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POETRY

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*George Szirtes*

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**George Szirtes** was born in Budapest in 1948 and came to England with his family in 1956, after the Hungarian Uprising. He was brought up in London and trained as an artist in Leeds and London. His first book, *The Slant Door*, appeared in 1979 and was joint winner of the *Faber Memorial Prize*. Since then he has published several others including *Reel* (2004), which was awarded the *T S Eliot Prize*, *The Burning of the Books* (2009) and *Bad Machine* (2013), both of which were shortlisted for the same prize. His *New and Collected Poems* appeared in 2008. Selections of his poems have appeared in various languages. He has also spent the last twenty years translating poetry and fiction from the Hungarian, for which he has won several prizes and awards, including most recently the *Best Translated Book Award* in the USA for László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* (2012). He is a *Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature*.

**On Beauty**

I don't know what to do with beauty, with the curled  
lip, with the delicate bones, with the cocked wrist,  
with that sudden sense of being hurled

into a place I have no right to be, as if to exist  
on such ground might be forbidden, allowed  
only a glimpse, then what to do with it? We have missed

the last bus home. We have become detached from the crowd.  
The spirit moves with the body. The mind wakes  
from its dream of weightlessness. The high cloud

forms itself into fantasy. It is an act that takes  
our breath away. I am awake. I lack perfection.  
I am a votary of something at which the hand shakes.

Now to walk. Now to find a route through the fiction  
of becoming. I know I am dying and that my time  
is full of shadows, that there is no protection.

**Dusk**

The dusk closes in  
- inexorably perhaps -  
as words close, and flowers.

We have no words for  
the elemental. Nothing  
serves for dusk. Or night.

We open our hands  
to clutch forms as small as this,  
flotsam, curlicues.

It is like praying  
without gods, without meaning,  
without knowing prayer.

Meanwhile dusk closes  
or night falls. The metaphor starts  
unsaying itself.

Here we are, unsaid.  
The light proceeds on its way.  
It's the way to go.

### **A Hard Day's Night**

From the first chord we knew what we had lost.  
The old landscape was re-adjusting its dress  
but not to cover up the old distress.  
Nothing was predictable. We had crossed  
some threshold and had emerged into a place  
that was ourselves but otherwise. The noise  
itself was new. It strutted a new poise  
with a new haircut and a different face.

We launched out into a world devoid of guilt.  
No army discipline now, the war was done,  
Our fathers were suddenly older, our mothers' bruised  
eyes looked away. Everything they had built  
was ours now. The old rules were confused,  
as was apparent once we had begun.

### **Cliché: Man at a Bar**

We negotiate  
the barren rocks of cliché,  
steering by cliché.

Rocks, whirlpools, sandbanks:  
the metaphors are themselves  
insecure symbols.

Of course the sea, yes,  
the undertow, yes, the drag  
of the tide, the swell

of something valid  
and painful and terrible,  
yes, and we mean it.

See, there is the bar,

a man is leaning on it,  
there are his red eyes.

And there on the floor  
something slips from his pocket,  
an object so small

it seems unlikely  
to be a metaphor for  
anything. He's drunk.

He is muttering  
clichés to himself. He slurs  
his words, and the sea

is rising round him,  
up to his waist now, rising.  
This too is cliché.

We are never there.  
Never precisely. He is  
dreaming of symbols.

### **Five Grotesques for Robert Graves**

1.  
When he bent over, the seat of his trousers bore  
an uncanny resemblance to the balloon in his pocket,  
which in turn looked remarkably like his face in the mirror.

There was no sign saying KICK ME yet something did  
and slipped away through the door of the establishment  
without remark leaving behind only the smell of sulphur.

Nor was it the devil as everyone agreed. The devil would  
not slip through a door, nor write his signature  
directly on the door he passed through.

And his face continued to resemble a balloon  
and the trousers did not split, nor had anyone kicked him,  
not properly, not with a genuine display of regret  
nor with a smell of sulphur nor any of the devil's marks.

2.  
Having spent her life being looked at she took her eyes  
out of the bathroom cabinet and threw them away,  
but the gentlemen in the sewers discovered them  
and deployed them for purposes of their own.

3.  
The last night of the professor's life was spent  
writing down a list of his honours followed by those  
honours he resented not having received.

At midnight precisely two undertakers, one with the face  
of an eagle, arrived to take him away but could not remove him  
from his desk without severely damaging the desk.

