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**“Out of the Marvellous,” Into the Marvellous
In Memoriam: Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)**

Roslyn Blyn-LaDrew

ca. 1250 A.D. With no more *rírá* or *ruaille buaille* than a modern day traffic report, a Norse scribe noted that the people who were gathered at the church at Clonmacnoise, Ireland, looked up and saw an anchor descending from the sky. Looking higher, they saw that the anchor was attached to a rope dangling over the side of ship that was swimming through the air. When the anchor got caught in the church door, a crewman from the air-ship shinnied down, tried to free the anchor, and nearly “drowned,” breathing our air, which was like inhaling water for us. The group attending church freed him by cutting the rope and the man returned to his ship, leaving the anchor behind. Centuries later, Seamus Heaney incorporated this incident into his poem “Lightenings viii.”

ca. 1330 A.D. With no *rírá* or *ruaille buaille*, *fuile faile* or *gaoirle guairle*, an Irish scribe wrote another version of the incident in the annals. He noted, very matter-of-factly, that a ship appeared in the air, moving as if it were floating on the water. Looking up, the crowd saw the anchor descend and the church clerics grabbed it. A crewman came down, as if swimming in the sea, for, as the manuscript says, our air was “*mar budh uisgi do*” (like water to him). He tried to free the anchor. “*Ar Dia frib! Legidh uaib me uair atathur ocum bathadh agaib,*” he said, imploring the men to stop holding onto him, since they were drowning him. They released him and he swam back up to the ship through the water-air, with the anchor, according to this account. To conclude this seemingly “*mirabile dictu*” tale, the laconic scribe simply “etcetera-ed” the story, with the Old Irish abbreviation “7 rl,” the Irish equivalent of “ampersand and other.” As if such wonders happened so frequently that details were not needed! Centuries later, Seamus Heaney incorporated this into his remarkably succinct, 101-word poem “Lightenings viii.”

1991 Seamus Heaney published *Seeing Things*, which included the “Lightenings” series. “Lightenings viii” is based on the two “air-ship” incidents described above. Brief as Heaney’s poem is (101 words), he manages to include a note of wonder that neither of the actual medieval accounts contains, by adding the final line, “Out of the marvellous as he knew it.” Here Heaney is describing the adventure from the viewpoint of the air-ship’s crewman. Heaney reminds us that we should always try seeing things from other people’s perspectives, especially situations as complex as the “Troubles” in his native Northern Ireland. Our ordinary air is strange, marvelous, and dangerous to the traveler from the air-ship. Likewise, his world, if we could ever visit it, would, no doubt, also be strange, marvelous, and perhaps dangerous to us. This line in *Seeing Things* may have been one of the deciding factors contributing to Heaney’s winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 and it is published on the nobelprize.org website. Of course, a solid lifetime of achievement in poetry was no doubt also a factor.

1995 Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Seeing Things*. And oh, the *rírá* and the *ruaille buaille*, the *fuile faile* and the *gaoirle guairle*, as Ireland, indeed the world, celebrated his achievement! Ireland’s fourth (Nobel Prize winner for Literature, that is).

August 2006 Heaney suffered a stroke but recovered and resumed writing, touring, and lecturing. Perhaps the marvelous was beckoning him, but like the air-ship crewman of the medieval annals, he was released. “*Ar Dia frib! Legidh uaib me uair atathur ocum bathadh agaib,*” the crewman had implored. The powers that be heard the new plea, be it Heaney’s or the world’s, “*Legidh uaib,*” and, to put it in Modern Irish, “*Ligeadh é*” (He was released).

30 August 2013 Once more a rope descended from an air-ship, which had dropped anchor, but this time above a hospital, the Blackrock Clinic, An Charraig Dhubh, in County Dublin, not above Clonmacnoise. This time a crewman descended and eventually returned to the safety of his ship, but this time he took a passenger with him. This time one of our own ascended the rope with his new companion, and Seamus sailed away in the air-ship.

2014 (le cuidiú Dé) I will fly to Ireland on Aer Lingus, whose name literally means “air-ship,” from the Irish “*long*” (ship). No doubt I will participate in some Irish language events, the ostensible purpose of my trip, but I hope that I can also visit Heaney’s grave. As I do so, I will ponder the full cycle, from medieval chronicle to trans-Atlantic flight, from mysterious air-ships to modern jetliners, from an unnamed air-ship crew-man nearly drowned by breathing our air to our famed and beloved poet, Seamus Heaney, taken by that same air-ship into a new “marvellous,” which the rest of us have yet to experience.

Notes: The text of Heaney’s poem “Lightenings viii” can be found at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/poems-3-e.html

As for “*rírá,*” “*ruaille buaille,*” “*fuile faile,*” and “*gaoirle guairle,*” they all mean “hubbub” or “commotion” in Irish. With a nod toward alliteration and end-rhyme, the reader might note the approximate pronunciation: “ree-raw, rool-yuh bool-yuh, fwil-yuh fwal-yuh, geer-il-yuh, goor-il-yuh.” While most Irish speakers would use only one or two of these “reduplicatives” at a time, I strung them together to blur the boundary of prose and poetry. Although Heaney did not actually write his poetry in Irish, the rhythms and rhymes of the Irish language certainly have added a lilt to his literary voice in English. And indeed, he often spoke about the juxtaposition of the two languages, in words like “Mossbawn,” the name of his family’s farm in Co. Derry. I would like to think that these “*athdhúbaltaigh*” (reduplicatives) would please him.