

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aidan O' M A L L E Y (University of Rijeka)

ajomalley@ffri.uniri.hr

AN "OBLIGATION TO DUTY": SEAMUS HEANEY AND FIELD DAY

Accepted: 22 January 2026

UDK 821.152.1.09Heaney, S.

821.152.1(082)

94(410.7)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22210/ur.2025.070.1/03>

Seamus Heaney's involvement with the Field Day enterprise was perhaps the most controversial period of his career, provoking criticism from commentators who believed that his association with this group signalled a breach of his poetic vocation in favour of a more political stance. Field Day was founded in 1980 by the actor, Stephen Rea, and the playwright, Brian Friel, and produced dramas and critical interventions that stimulated a rethinking and reimagining of the cultural histories of Ireland that had contributed to the stalemate of the Northern Irish "Troubles". This article re-examines Heaney's time with Field Day and the texts he produced under its banner in light of archival sources and the publication in 2023 of *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*. This opened another window on his efforts to find a balance between what can be termed the private space of his poetry and the calls made on him by a seemingly endless series of public duties. While these demands often threatened to become overwhelming, Heaney nevertheless saw them as a part of his job as a poet. Considering that, as Christopher Reid the editor of the collection noted, the "principal theme" running through the letters is Heaney's "obligation to duty", the fourteen years he spent as a director of Field Day were by no means the anomaly that critical reaction in the 1980s and '90s suggested. On the contrary, his work for the company and the texts he produced for it articulate tensions between different public realms and the private world of poetry that can be traced throughout his *oeuvre* and career.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney; Field Day; Northern Ireland; *An Open Letter*; *Sweeney Astray*; *The Cure at Troy*; *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*

[H]ow should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?

(Heaney 1981a)

Throughout his career Seamus Heaney sought to come to terms with these questions—with the often-conflicting demands of poetry and those posed by the world in which he lived. While a student at Queen's University, Belfast, in the early 1960s, Heaney published his first poems in magazines under the pseudonym *Incertus*, which, as he later admitted, gestured towards his "lack of writerly self-confidence" (O'Driscoll 2008: 37) and the diffidence he felt about seeing himself as a poet. This hesitancy can be related to the first and most important "public" context for the young Heaney, which was his family. Famously, "Digging", the poem that opens his inaugural collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), strives to frame his decision to write in terms of his father's and grandfather's lives spent working on the land. In this poem Heaney, the eldest son, acknowledges that he is breaking from this family tradition while, at the same time, he looks to establish his vocation in terms of this inheritance by insisting on the poetry of farm work and by casting poetry as an act of excavation. At the heart of Heaney's immense popularity was this ability to unveil the poetry of the everyday and, in the same moment, render poetry an act of familiar magic. And this distinctive quality was, in many respects, an expression of his intense sense of duty towards, and a graceful incorporation of, a world beyond poetry.

52

Heaney once averred that writers "live precisely at the intersection of the public and the private" (qtd. in O'Driscoll 2009: 56), and forms of public engagement were for him a part of the job of a poet. In her recent work on Heaney, Rosie Lavan notes that "[e]ncounters between a writer and a reader, or a writer and an audience, are always by definition social. They are also enabling" (Lavan 2020: 2). The publication in 2023 of *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* might be read as putting a question mark over that final claim. This volume provides an insight into the furious work that went on beneath the remarkably serene self that Heaney presented to the world, as the letters reveal how much time and energy he spent fulfilling an ever-increasing number of public duties. As his poetic star rose so did the number of requests from all around the world for readings, lectures, interviews, articles, reviews, book launches, blurbs, his participation on prize committees and the like. Heaney was known as the most affable and agreeable of men, one who found it hard to say no and who could be relied on to perform these tasks with an easy-going brilliance. Being naturally gregarious, he enjoyed many of these events, however they not only drastically reduced the time available for poetry, but also took a considerable toll on his psychological and physical well-being. Notably, many of the letters in the collection were written in transit, on his way from one engagement to the next. Writing to his friend and fellow Field Day director, David Hammond, on 11 December 1987, from "Salt Lake City airport,

awaiting a delayed Boston flight", the 48-year-old Heaney calls himself "a slightly impatient, stressed, schedule-haunted, fat-bellied man" (Heaney 2023: 291). In this period he was teaching one semester a year at Harvard, and had flown from there the day before to give a class and a reading in Salt Lake City. Apologetically, he allows himself to air some of his frustrations, and lists the other tasks calling for his attention:

[o]n my way here yesterday [...] I wrote fourteen letters and recommendations. I have as many more to do on the way back, and then when I land, more testimonials and blurbs. My desk is full of books [...] that I am meant to puff. I am also nowadays on appointments committees and have the work of fourteen poets to read [...]. [...] The year is going well, really. But it is inordinately, inexorably, minute by minute, unexpected visitor by visitor, telephone call by telephone call—busy. [...] Backlogs of reviews, lectures, and festschrifts. The chance to sit at a desk has almost disappeared from my life. (Heaney 2023: 292)

Complaints of this nature were never articulated in public, and Heaney approached chores such as these in a serious and conscientious manner; indeed, as Christopher Reid, the editor of *The Letters*, rightly notes, the "principal theme" of the collection is Heaney's "obligation to duty" (Heaney 2023: xii).

In exactly this light, the publication of *The Letters* prompts a revisiting and a reassessment of Heaney's association with Field Day. While a considerable number of the letters from the 1980s and '90s speak directly about Heaney's involvement with this enterprise, it also becomes evident more generally, in the context of the collection as a whole, that his work with this enterprise was another, crucial, expression of his sense of duty as a poet. This re-examination is also motivated by the fact that while Lavan's 2020 study, *Seamus Heaney and Society*, offers an exploration of Heaney's interactions with different "publics" via his publishing networks, his work in the media and in education, it focuses on his poetic output and largely overlooks his work with Field Day. Yet as a director of the Field Day Theatre Company, Heaney took on an artistic and administrative position that lay squarely "at the intersection of the public and the private", and through this enterprise his work reached different audiences. Moreover, his association with Field Day was his most sustained precisely public engagement with the "Troubles". And while this did not mean that he or any other member of Field Day toed a party line on this matter, some prominent critics nonetheless believed that the company was a stalking horse for a nationalist agenda. As a result, Heaney's involvement with Field Day saw him receive some of the harshest criticism of his career for, in the eyes of these commentators, having sacrificed poetry for politics.

