

*Seamus Heaney:
A Tribute by a Brazilian living in Ireland
for 42 years.*

Patricia O’Flaherty

Abstract: *The life and works of our great Poet have been – and will continue to be – documented in journals and theses, books and blogs around the world. What follows is a simple but grateful testimonial of how meeting Seamus Heaney and his poetry helped me begin to understand this magical island and its people.*

Keywords: *Seamus Heaney; “Digging”; translation.*

30 August 2013: “Seamus Heaney dead RIP.”

Text arrives while on retreat on the mountains of L’Herault, south of France. I’m in shock but can act. Special request for prayers, candles, butter lamps. Action postpones feeling the pain.

At a master-class, Seamus urges us to memorize poems, poems we like, poems that penetrate the heart. His words come back to me:

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.
(*Doubletake*, from *The Cure at Troy*)

I leave the temple in the direction of the forest. Walk towards the valley.
Memories crowd in. Back to when I first met him.

The Seventies

1971: My first Christmas in Ireland is spent in Derry~Londonderry. I visit St. Columb’s College, where Seamus Heaney boards for six years (1951-1957), having won a scholarship. I’m given a well-thumbed copy of *Death of a Naturalist* by one of the

teachers, a classmate at Oxford. And here begins a long relationship with Seamus' poetry, starting with "Digging", telling us how father and grand-father farmed the land, the sounds, the smells, the feel of the soil, his analogy of their digging out potatoes with a spade and his digging out words with his pen: "Between my finger and my thumb, the squat pen rests, I will dig with it."

I don't fully understand the poems, yet they have a profound impact on me. He ends the book with the words "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing." There is curfew, midnight Mass happens at 9.00 pm. Soldiers in camouflage wait at the door as we leave the church. The city is sad, sombre, starless.

1972: On 2 February I'm one of hundreds who witness the burning down of the British Embassy at Merrion Square, Dublin, three days after Bloody Sunday in Derry.

1975: A very important year for Seamus and his family. He becomes Lecturer in English at Carysfort College of Education and moves to Dublin, leaving Glanmore Cottage, his haven in Co. Wicklow. *North* is published. We are reminded in the *Foreword* of Heaney's "appeal to the ear" ... that the poem is "intended as a song to be heard and enjoyed or, to the 'mind's eye, a picture to be 'seen' and felt."

Sometime in the mid-seventies I meet Seamus and Marie at a large party at Diane Guggenheim Hamilton's home at Percy Place, Dublin. Diane Meek, as she was known then, is patron of the arts, of Irish traditional music, of education. Seamus is here because he is Seamus, the Poet. I'm here because of Diane's interest in my work on Paulo Freire. This is the era of Cuernavaca, Ivan Illich, De-Schooling Society. Someone plays the harpsichord upstairs, Peter Browne has his *uilleann* pipes, an instrument I've just met. Some of us retreat into a small room off the kitchen to discuss Ivan Illich's *To Hell with Good Intentions*. We are inflamed, we want to save the world. The door opens softly, Seamus comes in and gently asks: "Would you mind if I shared with you a few lines I wrote this afternoon?" We are mesmerized by this powerful sudden apparition, this beautiful man, his black mane, his manner. We nod. He starts reciting and we sense urgency in his voice, as if full birth can only take place when the words are heard by others, when the poem is shared. I wish I could quote what he had just created, but this was long ago. I remember his voice, his intonation, the sound of the words. It deeply penetrates my heart, our hearts. So we ask him for more and he recites from *North*:

Compose in darkness
Expect aurora borealis
In the long foray
But no cascade of light.

He leaves the room as softly as he had entered. Revolution postponed, we return to conviviality and to Donal Looney's bazooka. The power of poetry, the spell of the poet.

The Eighties

In 1981 Seamus resigns from Carysfort College. He has now been discovered by the world, the boy who had grown up in a "three-room traditional thatched farmstead" and "lived a kind of den-life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world", as he would recall 14 years later at the Nobel Prize Ceremony.

Crediting Poetry

I reflect on my own upbringing high up in the mountains of Minas Gerais, Brazil and now living 10,000 kms away. I've been in Ireland for ten years now, married and with a daughter. I want to get into the heart of Ireland. So I let the theatre, music and poetry penetrate my being. Teaching is also a great help: I learn so much from my students. I want to understand Brian Friel's *Translations*:

'We must learn those new names ... We must learn where we live.
We must learn to make them our own.'

I meet Seamus again, through his involvement with *Translations* and Field Day. Heaney gives Friel great support with the project and becomes a director of Field Day.

