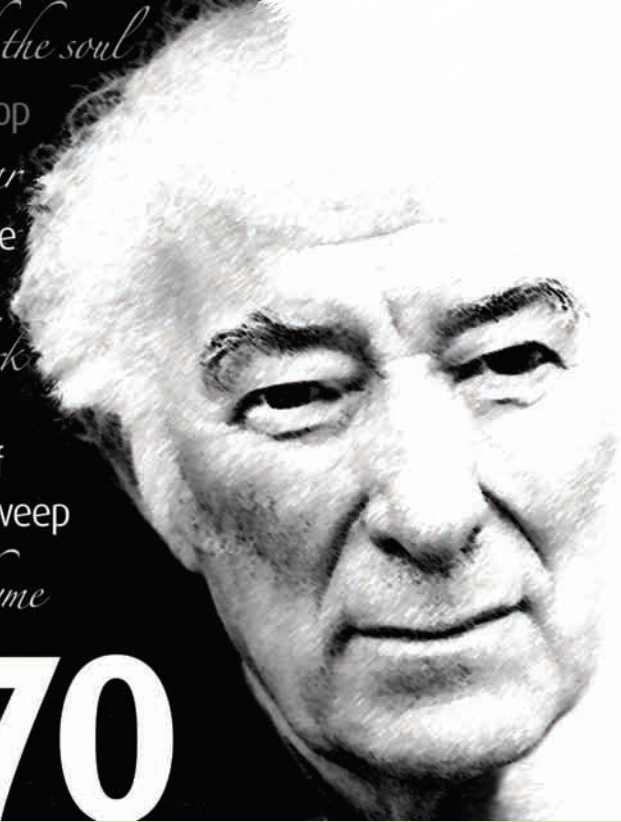


RTÉ

HEANEY at 70

*Stepping stones were stations of the soul*  
here is love / like a tinsmith's scoop  
*A four-foot box, a foot for every year*  
that moment when the bird sings very close  
to the music of what happens  
*All I know is a door into the dark*  
he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep  
*And hope and history rhyme*



## SEAMUS HEANEY'S BIRTHDAY SPEECH

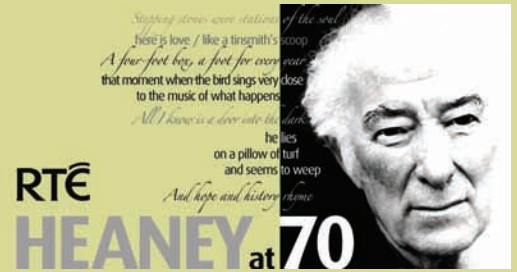
IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
MONDAY 13th APRIL 2009

From the moment this celebration was proposed, I have been looking forward to it – but looking forward, I confess, with mixed feelings. Sometimes Easter Monday would appear on the calendar the same as ever, a luminous day, a holiday to be looked forward to; but at other times it seemed more like a deadline that loomed. I realized from the start, in other words, that the sense of occasion would be high this evening, but so high I wasn't sure that I could rise to it. And yet the celebration was being proposed by people who occupied such distinguished positions in Irish life and who were held in such esteem by me personally, it would have been difficult to decline.

I am deeply grateful to these people and the institutions they represent for the commitment and co-ordination of effort that have brought us to IMMA this evening. I am honoured beyond measure to be at the centre of such attention. I feel both elevated and obligated. I feel equally the need to be thankful and the need to take nothing for granted. And because my life has been unusually blessed, these feelings are habitual to me. From the moment my first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, appeared in 1966, when I was twenty-seven, until this happy birthday, with ten more books of poems behind me - during that whole time my work has been favourably received and I have been given credit and accord and awards of a sort I could never have imagined during the first two decades of my life.

