A CATHOLIC SENSIBILITY IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I set out to explore Catholicism as a felt sense in Seamus Heaney's poetry from his first collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) to his last collection *Human Chain* (2010). Chapter One sets the scene of Heaney's Catholic sensibility, which was rooted in his childhood home of Mossbawn and formalised in the learning of the Catholic Catechism at school and his early exposure to writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Patrick Kavanagh. Chapter Two identifies a Catholic sensibility in Heaney's use of sacramental language which consecrates the body as a unique good in *Death of a Naturalist*, manual labour in *Door into the Dark*, and place in *Wintering Out*. Chapter Three looks at Heaney's treatment of death in terms of Catholic ritual, including the veneration of relics (*North*), and the tactile piety which informs some of the elegies in *Field Work* and *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney's complex engagement with Catholicism in *Station Island* is the subject of Chapter Four, and I read the collection alongside his translation *Sweeney Astray*, published in the same year. Chapter Five explores Heaney's attempts to go beyond the limits of the material world (*Seeing Things*), and identifies this longing in the nature of love, and its demands, in *The Spirit Level* (exemplified in the saints) and *Electric Light*. In Chapter Six I argue that Catholicism operates in a more embedded way in the poems of *District and Circle* and *Human Chain* but remains as part of a sensibility which expands to include writers such as the classical poet Virgil. I identify four ways in which Catholicism operates in Heaney's poetry and draw attention to how these weave their way through the six chapters as: i) iconography, ii) sacramental vision, iii) poetic process, and iv) syntax and form.

A Catholic Sensibility in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

The following texts are cited parenthetically in the text. Where poems appear in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, I have cited this collection for ease of reference.

CT *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991)

DC *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

DD *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

DN *Death of a Naturalist.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

EL *Electric Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)

FW *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979)

HC *Human Chain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)

HL *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)

N *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

OG *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998)

SA *Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984)

SI *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984)

SL *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

SS *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008)

ST *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991)

WO *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972)

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

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DEDICATION

To my mother Ann

and in loving memory of my father, Raymond

1945 to 2017

INTRODUCTION

A CATHOLIC SENSIBILITY

One of the earliest poems which Seamus Heaney presented to the Belfast Group between 1963 and 1966 was 'Boy Driving his Father to Confession.' It conveys the complex but tender relationship between father and son that was to become a theme of Heaney's work from his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, and the subject of some of the most beautiful poems of *Seeing Things* and *Human Chain*. In the Groupsheet poem, the poet recalls moments when he was aware of his father's vulnerability, two of which were moments of 'incredible distress' – the death of Christopher and the temporary parting of Heaney's mother and father after twelve years of never being apart for a day. His father's distress clearly marked Heaney and the poet returns to Christopher's death in 'Mid Term Break' (*OG*, 12) and 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' (*DC*, 75-76), and to the final parting between his parents in 'Clearances' 7, when, at his mother's deathbed, his father 'called her good and girl. Then she was dead' (*OG*, 313).[1] The last moment of distress he recounts in 'Boy Driving his Father to Confession' is his father's anxiety about his sinfulness and his request that his son drive him to the local church for the sacrament of confession: 'What is going on | Beneath that thick grey hair? What confession | Are you preparing? Do you tell sins as I would?'[2] The repetition of questions itself mirrors the examination of conscience his father will make and the questions his confessor may put to him. Although never collected, the poem was published as late as 1994 in

[1] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 313.
[2] Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 49,493/1, Groupsheet 1. Hereafter, NLI.

the *Honest Ulsterman*, suggesting its importance for Heaney and the continuing confidence he had in it.[3]

A second poem on the theme of confession also appeared in the early Groupsheets, but remained unpublished. 'Men's Confessions'[4] depicts 'tight-lipped farmers … | Totting up breaches of faith, hope, love.' The poem has a mood of reckoning and the farmers' souls 'sweat hot as an armpit' as they prepare 'accounts' of their failings. The interior of the church is described as a 'chill nave' and the confessional box as 'hoarse dark', the synaesthetic quality of that description picked up in Heaney's later poem 'Personal Helicon': 'I rhyme | To see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (*OG*, 15). More importantly, perhaps, it anticipates the interior of the ancient church in 'In Gallarus Oratory' with its 'core of old dark walled up with stone | A yard thick' (*DD*, 10). The sombre mood continues in the monologue delivered by a Cistercian lay brother in another unpublished poem from the early Groupsheets.[5] In 'A Cistercian Speaks', the lay brother privileges manual work over study:

> Imagine
> Me studying Saint Augustine! I read
> Two chapters of those *Confessions* once
> And it finished me with that old sinner.

As he lays out the 'crockery' on the table, he can hear the priests reciting the Divine Office 'All smooth and sad and up and down like hills', and as he concludes his long

[3] It was first published in *Phoenix*, in March 1967; a chapbook published by Sceptre Press in 1970; *Poems and a Memoir* published by The Wild Carrot Letterpress, 1982, and *Honest Ulsterman*, Spring 1994. See Rand Brandes, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 362.

[4] NLI, MS 49,493/1, Groupsheet 4.

[5] Heaney's experiment with this form might owe something to the influence of Philip Hobsbaum who convened 'The Group' between 1963 and 1966. Hobsbaum was interested in the dramatic monologue as a form and thought that, among others, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell (two poets who were to have a significant influence on Heaney) were 'distinguished practitioners of the monologue.' See Philip Hobsbaum, 'The Rise of the Dramatic Monologue', *The Hudson Review*, 28.2 (1975), 227–45 (p. 244) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3850179>.

soliloquy, he corrects himself: 'Pardon me, I talk too much. Repression, | You might say.'[6]

In a personal and less dramatic sense, that final line could easily belong to Heaney. After all, he began his life as a writer under the pseudonym *Incertus*, 'uncertain, a shy soul fretting and all that.'[7] The lay brother's suspicion of learning and his trust in the value of his domestic chores ventriloquizes, to some extent, Heaney's own distrust of poetry. In an interview with John Haffenden in 1979, he said about writing:

> there is indeed some part of me that is entirely unimpressed by the activity, that doesn't dislike it, but it's the generation, I suppose, of rural ancestors – not illiterate, but not literary. They, in me, or I, through them, don't give a damn.[8]

If the voice of the lay brother is also the voice of the poet, then the reference to repression is important and is a clear indication that Heaney's engagement with Catholicism as his work develops will not be an untroubled one. In his mid-twenties, when he offered these poems to the Belfast Group, he was clearly coming to terms with the rural pieties of his youth and already engaged in an examination of conscience which would reach its apotheosis in the self-excoriating poems of *Station Island* (1984).

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[6] NLI, MS 49,493/1, Groupsheet 2. Heaney's use of the colloquial 'You might say' may owe something to Robert Browning's 'Bishop Blougram's Apology': '…so despise me, as I say.' Hobsbaum begins his discussion of the dramatic monologue by reminding us that the form is associated with Robert Browning.

[7] 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 41-60 (p. 41). 'Feeling into Words' was first delivered at the Royal Society of Literature in October 1974, and later collected with revisions in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*. Heaney's fretting recalls the fretting of Stephen Dedalus before the Dean of Studies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'My soul frets in the shadow of his language.' James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 205.

[8] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 63 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).

However, also included in the early Groupsheets was a poem 'Saint Francis and the Birds', which was later collected in *Death of a Naturalist*, and which I discuss further in Chapter Two. In its three tercets and final single line, it differs from the long monologue of 'A Cistercian Speaks'. In the Saint Francis poem, there is something of the 'visionary, religious, simple'[9] poetry that Heaney was yearning for later in his career and which he realised in *Seeing Things*. The lethargy of the Cistercian's long monologue gives way to the language of 'fluttered', 'throttled', 'wheeled', 'whirred', 'pirouetted', 'danced' 'joy' and 'sang'.[10] The appeal of a saint whose 'Canticle of the Sun' praises a universe alive with joy is obvious for Heaney, and his engagement with saints, I argue, is an important element of his Catholic sensibility and is the focus of my reading of *The Spirit Level* in Chapter Five.

What the Groupsheets demonstrate is the formative influence Catholicism exercised upon the poet in the earliest stages of his writing life. What is of interest for this thesis is not primarily that they deal with Catholic themes but that they emerge out of a sensibility that is shaped by Heaney's early religious experience and which continues to inform Heaney's poetry long after Catholicism disappears thematically from the poems.[11] In other words, what I set out to argue is a case for the importance of Catholicism in Heaney's poetry at the level of feeling not doctrine, what Wordsworth called in his poem 'Tintern Abbey' 'sensations sweet, | Felt in the

[9] Interview with David Montenegro, in *Points of Departure: International Writers on Writing and Politics*, ed. by David Montenegro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 180-197 (p. 191).

[10] NLI, MS 49,493/1, Groupsheet 1.

[11] Eugene O'Brien usefully reminds us that that the word 'Catholic' appears only eight times in Heaney's work: in 'Docker' (*DN*); in 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' (*FW*); in a note describing William Carleton (*SI*); 'The Settle Bed' (*ST*); three times in 'Senior Infants', and one in 'Brancardier' (*DC*). See '"Any Catholics among you …?": Seamus Heaney and the Real of Catholicism', in *Breaking the Mould: Literary Representations of Irish Catholicism*, ed. by Eugene O'Brien and Eamon Maher (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2011), pp. 159-78 (p. 171).

blood, and felt along the heart'.[12] In this respect, Heaney's essay 'The Poet as a Christian' is important:

> The poetic vocation involves a pursuit of psychic health, a self-possession, an adjustment between outer and inner realities, a religious commitment to the ever-evolving disciplines of the art which the poet has to credit as his form of sanctity. Unless he is to make of the doctrines of Christianity an apologetic or an ordering myth – such as Hopkins and David Jones have done – the poet will know those doctrines and the whole undergrowth of behaviour and sentiment and attitude that attaches to them only as part of his mode of feeling.[13]

Heaney's choice of religious vocabulary – 'vocation', 'religious commitment', 'sanctity' – reveals the extent to which he understood the role of the poet in deeply religious terms. The choice of *Preoccupations* as a title for his first collection of prose, published just a year after 'The Poet as a Christian', borrows its title from a passage in the work of W.B. Yeats which provides an epigraph for the book: '… the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense pre-occupation it demands.'[14] But Heaney is quick to separate out this preoccupation from any system of belief or religious apologia. What a religious sensibility supplies for Heaney is part of his mode of feeling, the qualifying word 'part' a reminder that other sensibilities are also at play in Heaney's poetic process.

I use the word sensibility because it is a word which Heaney himself used. In his interview with John Haffenden in 1979, he said:

> My sensibility was formed by the dolorous murmurings of the rosary, and the generally Marian quality of devotion […] Irish Catholicism, until about ten years ago, had this Virgin Mary worship, almost worship. In practice, the shrines, all the devotions, were centred towards a feminine presence, which I think was terrific for the sensibility.[15]

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[12] Neil Corcoran reminds us that Wordsworth 'is probably the most deeply informing presence in Heaney'. See 'Heaney and Yeats', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 165-77 (p. 169).
[13] The essay was first published in *The Furrow* in 1978 and reprinted in memory of the poet in 2013. Seamus Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 541–45 (p. 542).
[14] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p, 7.
[15] Haffenden, pp. 60–61.

Heaney used the word 'sensibility' to describe the experience of religious feeling. In his 1975 essay on Patrick Kavanagh, collected in *Preoccupations*, he wrote, in an obvious reference to James Joyce, that Kavanagh managed to cross the 'pieties of a rural Catholic sensibility with the *non serviam* of his original personality'.[16] And in the final essay collected in *Finders Keepers*, he wrote of Czesław Miłosz that the tradition of Christian humanism he was born into 'had such a formative effect upon his sensibility'.[17] For Heaney, the word 'sensibility' has to do with feeling, with the importance, from the beginning, of getting that 'feeling into words', to borrow the title of an early essay in which he writes that 'Digging' was the first poem he wrote 'where I thought my *feel* had got into words.'[18] About Heaney's early poetry, John Wilson Foster wrote that Heaney privileged 'states of feeling over statement […] its appeal is to the senses more than to the mind.'[19]

Catholicism as a mode of feeling operates, I want to argue, in at least four important ways in Heaney's poetry. The first is at the level of Catholic iconography, what Eamon Duffy has called the 'word-and-image hoard'[20] so richly available to Heaney from his childhood. The second relates to form and syntax, where syntax, for

[16] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 116. The essay first appeared in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Carcanet Press, 1975) pp. 105-117.
[17] Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 414. The word sensibility is also used by Andrew Greeley in the introductory chapter ('The Sacraments of Sensibility') of *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001), and he returns to the word throughout the book to refer to a sacramental or enchanted view of the created world. A note from Brian Friel to Heaney in the Emory Archive appears to refer to Greeley: 'Two books from A. Greeley today, one for each of us. "The book is about the religious imagination, - a subject in which you two are most definitely among the world's finest practitioners." So there.' The letter is dated 23 November 1984 and so cannot refer to *A Catholic Imagination*. Atlanta (GA), Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, MSS 960, Box 67. Hereafter, Emory.
[18] *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 41.
[19] John Wilson Foster, 'Heaney's Redress', in *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991), pp. 168-205 (p. 173). Foster later developed the essay in book form as *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995).
[20] 'Seamus Heaney and Catholicism' in *The Present Word: Culture, Society and the Site of Literature: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Boyle*, ed. by Nicholas Boyle and John Walker (London: Legenda, 2013), pp. 166-83 (p. 177).

example, occasionally assumes a prayer-like quality reminiscent of the litany. The third operative sense is at the level of poetic process (and here I rely on the drafts of the poems in the National Library of Ireland), where I set out to show that a Catholic sensibility survives translation into the published poem in a deeply embedded sense. And, finally, related to this sense, is a deeply sacramental vision in Heaney's poetry which informs the poems even after he masters 'new rungs of the air' (*OG*, 274) in *Station Island*.

The extent to which Catholicism operates as a mode of feeling in the work can be illustrated through an attentive reading of a familiar poem such as 'Clearances' 3 (*OG*, 309):

> When all the others were away at Mass
> I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
> They broke the silence, let fall one by one
> Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
> Cold comforts set between us, things to share
> Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
> And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
> From each other's work would bring us to our senses.
>
> So while the parish priest at her bedside
> Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
> And some were responding and some crying
> I remembered her head bent towards my head,
> Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
> Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The poems of 'Clearances' employ the form of the sonnet. Stephen Regan reminds us that the sonnet is primarily a love poem that has evolved over the centuries to include, among other things, religious devotion and elegiac mourning.[21] The 'Clearances' sequence articulates each of these concerns as the poet comes to terms with the death of his mother. The intimacy of the love shared between mother and son in the octave of the poem is conveyed by the almost furtive context in which

[21] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

mother and child make the most of the others being away at Mass – 'I was all hers …' But almost immediately the word 'weeping' sounds a note of elegy and reminds us of the *lacrimae rerum* ('the tears of things') that was to become a key motif in Heaney's poetry going forward.[22] I discuss the poem more fully in Chapter Three of the thesis, where I argue that the various drafts of the poem show us the extent to which Heaney's religious devotion as a child was almost inseparable from devotion to his mother. His early religious sensibility is intricately and intensely related to the love felt for his mother and the weeping associated with her loss, and the sonnet form effectively accommodates and expresses love, devotion and mourning all at once.

'Clearances' 3 has received much attention from the critics. However, what the drafts of the poem reveal, and what has not been addressed by critical discussion, is the extent to which a Catholic sensibility is operative during the poetic process. What I set out to show later in the thesis is the extent to which the drafts of the poem (and other poems) are deeply informed by Catholic iconography even if they are absent from the published poem. In an early handwritten draft of what became 'Clearances' 3, Heaney includes a line 'Reflections brimming the ciborium'. The ciborium is the vessel used to hold the consecrated hosts, and if 'reflections' refers to Heaney and his mother, then it is clear how much Heaney understood their relationship in a deeply sacramental way. This is not at first sight obvious from the published poem, but it remains as an afterglow all the same:

> I remembered her head bent towards my head,
> Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
> Never closer the whole rest of our lives.[23]

[22] What Heaney found and appreciated in Virgil would become even more pronounced in the context of a faith in which the contemplation of sorrow has a profound significance.

[23] We might, for example, find a residual sacramental sense in 'Her breath in mine'. At the Easter Vigil Mass, recalled in 'Clearances' 6, Heaney brings to mind the rubrics for the blessing of the font, including: 'The water breathed on' (*OG*, 312).

Catholicism as a mode of feeling is operative, then, in Heaney's choice of the sonnet as a form, in his original simile of the ciborium in a draft of the poem, and in the sacramental afterglow in the finished poem itself. The shift from the Groupsheet poems to the sonnets of 'Clearances' is from Catholicism largely as a theme to Catholicism as an embedded sensibility. It is this sensibility which I wish to trace in Heaney's poetry. Where this fits in to the critical work already available in this field I hope to demonstrate in what follows.

THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

The early critics

In an interview with Maggie Parham for *Harpers & Queen* in 1995, Heaney spoke of his gratitude for the 'visionary crystal' at the centre of Catholicism. He acknowledged that he no longer believed in a personal God but went on to say:

> People talk about the effects of a Catholic upbringing in sociological terms […] repression, guilt, prudery. What isn't sufficiently acknowledged is the radiance of Catholicism. It gave everything in the world a meaning. It brought a tremendous sense of being, of the dimensions of reality, the shimmering edges of things. That never quite vanishes. The older I get, the more I remember the benediction of it all.[24]

Heaney returned to this experience of Catholicism increasingly in subsequent interviews.[25] However, despite this, the subject received little critical attention in its own right.

If Heaney felt free to speak of the 'radiance of Catholicism' in 1995, it was a mark of how much the political landscape had changed from twenty years before, when the publication of *North* evoked an almost visceral response among some

[24] Maggie Parham and Seamus Heaney, 'Seamus Famous: An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Harpers & Queen*, 1995, 144–48 (p. 148).
[25] See, for example, J.J. Wylie and John C. Kerrigan, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 2.1–2 (1999), 125–37 (p. 133); Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 36; John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Northern Irish Poets* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002), pp. 75–85 (pp. 83-84).

critics who inevitably, perhaps, understood Heaney's Catholicism as a socio-political descriptor. There is evidence that at some level Heaney himself thought of it in this way. Seamus Deane, in an interview in 1977, pressed Heaney on the political responsibility of the poet in facing the Northern situation. Deane questioned the value of a neat and tidy formalism as a response to a fractured and violent society which gave rise to the poetry in the first place. Heaney's response was to conflate 'Catholic' and 'nationalist' in a manner which rendered Catholicism as socio-political descriptor:

> Poetry is born out of the watermarks and colourings of the self. But that self in some ways takes its spiritual pulse from the inward spiritual structure of the community to which it belongs; and the community to which I belong is Catholic and nationalist.[26]

Subsequent reviews of *North* demonstrated the difficulties in disentangling a religious sense of Catholicism from a political one. Edna Longley (who draws on the interview with Deane) argues that the ritualising habit in the book imparts a 'decorative tinge' to violence and to history and derives from Heaney's religious sensibility.[27] Her argument has echoes of Ciaran Carson's review of *North* and his claim that the 'superstructure of myth and symbol' in the book was like a 'mystery of the Catholic Church, ritualized and mystified into a willing ignorance.'[28] In searching for rituals adequate to the predicament of the Northern Troubles it was hardly surprising that Heaney would delve into the myth-kitty of his religious sensibility. In doing so, however, it became difficult for critics to distinguish a religious sensibility from a political one.

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[26] Seamus Deane and Seamus Heaney, 'Unhappy and at Home', *The Crane Bag*, 1.1 (1977), 66–72 (p. 67).
[27] '"Inner Émigré" or "Artful Voyeur"? Seamus Heaney's *North*' in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 160.
[28] Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), 183–86 (p. 185).

However, Catholicism as an expression of a religious sensibility began to be addressed by the 1990s. In 1990, in an essay entitled 'Heaney's Redress', John Wilson Foster acknowledges the strong residual presence of Irish Catholicism in the poet's work, arguing that 'Heaney's Catholicism is apparently instinctive and remembered, not practised.'[29] He goes on to suggest that Heaney, like Joyce, has retained 'something priestly' in himself and that his instinct is to make poetry 'a ceremony of assuagement.'[30] Foster speaks of the poetry's 'largesse of humane love'[31], not much talked about in critical studies of Heaney, but which I identify in this research as one expression of his Catholic sensibility. Michael Parker's *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (1993) provided some excellent biographical detail long before the publication of *Stepping Stones* in 2008, and is sensitively alert to the formative role which Catholicism played in the shaping of Heaney's sensibility. Parker, in a carefully nuanced paragraph, argues that it is almost impossible to dissociate the artistic and religious impulses in Heaney:

> Clearly Catholicism permeates both his poetic consciousness, with its weighty emphasis on ritual supplication, on awe, grace, guilt, humility, responsibility, discipline, and its burdened and burdening vocabulary. His fondness for the pieties of his Mossbawn childhood has survived both the impact of his secular 'British' education and the psychological-spiritual trauma of the Troubles, and has not been diminished. The highly-charged language in which the Church's teachings were couched permeate the poet's idiolect. His religious metaphors and allusions are not to be dismissed simply as products of nostalgia, the detritus of belief long since abandoned; rather they incarnate a potency of feeling remembered and renewed.[32]

To my mind, this is as good a summary of Heaney's relationship with Catholicism as any. It avoids the slippage of pinning Heaney down to a doctrinal position, religious or otherwise, as if, in the end, Catholicism can be reduced to a set of propositional

[29] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences*, p. 178.
[30] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences*, p. 181.
[31] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences*, p. 182.
[32] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 115.

truths to be assented to or dissented from. Instead, Parker identifies modes of feeling (awe, grace, humility, childhood pieties) as the identifying characteristics of Heaney's Catholic sensibility and, in this, he shares Foster's view that Heaney privileges 'states of feeling over statement' and that poetry's appeal is 'to the senses more than to the mind.'[33] It is Catholicism as a felt sense, as something which appeals to the senses, which is the focus of this research.

Two important critical studies of Heaney's poetry were published in 1998 – Neil Corcoran's *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (an expanded edition of a book first published in 1986) and Helen Vendler's *Seamus Heaney*. Both books remain foundational texts for a critical understanding of the poet. In her introduction, Vendler sets out her stall as a formalist critic, who aims to show, through a close reading of selected poems, 'the lyric process in action, and to investigate how form becomes realized in words.'[34] Catholicism, then, remains beside the point for Vendler, but where it is discussed in relation to specific poems, I argue that a strict formalism prevents a more nuanced reading of some poems ('Elegy' and 'The Skunk' in *Field Work* and 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' in *The Spirit Level*, for example). In an essay published shortly after Heaney's death in 2013, Vendler argues that after *Station Island*, Heaney 'has now exhausted, as a primary subject, the earlier narratives of his childhood life and its religious observance'.[35] Once again, I think that too strict a formalism prohibits wider considerations around Heaney's later poems (not least Heaney's discussion of them in interviews and the poems in their draft forms), considerations, which,

[33] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences*, p. 173.
[34] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 10.
[35] 'Second Thoughts and Coda', in *Irish Pages: A Journal of Contemporary Writing*, ed. by Chris Agee and Cathal Ó Searcaigh (Belfast: Nicholson and Bass, 2014), 8.2, pp. 12-22 (p. 16). These articles appeared, respectively, in the *American Philosophical Society Bulletin* and *The New Republic* shortly after Heaney's death.

nevertheless, allow the final text of the poems to retain their integrity. In Chapters Five and Six, where I discuss these poems, I set out to show the extent to which Catholicism continues to operate in their draft forms and, in a more embedded way, in the published poems themselves. In this, my position is most closely aligned with Neil Corcoran who argues for a middle position which recognises the validity of interviews, broadcasts and readings as well as the integrity of the text, what he calls a 'combination of formalism and historicism'.[36]

Critics and broader theological categories

Both Daniel Tobin and John F. Desmond read Heaney's work within the broader theological categories of the sacred and the transcendent. Around the same time as Vendler's *Seamus Heaney*, Tobin published *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (1999). Drawing on the thought of Mircea Eliade (whose book *The Sacred and Profane* Heaney read[37]) and the sacramental power of the centre in Heaney's evocation of Mossbawn in *Preoccupations*, Tobin argues that 'Heaney's evocation of the center here as elsewhere reflects a preoccupation with religion that runs deep in his psychic and cultural roots.'[38] Tobin's methodology is partly informed by the history of religions, and as a result his categories are more broadly defined: '… by the sacred I mean a revelation of the numinous often encountered in the religions and myths of various cultures as a hierophany.'[39] Consequently, his study is not concerned with a Catholic

[36] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. ix.

[37] Heaney recalls that he discovered Eliade's book on sacred and profane space in the early nineteen-eighties, when writing the 'Station Island' sequence. He goes on to say: 'The desacralizing of space is something that my generation experienced in all kinds of ways: faith decaying and the *turas* – the turn around the holy well or the Stations of the Cross – losing its supernatural dimension …' Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 309.

[38] Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 2.

[39] Tobin, p. 4.

sensibility per se but with the broader question of how Heaney variously responds to the centre in his work without allowing himself to be drawn into a mood of mere nostalgia. Heaney is at once concerned with a moment of transition in Ireland from the sacred to the profane and an accompanying 'desacralizing' of place and, at the same time, with the generative possibilities of 'the dry place'.[40] For Tobin, 'This return circumvents nostalgia because it seeks to uncover the limits and inadequacies of the determining ground, and not merely to affirm its continuity with that ground.'[41] Beginning with his early work, Tobin discusses the various ways in which Heaney responds to the sacred centre in his work from creative source to malevolent goddess and from a point of repose to the generative emptiness of *Seeing Things*. The emphasis on Mossbawn as a sacred centre and the *omphalos* of Heaney's creative imagination is an important one for the purposes of this research. But where Tobin treats it more broadly in relation to sacred and profane space, my focus is on the modes of feeling generated by the Catholic pieties of Mossbawn.

The focus of John F. Desmond's *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light* (2009) is the dynamic tension in Heaney's poetry between the immanent and the transcendent. His point of departure is to acknowledge Eugene O'Brien's emphasis on the ethical importance of Heaney's writings in his book *Seamus Heaney: Searches for Answers* (2003), but to push further and to ask 'what is the fundamental ground for such notions in Heaney's work?'[42] His answer is that Heaney's aesthetic is grounded upon a belief in a transcendent metaphysical ontology, which he sees as 'compatible with a Christian anthropological view of humanity, with the essential doctrines of the faith, and with the ideal Christian vision

[40] Rand Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney: An Interview', *Salmagundi*, 185/186, (1988), 623–40 (p. 625).
[41] Tobin, p. 10.
[42] John F. Desmond, *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), p. 2.

of community'.[43] One of the essential doctrines of the faith which Desmond identifies as central to Heaney's notion of poetry is the doctrine of grace, which Heaney discusses in his interview with Karl Miller and which Desmond draws attention to here.[44] Perhaps the most important contribution Desmond makes is to draw attention to the influence of Czesław Miłosz on Heaney. In Miłosz, Heaney found an intellectual Catholicism more expansive than that of his childhood pieties but which retained a sense of man as a metaphysical being. Desmond sees this kind of ontology and metaphysical language as largely out of fashion, but key to an understanding of the dynamic tension between the immanence of gravity and the transcendence of grace in the poet's work. He treats the French philosopher Simone Weil as an example of someone who set out to redress the imbalance between these two orders of reality and who exercised a considerable influence on the thought of Czesław Miłosz, and through Miłosz on Heaney.[45] Desmond concludes his book with an extended reading of *The Spirit Level* in the context of Weil's thought in her book *Gravity and Grace.*

Peggy O'Brien, in her excellent study *Writing Lough Derg* (2006), has also drawn attention to the importance of Miłosz for Heaney. Her book offers a discussion of Heaney's treatment of Lough Derg in the context of other writings on the subject, including William Carleton and Patrick Kavanagh, both of whom Heaney engages with in his own poem 'Station Island'. To date, it remains the most extensive critical study of Heaney's 'Station Island' sequence, of which O'Brien writes: 'I see that poem as pivotal in Heaney's career, a penitential exercise to

[43] Desmond, p. 3.
[44] Desmond, p. 4.
[45] Weil is an important touchstone in Heaney's Oxford lecture 'The Redress of Poetry', delivered at Oxford on 24 October 1989, and collected in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 1-16 (p. 3).

expiate certain self-perceived poetic and moral lapses, which leads to the affirmation of "Clearances" (*The Haw Lantern*) and the renewed but refined doubt of "Squarings" (*Seeing Things*).'[46] I agree with O'Brien that *Station Island* is a pivotal book in a discussion of Heaney and Catholicism, and it is for this reason that I devote a complete chapter to it (Chapter Four). Central to Heaney's wrestling with the twin pieties of what O'Brien calls a 'brand of conservative Catholicism associated with post-Famine Ireland'[47] and the demands of nationalism, was a breadth of vision opened up by Heaney's appointment at Harvard and his admiration for American poets such as Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. It was in America that Heaney also came into contact and made lasting friendships with several émigré poets such as Joseph Brodsky, Derek Walcott and, arguably, most importantly Czesław Miłosz, whom Heaney first met in Berkeley in 1971:

> The examples of these fellow international poets would offer strategies for coping with varieties of Irish cultural problems, from confronting the ongoing repercussions of colonization, to, given the example of Polish poetry especially, prizing the artistic conscience free of the hinged jaws of patriotism and Catholicism.[48]

Such is the influence of Miłosz on Heaney for O'Brien, that she devotes one out of four chapters to this topic.

The strength of O'Brien's treatment of Heaney's relationship with Catholicism in *Station Island,* and beyond, is in its fastidiously careful and nuanced understanding of Catholicism as something operative in Heaney at the level of feeling, and as existing somewhere between belief and scepticism. When discussing Heaney's thoughts on Yeats's poem 'The Cold Heaven', O'Brien insists that for Heaney belief does not have to be located at one definite point between metaphor

[46] Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg: From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p. xv.
[47] Peggy O'Brien, p. xiv.
[48] Peggy O'Brien, p. 156.

and metaphysics.[49] For her, Heaney's interest lies not in doctrine but in religious impulse and it is in this felt sense of Catholicism that she locates the attraction of Miłosz for Heaney: 'During the eighties and nineties the common aim of Heaney and Miłosz was to imbue poetry with a questioned but also felt religious impulse quite at odds with the metaphysics of modernism and postmodernism, ranging from agnosticism to atheism.'[50] What Heaney found in Miłosz was a point of entry into a more expansive and intellectual form of Catholicism far removed from what O'Brien calls the 'hidebound pieties of Irish Catholicism.'[51] What Heaney credits, in the end, is the imaginative and sensuous appeal of Catholicism unfettered from its doctrinal framework, and O'Brien does an excellent job of being sensitive to the difference between the two.

Recent criticism

In the last ten years Gail McConnell has made a significant contribution in rescuing the theological implications of Catholicism for Heaney's poetry from a view of Catholicism merely as a socio-political descriptor. Equally important is her discussion of Catholicism's constitutive role for Heaney's poetics as something more specific than the broader categories of transcendent or numinous poetics as set out in the work of Tobin and Desmond. In an essay in *The Irish Review* in 2011, McConnell argues for a convergence of the 'verbal icon' of New Criticism (formative for Heaney in the 1950s and 1960s) and the iconography of Catholicism

[49] Peggy O'Brien, p. 162. In a footnote to her paper 'Towards a Theology of Poetry', Gail McConnell emphasises the binary nature of much of Heaney's aesthetic practice: 'Masculine/Feminine, England/Ireland, Active/Passive, Structure/Sound, Consonants/Vowels.' She concludes: 'Crucially, however, Heaney does not make a strong distinction between "sacred" and "secular", neither in his prose nor his poetry.' See 'Towards a Theology of Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Icons and Sacraments', *The Irish Review*, 43, (2011), 70–85 (p. 84).

[50] Peggy O'Brien, p. 164.

[51] Peggy O'Brien, p. 163.

in Heaney's poetry, and sees both as 'constitutive of his poetic forms'.[52] In the formalist tradition of New Criticism, she offers a close reading of 'Blackberry-Picking' in which Heaney draws on the Christian idea of incarnation and the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist in order to achieve the 'satisfactory verbal icon' he discusses in 'Feeling into Words'.[53] However, Heaney's concern is with the well-made poem and not with the Christian deity, and so McConnell concludes that he tends towards 'making a theology of poetry.'[54] She incorporates her argument in an essay 'Catholic Art and Culture: Clarke to Heaney', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry,* in which she concludes a discussion of the manuscript drafts of 'Strange Fruit' by saying: 'Heaney's wish that the poem become a monstrance for the divine, whether as verbal icon or Catholic sacrament, is at the heart of his poetic endeavour.'[55]

In *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (2014), McConnell develops her 2011 paper on Heaney, as well as offering two further chapters on the relationship between theology and poetic form in Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. In her introduction, she reminds us of her central thesis that religion is more than a socio-political descriptor and that 'theology shapes subjectivity, language and poetic form.'[56] She extends her reading of Heaney in at least two ways, one of which is to argue that Catholic sacramental theology not only informs his poetic form, but his very conception of the role of the poet and the power of language.[57] She draws on 'Feeling into Words' to argue that for Heaney poetry is both craft and 'divination'

[52] McConnell, p. 75.
[53] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 56.
[54] McConnell, 'Towards a Theology of Poetry', p. 82.
[55] Fran Brearton and Alan A Gillis, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 437-455 (p. 455).
[56] Gail McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 5.
[57] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 10.

and that Catholic iconography and sacramentalism contribute to this view. The second way in which she develops her reading is to extend her 2011 discussion of 'Blackberry-Picking' to include readings of poems from *North*, *Field Work, The Spirit Level* and *District and Circle*. In relation to *North*, she argues for a reassessment of Ciaran Carson's critique of Heaney as a mythologiser of ritual violence and, instead, argues that Heaney may have employed Catholic iconography to draw the reader into a contemplation of violence 'in order for some change to occur.'[58] She goes on to discuss the manuscript drafts of 'Strange Fruit' and the profoundly Eucharistic images of these drafts in which the beheaded girl is represented as the sacrificial Christ.[59] In her discussion of the sequence 'Field Work', in the collection of that title, she returns again to Eucharistic imagery involved in the anointing ritual in poem IV of that sequence.[60] However, her conclusion becomes clear in her discussion of 'Damson' from *The Spirit Level*. She argues that Heaney represents the wound in the bricklayer's hand as 'a form of stigmata as well as sacrament', but that in the end Real Presence is a 'tragic impossibility. The poem cannot bring back the dead, although it invites their commemoration in a sacramental form.'[61] And so to her conclusion: '… in his pursuit of the verbal icon, Heaney's endeavour is only theological in so far as his icons refer, finally, to poetry, and not the god of Christian theology.'[62] McConnell's work has been seminal in re-focusing

[58] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 99.
[59] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, pp. 100–101. Richard Rankin Russell also offers a sustained close reading of 'Strange Fruit' in *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, where he draws attention to the Catholic and devotional language in the many drafts of the poem. See *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp. 169–84. He also includes Heaney's immersion in Catholicism in more general terms in *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
[60] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 102.
[61] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 104; 110.
[62] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 111.

attention specifically on the operation of Catholicism in Heaney's poetry, but its focus on a theology of the text is not the aim of this research.

In 2015, McConnell reviewed Andrew Auge's *A Chastened Communion* (2013), another welcome contribution to the discussion of Catholicism's role in Irish poetry. Given that Auge writes on seven poets, his discussion of Heaney is limited to one aspect of Catholic theology, namely a theology of atonement. He argues that Heaney seeks to divest himself of the sacrificial imperative and self-abnegation involved in such a 'debilitating'[63] theology and that in doing so, he opens up a space for the marvellous in his poetry. Not surprisingly, then, his discussion of Heaney pays particular attention to the poems of *Station Island* (not discussed in McConnell's work), before finishing with a lengthy discussion of *Seeing Things*. He draws on two images from Heaney's Nobel Lecture which appear to exemplify the poet's shift from guilt to gift. The first is Heaney's description of himself as a monk-like figure bowed over his prie-dieu attempting to bear 'his portion of the weight of the world', in a sacrificial exchange, where poetry is understood as an act of atonement. The second image is the figure of St Kevin, whose outstretched hand seeks no reward but is an act of pure gratuity, which, as Auge, writes 'transcends calculation and resists reciprocity.'[64] It is this 'transcending sacrifice' which provides the title of Auge's essay on Heaney.[65] This becomes especially clear, for Auge, in the final poems of the 'Station Island' sequence: 'When the self-abnegating sacrificial mind-set fostered by Catholicism is set aside, the doors of consciousness are opened to the possibility of the gift. What had previously been forgotten or forfeited

[63] Andrew J. Auge, *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism* (New York, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2013), p. 109.
[64] Auge, p. 117.
[65] 'Transcending Sacrifice: How Heaney Makes Room for the Marvelous'.

suddenly appears to have been miraculously given.'[66] What is 'miraculously given' remains indeterminate in Auge's carefully nuanced reading: 'what Heaney gives us instead is exposure to a mystery that can never be resolved but only plumbed over [*sic*] more deeply.'[67]

If Heaney's relationship with Catholicism has been strangely absent in a good deal of the criticism prompted by his poetry, its inclusion as a chapter in *Seamus Heaney in Context* in 2021 is one important indicator of the growing interest in this area of Heaney studies in the last decade. Under the section heading 'Frameworks', is an essay titled 'Catholicism' by Kieran Quinlan. Quinlan's essay follows on from a fine book by the same author, *Seamus Heaney and the End of Catholic Ireland*, published just a year before in 2020. It remains the only book-length study of Heaney and Catholicism to date. In his introduction to the book, Quinlan sets out his methodology, which is to read Heaney's poetry and prose through the construction of religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, as others have read it through the constructions of gender and politics.[68] His study, then, proceeds in chronological order tracking Heaney's complex and changing relationship with Catholicism as the institution itself changed. He sees the fundamental change in Heaney's relationship with Catholicism to be his 'transition from belief to unbelief'[69], the implications of which Quinlan believes have not been fully recognised. He begins by setting out the historical scene and by describing the type of Catholicism which Heaney inherited against the backdrop of what became known as the 'devotional revolution' in Ireland in the nineteenth century, and which I return

[66] Auge, p. 133.
[67] Auge, p. 143.
[68] Kieran Quinlan, *Seamus Heaney and the End of Catholic Ireland* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), p. 8.
[69] Quinlan, p. 10.

to in Chapter One. His survey concludes that 'By the 1940s and '50s, then, Irish Catholics were generally so orthodox that they were hardly conscious of orthodoxy as a position.'[70] He goes on to discuss the momentous change and excitement brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) and, in the same chapter, draws attention to a number of important conversions to Catholicism, each of which to varying degrees, would feature in Heaney's thinking: the American poet Robert Lowell, the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, and the Trappist monk Thomas Merton.[71] A particular strength of Quinlan's book is his contextualising of Heaney's Catholicism, and towards the end of the book he places Heaney in the wider literary company of James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Ted Hughes, Brian Moore and David Lodge.[72]

At the outset, Quinlan acknowledges that his methodology is not that of formalist criticism, and that, instead, 'I include poems and prose as they are relevant to the life events.'[73] It is the 'life events', or biography of Heaney, that are the focus of the book, and, as a result, what the book does not offer is a close reading of each collection, so that *The Spirit Level*, for example, is discussed in just under three pages.[74] In the chapters that follow, my own reading of Heaney falls somewhere between these two approaches, so that while I take account of the historical circumstances in which Heaney is writing, and of his own commentary on many of the poems in his critical essays and interviews, I set out to discuss a Catholic sensibility as it is found in the text of the poems and in their manuscript drafts. In this I follow Neil Corcoran's combination of formalism and historicism.

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[70] Quinlan, p. 18.
[71] See Chapter 3, 'Sacred and Secular in the Sixties', Quinlan, pp. 51–76. I discuss Lowell's importance for Heaney in Chapter Three, and Heaney's engagement with Maritain in Chapter Five.
[72] See Chapter 9, 'Varieties of Religious Experience', Quinlan, pp. 212–38.
[73] Quinlan, p. 4.
[74] Quinlan, pp. 202–5.

In the same year as Quinlan's book was published, Eamon Duffy published *A People's Tragedy: Studies in Reformation*. Included in the book is a chapter devoted to the dissolution of Ely Priory in 1539. The octagonal Lady Chapel on the north side of the Cathedral building took thirty years to complete. In the context of the Lady Chapel, Duffy writes:

> the cult of the Virgin Mary was one of the most vital aspects of medieval religion, bringing a dimension of beauty, tenderness and femininity into the religious experience of both clergy and laypeople that had been comparatively lacking in the Christianity of the first millennium.[75]

He might easily have been writing of the world of Heaney's childhood with its emphasis on Marian devotion and which the poet himself acknowledged as medieval. That shared devotional culture might account for Heaney's account of the iconoclasm which attended the dissolution of Ely, and especially the Lady Chapel, in his poem 'Leavings' (*OG*, 182):

> I rode down England
> as they fired the crop
> that was the leavings of a crop,
> the smashed tow-coloured barley,
>
> down from Ely's Lady Chapel,
> the sweet tenor latin
> forever banished,
> the sumptuous windows
>
> threshed clear by Thomas Cromwell.
> Which circle does he tread,
> Scalding on cobbles,
> Each one a broken statue's head?

This poem gives us a real sense of Heaney's preoccupations when it came to Catholicism, and which Duffy had earlier outlined in an excellent essay, 'Seamus Heaney and Catholicism', in 2013.[76] Almost a decade before, in his book *Faith of*

[75] Eamon Duffy, *A People's Tragedy: Studies in Reformation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), pp. 32–33.
[76] Boyle and Walker.

Our Fathers, Duffy wrote of how he shared a similar childhood to Heaney, where the 'timeless realties' of pre-Conciliar Catholicism had such a powerful effect on their imaginations: 'The visual and verbal minutiae of pre-Conciliar Catholicism are everywhere in Heaney's writing, with a cinematic force which is testimony to their imaginative power as well as to his eloquence'.[77] In his later essay, Duffy returns to those 'visual, tactile and verbal minutiae',[78] which he probes in more detail, offering close and sensitive readings of poems from *Door into the Dark* up to *Electric Light*.

Duffy shares with Gail McConnell and Andrew Auge an alertness to Heaney's use of theological categories, especially in his discussion of Heaney's essay on Yeats and Larkin, but his reading of Heaney in terms of any systematic theology ends there, and his concern is principally with the visual and tactile expressions of Catholicism as they manifest themselves in the poems. There are limits to what can be explored in an academic paper and several strands of Duffy's thinking deserve further development: i) Heaney's sacramental apprehension of reality, which Duffy discusses in relation to poem X of 'Station Island'; ii) the more embedded nature of Catholicism in Heaney's later work; iii) the playfulness and daring of Heaney in writing about the erotic use of Catholic iconography, which Duffy touches on when discussing 'La Toilette'; and iv) Heaney's inherited Catholicism as something fundamentally 'prelapsarian' and from which the poet is later 'cast out'.[79] Much of the research that follows takes up these fundamental questions and looks to develop them further, not only through a close reading of the poems, but by paying attention, also, to their drafts in the National Library of Ireland and the extensive correspondence held at Emory University.

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[77] Eamon Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition* (London; New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2004), pp. 176–77.
[78] Boyle and Walker, p. 167.
[79] Boyle and Walker, p. 176.

Duffy concludes his paper with an observation of Heaney's on the final page of *Stepping Stones*, where the poet talks about his 'sudden joy' when taking in all around him on a drive from Dublin to Wicklow: 'When I experience things like that, I'm inclined to credit the prelapsarian in me' (*SS*, 475). In what follows, part of what I will argue is that Heaney's childhood experience of Catholicism, which was pre-articulate and felt before it was understood, forms part of that prelapsarian world and accounts for the draw it continued to exert upon Heaney as far as *Human Chain*. What some of the archival material reveals, both in Emory and in correspondence with Ted Hughes in The British Library[80], is the sense of loss which Heaney attached to the absence of this world. In his Preface to the Second Edition of his seminal work *The Stripping of the Altars*, Duffy writes: '*The Stripping of the Altars*, then, was at one level an elegy for a world we had lost, a world of great beauty and power which it seemed to me the reformers […] had misunderstood, traduced and destroyed.'[81] Duffy gave voice to an elegy in prose which Heaney had already voiced in his poem 'Leavings'. But Heaney was also alert to the sense of loss in his correspondence. In 2001, in a letter to Duffy, in which Heaney praises Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath*, he wrote:

> And the big overall elegy for the death of the old sacralized community, that comes thorough – to me at least – as a not so objective correlative for the world of loss we ourselves have known. From the morning offering to breakfast TV, the May altar to the camcorder.[82]

Heaney clearly thought of it as a world of loss, but as Roy Foster reminds us in his recent book on Heaney: 'A Catholicism of the imagination would remain.'[83] What

[80] I will return to a discussion of this archival material in Chapter Four.
[81] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400 -1580*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. xiv.
[82] The letter is dated 21st August 2001. Emory, MSS 960, Box 52. My thanks to Eamon Duffy for providing the context of the letter.
[83] R. F. Foster, *On Seamus Heaney*, Writers on Writers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 12.

Heaney elegises is the loss of a sensuous and felt sense of Catholicism, the verbal, visual and tactile expressions of which Duffy so eloquently alerts us to in his paper, and in his work more generally, and which provides the starting point for this research.

THE THESIS

I concentrate, in this research, on the poetry of Seamus Heaney and I treat the collections in a chronological fashion from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) to *Human Chain* (2010). The opening chapter sets out Heaney's Catholic formation and employs the tripartite model of home, school and parish to explore the shaping of his early religious sensibility. I place the devotional piety of Heaney's family life at Mossbawn in the historical context of the 'devotional revolution' in Ireland in the nineteenth century. I go on to trace the importance of catechetical learning in Heaney's education at Anahorish Primary School and St Columb's College. At St Columb's, Heaney was introduced to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was to have a formative influence on the poet in his very earliest poems and, I will argue, continued to be a quieter presence in Heaney's later work, including the sequence of poems 'Station Island'. In the poems of Patrick Kavanagh, Heaney found a celebration of the parochial and a validation of the importance of the parish, where the liturgical beauty of the Catholic liturgy was set against the privations of rural life.

Chapter Two explores the sacramental appeal of Catholicism for Heaney and its incarnational expression in a celebration of the corporeal body (*Death of a Naturalist*), manual labour (*Door into the Dark*) and the sacramentality of place (*Wintering Out*). Through a close reading of a selection of poems, I draw attention to the physicality of Heaney's early poems and the attention he pays to what Hopkins

called the *haecceity*, or thisness, of a thing. I argue that this attention to materiality is the product of a deeply sacramental sense and that this informs his writing about place in *Wintering Out*. Heaney's writing about death is the subject of Chapter Three. Staying with the importance of the corporeal body and materiality, I begin with a discussion of *North* and argue that the tactile piety of Heaney's religious formation is foundational to a reading of the collection. Central to this tactile piety is the importance of relics in the Catholic Christian tradition, and I read some of the bog poems (and their draft forms) against this background. The gentler tone of *Field Work* is suited to a number of elegies for friends and writers, and I discuss some of these in the context of Heaney's Catholic sensibility. However, I also read the collection as a more general elegy for the loss of a world in which Heaney's religious sensibility was formed and which he had lamented in the letter to Eamon Duffy referred to above. I conclude the chapter with a close reading of the more personal elegy of 'Clearances' (*The Haw Lantern*), paying attention to the drafts of the poem, where a Catholic sensibility is most evident. I include a reading of 'Alphabets', which argues that Heaney's vision, like that of the necromancer in the poem, encompasses a vision where other sensibilities (not just a Catholic one) are at play in Heaney's work but where each is consistent with a single unifying vision which is at the heart of the poetic endeavour.

Station Island is a pivotal collection not only because of the place it takes chronologically at the centre of Heaney's poetry but also in terms of Heaney's re-evaluation of his inherited Catholicism and his examination of conscience in the title sequence of poems. It is for this reason that I devote a single chapter (Chapter Four) to it. I argue that part of the tension in the collection is that even as Heaney sets out to disengage with Catholicism as an orthodox belief system it continues to have an

emotional purchase on him at the level of a felt sense and of 'all that keeps pleading' (*OG*, 221) from his childhood world of Mossbawn. I draw on the *Station Island* notebook to highlight the role that Hopkins played in the developing scheme of the poem and to suggest that he may inform the figure of the Carmelite priest in poem XI. In exploring Heaney's move away from the constraints of religious orthodoxy, his translation *Sweeney Astray* is important, and I read the final part of *Station Island* in the context of the Sweeney legend. However, my conclusion is that *Station Island* is a deeply ambiguous collection which resists the reductive argument of Helen Vendler, that Heaney has by now exhausted the earlier narrative of his childhood life and religious observance.

In Chapter Five, I deal with how poetry gestures towards some form of excess in the material world. I begin with a discussion of the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain's outline of the poetic process in *Creative Intuition and Art and Poetry* and continue with Heaney's application of this to his 'Squarings' sequence (*Seeing Things*) in his unpublished essay 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven.' By now Heaney is concerned to see beyond the materiality of the world, to establish a 'sixth sense' beyond our ordinary perception and this, I argue, accounts for his turning to Yeats in the collection. I conclude my discussion of *Seeing Things* by suggesting that the source of this excess and the surplus energy of the poems is rooted in disinterested love, a theme which Heaney articulates in his presentation of the saints in *The Spirit Level*, a collection alive with the language of wounds, healing and cures in the sacrificial love of saints such as St Agatha and St Kevin. The theme of light pervades the poems of *Electric Light*, but so too, I want to argue, does the *lacrimae rerum* of suffering, sickness, and an ongoing sense of elegy for the loss of Heaney's childhood world. In the final chapter, borrowing Heaney's image of 'well water far

down' from the title poem of *District and Circle*, I argue that Heaney returns to the world of Mossbawn as a first centre even as the circumference of his experience continues to widen. A Catholic sensibility continues to operate in Heaney's poetry, but in a much more integrated and embedded sense, and, in this context, I say something about the shaping and abiding presence of Cesław Miłosz in Heaney's career. What both poets share, I suggest, as part of their religious sensibilities, is a poetry of praise and the desire to 'glorify things just because they are'. Shortly after the publication of *District and Circle*, Heaney suffered a mild stroke, but enough to turn his thoughts increasingly to his own mortality, which pervades the poems of his final collection *Human Chain*. The guiding presence in the book is Virgil, but I set out to show that questions with which Heaney's Catholic sensibility were concerned (the importance of the corporeal body and what happens to it post-mortem; mourning and communing with the dead; and the limits of the material world) remain foundational to his reading of the classical poet. By *Human Chain*, Heaney's Catholic sensibility has become deeply embedded in such an expansive vision that he is able to hold in a single thought the Classical and Christian worlds, both of which provided him with the means of articulating the longing of the human heart and its assuagement in the human chain of love.

Gail McConnell has pointed out the importance of Heaney's critical essays for reading his poetry despite his celebration of a self-contained poetic. She points out the irony of Heaney's position whereby his criticism helps explain the poems' form and meaning.[84] In his interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney acknowledges his belief in form but also his sense that 'formalist' sounds too much like a 'doctrinaire position' (*SS*, 447). In this thesis, then, in a combination of

[84] McConnell, *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, p. 73.

formalism and historicism, I take account of Heaney's prose (and extensive interviews) where I believe it has something important to say as a gloss on specific poems. I also make use of Heaney's extensive correspondence held in the Rose Library at Emory University and of more limited correspondence between Heaney and Ted Hughes in the British Library. However, it is in the poems, and some of their draft forms in the National Library of Ireland, that I set out to detect a Catholic sensibility. As outlined above, the four strands of a Catholic sensibility which weave their way through each chapter are the operative senses of Catholicism as i) iconography, ii) poetic process, iii) sacramental vision, and iv) syntax and form.

CHAPTER ONE

INNERSPACES OF AN EARLY LIFE: FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND PARISH

In an interview with Robert Druce in 1979, Seamus Heaney said of his childhood: 'I think Catholicism meant everything to me, in some ways'.[1] In subsequent interviews, he repeatedly returns to the formative presence which Catholicism had on his childhood and adolescence. He recognises the cross-pressures which were at work in his later education at Queen's University, Belfast, which meant that he moved away from 'catechized youth into secular adult' (*SS*, 471-72). However, the older he got, the more he returned to the visionary possibility which Catholicism sets alight in a child's mind, and to what he called the 'innerspaces created by that early life.'[2] These innerspaces were inhabited by family, school and parish. In the 'domestic church'[3] of family life at Mossbawn, Marian devotion and the visual reminders of Catholic life – the Sacred Heart lamp and other religious imagery – were early material repositories of deeper spiritual realities. At school, this early religious sensibility received its first structure in the learning of the catechism, at Anahorish Primary School, where the *Maynooth Catechism* was followed, and in St Columb's College, where pupils studied *Hart's Catholic Doctrine*. At St Columb's, the almost monastic routine of daily Mass, retreats, and night prayers, converged with Heaney's earliest faith experience at Mossbawn, and found its intellectual expression in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. During his teaching practice in Belfast, Heaney was introduced to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, and for the first time found a

[1] Robert Druce, 'A Raindrop on a Thorn', *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 9.1 (1979), 24–37 (p. 30).
[2] J.J. Wylie and John C. Kerrigan, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 2.1–2 (1999), 125–37 (p. 133).
[3] The term 'domestic church' was used by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to refer to the teaching of faith in the family home. See Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents*, The Vatican Collection, 2, New rev. edn (Northport NY: Costello Publ., 1998), p. 362.

validation of the parochial and of the parish. Family, education and parish were all to play a significant role in a Catholic sensibility, which despite the pressures of a secular education, the older Heaney was never able, or willing, to disavow.

FAMILY: 'THE DOMESTIC CHURCH'

Seamus Justin Heaney was born on 13 April 1939 at Mossbawn, between the villages of Castledawson and Bellaghy, in County Derry. In a series of interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, he explains the name Justin: 'And my own second name is Justin, taken from the liturgical calendar. The feast of Justin Martyr falls on the day after my birthday' (*SS*, 29). Pope Leo XIII (d. 1903) set 14 April as the feast day of Justin Martyr. The proximity of Heaney's birth to the feast day best explains the choice of the saint's name for the first child of Margaret and Patrick Heaney. But there was also something felicitous in the taking of Justin's name. When Justin converted to Christianity in the second century, he retained an interest in Platonism, arguing that Plato's teachings were not contrary to Christ's and that the same held true for 'the poets, and the prose authors.'[4] For Justin, the Incarnation of Jesus meant that the material world was important, and that there was no longer a distinction between the sacred and profane worlds. Attention to the materiality of the world is at the heart of Catholic Christianity and is foundational, I argue, for Heaney's own poetic sensibility.

Justin's feast day will have been recorded on the liturgical calendar which hung on the kitchen wall of Heaney's Mossbawn home. The description of his childhood home has all the material hallmarks of a repository of rural Catholic life, and is all the more remarkable to a modern sensibility for the natural sense of place this repository occupied in a mid-twentieth century Irish farmhouse:

[4] Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia, *Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 19.

> On the walls, a holy calendar […] And a kind of little shrine picture, to commemorate the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932 – the three patron saints of Ireland on it, Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille, and little ornamental medallions with motifs of round towers and Celtic crosses. A tiny red glass lamp on the mantelpiece kept lit for the Sacred Heart. Saint Brigid's crosses behind the pictures (*SS*, 11-12).

