

Following their Stars – Astrological Correspondences in the World of Poetry

Presentation by Anna May Harkin

at

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- Firstly, to what extent is there an artistic dimension to the practice of astrology or at least parallels in the two fields of art and astrology;
- Secondly, to what extent can we see a reflection of their astrological charts in the imagination of artists as revealed in their work (in this case poetry).

Both poetic composition and an astrological reading involve **a way of seeing**, a mode of perception and, in an ideal outcome, an articulation of that seeing in a way that resonates with the poem's readers in the first case and the astrological client/situation in the second.

Astrology and (most times) poetry work through:

**symbols, metaphors, images,
analogies and correspondences**

and in this way, through their respective languages, can access the deeper structures of the human mind, what some would call the archetypal layers of the unconscious.

Fintan O'Toole*, speaking of the poet Seamus Heaney (of whom more later), writes of

“his lifelong quest - for images and symbols adequate to the predicament of being alive in his own time”.

Incidentally O'Toole starts off his contribution with the following sentence: **“Like all great poets Seamus Heaney was an alchemist”.**

*Fintan O'Toole in an obituary entitled *The Great Citizen* p. 105 of *Irish Pages – Heaney Memorial Issue*. Vol.8, No.2. 2014. eds. Chris Agee and Cathal O Searcaigh.

The astrologer is working with the given and evolving set of symbols of our tradition – s/he must choose which symbols are the best fit for the issue in hand e.g. the nativity, the question and the context.

Within those s/he has to choose from the array of meanings/correspondences of each symbol and combinations thereof and the complex interactions between them – the shared understandings of astrology's language.

Astrological interpretation comes into being through the playful engagement of the astrologer with these arrays of meanings and correspondences in the specific unique context of the client, question/situation. This engagement involves the creative imagination of the astrologer and I use the word “playful” in that sense.

When the astrologer's "take" speaks or matches truthfully to the person or situation, it has the potential to transform the insight of the client and to leave the astrologer (and perhaps sometimes also the client) with of a sense of the numinous – in awe before the mystery of a reality in which astrology's symbolic language "works".

**“the cure
by poetry that cannot be coerced”.**

Seamus Heaney from *Out of the Bag* in the collection *Electric Light*. 2001: Faber & Faber

Heaney elaborates on this as follows:

“some cures can be coerced – by operations, by antibiotics and the like, but there are others that occur slightly mysteriously - through the intervention of a healer or a doctor or a prayer. The good that poetry does is akin to that kind of intervention”.

Stepping Stones - interviews with Seamus Heaney by Dennis O’ Driscoll. 2008: Faber and Faber. p. 388

Seamus Heaney 1939 – 2013

Nobel Prize for Poetry 1995

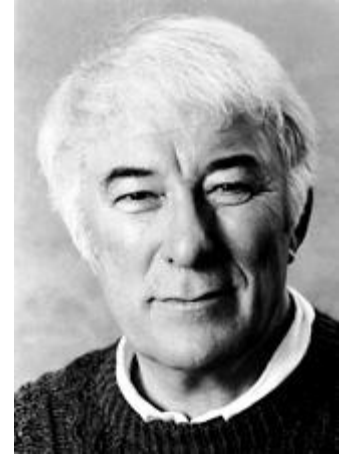
Publications include:

Some 12 collections of Poetry

5 Prose works

including *Stepping Stones* (with Dennis O'Driscoll)

