



MA BY RESEARCH DISSERTATION

Outfacing History: The Artistic Influences of
W.B. Yeats and Others on Seamus Heaney's
Noughties Poetry

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Abstract

This dissertation focusses on Seamus Heaney's last three major collections of poetry, *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010). The main political, historical, and personal contexts of these collections are as follows: for *Electric Light*, the Northern Irish Peace Process, and the Celtic Tiger economic boom in the Republic of Ireland, for *District and Circle*, 9/11 and the War on Terror are the milieux that Heaney is responding to, and in *Human Chain*, personal mortality is the most immediate concern for the aging Heaney. In light of these collections, the artistic influences of W.B. Yeats are discussed, in particular Yeatsian intransigence and the idea of art as conducive to civilisation, Yeats's dialecticism, and the latter's attitude towards art and personal mortality. These ideas assist Heaney in finding a way to write as a public poet under intense political pressure, and feed into his own conceptions of poetry, such as the *field of force*. From the Troubles onwards, Yeats is Heaney's primary artistic influence. In addition, Heaney engages with a number of other literary figures in his career as poet and critic, such as Virgil, Ted Hughes, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Patrick Kavanagh, and Philip Larkin. As they appear in the collections examined, the impact of these figures on the central Heaney–Yeats relationship is also discussed. These poets are ultimately useful for Heaney in answering his central artistic questions of how a poet should properly live and write, and what his relationship is to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world.

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Introduction: 'All changed, changed utterly'

Yeats as an Example

In the context of Seamus Heaney's *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010), I shall be examining what I see as the most important relationship in Heaney's artistic life, that with William Butler Yeats, but I shall also be considering how some of Heaney's many other artistic relationships have affected his central relationship with Yeats. The reasons for Yeats's precedence for Heaney, as I shall argue, are bound up with the governing questions of Heaney's art, which he first outlined in the 1980 prose collection *Preoccupations*, and reiterated in *Finders Keepers* (2001): 'how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?'¹ These questions, as Eugene O'Brien suggests, mark Heaney's attempt to formulate 'a theory, or epistemology, of poetry', or an *ars poetica*: a personal 'code of practice' for the composition of poetry, regarding the role of the poet in relation to the world around them, and the formal considerations that this entails.² Perhaps the most terse *answer* to these questions can be found in the same Preface to *Finders Keepers* in which Heaney broaches his 'preoccupying questions': poets are duty-bound 'to look after art and life by being discoverers and custodians for the unlooked for'.³ The interaction between 'art', the product of human creative endeavour, and 'life', that is, the collective, social or political 'life of our times', as well as the experiences of the individual, is the thrust of Heaney's prose writings and his poetry.⁴ In his poetry and in his prose, Heaney is attempting in some way to find answers to these art–life questions. But what

¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Preface', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), X. I shall refer to these as Heaney's 'preoccupying artistic questions', his 'preoccupying questions', or simply as 'Heaney's questions' throughout this chapter.

² Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney Searches for Answers* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p.13 and Andrew Laird, 'The *Ars Poetica*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Horace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 132–144, p. 132.

³ Heaney, 'Preface', in *Finders Keepers*, X.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Secular and Millennial Milosz', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 410–416, pp. 416.

are, or is, 'the unlooked for'? Does the vocation of the poet necessitate a moral charge, to the marginalised in all things? Heaney's formulation is casually unassertive, imprecise even, but it does suggest that the poet must reach beyond present circumstance in some way, whether this be political or imaginative, for something new, and one assumes, something better.

Heaney's quest for his personal *ars poetica* is unceasing. The central figure for Heaney in his 'searches for answers' is W.B. Yeats, the poet about whom Heaney has written most extensively.⁵ Terence Brown asserts in his critical biography of Yeats: Heaney 'has engaged as critic with the poetic achievement of Yeats more fully than any other Irish poet since [Louis] MacNeice'.⁶ Neil Corcoran suggests that Heaney's writings on Yeats would make a slim although intellectually substantial book, and that Heaney's critical engagements with Yeats are examples of Heaney at his best as a critic 'provoked into some of his most alert and challenged acts of attention'.⁷ This book, Corcoran suggests, would begin with the 1978 essay, 'The Makings of a Music: Reflections on Wordsworth and Yeats', in which Heaney maintains the contrast between the poetry of 'surrender' and the poetry of 'discipline', and would end with Heaney's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1995 (now collected in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*), an address concerned with Heaney's poetry in relation to Northern Ireland since 1969.⁸ This lecture is 'much taken up with Yeats', the earlier winner of the same prize.⁹ That Heaney has sustained his critical attention to Yeats – Corcoran's hypothetical book would collect nearly twenty years of writing – is itself suggestive of the importance of Yeats in Heaney's artistic life.

Heaney first turned to Yeats during the Troubles. For some of the writers of the Belfast Set, and others, Yeats provided a precedent for the suitable artistic engagement with fraught historical circumstance:

⁵ Heaney, 'Preface', in *Finders Keepers*, X.

⁶ Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 381.

⁷ Neil Corcoran, 'Heaney and Yeats', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 165–178, p. 165.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*

that is, a kind of artistically faithful engagement with one's history via the poetic imagination. As Ronald Schuchard argues:

The successive shock-waves that had shaken Yeats's poetic sensibility – the Easter Rising, the atrocities of the Black and Tans, and the Civil War – were felt anew in these poets by the Bogside Rising, Bloody Sunday, and the Dublin Bomb Blasts.¹⁰

The historical turn to Yeats by writers of Heaney's generation is borne of an 'urgency and necessity' to establish a dialogue with history similar to Yeats's.¹¹ Heaney pinpoints the moment when the politics of his home irrevocably altered his poetic outlook. This was the summer of 1969:

[The Troubles erupted] in Belfast, two months after the book [*Door into the Dark*] was published. [...] From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.¹²

Similar to Yeats's attempt to create '[b]efitting emblems of adversity' – a way of finding a voice to authentically encapsulate the intensity of political violence – Heaney, in his 'Troubles' work of the 1970s and '80s, attempts to provide 'symbols adequate to our predicament'.¹³ This particular artistic challenge that Heaney set himself is part of his search for answers to his preoccupying questions. Heaney is attempting to find in his poetry a way to respond to his 'contemporary world'. Yeats, for Heaney (and others), was exemplary in responding to this challenge.

¹⁰ Ronald Schuchard, 'The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry', *Irish University Review*, 34.2 (Autumn–Winter 2004), 291–314, p 293.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 14–26, p. 23.

¹³ W.B. Yeats, 'Meditations in time of Civil War', in *Collected Poems* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 206–213, (p. 208), l. 70.

In response to Dennis O'Driscoll's question, 'Your interest in Yeats began to deepen in the 1970s?', Heaney replies: 'I'm not saying that I wasn't exhilarated by the work before that', but it was when Heaney's writing began to change with poems such as 'Singing School' and 'Exposure' (which formed part of *North*, published in 1975) that Yeats's example became more important for Heaney.¹⁴ In these poems and in general at the time, Heaney had been concerned with 'working out a position or a stance in relation to the place and the times we were inhabiting'.¹⁵ This 'reach for statement' drew Heaney to Yeats's 'vigour'.¹⁶ To re-quote Heaney's preoccupying questions: 'how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?', Heaney's concern with the poet's relationship to 'his own place' and 'his contemporary world' is precisely what drew him to Yeats. Heaney, in his reply to O'Driscoll essentially re-states his preoccupying questions, 'the place' being 'his own place' in those questions, 'the times we were inhabiting' being the 'contemporary world' in Heaney's questions. Undeniably, it is this concern with the poet's relationship to place, and implicitly politics, that drew Heaney to Yeats's poetry. Heaney's own place is Northern Ireland, and his relationship to it is bound up with its uniquely complex politics (an idea I shall explore further). Heaney's work since the 1970s, from *Wintering Out* (1972) and beyond, in being part of Heaney's search for answers to his artistic questions, thus has the artistic example of Yeats at its heart.

Moreover, Heaney's questions are inextricably entwined with his public role, a role previously held by Yeats, and which Heaney consciously emulated in some respects. The Yeatsian mantle of the great national poet capable of delivering 'memorable truths in an authoritative way', is something Heaney

¹⁴ Dennis O'Driscoll, 'The life we're shown': *Field Work*, in *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 191–232, p. 193

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

took seriously.¹⁷ In a Radio 4 programme on this topic, Fintan O'Toole summarises the importance of Yeats for Heaney in this regard:

Yeats's sensibility – Protestant, mystical, middle-class, and cosmopolitan – was very different to the rural Catholic world of Seamus Heaney, [...] yet this distance allowed Heaney not to be overshadowed by Yeats. He found his great predecessor waiting for him when he needed the inspiration. [During the Troubles] Heaney was forced by circumstances to take on the mantle of the public poet, yet he was afraid of becoming a mere mouthpiece for a tribal war. He discovered for himself Yeats's marvellous ability to make great poetry under the pressure of public engagements.¹⁸

Or as Heaney himself decisively phrases it: 'for our own generation, the Yeatsian engagement and example was central'.¹⁹ Forced by 'circumstances', the eruption of sectarian conflict in the North, *famous Seamus* donned, and not without a certain measure of ambivalence, the Yeatsian cloak of the national bard.²⁰

For a public poet at any time, although especially in times of bloodshed, one's audience is a crucial consideration when composing verse. Contained within Heaney's questions is a consideration of the poet's audience, or more precisely, who the poet is speaking for, that is, those of 'his own place'. For Heaney, a poet especially attuned to his originary culture, this is inherently Ulster Catholics. As O'Toole suggests, the fear of certain sentiments expressed in his poetry being used for sectarian ends was at times very intense for Heaney. In O'Toole's radio programme, Heaney ruminates honestly on the question of audience: 'You're in the polis as a writer', the word 'political' deriving from the word 'polis',

¹⁷ 'Heaney and Yeats: 'A Terrible Beauty'', *Archive on Four*, BBC Radio 4, 5 October 2013, 20:00.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ This is a soubriquet given to Heaney in Ireland because of his being especially well-known.

meaning a community or city state.²¹ In the radio interview from 2009 that features in O'Toole's broadcast, Heaney adds, 'Northern Ireland is a cockpit. Holding that in focus, at bay, or taking it in, necessarily makes you a political writer'.²² So if one's poetic utterances are in their very nature *political*, then the pressure to make 'great poetry' is a sure challenge.

As O'Toole states, it is Yeats who provides counsel for Heaney on this quandary. Much of what Heaney credits in Yeats develops from this central consideration, and is expounded in his essay 'Yeats as an Example?' Heaney adds an interrogation point to the title of W.H. Auden's earlier essay by way of evaluation of Auden's earlier assertion of Yeats's genius. Heaney evaluates Yeats's artistic legacy or example to other artists, especially for a poet approaching middle-age. Heaney venerates what might be dubbed Yeatsian intransigence:

I admire the way Yeats took on the world in his own terms, defined the areas where he would negotiate and where he would not; the way he never accepted the terms of another's argument but propounded his own. I assume that this peremptoriness, this apparent arrogance, is exemplary in an artist, that it is proper and even necessary for him to insist on his own language, his own vision. This will often seem like irresponsibility or affectation, sometimes like callousness, but from the artist's point of view it is an act of integrity.²³

By way of example, Heaney takes an anecdote from Irish novelist George Moore, a contemporary of Yeats, on the latter's very public response to the Lane controversy from the former's autobiographical account of the Irish Literary Revival, *Hail and Farewell*. Heaney suggests that 'Moore's book is finally

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. This is reminiscent of what Heaney talks about with respect to Yeats in 'Yeats as an Example?': 'What is finally admirable is the way his life and his work are not separate but form a continuum'. Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 96–112, p. 98

²³Ibid, p. 99.

more of a testimony to Yeats's genius than a worrier of it'.²⁴ The Hugh Lane controversy erupted following the death of the wealthy aristocrat and art collector in 1915 on the *Lusitania*. Unable to find a suitable gallery in Dublin to house his collection of Impressionist painters and Irish painters, he allowed the National Gallery in London to house them. After his untimely death, Yeats and other public figures such as Lady Gregory of Coole campaigned to have the paintings returned to Dublin (as expressed in a codicil attached to Lane's will, although unwitnessed). Yeats, in Moore's account, rages against the refusal of Dublin's middle-class to donate money towards a Dublin exhibition of the works. Moore describes Yeats as being 'clad in an immense fur coat', and as 'stamping his feet' as he raged 'like Ben Tillett' against the middle classes.²⁵ Far from appearing aberrant or eccentric, for Heaney, 'the conscious theatricality of this Yeats, the studied haughtiness, the affectation', recalls W.H. Auden's 1939 elegy to Yeats in which he writes: '[y]ou were silly like us, your gift survived it all'.²⁶ We have here an example of Yeatsian intransigence, 'that protectiveness of his imaginative springs, so that the gift would survive'²⁷, by which Heaney means, of course, 'the gift of poetry'.²⁸ Yeats's attitude to his art influences Heaney's desire to write for himself. Despite the pressures that politics places on Heaney to produce art, Yeats teaches Heaney also to 'insist on his own language' and 'vision'. It is this that enables Heaney to maintain his artistic integrity in times of intense political pressure.

In this veneration of the artist's own vision, Heaney seeks to find a solution to the problem of audience. If he always writes consciously for himself, then he can evade the trap of being an Ulster Catholic trying to respond to sectarian violence in a way that can be seen to condone violence on either side. And yet, this quandary is not so easily solved. In section IV of 'The Flight Path' from *The Spirit Level* (1996),

²⁴ Ibid, p. 104.

²⁵ George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, 1925, Ed. Richard Gave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), p. 540.

²⁶ Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?', p. 105.

²⁷ W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', in *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 247-249, (p. 248), l. 32.

²⁸ Neil Corcoran, 'Heaney and Yeats', pp. 165-178, p. 169.

Heaney recalls being accosted by the Sinn Féin spokesman Danny Morrison as he travelled by train between Dublin and Belfast in 1979. ‘When, for fuck’s sake, are you going to write / Something for us?’ he says, asking Heaney to produce poetry for the nationalist cause. ‘If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for myself’, Heaney replies.²⁹ In spite of this declaration of steadfast Yeatsian devotion to the art, in writing for himself, Heaney is, in a sense, as Bernard O’Donoghue argues, writing for *us*, ‘addressing a restricted [Irish–Catholic] national clientele’.³⁰ To again re-state Heaney’s artistic questions first expressed in *Preoccupations*: ‘how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?’, O’Donoghue suggests of these questions: “‘his own voice’ and ‘his literary heritage’ are private, artistic matters; ‘his own place’ and ‘his contemporary world’ envisage much wider and more public domains [...] ‘writing for us’ [...] manages to fit in somewhere between the private and the public’.³¹ Heaney is implicitly always writing for those of his community, as he *knows* that his work has an audience.

Heaney thus writes of Yeats:

For all the activity and push of the enterprise, the aim of the poet and of the poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of the individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole, and the spirit of our age is sympathetic to that democratic urge.³²

As Heaney explains later in ‘Yeats as an Example?’, having praised Yeats as an ideal example for the poet approaching middle-age, ‘[a]bove all, [Yeats] reminds you that art is intended, that it is part of the

²⁹ Seamus Heaney, ‘from Flight Path’, in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 412–413, (p. 413), ll. 29–31.

³⁰ Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘‘The Gift to Set a Statesman Right’’: Politics and Irish Poetry in Yeats and Heaney’, *Journal of Irish Studies*, 24.1 (2009), 3–14, p. 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³² Heaney, ‘Yeats as an Example?’, p. 103.

creative push for civilisation itself'.³³ Yeats, in the late poem, 'Longlegged Fly', suggests poetry's aim is to ensure '[t]hat civilisation may not sink'.³⁴ Following Yeats's example, Heaney aims to produce art that is ever-attuned to the sensitivities of its audience, and yet also striving to transcend its present circumstance via its own vision. So as he did for Heaney in a Troubled North, for the post-9/11 world, with its paradigm shift in foreign policy and national security, and its real dangers, Yeats provides counsel for Heaney. Yeats proves to be especially important for Heaney in balancing the personal-artistic insistence on one's vision with a perceived duty to the wider domains of politics and the community. For Heaney, also, Yeats represents the model poet, the poet convinced of his own vision, and the conduciveness of that vision to civilisation. In short, he is a poet committed to his imaginative powers, and the redeeming power of art, an art that exists 'so that civilization may not sink'. In the context of political violence in Northern Ireland from 1969 onwards, it is perhaps unsurprising that the greatest Irish poet since Yeats (as argued by Robert Lowell) found this notion so empowering. Crucial to the efficacy of this art is a rigorous dialecticism, a central aspect to Yeats's aesthetic outlook that I shall examine later in this introduction. But firstly, I would like to explore the nature of some of Heaney's other artistic engagements, and their relevance to the focal Heaney-Yeats relationship. Heaney's lesser critical engagements (in terms of critical attention) with the likes of Patrick Kavanagh, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Philip Larkin, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz, and even Virgil, are part of his ongoing formulation of a personal *ars poetica*, and as such, are also part of his central relationship with Yeats.

³³ Ibid, p. 107-108.

³⁴ W.B. Yeats, 'Long-legged Fly', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 352-353, (p. 352), l. 1.

Heaney's Eclectic Affinities

In this section, I shall discuss the influences of Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky on the Heaney–Yeats relationship, before moving into an exposition of Yeats's dialecticism and its impact on Heaney. I shall end this chapter with *précises* of the chapters to follow. In order of chronology, they focus on *Electric Light*, *District and Circle*, and *Human Chain* respectively. In my summaries of these chapters, I shall outline some of the artistic influences on the collections. These other relationships provide Heaney with fresh arguments and ideas in his long negotiation with his public role as a poet. Many of the poets that Heaney was attracted to, such as Brodsky and Miłosz, are public poets of a kind. Every poet is a public poet, as every poem implies an audience, but Heaney finds in his many artistic engagements a particular quality. Heaney is drawn to the poets who, with Yeats as their exemplar, 'practise such faith in art's absolute necessity' that they 'overbear whatever assaults the historical and contingent might mount upon their certitude'.³⁵ Each of these figures has their own effective strategies for responding to their contemporary world, and as such, Heaney is able to draw on their particular artistic examples in his searches for answers. To take the examples of Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky, Heaney credits in their artistic approaches ideas similar to those that he credits in Yeats's. In her monograph, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe* (2012), Magdalena Kay explores (among other things) the artistic relationship between Heaney and 20th century Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. Of the frequent attribution by critics to the *Yeatsian* influences on Heaney's work, she asks: 'Why Yeatsian? [...] one might just as readily say Miłoszian'.³⁶ Kay identifies a shared poetic concern of Miłosz and Yeats to which Heaney was attracted in his mid-career, the broad concern of 'art's place in the

³⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'from The Government of the Tongue', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 180–191, p. 183.