Heaney's description of his childhood home corresponds almost exactly to the description of devotional practice in Ireland, which emerged in post-famine Ireland, according to Emmet Larkin, with a 'devotional revolution' brought about by the arrival of Paul Cardinal Cullen from Rome in 1850. A series of devotional exercises, including the rosary, novenas, blessed altars, benediction, devotion to the Sacred Heart, pilgrimages, shrines and retreats, were encouraged to instil a sense of ritual beauty. Larkin writes: '…this was the period when the whole world of the senses was explored in these devotional exercises, and especially in the Mass, through music, singing, vestments and incense.'[5] It was this appeal to the world of the senses that was to shape Heaney's Catholic sensibility indelibly.

The devotional revolution reached its climax in the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, to which Heaney refers above. Established by the same pope who set the feast day of Justin Martyr, it is a celebration of the Roman Catholic belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The decision to hold the congress in Dublin in 1932, on the supposed 1500th anniversary of the arrival of St Patrick in Ireland, was seen as a great honour, not only by the Catholic Irish faithful and church leaders, but

[5] Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *The American Historical Review*, 77.3 (1972), 625–52 (p. 645) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1870344>. Larkin's thesis was later challenged by Thomas McGrath who argued, instead, that Ireland experienced a 'Tridentine evolution', whereby devotional practice initiated by the Council of Trent was driven underground by penal legislation only to reappear three centuries later. See Thomas G. McGrath, 'The Tridentine Evolution of Modern Irish Catholicism, 1563–1962: A Re-Examination of the "Devotional Revolution" Thesis', *British Catholic History*, 20.4 (1991), 512–23 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200005598>. Whether it was a revolution or evolution, it shaped Heaney's Catholic childhood indelibly.

also by the governments of William Cosgrave and Eamon de Valera.[6] It was an opportunity to celebrate and consolidate Irish identity a decade after Ireland gained a degree of independence from the British Empire. The round towers, which adorned the ornamental medallions in the Heaney family home, were a popular motif in decorations for the congress.[7]

It was an image of Ireland as an island of deep faith and spirituality, faithful to the Roman Church. The Congress, however, masked deep social problems in Irish society which were the reverse of the spiritualized portrait of Ireland's faithful presented to the world. Dermot Keogh has pointed out that illegitimacy had been increasing throughout the country 'at an unprecedented rate'.[8] Many unmarried mothers travelled to England to have their children because of the stigma attached to illegitimacy in Ireland, and what Heaney elsewhere called the 'fear of flesh and sin…' (*DD*, 11). A sense of the enormity of that stigma is conveyed in the rawness of Heaney's poem 'Limbo' (*OG*, 75), where fishermen at Ballyshannon net an infant – 'An illegitimate spawning' – along with the salmon. In a remarkably tragic scene, Heaney manages to evoke both the violence and tenderness of the moment when a mother drowns her child in the river:

> Ducking him tenderly
>
> Till the frozen nobs of her wrists
> Were as dead as gravel,
> He was a minnow with hooks
> Tearing her open.

[6] It was during the Presidency of William Cosgrove (1922 to 1932) that assiduous preparations were made for the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, and these were enthusiastically implemented by the new government of Eamon de Valera.
[7] David G. Holmes, 'The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Irish Identity', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 4.1 (2000), 55–78 (p. 61).
[8] Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State*, New Gill History of Ireland, 6 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), p. 71.

Just how far this painful reality was from the idealised picture of the Church in 1932 would become increasingly apparent in Heaney's adult life as a poet:

> I have no doubt that its [the Catholic Church] power is failing, and that its mystery is vitiated, by all the revelations, of sexual abuse, and so on. Mass-going has declined, the population is no longer in thrall to the man behind the grille in the confessional, and all that constitutes a great shift.[9]

Despite the image of the Eucharistic Congress on the kitchen wall of Mossbawn, the sense of the Church triumphant, experienced in Dublin and the rest of the Irish Free State, would have been much more muted in County Derry, one of six counties to remain under British rule, and Unionist governance. The point is well made by Eamon Duffy who argues that 'The forces which stultified and denied life in Heaney's youth were far more readily identified with Orange sashes and bowler hats than with even the starchiest of soutanes and birettas.'[10] The sense of a besieged church in Brookborough's Six Counties may account to some extent for Heaney's emotional attachment to a picture of the outlawed priest celebrating Mass during the penal times in Ireland, recalled in his poem 'The Old Icons' (*OG*, 284):

> An oleograph of snowy hills, the outlawed priest's
> red vestments, with the redcoats toiling closer
> and the lookout coming like a fox across the gaps.

About this picture, Heaney said elsewhere: 'Nothing I have learned or could ever learn about penal laws against Catholics in eighteenth-century Ireland could altogether displace the emotional drama of that picture.'[11]

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[9] Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 36.
[10] 'Seamus Heaney and Catholicism' in *The Present Word: Culture, Society and the Site of Literature: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Boyle*, ed. by Nicholas Boyle and John Walker (London: Legenda, 2013), pp. 166-83 (p. 166).
[11] Seamus Heaney, 'Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych', *Salmagundi*, 68/69, (1985), 30–47 (p. 35).

At the centre of Heaney's religious upbringing at Mossbawn was the importance of Marian devotion and the example of his mother. In an interview with John Haffenden, he says:

> My sensibility was formed by the dolorous murmurings of the rosary, and the generally Marian quality of devotion. The reality that was addressed was maternal, and the posture was one of supplication. The attitude to life that was inculcated into me – not by priests, but by the active lived things of prayers and so on, in my house, through my mother – was really patience.[12]

Heaney's early experience of faith is inseparable from the faith and witness of his mother, something borne out in the drafts of 'Clearances', which I address in Chapter Three. In his mother, who 'coughed out angry tearless sighs' (*OG*, 12) at the tragic death of her young son Christopher, Heaney saw the quality and virtue of patience in the face of suffering. Not, as Heaney said, the idea of passive suffering, but suffering as part of the wider Christian dispensation of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and as reparation for the sins of others: 'But the idea that your own travails could earn grace for others, for the souls in purgatory, for instance, was appealing; my mind worked on those lines all right, my sense that there was value in selfless endurance' *(SS*, 39).

Bernard O'Donoghue had drawn attention to the plight of the 'disregarded' in Heaney's later poetry, which he sees as an expression of 'wisdom poetry'.[13] I want to suggest that Heaney's attention to the disregarded may be rooted in his experience of Marian devotion and especially the *Magnificat* prayer. Following the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she is to bear God's son, in Luke 1. 26-38, Mary makes a prayer in which she 'magnifies the Lord' for bestowing such a favour (1. 46-55). The *Magnificat* praises God who 'has brought down the powerful from their

[12] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 60 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).
[13] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Poetry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 112.

thrones and lifted up the lowly.' Heaney makes explicit reference to it in his poem 'The Loose Box' (*EL*, 14), when he writes that a scene from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 'magnified my soul'. However, the spirit of the prayer is evident in other poems. Not only in the poem 'Limbo', but in a number of later poems, Heaney brings to the forefront of our imaginations those society has disregarded. In 'Bye-Child' (*OG*, 76-77), the cruelty of a small child kept in a henhouse is not only 'glimpsed' in the 'floor' of Heaney's mind, but is revealed to us in the child's 'Unchristened tears'. However feeble in efforts in the face of such struggle, Heaney's poem is an attempt to lift up the lowly. The Catholic minority overlooked in Northern Ireland is the subject of 'From the Canton of Expectation' (*OG*, 319-20), in which Heaney recognises the place of education in raising the lowly, and in a clever grammatical metaphor describes the 'change of mood' from the conditional to the imperative, where: '*What looks the strongest has outlived its term.* | *The future lies with what's affirmed from under*.' In his sequence 'Lightenings', in poem ii (*OG*, 359), the poet's 'unregarded floor' becomes his study, and in 'Station Island', section XI (*OG*, 264-66), the ghost of a Carmelite priest encourages him 'to salvage everything, to re-envisage | the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift | mistakenly abased…' In *The Spirit Level*, it is a plant which is mistakenly abased in the poem 'Mint' (*OG*, 396), where the herb at the gable of the house is 'almost beneath notice'. In the final quatrain, the mint stands for prisoners liberated in the prison yard: 'Like the disregarded ones we turned against | Because we'd failed them by our disregard.' By far the most explicit example of the reversal of worldly power conveyed in the *Magnificat* finds its clearest expression in Heaney's translation of one of Horace's Odes in *District and Circle*. Written in the wake of 9/11, 'Anything Can Happen' (*DC*, 13) re-imagines the attacks on the Twin Towers as a lightning

bolt which Jupiter shoots across ‘a clear blue sky’. The instant and unannounced shockwave of Jupiter’s lightning is a reminder that:

> Anything can happen, the tallest towers
> Be overturned, those in high places daunted,
> Those overlooked regarded.

Heaney acknowledges that his experience of growing up in a practising Catholic household at Mossbawn was ‘terrific for the sensibility.’[14] It should come as no surprise that he celebrates Mossbawn in two poems of dedication at the beginning of *North*. ‘Sunlight’ (*OG*, 93-94) celebrates the rhythms of domestic life and remembers his aunt Mary (who lived with the family) baking scones ‘to the tick of two clocks.’ It is a beautifully evocative poem of domestic security, emphasised by the ‘helmeted pump in the yard’, which may evoke the ‘herms’ that stood at the doorways of the ancient Athenians, guarding their goings and comings, and offering protection. The ‘tick of two clocks’ may refer to Heaney’s mother and his aunt Mary, but we might also read a temporal sense in which the moment happened in time, and out of time – in Heaney’s memory. In the same way, the liturgical calendar, hung on the kitchen wall, marked time in a spiritual as much as a temporal sense. And so too the landscape. In the second Mossbawn poem, ‘The Seed Cutters’ (*OG*, 95), the poem inhabits the world of Bruegel ‘hundreds of years away’, but also imagines, in the ‘calendar customs’, a frieze ‘With all of us there, our anonymities.’ In alluding to Bruegel, Heaney reinforces the idea of Mossbawn as a medieval world in which the rhythms of the farming year are marked out in calendar customs, just as the liturgical one is marked out in feasts. The poems preface the two main parts of *North*, and in doing so somehow maintain an independence from the realities of violence faced there. But for now, Heaney finds love in the domesticity of early family life, and

[14] Haffenden, p. 61.

perhaps this accounts for his reluctance to disavow what he experienced there, including his first experience of a Catholic sensibility. At Anahorish School and St Columb's College, this sensibility would take on a more formal structure in his learning of the catechism.

SCHOOL: THE CATECHISM

Towards the end of *Stepping Stones* (471-72), Dennis O'Driscoll asks Heaney: 'Once a Catholic, always a Catholic?' to which Heaney replies:

> I suppose so, because Catholicism provided a totally structured reading of the mortal condition which I've never quite deconstructed. I might have talked differently, certainly more diffidently, if you'd asked me about these matters thirty years ago, since I eventually did my best to change from catechized youth into secular adult.

Heaney's 'catechized youth' was first formed at Anahorish Primary School, which Heaney attended between 1944 and 1951. Catechisms had their origins in the Catholic Counter-Reformation and were employed by the Jesuits as a basic means of religious instruction. Michael Tynan has written of the 'nitty-gritty detail' of the early catechisms:

> Every Christian – raised as he was on his catechism – was concerned in his formative years and in a measure throughout his life with issues such as the validity of the monastic concept, the nature of the Mass, the practice of confession, the veneration of saints, images and relics, the role of fast and abstinence in the life of the spirit, the question of indulgences, church ceremonial, the devotional practice of lighting candles or blessing oneself with holy water.[15]

Mass, confession, the veneration of saints, images and relics and other devotional practices saturate the poems of Heaney. Tynan writes that a certain type of Catholicism emerged in Ireland, one enormously influenced by the 'Ignatian blueprint for religious formation'.[16] It was the same blueprint which was to have

[15] Michael Tynan, *Catholic Instruction in Ireland: 1720-1950: The O'Reilly/Donlevy Catechetical Tradition* (Blackrock: Four Courts Press, 1985), p. 10.
[16] Tynan, p. 13.

such a formative influence on Gerard Manley Hopkins. Tynan makes the point that from the earliest days of the origins of the catechism there was a profusion of texts. The Butler catechism (1777), which took its name from Archbishop James Butler of Cashel, was eventually revised as the *Maynooth Catechism* in 1882. An important element of the revision was the principle that the answers should include the terms of the question:

> Question: Who made the world?
> Answer: God made the world.[17]

Heaney mirrors this in his poem 'Ten Glosses' (*EL*, 54):

> 2 The Catechism
> Q. and A. come back. They 'formed my mind'.
> 'Who is my neighbour?' 'My neighbour is all mankind.'

Four dioceses, including Heaney's home diocese of Derry, followed a catechism in the O'Reilly/Donlevy tradition. However, Heaney's townland straddled the border with the neighbouring Archdiocese of Armagh, where Anahorish School was, and where pupils followed the *Maynooth Catechism*. For the young Heaney, it was another early lesson in the significance of boundaries:

> From the beginning I was very conscious of boundaries. There was a drain or stream, the Sluggan drain, an old division that ran very close to our house. It divided the townland of Tamniarn from the townland of Anahorish and those two townlands belonged in two different parishes, Bellaghy and Newbridge, which are also in two different dioceses: the diocese of Derry ended at the Sluggan drain and the diocese of Armagh began. I was always going backwards and forwards. I went to school in Anahorish School, so I learnt the Armagh catechism; but I belonged by birth and enrolment, to Bellaghy parish. So I didn't go with the rest of the school to make my first communion in Newbridge. And when I was confirmed in Bellaghy, the bishop had to ask us these ritual questions and I didn't know the Derry catechism. When we moved to the other end of the parish when I was fourteen, I still played football in Castledawson, though I was living in the Bellaghy team's district.

[17] Rugeley, *The Short Catechism Extracted from the Catechism Ordered by the National Synod of Maynooth, and Approved by the Cardinal, Archbishops, and Bishops of Ireland, for General Use throughout the Irish Church* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1891), p. 7 <http://archive.org/details/shortcatechismex00nati> [accessed 11 February 2019].

> I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start.[18]

Heaney's 'being in between' is celebrated in the final section of his poem 'Terminus' (*OG*, 295-96), where he writes that 'Baronies, parishes met where I was born.'

The Maynooth Catechism was an abridgement of a much larger book. The title page read: 'The Short Catechism, extracted from The Catechism'. On the inside front cover was a 'Litany of the Blessed Virgin' which began 'We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God! Despise not our prayers in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O ever glorious and blessed Virgin.' Beneath this invocation was the Loreto Litany[19] to which Heaney makes reference in his essay 'Feeling into Words', where he writes about the 'gorgeous and inane phraseology of the catechism'[20] and 'the litany of the Blessed Virgin that was part of the enforced poetry in our household: Tower of Gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Health of the Sick, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted.'[21] On the inside of the back cover, the same litany appeared in Latin, which may have allowed Heaney a way into the deeper mystery of this prayer, since after he won the scholarship examination to St Columb's, he had early morning lessons in Latin with Master Murphy at Anahorish (*SS*, 295).

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[18] The quotation is from an uncited reference taken from conversations Corcoran had with Heaney in Dublin on 5 and 6 July 1985. See Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 234 and 236.

[19] It is known as the 'Litany of Loreto' because of its use at the shrine of the Holy House of Loreto by 1558 AD at the latest. See Eamon Duffy, *Heart in Pilgrimage - A Prayerbook for Catholic Christians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 365.

[20] A phrase he borrows from Wordsworth's 1798 version of his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth dismisses the 'gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers'. See William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and Alun R. Jones, 2nd edn (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

[21] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 45.

Later, in his reading of Joyce, Heaney would have come across the Loreto Litany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In an article in the *James Joyce Quarterly* in 1969, Harry Staley drew attention to the influence of the *Maynooth Catechism* on the work of Joyce and to the 'conscious imitation of the catechism idiom, that is to say, imitation of the actual dictional practice of the texts.'[22] Part of Joyce's conscious imitation of the catechism idiom was a reference to the Loreto Litany. In *A Portrait*, the catechism provides Joyce with the suggestive phrases of 'Tower of Ivory', 'House of Gold' and 'Morning Star'. Dante recalls Protestants who 'used to make fun of the litany of the Blessed Virgin. *Tower of Ivory*, they used to say, *House of Gold*! How could a woman be a tower of ivory or a house of gold?'[23] But for Stephen, despite his state of sin, or perhaps because of it, Mary becomes his refuge, as she does for all sinners: 'The glories of Mary held his soul captive: spikenard and myrrh and frankincense, symbolizing her royal lineage, her emblems, the late-flowering plant and late-blossoming tree, symbolizing the age-long gradual growth of her cultus among men.'[24]

We have seen already that the 'cultus' of Mary, identified by Stephen in *A Portrait*, was part of Heaney's early domestic life, and that it provided a religious environment in which Heaney came to trace the fortitude and patience of his mother. In the catechism, Heaney would have learned that suffering could be turned to the good for the relief of those souls held in purgatory. In Lesson V of the catechism, the question 'Can the souls in purgatory be relieved by our prayers and other good works?' was answered 'As the souls in purgatory are children of God, and still members of the Church, they share in the communion of saints, and are relieved by

[22] Harry Charles Staley, 'Joyce's Catechisms', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 6.2 (1969), 137–53 (p. 146).
[23] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 35.
[24] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 112.

our prayers and other good works'.[25] We saw above, that Heaney found this idea of suffering as a means of grace enormously appealing.

Heaney's catechetical training continued at Saint Columb's, where the text was Charles Hart's *The Student's Catholic Doctrine*.[26] This was an altogether more systematic work, running to 382 pages, and although it dispensed with the question and answer format of the *Maynooth Catechism*, in essence, it was a book of catechesis. Divided into five parts, the first three dealt with the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which find an echo in the title of Heaney's essay on Osip Mandelstam, 'Faith, Hope and Poetry', in which Heaney argues that 'Art has a religious, a binding force, for the artist.'[27] The reference to the theological virtues is another example of how Heaney's prose, as well as his poetry, finds expression in religious terms. Part IV dealt with the seven sacraments of the Church, and Part V with 'Virtues and Vices'.

In the section on Faith (Part I), Hart discusses the second article of the Creed – the mystery of the Incarnation. 'To accomplish the work of our salvation, a sublime mystery was needed – the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of the Son of God made man for us.'[28] In an essay on 'Poetry and Catholic Themes', Angela O'Donnell identifies four metaphysical presuppositions that are foundational to Catholicism, one of which is that the world is incarnational.[29] She argues that a number of poems, including some by Heaney and Czesław Miłosz, demonstrate the

[25] *The Short Catechism*, p. 13.
[26] Charles Hart, *The Student's Catholic Doctrine*, 5th edn, rev. (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1922). Heaney mistakenly refers to this in O'Driscoll (2008) as 'Hart's Christian Doctrine', p. 38.
[27] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 217.
[28] Charles Hart, p. 39.
[29] The other three presuppositions are that creation is graced, that language possesses a unique power to express divine immanence and transcendence, and that the act of making a poem imitates God the creator. See John J. Piderit and Morey, *Teaching the Tradition: Catholic Themes in Academic Disciplines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199795307.001.0001/acprof-9780199795307> [accessed 4 March 2019].

intricate connections between the religious and artistic impulses. In his essay on Miłosz, Heaney admits as much: 'His imagination is supplied and made ample by a fundamentally religious vision, the one based on the idea of the Incarnation.' He goes on to argue that one meaning of this 'astonishing proposition' is that in the figure of Christ, the eternal has intersected with time, and that 'through that intersection human beings, though creatures of time, have access to a reality out of time.'[30] In a sense, Heaney already knew this from growing up in Mossbawn, where life was lived between the tick of two clocks, with time measured out in calendar months and liturgical feasts. It will be a core part of this research to argue that Heaney's own vision is one amplified, at least implicitly, by the mystery of the Incarnation.

In sanctifying ordinary time, the mystery of the Incarnation elevated not only the temporal but also the material world. After all, God took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and this radically altered how believers viewed created realities. These created realities could be made to point towards the reality of the uncreated God. In other words, they could act as signs, what in the Christian Church became known as sacraments. At the beginning of Part IV of *The Student's Catholic Doctrine,* a sacrament is defined as 'an outward sign of inward grace, ordained by Jesus Christ, by which grace is given to our souls.'[31] Grace itself is 'a supernatural and gratuitous gift of God, bestowed upon us for our sanctification and salvation.'[32] This language of faith and catechesis finds its way into Heaney's own discussions of his work. In his interview with Karl Miller in 2000, he described his notion of poetry as 'a grace', crediting this understanding from his early religious education:

[30] Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 414.
[31] Charles Hart, p. 253.
[32] Charles Hart, p. 39.

> From a very early age, my consciousness was always expanding in response to the expanding universe of Catholic teaching about eternity and the soul and the sacraments and the mystical body and the infinite attentiveness of the Creator to the minutiae of your inmost thoughts.[33]

And in response to a question from John Haffenden, in a much earlier interview in 1981, in which Haffenden suggests that Heaney's poetry 'shows a sacramental view of the earth', Heaney replies that it is a fair observation: 'David Jones has nice notions of the "sign", the artist as sign-maker…I hesitate to talk about these things…I think what you're saying is right.'[34] In exploring the Catholic sensibility in Heaney's poetry, I want to pay due attention to the hesitation Heaney expresses here. The terms which he borrows from his early Catholic catechesis are not used in a univocal sense. Grace as a gratuitous gift from God, in Heaney's understanding, retains the gratuity, if not the divine source. In finding recourse to the language of catechesis and faith, Heaney is searching for a language adequate to the mysteries of the creative process of writing poetry.

Heaney clearly identifies the writing of poetry as a vocation, an idea worked through in 'Digging' (*OG*, 3-4), the first poem of Heaney's first collection of poetry. As he carefully describes his father and grandfather at work cutting turf, he acknowledges: 'But I've no spade to *follow* [my italics] men like them.' A few poems later, the word 'follow' is picked up in 'Follower' (*OG*, 11), where the vocation of hard labour is somehow sanctified in the description of it. For Heaney, it is the vocation of writing which will become his 'form of sanctity'. In understanding manual labour and the creative act of poetry as forms of sanctity, Heaney found a precursor in the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

SCHOOL: THE CURRICULUM

[33] Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 32.
[34] Haffenden, p. 66.

In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney discusses a deferred scholarship to Queen's University, Belfast (because of age), which meant that he stayed on for an extra year at St Columb's as part of a small class of four, which included Seamus Deane. Encouraged by an inspirational English teacher, he read *Hamlet*, *The Canterbury Tales*, as well as the poems of Wordsworth and Keats (*SS*, 404). He acknowledges that Wordsworth, especially the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, would stay with him for the rest of his life, and, indeed, Neil Corcoran has written of Wordsworth as the 'most deeply informing presence in Heaney'.[35] However, it was the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins which was to have a more immediate impact on Heaney. He came across the prescribed poems for A level in an anthology called *A Pageant of English Verse*. In 'Feeling into Words', Heaney attributes his desire to write to his reading of Hopkins, where he found a connection between the 'heavily accented consonantal noise of Hopkins's poetic voice, and the peculiar regional characteristics of a Northern Ireland accent.'[36] In subsequent essays, Heaney repeatedly acknowledges his debt to Hopkins. In an interview with James Randall in 1979, he says that even before he was introduced to Philip Hobsbaum during his time at Queen's University, his sense of literature was a sense of English literature, and that 'The poetry that meant most to me was Hopkins'.[37]

An early imitation of Hopkins appeared as 'October Thought' in a Queen's University literary magazine during the Michaelmas term of 1959.[38] In what Henry

[35] 'Heaney and Yeats', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 165-77 (p. 169).
[36] 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, pp. 41-60 (p. 44). 'Feeling into Words' was first delivered at the Royal Society of Literature in October 1974, and later collected with revisions in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001*.
[37] Seamus Heaney and James Randall, 'From the Archive: An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Ploughshares*, 37.1 (2011), 173–88 (p. 13).
[38] At this time, a number of Heaney poems appeared in two Queen's University literary magazines, *Q* and *Gorgon*. The Michaelmas edition of *Q* (1959) contains 'Reaping in Heat' and 'October Thought'.

Hart has called a 'pastiche' of Keats, Hopkins, and Dylan Thomas, Hart finds Keats in the motifs of swallows, willows and twitterings, 'but the somniferous music is broken up everywhere by the clanging consonants that Hopkins adored …'[39] The poem is worth quoting in full, not only because of its early echoes of Hopkins, but because it was the poem which first brought Heaney to the attention of Philip Hobsbaum, who 'was immediately struck by the poet's use of Hopkins.'[40]

> Startling thatch watches, and sudden swallow
> Straight shoots to its mud-nest, home-rest rafter,
> Up through dry, dust-drunk cobwebs, like laughter
> Flitting the roof of black-oak, bog-sod and rods of willow;
> Haystacks straw-broken and strewn
> Hide, hear mice mealing in the grain, gnawing strong
> The iron-bound, swollen and ripe-round corn-barrel.
> Minute movement millionfold whispers twilight
> Under heaven-hue plum-blue and gorse pricked gold,
> And through the knuckle-gnarl of branches, poking the night
> Comes the trickling tinkle of bells, well in the fold.[41]

Heaney is exploring a sound-scape he would come to use later, his ear vibrating to the sounds of the swallow's flight home, which we hear in the sibilance of 'S' in the opening line, and the internal echo of 'thatch watches'. In 'home-rest rafter' we find an example of a compound, so favoured by Hopkins. The alliteration of 'rest' and 'rafter' emphasises just how homely the mud-nest is, and in the next line the rhyming 'laughter' looks forward to the 'joy' of the pirouetting birds in 'Saint Francis and the Birds' in *Death of a Naturalist* (*DN*, 40). The laughter may also play on the idea of the drunkenness of the cobwebs in the same line. While Heaney was attracted to the consonantal noise of Hopkins's poetic voice, he thought of the

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See Rand Brandes, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 287.

[39] Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 16.

[40] Heather L Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 53.

[41] Quoted in Clark, pp. 53–54.

'personal and Irish pieties as vowels'[42], which we find in the assonance of the line: 'Fl*i*tting the r*oo*f of bl*a*ck-*oa*k, b*o*g-s*o*d and r*o*ds of w*i*ll*o*w'. The 'black-oak' will be picked up again in *Wintering Out*, in 'Bog Oak' (*OG*, 44-45), where the bog oak is described as a 'black | long-seasoned rib'. The alliteration of the nasal consonant 'm' in 'Minute movement millionfold', alongside 'whispers', conveys the almost inaudible and gentle pattering of mice 'mealing in the grain', reinforced in the final line by 'the trickling tinkle of bells…', the word 'tinkle' picked up much later in the 'cruet tinkle' of 'Clearances' 6 (*OG*, 312).

In his essay on the poetry of Hopkins, 'The Fire i' the Flint', Heaney sets up two modes of language, which he thought broadly representative of Hopkins and Keats. The masculine mode (Hopkins) has to do with a poetic effort where words are 'athletic, capable, displaying the muscle of sense', and the feminine (Keats), where words are less a labour of design and more the 'lover's come-hither'.[43] In *Death of a Naturalist*, we can detect those athletic words with the muscle of sense in the opening lines of 'Churning Day' (*OG*, 9-10), where Heaney describes the 'yellow curd' of butter as:

> A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast,
> hardened gradually on top of the four crocks
> that stood, large pottery bombs, in the small pantry.

The language itself is as coarse-grained as the process it describes, and 'coarse-grained' itself, an example of Heaney's fondness for compound words in a vein similar to that of Hopkins.[44] Much later, in a reflective and somewhat self-

[42] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 37.
[43] 'The Fire i' the Flint', in Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, pp. 79-97 (p.88). Originally delivered as The Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet at the British Academy, December 1974.
[44] Examples include: 'Heaven-Haven' (as the title of the poem by that name), 'heavengravel' ('The Loss of the Eurydice'), 'Churlsgrace' and 'Amansstrength'('Harry Ploughman'), 'dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon' ('The Windhover'). For similar examples in Heaney, see Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 130.

deprecating manner, Heaney would say that '"Churning Day" had too many words in it. It's kind of thick, in love with the idea of writing like Hopkins.'[45]

The powerful rhythmic control of Hopkins was what most appealed to Heaney as he started to write poetry. In 'Digging' (*OG*, 3-4), the influence of Hopkins's fondness for alliteration is clear in the description of Heaney's father digging peat: '…the squelch and slap | of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge…' In 'Feeling into Words', Heaney describes Hopkins's language as 'bumpy alliterating music, the reporting sounds and ricocheting consonants typical of Hopkins's verse.'[46] Jason Hall has written that the vigorous thrust of Heaney's rhythm 'is without a doubt indebted […] to Gerard Manley Hopkins's experiments with "sprung rhythm"'.[47] Hopkins believed that sprung rhythm, with its emphasis on stresses rather than syllables, was closer to natural speech. And sprung rhythm, with its alliterative repetition, as James Wimsatt[48] has demonstrated, is closely associated with a central idea of Hopkins pertinent to how I want to trace further Hopkins's deeper influence on Heaney – the idea of inscape and its accompanying *haecceitas*.

'Inscape', for Hopkins, has to do with the essence or substance of a thing, which gives it its own particularity. In two notable passages in his *Journals*, he describes the inscape of bluebells. Here is one:

> The bluebells in your hand baffle you with their inscape, made to every sense: if you draw your fingers through them they are lodged and struggle/ with a shock of wet heads [virgule in original]; the long stalks rub and click and flatten to a fan on one another like your fingers themselves would when you passed the palms hard across one another making a brittle rub and jostle

[45] Quoted in Thomas C. Forster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien, 1989), p. 139.
[46] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 44.
[47] Jason David Hall, *Seamus Heaney's Rhythmic Contract* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 133, note 10.
[48] James I. Wimsatt, 'Alliteration and Hopkins's Sprung Rhythm', *Poetics Today*, 19.4 (1998), 531–64 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773259>.

> like the noise of a hurdle strained by leaning against; then there is the faint honey smell and in the mouth the sweet gum when you bite them.[49]

By engaging 'every sense' – sight, touch, sound, smell and taste – Hopkins hooks our attention and reels us in to share his experience of the beauty of this tender flower. His *Journals*, as much as the poems, testify to his remarkable ability to revel and to marvel in the particularity of all things, so that Hopkins's ear is alert even to 'the lisp of the swallow's wings'[50], as Heaney's will be to the birds who listen to St Francis preach, and who 'Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played | And sang, like images took flight' (*DN*, 40).

In a Journal entry for 3 August 1872, Hopkins tells us that he first got hold of a copy of the *Sentences* of the medieval theologian and philosopher Duns Scotus, and that 'just then when I took in any inscape of the sky or sea I thought of Scotus.'[51] Medieval philosophers were concerned to understand how to know the universal. For Scotus, the answer was to be found in the individuation of persons and things. It was to Scotus that Hopkins owed the idea of *haecceitas*, or 'thisness', the idea that each finite thing, such as the bluebell, had its own particularity or individuation, and that this individuation was also to be found in activity: 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame…'[52] In discussing this poem, Richard Watson has written: 'the function of the poet must be not only to write poems which have their own inscape, but to remind people of the inscape of things.'[53]

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[49] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 209.
[50] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 133.
[51] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 221.
[52] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 90.
[53] J. R. (John Richard) Watson, *The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 33.

Hopkins was the master of reminding people of the inscape of things, and a corollary to his idea of inscape was the notion of 'instress'. Martin Dubois points out that 'instress' holds a double meaning: 'indicating at once the force of being which upholds the inscape and the effect of observing the inscape on the beholder.'[54] Here is a lovely illustration from Hopkins: 'Take a few primroses in a glass and the instress of – brilliancy, sort of starriness: I have not the right word – so simple a flower gives is remarkable.'[55] 'Instress', then, is the force or the feeling of the particular thing which is held within the 'inscape'. We might say that if 'inscape' is an assault on every sense, then 'instress' is, what Eliot has called elsewhere, 'a raid on the inarticulate.'[56] It is what Heaney means when, discussing his poem 'Digging', he writes that it 'was the name of the first poem I wrote where I actually thought my feelings had got into words, or to put it more accurately, where I thought my *feel* [Heaney's italics] had got into words.'[57] For Heaney the 'instress' is to have known something particular 'in your bones', even the shiver of an inanimate sledge-hammer:

> A first blow that could make air of a wall,
> A last one so unanswerably landed
> The staked earth quailed and shivered in the handle?

'A Shiver' (*DC*, 5) appeared in *District and Circle* in 2006, almost fifty years after 'October Thought', and reminds us that Hopkins's notion of instress persisted in Heaney's imagination for the duration of his career.

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[54] Martin Dubois, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Poetry of Religious Experience*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 12.
[55] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 206. Hopkins's use of the word 'brilliancy' is echoed in Heaney's use of the word 'brilliantly' in his poem 'The Clothes Shrine' (*EL*, 27), discussed in Chapter Five.
[56] T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot. Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 191.
[57] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 41.

Hopkins's imagination was further encouraged by his reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola (1491 to 1556). While Hopkins, the Jesuit priest, would have been familiar with the exercises as a source of spiritual guidance, Hopkins the poet would have been equally attracted to the part that the five senses played in the various 'contemplations'.[58] On contemplating the nativity of Jesus, for example, the retreatant is encouraged to '*Look* in imagination at the persons, meditating and studying in detail the situation in which they find themselves', then to '*Listen* to what they are saying', to '*Smell* the indescribable fragrance and *taste* the boundless sweetness of the divinity', and, finally, '*Touch* by kissing and clinging to the places where these persons walk or sit …'[59]

The attraction of the *Spiritual Exercises*, as a way of engaging the imagination and using the five senses to come to a deeper understanding of a spiritual reality, was apparent not only to Hopkins, but as Graham Storey has pointed out, to earlier religious poets also: 'George Herbert (for whom Hopkins had a particular affection) and John Donne, in his *Holy Sonnets*, undoubtedly drew on the Ignatian meditation…'[60] But the attraction of the *Exercises* was not limited to the writing of religious poetry; they were later identified by Ted Hughes as an excellent tool for engaging young writers. In a short prose piece, 'A Word about Writing in Schools', he describes them as 'gymnastics for the imagination' and recommends

[58] To speak of Hopkins the priest and Hopkins the poet is to lend credence to a view (to be found in the early Hopkins, also) that priesthood and poetry constituted two very different vocations and that the former took precedence over the latter. It is the view of Martin Dubois that this compartmentalising of Hopkins into some kind of opposition, or at least tension, between the sacred and the profane 'has now largely disappeared from recent studies, to be replaced by the notion that poetry was for Hopkins an act of spiritual dedication and formed part of his attempt to reconcile a philosophical and theological faith in God with sensitivity to natural beauty.' See Martin Dubois, p. 8.
[59] Ignatius and Thomas Corbishley, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1973), p. 49.
[60] Graham Storey, *A Preface to Hopkins*, Preface Books, 2nd edn (London; New York: Longman, 1992), p. 35.

them as a way of comprehending the intricacy of the world.[61] Hughes was a significant influence on Heaney, although Heaney would already have understood the *Spiritual Exercises* from his Catholic formation at school.

We also find echoes of Hopkins's *Journals* in Heaney's early work. It is a mark of Hopkins's appreciation of the inscape and individuation of all things that, on a visit to Lucerne in 1868, he found beauty in a barn: 'In leaving Lucerne saw the best shaped and proportioned barn I ever saw.'[62] So, too, Heaney thinks a barn and the implements it houses worthy of lyric verse: 'A scythe's edge, a clean spade, a pitch-fork's prongs: | Slowly bright objects formed when you went in' (*OG*, 7). In describing the blooms on furze (or gorse), Hopkins writes that the 'wings or crests' rising behind the 'nibs' of each flower 'make a little square with four walls […] these little walls are like the partitions in honeycombs…'[63] So too, in the final stanza of 'Thatcher' (*OG*, 20), Heaney writes:

> Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,
> He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
> Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
> And left them gaping at his Midas touch.

The rich instress of the thatcher's art is brought out not only in the reference to Midas, but in the ordered shape and golden sweetness of the honeycomb, which seems, too, the apt metaphor for the rich golden colour of the furze. As a final example, we might consider Hopkins's description of the sunset on 12 March 1870, when he writes: 'It was all active and tossing out light and started as strongly forward from the field as a long stone or a boss in the knop of the chalice-stem'.[64] Light is equally active, and at play, in 'Churning Day', where 'gold flecks began to

[61] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 25–26 (p.25).
[62] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 171.
[63] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 155.
[64] Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 196.

dance' and the curd that thickened was 'heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight…| heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl.' The use of a simile to liken the light of the sun to the 'boss in the knop of a chalice-stem' set a precedent for Heaney's use of Catholic iconography, sometimes, we shall see, in the most erotic of contexts.

In Hopkins, then, Heaney found a vigour in terms of rhythm and a sacramental vision in terms of an attention to the inscape and instress of things. But together with Kavanagh and Hughes, he also found permission to write about the earthed experience of the world he inhabited and which inhabited him. Hopkins's treatment of rural and agricultural life, and the dignity it assumed in taking on a verse-life, must have appealed to the young Heaney. In 'Follower' (*OG*, 11), we find clear echoes of Hopkins's 'Harry Ploughman', two poems which sanctify the act of ploughing by describing it. In Hopkins, the physicality of the ploughman and his work is described as: 'Head and foot, shoulder and shank – | By a grey eye's heed steered well, one crew, fall to…'[65] The nautical metaphor of crew is found in Heaney too:

> My father worked with a horse-plough,
> His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
> Between the shafts and the furrow.

Hopkins's 'grey eye's heed' becomes in Heaney:

> His eye
> Narrowed and angled at the ground,
> Mapping the furrow exactly.

The sheer rhythm of Hopkins's ploughman is wonderfully evoked as '…onewhere sucked or sank – | Soared or sank', just as Heaney remembers being carried on his father's back and 'Dipping and rising to his plod'. And the 'broad in bluff hide' of

[65] Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 104.

Harry Ploughman's feet[66], finds its echo in Heaney's father 'In his broad shadow round the farm.'

The idea of manual labour as vocation finds further expression in Hopkins's 'Felix Randal', as it does in Heaney's 'The Forge' (*OG*, 19). Both poems celebrate individuals known to each poet. 'Felix Randal' commemorates a young Liverpool blacksmith whose real name was Felix Spencer, who died on 21 April 1880 at the age of thirty-one, during Hopkins's time as a priest at St Francis Xavier's (1880-81). MacKenzie has noted how in keeping the (Latin) forename Felix, Hopkins suggests the blacksmith was happy.[67] Even as Hopkins laments the sickness which 'broke him', he celebrates a man 'big-boned and hardy- | handsome', recalling:

> When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal![68]

Heaney's blacksmith is Barney Devlin, a neighbour at Hill Head, about a mile from Mossbawn. Heaney recalled hearing 'a sweet and carrying note' from Devlin's anvil, when he was a youngster (*SS*, 91). In the 'short-pitched ring' of the anvil, Heaney finds a 'music' which somehow elevates the blacksmith's manual labour, and in the description of the anvil, almost consecrates the work:

> The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
> Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
> Set there immovable: an altar
> Where he expends himself in shape and music.

'The Forge', like 'The Windhover' and 'Felix Randal', is a sonnet, and Heaney's fondness for the sonnet was in no small measure down to Hopkins's use of the form. Like Hopkins, Heaney wrote many of his most beautiful poems in the sonnet form.

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[66] Norman MacKenzie thinks 'broad in bluff hide' must refer not to the appearance of his feet, but to the wrinkles in his boots. See *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 194.
[67] MacKenzie, p. 136.
[68] Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 87.

John Adames identifies two major turning points in Heaney's life when he turned to the sonnet. One was his move to Glanmore Cottage in County Wicklow, in 1972, celebrated in the 'Glanmore Sonnets' in *Field Work*. The other was the death of his mother in 1984, which became the occasion for his sequence 'Clearances', in *The Haw Lantern*.[69] At the heart of the sonnet form is the 'turn' (normally after the octave) where the poet attempts to resolve in the sestet the complex scenario she/he has established in the octave. In 'The Windhover', the beauty of the falcon battling against the 'big wind', described so vividly in the octave, is somehow resolved in the sestet, where the humble ploughshare and dying embers, like the falcon, can triumph over adversity and shine forth in a renewal of the ordinary. In the very turn of 'The Forge', in the last word of the octave, the anvil is renewed as an altar, and on this the sonnet turns and the work of the blacksmith is consecrated. In consecrating the work of a local blacksmith, Heaney is also consecrating the space which the forge occupies. In this consecration of space, Heaney may be drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade which he read in the early nineteen-eighties (*SS*, 309). However, he is almost certainly drawing on the work of Patrick Kavanagh, whose work he was introduced to only after he had left Saint Columb's.

THE PARISH: PATRICK KAVANAGH

In the 'Author's Note' to his *Collected Poems*, Patrick Kavanagh sought to distance himself from a poetic movement which viewed poetry in a materialistic fashion, devoid of any transcendent sensibility. For Kavanagh, poetry was a 'mystical thing'.[70] This claim of Kavanagh's, that poetry has to do with something beyond the bounds of material sense, is borne out in his published poems, just over half of which

[69] John Adames, 'The Sonnet Mirror: Reflections and Revaluations in Seamus Heaney's "Clearances"', *Irish University Review*, 27.2 (1997), 276–286 (p. 276).
[70] Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems [of] Patrick Kavanagh* (London: Martin Brian and O'Keeffe Ltd, 1972), p. xiii.

deal with religious themes and images.[71] Of these poems, the two most substantial are 'The Great Hunger' and 'Lough Derg'. Born just three years before the publication of 'The Great Hunger', Heaney went on to publish *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* by the time of the posthumous publication of Kavanagh's 'Lough Derg' in 1971. Despite the appeal of Yeats, Heaney felt much closer to 'the fundamentally Catholic mysticism in Kavanagh' (*SS*, 318). What both poets shared were 'the pieties of a rural Catholic sensibility'[72], which at a fundamental level found their earliest expression in the idea of the parish.

Patrick Kavanagh was born in the parish and village of Inniskeen in County Monaghan in 1904. He was one of ten children and his family belonged to the small-farming class, which in the local social hierarchy was enough to arouse a certain envy, the subject of which is present in his novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948). According to one biographer, Kavanagh appears to have been spared the hellfire Catholic upbringing experienced by James Joyce, and, instead, was attracted by the beauty of the liturgical life of the Church.[73] Having made his first confession at about the age of six, he was invited to become an altar boy by his parish priest, Father McElroy[74], as Heaney was later required to do, as a boarder, at Saint Columb's. For Kavanagh, as for Patrick Maguire, his central character in 'The Great Hunger', 'Heaven dazzled death', and

> Five hundred hearts were hungry for life –
> Who lives in Christ shall never die the death.
> And the candle-lit Altar and the flowers
> And the pregnant tabernacle lifted a moment to Prophecy
> Out of the clayey hours.[75]

[71] Patrick Kavanagh and Tom Stack, *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: An Anthology*, 3rd edn (Blackrock, Co Dublin: Columba Press, 2004), p. 9.
[72] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 116.
[73] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), pp. 27–28.
[74] Quinn, p. 27.
[75] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 139.

The ‘candle-lit Altar’, the flowers, the gleam of tabernacle and brass candle holders, the warm glow of the sanctuary lamp, and the rich fabric and changing liturgical colours of the priest’s chasubles, the solid golden bar of the Altar Missal and the colours of its ribbon markers splayed like the colours of the rainbow refracted through glass – all of this must have shone all the brighter in Kavanagh’s mind as he searched for ‘some light of imagination’ in the wet clods of clay.[76] The liturgical beauty of the life of the parish church ‘lifted a moment to Prophecy | Out of the clayey hours’. The awkward diction of the word ‘clayey’ seems somehow apt to describe the farmyard chores of Maguire, and the prominence of the word clay in the opening line of the poem – ‘Clay is the word and clay is the flesh …’[77] – not only underlines the attachment of the peasant farmer to the land but suggests a parody of the opening of John’s Gospel: ‘The Word became flesh …’ (1. 14). Clay, indeed, is the flesh, since it shares its Hebrew root (*adama*) with the first man Adam, and in doing so may allude to an emphasis of post-famine Irish Catholicism on morality (and the ‘Fall’) rather than the redeeming love of the ‘new Adam’, Jesus Christ, ‘the Word made flesh’. In the anti-pastoral mood of ‘The Great Hunger’, the peasant farmer can ‘react to sun and rain’ but sometimes

> Regret that the Maker of Light had not touched him more intensely.
> Brought him up from the subsoil to an existence
> Of conscious joy.[78]

At some level, Kavanagh was reacting against the ‘idealization’ of rural life, a feature of the work of the Literary Revival, which had gone before in the writing of W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge.[79] He rejected the sentimentality and

[76] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 133.
[77] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 133.
[78] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 155.
[79] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 491.

mythology of the Revivalists, and instead emphasised the influence of Catholicism on Irish culture, especially its expression in the local parish. The aesthetic richness and visionary possibility which he experienced in the Catholic liturgy could tap into the regret of the peasant farmer and promise him some resurrection from the subsoil of a 'broken-backed'[80] life to the conscious joy of beauty and visionary possibility. As with his fellow Irishman and novelist John McGahern, Kavanagh might have claimed that 'In an impoverished time, it [the Church] was my introduction to ceremony, to grace and sacrament, to symbol and ritual, even to luxury.'[81]

Unlike Kavanagh's Inniskeen, the Heaney family farm of Mossbawn was in Northern Ireland, separated from what some called the 'Free State', the result of the Partition of Ireland in 1921. This political and cultural reality was to shape Heaney's work in a distinctive way, not least in his poetic response to the Troubles, the recent origins of which could be traced back to 1921. But what bound Heaney to Kavanagh in terms of poetic influence had more to do with the mysteries of faith which saturated Heaney's world as they had Kavanagh's. For both poets, these mysteries were rooted in the particularity of place, a point Heaney drove home in 'The Poet as Christian':

> Words for me have always become instinct with a fresh energy when they are hovering over my home ground in Co. Derry. You may say there is nothing specifically Christian about that but nevertheless I am convinced that our sense of transcendental realities played an active part in the way we sensed our place.[82]

The particularity of place was central to Kavanagh and Heaney's view of the world. At the heart of this particularity, for Kavanagh, was the validity of the parish and the universal truths which could be found there. He thought that all great civilisations are

[80] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 133.
[81] John McGahern, *Love of the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 150.
[82] The essay was first published in *The Furrow* in 1978 and reprinted in memory of the poet in 2013. Seamus Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 541–45 (p. 542-43).

based on what he called a parochial mentality, which 'is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of its own parish.'[83] In Joyce, Kavanagh found one literary precursor for this view of the world and thought of him, alongside George Moore, as one of the two great 'parishoners' of Irish literature.[84] In his 'Class of Elements' at Clongowes College, when Stephen Dedalus writes:

> Stephen Dedalus,
> Class of Elements,
> Clongowes Wood College,
> Sallins,
> County Kildare,
> Ireland,
> Europe,
> the World,
> The Universe

Fleming mocks him by writing on the opposite page:

> Stephen Dedalus is my name,
> Ireland is my nation.
> Clongowes is my dwelling place
> And heaven my expectation.[85]

Kavanagh was never in doubt that the expectation of heaven could be realised in the local. He understood by experience the importance of the Greek root of the word parish, the noun *paroikia*, meaning 'those living near or beside'. In his poem 'Epic', during a local farming dispute about 'who owned | That half a rood of rock', he hears the voice of Homer whisper: 'I made the *Iliad* from such | a local row. Gods make their own importance.'[86]

The other literary influence in this regard was another Ulsterman, William Carleton, whose prose piece 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim' was to become an important

[83] Patrick Kavanagh, *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. by Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), p. 237.
[84] Geert, Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo, *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*, Athlone Critical Traditions Series (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p. 472.
[85] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pp. 12–13.
[86] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 87.

presence in both Kavanagh's 'Lough Derg' and Heaney's 'Station Island'. His *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, in which he writes about the life of the people in the southern half of County Tyrone, the southwestern corner of County Armagh and the northern half of County Monaghan, gave Kavanagh the voice he needed to write about his fictional parish of Ballyrush in *By Night Unstarred*:

> It was a parish of small farms, not that either the location or the source of livelihood are of the highest importance, for life is the same everywhere. Yet the poverty of the place, the shape of the hills and the twist of the roads did give a certain individual colour to the thoughts of the people.[87]

The idea that 'life is the same everywhere' and that the parish might be understood as the world writ small was also true at the level of theology and ecclesiology. Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit theologian, in his writings on ecclesiology, emphasised the integrity of the local parish within the wider communion of a diocese and the universal Church. In volume 10 of his monumental *Theological Investigations*, he writes that the local Christian community 'is not merely one segment of the universal Church […] Rather it is *the* Church as present at one specific place'.[88] In other words, the *unam sanctam catholicam* finds its complete expression in the local.

This validation of the local and the emphasis on parish proved immensely attractive for the young Heaney, who realised that

> Kavanagh's genius had achieved singlehanded what I and my grammar-school, arts-degreed generation were badly in need of – a poetry which linked the small farm life which produced us with the slim-volume world we were now supposed to be fit for. He brought us back to what we came from […] Kavanagh gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life.[89]

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[87] Patrick Kavanagh, *By Night Unstarred: An Autobiographical Novel*, ed. by Peter Kavanagh (The Curragh, Ireland: The Goldsmith Press, 1977), p. 25.
[88] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), p. 75.
[89] 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', in Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 3-14 (p. 9). Originally given as the opening address at 'Kavanagh's Yearly', Carrickmacross, November 1985.

Kavanagh affirmed for Heaney a sense that all of life could be represented in one place, just as the lake in John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* becomes the beginning and end of a community's existence, no less the impoverished for it:

> The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire world to themselves.[90]

As a young boy, Heaney knew by instinct that he had the entire world to himself in Mossbawn. When the Heaney family moved in 1954 from Mossbawn to The Wood, outside the village of Bellaghy, Heaney wrote about it afterwards as a move 'to the other end of the parish' (*SS*, 25).

Heaney will also have known that the boundaries of parish and diocese were older than the boundary imposed on the country by the partition of Ireland in 1921. In 1951, on his way to St Columb's in Derry, his parents took him to the seaside town of Buncrana, in County Donegal, where they bought him a Conway Stewart fountain pen, celebrated in a poem in his last collection *Human Chain* (*HC*, 9). In crossing from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland, he remained in the diocese of Derry, whose ecclesiastical boundaries were no respecters of political ones. If Heaney knew by instinct that he had the entire world to himself in the parish of Bellaghy, that instinct was validated by his reading of Patrick Kavanagh.

Heaney had been introduced to Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' while on teaching practice at St Thomas's Secondary Intermediate School in Belfast in 1961 to 1962. The headmaster of the school at the time, Michael McLaverty, a short-story writer, loaned Heaney Kavanagh's *A Soul for Sale*, in which Heaney came across 'The Great Hunger'. Heaney has referred to Kavanagh (along with Ted Hughes), and

[90] John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 1.

his poetry, as a plant which grows inside you and comes to life in and through you: 'You're Jack and at the same time you're the beanstalk. You're the ground and the growth all at once' (*SS*, 50).

Kavanagh died on 30 November 1967. At his funeral Mass, two days later, Seamus Heaney was one of three poets who read from Kavanagh's work. He read 'A Christmas Childhood'.[91] In the poem we can see more clearly what Kavanagh meant by poetry as a 'mystical thing', and what Heaney meant by poetry as a 'grace', and what both understood by a Catholic sensibility. 'A Christmas Childhood' is a retrospective poem, written in 1940, and looks back to the poet's childhood. At one level it is a hymn to Christmas, at another, it reflects on the poet's formation as a writer, picking out letters 'On the grey stone'. It is a poem wonderfully in tune with the ordinariness of the world around it, but alert, also, to a more universal story and world of the Nativity:

> Outside in the cow-house my mother
> Made the music of milking;
> The light of her stable-lamp was a star
> And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

It is a poem as much about listening to things as seeing them. Milking cows becomes music, and even more oddly, paling posts:

> One side of the potato-pits was white with frost –
> How wonderful that was, how wonderful!
> And when we put our ears to the paling-post
> The music that came out was magical.[92]

It is hard not to imagine the music of those paling-posts playing in Heaney's imagination when he wrote 'The Rain Stick' (*OG*, 395), the opening poem of *The Spirit Level*:

> Upend the rain stick and what happens next

[91] Quinn, p. 463.
[92] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 77.

> Is a music that you never would have known
> To listen for. In a cactus stalk
>
> Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
> Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
> Being played by water…

In Heaney, too, the ordinary fun to be had from upending a cactus stalk is suddenly brought within the more universal and visionary narrative of the rich man in Matthew's gospel trying to enter the kingdom of heaven:

> And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (19. 24).

In Heaney, the eye of a needle is magically transformed:

> You are like a rich man entering heaven
> Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.

In 'The Great Hunger', Kavanagh cautions Patrick Maguire not to turn from 'the five simple doors of sense.'[93] 'A Christmas Childhood' engages not only the sense of hearing, but all five senses in a powerfully descriptive fashion. The poet *sees* the light between the ricks of hay and straw as 'a hole in Heaven's gable'; he *tastes* (eats) 'the knowledge that grew in clay'; on Christmas morning the 'Mass-going feet | Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes' (*touch*); and towards the end of the poem we can almost *smell* the cut tobacco and the white roses 'pinned | on the Virgin Mary's blouse'. It is this tangible, felt sense of things which is at the very heart of a sacramental view of the created world. It involves the whole person in her/his full embodiment as a sensuous and sensitive human being, sensitive to the sights, smells, tastes and touches of created realities, and responsive to these as outward signs of invisible realities.

[93] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 142.

When Kavanagh writes in *The Great Hunger*: 'O Christ, that is what you have done for us: | In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is'[94], he is not only echoing William Blake's 'heaven in a grain of sand' but summing up the mystery of the Incarnation and expressing a sacramental vision of reality, where the outward sign of bread becomes the inward reality of Christ's grace. A sacramental vision of reality pays due regard to the particularity of every created thing. For Kavanagh part of that regard was to name things, and in doing so to 'record love's mystery':

> The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.
> Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
> For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
> Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.[95]

Naming things is a hallmark of Heaney's work from the very beginning. In an unpublished poem, 'Homage to Pieter Brueghel'[96], written while he was a member of the Belfast Group, Heaney was already showing signs of the influence of Kavanagh and the importance of naming the actual:

> The real unshakeables lodged out of doors:
> Hope may be blind-man's-buff but life is seasonal.
> Skate, hunt, lop, cut the corn, take ease
> Spread out, unbuttoned, grateful, under trees.

Soon the 'real unshakeables' of Bruegel's landscapes became those of Heaney's own childhood, in his collection *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966. The skating, hunting and lopping of Bruegel's Flemish world gave way to the digging, churning and potato digging of Heaney's Irish one.

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[94] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 110.
[95] Kavanagh and Stack, p. 102.
[96] 'Belfast Group Poetry|Networks: Poems by Seamus Heaney' <https://belfastgroup.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/groupsheets/heaney1_10163/> [accessed 26 February 2021].

CHAPTER TWO

RENEWING THE ORDINARY: *DEATH OF A NATURALIST*, *DOOR INTO THE DARK*, *WINTERING OUT*

DEATH OF A NATURALIST

Critical Reception

In December 1964, Karl Miller published three of Heaney's poems in the pre-Christmas issue of the *New Statesman*: 'Digging', 'Storm on the Island' and 'Scaffolding'. Shortly after Christmas, in January 1965, Heaney received a letter from Charles Monteith at Faber and Faber inviting him to submit a manuscript. Monteith was particularly impressed by 'Death of a Naturalist' and 'Digging', and this encouraged Heaney to 'concentrate on subjects and settings around Mossbawn' (*SS*, 82). *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney's first full-length volume of poems, was published by Faber and Faber on 19 May 1966.

