

Airs and Graces  
Inaugural Seamus Heaney Lecture  
Liverpool University  
October 17, 2019

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished colleagues and guests; family, friends and devoted readers of Seamus Heaney. Thank you for inviting me.

I'm deeply honoured and, in truth, surprised to have been invited to give this lecture, as I am no scholar of literature, Irish or British. I am just one of the many, many people who admired Seamus Heaney and had enormous affection for him. This combination of admiration and affection is rare. There are many people we admire (fewer by the day, it seems) and a smaller number for whom we have deep affection, but the combination is unusual. Yet Seamus evoked this in people: admiration for the work and affection for the man. There are many people, poets and scholars of poetry, who can speak more knowledgably about his work, and others, like his family, who can speak more knowledgably about the man. I'm delighted to have been asked to speak about him at all.

I knew Seamus off and on for over 30 years. It says a great deal that to everyone he was always Seamus, not Mr Heaney, Dr Heaney, Professor Heaney... just Seamus. He wouldn't have wanted to give himself airs! We arrived in Harvard around the same time - the early 1980s, two fairly impecunious Irish people out of what today might be called, but he would never have called, our "comfort zone." Harvard at the time had a system very loosely based on Oxbridge Colleges. First year students lived in Harvard Yard, older students lived in one of 13 Houses. The University sought to create an intellectual life in the Yard and the Houses by having a few academics or

graduate students live among the students. For a foreigner unsure of their financial stability this was a great gig. You got free room and board, had no transport or utility costs, and you lived a stone's throw from Widener Library. Seamus lived in Adams House. I lived in the Yard.

I knew Seamus was in Adams House. I probably heard through a family connection as I have a cousin, Thomas Kinsella who is a poet. But with typical Irish reticence I was not about to approach him. I had an American friend, however, who lived in Adams House and had no such reticence. He told Seamus about me and arranged for us to meet. Thus began our unlikely friendship. Seamus was about 20 years older than us but, once a week, we would go out to a local pizza joint, Bertuccis, which had a Bocce Alley. We would play bocce, drink beer and experiment with different types of pizza. I always remember Seamus asking, "Do you think anchovies would go well with pineapple? Will we try?" They do, and we did. We would then repair back to my student rooms in Harvard Yard. By way of a couch in the living-room I had a single bed with cushions at the back and no frame. Seamus would always sit on the couch and as the night wore on the mattress would gradually slide off the base towards the floor, but we would keep talking, about Harvard, about America, about Ireland and about books. For hours after he'd left, I would walk my room remembering the turns of phrase, the use of language, the layers of meaning in simple sentences that Seamus threw out casually as we whiled the evening away. Brilliant, friendly conversation can be nourishing in the same way as poetry: it can be the rain that makes your own thoughts grow and change and ripen. Talking with Seamus was a joy that long outlasted those playful bocce evenings. It was inspiring. And in talking about Seamus this evening, I would especially like to reflect on the ways in which his life and work continue to offer inspiration.

Seamus would spend the spring semester at Harvard every year, and would count the days until the spring break when he could return to Marie and the kids. It was an uncomfortable and lonely existence. One year the family came and they rented a house off Kirkland Street and he seemed more at ease, but I never felt he was completely relaxed at Harvard, even later when he was most celebrated. He was always anxious to get home. He served semester-long stints as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory until 1995 when, thanks to the Nobel Prize, he did not need to do it any more. He became instead the Ralph Waldo Emerson Poet in Residence, meaning he stayed for only a week or so. He took the post, he told me “to keep other Universities at bay.”

In the course of his time at Harvard, Seamus went from being a little-known poet in the 80s, to a major celebrity in the 90s. His later lectures were mobbed with what were known as “Heaneyboppers” and he was besieged with requests for talks, openings, endorsements and Irish events of all kinds. (The Irish of Boston were delighted that one of their own had finally conquered the Anglo bastion of Harvard.) He had an acute sense of personal obligation to both people and institutions and agonized about many of these requests. He talked to me about some of them – what to do when a prominent Irish American asked his endorsement of a very bad book, or when the Houghton Library wanted to buy his papers. He felt the papers belonged in Ireland but also considered himself under an obligation to Harvard because of the university’s generous hospitality over the years. As he became more famous, I slipped into the background – never presuming on a relationship with him. But if he ever caught a glimpse of me at the back of a lecture theatre, he’d welcome me as an old friend.

