

Writer & Righter

By Seamus Heaney

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equal in dignity
and rights. They
are endowed
with reason
& conscience
& should act
towards one
another in a spirit
of brotherhood.

Preface

As one of Ireland's most distinguished poets and prominent advocates for human rights, we invited Seamus Heaney to give our fourth Annual Human Rights Lecture. We considered it an honour when he accepted our invitation.

The theme Seamus Heaney chose was the relevance of poetry in times of societal upheaval and unrest. Was it ethical to create poetry when a country or people were in turmoil? Was it 'right on' to 'write on'? He particularly highlighted the differences between the sedentary w-r-i-t-e-r-s and the pro-active r-i-g-h-t-e-r-s, the former whose job it is to reflect and the latter whose role it is to take action.

The literary traditions of this country illustrate to us that writers have always 'written on' in times of turmoil. They have, as so eloquently described in his lecture, suffered with the sufferers. Those of us who work every day for human rights know the inspiration which writers can give us. Their powerful observations allow us to reflect in ways which would otherwise not be possible. Seamus Heaney has, throughout his career, shown us how a w-r-i-t-e-r can be a r-i-g-h-t-e-r. One of the clearest examples is *From the Republic of Conscience*, which is one of the most inspirational poems in support of human rights ever written. The simplicity and power of the poem; the idea that the visitor to this Republic became a dual-citizen and representative to speak on behalf of the Republic, which has embassies everywhere, operating independently, and from which no ambassador can be relieved.

When thinking about this poem, it brought home to me the sense of responsibility that stirs all of us to act to uphold human rights. It represents the idea that once you become aware of your rights, and the rights of others, you cannot but be a representative for them. You cannot sit idly by and let the rights of others be eroded or abused. It is in this way that writers both inspire righters, and are righters themselves.

Seamus Heaney's work rouses us to press forward with renewed energy. Indeed, we were so moved by his words that night in December we wanted to share the insight of this writer and righter by publishing it. His lecture, given on the eve of Human Rights Day 2009, is a unique contribution to the canon of literature on human rights. We wish to thank him for this inspirational and visceral piece of work which spurs all of us on to take action in the defence of human rights.



Maurice Manning
President
Human Rights Commission

Writer & Righter

Fourth IHRC Annual
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It's an honour to give this important lecture, yet to follow speakers as highly respected and qualified as President Mary McAleese and Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg is also something of a test. But then it's always a test for somebody who practises what Yeats called the 'sedentary trade' of writing to stand up and address people who are active in the practical, principled, courageous work of defending human rights. What I experience on these occasions is something like defensiveness, a need to justify the good of the imaginative work done by writers, a need to affirm the value of their particular contribution when faced with the more obviously focused effort of the lawyer taking a case or the aid worker keeping going on the ground or the advocate writing a report on human rights abuses and injustices.

So when my respected friend Michael Farrell approached me to speak on this occasion I hesitated - because it struck me that Michael himself would be a better man for the job. For a start, he has far more knowledge and experience in the area of human rights than I have, but that is not his only entitlement. He is also a man with a deeply cultivated literary sensibility – something I've been aware of ever since he was a student in a tutorial I taught in the Queen's University English Department forty years ago. In the meantime, Michael's intelligence has been at the service of people less gifted than himself, exposed to what the poet John Keats called a world of pain and troubles. And his compassionate response to that world produced a result that can be described in Keats's terms also: his intelligence has been schooled into becoming a soul, (1) the soul of a conscience-bound individual, passionate, intellectual and answerable; and in that respect he is admirably representative of the values that motivate and sustain every endeavour and every member of the Irish Human Rights Commission.

The work of the Commission is worthy of the highest praise, especially at this moment when economic downturn weighs most cruelly upon the under-represented and the underprivileged. The Commission's endeavours to keep the country's conscience informed are constant, extensive and urgent, something I discovered when I read a catalogue of the reports and observations it has submitted to the Government in the past few months. To name only a few of the topics listed on its website is to realize how vigilant and indispensable the Commission is proving itself to be. Things it has reported on recently include, for example, the determination of life sentences, the human rights compliance of the Garda Síochána and safeguarding the rights of migrant workers and their families; it has also published observations on the Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill (2008), made submissions to the Government on the protection of rights of transgendered persons, on women's rights in Ireland and the conventions for the elimination of discrimination against women, on racial discrimination, on Travellers' rights. And that is only a fraction of the reports and submissions and observations listed.