One week after the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* Christopher Ricks reviewed the collection enthusiastically in the *New Statesman*. His praise was fulsome: 'The power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection *Death of a Naturalist* is outstanding.' Ricks identified several poems as particularly worthy of mention: the 'taut accuracy' of 'Follower', the 'piercing nostalgia' of 'Blackberry-Picking' and, like Monteith, he picked out 'Digging', which he thought worthy of praise for its 'unsentimental clarity'. Playing on the title poem of the collection, Ricks wrote rhetorically: ''Death of a Naturalist'? Long live the naturalist…'[1] How far this early critical reception informed Heaney's *Selected*

[1] Christopher Ricks, 'Growing Up', *New Statesman*, 71, 27 May. Quoted in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Michael Allen, New Casebooks Series (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 21–23.

Poems 1965-1975 (1980) is impossible to say, but it may have come as little surprise to find among the poems included in that volume: 'Digging', Death of a Naturalist', 'Blackberry-Picking', 'Churning Day', 'Follower', 'At a Potato Digging' and 'The Diviner'. Of these, only 'Churning Day', 'At a Potato Digging' and 'The Diviner' failed to make it into *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (1990). Blake Morrison is right to point out that 'Such reviews set the terms for subsequent critical discussion of Heaney's work. It is as a twin to the early Ted Hughes, as a fellow demolisher of the *Golden Treasury* treatment of nature, that he has found his way into the school and university syllabus.'[2] When Nicholas McGuinn wrote *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems 1965-75*, it was to 'Digging' and 'Follower' that he turned for close readings of *Death of a Naturalist*.[3]

In Chapter One, however, I drew attention to Catholicism as the source of a vitally shaping sensibility at work in Heaney's Groupsheet poems and here I want to trace it further in *Death of a Naturalist*. In what follows, I begin by privileging two poems which have been largely neglected in Heaney criticism, and which articulate aspects of a Catholic sensibility which can be traced in Heaney's later poetry. 'Poor Women in a City Church' (*DN*, 29) and 'Saint Francis and the Birds' (*DN*, 40) borrow as their themes veneration of the Virgin Mary and veneration of the saints respectively. I want to argue that a close reading of these poems allows us to trace the watermark of a Catholic sensibility in other poems less obviously 'Catholic'. The physicality of poems such as 'Turkeys Observed' and 'Digging' are consistent with the Christian idea of the corporeal body as a unique good and are indebted to the muscular language of Hopkins as they are to the earthiness of Kavanagh.

[2] Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 17–18.
[3] Nicholas McGuinn, *Seamus Heaney: A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems, 1965-1975* (Leeds: Arnold-Wheaton, 1986), pp. 20–21.

The neglect of 'Poor Women in a City Church' (*DN*, 29) may be explained in part by its comparison with the poem 'Docker' (*DN*, 28). Both appeared in *Dublin Magazine* in 1965 under the title 'Belfast Snapshots' and later side by side on opposite pages in *Death of a Naturalist*, but without the linking title 'Belfast Snapshots'.[4] Ashby Crowder thinks 'Docker' the better of the two poems[5] and in terms of accomplishment, Roland Mathias thinks 'Poor Women in a City Church' a miscalculation in comparison with the technical quality of poems such as 'Personal Helicon' and 'An Advancement of Learning.'[6] However, the understanding of 'Catholic' as a political sensibility, rather than a religious one, may also account for the greater exposure of 'Docker' in Heaney criticism. Richard Rankin Russell thinks the absence of 'Poor Women' from *Poems 1965-1975* a shortcoming because it 'impoverishes our sense of Heaney's historical awareness of sectarianism in Ireland.'[7] But I want to argue that that it also impoverishes our understanding of Catholicism as sacramental presence in Heaney's work. I agree with Gail McConnell, that in treating Catholicism as a socio-political descriptor, what got left out was 'Catholicism's sensuous appeal' for Heaney.[8]

It is precisely this sensuous appeal which is at play in 'Poor Women in a City Church'. Where 'Docker' is a cacophony of noise – the 'bang' of rivets, the 'blare' of the Resurrection, and the 'slammed door' of the docker's home, 'Poor Women in

[4] Seamus Heaney, *Dublin Magazine*, Spring 1965, p. 69.
[5] Ashby Bland Crowder, 'Seamus Heaney's Revisions for Death of a Naturalist', *New Hibernia Review*, 19.2 (2015), 94–112 (p. 100) <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2015.0021>.
[6] 'Death of a Naturalist', in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Tony Curtis, 4th edn (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), pp. 13-25 (p. 24).
[7] Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 32. *Poems 1965-1975*, to which Russell refers, was published in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and published as *Selected Poems 1965-1975* in London by Faber and Faber in 1980. *Poems* included significantly more poems than the *Selected Poems* but excluded 'Poor Women in a City Church'.
[8] 'Catholic Art and Culture: Clarke to Heaney', in Fran Brearton and Alan A Gillis, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 437-455 (p. 438).

a City Church' is a sanctuary of quiet. The only noise in the poem is the muted voices of prayerful women, whose 'whispered calls | Take wing up to the Holy Name.' The almost mystical sense of the scene is conveyed in words like 'Flicker', 'Mince and caper', and the 'cool shadows' which 'Still them.' The 'sledgehead jaw' of the docker becomes the 'dough-faced women' in the church, his 'plated forehead' their 'beeswax brows.' If each poem were the single side of a diptych painting, then its chiaroscuro world is reflected in the black of the docker's porter and the white 'altar lace' of 'the Virgin's altar'.

The descriptive quality of 'Poor Women' is true to the tactile nature of Catholic sacramental practice. The opening rhyming couplet and the internal rhyme of the third line convey the serenity of the scene and a sense of liturgical order:

> The small wax candles melt to light,
> Flicker in marble, reflect bright
> Asterisks on brass candlesticks …

Crowder argues that the original title 'Belfast Snapshots' emphasises both the poet's distance from the scene and the 'casual nature of his observations.'[9] But, in his rich description of the church interior and in a suggestion of sympathy in the word 'poor' in the title, he is almost certainly imaginatively present in a way which suggests more than casual observation. The description of the women as poor may play on 'the candles of the Irish poor' in Louis MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus'[10], just as the poem may owe something to his poem 'Belfast':

> In the porch of the chapel before the garish Virgin
> A shawled factory-woman as if shipwrecked there
> Lies a bunch of limbs glimpsed in the cave of gloom
> By us who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib.[11]

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[9] Crowder, p. 99.
[10] Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 24.
[11] MacNeice, p. 15. It has further echoes in Thom Gunn's 'In Santa Maria Del Popolo', where old women kneel '…each head closeted | In tiny fists holds comfort as it can. | Their poor arms are too tired for more than this.' See Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems*, Faber Paper Covered Editions, Repr (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 24–25. It is possible, too, that the description of

In the detail of its visual imagery, 'Poor Women' anticipates the more accomplished poem of 'Clearances' 6 in *The Haw Lantern*, which depicts a rich scene during the Easter Vigil of Holy Week (*OG*, 312). Both poems describe the rich interiors and rubrics of pre-Vatican II churches. But 'Clearances' 6, written after the death of Heaney's mother, has all the felt intimacy of an elegy for a parent. Where the poet observes of the poor women how 'Thus each day in the sacred place | *They* kneel' [my italics], in the later poem the poet is 'Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next' to his mother. The intimacy of memory has come to replace the distance of observation. If, as Crowder suggests, the earlier poem is a snapshot devoid of emotional attachment, the latter poem is charged emotionally, and with its allusion to D. H. Lawrence, intimately so, in this '*Sons and Lovers* phase.'

Heaney's description of the prayerful women as 'dough-faced' is richly suggestive. As an image it finds emphasis in the text by the use of 'black shawls' in the same line. However, it also finds emphasis if we read it in the context of his later poetry. The word 'dough' is richly suggestive of the domestic love which Heaney was later to celebrate in his Mossbawn poem 'Sunlight' (*OG*, 93-94), and in the 'ripped-out flour sacks' which brought the poet so close to his mother in 'Clearances' 5 (*OG*, 311). But, equally, it might also suggest hardship, and the

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the women as poor owes something to an observation of G.K. Chesterton's in his essay on the Eucharistic Congress held in Dublin in 1932 ('Christendom in Dublin'). Chesterton recalls hearing a story about a 'very poor threadbare working woman' remarking on a tram: 'Well, if it rains now, He'll have brought it on Himself.' See *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), XX, pp. 73–74. Chesterton understood the remark as saying something 'profound' about 'a contradiction in the core of the Christian mystery'. The idea of the poor woman as spiritually sophisticated and superior to the 'educated' Christian was recounted by priests during retreats at St Columb's when Heaney was a pupil. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc were regularly referred to by priests at the School in the 1950s and 1960s. I am grateful to Fr John R. Walsh for this information. Like Heaney, Fr Walsh is a native of South Derry and joined St Columb's as a boarder in 1960, just three years after Heaney left the school. He was President of St Columb's between 1990 and 1998. He recalls frequent references to Chesterton and Belloc, but says that this would have been even truer of Heaney's vintage.

reason these women are described as poor. At the end of 'Clearances' 6, Heaney quotes the 'psalmist's outcry' from Psalm 42: '*Day and night my tears have been my bread*' (*OG*, 312). Here bread is not the sustenance of love, but the endurance of suffering, which pre-figures the suffering of Jesus in the New Testament. But it is through that suffering that Jesus becomes the 'bread of life' in John, chapter 6. If 'dough-faced' is not explicitly working on all these levels, it is at the very least suggestive of them.

Heaney concludes the poem with 'In the gloom you cannot trace | A wrinkle on their beeswax brows.' In the version of the poem in 'Belfast Snapshots', the women's brows are described as 'waxen' only. Crowder argues that with the addition of 'beeswax', there is the suggestion that the women's brows, like the candles themselves, are ocherous in colour and that they convey a hint of reflected light from the 'yellow candle-tongues', which also gives emphasis to the poem's closing image.[12] The alliteration, of course, may also remind us of the early influence of Hopkins. What the change demonstrates is the attention Heaney paid to descriptive detail and to the physicality of the women. In one of the few critical discussions of the poem, Michael Molino writes: 'The worshippers' identity, even their physical characteristics, acquiesce to the molding effects of their religious heritage.'[13] The importance Heaney placed on corporeality and the physicality of things is also apparent in his description of birds in the second poem I want to look at.

'Saint Francis and the Birds' has received marginally more attention than 'Poor Women in a City Church'. Roland Mathias argues that many of the later

[12] Crowder, p. 99.
[13] Michael R Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 6.

poems in the collection are uneven and have all the hallmarks of 'apprentice work' but singles out three poems in which the conclusion is 'as deft and satisfying as idea and verbal organisation have been throughout…'[14] One of these is 'Saint Francis and the Birds'. His judgement is echoed in a more recent discussion of the poem by Richard Rankin Russell. Russell reads the form of the poem as resembling the *terza rima* of Dante where the stanza's slant rhyme becomes full rhyme in the conclusion, when the birds

> Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played
> And sang, like images took flight.
> Which was the best poem Francis made,
>
> His argument true, his tone light.

The last word of the middle line of the tercet above ('flight'), which rhymes with the final 'dangling' line of the last line ('light'), Russell thinks characteristic of the end of Dante's canti in *The Divine Comedy*.[15] Helen Vendler also draws attention to the final line as an announcement by Heaney '… of his own literary resolve'.[16]

The subject of Heaney's poem is a story recalled in a life of Francis by his first biographer. Thomas of Celano wrote *The Life of Saint Francis* in 1229.[17] He tells us that when Francis was travelling through the Spoleto valley, he reached a place near Bevagna, where a great multitude of birds had gathered. When Francis greeted the birds, they did not fly off. Thomas tells us that Francis addressed the birds with the following words:

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[14] 'Death of a Naturalist', in Curtis, p. 21. The other two poems whose conclusions he identifies as satisfying are 'Synge on Aran' and 'Trout'.
[15] Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, p. 46.
[16] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 23.
[17] Thomas composed two major works on the life of the saint. *The Life of Saint Francis*, commonly referred to as *The First Life*, was composed in 1229, and *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, commonly referred to as *The Second Life*, was composed in 1247. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York, N.Y.: New City Press, 1999), p. 171.

> My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love him always. He gave you feathers to wear, wings to fly, and whatever you need. God made you noble among His creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, so that, though you neither *sow nor reap*, he nevertheless protects and governs you without your least care.

Having addressed the birds in this way, Thomas tells us that the birds rejoiced in a wonderful way 'according to their nature.'[18]

In an early typescript draft of 'Saint Francis and the Birds' to be collected in *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney makes an important change to the opening of the poem. The typed draft reads: 'When Saint Francis preached to the birds | They listened …' However, Heaney scores out the word 'Saint' and adds the word 'love' so that the opening now reads: 'When Francis preached love to the birds | They listened …'[19] He may, of course, have thought the word 'Saint' superfluous since it already appears in the title of the poem, but the addition of the word 'love' seems to me hugely important. The word 'love' is one which Heaney admitted to using sparingly, and therefore its inclusion here in a re-draft of the poem should make us take notice.[20] With the addition of the word 'love', Heaney draws attention to the centrality of service in the Christian life. The suggestion is that the birds listen not because Francis preaches, but because he preaches love. It also resonates with St Francis's instruction to the birds that they should love their Creator. Christian teaching is found in the witness of the saint's life, and this is something to which Heaney will return in *The Spirit Level*, most notably in the poem 'St Kevin and the Blackbird'.

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[18] Armstrong, Hellmann, and Short, p. 40.
[19] Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 49,493/8. Hereafter, NLI.
[20] In discussing his use of the word 'love' in 'Sunlight' ('Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication'), Heaney says that the word is 'risked in that poem for the first time' and that he would be 'very careful about using it.' See 'Seamus Heaney: Out of the Marvellous' (RTE Television, 2009).

‘Saint Francis’ shares with ‘Poor Women’ an emphasis on description as a means of conveying physicality. The word ‘throttled’ suggests the force of an engine, and, again, reminds us of the muscular language of Hopkins which is an important influence in this first collection. The love which Francis preached is received with joy, the spontaneity of which is wonderfully conveyed in an almost ecstatic play of joy where the birds throttled up

> Then wheeled back, whirred about his head,
> Pirouetted on brothers’ capes,
> Dance on the wing, for sheer joy played
> And sang, like images took flight.

The energy of the birds which ‘wheeled back’ about the saint’s head, may also owe something to Thom Gunn’s ‘…gust of birds | That spurts across the field, the wheeling sparrows’.[21] In that final tercet, the inchoate images take on a physicality, and the phonetic play of ‘birds’ and ‘words’ in the first tercet serves to emphasise how words take on the physicality of a ‘flock’. In the final lines we are reminded that Francis himself was a poet and that preaching love to the birds ‘…was the best poem Francis made, | His argument true, his tone light.’ We could say of that final line what Kathleen Norris said of Denise Levertov’s poem ‘Mass for the Day of St Thomas Didymus’: ‘Her poem has done the work of poetry, which is not argument, but revelation. Not reference, but incarnation.’[22]

In reviewing David Jones’s *The Sleeping Lord* in 1974, Heaney wrote that what Jones said of Joyce could equally be said of Jones: ‘The concrete, the exact dimensions, the contractual, the visual, the bodily, what the senses register, the assembled data first – *then* is the “imagination” free to get on with the job.’[23] It could

[21] ‘On the Move’, in Gunn and Hughes, p. 14.
[22] ‘A Word Made Flesh: Incarnational Language and the Writer’, in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. by Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 303-12 (p. 305).
[23] Seamus Heaney, ‘Now and in England’, *The Spectator*, 4 May 1974, p. 547.

equally be said of Heaney. In an interview with Henri Cole, Heaney said that in his early books he was looking for 'the sheer materiality of words', that he was trying for 'concreteness'.[24] In his classic essay 'Art and Sacrament', first published in 1955, Jones argues that the human person is a sign-making animal and that fundamental to this is the corporeal body as a unique good. At the heart of his argument about the sacramental nature of human beings is the idea of corporeality, the idea of a physical body denied to the angels and unconscious in animals.[25]

Death of a Naturalist is a book which celebrates corporeality. It includes an early poem 'Turkeys Observed', which Michael Parker describes as 'Hughesian.'[26] It was originally published in 1962, the same year that Heaney read Hughes's *Lupercal*.[27] Heaney told Henri Cole how he took down *Lupercal* from a shelf in the Belfast public library and opened it at 'View of a Pig', which set him going '…and writing a couple of poems that were Hughes pastiches almost.'[28] In phrases such as 'thick pink bulk', Hughes conveys the raw physicality of the dead animal.[29] Heaney compares his turkeys to the 'red sides of beef' of a cow, slung from a hook which 'maintains | That blood and flesh are not ignored' (*DN*, 24). The 'blood and flesh' remind us of Christ's words in John's Gospel: 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'[30] If Heaney

[24] Seamus Heaney and Henri Cole, 'Seamus Heaney: The Art of Poetry LXXV', *Paris Review*, 144 (1997), 88–138 (p. 106).
[25] David Jones, *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 143-79. 'Art and Sacrament' was first published in *Catholic Approaches* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955).
[26] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p.44.
[27] 'Turkeys Observed' was first published in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 15 December 1962.
[28] Heaney and Cole, p. 92.
[29] Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 75–76.
[30] John 6. 22-59 is referred to as the 'Bread of Life Discourse' by Biblical scholars.

found the 'muscle of sense'[31] in Hopkins's poetry in the late 1950s, his deep sense of the physicality of language found further validation in his reading of Hughes in the early 1960s.

Neil Corcoran sees the influence of Hughes in the anthropomorphism of 'Turkeys Observed' in the line 'He lorded it on the claw-flecked mud | With a grey flick of his Confucian eye'.[32] But he also sees the presence of Hughes in a more subtle way in the similarity in 'shape and movement' between Hughes's poem 'The Thought-Fox' and Heaney's poem 'Digging', the first in his collection *Death of a Naturalist*.[33] Both poems are concerned with the act of writing poetry but also with the physicality of bodies (Heaney's father, Hughes's fox) and their corporeality. In Hughes's poem: 'A fox's nose touches twig, leaf; | Two eyes serve a movement' in 'a body that is bold to come | Across clearings.' All of this is leading up to the moment of creativity for the poet where 'with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox | It enters the dark hole of the head.' The place of creativity is not some inchoate space in the imagination but the 'dark hole of the head.' This is the flesh and blood stuff which Heaney would not ignore in *Death of a Naturalist*. In 'Digging', his father's 'straining rump' is unflattering (*OG*, 3-4). The OED defines the noun 'rump' as 'The part of an animal's body from which the tail springs.' It may not be flattering but it is entirely in keeping with the farm life in which the digging takes place. When Heaney describes 'The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft | Against the inside knee…', the almost anatomical detail of the 'inside knee' provides us with the inscape so

[31] 'The Fire i' the Flint', in Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 79-97 (p.88). Originally delivered as The Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet at the British Academy, December 1974.
[32] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 3.
[33] 'The Thought-Fox' was first collected in *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957 (London: Faber and Faber). Hughes and Keegan, p. 21.

favoured by Hopkins. The shoulder of his grandfather (who appears in the second half of the poem), over which he heaves sods, is picked up later in 'Follower', where his father's shoulders are 'globed like a full sail strung' (*OG*, 11), with its echo of 'Harry Ploughman'. The physicality of Heaney's mother is emphasised in the demands of physical labour in 'Churning Day', where she sets up the rhythms 'that slugged and thumped for hours. Arms ached. | Hands blistered' (*OG*, 9-10). Heaney's attention to corporeality in his first collection is consistent with the physical body as valued in Christian theology, and as Jones puts it 'Theology regards the body as a unique good. Without body: without sacrament.'[34]

In his book *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, David Brown borrows and adapts his subtitle from George Herbert's poem 'Prayer I', where prayer is 'Heaven in ordinary'.[35] Brown argues for the reality of Christ's 'physicality' in the eucharist and goes on to write:

> The activity of God is everywhere in the material world that is his creation, and not at all an isolated and occasional phenomenon. That is why it seems to me no accident that Christianity's central sacrament focuses on body and on a human body at that.[36]

Brown's focus on the human body reminds us of Jones's distinction between the body as unconscious in animals, and the human body which is gratuitous in its art and whose art has a sign-making quality. The importance which Christianity places on the body finds implicit expression in some of the poems of Heaney's first collection where the body is celebrated in its flesh and blood. If the body is celebrated in *Death of a Naturalist*, it is consecrated in a renewal of the ordinary in *Door into the Dark*.

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[34] Jones, *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, p. 167.
[35] David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.
[36] David Brown, p. 4.

'Night Drive' (*OG*, 26) is a love poem in which, on a journey through France, the poet thinks of his wife 'continuously'. The poem opens with a description of the smells of rain, hay and woods: 'The smells of ordinariness | Were new on the night drive through France'. The poet's anticipation of being reunited with his wife is heightened by a sense of loss – various towns 'Were promised, promised, came and went', a fire smoulders out, and cafes shut 'One by one'. Elmer Andrews picks up on this theme of loss: 'Painful reminders of death, defeat and separation are the very things which "renew" ordinariness':[37]

> I thought of you continuously
> A thousand miles south where Italy
> Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere.
> Your ordinariness was renewed there.

The idea of the renewal of the ordinary against themes of loss is picked up in poems such as 'The Forge', where the blacksmith's work is threatened by '…traffic flashing in rows'. The 'old dark' of Gallarus Oratory is renewed in the bright dazzle of the natural world. Most poignantly, in two poems on pregnancy which face each other in the collection, the 'evicted world' of a mother's womb in 'Elegy for a Still-born Child', becomes '…the bone-hooped womb, rising like yeast' in 'Cana Revisited'. In describing the child growing in the womb as a 'consecration wondrous', Heaney employs a sacramental language which will become a feature of the collection as a whole.

In an interview in 1995, Heaney said: 'Recently I read a poem which I wish I had read when I was much younger by Miłosz.'[38] The poem was 'Blacksmith Shop'.

[37] Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 45.
[38] The interview took place in October 1995, in Dublin, and was originally published in German in *Frankfurter Rundschau* on 28 October 1995. The quotation here is taken from its first full-length

By 1995, Heaney's poem on the same subject was a well known and well established part of his work. 'The Forge' is an important poem in Heaney's work, appearing as early as the Belfast Group poems.[39] Also drafted as 'The Forge and the Man', the notebooks indicate that Heaney worked on a number of drafts.[40] First published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in May 1966[41], it was collected in *Door into the Dark* with minor changes, and reprinted in the *Selected Poems* and *Poems* (1980), and *Opened Ground* (1998).[42] Its importance might also be gleaned from the considerable critical attention it has received, most recently in Stephen Regan's study of the sonnet.[43] In its figure of the blacksmith, Parker notes literary precedents in Hopkins's 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and Joyce's *Portrait*.[44] In terms of Hopkins, it also finds an antecedent in the young blacksmith of 'Felix Randal'.

Critics have understood Heaney's blacksmith as 'a surrogate figure of the artist'[45], who stands as a model for the poet.[46] 'The Forge' fits appropriately within a grouping of poems that explore connections between the writing of poetry and physical labour.[47] It is from 'The Forge' that Heaney borrows the phrase 'door into

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publication in English: Seamus Heaney, Gabriel Rosenstock, and Hans-Christian Oeser, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Cyphers*, (2014), 10–22 (p. 21).

[39] NLI, MS 49,493/3.

[40] NLI, MS 49,493/10.

[41] Seamus Heaney, 'The Forge', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 May 1966, p. 417, The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive.

[42] 'The Forge' does not appear in the *New Selected Poems* (1990).

[43] Regan, *The Sonnet*, pp. 178–79.

[44] Parker draws attention in a footnote to the tenth stanza of 'The Wreck', where God is depicted as 'smith' of the universe, and to the end of Joyce's *Portrait*, where Stephen resolves 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.' See Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 238.

[45] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 26.

[46] Morrison, p. 31.

[47] We have seen this already in relation to 'Digging'. In his essay 'Door into the Dark', Dick Davis argues that, together with 'The Forge', 'Thatcher' can be read to some degree as a poem about poetry: '…the poet's regard for the thatcher is a regard for the laconic, unfussy skill, for the "mystery" in the old sense, as is his regard for the smith of "The Forge"; both carry with them the glamour of the maker which we feel the young poet anxious to emulate.' See Curtis, pp. 29-34 (p. 33). We find it, also, in the later epigraph to 'Clearances' in the image of splitting a block of coal: 'Teach me now to listen, | To strike it rich behind the linear black.' See *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 24.

the dark' for the title of his second collection, and about which he writes: 'When I called my second book *Door into the Dark* I intended to gesture towards this idea of poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of feelings or as a point of exit for it.'[48] In other words the interiority of the darkened forge comes to represent the inner life of the poet's own experience. Like the dark of the 'bone-hooped womb' in which the child rises 'like yeast' ('Cana Revisited') or the bogland whose 'ground itself is kind' ('Bogland'), the dark interior life of the poet is a place hospitable to life and poetry for all its darkness.

But the idea of the interior life has a rich tradition in Catholic Christianity too and Heaney was aware of this. The great spiritual writer and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, wrote about the interiority of the spiritual life in works such as *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, both of which became classic works of spirituality. In a letter to Henry Hart, Heaney wrote that he read *Seeds of Contemplation* as an undergraduate 'in a pious spirit.'[49] Much later, Heaney also read the correspondence between Merton and Czesław Miłosz[50], which he thought 'one of the most revealing books in this regard', and about Miłosz's own poetic vocation Heaney said: 'Miłosz I hold in high regard because of the way he followed conscience into solitude' (*SS*, 302).[51] This sense of solitude, so important in the spiritual life, is no less important for Heaney the poet. When he translates a poem from St John of the Cross in his sequence 'Station Island', he knows the depth of the

[48] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 52.
[49] Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 34.
[50] Thomas Merton and Czesław Miłosz, *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. by Robert Faggen, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
[51] Heaney was clearly interested enough in Merton to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1994, while on a visit to Bellarmine University in Louisville. Miłosz made a similar visit to the Abbey in 1999. See Paul Quenon, *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2018), pp. 121–22.

paradox that spiritual growth is found in the dark night of the soul, just as poetic inspiration is found in the shadowy places of memory and the hidden places of the human heart. John Wilson Foster is right to argue that in *Door into the Dark* the dark 'is close to the centre of religious faith – the darkness of confessional and monastery, both projections in space of the dark recesses of the soul.'[52]

'The Forge' is one of Heaney's earliest sonnets, and as Stephen Regan reminds us the sonnet also has a metaphysical function: '…a subtle and tentative enquiry into the realm of the unknown and the unexplored, which prompts it to reflect on its own imaginative origins and its own processes of composition.'[53] As an enquiry into the unknown we might find in the image of the anvil as an altar an echo of St Paul's altar 'to an unknown god' in Acts of the Apostles (17. 23). The anvil, as a metaphor for the craft of poetry, becomes the place of something sacred. Corcoran thinks the analogy between the blacksmith's craft and the poet's '…too studied and mannered' and sees 'hyperbolic strain' in the religious metaphor of the anvil and the altar.[54] But if we read the poem in the context of Heaney's deep Catholic sensibility, and his sense of poetry as a calling or vocation in some sense analogous to that of the priest, then the religious metaphor seems entirely apt.

Discussing his writing habits after moving to Wicklow in 1972, Heaney said: 'I think that I consecrated myself at that point.'[55] It is a bold claim but one which demonstrates just how deeply Heaney thought about his poetic vocation in the context of his inherited religious sensibility. Gail McConnell goes as far as to say that Heaney is not content with the Romantic conception of the poet as priest of the

[52] John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995), p. 11.
[53] Regan, *The Sonnet*, p. 179.
[54] Corcoran, p. 14.
[55] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 65 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).

imagination, but that he 'goes further than this, presiding over the Eucharist, within the poem and between the poem and the reader, as a Catholic priest as well as an imaginative one.'[56] At St Columb's as a young boy, he served Latin Mass and was up close to the mystery at the heart of which was the transubstantiation of the ordinary materials of bread and wine into the mystical body and blood of Christ. Attending to the mystery of the eucharist in this intimate way must have lured the imagination of a boy as intelligent and sensitive as Heaney. Out of this early religious experience and education, which Heaney acknowledges in his interview with Miller, he says: 'I have some notion of poetry as a grace…'[57] Once again, Heaney borrows the language of faith to explain his understanding of poetry. This sense of poetry as operating at some deeply mysterious level, which is both craft and grace, and which in some ontological change has the capacity to renew the ordinary experiences of our lives, finds its correlative and source in the Catholic liturgy.

In the tradition of the Catholic liturgy, the altar sits in the centre of the sanctuary. Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, when Heaney would have been attending Mass as a boy, the altar would have been fixed to the eastern wall of the church, and in the centre. The priest would have celebrated Mass facing the east (where the sun rises) and with his back to the people. The top stone of the altar would have held relics of the saints, following the early tradition of celebrating Mass over the tombs of the martyrs. Many churches had side chapels often dedicated to the Virgin Mary or to individual saints, and each of which had an altar in the centre. When the women of 'Poor Women in a City Church' pray, it is 'At the Virgin's altar on the right'. The centrality of the altar draws attention to the central

[56] McConnell, 'Towards a Theology of Poetry', p. 77.
[57] Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 32.

mystery of the eucharist, which for Catholic Christians is the 'source and summit of the Christian life'.[58] If there is a sense of hyperbole in the religious metaphor Heaney uses, it is in likening the blacksmith's work to such a sacred act.

> The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
> Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
> Set there immovable: an altar
> Where he expends himself in shape and music.

Heaney locates the anvil with liturgical precision. Like the altar, it is fixed, 'immovable', and 'in the centre'. In the earlier *TLS* published version of the poem, Heaney had described the anvil as 'Set there immovable *like* [my italics] an altar'.[59] In the later version, he removes the word 'like' and punctuates the line with a colon, thereby replacing the simile with what Corcoran calls 'that punctuation mark of pause, definition and weighed apposition, the colon.'[60] Heaney's revised line reads: 'Set there immovable: an altar'. In terms of Heaney's Catholic sensibility, I want to argue that the change is significant. The insertion of the colon creates a mid-line caesura which fittingly follows the word 'immovable', so that the punctuation enacts what is described. It also makes us pause before the words 'an altar'. The pause reminds us of the pause which the priest makes at the beginning of Mass when he genuflects before the tabernacle and kisses the altar, both in reverence of the mystery of the Real Presence of Jesus. Furthermore, in the phrase 'expends himself' there is a subtle suggestion of sacrifice which may parallel the vocation of the labourer with that of Christ.[61] Heaney's wish to emphasise the word 'altar' may also account for his deletion of the adjective 'singing' from an earlier draft which had 'Singing

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[58] Iglesia Católica, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), pp. 297–98.
[59] Heaney, 'The Forge'.
[60] Corcoran, p. 62.
[61] Phonetically, the word 'expends' may also have subliminal connections with 'expands', neatly suggesting the work of the blacksmith.

altar'.[62] Finally, the centrality of the word 'altar' is further reinforced by its exact placing at the turn of the sonnet, between the octave and the sestet 'with all its mystical and metaphorical significance on show'.[63] In elevating the anvil to an altar, Heaney has consecrated the work of the blacksmith and sacralised the inner dark of the forge. If 'The Forge' is a door into the dark in which manual labour is consecrated and renewed, 'In Gallarus Oratory' provides a door out to the light in which the natural world becomes the place where God smiles on the community.

The precise date of Gallarus Oratory is unknown. Scholars have argued for a date ranging from as early as the eighth century to as late as the twelfth.[64] What is agreed is that it is a remarkable little building and the 'most perfect' of this type of boat-shaped architecture.[65] Measuring just over 15 feet by 10 feet, it is not hard to imagine Heaney's description of it as a 'turfstack'. Heaney visited the oratory on 19 August 1966 and in a diary entry described Gallarus as a 'bee-hive Christian Church'.[66] The word bee-hive is more properly given to the small stone huts frequently found in the Dingle Peninsula. The locals refer to these as *clocháin* (the singular *cloch*, meaning a stone). Peter Harbison has argued that these *clocháin* were pilgrim hostels, and that '…oratories of the Gallarus type, which use the same principle of corbel construction, should also be seen as connected with pilgrimage

[62] NLI, MS 49,493/10.
[63] Regan, *The Sonnet*, p. 179.
[64] Peter Harbison accepts that in the absence of firm evidence the date of Gallarus remains open to question, although he leans towards a later date, perhaps as late as the twelfth century. See Peter Harbison, 'How Old Is Gallarus Oratory? A Reappraisal of Its Role in Early Irish Architecture', *Medieval Archaeology*, 14.1 (1970), 34–59 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.1970.11735325>. Máire and Liam De Paor are also cautious about a date and suggest that '… it is usually assumed to be at least as early as the eighth century but it may well be several centuries later.' See Máire De Paor and Liam De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, Ancient Peoples and Places, v. 8 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), p. 58.
[65] De Paor and De Paor, p. 57.
[66] NLI, MS 49,493/5.

traffic.'[67] He argues that *clocháin* were temporary habitations of pilgrims waiting for suitably clement weather to climb Mount Brandon, a place of pilgrimage associated with the early Irish saint Brendan the Navigator. If this is the case, then it is unlikely that Gallarus was ever the home of a monastic community as Heaney assumes in his poem. Instead we might imagine early Christian pilgrims praying here in ones and twos.

Together with 'The Forge', 'In Gallarus Oratory' (*DD*, 10) provides a door into the dark. The dark concentrated space is reflected in the poem's dimensions, which on the page has the appearance of a sonnet. However, at twelve lines, its shortened form suggests that Heaney may be playing with the proportions of the poem in an effort to reflect the curtailed nature of the oratory itself:

> You can still feel the community pack
> This place: it's like going into a turfstack,
> A core of old dark walled up with stone
> A yard thick. When you're in it alone,
> You might have dropped, a reduced creature,
> To the heart of the globe. No worshipper
> Would leap up to his God off this floor.

The more compressed form of the poem gestures towards the compressed space in which 'You might have dropped, a reduced creature, | To the heart of the globe.' The reduced creature finds emphasis in the reduced seven lines of the curtailed sonnet octave. The 'gloom' of 'Poor Women in a City Church' has become the 'old dark' of the oratory where 'No worshipper | Would leap up to his God off this floor.' Here the poem appears to depart from 'The Forge'. Where the darkness of the forge becomes a generative space for the blacksmith's creativity and craft, the dark of Gallarus Oratory becomes paralysing of those worshippers who seek their God there.

[67] Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and The People* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 182.

In a short interview published in 1970, Heaney distinguishes between the dark centre of the self which is a 'blurred and irrational storehouse of insight and instincts' and the dark which 'presides in the Irish Christian consciousness', which he associates with St Patrick banishing the snakes from Ireland, and in which 'certain life forces have been paralysed.'[68] We might identify such paralysis in the 'reduced creature' of the poem and in the monks who are weighed down 'Under the black weight of their own breathing.'

This sense of the dark as oppressive in the Irish Christian consciousness, as Heaney understands it, might account for a change he made to an earlier draft of the poem. The opening line of the draft poem reads: 'I can imagine the community pack | This place'. In the published version, he makes two changes, one of which is to switch from the first to second person: 'You can still feel the community pack | This place'.[69] The first person singular is, of course, characteristic of the lyric form, and although Bernard O'Donoghue reminds us that this doesn't mean that the first person in the lyric is always to be identified with the poet, he goes on to argue that in some cases 'it would be perverse' to say that we are not sure if the poet himself is speaking.[70] The draft of 'In Gallarus Oratory' is a case in point, since we know from Heaney's diary entry that he visited the oratory in 1966. If Heaney can be identified with the first person of the draft, then how do we account for the switch to the use of the second person in the published version? Perhaps the most straightforward explanation is to assume that in the published version Heaney wishes to put some distance between himself and the dark which he recoils from in this instance. Henry Hart suggests something to this effect when he argues that Heaney's '…composition

[68] 'Poets on Poetry: Auden and Others', *The Listener* (London, England, 8 November 1973), p. 629 (pp. 181–82), The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991.
[69] NLI, MS 49,493/10.
[70] *Poetry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 117.

of place and self-anlaysis lead him towards those monks in the past whose rapport with God he respects but cannot quite share.'[71] In his essay 'The God in the Tree', Heaney writes about his visit there: 'I felt the weight of Christianity in all its rebuking aspects, its calls to self-denial and self-abnegation, its humbling of the proud flesh and insolent spirit.'[72] If Heaney finds the dark rebuking and cannot quite share the faith of these early monks then his switch to the second person makes sense. His understanding of the dark here as something essentially negative provides an early indication of his complex relationship with Christianity and Irish Catholicism, in particular, which he will wrestle with most explicitly in his later sequence 'Station Island'.

The second change to the draft substitutes the word 'feel' for 'imagine'. I want to argue that even if Heaney can no longer share the faith of the monks, his deeply rooted Catholic sensibility justifies the use of feel over imagine. I argued earlier that, for Heaney, his Catholic sensibility was part of his mode of feeling and the use of the word 'feel' in the published poem fits with such a sensibility. When the word is used again in the opening line of 'Punishment' –

> I can feel the tug
> of the halter at the nape
> of her neck

– it begins a poem in which the poet is eventually drawn into such imaginative sympathy that he declares: 'My poor scapegoat, | I almost love you' (*OG*, 117-18). The description of the monks as 'heroes' in the opening line of the second stanza supports Hart's reading that Heaney respects the faith of the monks, even if he doesn't share it. Dick Davis has argued that the oratory and the forge (and the byre in

[71] Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions*, p. 41.
[72] 'The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, pp. 181-89 (p. 189). It was first broadcast on Radió Telefís Éireann in 1978.

'The Outlaw') '…act as symbols of a desired intensity of labour and authenticity, as if the poet takes as heroic paradigms, the bull's potency, the smith's strength and skill, the religious community's passion and commitment.'[73] In the draft of the poem, the opening line of the second stanza reads: 'Think of them like heroes in a barrow'. In the published version, Heaney replaces the more conceptual word 'think' (as he did with 'imagine' in the first stanza) with the word 'founded': 'Founded there like heroes in a barrow'. The word 'founded' is perfectly suited to the early monastic communities as 'foundations', but it might also be suggestive of the OED definition: 'Establish (something immaterial) on a firm basis, support, principle, etc.' Christopher Ricks argues that the word has a wider application to the collection as a whole: 'His preoccupation […] is still with whatever lasts, with everything of which he can say (the word is crucial to him) that it is *founded*'.[74]

In his diary entry, we sense Heaney's frustration at a group of American tourists who appeared to be interested only in taking photos of themselves '…with the Church for background […] It was the kind of place where one could have sat alone, just in the presence of the past. But not to-day.'[75] Clearly for Heaney, the oratory is more than background and even if Heaney could no longer subscribe to the practice of the faith in the first person, his own deeply rooted Catholic sensibility meant that he knew and felt what the place stood for. In his homily for the poet's Requiem Mass, Monsignor Brendan Devlin, recalling the importance of the 'memory of a community', said of Heaney's south Derry childhood and his own neighbouring Tyrone one:

> What was important was not so much the prayers we did or did not say as the prayers that had been said before us for generations, generations whose

[73] 'Door into the Dark', in Curtis, p. 33.
[74] Christopher Ricks, 'Lasting Things', *The Listener*, 26 June 1969, pp. 900–901 (p. 900), The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991.
[75] NLI, MS 49,493/5.

> hardwon loyalties were so authentically embodied in the man and so vibrantly expressed in his work.[76]

The hardwon loyalties of those who worshipped at Gallarus over many generations would easily account for Heaney's apparent frustration at those who saw the oratory as mere background.

Heaney may have felt the weight of the monks' spirit of self-denial and self-abnegation but if he respects their rapport with God, as Hart suggests, it may well be because he sees in their focus on the interior life a paradigm for the creative life of the poet. O'Donoghue considers Hart's reading of *Door into the Dark* to be the best discussion of the book which he sees '…as the first stage of a mystical progress which culminates in *Seeing Things*.'[77] When Heaney described the foundation of good writing as '…the cloud of unknowing'[78] he is articulating that mystical tradition which Hart identifies. O'Donoghue goes on to suggest that the mystical *via negativa* and 'Dark Night of the Soul' are '…entirely positive in their meaning.'[79] I want to argue that this reading of O'Donoghue's might provide us with another level of meaning in understanding the role which the dark plays in the first stanza. It chimes with what Heaney later said to Dennis O'Driscoll about *Door into the Dark*: 'There's also the usual old archetype of the dark as something you need to traverse in order to arrive at some kind of reliable light or sight of reality. The dark night of the soul. The dark wood' (*SS*, 95).[80] In the first stanza, the monks may be traversing the dark of the interior life of the soul in order to be more spiritually alert to the

[76] Brendan Devlin, 'Hardwon Loyalties – Requiem for Séamus Heaney', *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 538–40 (pp. 539–40).
[77] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 53.
[78] 'Poets on Poetry: Auden and Others', p. 181.
[79] O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, p. 125.
[80] The reference to the 'dark wood' brings Dante to mind, anticipating an important touchstone for *Field Work* and *Station Island*.

revelation of God's self in the reliable light of the created world: 'And how he smiled on them as out they came, | The sea a censer and the grass a flame.'

'In Gallarus Oratory' is both a door into the dark and a way out into the light. The release of the monks from the darkened oratory out into the natural world where God is revealed to them, is suggestive of the story of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. The apostles and other followers of Jesus are gathered in an upper room after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. We are told that having been promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, the apostles are visited by the Spirit in the form of a mighty wind and fire: 'and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them' (2. 3). The revelation of God in the form of fire goes back to God's revelation to Moses in the form of a burning bush in Exodus chapters 3-4. So too, God smiles on the monks of Heaney's poem in the 'grass a flame.' The image of fire is reinforced by the description of the sea as a censer, the earliest reference to which we find in Leviticus 10, when the sons of Aaron place fire and incense in their respective censers and offer '…strange fire before the Lord' (10. 1). Just as God cannot be contained in the narrow space of the oratory, neither can the small receptacle of a censer contain the mystery of God whose horizons are beyond even those of the sea. It is tempting to argue that Heaney sets up the consecrated expanse of the natural world over and against the turfstack of the oratory. But I think that Andrews is absolutely right to argue that: 'Light and darkness, the earthly and the spiritual are part of a total vision' and that 'submission to the dark is the prerequisite of illumination'.[81] Heaney is too sensitive a poet and too steeped in a Catholic sensibility to set up a binary between the spiritual and the material. It is because the monks emerge from the darkened space of the oratory that the

[81] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 28.

illumination of the natural world is such a revelation. The sea becomes a consecrated space where God smiles on the community and the monks return their offering of praise to God.

Perhaps the most explicit example of a poetic reconfiguration of the sacred, where the ordinary is renewed in an act of consecration, is the poem 'Cana Revisited' (*DD*, 18). The poem first appeared in the *Irish Times* in 1966[82], before its publication in *Door into the Dark*. However, it fails to make it into later selections, except the Farrar, Straus and Giroux *Poems 1965-1975*, published in 1980. It also receives limited critical attention and where it does it has been to read it as a metaphor signalling the embryonic nature of the poet's craft.[83] However, I want to argue that other sensibilities are at play here too which have been overlooked, not least the renewal of the ordinary through a borrowing of sacramental language. The opening stanza of the poem recalls the first miracle of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John:

> No round-shouldered pitchers here, no stewards
> To supervise consumption or supplies
> And water locked behind the taps implies
> No expectation of miraculous words.

The miraculous words refer to those of Jesus who turned water into wine when the guests required more (2. 11).

The title of the poem tells us that Heaney wishes to revisit the biblical story. The opening word 'No', emphatically placed at the beginning of the first and fourth lines of the opening stanza, sets the perimeters of what not to expect. This is not the miraculous setting of Cana, and just as Heaney may have wanted to put some

[82] Seamus Heaney, 'Cana Revisited', *Irish Times*, 8 April 1966, p. 8.
[83] Neil Corcoran reads it in the context of T.S. Eliot's 'dark embryo', which finds its birth in the poem. See Corcoran, p. 13. In the image of 'water locked behind the taps', Blake Morrison reads the poem as a writer trying to unlock his poetic potential. See Morrison, p. 32.

distance between himself and the monks of Gallarus, here too he revisits the Cana story only to transfer its power to the ordinary experience of the child growing in the womb. In an early draft of the poem from January 1966, the opening lines of the second stanza read: 'But in the bone-hooped womb, rising like yeast, | *The miracle* [my italics] is waiting to be shown'.[84] Heaney at first replaced the words 'the miracle' with the vaguer term 'a power', which suggests a distancing from the biblical story. He then makes one final change to 'Virtue intact' which appears in the published version of the poem. However, in both the drafts of the poem and in the published version he retains the word 'consecration' in the penultimate line when describing the unborn child: 'The consecration wondrous (being their own) | As when the water reddened at the feast.' The language of consecration returns us to the altar of the 'The Forge' as the place where manual labour is consecrated, and the vocation of the poet finds its benediction. In 'Cana Revisited' it is the body of the child growing in the 'bone-hooped womb' which is consecrated. If the miracle of Cana looks forward to the wine which will become the blood of Christ at the Last Supper, the consecration of the unborn child in the poem is suggestive of Christ's body.

In the 'Setting' poem of 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' (*OG*, 28-35), Heaney once again borrows from the Catholic Mass in describing the gulls which accompany the fishermen on Lough Neagh as 'acolytes':

> The gulls fly and umbrella overhead,
> treading air as soon as the line runs out,
> Responsive acolytes above the boat.

The office of acolyte in the Catholic Church involves attending to the service of the altar and assisting the priest, as needed, in the celebration of the Mass. The word

[84] NLI, MS 49,493/5.

comes from the Greek *akolouthos*, which means an 'attendant follower', the word follower reminding us not only of the poem of that name, but of the idea of vocation which is present in Heaney's poetry from as early as 'Digging'. I have argued for the consecration of the body and of manual labour in Heaney's first two collections of poetry. In the poems of *Wintering Out*, he borrows sacramental language in order to consecrate place.

WINTERING OUT

In his essay 'The Poet as a Christian', Heaney remarked that 'I am convinced that our sense of transcendental realities played an active part in the way we sensed our place. The landscape was sacramental, a system of signs that called automatically upon systems of thinking and feeling.'[85] *Wintering Out* is a collection in which a sense of place is intimately connected with the poet's sense of language. In 'Traditions' (*WO*, 21-22), when the 'alliterative tradition' of Elizabethan English has 'bulled' or raped the 'guttural muse' of the native tongue, the Irish language is described as

> forgotten
> like the coccyx
> or a Brigid's Cross
> yellowing in some outhouse …

The comparison of the Irish language to a Brigid's Cross is rich with its own sacramental sign-system:

> The green rushes bound us to the beneficent spirit of St Brigid: cut on Brigid's Eve, they were worked into Brigid's crosses that would deck the rooms and out houses for the rest of the year. Indeed one of my most cherished and mysterious memories is of an old neighbour of ours called Annie Devlin sitting in the middle of a floor strewn with green rushes, a kind of local sybil, plaiting the rushes and all the rest of us into that sacramental, ritualized way of life.[86]

[85] The essay was first published in *The Furrow* in 1978, and reprinted in memory of the poet in 2013. Seamus Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 541–45 (pp. 542-43).
[86] Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', p. 543. Just how deeply Heaney drew upon the sacramental nature of signs can be gleaned from a letter he sent to Brian Friel in 1989, which reveals, even at this

A sacramental, ritualized way of life is present in 'Fodder' (*OG*, 43), the opening poem of the collection. The poem begins (in a stylistic device favoured by Hughes) with the elision of the title and the first line:

> Fodder
>
> Or as we said,
> *fother*, I open
> my arms for it
> again.

His insistence on the word *fother* emphasises the intimate connections between language and place, and it is as if he wants to reclaim the land by first reclaiming its name and by 'bedding the locale | in the utterance' ('Gifts of Rain', *OG*, 50-52). But it also about the validity of the parochial which Heaney borrowed from Kavanagh. There is almost a sense of home-coming as Heaney opens his arms for it again. The gesture suggests familial intimacy as if in reclaiming the word *fother* (a word which might remind us phonetically of 'father' in the very first poem of *Death of a Naturalist* – 'Digging') Heaney has restored and 'opened my right-of-way' ('Land', *OG*, 48-49). In 'Fodder', Heaney borrows the biblical story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes to describe the abundance of hay harvested the previous summer:

> last summer's tumbled
> swathes of grass
> and meadowsweet
>
> multiple as loaves
> and fishes, a bundle
> tossed over half-doors
> or into mucky gaps.

---

mature stage of his career, how he continued to write out of a sensibility shaped by the life he describes in 'The Poet as a Christian'. The letter to Friel, dated 1 February, begins: 'Dear Brian, The Feast of St Brigid.' He goes on to write (in the context of his son leaving home the following day): 'I suppose the sense of being on the cusp of something is working in me, not just because of the weather and the Saint's calendar, but because Michael is going off to-morrow'. The letter is included in the National Library of Ireland Exhibition 'Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again'.

In the miracle of the loaves and fishes, which fed five thousand people, Jesus asks his disciples to provide food for the crowd, but his disciples explain that they have only five loaves and two fish. Jesus raised the bread and fish towards heaven, said the blessing, and we are told that the whole crowd ate and were satisfied.[87] The image, of course, has eucharistic overtones and in Heaney's allusion to it he is reading the harvest sacramentally. The sense is one of abundance, of the miraculous gift of summer, where Heaney remembers how he would

> pull hay
> for comfort, anything
> to bed the stall.

If the hay bedded the stall, Heaney's implicit sense of the sacramentality of the landscape 'bedded itself in the unconscious'[88] so that his sense of the parochial takes on biblical proportions, just as Kavanagh's took on Homeric ones.

The threat to the sacramentality of the rituals of rural life is beautifully conveyed in 'The Last Mummer' (*WO*, 8-10). The mummer is a mysterious figure moving 'out of the fog' and 'shrouded'. Like the servant boy of the poem on the previous page, he too is 'resentful' (*OG*, 47). Corcoran describes him as representing the dying forms of rural life, a figure who casts his stones in frustration at the coming of television which 'has rendered him obsolete and redundant.'[89] As the mummer disappears 'beyond the lamplit | slabs of a yard' his tracks are lit instead by 'The moon's host elevated | in a monstrance of holy trees'. If the poem opened with a threat to the traditions of rural life it closes with the artificial light of the yard lamp giving way to the natural beauty of moonlight. Just as the priest elevates the host in a

[87] Matthew 14. 13-21; Mark 6. 30-44; Luke 9. 12-17; John 6. 1-14.
[88] Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', p. 544.
[89] Corcoran, p. 32.

gilded monstrance in a benediction of the faithful, at the close of the poem the moon acts in a natural benediction of the frustrated mummer. I think that Michael Parker is right to argue that the mummer fulfils an essential priestly function in attempting to 'restore ceremony, communion, communication.' In an obvious allusion to the doxology of the Mass, Parker argues that 'Through him, with him, in him, reconciliation and order are possible, as the mingling of Celtic ('holly trees') and Catholic symbols ('host', 'monstrance') indicates.'[90] Just as the consecrated host of the Mass becomes the moon which guides the path of the mummer, so too the act of thanksgiving after the reception of holy communion becomes in 'Shore Woman' (*OG*, 73-74) an act of 'thanksgiving' for the 'taste of safety' as she walks 'between moonlight and my shadow.'

Two contrasting religious sensibilities are at work in Heaney's poem 'The Other Side' (*OG*, 59-61).[91] The poem draws upon two traditions of religious language which describe the duality between masculine and feminine modes of language which Heaney would later define in his essay on Hopkins ('The Fire i' the Flint'). There is something judgemental in the Protestant neighbour's 'biblical dismissal' of the Heaneys' land as 'poor as Lazarus'. As the neighbour turns away 'towards his promised furrows', his movement whips up pollen which will become for the Heaneys 'next season's tares.' Corcoran points out that the allusion is to the parable of the sower in Matthew's gospel (13. 24-30) where tares (or weeds) are sown by an enemy.[92] Heaney's thoughts on Hopkins might provide a useful gloss

[90] Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 97.
[91] In a typescript of poems for possible inclusion in *Wintering Out*, what became collected as part III of the final poem was originally titled 'The Other Sort'. In the local idiom of Northern Ireland, the word 'sort' carries within it a deeply sectarian prejudice. As the violence escalated in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, Heaney may have judged the word inappropriate and replaced it with 'side', which retains the sense of division but in a much less sectarian way. NLI, MS 49,493/28.
[92] Corcoran, p. 49.

here. The masculine mode of language, Heaney thought, 'functions as a form of address, of assertion and command'[93] just as

> For days we would rehearse
> each patriarchal dictum:
> Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon
>
> and David and Goliath rolled
> magnificently, like loads of hay
> too big for our small lanes.

As if to reinforce the distinct religious sensibilities, Heaney has the neighbour say: '"Your side of the house, I believe, | hardly rule by the book at all."' In the final tercet of the second section we might read ambiguities in the words 'whitewashed' and 'hung':

> His brain was a whitewashed kitchen
> hung with texts, swept tidy
> as the body o' the kirk.

The placing of the words 'brain' and 'whitewashed' in the same line might tempt us to hear 'brainwashed' with all its suggestions of religious and political dogma. There is also the figurative sense of whitewashed as an attempt to uphold the reputation of a discredited person or institution.[94] And if the neighbour's brain is 'hung with texts' we might also read hung in the sense of something deprived of life rather than life-giving, what Tom Paulin called in his poem 'Desertmartin', 'the bondage of the letter':

> Here the Word has withered to a few
> Parched certainties, and the charred stubble
> Tightens like a black belt, a crop of Bibles.[95]

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[93] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 88.

[94] In the wake of Bloody Sunday in Derry, in January 1972, the report of the Widgery Tribunal, in April of that year, was widely described as a 'whitewash'. It was during this time of escalating violence that Heaney modified a manuscript of *Wintering Out*, which he first sent to Faber on 14 October 1971. The final typescript of *Wintering Out* was sent on 15 May 1972. For an excellent discussion of the evolution of *Wintering Out* and the political context of the redrafted manuscript, see Michael Parker, 'From "Winter Seeds to Wintering Out": The Evolution of Heaney's Third Collection', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11.2 (2007), 130–41.

[95] Tom Paulin, *Selected Poems 1972-1990* (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 43.

But in section III there is 'the possibility of *rapprochement*', which Parker thinks the subject of the whole poem.[96] If we understand the poem as in some sense dealing with the language of two different religious sensibilities, then the final section describes the language of Marian devotion which Heaney thought representative of the feminine mode and which he described in the Hopkins essay as 'evocation', where language behaves with 'the lover's come hither instead of the athlete's display.'[97] In his essay 'The Poet as Christian', Heaney concludes with a reference to the 'Hail Mary' and the litany which concludes the recitation of the rosary: 'But the word is enriched and nurtured when it blesses a woman and the tongue is deeply humanized when over and over again it rolls a phrase like "the fruit of thy womb" or when it humbles itself to repeat "pray for us, pray for us, pray for us."'[98] In the humble repetition of 'pray for us' we might see the lover's come hither which stands in contrast to the patriarchal and dogmatic texts of the previous section. If the opening two sections of the poem present us with a grand biblical epic populated by heroes such as Pharaoh, Solomon, David and Goliath, then the final section restores us to a more personal lyrical space in which we might detect in the mournful recitation of the rosary an elegiac regret for the religious divide. The Protestant neighbour appears to acknowledge the final prayers of the litany even if he doesn't share that sensibility:

> we would hear his step round the gable
> though not until after the litany
> would the knock come to the door.

[96] Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 101.
[97] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 88.
[98] Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', p. 545.

