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Geraldine Higgins

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Feeling into Words: Remembering Seamus Heaney

Geraldine Higgins

“The nation is a man down.”

Letter to the *Irish Times*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Seamus Heaney was the most generous of poets and gracious of men. I first met Seamus Heaney when I was a teenager growing up in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, fifteen miles from his home place of Bellaghy, Co. Derry. When his *Selected Poems* were assigned on the English ‘A level’ syllabus, it was the first time that we had the chance to study a living Irish writer. The exam question was something along the lines of “How accurate is it to describe Seamus Heaney as an Irish poet?” We all scribbled our standard answer that while he was, of course, Irish, the themes addressed in Heaney’s poems were universal and therefore he was in a very real sense an international poet. But as children of the Troubles we knew that he spoke about our lives and in our language in a way that made poetry seem like the most natural and beautiful and important thing in the world.

Like many people, I became a follower of Heaney, attending readings and lectures in Dublin and later in Oxford and Atlanta. Whenever I was in his orbit, whether in lecture halls, restaurants or pubs, he took care to include everybody in the circle of his attention. No one was made to feel unnecessary to the warmth of his welcome. My time as a graduate student at Oxford coincided with his tenure as Professor of Poetry there from 1989 -1994 and I will always remember the extraordinary electric atmosphere as the huge examination hall filled and we waited for the lecture to begin. The formality of Oxford added an edge to the proceedings and then his familiar voice with its South Derry vowels would claim our attention as he illuminated Frost’s “Directive” or Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses”. Afterwards, the cadre of Irish students known as the Murphia would stream into the pub around the corner and we would bask in the heady aftermath of pints and poetry with Heaney at the centre of it all. On one occasion only, he stumbled when reciting the lines of one of his own poems and his wife, Marie, spoke up from the audience, filling in the gaps. My friend Ann and I spent hours discussing that moment and the way that it spoke to their deep and abiding partnership. At the beginning of our own journey as fledgling academics, we wondered, would we rather be the poet or the poet’s wife? As though these things are chosen, not earned.

For me, the most significant lecture was the final one, “Frontiers of Writing” delivered 20 years ago in 1993 to an audience tense with expectations about Heaney’s final “redress” as poetry professor. In it, he returned to another Oxford visit in May 1981 just after the death of hunger striker, Francis Hughes, a Derry neighbor. Heaney’s discussion of his deep sense of alienation, staying in the room of a Tory minister while the funeral took place, spoke to my own ambiguity about Oxford and its privilege. More importantly, Heaney framed this recollection in terms of ethics and aesthetics, the codes and conventions of life and art:

What was in the eyes of the world at large the death of an IRA hunger striker was in the eyes of a smaller, denser world the death of a son and neighbour. And so, the imagined

reality of that confusing wake—confusing because for some it was necessarily a domestic rite of mourning, whilst for others it was inevitably a show of political solidarity—that imagined event from which I was absent shadowed and questioned my presence at an otherwise perfectly jocund college feast.¹

This memory, and his decision not to share it in his first lecture “because it seemed unduly loaded with political promise” revealed the cost to Heaney of maintaining his equilibrium, of retaining his fidelity to the place of “neighbourly murders” while insisting on the rights of poetry as “a principle of integration.” Clearly, although many journalists ascribed to Heaney an unwavering “stance” on Northern Irish politics, he agonized over every incident and each political statement. Indeed, in examining his own conscience, he became the reluctant conscience of the North.

When Heaney won the Nobel Prize in 1995 for works “of lyrical beauty and ethical depth,” the Murphia had a huge party in his honor and my favorite memory is of my advisor, the great Yeats scholar and bon vivant John Kelly, standing in the middle of the room yelling:

“Who won the football?”

“CLARE”

“Who won the Nobel prize?”

“HEANEY!!!”

