

HEANEY'S EMBRACE

Seamus Heaney. *Human Chain: Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
 Dennis O'Driscoll. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

Dónal Kevin Gordon

When my five children were young, each had his or her own “special box,” a place in which to keep mementos—a favored rock, a saved feather, some treasured photograph. Those boxes were repositories, an acknowledgment by them, even then, that their youths were fleeting, on the run.

Human Chain is Seamus Heaney’s special box.

Inside, in uneasy rest, are Heaney’s own talismans, touchstones, keepsakes—held again to light, this time from the vantage point of a poet now in his 70s, his own human chain weighed by the shock of human loss, the shackles of longing, no less than by a stroke which, in 2006, summoned the shade of his own mortality, a shade that is shepherding many of these poems.

Open the cover and the reader is soon standing with the boy Heaney in the unlit coalhouse door of an Ulster farm, taking in—in one of the many, less colloquial words, which Heaney, being Heaney, sets like gems—the violet “blet” of “a sullen pile” of coal, hefting with a shovel “its wet sand weight.” Hearing, in another poem, in the poet’s post-stroke reverie, the cardiac-clunk of a baler, the sound evoking the long-ago memory of thirty gleaned acres and recalling what Heaney had known then and was missing now, “summer’s richest hours.” Thumbing again through yellowed, still visibly bloodied, clippings of Troubled Ireland. Only to then be ferried, in “The Riverbank Field,” written after Heaney’s beloved *Aeneid VI*, to the poet’s own Lethe, the river of his youth, the river Moyola, coursing through his life, all life, all history.

But it is wind that truly turns the pages of *Human Chain*, a wind like the one I remember, one August some twenty-something years ago, a wind that formed a fist somewhere over the Atlantic, then battered the Irish coast where we lived, stripping, in a night, every leaf from every nearby tree, turning, without exaggeration, summer to autumn in hours.

Such a wind is the one Heaney hears chinooking in the opening lines of the opening poem, “Had I Not Been Awake,” a wind that rises and whirls from nowhere, like the stroke that lamed, for a time, the poet. And, at the far end of the collection, “A Kite for Aibhín” lofts a zephyr of a kinder sort:

“Air from another life and time and place, / Pale blue heavenly air,” lifting a loved grandchild’s kite, “itself alone, a windfall,” even if, in the string’s very unspooling, the kite stretches the line of life itself, Heaney’s own human chain, the ties that bind the poet to his mother and his father and to theirs, to his wife Marie and to their children, and to Aibhín.

“It must have to do with the wind,” Heaney tells us in “A Herbal,” his ethereal homage to Guillevic’s “Herbier de Bretagne,” again implicating the wind in the course of events. Wind, in the lyrical “A Herbal,” that keeps grass from ever resting in peace. That elsewhere in this collection patters a roof with “quick leaves off the sycamore.” That rehearses us all, no less the very grass, the lowest broom, in even the most secret ways of the world. “A courier blast,” says Heaney of the wind that shook his own barley that stroke-Sunday in 2006, then, incongruously, if not believably, “lapsed ordinary,” to which his response in these pages, in another poem, is, understandably, “go with the flow.”

Go with the flow in *Human Chain*, and the reader can’t help but peer over the poet’s shoulders, squinting through sepia as Heaney remembers his dead parents, in “Album,” in “Uncoupled,” in their most ordinary of moments, in their own now, dead-to-time youth.

Or, in “The Conway Stewart,” in an evocation of that long-ago squat pen, that snug gun of “Digging,” the poem that announced the poet, watch as his parents’ son, on the very eve of leaving for boarding school, takes the measure of an earlier pen, “guttery, snottery” in its first snorkeling of ink, its first task to write the letter signaling, from his now-aged perspective, the line loosed from shore, the son’s skiff freed once—and irretrievably.

Irretrievable, too, except in these poems, is the sing-song “Derry Derry Down” of Heaney’s Ulster before its Troubles, the stripling Seamusín stripping the unforbidden fruit of lush, sunset-blushed gooseberries from the eden of Annie Devlin’s back garden. Or, in a blush of another kind, that of young love, the poet recalling his quest, by way of downing an eel dinner in a fish-factor’s house, the better “to win the hand of the princess.” The memory of dew-eyed love, segues ineluctably to smell and to sound, to the “cut of diesel oil in evening air,” to “tractor engines in the clinker-built / Deep-bellied boats.”

But the poet, a landlubber himself, cannot help but see in those boats “landlubbers’ craft, / Heavy in water / As a cow down in a drain,” and in their crews, “Horse-and-cart men, really, / Glad when the adze-dressed keel / Cleaved to the mud.” All that, only to have the memory of that eel supper and a classmate’s eel slicker conjure again the slip of a girl, a “white linen *éblouissante*,” her “slyph-flash made flesh,” a practiced touch winning at

first—and at last.