In the course of preparing for this lecture, I came to realize how necessary and admirable a part the Commission plays in our public life, north and south, how many committed people are at work on behalf of the vulnerable and the exploited. Each and every one of these individuals is helping to maintain what we might call the immunity system of the body politic. More obviously than writers, who are also part of that immunity system, human rights workers contribute to the good health of society at local, national and international level; their endeavours are noble and indispensable, even if they cannot guarantee that the noxious conditions they are fighting will be defeated or won't recur.

The great web that unites those local, national and international endeavours has thirty meshes and each of those meshes is woven into and woven out of the document which we celebrate again this evening, the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sixty years ago this promulgation made an immense difference to the work of each and every person and indeed nation striving for justice and equality, and each and every person and nation suffering injustice and inequality. In ratifying the principles articulated in the Declaration, the governments of the world gave epoch-making sanction to the human need for fairness and natural justice, and in doing so they strengthened the moral standing of international law. Even if the articles of the Declaration are not legally binding, there is immense potency in the cogent, simple language in which they are framed, as is evident in the all-encompassing first Article:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

On two occasions recently I have heard Mary Robinson argue with great force that the keyword here is dignity, the dignity of the individual, that dignity which is the basis of his or her self-respect and inner freedom at a personal level, and the basis of his or her right to fair treatment and democratic representation at a political level. And behind the primary words and sentiments of that first article, of course, you can hear the echoes of many of the great foundational texts of western civilization, from Sophocles' paeon to the wonders of man in the famous Chorus in his *Antigone*, through Christ's Sermon on the Mount, right on up to the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.

These documents did undoubtedly lay the foundation for the moral consensus which the Declaration embodies, but the imaginative work of individual creative writers has been equally influential and ameliorating in the formation of human consciousness. One can point to the mighty classics, to Shakespeare's King Lear on the heath coming to a realization of other poor naked wretches abiding the fury of the storm, a realization that the human being, king or beggar, in robes or in rags, is just another poor bare forked animal; or one can remember Dante's mighty affirmation of the privileges and elevated destiny of the our species in the words he gives to Ulysses in the 36th Canto of *The Inferno*:

**Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatte non foste a vivere come bruti
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.**

(*Inferno*, XXVI 118-120)

**Remember who you are, what you were made for;
Not to live like brutes, but for the quest
Of knowledge and the good. (2)**

In this episode of *The Divine Comedy*, Ulysses is urging his crew to sail with him beyond the borders of the known world, and in doing so he becomes one of the great voices speaking on behalf of human dignity and human spirit, a representative of the capacity of our species to transcend the boundaries of pettiness and self-interest.

These, as I say, are the classic voices, all of them fundamental to the evolution and maintenance of a more equitable and civilized world. And in their wake, right down to the present, the work of writers has been crucial in keeping alive conscience and the spirit of freedom not only within the individual psyche but also in the collective mind of nations and peoples. Everybody will have his or her own pantheon of such exemplary literary figures, from local heroes like the Oscar Wilde of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* or the Brendan Behan of *The Quare Fellow*; or the English poets of the First World War who exposed what Wilfred Owen called 'the old lie' that war is a noble and ennobling aspect of life; or further afield, the great tragic generation of Russian poets and novelists who paid dearly in the cause of truth telling and soul saving during the terror of the Stalin years, people like Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn; or again the poets and artists who wrote under Soviet surveillance in post-war Eastern Europe, in Poland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary and Romania, people like Vaclav Havel and Wisława Szymborska, Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz.

The achievement and example of such writers operate on later writers in much the same way as the achievement and example of human rights workers. They hover at the back of the mind as a pressure, awakening that anxiety I mentioned earlier, the need to justify the value of one's own literary work, make it a rebuttal of the well-known line by W.H. Auden where he avers that poetry makes nothing happen. So what I want to talk about in the rest of the lecture is that need for justification which writers feel when faced with a world of pain and troubles and how the need gets fulfilled. I want to talk about the reality of what the Italian poet Eugenio Montale once called 'the second life of art', something he equated with arts

**obscure pilgrimage through the conscience and memory...
Its entire flowing back into the very life from which it took
its first nourishment. (3)**

I'm going to talk about the reality of that obscure pilgrimage of poetry through memory and conscience and the way it flows back into the life from which

it arises and takes its nourishment, its re-emergence, as Montale puts it elsewhere, into 'the life of everyday circulation'.

