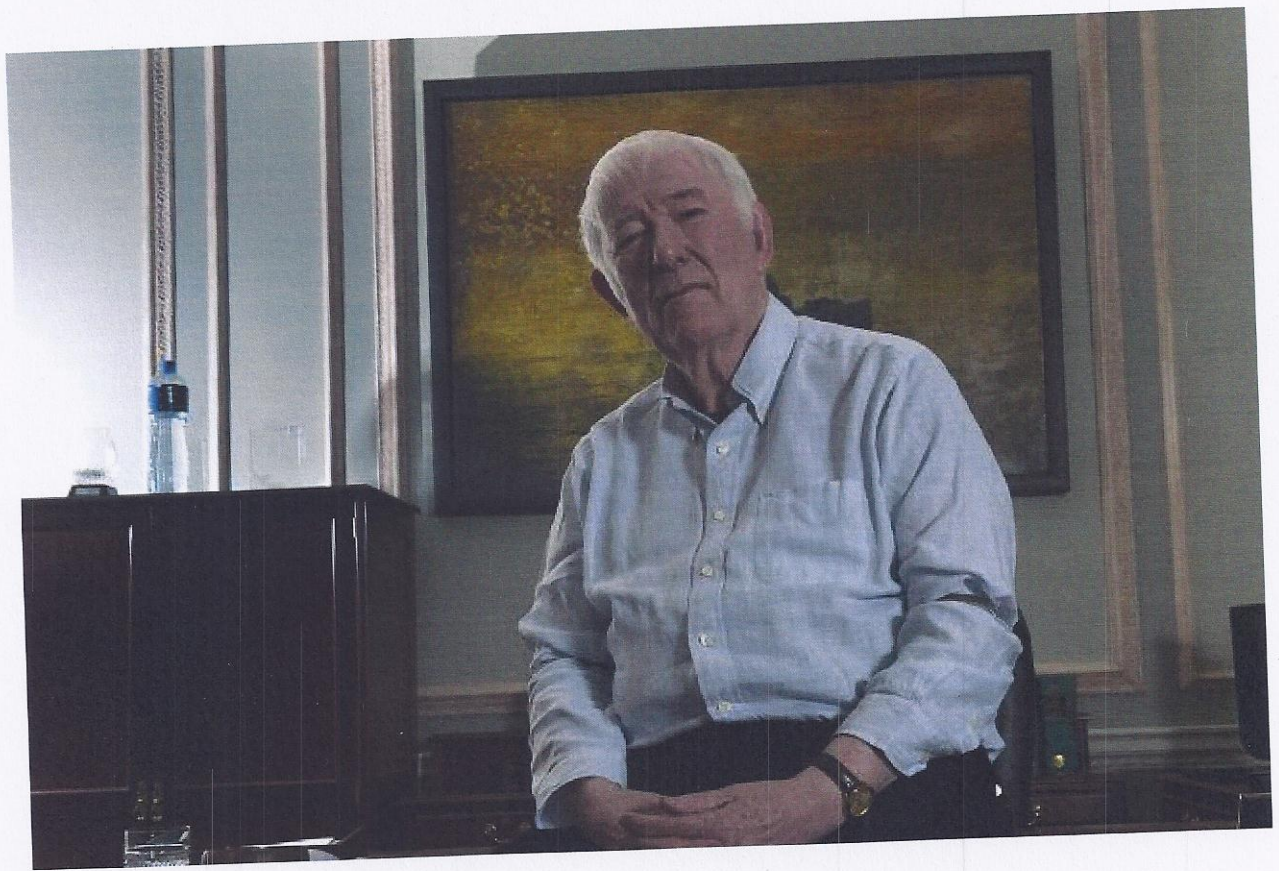


THE ~~2012~~ TIMES

The Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney says that poets can still save the world



The poet Seamus Heaney Chris Harris/The Times

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Last updated at 12:01AM, January 28 2013

The man who revived Beowulf talks to Erica Wagner about the future of Northern Ireland and his love for fellow poets

At the Irish Embassy in London, the delicate teacups are emblazoned with Ireland's harp; around the gracious sitting room are photographs of Bobby McDonagh, Ireland's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, meeting the Queen, but also family wedding photographs. And despite the proportions of the room, there's a warmth to the place.

