



Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics

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Nobel Prize winning Irish writer Seamus Heaney has been an ambitious critic as well as poet, publishing five books of literary criticism in the four decades of his career. This book surveys his critical essays, setting forth Heaney's poetics--his concept of what poetry should be and what its uses are--and relating them to his practice as a poet.

The first full-length study of Heaney's poetics, *Professing Poetry* explores Heaney's unusual concept of influence and the various ways in which Heaney interacts with other writers. It shows how Heaney, writing brilliantly about others, establishes quiet partnerships with them. It shows as well how he sometimes resists writers, sometimes misrepresenting them and even himself in the process. The book returns frequently to Heaney's anxiety about poetry's justification, to his wariness of the politicizing of poetry, and to his spirited and eloquent defense of what he calls poetry's "redress." Heaney wants to "make sense" of poetry in the context of the modern world, but he feels the pull of contradictory opinions. Poetry, he sometimes thinks, should immerse us in the world. At other times Heaney thinks it redeems us by putting us at a distance from the world.

Professing Poetry aspires to a simple language described by Heaney in *Finders Keepers* as one in which "there will be no gap between the professional idiom and the personal recognition." The study considers Heaney's relations with Robert Lowell, Dante, Philip Larkin, Patrick Kavanagh, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michael Cavanagh is Orville and Mary Patterson Rount Professor of Literature at Grinnell College.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK:

"Michael Cavanagh's *Professing Poetry* accomplishes the laudable task showing for the first time how pervasively and complexly the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney's critical work has been informed by the majestic shades of the poet's personal canon, and how much in turn they have helped to shape the evolution of his poetry. This book, at once astute, readable, and well organized, is a significant contribution to the field of Heaney studies."--Daniel Tobin, Professor and Chair of the Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing, Emerson College

"Cavanagh knows Heaney's criticism and poetry inside-and-out, and he does an admirable job of discussing the influence of other writers on Heaney's poetry and criticism. While numerous critical studies of Heaney exist, Cavanagh's book is the first to bring Heaney's essays out from the wings to center stage."--Henry Hart, The College of William and Mary

"Cavanagh's elegant yet plain-spoken parsing of Seamus Heaney's prose in defense of poetry, and of poets, puts Cavanagh into the fine company of the leading American scholars of Heaney's poetry--Rand Brandes, Henry Hart, Helen Vendler, and Daniel Tobin. In *Professing Poetry*, Cavanagh empathetically explores Heaney's wavering confidences in the poets who have shaped our reading life in the twentieth century. Never doctrinaire or pretentious, Cavanagh's chapters read and reread Heaney's essays remaining mindful, as Heaney always does, that their assurances and affiliations point us toward understanding the services and satisfactions of poetry and, in particular, of Heaney's poetry."--Thomas Dillon Redshaw, Editor Emeritus, *New Hibernia Review*

"The true value of a critical study is not only the insights the author brings to the work, but also the insight it makes possible in future studies. *Professing Poetry* meets both of these critical standards. This is a book many of us have been waiting for, a book on Heaney's prose that will enable the next generation of Heaney students and scholars to discover new constellations in Heaney's universe and to set off on new journeys of their own. Cavanagh has the intelligence, breadth of knowledge, and mo



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