



Interview with Seamus Heaney

Morgan George

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EPI-REVEL

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Interview with Seamus Heaney

George Morgan

Université de Nice - Sophia-Antipolis
George Morgan est maître de conférences à l'U.F.R. Lettres, arts et sciences humaines de l'université de Nice - Sophia-Antipolis où il assure un enseignement sur l'œuvre de Seamus Heaney. Poète, traducteur et auteur de nombreux articles sur la poésie d'inspiration celtique en langue anglaise, il travaille actuellement sur l'Espace dans la poésie de Dylan Thomas.

— George Morgan: What does “exile” bring to mind?

Seamus Heaney: I think of Joyce. Joyce gives the condition an almost mandatory status for the writer when he talks about “Silence, exile and cunning.” Then, if I go back through my heritage as a man from Northern Ireland, from Derry, I remember Saint Columba who exiled himself from Derry to Iona. He was a scribe and a poet — as well as a saint — and ended his life on Iona because of a self-lacerating vow. So, from the beginning to the end of the Irish tradition, there is this example of exiling yourself from the familiar in order to compose your soul — which is a parallel activity, I suppose, to composing poetry.

— Do you think of writing then as a form of exile?

If things go well for you in an act of writing you are displaced to a distance and insulated within an elsewhere that gives you an exiled perspective on the usual. One could extend the meaning of “exile” to include that defamiliarisation or strangeness which happens in the act of writing.

— And would this account for so many images and references in your work to voyages and journeys? I'm thinking, for instance, of “The islands riding themselves out into the fog” in “Peninsula.”

I am a child of Romanticism as much as anything else and so the idea of the poem as an imaginative journey, as the crossing of some border into an elsewhere, that idea is very deeply laid down. It's there already in the idea of a Muse who gives you access to another stratum of your own being. It's there in the old images of Oisín going to Tir na nÓg and of Thomas Rhymer going to fairyland. I think that the idea of escaping out of your usual frame of reference and your usual conditions of perception is an inherited one for all of us. It's in Yeats at the beginning in “The Wanderings of Oisín.” And then later, in “The Collarbone of a Hare.” And then later still, in “Sailing to Byzantium.” I think it's basic. You get “carried away,” “transported,” in English: those words tell you what happens when the poetic trance begins.

— You once wrote of yourself as an “inner émigré,” a term that has been bandied about a lot since then. Do you still think of yourself in this way?

As far as possible, you try to remain a mystery to yourself. Living in Ireland, not being an exile, living in Ireland as a social creature, as a familiar citizen, I think there is a great danger that one's social persona might overwhelm one's *daimon* — if you'll permit me such a grand term... And so what one is always trying to do is displace oneself to another place or space. In my case, I've been very lucky to have had a cottage in Wicklow where I am literally displaced from my usual Dublin surroundings and indeed Wicklow is where I first thought of myself as being an inner *émigré*. Since 1988, thanks to the great kindness of Ann Saddlemyer, I've been able to own the cottage and to think of it as my “place of writing.” When I said “inner émigré,” I meant to suggest a state of poetic stand-off, as it were, a state where you have

slipped out of your usual social persona and have entered more creatively and fluently into your inner being. I think it is necessary to shed, at least to some extent, the social profile that you maintain elsewhere. “Inner émigré” once had a specific meaning, of course, in the 1920s and 30s in Soviet Russia. It referred to someone who had not actually gone into exile but who lived at home disaffected from the system. Well, to some extent that was true of myself. Certainly, in relation to Northern Ireland.

— You also talk a lot about “home,” of being “at home.” But when you do so you’re often abroad somewhere, in Jutland or somewhere.

Yes, that’s right [Laughter].

— I remember there’s a poem in which you talk about a platinum bar, in France presumably, which represents the standard measurement, the metre, and you write : “I could feel at home inside that metal core slumbering at the very heart of systems”. What does it actually mean to you to be “at home?”

