North and South: A Calling

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In my office on campus I keep a small sheaf of papers, 11 facsimile pages of Seamus Heaney’s poem, “North”—the title poem of his 1975 collection of the same name. In that sheaf are handwritten drafts with different variations of the title, typescript drafts with words or lines crossed out and new words and lines written in the margins in the poet’s hand. Like most people, I encountered Heaney through his published books before ever meeting him or seeing these intimate drafts in the archives.

I’d been reading North while working on a book of my own, turning again and again to that title poem. In it I found one of the things to which I am most drawn in Heaney’s great body of work: that Heraclitus’s axiom is as true now as ever—“Geography is fate”—and that answering the call of our particular geographies and their attendant histories is a noble undertaking: a necessary one. In the poem, having “returned” to the shores of the Atlantic, Heaney evokes a scene of the confrontations of history, the past come back in imagined voices from the ocean: “those in the solid/belly of stone ships/those hacked and glinting/in the gravel of thawed streams,” and “the long ship’s swimming tongue.” In that moment he hears the knowing voice of history speaking:

It said, ‘Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.’

The draft version I keep is only slightly different from these published lines, but the call to write from or to make sense of the history one has been given is there. Reading the drafts of the Nobel Laureate’s work, seeing his revisions large and small, reminds me of his extraordinary humanity, his work to find the best word to say the thing that must be said, to match the rhythms of thought with a music that could bear the weight of his concerns. One finds in Heaney’s accessibility a precision of thought and image that not only represents the pursuit of beauty and truth, but also justice. About poetry Ed Hirsch wrote, “the poet wants justice. The poet wants art. In poetry there can’t be one without the other.” In grappling with the difficult history and hardships of his homeland, Heaney’s work shows us this. And it showed me, too, a way into my own work, the calling to make sense of my South with its terrible beauty, its violent and troubled past. His
influence on poets and readers of poetry is immeasurable.

When I finally did meet Seamus, at the garden party of the colleague who’d made those facsimiles for me, I was stunned by his accessibility and generosity of spirit—two things quite evident in his poems. Often it seems that there are writers who are their best selves on the page. That Seamus Heaney was as genuine and deeply admirable in person as in his poems was to me a gift, then as now.

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