In an article in 1973, in which he otherwise laments the state of British Poetry, Philip Hobsbaum draws attention to a small number of works which he thinks readers should be conversant with. Among these, he identifies 'the marriage sequence in *Wintering Out* and especially "Summer Home"'.[99] His judgment appears to have been vindicated by the poem's inclusion in all selections of Heaney's poems up to and including *Opened Ground* (69-71). Parker describes the poem as 'a journey in five acts from sin to chastened redemption'. In the first act (what Heaney had called 'The Smell' in an early manuscript[100]) Heaney recalls an unhappy period in a marriage during a 'summer gone sour': 'Whose fault, I wondered, inquisitor | of the possessed air.' The language of possession is almost diabolic and emphasises the magnitude of what had gone wrong. Andrews sees the pain reflected in 'wavering, meditative rhythms, the irregular rhyme and hovering half-rhymes.'[101] The word fault, however, reminds us of the Penitential Act of the Mass, where the penitent acknowledges their sins before God in the hope of forgiveness: 'through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.' The penitent places their hope of forgiveness in the intercession of Mary and the saints: 'therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.'[102]

In this plea of intercession to Mary we might trace the origin of the second act of Heaney's poem:

> The loosened flowers between us
> gather in, compose

[99] Philip Hobsbaum, 'The Present State of British Poetry', *Lines Review*, 45 (1973), 5–22 (p. 20). Eavan Boland also singled out the poem in a review in the *Irish Times*, when she wrote that with 'Summer Home' Heaney 'seems to reach towards an achievement better than any he has realised yet.' See 'Poetry of the Year: a retrospect', 15 December 1972.
[100] NLI, MS 49,493/12.
[101] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 67.
[102] *CTS New Sunday Missal: People's Edition with New Translation of the Mass* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2011), p. 523.

for a May altar of sorts.
These frank and falling blooms
soon taint to a sweet chrism.

Attend. Anoint the wound.

The appeal is not one of prayer in the sense that Mary is asked to intercede for the restoration of marital love but the hope for such a restoration is signified, nonetheless, in deeply sacramental language which finds its source in the Marian devotion of Heaney's childhood home. In his essay 'The Sense of Place' Heaney has written about the appeal of the May altar:

> Then on May Eve, the buttercups and ladysmock appeared on the windowsills in obedience to some rite, and during the month of May the pagan goddess became the Virgin Mary and May flowers had to be gathered for her altar on the chest-of-drawers in the bedroom, so that the primroses and the celandines also wound us into the sacral and were wound into it in their turn.[103]

When pressed in an interview by Frank Kinahan as to what he meant by describing himself as a Catholic writer, Heaney's response throws further light on the feminine structure of religion he saw personified in the Virgin Mary and specifically her role as intercessor in the Catholic tradition:

> I mean that the specifically Irish Catholic blueprint that was laid down when I was growing up has been laid there forever. I think of the distrust of the world, if you like, the distrust of happiness, the deep pleasure there is in a mournful litany, the sense that there's some kind of feminine intercession that you turn to for comfort – this is part of the Irish Catholic thing.[104]

In fact, if we stay with Parker's description of the poem as five acts moving from sin to redemption, we can see how the poem maps itself onto the penitential rite at the opening of the Mass. The poet examines his conscience in part I, takes responsibility for his fault in part II – 'O Love, here is the blame' and intercedes for healing

[103] 'The Sense of Place', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, pp. 131-149 (p. 134). The essay was originally delivered as a lecture in the Ulster Museum in January 1977.
[104] Frank Kinahan and Seamus Heaney, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.3 (1982), 405–14 (pp. 408–9).

'Attend. Anoint the wound.' In part III, after the uneasy image of being wounded by the 'cold flat of a blade', healing is once again restored in language borrowed from Catholic tradition as the poet postulates

> thick healings, like now
> as you bend in the shower
> water lives down the tilting stoups of your breasts.

It is a remarkable image of a fusion of the sacred and the profane, the word 'stoup' normally used to describe the receptacle for holy water in churches. Heaney's playfulness with the erotic and the sacred is not an isolated one. In the beautiful love poem 'The Skunk' (*OG*, 176), in *Field Work*, he likens his wife's 'black plunge-line nightdress' to the priest's 'chasuble | At a funeral mass'. Helen Vendler thought the image 'remarkable and blasphemous', and asked the rhetorical question 'is nothing sacred?'[105] The answer, I want to suggest, is that for Heaney everything is sacred, and the human body a sacramental sign of human love. It is not a case of offending a Catholic sensibility, but of writing out of one. Heaney returns to a similar image again in his poem 'La Toilette' in *Station Island*, when he describes the 'first coldness' of his wife's underbreast 'like a ciborium in the palm' (*SI*, 14). In the dignity with which he treats erotic feelings, Heaney may have had a precursor in W. R. Rogers who, in discussing the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene in his poem 'Lent', wrote the following lines:

> Over the balconies of these curved breasts
> I'll no more peep to see
> The light procession of my loves
> Surf-riding in to me
> Who now have eyes and alcove, Lord, for Thee.[106]

[105] Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 69.
[106] 'Poetry', in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. by Michael Longley (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), p. 100.

If, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, the body in Catholic theology is understood as a unique good, then Heaney's apparent fusion of the sacred and profane is entirely in keeping with the corporeal body as a sacramental good. Andrews gets it right, I think, when he writes: 'This is the poet as postulant, struggling to reassert a sexual piety, longing for benediction to offset human imperfection.'[107]

Heaney's description of the reconciliation between him and his wife in 'Summer Home' as 'a May altar of sorts' draws on the Catholic understanding of Mary as 'Mediatrix', an ancient title which describes her intercessory role in the salvific work of her son. In an essay on the art of David Jones, Paul Hills describes the importance of the Virgin Mary in Jones's own religious sensibility: 'The eminence afforded to the Virgin Mary by the Catholic tradition, which he embraced so soon after the First War, fitted with his own instincts. She became his essential mediatrix and protectress'.[108] The role of Mary as mediatrix or intercessor clearly fits with Heaney's instincts too, if less explicitly.

What both Jones and Heaney explicitly share, however, is their understanding of the earth as feminine. Hills writes that for Jones 'private soldier and Mother Earth belong to each other with an intimacy that not even the shepherd can know.'[109] In a part of *In Parenthesis*, where the battalion go over the top, Jones intercedes through the feminine earth:

> mother earth
> she's kind:
> Pray her hide you in her deeps.[110]

[107] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 68.
[108] David Jones, Paul Hills, and Nicolete Gray, *David Jones* (London: Tate Gallery, 1981), p. 62.
[109] Jones, Hills, and Gray, p. 61.
[110] David Jones, *In Parenthesis: seinnyessit e gledyf ym penn mameu* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), pp. 176–77.

The line is echoed in Heaney's 'The Tollund Man' (*OG*, 64-65), when Heaney invokes the bog body to resurrect the scattered flesh of those killed by violence:

> I could risk blasphemy,
> Consecrate the cauldron bog
> Our holy ground and pray
> Him to make germinate
>
> The scattered, ambushed
> Flesh of labourers,
> Stockinged corpses
> Laid out in the farmyards…

Andrews is right, I think, to suggest that the Tollund Man 'becomes a possible intercessor to whom the poet would pray to redeem his slaughtered countrymen.'[111] After all, for Heaney, the bog body has been worked to 'a saint's kept body' and it is because of the sanctity of his body that Heaney can intercede through him. If the Virgin Mary acts as Mediatrix, the saints too play their role in intercession: 'In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints.'[112] If, as Heaney suggested to Haffenden, he 'consecrated' himself after his move to Wicklow in 1972, then his first priestly act is to consecrate the cauldron bog and intercede through the power of the Tollund Man.

In a discussion of the poem in 'Feeling into Words', Heaney speaks of a 'new sensation' when he wrote the poem which was 'a vow to go on pilgrimage' to the museum of Silkeborg near Aarhus where the preserved head of the Tollund Man rests.[113] In a subsequent postcard to the poet Michael Hartnett in Dublin, Heaney wrote: 'I've been in Denmark – a pilgrimage – to see the "holy blissful martyr" overleaf.'[114] The language and feeling of the poem are, as Andrews suggests,

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[111] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 64.
[112] Iglesia Católica, p. 562.
[113] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 58. Heaney viewed the Tollund Man in the Silkeborg Museum and the Grauballe Man (about which he will write in *North*) in Aarhus in 1973.
[114] The postcard is included in the permanent National Library of Ireland Exhibition 'Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again'.

devotional.[115] The poet vows to 'stand a long time' in an act of veneration of the 'saint's kept body' which 'Reposes at Aarhus.' The word 'kept' is suggestive of those Christian saints and martyrs whose bodies, even in death, remain incorruptible. The preserved body 'reposes' in language familiar from Catholic liturgical practice where prayers are offered for the 'happy repose' of those who have died. Catholicism operates not only at the level of language but also at the level of syntax: the words of the Loreto Litany, which Heaney found 'bearers […] of mystery',[116] find their echo in an altogether different litany as Heaney drives through Denmark 'Saying the names | Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard'. In choosing to describe the 'man-killing' landscape of Jutland in the language of 'parishes', Heaney articulates Kavanagh's insight that the universal is to be found in the parochial, where Heaney is paradoxically both lost and at home:

> Out there in Jutland
> In the old man-killing parishes
> I will feel lost,
> Unhappy and at home.

In his discussion of this poem, Thomas Foster observes:

> The waters of the fen do not devour their victim; rather they turn his form into a 'saint's kept body.' This pre-Christian pattern flows into a Christian, specifically Catholic, form of belief: his body, turned into a relic of worship (Heaney promises to make a pilgrimage to Aarhus to see the corpse), becomes holy because his sacrifice, like that of the Christian saints, was for the causes of belief and community.[117]

James Simmons writes that 'The Tollund Man' 'announces the future books'.[118] It almost certainly announces *North* and I want to argue that in treating the Tollund

[115] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 65.
[116] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 45.
[117] Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1989), p. 34.
[118] Elmer Andrews, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic & Professional, 1992), pp. 39-66 (p. 53).

Man as a relic of worship Heaney draws deeply on the Catholic veneration of saints which he continues to draw on more fully in Part I of that collection.

CHAPTER THREE

'PINING FOR CEREMONY': *NORTH*, *FIELD WORK*, *THE HAW LANTERN*

NORTH

In his poem 'Relic of Memory' (*OG*, 27), from *Door into the Dark*, Heaney recalls a piece of petrified wood from Lough Neagh which was exhibited on a shelf of Anahorish School. He describes how the lough waters 'Can petrify wood' over the years and 'Incarcerate ghosts | Of sap and season.' In the final stanza he writes about:

> the lure
> That relic stored –
> A piece of stone
> On the shelf at school,
> Oatmeal coloured.

Together with 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', Michael Parker reads 'Relic of Memory' as a 'precursor for the bog poems of *North*'.[1]

The lure of relics in the Irish Catholic consciousness gained emphasis in the 'devotional revolution' of which Heaney's Catholic sensibility is an expression. In the early Christian Church relics were associated with the veneration of saints and began with Polycarp of Smyrna's martyrdom around AD 160. Early Christians gathered at the graves of martyrs to commemorate their heroic death. Over time the remains of saints were removed from graves and brought to churches where they were deposed in altars: 'This deposition signifies a real eucharistic connection between the saints and the faithful still on pilgrimage to heaven.'[2] Such became the eucharistic connection between the veneration of saints and the living faithful that,

[1] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 83.
[2] *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. by Lewis Ayres, Medi Ann Volpe, and Thomas L. Humphries, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 224.

since the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, no church may be consecrated without containing the relics of saints. In 1563 the Council of Trent reminded the faithful that 'it is good and useful to invoke them (the saints in heaven) humbly and to have recourse to their prayers […] in order to obtain favours *from God through his Son*, our Lord Jesus Christ, who *alone* is our Redeemer and Saviour'.[3] When Heaney invokes the Tollund Man to

> make germinate
> The scattered, ambushed
> Flesh of labourers

he is drawing on this tradition of the intercessory role of saints.

In early Christian Ireland, relics were of two kinds: the corporeal remains (bones) of saints and material objects associated with the saint in some way. These associative relics were such things as the gospel book, the bell and the crozier. Eamon Duffy has pointed out that in early Christian Ireland these associative relics mattered more than a saint's bodily remains.[4] Bells of both iron and bronze have been found in considerable numbers around Ireland and, as relics, were commonly associated with cures. It is the story of one such bronze bell that Heaney recounts in 'The Thimble' in his later collection *The Spirit Level*. Instead of acting as a cure, the molten bronze (a relic of St Adaman), sent the workers into a 'fiery delirium' which only the Saint himself could cure (*SL*, 42). Another associative relic used for cures, probably for animals as well as humans, was the saint's crozier or staff. In an excellent essay on the social role of relics in early Christian Ireland, A. T. Lucas tells us that:

> The saint's staff or bachall was, perhaps, more important than his bell because it was thought of as the principal vehicle of his power, a kind of

[3] Quoted in Ayres, Volpe, and Humphries, p. 224.
[4] Eamon Duffy, *Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), p. 158.

> spiritual electrode through which he conveyed the holy energy by which he wrought the innumerable miracles attributed to him.[5]

In my discussion of 'In Gallarus Oratory' I pointed out that Heaney thought such power (St Patrick's crozier) might also have a paralysing force. Another relic, common in Ireland, but comparatively rare in the rest of Europe was the saint's belt.[6] Again, it was associated with the power to heal and the tradition may lie behind the story Heaney recounts in 'A Brigid's Girdle', where the twisted straw is 'lifted in a circle | To handsel and to heal' (*SL*, 5).

The corporeal relics of saints in early Irish Christianity were often used to lend importance to certain religious sites. Their importance was reflected in the reliquaries created to house them, the reliquaries often themselves in the shape of houses.[7] Dee Dyas has written about the 'tactile piety' associated with such relics:

> the importance of touch in early devotional practice is not limited to the obviously beautiful or physically appealing. Indeed some of the saints' relics touched and kissed, both in the Middle Ages and still today, are not physically appealing at all.

He goes on to write: 'This is not just piety in terms of obedience and holy living, but a quality of sensory experience which reveals an extraordinary degree of physicality at the heart of much Christian spirituality.'[8] It is against this background of tactile piety and physicality that I want to read some of the bog poems in *North*. In *North*, Heaney pays the closest attention to the physicality of the body, even in death. There is a compulsion in Heaney not only to name things but to 'reach in | for shards of the

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[5] A. T. Lucas, 'The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 116 (1986), 5–37 (pp. 8–9).
[6] For a fuller discussion of the role of relics and reliquaries, see Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and The People* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 158.
[7] One such reliquary is the 'Emly Shrine', dating from 800, and now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.
[8] 'To Be a Pilgrim: Tactile Piety, Virtual Pilgrimage and the Experience of Place in Christian Pilgrimage' in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, ed. by James Robinson, Lloyd De Beer, and Anna Harnden (London: British Museum Press, 2014), pp. 1–7 (p. 1-2).

vertebrae' ('Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces', *OG*, 103-06) and to 'feel the tug' of the girl's body in 'Punishment' (*OG*, 117-18).[9] I argued in the previous chapter that the attention Heaney pays to the corporeal body in *Death of a Naturalist* could be read in the context of a theology of the body in Christianity which understands it as a unique good. I want to argue here that, at least in the drafts of the poems, Heaney's presentation of the bog bodies comes close to the Christian veneration of saints and that in the tactile language which he employs he borrows from the tradition just described. However, while the drafts show that he draws upon the resources of his Catholic upbringing, the worsening violence in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s led Heaney to question and revise the language of his inherited sensibility in the final poems which were collected in *North*.

In a review of George Mackay Brown's *An Orkney Tapestry* in 1969[10], Heaney said about the book:

> it is stirred by legends of Viking warrior and Christian saint; it solemnises the necessary labour of life into a seasonal liturgy; it consecrates the visible survivals of history, and ruins of time, into altars that are decked with the writings themselves.[11]

Much of this might apply to Heaney's own poetry. In *North*, however, the legend of Christian saint is more muted than that of Viking warrior. If in *Wintering Out* Heaney had begun to re-phrase sacramental language, there is evidence to suggest that in *North* he removes religious language almost entirely. I want to illustrate this through a close reading of 'The Grauballe Man', 'Punishment' and 'Strange Fruit'. It

[9] In his discussions with Dennis O'Driscoll about the writing of *Field Work*, Heaney says that he became increasingly aware of the poem itself as 'more a matter of vertebrae than plasm.' See *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 193.
[10] A year before, in 1968, Brown was awarded a scholarship for foreign travel by the Society of Authors. He decided to travel to Ireland and visited Heaney in Belfast. See Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), pp. 202–3.
[11] Seamus Heaney, 'Celtic Fringe, Viking Fringe', *The Listener*, 21 August 1969, 22–23 (p. 254), The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991.

may be that Heaney finds 'only the secular | powers of the Atlantic thundering' ('North', *OG*, 100-01) at this stage in his career, but a more convincing explanation may be in the nature of the poems themselves. In confronting the troubles in Northern Ireland in an oblique way, Heaney may have found it wise to have recourse to a myth more distant and more unifying than the Christian one in which the origins of the conflict might itself be traced.

In *Wintering Out*, Heaney presents 'The Tollund Man' as 'a saint's kept body'. Precisely because Heaney understands him as a saint, he is able to intercede through him for the 'scattered' and 'ambushed' victims of Northern Ireland's violence. It is tempting to read 'The Grauballe Man' (*OG*, 115-16) as a companion piece to the earlier poem. The opening of both poems describes the darkened heads of each victim – the Tollund Man's 'peat-brown head' comes to mind in the opening stanza of 'The Grauballe Man':

> As if he had been poured
> in tar, he lies
> on a pillow of turf
> and seems to weep
>
> the black river of himself.[12]

Like the Tollund Man, he too reposes in a manner which suggests the 'happy repose' of Christian souls. The physicality of the body is brought to life in the 'grain of his wrists', 'ball of his heel', his shrunken 'instep', and in a powerfully evocative metaphor:

> His hips are the ridge
> and purse of a mussel,
> his spine an eel arrested

[12] Christopher Ricks argues that the self-infolded simile of the last two lines is an example of a characteristic figure of speech in Andrew Marvell. See Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp 51-52. Heaney was familiar with Marvell's poetry and taught a course on Wyatt and Marvell in Carysfort College while working on the poems of *Field Work*. See John Breslin, 'Seeing Things: John Breslin Interviews Seamus Heaney', *Critic* (Winter, 1991), 26–35 (p. 33).

under a glisten of mud.

His ‘chin is a visor’ and his ‘slashed throat’ has ‘tanned and toughened’. It is as if Heaney wills him to life just by describing him, prompting the question: ‘Who will say “corpse” | to his vivid cast?’ When he describes his

rusted hair,
a mat unlikely
as a foetus’s

we might recall the foetus in ‘Cana Revisited’: ‘in the bone-hooped womb, rising like yeast’. In fact, the poem goes further than ‘Cana Revisited’ in delivering the ‘forceps baby’. Elmer Andrews likens the stanzas to incantation (and here, again, we have Catholicism operating at the level of syntax): ‘Similes and metaphors are strung together like solid, beautifully wrought, polished rosary beads. And what this highly figurative language and idolizing incantation does is to register an attitude of ritual obeisance.’[13] The extraordinary tension and dynamism of the poem, however, suggests more than obeisance – the poem registers an acute awareness of its own procedures.

In the final stanzas of the poem, although the Grauballe Man may be for Heaney ‘perfected in my memory’, in the end, like the Dying Gaul, he is ‘hung in the scales | with beauty and atrocity’:

with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

Parker is right to argue that ‘However much instinct and imagination urge him to elevate this casualty of religion to the communion of saints, the savage fate suffered by the Grauballe Man compels him towards a heavier conclusion.’[14] What the

[13] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 85.
[14] Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 136.

Grauballe Man is not for Heaney is a 'saint's kept body', and nowhere in the poem does he intercede through him. The description of the Tollund Man as a saint who could intercede on behalf of victims of violence opens Heaney up to the criticism that somehow his death was instrumental. The idea that the Tollund Man's suffering and death were somehow vicarious draws deeply on the Catholic theology of atonement and the tradition which informed Heaney's own sensibility. In his mother's faith, in the Catechism and in his experience of penance as a pilgrim of Lough Derg, he was, as Andrew Auge has argued, 'habitually disposed'[15] to such a theology. However, Auge argues that Heaney's poetry seeks to dismantle the debilitating components of his cultural system and that 'Foremost among these from his perspective is a sacrificial imperative sanctioned by a theology of atonement.'[16] When Andrews suggests that 'The religious impulse in "The Tollund Man" has been transmuted into doctrine and dogma' in 'The Grauballe Man', I am inclined to disagree.[17] In divesting the Grauballe Man of any intercessory role, Heaney is making a conscious decision to avoid such doctrine, and this position is supported by paying close attention to the process by which the drafts of 'Punishment' and 'Strange Fruit' became the final versions of those poems in *North*.

Arthur McGuinness has carefully traced the revisions to four of Heaney's poems eventually collected in *North*.[18] He traces six revisions of 'Punishment' before the final text of the poem in *North*. What the revisions clearly show is that Heaney

[15] Andrew J. Auge, *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism*, Irish Studies (Syracuse, N.Y.), First edition (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), p. 116.
[16] Auge, p. 109.
[17] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 85.
[18] Arthur E. McGuinness, 'The Craft of Diction: Revision in Seamus Heaney's Poems', *Irish University Review*, 9.1 (1979), 62–91. The revisions are based on worksheets in the November 1975 issue of *Quarto*, published by Queen's University, Belfast. The poems are: 'A Constable Calls', 'Act of Union', 'Punishment', and 'Funeral Rites'.

introduces language of atonement and hagiography only to remove it completely in the final version. In Stage I of the poem[19] Heaney introduces the idea of atonement:

> Beneath the stone
> my unshorn loins
> had been atoning.

The headband she wore as a blindfold 'was a soiled halo' and in this description the punished girl is closer to the 'saint's kept body' of the 'Tollund Man' than she is to the 'actual weight' of the Grauballe Man. Finally, in

> the birch scourge
> thrown across her settled
> in the posture
> of a palm

we are reminded of the palms on Palm Sunday, the day which marks the beginning of Holy Week in the Christian calendar in which the atonement of Christ reaches its full theological expression. On Good Friday of that week Christians remember the death of Christ who on the cross cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'[20] In this cry of forsakenness Christ was invoking the opening verse of psalm 22, the same psalm which Heaney references in his introduction of 'and numbered all her bones' in the second stage of 'Punishment'. In Stage V of the poem[21], Heaney introduces the theme of intercession familiar from 'The Tollund Man' when he implores the girl:

> Intercede
> for your weeping sisters
> foolish
> weeping under the lamppost.

Like the Grauballe Man, whom Heaney implores to 'make germinate' those killed in the Troubles, the Windeby girl becomes the instrument by which her 'sisters', who

[19] McGuinness, pp. 79–80.
[20] Matthew 27. 46.
[21] McGuinness, p. 84.

have broken tribal loyalties by fraternising with British soldiers, might escape punishment. However, almost immediately, in Stage VI, Heaney removes the appeal for intercession, but retains the idea of atonement and of the girl as a saint. It is only in Stage VII, which was collected in *North*, that Heaney removes altogether the language of atonement, the hagiographical reference to the girl's 'soiled halo' and the birch scourge likened to a palm. McGuinness concludes:

> The *North* text of 'Punishment' is at once a more secular and more personal poem than any of the preceding drafts. Except for casting 'the stones of silence', all specifically Christian language has been removed. The world of 'Punishment' operates not on the basis of sin and forgiveness, but on the basis of law or tribal custom.[22]

McGuinness acknowledges residual Christian language in the clear reference to the parable of the woman taken in adultery recorded in John 8. 3-11. Heaney introduces it later into his drafts of the poem (Stage III) in his reference to 'little adulteress', but the allusion outlives the other Christian language and imagery that he employs. It is only in Stage V that he develops the allusion: 'We all might cast | the stones of silence', to which he makes one final change in the *North* text which implicates himself and introduces the idea of the scapegoat:

> My poor scapegoat,
> I almost love you
> but would have cast, I know,
> the stones of silence.

The Troubles worsened in the early 1970s and peaked in 1972 with over five hundred deaths, at least half of which were of civilians. In the face of this cycle of violence, Heaney must have thought that instrumentally 'the efficacy of poetry is nil'[23] and that, in the reality of the worsening conflict, to intercede through the

[22] McGuinness, p. 67.
[23] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 107.

Tollund Man or the Windeby Girl for 'The scattered, ambushed | Flesh of labourers' rang hollow and was a poetic conceit too far. One OED definition of 'conceit' is 'anything quaintly decorative' and it is this sense of conceit which Edna Longley may have had in mind in her criticism of *North* when she impugned Heaney for imparting a 'decorative tinge' to violence and to history which, she felt, derived from his religious sensibility.[24] However, what the drafts of 'Punishment' show is that Heaney was fully alert to this ritualising habit and that in removing the hagiographical language of earlier drafts he was wrestling with the intercessory and instrumental role of the Catholic veneration of saints in the face of a cycle of violence which was more akin to elements of Greek Tragedy than it was to the hope of Christian redemption. Just as 1972 was coming to a close, Heaney was working on the drafts of a poem that was collected as 'Strange Fruit'. Once again, the various drafts of the poem indicate that what the instincts of a religious sensibility suggested, the terror 'of each hooded victim, | slashed and dumped' undercut.

In discussing 'Strange Fruit' with John Haffenden, Heaney says: 'I discovered the manuscript of that poem a while back, and it had ended at first with a kind of reverence, and the voice that came in when I revised was a rebuke to the literary quality of that reverent emotion, if you like.'[25] It has been my argument that Heaney's voice of rebuke is also heard in 'The Grauballe Man' and 'Punishment' and is most evident in the series of drafts of the latter. 'Strange Fruit' also went through a series of revisions and in its draft forms was variously called 'My reverence', 'Triceps', 'Reliquary', and 'Tete Coupee'.[26] The poem (and its draft

[24] 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur' in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 160.
[25] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 63 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).
[26] Richard Rankin Russell is correct to argue that 'Heaney's extensive revisions of this poem, beginning as early as December 19, 1972, and continuing through sometime in 1975, themselves

forms) receives extensive treatment in Richard Rankin Russell's *Seamus Heaney's Regions* and in a later paper by Gail McConnell.[27] It is not my intention here to rehearse these close readings, but to draw attention to a number of details in the drafts which have not been part of their readings but which, nevertheless, are important to my line of argument.

In its draft forms, 'Strange Fruit' was an intensely devotional poem which presented the murdered girl as a Christ-like figure. In a number of handwritten pages entitled 'My reverence', the last of which is dated '19/12/72', Heaney treats the girl as worthy of reverence in the tradition of the Catholic veneration of saints: 'So my reverence for the seasoned kernel | of her beauty comes naturally.' It comes naturally because of his tactile experience at wake-houses and the veneration of saints in the Catholic tradition which formed him, a point he makes in a speech in Denmark in 1996: 'My sense of reverence was also compounded by feelings derived from my Catholic background, with its stories of saints whose bodies stayed un-decomposed and fragrant in death because of their sanctity in life'.[28] Heaney thinks of the girl in deeply hagiographical terms, likening her face to 'an after-image | Of Veronica's napkin' in an allusion to the relic of the cloth used to wipe the face of Jesus at his crucifixion. His reverence is such that he implores: 'Church militant and Church triumphant | Find a niche for this beheaded girl' and then in an extraordinary line (crossed out) he threatens '~~Or I will nail my articles to the door | At Drogheda~~'.[29] It is

suggest its importance to him.' See Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p. 169.

[27] McConnell's paper argues that Heaney's greatest debt in the poem is a visual one (Glob's photo of 'The decapitated girl from Roum') rather than a literary one. See 'Heaney and the Photograph: "Strange Fruit" in Manuscript and Published Form', *Irish University Review*, 47. Supplement (2017), 432–49 <https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0302>.

[28] Quoted in Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, pp. 172–73.

[29] Dublin, National Library of Ireland, NLI, MS 49,493/38. All further references to drafts of the poem are to this manuscript.

a remarkable line in which Heaney is almost insisting that the Church beatify the murdered girl and, if not, then he will protest in the manner of Luther.

In an untitled typescript draft of the poem, Heaney's reverence for the girl assumes deeply eucharistic language:

> We have uncarpeted
> her fragrant sanctuary,
> let the air consume
> her censers of dead flowers,
>
> gathered her broken cruets.
> Her tabernacle is unroofed,
> her veil pulled off.

The word sanctuary has a rich heritage in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a sacred place usually associated with the presence of God and the sacred mysteries. Just as Heaney wishes to 'Consecrate the cauldron bog' in 'The Tollund Man', here too, in this earliest draft, his instinct is to make of the bog a sacred place. In Christian theology the body is also 'consecrated' in the sacrament of baptism when it becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit.[30] The sanctuary is fragrant from the 'censers of dead flowers', the description of which takes us back to 'In Gallarus Oratory' where the sea is described as a censer. The poet wishes for the air to consume this fragrance in a manner which calls to mind the incensation of the body in the Catholic rite of funerals when the priest prays: 'Receive his/her soul and present them to God the most high'. Heaney assumes the role of a priest in this incensation of the murdered girl. Reference to her 'broken cruets' has deeply eucharistic overtones as they bring to mind the two small vessels which contain wine and water to be poured into the

[30] Heaney is also alert to this meaning of sanctuary when he refers to 'the sanctum' of himself in an interview in 2000. See *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, ed. by Mike Murphy and Clíodhna Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), pp. 81-97 (p. 92). Heaney will also have been familiar with the use of the word in Louis MacNeice's poem 'Autumn Journal': 'But the home is still a sanctum under the pelmets'. See *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 46.

chalice and consecrated in the Mass, the 'tinkle' of which can be heard in 'Clearances' 6 (*OG*, 312).[31] The eucharistic reference is reinforced by making the girl into Christ himself – she is present in a 'tabernacle' whose 'veil' has been pulled off in an obvious allusion to the veil of the Temple which was torn in two at the moment of Christ's own murderous death.[32] In the final stanza of this draft the identification with Christ is made explicit:

> This was her body.
> This was her blood.
> This is a monstrance
> for her exposition.

The 'exposition' of the girl's body draws deeply on the Catholic practice of the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament during which time Catholics are encouraged to venerate the Real Presence of Christ shown forth in the monstrance.[33]

Heaney's reverence for the girl's head may be likened to the veneration of the head of Oliver Plunkett which Heaney introduces in a draft of the poem entitled 'Triceps'.[34] The head of Plunkett was eventually brought to Saint Peter's Church in Drogheda in 1921 where it can still be viewed in an ornate reliquary. He was beatified in 1920 and not canonised until 1975, a detail Heaney is aware of in referring to him as 'blessed'[35] in the draft poem:

> I once knelt

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[31] In Catholic liturgy, water is mixed with wine in preparation for the consecration of the Mass because John's gospel tells us that both blood and water came out of the side of Christ at his crucifixion (19. 34). Heaney's reference to cruets may allude to the drinking vessels which Glob tells us were sometimes found in the graves of the bog bodies. See *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 136.

[32] Recorded in each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew 27. 51; Mark 15. 38; Luke 23. 45.

[33] The word monstrance derives from the Latin verb *monstrare*, which means 'to show'.

[34] Plunkett was the Archbishop of Armagh and the last victim of the Popish Plot. Tried at Westminster Hall and found guilty of high treason in June 1681 for promoting the Roman faith, he was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn on 1 July 1681. His remains were exhumed in 1683.

[35] In the Catholic tradition, beatification is a path on the road to sainthood when a person is referred to as 'Blessed'. Only after canonisation, when the person is declared a saint by the pope, is the person referred to as 'Saint'. Heaney is clearly aware of this distinction in referring to Oliver Plunkett as 'blessed' since it was not until three years after the draft of this poem that Plunkett was declared a saint.

where our martyr's head reposes
under its dome
on a side-altar.

He kept the faith for us,
this Oliver.
We name our sons for him
and call him blessed.

In the draft of the poem entitled 'Reliquary', Heaney describes the girl as 'a seat for my strayed affections.' His use of the word reliquary reminds us of the reliquaries used in early Irish Christianity to house the corporeal relics of saints and once again, Heaney appears to be beatifying the dead girl's body. The phrase 'a seat for my strayed affections', however, suggests ambivalence on Heaney's part towards his inherited Catholicism. Although he strays from institutional Catholicism and its orthodoxy, what the drafts of 'Strange Fruit' show is the extent to which he was drawn to the tactile sense of those first affections. The gradual deletion of Catholic imagery in the drafts of the poem appear to mirror the strayed affections of Heaney's Catholicism. In the draft entitled 'Tete Coupee', the story of Oliver Plunkett disappears and a much shortened form of the poem assumes the form of a sonnet, where both the devotional nature of the form and Heaney's reverence for the girl are questioned in the sestet:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless terrible
beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

Except for minor changes, 'Tete Coupee' was renamed 'Strange Fruit' and was collected under that name in *North* in 1975. What the drafts show, even more explicitly than those of 'Punishment', are the very lineaments of Heaney's strayed affections, affections rooted in the Catholic veneration of saints.

Heaney's recourse to Catholic ritual was at the core of criticisms of *North*, most notably those of Edna Longley and Ciaran Carson. Longley argued that Heaney's rites were 'profoundly "Catholic" in character'.[36] Together with Elmer Andrews, she suggested that the ritual employed in *Wintering Out* had become doctrine in *North*:

> If what was hypothetical in 'The Tollund Man' – the consecration of "the cauldron bog" – has hardened into accepted doctrine, do these later images imply that suffering on behalf of Cathleen may not be in vain, that beauty can be reborn out of terror: "The cured wound"?[37]

In writing about 'Act of Union', Ciaran Carson criticises Heaney for a lack of explanation and goes on to say 'it is like a mystery of the Catholic Church, ritualized and mystified into willing ignorance.'[38] My argument is that what the drafts of the poems clearly reveal is the de-consecration of the bog and the removal of the language of atonement and hagiography in an effort to do away with any sense of violent death as intercessory or instrumental. What they show instead are the lengths to which Heaney quarrelled with himself about the legitimacy of employing such rites instrumentally in coming face to face with victims of violence. If he gradually strayed from the orthodoxies of his religious upbringing in his personal life, as a poet he strays from Catholic ritual in the final versions of the bog poems because not even ritual could abate the horrors of sectarian violence. It is Catholic ritual and veneration which the girl outstares at the end of 'Strange Fruit', and Russell gets it exactly right when he concludes: 'The poem thus brilliantly reverses a series of poetic gazes in previous bog poems, including Heaney's reverential description of the body in "The Tollund Man" from *Wintering Out* – "a saint's kept body"'.[39]

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[36] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 161.
[37] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 153.
[38] 'Escaped from the Massacre?' The Honest Ulsterman 50 (Winter 1975), 183-6 (p. 185).
[39] Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, pp. 182–83.

Blake Morrison thinks that the subject matter and 'poetic line' of *Field Work* are a return to the first two books.[40] When in 'High Summer' (*OG*, 45-46) the poet opens a bag of maggots and 'A black | and throbbing swarm came riddling out', or in Glanmore Sonnet IX, when 'a black rat | Sways on the briar like infected fruit' (*OG*, 171), we could be back in 'Personal Helicon', where a rat slaps across the young Heaney's reflection. In Glanmore Sonnet IV 'small ripples shook | Silently across our drinking water' (*OG*, 166), just as they had at Mossbawn.[41] Like the old woman in 'A Drink of Water' (*OG*, 151), Heaney dips 'to drink again, to be | Faithful…' to the rich source of Mossbawn, which even for a poet now in mid-life, is an 'untoppled omphalos' ('The Toome Road', *OG*, 150). In his elegy for Robert Lowell, Heaney tells his fellow poet: 'you found the child in me' (*FW*, 31-32). *Field Work* is as much an elegy for Heaney's childhood as it is for those killed in violence or those celebrated for their art. But I want to argue that it is more than this – that in a number of poems Heaney elegises his own Catholic upbringing which is intimately connected with his life at Mossbawn, not as mere nostalgia, but as something that was 'marvellous | And actual' ('Glanmore Sonnets VII, *OG*, 169).

Field Work is a book in which Heaney weeps for the securities of his childhood, what he referred to elsewhere as 'the womb life of church + (*sic*) community'.[42] Almost from the beginning of the collection there is a sense of the disintegration of the Christian vision. The concluding poem of 'Triptych' (*OG*, 149-

[40] Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 73.
[41] In 'Crediting Poetry' Heaney writes of his Mossbawn childhood: 'Ahistorical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern, we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence.' See *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 447.
[42] Diary entry, dated 14 December 1981, NLI, MS 49,493/57, p. 137.

49) finds the poet among the pagan and Christian remains of Lough Erne. In part III of the poem ('At the Water's Edge') 'carved monastic heads | were crumbling like bread on water.' Even the pagan god on Boa 'Answered my silence with silence', and the stoop, which in Christian churches is a receptacle for holy water, is now 'A stoup for rain water.' The solitary word 'Anathema' at the end of the second stanza appears to echo the traditional condemnation of erroneous Church teaching – 'Anathema sit'. Is Heaney here condemning the aridity of a once life-giving Christian faith which has wilted into sectarian division and is now like a 'cracked jug full of cobwebs'? When John Wilson Foster, writing about *Field Work*, says that 'Heaney's Catholicism is instinctive and remembered, not practised'[43] he may have been thinking of the penultimate stanza of this poem:

> Everything in me
> Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
> To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,
>
> And pray at the water's edge.

In these lines Thomas Foster detects the same impulse which Heaney expresses in 'The Tollund Man', only on this occasion his prayer is one of solace rather than intercession: 'The change in goals may signal a move from delving after solutions to wishing for spiritual wholeness, from youth's confidence in answers to middle age's desire for solace.[44] In the face of the 'fouled magma' of the relentless cruelties of spiralling violence, against the erosion of the Christian vision in which 'forgiveness finds its nerve and voice' ('Sibyl', *OG*, 148), Heaney's instincts are to turn to the language and imagery of his Catholic childhood. If, as Parker suggests, the poet is 'fortified by the memory of Mossbawn' in poems such as 'Toome' and 'A Drink of

[43] John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995), pp. 34–35.
[44] Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1989), p. 84.

Water'[45], part of that memory finds its source in Catholic ritual and practice, an example of which we find in 'The Strand at Lough Beg'.

'The Strand at Lough Beg' (*OG*, 152-53) is one of three elegies to murdered friends, the other two celebrated in 'A Postcard from North Antrim' and 'Casualty'. The scale of the bog poems in *North*, both historically and geographically distant, is shrunken in *Field Work* to the intimacy of home and community. Neil Corcoran writes that 'The immediacy of Heaney's sympathy forces him, for the first time in his work, to confront directly – as he did not in the mythologized obliquities of *North* – the actual circumstances of sectarian murder.'[46] Colum McCartney (Heaney's second cousin) was killed in a random sectarian assassination by loyalist paramilitaries in 1975. Heaney imagines his cousin driving towards Newtownhamilton and the sudden appearance of men with 'heads hooded' where his cousin was

> far from what you knew:
> The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,
> Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew.

The juxtaposition of his estrangement from home with the familiarity of Lough Beg (reinforced in the rhyming of 'knew' and 'yew') serves to reinforce the lonely and solitary nature of his murder. Heaney has written of Lough Beg as 'a local mecca' where 'St. Patrick, they said, had fasted and prayed there fifteen hundred years before.'[47] He is clearly attracted to the spiritual resource of Lough Beg, just as he wanted 'to bow down' on the island of Devenish. The deliberate reference to the church spire recalls the other-worldly, visionary possibility of Catholicism so beautifully expressed in a letter of Proust:

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[45] Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 158.
[46] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 93.
[47] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 19.

> the spiritualized beauty of the church spire – pointing upward into the sunset where it loses itself so lovingly in the rose-coloured clouds; and which, all the same, at first sight, to a stranger alighting in the village, looks somehow better, nobler, more dignified, with more meaning behind it, and with, what we all need, more love than the other buildings ...[48]

If Heaney thought of Church Island's spire in much the same way, as a repository of love, then it foregrounds even more powerfully the complete absence of love which accompanied the murder of Colum McCartney.

'The major poetic presence in *Field Work*, and in much of Heaney's subsequent work […] is Dante.'[49] He provides Heaney with the epigraph for 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and with the tender imagery in the third part of the poem, where Heaney washes the face of his murdered cousin, just as Virgil had washed the face of Dante in the opening canto of the *Purgatorio*. In the dream-like vision, Heaney finds his cousin on his knees 'With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes' and gathers up 'cold handfuls of the dew | To wash you, cousin.' Beyond its source in Dante, we might also identify dew as a blessing from God as it appears in Genesis 27. 28 and as a blessing of youth in Psalm 110. 3.[50] In this sense, the dew may serve to emphasise the fact that Colum McCartney was only twenty-two at the time of his death.[51] Laying the dead body of his cousin flat, Heaney completes the burial preparations: 'With rushes that shoot green again, I plait | Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.' Historically, in the Catholic tradition, scapulars were long pieces of cloth covering front and back and worn still by many religious orders. However, smaller versions of these are sometimes worn by Catholics around their

[48] The letter is to his friend Georges de Lauris and is quoted in McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 150.
[49] Corcoran, p. 84.
[50] 'Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine' (Genesis 27. 28); 'thou hast the dew of thy youth' (Psalm 110. 3).
[51] The details of his death are recorded in David McKittrick and others, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women, and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), pp. 565–66.

necks and are either brown or green in colour. Green scapulars are associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary and are an example of 'sacramentals', which are defined in the Catechism as things which 'prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to co-operate with it.'[52] Heaney may be invoking the intercession of the Virgin Mary for his dead cousin, a tradition familiar from his Mossbawn childhood and one which articulated spiritually the 'vale of tears' that was the occasion not only of Colum McCartney's death but of countless others.

The domesticity of the Marian devotion which Heaney was familiar with from Mossbawn appears once more in his elegy for the poet Francis Ledwidge, the Irish poet who died fighting for England in the First World War. Heaney's elegy borrows from Lowell's 'For the Union Dead', which Heaney described as 'majestic' in his memorial address for Lowell in October 1977.[53] Where the statue of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw on Boston Common 'is as lean | as a compass needle'[54], the figure of Francis Ledwidge 'hitches a bronze cape | … His sudden hunkering run, forever craned | Over Flanders.' The pathos of sudden death in war is brought to the fore in each poem: 'Two months after marching through Boston, | half the regiment was dead' and for Ledwidge: 'You were rent | By shrapnel six weeks later.' Both poems recall memories of each poet's childhood: Lowell recalls a visit to the South Boston Aquarium, Heaney to the prom at Portstewart, where his aunt Mary takes him by the hand. Mention of his aunt takes us back to the dedicatory poem of *North* – 'Mossbawn: Sunlight' – where domestic love is celebrated in a 'tinsmith's scoop'. In the subsequent stanzas, Heaney juxtaposes memories of his aunt herding cows

[52] Iglesia Católica, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), p. 373.
[53] 'Robert Lowell Special Issue', ed. by William Bedford, *Agenda*, 18.3 (1980), 116 (p. 26).
[54] Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 376–78.

with the young Francis Ledwidge in the trenches, who like Colum McCartney is far from what he knew:

> the leafy road from Slane
> Where you belonged, among the dolorous
> And lovely: the May altar of wild flowers,
> Easter water sprinkled in outhouses,
> Mass-rocks and hill-top raths and raftered byres.

The word 'dolorous', as we saw in Chapter 1, is picked up in a later interview: 'My sensibility was formed by the dolorous murmurings of the rosary, and the generally Marian quality of devotion.'[55] And the reference to 'Easter water' will be picked up again in *The Haw Lantern*, in Sonnet 6 of 'Clearances', Heaney's elegy for his mother.

In both 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', the parochial, to borrow Kavanagh's phrase, looms large as a place of security, and integral to that sense of place is the idea of the landscape as sacramental, 'a system of signs that called automatically upon systems of thinking and feeling'.[56] The spire of Church Island, the beauty of the May altar, and the renewal of Easter Water are foundational resources upon which Heaney draws to emphasise the sacred nature of home and of place and thereby bring to the fore the alienation of Colum McCartney and Francis Ledwidge, an alienation made complete by their deaths. The reference to 'Mass-rocks' brings to mind the historic alienation of Catholics during the penal times in Ireland, an image of which at Mossbawn (as we saw in Chapter 1) had a deep emotional impact on Heaney as a child. The Reformation and the alienation of Catholicism in England is the subject of his poem 'Leavings' where he imagines Thomas Cromwell consigned to Dante's *Inferno*.

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[55] Haffenden, p. 60.
[56] Seamus Heaney, 'The Poet as a Christian', *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 541–45 (p. 543).

There is little doubt that Heaney understood the Reformation as a rent in the veil of sacramental beauty. In a review of David Jones's *The Sleeping Lord*, Heaney wrote about Jones: 'Picking up where the Oxford Movement left off, his effort has been to graft a healing tissue over that wound in English consciousness inflicted by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution.'[57] In 'Leavings' (*OG*, 182), Heaney uses an image of threshing and the 'blackened stubble' of burnt straw to describe Cromwell's dissolution of the monasteries and the threshing of beauty from the Church:

> I rode down England
> as they fired the crop
> that was the leavings of a crop,
> the smashed tow-coloured barley,
>
> down from Ely's Lady Chapel,
> the sweet tenor latin
> forever banished,
> the sumptuous windows
>
> threshed clear by Thomas Cromwell.

What is of particular interest here are the things which Heaney considers losses. He laments not the loss of dogma or theological truth but the tactile piety which, like 'the sunset blaze | of straw', could dazzle the senses. Once again, the reference to 'Ely's Lady Chapel'[58] brings to mind the appeal of Marian devotion for the young Heaney, devotion which was to become a particular target of the reformers during the English Reformation. The loss of Latin from the Church's liturgy was something keenly felt by Heaney. When the Roman Catholic Church itself replaced Latin with the vernacular after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Heaney could not

[57] Seamus Heaney, 'Now and in England', *The Spectator*, 4 May 1974, p. 547.
[58] The 'Lady Chapel' at Ely remains an elegy itself to popular piety and Marian devotion. The bleaching of colour (some of which is still faintly visible), the clear glass which has come to replace the stained glass, and the smashed heads of various depictions of the Virgin are perhaps the strongest evidence of the reformers' zeal and iconoclasm which are at the heart of Heaney's poem.

hide his disappointment: 'I think that the Church deserted poetry when it deserted Latin, it precisely brought us down into the usual.'[59] When he writes of 'sumptuous windows' he may have in mind not only those of Ely, but also those of Chartres Cathedral about which he said elsewhere that they could inspire him to 'symphonic utterance.'[60] The threshing of Cromwell is a threshing of the senses for Heaney. The monastic heads which crumbled 'like bread on water' in 'At the Water's Edge' are now broken in an act of iconoclasm so fierce Heaney wonders which circle of Dante's *Inferno* does Cromwell tread?

It is clear from 'Leavings' that Heaney feels this iconoclasm deeply and his depth of feeling says something about the draw which his Catholic sensibility continues to exert on him at this stage of his career. Increasingly, Heaney comes to understand Catholicism as a subculture in relation to England. He makes the point light-heartedly in an interview with David Montenegro in 1991: 'The subculture of Catholicism never is reflected in the high art of England, with a few freakish exceptions like Hopkins and Hopkins and Hopkins (*laughs*).'[61] Part of his attraction to Dante was that he allowed Heaney to place his experience of Northern Irish Catholicism in a wider European context and thereby credit it in some way.[62]

In 'Leavings', the cultural sense of loss is palpable and personal. Andrews borrows the word 'leavings' to make a point which concurs with this reading of *Field Work*: 'The elegy is an appropriate genre for a poet preoccupied with 'leavings' – 'leavings' not only in the sense of death, but also inheritances that are

[59] Seamus Heaney, Gabriel Rosenstock, and Hans-Christian Oeser, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Cyphers* (2014), pp. 10–22, (p. 13).
[60] Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 414.
[61] Interview with David Montenegro, in *Points of Departure: International Writers on Writing and Politics*, ed. by David Montenegro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 180-197 (p. 181).
[62] See Michael Glover, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Poetry Life*, (1996), 8–12, 15–18 (p. 9).

precious and sustaining.'[63] One of these inheritances is surely his Catholic sensibility. Complicated as his relationship was with his Catholic past, nevertheless he says to Henri Cole: 'In many ways I love it and have never quite left it'.[64] We can sense that complicated relationship with Catholicism in his elegy for the poet Robert Lowell.

In a diary entry for 13 September 1977, Heaney wrote: 'Robert Lowell died in New York sometime last night. He was with us last week'.[65] It is that time together in Ireland which Heaney describes in the opening stanzas of 'Elegy' (*FW*, 31-32):

> here where we all sat
> ten days ago, with you,
> the master elegist
> and welder of English.

One of Lowell's elegies is 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket', a long poem in seven sections, the sixth of which, 'Our Lady of Walsingham', explores the possibility of grace through penitence: 'There once the penitents took off their shoes | And then walked barefoot the remaining mile'[66]. There are echoes of the line in Heaney's wish 'To go barefoot, foetal and penitential', just as the lines must have reverberated in Heaney's mind when working on 'Station Island'. In Lowell's poem, the pilgrims make their way slowly until they 'lose | Track of your dragging pain'. Mark Rudman thinks that Lowell's effort to leave behind the dragging pain of his puritanical shackles 'may have drawn him to Catholicism'.[67] His conversion wasn't

[63] Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper*, p. 134.
[64] Henri Cole, 'Seamus Heaney The Art of Poetry LXXV', *The Paris Review* (1997), 88–138, (p. 110).
[65] NLI, MS 49,493/11.
[66] Lowell, p. 17.
[67] Mark Rudman, *Robert Lowell, An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia Introductions to Twentieth-Century American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 33.

to last, however, and in 'Beyond the Alps' a journey from Rome to Paris becomes a journey away from faith: 'I left the City of God where it belongs'.[68]

Lowell's religious conversion to Catholicism and his moving away from it must surely have been of interest to Heaney for whom the question of his own complex relationship to his inherited Catholicism was important. Heaney describes the farewells with Lowell in the final two stanzas of 'Elegy'[69]:

> you found the child in me
> when you took farewells
> under the full bay tree
> by the gate in Glanmore,
>
> opulent and restorative
> as that lingering summertime,
> the fish-dart of your eyes
> risking 'I'll pray for you.'

Critics have been rather too keen to dismiss 'I'll pray for you' as mockery in a way I feel is not supported by the text or Heaney's later comments on it. Helen Vendler refers to it as 'an affectionate and mocking assertion of the fact of their mutual lapsed religion,'[70] and she cites Heaney's explanation in support. Heaney's explanation is provided in his interview with Henri Cole in which he acknowledges 'the faintest backlight of irony', but also 'there was a tenderness in it. And I think it was partly his way of saying, "I was once a Catholic too."'[71] It is certainly more than the 'post-Catholic quip' Ronald Tamplin argues it is.[72] The answer lies, I think, in the text itself and in the context of a book which addresses leavings and loss. When Lowell risks 'I'll pray for you' he finds the child in Heaney, and it has been at the

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[68] Lowell, p. 113.
[69] The farewell described in the poem took place after a week Heaney spent in Lowell's company at an arts festival in Kilkenny in 1975. See Heaney and Cole, p. 126.
[70] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 62.
[71] Heaney and Cole, p. 126.
[72] Ronald Tamplin, *Seamus Heaney*, Open Guides to Literature (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989), p. 84.

centre of my reading of *Field Work* to argue that the elegiac nature of the book which elegises relatives, friends and artists, is also an elegy for Heaney's own childhood and for the leavings and the losses which accompany growing up and which we see more clearly in middle age. If one of those losses is Heaney's inherited Catholic faith, the source of a rich and expansive sensibility, then it is surely deserving of mourning. Like Dante, Heaney is in the middle of his life when he publishes *Field Work,* and there were undoubtedly pressures to jettison many of the pieties of his childhood. He may have jettisoned them in practice, but they remained at the level of Heaney's felt sense like his father in 'The Harvest Bow' (*OG*, 183-84), whose stick 'Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes | Nothing'. A devout religious sensibility nurtured on a farm in rural Ireland in the 1940s may well beat out of time with a more secular vision beyond that world and time, but as a source for Heaney's expansive poetic vision, it flushes nothing.

THE HAW LANTERN

In his review of *The Haw Lantern*, William Scammell wrote that there is a 'contemplative' side to Heaney for whom, in the end, 'everything turns into a Mass'.[73] In a similar vein, Peter Forbes wrote: 'The obsessive sacramental poet, of which Heaney is the type par excellence, must keep returning to the same sacraments – after all, one Mass is very like another.'[74] If this sounds merely nostalgic, Peter Balakian reminds us that *The Haw Lantern* 'reveals Heaney's continuing ability to move in a new direction without relinquishing the core of his sensibility.'[75] Some

[73] William Scammell, 'The Singing Robes of Art', *Poetry Review*, 77.3 (1987), 42–44 (p. 42).
[74] Peter Forbes, 'The Growth of a Poet's Mind', *The Listener*, 9 July 1987, 29, The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991.
[75] Peter Balakian, 'Seamus Heaney's New Landscapes (Book Review)', *The Literary Review; Madison, N.J., Etc.*, (Summer 1988), 501–505 (p. 501).

critics saw that new direction in poems which are more visionary[76] and in which fire and air replace the presiding elements of earth and water in the early work.[77] But the core of his sensibility remains too, in which, to borrow an image from Helen Vendler, Heaney accumulates new layers without discarding old ones.[78] In discussing *Field Work*, I argued that at the core of Heaney's sensibility is his Catholic childhood which he elegises as much as he elegises friends and artists. Michael Allen, reviewing *The Haw Lantern*, argues that 'The best poems by far in the new book are elegiac'.[79] If Heaney acts like 'A raider from the old country | Of night prayer' ('Two Quick Notes', *HL*, 16), it is because he is so steeped in 'memory's riverbed' ('The Summer of Lost Rachel', *HL*, 34-35), where what was 'Glimpsed once' is 'imagined for a lifetime' ('The Spoonbait', *OG*, 305). There are glimpses of his Harvard colleague Robert Fitzgerald whose death, like Odysseus's arrowhead, 'Leaves a whispered breath in every socket' ('In Memoriam Robert Fitzgerald', *HL*, 22); of a young niece Rachel, killed in an accident, 'but still, | So absolutely still' ('The Summer of Lost Rachel', *HL*, 34-35); of his mother-in-law re-imagined as a wishing tree 'lifted, root and branch to heaven' ('The Wishing Tree', *OG*, 316); an elegy for his father who stands in his judgement place 'With his stick in his hand and the broad hat | Still on his head' ('The Stone Verdict', *OG*, 304). But it is the sonnet sequence to his dead mother which presides over the collection and which Steven Erlanger describes as 'The still center of the book.'[80] Across eight sonnets we catch glimpses of the child Heaney and his mother sharing moments now

[76] Steven Erlanger, 'How Gracious and Generous Grows Ireland's Poet', *Boston Globe*, 3 July 1987, p. 21.
[77] Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 217.
[78] Helen Vendler, 'Second Thoughts', *The New York Review*, 28 April 1988, p. 41.
[79] Michael Allen, 'Holding Course', ed. by Seamus Heaney, *The Irish Review*, 3 (1988), 108–18 (p. 113) <https://doi.org/10.2307/29735321>.
[80] Erlanger, p. 22.

'imagined for a lifetime'. That he should turn to the Mass as one of those moments will have come as no surprise to those reviewers who wrote of Heaney as a 'sacramental poet'. The child whom Robert Lowell found in *Field Work* presides in *The Haw Lantern* too, not only in 'Clearances', but from the opening poem 'Alphabets' onwards.

