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Books

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Heaney's ghosts

by [William Logan](#)

A review of *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, by Dennis O'Driscoll (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux).

Even though no one reads poetry any more, poets are still in demand. Those who wear the albatross of the Nobel Prize, like Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, are on permanent call for lectures, readings, blurbs, and book launches, while suffering a blizzard of invitations to serve as judges, receive honorary degrees, or read the manuscripts of nervous young poets. If the job required kissing babies and opening supermarkets, it would hardly be worth doing.

Somewhere in the midst of the fur-trimmed academic gowns and soapbox punditry, the poetry can get lost. A poet of the hedge and ditch has to remember the rank smell of ploughed earth. For some four decades, Seamus Heaney has served as a reminder of a pastoral world almost forgotten, the culture of the small farm and the turned penny that has become increasingly rare, even in Ireland. Behind him stand Frost, a farmer only briefly and disastrously, and much further back Virgil, who was probably no more than an armchair ploughman.

The Irish poet Dennis O'Driscoll had the bright idea of sitting Heaney down for a marathon series of interviews, and with Irish cheek he persisted, though Heaney had already been called the “most over-interviewed of living poets.”^[1] O'Driscoll has a day job in Irish Customs, which sounds like a joke—if any country already has too many customs, it's Ireland. The interviews took place mostly on pen and paper, but Heaney is a master at making prose an informal conversation. By fits and starts he completed, over the course of six years, this Cook's tour of his childhood and his poetic career.

Heaney has so frequently read in contributor's notes that he was born in County Derry in 1939, he claims he has almost stopped believing it. (A few old men alive then would have been babies during the Great Famine.) His answers to questions about childhood do have a slightly warmed-over, rehearsed feel—and when he explains, early in this iron anvil of a book, which side of the family home was devoted to the kitchen and which the stable, you realize you're in for a very long haul. Questions like “What kind of traffic is on the road in the forties?” and “Did your mother cycle sometimes?” suggest that, if this is O'Driscoll's audition as Heaney's biographer, he won't be able to fit the life into fewer than twelve volumes.

Every few pages, however, Heaney condenses memory into a moment of poetic resonance, with all his charm and cunning—the schoolmaster cyclist battering by on his “racer,” or the whole large Heaney family tumbling out to push a car. The family shed was sheathed mostly in flattened tar-barrels, just as the childhood seems sheathed in the magical ken of things—the thatched roof much favored by mice, the pump Heaney has called the “omphalos” (after the stone in the temple of

Apollo at Delphi), the small windbreak of old hawthorns, the reeking dunghill, all in the manner of a “small, ordinary, nose-to-the-grindstone place.” The childhood has its own peculiar logic, like a fairy tale’s. The interviewer sometimes knows the right question, asking if the house depended on rainwater. You feel that he has reminded the poet of things half-forgotten. O’Driscoll says modestly that the questions provoked Heaney to write a few poems.

A reader jaded by memoir might still find it curious to know that the Heaney stove would have been stewing up feed for the animals, with scones rising on the griddle, an ever-boiling kettle, and pots choked full of washing. After he vanished into boarding school, the family traveled back in time, moving into a home with a traditional turf fire and an open hearth. The fascination is not that such stray facts have sometimes inspired Heaney, but that this particular life turned into poetry, when the life of the next farmer’s son down the road did not. The muse does not rise from every patch of local mud.

Heaney’s rural childhood fell during the Long Weekend between the War of Independence and the Troubles of the late 1960s. The Heaneys were Catholic in a part of Northern Ireland where farmers both Protestant and Catholic lived side by side. The family was not Republican, and the poet has maintained a peculiar, sidling relation to the fraught politics of the counties that make up that thorn in the neck of Ireland. His school map showed the six counties of partition and almost nothing else, as if they were their own island.

Heaney was not immune to the hurts offered in a province where Catholics were viewed with beetle-browed suspicion. He suffered the “old Northern Ireland reminders that I’d better mind my Fenian manners.” At Queen’s University, where he wrote his first poems in “Hopkins-speak” (too much could be read into his early debts to that most Catholic of Catholic poets), there was still at times an informal apartheid. The interviews are particularly thorough on Heaney’s discovery of his contemporaries there (less thorough on his obligations to the poetic tradition), and the shouldering and elbowing among members of a famous workshop of poets called the Group.

The “need to voice something that hadn’t got voiced,” the experience of the Northern Irish Catholic, lies behind the great pressure Heaney feels to record and testify, though in his later books the ground has been too well covered, the imaginative mechanics grown a little worn from overuse. It’s not surprising, for a poet who does not want to be overwhelmed by politics, that his poems have been driven toward symbolic experience. If Heaney too often talks of poetry metaphorically, by reference to barrel-making or cement-mixing or some other far-fetched labor, that may be no more than the poet’s inability to explain the unexplainable except by homely analogy—or it may be an unconscious desire to justify poetry in the world of drudgery. Education estranged him from the grim labors of the farm—his poems have been a long struggle to atone.

