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# What we leave behind: poetry, music, and Seamus Heaney

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## What We Leave Behind: Poetry, Music and Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney's death in late summer, 2013, came as a shock and is now a residual sadness. I miss his guidance, his humanity, his humor. Heaney's presence, through the poems, has been a richly-colored thread connecting each stage of my life – or at least of how I made sense of them. I sometimes think most everything I do is still sewn through with his color (the color of a woodland in bloom).

I first read him in a classroom in Boston in 1984, when I was seventeen years old. Awkward, so shy I would turn red from toe to top if called upon in class, his poem, "Bone Dreams" from *North*, opened up the adult world to me, revealed to me a realm in which good words do not lose their edge, where words carry history and mystery just as bones and architectural remains do. In his poetry, I lost, and then found, myself. Etymology, beauty, political strife, sensuality, vulnerability – it was all there, rocking about in this taut poem made of squat quatrains. He described the word hoard as a bone-house, where "the iron flash of consonants" cleaves the line and "the soul fluttered a while in the roofspace." Part incantation, part geography lesson, part love poem to a landscape, I was smitten, and smitten I remain. His writing took the pulse of all that seemed important. He took the muck of existence and made it into mud-pies.

Over the years I had awaited each new poem as I awaited the turn of each new page of the calendar. The appearance of a volume would ratchet up the significance of the season. I loved other living poets, certainly, but Heaney's work I consumed with a hunger that never lessened. *The Haw Lantern* appeared the same year my own father died. I learned how grief can be spelled out intimately in sonnet form. "He called her 'good' and 'girl,' then she was dead." (*Death of a Naturalist*, his first volume, was published the year of my birth). Between *Seeing Things* and *The Spirit Level*, my first child, a daughter, was born, not long after her own father died. The year *Electric Light* came out, 2001, I married my husband. My second child, a son, was born as Heaney composed *Human Chain*. In fact, when I was pregnant with Otto, I saw Heaney and asked him to place his hand on my belly, the closest I've ever come to asking for a blessing. When queried about recommendations of what to name a newborn, he said: *An seo* (pronounced "ansho,") which in Gaelic means, "Here, present." My German husband wasn't keen on Gaelic so we settled for a palindrome, Otto (the "prosperous").

The month after Heaney died I flew to Manchester in the UK for the third annual Contemporary British and Irish Poetry conference, where Heaney had been scheduled to appear and read. The conference was not unlike an Irish wake, booze and poetry everywhere. Everyone wept. Don Paterson said that the current generation of poets had just lost the head of its household. The occasion was sorrowful, and healing. The life that spilled out of his poems and his person was very much there with us.

I returned to Boston in October and went to a meeting of the Boston University Arts Council in the Provost's Office. I ran into a fellow council member, Scott Jarrett, who leads the Marsh Chapel Choir. Scott mentioned that he was conducting a performance of "Anything Can

Happen,” the result of a recent collaboration (2012) between the Arab-American composer, Mohammed Fairouz, and – why was I surprised -- Seamus Heaney. I blurted out that I was a Heaney scholar. Scott said he needed someone to say something about the poems at the beginning of the evening, and so I was thrilled to participate. The collaboration was unknown to me, and so it greeted me in the manner of a new work by Heaney, which in essence it was. The three poems to which Fairouz set the music were familiar to me, but not as a threesome. I went home and began to put together my thoughts about these, the sense of impending catastrophe the poems bespeak.

The first time I heard the music accompanying the poems was the night of the performance. I wasn't sure how it would all work. The idea of poems set to music unnerved me. Poetry was a sanctuary, a place of quiet, where the music I heard was in my head or sometimes came to me through a poet's voice. At the beginning of the show, I stood up before the audience and gave a short spiel about the poems, then I sat back and let the occasion unfurl.

By evening's end. I was made to think anew of the way one art form can help illuminate another, how the blending of two creates a third form. What the collaboration achieved was in a nutshell one of the things I most admire about Heaney. He brought together languages and the sensibilities attached to them – English and Arabic – into a co-habitable space. The work teaches us how these two different cultural shapes and forces can find consonance amid the dissonance. The work of mourning once again became a work of learning too. The evening was not, after all, about Heaney. Not about Fairouz. It was not about Irish poetry or about being an Arab-American. It was about trying to make sense of cataclysmic times through art. The jumbled genres reflected the fractures of feeling.

Before writing the poems in *District & Circle* (2006), from which the triptych was taken, Heaney commented that we were living in a new age of anxiety, which he perceived as arising from the what has been called the war on terror. Having lived through an era of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, the imminence and the ominousness of the unpredictable was familiar to him. What was unfamiliar was the global scale.

