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Nat Anderson

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Grand

Nat Anderson

An impossibly soppy articulation, with all its intonations of stage Irishness—”Sure, and wasn’t he grand?”—keeps circling through my head as I start to write about Seamus Heaney, because on the one hand he obviously stands grandly beyond the people most of us have met and talked with in day-to-day life—his elevation manifested in the Nobel Prize, his celebrity patent—and because on the other hand he was not grand at all. This entity who evidently hobnobbed with prime ministers and rock stars, who had known Robert Lowell, who counted Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott among his intimate friends, whose children called the daunting Ted Hughes “uncle,” seemed also to remember every person he encountered, to call us by our names, to wonder genuinely who and what we might be reading, to encourage us forward in our own efforts. When I sent around a notice of Seamus’s passing to the poets affiliated with the American Conference for Irish Studies, the out-pouring of personal sorrow was immediate and overwhelming: each of us, it seems, had been moved by him, changed by him, up-lifted by him. When I say “by him,” of course I mean by his work, but that’s only partly how we experienced his influence. Rather, each encounter with the man imbued and intensified our understanding of the poetry, as if his geniality and generosity reached out perpetually from the page.

I had the great good fortune to be in his presence surprisingly often over the years, but our first visit still strikes me as paradigmatic. In the late 1970s, I was writing my dissertation at Emory University on the ways Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney were re-inventing myth, and, with my dissertation advisor Ronald Schuchard, was able to bring Seamus to campus for a reading. I have always been callow, and was particularly callow then—knew shockingly little about Irish history and so was just discovering the literary and political realities that had shaped him—but Seamus met with me for a long session over coffee, answering my questions patiently, offering me access to his contacts, speaking kindly about my own first chapbook of poems. When Ron and I brought him to the auditorium where he was to read, we opened the door on a room full to the gills—indeed, I spent the duration of the reading packed like a sardine against the back wall—and here’s what sticks in my mind: when we opened the door, Seamus saw the crowds waiting for him, and he drew back to share a look with us, a slightly abashed look, as if to say, who in a million years could have predicted *this*? So many layers of significance lie behind that look: the farm-boy in the city, the Catholic boy among the Protestants, the schoolboy poet who named himself “Incertus,” the Irishman bemused by America, the outsider unsure of his Southern audience. Of course, Seamus was also simultaneously the brilliantly philosophical, expansively well-read, bracingly cosmopolitan sophisticate, and that paradox—the simple or humble man at home within the intellectual—seems to me still to define him. It powers the poems, too: as the humble man, he values clarity; he never wrong-foots the reader; he lightens his seriousness often with a quip; he asserts a persona who’s self-effacing; he moves towards wisdom through the *exemplum*; while, as the intellectual, he fuses an archaeologist’s particularity with a post-colonial awareness, draws on Dante to scrub away at his island’s sectarian divide, alludes comprehensively without seeming to be allusive. His own words echo so grandly now: “a space / Utterly empty, utterly a source”; “a bright nowhere”; “Silent, beyond silence listened for.”