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How to Get from the Plough to the Stars: Reception Theory and the Work of Seamus Heaney

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Cet article se place sous l'enseigne de la sociopoétique. À l'aide de la théorie de la réception, élaborée entre autres par Georges Molinié et Alain Viala, il suit les traces de la carrière de Seamus Heaney à partir de son entrée remarquable dans le monde littéraire en 1966. Le passage de S. Heaney à travers les étapes de la praxis littéraire se décèle facilement : il s'inscrit dès ses débuts au sein des codes génériques puis franchit les seuils des institutions de la vie littéraire pour arriver à les dépasser grâce à son adoption par des organismes supra-littéraires. Une étude des caractéristiques de sa poésie tente d'expliquer ce succès hors du commun. Sa carrière fut couronnée en 1995 par le Prix Nobel de Littérature. Ce fut l'occasion de grandes réjouissances en Irlande. Son impact auprès des Irlandais est étudié, journaux, statistiques de vente et questionnaires à l'appui. Force est de constater que les effets du "Heaney-fever" durent encore aujourd'hui.

As all the best magicians and hypnotists say at the beginning of their acts, for this number I would like the help of the members of the audience. Would you be so good as to answer the following two questions. Could you name the most recent French recipient of The Nobel Prize for Literature? Could you name any of his works?

No, you have not stepped into the wrong room. We are not here to play party games or the SOFEIR edition of trivial pursuits, but through my rather unorthodox introduction I hope to draw your attention to the rôle of the public in this study. The basic premise of reception theory is that public recognition of a writer is vital in terms of literary value. In the realm of reception theory it is consensus which turns a poet into a great poet, a writer into a great author. If one carries out the above experiment with an audience of Irish people practically every person present will be able not alone to identify the most recent Irish laureate but also to name and possibly quote from his work. One emerges confirmed in one's belief that Seamus is famous and is up there among the stars.

My paper today proposes to explore the whys and the wherefores of the extraordinary recognition enjoyed by Seamus Heaney and to examine the reasons for his success and popularity as a poet. My work inscribes itself within the scope of the research being undertaken in the area of sociopoetics. Sociopoetics, as its name indicates is a hybrid field, which marries the fields of sociology and poetics in a combined exploration of literature and society. In the dialogue between these two disciplines, researchers draw on the strength of each to go beyond the basic truths which Sartre acknowledged in "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" his exploration of literature. He defined literature in the following manner: "La littérature c'est ce que l'on appelle ainsi dans une société donnée."¹ From this stems his *de facto* belief that literature is a social act.

The methodological basis for my study is to be found in the work of such theorists as A. Viala and Georges Molinié, who have attempted to define the process whereby the writing of a contemporary author acquires the status of a classic work of literature. Viala for instance in

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?" in *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 55.

his contribution to the book *Approches de la réception*,² has attempted to account for the success of one of the favourite sons of the city of Nice, J. M. G. Le Clézio, through the analysis of one of his collections of short stories.

Working within this framework therefore, the first issue I would like to explore is that of determining how and at what speed the process of recognition occurs. Poets who remain unknown during their lifetime contrast greatly with those who achieve a measure of renown during their lives. As this success is modified by a number of variables, I will then attempt to identify and elaborate on them. Finally, I will address the issue of the Nobel Prize and examine why, and to what extent, a poet becomes part of a country's heritage, literary or otherwise.

Praxis and Progress

It is a truth generally acknowledged that Seamus Heaney made a remarkable début for a young poet when his first collection of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist* was published by Faber and Faber in 1966. It was warmly praised and received attention from a wide variety of critics.³ This publication inscribed the poet clearly and confidently within the first circle of literary praxis as outlined by Viala, i.e. being identified with a specific literary form and code.⁴ It wasn't long before Heaney progressed to level two, that is the recognition of his work by literary bodies engaged in the awarding of prizes. He received the Somerset Maugham Award in 1967, The Cholmondeley Award in 1968. In 1975 he received two awards, the WH Smith Award and the Duff Cooper Prize.⁵ In less than ten years the poet was a well established figure on the literary scene, having published four collections of poetry he was without doubt an up and coming star. Indeed at an early stage two of his contemporaries believed that he was destined for greatness. "From the beginning Hobsbaum made it clear that his stars were Seamus Heaney and Stewart Parker,"⁶ writes Michael Longley in an article about the initial Belfast poetry group, while James Simmons, in a rather disgruntled article, talks about him being "groomed for stardom."⁷