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It all happened as if by magic. In my early twenties I walked through the *ceo draoícha* of contemporary poetry - Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh and American poetry. During those first years of creative excitement when I discovered the company of other poets, young and old, north and south, it was as if the morning fog that had once hung over the fields of Patrick Kavanagh's Mucker, the fog where he met the god of awakened imagination, it was as if that fog had descended on my own home ground in Co Derry. I rhymed to see myself, as the last lines of the last poem in that first book put it – 'to see myself,/To set the darkness echoing.'

Interestingly then, very soon after the acceptance of *Death of a Naturalist*, at that first moment of literary notice, in the first flush of good reviews, I wrote another poem which I didn't publish until some years later. It was called 'Antaeus' and was a monologue spoken in the voice of that legendary character. In Greek mythology, Antaeus was a giant who was born out of the earth and who consequently derived all his strength and prowess from contact with the earth. This meant that every time he was brought to the ground in a fight or a wrestling match, every time he seemed to be beaten, he wasn't beaten at all; instead, he was gathering strength, recharging his batteries, getting ready to rise again, refreshed and fighting fit.



Seamus Heaney, RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

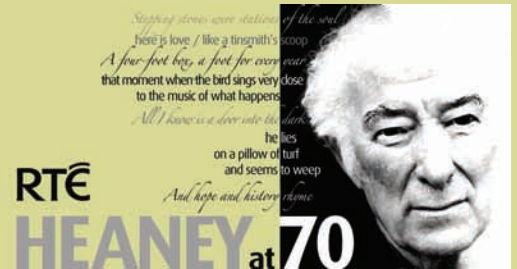


Marie Heaney, Louis le Brocqy, Anne Madden. RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

I identified with this earthman because I saw myself as something of an earthman, somebody with his poetic feet very much on the local ground. At that stage I too felt fighting fit, having just written a book that began with images of a man digging, 'going down and down for the good turf,' and ended with my young poet self looking deep into the 'trapped sky' at the bottom of a well. I therefore regarded Antaeus as something of a guardian spirit, an emblem of whatever poetic gift I might have. But at the same time I was also aware that Antaeus, for all his strength, was far from invulnerable; I knew indeed that he would be defeated in the end by another hero, the mighty Hercules.

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Hercules turned out to be a match for Antaeus in brawn and more than his match in brain, for he realized in the course of their wrestling match that the way to defeat the giant was to hold him high rather than hammer him down. The way to bring him low was to elevate him. So instead of throwing his adversary, Hercules lifted him up until all the strength drained out of him. Which is why I made Antaeus voice his anxiety in these final lines of the poem:

*Let each new hero come  
Seeking the golden apples and Atlas:  
He must wrestle with me before he pass  
Into that realm of fame*

*Among sky-born and royal.  
He may well throw me and renew my birth  
But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,  
My elevation, my fall.*

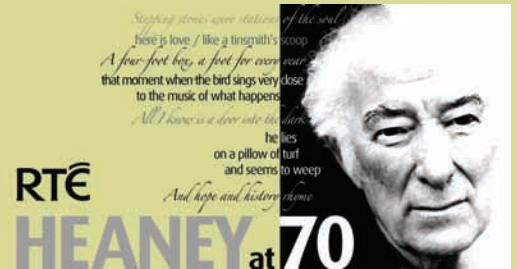


Front: Ian Wilson, Seamus Heaney, Kevin O'Connell, Rachel Holstead. Back: Gregory Ellis, Keith Pascoe, Simon Aspell, Christopher Marwood (RTÉ Vanbrugh Quartet). RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

It will be plain why I am telling you all this. I mean to say that from the beginning I felt cautious at moments of elevation. Honours come unlooked for, they are pure gift and something to be grateful for always, but equally they are something that have to be survived. They can create a profile larger than the life. It's easier, admittedly, to survive an upgrading than a downgrading, but even that is not without its dangers. It's no accident that when Satan wanted to tempt Christ he took him up to the top of a high mountain. I felt, at any rate, even back then in 1966, I felt that I had better take care to remain on or near ground level. At the same time, there remained also the necessity to deal with a wider newer world that the life of poetry had led to – I mean the things which that world faced you with by way of challenge or offered you by way of reward.

