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Northern Irish Elegy

Naomi Marklew

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Department of English Studies**

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Abstract

This thesis proposes that Northern Irish elegy is a distinctive genre of contemporary poetry, which has developed during the years of the Troubles, and has continued to be adapted and defined during the current peace process. It argues that the practice of writing elegy for the losses of the Troubles has established a poetic mode in which Northern Irish poets have continued to work through losses of a more universal kind. This thesis explores the contention that elegy has a clear social and political function, providing a way in which to explore some of the losses experienced by a community over the past half-century, and helping to suggest ideas of consolation.

Part one focuses on three first generation Northern Irish elegists: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. Heaney is considered in a chapter which takes in a poetic career, through which might be traced the development of Northern Irish elegy. Following this are two highly focused studies of the elegies of Longley and Mahon. The place of artifice in elegy is considered in relation to Longley's Troubles elegies, while Mahon's irony is discussed in relation to his elegiac need for community.

Part two looks at a second generation, represented by Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon. Carson's elegies for Belfast are read in a discussion of the destruction and reconstruction that occurs during the process of remembering. This study explores the idea that elegies might also be written for places and temporal spaces. Carson's interest in poetic form is shown to be intricately related to his elegiac practice. The chapter on Muldoon surveys a career which has interrogated the connections between art and suffering. Muldoon raises questions of poetic responsibility, and also challenges poetry itself, on a formal and linguistic level. As his career develops, he includes not only the local threats of Troubles violence within his elegies, but also the global threats of disease, violence and terror.

Part three starts with Medbh McGuckian, whose work is discussed in relation to the third generation poets Sinead Morrissey, Leontia Flynn and Colette Bryce. As McGuckian's poetry is perhaps the least immediately accessible of all the poetry covered here, the thesis considers ways in which her work might be read, before her poems are discussed as Northern Irish elegies. Following this are readings of poems from Morrissey, Flynn and Bryce, noting ways in which this generation works to develop the genre of elegy, working in the same broad themes that have been charted throughout this thesis.

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For my parents

Introduction

“I write it out in a verse”: Northern Irish Elegy 1968 – 2008

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.¹

Background to the study

Early in 2010, following the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti, Britain's Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, helped to organise a literary event to raise funds for the victims. Speaking about Poetry Live for Haiti, Duffy explained:

We turn to poetry at intense moments in our lives. [...] When we lose people, or are bereaved, we look for a piece of music or poem to read at the funeral, or when we fall in love we turn to poetry, or when children are born. And I think that can happen at moments of public grief too, as well as personal. It is so close to prayer, it is the most intense use of language that there is. It is the perfect art form for public or private grief.²

Duffy's instinctive poetic response to loss and crisis is one that is heard in the work of elegists writing about situations of personal and communal grief all over the world. She also echoes many of the theorists of elegy, in declaring that, just as in the past, poetry continues to be one of the most enduring sources of consolation, even in the twenty-first century. This thesis seeks to trace the development of a specific kind of poetry which has grown out of the need to work through the grief suffered during a period of violence and conflict that has taken place in recent decades; the years that have come to be termed the Troubles of Northern Ireland.³

Perhaps the most influential work done on elegy in recent decades has been Peter Sacks's book The English Elegy. Sacks sets out the conventions of the traditional genre of elegy, interpreting them largely through the lens of psychoanalysis, and taking inspiration from the notion of “the work of mourning”, which is found in Freud's essay “Mourning and Melancholia”.⁴ Sacks's study follows a chronological route, performing close readings upon the major elegies of poets ranging from Spenser to Yeats. It is from this foundational work that many subsequent understandings of the genre of elegy have developed, and many of the conventions identified by Sacks are the ones which are held up for comparison against the poems studied in this thesis. The pre-eminent inheritor of Sacks's project, however, is often

1 Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” Finders Keepers, (London: Faber, 2002) 14-25 (23).

2 BBC news website, “Poets to hold 'literary Live Aid',” 29th Jan 2010, accessed 17/02/2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts_and_culture/8485443.stm>.

