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Secondary Sources: A Gloss on the Critical Reception of Seamus Heaney 1965-1993

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"SHAKESPEARE TAKES second place to Seamus Heaney as the writer whose name appears most in English Literature courses at polytechnics and colleges of higher education [in Britain]" announces the 1992 *Guardian International* article. Toppling Shakespeare on his home turf is no small task. While it may be more to the point to ask which institutions did not teach the Bard, Heaney’s preeminence on syllabi across the imperial isle signifies the phenomenal international appeal of the Irish poet. Readers of contemporary poetry written in English should not be surprised that Seamus Heaney is one of the most often taught (contemporary) writers in England and perhaps in the English-speaking world, notably in America. Heaney’s institutional and canonical stature is matched by the immense international scholarly reception of his work and by the almost fanatical media coverage of his professional life in Ireland and England. More critical and media attention has been focused on Heaney and his work than any other contemporary Irish poet and perhaps any other poet in the English-speaking world outside of America in the last thirty years.

Since the first reviews of his 1965 publication *Eleven Poems* to the recent publication of *The Midnight Verdict* (Gallery Press, 1993), over 20 full-length studies (books, pamphlets, and collections of essays) of Heaney’s writing have appeared; nearly 50 dissertations in which he is a major figure; dozens of interviews; hundreds of articles; and even more reviews, profiles, and notices. These relative figures do not include the myriad of articles, collections of essays, and books on Heaney circulating or going to press or the endless number of conference papers presented on his work around the world. The debate still continues as to whether Heaney’s international reputation has opened or closed doors for other Irish poets. Whatever the conclusion, this exposure has not been without its professional and private costs, as Heaney comments in a 1991 interview: “Too late did I realize that everything like this [the interview] is in a
way stealing from me, comme artiste. . . . so it’s a condition of complete self-destruction [he laughs].”3 The extreme condition of the poet’s self-deconstruction is seen in another interview in which he says that he has been interviewed so many times that “I don’t even believe I was born on a farm in Derry anymore.”4

If Heaney feels that he has been buried alive under paper after having been strung up in classrooms around the world and then X-rayed by the critics, he has good reason. A forthcoming annotated bibliography of Heaney criticism contains approximately 2,000 entries, which include citations not only from scholarly studies, but also from reviews, interviews, newspaper articles, notices and profiles. In the following pages I will gloss this mass of material. It is impossible to give the full bibliographical citation for every reference mentioned, and I have rounded off statistics since the bibliography is in progress and new items are found daily. Finally, I have attempted to capture the distinctive elements and general character of the criticism of Heaney’s work as I see it. Given the mass of writing on Heaney, any number of alternative readings could be made and conclusions drawn. These will certainly follow with time. What one will notice overall is how few negative or heavily guarded reactions there have been to Heaney’s work. In this essay I acknowledge these critiques as an important part of literary history and as an attempt to keep my own enthusiasm in check.

The secondary Heaney materials I examine, when taken together, do have theoretical implications, especially in terms of literary production, cultural reproductions, and canonical constructions—issues beyond the scope of this essay. The immense critical focus on Heaney’s poetry, beyond any inherent quality/value of the poetry itself, is certainly affected by market forces in the publishing world, audience expectations regarding subject matter and form, and the institutionalization of the work itself. In some ways the extensive critical reception of Heaney’s work is a historical phenomenon related to changes in the academy, technology, and publishing. Who, why, where, how, when, and what one writes on Heaney is more than a matter of interest in the poetry. Each critical response bears the imprint of its occasion and its history. The projected audience, for example, will affect the writing; thus, critics writing in Ireland for a mostly Irish audience work from a different set of assumptions when writing about Heaney’s poetry than, for example, American critics for American audiences.

Whether one critical perspective has advantages over another is a complicated issue. Certainly, critics writing in different countries have access to different primary materials as well as secondary sources. Thus a bibliography attached to a book on Heaney published in England or Ireland may not include references that an American critic would consider essential for a thorough understanding of a particular critical issue or vice versa. Consequently, while some Irish critics may complain (but rarely in print) that American critics (or even British critics) have missed the point and have not done their homework when writing on Heaney, often the reverse charge could be made. This is not to

privilege one cultural perspective and framework over another, but to emphasize the difficulty in discussing the diverse international response to Heaney’s work and the need for a comprehensive bibliography of Heaney criticism.

