READINGS & CONVERSATIONS

SEAMUS HEANEY
With
DENNIS O'DRISCOLL
1 October 2003

CONVERSATION

DENNIS O'DRISCOLL: So, welcome back to the public interrogation of Seamus Heaney. There was once a literary conversation where one of the poets present said that he was going to give a short….(from the audience, Louder.) Louder. I once was at a literary event, I was not there actually, but I heard of a literary event where a poet said that he was going to give a short poetry reading, and Seamus' wife said, 'There's no such thing as a short poetry reading.' [laughter] And I've held, I suppose, the view that there's no such thing as a long Seamus Heaney poetry reading. [applause]

So, what we're going to do now is entirely unrehearsed. I know some of you think we've been sort of like a priest and an altar boy [laughter] on the plane over [laughter] one making declarations, and the other reciting, [laughter] and that we could now sort of say, Well, question 45, and he would say his thing. But actually, what Seamus asked me to do was not to tell him at all what I was going to ask him. Everyone knows at school you'd be anticipating exams and wondering how tough the questions would be. So, I've decided to surprise him by asking really simple, basic questions about writing. Just the fundamentals of writing: the where, the when, the how. I mean, after forty years of writing, as he said, and being asked difficult, and complex, and political questions, sometimes the simple questions are the difficult ones. But we shall see.

Seamus, in the course of his reading, was quoting from 'Timon of Athens' where the poet is talking about the fire and the flint and the poem that inflames itself, and I think that's a good prompting for where we might start as well. I actually remembered, in thinking about this, something that Seamus was quoting - Robert Frost, 'Poetry begins in delight, and ends in wisdom'. And then Seamus added, 'It begins in delight, and ends in self-consciousness.' So I hope I won't make you more self-conscious with some of these questions.

I was going to begin with a remark that you made to an English journalist, where you said, 'My notion was always that if the poems were good, they would force their way through.' I was wondering was that still your experience?

SEAMUS HEANEY: I regret, possibly, not keeping more in the notebook. I did always believe that. But I always was busy, to tell you the truth, with other things. I began to write in earnest in…when I was 23, in 1962, when I read contemporary poetry. Eagerness, excitement, a sense of change came over me when those first poems occurred. They occurred through the charge of other…they occurred through reading. So I've always associated the moment of writing with a moment of lift, of joy, of reward totally unexpected. For better or worse, I got this notion that labor wouldn't help. [laughter] Being a young Catholic – and more or less turning into an old one, in between being a great blank – I've got this notion of grace, and I do believe that unless there is energy to begin with, that you can't go ahead.

Nevertheless, I do feel that maybe poems should have been forced more. I always believed that the things that were, as I say, had to be written, would make themselves written. That was the early days when there was plenty of charge in the battery. But I still can't get away from that. I don't know how to write a poem unless there's something to write a poem with.

O'DRISCOLL: Philip Larkin used to say that you can't write a poem unless you have a poem to write.

HEANEY: Well, Larkin is kind of ….[laughter]. There's a kind of grim accuracy about him. [laughter]

O'DRISCOLL: And so, I know one of the quotes you used to use quite a lot over the years was that one from Keats, 'If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it better not come at all.' I'm wondering, is that just a young poet's perspective?

HEANEY: Well, it doesn't mean - and it didn't mean for Keats - that the actual labor of composition or the working on the poem… it's not just a natural function like sneezing. [laughter] It's…..you do have to work. One of the best books I got early on, probably in the early 60's, just when I'd begun to write, was a book by John Stallworthy, called *Between the Lines,* and it was about Yeats' manuscripts. And a poem like 'Coole Park, 1928', its got thirty two lines I think, four *octava rimas*. It takes thirty-two pages of manuscript. It's a middle-range Yeats poem; it's kind of a cruising altitude poem, where he's not breaking any sound barriers but just…it's iambic pentameter, and yet, there were only three lines given.