It’s not something I’ve thought through. I try to dive down, as far as possible, away from the analyses and the self-consciousness encouraged by these questions. I’m not quite sure what “home” means other than that deep sense of planetary, experiential, creaturely, animal “at-homeness” which I’m trying to express in the metaphor of “slumbering at the heart of systems.” When I hear the word “home,” I hear the sound the earth might make humming on its axis. Something Wordsworthian. You know that poem “A slumber did my spirit seal” where Wordsworth says that Lucy is “roll’d round in earth’s diurnal course / With rocks and stones and fields.” “At home” means something like that to me.

— A kind of centredness?

Something centred and deeply harmonious, yes. I’d have to be a bit Heideggerian here, and coin a term like “in-dwelling.” My favourite meditation on it is in a poem called “The Birthplace” which is about Thomas Hardy’s birthplace. But I’d want to insist that when I use the word “home,” I’m not talking of “hominess” in the American sense. I credit all that nostalgic part of my being but I also want to put it to the test, to remind it that we are made up of homelessness as well as centredness.

— You’re on record as saying to Seamus Deane that “you have to make your work your home.”

I think that’s true enough. The thing which is personally most satisfactory in your own work is the part which gives you the words for “where you are.” The words that make clear to you the stage you have reached and that signal a path by which you might proceed. Those words don’t happen every day and not everything you write is like that. But it is what is most rewarding about the vocation of poetry. I would take, as an example of what I mean, a set of poems called “Sweeney Redivivus” at the end of *Station Island*. In those poems, I arrived at a terrific sense of having come through something, of having freed up, of having understood the previous ten years of my life, of having laid down new laws for myself, and taken farewells and opened up possibilities. And yet the poems are as much about homelessness as about being at home.

— There is a paradox that runs through much of your work. On the one hand, there is the sense of centredness, this rootedness you’re talking about but, at the same time, a moving towards distances, absences, horizons.

That’s right. I formulated it recently, perhaps a little too neatly, in the image of the ripple. I think of consciousness as a starting at a small centre and then widening out and widening out.

What are we? Are we the centre where the ripple begins or are we the circumference to which the ripple extends? I think we are the negotiation between that first stirring of infant consciousness and the ultimate reach of our own recognitions. I would like to think that a poem can be faithful to the original inner lining of your consciousness and, at the same time, register and give credit to all you might have experienced and aspired to and intuited in adult life in the meantime.

— Is this what you mean when you talk about perceiving things “in extremis,” as in “Disappearing Island?”

I was really thinking of what happens in a political crisis where people are thrown back their pieties. When threat arrives, people are simpler and clearer. The idea of Irish nationalism, for example, is mocked by revisionists and by all kinds of sceptics and commentators but if Ireland were to be invaded or threatened, they might think twice; *in extremis*, people begin to realize what is precious to them. When conditions are more relaxed and more generous, people forget the basics. Remember what William Blake said? “Damn braces. Bless relaxes.”

— In the poem you’ve just quoted, “Disappearing Island,” you write: “The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm / Only when we embraced it in extremis. / All I believe that happened there was vision.” This seems to be less political than metaphysical?

It’s born out of living in contemporary Ireland. It’s based as you know on the incident in the voyage of Saint Brendan when the monks disembark upon an island which turns out to be the back of a sleeping whale. The incident is both matter-of-fact and dreamlike, unexpected and foreknown, like poetry itself. I think that what a poem has to do is to begin in the given circumstances, in the usual and the circumstantial and then to trampoline off them and get into some more oneiric and abstract element. The last line of the poem delighted me because it was full of double takes: “All I believe that happened there was vision.” After that, I did a book called *Seeing Things*.

— In many of your poems, to dwell on the theme of exile, you write of frontiers, barriers and so forth. A number of poems are entitled “From... somewhere,” “From the Frontier of Writing” for instance. It seems to me that these are as much about the process of writing as about some real experience... going through an army road block, for example.

I keep on going back to the old examples of Usheen going to Tir na nOg or Thomas Rhymer going to fairyland. “The Frontier of Writing” is that kind of poem, and the history of its composition is of some interest to myself, if to nobody else. It began as a cancelled section of *Station Island*. I was writing about the pilgrim going to Station Island and being stopped at a roadblock. And what occurred at the roadblock in that particular version was a meeting with the British army, a re-run of Irish meets English, and so on. And I thought: “Hmm, this isn’t very interesting, it’s another sociological report, it’s a bit heavy, drop it.” At the same time, I did like the actual documentary recording of the encounter at the roadblock. So, in the new poem which became “From the Frontier of Writing,” I allowed the encounter to happen twice. And it seemed to have more interest and more import when it moved from documentary to dream. It became a parable.

