As a student of the National University of Ireland at Cork in the early 1980s, I had the privilege of meeting and becoming acquainted with Seamus Heaney who frequently gave special lectures and poetry readings on campus. This was before he received major international recognition (including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995) for his literary works, which are imbued with a profound lyrical intensity. Such international fame and acclaim never changed the essence of the man who had a profound sense of his own self and the contexts that shaped his life. I say so because on the memorable occasions I met him during his several visits to Japan, I clearly could recognize the same person I knew from my student days: a poet who was first and foremost a human being with tremendous dignity — this sense of the ordinary tinged with the extraordinary signifies the hallmark of his greatness. It should also be noted that Seamus Heaney nurtured a profound interest and fascination with Japan and its unique cultural heritage; the Japanese Novelist, Kenzaburō Ōe 「大江 健三郎」, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994, was among his valued
circle of friends — coincidentally, Heaney was granted the Nobel Prize for Literature the following year.

In 2009, as part of the special events in Ireland to celebrate the poet’s 70th birthday, the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ (Radio Telefís Éireann) made a biographical documentary on Seamus Heaney that contextualized his literary brilliance in terms of his astute sense of place — the farmer’s son from a small, frugal family farm in Country Derry on the beautiful, but unrelenting, Northern Ireland coastline. Towards its conclusion, Heaney, who died on 30 August 2013 aged 74, was asked whether anything in his work seemed appropriate to him as an epitaph. He was reticent initially but, when courteously enticed, quoted what he had translated from *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles when his friend and mentor the renowned Polish poet Czesław Milosz died in 2004. Telling the story of the old king who dies and vanishes into the earth, the play’s Messenger says in Heaney’s version: ‘Wherever that man went, he went gratefully.’ That journeying, said Heaney, would be fitting for him too.

The appreciation is not so much for departing from life, but for the work honourably done during the course of that life — the recurring theme of the heroic code not just in Greek classical drama but also in Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially in the epic *Beowulf*. Heaney suffered a stroke in 2006 and his volume *Human Chain* (2010) is painfully shadowed by ageing and mortality. Yet it is also deeply informed by a spirit of resilience and acceptance and, in his elegiac love poem ‘Chanson d’Aventure’, which describes his ambulance journey to hospital in the company of his wife Marie, by the sense of renewal and new reward, even at a mature stage, in human affection.

Mortality and domestic relations, cordiality and obligation, had preoccupied Heaney throughout his work, and were frequently expressed together. One of his most emblematic poems, ‘Mid-Term Break’, from his
collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), deals with the death of his younger brother Christopher in a road accident in 1953 at the tender age of 4, when Heaney was still a schoolboy; that loss is returned to again in a superb late poem 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' in *District and Circle* (2006), which is also tinged with inklings of the poet's own encroaching mortality.

The tragic loss of life in the period known as the Troubles (*Na Trioblóidi*) (1969 - 1998) features in numerous Heaney poems, notably in *North* (1975), where, in the now famous sequence of 'bog poems', they are brought into alignment with the iron-age bodies recovered from the bogs of Jutland, which Heaney had encountered in P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People* (1965). Glob (1911 - 1985) was a renowned Danish archaeologist who worked as the Director General of Museums and Antiquities of Denmark and Director of the National Museum in Copenhagen. In the collections *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984), Heaney encounters phantoms. Through these poems, and others, he acquired the recognition as one of the great elegists of modern English literature.

Heaney was also an excellent poet of family cohesion and, notably, of enduring marital love. There are numerous poems of filial affection, for both mother and father, and wonderful poems for his children and, finally, his granddaughter. One of his finest poems, 'Sunlight', which is in *North* (1975), was written for his aunt Mary, who played an integral role in his upbringing. 'Chanson d'Aventure' marked a late stage in the spousal relationship he had vividly portrayed for years after his marrying Marie Devlin (a fellow schoolteacher) in 1965: from the difficulties evoked in 'Summer Home' in *Wintering Out* (1972), a poem of remorse and critical self-reflection, through to the stabilities, accommodations, supportiveness, sources of strength and erotic tenderness and arousal recorded in such poems as 'The Skunk' and 'An Afterwards' in *Field Work* (1979), and 'The Underground' and 'La Toilette' in *Station Island* (1984).

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In its bleak treatment of the Troubles (*Na Trioblóidí*), Heaney's poetry is full of broken things; however, it is also poetry of the continuities that sustain us against mortality. His resourceful, disciplined equilibrium finds one of its best expressions at the end of 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher' in *Station Island* (1984), when the poet-parent hands the emblematic kite on to his sons:

Before the kite plunges down into the wood
and this line goes useless
take in your two hands, boys, and feel
the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief.
You were born fit for it.
Stand in here in front of me
and take the strain.