Critics have read 'Alphabets' (*OG*, 292-94) as a poem concerned with writing. Bernard O'Donoghue finds parallels in the opening poems of *Wintering Out* and *Field Work* which are also concerned with 'linguistic issues'.[81] Neil Corcoran, however, also reads it, in part, as an elegy for 'a vanished child, a bulldozed school, a disappeared rural way of life, and a language in danger of extinction, the "other writing" of Irish.'[82] Read as an elegy, we find the poem crediting Heaney's childhood learning even as he moves out towards a more expansive vision and understanding both in terms of language and geography. Heaney is like the poem's astronaut who 'sees all he has sprung from' and as the poem's circumference widens through its three parts, the final quatrain returns the poet to his Mossbawn childhood 'All agog at the plasterer on his ladder'. 'Alphabets' is the poetic expression of Heaney's remark to Karl Miller that 'You want to be able to include the experience at the circumference and to find your bearings between the circumference and the first centre.'[83] Tobin rightly sees in the 'coloured O' of the globe in Heaney's primary school, the *omphalos* of the poet's childhood.[84] As the poem moves to a stricter school (St Columb's), where he is introduced to the beauty of the Irish

[81] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 110. The poems O'Donoghue identifies are 'Fodder' (*WO*) and 'Oysters' (*FW*). Helen Vendler also thinks that 'It is language that underpins "Alphabets"'. See *Seamus Heaney* (1998), p. 130.
[82] Corcoran, p. 143.
[83] Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 29.
[84] Tobin, p. 221.

language (‘The capitals were orchards in full bloom’), the word ‘fostered’ seems a perfect borrowing from Wordsworth who himself was ‘Foster’d alike by beauty and by fear’.

Read in this way we might think of ‘Alphabets’ as anticipating other elegies in the book. Corcoran identifies in the alpha of ‘Alphabets’ and in the upper-case O’s of the poem the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The letters will appear again (though not stated) in the ‘paschal candlestick’ of ‘Clearances’ 6. At the Easter Vigil, the celebrant marks the paschal candle in a number of ways, including the capitalised A and Ω as a reminder that Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last (Revelation 22. 13). It is a reminder that in the incarnation of the Son of God, as Heaney says elsewhere, ‘the eternal has intersected with time’[85] and that such a vision has an amplifying energy for the poet, even if Heaney no longer assents to the doctrinal letter of it.

Such a vision, I want to argue, is entirely consistent with the unifying vision Heaney recounts in the final part of ‘Alphabets’. The figure of the necromancer is the personification of a Platonic vision (or neo-Platonic in this instance) of reality in which individual things participate in a more unified realm of Ideas or Forms.[86] The idea is wonderfully brought to life by the necromancer

> Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house
> A figure of the world with colours in it
> So that the figure of the universe
> And ‘not just single things’ would meet his sight
>
> When he walked abroad.

[85] Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, p. 414.
[86] For a discussion of the origins of this story in the Renaissance Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, see Corcoran, pp. 144–45.

The story of the necromancer is another salutary reminder that although the Catholic sensibility is the focus of this research, it is not to suggest that this 'single' sensibility is the only one at work in Heaney. However, I want to argue that a Catholic sensibility, in its incarnational expression, is expansive enough to accommodate other sensibilities at work in Heaney too, including the pagan Celtic and Classical traditions upon which Heaney draws extensively and to which I pay particular attention in my reading of *Human Chain* and Heaney's turning to Virgil. After all, the Apostles' Creed tells us that after his death Jesus 'descended to the dead' so that 'the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and places'[87] could fulfil his message of salvation even for the pagans. The descent of Jesus made salvation possible for those who died before his message had been proclaimed. The unifying vision of 'Alphabets' and that of Christian theology are not at odds.

Reviewing *The Haw Lantern*, J.D. McClatchy wrote that Heaney is 'concerned with how the child he was came to words and stories, and so to a magical view of the world, subject to spells and transformation'.[88] Transformation is at the heart of *The Haw Lantern* where 'Balers drop bales like printouts where stoked sheaves | Made lamdas on the stubble once at harvest'. Heaney laments the loss of a world where the good luck horse-shoe 'kept | Watch above the door' with the simple words 'All gone'. The 'central stepping stone', which Heaney stands on in 'Terminus' (*OG*, 295-96), could act as a metaphor for the collection itself, which Heaney described as 'a kind of middle-aged book'.[89] Mid-way through his life, the death of his mother in 1984 becomes the moment not only for reflection on what has

[87] Iglesia Católica, p. 144.
[88] J. D. McClatchy, 'The Exile's Song', *New Republic*, 197.25 (1987), 36–39 (p. 38).
[89] Montenegro, p. 194.

gone but for profound meditation on absence and what has been transformed. The collection's epigraph for Bernard and Jane McCabe – 'The riverbed, dried up, half-full of leaves. | Us, listening to a river in the trees' (*OG*, 291) – lifts Heaney's vision skywards where the tactile and sensuous world gives way to the visionary, so that, in the title poem of the collection, breath which 'plumes in the frost' takes on 'the roaming shape of Diogenes' (*OG*, 299). *The Haw Lantern* increasingly becomes a meditation on absence, the word used for the first time in the poem 'Hailstones'.

Together with 'Alphabets' we might read 'Hailstones' (*OG*, 302-03) as a poem about writing. As Heaney's cheek is 'hit and hit' by sudden hailstones we have a sense of the sudden over-abundance of lived experience which for all of its surprise and 'knowledge' is momentary. As the hailstorm clears (the word 'clears' anticipating the 'Clearances' surrounding his mother's death), the moment invites the poet to take 'my chances' and salvage something in poetry from the slippage of time:

> I made a small hard ball
> of burning water running from my hand
>
> just as I make this now
> out of the melt of the real thing
> smarting into its absence.

Here Heaney may be expressing in poetic form the analogy he borrowed from Robert Frost who wrote that a poem, like a piece of ice on a hot stove, 'must ride on its own melting' on which Heaney commented: 'The poem is a complex word, a linguistic exploration whose tracks melt as it maps its own progress.'[90] But it is as much about the disappearance of the self as it is about the process of writing. 'Alphabets' is an elegy to the melt of lived experience in which the melt of the

[90] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, pp. 80–81.

hailstone provides 'the truest foretaste of your aftermath'. In the second part of the poem, he writes:

> To be reckoned with, all the same,
> those brats of showers.
> The way they refused permission,
>
> rattling the classroom window
> like a ruler across the knuckles.

In *Field Work*, Heaney shows us the way suffering often comes in an instant like 'the sudden brakes and stalling | Engine' that immediately preceded Colum McCartney's murder, or the 'pointblank teatime bullet' that killed Sean Armstrong. Like the murder of King Agamemnon in the later poem 'Mycenae Lookout' (*OG*, 414-22), in the shock of suffering which refuses permission,

> The shadow-hinge
> swings unpredict-
> ably and the light's
> blanked out.

In *The Haw Lantern*, after the death of his mother, Heaney is made to reckon with the sudden shock of what Larkin calls 'the new absence'.[91]

The manuscript drafts of 'Hailstones', however, also reveal another level of the poem which Heaney omits from the published version, but which in important ways anticipates the sonnets of 'Clearances'. In what became section III of the published poem, the draft reads:

> Nipple and hive, bite lumps,
> all the hot beginnings still alive
> in my cooling cheek.
>
> Our toga virilis then, a duffel-coat
> with its monkish hood.
> And what we looked up to, hard starched lace
>
> on a priest, embroidered knots

[91] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: The Marvell Press and Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 214.

on a belly-girdling surplice,
as tight and pure as hailstones.[92]

Heaney, no longer a child, wears a duffel-coat as the Romans wore the *toga virilis* to signify manhood. Even as the 'hot beginnings' of his early childhood experience begin to cool in adulthood, his duffel-coat is still a 'monkish hood' and 'what we looked up to' suggests not only the child's view vis-a-vis the adult's, but also a sense of reverence, which the drafts of 'Clearances' suggest is transferred to his mother in adulthood. The embroidered knots on the priest's starched surplice which are 'as tight and pure as hailstones' might convey the paradoxical nature of Heaney's experience of Catholicism which is both restricting and illuminating at the same time. The illumination provided by Heaney's childhood sacramental experience finds its deepest expression and indeed its Latin root 'clarus' ('bright', 'shining', 'brilliant') in the title he chooses to give to the sonnets in memory of his mother – 'Clearances'.

In an interview with John Breslin in 1991, Heaney spoke about the significance of being at the deathbed of his parents as one of the reasons 'for the sense of the roof coming off, and my daring to speak about the big events.'[93] Elsewhere he spoke about how the word 'spirit' came to mean something after the loss of his parents: 'I would say that space should be made in the human scheme of reality for something called spirit.'[94] In this sense the poems which make up 'Clearances' are what Bernard O'Donoghue describes as 'special-occasion poems.'[95] They mark a one-off moment in the poet's life. Discussing Heaney's treatment of

[92] NLI, MS 49,493/80.
[93] John Breslin, 'Seeing Things: John Breslin Interviews Seamus Heaney', *Critic*, (Winter 1991), 26–35, (p. 28).
[94] J.J. Wylie and John C. Kerrigan, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 2.1–2 (1999), 125–37, (p. 134).
[95] O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, p. 114.

elegy, Jahan Ramazani described them as 'Heaney's finest achievement'.[96] Peter Balakian describes Heaney as 'masterful' and argues that 'His ear is so well-tuned to the myth in things that he can hear his way back to his mother.'[97] If Scammell and Forbes are right to argue that Heaney keeps returning to the Mass, then the sonnets, and their draft forms, provide much of the evidence.

What the extensive drafts of 'Clearances' reveal in terms of Heaney's relationship with his mother, is just how closely bound it was to his relationship with Catholicism. In a draft of sonnet 6, in which Heaney remembers kneeling beside his mother at the Easter Vigil, he writes:

> Me glad to be pleasing, she to be pleased,
> The good boy with his mother near the front,
> Elbow to elbow…[98]

The suggestion is that Heaney's mother took pleasure in her son's devotion to his inherited Catholic faith, and her son's enthusiasm to please her is the reverse of Stephen Daedalus who refuses to kneel at his dying mother's bedside.[99] It is as if Catholic devotional practice is the channel by which the child Heaney shows devotion to his mother. Stephen Regan reminds us that 'Primarily a love poem, the sonnet has extended its remit over the centuries' to become the preeminent form of religious devotion and elegiac mourning among other things.[100] If 'Clearances' is primarily a sequence of love poems, it is also one of religious devotion, but where the object of devotion is transferred to Heaney's own mother. Regan goes on to argue that Heaney 'revises and extends the tradition of the elegiac sonnet' in

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[96] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 353.
[97] Balakian, p. 501.
[98] NLI, MS 49,493/83.
[99] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Danis Rose (London: Picador, 1998), p. 7.
[100] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

'Clearances'.[101] What is clear from the drafts of the poems is that one way in which Heaney extends the tradition is the extent to which the love poem and the devotional poem dovetail so that they become almost inseparable. A closer look at sonnet 3 and its draft forms will reveal the extent to which this appears to be the case.

Among the typescript drafts of poems, some of which were collected in *The Haw Lantern*, is a poem entitled 'A Chaplet'[102] dedicated to the poet's mother. The poem is alternatively entitled 'Dear Mam and Aunt Mary', with some variations, in the same folder.[103] A poem in five parts, it was revised and collected as sonnet 3 in 'Clearances'. Only the opening stanza and the opening line of the third stanza of 'A Chaplet', with slight variations ('Your breath in my breath those Sunday mornings'), make it into the published poem. In a stanza not collected in the published version, Heaney writes:

> Earlier you let fall memorial cards
> Out of your missal, between the kneeling boards,
> Black-rimmed, black-lettered, each with its photograph
> Of the deceased…Pray for the soul of…
> Our Lady of the Seven Dolours
> Pined on the obverse in her sepia colours.

Memorial cards remain an important tradition in Irish Catholic life. They include a photo of the deceased and various prayers for the repose of their soul. Traditionally, these were inserted inside personal missals which allowed people to follow the Latin Mass. The 'Seven Dolours' refer to the seven sufferings of the Virgin Mary in popular Catholic devotion and would have been familiar not only from Heaney's childhood, but also from his home at Mossbawn where Marian devotion was strong and in which Heaney saw mirrored the suffering of his own mother (*SS*, 40). In part

[101] Regan, *The Sonnet*, p. 187.
[102] A Chaplet is a form of Christian devotional prayer which uses prayer beads in a similar vein to the use of rosary beads. Like rosary beads, some chaplets are related to Marian devotion and this is likely what Heaney intends here.
[103] NLI, MS 49,493/80.

V of the draft, Heaney identifies some of that suffering, this time borrowing an image from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> And now the tears of things[104], now your resentments
> At other's whimpering, or incontinence.
> O mother, mother, in each departing kiss,
> The lents, the christenings, the rosaries.[105]

What is extraordinary about the final two lines is how the moment of intimacy shared between Heaney and his mother is signified by popular Catholic devotion – the suffering associated with lent, the centrality of family (Heaney's family and the family of God in baptism), and the memory of the rosary which Heaney associates with the domestic life and love of Mossbawn. However, even more revealing are notes which Heaney scribbled after the typescript draft of 'A Chaplet' in which he equates his mother with the Virgin Mary: 'You are our lady of the seven sons. | I was the first of your annunciations.' Beneath these two scribbled lines is the single word 'Patience'.[106] It is an extraordinary claim, but one which seems to support my argument that Heaney's relationship with Catholicism is inextricably linked to his relationship with his mother and what he most admired in her. In the draft of the poem entitled 'Dear Mam and Aunt Mary', Heaney retains (in modified form) only the first and last stanzas of 'A Chaplet'. However, in a second stanza, where he refers to the tongue (perhaps of the 'other woman' away at Mass) of someone 'always wounding, wounding', he once again commends the patience of 'My virgin mother' in a clear identification of his mother with the Virgin Mary. In the patience

[104] 'The tears of things' is a translation of 'lacrimae rerum', the tears shed by Aeneas having seen a depiction of the destruction of Troy in *Aeneid* 1, line 462. Once again, the switch from Marian devotion to Virgilian pathos is another example of how easily Heaney accommodates different sensibilities in his work, not in opposition, but as part of the unifying vision we saw in 'Alphabets'.
[105] Heaney had written a variation of the final two lines on 5th January 1978 in an earlier notebook relating to *Wintering Out.* Parts of the second line are difficult to decipher, but the lines appear to read: 'O mother, mother, in each long kiss, | What lents, what christenings, what last-ditch rosaries.' What is clear in the second line is 'what last-ditch rosaries.' See NLI, MS 49,493/11.
[106] NLI, MS 49,493/80.

which Heaney saw his mother exercise against the 'wounding' tongue, he clearly sees the figure of the Virgin Mary. Of the impact of this on Heaney as a child he said in an interview in 2002:

> One of the effects of a Catholic childhood as pious as mine was to give special value and even beauty to the concept of passive suffering…I was sensitized to the reality of dumb sorrow, helpless endurance. Highly conscious of "the suffering souls in purgatory"; and developing a kind of answerability for them.[107]

What we can now tell from the notebooks is that the origins of 'Clearances' 3 go back at least as far as January 1978, and possibly as far back as 1975.[108] In a hardback notebook dated 1968-1980, we find an early handwritten draft of what became the first octave of 'Clearances' 3:

> ~~Sunday mornings were our chance~~
> When the other woman was away at mass
> I was all yours, peeling the potatoes.
> They gleamed in the bucket of clean water,
> Reflections brimming the ciborium
> Your…[109]

The 'reflections' may refer to those of Heaney and his mother, which reinforce further the intimacy of the moment. However, the most significant word is 'ciborium', the sacred vessel used to contain the consecrated communion hosts. The word disappears after its use here, but its inclusion in this earliest identifiable draft reveals not only Heaney's sacramental instinct as he first thought about this poem, but his understanding of the relationship with his mother as profoundly eucharistic. Ramazani remarks that 'this sonnet depicts a moment of prelapsarian communion between mother and son, elegy's conventional period of idyllic concord between

[107] John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Northern Irish Poets* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002), p. 82.
[108] The draft of what became 'Clearances' 3 appears in a notebook dated 1968-1980, which contains the manuscript drafts of poems, many of which were collected in *Wintering Out.* The draft notes appear immediately below notes for 'Glanmore Sonnet I', 'September Song' and 'The Harvest Bow', dated 'Feb 1975'. See NLI, MS 49,493/11.
[109] NLI, MS 49,493/11.

mourner and deceased.'[110] But it is communion not merely as something shared or 'held in common' (OED), but communion in the sacramental sense of the eucharist and the communion of saints.

I have argued that Heaney's relationship with his mother is closely bound to his early experience of Catholicism. We find evidence of this, again, in sonnet 6, about which Ramazani says: 'Their contact is mediated by rituals and texts that both permit the closeness and yet enforce a respectable distance, the image of mystic desire expressing erotic love while sanitizing it.'[111] The mediation in this poem is the Easter Vigil, which is not only a highpoint of 'our Sons and Lovers phase', but the highpoint theologically of the Church's liturgical year, and which Heaney would have been fully aware of.[112] As the child Heaney and his mother follow, in Latin, the 'rubrics for the blessing of the font', the 'Dippings' refers to the fact that during the blessing of the water in the font, the paschal candle was plunged three times into the water with the words 'Descendat in hanc plenitudinem fontis virtus Spiritus Sancti' ('May the power of the Holy Spirit come down into the fulness of this fountain'). Like the 'echo' of the introductory poem of 'Clearances', Heaney may have found in the memory of the potatoes falling 'one by one' into the 'bucket of clean water' in 'Clearances' 3 an echo of the plunging of the paschal candle in 'Clearances' 6, just as his mother's breath in his finds its liturgical source in the priest breathing on the water. As if to emphasise the son's (and poet's) intimacy with the liturgical life of the Church which, as I have argued, found its expression in the intimacy shared with his mother, we have the delicate, but important sound of 'Cruet tinkle'; only

[110] Ramazani, p. 355.
[111] Ramazani, pp. 356–57.
[112] 'Therefore Easter is not simply one feast among others, but the "Feast of feasts", the "Solemnity of solemnities", just as the Eucharist is the "Sacrament of sacraments" (the Great Sacrament).' Iglesia Católica, p. 268.

someone who was glad to be kneeling next to his mother ‘near the front’ and who had served Mass at St Columb’s College, could have heard such a delicate and sweet noise. Like the chestnut tree in sonnet 8, Heaney’s first experience of the beauty of the Church’s liturgical life was ‘coeval’ with his mother’s devotion to it. His sometimes complex relationship with his inherited Catholicism was no doubt complicated by his own devotion to his mother. It was most fully explored in the book he published just before *The Haw Lantern* and to which we now turn – *Station Island*.

CHAPTER FOUR

'HABIT'S AFTERLIFE': *STATION ISLAND*

THE SHADE OF DANTE

When discussing the origins of *Station Island* with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney said: 'Dante was the first mover of the sequence, no doubt about that. The experience of reading him in the 1970s was mighty' (*SS*, 234). In his essay 'Dante's Versatility and Seamus Heaney's Modernism', Bernard O'Donoghue traces references to Dante from *Field Work* to *Seeing Things*. He explores the various ways in which Dante becomes a presence in Heaney's poetic structure and concludes that 'Heaney follows another modernist tradition in the multiplicity of senses he wants Dante to represent.'[1] It is to this multiplicity of senses I now wish to turn.

An obvious sense which Dante represents for Heaney is in providing him with an apparatus which becomes 'structurally indispensable'[2] for *Station Island*. Dante's structure is reflected in the three-part Dantean journey scaled down, as Heaney says, into the three-day station which makes up the pilgrimage on Lough Derg (*SS*, 235). The example of Dante allows Heaney to commune with the shades of his own dead friends and guides. It is what Heaney first 'loved in the *Commedia*', the 'vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades'.[3] We find that fondness

[1] *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. by Nick Havely (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 255.
[2] Havely, p. 245. In the typed draft of a lecture on 'Seamus Heaney and Dante', which Darcy O'Brien sent to Heaney on 31 March 1992, O'Brien writes that, for Heaney, the 'apparatus of Catholicism' operates in much the same way as the Homeric schema in Ulysses. In a handwritten note on page 23 of the typed text, O'Brien writes: 'For Heaney the apparatus of Catholicism, its dogma […] operates much in the way that the Homeric schema functions in Ulysses, as a scaffolding, or a frame of reference. As with Joyce, the sensibility is another matter.' 'Seamus Heaney and Dante', p.23. Atlanta (GA), Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, MSS 960, Box 67. Hereafter, Emory.
[3] Seamus Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review*, 15.1 (1985), 5–19 (p. 18).

attaching itself to the 'seaside trinket' of a young girl (Heaney's aunt Agnes who died of TB in her teens) which 'housed the snowdrop weather of her death' (*OG*, 248); the reflection which appears to Heaney of a friend (William Strathearn) shot dead in his own home, who 'trembled like a heatwave and faded' (*OG*, 258); and the pleading of Heaney with the ghost of Colum McCartney for forgiveness for drawing the 'lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*' over his ugly death (*OG*, 261). What Dante allows Heaney to do is place himself in this historical world of familial pieties and sectarian violence and yet to 'submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history'.[4] Eliot felt that such a structure provided Catholic writers with a head start: 'I will not deny that it may be in practice easier for a Catholic to grasp the meaning, in many places, than for the ordinary agnostic; but it is not because the Catholic believes, but because he has been instructed.'[5]

A second sense in which Dante appealed to Heaney, and a sense also identified by Eliot, is the visionary aspect of the *Commedia*. Eliot wrote that 'Dante's is a *visual* imagination. It is a visual imagination in a different sense from that of a modern painter of still life: it is visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions.'[6] Eliot's borrowing from Dante in this regard is perhaps most obvious in his poem 'Little Gidding', a poem which had a particular bearing on Heaney as a model for *Station Island*. In 'The Impact of Translation', Heaney discusses Eliot's 'Little Gidding', published in 1942 against the backdrop of the

[4] Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications', p. 18.
[5] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode, Faber Paperbacks (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 221–22. This insight of Eliot's has particular bearing on Heaney's Catholic sensibility which operates on levels other than belief. I have traced the catechetical origins of Heaney's Catholic sensibility in Chapter One.
[6] Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p. 209. Heaney also lived in a time when 'men saw visions'. It is one such vision which informs 'The Mud Vision' towards the end of *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney recounts the story to Henri Cole in 1997. See Henri Cole, 'Seamus Heaney The Art of Poetry LXXV', *The Paris Review* (1997), 88–138 (p. 118).

Second World War.[7] The setting is a street in Kensington just before dawn, where the narrator is on duty as an air-raid warden.[8] 'In the uncertain hour before the morning', Eliot's persona meets a figure with a 'down-turned face'[9], an obvious reference to Dante who, on his meeting with Brunetto Latini in Canto XV of *Inferno*, 'walked with down-bent head'.[10] This is Eliot's 'compound ghost'.[11] Heaney says of 'Little Gidding':

> There, in the Dantesque set-piece of the dawn patrol, Hitler's Luftwaffe could be sent packing as a dark dove beneath the horizon of its homing, and the All Clear after an air raid could recompose the morning by recourse to matutinal airs which had once drifted from the dew of a high eastern hill towards the battlements of Elsinore.[12]

It is with the same matutinal airs that Heaney begins his own ghostly colloquies in 'Station Island': 'A hurry of bell-notes | flew over morning hush | and water-blistered cornfields' (*OG*, 242).

The figure of the émigré poet provides another sense in which Dante appealed to Heaney. Exiled from Florence in 1302, Dante was never to return to his homeplace and died in Ravenna in 1321. Anne Stevenson believes that these particular circumstances, in which Dante found himself as a writer, were attractive to Heaney. Both poets weighed their 'responsible *tristia*', Heaney as 'inner émigré' (*OG*, 144), Dante as physical émigré:

> Heaney's affinity with Dante, as we might expect, is different from Eliot's. It is Dante's personal predicament that attracts him – Dante's situation in his society (similar to his own) as a scholarly, imaginatively just man who

[7] See T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot. Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 989. The poem was published in *NEW* on 15 October 1942.
[8] See Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot. Volume 1*, p. 1004.
[9] Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot. Volume 1*, p. 203, lines 25; 36.
[10] Dante, *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers, Repr (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 163.
[11] Eliot suggests an identification of the compound ghost in a letter of 1961, where he says: 'I was thinking primarily of William Yeats, whose body was of course brought back to Ireland after the war.' Letter to Kristian Smidt, 25 September 1961. See Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot. Volume 1*, p. 1012.
[12] *Seamus Heaney, The Government of the Tongue* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 43.

> adheres to peace in an environment corrupted by politics and rife with murderous betrayal.[13]

It was partly for this reason that Heaney was attracted to Osip Mandelstam. Heaney's use of the word *tristia* reminds us of Mandelstam's *Tristia* and the circumstances which saw him arrested in 1934 and later in 1938, when he was sentenced to five years' hard labour and died of a heart attack on his way to the camps.[14] The question for Mandelstam and Heaney, to different degrees, was the responsibility of the poet faced with the labour camps of Russia and the internment camps of Northern Ireland respectively.

In the introductory essay to *The Government of the Tongue,* 'Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker'[15], Heaney asks how the poet is to choose between 'Song and Suffering', between the 'free gift'[16] of lyric poetry and the deprived conditions of the world in which the poet finds himself? Notwithstanding the ethical and other demands made upon the poet, Heaney sides with Mandelstam in affirming the 'unlooked-for joy in being itself' of lyric poetry. Mandelstam, Heaney writes, 'had no immediate social aim. Utterance itself was self-justifying and creative, like nature.'[17] In the essay which lends the book its title, Heaney returns to Mandelstam again, this time to his essay on Dante, which Heaney describes as an 'astonishing fantasia on poetic creation'.[18] Mandelstam rejected a reading of Dante as a poet whose tongue was governed by an orthodox system of belief, in favour of a poet of

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[13] 'The Peace Within Understanding: Looking at "Preoccupations"', in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Tony Curtis, 4th edn (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), pp. 131-137 (p. 134).
[14] The word 'tristia' also suggests more distant echoes of Ovid's elegiac poems *Tristia* written in AD 8-12, the early years of the poet's exile to Tomis on the west coast of the Black Sea.
[15] 'Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', pp. xi-xxiii. This essay, Heaney tells us, 'steals' from his essay 'Place and Displacement' delivered at Glasmere in 1984, the year in which *Station Island* was published. See *Government of the Tongue*, p. ix.
[16] *Government of the Tongue*, p. xviii.
[17] *Government of the Tongue*, p. xix.
[18] *Government of the Tongue*, p. 94.

lyrical freedom, of 'free biological play, a hive of bees, a hurry of pigeon flights'.[19] It was this reading of Dante that most appealed to Heaney as he set out, in *Station Island*, to free his lyric impulse from his own inherited orthodox system of belief.

In tracing this multiplicity of senses which Heaney wants Dante to represent, there is one further sense which Heaney identifies in an interview in 1996, which has not been acknowledged by the critics, but which has a particular bearing on this research. In an interview with Michael Glover, Heaney said:

> What Dante enables me to do is to bring what was and is in Anglophone culture subcultural and ghettoised – that is to say, Northern Irish Catholicism – into touch with a europeanizing, classicizing influence, and thereby give it a much greater hegemony. So that there is an empowering of the discredited data – of the B.V.M., the Blessed Virgin, for example. Intellectually, if you like, it was a reminder that your experience which, in one way, is marginalised, in another has huge accreditation.[20]

In the specific reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary, we are immediately drawn back into the domestic and religious life of Mossbawn. What we cannot ignore is Heaney's impulse to credit the validity of the parochial (in Kavanagh's sense), even as he attempts to move beyond it in *Station Island*. It is this tension which is at the heart of Part One of the collection.

In terms of the discredited data of Heaney's inherited Catholic pieties, Dante offers Heaney a broader historical context in which these find validation. And so too the sub-culture of Lough Derg about which Heaney said: 'Famous throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, notorious during the penal days, it has always been an important element in Irish sub-culture.'[21] In Brian Friel's play *Translations*[22], Hugh,

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[19] *Government of the Tongue*, p. 95.
[20] Michael Glover, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Poetry Life*, (1996), pp. 8–12, 15–18 (p. 9).
[21] Seamus Heaney, 'A Tale of Two Islands: Reflections on the Irish Literary Revival', *Irish Studies*, 1 (1980), 1–20 (p. 10).
[22] Heaney dedicated *Station Island* to Brian Friel whose play *Translations* deals with questions of language in the context of Gaelic as a sub-culture under threat from a detachment of British soldiers charged with mapping the fictional village of Ballybeg in Donegal.

the hedge school master, informs the English lieutenant that he is not familiar with Wordsworth: 'We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island.'[23] At least part of what Heaney is doing in turning to Dante follows in the footsteps of Hugh.

'ALL THAT KEEPS PLEADING' (PART ONE)

Part One of *Station Island* returns us to the world of Mossbawn. In 'Making Strange' (*OG*, 221-22), the poet is driving a stranger through his own country 'reciting my pride | in all that I knew'. Like the helmeted pump in 'Changes' (*OG*, 225-26), which the poet unroofs for his child, he is unroofing his childhood world again for us in 'the clear weather of juniper' ('Sloe Gin', *OG*, 214), and in 'The Railway Children' (*OG*, 232):

> the shiny pouches of raindrops,
> Each one seeded full with the light
> Of the sky.

Poems such as 'Shelf Life' and 'A Hazel Stick for Catherine Ann' take us back to the domestic warmth of 'Mossbawn: Sunlight', and to the mysterious world of 'The Diviner'. In her review of *Station Island*, Elizabeth Jennings caught the mood of the first part of the book in her title 'The spell-binder', and drew attention to the six short poems of 'Shelf Life' as an example of the 'delight' Heaney takes in the objects of the past.[24] From his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney has been spell-bound with his childhood home of Mossbawn so much so that he advises one of his children in 'Changes' (OG, 225-226):

> 'It will be good for you to retrace this path
> when you have grown away and stand at last
> at the very centre of the empty city.'

[23] Brian Friel, *Selected Plays*, Repr. (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 417.
[24] Elizabeth Jennings, 'The Spell-Binder', *Spectator*, 24 November 1984, 30–31 (p. 30).

This sounds very much like the poet's advice to himself. Part One is a retracing of the path of Heaney's domestic obligations and the roots of his childhood sensibility, but only as the prelude to, what Deane called, 'the clearing of a territory' which is 'Station Island'.[25] It was a sensibility 'bred in gentler times'[26] and which Heaney revisits in the more fractured world of his mid-life. Before he can clear the territory in 'Station Island' he must pay attention in Part One to 'all that keeps pleading and pleading' (*OG*, 221).

A number of critics have drawn attention to the standalone lyrical beauty of some of the poems in Part One.[27] Alongside love poems to his wife and poems to his children about the rootedness of place, we find poems celebrating objects, including a sandstone 'reliably dense' ('Sandstone Keepsake', *OG*, 217), the six objects celebrated in 'Shelf Life' (*SI*, 21-24), the cast iron pump at Mossbawn ('Changes', *OG*, 225-26), a hazel stick ('A Hazel Stick for Catherine Ann', *OG*, 229-30) and a bricklayer's trowel ('*What the Brick Keeps*', *SI*, 55). In his review of *Station Island*, Seamus Deane wrote:

> His reverence for things – earth, a stone, plants, a stick – is so natural and deep that he has the capacity to reach into their physical existence so thoroughly that he possesses and is possessed by them, like a believer who is inseparable from his beliefs.[28]

Heaney's perennial concern is with the question 'What guarantees things keeping…?' ('*Iron Spike*', *SI*, 23). In his poetic imagination, these objects, become transfigured

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[25] Seamus Deane, 'A Noble, Startling Achievement', *Irish Literary Supplement*, 4.1 Spring (1985), 1, 34 (p. 34).
[26] Stefan Hawlin, 'Seamus Heaney's "Station Island": The Shaping of a Modern Purgatory', *English Studies*, 73.1 (1992), 35–50 (p. 40) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138389208598793>.
[27] Adrian Frazier, for example, thinks the first and third sections of *Station Island* the best; see 'Pilgrim Haunts: Montague's *The Dead Kingdom* and Heaney's *Station Island*', *Eire-Ireland*, 20.4 (Winter 1985), 134–43 (p. 141). Edna Longley has drawn attention to 'several beautiful poems' in Part One, which 'redefine the origins of Heaney's art'. Among these are 'Sloe Gin', 'The Railway Children' and 'Widgeon'. See 'Old Pewter', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 77 (Winter 1984), 54–58 (p. 54).
[28] Deane, p. 1.

and assume a spiritual potency in their status as relics of memory and return us to the tactile piety at the heart of *North*. Although Stephen Regan reminds us that Heaney is careful in his use of the word 'relic', 'the poems nevertheless yearn for some transcendental significance.'[29]

However, if he is to clear the way for 'Station Island' then there must be a loosening of domestic ties. In a diary entry for 16 January 1981, in the *Station Island* notebook, among the 'changes in the self' which Heaney thought necessary was an 'ungoverning of the tongue'.[30] We find the prefix 'un-' in a number of poems in Part One – his wife's bathrobe 'ungirdled' in 'La Toilette' (*SI*, 14), the poet 'unscrewed' the glass container of gin in 'Sloe Gin' (*OG*, 214), his mouth is 'untrammelled' in 'Stone from Delphi' (*OG*, 220), he 'uncovered' the pump in 'Changes', and his child 'unroofed' it (*OG*, 225-26). Edna Longley has drawn attention to the use of prefixes such as un- in Larkin's poetry which she understands as part of a broader syntax and diction which 'constitutes agnosticism in practice'.[31] Heaney's essay 'The Main of Light' appeared in 1982[32] (while he was working on *Station Island*) and noted among Larkin's lexis the following words: 'unclosing', 'unhurried', 'unfenced', 'unnoticed' and 'untalkative'. Larkin's 'agnosticism in practice' may have been an influence on Heaney in the context of what he was trying to do in *Station Island*. The poems of Part One return us to the bonds of Mossbawn not to strengthen them but to loosen them.

[29] Stephen Regan, '"Things Remembered": Objects of Memory in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney', *Éire-Ireland*, 49.3–4 (2014), 320–36 (p. 320) <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2014.0020>.
[30] Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 49,493/57, p. 103. All further references to the *Station Island* notebook are to this manuscript.
[31] 'Larkin, Edward Thomas and the Tradition', in *Phoenix: A Poetry Magazine. Philip Larkin Issue*, ed. by Harry Chambers, 11/12, pp. 63-89 (p. 81).
[32] In the 'Acknowledgements' of *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney tells us that 'The Main of Light' appeared in *Larkin at Sixty* (Faber, 1982). It was reprinted in *The Government of the Tongue*, pp. 15–22.

Clues to how we might read the rest of the collection are to be found in the opening poem.

It is surprising how little attention critics have paid to 'The Underground' (*OG*, 213).[33] It records an incident from the Heaneys' honeymoon in 1965 when the couple are dashing through the underground on their way to the Proms. As they run through the 'vaulted tunnel' of the underground station, buttons come off Marie's coat, which Seamus goes back to lift:

> As the coat flapped wild and button after button
> Sprang off and fell in a trail
> Between the Underground and the Albert Hall.

I want to argue that this poem deserves much more attention as a roadmap for the rest of the collection. If Orpheus is present, so too is Sweeney. The word 'flapped' is suggestive of a bird and recalls, almost instantly, the figure of Sweeney who, as Alisdair Macrae suggests, 'creates a bridge across the whole collection.'[34] As if to emphasise the connection with Sweeney, we are told that the coat flapped 'wild', the adjective forging an even closer parallel with the madness or frenzy of the exiled king. The verb 'Sprang', in the sense of 'to dart or fly' (OED), is placed emphatically at the beginning of the line and reinforces the parallel even further and takes company with those words in section one which take the prefix un- and which suggest an unfastening. But it is the final line of the second quatrain, which on the surface appears to offer only the context of location, which in fact creates a further

[33] Where it has received attention, it has been as a love poem or as a poem rich in classical allusions. In the critical studies of Heaney, the poem is only addressed in Foster, Parker and Russell. Foster (1989) mentions it briefly in the context of an 'Orphean adventure' (p. 42); Parker (1993) details the classical allusions and the risks of looking back (pp. 184-85); Russell (2016) details the classical allusions also and describes it as 'another love poem to the poet's wife Marie' (p. 111).

[34] 'Seamus Heaney's New Voice in *Station Island*' in *Irish Writers and Society at Large*, ed. by Masaru Sekine (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1985), p. 125. In a detailed study of the composition of *Sweeney Astray*, Stephen Regan argues for the book's 'crucial role as a bridge' between *Wintering Out* and *Station Island*. See Stephen Regan, 'Seamus Heaney and the Making of "Sweeney Astray"', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 21.2 (2015), 317–39 (p. 318).

bridge across the whole collection. The trail of buttons fell 'Between the Underground and the Albert Hall'. The journey outlined in those seven words is the journey of *Station Island* writ small. In the hurry to emerge from the underground into the symphonic delights of the Albert Hall we are fast-forwarded to the final poem of the collection 'On the Road' (*OG*, 286-88) where the poet 'was up and away | like a human soul'. The underground journey is necessary in order to enjoy the artistic bliss of the Proms in much the same way as 'Station Island' acts as a necessary journey or purgation on the way to 'Sweeney Redivivus', where the poet masters 'new rungs of the air' ('The First Flight', *OG*, 273-74). 'The Underground' is a manifesto and a roadmap for *Station Island*. The word 'damned' in the final line of the poem is powerfully evocative not only of Sweeney who is damned to exile and to frenzy, but of the souls in Dante's *Commedia* who are damned to hell and who seek purgation. But above all, it is evocative of Heaney's deeply personal journey as a poet who must ungovern his tongue if he is not to be damned in his artistic vocation and, if he is to do so, he must be obstinate in the further colloquial sense of 'damned' – 'damned if I look back.'

When Heaney comes to write about erotic love, he turns to iconography familiar from his Catholic childhood. As with 'Summer Home' in *Wintering Out*, 'La Toilette' (*SI*, 14) plays with the idea of the sacred and profane where the erotic is elevated to the level of sacramental sign. As his wife's bathrobe ungirdles, there is the 'first coldness of the underbreast | like a ciborium in the palm.' Possibly derived from the Latin word *cibus* meaning food, the sacred vessel is held by putting the stem between the middle and ring fingers and allowing the cold belly of the vessel to rest on the hand. The sensation is one of physical intimacy and one which Heaney would have been familiar with from serving Mass in St Columb's. That he should

transfer the intimacy of this sacred vessel to the intimate touch of his wife's breast may appear to risk blasphemy more immediately than wishing to consecrate the cauldron bog of the Tollund Man. And Heaney knows it. He quotes back to himself his early catechetical learning: '*Our bodies are temples | of the Holy Ghost*. Remember?' The interrogative sense of 'Remember?' sits at the exact midway of the poem, just as Heaney's interrogation in 'Station Island' sits in the midway of the poet's life. The word invites more than recall; instead it invites the poet to wrestle with the pieties of his childhood if he is to clear the way towards some artistic freedom. In the second half of the poem, he develops further the playfulness of erotic and sacred:

> And the little, fitted, deep-slit drapes
> on and off the holy vessels
>
> regularly? And the chasuble
> so deftly hoisted?

The drapes which cover ciboria are made of silk, the beauty of the fabric reflecting the sacredness of the vessel. On the lid of each ciborium is a small cross symbolising the sacred presence of Christ in the consecrated hosts, and to allow the silk drape to sit on top, a small hole is cut in the centre. Again, only someone who was familiar with details such as this could have made the parallel with the 'slub silk' of his wife's dress which may have been fitted over her head. The sacred parallel is further reinforced by a second analogy between his wife's dress and the priest's chasuble, the outer rich garment worn only during the celebration of the Mass, which, like the silk drape on the ciborium and the silk dress of Heaney's wife, fitted over the priest's head. In my discussion of 'Summer Home' in Chapter Two, I quoted Elmer Andrews who suggested that Heaney was 'struggling to reassert a sexual piety, longing for

benediction to offset human imperfection.'[35] In 'La Toilette' he is seeking to divest himself of such pieties as he is in the rest of *Station Island*. The final words of the poem addressed to his wife are addressed to himself in the final poem of Part One and remind us of Heaney's wish to 'consecrate' himself on his move to Wicklow in 1972:[36]

> But vest yourself
> in the word you taught me
> and the stuff I love: slub silk ('La Toilette').

> And my stealth was second nature to me, as if I were coming into my own. I remembered I had been vested for this calling ('The King of the Ditchbacks', *OG*, 238-39).

Heaney wishes to vest himself in the chasuble of poetry. Sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit at his Confirmation, he now wishes to unscrew the seal of childhood pieties like the gin and sloes 'sealed' in a glass container in 'Sloe Gin' (*OG*, 214), so that he can release the fragrance of poetry:

> When I unscrewed it
> I smelled the disturbed
> tart stillness of a bush
> rising through the pantry.

Heaney finds a similar moment of consecration in 'Chekhov on Sakhalin' (*OG*, 215-16), where he recounts Chekhov drinking a bottle of cognac before setting off to visit the penal colony of Sakhalin. The fragrance and freedom of the moment is emphasised in the erotic simile of 'pert young cleavage':

> No cantor
> In full throat by the iconostasis[37]
> Got holier joy than he got from that glass
> That shone and warmed like diamonds warming

[35] Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 68.
[36] Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in John Haffenden, Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 65 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).
[37] The iconostasis, a structure of icons and religious painting separating the nave from the sanctuary in the Orthodox tradition, functioned in the same way as altar rails functioned in pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Churches, separating the lay faithful from the sanctuary of the church.

On some pert young cleavage in a salon ...

Heaney transfers a moment from the beauty of the Orthodox liturgy to a more ordinary moment. The erotic playfulness of 'La Toilette' and 'Chekhov on Sakhalin' suggests Heaney's attempt to 'walk away from floggings' ('Chekhov on Sakhalin', *OG*, 216) he associates with a rule-bound sexual ethic. In the diary entry for 16 January 1981, he writes about 'the pieties' and 'the confinements' which produced the self.[38] Heaney no longer wishes to be 'stooping along, one of the venerators' ('Sandstone Keepsake', *OG*, 217), the word 'stoop' repeated in the poem 'Old Smoothing Iron' (*OG*, 219), where Heaney remembers his mother's

> intent stoop
> as she aimed the smoothing iron
> like a plane into linen …[39]

Heaney wishes to escape the domestic and religious confinements that meant his mother was 'doomed to biology, a regime without birth control, nothing but parturition and potato-peeling *in saecula saeculorum*' (*SS*, 39).

'The Birthplace' (*OG*, 223-24) celebrates a visit to Thomas Hardy's home in Upper Bockhampton. After the visit, Heaney reflects:

> We come back emptied,
> to nourish and resist
> the words of coming to rest:
>
> *birthplace, roofbeam, whitewash,*
> *flagstone, hearth,*
> like unstacked iron weights
>
> afloat among galaxies.

[38] *Station Island* notebook, p. 109

[39] The word 'stoop' also reminds us of 'At a Potato Digging' in *Death of a Naturalist* (pp. 18-20), where labourers 'stoop to fill | Wicker creels' and 'Processional stooping through the turf | Recurs mindlessly as autumn', the word 'processional' adding a religious dimension to the 'mindless' activity.

These lines, perhaps more than any other in Part One, articulate the dilemmas of divesting oneself of all that keeps pleading. What Bernard O'Donoghue said of 'Making Strange' is equally true of this poem – that conscience 'attempts to reconcile the demands of traditional piety with the desire for personal expansion without selling out on either'.[40] Heaney returns emptied as if to a source which is both a place of nourishment and a place to be resisted. Words like *birthplace, roofbeam, whitewash, flagstone, hearth* take us straight back to Heaney's childhood world of Mossbawn which nourished Heaney (and his poetry) in every sense. As he grows into adulthood and into his poetic life he feels the need to resist 'the words of coming to rest' even as he has fed off them. Driving through his homeland he is able to recite his pride in all that he knew, but his familiar childhood home 'began to make strange | at that same recitation' ('Making Strange', *OG*, 222). The word recitation in the final line brings to mind the 'recitation' of the rosary, a familiar religious ritual in Heaney's childhood home. And it reminds us that it is not only Heaney's childhood country from which he now feels somehow estranged, but his religious sensibility so deeply rooted in Mossbawn.

There is the hint of the freedom he is seeking in 'A Migration' (*SI*, 25-27). With its references to Wicklow, we are reminded of his migration south in 1972 to Glanmore Cottage. The choice of the word 'migration' keeps the presence of Sweeney hovering over these poems, even as he introduces for the first time the image of the deer which will reappear in the final poem of 'Sweeney Redivivus':

> Windfalls lay at my feet
> those days, clandestine winds
> stirred in our lyric wood:
> restive, quick and silent
> the deer of poetry stood
> in pools of lucent sound ...

[40] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Singing Responsibly', *Poetry Review*, 74.4 (1985), 57–59 (p. 58).

The image of the deer may summon the Celtic figure of Oisin, whose name means 'little deer', and whom Heaney felt every poet must side with against Patrick.[41] However, there is evidence in the Emory archive that Heaney was also interested in the Christian image of the deer as depicted in the Church of San Clemente in Rome.[42] The origin of the image is Psalm 42, a psalm of lament for the psalmist's estrangement from Jerusalem: 'As a deer yearns for running streams, so I yearn for you, my God' (42. 1). If the deer of poetry conjures up the figure of Oisin, it also draws on the figure of the deer estranged from water as the source of life and as representative of the spiritual quest which Heaney is making ready for in 'Station Island'.[43] Heaney's real migration is a spiritual one in which he must leave all that keeps pleading for 'a migrant solitude' ('King of the Ditchbacks', *OG*, 241). Only then might he achieve the freedom of the woman in 'Sweetpea' (*SI*, 46) who 'opened a clearing where her heart sang | without caution or embarrassment, once or twice.' 'Station Island' is Heaney's attempt to open just such a clearing.

'Habit's Afterlife' (Part Two)

In reviewing *Station Island*, John Carey wrote that Heaney's poetry 'does not argue, it makes itself felt.' His observation is an important one, especially when it comes to Part Two of the collection. If Heaney is not entirely won over by some of the admonishing ghosts of 'Station Island', it is because they offer him only alternative

[41] 'But I have no doubt that I am also a pagan, and that every poet is: the poet will have to be standing with Oisin against Patrick, he will have to roost in the tree of his instincts with Mad Sweeney while St Moling stands ideologically in the cloister.' See 'The Poet as a Christian'. The essay was first published in *The Furrow* in 1978 and reprinted in memory of the poet in 2013. *The Furrow*, 64.10 (2013), 541–45 (p. 544).

[42] In a fax to Father Paul Lawlor O.P. in October 1997, Heaney wrote: 'I am wondering whether I could get permission to reproduce an image from one of the postcards on sale at San Clemente – the one with the deer as symbol of the soul's thirst for God.' Heaney signed off the fax: 'Again, I apologize for bothering you; we can blame it on the soul.' Emory, MSS 960, BOX 48.

[43] In this context too, we think of St Augustine's search for God in the *Confessions* and George Herbert's 'The Pulley', both mentioned in 'The Redress of Poetry'. See Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 11–12.

orthodoxies in which their arguments are reasoned rather than felt. Carleton simply replaces one religious orthodoxy with another and Joyce's voice is 'like a prosecutor's' in which he attempts to set out his case for the artist's untrammelled freedom. Bernard O'Donoghue reminds us that 'The mouth of the poet of most moment is never "untrammelled", free of its responsibility towards the pre-artistic world which is its material.'[44] The tension in 'Station Island' is always between freeing the lyric impulse from religious and political orthodoxies while at the same time crediting the poet's pre-artistic world. Throughout the sequence, Heaney's response is always a felt sense – in response to Sweeney, he turns to the 'sound' of shawled women; against the voice of Carleton, 'hymns to Mary' are what 'tuned me first'; and when Joyce tells him that he is 'raking at dead fires', Joyce challenges words like *birthplace* and *hearth* which, for Heaney, are 'words of coming to rest'. In contrast, the ghosts who most unsettle Heaney and whose admonishments are most deeply felt, are those whose lived experience of suffering speak against the dangers of orthodoxy, religious or otherwise (William Strathearn, Colum McCartney and Francis Hughes).

It is this tension which is at the heart of 'Station Island' and which Heaney acknowledged in an interview with Fintan O'Toole when asked if *Station Island* might resolve his own unclear relationship with Catholicism:

> But I don't think the poem resolves it. I was hoping that the book would end up as an act of faith or an act of unfaith and it doesn't quite end up in either place. You want certitude but it is hard to find.[45]

In this sense, I think, Louis Simpson strikes the right note:

> The answer, I think, is that, without being the kind of person who would make the pilgrimage for religious reasons, Heaney is able to make it for

[44] O'Donoghue, 'Singing Responsibly', p. 59.
[45] Fintan O'Toole, 'A Pilgrim's Progress', *Inside Tribune* (Dublin, 30 September 1984), pp. 1–3, 6 (p. 2).

> personal reasons. And these are as heart-felt and sincere as if he were a true believer.[46]

In a similar vein, Bernard O'Donoghue argues that *Station Island* is 'specifically religious poetry, a new departure for Heaney, to do with faith and affiliation'.[47] It is in this spirit of uncertainty and of a sincere spiritual quest that I wish to read the twelve poems of 'Station Island'.

Simon Sweeney (*OG*, 242-44) appears as an unsettling figure. As the bell-notes ring out on a Sunday morning

> the silence breathed
> and could not settle back
> for a man had appeared
> at the side of a field …

He is a peripheral figure (as other figures such as Carleton and Joyce are) who stands outside the bonds and demands of community, the very demands from which Heaney wishes to be freed. As the bell-notes sound for a second time, Heaney instantly turns from the figure of Sweeney to 'another sound: | a crowd of shawled women'.[48] In a way reminiscent of George Herbert's 'Church-bells beyond the stars heard', Heaney is summoned by the clear echo of the religious obligations he wishes to be free of. But, in this context, the word 'sound' is important. What turns Heaney from Simon Sweeney is not the obligations of doctrine but the draw of his senses. Heaney joins the company of believers, Simpson argues, 'not because he believes in the things they believe in, but because he *feels* [my italics] as they do.'[49] His willingness to turn towards 'another sound' is indicative of the sincerity of his spiritual quest. In this

[46] 'Irish Ghosts: "Station Island"' in Andrews, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 139-149 (p. 140).
[47] O'Donoghue, 'Singing Responsibly', p. 58.
[48] The crowd of shawled women return us to the shawled women of 'Poor Women in a City Church' in *Death of a Naturalist* (p. 29), a poem rich in sensuous detail and expressive of the sensory quality of Catholicism which so appealed to Heaney.
[49] Andrews, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 140.

sense he stands in opposition to Sweeney 'not turning his head', to Carleton who is 'determined | in his sure haste' (*OG*, 245), and to Joyce with 'his eyes fixed straight ahead' (*OG*, 267). Despite Sweeney's advice to 'Stay clear of all processions!', Heaney, who had sensed the trail of Sweeney as a child, now 'trailed those early-risers | fallen into step' (*OG*, 244). His switch to the trail of pilgrims dramatises perfectly the ambiguity of Heaney's position. In this sense, as J. D. McClatchy argues, 'The quarrel is only dramatized, not resolved'.[50]

The ghost of William Carleton (*OG*, 245-47) appears to Heaney, not on the island itself, but 'along the crown of the road', the location serving to emphasise Carleton as a peripheral figure in much the same way as Simon Sweeney. A Catholic convert to Protestantism, his conversion was partly fuelled by – what he called in his article 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim' – the 'mistaken devotion' of this form of popular piety.[51] Carleton is 'aggravated' as he recalls 'yeoman on the rampage, and his neighbour | among them'.[52] The sectarianism of 'hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots' made Carleton hard and 'made the traitor in me sink the knife.' He suggests to the poet: 'And maybe there's a lesson there for you', although something about Heaney strikes him 'as defensive.' In his 'Lough Derg Pilgrim', Carleton wrote that 'We know that nothing acts so strongly and so fatally upon reason, as an imagination diseased by religious terrors.'[53] But Heaney feels rather than reasons and this may account for his defensive response. Just as he turned at the 'sound' of the

[50] J. D. McClatchy, 'Poetry Chronicle', *The Hudson Review*, 38.1 (1985), 157–76 (p. 174) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3851005>.
[51] Quoted in Henry Hart, 'Ghostly Colloquies: Seamus Heaney's "Station Island"', *Irish University Review*, 18.2 (1988), 233–50 (p. 243). A revised version of this essay was later published as Chapter 9 in *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992), pp. 159–74.
[52] The word 'neighbour' seeks to emphasise the tragic irony of the intimacy of sectarian division, reminding us of 'each neighbourly murder' in 'Funeral Rites', and anticipating William Strathearn in VII, who, when his assassins moved into the light of the street lamp, 'knew them both.'
[53] Henry Hart, 'Ghostly Colloquies', p. 244.

shawled women in I, his reply to Carleton appeals to the senses rather than argument:

> 'The angry role was never my vocation,'
> I said. 'I come from County Derry,
> where the last marching bands of Ribbonmen
>
> on Patrick's Day still played their "Hymn to Mary"'.

Heaney reminds Carleton that 'Obedient strains like theirs tuned me first' and, once again, we are returned to the domestic piety of Mossbawn and the sensuous and tactile quality of devotion there. Carleton, at least as Heaney voices him, comes close to acknowledging this towards the end of the poem:

> 'We are earthworms of the earth, and all that
> has gone through us is what will be our trace.'

Like the trowel in '*What the Brick Keeps*' (*SI,* 55), which sent the builder's 'touch' and 'the constant sound of hidden river water' 'into the brick for ever', so too Heaney cannot ignore the lived experiences of his childhood, which include his early religious formation, which has left its trace.

In the opening line of III (*OG*, 247-49), Heaney encounters a blockage on his path to freedom – 'I knelt. Hiatus. Habit's Afterlife …'[54] In spite of Simon Sweeney's advice to stay clear of the 'drugged path' of popular piety, Heaney kneels. But, instantly, the single word 'Hiatus' interrupts Heaney's course to divest himself of the 'womb life of church + [*sic*] community'.[55] The alliteration of 'Hiatus' and 'Habit' serves to emphasise just how fraught this course of action is for the poet. Once again, in the language of 'bead clicks', 'side altars' and the 'intimate smells' of candle wax, Heaney finds himself back in the world of 'Poor Women in a City

[54] In the notebook for *Station Island*, the working title Heaney gives to section III, perhaps tellingly, is 'Road Block'. See pages 97, 121, 138, 175.
[55] *Station Island* notebook, p. 137.

Church', the word 'intimate' reinforcing the felt sense of religious ritual. The intimacy is conveyed beautifully in the image of the 'seaside trinket' which belonged to his aunt Agnes. The memory of it returns him to the 'gorgeous' phraseology of the litany:

> pearls condensed from a child invalid's breath
> into a shimmering ark, my house of gold
> that housed the snowdrop weather of her death
> long ago.

In her review of *Station Island*, Edna Longley singled out this stanza as a 'gem' of 'moving local and family memories'.[56] Heaney's 'forage' for his aunt's relic in the sideboard becomes a metaphor for his raid upon the inarticulate. He may be 'robbing the nest' of his childhood world, but only so that he can soar like Sweeney and master new rungs of the air. As he kneels, he is brought to his senses by a 'cold draught' and, once again, the sense of sound is invoked:

> I thought of walking round
> and round a space utterly empty,
> utterly a source, like the idea of sound ...

The idea of a space both utterly empty and utterly a source is perhaps the best articulation of what John Evans calls the 'paradoxical logic of the spiritual' in *Station Island*.[57] Its most profound spiritual articulation is found in John of the Cross's dark night of the soul to which Heaney turns in the penultimate poem of the sequence.

