
Leaning “well beyond the plumb” of His Native Language: Heaney’s Tone and the International Style

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Abstract. In the last decades of his life Seamus Heaney enjoyed phenomenal worldwide success, outselling, or so it was widely held, all other poets writing in English combined, a fact attesting to the existence of an international component in his work. A close study of the entire body of his poetry, as well as a study of the concurrent poetic interests he himself professed and which other critics have identified, reveals a subtle and gradual shift toward what may be referred to as the “international style”. The reader encounters such a style, prominently manifest, in the work of some of Heaney’s poetic influences, especially Eastern European poets like Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert. This article argues, however, that Heaney’s stylistic shift was too slight to account for the enormity of his international success and asserts instead that his far-ranging appeal is a matter of tone: Heaney’s attitude toward his material, but more so, deep characteristics of his personality – what Ted Hughes refers to as “the ultimate suffering and decision” in him – occupy space below the surface of his work and imbue it with a quality to which readers around the world are drawn.

Key Words. Seamus Heaney, International Style, Poetic Tone, Poetry in Translation, Czeslaw Milosz, Richard Wilbur.

Resumen. En las últimas décadas de su vida, Seamus Heaney tuvo gran éxito mundial vendiendo más que otros poetas que también escribían en inglés, lo cual demuestra que hay un componente internacional en su poesía. Al examinar en detalle todos sus poemas, los intereses poéticos que él mismo profesaba y los que sus críticos identificaban, se puede encontrar un cambio sutil y paulatino con respecto a que podría llamarse un “estilo internacional”. Este estilo se puede encontrar en las obras de poetas de Europa oriental como Czeslaw Milosz y Zbigniew Herbert, quienes influenciaron la poesía de Heaney. Sin embargo, este artículo argumenta que el cambio estilístico de Heaney fue muy leve para explicar la magnitud de su éxito internacional. Al contrario, este artículo afirma que el gran atractivo de su poesía se debe al tono, a su actitud hacia la poesía, pero especialmente, a que las características de su personalidad ocupan un lugar debajo de la superficie de su poesía y estas características infunden sus obras con elementos que atraen a lectores alrededor del mundo.

Palabras claves. Seamus Heaney, el estilo internacional, tono poético, traducción poética, Czeslaw Milosz, Richard Wilbur.

In the last decades of his life Seamus Heaney occupied the position of “world poet” and outsold – or so it was widely held – all other poets writing in English. Such popularity,

accessibility – such transferability – would suggest, among other things, that his work manifests at least some semblance of an “international style”. Admittedly, it is a pretty

slippery term. But it is worth asking, by what other means than manifesting a “style” with an “international” appeal could Heaney have attracted such a large international audience? What would make readers as far-flung as West Texas and Eastern Siberia find his work so compelling? Roy Foster, professor of poetry at Oxford and a Heaney scholar, calls him flatly “an international poet” (2013), and as much as one may want to associate Heaney with a small farm in Co. Derry, Northern Ireland, it is hard to argue that Foster is not in some sense correct. But Foster also acknowledges that as much as anything else Heaney’s tone – “the worlds below” (2013), as he glosses his use of the term – may be the most important characteristic of his work. One might reasonably argue that many aspects of Heaney’s poetry are worthy of consideration and contribute to its overall success: its linguistic richness, for instance; its pleasing balance of strict and loose formalism; its social, ethical, and moral consciousness; its striking vividness and immediacy, to name but a few of the many. My argument is that, seeking to identify the keystone element, the one that separates Heaney from the field – including the impressive field of talented poets from Northern Ireland, who were his contemporaries, his rivals and friends – we should name *tone* as that single most important characteristic.

In interviews and in his own prose Heaney demonstrated how important to him were a wide range of “international poets”: the contemporary Eastern Europeans Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Osip Mandelstam and others; American poets like Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, and Elizabeth Bishop; the classical Greek dramatists; Dante. Further, a stylistic evolution taking place is manifest in Heaney’s work, from the early Mossbawn-centered world of the first four books, to the more topically wide-ranging middle and late periods. At some point, maybe around the late 1970s, Heaney became more “cosmopolitan”, and the shift seems to have coincided with his growing interest in the Eastern Europeans.

