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## Heaney and Ellmann at Emory

### Ronald Schuchard

Seamus Heaney's legacy is worldwide. It will take years to collect the stories and measure the impact of his personal presence and generosity on the peoples of Ireland, Great Britain, Eastern and Western Europe, America, Russia, Japan, South Africa □ their schools, colleges, universities, poetry festivals, and summer schools in Sligo, Cleggan, Dublin, Bellaghy, Belfast,



Grasmere, Oxford, London, Berkeley, Boston, New York, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Krakow, Kyoto, Cape Town, and other towns and cities and countries galore whose citizens have attended his classes, readings, lectures, signings, openings, and a cornucopia of civic ceremonies and literary occasions beyond the outreach of other poets. From this global satellite perspective, however, I want to zoom in on his bardic wanderings in the American South, recognizing in descent his

contribution to the growth of Irish Studies in the Southern ACIS through his participation in annual conferences and special events in Atlanta, Wake Forest, Chapel Hill, Hickory, Lexington, Charlottesville, Williamsburg, Tulsa, Waco, and other college towns. My special focus, however, is on the extraordinary role he has had on shaping the poetic identity of Emory University over the past thirty-two years. In the early years, his essential companion in the transformation of Emory's regional, pre-professional College into an international research and teaching university in Irish literature was Richard Ellmann.

Ellmann, then the Goldsmith's Professor at Oxford, had been coming to Emory for an annual five-week, short-course visit since 1977, accompanied by his wife Mary, who received medical rehabilitation treatment at Emory Hospital. When in 1979 Emory received a munificent gift of \$105 million from Robert W. Woodruff, CEO of Coca-Cola, Ellmann was here to encourage President James T. Laney to devote some of the windfall to creating a research library. In 1979 Emory did not have any research collections in modern literature, until Laney sent Ellmann to a Sothebys auction to acquire from Lady Gregory's Coole Park library most of her unique collection of books and manuscripts by W. B. Yeats, thereby setting in place the cornerstone of what is now the Manuscript, Rare Book, and Archives Library (MARBL). Ellmann continued to advise on acquisitions and helped to increase the flow of outstanding writers and scholars; he was here on 9 March 1981 to welcome Heaney for his first reading and to show him some of the extraordinary Yeats items from Coole Park. At a party afterwards they were treated to some sips

of the finest South Carolina moonshine (Heaney thought it better than Irish poteen) to seal their southern bonds.

One undergraduate student at that memorable party, the late John Simpson, made a deep and lasting impression on Heaney, moving him to talk and write about it on several later occasions. John, an amateur singer and guitar player, and blind from birth, had trained himself in the chanting of Yeats's poetry with a replica of the psaltery that Arnold Dolmetsch made for Florence Farr. After listening to him chant a number of Yeats's poems, Heaney inscribed in a copy of *Field Work* the last line of "The Singer's House": "We still believe what we hear." When he delivered the commencement address upon receiving an honorary degree in 2003, he recounted the scene for the audience:

So at one point he sets the psaltery upon his knees and begins to utter these poems in a high liturgical chant, as if he were a cantor singing the psalms or a widow lamenting a massacre. It was 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 . . . but we seemed to have entered mythic time, to be listening to a bard or a soothsayer."<sup>i</sup>

On another day, he told Dennis O'Driscoll about John's haunting voice and chanting: "Anyhow, that's how the Emory connection started. On that first visit I met a graduate student called Rand Brandes who was to devote himself to my work over the years and would end up doing my bibliography."<sup>ii</sup>

Such personal encounters with Emory students came again soon and came often. In July 1982, while teaching a modern poetry course in Emory's British Studies program at University College, Oxford, I took a group of ten students on a day-trip to Thomas Hardy country in Dorsetshire. We were enjoying a picnic lunch and seminar around Hardy's grave on a beautiful English summer day, alone and undisturbed in the iron-fenced graveyard. I paid no attention when a squeaking gate opened in a far corner and a man entered, but as I continued to talk I noticed that the students were watching him approach us. I was gobsmacked when I pivoted to see Seamus: "Hello, Ron," he said, "I thought I'd find you here. I'm on my own Hardy pilgrimage and thought I might join you if it wouldn't be an interruption." Seamus learned from Ellmann the previous evening in Oxford that I had taken the class to Dorset. And so for the best part of the next hour, never to be forgotten, he sat on the ground with the awe-struck students, talking about Hardy and reciting numerous poems from memory before wishing us well and walking away. A magical teaching day.