In IV (*OG*, 249-51), Heaney meets the ghost of Terry Keenan, a priest from Heaney's home parish, who returns from the missions disillusioned and wondering at his own naivety. Keenan is an unsettling figure for Heaney whose 'name had lain

[56] Edna Longley, 'Old Pewter', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 77 (Winter 1984), 54–58 (p. 56).
[57] John Evans, 'Strong Enough To Help: Spirituality in Séamus Heaney's Poetry', *New Blackfriars*, 78.917/918 (1997), 327–35 (p. 334).

undisturbed for years', just as the appearance of Simon Sweeney had unsettled morning. The word 'undisturbed' is worth probing a little further in the context of what Heaney is trying to do in the sequence overall. Neil Corcoran has suggested that in so far as 'Station Island' is a poem about the loss of faith, '45 is an unusually late age for such a crisis to occur.'[58] Not necessarily so. From at least as early as 'In Gallarus Oratory', it was clear that Heaney felt torn between the roots of his Catholic sensibility and the freedom offered beyond the orthodoxies of belief. However, as he continued to draw on the language and rituals of that sensibility, a more sustained reckoning with his own relationship to orthodox Catholicism lay undisturbed. What may have disturbed it at this point in his life was the increasingly sectarian nature of the Troubles and the part tribal loyalties, including religion, played in this.[59] It is the conventional terms of the tribe which Heaney is determined to be freed from and a form of Catholicism which is tribal and restrictive.

Before each 'station' of the pilgrimage, the penitent is required to stand alone at a cross, stretch out their arms and say the words 'I renounce the world, the flesh and the devil.' Despite his best efforts, Heaney cannot: 'My arms were open wide | but I could not say the words.' Heaney's wide-open arms indicate some fundamental receptivity. Darcy O'Brien makes an interesting observation in relation to Heaney's later encounter with Joyce which is pertinent here too. He says of Heaney: 'It is less "I will not serve" than "I would serve, but I cannot."'[60] Like the rich young man in

[58] 'Heaney's Joyce, Eliot's Yeats', *Agenda*, 27.1 (Spring 1989), 48–59 (p. 43).
[59] Heaney says as much in an entry in the *Station Island* notebook: 'T. Keenan represents idealism and renunciation strictly within the conventional terms of the tribe. There is a beauty and inadequacy about it: beauty because of the surrender and ideal of abnegation and service, the emptying of self; inadequacy because of its […] sectarian nature, the egotism of the whole venture', p. 139.
[60] Darcy O'Brien, 'Piety and Modernism: Seamus Heaney's "Station Island"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 26.1 (1988), 51–65 (p. 64).

the gospel story, which runs as a motif through *Station Island*,[61] Heaney is looking for salvation, but, in the end, cannot renounce the world and the flesh which are the source of his poetic riches.

The three masters who fostered Heaney at various stages in his education appear in V (*OG*, 251-53). Only one – Barney Murphy – is named. The *Station Island* notebook provides the names of the other two – Michael McLaverty and Patrick Kavanagh. Michael McLaverty was Heaney's headmaster at St Thomas's School in 1962. In *North*, Heaney had already acknowledged the influence of McLaverty in 'Fosterage' (*OG*, 142). In advice, which appears to prefigure Joyce, McLaverty encourages Heaney to 'Go your own way. | Do your own work', after which he introduces another fosterer of Heaney's – Hopkins:

> But to hell with overstating it:
> 'Don't have the veins bulging in your Biro.'
> And then: 'Poor Hopkins!' I have the *Journals*
> He gave me, underlined, his buckled self
> Obeisant to their pain.

In V, McLaverty quotes from Hopkins again:

> *For what is the great*
> *moving power and spring of verse? Feeling, and*
> *in particular, love*.[62]

In his earliest poems, Heaney had written self-consciously in the manner of Hopkins. His presence in 'Station Island' may appear slight, but there is evidence in the

[61] The story of the rich young man occurs in each of the synoptic gospels. Heaney alludes to it three times in *Station Island*. He alludes to it in an oblique way in 'The Railway Children' (*OG*, 232), where he remembers the raindrops on the wires of telegraph poles, which 'We could stream through the eye of a needle.' The story receives a more explicit treatment in the Sweeney poem 'The King of the Ditchbacks' (*OG*, 238-41), where Sweeney is described as 'a rich young man'. Finally, the story runs as a motif through the final poem of the collection 'On the Road' (*OG*, 286-88).

[62] McLaverty quotes the line in a letter he sent to Heaney on 20 October 1979; see Emory, MSS 960, Box 42. The origin of the quotation is in a letter Hopkins wrote to Bridges on 15 February 1879: 'Feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse and the only person that I am in love with [God] seldom, especially now, stirs my heart sensibly …' See *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. by Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 66.

Station Island notebook that Hopkins played a much bigger role in Heaney's developing scheme for the poem. In the diary entry for 16 January 1981, Heaney began to explore characters who would appear at the beginning and end of the sequence – 'At [*sic*] beginning, those who define what has produced the self […] At [*sic*] end, characters with guiding or exemplary traits, to help one into middle age […] Hopkins?'[63] The note is significant, and I will return to it more fully in my discussion of section XI. For now, what we can say it demonstrates is the honesty of the endeavour on which Heaney embarks in 'Station Island' and the authenticity he affords competing voices.

In I, as the bell sounds, Heaney turns to the crowd of shawled women and follows their 'drugged path'. In VI (*OG*, 253-55), as he remembers a first love, he tells us: 'I shut my ears to the bell.' There is now a resolve in Heaney's tone. It is as if he is taking a respite from the admonishing ghosts of I-V, who have been concerned with his ambiguous attitude to his childhood piety, before he faces the more personal accusatory ghosts of VII-IX, who charge him with evasion and failing a personal obligation. In VI, the ghosts which have worn Heaney out up until now, become the shades of an imagined bucolic landscape which are restorative and in sharp contrast to the asceticism of Lough Derg:

> Shade of an oak. Shades of the Sabine farm
> On the beds of Saint Patrick's Purgatory.
> Late summer, country distance, not an air:
> Loosen the toga for wine and poetry
> *Till Phoebus returning routs the morning star*.

The final line, from one of Horace's *Odes*, not only sets up an alternative to the site of pilgrimage but reminds us of how easily Heaney moves between pagan and

[63] *Station Island* notebook, p. 103. Among the other names, following Hopkins, are Maura Sweeney and Ann Wilson.

Christian sensibilities. But even in this poem of respite, Heaney 'felt an old pang' in hearing the pilgrims sing 'a somnolent hymn to Mary'. In the final sonnet, in which Heaney finds sexual satisfaction (and whose blunt language reminds us of Patrick Maguire in Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*), Heaney finds, momentarily, the freedom he has set out for in 'Station Island', a freedom conveyed beautifully in the simile from Dante's *Inferno* which closes the poem: '*So I revived in my own wilting powers | And my heart flushed, like somebody set free*.'[64]

In VII – IX, Heaney meets the shades of William Strathearn, Tom Delaney, Colum McCartney and Francis Hughes, three of whom died as a result of the Northern Irish Troubles, and the fourth – Tom Delaney – an archaeologist friend of Heaney's who died at the age of thirty-two. Stefan Hawlin thinks that these three encounters 'intensify our sense of the whole sequence as a *purgatorio*' and that in the encounter with the murdered shopkeeper, William Strathearn, we find the 'Dantean intimacy between shade and poet, and the typical Dantean effect of the poet confounded in his own poem.'[65] In a similar vein, Louis Simpson thinks that VII, in particular, bears comparison with Dante: 'In this part all Heaney's powers come together – his realism, his attention to detail, his narrative ability and his powers of feeling.'[66]

Heaney has William Strathearn voice his own story and perhaps this accounts for an avoidance of sentimentality in describing the brutal circumstances of his death at the hands of two off-duty policemen (*OG*, 255-58).[67] Heaney's reluctance, in the

[64] Heaney had at least two different versions of Dante's *Inferno*, including Dorothy Sayers ('a real lolloping, galloping piece of terza rima.') and Charles Singleton's translation and commentary in six volumes. See Seamus Hosey, *Speaking Volumes* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1995), p. 36. The lines Heaney translates are from Canto II, 127-132.
[65] Hawlin, p. 44.
[66] Andrews, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 144.
[67] The circumstances of William Strathearn's murder are detailed in David McKittrick and others, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women, and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern*

poem, to turn and 'meet his face', may suggest his reluctance to write at all about his murder, the very source of the accusation which the ghost of Colum McCartney makes in the poem that follows. Heaney's shock at what he saw is calmed by the gentle words of Strathearn: '"Easy now," | he said, "it's only me."' Released by death from the contingencies of the violence which took his life, Strathearn's shade is free to recall a football match in jocular fashion just before he recounts his own killing. When he gets up from bed, startled by 'this knocking, knocking', his wife asks him '"Is your head | astray, or what's come over you?"' The word 'astray', which Heaney had given to his Sweeney poem, suggests the frenzied panic at such a call 'in the small hours'. The cruelty of the murder is made worse by the excuse of a sick child to lure Strathearn to his death. Heaney's 'powers of feeling', to borrow Simpson's phrase, are most evident at the moment Strathearn leaves his wife to go downstairs, what we know to be his final leave-taking:

> 'Who are they anyway at this time of the night?'
>
> she asked me, with the eyes standing in her head.
> 'I know them to see,' I said, but something
> made me reach and squeeze her hand across the bed
>
> before I went downstairs into the aisle
> of the shop.

In the cruel realities of the Northern Irish conflict, the fact that he knew them to see was not a reason to be reassured but the reason he reached across and squeezed his wife's hand. There is no need for Heaney to overstate it. That small, intimate and beautiful gesture, the squeeze of a hand, in which a lifetime of love is sealed, is set

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Ireland Troubles (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), p. 716. His death is listed as number '1918'. The simple biographical details at the beginning of the entry serve to deepen the pathos of the story that follows: '*1918. April 19, 1977, William Strathearn, Antrim, Civilian, Catholic, 39, married, 7 children, shopkeeper*.'

against the squeeze of a trigger and a final 'stun of pain'.[68] Refusing anger, Strathearn, 'the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim' instead recalls Heaney courting as a young man. Faced with such generosity, Heaney asks for forgiveness: 'Forgive the way I have lived indifferent – | forgive my timid circumspect involvement'; the repetition of 'forgive', an echo of the *mea culpa* familiar from the Latin Mass. In turn, Strathearn asks for forgiveness for the wound above his head, and then 'he trembled like a heatwave and faded.'

In VIII (*OG*, 258-61), Heaney encounters the ghosts of Tom Delaney and Colum McCartney. At the beginning of the poem Heaney is on his knees at 'St Brigid's Bed', in an act of atonement (at the end of the poem, McCartney addresses the poet, in an accusatory voice, as 'you | who now atone upon this bed'). Delaney appears to him as he kneels, and Heaney confesses his regret at the inadequacy he showed in their final meeting in a hospital ward. The self-accusation is deeply felt and emphasised in the words 'as usual': 'as usual, I had somehow broken | covenants, and failed an obligation', the word 'covenants' reinforcing a sacred sense of duty. The note of self-pity in Delaney's parting question: 'Ah poet, lucky poet, tell me why | what seemed deserved and promised passed me by?' is, of course, a further self-accusation on the poet's part that what lay between him and the suffering shades of 'Station Island' was nothing more than good fortune.

The ghost which now rises before Heaney is another object. As with the objects in 'Shelf Life', there is a spiritual potency to the plaster cast given to the poet by Delaney. It is the cast of an abbess's face, 'mild-mouthed and cowled, a character of grace', the word 'grace' reminding us of the Virgin Mary, 'full of grace'. But

[68] In his Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney refers to another sectarian killing at Kingsmill, where Protestant workmen were shot dead by the Provisional IRA. In a gesture of solidarity, one of the Protestant workmen squeezed the hand of his one Catholic colleague, fearing that the gunmen were Loyalist paramilitaries. See *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 455-57.

almost immediately, another face rises before Heaney, this time muddied, whose juxtaposition with the face of the abbess is emphasised in the word 'plastered': '… a bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud.' The face is that of Colum McCartney, who utters, as Neil Corcoran says, 'the most unrelenting accusation in the sequence'.[69] The accusation is in two parts: in the first he accuses Heaney of remaining at Jerpoint Abbey with his poet friends in the immediate aftermath of his assassination.[70] In response, Heaney claims '"I was dumb"', which, of course, is not entirely true since he elegised McCartney's death in *Field Work*. Perhaps it is this defence of Heaney's which elicits the second allegation that '"You confused evasion and artistic tact."' He accuses Heaney

> 'for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
> the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
> and saccharined my death with morning dew.'

The charge is exactly that which Heaney cautioned against in the introductory essay of *The Government of the Tongue* – that the 'intrusion of the aesthetic can feel like impropriety.'[71] The impact of McCartney's death, which might also stand for the other ghostly figures in the poem, is of an arid waste-land: '"I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake"', prefiguring 'the font of exhaustion' in the final poem (and words) of the collection ('On the Road', *OG*, 288).

The ghost of IX (*OG*, 261-63) is based on Francis Hughes, a neighbour of the Heaney family in Bellaghy, who was one of ten prisoners to die on hunger-strike in 1981. In terms of the three-day pilgrimage, the timing of this poem, I want to argue, is important. In the third sonnet, Heaney's self-loathing appears to well up:

> And I cried among night waters, 'I repent

[69] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 117.
[70] See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 200.
[71] Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. xiv.

My unweaned life that kept me competent
To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust.'

The reference to 'night waters' suggests that Heaney is undergoing the long sleepless vigil of the first night and supports Parker's point that 'The five sonnets of IX complete the vigil and the rigorous self-inquisition which has accompanied it.'[72] Only someone who has in fact undergone the pilgrimage and the deprivation of sleep (and food and footwear) over the course of forty-eight hours could understand the precise timing of Heaney's self-loathing in the poem.[73] Denied everything which feeds the appetites, the almost hallucinatory quality of the religious exercise, intensified by the endless litany of prayers which accompany each 'Station', forces the pilgrim into a period of intense introspection. The experience is intensified further by the darkness of night.[74] No wonder, then, that Heaney becomes steadied by 'a lighted candle', recalling the gift of Delaney in the previous poem: 'Your gift will be a candle in our house' (*OG*, 260). A further image of light is revealed in the 'Inside-sheen' of a remembered trumpet from childhood, another object in the collection which has the spiritual potency of 'a mystery', its brilliance ('so close and brilliant') anticipating the 'marvellous lightship' of XI.

As his vigil ends, Heaney's own ghost appears to him in the shaving mirror and he speaks to it in his most explicit outburst of recrimination yet:

'I hate how quick I was to know my place.
I hate where I was born, hate everything
That made me biddable and unforthcoming'.

He is 'Lulled and repelled by his own reflection' and the starkness of this self-reproach led Darcy O'Brien to argue that IX 'is the most overtly penitential of the

[72] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 201.
[73] I undertook the pilgrimage as a teenager and later in my twenties and recall the effects of sleep deprivation as the single most challenging aspect of the pilgrimage.
[74] Recalling this experience must have provided Heaney with at least some sympathy for John of the Cross's dark night of the soul in XI.

poem'.[75] The outburst and the repetition of 'hate' is penitential and cathartic in its severity. It is not necessarily the last word. Heaney can no more renounce the world of Mossbawn than he could the world, the flesh and the devil in IV. As with the 'stone swirled under a cascade', the root of his sensibility can no more 'grind itself down to a different core.' Corcoran is right to say that

> Here, knowing his place is not so much establishing an identity with a particular territory – which is celebrated as a virtue often enough in Heaney's earlier work – as meekly accepting a servitude to the mores of a community; where to "know your place" is to stay put.[76]

The final three poems (X-XII) ease us, in Foster's words, 'back out into the world.'[77] In X (*OG*, 263-64), there is a sense of release and expanse in 'The open door brilliant with sunlight', no longer a door into the dark. A 'thud of earthenware' elicits a further epiphany of a mug from childhood, with its 'patient sheen', which is borrowed as a prop for use in a local drama production. The spiritual quality of objects, their poetic elevation to the status of near relics throughout *Station Island*, is again apparent in Heaney who feels 'estranged' from the mug as he watches the performance on stage. When the mug is restored to the Heaney household, the spiritual worth of the object is amplified by its 'translation' into Ronan's psalter, the comparison strengthened by the play on the word 'parchment' – the mug's 'parchment glazes fast' reminds us that the parchment of Ronan's psalter (thrown into the lake by Sweeney), after a day and a night, resurfaced 'miraculously unharmed'.[78] The translation is one from 'unremembered' domestic object to a symbol 'glamoured' and 'restored' through the transfiguring power of art, where, as

[75] Darcy O'Brien, p. 56.
[76] Corcoran, p. 120.
[77] Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1989), p. 126.
[78] The story is recounted in the opening pages of *Sweeney Astray* and is a further example of the hovering presence of Sweeney over the poems of *Station Island*. See Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 3–4.

Hawlin argues, 'A Catholic sacramental sense seems to be working in the background'[79]:

> And so the saint praised God on the lough shore[80]
> for that dazzle of impossibility
> I credited again in the sun-filled door,
> so absolutely light it could put out fire.

Words like 'dazzle', 'sun-filled' and 'light' anticipate the brilliance and luminosity of Heaney's later work, especially *Seeing Things*, where 'extravagant | Sky entered and held surprise wide open' (*OG,* 350).

The luminosity of the final stanza of X carries over into XI (*OG*, 264-66). The image of the kaleidoscope, which surfaces before Heaney, is a 'marvellous lightship' with 'silted crystals', a gift of 'glimpsed jewels' which must be re-envisaged, says the monk, whose forehead is 'shining'. The 'breathed-on grille of a confessional' in VI, which represented the guilt and shame of a repressive sexual code, becomes an opening in XI for a more enriching vision (and voice) of faith. 'Returned from Spain', the monk embodies a more expansive Catholic vision where an emphasis on guilt is set aside ('he had made me feel there was nothing to confess') and the visionary possibility of Catholicism[81], which Heaney felt attracted to, but deprived of, may figure in the 'gift | mistakenly abased …'

I said above that in the *Station Island* notebook, Heaney lists Hopkins as a possible 'guiding exemplary' character at the end of the sequence.[82] In a further note,

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[79] Hawlin goes on to say: 'In the Mass, as Catholics believe, ordinary food and wine are transformed into the body of Christ; so here, whether consciously or not, Heaney is drawing a parallel with sacramentalism on a natural level, seeing art as having a similar transforming effect. Art (in this case theatre) re-presents life, makes it strange to us, and translates it into an intensified realm seemingly more real than life itself.' See Hawlin, p. 47.

[80] In South Derry, Lough Shore is the name given to all the lands close to Lough Neagh, just down the road from Mossbawn.

[81] Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 36.

[82] *Station Island* notebook, p. 103.

he lists: 'Hopkins at end' and immediately beneath: 'Joyce on other side'.[83] There is no evidence in the early scheme of the poem in the notebook for the figure of the monk in XI. What I want to argue is that Heaney may be presenting us here with his own 'compound ghost' figure in XI, in the figure of the Carmelite monk and the figure of Hopkins.[84] In Heaney's translation from John of the Cross, in which the paradox of the darkness of faith is conveyed, we find a spiritual tradition which is articulated again in Hopkins:

> Now his sandalled passage stirred me on to this:
> How well I know that fountain, filling, running,
> although it is the night (Heaney)

In the monk's 'sandalled passage' we find a faint echo of Hopkins and the 'bright and battering | sandal' of Felix Randal, discussed in Chapter Two. But it is in the refrain of the poem – 'although it is the night' – that we find the deeper spiritual parallel with Hopkins:

> This life is night, it is a night, it is a dark time (Hopkins).[85]

In Heaney's refrain, we find a felt spiritual synthesis of St John of the Cross and the dark night of the soul. The paradox of the mystical tradition is that in this darkness comes the felt knowledge of God as a living fountain. Unlike the 'butt of muddied water' in which Heaney plunged the kaleidoscope, the 'eternal fountain' of God's love is 'So pellucid it can never be muddied'. In the waters of the fountain which 'overspills | to water hell and heaven' we have a foretaste of the later poems of

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[83] *Station Island* notebook, p. 76. In a scheme for a longer version of the poem (which follows an entry in the notebook for 14 December 1981), in which Heaney had thought of 16 sections (concluding with Joyce), under section 14 he lists 'Hopkins, Kavanagh, Lowell', p. 138. By page 159 of the notebook, only Kavanagh and Lowell remain.

[84] It may be more than coincidence that the figure of the monk is based on a Carmelite priest who gave a retreat at St Columb's in Heaney's final year, when he was also studying the poetry of Hopkins. See O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 249.

[85] Gerard Manley Hopkins and Christopher Devlin, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 39.

Seeing Things in which 'The skyline was full up to the lip | As if the earth were going to brim over' ('A Retrospect', *ST*, 42).

Coming as it does as the penultimate poem of the sequence, Heaney's encounter with the ghost of the Carmelite monk undermines a reading of the sequence in which Heaney incrementally divests himself of a religious sensibility. What he encounters instead is a more expansive vision of Catholicism in which he can 'Read poems as prayers' and in which he is encouraged 'to salvage everything' which shaped his sensibility. It was not necessary for *Station Island* to end up either as an act of faith or an act of unfaith as Heaney suggested to O'Toole. It was necessary only to clear a blockage so that he could move forward as a poet with a sense of inner and artistic freedom. It was important for him to jettison certain attitudes to his inherited religious obligations, but not the source of these whose felt sense he could turn to poetry.

In the final poem of the sequence (XII), as he steps off the island, Heaney encounters the ghost of Joyce (*OG*, 266-68). Concluding his essay on Dante, Heaney writes:

> Yet the choice of Lough Derg as a locus for the poem did, in fact, represent a solidarity with orthodox ways and obedient attitudes, and that very solidarity and obedience were what had to be challenged. And who better to offer the challenge than the shade of Joyce himself?[86]

Joyce already appears more substantial than the other shades: 'Then I knew him in the flesh'. But Joyce is 'wintered hard', the word 'wintered' recalling *Wintering Out* and, perhaps, suggesting something of Joyce's discontent.[87] If Heaney was susceptible to the 'drugged path' of pilgrims in I, he is also aware of the 'narcotic' voice of Joyce. Joyce advises the poet: 'Your obligation | is not discharged by any

[86] Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications', p. 19.
[87] 'Now is the winter of our discontent', *Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 1.

common rite' and encourages Heaney to dismiss this 'subject people stuff' and his 'peasant pilgrimage.' The charge which Heaney levelled against the priest in IV ('doomed to the decent thing'), Joyce now levels at Heaney: 'You lose more of yourself than you redeem | doing the decent thing.'

Heaney revised the text of 'Station Island' between its publication in 1984 and its inclusion in *Opened Ground* in 1998. Part of the revision to the Joyce section was to remove the lines in which he refers to Joyce as 'Old father' (*SI*, 93). The revision might indicate a more circumspect appropriation of Joyce as Heaney got older. Joyce finishes by advising Heaney to '"Keep at a tangent"' and to

> '…fill the element
> with signatures on your own frequency,
> echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,
> elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'

The 'whole sea' becomes a metaphor for the expansive vision of the poet whose tongue is ungoverned. In this sense Joyce's advice is closer to the monk's (that the poet should seize the chance to 'salvage everything') in the previous section than we might think. It's a vision of the world which, as I indicated in the previous chapter, Heaney returns to in the opening poem of *The Haw Lantern*, 'Alphabets', in which the necromancer's figure of the world stands for '…the figure of the universe | And "not just single things"'. As with all good students, it may be that Heaney exceeds his teacher's example in the end, and that because he takes seriously all that keeps pleading, his vision is the bigger for it. Hart hits the right note, I think, when he writes:

> The appeal of Heaney's 'confessional' poems comes from their willingness to bow down over old haunts and speak with humility and candour for the troubled conscience. While Joyce celebrates his wilful detachment from church and country, Heaney makes the artist's ambivalent attachment to them the crux of his work.[88]

[88] Henry Hart, 'Ghostly Colloquies', p. 238.

MASTERING NEW RUNGS OF THE AIR (PART THREE)

In an interview with Fintan O'Toole in November 1983, Heaney provided a useful chronology of *Sweeney Astray*. It began with his move to Wicklow in 1972 where, living so close to the natural world, 'it was as if the eye-level life of a child was reanimated and it seemed to me that Sweeney in the branches could conduct a lot of that energy out of me into words.'[89] Unsatisfied with his first attempt, he put the project aside until 1979, by which time he had published *Field Work,* and the 'creepy lush' of the writing in *Wintering Out* had gone.[90] In September 1983, immediately after the publication of *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney began a series of poems 'voiced for Sweeney'[91] and these make up Part Three of *Station Island*.

Heaney's chronology suggests the almost symbiotic nature of the two books.[92] Deane called *Sweeney Astray* a 'prelude' to the final part of *Station Island,* and Macrae argues that a reading of *Sweeney Astray* is 'extremely useful, possibly even necessary' as a preliminary to *Station Island*. Part One of *Station Island* concludes with Sweeney as the 'The King of the Ditchbacks' (*OG*, 238-41), the word 'ditch' repeated in the opening poem of Part Two when the child Heaney senses the trail of Simon Sweeney in 'ditches rustled' (*OG*, 243), and thus a bridge is established between Part One of the collection and the poems 'voiced for Sweeney' in Part Three. But the larger connection with *Sweeney Astray* is also forged in a self-referential line in 'The King of the Ditchbacks', in which Heaney refers to the

[89] Fintan O'Toole, 'Heaney's Sweeney', *Inside Tribune* (Dublin, 20 November, 1983), p. 12.
[90] Instead, he says, he 'had a much barer kind of writing' and 'some distrust of lyric sweetness.'
[91] Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 123.
[92] Stephen Regan reminds us that 'The Faber edition of *Sweeney Astray* was published simultaneously with *Station Island* in 1984, and the deliberate pairing of these volumes is a reminder that both are fundamentally concerned with pilgrimage and penance in ways that strongly impact upon Heaney's consideration of the role of the poet.' See Regan, 'Seamus Heaney and the Making of "Sweeney Astray"', p. 337.

project begun in Wicklow: 'The time I'd spent obsessively in that upstairs room bringing myself close to him'.[93]

Sweeney Astray relates the wanderings of King Sweeney, changed into a bird and exiled by the curse of the cleric Ronan and eventually reconciled with Christianity through the ministry of the priest Moling. In his introduction to the poem, Heaney recognises this tension between 'the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament.'[94] However, he suggests that this tension does not exhaust the imaginative possibilities of the story:

> For example, insofar as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation.[95]

It is this aspect of Sweeney which is most appealing to the poet of *Station Island* and which reflects almost exactly what Heaney outlined as his methodology in the *Station Island* notebook: 'An emerging knowledge of the necessary autonomy of the "artist" within the "domestic man", a freeing of the imagination.'[96]

Although the poems are 'voiced for Sweeney', Thomas Foster reminds us that Heaney shaped them for his own purposes and that as an 'author-surrogate', Sweeney takes company with Ted Hughes's Crow and Geoffrey Hill's King Offa.[97] The opening line of 'The First Gloss' – 'Take hold of the shaft of the pen' – almost certainly takes us back to 'the squat pen' of 'Digging' and establishes the shaping

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[93] 'Upstairs room' recalls the venue for the Last Supper and the post-crucifixion hiding place of the apostles. It provides the scene for the story of Doubting Thomas in John 20. 19-31, the story alluded to in an early unpublished Group poem called 'Amputation'. See NLI, MS 49,493/1.

[94] Seamus Heaney and Field Day Theatre Company, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), not paginated.

[95] Heaney and Field Day Theatre Company, not paginated.

[96] *Station Island* notebook, p. 103.

[97] Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 105. Foster goes on the draw explicit parallels between Sweeney and Offa, including their ability to 'make outrageous statements that the poet might be reluctant to utter in his own voice.' p. 105. Heaney may also, of course, have had a more immediate model in Yeats, whose theory of the mask allows him to speak in various guises such as 'The Wild Old Wicked Man'.

voice of Heaney who is 'beginning to unwind' (*OG*, 270). As with many of the poems in Part One, 'Unwinding' (*SI*, 99) abounds in words which take the prefix un-: 'unravels'; 'unfurtherable'; 'unlearned'; 'unwinds'. In the twine which 'unravels' and 'unwinds', we are reminded of Ariadne who provided Theseus with a ball of twine so that he could retrace his way out of the labyrinth of the Minotaur. In *Station Island*, Heaney has been retracing his path from the labyrinthine obligations of the first kingdom of Mossbawn and from all that kept pleading from that world.

Sweeney's voice allows Heaney to survey the world of his childhood, as well as his growing reputation as an artist, from a safe distance. 'In the Beech' (*OG*, 271) recalls a moment from childhood when his high vantage point allowed him to watch 'steeplejacks up there at their antics | like flies against the mountain.' In the poems which follow, Heaney's domestic and political obligations are cut down to size in poems which are more Heaney than Sweeney. In 'The First Kingdom' (*OG*, 272) of Mossbawn, Heaney was doomed to the decent thing where his rights to such a kingdom came only by the 'acclamation' of family bonds and pieties:

> And seed, breed and generation still
> they are holding on, every bit
> as pious and exacting and demeaned.

'The First Flight' (*OG*, 273-74), based on his move south to Wicklow, becomes a 'point of repose' from which Heaney renounces artistic attachments and the pious judgments which attended (presumably Heaney has this in mind) the publication of *North*:[98]

> I was mired in attachment
> until they pronounced me
> a feeder off battlefields
>
> so I mastered new rungs of the air ...

[98] See Chapter Three.

In ‘Sandstone Keepsake’ (*OG*, 217) in Part One, Heaney is ‘not about to set times wrong or right, | stooping along, one of the venerators.’ In ‘Drifting Off’ (*OG*, 275-76), Heaney stoops again, but this time in preparation for lift off:

> But when goldfinch or kingfisher rent[99]
> the veil of the usual,
> pinions whispered and braced
>
> as I stooped, unwieldy
> and brimming,
> my spurs at the ready.

However, as with the poems of ‘Station Island’, the freedom Heaney seeks is not accrued incrementally in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ poems. In ‘Alerted’ (*SI*, 106), he asks:

> could I ever
> and if I ever should
> outstrip obedience

and by the end of the poem he finds himself ‘rooted’ to the spot

> disappointed
> under my own clandestine
> pre-Copernican night.

The same honest self-scrutiny finds its voice in Sweeney whose quarrel with Ronan began over the marking out of ‘a church called Killaney.’[100] In ‘The Cleric’ (*OG*, 277-78), Ronan represents the arrival of Christianity and the ousting of Sweeney ‘to the marches | of skulking and whingeing.’ And then the voice of Heaney becomes almost indistinguishable from that of Sweeney:

> Or did I desert?
> Give him his due, in the end
>
> he opened my path to a kingdom
> of such scope and neuter allegiance
> my emptiness reigns at its whim.

[99] In this line we might hear an echo of Hopkins’s ‘As kingfishers catch fire’, and another indication of his presence in *Station Island*. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 90.
[100] Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, p. 3.

Corcoran reads in these final lines the 'double-bind of the devout lapsed Catholic', that the freedom Heaney seeks is inevitably defined by the belief system he wishes to leave behind.[101]

In 'The Master' (*OG*, 280), Heaney turns to the shaping presence of Czesław Miłosz. The 'tower' also suggests the presence of Yeats, who Heaney admits was a 'composite element', but the poem is a 'transmogrified account of meeting Czesław Miłosz.'[102] Michael Parker has detailed the influence of Miłosz on Heaney, especially during his writing of *Station Island*. Early in the book, Heaney quotes from *Native Realm* in his poem 'Away from it All', and in the poems which venerate objects, Heaney comes close to Miłosz's thinking, especially in a poem such as 'The World'. In 'The Master', the word 'unroofed' recalls the unroofing of the helmeted pump in 'Changes'. But whereas the helmeted pump stands as the *omphalos* of the domestic life at Mossbawn, the 'unroofed tower' of 'The Master' places Heaney within the wider circumference of European poetry and the example of Miłosz. The birds eye view, which Heaney had 'In the Beech', complements the bird motif in Miłosz in which the poet is seer.[103] As Heaney climbs down the 'unrailed stairs' of the tower, he hears 'the purpose and venture | in a wingflap above me', the word 'wingflap' bringing us back to the other master of Part Three: 'Sweeney Redivivus'.

Corcoran points out that the final poems of Part Three 'seem written more straightforwardly in Heaney's own voice'.[104] 'The Old Icons' refer to three pictures which belonged to the Heaney family, one of which was an image of an outlawed priest celebrating Mass during the penal times and to which I drew attention in

[101] Corcoran, p. 132.
[102] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, p. 262.
[103] See Czesław Miłosz, 'The Nobel Lecture, 1980', *The New York Review of Books*, XXVIII.3 (1981), 11–12; 14–15 (p. 11).
[104] Corcoran, p. 130.

Chapter One. Heaney asks 'Why, when it was all over, did I hold on to them?' He provides part of the answer in 'Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych': 'Nothing I have learned or could ever learn about penal laws against Catholics in eighteenth century Ireland could altogether displace the emotional drama of that picture.'[105] Published in 1985, a year after *Station Island*, Heaney's essay provides us with an insight not only into the emotional drama of the picture of the outlawed priest, but into the entire emotional drama which is the backdrop to *Station Island*. Heaney's Mossbawn childhood is rooted deep and at some fundamental level is inseparable from Heaney's sense of self. However hard he may wish to free himself from religious and political pieties, he knows that he risks the fate of the traitor at the end of 'The Old Icons' (*OG*, 284), whose betrayal 'was his rack | and others' ruin'.

The title 'In Illo Tempore' (*OG*, 285) is borrowed from the words used to introduce the reading of the gospel in the Latin Mass. As the penultimate poem of the collection, it is noteworthy that its tone is elegiac and has none of the earnestness of Joyce's advice at the end of Part Two. Heaney's choice of Latin for the poem's title reminds us of how Heaney's experience of Catholicism was deeply rooted in the pre-Vatican II liturgy.[106] Bernard O'Donoghue has pointed out that it is a poem which 'transmutes experience almost totally into language.'[107] Corcoran argues that the poem imagines Catholicism 'as a language one has lost the ability to speak, consigning it to "illo tempore", "that time"'.[108] The 'big missal' assumes an active

[105] Seamus Heaney, 'Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych', *Salmagundi*, 68/69, (1985), 30–47, (p. 35).
[106] In a letter to Suzanne O'Brien on 9 July 2001, Heaney writes about attending the funeral of the Dominican priest and scholar Herbert McCabe in Oxford. In reference to the liturgy he writes: 'The full Latin hullabulloo. Worth the journey …' Emory, MSS 960, BOX 48. Heaney kept the booklet for McCabe's Requiem Mass, now archived as MSS 960, BOX 87.
[107] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 94.
[108] Corcoran, p. 132.

life of its own in the transitive verbs ‘splayed’ and ‘dangled’, whereas for the child Heaney, the experience is more passive:

> Intransitively we would assist,
> confess, receive. The verbs
> assumed us. We adored.

In the final two stanzas, Heaney reflects on his contemporary life now as a poet living in Dublin where:

> the range wall of the promenade
> that I press down on for conviction
> hardly tempts me to credit it.

In ‘On the Road’ (*OG*, 286-88), a poem structured around the parable of the rich young man, and which brings a book of intense self-scrutiny to a close, Heaney meditates on an image of a drinking deer ‘at a dried up source’ and waits for his ‘long dumbfounded | spirit’ to break cover and ‘to raise a dust | in the font of exhaustion.’ If ambiguity surrounds the artistic freedom Heaney has sought in *Station Island*, it is because, as Richard Kearney remarked in a review, Heaney is ‘the Janus-faced author’, and what Kearney said of the central sequence of the book, equally applies to the collection as a whole: ‘But a singular virtue of “Station Island” is its refusal to choose between Heaney and Sweeney, between the guilt-ridden pilgrims of history and the carefree émigré of the imagination.’[109] Whatever freedom is won in *Station Island*, it is always in the shade of ‘habit’s afterlife’.

[109] Richard Kearney, ‘Annual Review ’84: The Year of “The Gigli Concert”’, *Irish Times* (Dublin, 31 December 1984), p. 6.

CHAPTER FIVE

'THINGS BEYOND MEASURE': *SEEING THINGS*, *THE SPIRIT LEVEL*, *ELECTRIC LIGHT*

SEEING THINGS

In his book *Grace and Necessity*, Rowan Williams reflects on the relationship between the arts and theology. In particular, he explores the contribution to aesthetics by the French Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and goes on to trace his reception in the work of the poet and painter David Jones and the novelist Flannery O'Connor. Williams writes: 'One of the most striking features of the reception of Maritain's thinking is the enthusiasm displayed by working artists for his ideas. It would be intriguing to trace that reception among artists who had little or no theological commitment'.[1] It seems to me that Heaney showed an interest in Maritain, even though he had little theological commitment. As early as 1978, he makes passing reference to Maritain in a lecture on Wordsworth and Yeats later collected in *Preoccupations*.[2] However, his most sustained discussion of Maritain appears in his uncollected essay 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven' (2002), where he discusses Maritain's thoughts on the poetic process and illustrates this with a close reading of the opening poems of the 'Squarings' sequence in *Seeing Things*.

Williams sees Maritain's contribution to aesthetics as twofold: his insistence on the integrity of the artwork independent of any propagandist value, and the creative process as 'rooted in the sense of an unfinishedness in "ordinary"

[1] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*, Clark Lectures, 2005 (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005), p. 41.
[2] 'The Makings of a Music', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 61-78 (p. 62). The essay was first delivered as the first Kenneth Allott Memorial Lecture at Liverpool University in January 1978.

perception, a recognition that the objects of perception were not exhausted by what could be said about them in descriptive, rational and pragmatic terms.'[3] Part of what Heaney was engaged with in *Station Island* was establishing the integrity of the artwork independent of the claims of religious and political orthodoxies, and he sees the fruition of this in *Seeing Things*: 'A great deal of their insouciance arises from their having escaped the shackles of the civic.'[4] Maritain's ideas around the unfinishedness in ordinary perception, however, require further elaboration and will form the basis of my discussion of *Seeing Things.*

The book which Heaney draws attention to in 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven' is Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, published in 1953. In a chapter entitled 'The Three Epiphanies of Creative Intuition', Maritain outlines three stages of the poetic process which he calls Poetic Sense (the emotion of lived experience), Action and Theme (the need to express the emotion), and Harmonic Expression (the writing of the poem). Heaney says that he is most concerned, like Maritain, with the second stage of Action whereby a poem which has no will of its own nonetheless requires expression.[5] He goes on to say that for Maritain action is 'hungry for theme' which is 'potentiality discovered within the material'.[6] He then applies this idea of potentiality to the 'Squarings' sequence which he says began with 'a supply of images'.[7] He borrows the word 'supply' from a reference to Robert Frost at the beginning of the essay where Frost notes how 'the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing' when the writing experience is most fruitful. Heaney concludes:

[3] Williams, p. x.
[4] Seamus Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', *Dublin Review*, 8 (Autumn 2002), 115–26 (p. 125).
[5] Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', p. 116.
[6] Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', p. 117.
[7] Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', p. 118.

'Which is to say a sixth sense of possibility grows into a gleeful seventh heaven of reward.'[8]

Heaney published an essay on Robert Frost entitled 'Above the Brim' in the journal *Salmagundi* in 1990. In the same edition he also published 'Seeing Things', the title poem of his next collection.[9] In the essay, Heaney wrote that Frost's strongest poems were those in which there was 'fullness overflowing', hence the 'brim' of the title.[10] In *Seeing Things*, Heaney uses various forms of the word 'brim': in 'A Retrospect' (*ST*, 42) 'The skyline was full up to the lip | As if the earth were going to brim over', and in his poem for Richard Ellmann, 'The Sounds of Rain' (*ST*, 49), a flood is like 'a named name that overbrims itself'; the final poem of the 'Settings' sequence (*OG*, 373) concludes:

> Air and ocean known as antecedents
> Of each other. In apposition with
> Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim.[11]

This sense of unexpected supply overflowing in a poem brings us back to Maritain who argues that 'things are not only what they are' and that they 'give more than they have'.[12] Williams understands this as Maritain's most significant contribution to the debate concerning theology and the arts: the ability of art to expose the 'excess' of the material environment.[13] This idea of excess of is most beautifully captured in 'A Basket of Chestnuts' (*ST*, 24-25):

> I recollect this basket full of chestnuts,

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[8] Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', p. 115.
[9] See Rand Brandes, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 355.
[10] Brodsky/Heaney/Walcott, *A Homage to Robert Frost: Essays on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 83.
[11] Heaney also finds sanction for the word 'brim' in Yeats and Larkin. He knew Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole' very well: 'Upon the brimming water among the stones | Are nine-and-fifty swans', and Larkin's 'At Grass', modelled on Yeats's poem: 'Dusk brims the shadows.' In both poems 'brim' is used as a verb, not a noun, and Heaney follows suit in 'The Sounds of Rain'.
[12] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1 (London: Harvill Press, 1954), p. 127.
[13] Williams, p. 53.

> A really solid gather-up, all drag
> And lustre, opulent and gravid
> And golden-bowelled as a moneybag.
>
> And I wish they could be painted, known for what
> Pigment might see beyond them, what the reach
> Of sense despairs of as it fails to reach it,
> Especially the thwarted sense of touch.

The sense of touch, which Heaney so relied on in the early books and which I drew attention to in terms of the tactile piety of *North* especially, is now found wanting. In 'A Basket of Chestnuts', Heaney credits the creative process itself with its own integrity – 'known for what | Pigment might see beyond them'. Here the paint 'sees' – rather than the painter – when the sense of touch is thwarted. The poem recalls a visit by the artist Edward Maguire to the Heaney home that culminated in the portrait of Heaney which now hangs in the Ulster Museum. Heaney recalls the visit in the autumn of 1973 when 'A basketful of chestnuts shines between us, | One that he did not paint when he painted me'. The mention of Maguire (as well as El Greco and Matthew Lawless) in a book saturated with literary references from Virgil to Vaughan, is a reminder of Heaney's abiding interest in the fine arts. In an interview with the Irish broadcaster Mike Murphy, published in 2000, Heaney discussed his interest in painters:

> I am susceptible to the mystery and fetch of an image. Whether it's an image of complete serenity as in Fr Angelico or the Italian primitive painters, or whether it's the absolute fidelity and love of the usual in somebody like Breughel, or whether it's the blaze of a Van Gogh, I don't know, but there's an extraness in it.[14]

Heaney's sense of an *extraness* in the creative process comes close to Maritain's idea that things give more than they have and that artistic creativity exposes an excess of being in the material environment. Although Heaney in 'Sixth Sense, Seventh

[14] *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, ed. by Mike Murphy and Clíodhna Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), pp. 81-97 (p. 96).

Heaven' is primarily interested in the three stages of the creative process as they are systematised by Maritain, he cannot have failed to be aware of Maritain's idea that art reveals an excess of being in the material world that ordinary seeing cannot grasp. And this must account for at least one important sense of 'seeing things'.

In his review of *Seeing Things,* James Wood thought that Heaney had 'regressed' in the first half of the book to his earliest poems, and that 'The Pitchfork' (*OG*, 344) was 'as unremarkable a poem as Heaney has ever written.'[15] And yet a comparison with the pitchfork in Heaney's poem 'The Barn' (*OG*, 7), from *Death of a Naturalist,* suggests otherwise. In 'The Barn', the sheer materiality of Heaney's first collection is everywhere evident in corn described as 'solid as cement' and the 'armoury' of farmyard implements. Entering the barn and adjusting to the darkness 'Slowly bright objects formed' including 'a pitch-fork's prongs'. In other words, as the poet begins to see things in his first collection, they solidify. Now compare the pitchfork of *Seeing Things*:

> And then when he thought of probes that reached the
> farthest,
> He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past
> Evenly, imperturbably through space,
> Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless.

Here the material gives way to the visionary. No more is Heaney satisfied to describe merely the *haecceitas* or thisness of a thing but is drawn to describe what might be seen or imagined beyond the purely material. He wants not only to see things but to see *beyond* things, beyond the given materiality as he describes it in the title poem of the collection: 'And yet in that utter visibility | The stone's alive with what's

[15] James Wood, 'Looking for a Place Where Things Matter', *The Guardian*, 30 May 1991, p. 24.

invisible' (*OG*, 339-41). Whatever the merits or otherwise of 'The Pitchfork'[16], it cannot be said that it merely regresses to the language of Heaney's earliest poems.

In 'The Golden Bough' (*OG*, 333-34), which opens the collection, Heaney translates a passage from *Aeneid VI* where Aeneas seeks entrance to the underworld to see his dead father Anchises. The Cumean Sibyl warns Aeneas that the way back from the underworld is fraught with danger, but: 'if you will go beyond the limit, | Understand what you must do beforehand.' *Seeing Things* is a collection in which Heaney wishes to go beyond the limit. The passage from Virgil anticipates Heaney's search for his own father in *Seeing Things*, and if there is a return to the early books, then it is, as Patrick Crotty suggests, a return to the poet's childhood world seen in the light of his father's death.[17] But the collection is less an elegy to his dead father than an attempt to go beyond the limits occasioned by his absence. The deaths of Heaney's parents prompted a significant upheaval not only in the emotional and familial life of the poet but also in the realms of language as it confronts limits. In interviews after the publication of *Seeing Things* Heaney repeatedly returned to the deaths of his parents and his renewed trust in words like 'soul' and 'spirit'. Having been present at the deathbeds of both his parents he says in an interview in 1995: 'There was also a deep knowledge that whatever the soul or spirit is, it is a precious and ungainsayable reality.'[18]

[16] Michael Parker was also disappointed in the poem and felt that it insisted on cataloguing effects. See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 219.
[17] Patrick Crotty, 'Lyric Waters', *The Irish Review*, 11, (1991), 114–20 (p. 118) <https://doi.org/10.2307/29735626>.
[18] Maggie Parham and Seamus Heaney, 'Seamus Famous: An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Harpers & Queen*, (1995) 144–48, (p. 148). See also interviews with John Breslin (1991), J.J. Wylie and John Kerrigan (1999), Karl Miller (2000) and Mike Murphy (2000), where Heaney also discusses the death of his parents.

The poem from *Aeneid VI* sets the scene for Heaney's encounters with his father in the collection. But unlike Aeneas who carries his father from burning Troy, in 'Man and Boy' (*OG*, 337-38), it is Patrick Heaney who will 'piggyback' his son 'Like a witless elder rescued from the fire.' In the title poem of the collection (*OG*, 340-41), Heaney recalls a memory of his father returning home, somewhat shaken, after his horse had reared up and overturned his cart:

> So the whole rig went over into a deep
> Whirlpool, hoofs, chains, shafts, cartwheels, barrel
> And tackle, all tumbling off the world.

Here, again, is the sense of surplus, the inability of the material world to contain all that there is. It is as if the cart tumbling off the world becomes a metaphor for the surplus energy of poetry itself, Maritain's sense that poems give more than they have and Heaney's sense of extraness.

Douglas Dunn has observed that in *Seeing Things* Heaney attends to the materiality of what he sees before this gives way to a more imagined sense: 'Before he permits his imagination to suggest what might be beyond the limits of average experience he sets down a solid reconstruction of an event.'[19] A fine example of this is 'The Biretta' (*ST*, 26-27), which Michael Parker considers one of the 'marvellous highs' of the first part of *Seeing Things*.[20] It is another example of Heaney's felt sense for the material objects and rubrics of Catholicism. He would have come across a biretta when he served Mass at St Columb's College and such a moment is recalled in the first half of the poem[21]:

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[19] 'Quotidian Miracles: *Seeing Things*' in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Tony Curtis, 4th edn (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), pp. 207-225 (p.212).
[20] Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p. 220. The other two poems he identifies are 'Wheels within Wheels' and 'The Settle Bed'.
[21] The biretta was handed to the server at the start of every Mass and given back to the priest at the end of the Mass. It was part of the quotidian garb of the priest, worn by the priest/teacher in St Columb's, and by the curate, for instance, when he was on his rounds of the parish. I am grateful to Fr John R. Walsh for this information.

Its insides were crimped satin; it was heavy too
But sported a light flossy tassel
That the backs of my fingers remember well,
And it left a dark red line on the priest's brow.

I received it into my hand from the hand
Of whoever was celebrant, one thin
Fastidious movement up and out and in
In the name of the Father and of the Son AND

Of the Holy Ghost … I placed it on the steps
Where it seemed to batten down, even half-resist
All the brisk proceedings of the Mass –
The chalice drunk off and the patted lips.

The sheer felt sense of the biretta is wonderfully conveyed through the sense of touch – it is Heaney's fingers that 'remember' the object. It is both 'heavy' and 'light': the heaviness conveyed in the first half of the poem, where it would 'batten down' and even had the power to 'half-resist; its lightness anticipating the 'paper boat' of the second half of the poem where it is alternatively imagined as

that small boat out of the bronze age
Where the oars are needles and the worked gold frail
As the intact half of a hatched-out shell,
Refined beyond the dross into sheer image.[22]

These lines have echoes of John Donne's poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' in which the soul expands 'like gold to aery thinness beat.'[23]

Where Heaney was content to relish the materiality of the world in his early books he now wishes to be freed of its gravity. In 'The Settle Bed' (*OG*, 345-36), the piece of furniture has an 'un-get-roundable weight':

But to conquer that weight,
Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven
[…] whatever is
given
Can always be reimagined.

[22] The bronze boat was one of a hoard of objects, dating back to the Iron Age, discovered at Broighter, County Derry, in 1895. An image of the boat is pictured on the American edition of *Seeing Things*.
[23] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by Albert James Smith, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 84.

Since *The Haw Lantern* Heaney has been concerned with the generative emptiness in the wake of the death of his mother. As he revisits Glanmore ('Glanmore Revisted') he is now 'in full possession | Of an emptied house' (*OG*, 348). And yet he finds 'The whole place airier' (*ST*, 36) and the unroofing of his childhood world, hinted at in the description of the 'blue slates' of his adult home as the 'midnight thatch' of his childhood one, makes for unexpected marvels: 'But when the slates came off, extravagant | Sky entered and held surprise wide open' (*OG*, 350).[24]

I have been arguing for a reading of *Seeing Things* which in its efforts to articulate a sixth sense ('A Royal Prospect', 40), an 'extraness' beyond what is given materially, at the very least coheres with Maritain's ideas around how poetry (and art in general) gives expression to an 'excess' in our material environment which is beyond our ordinary perception. In *Seeing Things*, Heaney is concerned to articulate a language of surplus in which the material world appears to brim over. It is a poetry 'coterminous with longing' ('Wheels within Wheels', *OG*, 355-56) where, like Aeneas, Heaney prays to go beyond the limit: 'But enough was not enough. Who ever saw | The limit in the given anyhow?' In his early books Heaney, like Antaeus, could not be 'weaned | Off the earth's long contour' (*N*, 3). In *Station Island* he faced squarely the political and religious demands by which he felt earth-bound and found thereafter a greater imaginative freedom. The death of his parents was a final unroofing and clearing of a space. As he approached fifty it was time 'To credit marvels … So long for air to brighten, | Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten' (*OG*, 357). The word 'lighten' is picked up in the title of the first series of poems in the 'Squarings' sequence – 'Lightenings'.

[24] The word 'extravagant' is used here in both the habitual sense of abundant giving, but also in the etymological sense of going beyond limits. In this sense it anticipates the *extraness* I have been drawing attention to in the poems of *Seeing Things*.

In ‘Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven’, Heaney recounts how the first draft of the opening poem of ‘Squarings’ was written on the same day that he completed a long annotation of a selection of Yeats’s poems for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.[25] In his introduction to that selection he refers to the importance of the moon in the symbology of Yeats’s *A Vision* and how it has been ‘immemorially associated with shifting and change, both physical and psychic.’[26] Heaney borrows the word *shifting* as the opening word of the ‘Squarings’ sequence: ‘Shifting brilliancies’ (*OG*, 358).[27] Part of Heaney’s attraction to Yeats was Yeats’s refusal to surrender to the limits of the material world. Yeats’s interest in the occult, in mysticism, and as a practitioner of magic allowed him access to a world otherwise inaccessible. He was interested in – to borrow a title from a chapter in Richard Ellmann’s biography of the poet – ‘combatting the materialists’.[28] Heaney was certainly less experimental than Yeats (although an entry in the *Station Island* notebook suggests an interest in Buddhism, something of much interest to Yeats[29]), but his interest in how poetry could articulate something ‘coterminous with longing’ found validation in Yeats, whose poem ‘Cold Heaven’ ‘is as much about metaphysical need as it is about the meteorological conditions’.[30] Heaney felt that the poem had ‘extra and inestimable dimensions’, the word extra reminding us of the extraness which so appealed to him in painters such as Fra Angelico and Van Gogh.

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[25] Heaney, ‘Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven’, p. 119.
[26] *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. by Seamus Deane, Andrew Carpenter, and Jonathan Williams, 5 vols (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 787.
[27] Richard Rankin Russell believes that Yeats became the ‘governing poetic spirit’ over the entire ‘Squarings’ sequence. See Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 151.
[28] Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).
[29] In an entry dated 14 December 1981, in which Heaney explores what he wishes to achieve in the ‘Station Island’ sequence, he writes that he strives ‘towards an ideal that is bhuddist [*sic*] in its paradox of attachment and detachment.’ Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 49,493/57, p. 137. Hereafter, NLI.
[30] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p. 147.

It is that extra dimension of poetry which Heaney applauds in 'Joy or Night': 'When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the condition of overlife, and rebels at limit.'[31]

In a review for the *TLS*, Lachlan Mackinnon praised the 'Squarings' sequence for its 'astonishing imaginative freedom',[32] and there is no doubt that its freedom is rooted in poetry which constantly rebels at limit. It also rebels at a hard-edged border between the material and the imagined or what has been more commonly referred to as the secular and the sacred. Poem viii (*OG*, 364), perhaps the best known of the sequence, provides a wonderful parable of what is happening in 'Squarings' as a complete sequence. Bernard O'Donoghue describes it 'as assured as anything Heaney has written'.[33] It recounts a story from the Irish annals of a ship which appears in the sky above a monastic community. As it hooks itself into the altar rails, the abbot is concerned to free it:

> 'This man can't bear our life and will drown,'
>
> The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
> They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
> Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

The story inverts our expectations: a ship sails in the air and a crewman fears drowning in the material surrounds of the monastic community. For the monks at prayer, the ship is visionary, for the crewman who descends to release it, the material world is 'marvellous'; if the monks see things, so too does the crewman. The threat of drowning, which the crewman faces, is almost a mirror image of the poet's own fear of water in the title poem 'Seeing Things' (*OG*, 339-41):

> It was as if I looked from another boat

[31] Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, p. 158.
[32] Lachlan Mackinnon, 'A Responsibility to Self', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 June 1991, p. 28, The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014.
[33] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 127.

Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.

Heaney's 'bowed' head suggests his place among the community of monks, even if his fear of drowning places him squarely with the crewman of poem viii. The crewman is not the only 'successful Orpheus' (*SS*, 322) who navigates two worlds; in the poems of *Seeing Things*, the poet moves between the real and the imagined in language which conveys the superfluity of being and which, therefore, allows us to see things too.

Heaney's interest in painting was shared by Czesław Miłosz. In the same year as *Seeing Things*, Miłosz published *Provinces* in which he collected his poem 'At Yale' where he writes 'So the time came again for adoring art.'[34] He goes on in the poem to celebrate Jean Baptiste Corot who 'Whatever he saw […] revealed radiance in the disguise of a moment.'[35] The same claim could be made for Heaney and a beautiful illustration is poem xv (*OG*, 370), where the poet's father is imagined in a scene from Rembrandt:

And strike this scene in gold too, in relief,
So that a greedy eye cannot exhaust it:
Stable straw, Rembrandt-gleam and burnish

Where my father bends to a tea-chest packed with salt,
The hurricane lamp held up at eye-level
In his bunched left fist, his right hand foraging

For the unbleeding, vivid-fleshed bacon
Home-cured hocks pulled up into the light
For pondering a while and putting back.

That night I owned the piled grain of Egypt.
I watched the sentry's torchlight on the hoard.
I stood in the door, unseen and blazed upon.

[34] Czesław Miłosz, *Provinces*, trans. by Robert Hass (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1991), p. 15.
[35] Miłosz, *Provinces*, p. 20.

