

Seamus Heaney and the Great Poetry Hoax  
*A critical exposé of Faber and Faber's verse-man*

By Kevin Kiely

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Mary de Rachewiltz (Ezra Pound's daughter), Seamus Heaney and Kevin Kiely in Trinity College Dublin, (July) 2013

## **Introduction: Heaney's travesty of rural life**

'Frost was at home in the high cultural context of the university courses, but he still gave you a link back down into what you stored in your own intimate child-body, the tramping of hay. So I responded immediately to that primal reach into the physical'

—*Stepping Stones*

I told me brother Seamus  
I'll go off and get right famous  
And when I come back home again  
I'll have seen the whole wide world  
Goodbye, Muirshin Durkin  
I'm sick and tired of workin'  
I'll no more dig the praties  
No more be a fool

—*Nineteenth Century Ballad*

I admit from the outset that my case contra Heaney (hereafter H), is not *ad hominem*, or to his individual being, such as it was, and the case is made by close reading, analysis, and minutely examining his verse, and less so his critical output which is reflected in the opening quote. H emerged through the 'media-poetry scene' which is the subtext of the critical analysis that follows.

Critical writing is never offensive or shabby: it is about quality, ethics, and the expert appraisal of poetry, prose and other verbal art forms. It is a discipline inherent in writing poetry and prose to their final form, and that is from where I hail. I have had to ingest some guile and wit into the book because the grim turgidity of H's verse resonates at a low threshold that can barely enliven the discussion. H's verse product evokes shock because of its shallow provenance, and begs to be exposed as a gross infamy. The whole pretence of H posturing as literature-maker began when I was immediately repulsed on first sighting his verse which is related later.

H's use of 'high cultural context' and 'the tramping of hay' (above) with his mention of 'intimate child-body' and 'the physical' redolently locates him as I will show: the fake farm-boy serving the cash-cow of the campus and the media poetry scene during a time of sectarian war in Ireland.

H's Wordsworthian pretensions are far too irritating to demand much unravelling. Frost's poems cover the material which H largely re-uses, as in the rural anecdotes and dialogue-verse. H is, of course, a miniature Frost in verse; doesn't have any wit and whimsy which Frost purveyed, but H certainly absorbed the melodrama of being out there in the countryside and 'sold' it to a gullible, complicit academic audience, if less so to the cognoscenti of poetry. It will be offensive to some that there even exist cognoscenti of poetry, but you can hardly have expected the art form to have survived for centuries through verse-making cliques, 'poetry-careerists' and the likes of H.

Frost's *North of Boston* gave H his title *North*. All of Frost's work in *North of Boston* (1914) *Mountain Interval* (1916) and *New Hampshire* (1923) meant that H's rural nostalgia is redundant: the ground was already covered (no pun intended). H's verse is a subconscious homage to Frost, except that H's retro is not as good as Frost at his 'best'. There is no need for H. Frost's verse has already done the rural themes which H pilfered. Frost is sufficient in this rank but I am not much into Frost either.

In Ireland, we had Patrick Kavanagh, a poet who abandoned rural verse for urban poetry and satire, yet he unfortunately spawned too many rural-clones during and after his demise. It is often forgotten, or disregarded that Kavanagh hated his local village, well not hated one hundred percent, but if you read his poetry, the hatred outweighs the love of the countryside: he found refuge in the city, if inferiority as he was recognisably rural, unlike H who quit the farmstead for education and a progressively successful career in teaching at many levels where he could promote himself as Faberman.

Across the Irish Sea, poets such as Dylan Thomas and R. M. Thomas, H's older contemporaries hold the field in twentieth-century pastoral English poetry because they did more with the form than H's farmyard-museum verse of churning butter, closing gates, milking cows and admiring the scenery. H is a smaller clone-version of the many Kavanagh clones who still operate in Ireland. Admittedly, archaic nostalgic rural imagery is a staple of Irish verse even today, and H is currently (or just about) the yardstick for academic 'poetry' on campus of this type.

H's verse has no affinities with the two Thomas poets, he hails from the media era that raised Pam Ayres to 'famous' TV poet with accessible punch-line verse, occasional bawdy subject matter with double entendres, and excessive use of her rustic accent for added comic effect. Ayres, in turn, echoed the flower-toting 'poet' Henry Gibson of Rowan and Martyn's *Laugh-In* whose verses included deliberate cringe comedy verse such as "Dogs are better than Ants (as Pets)". H soon lost his accent on the academic circuit to the normal whine of the campus professor but I always place him with Ayres and Gibson. However, I assert that this text is hardcore academic analysis to counter the claims for H as poet.

