The Poetry of Seamus Heaney

EDITED BY ELMER KENNEDY-ANDREWS

Consultant editor: Nicolas Tredell

Original series editor: Richard Beynon
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 5

This offers a brief outline of the guiding principles informing the selection and organisation of material in this book.

CHAPTER ONE 7

Heaney and the Anglo-American Canon

This chapter examines Heaney's relation to the Anglo-American canon and the critical process whereby he was installed at the very centre of that canon. There is discussion of the critical reception of Heaney’s poetry in the reviews and commentaries of such influential critics as John Carey, Christopher Ricks, A. Alvarez, Blake Morrison and John Bayley in England, and Helen Vendler in America. The chapter ends by considering the challenges offered to canonical values and to Heaney’s reputation by the Irish cultural critic Desmond Fennell.

CHAPTER TWO 40

Place, Identity, Language

This chapter opens with a consideration of some of Heaney’s own early statements about his relation to place and the question of identity. This is followed by excerpts from David Lloyd’s and Clair Wills’ deconstructionist analyses of Heaney’s poetics of identity and emplacement. The views of other critics who emphasise Heaney’s sense of displacement as the ground of identity are also presented. These include Robert Welch’s analysis of the poetry as a process of Jungian ‘individuation’, Richard Kearney’s ‘anti-revivalist’ interpretation, and the more radically post-modern readings of Timothy Kearney, Alastair Davies and Stan Smith, which extend the notion of the poet’s displacement from origins to include his displacement into language.

CHAPTER THREE 80

Poetry and Politics

This chapter is focused largely on critical responses to Heaney’s fourth and most controversial volume North, and presents opinions from opposing
sides of the Irish ‘cultural debate’. On one hand there are the views of those (Conor Cruise O’Brien, Ciaran Carson, Edna Longley, Blake Morrison, George Watson) who are critical of what they see as the dangerous and debilitating atavisms in Heaney’s political poetry, and of those (Mark Patrick Hederman, Denis Donoghue, Seamus Deane) who find his mythological and archaeological procedures productive and impressive. The chapter concludes with a consideration of Heaney’s own views on the relation between poetry and politics.

CHAPTER FOUR 120

Gender, Colonialism, Nationalism

This chapter begins by examining Heaney’s elaborate sexual myth that relates gender, colonialism and nationalism. This is followed by exegetical commentary from Seamus Deane and Jonathan Allison on Heaney’s tropes of sex and marriage. The second half of the chapter is devoted to feminist critical reaction to Heaney’s poetry in recent years, and includes excerpts from Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s ‘Thinking of Her . . . as . . . Ireland: Yeats, Pearse and Heaney’, Patricia Coughlan’s “Bog Queens”: The Representation of Women in John Montague and Seamus Heaney', and Catherine Byron’s Out of Step: Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory.

CHAPTER FIVE 142

Powers of Earth and Visions of Air

This chapter concentrates on the major shift in Heaney’s poetic outlook and practice that makes itself increasingly apparent in and after Field Work. A range of interpretative accounts of Heaney’s later work charts this shift and offers an assessment of Heaney’s poetic development. These include Ciaran Carson’s sharply evaluative review of Sweeney Astray, Seamus Deane’s brilliant account of the ‘Antaean’/‘Herculean’ tension in Heaney’s poetry, Henry Hart’s essay on the visionary intensities of Seeing Things and Nicholas Jenkins’ review of Heaney’s latest volume, The Spirit Level. The chapter concludes with an excerpt from John Wilson Foster’s study, The Achievement of Seamus Heaney, which discusses Heaney’s development in the terms that have been used to structure this Guide as a whole.

BIBLIOGRAPHY 176