I carry so many memories of individual sentences as if he said them this morning. Seamus came to my rooms in Harvard Yard to celebrate my MA in June 1984. He looked at the spread on the table and said with a smile “Cucumber sandwiches no less”. An innocent enough comment, but clearly conveying in the gentlest way that it was far from cucumber sandwiches in Harvard Yard that he and I were both reared.

As the years went on, the graduate student gang dissipated and he embraced my husband and visited us in our home where we had a real couch. He understood that having married a doctor, in my parents’ eyes I had reached the pinnacle of success. On one occasion in 1994 he arrived and said “Expecting company, I see” — to which I replied “yes, Bill and Andy and Beth (the old grad student gang) are on their way”. He smiled and was, as ever, too polite to point out my stupidity, but he was alluding to the fact that he had noticed I was pregnant. That pregnancy turned out to be a very difficult one, as I had cancer at the time. As I was going into hospital, he sent me a beautiful blockprint of ‘The Poet’s Chair’ with an even more beautiful inscription about “being here for good in every sense.”

His generosity with his time and his words was extraordinary and can only have put an enormous strain on those closest to him, who had to share him with the world. In thinking about this lecture I pulled down from my shelves some of his books of poetry, only to find that several were gifts from him with beautiful inscriptions. Tom and I invited him to our wedding in America in 1988 but he was in Ireland at the time. Rather than simply completing the enclosed reply card and returning it in the pre-addressed envelope, as anyone else would have done, he wrote two beautiful letters – one to my parents and one to Tom’s – none of whom he’d ever met.

Seamus severed his formal ties with Harvard in 2006; I did in 2008. We met again in Dublin and in Scotland. At his home in Sandymount, the same house that he had bought on his lecturer's salary in 1976 you caught a glimpse of the weight on this conscientious, courteous man as the postman delivered mountains of requests, to each of which he felt compelled to respond. He repaired to a cottage in Wicklow to write.

While Seamus had a longer association with Harvard than any other University he was not of Harvard, and I don't think he ever felt entirely comfortable there. While he had many friends there, and everywhere, his connection always struck me as entirely pragmatic. He needed the income to sustain himself and his family, but he needed to be at home in Ireland to compose poetry. In his entire time at Harvard he wrote only two poems, both in response to specific requests from the University and quite early in his tenure. One, "Villanelle for an Anniversary", was composed for the University's 350th anniversary celebration in 1986. The nineteen-line Villanelle, with its unmistakable evocation of a bell ringing, has two repeated lines: "A spirit moved. John Harvard walked the yard" and "The books stood open and the gates unbarred." The latter has always been for me the essence of a university, with books and gates open to all comers.

The other Harvard poem was "Alphabets" composed for the Phi Beta Kappa Literary Exercises in 1984. He explained that traditionally the Phi Beta Kappa poem is about learning, so his was about making the first letters at primary school:

*There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week*

*Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y*

*This is writing.*

The poem is, of course, about much more than learning to write. It is about recognising the visible world in the shape of language, and about, as Helen Vendler put it “widening the gaze”. The scholar encounters first English, then Latin, Old Irish, and finally Greek with different shaped letters: lamdas, deltas and omegas, which resonate with the familiar childhood shapes of corn sheaves, potato pits and horseshoes. Vendler sees this as implying that when many languages are known, the heart’s sympathy may widen, even to include the whole world: a world seen from the astronaut’s window as a familiar vowel  
*“The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O.”*

This is surely true. But ‘Alphabets’ also implies that language is something we can find anywhere. It is – like a forked stick – something we already have in our hand, even before we are educated to point it as a tool, as a divining rod, or a letter of the alphabet. The poem reinforces – as all Heaney’s poems do – that poetic language belongs to everyone. It is not a narrow matter of erudition, but a broad one of recognition. Of seeing things. The stick (which is also writing) is a means of reaching out into the world.

As he wrote in his beautiful poem, ‘A Hazel Stick for Catherine Ann’, the stick might be ‘cut from your family tree’:

*And the evening I trimmed it for you*

*you saw your first glow-worm –*

*all of us stood around in silence, even you*

*gigantic enough to darken the sky*

*for a glow-worm.*

*And when I poked open the grass*

*A tiny brightening den lit the eye*

*in the blunt cut end of your stick.*

This is the illumination of poetry. The writing a simple act, with a commonplace object, that yet reveals something extraordinary.

