Television’s Prose

It is gratifying, as well as convenient, to have this generous assemblage of Seamus Heaney’s essays (a good number of which appeared in various earlier collections) now brought together in one volume. Some have been slightly abridged, but all retain a lucid and incontestable coherence and display a mind of delightful agility: delicate, robust, discriminating in its love for every topic it addresses. Heaney’s title is half of the old, familiar playground taunt that in this country concludes, “losers weepers.” It rejoices not only in possession but in the appropriating of what had once belonged to another. But Heaney has rendered the first half innocent by applying it solely to the work of authors he so deeply admires and so thoroughly understands that they have become possessions that chime with and quicken his sensibility. In fact, he makes the same claim regarding Osip Mandelstam’s feeling for and knowledge of Dante’s Divine Comedy: “He possesses the poem as a musician possesses the score, both as a whole structure and as a sequence of delicious sounds.”

This acoustical sensitivity and musical faculty Heaney exhibits everywhere as he addresses poetry, and he delights to find others who share what Eliot called “the auditory imagination.” To one essay he affixes Joseph Brodsky’s statement:
Poets’ real biographies are like those of birds . . . their real data are in the way they sound. A poet’s biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes and metaphors . . . With poets, the choice of words is invariably more telling than the story they tell.

He quotes, with relish, some lines of his countryman W. R. Rodgers:

I am Ulster, my people an abrupt people
Who like the spiky consonants in speech
And think the soft ones cissy.

Of Robert Lowell’s style in his early book *Lord Weary’s Castle*, Heaney comments:

The percussion and brass sections of the language orchestra are driven hard and, in a great set piece like “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” the string section hardly gets a look-in. Distraught woodwinds surge across the soundscape; untamed and inconsolable discords ride the blast.

And in regard to a lovely passage in *Macbeth*:

The poetry . . . is to a large extent in the phonetics, in the way the English words waft and disseminate their associations, the flitting of the swallow being airily present in phrases like “they most breed and haunt” and “The air is delicate,” while the looming stone architecture is conjured by the minatory solidity of terms like “masonry” and “buttress.”

Of Ted Hughes’s *Wodwo*: “His diction is consonantal, and it snicks through the air like an efficient blade.” And of Geoffrey Hill: “There is in Hill something of Stephen Dedalus’s hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations, as sounds, to be plumbed, as weights on the tongue.”

More generally, he remarks,

In a poem, words, phrases, cadences and images are linked into systems of affect and signification which elude the précis maker. These under-
ear activities, as they might be termed, may well constitute the most important business which the poem is up to and are a matter more of the erotics of language than of the politics and polemics of the moment.

This puts more tersely what Cleanth Brooks elaborated into an essay called “The Heresy of Paraphrase.” But I can think of no one, critic or poet, whose ear is as perfectly pitched to the plain song as well as the full operatic pomps of poetic discourse. So we should not be surprised to find him writing, “I am sure that Coleridge’s excitement on first hearing Wordsworth read was as much a matter of how the poem sounded as of what it intended.”

James Joyce begins his autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* this way: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.” And Heaney reminds us of this by beginning his book with a section, chiefly autobiographical and topical, titled “Mossbawn” (the name of the farm on which he was born), which begins:

I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s.

And like in Joyce, it is not long before considerations of locality take a political turn and coloration. Ireland is, alas, a riven nation, and Heaney was so placed by birth, as a Catholic born into the Protestant segment of the land, as to feel as keenly as anyone the cleft of cultures that became his inheritance. It can trace itself back to the twelfth century, and the incursion into Ireland by Henry II—he whose impatient exclamation “Who will rid me of this priest?” (muttered under his breath, but loud enough to be heard by some loyal and dutiful barons) led to the murder of Thomas à Becket. Then came Essex at the behest of Elizabeth, and Cromwell and King William. Heaney tallies the losses at Derry, Aughrim, and the Boyne. The Troubles, as they are called, date
far back, to be sure, but are kept alive by, among other forces, the Reverend Ian Paisley’s sectarian rancor, which somehow resembles the Ayatollah Khomeini’s. Politics have consequences for poetry, especially for a poet subject to the snubs and persecutions that are heaped upon minorities; and Heaney is marvelously alive to how this works in such poets as Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, and Joseph Brodsky, for example. He tells us that Brodsky decried the yoking together of politics and poetry (“The only thing they have in common are the letters p and o”) not because he had no belief in the transformative power of poetry per se but because the political requirement changed the criteria of excellence and was likely to lead to a debasement of the language and hence a lowering of “the plane and regard” (a favorite phrase) from which human beings viewed themselves and established their values.

