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Remembering the Giver: Seamus Heaney

Richard Rankin Russell

Seamus Heaney gave me three great gifts in the last year and a half of his life—not only the text of his 2010 remarks at the 40th anniversary celebrations of Peter Fallon’s Gallery Press to print in my edited collection on Fallon, but also a poem for that collection (a translation from Pascoli), and finally an original poem for a broadside as part of his appearance at Baylor on March 4, 2013.

This last, entitled, “On the Gift of a Fountain Pen,” brings his career full circle as it returns to the vexed relationship Heaney always felt with writing, first signaled in one of his signature poems, “Digging,” a poem that opens his 1966 volume, *Death of a Naturalist*. “On the Gift of a Fountain Pen” begins by worrying about writer’s block by referencing Keats, a lifelong but relatively under-appreciated influence on the poet: “Now that I have your pen in my hand / And I have fears / That poems may cease to be. . . .” It’s cast in tercets, what I think of as his final form—the dominant form of his poetry in *Station Island* (1984), in *Seeing Things* (1991), and in his 2010 volume, *Human Chain*. When he sent me this poem for our broadside in late December of 2012, he expressed how pleased he was because “That method of first publication is one of the most attractive and provides a nice sense of occasion for the work, so I am glad the Poetry Festival is sponsoring it at Baylor.” By the second paragraph, however, he strikes a note of apology: “It’s more tercets, I’m afraid. After the attention you gave the form, you’ll probably wonder if I’m ever going to manage any other form—which is what I wonder myself.” That fear—coupled with the typical writer’s fear of poems that “may cease to be”—did not drive him as it did Keats, for instance, in the last years of his short life, but it must have weighed on him. “On the Gift” concludes with the poet’s resolve to keep going, “doubts / Or no doubts. Heigh-ho.” When he read this poem during his Baylor appearance, he inflected that concluding “Heigh-ho” with weariness, then instantly looked up and smiled. Smiling through the weariness; celebrating through suffering and pain. The Seamus Heaney I knew late in his life had found his last theme—Yeatsian tragic joy.

I really only knew him for the last year and a half of his life and like many another person has said since his passing on August 30, 2013, I feel immensely honored and privileged to have known him at all. In person and in the pages of his letters, he generated both intense excitement and a sense of care and trust. Additionally, there was the intimacy of his reading style and his graciousness from the podium and in person—these qualities endeared him to me as to many others.

When I invited Seamus to read at our Beall Poetry Festival in 2011, he ended up not coming because he was in poor health. When I re-invited him in the spring of 2012, for March, 2013, I sent him some publications of mine on him. I also asked him if he could contribute an essay or poem to my collection of essays on his close friend, the Irish publisher and poet Peter Fallon. I still remember the electric charge I got when I found the fax from him in my office mailbox. The

fax was dated “16 March, Vigil of St Patrick, 2012,” and typically for him in our correspondence over the last year of his life, it began with an apology even though he owed me none. That quality was closely compounded with his humility. He apologized for the “sluggishness” of his response to my letter, then praised my work on him, stating, “The cup is full, not to say running over. And the nice finishing—or starting—touch to all this is your readiness and generosity in hosting a visit to Baylor next March.” Somewhat unbelievably, he then apologized again—hoping that I “will excuse the brevity of this note”—and concluded with words I still cherish: “I just want you to know how grateful I am for your informed and attentive criticism, and your commitment to both the poetry and the peace.” He also confirmed he would contribute to my collection on Peter Fallon. Needless to say, I was over the moon. Here was the poet whom I had written about more than anyone else affirming my criticism on his work, agreeing to come read at Baylor the next year, and expressing his willingness to contribute to my collection!

As the months went on, we continued to exchange faxes and letters. In many ways, I wish I had written him years before. But something always held me back—the knowledge that I would be adding to his very considerable burden of correspondence. Sacks of mail were delivered to the Heaney household weekly and his fax machine apparently hummed day and night with invitations, requests, and pleas from many quarters. The fax letters I have from Seamus brim with encouragement, insight, and wit. How did he find time to write me and maintain so many other longer-held friendships? How did he find time to write poetry? Could a writer really be so magnanimous and generous? I do know that many of the busiest people are the best givers and Seamus supremely proved this rule.