3 The term “Troubles” might be regarded as a problematic one with which to talk about a serious conflict: it might seem to be overly euphemistic and fail to carry the full weight of the losses experienced during the violence of the past decades in Northern Ireland. However, as it has become the most common way in which this period of history is referred to, the term will be used throughout the thesis, and without the continual use of quotation marks, for the sake of brevity and ease of reading.

4 Peter M. Sacks, The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 1.

thought to be Jahan Ramazani.⁵ Sacks, in his study of pre-twentieth century poetry, builds on the idea that the work of mourning must be successfully performed in elegy in order to achieve consolation, but he finally comes to conclude that: “recent attitudes to death have made it increasingly difficult to write a conventional elegy”, as both modern “large-scale” warfare and the clinical detachment of hospital care make the experience of death “obscene, meaningless, impersonal”.⁶ It is this idea that is built upon in Ramazani's study, as he follows the other strand of thought found in Freud's essay, that of melancholia, arguing that the twentieth century has produced a type of dis-consolatory elegy.

Ramazani, acknowledging his debt to his predecessor, writes, nevertheless, that Sacks's model of “healthy” and “successful” mourning is, I think, inadequate for understanding in the twentieth-century elegy. As an alternative, I propose the psychology of melancholia or melancholic mourning, arguing that the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss. To explore the paradoxically melancholic emphasis within modern poems of mourning, I recast the classical distinction between mourning and melancholia, shading it as a difference between modes of mourning: the normative (i.e., restitutive, idealizing) and the melancholic (violent, recalcitrant). [...] I contend that the elegy flourishes in the modern period by becoming anti-elegiac (in generic terms) and melancholic (in psychological terms).⁷

Defining the “anti-elegy”, Ramazani states that

Over the course of the twentieth century, poets have drawn upon and transformed an age-old language of mourning, alloying the profound insights of the past with the exigencies of the present. Out of this fusion they have forged a resonant yet credible vocabulary for grief in our time – elegies that erupt with all the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning.⁸

He continues:

In becoming anti-elegiac, the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary.⁹

Having set out his case in no uncertain terms, Ramazani then seems to make allowances for the presence of seemingly conventional uses of elegy within his study:

[T]wo recent poets – Amy Clampitt and Seamus Heaney – suggest that a more traditionalist mode of elegy may have become viable once again, so long as it is sufficiently tempered by the skepticisms of our time. [...] Heaney is at first reluctant to transfigure the dead into heavenly beings or consolatory art. But he eventually resumes old-fashioned poetic codes in elegies for friends and family, depicting the dead as singing masters of the soul.¹⁰

Beginning his chapter on Heaney's elegies, Ramazani points out that

unlike most contemporaneous poems in the genre, they also reveal an elegist unembarrassed by conventional imagery – a difference that may reflect not only Heaney's more conservative

5 Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

6 Sacks, 299.

7 Ramazani, xi.

8 Ramazani, ix.

9 Ramazani, 1-2.

10 Ramazani, xiii.

poetic temperament but also his upbringing amid the more traditional mourning customs and other rituals of Northern Ireland.¹¹

It appears, then, that Heaney stands out against the main argument of Ramazani's study, failing to conform to the conventions of "anti-elegy" that have been so persuasively set out elsewhere in the book. There are a number of responses to this observation, and these are largely what constitute the impetus for the present thesis.¹² Ramazani pleads a special case for traditionalism in Irish poetry, and this thesis builds upon his contention that:

While questioning, analyzing, and even attacking the elegy's major subgenres and conventions, Heaney – together with such Irish contemporaries as John Montague, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon – energetically reclaims them for our time.¹³

What Ramazani begins to argue for Heaney seems to demand a fuller exploration: a study of the Northern Irish elegy as a distinct tradition, diverging from other poetic discourses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, yet still engaged with and influencing contemporary literature on a broader scale.

This chapter will consider some of the traditional conventions of the English elegy, by looking at John Milton's "Lycidas" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" as exemplars of the genre.¹⁴ It will also highlight some of the features of the *aisling* and the *dinnseanchas*, two poetic modes from the Irish tradition which will later be seen to have influenced the Northern Irish elegy. Northern Irish elegy, as will be explored in the course of this study, has developed during the course of successive generation, which means that there are a number of distinctive features which might now be used to identify it as a distinct tradition: for example, the five repeated themes which are discussed at the end of this chapter; the common interest in creating a "well-made poem"; the way in which death often enters the poem in a violent and abrupt manner, seeming to threaten or violate the poem itself. This last feature will be seen particularly in the studies of Longley's and of Carson's Troubles elegies.

