications include *Selected Letters*, ed. Christopher Reid; an official biography by Fintan O’Toole; and a *Collected Poems*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue and Rosie Lavan. Also of note is the BBC2 Arena Documentary, *Seamus Heaney and the Music of What Happens*, dir. Adam Low (2019).
- 8 Seamus Heaney, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 75’, interviewed by Henri Cole in May 1994, *Paris Review*, 144 (Fall 1997), [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney).
- 9 Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 3. For further discussion of ‘influence’, see Neil Corcoran, ‘Question Me Again: Reflections on W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney’, *Yeats Annual*, 18 (2013), 215–38.
- 10 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 153.
- 11 Seamus Deane, ‘Unhappy and at Home: Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Crane Bag*, 1/1 (Spring 1977), 61–7.