Examining the full body of work by that group suggests what seems a reasonable description of the international style, largely by

highlighting what it is not: local, obviously, but also historical. It is poetry not set in a specific place and time – at least not on its surface – and whose language does not tend to dialect, its images to any particular cultural milieu. *Cosmopolitan*, *universal*, and *parabolic* are other terms sometimes used as roughly synonymous with *international*, terms signifying a kind of poetry that seems to hover in air, tethered to the globe by invisible cables, shadowy anchorages. The local worlds from which the poets originate are hinted at but not filled out, not given full-blooded life. Of course, in the case of Milosz some poems do make reference to specific places, but they seem the exception rather than the rule. To choose as an example of the rule in Milosz, at least regarding style, I would offer the following, a poem called “What Once Was Great” (1988: 127) which he wrote in Polish in 1959, while in exile near Paris, and later translated into English:

What once was great, now appeared small.
Kingdoms were fading like snow-covered bronze.

What once could smite, now smites no more.
Celestial earths roll on and shine.

Stretched on the grass by the bank of a river,
As long, long ago, I launch my boats of bark.

Notice that, whatever cultural baggage the reader brings to Milosz – and certainly his contemporary Polish readers, including fellow exiles in France, would have associated these “Kingdoms” with their beloved homeland – this could be happening anywhere. The most localized-seeming scene in the poem features “the bank of a river”, not even “*the* river”. The poem floats in light, crisp air. Moreover, it seems calculated to produce just that effect. Even in poems in which Milosz names some specific place, he generally presents a speaker in exile –himself, presumably, in California, for instance, and/or thinking back to a country he left. There is a general, purposeful lack of immediacy lending the poetry a kind of cosmopolitan, universal, parabolic authority. In terms of style, it relies on what Heaney refers to as “the wire-sculpture economy of much Eastern European poetry” (1988: 51).

And Heaney’s characterization may be the best definition of the international style one is likely to find: a wire-sculpture economy –

spare, ahistorical; gauzy and impressionistic rather than thick-textured and immediate. The problem, then, is that even in the work post-*Field Work*, Heaney's poems do not strike us as wire sculptures. Likewise, they do not tend to hover in light air. Rather, they feel absolutely rooted in damp earth. Their dialect is often so thick and esoteric as to flummox native speakers of English who do not happen to be Northern Irish, much less non-native speakers trying to read him in the original. They are most often set in Northern Ireland – either directly or through association – and even in the poems that specifically are not set in Co. Derry, we seem somehow still to be there. That is, unlike the exiled speaker of a Milosz poem, a person of seemingly uncertain origin who has severed his ties with his homeland and remembers it like something out of a fading dream, Heaney's speaker is a Northern Irishman, always and forever. If he is in Berkeley, California – as of course Milosz's speaker also sometimes is – Heaney's speaker is there on a strictly temporary basis. He will soon be going home again. He looks at his surroundings like a traveler forced off the train between stops, amusing himself by considering the knickknacks in a gift shop. And regarding style, though Heaney expressed his admiration for the “clean-limbed gait” of Dante's language (Cavanagh 2009: 155), despite whatever influence on Heaney we may ascribe to the Florentine master or to the Eastern Europeans' wire-sculpture economy, Heaney's own language never completely escapes the thick texture and consonantal emphasis that were his trademark early and late.

And yet, at the same time, Heaney's possessing a style that leans “well beyond the plumb of its native language”, as he says of Herbert's work (1988: 54), seems unmistakable. The question, then: what *is* that specific quality in his style that marks it as cosmopolitan, universal, international? It would be easy to write off the matter as just another instance of Heaney being betwixt and between, as he himself has done, after his fashion, in the poem “Making Strange”, one in a long line of Heaney poems focusing on the poet's own development, another example of his autometapoetics; and in this particular case, one in which the poet addresses the specific

issue I wish here to address, asserting that “a cunning middle voice” directed him to be both “adept” (i.e., cosmopolitan) and “dialect” (local) (1998: 221). Heaney's speaker's self-assessment does not seem incorrect or inaccurate, and yet it also does not seem to have – to use one of his favorite verbs – plumbed that well all the way to its muddy bottom. Moreover, Heaney's internationalism doubtless has among its central causes the influence of the Eastern Europeans, his turn to Dante and Yeats as a way of purposely seeking a more universal depth and range, and his early immersion in and deep understanding of three quite different languages: English, Irish, and Latin.