North published in 1975 was a controversial and much talked about collection. Admired and respected by some for its attempt to come to terms with violence and retribution through the prisms of mythology and history it was "the book all books were leading to."⁸ In the following years other collections appeared, *Field Work*, published in 1978, was followed by the first *Selected Poems 1966–75*, representing the best of the first ten years of the poet's work. From initial print runs of "about 2,000–3,000 copies of his first book" in the early 1980's Faber, through Craig Raine, in a letter to David Lloyd, admitted to printing "somewhere in the region of 20,000 copies"⁹ of Heaney's later collections.

Literary praxis continued apace when Seamus Heaney was appointed to Harvard University in 1982, occupying the post of Boylston Professor of Rhetoric there until his resignation in 1997. *Station Island* and *Sweeney Astray* were published in 1984. He won the Whitbread Award for his collection *The Haw Lantern* in 1987. He received one of the most prestigious honours accorded a poet professor in 1989, his election as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Only one major honour eluded him and that supreme recognition, the Nobel Prize for

² Molinié et Viala, *Approches de la réception* (Paris: P.U.F., 1993).

³ Rand Brandes in his survey of secondary sources suggests that the volume was reviewed by approximately 30 reviewers.

⁴ Molinié et Viala, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁵ *Encaenia Document* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 10.

⁶ M. Longley, "The Belfast Group: A Symposium," *The Honest Ulsterman* (November 1976), p. 56.

⁷ J. Simmons, "The Trouble with Seamus," in *Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. by E. Andrews, p. 39.

⁸ S. Heaney in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. by M. Parker (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993), p. 150.

⁹ David Lloyd, "Pap for the Dispossessed," in E. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

literature, was awarded in October 1995. In under thirty years Seamus Heaney had scaled the summits of literary achievement. Prodigious progress indeed.

The question what now, what more must have sprung to mind. In actual fact one impertinent and irreverent participant in a talk at the Salon du livre¹⁰ in the following months dared to articulate those views and cited the example of Wordsworth. But Seamus Heaney suffers from no Wordsworth syndrome and when his latest collection of poetry, *The Spirit Level*, appeared in 1996, it was greeted with acclaim and received The Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

The third stage of literary praxis is that of assimilation by supra-literary bodies whose *raison d'être* has nothing to do with literature. This final stage refers to recognition by bodies such as educational institutions, and other organisations such as corporate bodies etc. In Ireland such recognition occurred very early. Poems from *Death of a Naturalist* were anthologised by school publishers in the mid 1970's. *Blackberry Picking* and *Mid-term Break* appeared in *Signposts*, a book designed for the last year of primary school, which was published by Brown and Nolan in 1975. Within the university sphere, Heaney appeared on the syllabus of the English departments quite rapidly. In UCC (University College Cork) for instance his poems were taught as part of a survey course on poetry in the early 1970s.¹¹ Again if one compares the rapidity of this institutional assimilation with that of other authors cited by Viala and Molinié it is highly unusual for a writer to achieve an imprimatur of that kind at such an early stage in his career. Today, Heaney figures on the courses offered by the English Departments of all universities in the Republic and is taught at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels in some cases.¹² The Irish example is not unusual however for, as Rand Brandes underlines, in his gloss on the critical reception¹³ of Seamus Heaney's work, Heaney is more present on the syllabi of British third level institutions than Shakespeare.

In the wake of the Nobel Prize, Heaney has also been adopted by bodies as varied as Aer Rianta (of which more anon) and that congregation made up of the vendors and performers on Grafton Street in Dublin. There, people sell portraits of the man and, for a pound, performers will do a rendition of your favourite Heaney poem.

X + Y = Popularity and Fame: the variables in the success equation

Groomed for stardom or not, these prizes and the continuing publication of collections of poetry do not suffice however to explain the interest in Seamus Heaney. It is possible to identify a number of variables¹⁴ which may explain this phenomenon.

