WALK ON AIR

Thomas C. Tiller

Presented to the Sphex Club

November 3, 2022

I have a growing interest in poetry but it wasn't always so. Oh no! Maybe that was because most my experience with poetry at the time I wasn't interested had to do with school-assigned poems. I remember thinking during my reticent teenage years of much of the poetry we were assigned to read and memorize as something to be avoided. And I recall particularly an assignment in school to create a proper 14-line English sonnet and read it in class – both of which I looked toward with dread. Mine was on friendship but I cannot recall the content. I gave it the title, "Sonnet Number One and Only." Lacking both inspiration and talent there is little wonder that the text has not survived. But years later I began to enjoy reading poems randomly encountered, then to seek out poems and volumes of poetry and eventually to think about the place of poets and poetry in our lives. So, I decided to offer a discussion about poetry in general along with consideration of some specific poets and poetry of particular interest to me (and hopefully to you.)

So, what is poetry? For me, defining poetry is as difficult as defining jazz but I recognize either when I hear it. Let's begin with some generic definitions. The word "poetry" "comes from an ancient Greek word [*poiein*] meaning 'to create' or 'to make,' suggesting the centrality of poetry to human creativity and expression." Britannica defines poetry as "literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound and rhythm." A similar offering is, "Poetry is the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative or elevated thoughts." Shakespeare defined poetry as "The art which uses words as both speech and song to reveal."

And here are some more thoughts about poetry. Edgar Shannon, an English professor who was president of UVA when I was a graduate student there, said, "When someone dies, when we fall in love, when people get married – at such crucial moments of heightened feeling, we often turn to the memorable and vivid language of poetry." Concerning his efforts to map the unconscious, Freud said, "Everywhere I go I find that a poet has been there before. Poets are masters of men, in knowledge of the mind, because they drink at streams which we have not yet made accessible to science." The Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo opined, "Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader

recognizes as his own." Ted Kooser, the U.S. poet laureate in 2004, said, "Poetry can give us fresh ways of looking at what might otherwise seem ordinary or dull." Shelly said, "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world …." Frost said, "Poetry is what gets lost in the translation." Robert Graves quipped, "There's no money in poetry, but then there's no poetry in money, either." Christian Wiman, a poet, teacher and former editor of Poetry Magazine offered, "Let us remember … that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things we might be less apt to destroy both."

Socrates and Plato understood the power of poetry. In the The Republic Plato first has Socrates proposing that poets should be banned from the ideal state because they mislead citizens by praising gods and heroes in spite of their vices, then later deciding they might be allowed, but only on the condition that they abandon their attachment to false gods and heroes. (Isn't it ironic that in his famous 399 B.C. trial, Socrates was found guilty – 280 to 220 – and sentenced to death – 360 to 140 – for rather similar charges: corrupting the youth of Athens by failing to recognize the old gods and introducing new ones.)

Although I endorse lofty thoughts about certain poetry, I also can see room for more variety than they imply. Concerning that, the selection of Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" comes to mind. That raised more than a few eyebrows. Dylan at first indicated confusion at having been chosen for the award and didn't confirm that he would accept it. When he eventually fulfilled the obligations necessary for claiming the prize, he somewhat explained his delay saying "When I first received [the notice], I got wondering how my songs related to literature. I wanted [time] to reflect on it and see where the connection was. When I started writing my own songs, folk lingo was the only vocabulary I knew, … but I had something else learned in the literature from grammar school – principles and sensitivities and an informed view of the world."

Also consider the title given a certain collection of offerings – Selected Poetry of Ogden Nash 650 Rhymes, Verses, Lyrics and Poems. That title is indicative of some of the variety and distinctions that can be made. Examining various types and styles of poetry, or any one of them, could be another paper in itself though one much beyond my capacity. Consider, for example, sonnets, epics and narratives, lyrics and ballads, Haiku, limericks, elegies, villanelles, odes, blank verse and free verse, etc.

No matter how you define poetry, how do you like to read it? One satisfying way is to come as close as you can to inhabiting the mind, life, experiences, culture and time of the poet, along with careful line-by-line reading, to determine to the extent possible what he or she consciously or unconsciously must have meant to convey through that poem. Of course, we don't know all that about the author of most poems, especially when we first encounter them, so another way is to simply bring yourself to a poem to see how it speaks to you.

I offer a statement by an artist – a painter named Patricia Riascos – that I think applicable to reading poetry. "There are certain elements in art that communicate feelings. It is up to the observer to establish a connection. Sometimes a person is drawn to a painting because it awakens memories and emotions that don't necessarily coincide with the artist's intention. I like it when someone tells me about their own interpretation which might be totally different from my own. It is also rewarding when someone gets exactly what I intended. It is an open dialogue."

I think it is fair to say that each reader experiences any given poem in an individually personal way. There is even some thought that poems "read the reader" – that is, that they offer material that we project onto, thereby revealing about ourselves. That would be similar to how projective psychological instruments such as Henry Murray's Thematic Apperception Test and the Rorschach Test work.

Sharing a poem can open a conversation, but of course not everyone is drawn to poetry and it can be difficult to guess who is and who isn't. For example, a friend, who is an avid reader and one of the very best writers I know, told me that he has avoided poetry since school and college days. On the other hand, when I learned that someone I got to know through a tennis contract cared greatly about redirecting at-risk youths that he worked with, I mentioned a poem titled "We Real Cool" to him. Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) wrote it about the self-destructive behavior she observed in a group of drop-out boys figuratively and literally headed for a dead end. He asked for a copy. I provided it and he appreciated the connection to his work and concerns. Here is the poem as the author recorded it for the poetry archives of the Library of Congress:

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Soon afterward he brought a folder full of rhymes he had written from time-to-time, mostly to his wife. The quality of his poetry is not what matters. He was proud of his poems and wanted to share them. And I'll bet his wife appreciated them. Sometime later, related to another conversation we had, I loaned him a collection of works by Langston Hughes (1901-1967). That led to interesting conversations about how Hughes' writings were part of his life-long conversation with his country about equality, justice and race matters. As just one example, think about Hughes' "I, too" poem, envisioning a future time of equal treatment and proclaiming "I, too, am America." I shouldn't have been surprised at my friend's interest in poetry because he is a graduate of Paul Laurence Dunbar High School where the students were all "Poets."

A difficulty for me in preparing this talk has been the choosing of what to include for the time available. As just one example of something special to me, but excluded, is a volume by Wendell Berry under the title, *A Timbered Choir* - a collection of meditative poems on beauty in nature, death, peace and hope. And if I had included love poems, at least one – Sonnet 43 – would have come from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets *from the Portuguese*.

Next, recall Edgar Shannon's remark that we turn to poetry at crucial moments of heightened feeling. That is what Kay Ryan - former Poet Laureate of the US, Pulitzer Prize winner and McArthur Fellow – did when her mother died. She expressed her sentiments by creating a poem, one that I liked and remembered. Then, in turn, when my mother died at age 98, I used lines from it and from one other poem at her graveside service. In her poem "Things Shouldn't Be So Hard" as I read it, Ryan made the case that everyday lives and people deserved to be remembered in this world. The poet used the hard surfaces of the physical world as a metaphor for the hardness, indifference and too-soon-forgetting shown concerning deaths of the unfamous. Here's the closing segment of that poem:

The passage
of a life should show;
it should abrade.
And when life stops,

a certain space—
however small —
should be left scarred
by the grand and
damaging parade.
Things shouldn't
be so hard.