When I left Oxford to take up a teaching post at Emory University in 1996, I thought that my days of following Heaney were over. Little did I know that my new home in Atlanta was another outpost for the Heaneys and that I would be able to add pig roasts and margarita fountains at the Schuchards to the delights of evenings in their company. When Ron Schuchard invited Heaney to give the inaugural Ellmann lectures in 1988, he formalized a relationship with Emory that dated back to the early 1980s with classroom visits, readings and lectures. Many Emory students treasure memories of surprise visits from Heaney that enriched not just their Emory experience, but also their appreciation for the life and liveliness of poetry. One English alum remembers Heaney joining a graduate seminar about Yeats, and talking about Derek Mahon’s line, “Yeats is Everest.” He asked, “If Yeats is Everest, and you are a contemporary Irish poet, do you try to conquer it?” Heaney laughed and said, “No, you tiptoe around it.”

As the newest member of the English department, I was thrilled to be invited by then president, Bill Chace, to a dinner for the Heaneys at Lullwater House, the president’s mock-Tudor residence. The house, built in 1926 for Asa Griggs Candler, the founder of Coca Cola, boasts a crenellated tower reached by a narrow stair. Late in the evening, the guests were invited to climb to the top of the tower to view the Hale Bopp comet, visible for a few weeks in 1997 but not to be seen again for three thousand years. Famously, in one of his best known poems, ‘Exposure,’ Heaney writes about missing the last comet, the “once in a lifetime portent/the comet’s pulsing rose.” This time, we all stood back as he took the binoculars and viewed it silently. The beautiful poem, “The Comet at Lullwater” was written to mark the occasion, probably the only time that any of us will witness the moment when such a poem by such a poet sprang into life.

In 2003, Heaney returned to Emory to receive an honorary degree and give the commencement address. He came back in September that year for a poetry reading and to announce the placement of his correspondence in Emory's Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library (MARBL) in honor of Bill Chace's retirement as president. As President Chace said, "No poet easily casts into the hands of others the record, intimate and telling, of his life's work". The Heaney archive, the cornerstone of Emory's collection of contemporary Irish literature, consists of 102 boxes (51 linear feet) of material including letters, drafts, photographs, printed and audio-visual material covering the period from 1951-2004.

I was thrilled to be invited to mine this archive to curate a major exhibition on Heaney's work, about a year before he died. The title of the exhibition, "The Music of what Happens" comes from an old Fenian legend quoted by Heaney in his short poem, "Song," "that moment when the bird sings very close/ to the music of what happens." Heaney's mission as a poet is not just to capture the music of what happens, but to urge us to listen. He understands that the soul's truest prayer is attention.

Curating the exhibition has been one of the highlights of my academic life—fascinating, exhilarating and poignant. To read and research Heaney is to inhabit his memory, both a dreamscape of sensory impressions and a real landscape of solid objects—pumps and buckets, sofas and meal bins. From the beginning, as in his best-known poem, 'Digging,' Heaney explores his own roots and heritage, introducing an archaeological theme, accessible but multi-layered, that remains vital throughout his work. I decided to follow the trajectory of Heaney's poetry from the earth-bound bog poems of his early work to the airiness and uplift of crediting marvels in his later career.

Two of the objects on display capture this range. The first is an old desk, really two planks of wood, from a decommissioned bench at Carysfort College, that Heaney used in the 1980s. It was transported to America by Emory alumnus Rand Brandes, whose first job as a Fulbright scholar and bibliographer was to organize Heaney's attic. In his 2008 book of interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, Heaney is asked why he was satisfied with such a rudimentary arrangement and he replies that he had a "superstitious fear of making a designer study, a film set rather than a bolt-hole."ⁱⁱⁱ He worried that he might sit down to a designer desk only to discover that the writing had "absconded." He also liked the idea that these oak planks "had been polished by the soft shiftings of a century of student schoolmistresses."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The desk reminds us of the work and craftsmanship that go into every draft, drafts that trace the fascinating journey from first idea to finished piece. One commentator described Heaney as a potter who made pieces of art you could drink from, and here we have the potter's wheel.