³⁶ Magdalena Kay, 'Heroic Names', in *In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 57–86, p. 73.

world'.³⁷ In his elegiac essay to Miłosz, 'Secular and Millennial Milosz', Heaney interrogates this concern with respect to the *other* master: ' "What is poetry," Miłosz once asked himself, "which cannot save / Nations or people?" '.³⁸ In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney describes the Miłoszian question as 'a cry wrung *in extremis, de profundis*, the cry of the responsible human', before countering this with Joseph Brodsky's³⁹ assertion that 'if art teaches us anything, it's that the human condition is private'.⁴⁰ In his essay on Brodsky, Heaney praises the latter's 'total conviction about poetry as a force for good – not so much "for the good of society" as for the health of the individual mind and soul'.⁴¹ Heaney himself professes to standing – with characteristic equivocality – 'betwixt and between [these positions] – which is, in effect, where Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky also stood'.⁴² What seems most striking for Heaney in the aesthetic perspectives of Brodsky and Miłosz is similar to what preoccupies Heaney with regard to Yeats. Brodsky's insistence on the privacy of the human condition is like Yeatsian intransigence, the artist's insistence on his own vision. Miłosz's 'cry of the responsible human' – a view of poetry as existing for the good of the wider community – is like Yeats's notion of poetry as constituting a 'creative push for civilisation'. Indeed, also like Yeats, Heaney arrives here at a view that maintains its fidelity to both of these positions.

This very notion of existing 'betwixt and between' is Yeatsian. This duality Heaney identifies in Yeats's conception of Ireland, and by extension, the man himself. In a radio programme where he visited Coole Park in the West of Ireland, Heaney describes being drawn to Yeats's desire to 'unite contrary impulses'.⁴³ Heaney identifies with Yeats's attempt, beginning in the 1890s, to form a new literature which united the Ireland of Gaelic tradition with Yeats's Anglo-Ireland, the Ireland of the Protestant

³⁷ Ibid, p. 74.

³⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Secular and Millennial Milosz', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 410–416, pp. 415–416.

³⁹ This is another Eastern European literary influence on Heaney, this time Russian–Jewish.

⁴⁰ O'Driscoll, 'So deeper into it: *Electric Light, District and Circle*', in *Stepping Stones*, pp. 375–414, p. 381.

⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Joseph Brodsky: 1940–1996', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 403–407, p. 404.

⁴² O'Driscoll, 'So deeper into it', p. 381.

⁴³ 'Heaney and Yeats: 'A Terrible Beauty'.

Ascendancy, a literature ‘which both sides could ascend to and both sides could be proud’.⁴⁴ Heaney values in Yeats more than just the example of how to write good poetry as a public poet in times of conflict. Heaney credits the ‘good poetry’ for what it is, a poetry that unites disparate points of view, different traditions, even.⁴⁵

Engendered in this dialectical view of literature itself, is a dialectical movement of thought. Of Yeats, Marjorie Howes writes:

His thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he embraced a counter-truth: a proposition that contradicted the first truth, was equally true, and did not negate it.⁴⁶

The act of the poet thinking dialectically greatly influences Heaney’s own conception of poetic composition and poetry itself, a position embodied in what Heaney terms the *field of force*. O’Brien discusses Heaney’s field of force, or in the German, *Kraftfeldt*. Poetry has an obvious relationship with the lived world, history, the times; it is the nature of this relationship that Heaney questions. In the last two tercet stanzas of the poem, ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Heaney describes leaving a checkpoint and accelerating off into a kind of other world:

And suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed,

as if you’d passed from behind a waterfall

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ In O’Toole’s illuminating radio programme, Roy Foster describes with typical lucidity the central contradiction to Yeats’s conception of an authentic Ireland: ‘The Trouble with Yeats’s position was that it was troubled and conflicted from the very beginning. He was part of a movement which stressed that Irish authenticity was located in the Gaelic tradition, in the Irish language, in the authentic prelapsarian Irishness which had been, so to speak, corrupted by years of English domination. But his own family descended from English settlers, his religion [...] was the Protestant religion of the Church of Ireland, he did not speak Irish, he lived between London and Ireland [...] He in all these ways would be considered by more restrictive cultural revolutionaries as inauthentic. His great achievement was from this [...] in many ways literally unpopular base, to emerge as the voice of a new and renascent Irish culture’.

⁴⁶ Marjorie Howes, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19, p. 1.

on the black current of a tarmac road

past armour-plated vehicles, out between

the posted soldiers flowing and receding

like tree shadows in the polished windscreen.⁴⁷

This poem describes the process, extending from the essential dialectic that Heaney's poetry enacts between fixities, whereby:

Individuals are encouraged to reattune their consciousness, to be "forwarded" within themselves. What [Heaney] means by this is that in the most illuminating poetry what is at work is the mind's capacity to "conceive a new plane of regard for itself, a new scope for its own activity". This new plane has a relationship with the actual, but is in no way governed by it, and it also has the ability to encompass different forces within its field of force, and to posit answers, in some way, to the questions raised by the actual.⁴⁸

As Heaney writes: '[t]he poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position, by his disposition to be affected by all positions'.⁴⁹ This idea of being 'arraigned yet freed' exemplifies, in a single phrase, this relationship with 'the actual' world of 'armour-plated vehicles', and 'posted soldiers', the actual here meaning the existent tangible realm of the everyday. They are there, and remain in the poet's consciousness, but he is also 'freed' from them, as they become transformed and have been transcended, like the individual consciousness of reader

⁴⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'From the Frontier of Writing', in *Opened Ground*, pp. 297–299 (pp. 297–298), ll. 19–24.

⁴⁸ Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney Searches for Answers*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry in Northern Ireland', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 112–134, p. 119.

and writer, becoming 'like tree shadows in the polished windscreen'. This serene, ghostly image sees Heaney leaving the realm of the actual, and in doing so, he becomes free to levitate above his world and 'posit answers'. Thus the *Kraftfeldt* is the new realm in which different fixities of identity and of position are subsumed into this fluid dialectical space, with everything 'flowing and receding' in a constant dynamic.

This dialecticism is at the core of both Heaney's and Yeats's way of thinking, and has a particular importance when it comes to politics. This is especially clear in the 'From the Frontier of Writing', a poem that takes its subject matter directly from Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict. Heaney's employment of the noun 'frontier' in the poem's title, suggests that the very act of writing is combative, although he may also be suggesting that writing emerges from a brink point. This last idea relates to 'the unlooked for' for whom or which Heaney argues the poet must stand; art is an act of moving beyond its given boundaries, a seeking of 'a new plane of regard'. Heaney quotes Richard Ellmann on this point, who suggests how Yeats wished to show how 'brute force can be transmogrified', and how we can sacrifice ourselves to our 'imagined selves' which offer 'far higher standards than anything offered by social convention'.⁵⁰ Heaney qualifies Ellmann's point in arguing that however much a poet may 'concede' to the 'corrective pressures' of social, moral, political, or historical reality, the 'ultimate fidelity' must be to the 'demands and promise' of the 'artistic event'.⁵¹ Heaney is not suggesting that the artist ignore these different realities *in favour* of a conception of detached or isolated artistic endeavour, rather he is arguing that the artist remain engaged with his times, whilst remaining faithful to their own poetic processes. For Heaney this is the dialectic enacted by the field of force. The artist responds to political pressures not via the crude procedures of 'social convention', but by the higher state of the 'imagined self[f]'. This conceives successful artistic production as arising from 'a break with

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, 'from The Government of the Tongue', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 180–191, p. 183.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the usual life but not an absconding from it'.⁵² I have now outlined some of the ways in which Heaney has engaged with the artistic relationship with Yeats. I have also started to consider how some of Heaney's many other artistic relationships have affected his central artistic relationship with Yeats. In the following section, I will summarise the chapters to follow.

The Collections: *Electric Light*, *District and Circle*, and *Human Chain*

I shall devote a chapter to each of Heaney's three collections, in order of chronology. Starting with *Electric Light*, I shall then move into a discussion of *District and Circle*, before examining *Human Chain*. In *Electric Light*, Heaney's poems show an awareness of the Northern Irish Peace Process. This collection, as Heaney's first composed entirely *after* the Good Friday Agreement, is inflected with the anxiety of a 'peace process under constant challenge'.⁵³ This is manifested in the broad tone of 'denied consolation' in the collection.⁵⁴ Whether this be in antipastoral lyrics, the elegy, or the eclogue, this sense pervades. Additionally, some poems such 'Glanmore Eclogue', find Heaney responding to the economic boom in the Republic of Ireland, known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. I will focus on the impacts of Virgil, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ted Hughes on Heaney's central relationship with Yeats. I shall examine the impact of Hopkins and Hughes on the initial lyrics of the collection, in light of the theme of suffering in poetry. In Virgil's eclogues, of which there are three in *Electric Light*, I shall explore the intersection of the artist, their art, and their contemporary world.

⁵² Ibid, p. 190.

⁵³ Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Heaney's Classic and the Bucolic', *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, pp. 106–122, p. 118.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Heaney's 2006 collection, *District and Circle*, is deeply affected by the 'the massive and continuing fallout from the Al-Qaida attacks on New York of 9/11'.⁵⁵ There are two interconnecting themes in this collection as a result: bucolic violence, where military violence is prefigured in Heaney's evocations of the natural world, and poetic repossession, where Heaney seeks strength from the rural sphere of his youth in the face of terror in all its forms. T.S. Eliot and Patrick Kavanagh, in different ways, provide counsel for Heaney in his exploration of these ideas: Eliot, in his enabling Heaney to revisit the artistic example of Yeats in times of political upheaval, and Kavanagh, in his providing a way for Heaney to reflect on his contemporary world via the rural. Heaney draws on Yeatsian intransigence in this collection, but Kavanagh provides Heaney with a different subject matter in which to give shape to this idea. As Kavanagh strives to make 'home territory "a theme for kings"' by imbuing the local with universal resonance, so the local 'district' for Heaney can form an oblique commentary on the wider 'circle'.⁵⁶

Human Chain as a whole is primarily concerned with the poet's mortality. I shall discuss the attitudes of Yeats and Philip Larkin to personal mortality, as considered by Heaney in 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin'. Heaney sides with Yeats in the essay, and it is Yeats pitting his creative endeavour against 'the recalcitrant and inhuman' that Heaney draws on when facing his own death.⁵⁷ Virgil's *Aeneid* figures in *Human Chain*, especially in the poem, 'Route 110'. Heaney appropriates some of Virgil's motifs, such as the golden bough, Charon's barge, and the descent into the underworld, in the poem's broad personal-historical narrative, which begins with Heaney as a child, and ends with the birth of his granddaughter. Whilst Virgil provides Heaney with some useful images to

⁵⁵ Michael Parker, 'Fallout from the thunder: poetry and politics in Seamus Heaney's *District and Circle*', *Irish Studies Review*, 16.4, (2008), 369–384, p. 369.

⁵⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal: The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 115–131, p. 120. Heaney is quoting Kavanagh's 'Spraying the Potatoes' here: 'We talked and our talk was a theme for kings', in *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 36–37, (p. 37), l. 25.

⁵⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 316–332, p. 331.

frame his narrative, Heaney's ultimate view of death is decidedly Yeatsian in its vitality. I shall also devote a section of the chapter to a discussion of the tercet stanza, which Heaney employs extensively in *Human Chain*.

So as I have outlined, Yeats has occupied a central position in Heaney's artistic life since the Troubles, and his presence can still be traced in Heaney's later works. So too can the presences of Eliot, Hughes, Hopkins, Kavanagh, Larkin, and Virgil. There are other figures that are worth exploring, but would require more time and more space for an extensive exploration of their impact on Heaney. These poets figure, apart from Yeats, most prominently in Heaney's last three collections of poetry, and so are given attention in this dissertation. In the following chapters, I shall examine each of these collections chronologically, navigating between the formalist and historicist methodologies. Extending the arguments propounded in this chapter, I aim to explore further the impacts of Virgil, Hopkins, and Hughes for *Electric Light*, Kavanagh and Eliot for *District and Circle*, and Virgil and Larkin for *Human Chain*, on the central Heaney–Yeats artistic relationship.

Electric Light: 'Poetry, Order, The Times'

In *Electric Light*, we find Heaney in 'loose-weave' form, especially in the collection's opening poems.¹ Dennis O'Driscoll's phrase describes Heaney's metrically slack lyrics that, along with the eclogue and elegy, characterise *Electric Light*. This formal freedom stems in part from Heaney's revelling in the aural, psychical, and etymological associations of poetic composition. Heaney has written about *Electric Light* as an indulgence in the pleasure afforded by following the chain of memory sparked by a single remembered image. Heaney describes the joy in 'following each new [creative] impulse', and finding a shape for each image via his 'cultural memory and literary awareness'.² This explains the breadth of Heaney's allusions in *Electric Light*. He is giving himself *carte blanche* in this regard, but does acknowledge the risk entailed in this method, in 'that the poem might then move too freely beyond its reader's ken'.³ For Heaney, however, 'it is still a risk worth taking'.⁴ Heaney has also written, in contradistinction to this sense of artistic glee that he describes, how *Electric Light* 'could carry a Virgilian epigraph: it is full of mortalia, by people and things we must pass away from or that have had to pass away from us'.⁵ Taking a line from the *Aeneid*, Heaney formulates such an epigraph: '[s]unt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt'.⁶ Aeneas, surveying murals painted onto a temple wall in Carthage, sees depicted the timeline of the Trojan War from which he is a refugee. This glorification of the war moves him to tears. Transliterated into modern English from the Latin, Virgil's line means: there are tears for things and mortal things touch the mind. The phrase, '[s]unt lacrimae rerum', perhaps

¹ Dennis O'Driscoll, 'So deeper into it': *Electric Light, District and Circle*, in *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 375–414, p. 389.

² Seamus Heaney, *Lux Perpetua*, (London: *Guardian*, 2001).

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jun/16/poetry.features>> [accessed 20 May 2016].

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Virgil's most critically disputed formulation, Heaney himself has rendered as: 'there are tears at the heart of things'.⁷ Heaney's phrasing explores the association between the two heteronyms of 'tears', the first meaning lacrimation (the closest semantically to Virgil's 'lacrimae'), and the second, the plural of the noun meaning rip or fissure. Combined with the phrase 'heart of things', Heaney alludes to the cliché of the *tear in the fabric of society*, a breakdown in societal order which may precipitate bloodshed, and cause much sorrow and human lacrimation. For Aeneas, the cause is the Trojan War, for Heaney, the Troubles. Heaney's Virgilian epigraph recalls 'Mycenae Lookout', a sequence of poems published in *The Spirit Level* (1996). These poems, Robert Potts tells us, offer a description 'of the Trojan War and peace which we are clearly invited to take as an oblique reference to the peace process in 1990s Northern Ireland'.⁸ This paralleling is part of Heaney's searches for answers, or more precisely here, his search for examples of how to write in times of conflict. In the way Yeats proved fruitful for Heaney in how the latter responded to conflict in his art, so Heaney credits in Virgil a similar quality. Heaney is giving shape to his poetic imaginings through Virgil's poem, and thus posits an argument for a hard-won peace. *Electric Light* was published after the Belfast Agreement of 1998, the formal agreement to establish a power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland, and, accordingly, the renewed optimism in many poems is tinged with loss. That is, optimism for lasting peace following the agreement, yet a consciousness of the human suffering that it took to get them there. Another context that Heaney shows his awareness of in *Electric Light* is the Celtic Tiger. For Heaney, the optimism in this context is for the economic growth in the Republic, and the anxiety here is about the rate and nature of the changes that the boom precipitates. The exponential growth of the Irish economy in the 1990s resulted from a major shift in the means of production, from quasi-agrarian practices of working the land, to increasingly urban, capitalistic modes of production. In an interview with Paul Muldoon,

⁷ 'Greek and Latin Voices (Virgil)', *The Essay*, BBC Radio 3, 15 July 2008, 23:00.

⁸ Robert Potts, *The View from Olympia*, (London: *The Guardian*, 2001) <
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/apr/07/poetry.ts Eliotprizeforpoetry2001>> [accessed 15 May 2016].

Heaney conveys an anecdote about his wife Marie. Talking about the Celtic Tiger, Heaney remembers feeling 'uneasy' when the country became very prosperous: 'some part of many many people in the country relished it, but disbelieved it slightly, so Marie said, "this Celtic tiger is quite soon going to turn into a rug"'.⁹ From the initial smaller lyrics which draw on the work of Ted Hughes and Gerard Manley Hopkins to the reworking of Virgil's eclogues, this sense of tinged optimism pervades *Electric Light*.

Suffering in Art Proscribed?

Bernard O'Donoghue rightly points out that the pastoral in general is subverted in *Electric Light*: the pattern of 'the positive denied or questioned [...] is everywhere', not least in the eclogues.¹⁰ Heaney himself defines pastoral as a matter of 'idealised landscape with contented figures', but with antipastoral, 'sweat and pain and deprivation are also acknowledged'.¹¹ Heaney in *Electric Light* inclines towards the latter mode. The initial poem 'At Toomebridge' signals this. This is the famous bridge in County Antrim where 'the rebel boy was hanged in '98'.¹² Heaney here alludes to the Irish Rebellion of 1798, but beside 'the continuous present of the Bann', it is immediately accessible. This line also alludes to another '98 in recent history, 1998, and the peace agreement. For Heaney, 'negative ions in the open air / Are poetry'.¹³ The 'open air' of the pastoral is imbued with negativity, which Heaney versifies here in *Electric Light*. Similarly, the poem 'Perch', with its half-rhymes of 'river' / 'waver', 'slur' / 'air', enact the Ulster-Catholic stoicism embodied in the muscular perch parrying the current, 'on hold / In the

⁹ YouTube, 'Seamus Heaney On Poetry – The New Yorker Festival', 2015

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HWurkQ1ao4>> [accessed 10 August 2015].

¹⁰ Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 106–122, p. 117. Seamus Heaney, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 176.

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London; Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 176.

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'At Toomebridge', in *Electric Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 3, l. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ll. 8–9.

everything flows and steady go of the world'.¹⁴ The natural world does not provide sanctuary for the speaker *per se*, instead we see the political sphere encroaching upon it.

This is the case in 'Lupins' as well, another of the initial poems in the collection. Despite the hopefulness embodied in Heaney's description of flowers as 'sift[ing] lightness and small jittery promise', the speaker seems finally unwilling to confirm their status as 'erotics of the future'.¹⁵ Ultimately, they do not fully console, but embody a grittier stoicism in the face of suffering: 'and even when they blanched would never balk. / And none of this surpassed our understanding'.¹⁶ The root word of blanched is 'blanche', a transitive verb meaning to make ashen or pale. The garden lupin that Heaney depicts is a perennial plant which undergoes the annual death of its foliage, whilst remaining in a non-flowering state until the next spring. Thus the blanching Heaney describes is their annual dying back. To blanche is to also shrink from, and to whiten with, fear. For Heaney, this is the fear of Troubles violence. The stoicism of the perennial lupin is likened to Ulster's stoicism during this time. The flowers' refusal to 'balk', to capitulate to the violence of the world, resonates with Heaney and his compatriots, as 'none of this surpassed our understanding'. Consolation is not guaranteed in the natural world, then, rather political violence seems to impinge upon it here.