Heaney's career took off at the same time as the "Troubles" burst into flames in Northern Ireland, and long before he joined Field Day he had had to deal with the acute pressures exerted on him by this political crisis. As Marilyn Richtarik correctly notes, this shaped his poetics: "his entire body of work demonstrated his instinctive grasp of the political minefield represented by unspoken assumptions and everyday words" (Richtarik 2021: 191). For years his every word was minutely scrutinised and commented upon by people from a variety of different perspectives. For some, who wanted him to take on a semi-official role as the voice of the Catholic, nationalist community in Northern Ireland, he was considered to have failed to articulate "their side". "The Flight Path" from his 1996 collection, *The Spirit Level*, provides the most noted snapshot of this demand and his response to it. It recalls a 1979 encounter on a train to Belfast, when Heaney was confronted by Danny Morrison, a prominent Sinn Féin activist who, in the poem, asks him: "When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/ Something for us?" (Heaney 1996: 25). Heaney later told Dennis O'Driscoll that he greatly resented Morrison's "presumption of entitlement" (O'Driscoll 2008: 257), and the poem has him replying: "When I do write something,/ Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself" (Heaney 1996: 25). Morrison wanted a piece of propaganda, and Heaney's responses to the "Troubles", his "search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (Heaney 1981b) in collections such as *North* (1975), were clearly too oblique for Morrison's political purposes. However, in saying that he would write on his own terms, Heaney was not claiming that his work should not get involved in the mundane. Rather, as his *oeuvre* illustrates, Heaney was scrupulous in searching out modes of articulation that respected the right of poetry to exist outside the temporal realm without, at the same time, disavowing the possibility that events and his political inclinations might reverberate within his work.

Two years after this meeting with Morrison, Heaney became a director of the Field Day Theatre Company, which had been founded in 1980 by the actor, Stephen Rea, and the playwright, Brian Friel, to produce his play, *Translations*. In *Stepping Stones* Heaney described his fourteen years with the company as an act of "cultural service" (O'Driscoll 2008: 491), and if this reflection, made over a decade after he had left Field Day, gives the impression that it was something of a tiresome duty, he was much more excited by the potential of the enterprise when it was operating at full steam in the 1980s. The premiere of *Translations* in Derry's Guildhall is considered one of the key moments in twentieth-century Irish theatre (Morash 2002: 233–241), and in 1988 Heaney recalled his reactions to this event in these exuberant terms:

I remember feeling that the energies awakened all over the country by Field Day's first production of Friel's *Translations* in 1980 were indeed evidence of the power of theatre to do what Yeats said it might do: engross the present and dominate memory. The excitement which that play caused was palpable and its gratifications had to do with a feeling that the dramatic form had allowed inchoate recognitions, both cultural and historical, to be clarified and comprehended. (Heaney 1988)

In the wake of the success of *Translations*, in 1981 Friel and Rea decided to pursue this project further and put it on a more formal footing by forming a company in order to apply for funding. Heaney was one of the four friends, all from Northern Ireland, they invited to join them on a board of directors. The other three were: the filmmaker and musician, David Hammond; the poet, Tom Paulin; and the academic and poet, Seamus Deane. They had all been exploring different ways of addressing the "Troubles", and embraced the opportunities that Field Day offered: a forum wherein the links between culture and authority might be scrutinised, and which afforded the possibility of fresh ways of producing their work and having it performed before new audiences north and south of the Irish border.

Between 1980 and 1994 (when the board of directors started to disintegrate) a remarkable series of artistic and intellectual explorations appeared under the Field Day banner. These sought to reimagine and rethink, in particular, the increasingly entrenched and essentialised constructions of Irish identities that fostered the deadly stalemate of the "Troubles". In this period, Field Day produced and toured a series of important plays such as Friel's *Translations* (1980), *Making History* (1988), and his version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1981), Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986), and Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990). Notably, there was only one Field Day play set in the "Troubles", Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987): an exploration of Presbyterian and unionist identities. Agitprop theatre this was not; instead, the company repeatedly produced translations of the classics and plays that explored the translated nature of Irish identities.¹ However, Field Day engaged more directly with Irish political and historical experiences through its publishing arm. This largely came under Seamus Deane's purview and, amongst other things, resulted in the publication of fifteen pamphlets between 1983 and 1988, and the 1991 three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which was supplemented with two further volumes in 2002.

¹ For a thorough analysis of the translational nature of the Field Day plays see, O'Malley 2011.

When Deane took up the Donald and Marilyn Keough Chair of Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame in 1993, Field Day became increasingly identified with that university. And while occasional dramas were produced under the Field Day name after the board of directors dissolved, it mainly operated, up until relatively recently, as a publishing imprint, producing a series of key critical texts, a review, a magazine column and a podcast. In short, it is possible to credit Field Day with the introduction of postcolonial thinking into Irish discourse—Edward Said, who wrote a pamphlet for the company, saw it as an archetypal postcolonial enterprise (Said 2003: 353)—and it was instrumental in marking out the terrain upon which the interdiscipline of Irish Studies has developed.