I begin from the premise that human rights advocates and workers can be described in the words John Keats once used to describe true poets: like poets, they are to be distinguished from mere dreamers because they are 'Those to whom the miseries of the world/Are misery, and will not let them rest.' (4) But I begin also with that old familiar unease which I always feel before an audience that includes the doers rather than the discourses, people more active on a daily basis in the courts of law than in the courts of poetry, people who would incline to spell the word writer with the letters r-i-g-h-t-e-r rather than the letters w-r-i-t-e-r.

My concern, therefore, is with the serious question posed by that bit of word-play: the question whether it is 'right on', in the faded old idiom of the Sixties Californian counter culture, whether it is 'right on' to write on, as the term is usually understood by an author, to write on for the sheer joy of it in face of the miseries of the world. Whether, to put it another way, ethical obligation shadows the aesthetical vocation. Whether more is expected of poets than that they be what Arthur O'Shaughnessy called them over a century ago, the music makers and the dreamers of dreams.

'All I have is a voice': my text is taken from W.H. Auden's epoch-making poem, 'September 1 1939' which he wrote after the Nazis invaded Poland, on the day that Britain declared war on the Reich. (5) This was the work of a young English poet who had arrived in New York the previous year and was in the process of settling down to a life among the bohemians and intelligentsia of that city, a poet who had been something of a 1930's culture hero back at home, a star in the literary and political firmament, an author who had not only delivered a poem in support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, but had gone to Spain and worked, albeit briefly, as an ambulance driver. He could therefore be seen as a writer in both the r and the w categories. But on the eve of the war, this leftist had left in earnest, had sailed west to New York with his American lover, Chester Kallman. Eros had triumphed over England and engagement. So now, a few months later, as he sits in one of the dives on 52nd Street, the revolutionary prodigy is being portrayed in the old country as somebody who has broken ranks in the country's hour of need, somebody who has run away. The media darling has been cast as a deserter - and so the slight note of defensiveness to be heard in Auden's line is entirely understandable: 'All I have is a voice'.

Yet even if he had stayed at home in England at that drastic historical moment, Auden would not have been immune to anxiety about the worth of his calling. The defensiveness he was feeling is one that all poets experience at moments of great national crisis or when faced with the spectacle of great injustice. Consider, for example, what the literary historian Samuel Hynes has to say about the pressure that Auden's friend and contemporary, the poet Stephen Spender was subject to in the 1930s. Hynes speaks of 'the pressure of public life upon

the private, the sense of immediate history as an aggressor against private man.' And he goes on, 'External events, if they are dire enough – a war, or the collapse of a society – challenge the value of private acts, and put the personal life to the test...' But when this private man

is a poet, and the private act that he values is writing a poem, then a crisis in society becomes a literary problem. Is the role of the poet a defensible one in such a time? And if it is, what sort of a poem should he write? Is the traditionally private content of lyric poetry, for example, appropriate to a time of public distress? In a situation that seems to demand action, can any poem be a sufficient act? These are all questions that imaginative writers faced throughout the thirties... (6)

But not only throughout the thirties, throughout the centuries: in Virgil's Rome, in Joyce's and Yeats's Ireland, in Boris Pasternak's Russia and Czesław Miłosz's Poland. In fact, it is the sagacious Miłosz who provides one of the most cogent statements of the problem in lines written at the end of the war. At this stage, Miłosz had survived the Nazi occupation in Warsaw, had published in underground journals of the Resistance and had witnessed the death of many of his most gifted contemporaries in the Warsaw Uprising. He had been left to carry on with his vocation in a devastated Poland, in the aftermath of massacre and holocaust and obliteration, in a state of mind that has come to be known as survivor guilt, yet he would live on to write some of the greatest poetry of the post-war period in Europe. And the greatness of the poetry came partly from the fact that he was tormented by a question which he put to himself and answered as follows:

**What is poetry that does not save
Nations or peoples?
A connivance with official lies.
The song of drunkards whose throats are about to be cut. (7)**