The other poem used at the graveside was "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer (1886-1914). It opens with,

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

If Bono can go to Ukraine to speak and perform in a subway station in support of Ukraine's effort to repel the Russian invasion – as he did, certainly we can take note of it from here. With the current invasion ongoing, I thought it wouldn't be right in a talk about the place of poets and poetry in our lives without taking note of an inspirational Ukrainian poet. In a report about Ukrainian identity I heard mention of poet named Taras Shevchenko who lived from 1814 to 1861; so I learned about him. He is referred to as Ukraine's national poet and the most prestigious university in Ukraine is named Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Though born as a serf he was freed at age 24 and became a poet, writer, artist and political figure who had much to do with Ukrainian national consciousness. He wrote from exile for ten years, 1847-1857. A core theme of his poems written more than 170 years ago was the resistance of Ukrainians and other subjugated peoples against the Russian empire. The relevance of his theme to the situation today testifies that poetry and poets have found a way to time travel. One of his poems opens with the lines, "When I am dead, bury me In my beloved Ukraine, My tomb upon a grave mound high Amid the spreading plain So that the fields, the boundless steppes, The Dnieper's plunging shore My eyes could see, my ears could hear The mighty river roar." Its final verse begins, "Oh bury me, then ye rise up And break your heavy chains." Lines from

another of his poems are translated as, "Struggle on – and be triumphant! God Himself will aid you." To me, such sentiments refute any claim by Putin that Ukraine has no identity separate from Russia.

In cities around the world there are monuments honoring Shevchenko. The inscription on the one in Washington, D.C. includes, "Poet and fighter for independence of Ukraine and the freedom of all mankind," obviously still pertinent today. (*The Washington Post* opposed the monument when proposed, saying Shevchenko was the idol of the Soviet Communist Party, anti-Semitic and anti-Polish.)

I want to highlight the Irish Nobel Laureate poet, teacher, translator and playwright, Seamus Heaney. For years now I have enjoyed reading, listening to and learning about his works. I have a set of the recorded readings of all his published poems, available from RTE.

I really don't know exactly why Heaney's writing is so appealing to me. Part of it is that the way he reached back into his childhood for material resonates as authentic to me as a student of human development. And further, I like the way he brought history to bear on the present. Also, I find many memorable phrases and images in his poems. Additionally, he gave very appealing background introductions to poems for readings.

Heaney – the eldest of what would become eight children – was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland, and grew up on the family farm. At age 12 he won a scholarship to the boarding school, St Columbs College, in the city of Derry. He was taught Latin and Irish there, and later was taught Anglo-Saxon at Queens University in Belfast. The study of those languages had a lasting impact on his poetry, career and life. While a teacher in Belfast his poetry began to be noticed. Around that time Heaney met and later married Marie Devlin, a writer and editor in her own right. They had two sons and a daughter and once Seamus began periodically teaching abroad – most often at Harvard – it fell to her to manage the home. They later settled in Dublin, Irish Republic.

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995, he was cited for "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past." In addition to his own poems, Seamus is known for poetic translations – especially one of Beowulf.

One of Heaney's poems that I enjoy is "Alphabets" – an autobiographical offering – created for a Phi Beta Kappa event at Harvard. The poem begins by telling of the pre-school child in the warm confines of the family home and continues with ever-more-challenging steps in his education and ever-widening experiences in the world. Heaney said he got the idea for the structure of the poem from a scene in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. It is an example of how writers borrow from one another. In that scene, Stephen Dadalus, Joyce's alter ego, thinking about his place in the world after just having been bullied by older boys at school, writes out his address in ever-widening steps, beginning with his location at that moment – class, school, town, county, country, continent, world, universe. Following are some selected lines from "Alphabets," written in the third person. First the pre-school child "*... understands he will understand more when he goes to school.*" Then he is in school, *"Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate Are the letter some call ah, some call ay ... there is a right way to hold the pen and a wrong way. ....*" Next, *"Declensions sang on air… Book One of Elementa Latina… For he was fostered next in a stricter school."* Then his professional, adult self: *"The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O. He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.*

...from the domed ceiling of his house
A figure of the world with colours in it
So that the figure of the universe
And 'not just single things' would meet his sight

When he walked abroad. As from his small window
The astronaut sees all that he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum -

Another one I like is "The Republic of Conscience," created for an Amnesty International occasion. It describes a visit to a country greatly different from our known world. Here are a few lines from that one:

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.
...

I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs

woman having insisted my allowance was myself.

[An] old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.

He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

I think of the poem as a call for each individual person as a matter of conscience to work to eliminate injustice wherever it is found.

I chose not to emphasize Heaney's poems that were directly about "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland, but I should acknowledge that he did write about it. For example, "Requiem for the Croppies" reached back to the Irish rebellion of 1798 for lessons about loss. "The Toome Road" registered the incursion of British armored cars into Northern Ireland. "Casualty" was an elegy for a friend killed when he broke a Provisional IRA curfew. In two other poems he flatly reported the killing of a cousin in the first and then had the cousin criticize the poet in the second for his lack of expressed outrage in the original one.

The Nobel statement about Seamus Heaney noted that living for a quarter of a century of violence, polarization and inner distrust "gave Heaney a deep preoccupation with the question of poetry's responsibilities and prerogatives in the world, since poetry is poised between a need for creative freedom within itself and a pressure to express the sense of social obligation felt by the poet as citizen." Heaney himself said that a time came when he realized that violence from below in Northern Ireland and other places was begetting violence from above and destroying the very conditions necessary for the hoped-for peace. These concerns led to Seamus Heaney's involvement with Field Day, a theater company founded with the intention of creating a fifth province – an imaginary cultural space from which a new discourse of unity might emerge. That involvement led to Heaney's translation of Sophocles' drama, "Philoctetes," originally specifically for Field Day. Everyone here probably remembers hearing quoted a bit of Heaney's poetry saying to us that "once in a lifetime The longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, And hope and history rhyme." I especially liked the lines when I first heard them years ago and

went looking for how they came to be. That turned out to be an interesting chase going back thousands of years.

In the late 12th century B.C., the ten-year war between the Greeks and Troy was fought. (Historians say there is evidence of actual wars then, but most of what we have about them is from Greek folktales and mythology.) In the Iliad (8th century B.C.), Homer briefly described an incident that occurred early in the Trojan war. Philoctetes, one of the leaders in the fleet of Greek ships headed for Troy to recover Helen, developed a painful and odious sore after being bitten by a viper, badly affected morale with his moaning and stench, and was abandoned on the island, Lemnos, with little hope of survival. Against odds, with the help of his special bow, he did survive for ten years, was convinced to forgive the abandonment and rejoin the war as was necessary, along with a change of strategy (the wooden horse) and Achilles' participation, for a Greek victory. In the 5th century B.C, Sophocles created the play, "Philoctetes," in which he expanded the story and examined moral issues such as deception for a worthy end, and revenge versus forgiveness. Finally in 1990 Seamus Heaney brought out his translation, The Cure At Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes. For his version Heaney created and gave to the chorus a new section of poetry about hope in the face of seemingly hopeless reality, including the line about hope and justice. In that passage Heaney first acknowledged seemingly hopeless conditions in the world: "Human beings suffer, They torture one another, They get hurt and get hard. No poem or play or song Can fully right a wrong Inflicted and endured.
The innocent in gaols Beat on their bars together A hunger-strikers father Stands in the graveyard dumb The police widow in veils Faints at the funeral home.'

But the poet refuses to give in to the grievous conditions and continues with: "History says, Don't hope On this side of the grave, But then, once in a lifetime The longed for tidal wave Of justice can rise up, And hope and history rhyme. So hope for a great sea-change On the far side of revenge. Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles And cures and healing wells."

When his play was performed in 1998 by the Yale Repertory Theatre, Heaney provided the following note: "I don't think I would have had the gall to do a play with such a consoling outcome, had it not been for the extraordinary events of late 1989, … as one watched the Berlin Wall come down, a philosopher-president come to power in Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian tyranny crumble, … it was as if molten and repressed reality were erupting into history." (It unfortunately seems at present that the eruption has reversed.) Also at that time the possibility of

peace and reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland finally was looking possible.

In deference to a certain tradition of our Club, I gave this talk the title, "Walk on Air." The words in full engraved on Seamus Heaney's gravestone are WALK ON AIR AGAINST YOUR BETTER JUDGEMENT, from his poem, "The Gravel Walks." Heaney explained, "… poetry should dwell, between the dream world and the given world, because you don't want [just] photography, and you don't want fantasy either." And, "A person from Northern Ireland is naturally cautious. You grew up vigilant because it is a divided society. My [early] poetry on the whole was earth hugging, but then I began to look up rather than keep down. I think it had to do with a sense that the marvelous was as permissible as the matter-of-fact in poetry." Here is the final verse of "The Gravel Walks": "So walk on air against your better judgement Establishing yourself somewhere in between Those solid batches mixed with grey cement And a tune called 'The Gravel Walks' that congers green."