The aim of the current study is to pursue this avenue in providing a more comprehensive evaluation of the ways in which Heaney and his fellow Northern Irish poets have worked to make the traditional genre of elegy one that can speak about their contemporary situation, whilst retaining many of its conventional consolatory aspects. References to specific events of the Troubles ensure that the poetry remains firmly in the present. This will be seen as the study considers Heaney's elegy for his cousin, killed by paramilitary fighters, Longley's

11 Ramazani, 336.

12 A further response to this, which will be explored more fully later in this chapter, is the fact that it is perhaps inaccurate to say that this kind of scepticism, or "anti-elegy", is a modern phenomenon. In fact it might be identified as an integral part of the traditional genre (see Shelley's "Adonais" as a prime example). Elegy is inherently paradoxical, and while it has undoubtedly developed over time, traces of what Ramazani calls "anti-elegy" are present in the most traditional examples of the genre.

13 Ramazani, 337.

14 John Milton, "Lycidas," *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd ed., Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow: Longman, 1997) 237-56. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais," *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 529-45.

poem “The Linen Workers”, whose context is explained in chapter two, and Carson’s poem “Ambition”, to give a few examples. On the other hand, traditional offers of consolation are remembered, or at least gestured to, in the religious references in Heaney’s “Clearances” and in McGuckian’s “Porcelain Bells”, as well as in the on-going intertextual relationships that can be traced between many Northern Irish elegies and canonical texts such as “Lycidas” and “Adonais”.¹⁵ As Heaney has continued to write alongside his contemporaries and later generations of poets, the influence has been mutual. Heaney’s later work might be seen to respond to that of Mahon and Muldoon, for example. Northern Irish elegy might be seen as a web of interconnected poetic relationships, rather than a strictly linear inheritance, as might be suggested from a reading of Harold Bloom.¹⁶

Heaney writes about the “search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament”, and this might indeed be a description of the process of elegy – a poetic search for ways in which to respond to loss and suffering.¹⁷ In traditional elegy, the response to such suffering would be to search for consolation, and this still seems to be an aim for Heaney and many of his fellow Northern Irish elegists, although the consolation achieved may not be built upon orthodox Christian beliefs, as they seem to be in “Lycidas”. Shelley’s “Adonais”, however, shows that there is precedence within the elegiac tradition for poets to explore religious doubt and yet to continue to seek some form of consolation for their loss. As an example of consolation in Northern Irish elegy, “Requiem for the Croppies”, perhaps Heaney’s earliest Troubles elegy, ends with a consoling image of new life.¹⁸ Following the escalation of the Troubles at the end of the 1970s, consolation became increasingly problematic for Northern Irish poets, but this study aims to show that it is still a key consideration for the writers of Northern Irish elegy. Heaney and his fellow poets, in looking to Ireland’s mythological history, as well as wider European and American history and contemporary culture for the images with which to work out their mourning for the losses of the Troubles, follow Milton, Shelley, Arnold and others in using the images and symbols of myth and tradition in which to situate and investigate their current grief.

Alex Houen writes that

The history and politics of the Northern Ireland Troubles is a book-length subject; indeed, with more than 10,000 studies written since 1968, John Whyte has argued that “in proportion to size” Northern Ireland is probably “the most heavily researched area on earth”.¹⁹

15 For some Northern Irish poets, the consolation of a Christian belief in a heavenly afterlife is still possible. This is discussed in chapter five’s study of Medbh McGuckian’s elegies.

16 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997). Michael R. Molino writes: “The postmodern writer, however, is skeptical of such linear concepts of knowledge and seeks to disrupt the view that tradition follows a natural, even sequential order of development.” *Questioning Tradition, Language and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America P, 1994) 6.

17 Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” 23.