In this poem, the influence of Ted Hughes can be traced as well. In the second half of *Electric Light*, Heaney eulogises Hughes in 'On His Work on the English Tongue'. In this poem Heaney describes the steadying effect of the 'cogged and bolted stillness' of Hughes's poetry.¹⁷ He also slyly mocks Yeats for his banishment of Wilfred Owen's poetry from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936): 'Passive suffering: who said it was disallowed / As a theme for poetry?'.¹⁸ Yeats edited the anthology and refused to include the poetry of Wilfred Owen, along with Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, and

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Perch', in *Electric Light*, p. 4, ll. 1,2, 7, 8, 9–10.

¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Lupins', in *Electric Light*, p. 5, l. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, ll. 11–12.

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'On His Work in the English Tongue', in *Electric Light*, pp. 61–64, (p. 61), l. 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, (p. 62), ll. 20–21.

Isaac Rosenberg and other poets of the First World War. Written in ‘the midst of the great war’, Yeats has a ‘distaste’ for these poems, because they are written in the first person and so make the suffering they describe ‘their own’, and this theme of ‘passive suffering’, Yeats declares, ‘is not a theme for poetry’.¹⁹ Heaney, in his elegy to Hughes, counters Yeats with allusions to *Beowulf* in such lines as ‘the stunt and stress / [o]f hurt-in-hiding is the best of it’, and Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’, in the line ‘*To sullen halls where encumbered sleepers groaned*’.²⁰ Owen’s poem, situated during the First World War, describes the speaker’s descent into the underworld where he meets the man he has killed in the previous day. Heaney sees both *Beowulf* and Owen’s poem as exemplary of the theme of passive suffering in poetry.

Heaney also counters Yeats with a strange anecdote told to Heaney by Hughes as they walked together on Dartmoor, ‘a weird tale / Of a life and love balked’, and Hughes’s poem ‘Thistles’.²¹ The verb ‘balked’ here recalls the ‘balk’ in ‘Lupins’, which is a reworking of Hughes’s poem. John Wilson Foster argues that Heaney’s poem shares with Hughes’s poem the theme of stoicism in the face of suffering embodied in a species of plant life. In the last two lines of ‘Lupins’, Heaney is rephrasing Hughes’s closing lines from ‘Thistles’: ‘And even when they blanched would never balk. / And none of this surpassed our understanding’ is matched to Hughes’s, ‘They grow grey like men. / Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear / Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground’.²² The verb ‘blanched’ is linked to the phrase ‘grow grey’, and as Heaney’s lupins ‘never balk’, Hughes’s thistles reappear, ‘fighting back over the same ground’. Foster also comments upon the subtle differences between Hughes’s poem and Heaney’s. He terms Heaney’s poem as ‘mere persistence’, whereas ‘Thistles’ is a

¹⁹ W.B. Yeats, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892–1935*, <<http://www.english.emory.edu/LostPoets/Yeats.html>> [accessed 16 June 2016].

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, ‘On His Work in the English Tongue’, in *Electric Light*, p. 62, ll. 22–23, 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 30–31.

²² Ted Hughes, ‘Thistles’, in *Wodwo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 15, ll. 11–13.

poem of 'fierce resistance'.²³ 'Thistles' 'flaunts its Anglo-Saxon inheritance'.²⁴ Hughes's poem certainly possesses a muscularity, and a curtness of voice, especially in such lines as 'mown down, it is a feud'. Heaney's lines are more lyrical and supple. The resilience of the initial line, '[t]hey stood. And stood for something. Just by standing', 'thaws into a Latinate and romance diction' in such lines 'O pastel turrets, pods and tapering stalks'.²⁵ The 'O' signals the affectation of this line, in contrast to Hughes's urgent description of thistles as '[e]very one a vengeful burst / [o]f resurrection'.²⁶

Despite these differences, Heaney is suggesting, *contra* Yeats, that suffering *is* a theme for poetry. Hughes is the obvious influence on Heaney's poem here, but Hopkins seems to cast a shadow over this poem too. Foster suggests that some of Heaney's lines in 'Lupins' recall the 'embroidered dictions of Hopkins'.²⁷ Heaney himself describes the effect of Hopkins's dactylic (although sometimes anapaestic and iambic) falling rhythms, along with his characteristic compound adjectives and alliteration, as 'verbal gooseflesh', 'little ricochets and chain reactions within the nervous system'.²⁸ Perhaps the best example of Hopkins's brisk style is from a poem called 'The Windhover'. Hopkins writes in the initial eight-line stanza:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
 High there, how he rung upon the reign of a wimpling wing

²³ John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, pp. 206–224, p.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, and 'Lupins', l. 9.

²⁶ Ted Hughes, 'Thistles', ll. 4–5.

²⁷ John Wilson Foster, p. 215.

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a low bend: the hurl and gliding
 Rebuffed by the big wind. My heart in hiding
 Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!²⁹

The line from 'Lupins', '[r]ose-fingered dawn's and navy midnight's flower', is similar to Hopkins's 'king- / dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon', in its employment of compound adjectives in particular.³⁰ The stylistic gesture to Hopkins in 'Lupins' points to a deeper affinity with Hopkins on the theme of suffering and art. In discussion with O'Driscoll, Heaney remarks of 'passive suffering and the meaning of it: [...] the idea that your own travails could earn grace for others, for the souls in purgatory, [...] was appealing'.³¹ Heaney's view on this theme is informed by his rigorous Catholic schooling, which entailed his acquaintance with the overt Catholicism of Hopkins's poetry.³² As Heaney writes, 'the centrality of sacrifice [...] was at the very core of Hopkins's thought'.³³ This is what Heaney describes in the 'Fosterage' sequence from the 'Singing School' section of *North*: "'Poor Hopkins!" [...] his buckled self / Obeisant to their pain'.³⁴ Heaney sees 'The Windhover', in its evocation of the ecstatic flight of a Falcon as representative of Christ himself, as 'a versified enunciation of that attitude'.³⁵ For the young Heaney first considering the broader interaction of ' "life" and "literature" ', as Heaney himself phrases it, the self-mortifying, ascetic strain to Catholicism, with its 'cold-water shaves and single iron beds',

²⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover', in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 132, ll. 1–8.

³⁰ Heaney, 'Lupins', l. 4.

³¹ O'Driscoll, 'Growing into Poetry', in *Stepping Stones*, pp. 34–61, p. 39.

³² The Catholic strain of self-mortification seems to resonate with Heaney, although perhaps in secular as opposed to religious terms. He describes his identification with the theme of passive suffering as arising from his empathy with his mother being chained to annual cycles of pregnancy with no birth control. He describes her compliance with religion for its compensation, and also describes the 'fiction' of Catholicism. 'Growing into Poetry', p. 39.

³³ O'Driscoll, 'Growing into Poetry', p. 39.

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Singing School', in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 62–72, (p. 71, 'Fosterage'), ll. 11–13.

³⁵ O'Driscoll, 'Growing into Poetry', p. 40.

was something he inherently understood, 'embraced' as he was by organised Catholicism from a very young age.³⁶

In considering the impact of some of Heaney's many artistic relationships on his central one with Yeats, we can see how Catholic Hopkins, and also Hughes, informs Heaney's perspective on the interplay of suffering and art. Yeats rejected this as a theme outright, whereas Heaney credits it. This interaction of suffering and art is a corollary of Heaney's broader art-life questions regarding the poet's relationship to his own voice, place, literary heritage, and contemporary world. This is because it considers the artist's relationship to his own voice and the world around him. Heaney writes how both art and life in general 'have had a hand in the formation of any poet [...] yet both are often perceived to be in conflict and that conflict is constantly and sympathetically suffered by the poet'.³⁷ Heaney, I suspect, has Yeats in mind at the time of writing. Heaney rephrases the dichotomy of art and life as 'song and suffering', which is semantically akin to the idea of 'passive suffering' as a theme for poetry.³⁸ Using the example of Nero fiddling while Rome burned, Heaney suggests how art can often be seen to be an abdication from, or 'affront' to, life.³⁹ Yeats rejects Owen because he sees his life as congruous with his art. But Owen, despite his describing the horrors of the war from the trenches, still experienced the gap between 'reality and rhetoric', as entailed in the artistic method is a certain degree of 'mystification'.⁴⁰ Whether or not Yeats is right here, Yeats certainly maintained a theory of the separation of these two phenomena. He versifies this idea in the poem 'The Choice': 'The intellect of the man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work'.⁴¹ Despite an apparently forceful argument for its

³⁶ Ibid, p. 39.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', in *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. xi–xxiii, p. xii.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ W.B. Yeats, 'The Choice', in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 130, ll. 1–2.

segregation from art, in Yeats's poetry song and suffering ultimately form 'a continuum'.⁴² This is something Heaney admires in Yeats's work, as he sees art and life as subtly intertwining. This, for Heaney, is part of Yeats's intransigence, his fidelity to his own art. This vision is not confined to 'printed books' in a world of 'literate readers', but is presented as 'forthrightly' as it can be in a world of 'illiterates and politicians'.⁴³ So although Heaney is lightsomely placing himself in opposition to Yeats on this point, 'passive suffering: who said it was disallowed / As a theme for poetry?', the latter is a poet whose work presents the finest example for Heaney of the fruitful interaction of art and life.

The Eclogues

These broader questions about the relationship between art and the everyday realm also play out in Heaney's eclogues, where Virgil and Yeats are key participants. Not only are there a number of allusions to Yeats's poems in these eclogues, but the artistic concerns of the eclogues are decidedly Yeatsian. Guy Rotella remarks how Heaney and Virgil both share historical moments when historical shifts engender both end-time despair and millennial hope.⁴⁴ Both poets claim private and public roles, and respond to the roles' conflicting and 'companionate demands', acknowledging that if poetry is 'a solacing private pleasure' it is also 'publically beholden: required to record an age's facts and feelings; accountable too for resisting terror and abetting peaceful pursuits'.⁴⁵ Indeed, Yeats was also a public poet, whose work embodied this dualism, as Heaney has identified in his critical writings on the poet: Yeatsian intransigence, the poet's insistence on their own vision, is often checked by the notion that poetry must ultimately be conducive to civilisation, or be both attuned to, and exist for the good of, society. O'Donoghue describes Heaney's work as 'exemplary of [this] Yeatsian conflict between artistic

⁴² Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?', p. 98.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Guy Rotella, 'Poetry Itself', *Sewanee Review*, 109 (2001), cxxii–cxxiv, p. cxxiii.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

freedom and public responsibility'.⁴⁶ The eclogue verse form in particular, with its internal dialectic, and its way of providing the public poet with a formal resistance to political pressure, is especially apposite for Heaney in this regard. Indeed, Sydney Burris notes how this dualism is at the core of the pastoral in general. He discusses the 'dual emphasis on lyricism and social responsibility' and how as such, the form offered itself as *the* form when there was a conflict between 'realism and conventionalism', or for Heaney, public responsibility and artistic license.⁴⁷ Heaney himself has discussed the eclogue as a means of resistance to the contemporary world, and his poetry in general as constituting a simultaneous 'taking in' and 'holding [...] at bay' of its pressures (quoted before). It is perhaps a logical consequence for public poets inhabiting troubled times to seek forms which enable them, to paraphrase Heaney's apt phrasing, to simultaneously register and hold off those times. Heaney's identification with Virgil and his eclogues here thus springs from a similar anxiety which first led him to Yeats, and to then formulate his governing artistic questions. In the eclogue, Heaney is drawn to an essential dialecticism, the very same poetic method that Heaney was attracted to in Yeats. Iain Twiddy describes the eclogue in the following way:

[It ...] is concerned with things passing, whether lost love, the changing seasons, or dispossession and the loss or alteration of nature itself. [...] the Eclogue, and especially one of its forms, the pastoral elegy, show that things can be given up and that it is possible to be reconciled to substitutes.⁴⁸

We see, in Twiddy's description, a dialectical process engendered by the eclogue. This dialecticism is a draw for Heaney as a poet who, as I have argued, strives towards the dialectic in his work. The notion of change, or 'things passing' is important given the context of Heaney's writing after the Good Friday

⁴⁶ O'Donoghue, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, pp. 1–19, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Sydney Burris, *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), p. x.

⁴⁸ Iain Twiddy, 'Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral', *Essays in Criticism*, 56.1 (2006), 50-71, p. 51.

Agreement. The word 'reconciled' suggests healing. Following the official agreement to cooperate after two decades of violence, this healing is emotional and psychological.⁴⁹ Further still, the idea of being 'reconciled to substitutes' has its relevance to the politics of the North in the 1990s. The peace process asks those of both sides to abandon their resolute political aims in favour of a different conception of the North, one governed by 'cross-community consent'.⁵⁰

Comparing Heaney's eclogues with Michael Longley's pastoral elegies from *Gorse Fires* to *Snow Water*, Twiddy highlights the political resonances of the eclogue in Heaney's poetry: 'Heaney's recent work has examined the ability of the eclogue to unlock cycles of violence and stalemate, and to advance the possibilities of integration'.⁵¹ He further mentions the 'liberating space' afforded by the eclogue.⁵² The language of the eclogue is that of healing, and of 'integration' and 'reconcil[iation]'. The form enacts a process that I see as very much in the vein of Yeats's 'profoundly dialectical' disposition. Twiddy's explanation of the eclogue as advancing the 'possibilities of integration' is especially germane here. Other than its modern usage pertaining to the equal standing of different ethnic and religious groups within society, itself relevant to Northern Ireland with its history of division, to *integrate* is to bring together disparate parts into a single whole. This is like Yeats's desire for a literature which unites 'contrary impulses'.

It is the dialogic nature of the eclogue that enacts this dialectical movement. 'Eclogue IX', for example, details an exchange between two farm labourers, Lycidas and Moeris. Each interlocutor posits an opposing point of view, and the poem tends towards a reconciliation of both viewpoints. The eclogue,

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that 1998 was not the final end to Troubles violence. The peace process stuttered on until 2006, with the St. Andrew's Agreement, where Iain Paisley of the DUP became First Minister, and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin became Deputy First Minister. Northern Ireland's politics remains very complex to this day. Heaney, however, is cautiously optimistic at the time of writing.

⁵⁰ BBC History, *Good Friday Agreement*, (London: BBC, n.d.)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/good_friday_agreement> [accessed 30 May 2016].

⁵¹ Iain Twiddy, 'Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral', p. 52

⁵² Ibid.

with its promise of reconciliation, is therefore a perfectly apt form for a poet concerned with searching beyond the present for a better reality. The 'liberating space' of the eclogue is akin to the fluid dialectical space of Heaney's field of force. For further evidence of this link, in a published lecture, 'Eclogues *in extremis*: On the Staying Power of the Pastoral', Heaney argues of the eclogue:

In each case the art asks us to see through it, to view it from all sides, to enter in and to stand back, to regard it as both a revelation and an intervention, a *locus amoenus*, where you can choose to remember or forget the legions or the locomotives, depending upon how much reality you are ready to accommodate or are accustomed to bear.⁵³

Heaney's discussion of the eclogue as allowing the reader 'to enter in and to stand back', recalls O'Brien's phrase about the poem asking us to 'reattune [our] consciousness'. A poem is not governed by the actual, 'the legions and locomotives' here, but it has a clear relationship with it. Arising from the actual, the poem inhabits and creates a separate space, a *locus amoenus*, an idealised space of safety and comfort. It constructs a field of force, a dialectical sphere, as it asks to us 'to view it from all sides'.

Eclogue IX enacts a dialectical movement of thought. Heaney is outlining an internal dialogue on the question of art's efficacy in the realm of everyday reality. Each participant posits an opposing point of view. True to form, the poem is couched in bucolic language. O'Donoghue elucidates the situation of Virgil's poem:

[There] is an encounter between the poet Lycidas and the small landowner poet Moeris who complains that an outsider has taken over his farm, so it is this outsider's goats that Moeris, now only a tenant, is taking to market. Lycidas expresses surprise, believing that all the local

⁵³ Seamus Heaney, 'Eclogues *in extremis*: On the Staying Power of the Pastoral', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 103C (2003), pp. 1–12, p. 7.

land has been saved for its holders by the poetry of Menalcas, [...] whereupon Moeris declares that poetry has no power in a world where soldiers hold sway.⁵⁴

The notion of poetry's power in a world of military violence foregrounds the theme of poetry's efficacy. Can poetry be useful for actual political change? The confiscation of Virgil's farm becomes, in the noughties Republic of Ireland, the increasing investment of outsiders in Ireland's economy. As Moeris says: '[a]n outsider lands and says he has rights / [t]o our bit of ground'.⁵⁵ This sentiment may also be anti-imperial, articulating a complaint against historical occupation. Either way, the poem enacts the dual draws for the poet, those between 'politics and transcendence'.⁵⁶ Lycidas is an advocate of 'pure poetry', a poetry conceived within 'the pit of [the poet's] own consciousness', yet 'perfectly justifiable within earshot of the car bomb'.⁵⁷ As he says in a suitably sibilant, chanting phrase: 'The story I heard was about Menaclas, / How your song man's singing saved the place'.⁵⁸ The bard Menaclas may be Yeats. The salvific singing reminds one of the phrases Heaney writes in description of the oblique technique of Northern Irish poetry, in counter to the charge of confusing evasion with artistic tact in 1984: poetry 'need not apologise for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating'.⁵⁹ Since poetry's concern is with creating harmony – albeit from within an imaginative realm separate from the actual – this equation of singing with writing seems apt. It is 'singing' that can save the 'place', the jewels fired in the poet's imagination can offer resolution purely, as it were, from the shine they give off. He need not stoop, Heaney writes in a Mahon-esque

⁵⁴ O'Donoghue, 'Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic', p. 111.

⁵⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Eclogue IX', in *Electric Light*, p. 31–35, (p. 31), ll. 5-5.

⁵⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement', p. 119.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 118, 119.

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Eclogue IX', (p. 31), ll. 8-9.

⁵⁹ Heaney, 'Place and Displacement', p. 118.

phrase, to the 'arena of dustbin lids'.⁶⁰ Lycidas, one who people in the country call 'bard', not incidentally, espouses a view closest to Heaney the poet's.⁶¹

On the other hand, we hear Moeris say: 'But songs and tunes / Can no more hold out against brute force than doves / When eagles swoop'.⁶² Twiddy sees this as a subtle allusion to the confiscation of Virgil's farm by the Roman Empire, symbolised by the eagle here.⁶³ The Aquila, as it is sometimes known, presumably represents the ruthless imperial might of the Roman legions. The dove may therefore be Virgil's plaintive poetic complaint, benign yet feeble in the face of the *actual*. This phrase is obviously reminiscent of Heaney's lines from *The Government of the Tongue*: 'no lyric has ever stopped a tank'.⁶⁴ It also recalls the line from W.H. Auden's elegy to Yeats: 'poetry makes nothing happen'.⁶⁵ What Moeris argues here is a cynical and aridly *political* view of poetic art. Poetry has no efficacy, no place in the polis. Although Lycidas wants to sing while he works, to sing a song of reconciliation, '[t]o plant the pear slips for your children's children', Moeris urges artless pragmatism. Although 'we've come half way', partly because of the example of poetry, Moeris says forget art, 'we've a job to do', seeming to neglect the role of art in affecting or easing the task at hand.⁶⁶ Despite this, however, Moeris's last line, 'when the real singer comes, we'll sing in earnest', does ultimately display some faith in poetry, a poetry at least of some efficacy, despite acknowledging its limitations. The poem's literal

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 119. Heaney is quoting Mahon's early poem, 'The Last of the Fire Kings', where the speaker expresses a desire to be free of the quotidian, or the unbearable weight of historical circumstance, writing, 'I am / Through with history [...] But the fire-loving / People, rightly perhaps, / Will not countenance this, / Demanding that I inhabit, / Like them, a world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows'. Derek Mahon, 'The Last of the Fire Kings', in *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2011), pp. 63-65, (63, 64), ll. 13-14, 35-41.