The challenge here is delivered first and foremost to the poet himself, and is all the more sombre because it arises from an awareness of poetry's frailty in the face of the atrocious. A Molotov cocktail provides more immediate and potent resistance to the invaders of your nation than a lyric about its landscapes. In fact, an even more drastic statement of poetry's inadequacy in the face of the horrors of the war and the Holocaust became current when Theodor Adorno famously contended that after Auschwitz poetry was not only no longer possible, it was hardly even admissible. Yet when you hear a poem like the one I'm going to read now by Primo Levi, you incline to value Miłosz's plea for redemptive utterance over Adorno's proscription of utterance itself. Primo Levi, of course, survived not only the war but more heroically still, the death camp at Auschwitz, and his prose account of this ordeal reveals him as a man of extraordinary personal courage and enduring spirit, possessed of a canny knowledge of human nature and a profound cultural resource. The poem is entitled Shema and it goes as follows:

**You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:**

**Consider whether this be a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.**

**Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from the sun. (8)**

This poem is also about human dignity and human rights, about the need for human solidarity, but its expression is in a very different register from the language of the Universal Declaration. It is a poem of mighty rhetorical and emotional power, beginning with a note of implied accusation and ending with a potential curse, commanding attention because of its repeated imperatives - Consider, consider, consider, engrave, repeat - but commanding also because of its agonized awareness of human cruelty and human suffering. The poem, that is to say, has moral *as well* as rhetorical force and much of this moral authority derives from the fact that it is spoken with and from experience. It is the speech of one who has been tested and not found wanting, a work where the etymological relationship between the words 'author' and 'authority' is more than usually intimate and fortifying. It belongs to a category of writing which gained painful and necessary prominence in the Twentieth Century and which is now generally known as the literature of witness, a genre which admits those works I mentioned earlier, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the poetry of the First World War, Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, Vaclav Havel's *Letters to Olga* and many, many more.

All of these works were written to protest and protect human dignity and human rights. Though most were composed after the Universal Declaration was published, none of them appeals to it. Nevertheless, while their subject is the survival of the individual spirit and the dignity of the individual human being, they still address themselves to matters of common public concern, to the *res publica*, to the cruelty of regimes and the oppression of nations and peoples, and their authors would agree to a greater or lesser extent with the instruction implicit in the words of Miłosz. So it came as a surprise when I heard another great literary witness declare something which seemed at first a direct contradiction of Miłosz. This was a very defiant statement by the poet Joseph Brodsky who once said to me in conversation, 'if art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private.'

Brodsky was a Russian poet who lived a kind of bohemian literary life in Leningrad in the late 1950s and early 60s, refusing any affiliation to state literary organizations within the Soviet Union, so inevitably he was charged with being a social parasite. At his trial he went so far as to say that he believed his poet's vocation came from God rather than the state, was consequently found guilty and served his sentence in a work camp near Archangel. Eventually then, in 1972, he was exiled and ended up in the United States. So you will understand he was a man with an acute awareness of issues of human rights and human dignity, and a hard earned knowledge of the price of his soul. But still, he made that bold assertion: 'If art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private.'

At first this might seem to abscond from responsibility to the human community and constitute a blatant contradiction of the appeal for poetic action on behalf of nations and peoples; and it will seem even more so if I remind you of that still more vehement sound bite that Joseph contributed when he visited Dublin in the 1980s and was interviewed for *Magill* by Fintan O'Toole. 'The only thing poetry and politics have in common', he averred on that occasion, 'is the letter p and the letter o.' (9) Nevertheless, Joseph was not a man to abdicate from the poet's responsibility to his fellow men and women. He believed steadfastly in poetry's ability to work to good emotional and spiritual effect within each individual. 'The real enemy,' he would say, 'is the vulgarity of the human heart,' and he believed poetry to be the enemy of that vulgarity. Poetry, however, was not in the business of mass education. It was not there to brainwash people. Instead, Joseph equated it with that which is heard at a profound level on the individual's inner ear, that which is truly h-e-a-r-d as opposed to that which is a mass produced message directed at the h-e-r-d.

Because of his experience of the totalitarian system in action, Brodsky had a deeply ingrained fear not just of political propaganda, but of writing that too ardently supported causes, even good causes. He had seen Pegasus, the winged horse of inspiration, reduced to a heavy-footed didactic plod, had seen the sky-roamer reduced to the job of promoting the dictatorship of the proletariat and enforcing the idea of historical necessity. Brodsky disdained the language of politics because he connected it with herdspeak, with what Miłosz called

'connivance with official lies', with the subsuming of the individual into the mass, and a consequent stifling of inner freedom, an undermining of the individual's dignity and integrity. Hence another of his peremptory pregnant *ex cathedra* utterances: 'The only defence against evil,' he once said, 'is complete originality.'