With respect to the first of these, no figure looms larger than that of Czeslaw Milosz. Heaney's near hero-worship of the Polish Nobel Prize winner is well-documented, including by Heaney himself, who clearly admired both the work and the man. “Milosz I just find enormously close,” Heaney says,

the wonderful sense of loss of what is most cherished, and the way he can turn what, in lesser hands or with a lesser writer, would be a poem of personal nostalgia into a symptom of great cultural and historical change, without portentousness. That move from personal lyric lament to visionary, tragic lamentation (Corcoran 1986: 38-9).

Of course, Heaney's interest in Eastern European poets did not end with Milosz. His assertion in *The Government of the Tongue* that the situation of the Eastern European poet is “immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland's history over the last couple of decades” establishes his self-identified affinity (1988: xx). Further, Heaney famously remarked that perhaps the best way for contemporary Anglophone poets to find the mythical and artistic heart of poetry in English is “via Warsaw and Prague” (1988: 40-1). If Heaney's absorption of Eastern European poetry cannot be found completely responsible for the development of his own international-leaning style, certainly it had some influence on it. It seems clear about the poems in *North* that in writing them Heaney was seeking a literary, non-advocate way to address the situation in Northern Ireland, that he was

seeking images adequate to the horrors taking place there. And among the reasons for his move to the Republic in the 1970s is that he wanted to avoid becoming strictly a “Northern Irish poet”. Thus his instinct to move away from the purely local toward the universal would seem to predate that period of his career we associate with his deepening interest in Eastern European poetry, but equally clear is the notion that his thorough absorption of those poets helped him further develop a poetics both based on his own local experience and expressive of universal themes – especially those related to political turbulence and the oppression of specific groups of people.

The shift in Heaney’s influences no doubt played a part as well in his development of a more international style. Perhaps more than any other contemporary poet of Heaney’s stature we can chart his progress as a poet by naming off his precursors as if they were locations on a map: Hopkins, Hughes, Clare, Wordsworth, Hardy, Kavanagh; Frost, Lowell, Bishop; Mandelstam, Milosz, Herbert; Eliot, Dante, Yeats. Holding our chart at arm’s length, we can see a definite pattern emerging, a movement out and away, an expanding radius of travels, while staying tethered to a central location, a home base, an omphalos, whose other name, of course, is Mossbawn. Heaney himself remarks on the delight he finds in discovering the universal in his own old neighborhood, and finding aspects of his old neighborhood in the rest of the world (Cavanagh 2009: 44). In the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, for instance, he describes the thrill he felt when he stumbled upon the word “thole” in a John Crowe Ransom poem, a word his grandmother had used and with which he had always associated his local culture (2000: xxvi).

After *North*, and especially after *Field Work*, Heaney’s poetry reflects a search for poetic models that would allow him a wider range. He had succeeded at one level and now he wanted to take the next step. He wanted to become a world poet. Michael Cavanagh, in speaking to just what it was that Heaney sought from influences, asserts that it was a kind of universal connection, or more precisely, a way to make universal connections. “Heaney seems always in search of a higher or lower power

beyond the confines of the text”, Cavanagh writes, “and great writers are never merely themselves alone but connect to, and work in conformity with, something larger than themselves” (2009: 18). This makes us think of Eliot, especially in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, but also, as Cavanagh points out, in Eliot’s essay on Dante, in which he makes a distinction “between two kinds of poetic language, one universal and mimetic, which [he] sees as Dantean, the other local and expressionistic, which Eliot associates with Shakespeare” (2009: 77). But in Heaney’s searching for models that would help him make wider ranging connections, a religious component also helps explain the particular affinity he discovered for Dante and Eastern European poets; he shares with them their Catholicism, and that, he said himself, spoke to a non-secular side of him that wanted to be given a voice (Fumagalli 1994: xiv). And finally, on the specific subject of influence and its impact on Heaney’s style, it is interesting to note just how influence operated in him: he was influenced by great poets he admired, and he also acknowledged his understanding of how influence operated in them. He says, for instance, about the influence of Dante on Eliot and Pound that “they wore his poem [*The Inferno*] like a magic garment to protect themselves from the contagion of parochial English and American culture” (Cavanagh 2009: 146). We detect in Heaney’s language here both respect for Eliot and Pound and a degree of reservation. He did not wholly approve, and yet he followed them by making a similar move, just not one that completely severed his ties to Northern Ireland.

Helen Vendler has written convincingly about the importance of Heaney’s early immersion in and formal study of Latin and Irish as having had an enormous influence and salutary effect on his poetry. In her book *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*, Vendler asserts the following about Heaney:

No other contemporary poet has so exquisite a sense of the cognitive and moral import of the parts of speech as they play their syntactic roles. The sense arises in part from Heaney’s disciplined knowledge of three languages – English, Latin, Irish – in which grammatical and

syntactic textures, sharpened by difference, make themselves distinctly felt (1995: 67).