I want to finish with a brief narrative of Seamus’s visit to Waco earlier this year (2013). Waco was one of only four stops on what turned out to be his last tour of the United States. He visited New York, then Atlanta and Emory University, which holds some of his papers and the majority of his letters, before coming to Baylor. I had booked a great venue for his reading—Jones Theatre Hall on campus—but had been misinformed that it holds 450 people when in fact it only holds 350. On Friday, March 1, I realized I needed a larger hall, and having found out that Jones Concert Hall was newly available that night, proceeded to try to obtain that venue from the Baylor music department. There was now an organist in there the night of the reading with one student who would have an examination on that organ the next morning—but when I asked the organist if she could move their practice, she refused. Nicely. Sunday afternoon, as my wife Hannah and I rode down from Dallas with Seamus and Marie in a limousine (over the top, but well worth it), they informed me that 900 had turned out the night before in Atlanta to hear him read at Emory. Yikes! I was now desperate to secure Jones Concert Hall—just across from Jones Theatre Hall. It holds 1,000 people and attendees could still park in the same lot they would have used for the original venue. My desire was given more impetus that afternoon when a buddy that I hunt with called to ask about Heaney’s reading the next day. Somewhat dumbfounded, I asked Fred, “You know who Seamus Heaney is?” “Yes, of course, I do,” he said. “And you better get on the phone to Provost Elizabeth Davis to get a larger venue.” That was just the push I needed. I emailed Provost Davis, who replied she was in Washington, D.C., but would do what she could. The next morning, a representative from the music department called me and said, “I hear we’re hosting Seamus Heaney in Jones Concert Hall tonight. What can we do to help?” It turned out to

be a great decision because that night, on All-America center Brittany Griner's last Baylor home basketball game, we still had nearly 1,000 people show up for the reading. I was floored and delighted. Just recently, a music major in one of my classes told me that they cancelled their concert for the night of March 4 because of the women's basketball game and the fear that no one would turn up to the concert.

Earlier the day of the reading, I met Seamus for coffee at his and Marie's hotel. He was in good form, relaxed, jovial, and as generous as ever. He asked me what he should read and I responded, "Anything you want to!" I did mention that our students all would have read his translation of *Beowulf* since it's in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, but he seemed surprised and informed me he hadn't even brought that translation with him on the trip. I offered to run home and get one of my copies and he read from it that night. That afternoon, he spoke to fifteen of my undergraduate and graduate students and we all lapped it up, reveling in his attention and faith in poetry. The university president's wife showed up and secured us some parking spots for that night through her assistant. Everything was set. After the reading, two of my trusted graduate students walked Seamus and Marie through the exhibit in the library on his work and life I had helped curate. They loved it so much that they requested a couple of the poster boards the library staff had made such as of his book cover of *Field Work*. But the real treat was yet to come.

That night, I introduced Seamus and concluded with these words:

Part of the reason for Heaney's popularity stems from his rich word-hoard, his vocabulary that draws not only on the local rural culture of South County Derry in the North of Ireland where he was reared, but also upon the linguistic riches of the entire corpus of British and Irish and indeed world poetry. His work is simultaneously grounded and ethereal, precise yet suggestive of multiple registers of meaning. Influences include Wordsworth, Frost, Hughes, Eliot, Yeats, Milosz, Dante, and Virgil, among others, yet his style is inimitable, uniquely his own. He has great facility with various formal units of poetry including the quatrain and more recently, he has often employed the tercet, a form he has reworked from Dante's *terza rima* to make his own.

Moreover, Heaney's defense of poetry in a time and culture that is often based on busyness and the bottom line draws readers toward it who are seeking respite from such a life. And in a time of seemingly endless, impersonal war waged increasingly by automated weapons such as drones, defending poetry has never been more important. Poetry connects us to each other and our ancestors. Reading poetry alone and with others, hearing poetry read in public venues such as that where we are gathered tonight, slowly, patiently, begins to establish the means by which we might "Only connect," in E.M. Forster's famous dictum from *Howards End*.

Finally, I think readers of Heaney's poetry also recognize and are drawn to the fundamental decency in the man himself, a kindness that emanates out from the pages of his work to embrace all of humanity, even as he has consistently critiqued our propensity to commit violence and dehumanize each other. Instead, his poetry quietly insists on our ability to lift each other up, to extend a hand, to form communities of care, to do what he says Yeats's poetry does in his Nobel Prize address, *Crediting Poetry*: "The form of the

poem . . . is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being."

That evening, Heaney stepped out into the glare of those Jones Concert Hall spotlights and gave a memorable and moving reading, opening by characteristically praising me and my poetry festival committee. He read an excerpt from *Beowulf* as promised, along with other poems, including "Casualty," for me. My wife and I sat in the front row, still not quite believing he was with us. He even took time for some monologues disguised as questions from the audience, then he and Marie went out with us for a memorable three-hour supper.

He's with us still, I think. Not just in our memories, but every time we open his work and hear that voice—precise, narcotic, eddying in his pool of South Derry vowels, educated, down-to-earth, affirming. I know my own desire to be more generous toward others has increased because of my knowledge of Seamus's poetry and of the man himself. His is the gift that keeps giving. And it never will stop.