The musical composition was based on three poems from Heaney's 2006 volume, *District & Circle* (“In Iowa,” “Höfn,” and “Anything Can Happen”), a volume that was penned in these newly trying times. Heaney rationalized the choice of poems to Fairouz by saying, “I thought a triptych could be made as follows – the first two being ominous, the third catastrophic – the omen fulfilled, as it were.”

Heaney has collaborated with music makers other than Hammond and Fairouz. In 2003, he and Liam O'Flynn recorded “The Poet and the Piper” (Claddagh Records). O'Flynn's instrumental tracks alternated with recordings of Heaney reading poems; sometimes they were mixed together. Heaney has also collaborated with Janet Harbison, an Irish harp player. What differs in the Fairouz collaboration is that Heaney's heard voice is nowhere to be found. The poems are bodied forth by trained singers. Instead of music in between readings, the music is the background to the reading. In addition, the language is not always Heaney's. In the composition, Heaney's text (in English) alternates with passages (“Sura”) sung in the Arabic injeel. To listen

to the Arabic chanting sandwiched in between excerpts of the poems was a revelation. This bringing together of what might at first appear as an uncomfortable pairing seems fitting as the three poems attend to global unpredictability and consequence. The composition teaches us to listen – to Arabic, among other things – with fresh ears.

The first poem in the triptych, “In Iowa,” finds us in a tempest-tossed landscape, the warmth of humanity displaced by feet of snow. The language is resonant with biblical overtones and the closing image is of “rising waters,” as if Noah’s flood had returned to cleanse the earth of its pollution. What comes to mind also are Moses and the parting of waters, the sparing of a whole people, or a tribe’s salvation and deliverance. The second poem, “Höfn,” the name of a small Icelandic fishing village seen from above by the poet passing over in an airplane, offers us a glimpse of a melting glacier, the consequence of abuse of the planet. And the third in the triptych, “Anything Can Happen,” a translation of a Horatian ode, describes a cataclysm that can come out of nowhere – a clear blue sky, the finest of September days – and rain terror down upon us.

In each poem Heaney fuses together on the line conflicting elements: parting or rising waters, the sun’s warmth and a glacier’s demise, a pristine blue sky that delivers death. It has been his tendency to bring together disparate elements on the page, to create at least a momentary harmony; as he does with words from the Anglo-Saxon and Latin, or, in this case, English and Arabic. These unexpected congregations defuse the conflict, or launch music into the air. As was his Room to Rhyme tour through Northern Ireland some 45 years ago, Heaney’s collaboration with Fairouz, a young Arab-American, represents another such harmonizing measure. How sad for us that it was one of his last. I somehow think we need him now more than ever.

As Fairouz comments, “I found, in the process of putting together the texts with Seamus that there were beautiful parallels to the narrative of these three apocalyptic poems in passages from the Arabic Injeel (the equivalent to the New Testament) that I ended up setting in the original old Arabic to form the inner movements of the piece. These movements are titled Suras (literally “Pictures” or “Images”) to which I provide my own translation from the original Arabic.” The music and the performances were riveting and prescient. To hear alongside these poems Old Testament overtones, interspersed with the Arabic injeel, made me think about the need of and the wealth gained by the cross-pollination of forms and cultures. Bible, Koran and – Heaney. Once again I discovered in him an intermediary between sometimes sparring partners, showing us a way out of the stand-offs and silences, and drawing us into a harmonic arrangement.

Michael Longley, in a radio interview with Krista Tippett (*On Being*, August 2016), says that poetry is useless, but that does not mean it does not have value. Heaney’s collaborative impulses are, in a larger political sense, useless indeed. But what he harnesses imaginatively, what came to life in the high-ceilinged arches of the chapel, was something close to ethereal. The lifting up of voices provided for – if not transcendence, then at least a new angle from which to consider difference. The beauty of an eastern realm represented by the Suras came to rest in the soft folds in between Heaney’s poems. A juxtaposition and a welcoming.

Song and poetry have long had kinships. In a 2016 conversation with Meghna Chakrabarti on WBUR, Christopher Ricks discusses Dylan's win of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Ricks comments that Dylan's is a "triangular," a "compound" art. The words and voice and music must be fully and equally effective. A performing art that makes you "think again about what singing is." The collaboration between Fairouz and Heaney gives us a new way of hearing not only what these art forms are but also casts light on the value of collaboration. What better figure for the role art can play today, as mediating force, blending east with west. Of the elements combined in the composition, Fairouz writes: "They do not exist independently of each other." Just as discord exists between two conflicting forces, concord can arise from the same. Heaney learned this lesson long ago in a riven Northern Ireland.