At the memorial service for Heaney, one of his sons said that Seamus was "just dad at home," though he was a dad who would casually use Latin – including *sanctus fumus* (holy smoke) - around the house. Seamus Heaney's last writing was a text message in Latin to his wife minutes before his death: *"Noli timere"* – (Don't be afraid.)

I will end this section on Seamus Heaney by emphasizing the message of facing reality with forgiveness, hope and courage depicted in some of the poetic lines above.

Having said early on that though I honor lofty descriptions of certain poetry I think there also should be room for different kinds, I will close by reading a lighter poem—and a brief response to it—just for fun. It is a villanelle by Mary Jo Salter, "Video Blues."
Your questions, thoughts and sharing of poems will be welcome.

My husband has a crush on Myrna Loy,
and likes to rent her movies, for a treat.
It makes some evenings harder to enjoy.

The list of actresses who might employ
him as their slave is too long to repeat.
(My husband has a crush on Myrna Loy,

Carole Lombard, Paulette Goddard, coy

Jean Arthur with that voice as dry as wheat ...)
It makes some evenings harder to enjoy.

Does he confess all this just to annoy
a loyal spouse? I know I can't compete.
My husband has a crush on Myrna Loy.

And can't a woman have her dreamboats? Boy,
I wouldn't say my life is incomplete,
but some evening I could certainly enjoy

two hours with Cary Grant as my own toy.
I guess, though, we were destined not to meet.
My husband has a crush on Myrna Loy,
which makes some evenings harder to enjoy.

Thomas C. Tiller
For SPHEX
Meeting at the University of Lynchburg
November 3, 2022

WALK ON AIR

For SPHEX

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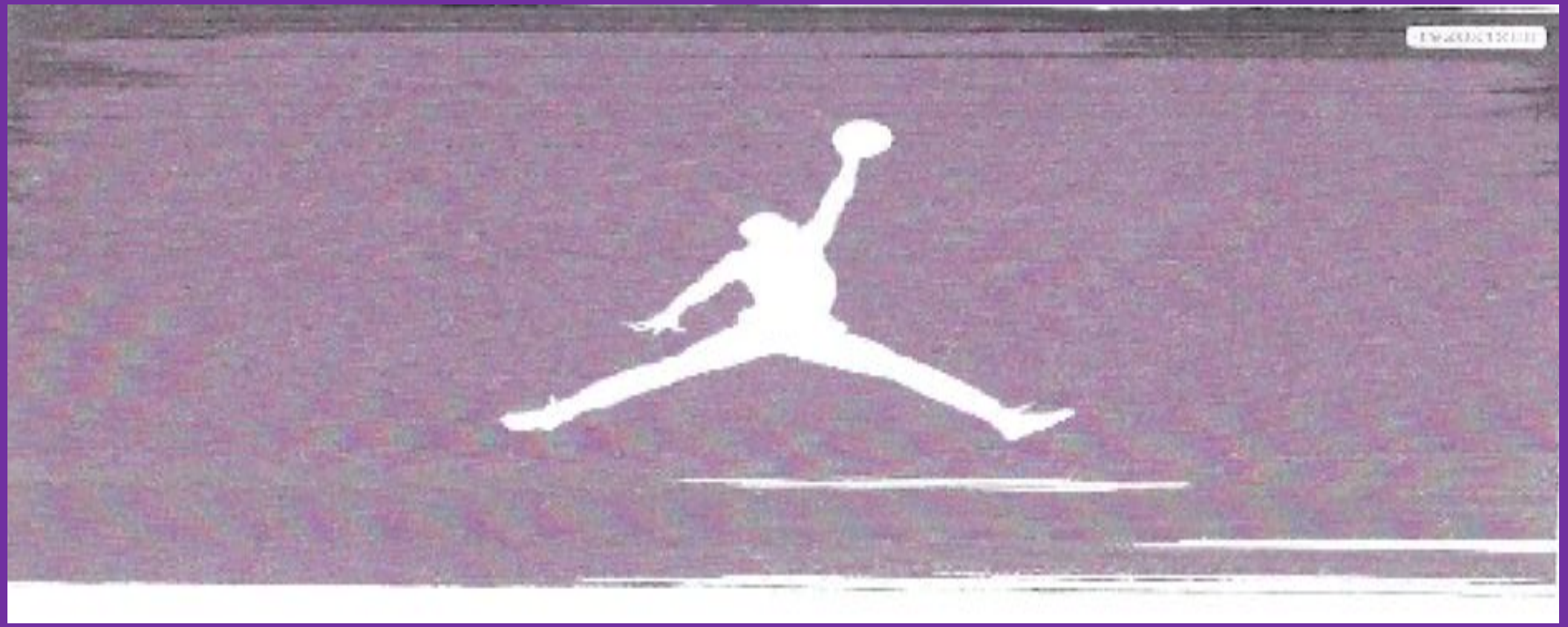


The word "poetry" comes from an ancient Greek word, "poiein," meaning "to create" or "to make."

Britannica defines poetry as "literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound and rhythm."

"When someone dies, when we fall in love, when people get married — at such moments of heightened feeling, we often turn to the memorable and vivid language of poetry."