In her assessment of what she calls “the grammatical moment” in Heaney, Vendler comes close to my own feeling about the international aspect of Heaney’s style in at least three respects: one, that the specific quality operates on some deeper level – grammatical, Vendler maintains: tonal as well, I would argue –; two, that the international quality in Heaney’s style has a moral component, that the poems, as Vendler puts it, serve as “testimony to the dependence of persuasive verbal art on a highly tempered sense of linguistic and formal implication going hand in hand with feeling and conviction” (1995: 69); and three, that, again quoting Vendler, “Seamus Heaney’s style – in the fullest sense of that word – has changed several times while retaining something ‘Heaneyesque’ throughout” (1995: 41). In other words, whatever it is about Heaney’s style we may consider international, it was there, in some nascent form at least, from the start.

Edna Longley has expressed some irritation with the terms I’m using here. In her essay “Irish Poetry and ‘Internationalism’: Variations on a Critical Theme”, she opens by saying, “I want to complain about the fuzzy uses of the word ‘international’ in criticism of Irish poetry” (2003: 48). Longley’s objection is multifaceted, but in general her view is that labeling the works of certain Irish writers as either “national” or “international” is clumsy at best and that, for instance, to view Yeats as a “nationalist” writer and Joyce an “internationalist” one is to gloss over the complexities of both writers’ work. Her point is well taken, but as noted earlier it is possible to come at what may be referred to as an international style, and as I will later show, we can see aspects of that style gradually manifesting themselves in Heaney’s poetry.

My larger concern, however, is with the matter of tone, which encompasses, in my mind, both the poet’s attitude toward his material and something greater, deeper – the poet’s attitude in general, what I take Roy Foster to mean by the expression “the worlds

below”, something at the base of the poet’s being that is expressed in everything he writes and cannot in fact be suppressed. My major assertion regarding Heaney’s poetry is this: it embodies a tone we have come to associate with the man himself, intelligent but warm; pious – if also sometimes critical – toward his local culture and tradition but open to others; saddened, remorseful regarding the loss of that which is most cherished and regarding the brutality inhering to so much human interaction, but ultimately hopeful about the future of human culture rather than bitter or defeatist. I am consoled by the fact that, though Edna Longley might not approve of my discussing the “fuzzy” notion of tone in conjunction with the international aspect of Seamus Heaney’s poetry, the poet himself very well might have. In his essay on the influence of Dante on Eliot and Mandelstam, Heaney makes the following remark: “What is important [in poetry] is not the language so much as the tone of the language. So that the equivalent of speaking in Creole is the same as speaking in English. [...] What I hope I have never done is to go away from the sound of my own language. I am not saying the vocabulary or the syntax but the sound, the tone” (Fumagalli 1994: 17). Heaney is speaking to the issue of what Eliot and Mandelstam found in Dante they could incorporate into their own work, and what they found, according to Heaney, was not so much specific subject matter or specific style as a moral or philosophical stance that revealed itself in the tone of Dante’s verse. I believe, in short, that the same might be said of the international aspect of Heaney’s own poetry.

Significant to my argument is the fact that tone can carry across from one language to the next in the process of translation, which greatly increases the possibility that a poet’s work may appeal to an international audience. In his review of the anthology of Irish poetry *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, which is translated by Thomas Kinsella, Heaney acknowledges tone’s ability to be translated and in the process offers a definition of tone itself. I quote the passage in full:

As a translator, Kinsella is most interested in tone, to try to carry the tone of Irish across the linguistic divide. Tone is the inner life of a language, a secret spirit at play behind or at odds with what is being said and how it is being structured in syntax and figures of speech. It has subtly to do with the deepest value system that the group speaking the language is possessed by. In another context, for example, Seán Ó Tuama has suggested that the goliardic strain in medieval continental poetry, the ironical and mocking intelligence of it, appealed immediately to the Irish spirit which did not take altogether naturally to the aureate philosophical apparatus of *amour courtois* proper. There was, if you like, a tone of the goliardic verse which the Irish recognized, picked up and made their own. (1988: 33)

We can surmise then that the tone of Heaney's verse can travel, and that not only English speakers from other countries but non-English speakers reading his poetry in translation are able to sense something of its tone and to respond accordingly.