One of the distinctive delights of Seamus's poetry is the easy connection it insists on between working the lines of the land, and working the lines of language. Ploughing, digging, the tongue and groove of carpentry, the forked stick of the water diviner, the sunk bucket of a woman drawing water from a well. All of these activities are compared with writing. The result is twofold. Seamus's poetry creates an absolute sense of the dignity, even the sanctity, of rural work – the rhythmic folding and unfolding the land – that insists upon the community of manual labour and of life lived in daily touch with the elements: soil, water, air. There is a huge sense of respect here. For Ireland's long heritage as an agrarian society, a small-town society. He pays tribute in his lines to his grandfather and his father. Not only to the beauty of landscape but to those who have shaped it, day after day, by their long-borne heft and toil and suffering and patience.

Secondly, the writer is not set apart, in an ivory tower or an ivy-league town. Instead he is embedded, dug in, to landscape: its history, its geology, its flora and fauna, its politics. This work is often sensuous, but it is also satisfyingly hard. There are stones to be lifted, graves to be excavated, grit

to be swallowed. He has to keep his ear to the ground; to break ground; to find a glimpse of sky at the bottom of the deep well of the everyday. It was part of Seamus's modesty and his keen eye for Irish reality that he did not prance on the horse of the poetic knight-in-armour. He preferred to stay grounded. He remained true to his roots. Yet his outlook was international, linguistically curious, culturally outgoing. It is interesting that although 'Alphabets' is about Seamus's own 'progress from the desks of Anahorish School to the podium of Sanders Theatre in Harvard', he happily acknowledged that it was also inspired by his reading of a poem by the Polish-American poet Czeslaw Milosz.

In his wonderful Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1995, Seamus fondly recalled the wonder of first listening to the wireless as a child:

*"I had to get close to the actual radio set in order to concentrate my hearing and in that intent proximity to the dial I grew familiar with the names of foreign stations...even though I did not understand what was being said in those first encounters with the gutturals and sibilants of European speech, I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world."*

At the risk of being political (but as a political scientist I can't help myself) this outlook on the world, this deep rootedness in a place, rural Ireland, and yet deep sympathy with people far beyond in both place and time, stands in stark contrast to much of what we hear today. Seamus was deeply rooted somewhere, but he was beloved anywhere. With deep roots in Ireland he was a citizen of the world and he knew well what citizenship meant.

The question of Seamus's citizenship came to the fore with his inclusion in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in 1982. Having been born in Derry, on the

Northern Irish side of a troubled border, Seamus was entitled to both Irish and British citizenship. In fact, he got a British passport before he had an Irish one. He told the story that he got a British passport when going on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. A friend told him that if he were living in the Republic of Ireland, he wouldn't need a passport, as Lourdes was part of the jurisdiction. In the late 60s Seamus had been included in an *Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry* and a compilation called *Young British Poets*, without protest, but things were different in the 80s, and he did protest his inclusion in the Penguin book of 'British Poetry', albeit playfully. In his pamphlet *An Open Letter*, he famously wrote "*Be advised...My passport's green. No glass of ours was ever raised to toast the Queen*" As he said himself this "*was meant to have a bit of merriment to it.*" He wasn't being strident – he didn't know how. But he was characterizing a culture, Catholic Ireland, in which people did not stand to toast the Queen. He pointed out, of course, that when in a formal setting he had always thought it the courteous thing to do to stand and toast.

This issue resonated deeply with me. Shortly after it was announced that I had been appointed Principal of St Andrews, and while still living in the US, the Scottish Government invited me to the Ryder Cup in Valhalla (I should have appreciated then just how important a role golf plays in Scottish society, and prepared myself for what was to come, but that's another story). At the end of the formal dinner we were asked to be upstanding for the Royal Toast. I was immediately seized by a range of conflicting emotions and silently recited Seamus's words to myself "*My passport's Green. No glass of ours was ever raised to toast the Queen*" as I wondered what to do. Courtesy took over and I conformed, while asking myself if I was betraying my culture, my country, my ancestors? Had I done a terrible thing by accepting this job in Scotland? My crisis, while acute, was momentary, as the royal toast was

immediately followed by the toast to the President: not the President of the Golf Club, as I'd assumed, but the President of the United States, George Bush. This time I really gulped — and decided that toasting the Queen wasn't so bad after all.

In 1989 Seamus was elected Professor of Poetry in Oxford. Reflecting in his last Oxford lecture on *An Open Letter* and its statement about his passport being green, Seamus said he "*preferred to envisage the poem conferring dual citizenship*":

*"I wrote about the colour of the passport...not in order to expunge the British connection in Britain's Ireland but to maintain the right to diversity within the border, to be understood as having full freedom to the enjoyment of an Irish name and identity within that northern jurisdiction...There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances."*

One can only imagine what he might have made of the saga of the French manufactured new, blue, British, post-Brexit passports!