David Dooley thought this poem among the most 'lovely' of *Seeing Things*.[36] To borrow the title of one of Rembrandt's most famous paintings, the child Heaney is like a night watchman gazing on his father just as we are invited to gaze imaginatively on the scene. But almost immediately we are reminded of the thwarted sense of sight and that 'a greedy eye cannot exhaust it'. The simple domestic scene is transfigured because what is seen by the child is re-imagined by the poet, the held-up hurricane lamp representing, perhaps, the illumination of poetry.[37] In the language of Maritain, the poem exposes excess in the material environment so that a simple image of his father becomes for Heaney the 'piled grain of Egypt.'

What is the source of this excess in the material environment? Rowan Williams believes that for Maritain art necessarily relates in some way to the sacred, what we call God.[38] Heaney won't go this far, but a Catholic sensibility, keenly felt as a child, still credits an impulse towards the transcendent even if it is no longer expressed in orthodox belief. His vision in *Seeing Things* coheres not only with Maritain's insistence on the integrity of an artwork, but also with his ideas around art's ability to articulate an excess of being. It is what Bernard O'Donoghue has called a 'secular mysticism' and which he sees as the 'principal operative sense of "seeing things"'.[39] Acknowledging his debt to Yeats in his interviews with O'Driscoll, Heaney also recognised that 'I'm much closer to the fundamentally Catholic mysticism in Kavanagh' (*SS*, 318). Henry Hart sees Kavanagh as one of the

[36] David Dooley, 'Poetry Chronicle', *The Hudson Review*, 45.3 (1992), 509–17 (p. 512) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3851763>. In this same review he also reviews Milosz's *Provinces*.
[37] The idea is well established in poetic theory, especially Romantic poetic theory. See Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, new edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
[38] Williams, p. 38.
[39] O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, p. 126. Terence Brown has written of the 'secular mysticism' of Derek Mahon, the dedicatee of *Seeing Things*. See Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*, ed. by Terence Brown (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1996), p. 19.

guides to *Seeing Things*, especially the Kavanagh of 'The Placeless Heaven',[40] where Heaney writes of the 'transfigured images' of Kavanagh's later poetry and of their 'visionary intent'.[41] He also writes of 'overflow' as a 'spurt of abundance from a source within and it spills over to irrigate the world beyond itself.'[42] The poems of *Seeing Things* do just that and in doing so owe something to Kavanagh, as they do to Maritain.

To return to poem xv. The child who sees his father remains himself 'unseen and blazed upon', the striking language of 'blazed' suggesting a sense of benediction. What we have is the self-forgetfulness of the poet and the integrity of the artwork which assumes a life of its own. Borrowing a favourite biblical image, Heaney says that 'The poem, in other words, must be all of a piece, must grow its own legs, arise, take up its bed and walk.'[43] The poet delights in what he has made and central to this dispossession of the artist is 'disinterested love.'[44] Love is not much talked about in Heaney criticism (his own caution in using the word might partly account for this), but it surely accounts for the surplus energy of many of the poems, and not least in *Seeing Things*. One of the few critics to acknowledge Heaney as a poet of love is John Wilson Foster: 'I for one am grateful for the spiritual comfort Heaney has offered us in Ulster. Only a poetry whose craft is equal to its largess of humane love can suggest an ennobling resemblance to religion.'[45] As Northern Ireland crept tentatively towards peace, that spiritual comfort was also to

[40] Henry Hart, 'What Is Heaney Seeing in "Seeing Things?"', *Colby Quarterly*, 30.1 (1994), 33–42 (p. 33).
[41] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 5; 10.
[42] Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 13.
[43] Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', p. 117.
[44] Williams, p. 161. For a fuller discussion of this, see Chapter Four 'God and the Artist', pp. 135-70.
[45] John Wilson Foster, 'Heaney's Redress', in *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991), pp. 168-205 (p. 182).

be found in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (published a year before *Seeing Things*), the final word of which is 'love'.[46]

'Where does spirit live? Inside or outside | Things remembered, made things, things unmade?' (78). If this is a question for Yeats, it is also a question Heaney asks himself in *Seeing Things*. At the heart of it is the poet's childhood world of Mossbawn, his 'Ground of being', whose 'cold memory-weights' loads him 'hand and foot, in the scale of things' (*OG*, 384).

> Was music once a proof of God's existence?
> As long as it admits things beyond measure,
> That supposition stands' (*OG*, 390).

We could easily exchange the word music for love without much change of sense. It is in that spirit of Heaney as a poet of love that I wish to read *The Spirit Level*.

The Spirit Level

Towards the end of his discussion of *The Spirit Level,* Neil Corcoran acknowledges the proliferation of saints in the collection.[47] He offers a close reading of 'The Butter-Print', where Heaney reads a childhood memory of choking on an awn of rye in light of the martyrdom of the third century Sicilian Saint Agatha. It is my intention in this section to expand Corcoran's reading to include other saints in the collection and to draw attention to Heaney's use of the language of wounds, healing and cures which runs as a motif throughout the book, and to suggest that the poet draws on this language to explore 'the glimpsed ideal' (*OG* 459) of sacrificial love. The language of wounds, healing and cures is already familiar from Heaney's *The*

[46] Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 81.
[47] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 206.

Cure at Troy and the 'rural Catholic idiom'[48] which Heaney employs in his translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (*CT*, 77) –

> Believe that a further shore
> Is reachable from here.
> Believe in miracles
> And cures and healing wells

– continues in *The Spirit Level*. In the early part of the book, the Irish saints Brigid and Kevin feature, the story of St Kevin also discussed in Heaney's Nobel lecture, *Crediting Poetry*. In the 'second half' of the collection we have the English saint and poet Caedmon, the abbot of Iona and biographer of St Columcille, Adaman (more commonly Adamnan[49]), St Agatha and the Virgin Mary.

The first saint to appear in *The Spirit Level* is St Brigid, one of the three patron saints of Ireland, together with Patrick and Colmcille. In his interview with John Haffenden in 1979, Heaney remarked that 'Irish Catholicism is continuous with something older than Christianity.'[50] Heaney's sense of a continuity between the pagan and Christian is, perhaps, most perfectly embodied in the figure of St Brigid. James Kenney, in his authoritative *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland,* remarks that

> Brigit is one of the Irish saints as to whose relationship with a pagan divinity there can be little doubt. Certain aspects of her character and career must be based on the myth or the ritual of a goddess, probably a goddess associated with a fire cult.

He goes on to say that 'It may be added that her feast-day, February 1, corresponds with *Imbolc*, one of the four great festivals of the pagan year.'[51] According to the

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[48] John Walsh, 'Bard of Hope and Harp', *Sunday Times*, 7 October 1990, p. 3, Gale OneFile: News <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A117281257/STND?u=duruni&sid=zotero&xid=07de28bf> [accessed 8 June 2020].
[49] For this usage I follow James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York: Octagon Press, 1979).
[50] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 60 (first publ. in *London Magazine*, 19 (1979), 5-28).
[51] See Kenney, p. 357.

sources, Brigid was a patron of the poets and men of learning.[52] Little is known about her life, but a series of miracle narratives were recorded by Cogitosus in his *Life of St Brigit*, possibly written some time around the middle of the seventh century, and the 'earliest hagiographical work in Hiberno-Latin.'[53]

Writing in 1935, just four years before Heaney was born, Alice Curtayne published a paper in which she drew attention to a revival of the cult of St Brigid.[54] In his interview with Robert Druce in 1979, Heaney discussed the place of Brigid in the Catholic, pagan and Gaelic ethos of his childhood upbringing:

> I think that was and is important. In February on St Brighid's [*sic*] Day, we made the Brighid's crosses in honour of St Brighid. I remember this old woman Annie Devlin sitting in the middle of the floor with the green rushes all around her, making those crosses. Then they were hung up everywhere throughout the year.[55]

Describing the Mossbawn kitchen to Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney talked about 'Saint Brigid's crosses behind the pictures' (*SS*, 12). The figure of Brigid, then, someone who seemed to epitomise the continuity between pagan and Christian cultures, was central to the folk-Catholicism in which Heaney grew up and which shaped his sensibility indelibly. Such an exposure to the revival in the cult of St Brigid may in part account for her appearance, not only in *Wintering Out* ('Traditions'), but also in three consecutive collections of Heaney's poetry, beginning with *Seeing Things*.

The cult around St Brigid and the ritual traditions surrounding her no doubt played an important part in the shaping of Heaney's early sensibility. Stories derived from Cogitosus of miracles relating to butter churning, harvesting and cattle[56], must

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[52] See Kenney, p. 358.
[53] Sean Connolly and J. M. Picard, 'Cogitosus's "Life of St Brigit" Content and Value', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 5–27 (p. 5).
[54] Alice Curtayne, 'The Rediscovery of Saint Brigid', *The Irish Monthly*, 63.745 (1935), 412–20. We know that Heaney was familiar with Curtayne as a biographer of saints as well as the biographer of Francis Ledwidge; see Seamus Hosey, *Speaking Volumes* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1995), p. 38.
[55] Robert Druce, 'A Raindrop on a Thorn', *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 9.1 (1979), 24–37, (p. 28).
[56] See Connolly and J. M. Picard, pp. 12–27.

have crossed with Heaney's own experience of farm life on Mossbawn. Religious practices and traditions around saints were woven into the fabric of the rural folk-Catholicism of Heaney's upbringing. It is one of these traditions which is the subject of 'A Brigid's Girdle' (*SL*, 5) in *The Spirit Level*. It is an image, however, which Heaney first describes in 'Squarings' xxx (*OG*, 376) in *Seeing Things*:

> On St Brigid's Day the new life could be entered
> By going through her girdle of straw rope:
> The proper way for men was right leg first,
>
> Then right arm and right shoulder, head, then left
> Shoulder, arm and leg. Women drew it down
> Over the body and stepped out of it.

When the tradition reappears in *The Spirit Level*, the playfulness of the 'Squarings' poem gives way to a more sombre and elegiac circumstance where Heaney addresses a seriously ill friend.[57] The poem opens by remembering a previous correspondence with Adele, when Heaney wrote to her 'from a rustic table | Under magnolias in South Carolina'. Heaney's reverie of a memory of 'blossoms' and 'Bisected sunlight' serves only to foreground his friend's isolation and pain: 'Where you faced the music and the ache of summer | And earth's foreknowledge gathered in the earth.' In the final two stanzas of the poem, Heaney is in County Wicklow and is plaiting a Brigid's Girdle for his sick friend on the feast of St Brigid:

> Twisted straw that's lifted in a circle
> To handsel and to heal, a rite of spring
> As strange and lightsome and traditional
> As the motions you go through going through the thing.

Here the girdle of *Seeing Things* assumes the added dimension of healing, and if there is a playfulness in the earlier poem, there is a sense of deep empathy in the later one. In the face of his friend's suffering, the poet draws on what nourished him in his

[57] The poem is addressed to 'Adele', possibly Adele Dalsimer, a friend of Heaney's who established the Irish Studies Program at Boston College and who died in February 2000 at the age of sixty.

childhood in the hope that the fragile image of the saint's girdle might stand for the wished for healing the poet hopes for his friend. As he plaits the girdle, we are reminded of his father plaiting the harvest bow which became 'A throwaway love-knot of straw'. Heaney's own imagined girdle (and his poem) is a 'love-knot' in the face of suffering, and if the motto of his father's 'frail device' could have been '*The end of art is peace*', then the motto for the poet's gift to Adele could be 'The end of art is healing'.

In his review of *The Spirit Level* in *Poetry*, Paul Breslin called 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' 'the most immediately ingratiating and memorable poem in *Spirit Level*' [*sic*].[58] The poem receives only passing comment in Corcoran but is closely read by John F. Desmond, Richard Rankin Russell and Helen Vendler. Both Desmond and Russell read the poem in the context of a theology of sacrificial love and understand Kevin as a model example of the self-emptying (*kenosis*) love of Christ.[59] On the other hand, Vendler finds in the poems of *The Spirit Level* what she calls a 'poetry of stoicism', which she sees enacted in Kevin. Desmond thinks this interpretation of Vendler's 'too simplistic to account adequately for the poem's nuances', and his view is one I sympathise with in my reading of the poem.[60]

An early draft of the poem was entitled 'Diptych'[61], although Heaney appears to have experimented with a poem originally in three parts. In the second part, which is excised from the final version, Heaney makes explicit an analogy between Kevin and the playfulness of lyric verse:

> Compared with Atlas posted faithfully
> At the world's end, or that bishop with his hand

[58] Paul Breslin, 'Heaney's Redress', *Poetry*, 168.6 (1996), 337–351 (p. 347).
[59] See John F. Desmond, *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009), pp. 68–72, and Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, pp. 162–63.
[60] Desmond, p. 119, footnote 12.
[61] NLI, MS 49,493/106.

Held steady on the coals for protestantism,

Kevin's playing games. He stands for lyric
Intervention in the scheme of things.
As when a simile begins to find

Focus and direction in epic verse
And the bard's strong hand upon the poem's helm
Slackens and the whole craft drifts or lifts …

What we find, then, is that Heaney's first thoughts are not on the saintliness of Kevin, but on the ways in which he might enlighten our understanding of the role of the lyric poet. There is nothing here of the solemn, penitential figure of Kevin which comes across in the final poem – here the playfulness of Kevin stands for the playfulness of the lyric poet.

In the draft of what became the second half of the published poem, where we are invited to see the interior disposition of the saint, Heaney compares the face of Kevin to a cliff or rockface and asks in the final tercet of the draft:

And the cliff is basalt, or is it a soutane
On a retreat-master's turned back up on altar steps,
<u>Veni creator spiritus</u> athrob in him?[62]

Heaney excised these lines in the published poem (*OG*, 410-11) and instead we have the much more beautiful lines:

Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

[62] NLI, MS 49,493/106. In school retreats, which Heaney would have attended at St Columb's College, and in parish missions, the first lecture was preceded by the singing of the 'Veni Creator Spiritus'. My thanks to Fr John. R. Walsh for this information.

Apart from a reference to the Ignatian prayer for selfless service ('To labour and not to seek reward'[63]), the excision of ecclesiastical and liturgical language – bishop, soutane, retreat-master, altar and *Veni creator* – from the published draft of the poem shifts the poem away from a more orthodox Catholic setting and instead focuses imaginatively on the interior life of Kevin: 'And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow, | Imagine being Kevin.' It also shifts our attention away from authority to service. In an early interview in 1970 Heaney spoke of St Patrick's crozier, planting a sense of sin in the country and paralysing certain life forces.[64] The crozier is a symbol of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and, in a sense, is a symbol of the orthodoxy of Catholicism which Heaney set out to disengage from in *Station Island*. Kevin and the other saints in *The Spirit Level*, however, are characterised by a certain dispossession of self and a gift for healing. Kevin is 'moved to pity' and his tenderness for the blackbird's young links him 'Into the network of eternal life'.

In writing about 'Squarings' xxx, where Heaney watches his father but remains 'unseen', I spoke of the dispossession of the artist when the artist stands back and allows the artwork to assume an integrity of its own. This is not necessarily derived from a Catholic sensibility, but it at least coheres with the notion of disinterested love which is at the heart of the Christian tradition and which finds particular expression in the witness of the saints' lives and Catholic devotion to them. It is in this sense that Kevin's actions are more than stoical (OED: 'Of disposition, behaviour etc.: characterized by indifference to pleasure or pain'). The suffering of Kevin is not a value in itself but must be understood (to borrow a phrase

[63] Again, the text of this prayer would have been familiar to Heaney from his time at St Columb's. For the full text of the prayer, see Eamon Duffy, *Heart in Pilgrimage - A Prayerbook for Catholic Christians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 219.
[64] Patrick Garland, 'Seamus Heaney', *The Listener*, 8 November 1973, 629, The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991.

from Spinoza) *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity'). It is for this reason that Heaney tells us that Kevin finds himself 'linked | Into the network of eternal life'. In theological terms, Kevin's actions are not the result of his own physical endeavour, or stoicism, but a response to the grace of God who is able to make all things possible.

When Heaney invokes the story of Kevin in his Nobel lecture, he draws attention to a Franciscan quality in Kevin's story. Kevin was 'overcome with pity and constrained by his faith to love the life in all creatures great and small' (*OG*, 458-59). The saint's harmony with the natural world may also have accounted for Heaney's attraction to Caedmon.[65] Caedmon's story is told by Bede, who, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, presents a picture of a humble stable worker, visited in a dream by a man who invites him to: 'Sing about the creation of all things'. Caedmon immediately sings a song in praise of God the Creator after which he is invited to join the religious community of the abbey.[66] In an interview for *The Guardian* in 1999, Heaney said:

> As the years have gone on I have become increasingly devoted to the figure of Caedmon, the first Anglo-Saxon poet […] The myth of the beginning of English sacred poetry is that this guy Caedmon was a worker on a farm attached to the abbey at Whitby.[67]

Heaney celebrates the poet and saint in his poem 'Whitby-sur-Moyola' (*OG*, 425), where he describes him as

> the perfect yardman
> Unabsorbed in what he had to do
> But doing it perfectly.

[65] It was an attraction he shared with Derek Walcott, who had written of 'Caedmon's raceless dew' in poem XXIII of his book *Midsummer*. See *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 483.
[66] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. by R. E. Latham, David Hugh Farmer, and Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin Classics, Rev. edn (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 248–51.
[67] Nicholas Wroe, 'Son of the Soil', *The Guardian*, (9 October 1999), p. 2.

Like Kevin who 'has forgotten self', Caedmon is unabsorbed with a herd of cattle who are his 'sacred subjects'. In a nod to his poem 'Digging', in which he credits the skill of his father and how his 'old man could handle a spade', Heaney credits Caedmon the yardman whose 'real gift' was not poetry, but 'just bogging in', the word bogging an echo, perhaps, of 'Toner's bog' in Heaney's first collected poem.[68] If Heaney does not celebrate Caedmon the poet, neither does he appear to celebrate his prayerfulness:

> I never saw him once with his hands joined
> Unless it was a case of eyes to heaven
> And the quick sniff and test of fingertips
> After he'd passed them through a sick beast's water.

Once again, together with Brigid and Kevin, Heaney's recourse to the lives of the saints is not for any orthodoxy they espouse, but for their witness to the goodness of all created things and for the embodiment they provide of the wished-for healing of Heaney as a poet of love. Heaney finds sanctity in healing and the restoration of the physical body. In my second chapter I argued that the emphasis Heaney placed on physicality in his early collections of poetry was in sympathy with the emphasis Catholic theology places on the body as a unique good. And it is precisely because the body is a unique good that the language of cures, healing and miracles plays such an important role in a Catholic sensibility and in Heaney's poetry.

Helen Vendler argues that Heaney returns to a 'close-up' celebration of objects in 'The Thimble' (*SL,* 42-43) and that the thimble stands for an 'an "absent centre" around which every culture weaves a different text of meaning.'[69] Heaney draws upon four different cultures, from ancient Pompeii to the punk culture of the

[68] We might also recall the Groupsheet poem 'A Cistercian Speaks', discussed in the introduction, where the lay brother privileges manual work over learning.
[69] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 133.

1970s. In the longest section of the poem he recounts a miraculous story attributed to the seventh century saint Adamnan (Adaman in the poem), the ninth abbot of the monastic community of Iona and the biographer of its founder St Columcille. In this case the thimble becomes a 'relic of St Adaman', the word relic recalling the tactile piety of many of the poems of *North*. The thimble began its life as a bell for the monastic community which was cast so heavy 'No apparatus could lift it to the belltower'. Then, as with many of the poems of his previous collection *Seeing Things*, the material gives way to the visionary as the workers succumb to a delirious vision:

> In the middle of the fiery delirium
> Of metal pouring, they would all fall quiet
> And see green waterweed and stepping stones
> Across the molten bronze.

In response to their suffering, Adamnan arrives to heal the men and at the same time the bell shrinks to the size of a thimble:

> So Adaman arrived and blessed their hands
> And eyes and cured them, but at that hour
> The bell too shrank miraculously
> And henceforth was known to the faithful
> And registered in the canons' inventory
> As Adaman's Thimble.

The word 'relic' is picked up in the next poem 'The Butter-Print' where – after choking on an awn of rye – the child breathes once again and his breathing is 'so clear and sudden'

> I might have been inhaling airs from heaven
> Where healed and martyred Agatha stares down
> At the relic knife as I stared at the awn.

The language of healing and cures, initially employed to bring his play *The Cure at Troy* to a close, pervades the language and poems of *The Spirit Level* and draws deeply on Heaney's knowledge of the saints. His poems on the saints are not the

hagiographies of Cogitosus or Adamnan in the sense that they aim to offer the saints as models of perfection for the Christian life, but they nevertheless illustrate once again the rich repository which Heaney's Catholicism offers him by way of embodying the language of healing and cures. It is a language which Heaney was familiar with not only from the lives of the saints but from his experience as a young pilgrim at Lourdes in 1958, where he acted as a *brancardier*, helping the sick and infirm.[70] The common theme running through Heaney's choice of saints from Brigid to Adamnan is their attention to and care for all living things. In the end, the language of healing and cures is a language of love, a word which Heaney employs three times in the final poems of *The Spirit Level*.

The Cure at Troy had finished with: 'And the half-true rhyme is love' (*CT*, 81). In 'A Call' (*OG*, 432), the word is half-said – said in the poem but withheld from his close friend Brian Friel. As he waits for Friel to come to the phone he imagines the unattended phone 'in a calm | Of mirror glass and sunstruck pendulums', the word sunstruck playing, perhaps, on the poem 'Mossbawn: Sunlight':

> And found myself then thinking: if it were nowadays,
> This is how death would summon Everyman.
>
> Next thing he spoke and I nearly said I loved him.

Heaney's hesitancy in his use of the word love is all in evidence here. In 'The Sharping Stone' (*SL*, 59-61), the poet remembers a postcard he and Marie sent to Marie's father after a visit to the Louvre. It was a picture of the sarcophagus of an

[70] Heaney was sponsored by his aunt Jane as a member of the Derry Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes. See O'Driscoll, pp. xxi and 288. Later, in 'Brancardier', in *District and Circle*, he will remember his time as a volunteer at Lourdes, where the sick lay on 'stretchers in the precincts of the shrine | … And always the word "cure" hangs in the air'. *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 48-49.

Etruscan couple laid out in terra cotta. There is a lovely symmetry with the figure of St Kevin in the held out hand of the Etruscan wife:

> Her right forearm and hand held out as if
> Some bird she sees in her deep inward gaze
> Might be about to roost there. Domestic
> Love, the artist thought, warm tones and property,
> The frangibility of terra cotta …

The frangibility of terra cotta might stand for the fragility of domestic love as Heaney sees it. After all, he had experienced the death of his youngest brother Christopher when he was only a child himself, when the 'warm tones' of domestic love became the 'paler' face of his dead brother. Heaney's childhood at Mossbawn 'made a world rim that was not for crossing' ('The Walk', *OG*, 437-38) and in the faintest echo of George Herbert's poem 'Love' ('Love bade me welcome …'):

> Love brought me that far by the hand, without
> The slightest doubt or irony, dry-eyed
> And knowledgeable, contrary as be damned;
> Then just kept standing there, not letting go.

The Spirit Level draws deep from the well of Heaney's experience of folk-Catholicism and the legends and stories embodied in its saints. If the saints witnessed to the reality of disinterested love in living out the Christian vocation, they also responded to its fragility by cures and miracles of healing. In the end, healing is inseparable from love and Heaney learnt it early on from his blind neighbour Rosie Keenan ('At the Wellhead', *OG*, 439-40):

> Being with her
> Was intimate and helpful, like a cure
> You didn't notice happening.

ELECTRIC LIGHT

Discussing the publication of *Electric Light* in the *Guardian* in 2001, Heaney drew attention to the proliferation of light in the collection:

> Once 'Electric Light' got written, I had no doubt about it as the title poem. Apart from anything else, the brightness of my grandmother's house is associated in my mind with a beautiful line from the Mass for the Dead – 'Et lux perpetua luceat eis', 'And let perpetual light shine upon them' […] Then, once I settled on the title, I began to see what I hadn't seen before, that there was light all over the place.[71]

Drawing on Heaney's comments, Stephen Regan has traced the theme of light from *Door into the Dark* to *Electric Light* arguing that

> Light has a powerful and perpetual presence in Heaney's poetry. It has a vital role in poetic composition, and in the cognitive and imaginative processes of poetry, from seeing and perceiving objects in the world to reflecting upon them and recreating them in the mind.[72]

'The Clothes Shrine' (*EL*, 27) is a beautiful example of seeing objects (on this occasion Marie Heaney's blouses and nylon slip) and recreating them poetically in the light of an image from the life of St Brigid. It is the final poem in which Heaney draws on a story from the saint's life. Chapter 6 of Cogitosus's *Life of St Brigit* recounts the miraculous story of Brigid hanging a garment on a sunbeam to dry. Cogitosus tells us that Brigid was drenched with a heavy downpour of rain while grazing her sheep:

> There was a ray of sunshine coming into the house through an opening and, as a result, her eyes were dazzled and she took the sunbeam for a slanting tree growing there. So, she put her rainsoaked clothes on it and the clothes hung on the filmy sunbeam as if it were a big solid tree.[73]

It is not difficult to see the appeal of this story for Heaney. We could equally be in the house at Mossbawn described in 'Mossbawn: Sunlight'. 'The Clothes Shrine' has

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[71] 'Saturday Review: Books: Poetry Special: Lux Perpetua: Seamus Heaney on the Making of His Recent Collection, Electric Light', *Guardian*, 16 June 2001, p. 9, Gale OneFile: News. The article was originally written for the Poetry Book Society Bulletin.

[72] Stephen Regan, 'Lux Perpetua: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, from "Door into the Dark" to "Electric Light"', *Romanticism*, 2016, p. 1 <https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2016.0293>. A version of this essay was later collected in Eugene O'Brien, *'The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances': The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), pp. 261–76.

[73] Connolly and J. M. Picard, p. 15.

no less than seven references to light: 'Light', 'see-through', 'shine', 'sun', 'light' and 'brilliantly', if we allow for the word-play of the final lines:

> The damp and slump and unfair
> Drag of the workaday
> Made light of and got through
> As usual, brilliantly.

Here the poetry is alert to the energies of language (and to the charge of language, which fits with the volume's title). In his use of the word 'brilliantly', Heaney takes a common way of speaking and re-energises it by showing its literal effect, restoring light to the more common expression. The brilliance of the poem in terms of light might also suggest the story of the Transfiguration, recounted in each of the synoptic gospels, where we are told that Jesus's clothes became 'as dazzling as light'.[74] In a draft of the poem, however, Heaney originally described the scene:

> the room
> And the woman un-
> Transfigured, the workaday
> Made light of as usual.[75]

Here, he may have been thinking not only of Brigid, but of the domestic chores of his mother – 'nothing but parturition and potato-peeling *in saecula saeculorum*' (*SS*, 39). In the humdrum of the workaday the woman remains un-transfigured until the dazzling light of poetry is made to shine on the scene, much like the transfiguration of his father in 'Squarings' xv.

'The Clothes Shrine' takes company with these earlier love poems ('Summer Home'; 'The Skunk') in its drawing on a 'sacred' or miraculous event to consecrate a moment of erotic awareness when Heaney first sees his wife's intimate clothing

[74] See Matthew 17. 1-8, Mark 9. 2-8 and Luke 9. 28-36.
[75] NLI, MS 49,493/114.

drying on a 'see-through nylon line', the words 'see-through' wonderfully evoking the overall playfulness of the poem:

> It was a whole new sweetness
> In the early days to find
> Light white muslin blouses
> On a see-through nylon line
> Drip-drying in the bathroom
> Or a nylon slip in the shine
> Of its own electricity –
> As if St Brigid once more
> Had rigged up a ray of sun
> Like the one she'd strung on air
> To dry her own cloak on …

In his detailed review of *Electric Light*, Dennis O'Driscoll called 'The Clothes Shrine' 'a gentle, transparent poem that also revels in electric light, although this time of a figurative kind.'[76] 'Transparent' is the perfect word. The phrase 'Light white muslin blouses' describes the transparency of the fabric but plays wonderfully on the idea of electric light. The electrical charge of the poem subtly conveys the sexual energy which lies just beneath its surface – the blouses are 'see-through' and the nylon slip hangs in the 'shine | Of its own electricity'. Into the high voltage of this suggestiveness arrives the saintly figure of St Brigid, as if to affirm this image of new-found sexual and domestic love. By invoking the saint in this way, Heaney may be thought of as risking blasphemy, but it has been one line of argument in this thesis that Heaney's Catholic sensibility does not differentiate between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' and that the beauty of nature (the river in 'Perch' (*EL*, 4) is described as a 'glorified body', language usually reserved for a description of Christ[77]) and the beauty of the human body, including its sexual desire, are understood in a deeply sacramental sense by Heaney as signs of inexhaustible love.

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[76] Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Steady Under Strain and Strong Through Tension', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, (2002), 149–67 (p. 163).

[77] The word 'glorified' appears most frequently in John's gospel. See a list of entries in Alexander Cruden, *Cruden's Complete Concordance to the Bible* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1996), p. 251.

Mossbawn provides for Heaney a constant well of inexhaustible love and it appears again in 'Out of the Bag' (*EL*, 6-10), together with Epidaurus and Lourdes. Describing the growth-rings of Heaney's poetry, Gerald Mangan in his *TLS* review of *Electric Light* says: 'The core of those growth-rings is of course Mossbawn, the county Derry farm of his childhood, where the sap of inspiration seems to rise without fail'. He goes on in the review to make an explicit point about Heaney's 'Catholic temperament':

> Heaney has perhaps not quite reached the point of nominating the poet as the unacknowledged priest of mankind; but his long absorption in his craft has clearly developed habits of thought which reify language, in a sacramental sense. There is more than a hint of the hieratic, Mallarmean poetics admired by Yeats; but Heaney's more Catholic temperament seems to conceive it as a form of transubstantiation, whereby the unleavened bread of the world is consecrated as the flesh of the word.[78]

'Out of the Bag' is one such act of transubstantiation. It begins with a vivid description of Doctor Kerlin arriving at Mossbawn to deliver another baby. The poet as child peeps through the door of the locked room just as he had watched his father in 'Squarings' xv, but this time he is seen by the doctor who delivers a little brother (perhaps Christopher?), the newborn baby described in the anatomical detail of Heaney's earliest collections:

> The little, pendent, teat-hued infant parts
> Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling –
> A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock
>
> A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole.

In the second part of the poem, Heaney moves between the healing 'Sanctuaries of Asclepius' in ancient Greece and the shrines of Lourdes. When he returns to Mossbawn in the poem, the new-born child is '*miraculum*':

> And then as he dipped and

[78] Gerald Mangan, 'Like Peat-Smoke Mulling', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 4 May 2001, p. 24, The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive.

laved
In the generous suds again, *miraculum*:
The baby bits all came together swimming

Into his soapy big hygienic hands …

In an early draft of 'Out of the Bag', Heaney gave it the title 'Miraculum'.[79] His use of the Latin 'miraculum' in the poem allows him to think of the word in its more rooted sense so that it encompasses a vision broader than, but including, its use in Catholic thinking. *Miraculum* is either 'a wonderful thing, prodigy, miracle' or 'wonder, surprise'.[80]

If 'Out of the Bag' recounts the *miraculum* of childbirth, it also celebrates the miracle of cures and healing as so many of the poems in *The Spirit Level* do. Parts 2 and 3 of the poem recount a visit to Epidaurus, the sanctuary of Asclepius, where inscriptions attest to the cures effected by sleeping in a dormitory attached to the temple (incubation). From here, Heaney seeks a hoped-for cure for a friend, just as he had in 'A Brigid's Girdle':

Bits of the grass I pulled I posted off
To one going in to chemotherapy
And one who had come through …

He imagines lying down 'under seeded grass' and being visited by Hygeia, the daughter of Asclepius and the Greek goddess of health, before in the final part of the poem he returns to the site of new birth at Mossbawn. In a reverie of memory, which could take its place alongside the sonnets of 'Clearances', Heaney imagines his own presence at his mother's bedside – 'Me at the bedside, incubating for real' – the word 'incubating' suggestive of the healing power of domestic love, especially the love of his mother 'whose precinct of vision | I would enter every time'. Together with

[79] He also gave it the title 'Tender'. NLI, MS 49,493/113.
[80] See entry in *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, ed. by D. P. Simpson (Wiley Publishing, 1968).

‘Alphabets’ (*OG*, 292-94), the poem begins at Mossbawn, moves out into the wider circumference of the world (here the shrines of Lourdes and Epidaurus), before returning to the first centre, the *omphalos* of his childhood home.

Electric Light is deeply elegiac and if literary friends are elegised in the second part of the collection, it is not without a sense of elegy in the first part. In ‘The Loose Box’ (*EL*, 14-16) Heaney describes the disappointment of a crib scene where the figure of the child Jesus was ‘Crook-armed, seed-nailed, nothing but gloss and chill – | He wasn’t right at all.’ The figures are described variously in language that is static – ‘solid stooping shepherds, | The stiff-lugged donkey’, which are all ‘well | And truly placed.’ The poet cannot hide his disappointment: ‘At the altar rail I knelt and learnt almost | Not to admit the let-down to myself.’

The folk-Catholicism of Heaney’s childhood is recalled in ‘Known World’ (*EL*, 19-23), which moves between Mossbawn and the wider circumference of the world, this time Macedonia, where in 1978 Heaney attended the Struga Poetry Festival. He remembers ‘Congregations blackening the length | And breadth of summer roads’ in his childhood world of Mossbawn with ‘kin groups still in place’. Against this scene of domestic security, he describes refugees in Macedonia ‘Come loaded on tractor mudguards and farm carts’. They are like ‘An old gold world-chain the world keeps falling from’, the words ‘world-chain’, perhaps, picked up later in the title of his final collection *Human Chain*. In the context of the suffering of refugees, Heaney alludes to Hygo Simberg’s painting of ‘The Wounded Angel’, bandaged and carried on a makeshift stretcher and sees it in the light of his Catholic childhood: ‘A first communion angel with big white wings’. A friend at the Festival teases him: ‘“Is this not you, these mosaics and madonnas?”’ Heaney witnesses the Greek Orthodox Madonna’s Day and, once again, the world of Mossbawn is evoked:

Then on the mountain top, outside a church,
Icons being carried, candles lit, flowers
And sweet basil in abundance, some kind of mass
Being celebrated behind the iconostasis,
A censer swung and carried through the crowd.
I had been there, I knew this, but was still
Haunted by it as by an unread dream.

Heaney had been there indeed, and one important line of thought in this thesis is to argue that part of his poetic composition has been to articulate the unread dream of his experience of Catholicism as a child. The word 'haunted' points to the ambivalence of what he reads, reminding us of the ghostly shades which appear to the poet in 'Station Island', and if he remains 'still haunted' it suggests that 'Station Island' was not quite the resolution he had hoped for.[81]

Part of the tension in *Station Island* and part of the reason why there is no final resolution in terms of Heaney's relationship with Catholicism is, at one level, the inseparability of Heaney's felt sense for the rituals around Catholicism and the orthodoxy in which those rituals find expression and which Heaney wishes to leave behind. The importance of those rituals in Heaney's sensibility is demonstrated in his disappointment at the crib scene in 'The Loose Box'. We also sense his disappointment in an unpublished letter he sent to Ted Hughes concerning a visit to Santiago de Compostela, the occasion of which provides the context for 'The Little Canticles of Asturias' (*EL*, 24-25). In the poem, Heaney makes his way to the town of Piedras Blancas in the province of Asturias and on his way sees farmers at work and a shrine, presumably to the Virgin Mary. Once again, the worlds of the Mediterranean and Mossbawn merge into one: 'I was a pilgrim new upon the scene | Yet entering it as if it were home ground'.

And in the afternoon, gulls *in excelsis*

[81] We saw in Chapter Four that Heaney says as much in his interview with Fintan O'Toole. See 'A Pilgrim's Progress', *Inside Tribune* (Dublin, 30 September 1984), pp. 1–3, 6.

> Bobbed and flashed on air like altar boys
> With their quick turns and tapers and responses
> In the great re-echoing cathedral gloom
> Of distant Compostela, *stela, stela*.

We are lifted momentarily from the gloom of the cathedral to the 'star of the earth' ('Compostela', from the Latin 'campus stellae', 'field of stars'), but with the repetition of *stela, stela* sounding like a diminuendo, a diminishing of light. The letter to Ted Hughes, now in the British Library, reveals that Seamus and Marie visited the Cathedral at Santiago in early July 1996. The letter is dated 8 July 1996 and the address is given as 'Galan 1, Salinas, Asturias'. It reveals, on Heaney's part, a realistic, but elegiac sense of the loss of faith in which he was grounded at Mossbawn:

> Dear Ted,
> At the weekend I got to Santiago de Compostella …
> We happened to be in the Cathedral on Saturday night at a Mass where an ordination was taking place. Two priests taking final vows, three deacons being consecrated, bishops in mitres, litanies in Latin, Gregorian chant, murmurous responses – the whole underlife of my childhood and teens rallied and wept for itself. The stone and the squares, at once 'southern' and Atlantic, lashed with rain and holding out for something more; it was potent because there is still just enough 'living faith' around the place to make you feel the huge collapse that had taken place at the centre of the Christian thing.[82]

In an article in the *Guardian* shortly after the publication of *Electric Light*, Heaney drew attention to the note of elegy in the collection: 'it is full of mortalia, by people and things we must pass away from or that have had to pass away from us. Deaths of poets and of friends who were poets. Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.'[83] The reference to the most familiar line from the opening book of Virgil's

[82] British Library, 'Personal and writers' correspondence Heaney', MS 88918/35/12.
[83] 'Lux Perpetua: Seamus Heaney on the Making of His Recent Collection, Electric Light', *Guardian*, 16 June 2001, p. 9.

Aeneid[84] (and a favourite of Heaney's) draws attention not only to the guiding presence of the pastoral poet from Mantua in *Electric Light*, but to the broader reality of the tears of things which runs through Heaney's poetry. When he writes about 'things we must pass away from' he surely has partly in mind the whole 'underlife' of his childhood faith whose loss is a source of tears in the letter to Hughes.

If Heaney can no longer assent to the faith of his childhood, he borrows the language of faith to credit the super-abundance of life in the sonnet which opens 'Sonnets from Hellas' (*EL*, 38): 'It was opulence and amen on the mountain road.' In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: 'In Hebrew, *amen* comes from the same root as the word for "believe". This root expresses solidity, trustworthiness, faithfulness.'[85] One of the most powerful moments in the Mass is the 'Great Amen', which comes at the end of the Doxology and concludes the Eucharistic Prayer. The believer also assents to the Real Presence of Christ in Holy Communion by saying 'amen'. Heaney's use of the word in 'Into Arcadia' is fully conscious of its Catholic import and is an assent to the grace of a super-abundance of life and joy:

> From Argos into Arcadia, a lorry load
> Of apples had burst open on the road
> So that for yards our tyres raunched and scrunched
> them
> But we drove on, juiced up and fleshed and spattered
> Revelling in it.

If the root meaning of 'amen' expresses solidity, trustworthiness, faithfulness, then Heaney's assent is to the 'trustworthiness' (*OG*, 459) and transubstantiation of language which, as he tells us in 'The Loose Box' (*EL*, 14-16), is

> a purchase come by
> By pacing it in words that make you feel
> You've found your feet in what "surefooted" means …

[84] Aeneid I, line 462. The line has been translated by R. G. Austin as: 'even here tears fall for men's lot, and mortality touches the heart'. See Austin and Publius Vergilius Maro, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos. Liber Primus*, Repr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 156.
[85] Iglesia Católica, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), p. 241.

Heaney's surefootedness is a reminder that if the airiness of the poetry of *Seeing Things* is a template for his later poetry, it is constantly in dialogue with his more Antaean instincts.

Ted Hughes is the subject of the opening elegy of part II of the collection. Henry Hart reminds us that 'On His Work in the English Tongue' (*EL*, 61-63) first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1998 as 'On First Looking into Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*'.[86] Heaney had read the manuscript of *Birthday Letters*, written after the death of Sylvia Plath and only published in 1998.[87] Heaney's poem credits a poet 'Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs | In language that can still knock language sideways.' In a poem which is set against the tragic deaths of Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill and Hughes's and Wevill's daughter, Heaney returns to the theme of passive suffering, which he had first identified in his mother, and to 'the limen world | Of soul on its lonely path'. It is a poem which brims over with the language of *lacrimae rerum*: 'roller griefs', 'fretful', hurt-in-hiding', 'grief-trap', 'weep for his boy', 'door of death', 'bereft of all delight', 'lament' and 'woes'. In its language, it is a poem almost as raw as 'Mycenae Lookout', but its subject has less to do with tragedy on a grand scale and more to do with the intense pain of private suffering and of grief as an expression of love which has nowhere to go. *Birthday Letters* was the public revelation of a private grief, and if Heaney praised the volume as a poetic landmark[88], he nevertheless defended the privacy and intimacies of love between two people and the grief which comes with its sundering:

> Soul has its scruples. Things not to be said.
> Things for keeping, that can keep the small-hours gaze

[86] Henry Hart, 'Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes: A Complex Friendship', *The Sewanee Review*, 120.1 (2012), 76–90 (p. 82).
[87] See the correspondence in the British Library, MS 88918/35/12.
[88] See extract from Heaney on back cover of Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

Open and steady. Things for the aye of God
And for poetry.

The affirmative 'aye' of poetry attests to its 'counterweighting function'[89], its ability to illuminate the burn out of human grief, like the monk in 'Late in the Day' (*EL*, 70-71) who

when his candle burnt out, his quill pen
Feathered itself with a miraculous light

So he could go on working.

In the words 'So he could go on working' there is a faint echo of Heaney's encouragement to his brother Hugh in the face of ongoing sectarian violence in 'Keeping Going' (*OG*, 400-02). Brigid's girdle and the pulled grass from the shrine at Epidaurus attest to Heaney's love for friends at their most vulnerable. However, what he really offers them is 'the cure | By poetry that cannot be coerced'. If it cannot be coerced, it is because it shares with the miraculous cures of his childhood faith the idea of grace.[90]

Heaney's concern for sick friends is brought closer to home in his poem 'Seeing the Sick' (*EL*, 79), where the subject is Heaney's dying father. It shares with 'Squarings' xv the domestic intimacy between father and son. And just as the child remains unseen in the earlier poem, so too, it is implied, he remains unseen in the later poem by his father who requires anointing and morphine. This further adds to the pathos of the poem and the sense of helplessness which accompanies the sickness of a loved one. Arnd Bohm has called the poem 'a subtle and nuanced reading' of Hopkins's 'Felix Randal'.[91] The title, 'Seeing the Sick', is borrowed from the

[89] Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, p. 8.
[90] In his interview with Karl Miller in 2000, when discussing the formative role of his early religious education, Heaney says: 'I have some notion of poetry as a grace'. See *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 32.
[91] Arnd Bohm, 'A Passing of Heroes: Seamus Heaney's "Seeing the Sick" and Hopkins' "Felix Randal"', *The Hopkins Quarterly*, 35.1/2 (2008), 47–53 (p. 47) <https://doi.org/10.2307/45241473>.

opening line of the sestet of Hopkins's sonnet: 'This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.'[92] In the reciprocal endearment there is the faintest anticipation of one sense of the title of Heaney's final collection: *Human Chain*. I have been arguing in this chapter that Heaney has been somewhat neglected as a poet of love and at least one theme of *Electric Light* is the tears of things that comes with loving another person, in this case a parent.

'Seeing the Sick' is a looser version of the sonnet form employed by Hopkins, but it stays true to the sonnet's expression as a love poem and to what Stephen Regan calls 'an intense form of verse soliloquy.'[93] Hopkins's description of the farrier as 'mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome' could well describe the Patrick Heaney of 'Follower' with 'His shoulders globed like a full sail strung | Between the shafts and the furrow.' Now he appears as if he might be a further shade from 'Station Island' – 'Spectral, a relict'. The robustness of his father in the 'octave' of the poem, who 'walked the streets of Hexham at eighteen', surrenders to the vulnerable patient in the sestet who requires morphine and once again we are back in the domestic warmth of home: 'His smile a summer half-door opening out | And opening in. A reprieving light.' Bohm draws attention to the capitalised opening letters of the first two lines – 'Anointed' and 'Of' – and sees in this a playfulness with the Christian symbolism of Alpha and Omega which she traces in the Hopkins poem.[94] I want to suggest that the capital 'O' might also stand for *omphalos* and that the suggestion of Mossbawn in the 'half-door opening out', as Heaney's father dies,

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Bohm also informs us that the poem appeared as part of an anthology of responses to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. See Joaquin Kuhn and Joseph J. Feeney, *Hopkins Variations: Standing Round a Waterfall* (Philadelphia: N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. 3

[92] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 87.

[93] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 3.

[94] See Bohm, pp. 48–49.

is both end (*omega*) and a return to the first centre (*omphalos*) and that the gravitational pull between the two is love.

'Electric Light' (*EL*, 80-81), the title poem which closes the collection, recounts the poet's own tears as a child when he was left to stay at his grandmother's house, where

> I wept and wept
> Under the clothes, under the waste of light
> Left turned on in the bedroom.

Once again, there is a playfulness in Heaney's use of the word 'waste', which suggests not only the 'dying of the light' in Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night'[95], but an anxiety around the waste of the earth's resources and environmental change, which is picked up in his next collection *District and Circle*.[96] If up until now Heaney has remained unseen (by his father in 'Squarings' xv and in 'Seeing the Sick'), it is as if he is finally revealed in the shine of electric light: 'They let me and they watched me'. The line is repeated in two consecutive tercets and its repetition recalls the syntax of the litany which Heaney first heard at Mossbawn. As he turns the 'wireless knob', he is able to roam 'at will the stations of the world.' In this wonderful poetic conceit and play on language, Heaney suggests that the illumination of poetry has placed him on the world stage. No longer the

> fasted pilgrim,
> light-headed, leaving home
> to face into my station (*SI*, 63),

Heaney has moved further out into the circle and circumference of the world. And yet the final line roots him still to the *omphalos* and district of his childhood world:

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[95] This is one of the poems Heaney includes in his discussion of Thomas in 'Dylan the Durable', collected in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, pp. 124–45.
[96] In a collection that returns us to Hopkins, the poet's tears might also remind us of 'Spring and Fall': 'And yet you *will* weep and know why.' Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, pp. 88–89.

‘Among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground.’ He will circle this familiar ground again in his next collection, *District and Circle*.

CHAPTER SIX

'WELL WATER FAR DOWN': *DISTRICT AND CIRCLE*, *HUMAN CHAIN*

DISTRICT AND CIRCLE

In an interview for *The Times* in 2006, after the publication of *District and Circle*, Heaney said 'But on second thoughts a reader might realise, "Ah, yes, in spite of the London poem, in most of the others, he's circling his own district,"'[1] Published forty years after *Death of a Naturalist*, reviewers inevitably made connections between the two books. In the *New York Times*, Brad Leithauser said: 'The author of "District and Circle" is unmistakably the flourishing direct descendent of his first collection, "Death of a Naturalist"'.[2] However, in his circling back on a world familiar to us from *Death of a Naturalist*, reviewers tended not to find any sense of nostalgia. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Caroline Moore argued that instead 'What Heaney thrills to is resurrection'[3] and, indeed, the editor fastened onto the theme of resurrection as a title for John Carey's characteristically insightful review.[4] Playing with the names of the London underground, *District and Circle* also suggests the trustworthiness of the parochial even as it moves out to the wider circumference of millennial anxieties such as 'rising waters' ('In Iowa', *DC*, 52) and a glacier 'begun to melt' ('Höfn', *DC*, 53). In his *Observer* review, Tobias Hill reminded us that 'What is new is the breadth of Heaney's territory'.[5]

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[1] Ben Naparstek, 'Notes from the Underground', *The Times*, 25 March 2006, p. 6 [S4], Gale Primary Sources.
[2] Brad Leithauser, 'Wild Irish', *New York Times*, 16 July 2006, section Books <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/books/review/16leithouser.html> [accessed 15 October 2020].
[3] Caroline Moore, 'The Parochial Pleasures of Famous Seamus', *Telegraph*, 2 April 2006, section Culture, p. 39.
[4] John Carey, 'Resurrection Man', *Sunday Times*, 2 April 2006, section 9, p. 39.
[5] Tobias Hill, 'Arms around the World', *Observer*, 2 April 2006, section Review, p. 21.

After *Station Island*, Heaney's engagement with Catholicism is less fraught, and it operates in a more integrated and embedded way in terms of how Heaney sees the world. Heaney's Catholicism in his later work has become unroofed in the sense that it no longer is housed in a religiously orthodox framework. In *Door into the Dark*, the enclosed space of 'In Gallarus Oratory' becomes a metaphor for the restrictions of Catholic orthodoxy as Heaney sees it. The 'turfstack' and 'core of old dark walled up with stone' in the Gallarus poem becomes 'an unroofed abbey' in 'The Birch Grove' in *District and Circle* (*DC*, 72). If the author of *District and Circle* is the direct descendant of *Death of a Naturalist*, he has arrived via *Station Island* where he lets go of the claustrophobic sense of Catholicism experienced in the Gallarus poem. An important shade who stands outside the central sequence of poems in *Station Island* is the figure of Czesław Miłosz who dwells in an 'unroofed tower' ('The Master', *OG*, 280) and who comes to occupy a more central place in *District and Circle*. Both the unroofed abbey and the tower might usefully act as metaphors for Heaney's Catholic sensibility in *District and Circle*, which since the unroofing of orthodox belief in *Station Island* has found more implicit expression in generative and liminal spaces especially since *The Haw Lantern*. A Catholic sensibility remains, however, and it is noteworthy that a critic as tuned in to Heaney's work as John Carey should devote the last two paragraphs of his review to a discussion of the 'nagging' question of Heaney's religious beliefs.[6]

'A hurry of bell-notes' (*OG*, 242) opens 'Station Island' and the sequence depicts 'A stream of pilgrims answering the bell' (*OG*, 254). The summons of Catholic orthodoxy in *Station Island* is no longer present in *District and Circle*: 'November morning sunshine on my back | This bell-clear Sunday' (*DC*, 15). But

[6] 'Resurrection Man', p.39.

still the language of Catholicism remains: 'crown of thorns' (20), 'surplice' (34), 'age of reason' (29), 'Requiescat' (44), 'blessed myself' (45), 'absolving' (52) and 'stigma' (54). Even the choice of Catholic language – 'age of reason'[7] – places Heaney firmly back in time to the district he is circling. However, Heaney has moved beyond (or, below, perhaps, if we allow for the importance of Heaney's metaphor of digging in his poetic composition) orthodox practice and so the question remains as to how Catholicism operates in *District and Circle*. The answer, I want to argue, is to be found in a gift he shares with Miłosz himself – a poetry of praise. In his review in the *Chicago Review*, Calvin Bedient wrote: 'Seamus Heaney is truest to his gift when he is praising, and his new collection, *District and Circle*, is largely about what can be fondly remembered.'[8] In *Death of a Naturalist* praise is voiced in the figure of Saint Francis; in *District and Circle* it is voiced in the poet's own voice. The difference is an important one: Catholicism is no longer the subject of poems but remains embedded in the vision out of which they grow.

> In a profile of the artist Barrie Cooke in 1998, Heaney wrote:
>
> if I were asked for a motto he might inscribe on the wall of his studio, I would suggest the following two lines by Czesław Miłosz, another master who has kept alive the gift for praise without ever averting his eyes from the worst that the age has to offer: 'It seems I was called for this: | To glorify things just because they are.'[9]

The quotation is from Miłosz's 'Blacksmith Shop'[10], a poem which had a particular appeal for Heaney. In an interview in 1995, where Heaney discusses the poem, he says: 'When I was writing poems much earlier on, I wish I had had that ideology of

[7] In Catholic theology, the age by which a child is believed to assume moral responsibility and sufficient understanding to receive holy communion.
[8] Calvin Bedient, review of *Review of District and Circle; Cracks in the Universe*, by Seamus Heaney and Charles Tomlinson, *Chicago Review*, 53.1 (2007), 160–65 (p. 160).
[9] Seamus Heaney, *Profile 10 - Barrie Cooke*, Gandon Editions (Belfast: Nicholson and Bass, 1998), p. 7.
[10] Czesław Miłosz, *Provinces*, trans. by Robert Hass (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1991), p. 1.

praise more available to me because I feel that that's part of my nature, for sure.'[11] In an unpublished letter in the Emory archive about the popularity of the Sweeney legend for various artists, Heaney makes a similar point: 'As to why other artists should have got involved with the theme, I can only speculate […] The artist, standing in Sweeney's place, becomes a register of pure being. A praiser of things just because they are.'[12] Heaney traced such praise of things to the very sense of Miłosz's 'vocation as a poet'.[13]

Richard Rankin Russell picks up on Heaney's fondness for Miłosz's 'Blacksmith Shop' and sees in Heaney's wish to glorify things something he shares with both Miłosz and Hopkins. However, he makes an important point when he says that while Hopkins looked for the 'thingness' he found in nature, Heaney extends that to what Martin Heidegger calls 'equipment'.[14] Heaney's attention to equipment has been there from his first collection – 'A scythe's edge, a clean spade, a pitch-fork's prongs' ('The Barn', *OG,* 7) and his search for the 'thingness' of material objects is wonderfully evoked in the objects of 'Shelf Life' in *Station Island*. But in *District and Circle*, as Carey has observed, 'Repeatedly his words aspire to the condition of metal.'[15] We can see this if we compare two of Heaney's own blacksmith poems. In 'The Forge' (*OG,* 19), Heaney describes the *effects* of the anvil: its 'short-pitched ring, | The unpredictable fantail of sparks' and the 'hiss' of

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[11] Seamus Heaney, Gabriel Rosenstock, and Hans-Christian Oeser, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Cyphers*, (2014), 10–22, (p. 21).

[12] Heaney is responding to a letter about the appeal of the Sweeney legend. The letter is dated 14th January 1993. Atlanta (GA), Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, MSS 960, Box 45. Hereafter, Emory. The most vivid instance of praise, perhaps, is Sweeney's praise of the trees in Heaney's version. See *Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 36–46.

[13] In a scribbled note in Emory MSS 960, Box 49, Heaney writes in relation to Miłosz's *Collected Poems*: 'Miłosz's own sense of his vocation as a poet – "to glorify things just because they are" – is radiantly fulfilled in that book.'

[14] 'Deep Down Things', in Eugene O'Brien, *'The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances': The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), pp. 239-260 (p. 240).

[15] 'Resurrection Man', p.39.

the horseshoe in water, before he focuses on a description of the blacksmith himself: 'leather-aproned, hairs in his nose'. In his translation of an eighteenth-century Irish poem 'Poet to Blacksmith' (*DC*, 25) in *District and Circle*, the shortened sonnet form is given over entirely to a forensic description of the implement *itself*: 'A suitable tool for digging'. It must be 'Lightsome and pleasant to lean on', 'Tastily finished', 'The shaft to be socketed in dead true and dead straight', 'The plate and the edge of it not to be wrinkly or crooked', 'The grain of the wood and the line of the shaft nicely | fitted'. Above all it must be durable: 'The thing to have purchase and spring and be fit for the | strain'. In the words 'fit for the | strain' the farmyard implement assumes almost an anthropomorphic life, if we allow for the echoes of an earlier poem 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher' (*OG*, 231):

> You were born fit for it.
> Stand in here in front of me
> and take the strain.