18 Heaney, “Requiem for the Croppies,” *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber, 1969, rpt. 1974) 24.

19 Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 264-5.

Rather than attempting to provide a complete history of the Troubles, details of some of the best sources of information are provided in the notes to this chapter, and key events are highlighted. Where Troubles elegies have been written about specific instances of violence during the years of conflict in Northern Ireland, more information on the historical context can be found within the individual chapters of the thesis. However, to provide a basic picture of the scope of the losses suffered by the Northern Irish community, Houen might again be quoted, here summarising some of the statistics that have been collected by the CAIN (Conflict Archive on the InterNet) Web Service:

Between 1968 and 1999 there were 3289 deaths caused by the Troubles, with more than 35,000 shootings, 150,000 bombings, and over 40,000 people wounded. As a consequence, it has been estimated from surveys that more than half of the region's population have known someone who has been killed or injured.²⁰

While events and legislation such as the Civil Rights campaign of 1969, the policy of Internment, the Hunger Strikes and the lengthy Peace Process of the 1990s might be ways in which the conflict can be mapped out, it is also important to note that instances of terrorism, “such as ‘Bloody Sunday’, ‘Bloody Friday’, and the Enniskillen and Omagh bombings have certainly attained mythic proportions in the minds of paramilitary and civilian communities alike”.²¹

Defining elegy

It is important to define what is meant by elegy. The functions of elegy are understood to be

to lament, praise and console. All are responses to the experience of loss: lament, by expressing grief and deprivation; praise, by idealizing the deceased and preserving her or his memory among the living; and consolation, by finding solace in meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values.²²

At the outset of this thesis, the major features of the genre may be illustrated by following the example of Sacks in looking to canonical models of the genre, and the two best-known examples are John Milton's “Lycidas” and Percy Bysshe Shelley's “Adonais”.²³ A reading of these poems can highlight not only the traditional conventions of elegy, but also the way in which elegy itself is open to development and revision, as each poet uses the genre to fit their specific purpose. As well as this initial overview of the conventions of elegy, the genre of Northern Irish elegy will be repeatedly defined and clarified throughout this thesis, as each new

20 Houen, 265. Houen cites the CAIN Web Service, <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html>>, which is probably the most comprehensive collection of data regarding all aspects of the Troubles.

21 Houen, 266.

22 “Elegy,” The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993) 322, 324.

23 John Milton, “Lycidas,” The Complete Shorter Poems, ed. John Carey, 2nd ed., Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow: Longman, 1997) 237-56. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Adonais,” The Major Works, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 529-45.

poet's contribution to its development is considered.

Dennis Kay ends his study of the English Funeral Elegy with a reading of Milton's "Lycidas", thereby showing that in writing his poem, Milton was responding to an already established tradition.²⁴ He acknowledges, however, that "Milton's 'monody' represents the next great innovation in the history of the English elegy, and has traditionally constituted both the starting point for historians of the genre and a standard against which later specimens are judged".²⁵ "Lycidas" was Milton's first pastoral elegy, and whether it was written "to secure immortality" for the poet as a "defense against his *own* mortality", or as an "occasional poem, called forth by a specific event", where "the 'I' of the poem is a professional poet in his conventional shepherd disguise", Milton skillfully uses and adapts a large number of conventions and images that have since become integral to the elegiac tradition.²⁶ "Lycidas" mourns a figure who died "ere his time" (8), and a sense of premature death is introduced in the opening lines of the poem, where the "berries" of the "laurels" and "myrtles" (1-3) are harvested before they are ripe, forcing the speaker to "Shatter [their] leaves before the mellowing year" (5).²⁷ The speaker introduces Lycidas as a fellow poet, who "knew / Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme" (10-11), and remembers an idealised youth for them both, where, cast as shepherds, they "Fed the same flock" (24). He calls upon the "sisters of the sacred well" (15) to mourn this dead singer, in one of the many references to water found throughout the poem. Indeed, water is one of the natural cycles used as recurrent images in "Lycidas", the others being "the daily cycle of the sun across the sky" and the "yearly cycle of the seasons".²⁸ The "sisters" are the first members of a large "cast of mourners" who are invited throughout the poem to assist the poet in what might be seen as a "delegation" of mourning.²⁹ Many of the figures called upon are mythological personifications of nature, often specifically of water: the "fountain Arethuse" (85), the "Smooth-sliding Mincius" (86). Indeed, the natural landscape itself seems to grieve:

Thee shepherd, thee the woods, and desert caves,
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn. (39-41)

The invocation of fellow mourners is not just a delegation of grief, but also an "off-loading" of

24 Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990). See also Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963) 126: "Every poem is inherently connected with other poems of its kind".