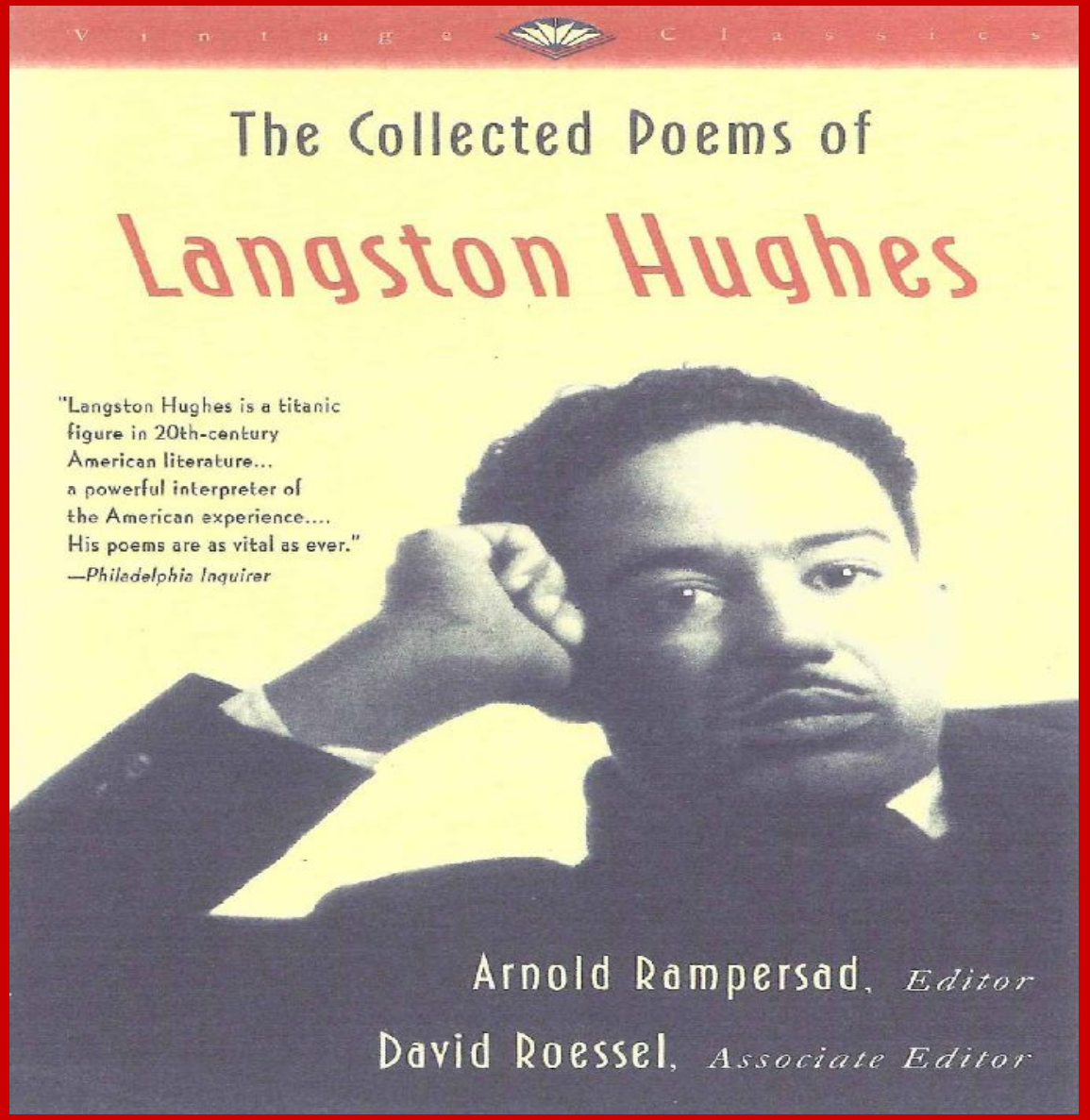
– Edgar Shannon —

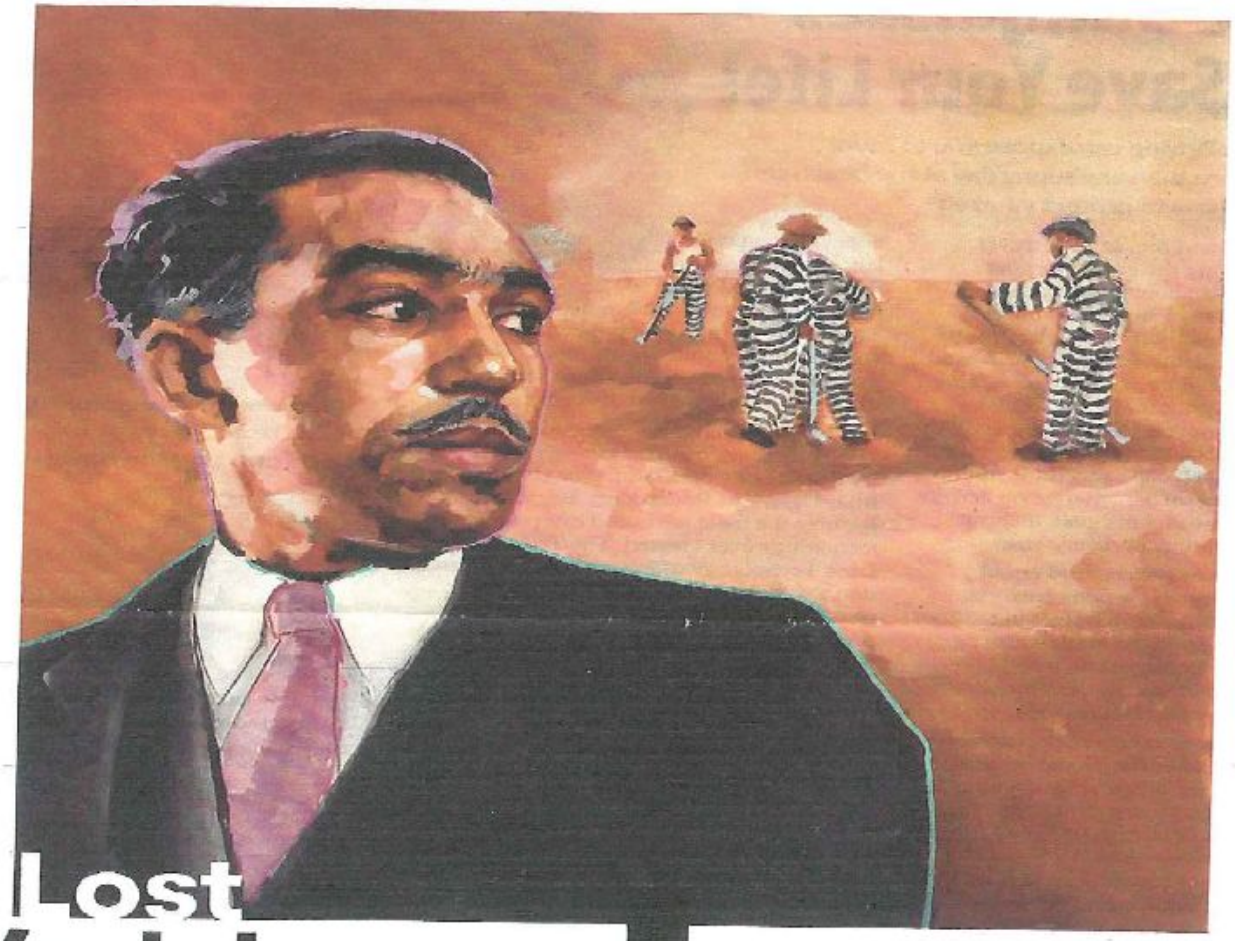
"Let us remember ... that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things we might be less apt to destroy both."

– Christian Wiman –

"There are certain elements in art that communicate feelings. It is up to the observer to establish a connection. Sometimes a person is drawn to a painting [or a poem] because it awakens memories and emotions that don't necessarily coincide with the artist's [or poet's] intention."

Gwendolyn Brooks


Vintage Classics
The Collected Poems of
Langston Hughes
"Langston Hughes is a titanic figure in 20th-century American literature... a powerful interpreter of the American experience.... His poems are as vital as ever."
—Philadelphia Inquirer
Arnold Rampersad, Editor
David Roessel, Associate Editor

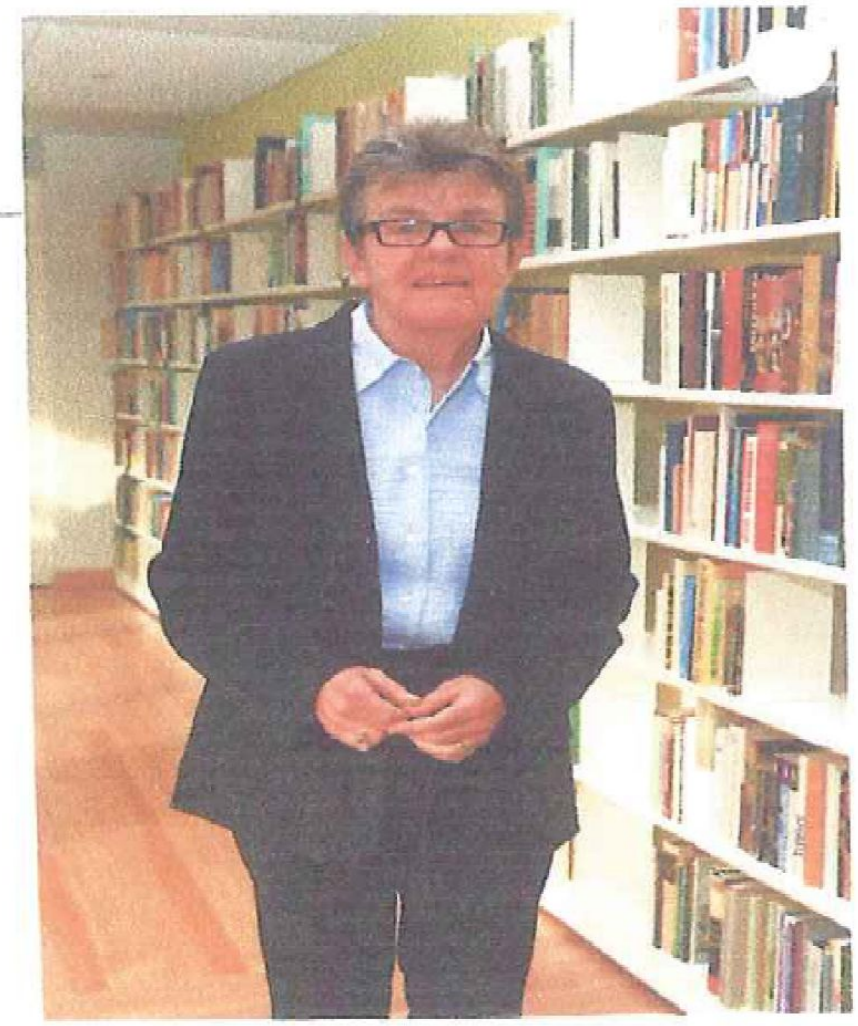


A Lost Work by Langston Hughes

In 1933, the Harlem Renaissance star wrote a powerful essay about race. It has never been published in English—until now.