The undertaker with the face of an eagle suggested  
he fill in the requisite form making one excuse or another.

4.

When she died the bonfires were already burning.  
*Immolation or drowning?* came the ultimatum.

Who lit the fires, she asked. Who brought the ducking stool?  
You did, they answered. She hesitated briefly in the doorway

then executed one of those elegant turns of hers  
as if her body could be divided into fire and water.

5.

The two solicitors stood at opposite ends of the room.  
They walked towards each other slowly as if reversing  
the procedure of a duel. Then the light changed  
and an apocalyptic wind blew in the walls  
and nothing was left of the law but the wind.

And the wind blew for a very long time.  
And the law was obliged to appoint a new firm  
to close up the business without due procedure.

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### ***Pascale Petit***

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**Pascale Petit** was born in Paris and lives in London. Her fifth collection, *What the Water Gave Me: Poems after Frida Kahlo* (Seren, 2010), was shortlisted for both the T.S. Eliot Prize and Wales Book of the Year, and was a Book of the Year in *The Observer*. Two of her previous collections, *The Zoo Father* and *The Huntress*, were also shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and selected as Books of the Year in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Independent*. *The Zoo Father* was published in a bilingual edition in Mexico and as an illustrated edition in Serbia. A selection of poems from her next collection, *Fauverie* (Seren, 2014), based in the M nagerie in Paris, won the 2013 Manchester Poetry Prize and a *Selected Poems* will be published in China in 2014. She currently tutors courses at Tate Modern and for The

Poetry School. Seren Books have generously granted us permission to publish some of Pascale Petit's poems.

#### **Arrival of the Electric Eel**

Each time I open it it's like I'm a Mats s girl  
handed a parcel at the end of my seclusion,  
my face pierced by jaguar whiskers  
to make me brave.  
I know what's inside – that I must

unwrap the envelope of leaves  
until all that's left  
squirming in my hands  
is an electric eel.  
The positive head, the negative tail,  
the rows of batteries under the skin,  
the small, almost blind eyes.  
The day turns murky again,  
I'm wading through the bottom of my life  
when my father's letter arrives. And keeps on arriving.  
The charged fibres of paper  
against my shaking fingers,  
the thin electroplates of ink.  
The messenger drags me up to the surface  
to gulp air then flicks its anal fin.  
Never before has a letter been so heavy,  
growing to two metres in my room,  
the address, the phone number, then the numbness –  
*I know you must be surprised*, it says,  
*but I will die soon and want to make contact.*

*Fauverie* (Seren Books, 2014)

### **The Strait-Jackets**

I lay the suitcase on Father's bed  
and unzip it slowly, gently.  
Inside, packed in cloth strait-jackets  
lie forty live hummingbirds  
tied down in rows, each tiny head  
cushioned on a swaddled body.  
I feed them from a flask of sugar water,  
inserting every bill into the pipette,  
then unwind their bindings  
so Father can see their changing colours  
as they dart around his room.  
They hover inches from his face  
as if he's a flower, their humming  
just audible above the oxygen recycler.  
For the first time since I've arrived  
he's breathing easily, the cannula  
attached to his nostrils almost slips out.  
I don't know how long we sit there  
but when I next glance at his face  
he's asleep, lights from their feathers  
still playing on his eyelids and cheeks.  
It takes me hours to catch them all  
and wrap them in their strait-jackets.  
I work quietly, he's in such  
a deep sleep he doesn't wake once.

*The Zoo Father* (Seren Books, 2001)

### **Self-Portrait with Fire Ants**

To visit you Father, I wear a mask of fire ants.  
When I sit waiting for you to explain

why you abandoned me when I was eight  
they file in, their red bodies

massing around my eyes, stinging my pupils white  
until I'm blind. Then they attack my mouth.

I try to lick them but they climb down my gullet  
until an entire swarm stings my stomach,

while you must become a giant anteater,  
push your long sticky tongue down my throat,

as you once did to my baby brother,  
French-kissing him while he pretended to sleep.

I can't remember what you did to me, but the ants know.