The way his work faces the worst but steadies itself against it must be the greatest single reason for Heaney's universal appeal. He presumably had his repute in mind when he referred to himself in that same collection as a 'poet, lucky poet'.

The eldest of nine children of Margaret (née McCann) and Patrick Heaney, a Catholic small farmer and cattle dealer, he was born at Mossbawn farm near the village of Castledawson in County Derry. Seamus was an early beneficiary of the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act which made it possible for him to attend the prestigious St Columb's College in the city of Derry, where his contemporaries included the politician and Nobel Peace Laureate John Hume and the renowned critic and academic Seamus Deane. He studied English language and literature at Queen's University Belfast, graduating with a first-class honours degree in 1961. He taught English at secondary level for a short period of time in Belfast and joined the writers' workshop known as the Group initiated by the academic, poet and critic Philip Hobsbaum (1932 - 2005), who lectured
at the English Department of Queen’s University. After Hobsbaum left the university, Heaney was appointed to a lectureship in English in 1966 and he became chairman of the Group, whose other members included the poet Michael Longley and the writer Bernard MacLaverty. An important impetus to the burgeoning of poetry and creative writing in the Northern Ireland, it would eventually also include the poets Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and Ciaran Carson.

In 1964, Karl Miller published three of Heaney’s poems in the New Statesman, where they were observed by the Northern Irish-born Charles Monteith, one of the publishing directors of the renowned literary publishers Faber and Faber. When he received Monteith’s letter requesting a manuscript, it was, Heaney commented, ‘like getting a letter from God the Father’. Two years later, Faber and Faber published Death of a Naturalist. It received exceptional acclaim, and Heaney almost immediately became a poet keenly watched, followed and imitated. By then, he had married Marie Devlin, with whom he has had two sons Michael and Christopher and a daughter Catherine-Ann.

Heaney took part in some of the early protest marches following the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) assault on the civil rights march by Catholics in Derry on 5 October 1968, which hallmarked the period of conflict in Northern Ireland between the unionist and nationalist ideologies, and he contributed insightful essays on this issue of religion-based inequality to The Listener. This magazine was published by the BBC from 1929 until it cessation in 1991.

Seamus Heaney spent a fullfilling time at the University of California at Berkeley during 1970 and 1971, where he got to know the contemporary poetry of America’s West Coast. On his return to Northern Ireland, he resigned from his post at Queen’s, became a freelance writer and moved with his family to the Republic of Ireland. They lived in a rented cottage in
a relatively remote and remarkably beautiful part of County Wicklow, on what had once been a vast estate owned by the family of the playwright and poet John Millington Synge (1871 - 1909) who is famed for his dramatic masterpiece *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). The Glanmore cottage was to prove, both at that time and later, after the Heaneys purchased it in 1988, not just an oasis from a busy Dublin life — it had no telephone — but also a source of poetic inspiration. It was the secluded site of a great deal of often nocturnal and almost trancelike poetic composition. *Glanmore Sonnets* and *Glanmore Revisited* are the most obvious products of that place and state as well as an appropriate testimony to it. When the Reigning Emperor and Empress of Japan made a state visit to Ireland in 2005, they specifically requested to journey to Heaney’s residence at Glanmore to meet with him there in the beautiful natural surrounds of the Wicklow Mountains — Ireland’s Lake District.

Inevitably, the move to the Republic of Ireland by a prominent Irish Catholic writer from Northern Ireland was viewed as having emblematic significance; and in ‘Exposure’, which appears at the end of *North* (1975), Heaney figures himself as ‘a wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre’. He spent several years hosting a books programme on Irish RTÉ radio and in 1975 resumed teaching again, this time at Carysfort College, a Catholic teacher-training college in Blackrock, Dublin for primary school teachers. Heaney bought a house in the city — ‘by a famous strand,’ he says in a poem: that is, Sandymount, along which Stephen Dedalus walks in an early episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

Heaney published *Preoccupations* in 1980, his first of several collections of critical essays. His literary criticism generally assumed great authority and gravitas. Heaney commented in richly rewarding ways on the works of Alighieri Dante (c. 1265 - 1321), William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850), John Clare (1793 - 1864), William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939), Sylvia