In the 1980s and '90s these efforts met with considerable and concerted resistance from scholars and critics who felt that framing Irish historical experience in terms of colonialism was little more than dressing nationalism up in inappropriate, imported clothes. From the vantage point of her position at Queen's University, Belfast, Edna Longley worked to establish herself as the spearhead of this anti-Field Day movement. She argued that the group's ambition "to insert Northern Ireland/Ireland in the colonial/post-colonial frame" was simply an expression of a perspective "derive[d] from Northern Nationalism, or more strictly from Northern anti-Partitionism: the introverted, self-sustaining rhetoric of the Catholic community since the 1920s" (Longley 1994: 28, 39). As this suggests, Longley's objections to Field Day were fundamentally political; however, her critiques were largely phrased in aesthetic terms, indicting the company for privileging politics over art—seeing in its activities a "process whereby political fixity shuts off imaginative possibility, the ideological tail wags the creative dog" (Longley 1985: 33). If, as Conor McCarthy has noted, her wariness about the relationship of art and politics was reflected in the thinking of a number of the Field Day directors (223),² she remained at loggerheads with the company, because her deployment of this aesthetic argument was always secondary to her explicit and implicit political defence of the Northern Irish state, and the mere fact that Field Day was interrogating the cultural histories that had produced the "Troubles" meant that it was at odds with the unionist *status quo* in Northern Ireland.

² McCarthy pointed, in particular, to the overlaps in the perspectives of Longley and Seamus Deane. He criticised both for their "idealism or culturalism", noting that, despite the apparent gulf in their perspectives, both "are agreed as to the centrality of literature, and of canonical writing at that". Citing Said, McCarthy phrased their longstanding argument as "oppositional debate without real opposition" (McCarthy 2000: 223).

Longley's essentially conservative perspective found echoes south of the border in critics who sought to marginalise the impact of the "Troubles" on the story of Irish modernisation. For the novelist Colm Tóibín, Field Day was an anachronism, out of step with contemporary Ireland. In a notably crude review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1995 he described the company as standing "for a mainly unreconstructed Irish nationalism", being composed of members who

seemed oddly unmoved by the social and cultural revolution which took place in Ireland in the 1960s. Most of them wrote as though nothing had ever changed in Ireland; they seemed happiest in a world of haw lanterns and hedge schools. Their Ireland was distinctly pre-decimal and pre-electric and pre-sexual. England for them was the problem, the enemy and the dramatic other. (Tóibín 1995: 10)

These were the exact same terms he had used to describe Field Day in a review for *Fortnight* in 1988 and in a 1992 piece for *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (Tóibín 1988: 21; Bradley, Longley and Tóibín 1992: 121–122). In the *TLS*, though, he felt he could add the opinion that,

[t]here were times in the 1980s when it was hard not to feel that Field Day had become the literary wing of the IRA. In the group's refusal to accept that there was another Ireland with problems besides those created by the colonial experience, Field Day became a deeply conservative, backward-looking force in Irish life, six middle-aged men who as individuals were important artists but as a group specialised in missing the point. (Tóibín 1995: 10)

This gross mischaracterisation—gesturing towards an affiliation with a terrorist organisation—gives an idea of the culture war into which Heaney (implicitly pointed to in the haw lantern reference) found himself thrust through his directorship of Field Day. Notably, Tóibín has not republished this review and a very different, considered, tone can be found in his more recent reflections on Heaney's engagements with the "Troubles".³ However, this re-appraisal is not the result of an aesthetic re-evaluation of Heaney's output but is a reflection of the changed political landscape, which was drastically altered by the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement that largely brought the "Troubles" to an end. Put simply, once the political temperature was reduced, academic debates about issues such as Ireland's (post)colonial status assumed a considerably more nuanced character.

When Heaney was pushed by Dennis O'Driscoll in *Stepping Stones* about whether he had felt "uneasy [...]" about aspects of the Field Day commitment—the

³ See, for instance, his elegy for Heaney in Tóibín 2013.

need to speak communally rather than individually", Heaney pointed out that there was no one Field Day position and that "there was plenty of give and take at the board meetings" (O'Driscoll 2008: 491). Field Day, indeed, never formulated an overarching programme or manifesto. Every now and again in the minutes of the company's board meetings questions emerge about the nature of the venture and if a more definite statement about this should be issued. But whenever the directors worked towards such a declaration, they backed away from it. This account of a discussion about Arts Council funding at a board meeting of 5 June 1983 is not untypical:

SH [Heaney] suggested, to JB's [Julie Barber, the company's administrator] pleasure, that a few sentences describing FD [Field Day] should be formulated. He thereupon formulated two. A third was felt to be necessary but no-one formulated it. It was suggested someone be appointed to do so. This was agreed. No-one was in fact appointed. End of JB's pleasure. (*Brian Friel Papers*, Minutes, Field Day board meeting, 5 June 1983, NLI, MS 37,181/1)

58

As the jokey tone of this excerpt illustrates, bonds of friendship held Field Day together more than anything else. This snippet also suggests that Heaney was perhaps the director most concerned about the practicalities of the enterprise, a trait that comes to the fore in his interventions in the 1990s when the company was floundering.

At the same time, it was precisely its lack of definition that rendered Field Day a fertile site of possibility for Heaney. As he put it in an interview for a 1988 BBC *Arena* documentary, Field Day was always in the process of becoming:

I think the Field Day collection is [...] a symbol of [...] the resolved contradiction [...]. It doesn't have a manifesto to fulfil. It has a notion, it has an inspiration, it has a possibility of formal definition. Its [...] purpose is to define itself. So it has an inner drama of possibility. (*Field Day Papers*, "Transcript of Interview with Heaney", NLI, MS 47,308/5)

When he joined Field Day Heaney was unsure what he might be able to offer a theatre company, but had ideas about how he might help to mould it beyond the stage. In a letter to Friel (27 September 1982), he proposed a "*Field Day Review of Books* [...]" an annual or biennial publication. A forum for critical discussion [...] of selected books significant in or for Ireland. To be anchored on longish review articles" (Heaney 2023: 210–211). A publication of this sort would eventually materialise, but long after Heaney had left the enterprise, in the form of *Field Day*

Review (2005-15).⁴ If this idea did not come to fruition during his directorship, Heaney nonetheless conscientiously delivered what he called his Field Day "home-work" (qtd. in Peacock 1992: 235): in 1983 he produced the pamphlet, *An Open Letter*, and published *Sweeney Astray* under Field Day's imprint; his version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, was staged by the company in 1990; and he edited the key section on W. B. Yeats in Volume II of the *Anthology*. In common with other Field Day productions, these texts explored the often aporetic dynamics that are generated when concepts such as power, authority and justice come into (frequently violent) contact with each other.