25 Kay, 222.

26 Sacks, 90-91. Frye, 126.

27 Renato Poggioli suggests that the sudden death has forced the poet into writing an elegy he is not yet prepared for, and finds in the poem "the significant declaration that the actual poem is as *immature* as the death forcing its diction had been *premature*". However, the mastery that Milton exhibits over the elegy would suggest that this declaration is either false modesty, or the "professional poet's" adoption of a conventional voice. *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1975) 84.

28 Frye, 119-20.

29 Sacks, 19, 147.

the speaker's sense of guilt at the death, which is voiced as the poet blames the “nymphs” who should have shielded Lycidas from death: “Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?” (50-1). Sacks sees that such

conventional questioning is in large part designed not only to avert potential self-accusation but also to *create* the fictive addressees, substituting the pretence of temporary absence for the suspicion of nonexistence or permanent neglect.³⁰

In other words, Milton is aware of the artificiality involved in his use of this convention, and this contributes to his sense of grief, as he “has to mourn the loss of Lycidas *and* his own loss of belief in the Muses' protection”.³¹

Other conventions of elegy are self-consciously performed for the reader of “Lycidas”. Before reaching the consolation of a heavenly afterlife, the speaker breaks off to rail against the “corrupted clergy” of his time.³² Although this might seem to be a deviation from the theme, such an “outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing” is a common feature of elegy.³³ Frye discusses Milton's use of “archetypal” symbols, which link his poem to the tradition in which he writes. The natural cycles of daylight, water and the seasons have already been mentioned, and another image taken from nature and made conventional is the flower. Once his invective against the clergy is done, the speaker again calls upon nature:

...return Sicilian muse,
And call the vales, and bid them hither cast
Their bells, and flowrets of a thousand hues. (133-5)

Frye points out that “in a poem about the death of a young man it is conventional to associate him with a red or purple flower”, and the speaker indeed goes on, commanding the valleys to “purple all the ground with vernal flowers” (141).³⁴ Placing flowers on the grave retains a sense of the ancient rituals associated with the “death and birth of vegetation gods”, but also completes some of the psychological work of mourning, in providing a barrier between the living and the dead.³⁵ The poet calls for “every flower that sad embroidery wears” (148), and the idea of embroidering or weaving is common in elegy, as another opportunity for the poet to display a self-consciousness in their writing: “To speak of weaving a consolation recalls the actual weaving of burial clothes and shroud, and this emphasizes how mourning is an action, a process of work”.³⁶ Milton completes his “work of mourning” by moving from lament to consolation, using the sunrise to symbolise the resurrection into “the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love” (177).

The potent Miltonic motifs of water, flowers and vegetation, nature's grief, the shroud,

30 Sacks, 103.

31 Sacks, 103.

32 See the poem's epigraph: “In this monody the author bewails a learned friend [...] And by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height,” *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 243.