⁶¹ Heaney, 'Eclogue IX', p. 33, l. 42.

⁶² Ibid, p. 31, ll. 13-15.

⁶³ Twiddy, p. 54.

⁶⁴ Heaney, 'from *The Government of the Tongue*', p. 189.

⁶⁵ W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 247-249, (p. 248), l. 36.

⁶⁶ Heaney, 'Eclogue IX', p. 34, l. 74, 83.

argument arrives at a conclusion that poetry can and does have an important effect. The conclusion reached here in 'Eclogue IX' is like that in *The Government of the Tongue*. Similar to but ultimately disagreeing with Auden's statement that 'poetry makes nothing happen', Heaney does conclude that poetry can make *something* happen, citing Yeats's artistic example. Heaney, in his introduction to his anthology, *Soundings '72*, writes how he 'finally disagree[s] that "poetry makes nothing happen" '.⁶⁷ In the context of the North, he sees poetry's effect of 'making new feelings' as far more effective, if less obviously practical, than 'a reframing of policies or of constitutions'.⁶⁸ A poetry that asks the reader to 're-tune their consciousness' is the aim then, a sentiment explored more fully some years later in *The Government of the Tongue* (1986): in one sense, the efficacy of poetry is nil, 'no lyric has ever stopped a tank', in another sense, for Heaney, 'it is unlimited'.⁶⁹ This is because poetry can leave its readers via its field of force 'speechless and renewed'.⁷⁰ Simply phrased, in the way poetry can change the way people think, it can 're-tune our consciousness' in a more fundamental way than political policy can. In this sense, 'singing shortens the road', art can be, to echo Yeats's sentiment, conducive to civilisation.

'Glanmore Eclogue' explores further some of the questions raised in 'Eclogue IX', specifically the relationship between artistic endeavour and the poet's contemporary world. This is a very Heaneyesque concern, with its Yeatsian influences refracted through a Virgilian verse form. Heaney, the poet, holds a dialogue with someone called Myles. Myles is likely to be a pun on what the medieval pseudo-history of Ireland, *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, calls the Irish people, the Milesians. Equally, Heaney could also be alluding to Irish writer Flann O'Brien's journalistic pseudonym, Myles na gCopaleen. The eclogue's first lines, 'You've landed on your feet. / If you can't write now, when will you ever write?',

⁶⁷ O'Donoghue, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Heaney, 'from *The Government of the Tongue*', p. 189.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

allude to Yeats's response to the Chinese curse, 'may you live in interesting times'.⁷¹ For Yeats, 'this is not a curse but a blessing'.⁷² The irony is that although peace is the aim of art, it is also its end, as it is more difficult to write in. To live in interesting times is indeed a blessing. The main body of the poem is concerned with historical change and the nature of art's response to this. Heaney inspects this question through the prism of the Celtic Tiger.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s and beyond, Ireland expanded in economic terms, becoming more ethnically diverse. Of course with the global capitalist crisis in 2008 as the consequence of neo-liberalist short-termism, Ireland suffered like all Western capitalist economies. But this poem predates the collapse, so the concern here is with '[o]utsiders [who] own / The country nowadays', perhaps meaning foreign investors, the phrase 'changed lives!' alluding to the exponential growth and change within the Republic.⁷³ As mythologised and anthropomorphised Ireland voices with pronounced consternation: 'now with all this money coming in / And peace being talked up, the boot's on the other foot'.⁷⁴ With outside money coming into Ireland, and talk of peace in the North, and one is anxious now about the Republic. Super-sized intensive farms established by 'outsiders' are, as Myles recalls, undercutting local farmers. There is a very real, indeed, quotidian vein to this kind of lament. The poet, Heaney himself, summarises Myles's fretful sentiment in his line, '[b]acks to the wall and empty pockets'.⁷⁵ But it is this kind of pressure which can be woven into art. Heaney re-visits his sense of detachment which he expresses in 'Digging', when Myles says, '[b]ook-learning is the thing. You're a lucky man'.⁷⁶ But like the concluding sentiment of 'Digging', his pen is also his spade. The boot *is* on the other foot, and Heaney is responding by creating a song for the present moment.

⁷¹ Heaney, 'Glanmore Eclogue, in *Electric Light*, pp. 35–38, (p. 35), ll. 2–3.

⁷² O'Donoghue, 'The Gift to Set a Statesman Right', p. 3.

⁷³ 'Glanmore Eclogue', ll. 8-9, 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, (p. 35–36), ll. 21–22.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, (p. 36), l. 26.

Heaney further explores this idea of poetry as responding to the times in Myles's phrase, 'Changed lives!'. Myles's phrase marries a Yeatsian and Virgilian idea. Despite the 'outsiders' dispossessing native peoples of their land, 'the power of poetry, of writing out history' is clear when he says 'Changed lives!'.⁷⁷ This phrase echoes Yeats's refrain from 'Easter 1916', 'All changed, changed utterly'.⁷⁸ Twiddy suggests that Yeats's poem is an example of 'the historical moment as monument'.⁷⁹ This status is shared with Virgil's *Aeneid*, a poem which traces origins in aftermath. That is, the origins of Roman civilisation in the aftermath of the Trojan War. In this evocation of Yeats's poem within Virgil's poem, this parallel is created. As Yeats's poem memorialises the Easter Rising of 1916 in Ireland, 'I write it out in a verse – / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse', so the *Aeneid* celebrates the rise of the Roman civilisation.⁸⁰ Like Yeats's listing the key participants in the uprising, Virgil provides his lengthy list of Roman heroes at the end of Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Of course, Yeats's poem is not strictly celebratory. It acknowledges, oxymoronically, the 'terrible beauty' of the rising. Book VI of the *Aeneid* is, contrastingly, triumphantly imperialist in tone. But the salient point here is the way both poets credit the importance of poetry in 'record[ing] an age's facts or feelings' (quoted earlier). Indeed, Augustine Martin characterises Yeats's poetry as doing just this, as the act of an 'imagination responding to every significant nuance of an age that it hates, fears, yet exults in'.⁸¹ Poetry at least has some 'power' then, at least when it 'complements great historical change'.⁸²

⁷⁶ Ibid, l. 33.

⁷⁷ Twiddy, p. 58.

⁷⁸ W.B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916', in *Major Works*, pp. 85–87, (p. 85), l. 15.

⁷⁹ Twiddy, p. 54.

⁸⁰ Yeats, 'Easter 1916', ll. 74–76.

⁸¹ Augustine Martin, 'Introduction', in *W.B. Yeats: Collected Poems* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. xxiii–xxxi, p. xxxi.

⁸² Twiddy, p. 54.

In 'Bann Valley Eclogue', Heaney explores his desire for both national and artistic harmony via the Yeatsian notion of 'poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths'.⁸³ Again, the dialectic nature of Virgil's form complements Heaney's dialectical way of thinking as derived from Yeats. In this poem, Heaney – Virgil's assumed poet interlocutor – is charged with finding a 'place', a context, a suitable tone, for his words, '[c]armen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens', which translate, or transliterate, to the Irish milieu as '[p]oetry, order, the times, / The nation, wrong and renewal'.⁸⁴ Heaney has to provide a song for the times, adjusting his voice to them. Virgil's fourth eclogue is a vision of the Golden Age under Augustus, the Roman Empire's founding emperor, and is concerned with the birth of a particular, and importantly, male, child. One may interpret this as Christ, as Twiddy does, given the year of composition, around 37 BC.⁸⁵ Heaney's child is female, however, and the poet is asked to 'sing / Better times for her and her generation'.⁸⁶ Heaney here is equating the act of singing with the act of writing, as he has done, for example, in 'The Interesting Case of Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker' (1972) where he describes travelling with David Hammond to record a tape of poetry and songs: 'the whole point of the tape was to promote that happiness and expansiveness which song, meaning both poetry and music, exists to promote in the first place'.⁸⁷

The female evoked here is Ireland herself, and the 'better times' are peaceful times. Yeats's poem, 'A Prayer for My Daughter', is another noteworthy analogue for this evocation of a feminised Ireland, and of the child as symbolic of a renaissance of peace. It is worth considering that Yeats's poem was written

⁸³ Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry in Northern Ireland', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 112–134, p. 118.

⁸⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Bann Valley Eclogue' in *Electric Light*, p. 11–12, (p. 11), ll. 10–11.

⁸⁵ Iain Twiddy, p. 56.

⁸⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Bann Valley Eclogue', (p. 11), ll. 5–6.

⁸⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'The Interesting of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', in *The Government of the Tongue*, pp. xi–xxiii, p. xi.

during the Anglo–Irish conflict in 1919, appearing in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). And as with ‘Bann Valley Eclogue’, Edna Longley suggests that ‘in its constructive aspect “A Prayer for My Daughter” seems a version of Virgil’s “messianic” Golden Age Eclogue IV’.⁸⁸ Yeats writes of the ‘great gloom’ in the poet’s mind, which correlates with Heaney’s expression of millennial anxiety, an eclipse which Virgil describes as a prescient sign of the messiah’s birth, in the phrase which Heaney quotes, ‘Pacatum orbem’.⁸⁹ This is Heaney’s ‘millennial chill’, an actual eclipse that occurred in 1999, and which he employs, in the Irish context, as an image gesturing towards the birth of lasting peace.⁹⁰ The first six lines of the second stanza of Yeats’s poem are recalled in Virgil’s prophetic words in ‘Bann Valley Eclogue’: ‘Bann’s stream will overflow, the old markings / Will avail no more to keep east bank from west. / The valley will be washed like the new baby’:⁹¹

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour

And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,

And under the arches of the bridge, and scream

In the elms above the flooded stream;

Imagining in excited reverie

That the future years had come.⁹²

⁸⁸ Twiddy, p. 51

⁸⁹ Heaney, ‘Bann Valley Eclogue’, (p.12), l. 19. The preceding poem from Yeats’s collection, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), ‘The Second Coming’, iterates this sentiment as well in the lines, ‘Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand’. W.B. Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’ in *Collected Poems*, p. 184, ll. 9–10. Ibid, l. 22.

⁹⁰ Twiddy, p. 53.

⁹¹ Ibid, (p. 11), ll. 16–17.

⁹² W.B. Yeats, ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’ in *Collected Poems*, p. 185–187, (p. 185), ll. 9-14.

Both poets understand the role of poetry in eliciting or welcoming future peace. Yeats's poem signals 'the future years', in which Ireland has become 'a flourishing hidden tree', where she may 'but in merriment begin a quarrel'.⁹³ The pastoral or bucolic as a means of resistance or a form of alternative sphere to the violence of urban life is in Heaney's poem too: 'Big dog daisies will get fanked up in [her pram...] spokes [...] / Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions'.⁹⁴ Yeats' tree trope is also reminiscent of Heaney's chestnut tree from 'Clearances' from *The Haw Lantern* (1987). Written in elegy to his mother, the last of eight sonnets describe a felled chestnut tree, '[d]eep-planted and long gone' as 'utterly, utterly a source', and as a 'bright nowhere'.⁹⁵ The tree is, of course, an image of growth. But it is not simply peace that is growing; as a useful synonym of Yeats's adjective 'flourishing', so is prosperity: peace ushers in the prosperity of the nation, of all things. The fruit-bearing tree beautifully epitomises this fantastic sense of energy and rebirth and growth. Furthermore, Heaney's 'bright nowhere' like Yeats's 'hidden tree', is an imagined Ireland, a visionary Ireland of the mind where all division is transcended. This becomes 'a source' for prosperity in itself, once achieved, but it is also a source, and indeed, desire, for Heaney himself as a poet.

Yeats's 'flooded stream' correlates with the line, 'Bann's stream will overflow' in Heaney's poem. The stream in 'Bann Valley Eclogue' blurs the lines; one could equally say the borders, the delineations, the divisions, between east and west. When Twiddy suggests that this image 'symbolis[es] interpenetration', he recalls Heaney's field of force.⁹⁶ O'Brien suggests that with the epistemology of poetry advanced in *The Government of the Tongue* and the field of force: 'Heaney is unwilling to

⁹³ Ibid, (p. 186), l. 41, 45.

⁹⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Bann Valley Eclogue', (p. 12), l. 27, 30.

⁹⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Clearances', in *Opened Ground*, p. 306–315, (p. 314), l. 10, 2, 12.

⁹⁶ Iain Twiddy, p. 55.

completely valorise one perspective over the other'.⁹⁷ The water trope has numerous connotations, especially for a poet raised in the tradition of Judeo-Christian philosophy. The Bann stream is imbued with the ameliorative effects of holy water, which also neatly aligns with the messianic pronouncements of Virgil's fourth eclogue. It represents a washing-away of division, 'the old markings' as Heaney writes (or Virgil says), and thus with it, a kind of penitence, whereby the guilt, the conscience of 'the valley' is expunged by this anointment. The valley is 'washed clean' like a new baby, and its sins removed. Heaney is eschewing reductive, indeed, axiomatic notions of fixed identity, and instead, to employ O'Brien's word, he is valorising or creating a place within his poetry, for their complex dialectical interaction. And through this melding, a new identity can be formulated, one seemingly free of division, since there are no fixed boundaries anyway. Poetry should not simplify, Heaney has said, and here he remains true to his maxim.

In *Electric Light*, we can see how Yeats remains central in Heaney's artistic life. His presence can be seen in many of the poems and in the nature of the artistic questions raised and answered in this collection. I have also examined, where relevant, the impacts of other poets on the central relationship with Yeats. In this last eclogue we can see how Virgil's verse form provides Heaney with a means to construct his field of force. Beyond this, as 'Eclogue IX' and 'Glanmore Eclogue' demonstrate, the form enables Heaney to explore his artistic questions, specifically the interaction between art and the poet's contemporary world. Much of what Heaney credits in the eclogue is central to his relationship with Yeats: the dialecticism, the exploration of art's relationship with its often bloody political milieu, and the idea of poetry as constituting a search for answers to such art-life questions, and providing a means of keeping at bay the times. In the interactions with Hughes and Hopkins in the initial lyrics of *Electric Light*, these art-life questions are also present. Examined through the political context of Ulster in the 1990s, Heaney asks if passive suffering is a suitable theme for poetry. Heaney's affirmative answer is

⁹⁷ Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney Searches for Answers*, p. 82.

adumbrated in his own poems, notably 'Lupins', which is refracted through the poetry of Hughes and Hopkins. In opposition to Yeats, it appears, Heaney argues this. However, the centrality of Yeats is clear in Heaney's evoking of Yeats on this point, and, ultimately, in Heaney's finding the 'continuum' of life and art in the poetry of Yeats. Indeed, Foster notes how *Electric Light* corresponds with a 'Yeatsian fellowship' of poetic practitioners who share similar 'high-minded' aims, of which Yeats, Hopkins, Hughes, and Heaney himself are a part.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Foster, p. 209.

District and Circle: 'I came forth from that wilderness'

T.S. Eliot and Heaney

In *District and Circle*, there are two chief artistic influences at work, aside from Yeats. These derive from T.S. Eliot and Patrick Kavanagh. I shall first consider the influence of Eliot on Heaney's theme of poetic repossession, before moving into a discussion of Kavanagh's influence on what I term the theme of bucolic violence, where political violence is prefigured in Heaney's evocations of the rural. The collection's title, *District and Circle*, has two chief connotations: the 'district' is Heaney's domestic context, political, cultural, and familial. The 'circle' symbolises the broader contextual sphere of international politics. This principally encompasses for Heaney, 9/11 and the regressive ideologies of Jihadism, and the equally strident neoliberal reaction to this phenomenon via the 'War on Terror'. There is a further, more directly literary influence upon the collection's title too, which comes from T.S. Eliot: the circularity of time, the notion that 'all time is eternally present'.¹ Heaney employs T.S. Eliot's metaphor found in his poem 'Four Quartets' of the London Underground's Circle Line 'as a symbol of the union of differences, and like Eliot he "redeems the time" by tracing the rhythm of his career, its cyclical progressions and regressions, its downs and ups'.²

These lines from Heaney's 'District and Circle' poem in which the speaker describes a train journey on the Circle Line,

So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging,

My lofted arm a-swivel like a flail,

My father's glazed face in my own waning

¹ Henry Hart, 'Seamus Heaney: Circling Back', *The Sewanee Review*, 114.3, (2006), 456–462, p. 458.

² *Ibid.*

And craning...

Again the growl

Of shutting doors, the jolt and one-off treble

Of iron on iron, then a long centrifugal

Haulage of speed through every dragging socket,³

correspond to the sequence from Eliot's poem, which reads:

Descend lower, descend only

Into the world of perpetual solitude,

World not world, but that which is not world,

Internal darkness, deprivation,

And destitution of all property, [...]

This is the one way, and the other

Is the same, not in movement

But abstention from movement; while the world moves

In appetency, on its metallated ways

Of time past and time future.⁴

³ Seamus Heaney, 'District and Circle', in *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 17–20, (p. 19), ll. 57–64.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 187–214, (p. 187), l. 4.

As Heaney moves 'deeper into it', so Eliot's speaker '[d]escend[s] lower', and as Heaney's speaker feels the 'jolt and one-off treble / Of iron on iron, then a long centrifugal / Haulage of speed', so Eliot writes how 'the world moves / In appetency, on its metalled ways'. The image of descent for Eliot represents a moral fall, into 'darkness, deprivation', and for Heaney, his replication of the image alludes to Eliot's meaning, but also, the more colloquial phrase 'so deeper into it' signals an increasing immersion in the times, specifically the political. Heaney is coerced by the magnitude of 9/11 and its aftermath into formulating a response. He is 'crowd-swept', compelled to pay heed.