Even though Heaney himself initially rejected the notion that the vast international interest in contemporary Irish poetry is related to the Troubles, he has more recently agreed with those who argue that many (international) critics are attracted to Irish poetry because of the eroticism of the politics in the North and the post-colonial buzz. “But we cannot be unaware, at this stage of our lives, of the link between the political glamour of the place (Ulster), the sex-appeal of violence, and the prominence accorded to the poets. There was certainly some journalistic help there.” In particular, critics are attracted to the cultural politics of contemporary Irish poetry because of its unresolved condition. Ireland appears as a never never land where dreams can come true or where nightmares can be explored with the horrified pleasure of the voyeur. In addition, discussions around contemporary Irish poetry often light upon women’s writing and class politics, topics of great international concern. Interest in Heaney’s writing is directly related to the broader framework of Irish poetry and culture, even if this culture is ignored or simplified. The more recent studies of Heaney’s work have attempted to come to terms with the complex cultural constructs informing the poetry, especially in terms of post-colonial forces. These highly theoretical studies are far away from the initial 1960’s reviews of Heaney’s poetry which described the poems’ subject matter and points of view and speculated on the poet’s potential.

In 1964 Heaney sent his manuscript, *Advancements of Learning*, to the Dolmen Press. This manuscript was the result of a flurry of publications in the early sixties. What was to become *Death of a Naturalist* did not appear until 1966. In this interval Heaney received his first critical attention with *Eleven Poems* (1965) published as part of the Poetry in Pamphlets series in conjunction with the Belfast Arts Festival. In 1965 Heaney appeared in a handful of reviews and articles. One of the most engaging of the earliest articles was a profile of Heaney which appeared in *Vogue* in September 1965 written by the poet’s sister-in-law, Polly Devlin. In her profile of the poet (which also includes four poems by Heaney), Devlin mentions her first encounter with Heaney in 1962, referring specifically to the poet’s agile “wit.” Also in September Heaney’s *Eleven Poems* was mentioned in a *Belfast Telegraph* review. This initial notice was followed by Heaney’s longtime supporter John Carey’s glowing review of *Eleven Poems* in the *New Statesman* on December 31, 1965. Heaney had published poems in the *New Statesman* and had already received word that *Death of a Naturalist* would be published the next year; consequently, *Eleven Poems* was immediately overshadowed by *Death of a Naturalist*.

Although Eavan Boland cited only *Eleven Poems* in her January 1966 article

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for the *Irish Times*, Michael Longley and Brendan Kennelly both praised Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*. In addition to catching the eye of fellow poets, *Death of a Naturalist* also attracted considerable notice from established critics in England and Ireland. Among the approximately 30 noteworthy reviews of *Death of a Naturalist* were notices by C. B. Cox, Denis Donoghue, Peter Marsh (Ian Hamilton), Augustine Martin, John Press, and Christopher Ricks. C. B. Cox, for instance, thought that it was the best first book he had read for some time. While most critics, like Cox, unreservedly praised Heaney’s attention to detail, metaphor, language, and craftsmanship, many appreciated his (rural) imagery but found it occasionally overdone. Peter Marsh in the *Observer* was particularly unimpressed by the volume which he described as a “strange featureless first collection.”

There were fewer reviews of the book in the following year; however, *Death of a Naturalist*, published by OUP in America, quickly crossed the country and was reviewed by David Galler in *The Kenyon Review* and by John Unterecker in *The New York Times Book Review*. The former critic found *Death of a Naturalist* interesting but hampered by minutiae while the latter compared Heaney’s verse to Roethke.

In 1969 Heaney’s second volume appeared, *Door into the Dark*. This book did not receive much more attention than his first book. However, *Door into the Dark* did attract a few new prominent reviewers, such as Dannie Abse, A. Alvarez, Elizabeth Jennings, James Simmons, Anne Stevenson and Anthony Thwaite. The reviews generally commented upon Heaney’s growing confidence, his verbal virtuosity, moral foundation, and again his rural subject matter modified only slightly by allusions to love and sexuality. Longer notices of Heaney’s work were already beginning to appear. In 1970, in *The Hollins Critic*, Benedict Kiely published “A Raid into Dark Corners,” a twelve-page consideration of Heaney’s poetry. A year before, John Press included Heaney in a review essay for the *Southern Review*, which also examined the work of Ted Hughes and Kenneth White. During this time Heaney was often mentioned in relation to Hughes, or the “Tribe of Ted” as Anthony Thwaite calls them in the *New Statesman*.

Both Hughes and Heaney were seen as anti-Movement poets, but while many critics were willing to tackle Hughes’s “violence” they were not ready to focus upon Heaney’s minority status as a Northern Irish Catholic, or from a British perspective to see him as a potential (even if romanticized) “enemy.” Consequently, Eavan Boland’s 1970 *Irish Times* article “The Northern Writer’s Crisis of Conscience” and Derek Mahon’s “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” which appeared in *Twentieth Century Studies*, were unique in foregrounding the “religio-political” strains in Heaney’s poetry. Furthermore, Mahon was quick to highlight the differences between the development of Northern Irish poetry and that of the Republic. The political content of Heaney’s work, however, did not impress a Newton, Iowa reviewer who found the subject matter of *Door into*

the Dark “ordinary” in a 1969 review. Heaney’s language was certainly exportable to the Midwest, but the interlinear politics were not. Still, it is amazing that Heaney’s book would even be mentioned in Iowa in the late 1960’s.

