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Seamus Heaney: An Appreciation

Margaret Mills Harper

After my beloved grandmother died, I remember clearly having conversations with several of my cousins and making a startling discovery. I had always known that of her many grandchildren Peggy really loved me best: as another Margaret I was her namesake, after all. But my cousin John knew that she loved *him* best. So did Cam, and Bo, and Kathy. And I learned something about my grandmother I've treasured since. Love is about particularity, not arithmetic: every child can be the best loved.

When I heard about Seamus's death, only a few weeks had passed since my partner Rick and I spent a lovely dinner with him and Marie, and since I'd had the chance to introduce what was one of his last public readings, at the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo. He and I had shared some private moments as well as the general pleasure of his and Marie's company. Right before the reading, waiting in the wings of the theatre for time to go on, I confessed to being nervous about my introduction; he said he was always nervous at a reading, too. I stayed there while he read, watching from my vantage point how he stood behind the podium and under the lights for over an hour, a little shaky but giving it his all. I felt that sense of soaring and being grounded at the same time that all of us who heard Seamus read will know. I also wondered at his ability to command the world's acclaim and also to make each person he encountered feel particularly attended to.

I remember dancing with Seamus over twenty years ago, at the meeting of the Southern ACIS Rand Brandes organized in Hickory, North Carolina, footing it long enough on a stone floor not meant for dancing to rip the soles out of my stockings. Over lunchtime pints after morning lectures in Sligo, Seamus always made me feel my ideas were well worth having. Good craic, including slightly wicked jokes, characterized sessions after readings at various conferences and events. Knowing I was one of thousands attracted by his presence, and that his time was precious even for close friends, I tried not to push, but Seamus made me feel he enjoyed my company as much as I enjoyed his.

Nor was that something special only something Seamus shared with individuals: he could mesmerize whole auditoriums as well as small reading spaces. Wherever Seamus was felt mysteriously more alive. He found for us the words that make joy out of the business of living—even when that business is dark indeed. Being at one of his readings was almost viscerally uplifting: you got the sense that an unflinching vision, no matter what it sees, and precise expression, no matter what the best words are, make us fully human. And that Seamus could see and say, so we were getting the benefit of that increase in our own humanity. At that last reading in Sligo, his soft voice, reading poems chosen for the particular event and structured like a musical programme, gave everyone in the sold-out theatre what she or he loved: old ones we could recite by heart, ones whose structures were practically visible in the air (like the football pitch in "Markings"), some that said Irishness (delivered of course in a voice that was soft and rich with Derry sound), others that spoke to students at the summer school from around the globe. He finished with new, personal ones, some unpublished, as well as "A Kite for Aibhín,"

the last poem from *Human Chain*, now his last volume. He made a joke about that volume, which he called “his last book” then backtracked to say he hoped not his last in the sense that he’d never write another. Now the joke has soured and “A Kite for Aibhín” is a poem whose meaning is now changed:

The longing in the breast and planted feet
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
Until string breaks and—separate, elate—

The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall.

When I heard the news of his death, I felt as if the only person who might be able to make sense of it, to find words adequate to the sense that the bottom had been ripped out of something huge, was gone. How could I grieve without Seamus to show me what that meant? Now, three months later, my own words seem to be coming back, inadequate as they are. Seamus was a great poet and a great man, a seer and sayer of the dark and the light. He was also that particular thing, a person who taught me something I will remember. Like Peggy’s lesson, Seamus’s is about love. I’m forever grateful.