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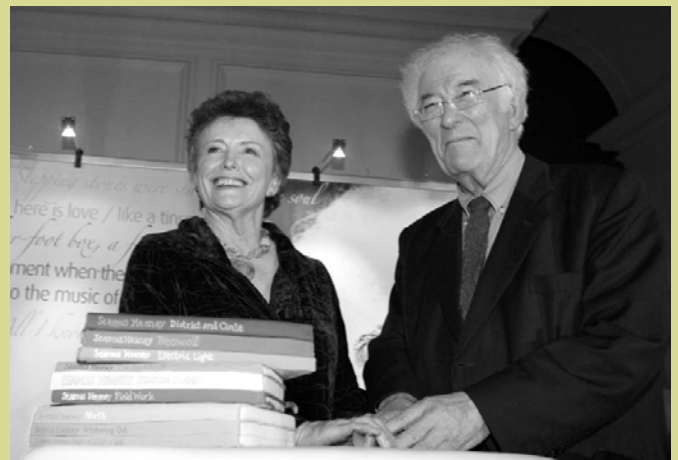


The course I then learned to hold, the course I was made to hold by temperament and by a decided consciousness, was the via media. As I said in another poem, I grew up in between. I grew up where the word 'march' not only meant enemies parading towards each other in a military fashion but meant also the hedge or drain or stream where fields belonging to neighbours bordered upon each other. Where one side met the other side. And I would end up in between also, a northerner in the south, one born upon the agricultural earth of Antaeus but destined eventually to live and breathe in the imaginative air of Hercules; subject at all times to the gravity and griefs of our human condition but at the same time susceptible to the lift of the heart when I'd lift up my eyes to the heavens.

The import of the story about Hercules and Antaeus is complicated but potent. It tells us that we are made to live in at least two places at one time, in two domains that march each other. We should keep our feet on the ground to signify that nothing is beneath us, but we should also lift up our eyes to say nothing is beyond us.



Seamus Heaney, RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009



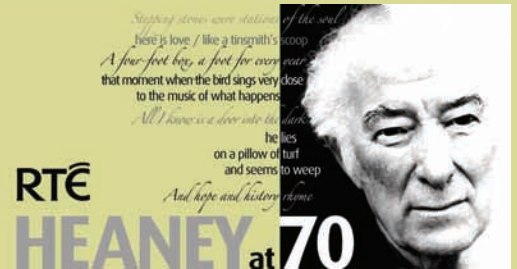
Marie and Seamus Heaney, RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

Over the years I have been helped to hold this midway course by the love of the family I was born into and by a loved one I met later who gave me the steadfast family that is now our own. In the course of my life I was helped also by the steadfastness of friends; by the nurture I got as a young poet in the north, when I had the camaraderie of other young poets and slightly older artists and singers and musicians, not to mention certain bohemian broadcasters of the Northern Ireland BBC; I was helped too by my stints as a teacher in the greatly tolerant, greatly generous republic of American letters, of which the Lannan Foundation is a shining example; helped again when I moved with my family to Wicklow and then to Dublin just over three decades ago - helped by the welcome I got from writers and artists and musicians and yet another gang of bohemians and journalists, many of them associated with *The Irish Times*. And I was also helped at that time very particularly by the patronage of RTÉ who gave me a job presenting a weekly books programme on the radio when I was working as a freelance writer.



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That patronage, I am happy to acknowledge, continued and it climaxed early last year in the course of a meeting with the Director General of RTÉ, Cathal Goan, during which this weekend's celebrations were proposed. As I said at the beginning, I was elated and yet a bit unnerved by the largesse of what was being envisaged. RTÉ Radio would produce an archival recording by me of all the poems in the eleven volumes published to date, a recording which would be supported by the Lannan Foundation and made available as a boxed set of CDs. There would be an hour long TV documentary about me in RTÉ's Arts Lives series. There would be a lyric fm concert where three Irish composers would be commissioned to respond to my poems, as well as a number of special radio programmes, and even indeed a website. I was delighted, of course, but at the same time cautious and inclined to demur.