H became Faber property in a publishing house meeting the crisis of gross lack of talent after their golden era. William Oxley described British poetry in critical terms retrospectively in the 1990s, reducing the deflated repute of Brian Patten, Jeni Couzyn, Andrew Motion and Craig Raine along with 'the recently hyped Wendy Cope and Simon Armitage' (Ox, 10). The

poetry business in public reputation making is a sorry state of affairs tied up with careers, salaries, editors, publishers and academic power. Faber's 'own' Raine, Motion and Armitage presume the achievement of classical poets such as Blake, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Hardy, the WWI Poets including David Jones, Keith Douglas and Robert Graves, as well as the Poundian, Basil Bunting among others. As I write, Faber is strategically run by Lacklan Mackinnon and Wendy Cope, aka Mrs and Mrs Faber.

One may as well say, run into the ground: be assured that contemporary British poets of worth, are not being published by Faber. If you check out the verse of Cope & Mackinnon, you will understand my position immediately. Cope is 'famous' for synopsising *The Waste Land* into a couple of Limericks. Mackinnon is 'famous' for 'poems' that look uncannily like diary entries. Faber has become the cruellest mammoth. However, when they put out classic poets, the introductions are done by feeble contemporaries all Faber personnel, thus making the ultimate pretence to continuity. Faber's actions are those of Poetry & Poetry Unlimited which is their arch claim.

Thus H's 'imposed' presence by certain vested interests is what I shall expose. The truth is that as time grinds on, H will be located in the position assigned him here just as Thomas Moore was declared to have squeezed the harp into a snuff box. Moore is, of course, far better (if bygone) than H. The professoriate in the majority pretend to admire H, yet, very few of them will 'out him'; however, the few who have, are listed below. My sympathy is for students and others, who are being forcibly steered towards H's verse, and whose time is being wasted on this tenth rate fraud.

H, is in fact, a very easy target but his detrimental effects require addressing. I (optimistically) know that unwary users of poetry (young and old) may have to dabble with him in educational institutions, and prescribed at second and third levels. The majority of such users pass him by rapidly, once they have handed in their paper on *Beowulf* or 'Northern Ireland Poetry of the Troubles Era' and 'H's archaeological transpositions'. It is a great insult to the dead from the North of Ireland War (1968-1998) that H and so-called *Northern poets* were seen, and are still to some extent as representative of the war when their verse barely dabbles with the immensity of it.

H, without academic acceptance is unthinkable as a verse-property. H *sans* the stale curricula of his era would have been a non-starter since critics have shown that he misrepresents a genre of English nature-verse rather than being distinctly Irish. H, in his verse is inaccurate, mealy-mouthed, rhetorical and laden in sophistry, using language that is clumsy with words, and in love with his own voice. H's fast-food fodder verse was lapped up primarily by many lazy professors, indicative of their lack of critical integrity besmirching the wider vistas of the academy.

The core of criticism is hierarchy, explication, and erudition, as to what is valuable for woman, man, society, country, and the world-making of literature. Literature is a parallel world in our world, not something to be endured by complicit students, and merely utilitarian towards the degree process and job market, tokenism as a forgotten sojourn within itself:

literature is more than alive to those who experience it. My case is not a protest because poetry is secure but at the level of injustice, I am lodging the complaint, conscience-bound but wish to get back to work, however, this chore had to be addressed.

I am giving literature its full status and outing one of the major counterfeiters of my generation. However, I am not a solitary voice, as was loudly heard in Trinity College Dublin in 2013, at the Ezra Pound International conference. Loudly heard by me, however, as not many publish what they hold to critically about H. His supporters may outnumber those who out him but this is changing rapidly.

H was invited to speak in TCD in 2013, being a ‘brand name’ and in truth his address on Pound, was, to be kind—graduate level, and poorly put together. As a member of the organising committee, I voted for H as a plenary speaker, in order not to seem reactive. To my utter satisfaction, I recall the lunch that day, hearing the majority of voices and their opinion of H as writer: ‘half-penny Poundian’ said one of the professors.