Following the publication of Wintering Out in 1972, the critical space allotted to Heaney on both sides of the Atlantic grew extensively. Excluding a few late reviews of Heaney’s earlier works, from 1972–1974 over 25 significant reviews of Wintering Out appeared and Heaney figured as the sole subject or a main subject in almost ten scholarly articles. He also gave a few interviews, signaling his willingness to comment upon his work, a willingness which has led to almost 50 interviews, many of which are substantive. Contemporary Irish poetry, like the Troubles, was drawing the awareness of many international journalists, critics, and thinkers. Heaney’s prominence was matched at this time by the work of Kinsella, Mahon, Longley and Montague, whose book The Rough Field also appeared in 1972.

Reviewers still concentrated on the domestic and rural aspects of Heaney’s poetry, but unlike earlier reviewers those writing on Wintering Out were more skeptical of the agrarian subject matter. Peter Porter argued that Heaney’s poems of country life would mesmerize the urban critics of London, but he overlooked the political charge and historical implications of Wintering Out. Conversely, Douglas Dunn in his 1973 Encounter review expresses disappointment that Heaney did not confront the Troubles head-on. Still some reviewers, like Brendan Kennelly in his review “Lines on a Distant Prospect of Long Kesh,” clearly sensed the political context and horrors of Wintering Out.

Groundbreaking scholarly essays which cited Heaney as a central figure in contemporary Irish poetry also began to appear in the early 1970’s. W. J. McCormack’s “Straight Lines Becoming Circles: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon” (Acorn, 1972), John Wilson Foster’s “The Poetry of Seamus Heaney” (Critical Quarterly, 1974), Dillon Johnston’s “The Enabling Ritual: Irish Poetry in the Seventies” (Shenandoah, 1974) and Thomas D. Redshaw’s “‘Ri’ as in Regional: Three Ulster Poets” (Eire-Ireland, 1974) represent the increasing academic interest in Heaney’s work, especially in North America. Heaney’s work has always been appreciated in both public and academic circles as the earlier studies demonstrate. Significantly, in these scholarly essays by critics who have continued to write well on Irish poetry, Heaney is rarely studied in isolation. However, exclusive treatments of Heaney were to increase when the first book-length study of Heaney’s work appeared in 1975.

Robert Buttel’s 1975 book, Seamus Heaney, along with a dozen or so essays on Heaney’s work published between 1975 and 1977 mark the critical launching of Heaney’s work into the mainstream of contemporary poetry written in English. This extensive reception was complemented by the 50 or more significant reviews of his fourth book North (1975) by major critics such as Seamus Deane, Helen Vendler, Terence Brown, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain, Conor Cruise

O’Brien, Richard Murphy, Neil Corcoran, Edna Longley and Ciaran Carson. Many of these essays and reviews appear to have been informed by the energy and insight of Heaney’s work at this time and have consequently been included in later collections of essays dedicated to Heaney’s poetry. While Heaney’s reputation was well established in the British Isles his work was gaining even greater prominence in the States. Around this time Heaney had acquired a more formidable U.S. publisher; he had taught in California in 1970-1971; and he had gone on a few hectic reading tours which took him literally from one end of the U.S. to the other. The poet as well as the poetry were gaining momentum and notoriety.

Helen Vendler’s review, “Poet of Silence, Poet of Talk,” focused upon the language of North as well as the politics, as did Richard Murphy’s New York Review of Books article “Poetry and Terror.” Other U.S. reviews of North appeared in the Hudson Review, Studies in the Humanities, and The New Republic. In Ireland, John Jordan’s favorable review in the Irish Independent was particularly notable as an important vote of confidence in the emerging poet. With increased exposure came the inevitable critical responses. Ni Chuilleanain found North’s “lack of ironic awareness” a serious limitation. The absence of irony in Heaney’s poetry has been seen by some as one of its greatest limitations. Also, Ciaran Carson in his review of North, “Escaped from the Massacre,” suggested that Heaney’s writing about the Troubles (from the Republic) was perhaps a type of exploitation. Questions raised by these reviewers were certainly relevant and are still under debate. Nonetheless, the vast majority of essays and reviews written about North praised Heaney’s handling of the violence. Conor Cruise O’Brien admired Heaney’s political poetry, a poetry informed by one who is “on intimate terms with doom.” Of course, many critics marveled at Heaney’s almost visionary transformation of P. V. Glob’s The Bog People into the prehistoric groundwork of North.