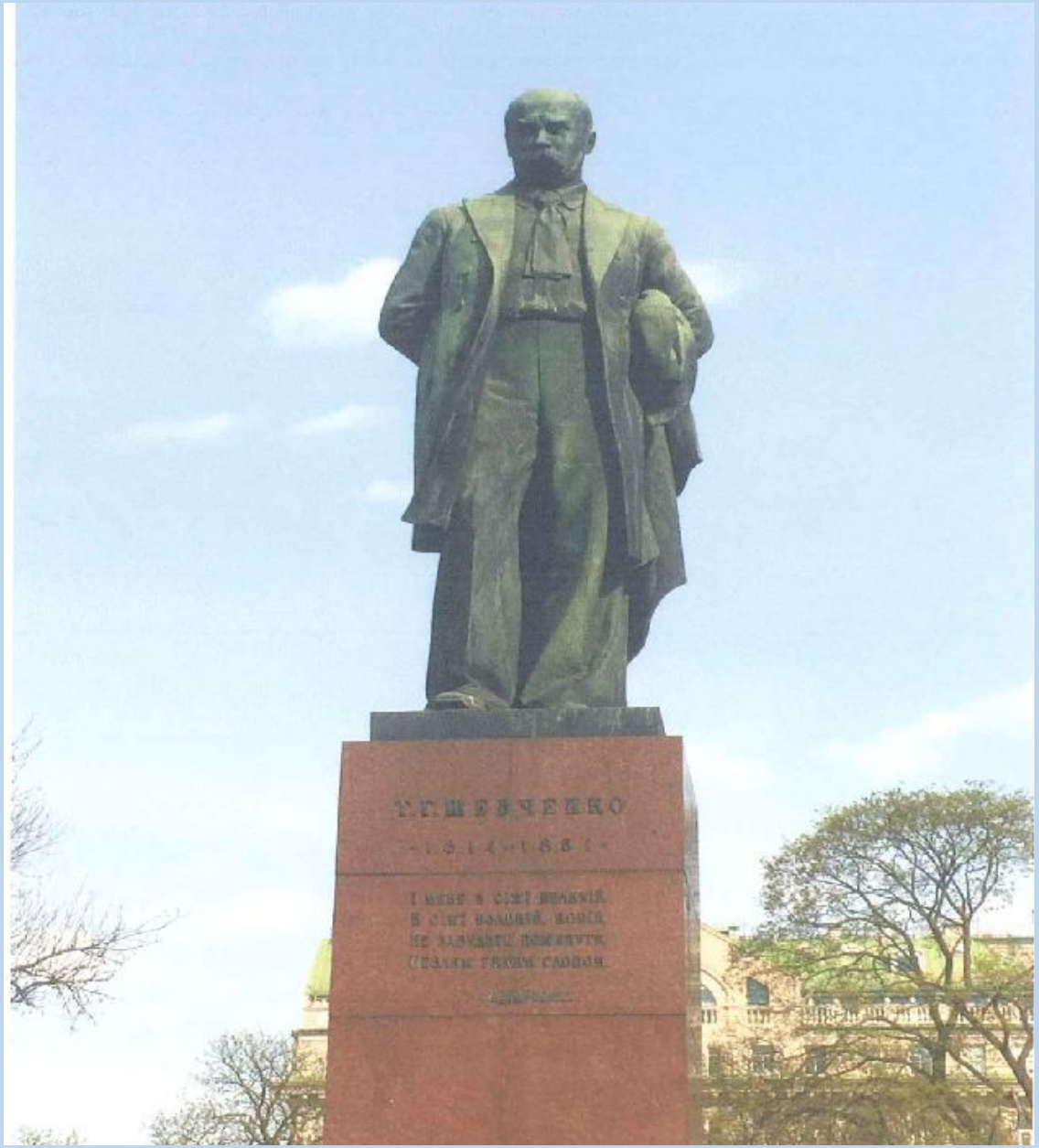
IT'S NOT EVERY DAY that you come across an extraordinary unknown work by one of the nation's greatest writers. But buried in an unrelated archive I recently discovered a searing essay condemning racism in America by Langston Hughes—the moving account, published in its original form here for the first time, of an escaped prisoner he met while traveling with Zora Neale Hurston.

In the summer of 1927, Hughes lit out for the American South to learn more about the region that loomed large in his literary imagination. After giving a poetry reading at Fisk University in Nashville, Hughes journeyed by train through Louisiana and Mississippi before disembarking in Mobile, Alabama. There, to



Kay Ryan

Taras Shevchenko
1814-1861


Т.Г.ШЕВЧЕНКО
1814-1861

The Taras Shevchenko Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Seamus Heaney in 1970

This is a scan from an original black & white photo taken and printed by me, SiGarb. It has been retouched to remove dust and scratches and repair the edges of the image. - Own work

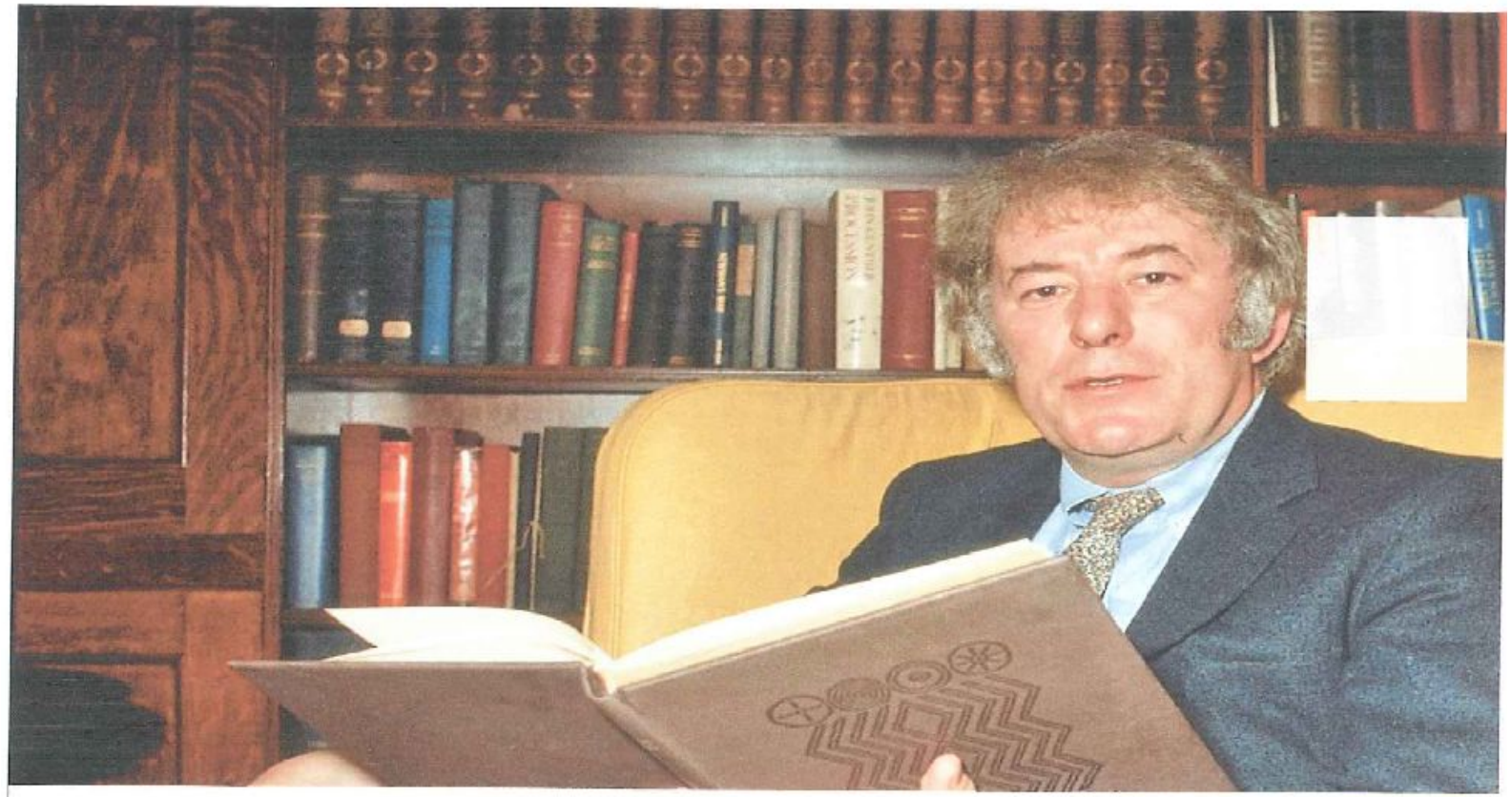
More details

File: SeamusHeaneyLowRes.jpg

Created: 1970.