What the poem does is to register the pure being of a spade.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, when looking at the idea of sacramentality in Heaney, I drew attention to Robert Welch's essay 'Sacrament and Significance' in which he writes that a Catholic sensibility 'reverences profoundly all the minute activities of life and the flesh.'[16] In that essay he refers to the discussion of the etymology of the word 'religion' by the poet and novelist Eoghan O Tuairisc, who argues that the Latin root *religio* indicates a joining between two things – this world and the next. Welch claims that O Tuairisc goes further than this in proposing 'that this "other" world is hidden in the here and now, that it is not, in other words, some rarefied ethereal otherness.'[17] Welch sees this experience as tied up with the

[16] Robert Welch, 'Sacrament and Significance: Some Reflections on Religion and the Irish', *Religion & Literature*, 28.2/3 (1996), 101–113 (p. 108).
[17] Welch, p. 104.

sacramental life of Roman Catholicism in which 'even insentient things such as bread and wine, have in them the potential, the power to become other through Divine grace'.[18] Heaney, of course, was fully conscious of the sacramental landscape which Welch outlines in his essay and of the power of the word *religare*. In his essay 'The Sense of Place', Heaney wrote: 'Much of the flora of the place had a religious force, especially if we think of the root of the word in *religare*, to bind fast.'[19] It is easy to see how the idea that the other world is somehow hidden in the here and now would appeal to Heaney and it is clearly evident in *District and Circle*, where a childhood memory of sitting at the foot of his parents' bed is 'heaven enough | To be going on with' ('To Mick Joyce in Heaven', *DC*, 10).

In his review of *District and Circle*, John Carey made much of 'the dense linguistic impasto that is Heaney's unique gift' and his ability to turn words 'into granules of solid matter': 'Anything that goes into his poetry comes out more insistently and resoundingly itself.'[20] If it is a unique gift of Heaney's, it at least owes something to the poetry of Hopkins and Hughes as I have argued in Chapter Two. But it may also owe something to Rainer Maria Rilke, whose work Heaney translates in two poems in *District and Circle*: 'Rilke: *After the Fire*' (*DC*, 16) and 'Rilke: *The Apple Orchard*' (*DC*, 68). Heaney has said that he felt in Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* 'the absolute strength of the language, the physicality of it, the materiality of the medium'.[21] Heaney uses language not only as the medium of praise but the very *material* of praise. The texture of his language is so close to what he describes that he not only praises things just because they are but praises them just *as*

[18] Welch, p. 108.
[19] 'The Sense of Place', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 131-149 (p. 133). The essay was originally delivered as a lecture in the Ulster Museum in January 1977.
[20] 'Resurrection Man', p. 39.
[21] Heaney, Rosenstock, and Oeser, p. 18.

they are. So much so that he allows the turnip-snedder in the opening poem ('The Turnip-Snedder', *DC*, 3-4) to have its own voice: '"This is way that God sees life,", it said, "from seedling-braird to snedder"'. We imagine that this is how the poet wishes to see life and that many of the poems of *District and Circle* are just such an effort. In 'Helmet' (*DC*, 14), where Heaney celebrates a 'Boston fireman's gift', he describes the

> Fantailing brim,
> Tinctures of sweat and hair oil
> In the withered sponge and shock-absorbing webs
> Beneath the crown …

One definition of 'tincture' provided by the OED relates to alchemy and defines it as: 'A supposed spiritual principle or immaterial substance whose character may be infused into material things'. The word in Heaney's poem, then, somehow animates the material object it relates to and, to borrow Carey's point, makes the helmet more insistently and resoundingly itself; Heaney registers the pure being of a fireman's helmet. However, Heaney will also have been familiar with another form of the word in Catholic sacramental practice. The word 'intinction' is defined as 'The action or practice of dipping the bread of the Eucharist in the wine so that the communicant may receive both together' (OED). This sense is not overt in the poem but may have sounded in Heaney's mind as he composed the poem and, if so, it elevates the helmet even further in the language of transubstantiation. And if we push the imagined sense further, we might read in the word 'crown' a faint echo of the crown of thorns put on the head of Jesus and, in 'Tinctures of sweat', the sweat which fell like 'great drops of blood' from his head as he prayed in anguish (Luke 22. 44).

Heaney's poetry of praise is intimately connected to his sense of place and to the district of his childhood which he circles around in this collection. World War II provides the background for the early poems in the collection, not least in the

description of the Aerodrome built at Toome during Heaney's childhood ('The Aerodrome', *DC*, 11-12). As the child Heaney holds his mother's hand, there is an ominous sense of parting: 'would she rise and go || With the pilot calling from his Thunderbolt?'[22] But almost immediately the child is reassured:

> But for her part, in response, only the slightest
> Back-stiffening and standing of her ground
> As her hand reached down and tightened around
> mine.

In this intimate and reassuring gesture we are reminded not only of the sonnets of 'Clearances' but also of the intensity of the gesture in the story of sectarian murder in the Nobel Lecture and in section VII of 'Station Island'.[23] It is a good example of how Heaney not only circles the geographical district of childhood, but also the imaginative district of the poems themselves. Heaney's collections are not stand-alone volumes but are in constant reference to each other. He is a deeply self-referential poet and *District and Circle* is no exception. When he finishes the collection with 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' (*DC*, 75-76), the poem revisits (circles back on) the tragic death of Christopher in 'Mid-Term Break' (*OG*, 12), collected exactly forty years before.

As his mother stands her ground there is not only the sense of someone standing physically on her home ground but of someone standing *for* her home ground: 'Wherever the world was, we were somewhere else, || Had been and would be.' Here there is an audible echo of the Christian doxology (traditionally an expression of glory or praise): '…as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall

[22] The poem reminds us that *District and Circle*, which can be read as poetry of praise, is not without a sense of foreboding both in relation to world terrorism ('Anything Can Happen' (13); 'Out of Shot' (15); 'District and Circle' (17-19)) and millennial anxieties around climate change ('In Iowa'; 'Höfn').

[23] See my earlier discussion of both when discussing the murder of William Strathearn in Chapter Four.

be world without end.' In his final collection, *Human Chain*, Heaney will stand his ground too: 'I had my existence. I was there. | Me in place and the place in me' (*HC*, 43). The standing *on* and the standing *for* home ground find their ultimate co-ordinates in love:

> If self is a location, so is love:
> Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,
> Options, obstinacies, dug heels and distance,
> Here and there and now and then, a stance.[24]

Heaney opened and closed *Seeing Things* with descents to the underworld – with a translation from *Aeneid VI* in which Virgil searches for his dead father and a translation from Canto III of Dante's *Inferno* in which Virgil acts as guide as Dante attempts to cross the river to the underworld. Both poems act as subtexts for the title poem 'District and Circle' (*DC*, 17-19) where the 'stubby black roof-wort' which the poet takes hold of as he steadies himself suggests some subterranean growth on the dank ceiling of Dante's *Inferno*. If Virgil's wish to see his dead father was only partially granted in the insubstantial shade of Anchises, the 'glazed face' of Heaney's father is indistinguishable from the poet's own reflected face:

> And so by night and day to be transported
> Through galleried earth with them, the only relict
> Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,
> Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
> By blasted weeping rock-walls.
> Flicker-lit.

The word 'relict' takes us immediately back to Heaney's description of his father in 'Seeing the Sick' – 'Spectral, a relict' (*EL*, 79), and the word 'weeping' to the tears of things in that collection.

[24] The 'here' of the final line indicates a possible circling back to *North* ('And here is love | like a tinsmith's scoop'), in which 'Mossbawn: Sunlight' is very much a matter of 'bearings taken' and 'a stance' being made at the outset of the book.

Heaney's praise is for the verity of memory and the trustworthiness of language to shape that memory into form and thereby into life. 'Wordsworth's Skates' (*DC*, 22) recalls a moment from Book I of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth describes a joyful moment of ice-skating on Lake Windermere.[25] The skates themselves form part of an exhibit at Dove Cottage in Grasmere about which Heaney has written fondly (*SS*, 208). But Heaney is less interested in the relic of the skates than he is in bringing them creatively back to life:

> Not the bootless runners lying toppled
> In dust in a display case,
> Their bindings perished,
>
> But the reel of them on frozen Windermere
> As he flashed from the clutch of earth along its curve
> And left it scored.

Heaney juxtaposes the 'bootless runners', which are 'toppled' and 'perished', with the dynamism of their past life conveyed in the energy of the words 'reel', 'flashed' and 'scored'. There is a sense of the skater, Antaeus-like, being weaned off earth's contours and 'from the clutch of the earth'. If Heaney's poem is an act of resurrection, breathing life into an object of the past, then its corporeal body is the material language of the poem itself.

Another artefact which Heaney resurrects from a museum display is the Tollund Man. 'The Tollund Man in Springtime' (*DC*, 55-57) is the final poem of three in which Heaney deals with the subject. In *Wintering Out*, the Tollund Man 'Reposes at Aarhus' and is a passive figure to whom Heaney prays for intervention in the face of sectarian violence. He is completely absent from the poem in *The Spirit Level*, where it is the geography of Tollund as a place that is celebrated and we are

[25] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Charles Gill, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 52.

told ‘Things had moved on’ (*OG*, 443), a possible allusion to the IRA ceasefires of 1994.[26] However, in the long course of six sonnets in the *District and Circle* poem, the Tollund Man assumes a resurrected life all of his own:

> In the end I gathered
> From the display-case peat my staying powers,
> Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,
> My old uncalloused hands to be young sward,
> The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored
> By telling myself this.

It is Heaney, of course, who is doing the telling and therefore the resurrecting. The Tollund Man ‘so long unrisen’ is ‘neither god nor ghost’ and the suggestion is that the city he has re-awoken into is less real than the one he has come from: ‘Into your virtual city I’ll have passed | Unregistered by scans, screens, hidden eyes’. If his resurrected world is virtual, the world from which he comes is solidly present:

> Scone of peat, composite bog-dough
> They trampled like a muddy vintage, then
> Slabbed and spread and turned to dry in sun …

If the Tollund Man can get restored from such a landscape, then ‘“The soul exceeds its circumstances.”’ [27] Heaney resurrects the bog body just as he resurrects his brother Christopher in the final poem of the collection, ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’ (*DC*, 75-76):

> And I think of one gone to him,
> A little stillness dancer –
> Haunter-son, lost brother –
> Cavorting through the yard,
> So glad to see me home,
>
> My homesick first term over.

[26] Perhaps why Heaney dated the poem ‘September 1994’.

[27] In the ‘Notes and Acknowledgements’ at the beginning of *District and Circle*, we are told that the line is quoted from Leon Wieseltier’s appreciation of Czesław Miłosz in the *New York Times Book Review*. *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), not paginated.

In a letter dated 1 February 2002, Heaney describes Miłosz as his 'boon companion and confessor' and acknowledges his '…great readiness to grieve or to rejoice'.[28] The word 'confessor' indicates not only the shaping presence of Catholicism in both their lives, but the sense of Miłosz in a sacramental role dispensing the grace of his own wisdom. The important role which Miłosz came to play in Heaney's imagination since the 1980s has been well documented. Michael Parker has written about Heaney's familiarity with Miłosz's poetry since the 1970s through the publication of *Modern Poetry in Translation*[29] and later in the 1980s when Heaney was visiting lecturer at Harvard where, in 1982, he attended some of Miłosz's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures.[30] It was also during this time that Heaney was working on the poems of *Station Island* and Parker observes that 'Heaney grew increasingly cognisant of the quality, range, and depth of Miłosz's writing.'[31] Magdalena Kay has devoted significant time to a discussion of 'The Master' from that collection and has observed that Heaney's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1995 marked a shift in his view of Miłosz 'as an unapproachable master to seeing him as a fellow craftsman.'[32] Kay constantly stresses Miłosz's 'multi-dimensionality' for Heaney, but she agrees with Parker that their shared experience of Catholicism is fundamental to their relationship. While Anglo-American commentators, in her view, insist on the completely secular character of language, Heaney shares with

[28] See Emory, MSS 960, Box 53.
[29] *Modern Poetry in Translation* (*MPT*) was founded in 1965 by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort. Heaney discusses his friendship with both men in *Stepping Stones*, p. 298.
[30] Michael Parker, 'Past Master: Czeslaw Milosz and His Impact on the Poetry of Seamus Heaney', *Textual Practice*, 27.5 (2013), 825–850 (p. 830) <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2012.751448>.
[31] Parker, 'Past Master', p. 830.
[32] Magdalena Kay, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 136 <http://ezphost.dur.ac.uk/login?url=https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662124> [accessed 19 March 2021].

Miłosz the belief that language possesses a religious function, and Heaney harbours such a notion, in Kay's view, because of his 'obstinately sacramental outlook.'[33]

In his interviews with O'Driscoll, Heaney recounts reading Miłosz's Nobel Lecture in the *New York Review of Books* and finding himself 'hugely attracted by what he had to say there' (*SS*, 301). In that lecture, Miłosz drew attention to the organic bonds of family, religion and neighbourhood. When he writes 'It is good in childhood to hear words of Latin liturgy, to translate Ovid in high school, to receive a good training in Roman Catholic dogmatics and apologetics'[34], we can see the appeal for Heaney. When he goes on to say '"To see" means not only to have before one's eyes. It may mean also to preserve in memory. "To see and to describe" may also mean to reconstruct in imagination'[35], the parallel with Heaney's way of seeing is apparent. For both writers, the experience of sacramental Catholicism and their way of seeing the world are fundamentally related. The shared vision of Miłosz and Heaney to glorify things just because they are is wonderfully summed up in the opening stanza of 'Hope', a poem from Miłosz's sequence 'The World'[36]:

> Hope is with you when you believe
> The earth is not a dream but living flesh,
> That sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
> That all things you have ever seen here
> Are like a garden looked at from a gate.[37]

[33] Magdalena Kay, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts*, p. 168.
[34] Czesław Miłosz, 'The Nobel Lecture, 1980', *The New York Review of Books*, XXVIII.3 (1981), 11–12; 14–15, (p. 11).
[35] Miłosz, 'The Nobel Lecture, 1980', p. 14.
[36] In an interview with Harry Thomas in 2002, Heaney discusses 'The World', which was written in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation. The poem, Heaney says, is about trust in the face of desecration and its different parts 'sing sweetness, they sing innocence, they sing song; they are sing-song poems. And the sing-song is the poet's deliberate answer to the destructive thing.' Harry Thomas, *Talking with Poets*, 1st softcover print (New York: Handsel Books, an imprint of Other Press, 2002), pp. 42-69 (p. 47).
[37] Czesław Miłosz, *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 49.

'Out of this World' (*DC*, 47-51), Heaney's poem for Miłosz in *District and Circle*, first appeared in an edition of the journal *Agni* in 2005.[38] This earlier version is in four parts, the second of which – 'Confirmation Day' – Heaney excludes from the collected poem. The opening poem, 'A Found Poem' (a title Heaney drops in the collected version) had its origins in the interviews conducted with Dennis O'Driscoll which were under way when Heaney wrote 'virtually all of the poems in *District and Circle*' (*SS*, viii) This may account for the quotation marks around the poem, even if we are also inclined to hear the vocalised voice of Miłosz himself.[39] The possible fusing of the two poets' voices would serve, of course, to underline the importance of Miłosz in whose memory Heaney writes the poem. What is of interest is that the prose account in the interviews with O'Driscoll appears in the context of their discussion of *Station Island* and the irresolution in terms of faith at the heart of that collection. If the tension in *Station Island*, as I argued, has to do with separating the felt sense of Catholicism from the orthodoxy in which it was first experienced, then this has been largely accommodated by the poet of *District and Circle* and finds settled expression in the opening poem of 'Out of this World'.

'Like everybody else …', the title of the opening poem in the collected version, is in the form of a sonnet and thereby lends itself not only to the quality of intimacy or 'interiority' as highlighted by Stephen Regan[40], but also to the devotional context of the narrative of the poem. The octave of the poem is given over to an intense description of the rubrics of the Catholic Mass, especially to the moment of the consecration of bread and wine and the reception of holy communion. The

[38] Seamus Heaney, 'Out of This World', *Agni*, 61, 2005, 226–30 (pp. 226–30).
[39] Neil Corcoran allows for both readings in his essay 'Happening Once for Ever', in Eugene O'Brien, *'The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances'*, pp. 107-128 (p. 120).
[40] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 3.

liturgical precision of what is required in the rubrics is conveyed in the quick succession of seven actions in the second quatrain:

> I went to the altar rail and received the mystery
> on my tongue, returned to my place, shut my eyes fast,
> made
> an act of thanksgiving, opened my eyes and felt
> time starting up again.

In the sestet of the poem, the descriptive quality of the octave gives way to the discursive meditation of the speaker, where 'The loss occurred off-stage'.[41] In the version of the poem in *Agni*, the same line reads: 'The loss *of faith* occurred offstage' [emphasis mine]. The change of emphasis is important. The loss *of faith* somehow compartmentalises faith as it if it could be divorced from other modes of feeling. If we allow that the speaker of the poem is Heaney, or at least in sympathy with Heaney's own experience, then Catholicism as a mode of feeling might also explain the substitution of the word 'disavow' for 'disrespect' in the version of the poem in *District and Circle*. We might 'disrespect' a belief which is important to someone else but which we do not share. When we 'disavow' something, there is the sense of the breaking of a covenant or promise with something we once held dear. And that covenant with a childhood experience of faith may also account for the added substitution of the word 'tremor' for 'pallor':

> 'And yet I cannot
> disavow words like "thanksgiving" or "host"
> or "communion bread". They have an undying
> tremor and draw, like well water far down.'

The dynamism of the word tremor brings to mind the classic definition of religious experience as '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' ('a mystery before which

[41] Heaney will almost certainly have in mind here the sense of *ob skene* associated with Greek Tragedy. Some acts were considered unfit to be seen on stage and took place *ob skene*, or 'off-stage', such as the self-mutilation of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*. The speaker of Heaney's poem is surely emphasising the privacy of the loss of religious faith.

humanity both trembles and is attracted'), formulated by the German theologian Rudolf Otto. Michael Parker is right to suggest that 'undying' and 'draw' point to the future, 'what continues to draw and be drawn by the poet is water, especially in wells'.[42] However, in the context of a poem to do with faith, it might also gesture to that limitless well of faith in Heaney's translation of John of the Cross in 'Station Island' XI:

> I know no sounding-line can find its bottom,
> nobody ford or plumb its deepest fathom
> although it is the night.

What Heaney does in 'Station Island' is to free himself from 'The concrete reinforcement of the Mystic- | al Body' ('Brancardier', *DC*, 49) in terms of its orthodox expression, but the Mystical Body itself retains its draw in Heaney's sensibility – even, if only as a metaphor for being (*esse*) itself. In the final poem of 'Out of this World' – 'Saw Music' – Heaney makes one addition to the collected version of the poem. He adds an epigraph in the form of a question and answer from the Catechism:

> Q. Do you renounce the world?
> A. I do renounce it.

In opposition to this he presents an image of a busker playing his stainless-steel saw in a 'puddled doorway' in Belfast and imagines Miłosz

> who lies this god-beamed day
> Coffined in Krakow, as out of this world now
> As the untranscendent music of the saw
> He might have heard in Vilnius or Warsaw
>
> And would not have renounced, however paltry.

[42] Michael Parker, '"Out of This World": Seamus Heaney Remembering Czesław Miłosz', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 20.1 (2014), 113–18 (p. 114).

In his Nobel Lecture, Milosz said: 'If books were to linger on a table, then they should be those which deal with the most incomprehensible quality of God-created things, namely being, the *esse*.'[43] What Heaney cannot finally disavow is the mystery of things themselves and their being, the reality, as Milosz says 'that Earth *is* and her riches cannot be exhausted by any description.'[44] Even the 'cold clutch' of a nestful of dead eggs, however paltry it may seem, is worthy of the poet's adoration ('On the Spot', *DC*, 54):

> I was down on my hands and knees there in the
> wet
> Grass under the hedge adoring it
> Early riser busy reaching in
> And used to finding warm eggs.

From a turnip-snedder to a builder's trowel, from a harrow-pin to a stove lid, *District and Circle* revels in the being of all things, praising and glorifying things just because they are.

HUMAN CHAIN

In his essay on *Human Chain* in *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances,* Andrew Auge draws attention to the illustration on the cover of the Faber and Faber edition of the book, which is taken from an illuminated manuscript of Dante's *Paradiso*. The image is of Christian philosopher-saints in the heavenly sphere of the sun, linked hand in hand, providing a blessed vision of the saved souls of paradise and suggesting an image for the human chain of the book's title. Auge, however, sounds a note of caution:

> The reader who, primed by this cover image, opens Heaney's book expecting some echo of this beatific Christian afterlife will be disappointed. *Human Chain* provides no transcendent music, no celestial harmonies, to console us

[43] Miłosz, 'The Nobel Lecture, 1980', p. 11.
[44] Miłosz, 'The Nobel Lecture, 1980', p. 11.

> in the face of death. However, neither does it leave us stranded in the eternal silence of the void that so terrified Pascal.[45]

If *Human Chain* provides no transcendent music of a heavenly sphere, it abounds in the 'untranscendent music' of the everyday joys and sorrows of human encounter, which 'however paltry', Heaney will no more renounce than the saw music he imagined Miłosz once hearing in Poland (*DC*, 51).

In his *Guardian* review, Colm Tóbín wrote: 'If there is a presiding spirit haunting this book, it is Virgil's *Aeneid*.'[46] More precisely, Rachel Falconer reminds us that it is one book of the *Aeneid* – Book VI – which is the presiding spirit in Heaney's later work and that he studiously avoids 'any identification with the Augustan arc of the *Aeneid* read as a whole.'[47] In his interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney says:

> But there's one Virgilian journey that has been a constant presence and that is Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs of Book VI have been in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father (*SS*, 389).

We now know that at the same time he was working on the poems of *Human Chain*, he was also working on a complete translation of *Aeneid VI*, posthumously published in 2016.[48] Virgil, then, becomes a 'major spiritual force'[49] in Heaney's late work. The question, then, germane to this thesis, is to what extent the spiritual force of

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[45] 'Surviving Death in Heaney's *Human Chain*', in Eugene O'Brien, pp. 29-48 (pp. 46–47).
[46] Colm Tóibín, 'Human Chain by Seamus Heaney - Review', *The Guardian*, 2010 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/21/seamus-heaney-human-chain-review> [accessed 6 November 2020].
[47] 'Heaney and Virgil's Underworld Journey' in *Seamus Heaney and the Classics: Bann Valley Muses*, ed. by Stephen Harrison, Fiona Macintosh, and Helen Eastman (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 180.
[48] In the 'Translator's Note' to the book, Heaney wrote: 'But the impulse to go ahead with a rendering of the complete book arrived in 2007, as a result of a sequence of poems written to greet the birth of a first granddaughter.' Virgil, *Aeneid. Book VI*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), p. vii.
[49] Michael C. J. Putnam, 'Virgil and Heaney: "Route 110"', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 19.3 (2012), 79–108 (p. 100) <https://doi.org/10.2307/arion.19.3.0079>.

Virgil displaces the incarnational faith of Heaney's childhood? To put it another way, to what extent does Virgil's hero take the place of the Virgin's child?

What I want to suggest in this section is that Heaney's turning to Virgil in his late poetry follows a trajectory after *Station Island* whereby, freed from the religious orthodoxy of his early life, he masters 'new rungs of the air'. However, the questions with which Heaney's Catholic sensibility were concerned (and which I discuss in detail in previous chapters) remain foundational to his reading of Virgil – namely, the importance of the corporeal body and what happens to it post-mortem; mourning and communing with the dead; seeing beyond the material world; and love as an expression of inexhaustible being. To the extent that these questions preoccupy Heaney's late poetry, they are as much Catholic as they are classical, and they provide a further illustration of Heaney's imaginative capacity to dwell in different worlds, where different sensibilities are at play and '"not just single things"' (*OG, 294*). Heaney writes elsewhere of the Irish capacity to live in 'two places at one time and in two times at one place […] Without having to decide *either or*, preferring instead the more generous and realistic approach of *both and*.'[50] It is interesting to note that the idea of *both and* has also been listed as one of the defining characteristics of Catholicism.[51]

Before turning to these foundational questions, we must ask, more generally, why Virgil appealed to Heaney. Rachel Falconer identifies three reasons – firstly, the

[50] Seamus Heaney, 'Varieties of Irishness', *Irish Pages*, 9.1 (2014), 9–20 (pp. 10–11). The Editor's Note tells us that the paper was originally given as an address to the Annual Conference of the Ireland Funds, held in Cork on 24-25 June 1989.

[51] In Chapter 10 ('Basic Characteristics of Catholicism') of their book on Catholicism, Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia outline three basic characteristics of Catholicism, which include the importance of 'Both/And' – for example, the importance of faith *and* reason in the Thomistic tradition, which they see exemplified in the person of Dante. The other two characteristics are a centring on Jesus (and Mary), and attention to the material and the spiritual. See *Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 376–80.

fact that Virgil 'gives voice to the *lacrimae rerum*, the weight of the world and its sorrows', secondly, the idea of Virgil as a farmer-poet, especially the poet of the *Georgics* and, finally, the visionary Virgil who was concerned with the soul's metamorphosis.[52] However, in the context of Heaney's relationship with Catholicism, I want to suggest a further reason why Virgil might have appealed to Heaney at this stage of his career, even if Heaney doesn't give voice to it. A few months before he died, after a poetry reading in Chicago, Heaney told Christian Wiman that he felt caught between the old forms of faith that he had grown up with as a child and some new dispensation that had not yet emerged.[53] The remark is interesting, not only because it demonstrates at this late stage the draw ('well water far down') that Catholicism continued to have on Heaney's sensibility (Heaney is the one 'most at home' in the 'small brick chapel' encountered in Italy in poem IV of 'Route 110', *HC*, 51), but because the moment of transition between one cultural dispensation and another finds its forerunner in the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BC). Philip Hardie, in his excellent cultural history of the *Aeneid*, argues that twentieth-century views of the *Aeneid* place Virgil and his poem 'at a point of transition, between two worlds, between the old order of the pagan Greco-Roman world and the new Christian order, towards which history is somehow groping in the darkness.' One such example is Eliot's lecture on 'Vergil and the Christian world' (1951), in which Eliot writes that Virgil has 'a significant, a unique place, at the end of the pre-Christian and at the beginning of the Christian world.'[54] Heaney makes no mention

[52] Harrison, Macintosh, and Eastman, p. 181.
[53] Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, The Faith of Art* (New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2019), pp. 88–89.
[54] Quoted in Philip R. Hardie, *The Last Trojan Hero: A Cultural History of Virgil's Aeneid* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016), p. 145. The extent to which Virgil was understood as *anima naturaliter Christiana*, 'a soul by nature Christian', is evident in the work of Theodor Haecker (upon whom Eliot relied heavily for his essay) who believed that the phrase *sunt lacrimae rerum* prepared the way for the tears of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. See Hardie, p. 144.

of this aspect of Virgilian reception, but he cannot have been unaware of it, and of its relevance to his own historical predicament.

Heaney makes no attempt to Christianise Virgil in the tradition of Eliot, but in his lyric rendering ('Route 110', *HC*, 48-59) of Virgil's epic poem occasionally we find images of Catholic ritual rising to the surface of individual poems. In poem IV Heaney moves from Ireland to the warmer climes of Italy, like Venus's doves (one of Virgil's great symbols for the souls of the dead) migrating to warmer climes:

> As Venus's doves, hotfooting it with the tanned expats
> Up their Etruscan slopes to a small brick chapel
> To find myself the one there most at home.[55]

'Home' has the last word in the poem, just as it has the last word in Heaney's sensibility. If Virgil's poem looks forward to the great heroes who will govern Rome and her empire, Heaney remains rooted to the authenticity of the parochial; the *orbis terrarum*[56] of Virgil's world becomes the *omphalos* of Heaney's one. In poem V, the household gods of Roman domestic life are replaced by a 'votive jampot' and the oat-heads wrapped in silver foil '"To give the wee altar a bit of shine"', a reference, possibly, to the 'May altar' familiar from Heaney's Catholic childhood and familiar to us as an image of reconciliation in 'Summer Home' (*OG*, 69-71). Poems VI and VII recall the death by drowning of a young neighbour and his subsequent wake 'Without the corpse'. The neighbour comes to stand for Aeneas's helmsman, Palinurus, for whom Aeneas weeps in the opening line of Book VI. Heaney's language of 'antiphonal recital' and 'absolve me', however, places the poem squarely within the Catholic rituals of mourning rather than classical ones. The rejection of an early love in poem VIII, loosely mirroring the rejection of Dido by

[55] The last word 'home' is a good measure of the distance Heaney has travelled since his writing of 'The Tollund Man', when he was 'lost, | Unhappy and at home.'
[56] The name given to a map of the world by the Romans.

Aeneas, recounts the 'nay-saying age of impurity' and reminds us of the 'sins of impurity' familiar from Heaney's Catholic catechism. In poem IX, he describes the bodies of those blown up by paramilitary explosions as 'Unglorified'[57], a word which bears (even in its negated form) the religious sense of the glory of the resurrected bodies in the Christian tradition. In the final poem of the sequence, Heaney makes a change to the poem published as *The Riverbank Field* in a Gallery Press limited edition of 2007. In the early poem, flowers are plucked from the garden as a 'morning offering' for the arrival of Heaney's first grandchild, the words 'morning offering' a reference to a popular prayer of devotion and familiar to Heaney.[58] In the version of the poem in *Human Chain*, the flowers become a 'thank-offering' instead.[59] Finally, the 'tapers that won't dim', in poem XII, recall the tapers familiar from Catholic liturgical practice and used, for example, to light the 'paschal candlestick' remembered in 'Clearances' 6. Michael Parker puts it perfectly when he writes: 'The retention of the word "offering" combined with the reference to "tapers that won't dim" at least thwarts, if not defeats, that secularising impulse.'[60] What these examples amount to is the occasional rising to the surface of the Catholic rituals of Heaney's childhood even as he turns to a classical poet to engage with

[57] Michael Parker draws attention to a change of position and, thereby, a change of emphasis in the word 'unglorified' from an earlier version of the poem, published in a Gallery Press edition in 2007. In the poem in *Human Chain*, the word is switched to the beginning of line 8 and becomes capitalised and 'acquires an important change in stress ("ungl**ór**ified" becomes "**Ún**glorified").' See '"Back in the Heartland": Seamus Heaney's "Route 110" Sequence in Human Chain', *Irish Studies Review*, 21.4 (2013), 374–86 (p. 380) <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2013.856171>.

[58] In the Introduction, I drew attention to a letter from Heaney to Eamon Duffy, in which Heaney appears to lament the passing of a sacralized world. In it, he makes reference to the Morning Offering prayer: 'And the big overall elegy for the death of the old sacralized community, that comes through – to me at least – as a not so objective correlative for the world of loss we ourselves have known. From the morning offering to breakfast TV, the May altar to the camcorder.' Emory, MSS 960, Box 52.

[59] I am indebted to Michael Parker for tracing these revisions of the earlier poem. See Parker, '"Back in the Heartland"', p. 382.

[60] Parker, '"Back in the Heartland"', p. 382.

questions which arose out of that early religious sensibility. It is to those foundational questions that I now turn.

In Chapter Two I drew attention to the importance of the corporeal body in Heaney's poetry and to David Jones's argument that 'Theology regards the body as a unique good. Without body: without sacrament.'[61] Belief in the incarnation and in the bodily resurrection of Jesus sits at the heart of this theology of the body. Agreement on the precise nature of a bodily resurrection was ambiguous even in the New Testament, with Paul writing to the Corinthians of a 'spiritual' resurrection (15. 44) and the Gospel writers increasingly emphasising the physical nature of the resurrection.[62] What became embedded in the Christian tradition, however, was the importance of the body, in some form, in post-mortem existence. In the Requiem Mass for the dead, prayers are offered for the deceased that they may share the resurrection of Jesus 'when from the earth he will raise up in the flesh those who have died, and transform our lowly body after the pattern of his own glorious body.'[63] The idea that, after death, somehow Christ would make new our mortal bodies must have been a source of some profound comfort especially to those whose loved ones had been so mutilated in life:

> And what in the end was there left to bury
> Of Mr Lavery, blown up in his own pub
> As he bore the primed device and bears it still …
>
> Or of bodies
> Unglorified, unaccounted for and bagged
> Behind the grief cordons …

[61] David Jones, *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 167.
[62] Luke recounts the resurrected Jesus showing his followers his hands and his feet (24. 39), for example, and John 20. 24-29 tells the story of Jesus inviting doubting Thomas to place his fingers in the flesh wound in his side.
[63] *CTS New Sunday Missal: People's Edition with New Translation of the Mass* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2011), p. 619.

It is doubtful that this aspect of Catholic theology informed Heaney's view of the body in any conscious way, but it almost certainly is consistent with a Catholic sensibility which emphasised the sacred and sacramental nature of material form.

The corporeal body and its fragility are constant motifs in *Human Chain*. The opening poem of the collection was written in the period following Heaney's stroke in 2006[64], when the poet's fondness for Virgil's *mentem mortalia tangunt* ('mortal things touch the mind') became an abrupt reality. Even the unexpected 'courier blast' of wind is given a body: 'Returning like an animal to the house' (*DC*, 3). In *District and Circle*, Heaney had breathed life into inanimate material objects, and he continues to do so in *Human Chain*. 'The Conway Stewart' pen (*HC*, 9), bought for Heaney by his parents before he moved to St Columb's, comes alive in the poem – the shopkeeper treats it to its

> first deep snorkel
> In a newly opened ink-bottle,
>
> Guttery, snottery,
> Letting it rest then at an angle
> To ingest ...

It is the opposite of the disembodied souls on the banks of the Lethe who await their second bodies ('The Riverbank Field'); instead, the body of the pen waits to be animated by the ink and, by extension, the soul of poetry. Just as the chronological narrative of Virgil's poem proceeds by taking us further back in the classical story, so too 'The Conway Stewart' is a poetic conceit which allows us to imagine the first deep snorkel of the pen, which has brought us all the way to *Human Chain*. In 'A Herbal' (*HC*, 36), the grass itself is anthropomorphised as it

> Now sets its face
> To the wind,

[64] See Michael Parker, '"Now, and Ever / After": Familial and Literary Legacies in Seamus Heaney's "Human Chain"', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 21.2 (2015), 341–59 (p. 345).

Now turns its back.

and even finds a voice: '"See me?" it says'. The invocation to 'See me' is the call which summons all of Heaney's poetry and not just the poetry of *Seeing Things*. From a pitchfork to a baler, 'So taken for granted' ('The Baler, *HC*, 24-25), Heaney is attentive to the being of all things. In this sense, even as late as *Human Chain*, a sacramental sense remains embedded in how he sees the world.

But it is the human body, its fragility, and the question of its post-mortem existence which are central motifs in *Human Chain*. In his review of the book for the *TLS*, Bernard O'Donoghue wrote that the collection 'realizes the preciousness and evanescence of human physical contact'.[65] In poem iv of the beautiful sequence 'Album' (*HC*, 4-8), Heaney draws on Aeneas's attempt to embrace his father (*Aeneid* 6, lines 700-02) to describe his efforts to embrace his own father in the week before he died:

And the third

> Was on the landing during his last week,
> Helping him to the bathroom, my right arm
> Taking the webby weight of his underarm.

In this final tercet we have two arms – the arm of the poet, strong enough to take the full weight of his aged father, whose own arm is weightless and fragile. One figurative definition of web is of something 'flimsy and insubstantial' (OED)[66], like 'the phantom | *Verus* that has slipped from "very"' in the concluding poem of the sequence. Heaney repeats the effort in 'The Butts', but as he lifts his father to wash

[65] Ajayi, Akin, et al. "Books of the Year." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5618, 3 Dec. 2010, p. 8+. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200555166/TLSH?u=duruni&sid=TLSH&xid=a6c491bd. [Accessed 7 Nov. 2020].

[66] The word 'webby' might also play on another definition of 'web' as a 'subtly woven snare or entanglement' (OED), and on Heaney's early poem 'Follower', where the father keeps stumbling behind his son 'and will not go away' (*OG*, 11).

him, he can feel only 'his lightness'. If part of the human chain Heaney looks for is the substantial presence of his parents, what he comes up against in the poems is their insubstantial and phantom presence. The two-part poem 'Uncoupled' (*HC*, 10-11), in both its title and its bipartite structure, suggests a break in the human chain and a separation of body and soul. The opening question – 'Who is this …', repeated in both poems, recalls the startled words of Heaney's grandfather, in 'Clearances' 2, in the land of the dead, when he welcomes his daughter home – 'What's this? What's this?' (*OG*, 308). By this playful echo, Heaney manages to extend the uncoupling of the human chain from his parents to his grandparents and, thereby, extend the sense of loss. In the first poem of 'Uncoupled', Heaney is able to give a detailed description of the pan which contains the coal ashes, which is 'slender' and 'weighty', but as he sets out to describe his mother – 'Hands in a tight, sore grip' – he 'Proceeds until we have lost sight of her'. The tight grip of his mother's hands on the firebox, Heaney can only wish for in terms of the fragile hold he has on his mother. Similarly, in the second poem, Heaney is able to describe what his father carries – 'His ashplant in one hand' and 'a stick of keel | In the other', but he 'cannot hear' him 'With all the lowing and roaring'; the cattle in their lowing are more substantially present than his father.

The fragility of Heaney's own body is the subject of the three-part poem 'Chanson d'Aventure' (*HC*, 14-16). The poem's epigraph is from John Donne's poem 'Extasie', where Donne writes about love in the context of body and soul: 'Love's mysteries in souls do grow, | But yet the body is his book.'[67] In other words, while love may grow in the hidden places of the soul, its physical expression is

[67] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by Albert James Smith, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 55.

found in the material body. As Heaney is driven to hospital after his stroke, it is this tactile expression of love that is now threatened: 'When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne | On love on hold, body and soul apart.' 'Apart', the final word of the first poem, is picked up as the first word of the second, perhaps to create a chain in words for what has been uncoupled in sudden ill-health: 'Apart: the very word is like a bell'.[68] In a desperate attempt to hold on to everything of substance, Heaney (in a return to his earliest books) grants the word 'Apart' the weight and materiality of a church bell. In the second tercet, the reference to the bell he tolled at St Columb's is the same bell 'knelling classes to a close' in 'Mid-Term Break', and thereby manages to bring to mind the memory of Christopher's death, just as Heaney has a brush with his own. Memory of the 'haul' of the college bell serves only to emphasise the sudden loss of strength in the poet's 'once capable || Warm hand, hand that I could not feel you lift', with the repetition of the word 'hand' an attempt, perhaps, to will it into strength.[69]

What Heaney is straining after in these poems is *purchase* in the sense of gaining a hold on something. In the title poem of the collection (*HC*, 18), he recalls lifting sacks of grain onto a trailer: 'Two packed wads of grain I'd worked to lugs | To give me purchase, ready for the heave'. However, the description of preparing an eel for cooking in poem V of 'Eelworks' (*HC*, 28-32) suggests the difficulty in

[68] The poem is strongly imbued with echoes of the poems of John Keats, recalling the poet's premature death. Here, we catch an echo of 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'Forlorn! The very word is like a bell | To toll me back from thee to my sole self!' *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, Penguin Classics, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 348.

[69] Heaney borrows the line from Keats's 'This living hand, now warm and capable' in which Keats writes: 'This living hand, now warm and capable | Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold | And in the icy silence of the tomb, | So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights …' See *The Complete Poems*, p. 459. Heaney first encountered Keats, of course, at St Columb's, which features in the poem.

gaining a hold on the slippery creature, and provides a metaphor for holding on to life itself:

> Getting a first hold,
>
> Then purchase for the thumb nail
> And the thumb
> Under a v-nick in the neck.

Stephen Heiny argues that the emphasis which Heaney places on the corporeal body accounts for the lines of the *Aeneid* which he chooses to emphasise in 'The Riverbank Field'. When Heaney quotes the Latin '*animae, quibus altera fato | Corpora debentur*' ('"spirits … To whom second bodies are owed by fate"') he is emphasising 'that the corporeal is the site of the aesthetic pleasures that this poem celebrates.'[70] Heaney omits the lines (724-732) in which Anchises (in a blend of Stoic doctrine and the doctrine of rebirth in Platonic and Orphic-Pythagorean beliefs[71]) presents the corporeal body in a negative light, arguing that it somehow encumbers the soul. The Loeb translation, used by Heaney, reads: 'Fiery is the vigour and divine the source of those life-seeds, so far as harmful bodies clog them not, nor earthly limbs and mortal frames dull them.'[72] This is hardly in keeping with the idea of the body as a 'unique good', which Heaney clearly sympathised with. He also omits the lines (739-43) in which Anchises tells us that the souls will be punished for their misdeeds ('schooled with penalties'). He may have omitted these because they reminded him of the orthodox Catholic teaching on purgatory which he disengaged from in *Station Island*. Finally, in Virgil, the souls on the banks of the

[70] Stephen Heiny, 'Virgil in Seamus Heaney's Human Chain: "Images and Symbols Adequate to Our Predicament"', *Renascence*, 65.4 (2013), 304–19 (p. 309).
[71] For a fuller discussion of this, see Patricia A. Johnston, *Vergil: Aeneid Book 6* (Newburyport, MA.: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 2012), p. 91.
[72] Virgil, *Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. by H. Rushton (Henry Rushton) Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library, 63, New edn / revised by G.P. Goold. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 557.

Lethe drink the water so that they 'may return again to the body' (750-51). However, as Heiny points out, Heaney emphasises the desire for corporeality by extending the translation of *corpora* ('bodies')[73]: 'And soul is longing to dwell in flesh and blood | Under the dome of the sky.' The words 'flesh and blood' remind us of Christ's injunction in John 6. 53 that 'if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you', a foundational text for the doctrine of transubstantiation in Catholic theology. Andrew Auge reminds us that 'For Heaney, the imminent prospect of death eventuates, not in a Platonic detachment from the material world, but in a wistful savoring of its beauty.'[74]

In Virgil, when the souls drink from the river Lethe, their memories are effaced. Virgil uses the word *immemores* to describe this idea of 'forgetting' as the souls prepare for reincarnation. In *Human Chain*, Heaney, instead, is involved in an act of remembering (*memoria*) the dead, especially loved ones. The idea of remembering the dead is an important element in the Christian tradition and was central to the rural Catholic experience in which Heaney grew up. In an interview in 1999 he said of that experience: 'I had entered a folk church, if you like, with its May devotions and the November month of the dead with its visits for the dead and so on.'[75] Eamon Duffy has written eloquently of this aspect of Catholic tradition which, he reminds us, he shared with Heaney.[76] It was a religion, Duffy writes, 'in which the dead were more or less continuously present.'[77] Duffy goes on to catalogue the rituals around remembering the dead: collection boxes for 'the Holy

[73] Heiny, p. 309.
[74] Eugene O'Brien, p. 44.
[75] J.J. Wylie and John C. Kerrigan, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 2.1–2 (1999), 125–37 (p. 133).
[76] Eamon Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition* (London; New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2004), p. 176.
[77] Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 125.

Souls' at the back of churches, remembering the dead in every public prayer as well as in grace before meals, memorial cards (often kept in people's missals), annual blessing of the graves, and the celebration of All Souls Day on 2 November, when the priest wears 'sombre black vestments.'[78] What emerges from Duffy's reflections, and what he shared with Heaney, is a sense of communal solidarity with the dead, where the dead remain part of the 'community of the Church.'[79] The souls of the dead continued to depend on the living to intercede for them so that their time in purgatory might be lessened. Heaney found appealing the idea that 'your own travails could earn grace for others, for the souls in purgatory' (*SS*, 39). At the same time, in a reciprocal act of faith, the souls of dead relatives and friends could intercede for the living, thereby extending Heaney's human chain even further to accommodate the generations of loved ones who had died. When Heaney purchased his 'used copy of *Aeneid* VI' (*HC*, 48) from a bookshop in the Smithfield Market in Belfast and read of Aeneas communing with the shade of his dead father, his reading must have found validation in his childhood experience, where '"life" and "literature" were beginning to connect' (*SS*, 39).

Heaney's Catholic sensibility, then, remains embedded in a reading of Virgil which emphasises the importance of the corporeal body in post-mortem existence. Several Classics scholars have drawn attention to the importance of translation in various senses in *Human Chain* – translation from Latin to English, from death to life, and translation as remembering the past.[80] However, I want to suggest that there is also the translation of a religious sensibility – from Catholic to classical – in which Heaney, nevertheless, stays close to the text of his early religious experience. This

[78] Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 125. Heaney recalls just such a vestment in his love poem 'The Skunk', where he describes the chasuble as 'black, striped and damasked' (*OG*, 176).
[79] Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 131.
[80] See Putnam, pp. 97–98, and Heiny, p. 316, for example.

experience of communing with the dead through prayer and 'visits for the dead', as he put it, finds its classical expression in Virgil in a way that is sympathetic and not in opposition. The imperative '*Quaerite*, Seek ye' from the motto of St Columb's (*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God*) 'stayed indelible' (*HC*, 5) for Heaney, even if his questing, as Parker notes, would not follow an orthodox religious direction.[81] There is at play, as Parker puts it, a more secularising impulse and, like the souls awaiting reincarnation on the bank of the Lethe, the communion of saints of Heaney's Catholic childhood becomes the human chain of his late adult life. But what both visions share are the bonds of love which, like the kite in the final poem, 'tugs' on the fragile heart and plants a 'longing in the breast' (*HC*, 85) as Heaney faces not only the mortality of loved ones, but his own mortality too.

In his sequence of poems ('Loughanure', *HC*, 61-65) in memory of the Irish painter Colin Middleton, whose surrealist and visionary paintings appealed to Heaney, the poet recalls the legendary figure of Caoilte, who encounters a girl on a fairy hill:

> While a girl with golden ringlets harped and sang,
>
> Language and longing might have made a leap
> Up through that cloud-swabbed air …

It seems to me that *Human Chain* does precisely that: it performs a leap in language in an effort to assuage the longing of the human heart in the face of death. Middleton's 'cloud-swabbed air' reminds us of the wind in the opening poem of the book ('Had I not been awake', *HC*, 3) and the 'heavenly air' ('A Kite for Aibhín', *HC*, 85) in the closing poem, and that 'aerial movement is this collection's central

[81] Michael Parker, '"His Nibs": Self-Reflexivity and the Significance of Translation in Seamus Heaney's "Human Chain"', *Irish University Review*, 42.2 (2012), 327–50 (p. 334).

motif.'[82] If Heaney makes a leap into the visionary in *Human Chain*, then he is given a leg up by Virgil, just as he was by Dante in *Station Island* and by Yeats in *Seeing Things*. The birth of his first grandchild Anna Rose in the final poem of 'Route 110', and to whom the sequence of poems is dedicated, reduces Heaney to 'baby talk', in which there is a faint echo of his discussion with Karl Miller on the 'exhilaration and risk about re-entering the baby language of faith.'[83] In the penultimate poem of 'Route 110', Heaney recalls fishing with his father when they may have seen an otter's head. He allows for the uncertainty of what they think they saw, but it was a vision ('gleam') nonetheless:

> Those evenings when we'd just wait and watch
> And fish. Then the evening the otter's head
> Appeared in the flow, or was it only
>
> A surface-ruck and gleam we took for
> An otter's head? No doubting, all the same,
> The gleam, a turnover warp in the black
>
> Quick water. Or doubting the solid ground
> Of the riverbank field, twilit and a-hover
> With midge-drifts, as if we had commingled
>
> Among shades and shadows stirring on the brink
> And stood there waiting, watching,
> Needy and even needier for translation.

In the gleam of vision (even in what is doubted) and commingling of shades, in the solid ground and the memory of a moment of unspoken love between a father and a son, Heaney's baby language of faith finds a home in the adult language of poetry where, like the patron saint of his school, the 'pen keeps going … To enrich the scholars' holdings' ('Colum Cille Cecinit', *HC*, 72-73) and to enrich his readers' lives. There are many poignant moments in *Human Chain*, not least the moment

[82] Harrison, Macintosh, and Eastman, p. 194.
[83] Seamus Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 36.

when the child Heaney is separated from his parents on the steps of Junior House at St Columb's, and about which Kevin Murphy writes:

> But perhaps most poignantly, Heaney elliptically cites the line of Colmcille's exile lament ('*a grey eye will look back'*) at the very moment when, at age twelve, he was left off at his boarding school in Derry and separated from his parents and from the thatched-roof-cottage world of his childhood at Mossbawn ('Album').[84]

From those steps and with the Conway Stewart in hand, it is as if Heaney set himself the task of returning to that first world of Mossbawn, not in a nostalgic way, but to the very source of all that he would grow into: 'An order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew' (*OG*, 459). In a private letter, dated 21 February 2000, Heaney wrote about a fundraising event for the renovation of the parish Church of St Mary's, Bellaghy – 'my native ground – the very fons and altare, not to mention confessional and graveyard'.[85] The Latin *fons* translates as 'a spring' or 'fountain' and thereby recalls the 'well water far down' (*DC*, 47) of Heaney's early religious experience. In its transferable sense, it also means 'origin' and 'source', and this is the sense in which it was used by Virgil.[86] In this single word, the Christian and classical come together in a symmetry that became a hallmark of Heaney's poetry and the sheer breadth of his sensibility. It was at that *fons*, or origin, of his childhood parish that Heaney was laid to rest on 2 September 2013, only yards from his parents and his brother Christopher. Around his graveyard, mourners sang the ancient anthem 'Salve Regina'[87], in which Virgil's '*lacrimae rerum*' becomes '*hac lacrimarum valle*', 'this vale of tears'. And yet, the 'sweetness and hope'

[84] Kevin Murphy, 'Heaney Translating Heaney: Coupling and Uncoupling the Human Chain', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58.3 (2016), 352–68 (p. 354).
[85] Private letter by Heaney, dated 21 February 2000. Emory, MSS 960, Box 50.
[86] See the entry in *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, ed. by D. P. Simpson (Wiley Publishing, 1968).
[87] For a brief discussion of the various anthems of Our Lady, including the *Salve Regina*, see Eamon Duffy, *Heart in Pilgrimage - A Prayerbook for Catholic Christians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 359.

(*dulcedo; spes*) which are at the heart of this prayer of intercession found their own translation in the words on Heaney's headstone from his poem 'The Gravel Walks' (*SL* 39-40): 'Walk on air against your better judgement.' In the graveyard at Bellaghy and at the *omphalos* of Heaney's world, prayers and poetry rise like the kite in the final poem of his final collection:

> Rises, and my hand is like a spindle
> Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower
> Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher
>
> The longing in the breast and planted feet
> And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
> Until string breaks and – separate, elate –
>
> The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall.

AFTERWORD

'LOVE WITH WEEPING'

In the RTÉ documentary *Out of the Marvellous*, Heaney acknowledges the inevitability of the tears that accompany human experience and recommends that we ready ourselves for them.[1] In the course of this thesis I have drawn attention to moments where Heaney returns to Virgil's sense of *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things that we cannot avoid. Heaney faced the reality of suffering as a young boy with the death of his brother Christopher. In his mid-thirties the suffering inflicted by the cruelty of sectarian violence was brought home to him by the death of his second cousin Colum McCartney. His elegy for his murdered cousin begins with an epigraph from Dante's *Purgatorio* and when the ghost of McCartney returns to challenge the poet in *Station Island*, it is in a Dantean sequence of poems in which Heaney's art is made to face the reality of suffering by the ghosts of those whose lives have been cut short by violence or by illness. Dante is as present in Heaney's work as Virgil. In a recent literary biography of the medieval poet, John Took begins his preliminary remarks with a discussion of Dante's *Vita nova*:

> Central to the *Vita nova* as the terminus ad quem or point of arrival in respect of what we may regard as the first phase of Dante's activity as a lyric poet is the notion of love as a principle less of *acquisition* than of *disposition*, as that whereby, seeking out the beloved as but an object of praise, the soul knows itself in the most radical kind of self-surpassing on the planes of understanding and desiring.[2]

[1] 'Seamus Heaney: Out of the Marvellous' (RTE Television, 2009).
[2] John Took, *Dante* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 75.

He goes on to quote from the *Vita nova*: 'Beyond the sphere that circles most widely passes the sigh that issues from my heart, Fresh understanding, instilled there by Love with weeping, draws it upwards.'[3]

Took's observation that central to Dante the lyric poet is the notion of love as a principle of disposition could equally be said of Heaney. Key to my reading of *Seeing Things* was an argument about the dispossession of the artist, the delight the poet takes in making something other than himself, the notion of disinterested love. We find it, perhaps most poignantly, in the final poem of *100 Poems*, written just twelve days before Heaney died. 'In Time' (169) was written for Heaney's grand-daughter Síofra and dated 18 August 2013:

> Energy, balance, outbreak:
> Listening to Bach
> I saw you years from now
> (More years than I'll be allowed)
> Your toddler wobbles gone,
> A sure and grown woman.
>
> Your bare foot on the floor
> Keeps me in step; the power
> I first felt come up through
> Our cement floor long ago
> Palps your sole and heel
> And earths you here for real.
>
> An oratorio
> Would be just the thing for you:
> Energy, balance, outbreak
> At play for their own sake
> But for now we foot it lightly
> In time, and silently.

The note of elegy is there in 'we foot it lightly', a clear echo of Yeats's 'The Stolen Child', where the faery and the child 'foot it all the night', and the refrain of that poem no doubt sounds in Heaney's poetic ear: 'For the world's more full of weeping

[3] Took, p. 80.

than you can understand.'[4] There is something beautiful about Heaney imagining Síofra a 'sure and grown woman' long after he is gone. To borrow from Took's observations on Dante, Heaney seeks out Síofra as an object of praise. His imagined life for her is an act of disinterested love, just as the poem itself assumes a life of its own and is able to 'grow its own legs, arise, take up its bed and walk'[5] and just as he hopes Síofra will. I have tried to show that love for Heaney has always been coeval with his first experience at Mossbawn, and it is the 'cement floor' of Mossbawn which now 'Palps' the 'sole and heel' of Síofra 'And earths you here for real.' The 'Energy, balance, outbreak' of Bach's oratorio might as easily describe Heaney's poetry where the poems, like those of Mandelstam, celebrate the 'unlooked-for joy in being itself'[6], and where love is no longer a matter of possession but of praise. If, in this act of dispossession, the soul knows itself in the most radical kind of self-surpassing, then there may be some freedom in letting go, and this is what Heaney may have gestured at in another poem written just weeks before he died, where the soul may 'stray beyond':

> Say 'canal' and there's that final vowel
> Towing silence with it, slowing time
> To a walking pace, a path, a whitewashed gleam
> Of dwellings at the skyline. World stands still.
> The stunted concrete mocks the classical.
> Water says, 'My place here is in dream,
> In quiet good standing. Like a sleeping stream,
> Come rain or sullen shine I'm peaceable.'
> Stretched to the horizon, placid ploughland,
> The sky not truly bright or overcast:
> I know that clay, the damp and dirt of it,
> The coolth along the bank, the grassy zest
> Of verges, the path not narrow but still straight
> Where soul could mind itself or stray beyond.

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[4] William B. Yeats, *Yeats's Poems*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares, rev. edn, repr (London: Papermac, 1991), pp. 53–54.
[5] Seamus Heaney, 'Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven', *Dublin Review*, 8 (Autumn 2002), 115–26, (p. 117).
[6] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. xix.

‘Banks of a Canal’ was published as part of a collection of essays, stories and poems to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the National Gallery of Ireland.[7] It describes a painting by the French artist Gustave Caillebotte called *Banks of a Canal, near Naples, c. 1872*. The description of the canal ‘slowing time | To a walking pace’ could usefully sum up the achievement of Heaney the poet, whose poems attempt to salvage moments of love from the wreckage of time, each poem a relic of the inexhaustible nature of human love.

Heaney may have moved beyond the law of his early religious experience but the spirit of it remained in poems which set out to celebrate the rich being of the world and of our relationships in it. In a world fractured by violence and threatened by climate change, where the fragility of life and love are always present, Heaney’s poetry anoints the wounds of our human frailty and in its ‘quiet good standing’ acts as an assuagement of the human heart.

[7] Janet McLean, *Lines of Vision: Irish Writers on Art*, Illustrated edition (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2014), p. 100.

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