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Seamus Heaney Memorial Reading
College of William and Mary, Virginia, September 30, 2013

Henry Hart

I thought I'd pay tribute to Seamus Heaney, who died a month ago, by telling a few stories about getting to know him—stories that reveal the sort of person he was, how he surprised me at times, and also how funny he could be. I met Seamus briefly in England in the early 1980s, but I didn't really get to know him until I went to see him at Harvard in the spring of 1985. I'd decided to write a book about his poetry—a book I hoped would get me a decent job and maybe even tenure—so my plan was to ask him questions that would help my research.

I must say, I felt intimidated by the prospect of talking to Seamus Heaney about my book. Back then, I was a lowly assistant professor at The Citadel, the Military College in South Carolina, and I thought Seamus might consider me another bothersome professor invading his privacy and taking time away from his busy schedule. Seamus, after all, was known as “Famous Seamus” and people were already talking about him as a contender for the Nobel Prize.

At the time, he actually liked to joke about the possibility of being a Nobel Laureate. “Did you hear about the Irishman getting news of winning the Nobel Prize?” he'd ask friends. Then he'd say: “The man was out-standing in his field.” Seamus had recently published a book called *Field Work* (1979) and was definitely “outstanding in his field.” And having grown up on a farm, he'd spent plenty of time “out standing” in fields. Later on when he won the big prize, he spoke of it with similar humor. When I once asked him how the Nobel Prize had affected his life, he said with a look of shock: “Henry, you're not allowed to use the N-word in my presence. In my house, we have a rule against using the N-word.” It seemed to me he'd banned the N-word—the “Nobel” word—because he didn't want me or anyone else to think of him as a high and mighty, rich and famous poet, but just another Irishman who'd been “out standing” in his field.

When I visited him at Harvard in 1985, though, I didn't think of him as just another Irishman. I knew that the university had just rewarded him for his “out-standingness” with one of its oldest and most prestigious endowed chairs. He was now the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. The American President John Quincy Adams had been the first Boylston Professor and there had been many other distinguished Boylston Professors after him. So I was nervous as I approached Adams House, the building named after John Quincy Adams where Seamus lived when he left Dublin to teach at Harvard for part of each year. Although students lived there, too, Adams House was more like a palace than a dormitory. In fact, one of its Common Rooms was modeled on a Florentine palace; another Common Room was modeled on rooms in Spanish and Italian Renaissance mansions; the Dining Hall was modeled on an eighteenth-century British spa; and there was an indoor swimming pool. Adams House had been built to attract the wealthy and powerful. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Henry Kissinger, William Randolph Hearst, Buckminster Fuller and even the wealthy Beat writer William Burroughs had lived there as students.

When Seamus led me up to his rooms, I was ready to walk into a posh apartment befitting someone with a title like the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. What I saw, though, was something that resembled the stage of a Samuel Beckett play. There were a few pieces of institutional furniture, and that was it. The walls were undecorated. The floors were colorless. There were no knick-knacks on tables or shelves. No TV or radio or stereo. No magazines or clothes thrown here and there. The only sign of habitation was a cardboard box. As I discovered later, it contained copies of his recently published poetry book, *Station Island*. I also noticed a framed picture of his wife, Marie, displayed prominently on the mantle.

Seamus didn't seem to mind his monastic surroundings at all. He was full of energy and couldn't have been friendlier. After he answered my numerous questions about his poetry, he took me to a restaurant in Harvard Square for dinner. Again, he surprised me. He was solidly built, so I thought he'd have a big appetite, but he ate like a bird—a little bird like a sparrow that pecked at his food. All he ordered was a small dish of mushrooms. I felt guilty eating a regular dinner, so I asked him if he wanted to order more food. He said “No;” he was cutting back.

We returned to his rooms in Adams House and talked some more about the book I planned to write. I remember at one point he got angry, not at me, fortunately, but at a critic who'd written a flattering review of his book *Station Island* in *The New York Times*. He told me he despised flattering reviews and used the word “fulsome” several times to dismiss the review and reviewer. When the conversation lagged, he hustled to another room and returned with a bottle of Irish whiskey and two jars. Not glasses, jars—the kind of jars used to hold jelly or pickled vegetables. I'm not sure where the conversation went after that, but I know I had a good time. After a few drinks, he gave me a signed copy of his book, *Station Island*, and then he walked me to my car. Before I left, I told him about my sister who'd recently graduated from college and was struggling to begin a career as an artist in Boston. He said he'd call her up and try to give her some help.

I knew that Seamus was one of the most gifted modern poets, but at the time I didn't know what a generous gift-giver he was. I guess I was more used to famous poets following the “mad, bad, and dangerous” model set by Lord Byron. I was used to poets like Ezra Pound who made pro-Fascist broadcasts for Mussolini during WW II, or the manic Robert Lowell who ranted in the streets that he was a reincarnation of Caligula and Hitler, or James Dickey who got drunk at poetry readings and threatened to beat up his hosts and seduce their wives. If a lot of famous poets leaned toward the Satanic side of the personality spectrum, Seamus definitely leaned toward the saintly side. I think it was significant, at least for Seamus's conception of himself, that his father traced his family lineage back to the medieval Saint Muredach O'Henehy who lived around the 12th century in what is now Northern Ireland. Seamus wrote about Saint O'Henehy and other Irish saints as possible role models. His Harvard apartment, it seemed to me, had the look of a place where a saint might live—a saint who didn't want to be distracted by lots of gadgets and decorations, or *any* gadgets and *any* decorations. As I later realized, his apartment also had the Spartan look of his writing cottage in the Wicklow countryside south of Dublin and of his original farmhouse in Derry, Northern Ireland, although his farmhouse was even more Spartan since it had no electricity and no running water.