During the next five years between the publication of North and Sweeney Astray (1983, Field Day; 1984, Faber and Faber) and Station Island (1984), Heaney published Field Work (1979), Poems 1965—1975 (1980, Selected Poems 1965—1975, Faber and Faber), and his first book of criticism, Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968—1978 (1980). Two other publications which drew limited reviews were Heaney’s anthology of poems for children, The Rattle Bag (1982, co-edited by Ted Hughes) and the Field Day publication An Open Letter (1983). All of the major publications were heavily reviewed by critics, such as Neil Corcoran, John Wilson Foster, Donald Hail, Arthur E. McGuinness, Calvin Bedient, Seamus Deane, Denis Donoghue, Paul Durcan, James Fenton, Robert Pinsky, Harold Bloom and Anthony Thwaite.

Over 200 items of note were published from 1976 to 1983—over one quarter of these publications were five pages or longer in length. Many of the extended studies were overviews of Heaney’s work which looked at basic themes, images,
or formal structures from New Criticism perspectives. Heaney’s politics, while always under scrutiny, began to be foregrounded (especially his complex relationship with mainstream British poetry and the London publishing world) along with issues relating to his translations and the mythic dimensions of his poetry. Heaney’s popularity and not his work was the subject of a number of brief articles and profiles. In addition, two books of edited material on Heaney were compiled and one major study was published. Almost ten extensive interviews appeared. And during this period the first dissertations focusing on Heaney were produced in universities from Dublin to Wales to California. There were also several bibliographical and biographical research pieces written from 1977–1983, including Henry Pearson’s bibliography of Heaney’s primary works and Mary Fitzgerald’s important survey of Heaney criticism, “Modern Poetry” in *Recent Research on Anglo-Irish Writers* (1983).

The two collections of edited materials and one book exclusively on Heaney published during the 1977–1983 period reflect the range of early responses to Heaney. *Seamus Heaney* (1977), edited by Edward Broadbridge, is constructed out of previously published reviews and autobiographical glosses written by Heaney and a selection of critical pieces on the poems. In addition, Broadbridge includes an interview conducted for a radio broadcast which contains Heaney reading his poems and explicating them for the Danish listening audience. Broadbridge’s substantive interview (11 pp.) was representative of the cluster of excellent interviews published at this time by writers and critics like Monie Begley (11 pp.), Seamus Deane (22 pp.), Robert Druce (13 pp.), John Haffenden (23 pp.), James Randall (15 pp.) and Frank Kinahan (9 pp.). (There is even a *Boston Globe* article describing Heaney and Randall working on their interview which quotes Heaney—an interview on the interview.)

As Broadbridge announces in his introduction of *Seamus Heaney*, “the best commentator on Seamus Heaney’s poetry so far is the poet himself.” Following the publication of *North* Heaney responded with eloquence and intelligence to requests to introduce his work and life and the historical context of both to foreign audiences in other parts of Europe and around the world, especially in America. Interviews like Broadbridge’s were of interest not only because of the poet’s willingness to provide helpful autobiographical material and to discuss various cultural and literary “influences,” but also because they often revealed in part the act of the poet confronting the poem itself, as its first reader and perhaps as if for the first time—the interview operating as an “innerview.” Of course, the poet’s comments inevitably shape the discourse surrounding the poems, at least initially, creating a textual self as the poet sees it; consequently, much of this material has been used to explicate Heaney’s poetry for over a decade. The sheer mass of interview material produced at this time revealed not only the intense interest in Heaney’s work but also Heaney’s own puzzling over the life and the work. This “puzzling” culminated in the publication of his first book of critical prose, *Preoccupations* (1980).

Broadbridge’s assembly of previously published critical responses certainly emphasized that by 1977 there existed a significant amount of material to warrant
a critical overview. In addition, Broadbridge’s balanced selection of criticism stressed that many aspects of Heaney’s work were under debate. *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (1982; revised 2nd ed., 1985), edited by Tony Curtis, reconfirms both of these points by its inclusion of an extensive bibliography of criticism about Heaney and at least one reserved voice. As the titles of her two essays—“Stations: Seamus Heaney and the Sacred Sense of the Sensitive Self” and “The Peace Within Understanding: Looking at Preoccupations”—suggest, Anne Stevenson reads Heaney sympathetically and with an eye to the philosophical if not the spiritual. In contrast, Edna Longley’s intelligently argued reading of *North*, “*North*: ‘Inner Emigre’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’?” questions the ramifications of and reasoning behind what she sees as Heaney’s mythologizing of the Northern Irish violence, especially in sexual terms. Like the critics, some reviewers were challenging the quality and content of Heaney’s work as well as his cultural status, which had started to become an issue in itself. In her *Washington Post Book World* review of *Preoccupations* and *Poems 1965–1975*, Marjorie Perloff contends that Heaney’s prose is “bland” and that his poems are contrived.13 In a *Christian Science Monitor* review of *Field Work*, Steven Ratiner agrees with the latter part of Perloff’s criticism and finds the “masterly craftsmanship” occasionally glosses over the poem’s rough subject matter.14 In contrast, Jon Stallworthy found the “digging” tropes in *Field Work* engaging, particularly when explored from the perspective of Yeats’s work.15