I hear the term "fifth province" for the first time. I learn that in Ireland, we have not just the four geographical provinces but a fifth one, a special space which transcends duality and allows for unity through co-creation. It can accommodate green and orange, catholic and protestant, east and west. I realise that the dialogical work of Paulo Freire and the Fifth Province have much in common. I begin to get a sense of unity between my past and present through accessing this special space.

In 1983 Seamus Heaney publishes *An Open Letter* in Field Day pamphlet series, as a response to being included as a "British" poet in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*.

You'll understand I draw the line
At being robbed of what is mine,
My *patris*, my deep design
To be at home
In my own place and dwell within
Its proper name –
(*Ireland's Field Day* 26).

During the Eighties Seamus spends several spring semesters at Harvard (*Stepping Stones* xxx). I visualise him gracing Harvard Yard with his presence. In May 1986 a friend of mine from Cambridge, Mass. days is among the 20,000 Harvard graduates who

listen to Seamus recite “Villanelle for an Anniversary”, celebrating Harvard College’s 350th Anniversary. (*Stepping Stones* xxviii)

In the Summer of 1989 he is elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, an appointment that would continue until 1994.

The Nineties

An unforgettable decade for Seamus and his family. Prizes and publications, awards and ceremonies. These are well-documented in *Stepping Stones*, Dennis O’Driscoll’s Interviews with Seamus Heaney and winner of the Argosy Irish Non-Fiction Book of the Year (2009).

1991: Seamus Heaney and uilleann piper Liam O’Flynn have their first performance of *The Poet and The Piper*, at Cibéal Festival in Kenmare, Co. Kerry. My husband, a Kerryman, is offered two tickets. Everything is possible in The Kingdom of Kerry. Twelve years later (2003) Seamus and Liam were to record an album that grew from this event: *The Poet and The Piper* (audio CD) with instrumental tracks and spoken poetry, a sensitive togetherness of words and music.

1994: Heaney’s work is honoured in the Newsletter *Irish Studies in Brazil*. It has several translations of *The Forge* and *Digging*. “A Challenge for Translators”, it reads. My good friend Munira Mutran sends me a copy and I accept the challenge with my own version of *Digging*. For days I dig in my dreams. I post the Journal to Seamus and include my own translation. He thanks me, sends me a reply: “I see there is a lot of digging in Brazil these days”.

1995: Seamus Heaney is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. His Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1995 is powerful and deeply moving and should be read by students of all ages.

Seamus starts by recounting growing up in rural Co. Derry, “... Ahistorical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern, we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence.” He takes us through Irish history and we emerge with a clearer vision and a deeper understanding of Ireland, of life. On Good Friday, three years later, 10 April 1998, the Peace Agreement is signed.

1998: Dinner at Brazilian Embassy residence in Dublin. We are eight at the dinner table: Ambassador Carlos Bueno and his wife Alice Pittaluga Bueno, Seamus and Marie Heaney and one of his nieces, my husband Bernard and I and our daughter Kathryn. We feel extremely privileged at being invited.

We first talk about Alicinha's beautiful sculpture *Hommage a Matisse* then gracing Merrion Square, Dublin, now at Botanical Gardens in Rio de Janeiro. Soon we move to Stockholm, the lights, the islands, the vibrant atmosphere. Seamus tells us the story of *St. Kevin and the Blackbird*, which he had told the audience in Stockholm. What follows is my own recollection but a full version can be read in *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture*. It is said that once upon a time St. Kevin was kneeling with arms stretched out and a blackbird lands in his hand, and mistaking it for the branch of a tree, nests and lays eggs. Seamus recounts how Kevin never moved for hours and days, because of his love for all creatures great and small until the fledging grew wings and could fly. And then he recites the last verses of the Blackbird poem:

A Prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name
from The Spirit Level

After dinner, Embaixatriz Alicinha asks me to read my translation of "Digging". I try to escape, but she has a copy from a Poetry Reading I had organized with my students in the Atrium at Trinity College. I try my best and at the end Seamus kindly says that even though he doesn't understand Portuguese, he enjoyed the sound of the words. He recites two more poems. An unforgettable evening.

2000 Onwards

2006: *District and Circle* is published. It is dedicated to Ann Saddlemyer, the original owner of Glanmore Cottage and to whom he also dedicated *Glanmore Sonnets*: For Ann Saddlemyer, Our heartiest welcome. He never forgets his friends.