So I'm hardly surprised when McDonagh himself pops his head round the door. "Seamus won't be a moment," he says. "He's just having those photographs taken downstairs." We shake hands and he disappears — and then I hear Heaney's unmistakable voice as he ascends the curling stair. Outside the embassy he might be "Famous Seamus" — 73-year-old Nobel laureate, the serious yet accessible voice of poetry in English across the globe and the man who made *Beowulf* a bestseller — but here one senses he's more a favourite uncle, a familiar, beloved face.

We last met at his home in Dublin, where he lives with his wife Marie Devlin, shortly after his twelfth volume of poetry, *Human Chain*, was published in 2010. But today the talk is of other poets and where his own poetry comes from. Last night at an event called *Inspirations* at the Tricycle Theatre in London to benefit English PEN, Heaney, with his fellow poet Simon Armitage, chose a sequence of texts that had spurred him on over the years.

All of the choices are personal, but some have a more political bent. He has occasionally been called to account for not engaging directly enough with the situation in his native Northern Ireland; though poems such as *Casualty*, and the work in his wonderful early book *North*, give the lie to that.

So here was an extract from the memoir of Nadezhda Mandelstam, for instance, and work by his late friend, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. Coming across the Mandelstam, he says, "was like a shock treatment, the stuff that came from that part of the world [the former Soviet Union], 'hope against hope'. It didn't inspire in any genetic way the things that I wrote — but it raised the stakes, and made the thing more serious. The same was true of Milosz: his own hovering, as he said, between transcendence and politics. So I was doing honour to them, I suppose."

That space between transcendence and politics is hard to hold — especially now. Heaney is pleased that Derry is European City of Culture this year (there will even be a mini-festival devoted to Heaney — called *On Home Ground* — just outside the city in September), but he recognises that, despite progress, the atmosphere and violence in Northern Ireland are worse than they have been in a long while. "It's very dangerous indeed. Somebody made this remark, and it made me alert to a new possibility — they said, if this goes on until the marching season, everything is, in a sense, lost."

The Loyalists, he says, "perceive themselves as almost deserted. And right enough. I think Sinn Fein could have taken it easy. No hurry on flags. Jesus." He shakes his head. "What does it matter? But — it matters utterly to them. And now there's no way they're going to go back on it, of course. As someone who knows something of prejudice, from early on, I can understand the Loyalists — but the unremittingness of it ... I remember, at the very beginning of the Troubles in Derry, Eddie McAteer, a big Nationalist politician, he was like the paterfamilias of Nationalism. And he said, 'both sides are entitled to their pageantry!' Which was a rather grand utterance, but true enough. But there's no doubt that the Loyalist side take the pageantry to extremes, they wipe the floor with the others."

He offers no solution: and, Mandelstam aside, not much hope. "Loyalism, or Unionism, or Protestantism, or whatever you want to call it, in Northern Ireland it operates not as a class system, but a caste system. And they [the Loyalists] have an entitlement factor running: the flag is part of it. There's never going to be a united Ireland, you know," he says plainly. "So why don't you let them fly the flag?"

A poet knows the power of a symbol; and what it means to take that symbol away. And a poet knows, too, that poetry can change the world. "Somebody like Yeats changed Ireland. Somebody like Ginsberg changed America, a bit. People were famished for something. It's the spirit, isn't it, that's nurtured by it."