Looking closely at the three poems, a few motifs connect them. Effective as poems individually, the pleasure we take in them is enlarged by their companionship. These poems make apparent that the afterlife of an image often sets not just a poem but also a feeling in motion for Heaney. Think of his early poem, "Mossbawn: Sunlight," where love is

like a tinsmith's scoop,  
sunk past its gleam  
in the meal-bin. (*North*, 9)

The focus rests on something we cannot see -- the light from the tin scoop that is no longer visible, and through this imagined, lost "gleam" Heaney takes account of a feeling. A similar movement occurs in later poems wherein he tries to get at the source of his discomfort, as in "In Iowa:"

In Iowa once, among the Mennonites  
In a slathering blizzard, conveyed all afternoon  
Through sleet-glit pelting hard against the windscreen  
And a wiper's strong absolving slumps and flits,  
  
I saw, abandoned in the open gap  
Of a field where wilted corn stalks flagged the snow,  
A mowing machine. Snow brimmed its iron seat,  
Heaped each spoked wheel with a thick white brow

And took the shine off oil in the black-toothed gears.

Verily I came forth from that wilderness

As one unbaptized who had known darkness

At the third hour and the veil in tatters.

In Iowa once. In the slush and rush and hiss

Not of parted but as of rising waters. (*District & Circle*, 50)

As we read, we get a sense of Heaney driving back, anxiously, from a poetry reading in Iowa City in intense wintry weather. As he moves along the road, Heaney, ever attentive at the level of the image, looks through his ice and sleet-battered windshield, and sees the figure of a mowing machine. The snow that has begun to cover it transforms it into something other than what it is. This sight of its newfound otherness leads him to reach past what he sees to what he knows is there, an imagined and unseen “shine,” which the white covering has removed from the “black-toothed gears.” Like the speaker, we imagine the white against the black, frozen water against oil, which then leads us to think about the separation of different kinds of material, for instance, like the sprinkling of holy water and the anointing of holy oil, restoratives. The small detail that catches his attention here, the oil covered by snow, feeds into a growing sense of dread.

The particular image of the shining oil-covered gears, now snow-topped triggers a feeling of unease in him that he wants to get to the source of. The image finds a companion in the wipers that try to clear the windscreen by whisking away the freezing matter, just as the flood waters fail to part but instead would cover the dirty and sinful earth. The sonnet, at its turn, grows dark, and the poem becomes one of foreboding, without reassurance of redemption.

How is it that he gets so much out of the image of a shine that can no longer be seen? Unlike “Mossbawn: Sunlight,” this lost light brings no memory of familial warmth and love. What it erupts into is apprehension, and his experience of such disquiet cannot help but be charged by his familiarity with the history of religion, with sectarian and historical violence, and he also knows that such things rarely end well. The wipers’ “absolving slumps and fits” makes us think of a priest’s equally mechanical arm, forgiving sins. When the elements are fierce, wipers rarely do what they need to, and in fact, they can sometimes make vision worse. They attempt to clean but never can, like a gesture of absolution. The sonnet moves from storm to apocalyptic vision. The image affects his thinking and feeling, his attention goes to this process, and he tries to work it out formally in the sonnet. Structurally, “In Iowa” promises what is expected. Divided into three quatrains and a closing couplet, the poem in outward form is a Shakespearean sonnet, but the rhyme pattern suggests an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet in the first

and third quatrains: *abba cded fggf hh*. The outward structure, however, belies the irresolution of the content.

What guides the movement of the sestet (the aftermath of the image) is never fully resolved. The frustration of expectation (don't sonnets often try to work things out?) contributes to the power of feeling, the residual unease. Notice also the shift in ground from octave to sestet, from Iowa, land of the Mennonites, to the Middle East, the Promised Land. Here there is no parting of the Red Sea for Moses' tribe but a deluge, a cleansing that wipes the earth clean of its people.

Fairouz puzzled over how to cast these verses in his composition: "The emergence of the biblical language "Verily I came forth..." is cast for the baritone soloist here. This movement is followed by the First Sura which is a setting in Arabic from a section of the Arabic Injeel somewhat corresponding to the recounting of the crucifixion from the book of Matthew. The imagery of the tearing of the veil at the third hour corresponds closely to Seamus' imagery in 'In Iowa'." Even without knowing that the Arabic Injeel is an equivalent to the New Testament, the listener cannot fail to acknowledge the music's gravity, the directives of the language, even when 'overheard' in an unfamiliar tongue.

On the page following "In Iowa" in *District & Circle* is "Höfn," a ten-line poem, which reads:

The three-tongued glacier has begun to melt.