Even though Helen Vendler, in her 1981 *New Yorker* review “The Music of What Happens,” admired Heaney’s “coming of age” in the more “social voice” of *Field Work, Poems 1965–1975* and *Preoccupations*, Andrew Waterman, writing from Ulster for the British *PN Review* in 1981, found elements of *North* monotonous and in general felt that “Heaney has tended too much to crave his ‘tribe’s’ endorsement.”16 Waterman’s conclusion was also supported by Blake Morrison in his 1980 essay “Speech and Reticence: Seamus Heaney’s *North*” in which he argues that the implicit Republicanism of the bog poems “give[s] sectarian killing in Ulster a historical respectability.”17 This reading anticipates the thrust of Morrison’s 1982 book, *Seamus Heaney*, the first major study of Heaney’s work, in which Morrison attempts to contextualize, historicize and politicize Heaney’s poetry. The poet as “historical witness” dominates the book. Morrison concludes that Heaney is more complex and post-modern than many critics think.18

During the period 1977–1983 more esoteric interrogations of Heaney’s work

were made by critics scrutinizing his translations of Baudelaire in *North* and Dante in *Field Work*. In a 1981 issue of *Present Tense*, Mark Hill argues that Heaney’s “The Digging Skeleton” relies too heavily on pity instead of the fear found in Baudelaire’s original “Le Squelette Laboureur,” and Eric Hadley concludes that Heaney’s Ugolino is too heavy-handed and coarse when compared to Dante’s *Inferno*. Issues related to Heaney as translator, version maker, or intertextual author would become even more predominant with the 1984 publication of *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island*.

While critics were still charting Heaney’s move from public history, myth, and atavistic violence in *North* to the personal, neo-pastoral, and elegiac aspects of *Field Work* in the early 1980’s, Heaney was bringing new material together for the publication of *Sweeney Astray* (Field Day, 1983; Faber and Faber, 1984) and *Station Island* (1984). Reviews of *Sweeney Astray*, such as John Carey’s, immediately focused on the figure of Sweeney as a trope for Heaney, the displaced artist. Reviewers more familiar with the original *Sweeney* text, such as Brendan Kennelly and Ciaran Carson, assessed the language of the text itself. The former writer appreciated Heaney’s rendering of the landscapes from the Irish, while the latter found too much Heaney in the translation. Robert Nye, in a 1985 *Times* review, had little patience for the translation, calling it “Kerrygold verse.”

In the mid-1980’s Heaney was receiving even more notice than before from popular and academic centers. *Station Island* was not only reviewed by major papers and journals, but was also noted by *Time* and *Newsweek*. Heaney’s regular presence on graduate school syllabi produced over one dozen dissertations from 1984–1986 in which Heaney was at least a main figure if not the only author examined. Almost as many articles, essays, reviews and other publications (200+) appeared in the three year period of 1984–1986 as had appeared in the seven year period of 1977–1983. Two full-length studies—Neil Corcoran’s *Seamus Heaney* and Nicholas McGuinn’s *Seamus Heaney: A Guide to the Selected Poems 1965–1975* —one collection of essays, Harold Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views, Seamus Heaney*, the second expanded and revised edition of Tony Curtis’ *The Art of Seamus Heaney* all appeared, as well as a student guide, Aisling Maguire’s *Seamus Heaney: Selected Poems* and numerous chapters on Heaney in surveys of contemporary British and Irish poetry. The student study guides confirm the increasing presence of Heaney’s poetry on British and Irish exams and the subsequent simplified readings of the poems. In addition, Bloom’s book and the reissuing of Curtis’ suggest that not only did readers want help reading Heaney’s poetry and that there was a market for books on Heaney, but also that the critical mass was becoming self-conscious and solidified behind Heaney by the mid-1980’s. While Bloom’s collection made certain essays available to a mostly American audience, it also short-circuited the critical process. The previously published essays in Bloom’s book, *en masse*, signified the limits and not the range of Heaney criticism at that point in time—determining which poems and points of view were worth considering. Selected from the possible hundreds of competent essays on Heaney, the texts were
generally accessible and celebratory; the editor did not want to confuse the reader with difficult or dissenting opinions. At this time, however, critics, like Dillon Johnston in his chapter on Kavanagh and Heaney in *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (1985), risked challenging the conventional wisdom on Heaney’s poetry manifest in Bloom’s collection and gave it a clear, hard, and ultimately invigorating look.