The pamphlet, *An Open Letter*, was Heaney's response, in the form of an epistle in verse, to having been included in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* by his friends, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. The most quoted lines from it—"My passport's green./ No glass of ours was ever raised/ To toast *The Queen*" (Heaney 1983: 9)—give the impression that this piece is more strident than it actually is. It is not just playful, but Heaney fully voices his hesitations about bringing the issue of his national identity into poetry: "For weeks and months I've messed about,/ Unclear, embarrassed and in doubt,/ [...] Wondering should I write it out/ Or let it go" (Heaney 1983: 8). Moreover, by phrasing this claim to his own name through the "Burns stanza," Heaney gives expression to the Scottish influence in Ulster. This debt to Burns is also registered in a 1991 verse letter Heaney wrote to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Scottish poet, Sorley MacLean, in which he called the stanza "the first/ Art speech" he had heard, a "local rhythm" that caught "The whole life of Ulster" (Heaney 2023: 367–368).

Before publishing it, Heaney sent a draft of *An Open Letter* to Blake Morrison, telling him that it "springs from a genuine sense of crisis [...]. I've a reluctance to raise the subject but a sense of abdication if I leave it alone. The exercise is finally purgative for me and may prove a salutary irritant all round" (Heaney 2023: 218).⁵ This crisis is encapsulated in the epigraph he chose from Gaston Bachelard: "[W]hat is the source of our first suffering?/ It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak .../ It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us" (Heaney 1983: 5). In other words, *An Open Letter* is an attempt to negotiate a series of interwoven hesitations. If Heaney had qualms about offending his friends, he was also keenly conscious of

⁴ All issues of the *Field Day Review* are available on JSTOR: <https://www.jstor.org/journal/fieldayrev>.

⁵ Heaney subsequently wrote to Morrison on 20 September 1983, after the publication of *An Open Letter*: "I was moved by your gracious handling of the thing in the *Guardian* and I am now, of course, in the post-coital tristesse, asking why I ever bothered. Nevertheless, I feel the exercise has clarified and appeased something" (Heaney 2023: 232).

the disabling power relations that had made him vacillate and not insist on being called Irish when others labelled him British. The links between naming and authority are at the heart of Friel's *Translations*, and also find expression in Heaney's essay "Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain", in which he recounts dropping into a fish-and-chip shop in a Loyalist area of Belfast in 1970 as he was beginning to gain public attention. He is served by an English woman, who asked if he was "the Irish poet" she had seen on television. Before Heaney answered, her Northern Irish boss "corrected her, 'Not at all, dear. He's like the rest of us, a British subject living in Ulster!'". Not wishing to cause a fuss Heaney paused, a reaction that niggled away at him for years: "[a]nd Irish and all as I was, I'm afraid I hesitated to contradict her" (Heaney 2002b). As he told O'Driscoll, applying British as a designation "[i]n Ulster [...] was an imposition and intended as such" (O'Driscoll 2008: 417). In this light, *An Open Letter* chronicles Heaney's struggle against his reflexive politeness and deference in situations in which such behaviour ultimately serves to underpin a hegemonic system.

The subjugation involved in this politics of naming was seemingly lost on the Dublin poet, Eavan Boland, who reacted to *An Open Letter* by wondering if the alteration in Heaney's tone and in his attitude to being categorised as British—something that had happened to him on numerous previous occasions—was brought on by him having "changed his friends" (Boland 1983: 12). In other words, she took this as an example of how, having fallen into dubious, political, company in Field Day, Heaney's sensibilities had been coarsened. As it happens, within Field Day *An Open Letter* was viewed by Deane as an expression of the group's lack of coherence, and he took exception to its inclusion in the pamphlet series. In a confidential comment to the board of directors (9 January 1983), he argued that the fact that it was in verse set it apart from the other two pamphlets with which it was published, Paulin's *A New Look at the Language Question* and Deane's own *Civilians and Barbarians*. They, in Deane's words, "are concerned with the general situation in itself", while Heaney's "is concerned with the author's particular situation as a manifestation of the general one. That immediately makes a distinction between the comparative delicacy of the writer's plight and the comparative stridency of the pamphleteers' attitudes" (Deane qtd. in *Brian Friel Papers*, "Field Day Pamphlet Series. A Comment. Confidential: To Field Day Directors and Secretary Only, 9 January 1983", NLI, MS 37, 181/1). Deane is protesting too much here. Looked at another way, precisely by not talking more generally, and instead exposing how the workings of what Friel called "the naming-taming process" (Friel 58) have impinged upon his own situation, Heaney brought the issue closer to home. Indeed, it could be argued that, thanks to this pamphlet and

other Field Day productions such as the *Anthology*, it is now much less likely that an Irish writer is casually categorised as British.

The opportunity that Field Day presented to work with friends such as his former schoolmate, Deane, and to stay involved with Derry and Northern Ireland appealed to Heaney, especially as his career was increasingly taking him away from Ireland. However, Deane's reaction to Heaney's pamphlet indicated that they not only saw Field Day differently, but that they also held conflicting outlooks on a writer's engagement with (cultural) politics. In many respects, this divergence can be traced in their contrasting perspectives on Yeats in their Field Day outputs.