1 - Communication and Image

While some writers set out to give themselves an aura of mystery and withdraw into splendid isolation, according rare interviews, this is not the case of Seamus Heaney. He is a communicator. His contact is not restricted to austere interviews in learned journals. His

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney participated in two debates at the *Salon du livre* in the context of *L'imaginaire irlandais* in 1996.

¹¹ University College Cork Calendars for this period refer to courses in Anglo Irish Poetry. People who were students at that period confirm the fact that Heaney figured on tutorial programmes. Such early institutional interest may be attributed to the work of Sean Lucey who was one of the first academics in Ireland to devote his research to Seamus Heaney and Northern Irish poetry generally. At a later stage, the interest was undoubtedly spurred by the appointment of the poet John Montague to the university. (I am indebted to Professor Kearney, Professor of English at UCC, for this information).

¹² Results of a survey I conducted among Irish Universities and third level colleges.

¹³ Rand Brandes, Secondary Sources: "A Gloss on the Critical Reception of Seamus Heaney 1965-1993," *The Colby Quarterly*, Waterville, ME (CIQ). (1994 Mar, 30 :1), pp. 63-77.

¹⁴ Molinié and Viala use a similiar method (*cf. supra*) which has also been adopted by Sophie Jollin in her work, also on Le Clézio.

interviews have appeared in newspapers such as *The Irish Times* and *The Belfast Telegraph*. While writing for the halls of academe, he has also published work in reviews as diverse as *The Listener* and *The Furrow*. Long before he received the Nobel Prize, articles about him have also appeared in a wide variety of journals. Indeed one of the first articles published about him appeared in *Vogue* in 1965. The public has also made contact with him through radio and television programmes, and through his readings.

In an era where communication and image have become increasingly important the public image of Seamus Heaney is extremely positive. This positive reaction relates to both physical and moral qualities. The camera loves him. A recent cliché of the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese who was photographed alongside Seamus Heaney, says it all. Despite the caption which says “The President with Seamus Heaney,”¹⁵ the image belies this. The President in the foreground is out of focus and not altogether recognizable, whereas Seamus Heaney seems to draw the light and our attention towards him.

The legend of famous Seamus is firmly established in the Irish psyche at this stage. It is nourished by the countless anecdotes of his common touch, his unassuming modest nature, and his undisputed niceness. Anecdotes like the following one have become part of Irish folklore. One of the people I interviewed in connection with this paper relates with fondness her memories of a post poetry reading celebration when Seamus Heaney gave her his drink after someone had run off with hers. “Imagine, I was only a student” she said “and he was really famous, even back then.” The event happened more than fifteen years ago but she treasures the moment.

2 - A Traditional Respect for Poets

Within Irish society the attention paid to poets and their rôle within the community has always been great. Although Alain Badiou, in his book *L'Être et l'événement*,¹⁶ says that the connection between poetry and politics was severed after 1945, this is not true of the condition of poets in Ireland. Urged by Daniel Corkery to create the moral fibre of the nation they have been listened to, have played a rôle in the founding of the state and in the formation of the national character. This is of course a heavy burden to bear. Poets are expected to step into the shoes of W. B. Yeats and address the nation on political issues. Indeed the most virulent critics of Seamus Heaney have been those, like Desmond Fennell, who accuse him of not doing “good to his people,” and who found his silence on the issue of the hunger strikers “particularly objectionable.”¹⁷ Caught between the cross fire, Heaney has also been accused, notably by James Simmons¹⁸ of having too much sympathy with extremist nationalist elements. However, most commentators recognise the difficult situation the poet finds himself in. Perhaps at this stage the nation as a whole comprehends and identifies with the desire to keep one’s own counsel,¹⁹ echoing Heaney’s reply to the angry aggressive individual who asks him “to write something for us” in the poem *The Flight Path*: “If I do write something, / Whatever it is I’ll be writing for myself”²⁰ is Heaney’s reply.

3 - The Autobiographical Element

The autobiographical dimension to the poet’s work favours its popularity. This interest cannot simply be attributed to a desire on the public’s behalf to know the details of a writer’s life, although interest in an early poem like *Mid-term Break* which recounts the accidental death of

¹⁵ Photograph Joe St. Leger, *The Irish Times* (24 February 1998).

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1988).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁹ This is certainly the case of “official” Ireland as is obvious when one examines the muted reaction of the government of the day to the 75th anniversary of the 1916 rising.