2 Plays



Seamus Heaney

Male Chart

13 Apr 1939, Thu

11:30 GMT +0:00

Castledawson

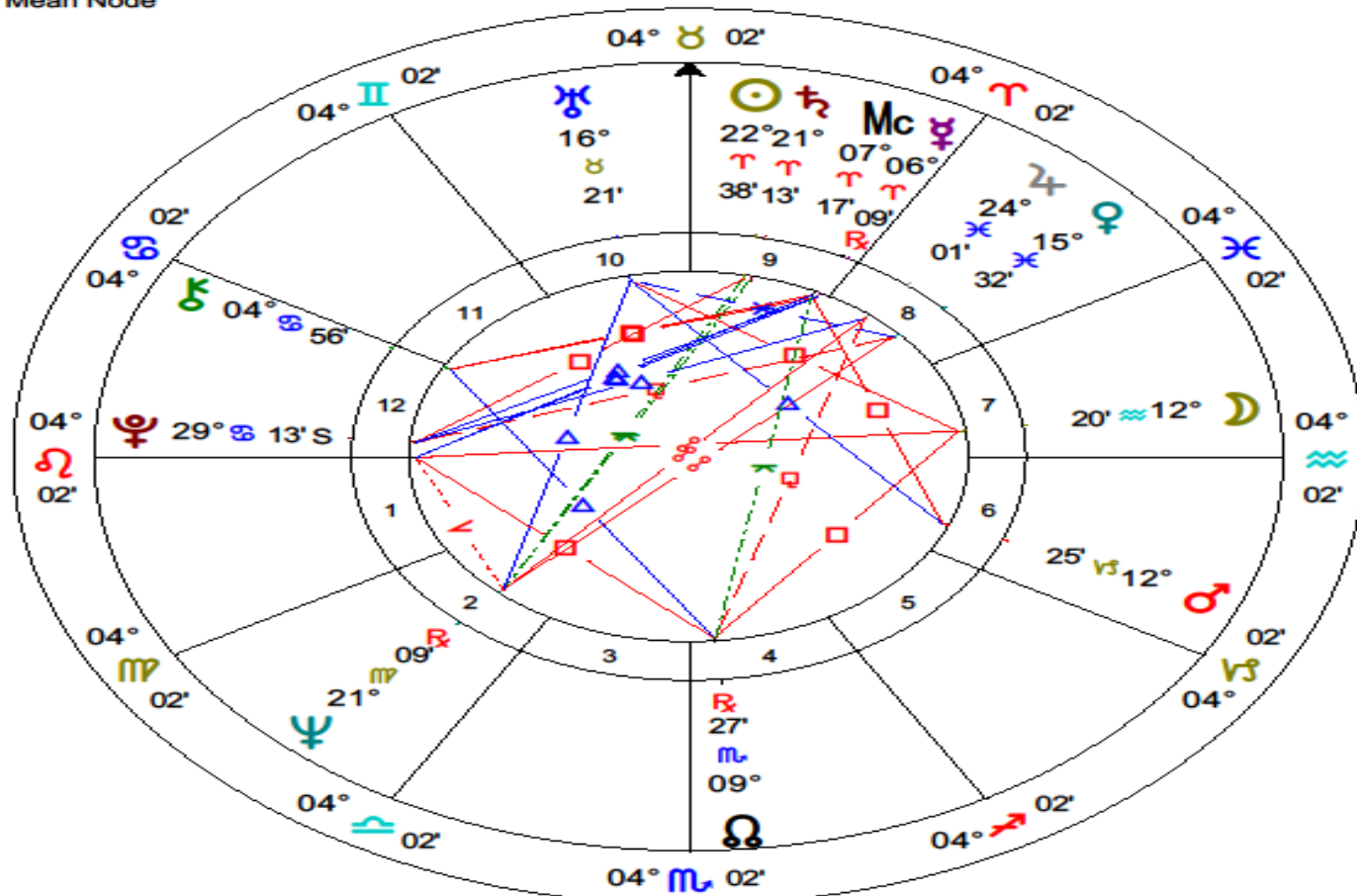
54°N47' 006°W33'