Heaney had mixed feelings about taking on the task of editing the Yeats section of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. As the most prominent Irish poet since Yeats, he was the obvious candidate, but that also heightened the possibility of it being viewed as a hubristic act on his part. In 1986 Heaney suggested that Edna Longley might be invited to edit the Yeats section, a move, he pointed out, that would also address the "lack of any women contributors" to the project (*Brian Friel Papers*, Minutes, Field Day board meeting, 14 June 1986, NLI, MS 37, 181/2). When the *Anthology* was published in three volumes in 1991, it received widespread criticism for the paucity of women writers in its pages, its blindness to issues of gender, and the fact that not one of the editors of its forty-four sections was a woman. In response, Deane, as general editor, did not try to avoid these criticisms, and publicly took full responsibility for what he termed "the faults and erasures" of the *Anthology* (qtd. in Crowe 2003). However, in 1986 he shot down Heaney's suggestion on the grounds that Longley would simply use her involvement in the *Anthology* in her campaign against Field Day and offer a provocatively unacceptable version of Yeats that they would not be able to print (*Brian Friel Papers*, Minutes, Field Day board meeting, 14 June 1986, NLI, MS 37, 181/2). Even if this would most likely have been the case, it still indicated that, for Deane, the matter of the representation of Irish women and their experiences in the *Anthology* was not as important as the issue of how the history of Irish literature might be understood in relation to the question of the nation.⁶

This emphasis also moulds how Deane views Yeats in his 1984 Field Day pamphlet, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*. In this, Yeats is cast as the chief

⁶ In a letter to Ted Hughes (24 September 1992), Heaney implicitly blames Deane for the reaction to the *Anthology*: "[i]t's Deane's baby, of course, but cabinet responsibility dictates solidarity, and the book sins indefensibly in many areas: no women editors, no 'feminist discourse' section (all true, all hubristically foreknown by S.D. [Seamus Deane], but he has collapsed under the vehemence of the reception)" (Heaney 2023: 389).

representative of an Anglo-Irish romantic mode of understanding Irish culture, whose work articulated a form of "adherence", by which Deane meant that Yeats's efforts to ennoble Irish literature were ultimately in the service of British literature (Deane 1984: 6). So, for Deane, the conflict Yeats delineated in his 1937 "General Introduction for my Work" between his Irishness and his English ancestral background and his debts to Shakespeare, Spenser and Blake, expressed nothing more than "[t]he pathology of literary unionism" (Deane 1984: 9). In contrast, the Yeats who emerges in Heaney's "Introduction" to the Yeats section of the *Anthology* is one whose intense engagement with the drama of the self fuelled, and was fuelled by, his public activities. In a manner strongly reminiscent of Denis Donoghue's noted account of Yeats (Donoghue 1971: 16–17), Heaney sees Yeats's conflicts, including his negotiations of his different identities, as a Blakean source of creative energy. Moreover, for Heaney, Yeats's coming to terms with these antagonistic forces constituted a fundamentally anti-colonial endeavour: as he put it, Yeats created "an Irish literature cognate with other movements of withdrawal from the imperial, empirical sway of Britain", based on "a vision of reality that possessed no surer basis than the ground of his own imagining" (Heaney 1991: 787). For Deane, on the other hand, the conflicts in Yeats work essentially speak of a flawed political vision, as they are evidence of his efforts to resolve "on the level of literature, a crisis which, for him, cannot be resolved socially or politically" (Deane 1984: 6). A suspicion of the ways culture was historically mobilised to bypass Irish political issues runs through much of Deane's considerable critical output, and it lies at the heart of his "General Introduction" to the *Anthology*, where he identified this practice as an expression of what he termed an "axis of translation" (Deane 1991: xxv). According to Deane, the operation of this axis is visible in how, in particular, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century (Anglo-)Irish translators and poets such as Thomas Moore employed and recast the resources of an older Irish literature to smooth over the disjunctions of colonialism; a process that largely served, in Deane's gothic perspective, to revitalise English literature (Deane 1991: xxiv–xxv). Strikingly, this attitude clashes with the fact that many of Field Day's productions, including Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* and *The Cure at Troy*, were translations. Moreover, the idea and act of translation was central to the enterprise's postcolonial project of reframing perspectives on Irish literature, culture and modes of identity, precisely because translation inevitably brings to the fore questions of originality, authenticity and hybridity.

Heaney began translating the Irish medieval text, *Buile Suibhne*, when he moved from Northern Ireland to Wicklow in 1972, and sporadically returned to it and put it aside over the following years, until his involvement with Field Day

gave him the impetus to finish and publish it under the title, *Sweeney Astray*. In the course of a 1982 letter to Charles Monteith, the director of Faber and Faber, Heaney pointed out that, as it concerns "a mad king from Rasharkin [...] who is driven mad by violence between northern dynasties", the figure of Sweeney might serve as "a salutary figure for the contemporary imagination in this country, north and south" (Heaney 2023: 215). For this reason, he favoured publishing this translation with Field Day than with Faber and Faber.

Sweeney Astray has received something of a mixed reception and has generally been relegated to the shadow of Heaney's looser rendering of the persona in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of his 1984 collection, *Station Island*. In short, for many critics, it falls somewhere between the stools of a full academic rendering of a complex text and a freer more fully re-voiced adaptation. The translation scholar, Maria Tymoczko, for instance, complained that *Sweeney Astray* failed to offer "a penetrating vision of the source text", and took Heaney to task for choosing to use Anglicised names, thus rendering it "one of the most timid representations of Irish cultural difference since Irish independence" (Tymoczko 2000: 312, 313). If Tymoczko's account of the cultural and political failure of *Sweeney Astray* is overstated, her criticism of the politics of naming in this translation nonetheless underscores the fact that Heaney's Field Day output simply did not follow a coherent cultural political agenda, considering that this text was published in the same year as *An Open Letter*. Tymoczko's review might also be read as gesturing to symptoms of the problematic, excessive, significance with which Heaney sought to imbue the figure of Sweeney. In an early draft of his translation, Heaney cast Sweeney not just in a Shakespearean light—"He is Lear and poor Tom"—but also saw him as "a Brookeborough and a Bernadette" (qtd. in Regan 2015: 320, 321). In other words, on some level, Sweeney was intended to straddle the political divide in Northern Ireland: the staunchly anti-Catholic, Unionist, Lord Brookeborough was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1943–63, while Bernadette Devlin was one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s who was regularly portrayed as an Antigone-like figure unflinchingly opposed to the Unionist administration of Northern Ireland. Even though this characterisation did not make it into the published version of *Sweeney Astray*, it nonetheless, as Josie O'Donoghue suggests, helps to account for the underlying sense of "schizophrenia" that can be traced in Heaney's rendering of Sweeney (O'Donoghue 2017: 454).