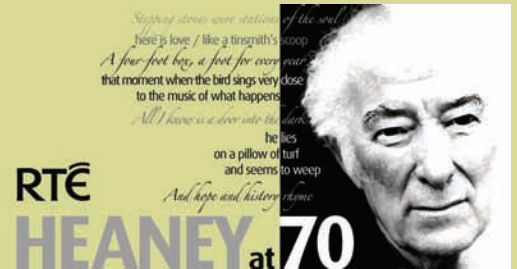
The argument which was then put forward to soothe me was that these salutes and celebrations would be concerned first and foremost with the work rather than the life. And even though I am not sure that you can ever separate the life from the work as neatly as all that, I persuaded myself that it would be ungracious to decline.



Jenny McCrohan, Christopher Heaney, Marie Heaney, Catherine Heaney, Emer Callan, Seamus Heaney, Aibhin and Michael Heaney. RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

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Then, as soon as I had agreed to my apotheosis as the vox in the box, as it were, a quite independent proposal came from Enrique Juncosa, the Director of IMMA, offering to run a sort of birthday *céilí* here at Kilmainham. With typical *fláithiúlas* and style Enrique promised us the use of these venerable premises for the broadcast concert, plus an exhibition space where his staff would arrange a display of books and artwork to run until June, not to mention the commissioning of two special prints by my friend Barrie Cooke. And lo and behold, thanks to the initiative and effort of these individuals and their devoted staff, thanks also to the interest and sponsorship of the Department of Arts Sport and Tourism, all these things have come to pass.



Writer Brian Friel and visual artist Robert Ballagh. RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

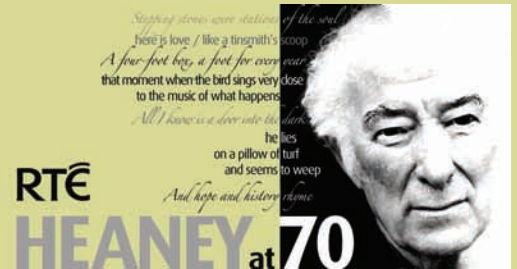


Seamus Heaney, Eoin McGonigal (Chairperson, IMMA). RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009

I am so honoured, so plied with birthday gifts I feel as privileged and almost as empowered as Prospero, the man who could call music from the air, consult his magic books, and like a documentary maker or a sound recordist conjure into his presence scenes from his past life. The lyric fm concert with those commissioned pieces by Rachel Holstead, Kevin O'Connell and Ian Wilson was entrancing, sounds and sweet airs that might have been heard on Prospero's island; the IMMA exhibition not only highlights the beauty of the individual books but has an extra dimension thanks to the display of works by the artists involved; and at this point we especially celebrate the completion of those boxed sets of the poems, impeccably recorded under the supervision of Tim Lehane, and released with a cogent introduction by the poet, Peter Sirr; and then, to round things off, tomorrow night will see the broadcast on RTÉ Television of a beautifully made, honest to heavens, down to earth documentary by Charlie McCarthy, entitled 'Out of the Marvellous'.

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Much therefore comes full circle here this evening. Friends whose work and whose company have helped me across the stepping stones of a life are here. Family and family friends are here. All of you are here, whether in this room or listening on the radio. And all this is beyond expectation. But I no longer have mixed feelings. This is a totally luminous occasion. And if the wheel has come full circle, that only means that the wheel is about to turn once more. This birthday, in other words, isn't just about keeping going, it's about getting started again tomorrow morning, when my inner Antaeus will have to rise as usual to take on my inner Hercules. So I am utterly grateful for the tonic of these tributes. They are not retirement presents but ratifications and refreshments. Thanks to them and to you I will continue to live obligated and elevated more happily than ever. Ever after.



Seamus Heaney, RTÉ/IMMA Heaney At 70 event, 13th April 2009