Developing an international reputation, notably in North America, Heaney initiated a long and enduring connection with Harvard University, where he had a visiting professorship in 1979. He held the Boylston chair of rhetoric and oratory there from 1985 to 1997, teaching one semester a year; he thereafter continued the nexus in a less formal way. He was professor of poetry at Oxford University from 1989 to 1994 and the resulting lectures were collected as The Redress of Poetry in 1995. In that year he won the Nobel Prize in literature. During his Nobel lecture, he dwelt at some length on the politics of Northern Ireland, condemning both 'the atrocious nature of the IRA's campaign of bombings and killings' and 'the ruthlessness of the British army on occasions like Bloody Sunday in Derry on 30 January 1972 when 14 unarmed protesters lost their lives during an onslaught of indiscriminate shooting'. Heaney's other accolades over the years included the T. S. Eliot, Forward, David Cohen and (twice) Whitbread prizes. In 1996 he was made a commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. In 2004, Queen's University Belfast officially inaugurated its Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry.

There is no doubt Heaney took great delight in his success. He was an adept, even charismatic, performer before an audience — as a reader of his own poems in academic auditoriums, as a public lecturer, and as a radio and television broadcaster; and he certainly understood, from very early on, the mechanisms involved in the creation and maintenance of a successful public reputation. In a sometimes envious literary world this led to some resentfulness, notably upon the 2008 publication of Stepping Stones in which Heaney, already a much-interviewed poet, discussed his life and career with his friend and fellow poet Dennis O'Driscoll (1954 - 2012).

The book was clearly intended as the alternative to an
autobiography, and if Heaney's way with his readership was absolutely not Samuel Beckett's or even Heaney's friend Brian Friel's ways of withdrawal and privacy, the book is, in the event, an exercise not in egotism or hubris but in self-questioning, self-definition, self-analysis, self-evaluation and, only finally, self-justification. As such, it suggests Heaney's conception of his role as a writer always included a strong element of the scholastic. What he commended in the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892 - 1941) 'the good force of creative mind at work in the light of conscience' — can be much-admired in him too.

When he wrote about the poet William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939) in an early essay — one of many in which Heaney returns to the work of his great Irish poetic mentor — he used the word 'exemplary' of that poet's demeanour at a particular point in his life, and Heaney's own life had the character of an experiment that was also available for scrutiny. For all the 'luck' he enjoyed throughout his career, it was a life lived with a strong awareness of social and cultural responsibility. If the even-handedness of some of his explicit political remarks could seem almost diplomatic at times (international politicians, including former US President William (Bill) J. Clinton, have a propensity for citing his works), he was also, when the occasion demanded, a forceful articulator of an Irish political conscience before a primarily English audience. This was notably the case at a prize-giving in 1988, at which he admonished the English press for their reporting of Northern Ireland, and in the last of his Oxford lectures, 'Frontiers of Writing', in which he analysed his disconcerted feelings when he resided in a Tory minister's room in an Oxford college during the period of the IRA hunger strikes in 1981 at the Maze Prison in the outskirts of Lisburn in County Down.

Heaney's major public artistic commitment in Ireland was to the Field Day Theatre Company, of which, along with the playwrights
Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, he became a director. Formed initially to stage contemporary plays outside the commercial theatre, Field Day developed, through various publications, into a controversial agency of provocation in the milieu of Irish cultural politics. In 1983 it published Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*, a translation from the medieval Irish tale *Buile Suibhne*, and in 1990 it staged *The Cure at Troy*, his version of *Philoctetes* by Sophocles. Both make clear, if coded, reference to the intricacies of contemporary Irish political life. Heaney published a further dramatic translation, of Sophocles's *Antigone*, as *The Burial at Thebes*, in 2004, and it premiered at Dublin's Abbey theatre that year.

Translation was a major dimension of his later work: notably his acclaimed version of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* (1999). His rendering of a Horatian ode titled 'Anything Can Happen' expressively commemorates the tragic events of September 11 in the United States.

Given his eminence, Heaney was exceptionally approachable: sociable, generous, courteous and genial. He was a formidably, spontaneously eloquent man gifted with a wonderful verbal memory: he would, for example, frequently adlib accurately recite the whole of a lesser known poetic piece by the English poet Philip Larkin (1922 - 1985) or several prose paragraphs from the Romanian philosopher Emil M. Cioran (1911 - 1995). Nevertheless, his social manner was entirely relaxed and relaxing. He had a benevolently playful wit and took great delight in telling as well as listening to jokes. Anyone fortunate enough to spend time in his company undoubtedly would laugh a great deal.