Heaney, who can read and speak Irish only haltingly, knew from the start that the “linguistic experiences that threw my switches were in English,” as was true for most of his generation of Irish poets. A writer is sometimes chosen by his language—and in Heaney it’s not the language once spoken by Irish bog and boulder. The imposition of English still rankles a little, as does being called a British poet. That’s a dangerous thing to call an Irishman, whether he’s a poet or not.

Though Heaney was surrounded by politics of the most violent sort (friends, a cousin, and a pub owner who lived down the street in Belfast all were murdered), he refused to be closely involved—a leader of Sinn Féin once browbeat him for not writing about the cause. The poet needed few excuses for moving out of Belfast in 1972, during some of the worst of the sectarian murders; but those offered (“The apprenticeship was over . . .” he says. “The required thing was to step away a bit”) prove no less shifty and unconvincing than Auden’s for emigrating to America in the shadow of World War II. Yet this ability to stand aside freed the poems from the powerful undertow of Northern Ireland’s violence, where the victors, if there were any, were often victims.

It is good to remember that this poet has been—has sometimes been forced to be—a smiling public man: cautious in judgment, a born diplomat, but clever at speaking behind his hand. (The slyest moments here are his backhanded judgments on fellow poets.) Heaney earned his keep at the podium for some years, and for more than a decade was a professor at Harvard. The academic language of “deconstruction,” “hegemony,” “post-colonial,” and that scare verb “privilege” still infects his speech and is not placed in ironic quotations. You could say more generously that in whatever pub Heaney happens to be, even when the pub is Harvard, he keeps his ears open.

Heaney’s ambition glowers like a turf fire beneath his genial manner, a blaze revealed in the dispiriting number of tetchy comments about critics. No matter the honors accrued, the resentments are alive: one review was a “hatchet job,” another may have been “payback.” He always examines a negative review “to see if it’s salutary objection or shitty backlash.” Apparently, it is mostly the latter. Perhaps without a thin skin a poet can’t be sensitive enough, though there have been poets with hides a howitzer couldn’t penetrate. The richness of these interviews comes in part from the weakness of character inadvertently revealed. A poetry of warmth and humility has been drawn around a personality at times icy with conceit—this is disturbing, until one remembers Robert Frost.

Heaney’s poems come from a specific place, while Frost, the other major pastoral poet of the last century, sometimes seems so dislocated from place, his poems are already halfway to allegory. (As the Irish poet wryly admits, however, for all his poems about fishing, since his teens he has rarely picked up a rod.) We go to Heaney’s prose not for the ripeness of atmosphere that infuses the poetry, but for all that cannot go into the poem—namely, how a poet views his craft. He is always sharp-eyed at spotting the psychological fractures in the verse line: “Every good poem ...” he says, “could conceivably be an epitaph.”

Heaney is a rationalist who wants access to the pagan past—his view of the poet is virtuous and metaphysical, as if there were still Irish bards wandering the countryside like tinkers. A reader can get a little weary of the references to the numinous in poetry, to the poet’s “fidelity to the mystery.” (To say that “poetry is a ratification of the impulse towards transcendence” makes it sound too much like faith-healing.) Ghosts tend to be housebound; and in a peculiar way Heaney has become the revenant of his own life, prone to dropping by. He is best at the long memory of the senses—the “old breadcrumby smell of the porch” at school, for instance. The interviews permit, even encourage, a gout of reminiscence; but in poems memory must be measured out slowly and more carefully, like old brandy.

The interviewer is as dogged as Kafka’s magistrates—his questions are courteous, rarely silly (O’Driscoll has read more of Heaney’s obscure addresses than the poet can probably remember writing), but almost always a trifle dull. If they rarely excite Heaney to memorable speech, he occasionally finds the proper burr—in his childhood home, the upper bedroom held “three of those big iron-frame beds that would eventually end up as makeshift gates, brass-turreted jobs, real old jinglers, as broad as ruck-shifters.” He recalls of some gardening tools, “You’d see this lean-to of seasoned shafts that could have been spear shafts stacked against the wall.” There stand Ajax and Achilles.

The most consequent poet of our age has long borne the burden of being called the finest Irish poet since Yeats—with the not-so-sly implication that he’s not as good as Yeats. Five hundred pages of chat, even with Yeats, would be a good deal too many. This book underscores how much a poet like Heaney is used by his past, but perhaps no book can explain the indelible mystery of his work. The secret can’t be found in interviews, because they are looking in the wrong place. In the end, this interminable inquisition does what it should—it sends you back to the poetry, the poetry of a man who has lived in the rectitude of language and the doubts of the tongue.

Notes

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1. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, by Dennis O'Driscoll; Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 523 pages, \$32. [Go back to the text.](#)

William Logan's most recent book of poetry, *Strange Flesh* (Penguin), was published last year.

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