What will we do, they ask, when boulder-milt

Comes wallowing across the delta flats

And the miles-deep shag ice makes its move?

I saw it, ridged and rock-set, from above,

Undead grey-gristed earth-pelt, aeon-scruff,

And feared its coldness that still seemed enough

To iceblock the plane window dimmed with breath,

Deepfreeze the seep of adamantine tilth

And every warm, mouthwatering word of mouth. (*District & Circle*, 51)

The glacier, seen from far above, is “three-tongued.” In this respect it could be seen as transnational, or cross-cultural, possessing as it does a blend of languages. The images that trigger anxiety in this poem sound out from the future: the “boulder milt” that will wallow “across the delta flats,” and “the miles-deep shag ice” that will “make its move.” The fear arises from the transformation of something gargantuan and stationary into something gargantuan and mobile. Heaney “feared its coldness,” which appears to reach so high to “iceblock the plane window dimmed with breath.” The imagined threat seems substantial here; it invades the space of one’s exhalations. The turn appears in the surprising nature of the threat which is not of its melting but its power to “deepfreeze” even language, “every warm, mouthwatering word of mouth.” Hell freezing over comes to mind.

Of the music surrounding this poem, Fairouz says he arranged it “for the male voices of the chorus. It is a setting of Höfn and recounts the melting of a glacier. This image of the earth flooding (with overtones of global warming) links not only to the closing lines of “In Iowa” (“Not of parted, but of rising waters”) but also to the next Sura.” The male voices seem appropriate here. In an early poem, “Act of Union,” Heaney aligns himself with England, as “imperial/ Male, leaving you with pain,/ The rending process in the colony.” The female (Ireland) suffers the “the big pain/ That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.” Fairouz’s Second Sura is a setting in Arabic that “corresponds to a sequence from the Book of Revelation in which the dragon, banished from Heaven attempts to drown the mother of humanity by drowning her and her children in a flood which it unleashes. In failing the dragon vows revenge on the woman and future generations.” The correspondences between Old and New testaments, Heaney’s poetry and the Sura, proliferate, and invite new ways of broaching or considering conflict.

Last in the triptych, although it appears earliest in the book, is “Anything Can Happen,” a version of a Horation Ode (I, 34), The longest of the three poems, it more loudly registers cataclysmic forces, and it sets the tone for much of the volume.

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter  
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head  
Before he hurls the lightning? Well, just now  
He galloped his thunder cart and his horses

Across a clear blue sky. It shook the earth  
And the clogged underearth, the River Styx,  
The winding streams, the Atlantic shore itself.  
Anything can happen, the tallest towers



Be overturned, those in high places daunted,  
Those overlooked regarded. Stropped-beak Fortune  
Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,  
Setting it down bleeding on the next.

Ground gives. The heaven's weight  
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle-lid.  
Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.  
Telluric ash and fire-spores boil away. (*District & Circle*, 13)

Here we find no tracking of an image that eventually spells out the reasons for Heaney's unease. Instead, he gives us the age-old context – the writing in the sky -- for disaster, disastrous outcome. The Horatian warning works its way into Heaney's idiom through the conversational phrasing "You know how[...]" and "Well, just now[...]." The poem describes a crisis unfolding, an apocalypse in the midst.

To hear the three Heaney poems sung in chorus is unsettling only in that the range and combination of voices depersonalizes and intensifies the lyrics, what Fairouz describes as an "androgenous opening." And it is true. The voice (Heaney's) I associate with the poems with its Irish lilt was not to be heard. Of the final poem, "Anything Can Happen," the beginning lines sung in plainchant suggest something as it is being strained toward or constructed, and the increasing volume suggests crisis is on the way. Once the chorus reaches the word "hurls," one note extends to two or three for each syllable, the tempo increases, voices overlap, and the choral refrain (not in the original poem) suggests something is happening again and again and again. A piercing soprano (part of Fairouz's "violent outburst") does not exactly provide release from this music of doom but it signals a change. The poem's final line is repeated in the monotone we heard at the beginning and the viola, amplified, which we had nearly forgotten about becomes all of a sudden vivid. The work closes with the pulsating lines of the chorus singing: "Telluric ash and fire-spores boil away." The aftermath of disaster lingers, does not dispel. The music, however, like the poem but unlike conflict between tribes, comes to a close.

Much applause concluded the performance. It had been an unexpectedly spellbinding show. As I walked out into the October evening, I thought of how alive speaking and thinking about Heaney made me feel, as if I were at the center or at least by the side of something important, larger than myself. We turn to art to get perspective, to find truth. We turn to art in the hope that at least for a short spell we can leave ourselves behind.

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