This schizophrenia is not just a manifestation of the split and doubled political meaning with which Heaney sought to burden the protagonist of this medieval Irish text. It also had a personal and translational dimension: Heaney's work on

the myth of Sweeney was spurred by a form of identification with the king who was transformed by a curse into a bird-like creature, who left his native Ulster to fly around Ireland and whose name in English rhymes with Heaney. This informed the drive and the drama of his translation: as he put it in a letter to his friend, the artist, Barrie Cooke (30 August 1983), "in order to make Sweeney my persona, my puritan self had to feel that it had earned the right—by rigid translation—to make free with his possessions, which were/are, to some extent, mine" (Heaney 2023: 230–231). Yet, in the same moment as his translation works to claim Sweeney for himself, it also functions as a way of disclaiming, to an extent, his own voice. Translation, in short, is always already a mode of "public" articulation, in the sense that the translator is never speaking entirely in her/his own voice.

This dynamic is more clearly performed in *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney's rendering of Sophocles's *Philoctetes* and his most important contribution to Field Day. Speaking of the famous choral intervention that creates the resolution in his version, Heaney noted that "the Greek chorus allows you [...] to speak with a public voice. Things you might not get away with in your own voice, *in propria persona*, become definite and allowable pronouncements on the lips of the chorus" (O'Driscoll 2009: 62). This choral intervention was fabricated by Heaney to solve a problem of translation. In the play, Odysseus and Achilles's son, Neoptolemus, have come to the island of Lemnos to get Philoctetes to give them his bow, as it will ensure that the Greeks will be victorious in their long war with Troy. Philoctetes refuses to relinquish it, because Odysseus had abandoned him on Lemnos years before when a wound on his foot was causing a noxious stench. In other words, the *agon* at the heart of this play concerns the ethical balancing of personal and public duties and responsibilities and, while working on this play, Heaney explicitly linked this dilemma to "the artist and his relationship to society" in a 1985 letter to Cooke (Heaney 2023: 256). In Sophocles the resolution is brought about by Heracles appearing *ex machina* and dictating that Philoctetes give Odysseus his bow. Heaney recognised that such a resolution would be too crude for a twentieth-century audience; moreover, a diktat of this nature would shatter any suggestion that this drama spoke in any meaningful manner to the tensions that obtained between the artist and society. Hence, he looked to frame, in his own words, a "conclusion [that comes about] as the inevitable culmination of an honestly endured spiritual and psychological crisis" (Heaney 1990b). He did this by creating a choral ode that stepped beyond the Greek world of the play by introducing scenes from "both sides" of the "Troubles"—the "hunger-striker's father" and "The police widow"—and that articulated a call for the arrival of a seemingly impossible justice beyond revenge: a world in which "hope and history rhyme" (Heaney 1990a: 77).

Standing as a translation of a passage that is not in Sophocles's play, this choral intervention could be called a "translation[]" of an imagined original", which is how Heaney described the influence of the Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, on poems in his collection, *The Haw Lantern* (O'Driscoll 2008: 181). In *The Cure at Troy*, these verses translate an imagined original that makes a case for the eirenic power of the literary imagination in the face of the implacable forces of history. And the source of this imagined original can be more convincingly traced to Cold War Eastern European poetry than to Greek tragedy: Heaney acknowledged that the "the extraordinary events of late 1989" that swept across Eastern and Central Europe informed the exuberant tenor of this choral intervention (Heaney 2002a: 176). Heaney's involvement with Field Day coincided with his growing interest in poetry from the eastern flank of Europe, which he believed provided a model of how poetry might engage with political and historical experiences. As he told O'Driscoll: "[t]hat historically-aware, hard-bitten eastern-European aesthetic meant more to me in the 1980s, as a precaution against the ahistorical aesthetic that I was encountering in America" (O'Driscoll 2008: 114–115). A key example of this was Czesław Miłosz's poem "Incantation", Robert Pinsky's translation of which Heaney cites in full in his essay "The Impact of Translation", where he hails it for doing "things forbidden" in contemporary Western poetics, employing "unabashed abstract nouns and conceptually aerated adjectives" to deliver "big, pulpit-worthy affirmations" (Heaney 1989: 37). "Incantation", in brief, puts abstract moral imperatives like "Truth and Justice" into action, looks to unclench "the congealed fist of the past" and concludes with a visionary crescendo in which "Nature" heralds the allying of "Philo-Sophia/ And poetry", which portends a "glorious" and "unlimited" "time" (Heaney 1989: 36). Echoes of these idealistic dynamics ring throughout the choral intervention in *The Cure at Troy*.

However, the choral ode is a problematic translation, both of "Incantation" and of the action of *Philoctetes*. While it is pure hypothesis that Miłosz's poem is its "imagined original", examining Heaney's text beside "Incantation" brings to the fore the awkward tone in which it articulates "unabashed abstract nouns" and "big, pulpit-worthy affirmations". "Incantation" operates entirely under the sign of irony and takes a wry perspective on the gap between human idealism and historical reality: its ardent assertion of faith in "Human reason" is expressed as "a spell," as Heaney noted, "uttered to bring about a desirable state of affairs, rather than a declaration that such a state of affairs truly exists" (Heaney 1989: 37). While this might also serve as a description of how the choral intervention in *The Cure at Troy* was intended to function, the incantation that Heaney establishes in this ode—through calls for "hope" and belief, and the invocation of "miracles/

And cures and healing wells" (Heaney 1990a: 77)—is bereft of irony, which in any case would be inappropriate in a piece that directly summoned up victims of the "Troubles". Without this ironic grounding, the choral ode takes the form of something more akin to a prayer; Heaney, indeed, came to regard these lines with considerable misgivings, seeing them as "belong[ing] to the realm of pious aspiration" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421).