— It’s structured rather like “Digging,” in the sense that it takes you a stage further, a little bit deeper.

Yes, it always has to happen twice [Laughter]. One of my favourite pieces about poetic composition is in Wordsworth. In *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, he says the original emotion is contemplated until, by some species of excitement, a second emotion is generated and is actually present in the mind, and in this mood successful composition usually begins. So the

emotion recollected in tranquillity actually constitutes a new emotion, the prerequisite animation which brings the words to life under your tongue, from the back to the front of your mind. They can come to life through sudden excitement or through a long happy incubation where you are content to revise gradually because you have a sense of being onto something.

— What about your actual process of writing, the rituals you may have?

I don't have any rituals. One of the best descriptions of the type of writer I am was given by Tom Paulin who described himself as a "binge" writer — like a binge drinker. I go on binges. Over the years, it has occurred as intense runs of about three months: you might write the half of a book in three months and then live for a year and a half...

— And go into hibernation?

Into desperation! That's why I embrace tasks of one kind or another. At the moment, for instance, I'm doing a translation of *Beowulf* and, before that, I had my Oxford Lectures. Things like that give you the illusion of purpose between the poems. They keep you exercised and convinced that you have some verity. If you just rely on the arrival of poems you can feel pretty shaky.

— A Welsh poet Vernon Watkins, who was a bank clerk in the thirties and forties, would go home every night and sit down and type, or retype anything, just to be there, ready for whatever came.

I think that's admirable, I know people who do that. I've not done it. It may have been a great waste. I have found that industry produces no work for me [Laughter].

— When a poem comes on one of your binges, does it come easily? Or do you have to squeeze out the words?

In my experience, poems are of two kinds. There are the ones which come swiftly and they are the definitive ones both for the reader and myself, poems which just surge up. Then there are ones which I know are crucial poems but they aren't written as speedily and yet it's as if you have hooked something and you're hauling it in gradually. There is the deep satisfaction of knowing that you are onto a proper subject, locked onto the right system and target. But it will take a while to work it out. Without that sensation that the poem has attained its biological right to life, as it were, I cannot proceed. I cannot start with a subject unless there is an excitement, although the excitement can indeed be generated, by remote control, as it were. The occasion of the excitement may not actually appear in the poem. For example, I did one poem at Harvard, a commission for the 350th anniversary of Harvard College. At first I thought, why the hell am I writing about Harvard? I don't have any emotional centre here. I happen to be employed as a professor, but that's a very external link. I'm not even an American. But then I discovered that John Harvard, who endowed the university in 1636, was the son of a man who had been in the cattle trade, a butcher, and that he had come from Stratford-on-Avon and Shakespeare's father was also, according to the sources, a butcher. So I thought OK! John Harvard grew up with a man who was in the cattle trade. That made me feel connected, since my own father was a cattle dealer, and I grew up among byres and cowsheds. And then Harvard came to America and the first school was founded in what was called the "yard," alongside a cattle pen. So, in that way, I generated a remote sense of identification with Harvard, yet these facts do not appear in the poem. They just contributed to some inner sense of rightness.

— You say in *Crediting Poetry*: "I credit poetry for being itself and for being a help." How do you see it as "being a help?"

That is a reference back to something I read in George Seferis's journals and that I quote in the *Redress of Poetry*. Seferis is reading Greek poetry during the war in the nineteen forties and he's trying to write an article. There is distress, uncertainty, destruction all round him, with civil war looming. And he's reading poetry and he's really testing it. Does this thing have any value? And at one point he says: "Reading X this morning, I found that poetry is a help." I think that what he means is that poetry secures some final place in your being, some little redoubt in your consciousness that will not be taken over by history or the world or disaster. Poetry says to the psyche: "You can stay here, this is a place that has been prepared for you!" Poetry's value is established and promulgated by people who have known that feeling or something like it.