Now, occasionally indeed, that has happened. It's the labored-for poem, especially if it's a formal poem. I think if you have a stanza form, whatever the stanza form is, whether it's a sonnet or couplets or quatrains or whatever, you can work at that and work with it because the stanza form immediately calls up all other stanzas in the language. Whether or not you remember them or not, there's a sense of a standard – there's a standard to work towards and around and away from. The quick free verse poem sometimes happens, but actually, oddly enough, my experience is that it

comes quicker if there is a form. Those sonnets to my mother, some of them I wrote very fast. The one about the sheets – I was upstairs in the attic and I heard a friend of ours, Barry Cooke, a painter, arriving downstairs unexpectedly. And I had twelve lines written and I thought, damn him, you know. [laughter] And I kind of scribbled down two; I'd got fourteen before I'm finished. I may have revised it. So, I think that if the thing is there, and once again if there is the energy there, if there's the makings of the thing there, it can come fast.

O'DRISCOLL: So we all remember that poem by Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', where he says he couldn't finish the poem because he was interrupted by a person from Porlock. So we now know the name of that person. Barry Cooke was his name! [laughter] So Seamus, the next thing I was going to ask you was just another very basic kind of question which is almost as basic as sneezing. It would be extraordinary if poetry was as contagious as sneezing, and all the great poets were being followed around in the hope that they might actually sneeze in your presence! [laughter] How does a poem actually begin for you? I know this is a very basic question. Is it like a murmur, a sound, an articulation, a music, a phrase? Or actually something as specific as here's a theme I'd like to write on?

HEANEY: Sometimes, it's a theme. Usually with a larger thing… There's a poem called 'Station Island', which is twelve sections, and it's kind of based on a pilgrimage to Lough Derg. And this notion kept me at it for two years. The ideal, I think, is to have…my notion is a big wheel, you know these water wheels in Egypt, in the desert, where you have one big wheel revolving and it's got little hangers and dippers that lift the water and it keeps turning around, big slow motion, and the water comes up and they come down and they fill. That big theme that keeps little dippings going on, that's ideal. So you want a big conception for that. Sometimes it can be a theme but sometimes, in my experience, it's a form also. If you get on to writing sonnets, write one sonnet and then try another. That keeps you going.

But, generally speaking, my poems come from remembered things, quite often from a way back, or things I see that remind me of something else. Little bleepers, I call them that send off something, and sometimes - like the helmet - a thing that has an aura and an invitation and some kind of blocked significance hanging around it, waiting to be written for. I'm a great hoarder of things, and I did a little sequence of poems, once upon a time, called 'Shelf Life'. Things that are kept, picked up, like bits of stone, a stick, an old smoothing iron that belonged in our house, and so on. Usually, it's a thing or an image. Rarely is it a musical thing. But you can't get started without some kind of first line that goes musically. So it's things, memories, little pebbles that hopefully start if not an avalanche, a snowball of some sort.

O'DRISCOLL: I mentioned in the introduction that you're a critic as well as a poet and produced a lot of essays, reviews and that. Can you mix those two? In other words, can you be actually working on a lecture, an article, or

a review, and at the same time or the same day say, work on a poem? Or do you need a particular day for one, a particular day for the other? Or would you divide your day, say, I'll give two hours in the morning to poetry and I'll work on prose later in the day? Is there a poetry time of day and a prose time of day?

HEANEY: Well, used to be I wrote…. whatever I did I wrote at night. That was my twenties, thirties, forties, partly because I was teaching and busy all day and marking scripts and doing this, that, and the other, and living a full life with the thrilling Heaney household. [laughter] So the house quietened later at night. Now the house is quiet all day, and I tend now to work in the mornings, certainly. And I would be now luckier to have morning time to write. I try to write poems in the morning if poems are coming.