Henry Adams observed, “Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds.” But Heaney interests himself in it, as did Yeats and Joyce, because it has such important historical consequences: for language, as well as other things.

What began with the sound of a Greek-speaking pump was to lead him into poetry: “I was getting my first sense of crafting words, and for one reason or another words as bearers of history and mystery began to invite me.” As regards words as bearers of history, he would find in due course:

We have learned how the values and language of the conqueror demolish and marginalize native values and institutions, rendering them barbarous, subhuman and altogether beyond the pale of cultivated sympathy or regard. But even so, it still seems an abdication of literary responsibility to be swayed by these desperately overdue correctives to the point where imaginative literature is read simply and solely as a function of an oppressive discourse, or as a reprehensible masking.

These paired sentences express deep sensitivity and sound critical sense. And as regards words as bearers of mystery, he writes of becoming enchanted
by the gorgeous and inane phraseology of the catechism; or by the litany of the Blessed Virgin that was part of the enforced poetry of our household: Tower of Gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Health of the Sick, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted. None of these things was consciously savored at the time, but I think the fact that I still recall them with ease, and can delight in them as verbal music, means that they were bedding the ear with a kind of linguistic hardcore that could be built on some day.

At one point, in the course of explaining how “an exuberant rhythm, a display of metrical virtuosity, some rising intellectual ground successfully surmounted . . . gratifies and furthers the range of the mind’s and the body’s pleasures and helps the reader to obey the old command: Nosce teipsum. Know thyself,” he quotes a splendid stanza of his own:

This is how poems help us live.
They match the meshes in the sieve
Life puts us through; they take and give
Our proper measure
And prove themselves most transitive
When they give pleasure.

Coming upon this stanza in an essay on Christopher Marlowe, we may instinctively recall Robert Burns, who famously employed the same form in a good number of his poems, like “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” “The Vision,” and “To a Mouse.” We have come to think of it as Burns’s stanza, though it is no more his than the Shakespearean sonnet in Shakespeare’s creation. But in his essay on Burns Heaney identifies the stanzaic form as “Standard Habbie metre.”

His characteristic mode of approach is by indirection. He begins with a poem by the Czech Miroslav Holub which describes two characters as a means of representing the different poetical postures of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin. He begins writing about Sylvia Plath through the prism of some marvelous lines by Wordsworth. Normally, one would think of

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1. The stanzaic form dates at least as far back as the early-seventeenth-century poem by Robert Sempill of Beltrees called “The Life and Death of Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan.”
Plath as being Wordsworth’s polar opposite; and in some ways indeed she is. But the Wordsworth lines are used allegorically, as is the Holub poem, and in both cases the illumination provided by those surprising juxtapositions is richly rewarding.

The main body of Finders Keepers, following upon the autobiographical prelude, is devoted to an examination of the work of those poets Heaney especially prizes and has made his own by admiring appropriation. They are: Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, Philip Larkin, Yeats, Lowell, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, Patrick Kavanagh, Zbigniew Herbert, Dante and Eliot, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Thomas Kinsella, Edwin Muir, Christopher Marlowe, John Clare, Hugh MacDiarmid, Dylan Thomas, Robert Burns, W. R. Rodgers, John Hewitt, Stevie Smith, Norman MacCraig, Italo Calvino, Joseph Brodsky, and Czesław Miłosz.

The list is impressive enough in its diversity, but lurking behind the appreciative considerations of these poets lie a number of other writers so thoroughly appropriated by Heaney as to have become melodiously woven into his own sensibility, and hence to flavor his thought almost everywhere. Of these the chief one is Shakespeare, whose language flows in and out of the of the author’s thought so unobtrusively as not to call for quotation marks but simply to lend a noble music to what is going forward. Others include Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Frost, Wordsworth, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, the Sir Philip Sidney of the Defence of Poesy, and the Robert Graves of The White Goddess.