— You speak of poetry as being like a "little redoubt"...

My image for it is Yeats's "stanza," the little room of the stanza building up the tower block of the poem itself. Now of course that can be deconstructed: the poem as male fortified edifice, the phallic poem, but I still think that what happens at the best times is a definite verification, if not fortification. The subject need not have any strong associations, the mood of the poem itself may be tentative, the melody unassertive — Verlaine say, or Edward Thomas — but it comes home to the reader as a safeness.

— How do you think that poetry has to respond in an era of growing expansiveness, of telecommunications, the Web, globalisation? You write yourself: "What might have been origin, we dissipated in news."

I think that poetry tends to evolve a little ahead of what's actually happening. In contemporary English-language writing, I would cite, for better or worse, the emergence of a poet like John Ashbery in the sixties, seventies and eighties in American literary culture. He precedes the weightlessness of being induced by Web culture. Ashbery's idiom is one in which Daffy Duck, Disney and Dante are somehow allowed equal status. They come up without affect. They are part of a gravity-free world. Poetry copes with the new conditions by being wise to them, either rhythmically or through images. In Ireland, for example, you have Paul Muldoon. Muldoon has that web-site, information-age capacity to surf through a lot of channels and to leap into a lot of systems in his poetry. You are constantly shifting systems from stanza to stanza. But Muldoon actually resists the total availability and shoulder shrug of the post-modern by having a deep obstinacy, an old fidelity to the dialect and language of Ulster. Muldoon is the local boy who is also a kind of clued-in internationalist and yet doesn't believe in the international, or not quite [Laughter]. And that is the soul's position too, I'd say. I think that, as ever, it will be strong, resistant cultural centres which will produce the actual work. In any given age, there are only three or four centres redeeming the usual...

— Where do you see these centres emerging?

Northern Ireland might be one. And I say that, I hope, not out of mere ethnic pride or local blindness or jingoism. I do believe that the sheer acceleration and the range of reference in Muldoon is Joycean. He is a post-Finnegans Wake jubilator. He has that Joycean... it's more than obstinacy. It's the vindictiveness of the local. Joyce has that in *Finnegans Wake*. This doesn't quite answer the question on technology — but even when the conditions which are offered are speed conditions, even intergalactic conditions, the dialect and the vigour of the ignorant will redeem us [Laughter].

— To return to your own personal quest in poetry, you write, in "The Land of the Unspoken": "My deepest contact was underground." The poem actually takes place on the Underground but I think it goes further. In other poems, you talk about the "deep brain" and so on. Do you

see your poetry as an exploration of the subconscious, and how do you relate to psychoanalysis?

I don't have any experiential or theoretical relation to psychoanalysis. But I do believe that the way rhythm works in poetry, the way language works is by a transmission of the undertruths of our being. The poetry that moves me most moves me for slightly odd reasons. When I read a poet as clear as Elizabeth Bishop, it is not the clarity of delineation which entrances me in the end. It is the mystery of that which is clearly delineated, and a sense of looking through clear water to a submarine truth. So yes, ideally, in my own poems, the effect I would like them to have is to make people say "Yes" to something that is clear in terms of presentation and in terms of psychological truth but also "Yes" because there is also a second-guessed truth in them. I hesitate to use the word "mystery" but I like the sense of a veil being lifted, of what was available becoming doubly available.

— A sense of the marvellous?

A sense of the marvellous, yes. Actually, that story of the monks seeing the marvellous boat in the air is one of my favourite poems. It has a lucid, clear, narrative persuasiveness and, at the same time, it hints at some form of extra integrity or coherence that might be available.

— Yeats had a series of revelations and drew these up into a coherent vision. Have you been tempted to do this yourself?

No, no. I've a limited number of truths to tell about myself or poetry. I think the important moment for me was the death of my parents and the freedom that gave me to use a more numinous vocabulary. You need the words to tackle death. You are at the death-bed and they are alive this moment, they are dead the next. What has disappeared?

— As in one of the Clearance poems?

That's right. All this language based on the old religious order of things is useful and overbrimming with meaning. It isn't abstraction. It is something that is necessary for us as human beings, to help us talk about what we know.

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