Scanned and retouched in Photoshop, November 2008.

When selected for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995, Seamus Heaney was cited for *"works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."*



Heaney in 1982

More details

Gotfryd, Bernard, photographer - Seamus Heaney, Irish poet, [New York. 1995 Nobel Prize Winner]

Title: Seamus Heaney, Irish poet, [New York]. 1995 Nobel Prize Winner Creator(s): Gotfryd, Bernard, photographer Date Created/Published: [November 1982] Medium: 1 photograph : color transparency ; 35mm (slide format) Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-gtfy-01593 (digital file from original) Rights Advisory: No known restrictions on publication. For information see "Bernard Gotfryd," (https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/res.592.gotf) Access

Public Domain

File: Seamus Heaney, Irish poet, brightened.jpg

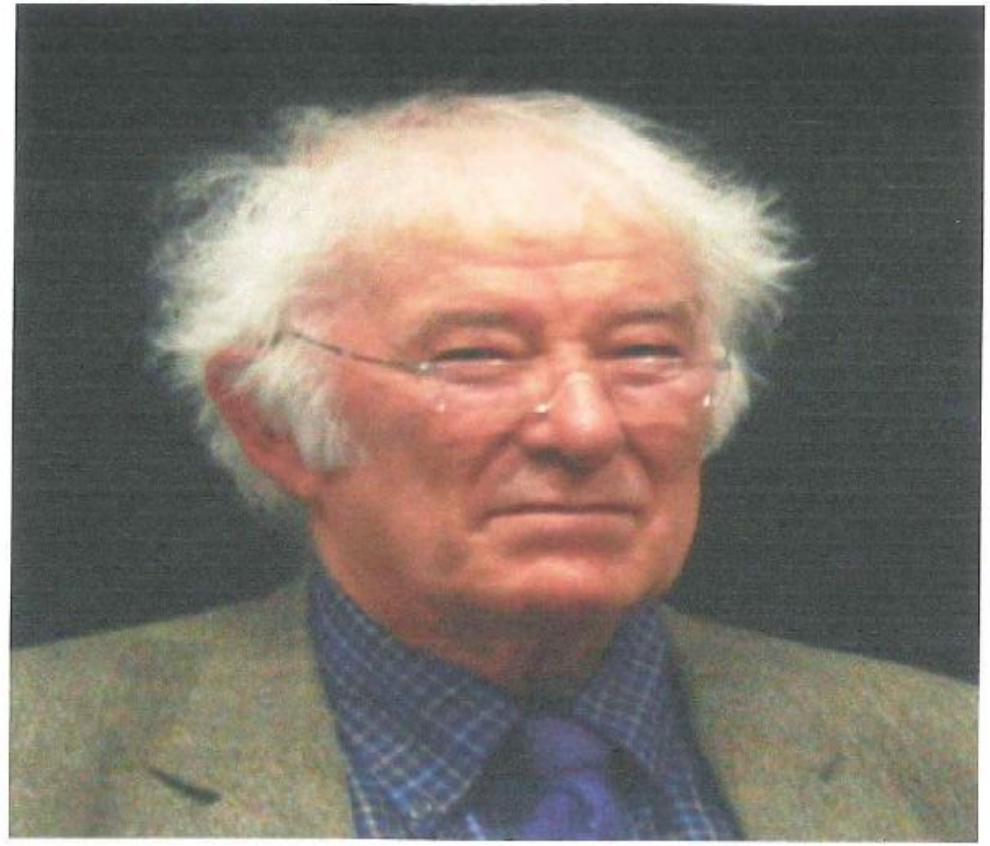
Created: 1 November 1982

About Media Viewer

"... once in a lifetime the tidal wave of justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme."

Seamus Heaney



Seamus Heaney in 2009

More details

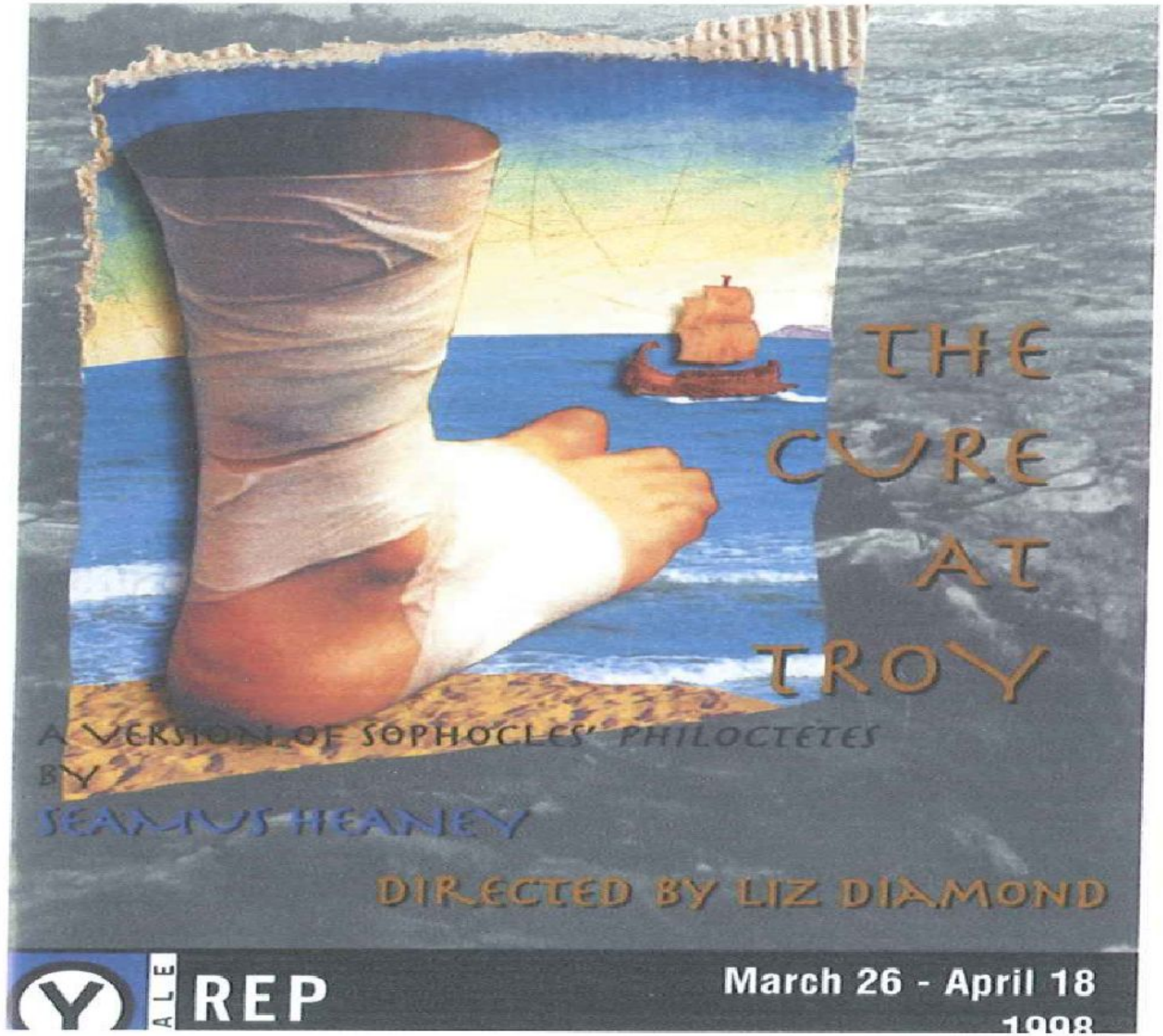
Flickr user Sean O'Connor - Cropped from https://www.flickr.com/photos/seanoconnor365/3290653431/

Picture of the Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney at the University College Dublin, February 11, 2009.