In Heaney's embrace, and *Human Chain* is itself, first and last, an embrace, life and love and loss are, as they have always been, one.

What's different is that Seamus Heaney, unlike Yeats, who, in a serendipitous passing of the pen, died the very year Heaney was born and who saw fit to cement at Drumcliff his cold eye in stone—instead casts his, a warm eye, on life, on death.

That warm eye is evident here, not only in fond remembrances of things past, but in elegies to friends lost, to singer, film-maker and broadcaster David Hammond, for example, who, with Heaney, was one of the founders and mainstays of the Field Day Theatre Company; to artists Nancy Wynne-Jones and Colin Middleton; and to Derek Hill, yet another artist, dying himself, who all at once steps unseen from the “fork-lifted, sweated-through” lines of “The Baler,” and strides unexpectedly from the “dusk eldorado” of those days into a last supper at the Heaney home, to beg, in a heartrending scene, a last request of his friends. “But what I also remembered,” writes Heaney,

*“Was Derek Hill's saying,
The last time he sat at our table,
He could bear no longer to watch*

*The sun going down
And asking please to be put
With his back to the window.”*

In *Human Chain*, Hill is entirely alone in having his back to the window.

For the reader, the experience is more visual and far more visceral.

Read “The Wood Road” and try to stay at any remove from that road, never widened, as the poet tells us, but often resurfaced, no less by the blood of the Troubles than by the somewhat more ordinary, if no less tragic, “stain at the end of the lane / Where the child on her bike was hit / By a speed-merchant from nowhere.” Or listen to Heaney in “Chanson d'Adventure,” his chronicle of the ill wind alluded to in the opening poem, “Had I Not Been Awake.”

“Apart,”

he writes of that sunlit cold morning, the word by itself as gelid, as suddenly distant from any feeling Heaney had ever before felt, despite the previous

loss of his parents.

“Apart,” in particular, from his wife Marie, she who is addressed in a sigh of lines earlier as, “O my love,” the poet lamenting, mid-stroke, the separation of his unresponsive body from a willing, still loving soul.

Or watch, in “Uncoupled,” as the adult Heaney looks back, from the distance of decades, on his childhood, his mother “Walking tall, as if in a procession,” bearing nothing more than the stove’s firebox, it bound for the ash-pit, clinkers yet alive, the wind—*that* wind, again—in her apron bib, she walking the worn path that turns behind the henhouse. His cattle-dealer father appears in the same poem, himself “not much higher than the cattle,” ashplant in hand, eyes on his son opposite the pen, only to be distracted by the lowing, roaring beasts, by revving lorries, by dealers shouting among themselves, much to the memory of a boy, perched atop a shaky gate and suddenly bereft at the loss of his father’s momentary attention:

“So that his eyes leave mine and I know
The pain of loss before I know the term.”

The pain of loss. It is everywhere in *Human Chain*.



To understand both the poet in *Human Chain* and the responsibility of being that poet requires reading Dennis O’Driscoll’s *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*.

First published in 2008, then issued as a paperback in 2010, *Stepping Stones* unearths the roots of the poet destined to make his mark with “Digging,” providing not only poet Dennis O’Driscoll’s insights into Heaney, but Heaney’s own insights into Heaney.

True to its title, *Stepping Stones* retraces, stone by stone, the path that led Heaney from there to here, this across a stream ever in full spate. And at every step, the poet remains mindful of the man he calls “the giant at my shoulder,” Polish poet and fellow Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, and of their shared response to some insistent inner voice:

“What did you do with your life, what did you do?”

What Heaney has done is nothing less than to put his country, his people, his tribe even, into verse—into memorable verse. In doing so, too, the poet has added his own name to those he so admires: Yeats, of course. Lorca and Mandelstam. Frost and Friel. Bishop and Stevens. Not to mention Lowell, Hughes and Kavanagh, Carson, Walcott and Milosz.

And yet, to read *Stepping Stones*, is also to witness the poet on a starlit night, in his word, “pissing” against the gable of his cottage at Glanmore and, at once, experiencing ‘the usual reveries of immensity,’ reveries not unknown, even to lesser mortals. Is to watch the young, would-be poet head off to boarding school at St. Columb’s, where his fellow penman, Seamus Deane, would be his literary wing-man, the two of them flying, side-by-side, into a “space that was separate and, for sure, not a little sorrowing.” Is to see Heaney publish his earliest poems under the pen-name *Incertus*, and to meet, through Heaney’s eyes, the young Longley, the young Muldoon.