In 1983 Seamus returned to Emory with Czeslaw Milosz to read for the benefit of Amnesty International, and in 1984 he made the first of several visits to Emory's Oxford program; he came again as the Oxford Professor of Poetry: reading, holding a workshop, mixing with students. On succeeding visits to Emory, he always visited poetry classes: on one occasion, purposefully unannounced, he walked into the classroom as a stranger while we were opening *Death of a Naturalist*. His surprise identity revealed and his participation begun, he so inspired Danielle Sered, a science major in that Introduction to Poetry class, that she wrote and sent to him a poem about it, received an encouraging reply, changed her major to English, and devoted herself to the study of Irish women's writing. For her honors thesis Heaney helped her arrange interviews with the Irish writers (transcripts now in MARBL), and his assistance to her

throughout her whole undergraduate career was instrumental in her becoming the first female graduate of Emory College to receive a Rhodes Scholarship.

In the fall of 1986, we learned that Ellmann, who had placed his own Yeats collection at Emory, was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. In February 1987, three months before Ellmann's death in May, President Laney flew to Oxford to tell him at bedside that Emory was establishing the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature in his name to perpetuate the legacy of his public lectures, his clarity and elegance in speaking about serious literature to general audiences. And when he asked Ellmann whom he wanted to inaugurate them, he replied at once, softly, "Seamus." And so Seamus and Marie arrived in April 1988 on his forty-ninth birthday for the inaugural Ellmann Lectures, "The Place of Writing," delivered to an audience of 1200. "I was sensible of the high regard implicit in the invitation," he wrote in his "Author's Note" for the published volume,

but daunted also by its high demands, since the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature would be measured against the standards of excellence that he represented. Nevertheless, the fact that Dick had assented to my being asked, and the knowledge that I had the approval of a selection committee both distinguished and friendly, emboldened me to accept. . . . Everyone who assembled for the occasion seemed to do so with a specific personal commitment; one had a feeling that the immense, equable force of Ellmann's personality, scholarship and teaching was being celebrated in a deliberate and truly ceremonial way. At the formal hospilities surrounding the inauguration of the series, at the informal but no less hospitable gatherings that ended each day, and on the occasions of the lectures themselves, there was a constantly renewed awareness that we had come together because we cherished a man of irreplaceable worth. Underlying the rightly public aspect of the events, there was an unusual prevailing mood of tenderness and loss."<sup>iii</sup>

On the informal side, it was indeed a festive occasion, complete with a pig roast, a three-tier, multi-jet margarita fountain, and a five-piece mariachi band. Seamus immersed himself in the spirit of it all, finding somewhere an armadillo T-shirt, an Arkansas Razorback hogshead headpiece, and an accordion-like manuscript book, which he titled "A Horn Book of Ye Hog Days," hastily filled with poetry for the occasion. A clandestine journalist was present to record the scene, and to print prominently in the Atlanta newspaper next day a large photo of Seamus reading in his low-country regalia:



With a Georgia pig freshly hoisted from the barbecue pit, one of the great bards of Ireland was going whole hog. Nobel committee take note. Seamus Heaney, that white-haired, rosy cheeked lamp of genius in the well-packed Armadillo T-shirt, had written another poem that he would now recite. As soon, that is, as he could set his margarita down and amble to center stage, or at least the center of a backyard deck. Once there, planted as firmly as though on his native sod, he inhaled, then intoned, thumping out the rhythmic syllables:

Ell-mann Lec-tur-ers be-ware!  
Before you venture South, prepare!  
Scorn the way that Heaney did it □  
Writing desperately at midnight,  
Like a scribe on overtime,  
Counting beats and pointing rhyme.