Henry Hart sees the evocation of Eliot here as establishing the poet's resistance to the disembodied effects of fame since Heaney's award of the Nobel Prize.⁵ Equally, Heaney is signalling his intention to 'trace the rhythms of his career' via Eliot. By using Eliot's image of the Circle Line as a 'union of differences', 'time past and time future' are accessible from the present. This is in keeping with the self-critical strain to Heaney's poetry. Heaney in the 1970s and '80s 'obsessively scoured his conscience', and in the mid-80s, his soul searching convinced him to move away from 'a morbid preoccupation with the dead in history's graveyard, and prepare [...] "to be uprooted, to be spirited away to some transparent yet indigenous afterlife"'.⁶ What Hart is identifying is Heaney's poetic shift, a move in Heaney's art away from dwelling on the dolorous circumstances of the North towards an attempt to the imagination of something better. Heaney himself self-critically remarks that in his poetry he inclined to attend 'insufficiently to the diamond absolutes'.⁷ The phrase 'diamond absolutes' alludes to the idealised precision and clarity of the poet's vision. Then a shift occurred in Heaney's poetic outlook. Heaney's poetry, in the context of the Troubles of the time, attends no longer to merely depicting the

⁵ Hart, p. 459.

⁶ Hart, p. 458.

⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', in *Opened Ground*, pp.445–467, p. 458. Heaney is recalling his lines from 'Exposure' in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), '...And yet each drop recalls / The diamond absolutes'. pp. 72–73, p. 73, ll. 28–29.

atrocities of political violence, but envisions for peace. Heaney transcends reality, or outstrips his political milieu, in his poetry from then on.

There is something Yeatsian to this poetic transition, something dialectical and transformative in this decision to imagine something better. As the Troubles ground on, the political mood affected Heaney's poetry. It seems at points weighed down and dejected, as if infected with the zeitgeist. The poem 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' epitomises this gloom: 'I live here too [...] sucking the fake taste [...] Of those old sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts'.⁸ The speaker then concludes, pessimistically, of his creative response to his times: 'for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable'.⁹ There is bitterness in Heaney's description of the 'fake taste' of the platitudes that he hears. The poet also feels 'incapable' of producing poetry that can be transformative of the situation it describes. After much probing of the interstices between writer, poetry, and political context via his preoccupying questions, however, Heaney 'straightened up'.¹⁰ When discussing this transition in *Crediting Poetry*, Heaney quotes a single sentence from Yeats's *A Vision*. Emerging from its pseudo-philosophical occultist speculation is a resonant truth about poetry that Heaney looks to emulate in his art: at its best, poetry can 'hold in a single thought reality and justice'.¹¹ Yeats's formulation is akin to Heaney's field of force, a poetry that 'holds [the reader's] attention [...] in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen'.¹² The usual life is attended to, but now there is the promise of transcendence too. Like Ellmann's evaluation of Yeats (quoted in the introduction), Heaney's work now seeks to outstrip the

⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', in *North*, pp. 57–61, (p. 57), ll. 16, 19–20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, (p. 59), ll. 59–60.

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', p. 458.

¹¹ W.B. Yeats, 'A Vision', in *The Major Works*, pp. 430–438, p. 438.

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'from The Government of the Tongue', in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 180–191, p. 190.

political violence that has weighed it down, as the poet is now 'sacrificed' to their imagined self, rather than to the demands of the times, or 'brute force'.¹³

In the poem 'The Tollund Man in Springtime' in *District and Circle*, Heaney recalls this change. Heaney is revisiting his established trope of the Tollund Man, a well preserved Iron-Age man recovered from a peatbog in Denmark in 1950. Heaney first employed this image in *Wintering Out* (1972), and 'Tollund' appeared in Heaney's 1996 collection, *The Spirit Level*. Heaney's employment of the figure varies in effect. Heaney's initial employment focuses on his shared sense of inner émigré with the Tollund Man, the poem ending with the lines, 'Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home'.¹⁴ Heaney suggests an equivalence between the ritual sacrifice of the Tollund Man and Heaney's North with its 'man-killing parishes', a phrase which alludes to inter-denominational violence. 'Tollund', written in the wake of the 1994 ceasefire in Northern Ireland, sees Heaney reject the static atmosphere of its precursor in favour of a more cheerful tone. Heaney is at home 'beyond the tribe'.¹⁵ The tribe has been transcended, paradoxically by an actual visit to Tollund by Heaney, rather than an imagined one, as in the earlier poem. The speaker is no longer enmeshed in the boggy sphere of '[s]tockinged corpses'.¹⁶ Instead, he marvels at an active, fluid vista, a perspective which is both 'hallucinatory and familiar'.¹⁷ The imagery here, with speaker and companion likened to 'ghosts', is redolent of the poem 'From the Frontier of Writing' in its ethereal, airy sense of poetic freedom.

In 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', Heaney adapts the Tollund Man trope to reaffirm poetry's potential.

The poet is embodied in the resurrecting bog body: 'As a man would, cutting turf, / I straightened, spat

¹³ Ibid, 183.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'The Tollund Man', in *Opened Ground*, pp. 64–65, (p. 65), ll. 41–44.

¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Tollund', in *Opened Ground*, p. 443, l. 20.

on my hands, felt benefit / And spirited myself into the street'.¹⁸ As Heaney 'straightened up', the Tollund Man 'straightened' like a turf-cutter bracing for the task. As Heaney describes in 'Crediting Poetry': 'I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous'.¹⁹ The 'straighten[ing] up' that Heaney describes in 'Crediting Poetry' is alluded to here as the Tollund man's own 'straighten[ing]'. That the latter 'felt benefit' recalls the artistic fulfilment that resulted for Heaney from deciding to, finally, imagine 'for the marvellous'. This move towards a more transcendent poetry was borne of the pressures Heaney felt as a public poet during the Troubles. That Heaney re-visits such artistic anxieties in *District and Circle*, in part via the Tollund trope, suggests that he is experiencing similar pressures to produce poetry. For Heaney, the complex tribal loyalties in the case of the Troubles are certainly not as intense in the context of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Despite this, Heaney has said that these phenomena certainly made their presence felt to his poetic self:

During fourteen years in Harvard, I learned about being in America, how different it felt and they felt; and two occurrences particularly registered as a result: firstly, the attack on the Twin Towers and secondly the Afghanistan and Iraq crackdowns. You cannot distinguish between your condition as a creature of the times and your action as a scribbler.²⁰

The 'attack on the Twin Towers' is the 9/11 Al-Qaida terrorist attacks in New York, and the 'Afghanistan and Iraq crackdowns' are the 2001 and 2003 US-led invasions under the auspices of the War on Terror. The key sentence of the above quotation is the last. Heaney is re-visiting his preoccupying artistic questions in emphasising the inextricability of his role as an artist, or 'a scribbler', and his place in his

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', in *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 55–58, (p. 57), ll. 82–84.

¹⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', p. 458.

own political milieu and contemporary world, as ‘a creature of the times’. These very questions arose from political violence, so in the context of the War on Terror they prove to be especially apposite.

In *District and Circle*, Heaney via Eliot is re-tracing his steps to an important point in his career, and in so doing, he is signalling a poetic renaissance. Entailed in this evocation of Eliot, therefore, is an inherent recapitulation of the importance of the artistic relationship with Yeats for Heaney. As Heaney sought the example of Yeats during the Troubles, so now he *rediscovers* ‘for himself Yeats’s marvellous ability to make great poetry under the pressure of public engagements’ (a line I quoted earlier). Eliot’s image of the Circle Line enables Heaney to do this. Hart writes that Heaney stands in this collection ‘for bringing contraries together into a creative union’.²¹ Hart attributes this to Eliot, but the above quotation essentially re-states Yeats’s desire for a poetry which ‘unites contrary impulses’. Richard Ellmann comments on Yeats’s preoccupation in old age with life as contrastingly a cornucopia and an empty shell in his essay, ‘W.B. Yeats’s Second Puberty’ (1985). ‘[T]he image of cornucopia’, Ellmann suggests, ‘was relentlessly undermined by the image of life as empty shell’.²² And yet, Heaney argues, ‘it is because of Yeats’s fidelity to both perceptions and his refusal to foreclose on either that we recognise in him a poet of the highest attainment’.²³ As I have already argued, the poet’s resistance to the single position, their refusal to ‘foreclose’ on either side, but instead to perform in their work a dialectic, is an aspect of Yeats’s poetry that Heaney holds in the highest regard. As Heaney writes in ‘District and Circle’, he fears being ‘crowd-swept’, being pushed into adopting a side. It is Yeats who demonstrates to Heaney how to refuse to foreclose on either position. These positions are those of the warring ideologies, which Heaney stands clear of. This relates to the dualism of artistic license and public responsibility in his poetry – Yeatsian intransigence versus the idea of poetry as being conducive to

²¹ Hart, p. 459.

²² Seamus Heaney, ‘Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin’, in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 316–332, p. 320.

²³ *Ibid.*

civilisation. It also relates to the nature of the poet's utterances on political matters. In *District and Circle* as a whole, Heaney refuses to foreclose on either side of the War on Terror, and thus strives to transcend ideological stridency.

Kavanagh and Heaney

I have argued how the influence of Eliot fits in with the Heaney–Yeats relationship in this collection. I shall now examine how the influence of Kavanagh affects the central Heaney–Yeats relationship.

Kavanagh's influence can be found in Heaney's descriptions of agrarian processes and the natural world in general. Heaney evokes the bucolic in this collection as both a means of commenting obliquely on ideologically motivated violence and a means of resisting the pressures of the poet's contemporary world. Heaney is both 'taking in' and 'holding [...] at bay' his world. The particular political milieu that Heaney is registering and holding off is 9/11 and the War on Terror, as I have already argued. Heaney's governing artistic questions frame his response, as Heaney is again asking questions about how the poet should relate to the world around him. Indeed, the Yeatsian binary between public responsibility and artistic license is also at work. This dualism finds expression in Heaney's evocations of the natural world in particular. This is where Kavanagh's confident parochialism finds expression as well. To quote Kavanagh himself on this point, he writes about the 'artistic validity of the parish', assured of its own standing, in contrast to the ignorance of the provincial, unsure of its opinions until they have been confirmed by the 'metropolis – towards which [its] eyes are turned'.²⁴ Heaney himself has described Kavanagh's poetry as 'standing [its] ground in print'.²⁵ His poetry, in depicting 'small-farm life', takes

²⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Parochialism and Provincialism', in *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2003), pp. 237–238, p. 237.

²⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 134–145, p. 138.

Heaney back ‘to where [he] came from’.²⁶ Many of Heaney’s poems in *District and Circle* are standing their ground in a Kavanaghese way, taking strength from the world they depict. This idea is similar to Yeatsian intransigence, but the rural subject matter comes from Kavanagh. There are two strands to this idea for Heaney: like Kavanagh making the home territory ‘a theme for kings’, Heaney’s depictions of the local are imbued with universal resonance, and these same depictions provide a means to resist the pressures of the political. In these two ways, I shall argue, we can see how Kavanagh’s confidence in his own ordinary community interlocks with the Yeatsian dualism in Heaney’s poetry. Kavanagh inspires in Heaney a sureness in using his local ‘district’ as a means to resist and remark upon the wider global ‘circle’. In this sense, the theme of poetic repossession interlocks with the theme of bucolic violence as well, as the poet is ‘repossessing himself and his subject’ via the rural sphere of his childhood. Indeed, Rand Brandes remarks how Heaney’s poetry is often rooted in memories of his childhood home. This sense of ‘rejuvenating, not ingrown, rootedness, is at the core of *District and Circle*’.²⁷ The word ‘rejuvenating’ here recalls the theme of poetic repossession.

There is more to Heaney’s descriptions of rural agrarian life than simply providing him with a means to offer oblique commentary on global political violence. The rootedness that Heaney finds with Kavanagh also aligns with Heaney’s dialectical way of thinking, which comes from Yeats. In commenting upon political violence in his evocations of the rural, Heaney is undermining the ideological binaries that motivate both sides. Ann Kenniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn have written of post-9/11 poetry: ‘by exploring the differences between “us” and “them”, between “individual” and “collective” histories, and between “seeing” and “feeling”, these authors undermine the structuring binaries essential to the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Working Titles: From ‘Advancements of Learning’ to ‘Midnight Anvil’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 19–37, p. 33.

“war on terror” and offer a “rooted cosmopolitanism” as “a post-secular alternative”’.²⁸ Although writing on the specific poetic contributions of Anne Marie-Levine, D. Nurkse, and Suheir Hammad, this sentiment also seems fittingly redolent of Heaney’s field of force. Heaney’s poems in *District and Circle* seem to fit into this particular category of literary response, although he counters the reductive ideological ‘structuring binaries’ of both sides less with ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ than a type of rooted rural or bucolic parochialism.

A number of poems in this collection deal with violence, or foreshadow violence in some form: ‘The Turnip-Snedder’, ‘A Shiver’, ‘Anahorish 1944’, ‘Helmet’, ‘Out of Shot’, and ‘The Nod’. Others such as ‘In Iowa’ and ‘The Lift’ do this slant. Many of these poems are boyhood reminiscences, indicating Heaney’s desire to seek strength from his roots, both poetically and culturally, whilst drawing on these experiences to elucidate present circumstance. Indeed, Michael Parker observes that many of these poems appear in the sonnet form, and remarks that ‘[e]vidence from previous collections suggests that the poet frequently has recourse to this highly governed, strongly traditional form when political and personal concerns are at their most intense’.²⁹ ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ from *Field Work* (1979), ‘Clearances’ from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), and ‘Glanmore Revisited’ from *Seeing Things* (1991) are fine examples of Heaney’s employment of the sonnet form. All of these collections are written after Heaney’s removal to County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland, when he decided to escape the Troubles in the North. For Heaney, this decision was certainly made under intense ‘personal’ and ‘political’ pressure. And in ‘Clearances’, for example, ‘Heaney’s exploration of personal subject matter [...] is facilitated by what Robert Lowell called “the squeeze of the sonnet”’.³⁰ That is, not only the sonnet’s concise dimensions,

²⁸ Ann Kenniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, ‘Representing 9/11: Literature and Resistance’, in *Literature after 9/11* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1–19, p. 10.

²⁹ Michael Parker, ‘Fallout from the thunder: poetry and politics in Seamus Heaney’s *District and Circle*’, *Irish Studies Review*, 16.4 (2008), 369–384, p. 369.

³⁰ John Adames, ‘The Sonnet Mirror: Reflections and Revaluations in Seamus Heaney’s “Clearances”’, *Irish University Review*, 27.2 (1997), pp. 276–286, p. 276.

but also its dialectical turn and pressure towards closure'.³¹ Heaney's discussion of his family history and need for 'emotional and spiritual regeneration' is aided by his adaptation of the Shakespearian and Petrarchan sonnet forms.³² As John Adames writes, '[t]he flexible Shakespearian rhyme scheme accommodates the forward momentum of narrative, while the sestet allows for extended deliberation'.³³ Indeed, Heaney's frequent use of the sonnet in *District and Circle*³⁴ is reminiscent of his attempt in 'Glanmore Sonnets' to develop artistic renewal, aware, as he is, 'that self-reflexive questions about the poet's art comprised a major strand of the sonnet tradition'.³⁵

I will begin by examining 'The Turnip-Snedder', 'A Shiver' and 'Anahorish 1944', the last two of which are sonnets. The turnip-snedder, Heaney tells us, is 'a machine for mangling and slicing turnips'.³⁶ Quintessentially agrarian or agricultural, it is from an 'age of bare hands / and cast iron', ancient, pre-capitalist, from a time of manual labour, synecdochally represented by the image of 'bare hands'.³⁷ Personified, 'it dug its heels in among wooden tubs / and troughs of slops'.³⁸ It takes its stand, parochially, in its own rural bucolic sphere against the wider world. In the same way, it becomes its own symbol for the natural order via Christianity: "'This is the way God sees life," / it said, "from seedling-braird to snedder"', from birth to death.³⁹ In addition to this, the theme of bucolic violence, where political violence is prefigured in Heaney's evocations of rural Irish life, is propounded here in the gory lines, 'the handle turned / and turnip-heads were let fall and fed / to the juiced-up inner blades', the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, p. 276–277.

³⁴ Of the 55 poems in this collection, 10 employ the sonnet form, compared to *Electric Light* which contains only 2 poems that are written consistently in the sonnet form, 'Sonnets from Hellas', and 'Little Canticles of Asturias'.

³⁵ Adames, p. 276.

³⁶ O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 407.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'The Turnip Snedder', in *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 3–4, (p. 3), ll. 1–2.

³⁸ Ibid, ll. 5–6.

³⁹ Ibid, ll. 13–14.

machine depositing its 'raw sliced mess'.⁴⁰ Anthropomorphised, the 'turnip-heads' become a 'raw sliced mess', generating a tone of discomfort as the viewer's eye is compelled to linger on this seemingly innocuous image of a farming process that has transformed into something explicitly, uncannily bloody. This is a Kavanagheseque approach, as the local, and specifically agricultural process, is effectively transformed into an image with universal relevance, as it prefigures political violence on a global scale. This is not exactly new for Heaney. The last sonnet, IX, from 'Glanmore Sonnets' from *Field Work* (1979) contains such an image: 'Blood on a pitchfork, blood on chaff and hay, / Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing – What is my apology for poetry?'⁴¹ The theme of bucolic violence – analogous at this time with Troubles violence via the image of the pitchfork having speared feral rats during threshing – asks the question of art's efficacy. Heaney here (in both poems) is concerned with his role as a poet in relation to fraught historical circumstance.

'A Shiver' adheres fairly loosely to the Petrarchan sonnet form, rather than the Shakespearean or Spenserian verse forms, with its iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme of abbaabbacddcd, although many of the rhymes are half-rhymes, such as 'fast'–'waist' or 'sledge'–'cage'.⁴² The volta or hinge-point occurs after the initial octave, again in keeping with the Petrarchan form. The poem describes an unknown figure swinging a sledge-hammer. This theme of bucolic violence is here again, especially in the lines, '[t]he way you had to heft and then half-rest / Its gathered force like a long-nursed rage'.⁴³ The phrase 'long-nursed rage' is obviously reminiscent of the Troubles, and reminds one of the lines from 'Dock' from *Death of a Naturalist*: 'that fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic –/ Oh yes, that

⁴⁰ Ibid, ll. 13–14, 15–17, 19.

⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Glanmore Sonnets', in *Opened Ground* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 163–173 (p. 171), ll. 9–11.

⁴² The form itself is significant, considering the idea of poetry as resolving opposing truths, with the volta marking, effectively, the counter-argument, or idea, to the idea expressed in the previous octave, with an attempt made in the final lines to arrive at a kind of resolution. There's a dialectic at work within the sonnet itself. Seamus Heaney, 'A Shiver', in *District and Circle*, p. 5, ll. 2–3, 1, 4.

⁴³ Ibid, ll. 7–8.

kind of thing could start again'.⁴⁴ The turn in 'A Shiver' offers a counter-argument: 'does it do you good / To have known it in your bones, directable, / Withholdable at will, / A first blow could make air of a wall'.⁴⁵ It asks if the wielder of the sledge should manifest their rage. It is '[w]ithholdable at will', conflict can be avoided. The phrase 'does it do you good' is the telling one. The rhetorical question here could be asked of America or Al-Qaida, given the respective bellicosity of both parties.