The idea of rhyming hope and history became a motto for the Northern Irish peace process, and was invoked by a host of writers, politicians and journalists; moreover, its aspirational political power has been mobilised in many other contexts around the world, including in an advertisement for Joe Biden's 2020 election campaign. (O'Malley 2011: 120; Biden 2020) As such, the entry of this text into public discourse might be thought of as endorsing and performing its utopian vision of the ability of literature and art to make the impossible imaginable. However, it achieves that status by being viewed outside the context of the play that it is translating (and these verses have regularly been published in stand-alone formats).⁷ Crucially, the resolution in *Philoctetes* and *The Cure at Troy*—be it instigated as a result of Heracles's *ex machina* intervention or the aspirational idealism of the choral ode—is between Greek and Greek alone: between Odysseus and Philoctetes. The accord that they reach sees Philoctetes give his bow to Odysseus, which will bring about the end of the Trojan war, but only because this bow will ensure that the Greek state defeats the Trojans. So, while the crux of the play concerns a coming to terms with one's duties to oneself and to the state, the war does not end through the peaceful exchange that the two characters enact onstage; as Deane noted, this will only happen later, when Troy is violently sacked (Deane 2002: 159). In summoning up references to the "Troubles", Heaney clearly wanted these verses to exceed the tragedy's diegesis. But by eliding the common political allegiance of Odysseus and Philoctetes in this ode, there is a sense, to revert to Deane's notion of the "axis of translation", that Heaney formulated an artistic resolution that by-passes a more intractable political context. And it is perhaps this muddying of the ethical drama and political message of the play that has rendered these lines somewhat too amenable to political and journalistic uses, and that prompted Heaney's qualms about them.

Friel's decision to give *Dancing at Lughnasa* to the Abbey Theatre in 1990 and not to Field Day opened a rift between himself and Stephen Rea, from which Field Day, an enterprise rooted in friendships, never recovered. This was

⁷ For instance, the Choral ode is published as "Part IV" of "Voices from Lemnos" in the 1998 collection, *Opened Ground* (Heaney 1998: 330–331).

compounded by the directors' burgeoning careers, which meant that they were increasingly on the move and not on hand to tend to the company. Moreover, the publication of the *Anthology* in 1991 and the controversies surrounding it not only brought into question and undermined the ambitions of Field Day, but it also left the company in considerable debt—something that seemed to bother the very practical Heaney more than any other director. As he put it in a 1993 fax to Friel sent from Harvard: "[w]e are in desperate straits. We have taken beatings in public and are on a weak wicket for fund-raising. Are we going to be able to raise any money? [...] Is bankruptcy a resolution, even financially? [...] Oh God, just putting this into writing is shocking" (*Field Day Papers*, Heaney, fax to Brian Friel, to be circulated to all directors, 18 February 1993, NLI, G/MFD/1993, underlining in original). By this point the board had fractured, with Rea and Deane insisting on keeping Field Day afloat while the others had become increasingly detached. Heaney remained on good terms with all his fellow directors, even as he found the atmosphere at meetings stressful, especially as Deane and Rea were making decisions without consulting the board. Addressing these issues in a letter to Deane on 22 November 1994, he declared that "Field Day has gone dead for me" (Heaney 2023: 422), and along with the all the other directors, bar Rea and Deane, he drifted away from the enterprise in the mid-1990s.

When it was in full spate, Field Day was a forum that supplied Heaney with inspiration and the support of friends and writers who were also negotiating the artistic and political pressures exerted by the "Troubles". Many of the Field Day productions, not just his own, explored precisely the crux that Heaney had long faced: the duty to maintain fidelity with the (poetic) self and with what he called in an essay on Dante, "the collective historical experience" (Heaney 1985: 19). As has been noted, this was not a new theme in his work, nor was its expression in his Field Day output entirely unproblematic. However, considering that the verse about hope and history rhyming from *A Cure at Troy* and the lines about the colour of his passport in *An Open Letter* are two of the most popularly cited passages of Heaney's work, it is clear that under the Field Day banner he allowed himself more artistic breadth and ventured somewhat beyond his natural reserve about himself, his politics and the role of literature in the world, to make more precisely public statements.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Brian Friel Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI):

Seamus Deane, "Field Day Pamphlet Series. A Comment. Confidential: To Field Day Directors and Secretary Only, 9 January 1983", MS 37, 181/1.

Minutes, Field Day board meeting, 5 June 1983, MS 37, 181/1.

Minutes, Field Day board meeting, 14 June 1986, MS 37, 181/2.

Field Day Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI):

Transcript of Interview with Heaney, MS 47, 308/5.

Seamus Heaney, Fax to Brian Friel, to be circulated to all directors, 18 February 1993, G/MFD/1993.

WORKS CITED

Biden, Joe. 2020. "The Cure at Troy by Seamus Heaney | Joe Biden for President 2020". YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkCvwwcT1zE>. Accessed 23 May 2026.

Boland, Eavan. 1983. "Poets and Pamphlets". In: *Irish Times*, 1 October: 12.

Bradley, Anthony, Edna Longley and Colm Toibin. 1992. "Review of: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* by Seamus Deane". In: *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18, 2: 117–124.

Crowe, Catriona. 2003. "Testimony to a Flowering". In: *The Dublin Review*, 10, <https://thedublinreview.com/article/testimony-to-a-flowering/>. Accessed 23 May 2026.