But I don't have a time of day for poems and a time of day for essays. In fact, my experience is that prose usually equals duty and last minute, overdue deadline stuff [laughter] or else there's a panic lecture to be written. The odd thing is that my first book of poems which…it was life-changing for me to write those poems. I felt blessed and challenged and strange and lucky. This book of poems I'm convinced, I know, got me into a university. Nowadays, you don't get in for that. I got into an English department, not a Creative Writing department, but a full teaching English department at Queens. (Belfast) And I said to the professor - I was a B.A. among PhDs on the staff – and I said, 'Well, do I need now to do a secondary degree, do you think?' He said, 'No'; bless him. He said, 'No, no'. He said 'Most people do those degrees to get the job you have'. [laughter] He said, 'What you want to do is write critical essays now and again'.

So from the beginning there was an element of the 'duty dance', of the good boy doing his university work, about my criticism. And it continues like that. I also felt…I was a teacher and I felt a pleasure when I had written it, in uttering it, writing it down and speaking it out. And in those years in Oxford when I gave the lectures and so on, I would bury myself in a cottage. I neglected to say an important aspect of my actual writing life is another house Marie and I got. We lived in it for four years *en famille* in the early '70s; then we were able to buy it late '80s and it saved my writing life because I was able to disappear from our home which was becoming like a cross between a travel agency and a telephone exchange, [laughter] and bury myself down there. I'd get two days to get this lecture done for Oxford; but the blessed thing was that a lot of my poems were written in that intense time, as an escape from the intensity of the lecture. So some of the poems I like best were written in the lay-bys from the main motorway of the lecture. So you escape from yourself. I mean I do in poems. You forget yourself when you get into a hurry.

O'DRISCOLL: So instead of commissioning you to write a poem, somebody should commission you to write a lecture? [laughter] And they get the poem as well.

HEANEY: That's right. [laughter]

O'DRISCOLL: So I was going to ask you just a few…one or two other questions along those lines and then maybe we'll change tack a bit. I know one poet who says that his wife always knows when he's going to write a poem because his breathing changes. And I was wondering ….I remember Yeats' daughter saying that he used to start sort of mumbling to himself when he started to write. So is there a kind of change of mood, when you're a bit more melancholic, when you're a bit more intense? Would the Heaney household know that a poem was coming on? [laughter]

HEANEY: Well, actually ….. maybe not so much in the house because I would withdraw a bit, but I do know that one of the best incubating times for me and beating out the beats of a poem, is on long drives. And my wife always knows, because driving on long journeys with the spouse is very stilling. She sees my fingers on the steering wheel, beating out the thing. That is true. Many, many poems that I have conceived of and started are in that shut-eyed, well [laughter] not literally shut-eyed. But you know how you go 50 miles before you waken up. [laughter] The car element; that is certainly one trance that is there. The other is ….I have to say, going to this cottage which is an old 19th century gate lodge and it brings me back to that first house, in a way, that I was in because it used to have a latch and the sound of a latch was like the sound of the primal world. I felt psychologically, physically safe in it. I felt that my first self was guaranteed by this place. I always found it conducive to writing. In fact, so satisfactory, that I almost didn't need to write. [laughter] So the car, and the cottage, and now the attic.

I used to very much like claustrophobic conditions – facing the wall with a low-set ceiling. In fact in the cottage we had this lovely, old, low ceiling and one of the different attitudes …..one of the things that my wife and I disagreed about was she liked the idea of a skylight. And I said, no, no, no, no, no. Keep the hutch of the hatch down. So when I was in Harvard one time, and I came back, and I went upstairs in the cottage – ooooh, there was a skylight. [laughter] Actually, it was a tremendous change for me and it was something to do with getting near fifty, I think. I lifted up my eyes to the heavens and …..I have a light in my attic at home - a door into the dark; a door into the light is what we're after now.

O'DRISCOLL: Because, in fact, the car obviously has a view and the cottage has a view and the attic doesn't have a view. I know your friend, Ted Hughes, used to advise writers to get all the books out of the room; never write in a room with books; have no view of any kind at all. I was wondering, do you have any view on that? [laughter]

HEANEY: Well, I used to find chain smoking very helpful, actually. [laughter] I'm sure many writers in the room have stopped smoking and there's a crisis. [laughter,]

O'DRISCOLL: So. for any would-be-writers in the room, there are two things to do: one is learn how to drive and the other is learn how to smoke. [laughter]

HEANEY: No. Well,,, I've forgotten the question. But the view …

O'DRISCOLL: The view, yes.