*The Zoo Father* (Seren Books, 2001)

### **A Tray of Frozen Songbirds**

For our last meal together  
my father takes out of the freezer  
a tray of frozen songbirds.  
He's saved them up, these delicacies  
with ice crystals in their beaks,  
wings stuck to ribcages.  
There are skylarks, blackbirds, doves.  
He tells me how some were plucked  
while still alive,  
about the mist net at dawn,  
how one nightingale was thrust  
into a sack of discarded heads  
and cried, then the poacher licked  
the sticky lime from its plumes  
tenderly, before slitting its throat.  
He pours champagne as if it's  
the river of life.

We eat like two drunks  
woken from dreams of flying,  
me on his lap, singing the song  
I've just learnt at school – *Alouette*,  
*gentille alouette, alouette je te plumerai*.

*Fauverie* (Seren Books, 2014)

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## Remembering

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### *How I got to know Seamus Heaney*

**Adolphe Haberer**  
Université Lumière-Lyon 2, France

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My first contact with the poetry of Seamus Heaney goes back to the mid 80's. I was teaching at the University of Lyon 2, had recently completed a very long state doctorate thesis on the poetry of Louis MacNeice and was asked to contribute to a special issue of *Études anglaises* on contemporary English poetry. While visiting Oxford during the summer of 1984, I met my friend John Fuller, who

introduced me to Bernard O'Donoghue, and they both advised me to look into the poetry then produced by the poets from Northern Ireland.

At the same time of my life, I was a member of the jury for the annual competition known as *agrégation*, and suggested that Heaney's *Selected Poems* be put on the syllabus for the 1987 session. This was accepted and so, all over France, in all the Departments of English, courses were taught on the poetry of Heaney to select audiences of postgraduate students. I was invited to give a paper at the Heaney Conference organized by Jacqueline Genet in Caen, lectured at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, and wrote the Heaney course for the *Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance* (CNED, our equivalent of the Open University).

I first met Seamus Heaney in June 1992 in Caen, at a rather extraordinary conference once again organized by Jacqueline Genet. Among the participants there were John Montague, Thomas Kilroy, Tom Murphy, John McGahern, John Banville, Maurice Harmon and Augustine Martin. I remember sitting next to Seamus who very kindly inscribed and signed my copy of *Seeing Things*. Later Jacqueline Genet told me that Heaney, having done his bit, didn't want to attend the rest of the conference, but wished to visit the Bayeux Tapestry. Jean Genet, her husband, was willing to drive him there, but spoke no English. I volunteered to act as interpreter and guide, only too happy to spend a whole afternoon in Heaney's company. And so we two had lunch with Jean at his home, and then drove to Bayeux. Contact with Seamus was easy and I felt very fortunate to be able to converse with him over lunch and during the drive. Unfortunately, as I stepped out of the car in front of the Bayeux Museum, I very badly sprained my ankle, tearing some ligaments. There I was lying in excruciating pain on the ground in the car park, waiting for an ambulance to come and take me to the local hospital, with Seamus bent over me, with words of comfort and compassion. Our friendship and our correspondence, as letters I have saved show, date from that day, and I dare say, from that accident.

For the 1994 session of the *agrégation*, the poems of Philip Larkin were on the syllabus. I taught the course in Lyon and in several neighbouring universities, again wrote it down for the CNED and published several articles. Among the ideas I had, there was a study of the way Larkin had been read by Heaney and Tom Paulin (whom I had met at Bernard O'Donoghue's). So I wrote to Seamus Heaney, asking him whether he had anything on Larkin, apart from the two published essays I had read. And this is how I got

the typescript of his Swansea lecture, “Joy or Night: Last Things in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin”.

In the early 90's I became a member of the Executive of the *Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (SAES) and was elected to the Chair in 1996. This accounts for the fact that I was asked to introduce Seamus Heaney on 20 March 1998, when he was the guest of a conference on Irish Studies in Nice, as well as for my even greater involvement in his attending the 38th SAES Conference in Rennes, in May of the same year. Marie was with him on both occasions.

On 21 November 2000, I was in Caen again, as a guest of Jacqueline Genet, when Seamus Heaney was made Doctor *honoris causa* of the University. I have kept the envelope with his hotel room number, which he used to pass on to me two signed booklets, *Diary of One who Vanished* and *From the Back of the North Wind*. In the same envelope are some documents about the ceremony.