Johnston was not alone in his rigorous reading of Heaney’s poetry. George Watson in his essay “The Narrow Ground: Northern Poets and the Northern Ireland Crisis,” collected in *Irish Writers and Society at Large* (1985), examines what he sees to be Heaney’s inability to write more sympathetically about Protestants and their traditions. More topically, in his review of *Station Island*, Robert Nye described Heaney as a “Parnassian poet” who wills his verse into being instead of writing out of true inspiration, and thus he finds Heaney’s verse in *Station Island* formulaic and too rhetorical.19 Derwent May found the book flawed thematically (too much guilt), linguistically (overcharged Lowellisms), and metaphorically (too inflated).20 One of the most interesting reviews of *Station Island* was written in 1984 by Paul Muldoon in *The London Review of Books* and picks up where May left off. Muldoon has three pieces of advice for Heaney: keep a clear eye, forget about “general absolution,” and “resist more firmly the idea that [you] must be the best Irish poet since Yeats, which arose from rather casual remarks by the power-crazed Robert Lowell and the craze-powered Clive James.”21

*Station Island* was reviewed by the vast majority of Irish, English, and American literary journals and significant newspapers: *Fortnight* (Hugh Bredin), *Linen Hall Review* (John F. Deane), *Sunday Times* (John Carey), *London Magazine* (Douglas Dunn), *Sunday Tribune* (Declan Kiberd), *Honest Ulsterman* (Edna Longley), *Times Literary Supplement* (Blake Morrison), *New Republic* (Robert Pinsky), and the list goes on. For the most part, these reviewers considered *Station Island* to be among Heaney’s best work in terms of subject matter, tone, and craft. These same reviewers were also plugged into the network of those writing more in-depth analytical pieces on Heaney’s poetry.

Essays of all varieties on Heaney’s poetry were being produced at a record rate. Indicative of the wide appeal and range of articles was “In and About the Poetic Line,” published in *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* by Donna A. Van de Water and Daniel C. O’Connell. The authors used a “Siemens Oscilomink L and F-J Fundamental Frequency Meter (Type FFM 6502)” to measure the length of Heaney’s pauses when reading his poetry. They concluded scientifically that punctuation is more important than lineation in determining the duration of a pause.22


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Not only was Heaney being cited in scientific journals; references to his professional life were appearing frequently in articles. There were newspaper notices of his acceptance of the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, articles on his teaching methods and course content, descriptions of his book-launching tour with Craig Raine, and regular accounts of his poetry readings. Heaney’s professional life and his poetry had become the subject of more and more articles, which commonly speculated on Heaney’s popularity. Typical of this approach is “Warts and All,” written by the editor of the Irish Literary Supplement, Robert Lowery. Lowery wonders how someone like Heaney, who has met so many people and who is read by such diverse audiences, has managed to alienate so few. The article then ends with an anecdote testifying to Heaney’s generosity.

In opposition to the growing trend to move away from the poetry and toward the person, Michael Durcan published the first comprehensive Heaney bibliography of primary and secondary works in 1986. This new reservoir of information was complemented by the publication of another central study of Heaney’s work, Neil Corcoran’s Seamus Heaney. Published by Heaney’s publisher Faber and Faber, Corcoran’s book enjoyed the generous cooperation of the poet; consequently new biographical material became available and has been cited extensively ever since.

The first 20 years of Heaney criticism still relied heavily upon close readings of the poems informed by the poet’s own commentary from interviews, uncollected prose and Preoccupations, commentary that many could recite by heart. Only a small percentage of the criticism was explicitly theoretical—becoming more aware of issues related to colonialism and identity. Post-structuralists were to find ample material in Heaney’s more knowing volume, The Haw Lantern (1987), and the internationalized collection of essays, The Government of the Tongue (1988).

During the late 80’s it appeared as if Heaney’s every move was being watched, recorded and published in Ireland. There were articles on his comments made at the John Hewitt Summer School, his candidacy and election to the Oxford Chair of Poetry, the Oxford lectures themselves, and even the rough treatment Heaney received when using a Sunday Times writing award banquet to discuss Anglo-Irish relations. (Fintan O’Toole describes the event after which some in the audience called out “rubbish.”)23 Further removed, but representative of relentless media coverage, was an article describing a lecture given at the Yeats Summer School in which Heaney’s poetry was discussed from what was considered a “shockingly” feminist perspective.

The electronic buzz now surrounding Heaney’s work was an undeniable part of the critical reception of his work. From 1987 to 1989 almost 250 notable citations appeared. Four new books were published, over ten dissertations appeared and almost as many interviews. There were special Heaney numbers

There were also reviews of books about contemporary Irish poetry which mentioned Heaney or were specifically on the poet. To write on Heaney was more than likely to tap the general attention his work was receiving. Interest in Heaney’s writing was so great that many of the reviews of his two new books, *The Haw Lantern* and *The Government of the Tongue*, were lengthy essay reviews.