I had a cup of coffee with H and his wife, Marie. My walking tour of literary Dublin had caught their attention, and which I admitted was ‘literary fun’ leading the academic pack to the city’s significant glittering streets and locations, associated with Swift, Wilde, Shaw, O’Casey, Synge, Yeats, Stoker, and Joyce to name only some. H was his usual diplomatic avuncular self, smiling, hand-shaking like a politician, but well I knew how these Poundians actually considered H’s verse, and the tattered lecture he’d delivered with a string of quotes that any anthology could provide from Pound. H doesn’t have to be rated as a scholar, but then again one would expect a verse-maker of his innings, to at least strike some fire from Pound. Many of us kept polite, nodded, smiled ironically, and felt some sort of obeisance had been made to none other than Faber & Faber really, for H was their so-called stable winner but as will be shown, far from classic material. This I knew many years ago.

H’s verse represents the diminution of literature to something that is mere novelty, nostalgia, anecdote, lame joke and faded photograph-album memory. H is a verse maker of dead objects within a dead noisy misuse of language, guttural showy word-effects backed up by the house of Faber, based on their former pedigree as publisher of notable twentieth century poets. H’s explanations and dramatic pleas based on his Mossbawn farmyard never recreates the beautiful landscape of the region of North Derry, and indeed close by North Antrim: spectacular places; nor does he infuse the sectarian foreground into his literary output as did Padraic Fiacc and James Simmons. H is a repository of fake literature unleashed and to some extent imprinted but not indelible and all because of his seeing a pump erected in the farmyard. H is the pretence of gold that is straw, milk that is whitewash, water that is dirty. This is, I must repeat, not *ad hominem* but at his product in verse. Product is linguistically overstating it.

## I: Heaney in bed with Helen Vendler

One of his champions among the professoriate is Helen Vendler, as a name it sounds like 'vendor' which she became, and she makes my case in giving the game away in her 1998 publication which in turn buries the exegesis of H's verse in imprecise critical language. There are implications beyond language, in the realm of abuse of poetic culture, by calling it poetry. It is like any mis-representation that uses sophistry or rhetoric. This is as much the failure of HU in financing the lifelong Vendler, beginning with her PhD on Yeats under the tutelage of the gifted Professor John V. Kelleher which proves the limitations of the academic quagmire, but she is not alone in being dangerous to poetry, and being dull as ditchwater in its assessment, if you examine her tome on Emily Dickinson. H loathed Dickinson's poetry; on being asked about a line of his, obviously derived from one of her poems, he coyly remarked: 'I don't know whether to be happy or unhappy about it' (StepStone 289). A poet would not deny Dickinson anything.

Not surprisingly, Faber siphoned off Dickinson, and handle her *Collected Poems* for the European English speaking world, and Hughes did a *Selected Poems* of Dickinson. Business is business of course but my case is the *emperor's new clothes* schools of verse masquerading as poetry.

In dealing with H, one is in the same ditchwater (mentioned above). Unfortunately, a few notable professors cannot redeem the academies. Professors in the majority, rule over academy curricula, hence the following: 'And there are poems of selfhood (notably "The Badgers") that I will reserve for consideration of Heaney's alter egos in the next chapter (Vendler 74).' Of course, one understands this but its pseudo-scientific diatribe is pernicious and really doesn't matter in its content, based upon commenting about H's effusions; 'effusions' is too complimentary a term for his verse. I have returned to complete this book-length essay having been woken up fully a long time ago to H, as one of the feeblest verse-makers of the twentieth century. Almost any page of Vendler yields similar useless fodder: 'he has levelled his voice to the conversational, turned his anthropological gaze to the ordinary ways life is lived, and become able, as a fieldworker, to sketch psychological and cultural transactions' (Vendler 74). There is a diminution of country life in Vendler that is abhorrent since many universities are in pastoral locations and with employees who would be more capable of commenting on the paucity of response by H to rural values, horticulture and nature.