Geocentric

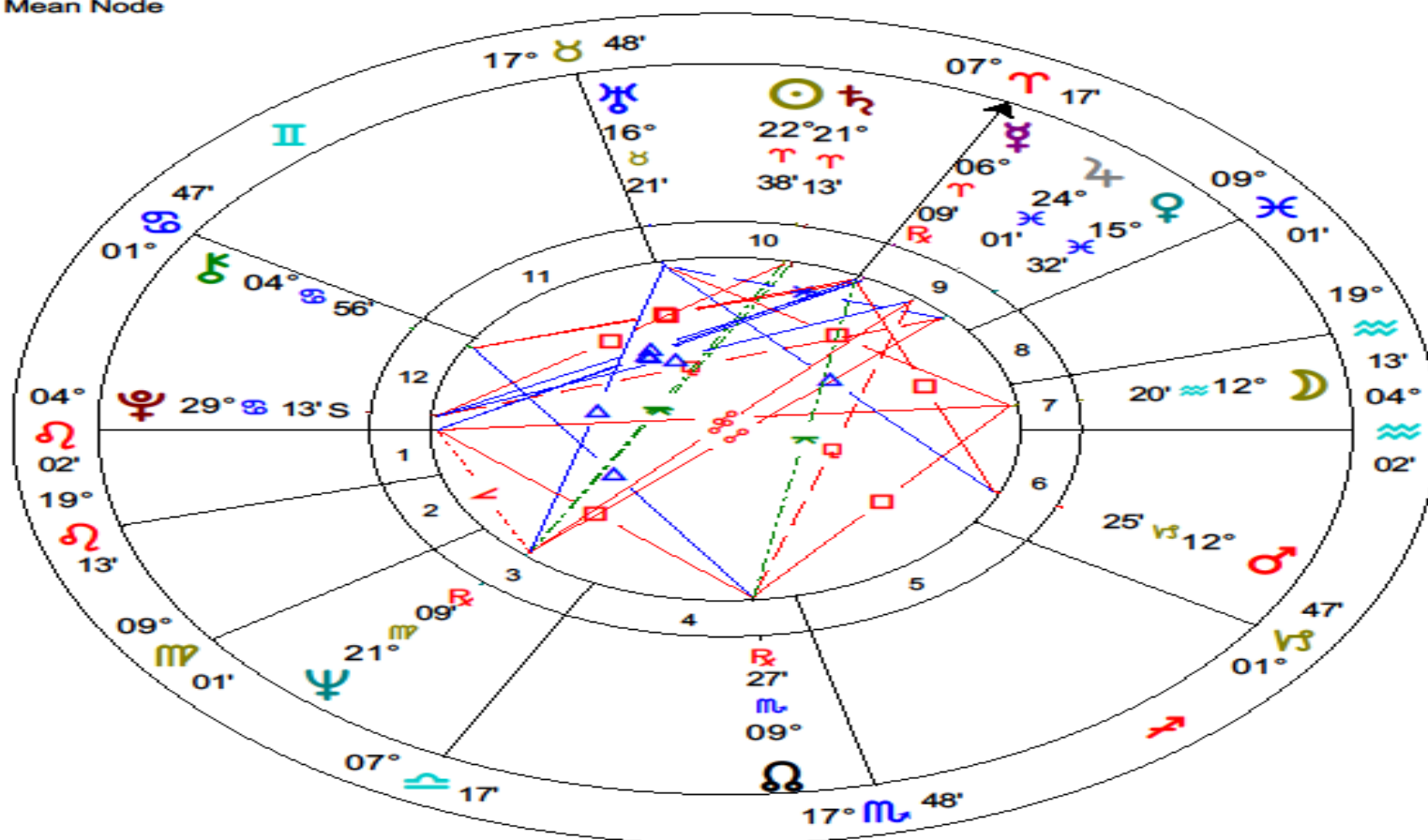
Tropical

Equal

Mean Node



Seamus Heaney
 Male Chart
 13 Apr 1939, Thu
 11:30 GMT +0:00
 Castledawson
 54°N47' 006°W33'
 Geocentric
 Tropical
 Placidus
 Mean Node



This chart is the one used by Julia Savage in her 2013 article on the Faculty website. The MO position in it would place Heaney's VE, his Libran IC ruler, close (orb $1^{\circ}57'$) to his direct SO/MO mid-point at 15 Pl 32.

The significance of Heaney's IC for his work will be well known to any of you familiar with his poetry, his early home and native place being a wellspring for his work and remaining very dear to his heart all his life.

This is borne out in any case by Heaney's own words:

“The early-in-life experience has been central to me alright.The amount of sensory material stored up or stored down in the brain's and body's systems is inestimable”.

Stepping Stones - interviews with Seamus Heaney by Dennis O'Driscoll. 2008: Faber & Faber. p.58

Heaney had this to say of his friendship with Ted Hughes:

“He was the one who fortified me the most, the most intuitive about what I worked from and how I worked. ... There was something **foundational** (my emphasis) about my relationship with him. I felt secured by his work and by his way of being in the world and that gave the friendship a dimension that was supra-personal”.

Stepping Stones - interviews with Seamus Heaney by Dennis O'Driscoll. 2008 Faber and Faber. p.395

Some general observations on chart

- Sun, Mars, Venus, all in signs of their exhaltation and Jupiter in sign it rules
- All 4 elements are represented by personal planets, with fire and water dominating*.

*Charles Carter has said that “Imagination proper, in the sense that we use the word when speaking of poetic or artistic imagination, is strongest in the fiery and watery signs, especially the latter...” . (Charles Carter. *An Encyclopaedia of Psychological Astrology*. 1954. 4th edition. London: Theosophical Publishing House p.100)

Correspondences to two astrological themes in particular strongly reflected in Heaney's work:

Mars/Arian theme coloured by a SA/CP one

NE/Piscean theme with NE in opp. to JU con VE in PI

“The central struggle in Heaney's work has been to
**“make space in reckoning and imagining for the
marvellous as well as for the murderous”** Peter Sirr from
In Step with what Escaped Me– the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

Heaney states, speaking of his own work: **“The
essential for doing a poem is either entrancement or
focus, which equals enjoyment.**What is important
for the doer is the quality of the attention, the “habits
of meditation”. *Stepping Stones - interviews with Seamus Heaney*
by Dennis O'Driscoll. Faber & Faber. 2008 p.451

Importance of the **Mars** theme is fairly self-evident in the chart:

SO, ME and SA all in Aries

Aries SO as chart ruler

MA itself as MC ruler and

SO and MA exalted in their respective signs.