And to the delight of a chorus of well-wishers gathered for his 49<sup>th</sup> birthday, the brilliant Poet of the Bogs was off on a rousing rendition of freshly minted doggerel that included a reference to himself “being treated like a hero / As blue grass fiddlers bow like Nero, / Bending elbows, quaffing toasts / To compound, dear, familiar ghosts.”<sup>iv</sup>

During the several celebratory events, Richard Murdoch presented to guests his Shadowy Waters Press printing of Seamus’s elegy for Ellmann, “The Sounds of Rain,” which Seamus read in closing the series; Marie Heaney sang some Irish airs, and the van that transported the lecture party here and there, including committee members Jon Stallworthy, Barbara Hardy, and Daniel Albright, bravely chauffeured by my co-pit-master Rand Brandes, was full of merriment. In his lectures, and in his full engagement with the occasion, Seamus had showed us all how to lift an audience in Ellmanesque language, how to be “high on the hog” and pay tribute to a great scholar at the same time. There were more elevated modes of Southern hospitality—a Dean’s formal dinner for faculty with chamber music—providing a taste of high table, Beethoven and Brahms before we strolled over together for the second lecture like robed Oxford dons.

Heaney’s inaugural Ellmann Lectures were a major turning point in the history of Emory University, both for the library and the future success of the Lectures. When he completed his lectures, he quite unexpectedly turned over to special collections all the manuscripts, typescripts, and correspondence related to them in Ellmann’s memory. It was a gift of great moment, equal in its packet of pages to the impact of a score of major collections, which followed in its aftermath. It moved and inspired the director of special collections, Dr. Linda Matthews, to say, “This is so marvelous. Why don’t we continue to build contemporary Irish archives as well as modern?” It moved the University to commit funds to build a research library of living writers, one that has surpassed our wildest dreams and greatly enhanced our teaching mission, on a scale that Ellmann had called for a decade earlier. Let me call the roll of those contemporary Irish poets and writers whose papers to date have come to what we now call MARBL as part of the Heaney legacy. I regret that I lack the space to tell the stories associated with each—enough to fill a volume: Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, Seamus Deane, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Thomas Kinsella, Peter Fallon and the Gallery Press archive (with its rich collection of Heaney and Friel), Frank Ormsby and the *Honest Ulsterman* archive, Eamon Grennan, Medbh McGuckian (including the tapes and typescripts of her *Conhrá* with Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill), Joan

McBreen, Rita Ann Higgins, Tom Paulin, Desmond O'Grady, Edna O'Brien, and others in process. These are accompanied by the Ted Hughes archive, which contains his letters from Heaney, whose correspondence contains his letters from Hughes. It is thought that their correspondence may be as important in its own way as that of Wordsworth and Coleridge for our time.

In 1995, when Anne Fogarty and I assumed the directorship of the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo, we called on Seamus to help us build up a declining enrollment. He agreed not only to give a reading and signing but to conduct the weekend poetry workshop. On the day, Maura McTighe of the Sligo Yeats committee came to me in distress to say that twice the number allocated had showed up: what were we to do? When we informed Seamus of the problem, he replied in his calm, generous manner, "Let them all in." And he did it again in 1997 to further enhance the enrollment when Valerie Eliot came over to open the School.

On the same plane of friendship, when I undertook the risk to start the T. S. Eliot International Summer School in the midst of the global financial recession in 2009, Seamus not only came to London to open the School; the next day he and Marie hopped on the coach with the students for the day-trip to Little Gidding, where he began the proceedings by reading alternate parts of "Little Gidding" with the Scots poet Robert Crawford, mixed with the audience, and read a Biblical passage for evensong in the chapel. He then stayed on for the next two days of morning lectures, listening attentively, asking questions, and joining discussions. When I tried to thank him for jump-starting the School through his extraordinary participation, he replied, "We're in this one shoulder to shoulder," and then turned over his honorarium for bursaries for the following year, to benefit international students who could not attend otherwise. The thriving School is now in its sixth year.