His words about dual citizenship and embracing '*the challenge to be in two minds*' have particular force now. In a world where borders and political factions are hardening and where petty nationalism spreads fear that cultural identity may be eroded by incomers, we need poets to remind us that being doubtful, double, Derry *and* Dublin can be a source of enormous cultural strength and imaginative vitality. The state that allows one to be in two minds, to have more than one tradition and identity (and to entertain the value of

more than one opinion), is not politically weak. It is vibrant, inclusive, diverse. It can think laterally – and bi-laterally. It is not anxiously introspective and isolationist, but playfully outgoing and polyphonic. Seamus’s work communicates the strength of an open hand and an open mind.

My daughter, Ciara, is far too cynical for someone her age and like so many Millennials expects nothing from the political establishment and political life. But on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May last year (the day after the Irish referendum) I received a WhatsApp message from her in Copenhagen that read simply:

*History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.*

You’ll recognize, as I did, The Cure of Troy.

After the terrorist atrocities of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Seamus wrote:

*'If poetry has a virtue, it resides in its ability to bring us to our senses about what is going on inside and outside ourselves. As human beings, we crave this realisation and one of the most observable proofs of such craving was the general and urgent quest, in the wake of September 11, for poems that would be equal to that moment.'*

I believe that in this time of political brinkmanship, of fearful rhetoric and angry division, his words are equal to our moment. They are deeply humane. His poems are, in fact, indispensable. Helpfully he identified the quality that makes a poem so:

*“One thing is certain. The indispensable poem always has an element of surprise about it. Even perhaps a touch of the irrational. For both the reader and the writer, it will possess a soothsaying force, as if it were an oracle delivered unexpectedly and irresistibly.”*

Often his poems describe such moments of unexpected epiphany. In *‘The Skylight’*, the moment when the slates come off is a small domestic miracle: *‘extravagant /Sky entered and held surprise wide open’*. In *‘Ballynahinch Lake’* it is *‘the utter mountain mirrored in the lake’*, which *‘Entered us like a wedge knocked sweetly home / Into core timber’*. In that moment, *‘something in us had unhoused itself’*. In *‘Postscript’*, stepping out of the car along the Flaggy Shore of County Clare grants a dramatic view of a lake whipped up by wind and *‘the earthed lightning of a flock of swans’*. That seemingly random decision while on a journey to make time to stop moving, to step out and expose oneself to the buffeting of the wind and the play of light produces an emotional revelation:

*“...You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.”*

I find it significant that in all these poems, opening up is associated with gifts of self-renewal. When we are ‘unhoused’, blown open, made vulnerable – something wonderful happens. Sky enters and holds surprise wide open. We re-assess; we appreciate; we are freshly exposed to the elements of ourself.

Great poetry is a skylight. A sky dive. A skeleton key to free us from the coffin of cynicism and worry that too often threatens to bury us alive. And it shares this gift with all its sister arts – from painting to music, from film to dance. This gift of openness to everything. Creative freedom. Empathy with other beings: human and non-human, living and dead. Telling new stories. The possibility of imagining things differently and better.

It seems worthwhile to re-state the infinite value of these practices, because we are living through a period when the Humanities are under fire. In concert with a renewed political emphasis on closing down borders, detaining and deporting non-nationals, and withdrawing from previous international agreements, has come a narrowing of the syllabus that governments are prepared to support. I see these forms of anxious constriction as related and worrying developments.

Music and ‘foreign’ languages, for example, are no longer considered necessary elements of a state school education, deserving of public funding, despite strong evidence that they promote children’s psychological well-being and their learning across the curriculum. The result is that most children who do not have access to private lessons are excluded from further study and careers in these subjects. The Warwick Commission Report of 2015 found that overall participation in arts subjects is falling amongst school-age children, with between 2003 and 2013 a 50% drop in GCSE numbers for design and technology, 23% for drama, and 25% for other craft-related subjects.

Universities, too, are threatened with a future in which public funds will support only students taking degrees related to science and technology. There is talk (much of it from MPs themselves privileged to be raised on a rich educational diet of arts and social sciences) of arts degrees

being 'worth less' when the high costs of university tuition are computed against the graduate salary students can, on average, expect to earn. The implication of this grimly utilitarian rhetoric is that the arts are luxuries. They are dalliances for the children of the rich, 'extras' as dance lessons once were in the curriculum of Victorian young ladies. As a society, we cannot afford them. The needs of the individual and the community are better served by learning that leads more directly to a quick buck. Seamus would strongly have repudiated this view.