Heaney’s vivid enjoyment of poetry that he loves is always persuasive in its own right, but the more so when he acknowledges some occasional reservations. Of Hugh MacDiarmid, he is frank about the poet’s bluster and rant, saying, “He was more devoted to opening salvos than to finishing touches . . . His polemical writings had all the troublemaking tactics of a dangerman in a bar, stripped to his shirt-sleeves and squaring up to anyone and everyone.” Of Stevie Smith, after quoting a quite Dickinsonian poem of hers, he observes that “her vision [is] almost tragic . . . Yet finally the voice, the style, the literary resources are not adequate to the somber recognitions, the wounded joie de vivre, the marooned spirit we sense they were destined to express.”

Such gentle demurrals serve to validate unqualified enthusiasms when we
encounter them, and this is most evident in the case of T. S. Eliot. Heaney first encountered this formidable figure at the age of fifteen, and was balked and daunted by the celebrated obscurities. He admits, “I was never caught up by Eliot, never taken over and shown to myself by his work, my ear never pulled outside in by what it heard in him.” But he was to discover

that what is to be learned from Eliot is the double-edged nature of poetic reality: first encountered as a strange fact of culture, poetry is internalized over the years until it becomes, as they say, second nature. Poetry that was originally beyond you, generating the need to understand and overcome its strangeness, becomes in the end a familiar path within you, a grain along which your imagination opens pleasanably backwards towards an origin and a seclusion. Your last state is therefore a thousand times better than your first, for the experience of poetry is one which truly deepens and fortifies itself with reenactment.

On Elizabeth Bishop:

Wit confronts hurt and holds a balance that deserves to be called wisdom . . . Like [George] Herbert, Bishop finds and enforces a correspondence between the procedures of verse and the predicaments of the spirit . . . Losses of all sorts have caused the mind’s scales to tilt drastically, and so they desperately need to be evened out by a redistribution of the mind’s burdens—and the act of writing is depended upon to bring that redistribution about.

On the divisions and allegiances in W. R. Rodgers and his poems:

In the triangulation of Rodgers’s understanding of himself between London, Loughgall and the Lowlands, in that three-sided map of his inner being that he provided with its three cardinal points, in all of that there is something analogous to the triple heritage of Irish, Scottish and English traditions that compound and complicate the cultural and political life of contemporary Ulster.

Such rifts and cleavages remind us of Derek Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa,” and the bitter cry of another of his poems, “Ah, brave third world!”
Of Marlowe’s “Hero and Leander,” Heaney comments,

Marlowe is involved here with a show-off performance, operating with real spontaneity and affection. . . . The intonation of “Hero and Leander” is not as ominous or stricken as the great scenes of Doctor Faustus, yet it does issue from a kind of seasoned knowledge that is almost unshockable, certainly undupable but still not altogether disenchan
ted.

I can’t help observing that Heaney’s account here fails to register any sense of the absurd comedy of the first two sestiads of the poem.² He quotes some lines about Hero’s very peculiar footwear, but omits those that immediately precede them:

Her kirtle blue, whereon was many a stain
Made with the blood of wretched lovers slain.
Upon her head she ware a myrtle wreath,
From whence her veil reached to the ground beneath.

That is, she never changes her bloody garments because they testify to the suicides of her previous conquests; and she is clothed from head to toe, though when in due course Leander is described, he is buck-naked.

After quoting a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, he observes,

When I read those lines in 1963, I took to their rhythm and was grateful for their skilful way with an octosyllabic metre. But I was too much in love with poetry that painted the world with a thick linguistic pigment to relish fully the line-drawing that was inscribing itself so lightly and freely here. I was still more susceptible to the heavy tarpaulin verse of The Great Hunger than to the rinsed streamers that fly in the clear subjective breeze of “Prelude.”

On Eliot:

This hankering for a purely delineated realm of wisdom and beauty sometimes asks literature to climb the stair of transcendence and give

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². The remaining four sestiads were composed with humorless solemnity by George Chapman.
us images free from the rag-and-bone-shop reek of time and place . . .

Eliot’s achievement in his Dantean stanzas is to create just such an
illusion of oracular authority by the hypnotic deployment of a vo-
cabulary that is highly Latinate.