While several critics admired Heaney’s willingness to frustrate the expectations of readers with the more abstract and difficult poems of *The Haw Lantern*, many reviewers were disappointed by its subdued tone, limited scope, and political allegories. Blake Morrison in the *Observer* argued that *The Haw Lantern* “feels like a book between bigger books, its new poetic style still struggling to work itself out.” Mark Rudman in *The New York Times Book Review* found the allegories in the volume lacking in Heaney’s “usual lyric intensity.” Andrew Waterman suggested that the book was “flawed, self-indulgent.” Of course, many reviewers approved of *The Haw Lantern*, especially the “Clearances” sequence and the elegiac tone which many, like J. D. McClatchy, considered the “heart of the book.” Sean O’Brien in *The Honest Ulsterman* thought that *The Haw Lantern* was the most interesting book since *Wintering Out* and that Heaney’s “allegories” marked the poet’s move into “international fabulism.” In light of the initial response to *The Haw Lantern*, it was not surprising that Heaney’s prose, *The Government of the Tongue*, was reviewed as extensively and intensely as the poetry.

Many critics, like Gus Martin (“In Defence of the Poet,” 1988), found Heaney’s essays in *The Government of the Tongue* truly impressive if the reader was not looking for an ideological charge. And if one wanted politics with their poetics, reviewers such as Lucy MacDiarmid (“Solidarity with the Doomed,” 1989) were satisfied with the volume. Criticism of the essays came from many camps. Derek Mahon found them “excessively professional.” Eileen Ni Chuilleannain thought Heaney concentrated too heavily on the poet’s style and language, which caused him to overlook “intellectual and political” content. Perhaps the strongest objections came from British reviewers such as Andrew Motion who felt that Heaney’s praise of Eastern European poets who wrote under political pressure excluded English poets suffering under the discriminating weight of class, culture, and gender. In addition, Edward Mendelson in his 1988 TLS review “Poetry as Fate and Faith” challenged Heaney’s assertion that “the note of crisis has disappeared from British poetry,” and he accused Heaney of applying double standards to the poets of Britain and Ireland and the poets of Poland and Russia. Still, the majority of critics would side with Helen Vendler who in her *New Yorker* review was not disturbed by Heaney’s (a)political stance.

and who appreciated Heaney’s belief in the rectifying power of poetry.

Scholarly publications during 1987–1989 still tended to focus on North, Sweeney Astray, and Station Island. While many critics were going over old ground—Heaney and myth, origins, or violence—some critics were attempting to tackle more theoretical problems related to the central assumptions informing Heaney’s poetry—modernism, faith, and history, among other subjects. Neil Corcoran, for example, in an essay in Yearbook of English Studies traced Heaney’s concept of the “exemplary” through Heaney’s work arguing that the notion was crucial to understanding the moral and aesthetic principles informing the poetry. Richard Kearney also applied a more theoretical approach to Heaney’s poetry in “Heaney and Homecoming,” as did Declan Kiberd in his essay “The War Against the Past.” Other critics began looking more carefully at Heaney’s possible influences and literary antecedents. Wordsworth and MacNeice began to be mentioned along with Yeats, Joyce, Kavanagh, Frost, Eliot, and Dante as important reference points for Heaney.

With Heaney’s reputation firmly established as exemplified in a New Selected Poems 1966–1987 (1990), it was not surprising to see one of the first virulent attacks on the poet appear in 1991, Desmond Fennell’s pamphlet, Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1. Fennell’s attack was particularly Irish, and the fallout stayed mainly on the island in the form of a rapid exchange of letters in the Irish Times under the byline “Heaney Phenomena.” Fennell accused Heaney of being too esoteric and too accessible, of pandering to the tastes of the critics (especially American reviewers and academics), and most personally of constructing his own rise in prominence. While an earlier critic had designated Heaney a “minor poet” who was incapable of getting outside of the colonial ideology and therefore offered cultural change as a substitute for political change, Fennell’s attack was aimed at Heaney’s reputation more than his work. Fintan O’Toole argued that the real reason Fennell criticized Heaney was that Fennell thought that the poet had not used “his standing to stand up for ‘our side’ in the Northern conflict.” O’Toole’s reading of the situation essentially clenched the debate, but Heaney was in for another hard assessment from fellow poet, James Simmons.

Graduate students and interviewers who followed Heaney’s writing were less active than in previous years as the number of dissertations on Heaney and the number of interviews dropped to approximately five and ten respectively during 1990–1993. Keeping up with previous levels of production, however, over 50 essays appeared along with at least an equal number of reviews of Heaney’s various recent publications in the early 1990’s. Including Fennell’s pamphlet, six books were published on Heaney from 1990 to 1993, one of which was a collection of essays edited by Elmer Andrews, Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays, which contained James Simmons’ article “The Trouble with Seamus.” Unlike early collections of essays which offered a fairly limited and soft handling of Heaney, Andrews included several essays which challenged the poetry and poet from various perspectives. Consequently, it was not surprising to read in Simmons’ opening paragraphs that under Hobsbaum Heaney “was
being groomed for success” and that Simmons “was impatient of his [Heaney’s] commonplace ideas, timid moral postures and shallow metaphysics” embodied in the earlier poems. In opposition to Simmons’ assessment of Heaney’s career, two major studies brought significantly diverse but affirming views to Heaney criticism. Michael Parker’s Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (1993) relied generally upon biographical material, while Henry Hart’s Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions (1992) attempts to read Heaney from a more theoretical orientation.