Poetry, in his understanding, was the sponsor of that originality, and as a result of that sponsorship poetry was an agent of human liberty and human rights. And in adopting this position Brodsky was at one with another great servant of liberty, the French Algerian novelist Albert Camus. In his Nobel acceptance speech in 1957, Camus stated his belief in the writer's role as follows: 'The writer's role,' he said,

is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it. Otherwise, he will be alone and deprived of his art. Not all the armies of tyranny with their millions of men will free him from this isolation, even and particularly if he falls into step with them. But the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliations at the other end of the world, is enough to draw the writer out of his exile, at least whenever, in the midst of the privileges of freedom, he manages not to forget that [prisoner's] silence, and to transmit it in order to make it resound by means of his art. (10)

Again, Camus is talking about having a voice and having an obligation to use it, an obligation to remember, in the midst of the privileges of freedom, the silence of the imprisoned one and to draw it out, send it on its obscure pilgrimage through memory and conscience. But as with all artists, the aesthetic remains for him a primary consideration, and he is unashamed and inspiring in his readiness to speak of beauty as an agent of human solidarity. He writes, for example, 'The artist forges himself to others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from'; and again, the artist does his work 'not ceasing to be divided between sorrow and beauty, and devoted finally to drawing out from his double existence the creations that he obstinately tries to erect in the destructive movement of history.' (11)

Camus' artist, as was usual in the discourse of that era, is spoken of as a 'he', a man, but as I move towards a conclusion, I want you to hear a poem by a woman, one which fully answers Camus' high expectations that the writer be on the side of those who suffer history. This is a poem entitled 'Tortures' by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, one which I quoted recently in an introduction to a book published by Amnesty. It manages not to forget the silence of the prisoner in his cell at the end of the world, or perhaps better say the cries of that prisoner in the torture chamber. It is caught between the sorrow of its subject and the beauty with which the subject is rendered, midway between that beauty the poet cannot do without and the human community she cannot tear herself away from.

The problem for a poet dealing with a subject like torture is how to make the reader experience the subject anew, how to break through all we assume we know in order to get to some deeper truth that has always been there, waiting to be revealed. But on its way to that revelation, Szyborska's poem about torture deals first with what we all know already:

**Nothing has changed.
The body is a reservoir of pain;
it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep;
it has thin skin and the blood is just beneath it;
it has a good supply of teeth and fingernails;
its bones can be broken; its joints can be stretched.
In tortures, all of this is considered.**

**Nothing has changed.
The body still trembles as it trembled
before Rome was founded and after,
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.
Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk
and whatever goes on sounds as if it's just a room away.**

....

**Nothing has changed.
Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.
The gesture of the hands shielding the head
has nevertheless remained the same.
The body writhes, jerks, and tugs,
falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,
bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.**

**Nothing has changed.
Except the run of rivers,
the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.**

**The little soul roams among those landscapes,
disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,
evasive and a stranger to itself,
now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
whereas the body is and is and is
and has nowhere to go. (12)**

Nothing has
changed.
Except the run
of rivers,
the shapes of
forests, shores,
deserts, &
glaciers.

What this poem manages to do is to end up inverting a truth which has been taken as self-evident for millennia. In all of the great religions it is the soul which is regarded as immortal and certain of its own existence, whereas the mortal body is uncertain, susceptible and unreliable. But here the voice of the poet leads to a different, unexpected, heartbreaking conclusion. By a combination of logical argument, cadenced speech and compassionate understanding she persuades us that it is the little soul which moves away in bewilderment, and that it is the body which has nowhere to go, and therefore endures and 'is and is and is'. Yet by inverting one truth, the poem manages to confirm another that comes home to us now in a new way. It reminds us, to put it in the nutshell of a cliché, that torture breaks the spirit.