In 1995 William (Bill) Chace, Joyce and modernist scholar, became president of Emory, bringing with him a friendship with Heaney that began in California twenty years earlier. In the spring of 1997 the Heaneys returned to Emory as guests of Bill and his wife JoAn, who hosted a memorable dinner party at Lullwater, the presidential home. There was much anticipation of the Hale-Bopp comet passing over Atlanta later that evening, so after dinner, the Chaces led Seamus and Marie and other guests up to the Lullwater ramparts to witness on a clear, starlit night the real and symbolic event. "There we were," he later recalled in his commencement address, "inhabitants of the space age, takers-for-granted of the technology that has sent men to the moon, and yet our sense of wonder remained as innocent and as wide open as if we had been carried back among the astronomers and astrologers of ancient Babylon." He soon transformed the experience into an uncollected occasional poem, "The Comet at Lullwater," *for Bill and JoAn Chace*:

On top of the world, we'd raised our mint-sprigged bourbon,  
Toasted, tasted, drunk and drunk again  
Unhurriedly when, like a spoor of pollen  
At an astronomic height, the curl and spill  
And lucent swish of Hale-Bopp's catkin tail  
Passed above the roof-deck. We lined the railing,  
Silenced, solaced beyond expectation,

And took the measure of the zenith, smiling.

So into my ken swam medieval God  
On the top deck of His pageant, overseeing,  
Summoning Death, His mighty messenger,  
And Christy Mahon, the lark of human being  
Who felt a pity for God's solitude  
*All ages sitting in His golden chair.*<sup>v</sup>

In the May 2003, the Heaneys were again guests of the Chaces when Seamus returned to Emory to receive an honorary degree. In the midst of his commencement address, "Holding Reality and Justice," Seamus turned to speak of the English department's longstanding commitment to the study and teaching of Irish literature:

That commitment, which I have experienced firsthand as a matter of friendship and scholarship of department members, that commitment gives extra significance to my own return to Emory this morning. As does the fact that Emory houses one of the greatest of literary archives. The holdings of the Robert W. Woodruff Library include the manuscripts and correspondence of some of the most significant poets of our time, and I am glad to say that in their Special Collections, Irish poets and poetry have enjoyed a privileged status.<sup>vi</sup>

My colleagues in the English department were of course honored by the recognition, but we had no indication of the direction in which his mind was moving until he returned on 23 September for a reading, which included the debut of "The Comet at Lullwater," in honor of Bill Chace's retirement. "I feel safe as ever at Emory because of the quality of the people I meet here," he said upon taking the podium. "No visit I've ever made here has been without great personal significance. All in all, Emory has proved itself a home away from home for many writers." We were then all stunned by his surprise announcement:

When I was here this Spring for Commencement, I came to the decision that the conclusion of President Chace's tenure was the moment of truth, and that I should now lodge a substantial portion of my literary archive in Woodruff Library, including the correspondence from many of the poets already represented in Special Collections. So I am pleased to say that these letters are now here and that even as President Chace is departing, as long as my papers stay here, they will be a memorial to the work he has done to extend the University's resources and strengthen its purpose.<sup>vii</sup>

The new materials, which complement previously acquired manuscripts and letters and an extensive collection of his published works, include personal and literary papers, thousands of letters to Heaney covering his entire career, reviews of his works, news clippings, translations, periodicals, tape recordings, photographs, programs, audio-visual and promotional materials. Meanwhile, the Ellmann Lectures had become one of the most prestigious series in America, the names of Ellmann and Heaney attracting an impressive list of writers and scholars who were pleased to lecture in their distinguished company, including Salman Rushdie, who gave the Lectures in 2004 and who subsequently placed his papers at Emory, to the surprise of many. I

remember him saying at one point in the process, “If MARBL is good enough for Heaney, it’s good enough for me.”<sup>viii</sup>