Where he encountered envies, resentments and hostilities, Heaney appeared to handle them with poise and composure, even if the eventual dissolution of some old allegiances clearly caused distress. He was a man of whom it could be said, as the poet W.B. Yeats desired it said of him, 'his glory was he had such friends'. These included such international literary
greats as Elizabeth Bishop (1911 - 1979), Joseph Brodsky (1940 - 1996), Ted Hughes (1930 - 1998), Robert Lowell (1917 - 1977), Czeslaw Milosz (1911 - 2004) and Derek Alton Walcott (born 1930); it should also be noted that Heaney had a great respect for younger writers, whom he encouraged and promoted.

For all the strength of personality manifest in Heaney’s life, it is in his poetic genius that this is most apparent. This is always within the ambit of human consciousness a life altogether elsewhere; and the elsewhere in Heaney characteristically is the life of memory, and specifically the memory of his childhood place, the townlands of his origins whose Irish names — Anahorish, Broagh, Toome, Mossbawn, Bellaghy — are now such an indelible part of English-language poetry, as are their accents, rhythms and people. There is a real sense in which his poetry is permanent homesickness, as the place is returned to again and again, but always with a difference, until its topography becomes the register of an immensely complex psychological, emotional, cultural and political terrain; until the place has become, in fact, in the title of one of Heaney’s collections of lectures, the ‘place of writing’.

Crucial to the worldview of that place of origin was an earlier phase of Irish Catholicism, and although the religion itself had for Heaney long given way to the secularism characteristic of his literary generation, his categories of discrimination in writing as well as in ethics — almost, you might say, his categories of consciousness itself — continued always to carry a distinctively Catholic inflection. For all his later secularism, Heaney’s imagination continued also to be suffused by images of a hereafter. This is figured most powerfully in his later work by allusions to and evocations of Virgil, and especially of the descent into the underworld in Book VI of the Aeneid, part of which Heaney translated in Seeing Things (1991), and which is conjured, absorbed and refracted in the
sequence 'Route 110 in Human Chain'.

In such places, the *Aeneid* seems to constitute a kind of displaced Catholicism, supplying a supportive mythology for a poet whose secularism continued to require such a thing. In the sequence 'Squarings' in *Seeing Things*, however, he finds an image all his own for an eternity that is the almost mysteriously continued life of his beloved Derry landscape:

At any rate, when light breaks over me
The way it did on the road beyond Coleraine
Where wind got saltier, the sky more hurried
And silver lamé shivered on the river Bann
Out in mid-channel between the painted poles
That day I'll be in step with what escaped me.

**Works of Seamus Heaney**

**Poetry**

- 1966: *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 1969: *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 1975: *North* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 1979: *Field Work* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 1984: *Station Island* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 2001: *Electric Light* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 2006: *District and Circle* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 2010: *Human Chain* (London: Faber & Faber)
Prose


Plays

- 1990: *The Cure at Troy* A version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (Dublin: Field Day)
- 2004: *The Burial at Thebes* A version of Sophocles' *Antigone* (London: Faber & Faber)

Translations

- 1983: *Sweeney Astray: A version from the Irish* (Dublin: Field Day)
- 1999: *Beowulf* (London: Faber & Faber)
- 1999: *Diary of One Who Vanished*, a song cycle by Leoš Janáček of poems by Ozef Kalda (London: Faber & Faber)
- 2002: *Hallaig*, (Isle of Skye: Sorley MacLean Trust)
· 2002: *Arion*, a poem by Alexander Pushkin, translated from the Russian, with a note by Olga Carlisle (San Francisco: Arion Press)
· 2004: *Columcille The Scribe*. (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy)
· 2009: *The Testament of Cresseid & Seven Fables* (London: Faber & Faber)
· 2013: *The Last Walk* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press)

**Major Prizes and Honours**

· 1966 Eric Gregory Award
· 1967 Cholmondeley Award
· 1968 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize
· 1975 E. M. Forster Award
· 1975 Duff Cooper Memorial Prize
· 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature
· 1996 Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres
· 1997 Elected Saoi of Aosdana
· 2001 Golden Wreath of Poetry, the main international award given by Struga Poetry Evenings to a world renowned living poet for life achievement in the field of poetry
· 2005 Irish PEN Award
· 2006 T. S. Eliot Prize for *District and Circle*
· 2007 Poetry Now Award for *District and Circle*
· 2009 David Cohen Prize
· 2011 Poetry Now Award for *Human Chain*
· 2011 Griffin Poetry Prize finalist for *Human Chain*
· 2011 Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award
· 2012 Griffin Poetry Prize Lifetime Recognition Award