HEANEY: Seriously, I didn't want a view early on. The cottage has a view, but it's straight into the hillside, you know. It's not a vista. It's a kind of early Irish hermit's view [laughter] of the wood and this was very conducive to the early Irish hermits' poetry because they were in the dark and they saw that bit of light and the radiance of a God-filled universe was there in that wee split, and that was good. [laughter] There were in the Irish language tradition, as we know, there were bardic schools, professional poetry schools, up until, I guess the 17th century or well into it, and they were, as we remember, made to compose in the dark. Lie in their cubicles and compose at night. They were made to memorize stuff and compose in these set forms. And then the professors, the *ollaimh*, would come in, and they would be examined in candlelight. So there's a traditional kind of ratification for the claustrophobic element in composition.

O'DRISCOLL: Would you ever sometimes be so intimidated, in a sense, by a poem that you had to write? In other words, would you know that what was required of you to write this poem was going to be so demanding – demanding of time, demanding of spirit, demanding of emotion, demanding of yourself, that you would almost distract yourself deliberately not to write it? Are there those kinds of poems where you yourself feel almost burdened by what you know, to do justice to a particular inspiration, you're going to have to do?

HEANEY: Yes, one or two….I mean I mentioned 'Station Island'. One of the difficulties is to know whether a little, quick flash of lyric is…You have the invitation and the inspiration, for want of a better word. It's a question that I never know: whether the will should do the work of the imagination, as Yeats said; how far you should push a thing. I used to think and probably practice bore it out, when you're starting, you love the high of finishing. So you do the lyric quickness, and that's a joy, and you rush round to the other fellow or girl and say, look, here it is. I think as you go on, the joy of actually doing it, of beating the gold out further, of making more of it, of thinking can I take that further, is … that's what you really, ideally want. But then the doubt comes in. Am I killing it? Am I deadening it?

Coleridge, I think, said that poems were like school boys, that they 'grew dull from much correction'. [laughter] But there are poems that ask to have more poems attached to them, to grow. The one about 'Station Island' about the pilgrims and so on, I was able to keep thinking about it for a couple of years and I did more sections than I put into it. I didn't know, and this is another question that there are different attitudes to, whether a big, lumpy thing, that is not as …bits of it not as good as you know it should be, but whether imperfection hasn't got its imperatives also, or whether you should make it, you know, trim and as good as possible. I remember Craig Raine, the English poet who was an editor at Fabers, he said, 'a poem should be as tightly shut as an oyster'. Well, D.H. Lawrence might have said it should be loose as a big hibiscus. [laughter] I think that one of the ways you can miss is to fear going through with an inspiration.

O'DRISCOLL: And with a poem like 'Station Island' how did you know it was finished? At what point did you decide, I'll let this go and move on? Or, indeed, in general, how do you know a poem is finished?

HEANEY: Well, I think we were talking here….'Station Island' is a sequence with separate finished bits put together to make a bigger finished thing. So there are movements in it and so on. The finishing of a movement is….that's one of the most difficult things to talk about in a situation like this. How do you know a thing is finished? I had a friend, Hugh Bredin, a philosopher, who went to Italy to the University of Turino; he studied the philosophy of Croce. He wanted to do a PhD on this very question, on how the artist knew that the work was finished. He couldn't actually proceed with it because there was no documentation whatsoever. [laughter] You see it physically in painters. The aforesaid Barry Cooke, a painter friend. You see it in any painter. Prowling round a canvas and the body is distressed and stressed and there's almost a - when it's finished – OK, you know, the body relaxes. I don't know. You know when it's not finished at least.

O'DRISCOLL: Yes. [laughter] And do you know that it is not good, for instance? When you write a poem, would you be fairly confident of your own judgment of that poem? And does it normally, in fact, even years afterwards, pretty much prove to be the case that your initial qualitative assessment of the poem, how good it is, stands up?