In 'Anahorish 1944' and the poem 'The Nod', Heaney again draws on the Kavanagheseque technique of evoking the local district to comment on the wider circle. The setting for the first poem is in Heaney's childhood in Anahorish in Northern Ireland. The juxtaposition of the ritualised slaughter of pigs with the arrival of the Americans who were going to be partaking in their own brand of slaughter, has the effect of defamiliarising the image of war. The slaughter of pigs becomes an analogue for war. Like with 'The Turnip Snedder', the seemingly everyday event, in this case the slaughter of pigs for consumption, prefigures political violence. The sight of 'gutter-blood' and the sound of 'squealing' are human-like, especially given the nature of modern urban warfare, with its almost unavoidable *collateral*.⁴⁶ The sight of 'gutter-blood' and the sound of 'squealing' would be familiar to anyone within a war-zone. This feels like a veiled anti-war poem, with the proleptic evocation of World War Two providing a means of obliquely commenting on the Afghanistan and Iraq insurgencies. The verb 'tossed' in the last phrase, '[a]s they tossed us gum and tubes of coloured sweets' belies the slaughter that is to be carried out.⁴⁷ The nonchalant or pococurante manner of 'toss[ing]' sweets by soldiers metaphorically alludes to the impetuosity of the United States government following the 9/11 attacks. There is something perverse and ironic in the distribution of sweets by men trained to kill. There is a further irony at work here in the seemingly convivial welcome of the Americans during the Second World War by the

⁴⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Docker', in *Death of a Naturalist*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 41, ll. 5–6.

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'A Shiver', ll. 9–11.

⁴⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Anahorish 1944', in *District and Circle*, p. 7, ll. 1, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, l. 14.

Northern Irish as described here, and the antipathetic response of certain sections of the Iraqi populace to the invasion of 2003 by coalition forces.⁴⁸

Another poem, 'The Nod', employs this technique of the juxtaposition of ritualised animal slaughter with military violence, but this time by the 'local B-men' of the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC), introduced at the sonnet's volta.⁴⁹ The speaker's father is paying for a '[r]ib roast and shin / Plonked down, wrapped, and bow-tied neat and clean / But seeping blood'.⁵⁰ It is 'seeping blood', which has the same effect as the image of 'gutterblood' in 'Anahorish 1944'. Also like 'Anahorish 1944', it proleptically alludes to the War on Terror. The latter poem is set during the Second World War, and 'The Nod' is situated in Heaney's childhood, as the speaker remembers his father. The 'dead-weight' of butcher-bought meat is linked to the 'neighbours with guns'.⁵¹ The phrase 'neighbours with guns' recalls the 'neighbourly murder' that Heaney describes in 'Funeral Rights'.⁵² This image, combined with the nodding of USC officers at the speaker's father, '[a]s if deliberately they'd aimed and missed him', conveys the intense discomfort of the speaker, borne of the simmering threat of violence.

The tranquil poem, 'In Iowa', is the apotheosis of Heaney's chief technique in *District and Circle* of evoking an agrarian setting as both a means of commenting upon and resisting political pressure. This is the Yeatsian binary between public responsibility and artistic license. This poem also represents the intersection of the themes of poetic repossession and bucolic violence. Via the rural sphere here,

⁴⁸ As Michael Parker identifies, the pararrhyme of 'jeeps', a symbol of military endeavour, and 'sweets', with its innocent and distinctly un-war-like connotation, reinforces this reading of the poem. 'Circling and Return: Public and Private Imperatives in Seamus Heaney's Late Poetry'.

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'The Nod', in *District and Circle*, p. 33, l. 10. The Ulster Special Constabulary was a force set up to effectively suppress Catholic opposition to Protestant Unionist rule in Northern Ireland. As such, it was viewed with great distrust by the Catholic minority in the North. It was linked with a number of reprisal attacks against Catholics in the North during the Irish War of Independence (1920–1922). It was disbanded in 1970 following the Hunt Report.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 4–7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 7, 12.

⁵² Seamus Heaney, 'Funeral Rights', in *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 15–19, (p. 16), l. 34. The full stanza from this poem reads: 'Now as news comes in / of each neighbourly murder / we pine for ceremony, / customary rhythms'. ll. 32–35.

Heaney is seeking the kind of 'pure self-possession' that he described to be the effect of Kavanagh's own creative endeavours.⁵³ In versifying his own place of origin, that is, a place of small-farm life, Kavanagh achieves this. By way of clarification, Heaney likens the sense of renewal in Kavanagh's poetry to the following lines from Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter': 'The soul recovers radical innocence, / And learns at last that it is self-delighting, / Self-appeasing, self-affrighting'.⁵⁴ In 'In Iowa', the depicted 'mowing machine' is 'brimmed' with snow.⁵⁵ Heaney's water trope from the poem 'Bann Valley Eclogue' returns here, hinting at the possibility of amelioration or 'rejuvenation', via the quasi-religious image of the speaker emerging, 'unbaptized' from the 'wilderness' or 'darkness'.⁵⁶ The agrarian sphere is the core from which this emanates, the speaker walking in 'a field where wilted corn stalks flagged the snow' during winter, a season of strife and decay and death.⁵⁷ The promise made is the promise of Heaney's field of force, '[n]ot of parted but as of rising waters'.⁵⁸ This image recalls 'Bann Valley Eclogue'. Like Yeats's 'flooded stream', 'the old markings / Will avail no more to keep east bank from west' in Heaney's eclogue. Through his description of a mowing machine, Heaney not only signals personal repossession, but he provides an image to belie the fixity of stance found in the political world. Taking the Old Testament image of Moses's parting of the Red Sea, Heaney counters it with his alternative figure of the rising waters that cleanse the valley, expunging all fixity.

⁵³ Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven', p. 144.

⁵⁴ W.B. Yeats, 'A Prayer for my Daughter', in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 92–94, p. 93, ll. 67–69.

⁵⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'In Iowa', in *District and Circle*, p. 52, l. 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 11, 10, 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 14.

'Anything Can Happen'

This poem stands as Heaney's most overt statement on the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Heaney is seeking in his poem to register the fallout – politically, ideologically and militarily – of the attacks. It is a translation of Horace's Ode 1, 34. Heaney has written of the poem's title: the phrase 'Anything Can Happen' would be a fair twenty-first century translation of the Latin "Valet...deus" (a/the god is capable).⁵⁹ The full lines from Horace's poem read, 'valet ima summis / mutare et insignem attenuat deus', which translate as: 'He [God] can lowliest change / And loftiest; bring the mighty down / And lift the weak'.⁶⁰ Although refracted through Horace, Heaney is still in his mode of commenting upon the political world through evocations of the natural world. Horace's Ode and Heaney's translation centres on the image of thunder resounding from a cloudless sky. In Horace's poem, as quoted above, the thunder is interpreted as a sign of Jupiter's divine superintendence, which causes the speaker to renege on their prior unbelief. Heaney strips this image of its godliness, and recasts it for the twenty-first century. The thunder in Heaney's poem becomes an analogue for the seeming abruptness of the 9/11 attacks. The lines, 'Anything can happen, the tallest towers / Be overturned' has obvious connotations.⁶¹ These two lines are significant both syntactically and formally. Placed, as it were, at the centre of the sixteen-line poem, as lines eight and nine, they are the fulcrum on which 'Anything Can Happen' pivots. The alliterative phrase 'tallest towers' quite clearly alludes directly to the other alliterative 'Twin Towers' of New York. The true subject of the poem, 9/11, is introduced at this mid-point. The enjambment of the lines 'the tallest towers / Be overturned' neatly enacts the symbolic and literal act of falling. The line tumbles over as the buildings tumbled. The syntax is suspended here with the verb 'overturned' placed

⁵⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Reality and Justice: On Translating Horace Odes', *Irish Pages*, 1.43 (2002–3), pp. 50–53, p.53.

⁶⁰ Horace, trans. John Conington, *Q. Horatius Flaccus (Horace), Odes* (Perseus), <
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0025%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D34>> [accessed 21 July 2016].

⁶¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Anything Can Happen', in *District and Circle*, p. 13, ll. 8–9.

at the end of the line. The conjunction of enjambment and suspended syntax mirrors the act of the towers falling. Thus the tremendous pregnancy, the sheer substantiality of the 9/11 attacks is rendered afresh. The process of defamiliarisation is at work. But this is no mere random attack, it entirely upends the balance of power, as the oxymoronic phrases that follow indicate: ‘those in high places daunted, / Those overlooked regarded’.⁶² This is an unforeseen revolution of the wheel of fortune, as ‘Stropped-beak Fortune / Swoops’.⁶³ As Jupiter did not ‘wait for clouds’ before ‘hurl[ing] the lightning’, there was no warning before the attacks.⁶⁴ As the ‘clear blue sky’ becomes an image of foreboding, the ‘air gasp[s]’.⁶⁵ The political shockwave of a wealthy Western country being attacked with such seeming ease and great cost to human life is reflected in the fallout reaching ‘the clogged underearth, the River Styx’, and with ‘heaven’s weight / Lift[ing] up off Atlas like a kettle-lid’.⁶⁶ The fallout is of, if not Biblical, then mythological, proportion in more senses than one.

The last two lines ‘[c]apstones shift, nothing resettles right. / Telluric ash and firespores boil away’ suggest that such is the fallout of the attacks, imagined in a kind of mythological eruption of ‘ash and fire-spores’, things have irrevocably changed, ‘nothing resettles right’.⁶⁷ The latter phrase may allude to the subsequent conflicts of the ‘War on Terror’. It is the political landscape that has changed. Russell makes an interesting point that although the quatrain structure of this poem (of which there are four) seems to be a departure from Heaney’s looseness of form, which usually signals a public voice, the tightness of Heaney’s form here may gesture towards the ideological ‘narrowness’ of both fundamentalist Islam and Western neo-liberalism.⁶⁸ The conclusive couplet of ‘Anything Can Happen’ is

⁶² Ibid, ll. 9–10.

⁶³ Ibid, ll. 10–11.

⁶⁴ Ibid, ll. 2, 3.

⁶⁵ Ibid, ll. 5, 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid, ll. 6, 13–14.

⁶⁷ Ibid, ll. 15, 16.

⁶⁸ Richard Rankin Russell, ‘Redressing Reality: *Seeing Things through District and Circle*’, in *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, US: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 267–291, p. 286.

suggestive of Yeats's refrain from 'Easter 1916', 'All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born'.⁶⁹ Heaney's last lines here attempt a similar 'reach for statement', as Heaney has elsewhere phrased it, as Yeats's lines, but this time with regard to the 9/11 attacks: 'Nothing resettles right' as 'All changed, changed utterly'.

I have argued how the artistic influences of, chiefly, Patrick Kavanagh and T.S. Eliot have affected the central relationship with Yeats in this collection, insofar as they have provided Heaney with different perspectives on his artistic questions. The questions about how the poet should relate to his own voice, place, literary heritage, and contemporary world govern Heaney's art. These questions Heaney formulated during the Troubles when political pressures on the public poet were at their most intense. It is at this time that Heaney found Yeats's artistic example of being able to write, as O'Toole says, 'great poetry under the pressure of public engagements' (quoted before). In *District and Circle*, the intensity of political violence has clearly registered with Heaney. Although the context is global and not domestic, the ideological stridency of both sides of the War on Terror is clear. The poem, 'Anything Can Happen', registers the shock and terror of 9/11, and a poem such as 'Anahorish 1944' expresses a distaste for the War on Terror. Heaney, via Eliot's metaphor of the Circle Line as a 'union of differences', is signalling self-reflection in *District and Circle*. Heaney is revisiting his artistic anxieties as first considered during the Troubles. This is also explored via Heaney's Tollund trope. Heaney is signalling poetic repossession, a desire to face up to political violence, and imagine something better.

This 'something better' is, most simply expressed, an end to the war. Indeed, Heaney contributed to the volume *Irish Writers Against War* in a clear statement of his opposition to violence. Heaney also calls on Kavanagh's artistic example. Kavanagh's confidence in his ordinary community – in drawing on the agrarian world of his roots for his poetry – instils in Heaney a similar confidence. The theme of poetic repossession interlocks with the theme of bucolic violence in this collection, as Heaney's evocations of

⁶⁹ W.B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916', in *The Major Works*, pp. 85–87, (p. 85), ll. 15–16.

the rural are not only a means to comment upon political violence, but are a means to resist the possibility of being 'crowd-swept' by the situation. The presence of Yeats can be seen in this collection in the way that Heaney revisits his artistic anxieties in times of political upheaval. In the way Heaney turned to Yeats during the Troubles, now Heaney via Eliot's metaphor revisits his questions of how to produce poetry under the pressure of public engagements. Yeats's presence is more overt in Heaney's poetic method: the way Heaney is countering the reductive ideologies of both sides of the War on Terror with a refusal to foreclose on either side is a Yeatsian idea. So too is the idea of balancing the poet's public utterances with a fidelity to their own creative processes. In these two ways, Yeats is a central influence for Heaney in *District and Circle*.

Human Chain: 'Steady-handedness maintained'

Larkin, Yeats, and Mortality

This collection is markedly different in theme from the previous two. In one sense, it shares its introspective quality with all of Heaney's work. The poet is writing his personal reflections on various phenomena, channelling his artistic anxieties, wants and fears. In *Human Chain*, however, Heaney reflects not as his work so often does on external and often political rumblings and their effects on his poetic self, but on the psychological effects of bodily decay and imminent mortality. That is not to say that Heaney's poems here are isolated from the goings-on in his wider community, as there are allusions to the politics of Northern Ireland's recent past, but these reflections are inevitably given, as it were, a more personal *tint*. This more personal dimension is likely influenced by the great shock that Heaney felt following his stroke in 2006. The collection's opening poem, 'Had I not been awake', describes this jolt to Heaney's poetic sensibility. A gust of wind, an embodiment of the stroke, or death itself, rose both 'unexpectedly' and 'dangerously'.¹ The poem's title describes the possibility that if Heaney's stroke had occurred while he was asleep, he might have died. I shall examine this poem in more detail later in this chapter, but first I will analyse Heaney's essay on Yeats and mortality, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin'. In considering how some of Heaney's many artistic engagements have affected his central Yeats one, this essay offers an explicit discussion of the influence of Philip Larkin's attitude towards personal mortality and art's relationship to it, as counterpoised to the position of Yeats. Heaney finally sides with Yeats. I shall explore this essay here,

¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Had I not been awake', in *Human Chain*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 3, ll. 7, 8.

also because it provides an outline of Heaney's relationship with Yeats on the theme of personal mortality, a central theme of *Human Chain*.

In direct contradiction of the sentiment of Philip Larkin's late poem, 'Aubade', that '[c]ourage is no good: / it means not scaring others. Being brave / lets no one off the grave. / Death is no different whined at than withstood', Yeats, for Heaney, argues that courage is *some* good.² It is 'the total emptiness forever, the sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always. Not to be here, / not to be anywhere' that is the crux of Larkin's desolate view.³ That is the central irony of life: it is a journey on which we are compelled to travel, and yet, it leads nowhere in particular. Instead, we slide inexorably towards our demise, which is no 'destination', just an 'end'.⁴ It is a fiercely atheistic and materialist position. The bathetic ending of 'Aubade' epitomises Larkin's bleak understanding of life: '[t]he sky is white as clay, with no sun, / work has to be done, / Postmen like doctors go from house to house'.⁵ The banality of existence epitomised in the image of postmen doing the rounds tumbles dismally down into silence, and consciously eschews any kind of grand philosophical pronouncement about life. The postmen, 'like doctors,' allude to the shadow of death that stalks all life.

As Heaney suggests, Yeats's argument opposes that made by Larkin. To take the last stanza of Yeats's late poem, 'The Man and the Echo':

O Rocky voice,

Shall we in that great night rejoice?

What do we know but that we face

One another in this place?

² Philip Larkin, 'Aubade', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 190–192, (p. 191), ll.

³ *Ibid.*, ll. 17–20.

⁴ Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 208.

⁵ Larkin, 'Aubade', ll. 48–50.

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
 Its joy or night seem but a dream;
 Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
 Dropping out of sky or rock,
 A stricken rabbit is crying out,
 And its cry distracts my thought.⁶

This is a poem 'where human consciousness is up against the cliff-face of mystery, confronted with the limitations of human existence itself [...] what the echo communicates, of course, is the man's own most extreme and exhausted recognitions'.⁷ The half-rhyme of 'crying out' and 'thought' of the final couplet expresses the misalignment of what Heaney calls the 'project of civilisation' and 'the facts of pain and death represented by the rabbit's crying out'.⁸ But what the rhyme, and the poem itself, does is not only describe what the human spirit must endure, but also show 'how it must endure, by pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman, by pitting the positive effort of mind against the desolations of natural and historical violence'.⁹ Larkin's last lines, in conjunction with his complex stanza structure, mean that there is no final rhyme, no hope, as the metre falls away into a barely perceptible 'no' to the question of 'pitting the positive effort of mind' against the inevitability of death. Yeats's half-rhyme dares to mouth the word 'yes' to life, to the strength of human will.

⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'The Man and the Echo', in *Collected Poems* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 360–362, (p. 362), ll. 39–48.

⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 316–332, p. 328.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

Rajeev Patke compares the attitudes of Yeats and Heaney to what he calls 'transcendence'.¹⁰ For Yeats, he argues, this has to do with 'the capacity of the poet to find in art a solace against his personal mortality'.¹¹ Or as Yeats puts it in his poem 'The Tower', the '[s]low decay of blood, / Testy delirium / Or dull decrepitude',¹² a sentiment also iterated in these lines from an earlier stanza:

I have prepared my peace

With learned Italian things

And the proud stones of Greece,

Poet's imaginings

And memories of love.¹³

Against unremitting death, Yeats pits his work, his 'poet's imaginings'. In 'Joy or Night', Heaney comes to the same conclusion as Patke. Heaney cites 'The Cold Heaven', a description of the mood evoked in Yeats by looking at the sky in wintertime: the speaker 'cried and trembled' and 'rocked to and fro', '[r]iddled with light', asking, '[w]hen the ghost begins to quicken / Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent / Out naked on the roads [?]'.¹⁴ This is a meditation on death, the 'ghost' being the human soul, and Yeats registers an intensity of feeling here, as he 'crie[s] and tremble[s]' as he crosses the frontier between life and death. He is '[r]iddled with light', the light which signals metaphysical transformation. For Heaney, it is a poem which suggests that there is 'an overall purpose to life'.¹⁵ As he writes, Yeats 'was as alive as Larkin to the demeaning realities of bodily decrepitude [...] but he deliberately resisted

¹⁰ Rajeev S. Patke, 'Yeats and Heaney: A Comparison', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 12.1 (1997), 29–43, p. 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² W.B. Yeats, 'The Tower', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 200–206, (p. 206), ll. 86–88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, (p. 205), ll. 59–62.

¹⁴ W.B. Yeats, 'The Cold Heaven', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 122–123, (p. 123), ll. 8–11.

¹⁵ Heaney, 'Joy or Night', p. 319.

the dominance of the material over the spiritual'.¹⁶ We can see this here in 'The Tower' and 'The Cold Heaven'. Yeats is acutely sensitive to the 'slow decay of blood', man's inexorable slide towards death, whilst, in a poem such as 'The Cold Heaven', he describes, whether imagined or not, the glories of the numinous or spiritual realm.