File: Seamus Heaney Photograph Edit.jpg

Created: 11 February 2009

About Media Viewer


THE CURE AT TROY
A VERSION OF SOPHOCLES' PHILOCTETES
BY
SEAMUS HEANEY
DIRECTED BY LIZ DIAMOND
YALE REP
March 26 - April 18
1998

CAST

Odysseus • J. Ed Araiza
Neoptolemus • Luis A. Laporte, Jr.
Philoctetes • Reg E. Cathey
Chorus *(attendants to Neoptolemus)* • Angela Bullock
Robin Dana Miles
Socorro Santiago
Merchant *(in disguise)* • J. Ed Araiza

SETTING

Lemnos. A deserted island in the Aegean.

The Cure at Troy will be performed without intermission.

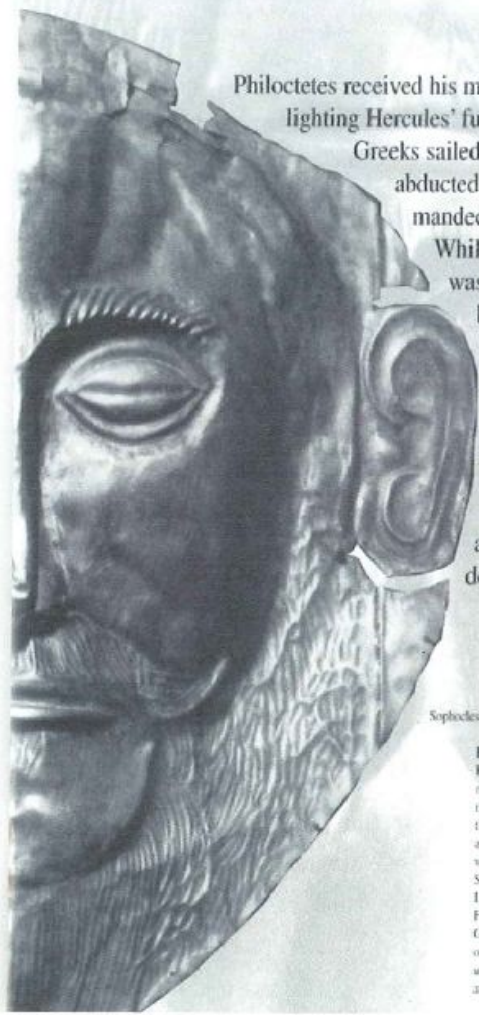
UNDERSTUDIES

Odysseus • Jon Ecklund
Neoptolemus • Robert Devaney
Philoctetes • Harvey Gardner Moore
Chorus *(attendants to Neoptolemus)* • Sheryl Arenson *(for Angela Bullock)*
Tessa Auberjonois *(for Socorro Santiago)*
Patti Lewis *(for Robin Dana Miles)*
Merchant *(in disguise)* • Jon Ecklund

SPECIAL THANKS

Ralph Chipman • Han Diamond Chipman • Chris Kelly
Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald • Professor Robert Welch • David Lavorgna
Professor Andrew Szegedy-Maszak • Vivlana Tkacz • Exiles Theater
New York Theatre Workshop • Yale Center for British Art

The *Cure at Troy* is an adaptation of *Philoctetes*, Sophocles' penultimate play. It was probably produced in 409 B.C., five years before its author's death.



Philoctetes received his magic bow as a reward for lighting Hercules' funeral pyre. When the Greeks sailed for Troy to reclaim the abducted Helen, Philoctetes commanded seven shiploads of men. While sacrificing to Apollo he was bitten by a snake, possibly sent by Hera as revenge for his service to Hercules. His cries became so terrifying and his wound so repulsive that his companions, goaded by Odysseus, abandoned him on the deserted island of Lemnos.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* ends with this speech:

Hear me, hated Lemnos.
Farewell, cave that shared my days,
nymphs of the water-meadows, farewell,
thundering beat of waves on the headland
that wetted my head with spray on the cliffs,
and the volcano that groaned in echo to my voice
when I was tossed by storms.
Springs and the well of Lykeios, I leave you.
I had lost all hope of doing so.
Farewell, Lemnos, bound by waves,
Give me no further cause to mourn, but send me
off on fair seas to win my glory
where Fate now carries me, to the wisdom of friends
and the all-governing spirit that rules these events.

– translated by Gregory McNamee

"TRULY REMARKABLE"

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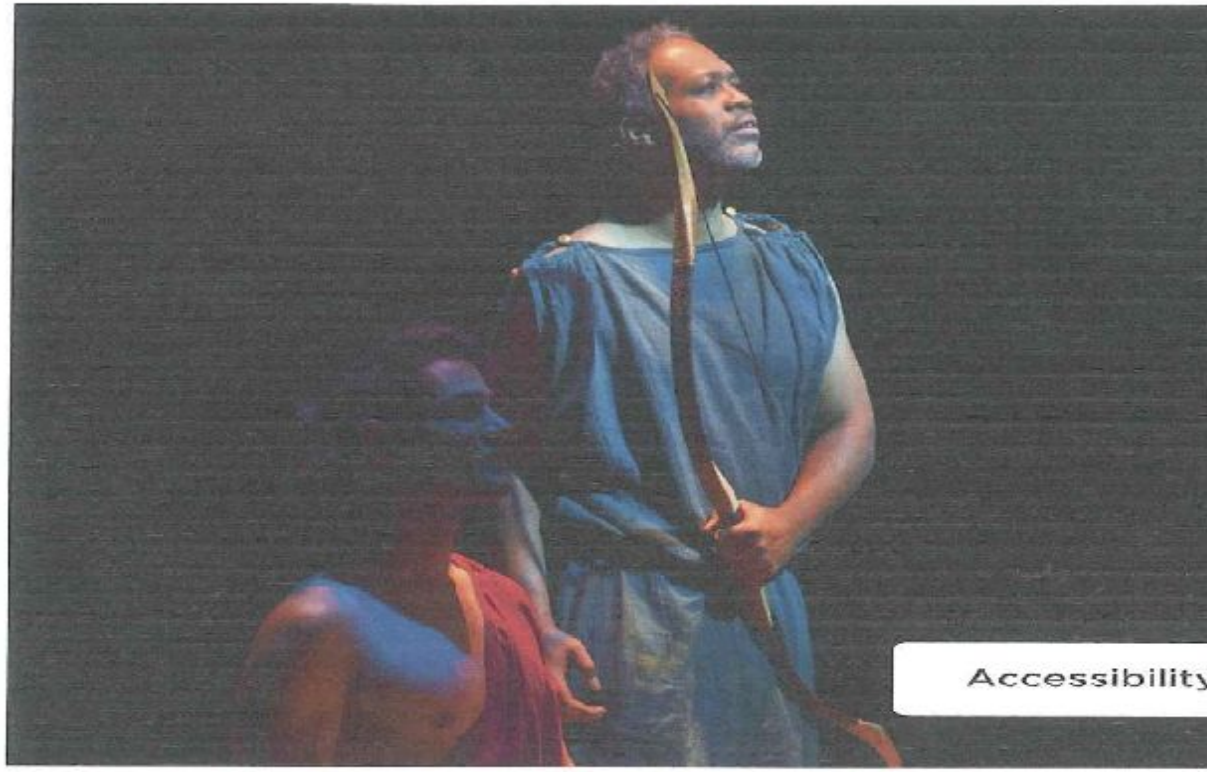


One man holds the sacred weapon that will end the Trojan War, but can Odysseus find a way to convince the outcast Philoctetes to rejoin the Greek army and heal the society that spurned him? Inspired by Nelson Mandela's release as well as the violent conflicts in Northern Ireland, **Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*** is a fresh adaptation of Sophocles' rarely produced