And so how would we characterize the tone of Heaney's work? What is it about that tone that allows his poetry to lean beyond the plumb of his native language? Perhaps the best description of it comes from a discussion of his prose, that by Anne Stevenson, who says we read Heaney's essays the same way we read his poems, "as distinctive perceptions of a humane, intelligence [sic] and eminently generous personality" (1985: 131). It must be admitted that Heaney's international audience comes to his work knowing something of his background and, specifically, that he experienced the Troubles as a member of the minority community. Assuredly, that has some effect on how his international audience reads him. Heaney argued that our knowledge of the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe influences our reading of its poets, "Which is why", he says, "the note sounded by translated poetry from that world beyond [...] is so credible, desolating, and resuscitative" (1988: 43-4). But even acknowledging that, surely Heaney's Northern Irishness does not fully account for the international appeal of his poetry. Again, I would argue that something imbedded in the tone allows it to transcend associations with his beleaguered homeland in a way that the tone of the work of, say, Tom

Paulin does not. In Heaney's work the reader detects a moral and, as he says of Lowell's verse, "a social dimension to what it is voicing" (1988: 131). Clearly there is a social dimension to Tom Paulin's work as well, but whereas the tone of that work often seems strident, distant, accusatory, or superior, Heaney's tone projects social consciousness and moral backbone balanced with tolerance, understanding, forgiveness; human warmth and compassion; and a seeming inability to condescend.

The perhaps unfortunate consequence for poets who would attempt to follow Heaney's lead is that, with respect to tone, to do so is impossible. Tone, it seems, is a matter beyond technique, beyond craft. It is not something that can be fully controlled by the poet's conscious self. "It grows more surely", Eavan Boland asserts, "and more painfully, from the ethics of the art. Its origins must always be in a suffered world rather than conscious craft" (2011: 137). Tone is a reflection of the poet's inner self. The term is typically defined as the poet's attitude toward his or her material, but this may be going only part of the way toward expressing its full meaning and its full significance. Here again, Boland sheds light on the concept, maintaining that

tone has less to do with the *expression* of a poet's experience than with the *impression* that experience first made. It reveals a poet's choices. It establishes a distance between a poet and their material which is then deflected into the distance between the poem and reader (2011: 137).

And perhaps Boland's assertion about the importance to the poet of initial impressions helps explain how reading Heaney's poetry always seems to return us to that small farm in Co. Derry. We might say in fact that his tone was forged there.

Looking at some specific Heaney poems with respect to their tone makes clear by example what I am at pains here to explain. First, I would like to compare one of his early poems to a poem by Richard Wilbur. Why Wilbur? First and foremost, because he is, like Heaney, a master poet, a highly respected artist of significant accomplishment and a long and distinguished career. Further, Wilbur shares with Heaney a strong connection to the English,

American, and European literary traditions, and, like Heaney, he is a formalist. The two poems I would like to compare are Wilbur's "Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning" and Heaney's "Night Drive", both of which are short lyrics written in rhyming quatrains focusing on the appeal of a desirable woman as she is associated in the speaker's mind with a particular place, and both of which place that woman in Italy. Here's Wilbur's poem:

I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that long marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square;

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness, – not then a girl,
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-for falling glide and whirl;

As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
Rides on over the lip –
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.
(1963: 68)

And here is the poem by Seamus Heaney:

The smells of ordinariness
Were new on the night drive through France:
Rain and hay and woods on the air
Made warm draughts in the open car.

Signposts whitened relentlessly.
Montreuil, Abbeville, Beauvais
Were promised, promised, came and went,
Each place granting its name's fulfillment.

A combine groaning its way late
Bled seeds across its work-light.
A forest fire smoldered out.
One by one small cafés shut.

I thought of you continuously
A thousand miles south where Italy
Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere.
Your ordinariness was renewed there. (1998: 26)

One of the first things the reader may notice is that the arrangement of Wilbur's quatrains, with their very artful use of indention, is altogether fussier than Heaney's, with its straight left margin. And that graphic difference is emblematic of the more important differences between the two poems, and perhaps between the two poets: Wilbur's scene seems romantically imagined rather than

immediately real; his poem is in third person, whereas Heaney's surprises us in the last stanza with a second-person address, making the poem seem more intimate; Wilbur's poem seems emphatically concerned with the loveliness of its own art, which is in fact a hallmark of his work and one of the things that perhaps most delights his admirers. He is unapologetically formal, urbane, sophisticated, and stylishly articulate. Even in a poem like "A Fire Truck" – a personal favorite – Wilbur's is the enthusiasm and exuberance of the connoisseur, the appreciator of things in good taste. His poem emphasizes the woman's artfulness, Heaney's her "ordinariness". I would describe the tone of Wilbur's poem as urbane, bemused, and enchanted, and I would identify as a significant phrase in this regard the second stanza's "as it were".