Patke suggests that Heaney's version of the transcendental differs from Yeats's, in the sense that Heaney's idea of transcendence has to do with freedom not from mortality, 'but from the necessity of having to write about that from the world of headlines and bullets which demands to be made into poetry'.¹⁷ Whilst this may well be true of the Heaney of *North*, for example, enmeshed in the Troubles as he was, in *Human Chain* 'personal mortality' is very much at the forefront of the poet's mind. This is something of a distinction without a difference from Patke, especially as Patke later acknowledges in the same article the dialectic at the core of Heaney's poetic, that between 'the collective historical experience' and 'the recognitions of the emerging self'.¹⁸ The freedom each poet seeks is a freedom from the material in favour of the numinous, whether this is political violence or bodily decay.

Heaney's interaction with Yeats on the point of art and mortality can be seen most explicitly in *Human Chain* in an intertextual allusion to Yeats in the final sequence (IX) of 'Hermit Songs'. This poem may well have three different sources, all of which Heaney was aware of when penning his poem. There is an early Irish lyric entitled 'A Hermit's Song', 'in which an ascetic calmly recounts his preparations for impending death'.¹⁹ This was translated by James Simmons for John Montague's *Faber Book of Irish Verse*. Appearing in the *Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, for which Heaney wrote the preface, 'The Hermit's

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Patke, p. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michael Parker, ' "His nibs": Self-reflexivity and the Significance of Translation in Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*', *Irish University Review*, 42.2 (2012), 327–350, p. 341.

Song', 'is a lyric which expresses the recluse's utter contentment and total integration with nature'.²⁰

And Heaney's epigraph to his version of the poem, '[a]bove the ruled quires of my book / I hear the wild birds jubilant', Parker tells us, 'comes from a ninth century poem, "Writing Out of Doors", which Heaney had recently re-encountered in Patrick Crotty's anthology, [*The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*]'.²¹ These three sources feed into the reworking of the poem.

It is written in simple unrhymed iambic quatrains of varying length, perhaps in reflection of the steady, monkish devotion to the art that the original poem describes. It's a relatively long poem that moves between different parts of the poet's history as schoolboy and scholar. In sequence IX the themes of art and death interlock, which are quoted here:

A great one has put his faith in 'meaning'

That runs through space like a word

Screaming and protesting, another in

'Poet's imaginings

And memories of love'.

Mine for now I put

In steady-handedness maintained

In books against its vanishing.²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Seamus Heaney, 'Hermit Songs', in *Human Chain*, pp. 74–80, (p. 79), ll. 97–104.

Yeats's poem, 'The Tower' is quoted in the lines "'Poet's imaginings / And memories of love'". Here again this poem proves particularly arresting for Heaney. The speaker's professions of his own poetic bear striking resemblance to precisely the aspect of the Yeatsian poetic that Heaney discusses in his essay 'Joy or Night'. As in the poem, 'The Man and the Echo', where 'human consciousness is [...] confronted with the limitations of human existence', Yeats's works show how the human spirit must endure by pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman' (quoted before). And thus Yeats mouths, finally, a firm "yes" to life. Heaney, placing the poet's own 'steady-handedness maintained / In books against its vanishing', is describing what Patke argues to be a chief motive for Yeats's desire for transcendence in his art, the inevitable extinction of the body. As in 'The Tower', 'the speaker does not abjure the finite. Instead he schools himself to contemplate art that endures as a result of the artist's intransigent service'.²³ It is through art, most simply, that one may resist mortality. Heaney, the hermit speaker, pits 'the positive effort of [his] mind' against 'his vanishing' from the minds of those left behind. This Yeatsian idea is essential to *Human Chain* as a whole.

The Form and its Theme

I would like to analyse the tercet form that Heaney uses so frequently in this collection, as it complements Heaney's attitude towards art and mortality, as derived from the example of Yeats. Of the twenty-nine poems in *Human Chain*, twenty-four of them employ the tercet stanza form. This is a form seldom used by Heaney. Sean O'Brien writes that the stanza moves 'as though between the epigrammatic hinge of the couplet and the more expansive quatrain, generating drama and extension'.²⁴ O'Brien also notes how the triple line, 'with its echo of terza rima, reels in and out, re-

²³ Parker, ' "His nibs" ', p. 344.

²⁴ Sean O'Brien, *Review of Human Chain*, (London: *Independent*, 2010), www.independent.co.uk [accessed 18 December 2014].

gathering to achieve the tension of resolution'.²⁵ The tercet is indeed conducive to the tone of 'drama and extension' and 'resolution' for the reasons O'Brien suggests. This is an attempt at thematic resolution – death and life, then and now, life and art, indeed implicitly, art and death, interweave to form the weft of Heaney's poems here. Neil Corcoran writes about form as distinct from intertextuality, taking his lead from Julia Kristeva. He argues that '[f]ormal indebtedness [...] is something substantively, and ethically, distinct from intertextuality'.²⁶ Heaney owes a 'formal indebtedness' to Dante here, most obviously, with this form recalling the latter's 'terza rima' as O'Brien identifies. There is a 'formal indebtedness' to Yeats here too, in the sense of the inextricability of form and meaning. The tercet (as an aspect of form) complements the theme of the poetry, that is, the desire for the work to resist mortality, and to utter a profound 'yes' to life. Poetry does not, cannot, prevent mortality but it does give life to the poet at least, a point, a meaning, a purpose, to which the tercet form attests. Russell suggests something similar to this when he describes the way the tercet 'refuses the finality of the couplet and the promise of extension inherent in the quatrain'.²⁷

To explain this idea more fully, I shall turn to Colm Tóibín. Of the twenty-four tercet poems in this collection, fifteen are twelve-line poems, and Tóibín offers a useful take on this form. His analysis accords with the collection's overarching themes of physical decline, origin, and birth: 'it offers a sort of looseness, a buoyancy, a refusal to close and conclude; it means that the endings of these poems can have a particular pathos, a holding of the breath'.²⁸ Heaney is refusing to 'close and conclude' his chapter on life, on the work, on the times, in this collection. The tercet also mirrors the stanza structure

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Neil Corcoran, 'Heaney and Yeats', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, p. 175.

²⁷ Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame US: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p. 394.

²⁸ Colm Tóibín, *Review of Human Chain*, (London: *Guardian*, 2010), www.guardian.co.uk/2010/aug/21/seamus-heaney-human-chain-review/print [accessed 20 December 2014].

of Heaney's favourite poem by Yeats on the theme of mortality, 'Cuchulain Comforted', the only one the latter wrote in this form. The poem describes the legendary warrior's descent into the underworld. The theme of mortality is somehow kinder, all-the-more comforting with the rendering of discord – political, historical or otherwise – into a bird-like chorus; '[t]hough all was done in common as before / They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds'.²⁹ It is sweeter in its vision of death than the poem that Yeats intended to be the last in a collected poems, 'Under Ben Bulben'. Its last lines read, 'Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horsemen pass by!'³⁰ As Heaney himself writes, 'Cuchulain Comforted' is written in *terza rima* by Yeats because it is 'the proper time' to do so, 'when he was preparing for his own death by imagining Cuchulain's descent among the shades'.³¹ It is a poem 'full of motherly kindness towards life, but also unflinching in its belief in the propriety and beauty of life transcended into art, song, words'.³² Heaney identifies both personally and poetically with the warmer tone of the former poem.

The poem, 'Had I not been awake', is exemplary of Tóibín's evaluation of Heaney's twelve-line verse form. This first poem establishes the theme of mortality as intersecting with art. It is consciously Romantic, or neo-Romantic, in style. The speaker's psychology is embodied in natural phenomena, '[a] wind that rose and whirled'.³³ It sends the speaker, as with Heaney's stroke, into shock – both existential and directly physical – '[a]live and ticking like an electric fence'.³⁴ The speaker becomes attuned to what Parker calls 'the transformative force of memory, and [...] the mysterious creative energies in both the natural and human worlds'.³⁵ He identifies that the poem owes much of its

²⁹ W.B. Yeats, 'Cuchulain Comforted', in *Collected Poems*, p. 348, ll. 24–25.

³⁰ W.B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulben', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 341–344, (p. 344), ll. 93–95.

³¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?', p.110–111.

³² *Ibid*, p. 111.

³³ Heaney, 'Had I not been awake', ll. 2, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid*, l. 5.

³⁵ Michael Parker, '“His nibs”', p. 331.

'dynamic' to the use of the tercet form and employment of enjambment.³⁶ Like many of the poems in *Human Chain*, the lines are decasyllabic, and mostly iambic, in structure. Parker writes of the initial stanza of this poem: '[i]ambs and alliteration quicken the momentum, capturing the gyre-like quality of "A **w**ind that rose and **w**hirled until the **r**oof..."', while '[r]epetitions of consonants ('h', 'k', 'n', 'w', 's', 'r', 'l', 'f') and the 'i' vowel in the opening stanza alert us to the poet's aural receptivity'.³⁷ Here is the stanza with just the 'i' vowels highlighted (not including the personal pronouns):

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

A wind that rose and whirled until the roof

Pattered with quick leaves of the sycamore³⁸

The vowel occurs seven times in twenty-six words here, compared to only three times in eighteen words in stanza three, for example. Enjambment drives the reader forward into stanza two, where the speaker is quickened by the wind, is all 'a-patter', a sensation likened to the agricultural image of the 'electric fence'.³⁹ This technique of enjambment, coupled with the monosyllabic, plosive phrase at the start of stanza two, '[a]nd got me up' (with the 't' of 'got' and 'p' of 'up'), enacts the jolt that the speaker receives. The techniques – the curt sounds, the unpunctuated run-on line – combine to produce a rushed feeling, or a sense of sharp start. The gust of wind in stanza three is as menacing as a wild animal, yet transient, coming and going both 'unexpectedly' and 'dangerously'.⁴⁰ Lines nine and ten too are enjambed, the reader carried over into the fourth and final triplet stanza, where the quasi-mythological 'courier blast' of Romantic epiphany '[I]apsid ordinary', and is momentary, it will not

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 332.

³⁸ Heaney, 'Had I not been awake', ll. 1–3.

³⁹ Ibid, ll. 4, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, ll. 7, 8.

remain 'ever / After'.⁴¹ This recalls Yeats's 'The Cold Heaven', and his fleeting sense of the transcendent, the speaker rocking 'to and fro', 'riddled with light' (quoted before). This Wordsworthian sense of brief epiphany and 'creative verification' is reflected well in Tóibín's analysis of the twelve-line tercet poem, with its sense of 'buoyancy' of both language and mind and 'refusal to close and conclude', as the final three monosyllabic words of the poem confirm: '[a]nd not now'.⁴² Though not experienced now, the transcendent *was*, and as is implied, may be so again. A fleeting brush with death is fused with or feeds into the speaker's neo-Romantic, transcendent, semi-panteistic sense of interconnectedness between man and the natural world.

Virgil and Heaney

I will now examine the impact of Virgil on Heaney's Yeatsian position on mortality. Or rather, it is Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* that in 'Route 110' provides Heaney with a literary mould in which to cast his musings on the nature of life and death, and the redeeming power of art. The River Styx and Elysium are prominent motifs in the poem, especially the former. Couched in a discussion of the definition of 'translation', Stephen Heiny identifies its root meaning as to 'carry across'.⁴³ Like those dead crossing Styx, the boundary between life and death, Heaney's employment of the image in *Human Chain* – and the centrality of Book VI within the collection as a whole – acknowledges 'that he is facing death and will need to be carried across the river'.⁴⁴ Yet, embodied in the birth of Heaney's granddaughter at the end of 'Route 110', is the notion of being 'carried back' from the side of the dead to the realm of the

⁴¹ Ibid, ll. 11–12.

⁴² Ibid, l. 12.

⁴³ Stephen Heiny, 'Virgil in Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*: "images and symbols adequate to out predicament"', *REN*, 65.4 (2013), 305–318, p. 313.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

living.⁴⁵ In Virgilian terms, ‘birth [...] means rebirth’.⁴⁶ The act of elegising the dead as Heaney frequently does in *Human Chain* is a means of transporting those dead back across the river. In his own personal acts of reflection and remembrance, Heaney is also doing this, as it were, of himself, he is providing a means to resist the loss of personal memory via his poetry.

Before his stroke, Heaney began a translation of Book VI of *The Aeneid*.⁴⁷ While recuperating, he began constructing ‘Route 110’, a lyric sequence containing certain episodes from Heaney’s own life which mirror incidents in Virgil’s narrative. The poem, ‘Riverbank Field’ is the precursor to the longer ‘Route 110’ sequence. It is a re-working of parts of Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in which Virgil descends into the underworld. He wishes to ‘confound Lethe in Moyola’ (the latter Heaney’s own local river)⁴⁸, Parker suggests, ‘damning the river of oblivion, [and] constructing a stay against the erasure of personal memory that must inevitably come’.⁴⁹ Once again this is strikingly Yeatsian. The poet is pitting his art against the realities of the material world. The speaker creates his parallel world to Virgil’s in his evocation of his own local sphere of ‘Upper Broagh’.⁵⁰ Differing from Virgil, his world is one of ‘[m]oths on evening water’ and ‘[m]idge veils instead of lily-beds’.⁵¹ He mixes classical allusion with original lines. Indeed, in confounding Lethe in Moyola, Heaney is not only attempting to construct ‘a stay’ against ‘the erasure of personal memory’. The verb ‘confound’ has Latinate roots meaning to merge, or flow together, ‘con’ meaning ‘with’, ‘fondere’ ‘to melt’ in modern Italian. So, with the verb ‘confound’, Heaney is also announcing his technique of interfusing classical allusion with evocations of his own real world of Ulster that is to follow in ‘Route 110’. He is symbolically mixing the rivers of Hades with the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ This complete translation of Book VI has now been posthumously published.

⁴⁸ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Riverbank Field’, in *Human Chain*, pp. 46–48, (p. 46), l. 3.

⁴⁹ Michael Parker, ‘“His nibs”’, p. 336.

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Riverbank Field’ (p. 46), l. 8.

⁵¹ Ibid, ll. 8, 10.

rivers of home. Thus this poem forms a kind of preface to 'Route 110'. As Heaney writes, bracing himself for the poetic task of 'Route 110', '[a]nd now to continue, as enjoined to often, / "In my own words"'.⁵²

So, taking his lead from Virgil, the remarkable poem 'Route 110' traces the arc of Heaney's life from his early days up to the birth of his granddaughter, Anna Rose, to whom he dedicates the poem. Heaney aspires to the transcendent, those 'boundary crossings of birth and death' as Richard Rankin Russell frames it.⁵³ These 'boundary crossings' are archetypally Heaneyan: dialectical, interrogative, and as permeable as the poems themselves. The speaker embarks upon a simultaneously imagined and real journey on a bus, 'For Route 110, Cookstown via Toome and Magherafelt'.⁵⁴ Russell identifies that this imagined bus journey is taken from the beginning of John Montague's *The Rough Field*, but is 'rendered buoyant and more memorable by virtue of the poem's lightsome handling of the now familiar tercet'.⁵⁵ The scene of 'Smithfield Market Saturdays' from his adolescence, a famous market in Dublin, is where Heaney began his relationship with Virgil as a youth, where he first bought 'A used copy of *Aeneid VI*'.⁵⁶ There are numerous other allusions to Virgil's poem. The market pet shop 'melodious with canaries' is 'silent now' as the entrance to Hades, 'birdless Lake Avernus', and the 'racks of suits and overcoats' on market stalls are like 'their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge'.⁵⁷ We move here from the entrance to Hades itself to where the dead are ferried across the river Styx. In sequence four the mythological image of 'Venus' Doves' from a remembered visit to the Etruscan slopes of Italy, the

⁵² Seamus Heaney, ll. 17–18.

⁵³ Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, p. 396.

⁵⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Route 110', in *Human Chain*, pp. 48–60, (p. 50), l. 36.

⁵⁵ Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, p. 396 – I think Russell here is thinking of the poem 'Home Again' by Montague which begins, '[c]atching a bus at Victoria station, / Symbol of Belfast in its iron bleakness, / We ride through the narrow huckster streets [...]'. John Montague, 'Home Again', in *New Selected Poems*, (Worcester: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), pp. 42–44, (p. 42), ll. 1–3.

⁵⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Route 110', (p. 48), l. 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, (p. 49), ll. 15, 16, 16, 23, 24.

setting for much of the *Aeneid*, is contrasted in the next sequence with the more mundane, all-the-more local Irish image of ‘McNicholls’ pigeons’, which leads the poet to reach for ‘stalks’ from ‘a votive jampot’, with ‘each head of oats / A silvered smattering’.⁵⁸ All these images recall Aeneas’s searching for the golden bough of a tree as a sign of whether he should enter the underworld, and the Doves that lead him to the tree. As the ‘stalk [...] Wrapped in a second husk of glittering foil [...] as good as lit [him] home’, ‘so looked the leafy gold in the shadowy holm-oak tree, and so tinkled the metal foil in a gentle wind. Aeneas snatched it down at once [...] and carried it to the home of the prophetic Sibyl’.⁵⁹ The ‘votive jampot’ is also ‘a sign of piety’, reminiscent of Heaney’s own art, though ‘steeped in the palpable’ of home, it gleams with ‘the possibilities of transcendence’.⁶⁰

One of the greatest images of the poem is Heaney’s placing all the death he has witnessed in ‘an age of ghosts’, as Heaney descends into the underworld.⁶¹ The first death is that of ‘Michael Mulholland’, presumably a childhood friend or neighbour, ‘lost in the Bristol channel’.⁶² The next death is one of romance, presumably an adolescent tryst of some variety. Heaney recalls the line where Aeneas meets Dido in Hades on the Fields of Mourning, the place where those who have died from the pain of love reside: ‘As one when the month is young sees a new moon / Fading into daytime, again it is her face / At the dormer window’.⁶³ The corresponding line from *The Aeneid* reads: ‘like one who early in the month sees or thinks that he sees the moon rising through the clouds, his tears fell and he spoke to her in the

⁵⁸ Ibid, (p. 51), l. 46, (p. 52), ll. 49, 53, 52, 54–55.

⁵⁹ Ibid, (p. 52), ll. 53, 56, 60, and Virgil, ‘The Visit to the Underworld’, in *The Aeneid*, Trans. W.F Jackson Knight, (London: Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 147–175, p. 153. Heaney has employed the ‘golden bough’ figure before in the poem ‘The Ash Plant’ in the lines, ‘...wield the stick like a silver bough and come / Walking again among us’. Seamus Heaney, ‘The Ashplant’, in *Seeing Things*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), ll. 17–18.

⁶⁰ Michael Parker, ‘“Back in the Heartland”’, Seamus Heaney’s ‘Route 110’ Sequence in *Human Chain*, *Irish Studies Review*, 21.4, (2013), 374–386, p. 377.

⁶¹ Heaney, ‘Route 110’, (p. 53), l. 61.

⁶² Ibid, ll. 64, 69.