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 25.

his young brother may contain an element of this. It is, I believe, more readily attributable to the fact that the autobiographical poems are perceived as a kind of exemplar of life in Ireland. The vignettes of *The Thatcher* or *The Diviner*, the incorporation of rites like the pilgrimage to Lough Derg²¹ into the poems draw on a kind of collective memory that people readily identify with. Individual poems dedicated to or about specific members of the poet's family also lead to a feeling of intimacy with the poet and account perhaps for the feeling of familiarity that many Irish people feel with regard to Seamus Heaney.

4 - The "Northern Thing"

Seamus Heaney has now been living south of the border for over twenty years, however he is still identified with County Derry, his Northern origins and the flowering of an identifiable poetry movement in the North. This movement has been well documented by critics like Edna Longley.²² The political unrest in the North has also led to attention being devoted to the works of these poets, as readers are interested to see their reaction and treatment of this situation. Seamus Heaney has addressed the issue in several poems both directly as in the earlier example cited from *The Flight Path*, through the mythological approach of poems like *Hercules and Antaeus*²³ or through the sequence of "bog poems" which figure for the most part in the collection *North*. Opinions are divided as to what extent the continuing troubles in the North have focused international attention on Irish poetry. The impact of this phenomenon is impossible to quantify. However, as the poet has said himself: "[...] we cannot be unaware ourselves [...] of the link between the glamour of the place, the sex-appeal of violence and the prominence accorded to the poets."²⁴

5 - Myth and legend

A rich and varied mythical background is used by the poet, drawing on elements of history, legend, and dinnseanachas. This use of a traditional Irish form of poetry is to be found most prominently in *Wintering Out* where Seamus Heaney explores the vocables of placenames. In poems such as *Anahorish*²⁵ he makes use of the original Gaelic name to contemplate the landscape. People are very much aware that the poems contain a particularly Irish cultural component. In the modern search for identity, these peculiarly Irish territorial elements are welcomed.

6 - Poetic texture

Seamus Heaney's poems are perceived as being very accessible. The language is that of the people, this is particularly true of the early collections of poetry. Conversational elements abound, images are drawn from popular speech, giving the impression that the poems are as Heaney has said of Mac Diarmid: "Never at any rate / Beyond us even when outlandish."²⁶ This deceptively simple language may account for Heaney's popularity with a dual readership, that of the general reader who likes the sound of a poem and appreciates its whole and the critical professional who analyses and parses each syllable. Rand Brandes reminds us in his article of just how popular Heaney is with that kind of reader: when his article was

²¹ *Station Island* is organised around the notion of a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, a traditional place of pilgrimage and penitance.

²² Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) and *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994).

²³ Seamus Heaney, *North*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 52.

²⁴ Seamus Heaney, quoted in T. Adair "Calling the Tune," *The Linen Hall Review*, 6, 2, p. 5.

²⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 26.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, p. 28.

going to press in 1994 over 2,000 critical articles had been published on the poetry of Seamus Heaney.²⁷

The Nobel Prize and Literary Heritage.

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, Ireland went wild with Heaney fever. He was acclaimed in the media, feted in the pubs and his books sold out overnight. Newspapers at the time reported the phenomenon. Always the lead seller in the Irish poetry market his books “disappeared off the shelves.”²⁸ By the end of the week following the announcement there wasn’t a book to be had. People were even snapping up critical introductions to the work of the poet in an attempt to obtain some keepsake of the man. Faber, who are loath to disclose sales figures, admit that there was “a local increase” in sales of “perhaps 10,000 on the most obvious titles”²⁹ during that period. Faber were at pains to underline that Seamus Heaney was already a very popular poet. “We have to reprint most of Seamus’s books anyway. His work is immensely popular. It has always and will always sell.” Helen Challoner declared to a *Sunday Tribune* reporter at the time.³⁰ But even Faber must have been astonished to see his book of critical essays on poetry, *The Redress of Poetry*, enter the bestseller lists at number five³¹ jostling up there alongside Lester Piggott who was a length ahead at number four, with Delia Smith leading the field at number one, on her trusty *Winter Collection* released in conjunction with a BBC television programme. Dizzy heights indeed for a form which represents only 2% of annual sales in the book trade.³²

Booksellers and bookwholesalers Easons, in answer to a questionnaire regarding the sales of Seamus Heaney’s books in the wake of the Nobel Prize, estimate that sales in the weeks following the prize increased many fold. They underline the continuing effect of the Nobel Prize remarking that *The Spirit Level* showed an increase of 300–400 % in comparison to the previous sales of new poetry titles by the poet. They also note that the number of retailers to whom they distribute Seamus Heaney’s poetry books has increased by roughly 50%.³³ This remains the case in 1998, more than two years after the awarding of the prize.