At the other end of the spectrum of artistic objects displayed in the exhibition is a "glass book" or rather "The Door Stands Open," a piece conceived in honor of Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz. It contains handwritten lines from Heaney's elegy for Milosz, "Saw Music," wrapped in a silkscreen collage of articles from the Polish press following his death, enclosed in a slipcase of thick clear glass with a metal spine. It is an extraordinary object—to be viewed, rather than read—its fragility in direct contrast to the rough utility of Heaney's coffee-stained desk.

The highlight of the exhibition for me is a Media Room called “Listen Now Again” in which visitors can sit and listen to Heaney and other writers and artists recite his poetry. Many thousands of people in all corners of the world have flocked to hear Heaney read his poetry in the course of his writing career. Most of us encounter poetry on the page but something else happens when we hear it out loud in the poet’s own voice. His words speak directly to us, engaging us in a world that is familiar yet strange, rooted yet transcendent. Each of the readers in the media room has a personal connection to Heaney or his work and their readings bring us back to one of his most important legacies—teaching us to listen and then to listen again.

Heaney of course remained deeply rooted in his homeplace of South County Derry—it was a source of strength and recovery for him and it was no surprise, least of all to the people of Bellaghy, that he chose to be buried there. As a great visitor of the graves of writers he admired, he understood the power of that sacred space, the last resting place, the writer at home and at peace. An uncollected poem, a villanelle written in 1996, “In Bellaghy Graveyard” ends:

As he swayed there in the crow’s nest of his dream
Above old headstones and the fresh clay piled
He looked both self-possessed and overcome.
It was hardly worth his while now going home.

As the tributes to Heaney continue to pour in across the world, we can see the poet’s friends and fellow-writers trying to live up to his stature—the great oak has fallen and we all want to give him our best because he brought out the best in all of us. And this is not just in the world of literature. In Croke Park, two days after his death, Dublin played Kerry in the Gaelic football semi-final. After observing a minute’s silence, the 80,000 strong crowd rose to their feet in thunderous applause. It’s hard to imagine a more powerful testament to his popularity. I wish I could say that it shows the power of poetry in Ireland but I think we know, it was all about Seamus.

Here at Emory, we feel an enormous sense of grief as well as incredible gratitude for Heaney’s presence here over the last 30 years. In March 2013, Heaney returned to Emory as the guest of honor at our annual library fundraiser, “12th Night” followed by a public reading filled to capacity at Glenn Memorial Church. In an extraordinary hour, he read with grace, humour and music, guiding the audience through treasured favorites as well as moving poems about his recovery from a stroke in 2006 and his sense of indebtedness to his family and friends. As he turned to acknowledge the thunderous applause, he saluted the audience with a gentle farewell.

In that reading, he talked about a memory of his father making a kite and going outside to fly it with the children even though he said, “he was one of the most earth-bound people I knew.” Heaney’s first kite poem is ‘A Kite for Michael and Christopher’ [his two sons] from his 1984 collection *Station Island*. In the poem, Heaney describes the kite’s “long-tailed pull of grief” as Heaney tells his young sons “you were born fit for it, stand here and take the strain.” However, the last poem that he read here, written for his second grandchild, ‘A Kite for Aibhín,’ ends with the poignant image of the string breaking and the kite taking off, “itself alone, a windfall.”

I met with Seamus in Ireland a month before he died to talk about our plans for the exhibition and to invite himself and Marie to come back to Emory for the opening. The moment that stays with me is his pure delight when I said that we intended to suspend a kite above the central staircase. Just then, Marie came back into the room and Seamus turned to her, smiling, and said, “Oh Marie, they’re going to fly a kite.”

Notes

ⁱ Seamus Heaney, “The Frontiers of Writing,” *The Redress of Poetry*, pp.186-88.

ⁱⁱ Seamus Heaney and Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p.230.

ⁱⁱⁱ Seamus Heaney, “Writers’ Rooms”, *Guardian*, 31 August, 2007.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/31/writers.rooms.seamus.heaney#> Retrieved October, 2013.