The minds of poets often revolve around a few central preoccupations. Seamus alluded to this in his first book of essays, which he called *Preoccupations*. I would say one of Seamus's central preoccupations was the saintly life or what he would probably call the "exemplary" life. He was also preoccupied with the poet's gift and the poet's obligation to share his gifts with others. Seamus realized early on that he was exceptionally gifted, that he received poems as if they were gifts of grace from a mysterious source. He might be sunbathing with Marie, smell a whiff from a garbage bin, remember flax rotting in a pond near his boyhood farm, and then sit down and quickly write a poem. This was actually how he wrote "Death of a Naturalist," the title poem of his first book that was later included in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Not all his poems came to him in bursts of inspiration; he often had to work hard hammering them into shape; but many did come as miraculous gifts.

Seamus felt both joy and guilt about these poem-gifts. He felt he didn't deserve them because he hadn't really worked for them; they just came to him as if some poetic Santa Claus brought them down the chimney—not just on Christmas, but at any time. Seamus also felt guilty because his poetic gifts made him famous and wealthy. His Nobel Prize alone earned him a million dollars. At the end of his career, he dominated the poetry market in the English-speaking world. In Ireland and Britain, two-thirds of all poetry books sold by living poets were by Seamus Heaney.

His poetry-writing and the fame and wealth it brought, however, distanced him from his farming community and some of his working-class friends in Northern Ireland. He once wrote in an article about Patrick Kavanagh, another Irish-Catholic poet who'd grown up on a farm, that he was obsessed with the idea of poetry as a wonderful but also an estranging gift. Seamus said: "Underlying almost everything Kavanagh wrote, there is an astonishment at the fact that he is writing at all. From beginning to end, he was entranced with [the gift of] his own creativity and grateful for it; yet it left him in an uneasy relationship with his own place and his own people." (577) Seamus could have been talking about himself. He was also astonished by and grateful for his gifts—for the gift of life on his family farm as well as for the gift of creativity—and he expressed his gratitude, along with his guilt, throughout his work.

Four years ago when Seamus turned 70, a journalist asked him what epitaph he would like on his gravestone. It wasn't a very nice thing to ask. Seamus didn't want to answer, but the journalist pressed him and Seamus finally said that for an epitaph he'd like a line from a translation he'd done of a play by Sophocles (*Oedipus at Colonus*). The line was: "Wherever that man went, he went gratefully." I think Seamus chose that line because it referred to his sense of gifts—of being gifted, of feeling gratitude for his poetic gifts, and of feeling obligated to share his gifts with others.

I'd like to finish with an anecdote about Seamus Heaney's three-day visit to William and Mary in April of 2002, a visit that occurred during an extremely busy time for Seamus. Partly because of his Nobel Prize, which he'd won in 1995, he was inundated by requests to give readings and lectures all over the world. Having spent time with Bob Dylan and befriended members of the band U2 and ingratiated himself with Eminem, you could legitimately say he'd achieved rock-star status. He socialized with current and former heads-of-state like the Presidents of Ireland [Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese], the President of the Czech Republic [Vaclav Havel], Empress Michiko of Japan, Bill and Hilary Clinton, even the Queen of England on occasion. But

he agreed to fly from Dublin and spend three days at William and Mary during a two-week reading tour that would take him to about half-a-dozen colleges.

The day I was supposed to pick him up at the Richmond airport, the phone rang in my office and a friendly Irish voice said: “Henry, I was just wondering what poems you’d like me to read at William and Mary.” I was surprised because I hadn’t expected Seamus to call. I’d worked out all the details of his trip with his high-powered agent in L.A., and I’d been instructed in no uncertain terms by this high-powered agent that I shouldn’t bother Seamus. I was also surprised because no writer I’d invited to William and Mary during my many years at the College had ever called me to ask what he or she should read. Basically, I didn’t think I should be telling Seamus what to do. I mean, he was a Nobel Prize winner! He should do whatever he wanted to do! So I said we’d be happy with whatever poems he chose to read. He replied: “But don’t you or your students have some favorite poems you’d like me to read?” Then I explained what poems I’d been teaching in my contemporary poetry class, and he said: “Fine, I’ll read those and then add a few others.”

When he arrived, he told me his trip was especially hectic because he’d agreed to do two additional readings to raise money for Irish hospitals. As I later learned from reading through his papers at Emory University, this was typical. I think somebody could write a book about all the charitable causes Seamus contributed to. At William and Mary, he was charitable to everyone who came to the reading I organized for him at the Kimball Theatre. At the parties on campus, he charmed the dean, provost, students, professors, local townspeople, and even my two children, who were 5 and 9 years old, and who have always been (perhaps because I’m a poet) rather wary of poets.

After Seamus left Williamsburg and got to his next reading (I think it was in Kentucky), he once again called me unexpectedly. He told me he’d left some Irish coins in his hotel room and urged me to get the coins and give them to my children, which I did. There were so many coins, though, I decided to keep a few for myself as souvenirs of his magnificent visit. When he returned to Dublin a week later, he sent me an envelope of signed special editions of several poems and lectures he’d written. I’d given him a gift, an honorarium from William and Mary, so he was giving me gifts in return to say “thanks.” A smart Englishman once said: “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” I think that was especially true of the immensely gifted and gift-giving Seamus Heaney.