Media reception to the award was almost unanimously appreciative. Articles ranged across the whole spectrum, from learned insights proposed by Terence Brown in the *Sunday Independent*,³⁴ to Eamonn McCann’s “I kissed Heaney and lived to tell the tale”³⁵ in the *Sunday Tribune*. The only black cloud on the horizon was the national begrudger, Eamon Dunphy who under the rhyming banner, *Stand in Line or be Called a Philistine*, accused Heaney of being a sham national poet and the nation of lapsing into “Robinsonspeak.”³⁶ The following week the story was still in the news and Faber and Faber had a full page advertisement, acclaiming the poet in both Irish and English and bearing the signatures of a variety of wellwishers, including Gerry Adams and the Vice Chancellor of Queen’s University

²⁷ Brandes, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

²⁸ Roisin Ingle, *The Sunday Tribune* (15 October, 1995), p. 7.

²⁹ Letter from Janet Feaver assistant poetry editor at Faber in response to a questionnaire sent by the author of this paper.

³⁰ Roisin Ingle, *ibid.*

³¹ “Weekend Supplement book pages,” *The Irish Times Bestseller Lists* (December 1995).

³² Roisin Ingle, *ibid.*

³³ The two major book wholesalers in Ireland, Hughes and Hughes and Easons were surveyed as were all the book retailers in Cork city. Easons co-operated in answering the questionnaire. The book retailers in Cork city confirmed the reaction to the Nobel Prize, all were sold out in a matter of days.

³⁴ Terence Brown, “Why Kavanagh’s Ghost Shares the Honour,” *The Sunday Independent* (8 October, 1995), “Living and Leisure Supplement,” p. 8.

³⁵ Eamonn Mc Cann, *The Sunday Tribune* (8 October, 1995), p. 7.

³⁶ E. Dunphy, “Stand in Line or be Called a Philistine,” *Sunday Independent* (8 October, 1995).

Belfast. The tribute by Faber began with the phrase “Tá grá ag muintir na hÉireann don fhile seo leis na blianta fada.”³⁷

The love affair between poet and people has continued to grow and develop. Seamus Heaney has now gone beyond Viala and Molinié’s table of literary praxis and has entered a category of his own. From being part of the nation’s cultural heritage he has gone on to represent its social heritage. Last year, in the run up to the Presidential elections, people wanted Heaney to stand for office and represent the country officially as its President. The poet demurred. However the poet does represent the country in a very tangible way in the display devoted to the Nobel Prize winners for literature in Dublin Airport.

The display arose from a desire to celebrate the achievement of Seamus Heaney and the airport worked in collaboration with the poet on the conception of the display. At the request of Seamus Heaney, all four Nobel Laureates are commemorated through their picture and their work. The display is a permanent feature of the airport’s decor but the selection of work illustrating each author may be changed. Aer Rianta have also brought out a series of postcards with a photograph and an extract corresponding to each prizewinner. This “take away” project is designed to leave a lasting impression of Ireland in the visitor’s mind. As Gerry Weir, co-ordinator of the Aer Rianta heritage project says, “when they leave they take a bit of Ireland with them.”³⁸ By a process of synecdoche the part has come to symbolize the whole.

By any standards, the relationship between the poet and his people is exceptional. I believe that I have illustrated in this short paper that it breaks the strictures and rules of current thinking on reception theory. Perhaps it is time to devise a special model for Seamus Heaney alone. Now there’s a thought! En avant for article number 3,999!

³⁷ “Faber Newspaper advertisement,” *Sunday Tribune* (15 October, 1995). The people of Ireland have loved this poet for many years.

³⁸ Personal interview with G. Weir Heritage Officer for Aer Rianta.