Look at it 'levelled'; 'anthropological gaze' and 'fieldworker'. I require some sort of relief after the nausea of Vendler. Her analysis of "The Badgers" refers to 'the numinous presence poem'[...] 'addressing himself, imagines the invisible but sensed badger as a revenant compounded of the murdered and the murderer' (Vendler 90). This is so loathsome, sad, and dispiritingly awful, and fraudulent as language usage that it is disgusting. I will prove that H hijacked the Sectarian War (1968-1998) in Ireland, and dined out on it; lived off it, kept away from its fiery centre, and yet made the prosperous claim to being its voice and assumed this role. Furthermore, snippets of H became the ideal filler by tabloid journalists during the war. These filler quotes made an easy accessible rural nostalgia to soften what were undeniably

the sufferings, agony, strife, and deaths unfolding month by month, year by year, and in commentary on the war from the news media. Anyone who believed (and many did at the time) that H could represent the war's texture, intensity, and complexity obviously knew nothing about the North of Ireland during this period. Invariably, H as verse-maker evoking nature, farmyards and animals, with a smattering of diluted reality suited those who wished to avoid the fierce wartime events.

H's backslapping, self-serving critics are such a breed, who granted him this role. Their disservice to poetry is tinged in deprivation, and the malevolence of keeping students bound to such a turgid non-poet, for that is my thesis, and having been minced through the academic process myself, suffered the fakery on my psyche of such a fog of verse which is survivable, even to the point of laughter, disgust and derision, except for the touch of evil in terms of embezzlement of finding one's time wasted on useless professoriate-babble that counterfeits criticism and promotes non-poetry.

I will return to Vendler, and do not have to waste much of the reader's time, re-hashing the complete commentary of hyperbole from other critics who pedalled H as academic fodder, except for a brief distillation of his superannuated fans who perpetuate the hoax, including John Carey, Frank Kermode, Peter Levi, Karl Miller, Blake Morrison, Andrew Motion, Lachlan Mackinnon, Christopher Ricks and Harold Bloom. The fact that these embrace H among real poets whom they 'teach' academic courses on, calls into question their critical discrimination. There is the whole area in any event, of the faculty and its presumed critical faculty, especially if it lumps H in with genuinely canonical poets. I loathe terms like canon and core: they involve the curricula. Placing H on any curriculum means real literature is being defrauded.

Clive James and Stephen Fry are in another media-poetry zone. James was an early 'admirer' of H, being himself a closet writer of verse as TV personality who presumed Faber & Faber could develop his verse product, but as it happened, he moved in on Picador and began to steer their ship. Clive James translated Dante which Picador peddles—the translation is a hellish experience on earth from what one garners—glancing at random through it. Fry is the terribly sincere, liberal goody-goody, among the plethora of 'renaissance men' TV personalities, an actor, writer, host, comedian 'heck' cetera, and in *The Ode Less Travelled* (note the Spike Milligan title) expounds on poetry, and of course, praises H.

This is sinking pretty low, having to quote Fry, but I will refrain from quoting Clive James: both are similar verbose lightweights. H's: 'superb poem "The Outlaw", which might be regarded as a kind of darkly ironic play on an *eclogue* or *georgic*—Virgilian verse celebrating and philosophically discoursing upon the virtues of agricultural life' (Fry, 207). This reflects Fry's diffuse language and amounts to no-meaning, except he shows that he links H to Virgil's *Eclogues*. H must be Homeric for his promoters in order to fool the public: he must be their Seamus Homer and Virgil Heaney. Note the imprecision in 'a kind of darkly ironic play' which is not untypical of 'media arts' panel discussions, inclusive of Melvyn Bragg and others, who attempt to hold sway with media-opinionated views on 'poetry'.

Here is Fry, once more and finally, and who continually moralises between his expositions on poets who ‘drank themselves to death’, or are ‘deeply unstable and unhappy neurotic’, as if other humans do not share such chaos, but of course H is above this, and can provide a villanelle along with ‘some very funny examples by Wendy Cope demonstrate that it need not be always down in the dumps’ (Fry, 228).

Back to business. Examine the H Bibliography (2008) and note the number of his supporters who continually reviewed him; and he them. Richard Ellmann, Brian Friel, and Ted Hughes were extensively reviewed by H. And Robert Lowell eight times. H puffed his fellow Northern verse men. John Montague twelve times back-slaps H; Paul Muldoon six times; and Peter Fallon, H’s Irish publisher. H is praising of Fallon in a tribute in the *Irish Literary Supplement* (1995). The verse men club coterie is another aspect, fully ascertainable from the H Bibliography, a doorstep book from Faber which provides more evidence but I must move on.