There is, of course, in *Stepping Stones* the expected invocation to that squat pen, the one first taken to hand with any poetic purpose in 1962. And then, the ink dried four years later, there is Heaney, hefting a book in his hand, scanning its lime-green and pink dust jacket, his eyes noting what he called the “fabulous names” listed on the jacket’s back: Auden, Eliot, Hughes, Larkin, Lowell, MacNeice, Spender.

“It was certainly strange,” Heaney admitted, decades later, to O’Driscoll.

What was strange to the poet was the fact that he was at the time living in a nondescript housing estate on the outskirts of Belfast and that the book he was holding was his own first collection of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*. Stranger still to him at the time was that until three years before this he had published a single poem in *The Irish Times* and another in *Kilkenny Magazine*. Now his hands held what he couldn’t know then would be the cornerstone of a legacy his admirers know now.

And *Stepping Stones* lets readers know now what Heaney is himself still coming to know. How he deals with criticism. Who matters to him, in terms of poetry—and why. What makes the poems, the poems. Where he finds inspiration. The effect of what this father-poet called “the cubs in the lair” on his ability to write. How he organizes his day—the “haphazard pattern of work and worry, fits and starts of highs and lows,” with which any writer could empathize.

Here, too, are Heaney’s own insights into his own poems. Not the least of them, “Mossbawn, Sunlight” and its Vermeer-like rendering of life as lived in Heaney’s boyhood home, a household that included his own Aunt Mary, loving to the last, a constant in her nephew’s life, “like the past gazing at you calmly, without blame.” Entire chapters in *Stepping Stones* also shed light on each of his collections of poetry, as well as on Heaney’s take on the role of the poet in society, on today’s proliferative creative writing programs, on the influence of poets like Milosz, of the Irish language, of his friendship with the likes of Ted Hughes and John McGahern, and of that “mighty

fortress,” the critic Helen Vendler.

To read *Stepping Stones* is also to read of Joseph Brodsky, whom Heaney limns, darkly, as “a kind of poetry samurai.” To share the poet’s thoughts about Mandelstam, Lorca and Lowell, Milosz, Stevens, Bishop and Frost. To see what his compatriot writers, among them Ciarán Carson and Brian Friel, see in the fractured island they all call home. To spend a memorable day with Heaney and the Scots poet—and “blathering genius”—Hugh MacDiarmid, their discussion of poetry wildly wetted by whiskey.

Stepping Stones also speaks of Heaney’s boyhood friendship with Seamus Deane and of what the poet calls, tellingly, the “end of youth.”

“Something had passed,” Heaney laments, “not just between Seamus and me, but between all of us who had been cresting on each other’s company since those Donegal summers in the 1970s,” his words addressing, not just the effects of life on that boyhood friendship, but the tension between being ultimately creative and still politically responsible, this in a time history would dub, with stark understatement, the Troubles. And yet it is Heaney, his own passive nature notwithstanding, who preaches in “Mycenae Lookout,” a poem central to *The Spirit Level*, what Deane practiced: “No such thing / as innocent / bystanding.”

Nor, in these pages, is the reader mere bystander, but is instead engaged in the conversation between Heaney and O’Driscoll. Indeed, if Heaney initially saw *Stepping Stones* as a “grand inquisition,” the interviews became, at the same time, “a potent stirrer-up of memories,” and, by themselves, the inspiration for any number of poems. They are also rife with moments of personal insight, as Heaney, for example, is confronted by O’Driscoll at one point about any sense of failure as a freelancer, back when he’d made the move from the Wicklow countryside to Dublin, where he took up a position as a college lecturer.

Heaney’s response—“I don’t think I felt that”—may, however, be somewhat less than forthcoming, based, at least, on an encounter I myself had with the poet sometime back in the late 1990s. At the time, Heaney had come to Notre Dame for a reading, and I had the chance to meet him at a mutual friend’s house. Only a year or so before, Heaney had become a Nobel laureate, and, the company of friends and the comfort of a friend’s home aside, I had every reason to expect to do nothing less than fawn in Heaney’s presence.

As it turned out, Heaney stepped alone from the kitchen, a kitchen as inviting and comfortable as any he would have known in Ireland, and into the dining room, where I found myself suddenly at his side and where I introduced myself.

Down-to-earth and disarmingly charming, Heaney greeted me with a smile that leveled any awe and made the two of us, by calling anyway, equal.

“Ah, yes, John told me all about you,” Heaney said. “Why, you’re the genuine article!”

“Me?” I replied, confused. “Genuine article?”

“Yes, you,” laughed Heaney. “You’re the real writer. You made a living of it. Me? I had to teach.”

But the last word, more than a decade later, now belongs to me: Seamus, without question, you are the genuine article.