August 9, 2009: I meet Seamus and Marie at a mutual friend's 80th birthday, their neighbour in Sandymount. In a brief exchange he surprises me by asking: "So is there still a lot of digging in Brazil?" The poet hasn't forgotten. "The squat pen rests. I will dig with it."

2011: Harvard celebrates its 375th anniversary and Seamus is invited to return and recite "Villanelle for an Anniversary" again. A seal to his long association with Harvard (*Stepping Stones*, xxx).

December 2012: *The Seamus Heaney Professorship in Irish Writing* is announced by Provost Patrick Prendergast: "This is a significant event in writing in Ireland and internationally. Trinity College Dublin is enhancing its extraordinary literary tradition with this new professorship." As I pass the Campanile I see the Provost and

Seamus walking by, his hair totally white, his presence always powerful and gentle. This would be my last sighting of him, our great Poet.

2013: Derry~Londonderry is *City of Culture*.

18 April: I return after 40 years, for a visit of HH Dalai Lama. He crosses the Peace Bridge holding the arm of the Church of Ireland Bishop on one side and the Catholic Assistant Archbishop on the other. A guard of honour of 300 local primary school children cross the bridge singing “Peace is flowing like a River”. The city is bright and shining. We all rejoice in the openness, the spaciousness and I wonder if Seamus is here today.

14 August: Derry~Londonderry, Millenium Forum. Seamus Heaney and Liam O’Flynn give a performance of *The Poet and the Piper*. A friend of mine recounts this magical evening, when the fusion of Seamus’ poetry and Liam’s *uilleann* pipes has the audience spellbound. The Poet back in his own city, a city transformed.

30 August: Seamus Heaney dies. The country mourns.

His son Michael tells us: “His last few words in a text message he wrote to my mother minutes before he passed away were in his beloved Latin and they read – “*nolle timere*” (‘don’t be afraid’).” Marie, his life’s companion, for whom he wrote: “Love, you shall perfect for me this child”, for whom he was prepared to “square the circle: four walls and a ring” and father three children: two boys and a girl. REF

1 September: At Croke Park over 80,000 spectators honour Seamus Heaney for three minutes. It is an All-Ireland Gaelic football semi-final match.

President Michael D. Higgins pays tribute: “... we in Ireland will once again get a sense of the depth and range of the contribution of Seamus Heaney to our contemporary world, but what those of us who have had the privilege of his friendship and presence will miss is the extraordinary depth and warmth.”

2 September 2013: Seamus is buried.

They decked his body no less bountifully
with offerings than those first ones did
who cast him away when he was a child
And launched him alone over the waves
(Beowulf)

No, they don’t “launch him alone over the waves”. They bring him home to Bellaghy and bury him at the old graveyard of St Mary’s.

A neighbour visits the cemetery one night, to talk to his father also buried there, and finds a group around Seamus’ grave, reading his poetry. He joins them.

I end my tribute to Seamus Heaney with a paragraph from his Nobel Prize Lecture:

The form of the poem ... is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.

Seamus Heaney, Keeper of the word: RIP

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Digging

Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Cavando

Trans. Patricia O'Flaherty

Entre meu dedo e meu polegar
A caneta grossa descansa, aconchegada como uma arma

Sob a minha janela, um som claro e raspante
Quando a pá penetra o terreno pedregoso:
Meu pai cavando. Olho para baixo

Seu dorso contraído, entre canteiros de flores
Se abaixa e levanta vinte anos mais tarde
Curvando-se em ritmo pelos canteiros de batata
Onde estava cavando

A bota tosca aninhada na lâmina, o cabo
contra o joelho firme como alavanca
Ele arrancava altas ramas, enterrava fundo a brilhante lâmina
Para espalhar novas batatas que apanhávamos
Adorando sua fria dureza em nossas mãos.

Meu Deus, o velho sabia manejar uma pá.
Exatamente como seu velho pai.

Meu avô cortava mais turfa num dia
Que qualquer homem na turfeira do Toner.
Uma vez levei leite para ele numa garrafa
Mal arrolhada com papel. Ele se endireitou
Para bebê-lo, e logo se abaixou
Cortando e partindo com cuidado jogando torrões
Sobre os seus ombros, cavando cada vez mais fundo
Em busca da boa turfa. Cavando.

O cheiro frio da terra do batatal, o esmagar e bater
De turfa encharcada, os cortes curtos da lâmina
Raízes vivas acordam na minha mente
Mas não tenho pá para seguir homens como esses.

Entre meu dedo e meu polegar
A caneta grossa descansa.
Cavarei com ela