Strong Neptune/Piscean theme

Natal NE rx = 21 VI 09 just slightly outside the 1° orb of exact opposition to the mid-point of the JU/VE conjunction, well situated in NE-ruled PI. Due to n. NE's ret. motion it was in fact within the 1° orb from age 20 onwards. Liz Greene* has said of **JU and NE contacts** “**this aspect, if it can be contained by a solid ego-structure, can be of enormous value to any individual working in the arts.**” (using the word ego here in a psycho-analytic or Jungian sense rather than a pejorative sense). I think the SO con SA disposed of by MA in CP suggests considerable containment and support from the ego in this chart. (*Liz Greene. *The Astrological Neptune and the Quest for Redemption*. 1996: Samuel Weiser Inc. p.435)

“Throughout his writing career he drew terrific metaphors and images from an extraordinary range of physical work practices”. Roy Foster in *A Luminous Emptiness* p. 96 of *Irish Pages*

e.g.

- *Digging* from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)
- *The Forge* from *Door into the Dark* (1969)
- *The Stone Grinder* from *The Haw Lantern* (1987)
- *The Pitchfork* from *Seeing Things* (1991)
- *The Harrow Pin, The Turnip Snedder, Poet to Blacksmith, Midnight Anvil* from *District and Circle* (2006).

The Pitchfork*

Of all the implements, the pitchfork was the one
That came near to an imagined perfection:
When he tightened his raised hand and aimed
with it,
It felt like a javelin, accurate and light.

So whether he played the warrior or the athlete
Or worked in earnest in the chaff and sweat,
He loved its grain of tapering, dark flecked ash
Grown satiny from its own natural polish.

*Seamus Heaney in *Seeing Things*. 1991. Faber & Faber.

The Pitchfork* (last 2 verses)

And then when he thought of probes that reached
the farthest,
He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past
Evenly, imperturbably through space,
Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless –

But has learned at last to follow that simple lead
Past its own aim, out to an other side,
Where perfection – or nearness to it – is imagined
Not in the aiming but the opening hand.

*Seamus Heaney in *Seeing Things*. 1991. Faber & Faber.

“Nostalgia is a risk here. The counterbalance comes in a yogic stretch that reaches forward even as it reaches back. **It is a warrior pose** (*my emphasis*) and it is perfectly aligned in *The Pitchfork*”.*

*Weiner Joshua in *Heaney’s Opening Hand in Poetry Ireland Review*. Issue 113: 2014. ed. Vona Groarke p.107

Shades of the 6th house MA in CP and the SO
conjunct SA in Aries in the following poem:

Scaffolding*

Masons when they start upon a building,
Are careful to test out the scaffolding;
Make sure that planks won't slip at busy points,
Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.
And yet all this comes down when the job's done
Showing off walls of sure and solid stone.
So if, my dear, there sometimes seems to be
Old bridges breaking between you and me
Never fear. We can let the scaffolds fall
Confident that we have built our wall.

*Seamus Heaney in *Death of a Naturalist*. 1996: Faber and Faber.

Neptune/Pisces – another astrological symbol whose correspondences permeate Heaney's work.

In the words of Liz Greene **“NE's vocabulary is that of water”**. (*Liz Greene. *The Astrological Neptune and the Quest for Redemption*. 1996: Samuel Weiser Inc. p.3)

In poems with varying themes, Heaney draws heavily on images of water, rivers, lakes, sea, wells, and associated things such as fishing and ships.

“I was at home on the water in all kinds of ways”

“Inside my 68 year old arm there's a totally enlivened 12 year old one feeling the bite. And that is enough for a lifetime of poems”. *Stepping Stones – interviews with Seamus Heaney* by Dennis O'Driscoll. 2008. Faber & Faber. p.95

Personal Helicon*

As a child they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.

I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

Last verse

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime
To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing

*Seamus Heaney in *Death of a Naturalist*. 1966: Faber & Faber.