Heaney's tone, on the other hand, is earnest and direct; thoughtful, not superior. A significant line in this regard is the first stanza's "Rain and hay and woods on the air", which seems casual, almost colloquial, in every regard – syntax, diction, reference. Like Wilbur's poem, Heaney's employs rhyme, but unlike Wilbur's, the rhyme of Heaney's poem is subdued and quiet and does not call attention to itself. The pleasure the reader derives from Heaney's use of rhyme is almost unplaceable, something subtle that happens to readers without their being fully aware of it; whereas the pleasure derived from Wilbur's use of rhyme is the kind eliciting an immediate reaction, a recognition of his cleverness, craftsmanship, and wit. If Wilbur's poem conspires with readers to relish the exquisite, Heaney's conspires with them to give thanks for the everyday. In its structure, theme, execution, in its tone, and, ultimately, in its effect, "Night Drive" expresses what we take to be the poet's modest gratitude.

To at once acknowledge the evolution in Heaney's style occurring over the course of his career, pinpoint the nature of that evolution, and demonstrate how, even amid that process of change, his tone remained constant, we can look at examples of his work from the early, middle, and late periods. The following poems seem to me representative of each. Of course, it

would be easy to stack the deck in favor of my thesis; but perhaps acknowledging that certain poems could only have come at the stage in his career in which they did sufficiently supports the argument. For instance, notice how “Night-Piece”— which is the first poem in Heaney’s second volume, *Door into the Dark*, and which I quote in full – features the sort of extreme compression we would associate almost exclusively with the early period of his career:

Must you know it again?
Dull pounding through hay,
The uneasy whinny.

A sponge lip drawn off each separate tooth.
Opalescent haunch,
Muscle and hoof

Bundled under the roof. (1991:1)

Notice then the more “loose-limbed gait” of these stanzas in “From the Republic of Conscience”, which appeared in *The Haw Lantern*, a volume he published at mid-career; the poem itself comprising three sections, 13 stanzas, 39 lines:

When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.
(1987: 12)

Notice, also, that at this one point in his career, Heaney had dropped, at least for some poems, the convention of capitalizing the first letter of every line, which perhaps befits the more relaxed, conversational nature of the verse.

And from his last volume, *Human Chain*, notice the airiness of these stanzas in the poem “Derry Derry Down”, a poem comprising two sections, eight stanzas, 24 lines:

The lush
Sunset blush
On a big ripe
Gooseberry:
I scratched my hand
Reaching in

To gather it
Off the bush,
Unforbidden,
In Auntie Devlin’s
Overgrown
Back garden. (2010: 25)

Readers who have studied his work from start to finish will recognize that each of these poems well-reflects the style of the Heaney period from which it comes. My assertion here is that we can just as easily identify the consistency of tone across all three. In the first, for instance, the line “Must you know it again?” may sound too forwardly accusatory until we recognize that it is self-accusatory and that it is followed by lines exhibiting Heaney’s typical balancing of close observation and sympathetic treatment, warts-and-all description and unabashed fondness. The very title of “The Republic of Conscience” carries a strong hint of the political and, given the political situation of his own times, the topical; but notice how the lines that follow its repeated reference in the first line undercut our expectations in that regard and take the edge off what might otherwise strike us as strident, preachy, or self-satisfied. And in the last poem, notice how achieving the Heaney tone has become a matter the poet accomplishes with a simple ease. Their Heaneyness is something the lines wear like a well-made garment uncompromised by age, the garment’s slight bagginess made handsome by the owner’s confidence

In his essay on Sylvia Plath, Heaney quotes Ted Hughes from Hughes’s “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems”: “It’s my suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us” (1988: 161). With regard to the poetry of Seamus Heaney, the powers in control of his life, the ultimate suffering and decision in him, imbued the tone with a quality to which his international audience could relate. Just as Heaney remarked on Milosz’s ability to translate his personal suffering into a “symptom of great cultural and historical change, without portentousness”, we might say the same of Heaney, and italicize the last two words in the process.

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