HEANEY: Yes. I would have to say that that pretty much is the case. And the other thing is that the stuff that is written pretty quickly pretty much is the stuff. My experience is a lot of poems I have a fondness for – not all by any means – but a lot of the poems that stand up I remember them coming smartly through. For example, that 'Postscript' that I'm fond of. I wrote it quickly. On the other hand, there are poems in a book called *North* that were *grimly* executed. And I really like them because they're odd as odd and I think hard and contrary.

O'DRISCOLL: And would you dip into a notebook much? I know you

mentioned the word notebook at the beginning – but I was wondering, would you have, say, little phrases and images and things that clearly belonged in a poem but you had to later recognize what that poem was?

HEANEY: I don't keep a notebook regularly. I haven't kept a notebook and what I depend upon is mood to generate those things. I remember seeing in the early '70s I think at least one book by a poet, Theodore Roethke, which is called *Straw for the Fire*. It was a book of lines that didn't get into poems. A quite exciting book itself and I thought, God, I could never do that at all. There's no straw; I don't know; just oul' brick. I do have notes, little lists of things, subjects and so on. To go back to your question where you would write, some of the places which are useful are long airplane journeys, as well as car journeys, and seclusions in hotel rooms. I find those escapes from your normal life, displacements, useful for making lists and for images to come up and those notions and memories to be there, little titles.

O'DRISCOLL: What about timing then? Would you have this feeling that it's very important to know when to start and when it's too soon to start a particular poem? In other words, should it be let marinate and distill and gestate and all those kinds of things?

HEANEY: Those are the complete uncertainties, I think. I tend to think – even though I don't always practice it – I tend to believe that a quick attack is the way to do it. And forget anxiety about how good it's going to be. Go and do it. On the other hand, I couldn't have written about the helmet just ….this fireman's helmet. Long before the fireman became a heroic figure, the helmet itself had a heroic aura. And I knew it must be written about. I knew the day I got it. But I couldn't quite do it. And I knew after I translated *Beowulf* there was something. Not that it's a big deal to wait for but just to get the right moment. When I finally wrote it I just jumped on it, unexpectedly one morning when it wasn't waiting, looking. [laughter]

O'DRISCOLL: And translation, which we mentioned, obviously with *Beowulf* and *Sweeney Astray,* but you also do odd little individual translations from the Gaelic, from the Irish. Do you decide to do those when there are no poems, as it were, presenting themselves, or are they just as much part of your writing process as original poems, as it were?

HEANEY: My first engagement with translation was in order to give myself a task. I resigned from that job in the University after six years there in 1972. I was going to be 'free', so to speak. Freelance, for a year. But I was used to a job. I always thought that's what you did when you grew up, have a job. So I just gave myself a job. I got this long middle-Irish poem/prose piece, and assigned it to myself as a job to be done. It had delightful, poetic invitation in it and I knew it was, to some extent, my subject – it was about trees, and so on. The American poet, Robert Lowell,

who I was lucky enough to know in the last three or four years of his life, great man, great furnace of intellect, and a lot of affection and a lot of mockery, high intelligence; nothing safe with him. Somebody asked him about my poems, after I had translated this *Sweeney* poem which had a lot of nature in it, so somebody said, 'What about Heaney's poems'? He said, 'Lots of trees. Lots of trees.' [laughter] There's actually not that many trees but, you know.

So the translation began as a job and the second big job….*Beowulf* was a big job. It was like breaking stones. It was taken on as such. More recently, I though I would do some Irish language translations – one-off poems that I'd known and loved - for pleasure and joy. I now actually like translation because it's a form of writing by proxy. You get the high of finishing something but you don't have to start it. [laughter]

O'DRISCOLL: You mentioned earlier about finding the form early, and clearly form is very important in your work and you have sonnet sequences, a lot of work that is rhymed and so forth. Would you be offended if somebody called you a formalist?

