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Hardly "A Cold Heaven": Recalling Seamus Heaney

Brendan Corcoran

In spring 2003, a number of stars were in alignment on the campus of Emory University. Seamus Heaney's literary papers had recently been acquired by what was then Emory Library's Special Collections (now MARBL). The tenure of a long-time friend of Heaney, William Chace, as Emory's president was set to conclude at the end of June. And, at least in part due to this friendship, Heaney had accepted the invitation to serve as Emory's Commencement Speaker. On May 12, 2003, Heaney gave a powerful and sobering commencement address that sounded like a précis of the exhortations behind "Anything Can Happen," his great poem commemorating the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.

Heaney spoke of "acts of coldly premeditated terror such as those of September 11" and "carefully premeditated acts of war such as the campaign in Iraq"; both, he said, possessed "a quality of mirage about them."¹ Despite the loveliness of the Emory quadrangle and the pageantry of the moment, Heaney invoked "twin towers bursting into flame, human bodies falling like plummet, sorties of black-winged bombers taking off, as terrible and phantasmagorical as black-winged devils of the medieval mind, explosions appearing in the coordinates of a reconnaissance camera, looking as harmlessly white and fluttery as snowflakes." He said that though "we know these things are real... it is hard to bring their terrible reality home." And so, we turn to literature and, in particular, poetry that "address[es] itself to the place of ultimate suffering and decision in each and every one of us." Acknowledging his debt to Ted Hughes for this remarkable phrase—"the ultimate suffering and decision in us"¹—Heaney then, in the vein of "From the Republic of Conscience," identified all of us assembled "as citizens of this more somber world," and said that in this world we all "will be faced with the challenge to maintain both balance of mind and quickness of sympathy. To maintain what the poet Wilfred Owen called during the First World War 'the eternal reciprocity of tears.' Or to put it more simply," he declared, "you will be challenged to be wise and to be good." Despite the conventional limits of the commencement address, the eloquence, intensity, and seriousness of Heaney's speech that morning seemed to elevate and charge everything associated with Heaney's visit.

Before the visiting dignitaries—Seamus and Marie, as well as Ted Hughes's widow Carol—left Atlanta, there was another more intimate but no less ceremonious occasion: a gathering hosted by those "Chief Revelers," Ron and Keith Schuchard. This was also a send-off for president Chace upon the conclusion of his remarkable years guiding a vital stream of the university's financial windfalls into institution-building, notably a great strengthening of the library and an exponential deepening and broadening of the holdings in the library's dearly beloved Special Collections. At this time, I had the extremely good fortune of working by day full time as a project archivist in Special Collections, aiding in the processing of the papers of other Irish poets, such as Derek Mahon, Ciaran Carson, Frank Ormsby, and others. By night, I was frantically completing my dissertation on Heaney, Mahon, and Michael Longley. I deemed myself almost blessed when Ron, also my dissertation advisor, invited me to this party honoring the Heaneys and the Chaces.

The night was extraordinary for various reasons, not the least of which was my overall sense of everything about it shimmering and alive with the moment's intensity as so many things seemed to be coming full circle. In Heaney's commencement address, he recalled the first time he ever visited Emory and, in particular, another extraordinary gathering at Ron and Keith's in which "one of Professor Schuchard's students... researching Yeats' habit of accompanying his own poetry readings on a stringed instrument called a psaltery... sets the psaltery upon his knees and begins to utter these [Yeats] poems in a high liturgical chant, as if he were a cantor singing the psalms or a widow lamenting a massacre." Heaney further described this moment as "extraordinary and uncanny, but the uncanniest thing about it was the fact that the student was blind—blind as the poet Homer or the prophet Tiresias. Again, we were in a modern social setting, at a regular social event, but we seemed to have entered mythic time, to be listening to a bard or a soothsayer."

Fortunately, I did not have this reference of an earlier student to mind when the recitation movement of the party began. Though, given what happened, maybe Heaney's account of this astounding precedent had infiltrated my subconscious. What is clear is that no representative of the student body played the role of bard or soothsayer on this particular evening! As I sat immediately beside Heaney in the tight circle that had become the Schuchards' living room, my turn came; I too decided on Yeats, and "A Cold Heaven."

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting Heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago...¹

I recall that I tried to speak these words slowly and forcefully, perhaps too slowly though, for suddenly the graduate student's nightmare set upon me: utter and complete blankness. The words just evaporated and I slipped into a loop, returning to the opening, this time with a little bit more speed and a lot less confidence, as I again tried to push past whatever blocked me from completing the poem. As I approached what was now a fateful moment for my evening, and "the hot blood of youth" began to rapidly cool and slow down even further, I received what I now recall as a true blessing. From his high perch on the chair beside me, slipping ever deeper into the couch, Heaney whispered, gently, delicately, like a kindly teacher among schoolchildren, a prompt: "And I took..." It was all I needed. The timing was perfect, and I finished reciting the poem:

And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

I first met Seamus Heaney in Columbia, Maryland, after he gave an inspiring reading sponsored by the Howard County Poetry and Literary Society (HoCoPoLitSo) on the evening of a blizzard in January 1994. I was accompanying my mother, Kathie Corcoran, who knew one of the organizers of the “Evening of Irish Music and Poetry.” And, perhaps also because the extreme weather had made those relatively few of us in attendance (at least compared to the 700+ tickets sold) intimates of a sort, my mother and I were invited to the post-reading party. No recitations here, the local Irish band that had opened the evening’s performances assumed a sort of pride of place in the house and the crowd congregated around it in the spirit of a session. The poet had been pretty much left to his own devices. And so, my mother and I encountered him two fisted, with a pint of Guinness in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other—an inspiring sight, indeed. My mother, who had read and taught Heaney’s poetry for many years to middle and high school students, struck up the conversation about poems, their teaching, and places in Ireland of literary importance that she had visited with my father, also an English teacher and a Dundalk man. Seamus exuded warmth, grace, and abundant good cheer—and gave me the powerful the gift of knowing that my mother, who had worked so hard and for so many years in the literary trenches, felt for those 20 or 30 minutes of conversation really important and valued as an educator and a reader.

Something of the light my mother felt that frigid night in 1994 touched me in May 2003 at what could have been the nadir of my graduate experience—choking my recitation of a Yeats poem in the presence of the Professor of Poetry and Nobel Laureate, not to mention all the other persons of note at the Schuchards’ party. Heaney’s quiet and eminently kind gesture, a throwaway prompt delivered without judgment but with the “quickness of sympathy” he has urged us all toward, has defined my private sense of the man *and* poet ever since.