Deane, Seamus. 1984. *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*. Derry: The Field Day Theatre Company.

Deane, Seamus. 1991. "General Introduction". In: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. I. General ed. Seamus Deane. Derry: Field Day: xix–xxvi.

Deane, Seamus. 2002. "Field Day's Greeks (and Russians)". In: *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Eds Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton. London: Methuen: 148–164.

Donoghue, Denis. 1971. *Yeats*. London: Fontana.

Friel, Brian. 1986. "Extracts from a Sporadic Diary". In: *Ireland and the Arts*. Ed. Tim Pat Coogan, London: Namara: 56–61.

Heaney, Seamus. 1981a. "Foreword". In: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. iBook.

Heaney, Seamus. 1981b. "Feeling into Words". In: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. iBook.

Heaney, Seamus. 1983. *An Open Letter*. Derry: The Field Day Theatre Company.

Heaney, Seamus. 1985. "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet". In: *Irish University Review* 15, 1: 5–19.

Heaney, Seamus. 1988. "A Field Day for the Irish". In: *The Times*, 5 December.

- Heaney, Seamus. 1989. "The Impact of Translation". *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings*. London: Faber and Faber: 36–44.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1990a. *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles's Philoctetes*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1990b. "The Cure at Troy: A Note on the Play". In: *The Cure at Troy by Seamus Heaney, after "Philoctetes" by Sophocles* (Programme for first productions). Derry: The Field Day Theatre Company: n.p.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1991. "W. B. Yeats: Introduction". In: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. II. General ed. Seamus Deane. Derry: Field Day: 783–790.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1996. *The Spirit Level*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1998. *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, Seamus. 2002a. "The Cure at Troy: Production Notes in No Particular Order". In: *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Eds Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton. London: Methuen: 171–180.
- Heaney, Seamus. 2002b. "Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain". *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. iBook.
- Heaney, Seamus. 2023. *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*. Ed. Christopher Reid. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lavan, Rosic. 2020. *Seamus Heaney and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Longley, Edna. 1985. "Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland". In: *The Crane Bag* 9, 1: 26–40.
- Longley, Edna. 1994. "Introduction: Revising 'Irish Literature'". In: *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books: 9–68.
- McCarthy, Conor. 2000. *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969–1992*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Morash, Chris. 2002. *A History of Irish Theatre 1601–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Donoghue, Josie. 2017. "The Politics of Metaphor in Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*". In: *Irish University Review*, 47, Autumn/Winter, Special Supplementary Issue: Writing from Northern Ireland: 450–469.
- O'Driscoll, Dennis. 2008. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber and Faber.
- O'Driscoll, Dennis. 2009. "Heaney in Public". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*. Ed Bernard O'Donoghue. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 56–72.
- O'Malley, Aidan. 2011. *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities: Performing Contradictions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peacock, Alan. 1992. "Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer". In: *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Elmer Andrews. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan: 233–255.
- Regan, Stephen. 2015. "Seamus Heaney and the Making of *Sweeney Astray*". In: *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 21, 2: 317–339.
- Richtarik, Marilynn. 2021. "Field Day". In: *Seamus Heaney in Context*. Ed. Geraldine Higgins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 188–197.

- Said, Edward W. 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Tóibín, Colm. 1988. "Three Green Fields". In: *Fortnight*, March: 21.
- Tóibín, Colm. 1995. "On the Literary Wing". In: *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 April: 10.
- Tóibín, Colm. 2013. "Seamus Heaney's Books were Events in our Lives". In: *The Guardian*, 30 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/30/seamus-heaney-books-poetry-corm-toibin>. Accessed 23 May 2026.
- Tymoczko, Maria. 2000. "Wintering Out with Irish Poetry". In: *The Translator* 6, 2: 309–317.

S a ž e t a k

"OBVEZA PREMA DUŽNOSTI": SEAMUS HEANEY I FIELD DAY

Djelovanje Seamusa Heaneeya u okviru kazališne skupine Field Day bilo je možda najkontroverznije razdoblje njegove karijere, izazvavši kritike komentatora koji su smatrali da njegovo povezivanje s tom skupinom narušava njegov pjesnički poziv u korist izrazitijeg političkog angažmana. Kazališnu skupinu Field Day osnovali su 1980. godine glumac Stephen Rea i dramatičar Brian Friel kako bi izvodili dramska djela i provodili kritičke intervencije kojima su poticali preispitivanje i novo promišljanje kulturne povijesti Irske, s obzirom na to da su te povijesne mijene pridonijele pat-poziciji tzv. sjevernoirskih "Nevolja" (*The Troubles*). Rad donosi novu interpretaciju Heaneyeva djelovanja u sklopu kazališne skupine Field Day i tekstova koje je u tom kontekstu napisao, oslanjajući se na arhivsku građu te osobito na objavu zbirke korespondencije *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* iz 2023. godine, koja pruža novi uvid u Heaneyeve napore da pronade ravnotežu između, uvjetno rečeno, privatnog prostora svoje poezije i sve većih zahtjeva javnih dužnosti. Iako su mu ti zahtjevi oduzimali sve više, a počesto i previše vremena, Heaney ih je ipak smatrao dijelom svoje pjesničke dužnosti. Budući da je "glavna tema" navedene zbirke "obveza prema dužnosti", kako ističe njezin urednik Christopher Reid, četrnaest godina koje je Heaney proveo kao direktor Field Daya nipošto se ne mogu smatrati anomalijom, kako je to kritika 1980-ih i 1990-ih sugerirala. Naprotiv, njegov rad i tekstovi vezani uz tu kazališnu skupinu artikuliraju napetosti između različitih javnih sfera i privatnog svijeta poezije, koje se mogu pratiti kroz njegov cjelokupni opus i karijeru.

Ključne riječi: Seamus Heaney; Field Day; Sjeverna Irska; *An Open Letter*; *Sweeney Astray*; *The Cure at Troy*; *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*