HEANEY: I wouldn't be offended but I think it would be a mistake. A formalist to me sounds like a kind of doctrinaire position. *Moi, je crie?*

O'DRISCOLL: He's translating again. [laughter]

HEANEY: I write in stanzas and so on. I totally believe in the form but I think that quite often when people ….it's used….they mean shape rather than form. I mean there are shapes. There's the sonnet shape – now, it's not just a matter of rhyming and eight and six. The eight and six happen to be set one on top of each other like two boxes. It's more like a torso and pelvis. There has to be a little bit of movement. It has to be alive in some sort of way. It has to…. A moving poem doesn't just mean that it touches you. It means it has to move along. So unless there's energy and movement in the shape – it's not an inert…. In other words, form is not like a pastry cutter - you go along and say, boom, there's a wee poem, there's a wee poem, there's the sonnet, the fourteen-line shape you just put down. No. It has to be discovered. I love to get a feeling that my own voice is on track and that can happen within a metrical shape or it can happen within a free shape. Generally, I'm pretty close to the iambic pentameter. I go by the ear and some sense of fidelity to whatever I'm hearing.

O'DRISCOLL: You say there's a form that has to be discovered but that prompts me to ask, have you ever discovered a form?

HEANEY: The only thing I would think of as my own, not a discovery but it was a thing I went through with, is a twelve-line shape, four threes. I was working, once again working very hard on another thing – somebody gave me a job to do an annotation of a selection of W. B. Yeats'

poems. And I worked and worked in the National Library of Ireland for about six weeks and the day I finished it - ooh – I was sitting in this most beautiful reading room with the rain on the glass, on the top, and suddenly, I wrote a few lines and it became a twelve-line, four three lines, thing. It felt given – I didn't quite know where it came from. It was marvelous stuff as far as I was concerned; strange and unexpected. And then I thought, well, there's something here that can continue, so I did another twelve lines next day. Then I did another twelve and then I thought maybe I could do twelve twelve-liners, and call it 'Squarings', because the word squarings gave it…. So I managed that. And then I thought, God, maybe I could do one hundred and forty four of them. [laughter] But I did forty eight. But their arbitrariness. We talked earlier about a theme, a theme inspiring you. The arbitrary shape can be done. And I was able to do them fast. And the idea was that I would pounce on them. Again, get through it quickly. So it's not a discovery, but it was ….. I mean it's not an original form, four three-lines things, but it worked for me as a generator of poetry.

O'DRISCOLL: Well, there's a poem called 'A Call' by Seamus Heaney in which he listens on a waiting telephone to the amplified, grave ticking of hall clocks. I'm afraid the clocks in this hall have begun to amplify. It is time to unwind and thank Seamus Heaney for being so absorbing that he made time stand still.
[Applause]

HEANEY: Thank you.

O'DRISCOLL: Seamus mentioned earlier that the word Lannan is a magic word and I do want to thank Patrick Lannan, all the members of his family, his Board, and, of course, his staff, always helpful, always cheerful, unfailingly thoughtful, ever inspiring, generous, and hospitable. I also want to thank Don Usner, the photographer, the video crew, the staff at the Lensic, and not least our friends in Garcia Street Books who keep us poring over the books when the readings are over. They will be here to sell books, and books can be signed – some of them are already pre-signed. And I want, of course, to thank you for being a wonderful audience.

I was wondering, could I break the Lannan rules before we change and if somebody had a copy of one of Seamus' books, to ask him to read one of those twelve-line forms that he invented, maybe the one about the monks at Clonmacnoise? Just to end the evening.

HEANEY: Alright. Thanks a lot. [applause] I think that…. I have that. Thanks, bud. Thank you.

This is another story; true story too in its way. It's from the annals of Clonmacnoise, this early medieval monastery. They kept these annals; not much was recorded year by year. Maybe they say, 'The Norsemen came.' [laughter] But it's all dead plain as was this story.

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man cannot bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

Thanks very much.

[Applause]

Thanks a lot. Thanks very much.