Poetry, the American poet Stanley Kunitz has claimed, is

ultimately mythology, the telling of the stories of the soul. This would seem an introverted, even solipsistic, enterprise, if it were not that these stories recount the soul's passage through the valley of this life – that is to say, its adventure in time, in history. (13)

And in order to have effect, in order to live the second life of art within the reader, these stories must first of all be h-e-a-r-d. They must be able to rend the veil of the usual, to pierce below the ambient noise of the world in order to let us hear the news of the world that is usually screened out, censored or otherwise deliberately suppressed. One line in Szyborska's poem says that the world has shrunk and that what goes on sounds as if it is just a room away. But that sound, for a variety of reasons, often does not succeed in reaching us. And very often it is not meant to reach us. I think, for example, of the poet Nikolai Zabolotsky, thrown into a Leningrad prison by the NKVD at the height of the Stalinist terror in 1938. The interrogations, as Zabolotsky reported in a later autobiographical fragment, used to begin at night when the whole multi-storey façade of the building was flooded in a cheerful way with hundreds of lights. Meanwhile,

The vast stone courtyard of the building, overlooked by the open windows of the offices, was filled with the groans and soul-rending screams of men being beaten up...So as to drown out those screams they often stationed heavy lorries in the courtyard with their engines running. (14)

Those running engines can easily stand for the systems and networks of cover-up which allowed the western powers in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to trample down human rights and civilized standards and international law, to perpetrate torture, to proceed with clandestine renditions, with the scandal of Guantanamo, the offences in Abu Ghraib, and a multitude of other locations. In such dire circumstances, a poem like Szyborska's is a kind of moral hearing aid and does help to unscramble the signals, contradict the spin, and let us hear the screams.

Earlier in this talk I made a contrast between those active in the courts of law and those active in the courts of poetry, those for whom the word writer began with an r and those for whom it began with a w. But I hope it is becoming clear that this antithesis was overstated, if not actually specious. The human rights worker and the poet with humanist sympathies are both in their own way concerned with the same thing, or at least with an activity which can be described in the same words, something that could go by the name of staying power. In the case of the human rights worker, staying in the sense of holding out against, keeping secular power at bay and resisting in particular the abuse of it. In the case of the poet, the emphasis is more on staying power as a quality inherent in a literary work, some beauty or truthfulness to life, some awareness that recognizes what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*, all that is tender and all that is tragic in reality.

One final observation. The poet Ted Hughes once said that what distinguishes the work we recognize as poetry from other kinds of literary production is the fact that it arises from what he called 'the ultimate suffering and decision' in us. It is from that same source, I would suggest, that the victims of human rights abuses derive a strength to endure violations and injustices, and equally it is the place to which workers for human rights must often repair in order to draw out of themselves the will to keep up the work. When a poem or literary work touches those deep chords of the individual being, something is strengthened, something bigger and broader than the challenged private self that Samuel Hynes wrote about. An artist whose work is capable of entering the place of ultimate suffering and decision in his or her own being will bring readers to a realization of that same stratum of humanity in themselves. The work will strike them, as John Keats said poetry should strike its readers, as a remembrance, and as it begins its obscure pilgrimage through memory and conscience, the human condition will be registered at a private personal level, yet the experience will involve a sense of common human belonging. And at that moment the art and the artist become allies in the great work of 'saving nations and peoples'.

Seamus Heaney



Footnotes

1. The Letters of John Keats, edited by Maurice Buxton Foreman, Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 336.
2. *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, translated by Ciarán Carson, Granta Books, 2002, p. 184.
3. Eugenio Montale, *The Second Life of Art*, edited and translated by Jonathan Galassi, Ecco Press, 1982, p. 22.
4. John Keats, *Selected Poetry*, edited by John Barnard, Penguin, 1988, p. 202.
5. 'September 1 1939': W. H. Auden first excised the stanza where this line appears and subsequently removed the entire poem from editions of his work.
6. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930's*, Pimlico, 1992.
7. Czeslaw Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001*, Ecco Press, 2001, p. 77.
8. Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, Faber and Faber, 1988, p. 9.
9. Magill Magazine, Dublin, 1 November 1985 p. 40.
10. Albert Camus, Banquet Speech, available [nobelprize.org/nobel prizes/literature](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature).
11. *ibid.*
12. Wisława Szymborska, 'Tortures' in *Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, edited by Barend van der Hiejden and Bahta Tahzib-Lie, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1998, pp.19-20.
13. Stanley Kunitz, 'Speaking of Poetry', *The American Poetry Review*, January/February 2009, Vol 28, No 1, p. 52.
14. Nicolai Zabolotsky, *Selected Poems*, edited by Daniel Weissbort, Carcanet, 1999, p. 210.

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