⁶³ Ibid, (p. 55), ll. 85–87.

sweet accents of love: 'O Dido, unhappy Dido...'.⁶⁴ Dido, earlier on in *The Aeneid*, commits suicide after our eponymous hero rejects her, aware of his higher calling. The following death is a 'Troubles' death, that of 'Mr Lavery, blown up in his own pub' by the Irish Republican Army.⁶⁵ Elegised in the poem, 'Casualty', 'Louis O'Neill' is remembered here too.⁶⁶ The un-memorialised dead are commemorated in sequence IX: 'bodies / Unglorified', 'not to be laid / In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot / Fired over on anniversaries / By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled'.⁶⁷ The speaker maintains their poet's role, elevated or distanced from the 'units drilled', a phrase at once suggestive of military violence and restricted intellectual or philosophical scope. These units are 'drilled', disciplined to be unthinking and un-introspective, a state of mind very much antithetical to that of the poet.

Though brief, this elegy to the dead aims to reconcile the death of innocents with the 'unreconciled', the divided of both sides, through the act of remembrance.⁶⁸ Losses, whether these are memories of Smithfield market, young friends, romance, victims of the Troubles, or his own father, are reimagined by Heaney in this poem. Elmer Andrews identifies that 'loss is very much the condition of Heaney's poetry', and that 'poetry contains the promise of loss redeemed'.⁶⁹ The idea that Heaney is recapturing those lost in his poetry has a personal dimension for sure. Often Heaney has figured his poetic shift, his movement 'from darkness into light' in a poetic sense, as 'Aeneas's crossing into the underworld'.⁷⁰ That he does so here ties in with the idea of loss redeemed, as 'loss and absence' can be 'transformed'

⁶⁴ Virgil, 'The Visit to the Underworld', pp. 160–161.

⁶⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Route 110' (p. 56), l. 98.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 101.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 103–104, 105–108.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 108.

⁶⁹ Elmer Andrews, 'The Spirit's Protest', in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1992), pp. 208–233, p. 211.

⁷⁰ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A reader's guide to essential criticism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), p. 155.

by 'absorbing them into a luminous, supra-historical realm of the imaginary'.⁷¹ The imagination is where loss is redeemed. This is akin to Heiny's observation that by elegising the dead they can be, if only in verse, immortalised. And as Heaney frequently remembers his younger self in 'Route 110', he seeks – whilst aware of death's inevitability – a Yeatsian resistance to the dominance of the material or bodily over the imaginative. And then we move into Elysium, 'Virgil's happy shades in pure blanched raiment', which Heaney compares with 'a sports day in Bellaghy'.⁷² Considering that Aeneas meets his father in Elysium, the next scene of '[t]hose evenings when we'd just wait and watch / And fish' is an image of Heaney and his father together again.⁷³ Even within a past seemingly peppered with deaths, as it were, Heaney separates the past 'age of ghosts' from the present 'age of births'.⁷⁴ As he writes 'It was an age of ghosts', 'And now [it is] the age of births'.⁷⁵ The final sequence of 'Route 110' describes the birth of Heaney's granddaughter Anna Rose. The speaker is Aeneas with his golden bough-like 'bunch of stalks', literally celebratory flowers, as he gathers around, with other relatives, his grandchild '[t]alking baby talk'.⁷⁶ There is something very hopeful in this transition from 'ghosts' to 'birth'. It suggests a movement from death to life, darkness to light, perhaps even old to young, aside from the connotations of imaginative flight. And more specific to the *Aeneid* narrative, the line recalls the professions of Aeneas's father, Anchises, in Elysium. He tells his son that his descendants, or the descendants of the Trojans, will found Rome and usher in a golden age of prosperity and imperial might. This, for Aeneas, is his 'age of births'. Virgil provides Heaney with a framework for exploring loss, the underworld paralleling well the Troubles themselves, to which Heaney alludes. This loss is also personal, it is a loss

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Seamus Heaney, 'Route 110' (p. 57), ll. 109, 114.

⁷³ Ibid, (p. 58), 121–122.

⁷⁴ Ibid, (p. 59), l. 133.

⁷⁵ Ibid, (p. 53), l. 61, (p. 59), l. 133.

⁷⁶ Ibid, (p. 59), ll. 141, 144.

of a life lived as well as one with sadness and death. Book VI of *The Aeneid* allows for reflection and reconciliation by an older Heaney more conscious of his own mortality.

But whilst the *Aeneid* is Heaney's caste for his meditations, he does not share Virgil's view. Heaney takes Virgil's text and transposes onto it his own vision of the world. Embodied in this vision is a bold defiance of death. Heiny remarks Heaney's 'defiant vitality' in *Human Chain*. Heaney is willing to 'look at the hard realities of life, but he will defiantly refuse to yield his spirit to them as he does so'.⁷⁷ There is a Yeatsian edge to this artistic sentiment. Heiny's description recalls Heaney's own of Yeats. Death is both recalcitrant and inhuman, and poetry embodies the ultimate pitting of 'human resource' against it. *Human Chain* testifies to the importance of such Yeatsian steadfastness, and in 'Route 110' is given weight and shape through Heaney's appropriation of a number of Virgil's motifs.

The overarching theme of *Human Chain* is personal mortality. More precisely, Heaney is concerned with the seeming inevitability of death, or one's inexorable physical decline, and the function of art in this process. That is, he seems to pose the following question: what can art do to buffer the onslaught on this most universal of foes? In a sense, this question forms part of Heaney's preoccupying questions of how a poet should relate to his own voice, place, literary heritage and contemporary world. Broadly speaking, it is an artistic question, but shifts the emphasis slightly away from the poet's contemporary world, to the personal sphere. Nonetheless, Heaney, as he so consistently does, looks to his forebears for guidance. His essay, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin' is his most detailed discussion of the relationship between artistic endeavour and personal mortality.

Regarding the aim of this dissertation, which is to examine how some of Heaney's many artistic relationships have affected his central relationship with Yeats, this essay is especially apposite. Larkin's fatalism is contrasted with Yeats's optimism, and Heaney aligns himself with the Yeatsian position.

⁷⁷ Heiny, 'Virgil in Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*', p. 315.

As Heaney writes of Yeats's position, and his own, in contrast to Larkin's idea that death is no different whined at than withstood: 'it is up to poets [...] to continue to withstand [death]'.⁷⁸ This position underscores *Human Chain*, and is borne out in the poetry, most fully in the wide-ranging 'Route 110'. Here Heaney calls on another forebear, Virgil, to give shape to his ideas. Many motifs from Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, such as the River Styx and Elysium, give shape to Heaney's recollections. The symbolism of the poet's descent into and emergence from the underworld has two chief effects: it is both a means to ruminate on various biographical events, chiefly the loss of others, and a means to attest to the importance of poetry in withstanding mortality. In reimagining those that he has lost, Heaney is imaginatively transporting them back across the river Styx, and likewise, in remembering his younger self, he is 'constructing a stay against personal mortality', as Parker aptly phrases it.

⁷⁸ Heaney, 'Joy or Night', p. 326.

Conclusion

Recapitulating the Collections

In his dialecticism, and his balancing fidelity to his vision with his perceived duty to his wider community, Heaney is following the artistic example set by Yeats. And in this sense, Yeats has made the greatest impact on Heaney's poetry. This poetic method, as it were, is carried into all of Heaney's works, and is certainly present in *Electric Light*, *District and Circle*, and *Human Chain*. I shall explore the first and second aims of this dissertation by way of summaries of my chapters, taking the collections in reverse chronology. Given that Heaney has engaged critically not only with Yeats, but many other writers and poets throughout his career, what are the impacts of these figures on Heaney's poetry and his artistic relationship with Yeats, insofar as they appear in the collections that I have examined? This question is best dealt with in reference to the collections themselves. In *Human Chain*, Heaney examines the question of the relationship between art and mortality. It is a corollary of Heaney's preoccupying artistic questions, as first outlined in the preface to *Preoccupations*, inasmuch as it concerns the role or function of art in the material world. Heaney explores Yeats's position on this in his essay, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin'. This essay deals with the second part of my aim in this dissertation, in that it constitutes an explicit discussion by Heaney himself of how Larkin's position on, in this case art and mortality, have affected his central relationship with Yeats. Heaney contrasts Larkin's view that art cannot outface personal mortality with Yeats's view that art can at least try. As Larkin writes that '[c]ourage is no good: / it means not scaring others. Being brave / lets no one off the grave', Yeats, in such poems as 'The Man and Echo', fiercely argues that courage is *some* good. This position underscores *Human Chain* as a whole. Heaney's acknowledgment of Yeats's influence in this regard is in two lines from the final sequence of 'Hermit Songs'. He directly quotes Yeats's lines from 'The Tower', 'poet's imaginings / And memories of love'. What Rajeev Patke

describes as being Yeats's chief artistic aim, 'to find in art a solace against his personal mortality', Heaney identifies in his own art, his 'steady-handedness maintained / against his vanishing' (quoted before). Heaney creates an art that will endure as a result of the 'artist's intransigent service'.¹

Indeed, this desire to outface mortality via poetry feeds into Heaney's appropriation of a number of Virgil's motifs from Book VI of his *Aeneid*. As I discussed with regard to Stephen Heiny's analysis in my chapter on *Human Chain*, Heaney, in visiting the underworld, is symbolically transporting the dead he depicts back across the river Styx and into the world of the living. In his 'defiant vitality', as Heiny phrases it, Heaney is displaying the kind of courage that he identifies in the life and work of Yeats. This is also reflected in Heaney's frequent employment of the tercet stanza, often forming a twelve-line poem. Colm Tóibín's analysis of this type of poem aligns with the underlying theme of personal mortality and Heaney's desire to set his art against this. The form enacts 'a buoyancy', and a 'refusal to close and conclude'. The finest example of this structure is the collection's opening poem, 'Had I not been awake', a poem which describes the great existential shock that Heaney experienced with his stroke in 2006.

Human Chain, with its focus on mortality and the role of art in outfacing this, represents a shift from the question of art's relationship to its contemporary world, which preoccupies Heaney in *District and Circle*. If personal mortality is the chief theme of *Human Chain*, then the poet's reaction to 9/11 and the War on Terror is Heaney's primary consideration in *District and Circle*. Indeed, Michael Parker observes 'how deeply [Heaney's] poetry since *Electric Light* has been affected by global events, primarily as a result of the massive and continuing fallout from the Al-Qaida attacks on New York of 9/11'.² Heaney sides with neither Al-Qaida and its affiliates nor the Coalition. Heaney is thinking dialectically, refusing to foreclose on either position in the manner of the Yeatsian dialecticism that he admires. Heaney looks

¹ Michael Parker, ' "His nibs" ', p. 344.

² Michael Parker, 'Fallout from the thunder: poetry and politics in Seamus Heaney's *District and Circle*', *Irish Studies Review*, 16.4 (2008), 369–384, p. 369.

to T.S. Eliot's symbol of the London Underground's Circle Line as a symbol of the 'union of differences', as a means to self-reflection or self-evaluation. The 'district' of the collection's title is Heaney's local sphere, and the 'circle' is the wider international political arena. Via Eliot, and in such poems as 'The Tollund Man in Springtime' which explore Heaney's Tollund trope, Heaney revisits his poetic shift. This is his move, which occurred after much rumination in the 1970s and '80s, from being buffeted by political violence, to a decision to outstrip political violence and imagine something better. In *District and Circle*, Heaney is exploring this poetic desire in the context of global political violence.

So where Eliot proves useful in this regard, Heaney looks to Patrick Kavanagh for a means to a kind of poetic steadying, and as a means to obliquely comment upon 9/11 and the War on Terror. There are two Kavanaghese principles that Heaney explores in *District and Circle*. These are the ideas of Heaney seeking strength from depicting the rural sphere of his birth, and the idea of using these depictions as a means of obliquely commenting upon the wider political sphere. On the latter aspect, Kavanagh writes in 'Spraying the Potatoes', 'we talked and our talk was a theme for kings', that is, our seemingly local or quotidian discussion has a universal resonance.³ On the first Kavanaghese aspect of *District and Circle*, Heaney finding a sense of solace and attempting poetic repossession via depictions of the agrarian sphere of his youth, has written how Kavanagh's descriptions of the 'small-farm life' around him are 'standing their ground in print' (quoted before). These ideas are fused with Heaney's dialectical way of thinking – which takes the form of oblique commentary on 9/11 and the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions and a general resistance to ideological certainty in *District and Circle* – and his seeking a balance between fidelity to his own vision and his artistic responsibility as a public poet. Heaney is resisting being 'crowd-swept' as he writes in the collection's titular poem, refusing to ventriloquise public opinion, but instead provide a more considered perspective. Paradoxically perhaps, the epitome of these Kavanaghese and Yeatsian ideas is not found in a poem that describes the Northern Irish

³ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 36–37, (p. 37), l. 25.

agrarian community of Heaney's childhood. Instead, the poem 'In Iowa' is situated in America, but it does foreground the agrarian theme. It is a poem that attests to the idea of poetic repossession via the rural sphere, and, along with 'The Tollund Man in Springtime' and Heaney's meditation on 9/11 in 'Anything Can Happen', a central poem of the collection.

Of the three collections that I examine in this dissertation, *Electric Light* is the most wide-ranging. We find Heaney in a number of different forms and styles, including elegy, lyric, song, sonnet, and eclogue. Heaney himself has explained this diversity as arising from his desire, as I quoted in my chapter on *Electric Light*, to follow 'each new [creative] impulse'.⁴ In my chapter, I focus on Heaney's initial lyrics in the collection, such as 'Perch', 'At Toomebridge', and 'Lupins', and, perhaps the most prominent verse form that Heaney explores, the eclogue. In the context of the Northern Irish Peace Process, I examine how the initial lyrics correspond to the notion of the subversion of the pastoral in the collection as a whole, and how this theme in Heaney's poetry springs from a cautious optimism in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In 'Lupins', I explore the relationship between Yeats, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ted Hughes on the interaction of suffering and art. This poem – as a reworking of Hughes's poem on the theme of passive suffering, 'Thistles' – attests to the idea that suffering really *is* a theme for poetry. As Heaney writes jestingly of Yeats's refusal to include the work of a number of First World War poets in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: 'passive suffering: who said it was disallowed / As a theme for poetry?'.⁵ This question of suffering and art is related to Heaney's overarching artistic questions which he developed from engagements with the artistic example of Yeats. This is because it is broadly concerned with the relationship between the poet and world around him. And, ultimately, Heaney shares the positions of Yeats, Hopkins, and Hughes. Indeed, one of the aspects of Yeats's work that Heaney admires, is the idea that the life and the work form a 'continuum'.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Lux Perpetua*, (London: *Guardian*, 2001).

⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'On His Work in the English Tongue', ll. 20–21.

Heaney also demonstrates his awareness of the Northern Irish Peace Process and the economic boom in the Republic of Ireland, known as the Celtic Tiger, in 'Bann Valley Eclogue', 'Eclogue IX', and 'Glanmore Eclogue'. The first two of these eclogues are situated in Northern Ireland, with one eye on the ongoing peace process, whilst 'Glanmore Eclogue' is set in County Wicklow, and is concerned more with the Celtic Tiger phenomenon. What Heaney explores in Virgil's form, in his three reworkings, are very Yeatsian concerns. Indeed, Heaney I think is drawn to the eclogues, because their themes are especially salient to the Heaney–Yeats relationship. These are: the dialecticism, the exploration of art's relationship with its contemporary world, the idea of art as probing the interstices between writer and context, and the idea of the poetry in some sense both absorbing and resisting such contexts as political violence. The eclogue for Heaney establishes a *locus amoenus*, an idealised safe space which transcends or outstrips its political milieu.

The Heaney–Yeats Relationship

So this dissertation has been concerned with two main points of argument. The first is to argue that the artistic example of W.B. Yeats remains, indeed, remained, central to Heaney's artistic life from the Northern Irish Troubles onwards. The second has been to also acknowledge some of the many other artistic influences on Heaney's poetry, insofar as they appear in the collections that I examine, and the affect they have on Heaney's central artistic relationship with Yeats. Heaney's engagement with Yeats first began around the time of the Troubles, when public pressures on Heaney were at their most intense. It was at this time that Heaney found Yeats's example waiting for him. In the 1970s, Heaney was coerced by the intensifying inter-denominational violence in the region of his birth to assume the mantle of the public poet. Heaney took to this role with a great degree of ambivalence. His main concern in collections such as *North* is, as I quoted in the introduction, with 'working out a position or a stance in relation to the place and the times we were inhabiting'. As an Ulster Catholic, Heaney feared

that he may become, as Fintan O'Toole phrases it, 'a mere mouthpiece for a tribal war' (also quoted in the introduction). It is at this time that Heaney discovered the artistic example of Yeats. To turn to O'Toole again, Yeats's gift was to be able to make 'great poetry under the pressure of public engagements'.⁶

But what exactly are the Yeatsian qualities to which Heaney aspires? Heaney's essay, 'Yeats as an Example?' goes some way to answering this question. A chief quality that Heaney admires is Yeatsian intransigence: that is, a steadfast devotion to one's own poetic vision. For Heaney, this entails a resistance to the political consensus, and a refusal to utter facile clichés or ventriloquise tribal sectarian rhetoric. As Heaney aptly records in his poem 'The Flight Path', 'If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself' (quoted before). But as Bernard O'Donoghue points out, all poetry at least implies an audience or readership. Thus, the question of artistic responsibility arises, an idea that feeds into Heaney's questions: 'How should a poet properly live and write, what is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and contemporary world?' Art is ultimately intended, as Yeats himself writes, 'so that civilisation may not sink'. Poetry must finally be 'of service' to the wider community. So there are two sides of the public poet coin: the idea of remaining faithful to one's own creative processes, whilst simultaneously trying to contribute to the betterment of society via one's poetic utterances.

What Yeats's poetic method gives Heaney is a means of balancing these two phenomena. It is Yeats's dialecticism that enables Heaney to do this. As Marjorie Howes writes of Yeats: 'his thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he embraced a counter-truth'.⁷ Via Heaney's field of force, different fixities of position are subsumed into a dialectical space. The poem 'From the Frontier of Writing' versifies this idea. The poet maintains his relationship with the actual

⁶ 'Heaney and Yeats: 'A Terrible Beauty', *Archive on Four*, BBC Radio 4, 5 October 2013, 20:00.

⁷ Marjorie Howes, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19, p. 1.

world of 'armour-plated vehicles', but he also transcends this world. He is simultaneously 'arraigned yet freed'. As Heaney himself aptly phrases it: '[t]he poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position, by his disposition to be affected by all positions'.⁸ Heaney maintains his fidelity to both his contemporary world and his own vision through his idea of the field of force. Not only does he do this, but he follows the Yeatsian mantra that poetry must ultimately be for the good of society as a whole. In being in tune with, whilst separate from, the political and actual realm, Heaney is able to 'posit answers, in some way, to the questions raised by the actual'.⁹

⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry in Northern Ireland', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 112–134, p. 119.

⁹ Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney Searches for Answers*, p. 64.

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