Many of his choices for the PEN evening were very personal, of course — and expressive of how his own spirit was nurtured. *The Bull Moses*, by Ted Hughes, or an extract from *Ulysses*, or the beginning of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, for instance. "When you read stuff like the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, it lifts the whole spirit," Heaney says of making his choices. "Delight enters. That's different from what you might call 'applied inspiration'. As in applied maths — there's pure inspiration, which lifts the world a bit. I always remember the opening lines of *Kidnapped*: 'I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house.' I was 8 or 9 maybe, when I first read it — when I read it again later on, I thought 'Good God, there's such a mythic charge to that.' He crosses a ford and meets a man who tells him of his fortune — it's sheer Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but so beautiful."

He smiles when he recalls first coming across Ted Hughes's work in a library in Belfast. Heaney was born and raised in Castledawson, in Co Derry; a Catholic in Protestant Northern Ireland. As with Hughes, his was a deeply rural background; both their lives were transformed by education — he attended boarding school, followed by Queen's College, Belfast. It was Hughes who showed him that the matter of his early life could be the matter of his poetry: "I pulled this book out, and there was *View of a Pig*.

"The poem begins: 'The pig lay on a barrow dead./ It weighed, they said, as much as three men.' And I thought: 'How does he know about all this?'"

I thought it was all completely out of range, and disallowed by its rural nature." Heaney's first major collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, in which he describes collecting frogspawn as a young boy, won the Somerset Maugham award in 1967.

Heaney's childhood was also filled with poetry. "At my local country school, I learnt chunks of Byron," he says, and reels off the first stanza of *The Eve of Waterloo*. "There was a sound of revelry by night,/ And Belgium's capital had gathered then/ Her beauty and her chivalry . . ." I also knew [Keats's] *Ode to Autumn* by heart when I went to secondary school at the age of 12, and *Fidelity* by Wordsworth." But he credits teaching — he has done so both at secondary schools and universities such as Harvard and Oxford — as "a memory informer. That's how I got to know Yeats's poems, by teaching them and being with them. And Hopkins, and Donne — so all that was the primary matter in my head. It was very canonical — but there we are."

These days, teaching is less canonical — despite the best efforts of Michael Gove, the Education Secretary. Children being made to memorise poetry in school is one thing; poetry being in the air, part of the furniture, is another. Thinking of future generations of poets, Heaney says, "Well — it'll be all different, won't it?"

It won't be woven so much from the memory, perhaps, but taken down from the spaces of the internet." But then, he reminds me, there's nothing new under the sun. "There's a story told by Socrates, about the invention of writing in Egypt — it was Thoth who invented letters, I

think. And Thoth goes to the big man, Thamus, and says: 'I've got this terrific invention. It will help people enormously.' But Thamus says, 'No, no, no, that doesn't help at all. They will forget everything; it won't belong in their memories.' And that's the revolution we're in now, again."

There have been many revolutions since Heaney was born in the year the Second World War started. One is the increasing interest of readers in the lives of authors — interviews tend to eat into precious writing time.

Heaney admits that his work, first as a teacher and then as a grand ambassador for poetry, has sometimes been a strain. But: "I suppose I had a sense of — given the kind of success I had in literary terms, published by Faber, etcetera, etcetera — I thought you should give something back. So I was in the education machine, and doing readings, and all that. And I think if I had it all to do again, I'd do much less of it. But you know, there's your personality: you can't help it."

However, he knows, too, that what he gained from contact with other poets was invaluable. "I know that, as a scribe, a poet, being close to and not stood off from by people of talent, like Elizabeth Bishop, like Ted, who was kind, like [Robert] Lowell — all that was fortifying. I never talked a word to Elizabeth Bishop about poetry, but she had a sort of strictness that was very related to the poetry she wrote."

Poetry loves company. "The people you start out with, your clique, your group, will stay with you as your ideal readers. There's something not as ardent as inspiration, but some sustenance from a group. For young poets. But poets are always young poets when we get together!"

Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain* is published by Faber and Faber. Seamus Heaney is included in the new Faber Voices series, digital-only poetry e-books from the Apple iBookstore (£2.99). Each book features a new selection of the poet's work with a line-by-line synchronised recording of the poet's own reading.