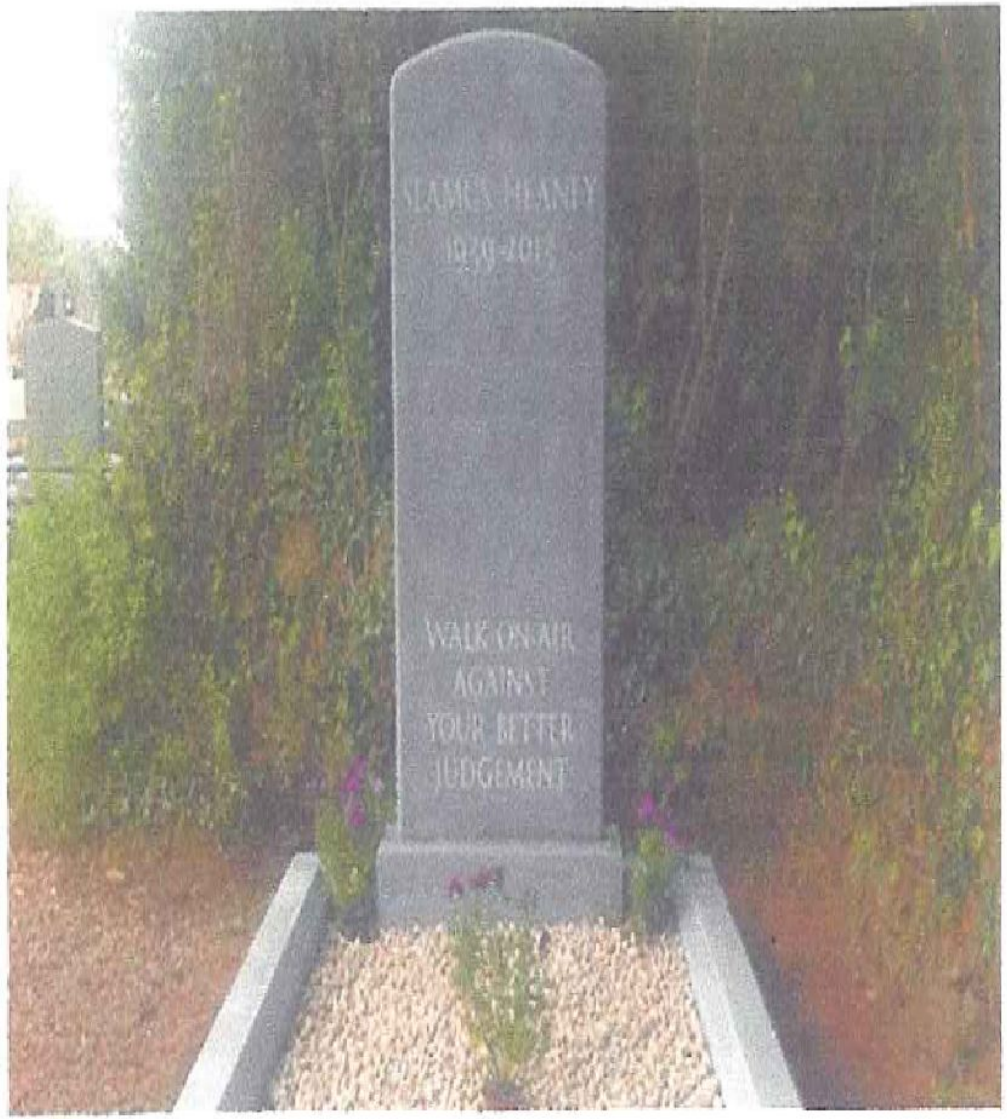
"History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells."

Seamus Heaney

<u>The Cure at Troy</u>

Seamus Heaney

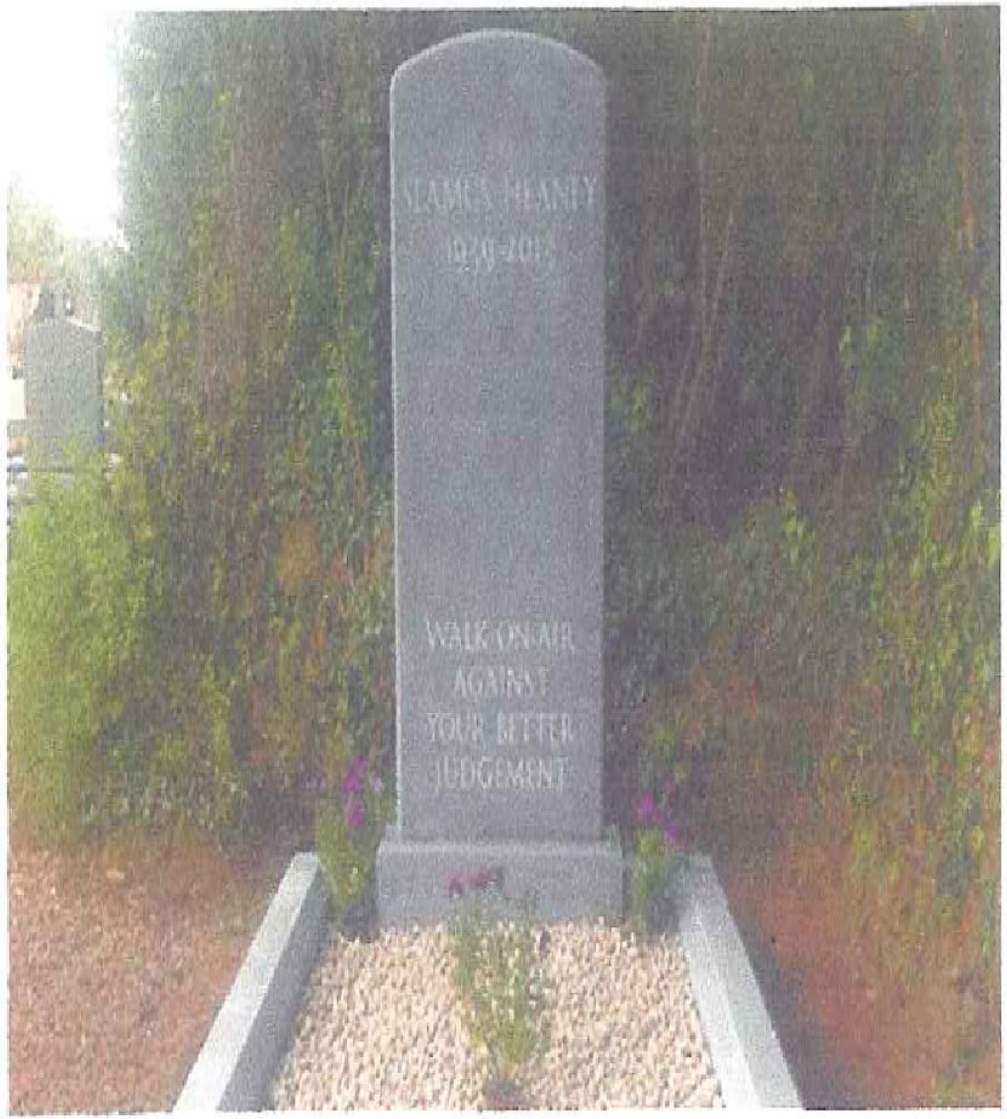


The inscription on Seamus Heaney's gravestone, which stands in the cemetery adjoining St Mary's parish church in Bellaghy, the town where he spent much of his childhood, speaks as much of the man himself as it does of his poetry. The words are clear, and beautiful, as is the craftsmanship that set them in the stone.

Kilkenny Blue Limestone is an entirely appropriate material for one of the greatest poets of his age. Michael Hoy was entrusted with the work, and the inscription, a line from his poem "The Gravel Walks" formed part of his 1995 Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

"Walk on air against your better judgement."

Seamus Heaney



The beautiful stone is marked by fossils, faint but clear against the blue-grey background, understated, yet meriting close attention, which might also stand for Heaney's work, apparently so simple, and yet with deep meanings that are not hidden from those who choose to look. Heaney himself, in his 1979 poem "Oysters" mentions limestone, as a man who observed, watched and loved the natural landscape of his island could not fail to do.

"We had driven to that coast

Through flowers and limestone

And there we were, toasting friendship,

Laying down a perfect memory …"