In 2000 I retired, but circumstances led to my election to the Chair of *The European Society for the Study of English* (ESSE), which federates some 30 national associations of teachers of English in Higher Education. In March 2001 Seamus rang me up, asking for my help. He had been contacted and offered the Chair of Poetry at the Collège de France, a most prestigious academic institution. He didn't know anything about what the position involved, and would I find out for him what I could about teaching duties, language to be used, remuneration, etc. Through a colleague, I was able to contact the Vice-president of the association of the Collège Professors, got all the information I needed and called Seamus back a couple of days later. Eventually Seamus decided not to accept the offer, as the copy of his letter to Prof. Carlo Ossola shows.

The reason why this turned out to be a blessing for me is that, while on the phone with Seamus, I seized the opportunity of asking him if he could let me have a couple of poems for *The English Messenger*, the ESSE newsletter, a 96-page quality periodical with a print run of some 8000 copies sent to all ESSE members across Europe. He said that he was sorry, that he had nothing left in his drawer because of a new collection then on the way. But would I be interested in an unpublished lecture? And this is how I got the typescript of his Millennium lecture, as from the podium, which, in its successive versions and manuscript corrections, constitutes the most important item among all the various “Heaney documents” I have saved.



*This note was written on 25 July 2013 at the request of Ms Colette O’Flaherty, Keeper of Archival Collections at the National Library of Ireland. She wanted to add it to the collection of papers I had donated to the Library. It so happened that I had in my possession the original annotated typescripts of two articles by Seamus Heaney and thought that they had better be deposited in the proper place for safekeeping. So towards the end of March 2013, I wrote to him asking him what to do. Over the years I also had saved all the items of our correspondence – letters, postcards and Xmas cards, pieces of light verse. In his reply, dated 8 April 2013, he wrote: “We septuagenarians, I see, think the same thoughts. Like Yeats’s ‘Scholars’, all shuffle here, all cough in ink...” He went*



on to tell me about his own anxiety about “this whole legacy / bequesting business”, what to do with his unpublished early student work and boxes of miscellaneous mail. “I’m not sure whether to deposit it for posterity or use it for kindling in the cottage.” As to my file of Heaney papers, he thought that Ms O’Flaherty would be delighted to have it <sup>1</sup>, as he had already, in 2011, donated to the NLI his personal literary notes. His letter ends on a more personal note. As I had told him about my declining health, he wrote: “As to weak legs and balance, I have the same problems. Going down steps without a bannister or rail, going up steps to a podium. Wobbly I am, with ‘this absurdity’, as the Gland Old Man called old age.” And, most movingly in retrospect, he concluded: “But you have the nine grandchildren: three times our three (girls). Non omnis moriamur.” He died a few months later, on 30 August 2013, and was laid to rest in his native Bellaghy in County Londonderry.

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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

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***Transactions and Connections: Memories of the Past in the European Context***  
(Málaga, 9-11 October 2013)

***Celia Cruz Rus and Juan José Martín González***  
*University of Málaga, Spain*

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The renewed fascination with the past has been a fervent issue within literary-critical circles in the last decades. In accordance with the pre-eminence of these critical debates, the Department of English, French and German Philology and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Málaga (Spain) hosted the international seminar “Transactions and Connections: Memories of the Past in the European Context” on 9 -11 October, 2013. Characterised by a truly European reach, this seminar gathered both reputed and early-career researchers coming from Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom. Both plenary talks and papers in the parallel sessions were given in English and they encompassed the analysis of the past in a wide variety of historical contexts.

Five papers were presented on (pre)Enlightenment, the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Siân Adiseshiah (University of Lincoln, UK) delved into Caryl Churchill's *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1972) and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), set respectively in the Algerian Revolution and the English Civil War in the 1640s. By perusing Churchill's rewriting of the British revolutionary past, Adiseshiah featured memory as a political tool liable to criticize and contest current modes of representation. More theoretical was Miriam Borham Puyal's paper (University of Salamanca, Spain), which dealt with the theory of the novel and the patchwork technique in women writers' fiction from the eighteenth up to the twenty-first century. Specifically, Borham Puyal focused on Jane Barker's and Scarlett Thomas' fiction, on how early novelistic forms still have an influence over current fiction. Maria Grazia

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note:* the catalogue of the "Haberer Heaney Collection 1992-2013" can be accessed at <<http://catalogue.nli.ie/Collection/vtls000547117>>. The two photos were taken at the 1998 SAES Conference in Rennes. The first photo has Adolphe Haberer on the left and Seamus Heaney on the right. In the second photo, the bearded gentleman in a white shirt is Jean Brihault, then President of the University of Rennes 2, himself a specialist in Irish studies.