In the early 1990’s, as suggested by the theoretical bent of Hart’s book, Heaney’s poetry was also beginning to be read more actively in terms of the construction of gender and in terms of post-structuralist concepts of language. For example, Clair Wills in “Language Politics, Narrative, Political Violence,” examines the problematic aspect of Heaney’s poetry that uses the “metaphor of woman as topography, the motherland, and the idea of the mother-tongue.”31 In The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland (1992) Stan Smith reads Heaney’s Haw Lantern in terms of a post-structuralist “middle voice,” and Richard Brown explores the influence of the pun on Heaney’s writing. In addition to post-structuralist approaches, a number of recent essays and reviews have begun to discuss Heaney as a European poet. Peggy O’Brien places Heaney’s “Station Island” in the context of Lough Derg’s “European Heritage,” and Robert Pinsky, in his review of Seeing Things (1991), refers to Heaney as a distinguishedly European poet.

Heaney confirmed that his recent work, most explicitly his play The Cure at Troy (1990), had been influenced by the historical events happening in Europe. In the 1990 Irish Times interview previously mentioned, Heaney comments that it was a “feeling of high passing over Europe at the end of 1989 which made me want to do something new.” In addition to publishing New Selected Poems 1966–1987 and The Cure at Troy, Heaney published his ninth major volume, Seeing Things, in 1991. As with Heaney’s previous books, Seeing Things was heavily reviewed and, as before, initial reviews were split on its accomplishments. While John Carey’s review was pure blurbspeak, other more reserved evaluations were offered by writers like Douglas Dunn who, in the Irish Times “Weekend,” appreciated Heaney’s more mature and assured lyric voice; Lachlin MacKinnon in the TLS (June 7) found Seeing Things a positive development because “Heaney has learnt not to sound like himself”; Blake Morrison considered Seeing Things to be the book that most resembles Death of a Naturalist to date, but Morrison chides Heaney for wanting to say the right thing in the right post-structuralist language.

How Heaney will fare in a post-structuralist or post-modernist, fin de siècle global critical environment is difficult to determine. The future of Heaney criticism will obviously be affected by the poet himself and the ever-changing critical climate. There will certainly be further analyses of the sociology of the

text, the politics of publishing, and closer studies of published revisions. With more bibliographical material available and accessible in data base form, further progress can be made into the significance of the uncollected poems and prose, which is extensive. In addition, we can foresee dramatic rereadings of his earlier work in light of the later work. The application of new ways of reading texts will inevitably bring to light significant new aspects of the poet’s writing and thinking. However, we will have to wait many years for crucial biographical information and manuscript materials to be made public; this material will without a doubt reveal new influential figures and texts in the poet’s life as well as increase our appreciation of the extensive weave of intertextual allusions as yet undetected in Heaney’s poetry and prose. At that time, we will truly see major leaps in our understanding of Heaney’s vision, a vision that is still vitally alive.

In Dublin in September 1993, 70,000 screaming Gaelic football fans from Cork and Derry had the chance to read Seamus Heaney’s poem, “Markings,” on page 17 of the All-Ireland Final program. When he launched his new book, The Midnight Verdict (a limited edition of three pieces of translation), in Dublin and later lectured on Gerard Manley Hopkins, there was standing room only as usual. In addition, in October 1993, Heaney gave his final Oxford lecture, “Frontiers of Writing,” to a full house of community members, students and professionals. Based on popular appeal alone, Heaney’s reputation in Ireland and England appears secure. In scholarly circles critics will undoubtedly respond eagerly to Heaney’s forthcoming collection of essays, The Redress of Poetry. They will perhaps even be astounded by Heaney’s straightforward and unreserved discussion of Northern Ireland politics from the perspective of Constitutional Nationalism in light of the recent Humes/Adams talks. The translations of Ovid and Merriman that comprise The Midnight Verdict will also add a twist to our understanding of Heaney as translator and version maker—a poet who speaks through the words of others. Heaney’s continuing productivity and reimagining of the poetic self means that there is and will be plenty of new material for critics to ponder.

If there is a lull in critical activity surrounding Heaney, perhaps we will see a rediscovery and renewed interest in his contemporaries such as Montague, Kinsella, Boland, and Murphy. A saturated or exhausted Heaney market could also produce a shift of emphasis onto emerging or recently emerged writers such as Muldoon, McGuckian, Carson or Ni Dhomhnaill. Whatever happens, it’s worth considering not what our fascination with Heaney tells us about the poet or the poetry, but what it tells us about ourselves.