Even in the poem *“In the Attic”* from his last collection *The Human Chain* (2010) – a poem about aging, fragility and end-of-life, Heaney uses the imagery of sea and ships. He starts the poem by drawing on imagery from *Treasure Island*
“like Jim Hawkins aloft in the cross trees
Of Hispaniola

Skippping to verse IV

As I age and blank on names
As my uncertainty on stairs
Is more and more the lightheadedness
Of a cabin boy’s first time on the rigging.
As the memorable bottoms out into the irretrievable,
Its not that I can’t imagine still
That slight ontoward rupture and world-tilt
As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed.

The Gutteral Muse*

Late summer, and at midnight
I smelt the heat of the day:
At my window over the hotel carpark
I breathed the muddied night airs off the lake
And watched the young crowd leave the
discotheque.

Their voices rose up thick and comforting
As oily bubbles the feeding tench sent up

* Seamus Heaney in *Field Work*. 1979. Faber & Faber

The Gutteral Muse (cont)*

That evening at dusk – the slimy tench
Once called the “doctor fish” because his slime
Was said to heal the wounds of fish that
touched it.

A girl in a white dress
Was being courted out among the cars:
As her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs
I felt like some old pike all badged with sores
Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed
life.

* Seamus Heaney in *Field Work*. 1979. Faber & Faber

When all the others were away at Mass
*from Clearances 3**

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of cold water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our
senses.

*Seamus Heaney in *The Haw Lantern*. 1987: Faber & Faber.

When all the others were away at Mass
*from Clearances 3 (cont.)**

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the
dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

* Seamus Heaney in *The Haw Lantern*. 1987: Faber & Faber.

Titles of poetry collections:

- *Station Island* 1984
- *The Haw Lantern* 1987
- *Seeing Things* 1991
- *The Spirit Level* 1996
- *Electric Light* 2001

5 of titles of 12 poetry collections call up Neptunian imagery with the last mentioned also having a Uranian flavour.

“Poetry is the ratification of the impulse towards transcendence”.

Stepping Stones - interviews with Seamus Heaney. Dennis O'Driscoll. 2008. Faber & Faber. p.470



“Water says ‘My place here is in dream,
In quiet good standing. Like a sleeping stream,
Come rain or sullen shine I’m peacable’.”

from *Banks of a Canal* by Seamus Heaney 2013 (inspired by picture *Banks of a Canal near Naples* by Gustav Caillebotte c.1872)

Incidentally Heaney’s NE is on Caillebotte’s NN, his SO is on Caillebotte’s UR, his JU is on Caillebotte’s SA, and his NN is on Caillebotte’s VE/MA.

We don’t know Caillebotte’s birth time but a noon chart gives his MO at 27 AR.

Speaking of how he chose the theme *The Redress of Poetry* for his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry 1989-94 Heaney states:

“When the phrase the ‘redress of poetry’ swam up I myself was aswim with possibilities. I suddenly realised that I could talk about poetry as something hung out on the imaginative arm of the scales to balance or redress the burden of the actual and the endured. I don’t mean as compensation or as consolation more as comprehension, a comprehension which has to be its own reward”.

From Stepping Stones – interviews with Seamus Heaney by Dennis O’ Driscoll, 2008. Faber & Faber p. 431

I think many astrologers could identify with this perspective as also relevant to their own discipline.

“Such an operation does not intervene in the actual but by offering consciousness a chance to recognise its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. It offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect on the human spirit”

Seamus Heaney in *The Redress of Poetry*, London: Faber & Faber 1995. p.2

I think astrology at its best could be well described in a similar way.

Fintan O'Toole writes* of how Heaney, in the context of the place and time he was born,

“struggled with contradictions, paradoxes and conflicting impulses”.“His genius lay in his ability to hover between them, to give each side of a political or emotional equation its full weight and proper due without becoming the prisoner of either” **“Heaney humanised uncertainty, made ambiguity rich with possibilities”.**

*Fintan O'Toole in an obituary entitled *The Great Citizen* p. 105 of *Irish Pages – Heaney Memorial Issue*. Vol.8, No.2. 2014. eds. Chris Agee and Cathal O Searcaigh.

O'Toole* points out that Heaney himself “put it in the beautifully homely metaphor of *Terminus* from *The Haw Lantern* (1987)

**“Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between”.**

Perhaps as we grapple in our own discipline with the issues of whether and to what extent astrology is an art and /or a science it may be a useful metaphor on which to reflect.

*Fintan O'Toole in an obituary entitled *The Great Citizen* p. 105 of *Irish Pages – Heaney Memorial Issue*. Vol.8, No.2. 2014. eds. Chris Agee and Cathal O Searcaigh.