This observation somewhat covertly sets Eliot in opposition to Yeats (who
embraced the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart). But the curious fact
is that in the Dantean stanzas of “Little Gidding,” composed in a variant
form of terza rima, Eliot first wrote of encountering Brunetto Latini in
bomb-scarred London, just as Dante met his old teacher in the Inferno;
but decided to replace him with “a familiar compound ghost.” When
asked about the change by John Hayward, Eliot replied that

The visionary figure has now become somewhat more definite and will
no doubt be identified by some readers with Yeats, though I do not
mean anything so precise as that. However, I do not wish to take the
responsibility of putting Yeats or anybody else into Hell and I do not
want to impute to him the particular vice which took Brunetto there.3

At one point in the midsection of this book, Heaney quotes a long
passage from Wordsworth’s 1802 preface to Lyrical Ballads, and follows
that quotation with a gloss or paraphrase of his own:

Essentially, Wordsworth declares that what counts is the quality, inten-
sity and breadth of the poet’s concerns between the moments of writ-
ing, the gravity and purity of the mind’s appetites and applications be-
tween moments of inspiration. This is what determines the ultimate
human value of the act of poetry. That act remains free, self-governing,
self-seeking, but the worth of the booty it brings back from its raid
upon the inarticulate will depend upon the emotional capacity, in-
tellectual resource and general civilization which the articulate poet
maintains between the raids.

Wordsworth in his statement is not quite as straightforward and clear as
Heaney in his gloss, and though I dare not claim that Heaney’s version is

very different from Wordsworth’s, I think it is fair to say that Heaney brings to the topic of where poems come from a moral tone and ethical dignity that has about it a nobility and sense of vocation that are not far from religious. We feel this pressure often in Wordsworth’s poems more powerfully, perhaps, than in his preface. But the side-by-side statements of the two poets appear in Heaney’s essay on Sylvia Plath, and its presence there invites some disturbing considerations. When we are asked to consider “the gravity and purity of the mind’s appetites and applications between moments of inspiration,” we must sooner or later find ourselves facing Plath’s Journals and Larkin’s Letters. And these volumes do not testify to the gravity and purity of their respective authors’ minds.

Plath’s Journals are rancorous, scornful, envious, and at times quite vicious; Larkin’s Letters are occasionally petty and often ungenerous. And yet I find myself disposed to think Heaney’s instinct is right in affirming the importance of a poet’s mind and spirit as it manifests itself in what Wordsworth elsewhere called “that best portion of a good man’s life, / His little nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love.” Heaney is inviting us to see a spiritual comportment that informs a poet’s work, brought to that work by something like disinterested devotion. If I understand him correctly, Heaney is putting in positive terms what Ruskin once put negatively, though with great force:

The emotions of indignation, grief, controversial anxiety and vanity, or hopeless, and therefore, uncontending, scorn, are all of them as deadly to the body as poisonous air or polluted water; and when I reflect how much of the active part of my past life has been spent in these states—and that what may remain to me of life can never more be in any other,—I begin to ask myself, with somewhat pressing arithmetic, how much time is likely to be left me, at the age of fifty-six, to complete the various designs for which, until past fifty, I was merely collecting material.4

There are dangers in positing too neat a correspondence between the moral character of an artist and the work he produces; we know of too many cases where such correspondence is nearly impossible to find. But

elsewhere in this book, in connection with Larkin and approaching the topic more indirectly, Heaney is able to find in the poet’s very *technique* something akin to the devotion he feels belongs to poetry. After quoting Larkin’s “Aubade,” a bitter, almost resentful meditation on his solitary, mortal condition, a muttered litany of whining complaint, Heaney goes on to reflect:

Still, when a poem rhymes, when a form generates itself, when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures, it is already on the side of life. When a rhyme surprises and extends the fixed relations between words, that in itself protests against necessity. When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the condition of overlife and rebels at limit. In this fundamental artistic way, then, Larkin’s “Aubade” does not go over to the side of the adversary.

In the course of time a number of young poets have asked me what I would recommend that they read—apart from poems themselves—to help them understand their craft, not in a handbook way, but as informal discourse. And I have proposed a number of texts that provoke long and lively thought, most often among them the letters of Keats. I get asked that question less frequently these days, but if a young writer were to come up with the same question I would now happily and gratefully add *Finders Keepers.*