In fact, books do make bucks in Britain. The creative economy is estimated to contribute a net value of more than 101 billion pounds to Britain's GDP. It is vital to the economic health of the sector that diverse talent is not lost because the most gifted young writers, actors, musicians, dancers and artists of the future (supremely gifted as Seamus was) never found their calling – or lived in the wrong postcode to be able to respond.

But, when we demean the arts, we stand to lose something more profound. The humanities may have been reconceived as a business. But it remains their true business to make us reconceive our humanity. As Seamus so eloquently argued, *'poetry and the arts ...fortify your inner life...Listening together and knowing things together...is what a culture is'*. He also said: *'The poet is on the side of undeceiving the world'*. An echo, perhaps of W H Auden's assertion that *"the primary function of poetry, as of all the arts...is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us...I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive"*.

So I say: Yes, we need STEM subjects. But, to follow the organic metaphor through, we also need FLOWER subjects. Film and Fashion design and Fine art. Law, Languages and Literatures. Oratory and Opera. World

History, Ethics and Epistemology and Religion. We need to stay open to cross-pollination, to bloom – as a society that is more than its economy. As a nation that is more than one nation.

Poetry is part of how we stay open. How we recognise our shared vulnerability as a strength. How we admit the world.

Seamus's poetry has in this regard, as he did, an irresistible charm. On his tombstone in Bellaghy is written a line from one of his poems: '*Walk on air against your better judgement*'.

It's a line that brings a smile and a tear. How often in recent times, have we needed the admonition to try to be light, to find light, while facing heavy realities? Yet we must do our best to let his words breathe joy and curiosity into us, inspiring us with a lighter heart and a determination to look outward. To stay open to the euphoria of living and breathing, despite our anxieties and misgivings.

One of Seamus's many obituaries in *The Belfast Telegraph* reported locals saying (approvingly) that he 'talked like a farmer's son', he was 'down to earth'; 'he had no airs and graces'. I would have to agree with the first assertion: he was of the earth, earthy, his voice warm and unaffected. He had no airs. But grace he had in lyrical abundance.

I met Seamus again in Scotland when he came to the poetry festival StanZa in March 2010. He had cut down on engagements by then but was still receiving invitations from all over the world. He explained that he had not gone to Venice because "you are there to decorate the program, a celebrity", but had come to Fife because of "connectedness," connectedness to the place and to the many poets there he counted among his friends.

He came back to St Andrews again in June 2013 to give a reading of some of his poems which are translated from and inspired by medieval literature. The reading was part of a conference called The Middle Ages in the Modern World convened to celebrate the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University. It took place on the same day as graduation when he sat in the audience and cheered on Mary McAleese, the Irish President, as she was awarded an honorary degree. He gave his talk in a modern very un-medieval lecture theatre and was introduced by the organizer, Chris Jones. Chris had been very keen to get Seamus to the conference and tried to get me to use my friendship with Seamus to encourage him to accept, which I was very loath to do. Chris told this story in his introduction of Seamus. As we drove back to my house after the lecture – the fact that we drove rather than walked along the seafront itself an indication that he had slowed down – Seamus said how glad he was that Chris had told the story. He had thought about doing it himself but didn't want to give himself airs. I remember laughing aloud and telling him that he was the only person on the planet who could possibly imagine that acknowledging the friendship between us raised his status more than it did mine. But he was like that: deeply Irish in his reluctance to seem self-important or bumptious, though the world was happy to lay laurels at his feet, knowing he had earned them.

He and Marie stayed with us a couple of days and when they left, he gave us an inscribed, illustrated print of A Drink of Water. It ends with the lines:

*Where I have dipped again, to be  
Faithful to the admonishment on her cup  
Remember the Giver fading off the lip.*

He gave us all so much.

His death, two months later, to quote his devastating line from 'Postscript', caught "the heart off guard".

It was too soon. We should have been celebrating his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. It would always have been too soon to lose his genius, his gentle heart, his generous spirit. But he has left us words on the cup. A taste of well water. A gift. A benediction.

I thank him from the depths of my heart. I am grateful to you all for sharing this evening with me, and for offering me the opportunity to remember Seamus as we celebrate the inauguration of what I am sure will be a long, inspiring and sustaining series of Seamus Heaney lectures.

Thank you.

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