Seamus and Marie last came to Emory for the library’s Twelfth Night celebration, moved forward from January to the first of March 2013 to accommodate their schedule. Twelfth Night is a formal, festive fundraiser for MARBL, with drinks and dinner and the reading of poems by selected guests, especially by writers whose papers are in MARBL: this year Seamus enjoyed the reading company of Peter Fallon, Joan McBreen, and Salman Rushdie. Other special guests were former graduate students who had written dissertations or publications on Seamus’s work and who came out of their own careers to share in the celebration of his influence on Emory and their own work. The hallway to the dining hall was lined on both sides with poster-size photographs of his years at Emory, from the pig roast to commencement. The next day he gave one of his finest and most moving readings to another Southern audience of 1200. As he walked towards the backstage green room after the reading, he paused, turned, and waved to the standing ovation. The Heaneys planned to return in February 2014 to open the MARBL exhibition of his papers, “Seamus Heaney: The Music of What Happens,” to run through November 2014.

Literally within minutes of the world-shocking news of Seamus’s death on August 30<sup>th</sup>, I began receiving emails from former students – scores and scores of them covering four decades of Heaney classes, all reaching out to express their sorrow and to say how much his poetry meant in their lives. I’m sure that many other teachers of Heaney’s work received similar spontaneous responses from their present and former students, as part of the worldwide “human chain” of grief and gratitude. I quote one such email from a student who is now a prominent journalist: “You may not remember me, but I wanted to let you know how wonderful it was for me to hear Seamus Heaney speak to our small class in Special Collections and to meet him. I remember being awed to be in the presence of such a well-known poet, and marveling at how down-to-earth he was, and his willingness to entertain our questions. It was a wonderful experience. I’m sure you’re mourning his loss, and hope that you know that your efforts to make him a part of the Emory community absolutely were appreciated by students.”

For thirty-two years Seamus Heaney’s periodic presence greatly enriched the undergraduate and graduate lives of a thousand or more of Emory students and bestowed great distinction on MARBL and the Ellmann Lectures, legacies that have reshaped the character and identity of the humanities at Emory, which became one of his spiritual homes, or havens. Seamus lived life and poetry large and with boundless largesse. Like people everywhere who experienced his presence and art, we also observed his exemplary conduct as a world poet, his constant alertness to the wishes of his hosts and audiences, his selfless conscience and imagination in responding to them with an open hand, leaving his down-to-earth imprint everywhere, leaving us, like the onlookers in Seamus’s “Thatcher, watching him skillfully pin down and stitch a beautiful roof-world out of wheat-straw, “gaping at his Midas touch.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Holding Reality and Justice,” Commencement Address, *Emory Report*, 55 (27 May 2003), 2; (copy in MARBL).



<sup>2</sup> See Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 428; also, Rand Brandes and Michael J. Durkan, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008). Another person who attended the party was the distinguished classicist William Arrowsmith, newly appointed Professor of Classics and English. He talked to Heaney at length about translation and invited him to translate a work for the Oxford Greek Tragedy in New Translations Series, of which he was general editor. Heaney declined – he was already translating from the Irish *Sweeney Astray* (1983), perhaps surreptitiously—but Arrowsmith may have planted the seeds for Heaney’s later translations of *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes: A Version of Sophocles’ Antigone* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Graham, “Seamus Heaney’s Poetic Pen Conveys ‘the good, the true,’” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 15 April 1988, 2E. Heaney’s “A Horn Book for Ye Hog Days,” which includes a holograph fair copy of “The Sounds of Round,” is now in MARBL.

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Comet at Lullwater*, published as a broadside for Emory University on the occasion of Chace’s retirement (Atlanta: Sutton Hoo Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> “Holding Reality and Justice,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> Heaney Honors Chace, Emory with Papers,” *Emory Report*, 56 (29 September 2003), 1, 5.

<sup>8</sup> The biennial Ellmann Lecturers to date have included, in addition to Heaney, Denis Donoghue, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Helen Vendler, Anthony Burgess (died before delivery), David Lodge, A. S. Byatt, Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco, Margaret Atwood, and Paul Simon.

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