33 Sacks, 2.

34 Frye, 120.

35 Sacks, 19.

36 *Ibid.*

and other conventions, can be traced through the work of his successors, for instance Shelley and Matthew Arnold, and they appear again in the work of Heaney, as well as in subsequent Northern Irish elegies. Shelley's elegy "Adonais" follows "Lycidas" in commemorating a fellow poet, John Keats.³⁷ Although there is disagreement among critics as to whether the poem is "a courteously elaborated compliment to its subject", or one in which an "ambivalent" elegist "consumes as well as re-creates the personality of Keats", it is clear that Shelley's elegy "reflects and transforms the whole tradition of pastoral elegy from Moschus and Bion to Spenser and Milton".³⁸ As might be expected, many of the conventions used by Milton are found in "Adonais": the pastoral setting; the self-conscious performance of the poet as he mourns, "I weep for Adonais – he is dead!" (1); the delegation of mourning, and the questioning of fellow mourners, "Where wert thou mighty Mother..?" (10); and the procession of mourners, including the dead poet's own "Dreams" (73), aspects of the natural world, in the form of "Morning" (120) and "Ocean" (125), and mythological figures like "Echo" (127), as well as the "mountain shepherds" (262) who symbolise Keats's fellow poets. The poem ends with the consolatory image of immortality, as "The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (494-5). Images of light, the cycling seasons and flowers are used, and Shelley also speaks angrily against an aspect of contemporary society. Where Milton's clergy are imagined as "the grim wolf" (128) preying upon the "hungry sheep" (125) of the congregation, Shelley imagines the critics who had judged Keats so harshly as "herded wolves" (244), "obscene ravens" (245) and "vultures" (246).

Like Milton, Shelley interrogates the "conventional gestures and figures of mourning", and at times, goes beyond Milton's evaluations.³⁹ Far sooner than Milton, Shelley admits his doubt in the efficacy of elegiac commonplaces, as, in the opening of the poem, the call to "weep for Adonais" is immediately qualified: "though our tears / Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!" (2-3). It seems that throughout the poem, Shelley struggles to find a satisfactory consolation in each traditional elegiac convention, before finding it in the power of poetry itself.⁴⁰ He strips the cyclical image of the seasons of its comfort, pointing out that "Winter is come and gone, / But grief returns with the revolving year" (154-5), as he realises that nature does not share our experience of mortality: "A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst, / As it has ever done" (164-5). Coming to the end of his elegy, having considered various modes of memorial, Shelley admits that "Rome's azure sky, / Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak / The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak" (466-8), and that there cannot

37 Kelvin Everest writes: "'Adonais' differs from other English elegies in celebrating its subject throughout as a more important poet than the author, which is what Shelley really judged Keats to be," "Shelley's 'Adonais' and John Keats," *Essays in Criticism* 57.3 (2007): 237-64 (237).

38 Everest, 237. Andrew Epstein, "Flowers that Mock the Corse Beneath: Shelley's 'Adonais', Keats, and Poetic Influence," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 43 (1999):90-128 (91). James A. W. Heffernan, "'Adonais': Shelley's Consumption of Keats," *Studies in Romanticism* 23 (1984): 295-315 (295).

39 Sacks, 147.

40 See Michael O'Neill, "'Adonais' and Poetic Power," *The Wordsworth Circle* 35.2 (Spring, 2004): 50-7.

therefore be a dramatic climax of consolation within this poem. Shelley, an atheist, cannot be satisfied with the Christian heaven pictured at the end of "Lycidas". The final comfort he finds is in "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe, / That Beauty in which all things work and move" (478-9), as the poet is "driven" by "The breath whose might I have invoked in song" (487-8). These lines seem to allude to Shelley's own poems "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Ode to the West Wind", and suggest a quiet hope that, through poetry, the elegist can secure both for his subject, and for himself, a lasting memorial.⁴¹

In both "Lycidas" and "Adonais", elegy is a process through which the poet must work in order to achieve consolation. The existence of a tradition of defined conventions and symbols does not mean that the work of mourning has already been done for future elegists, but instead provides a set of techniques with which each new poet must engage in order to journey through their own grief, and arrive at an acceptable consolation. Indeed, it has been argued that writing poetry within an established tradition like elegy is not to produce bland, uninspired work, rather the opposite:

Excavating tradition is both an act of discovery as well as an act of violence. So too is the act of inscription and reinscription. Through a new text, tradition can be perpetuated, truncated, interrogated, or reinscribed. As the poet Brendan Kennelly stresses, writing is a form of violence [...] And that violence branches out in fractures and fissures throughout the tradition. The marks on an individual page impose themselves upon all the texts that precede them as well as upon those that follow.⁴²

The poetic context for Northern Irish elegy

Northern Irish elegy, this thesis contends, is a clearly identifiable literary genre, which has developed from the conventions of the English elegiac tradition while also bearing the marks of influence that come not only from the Irish literary tradition, but also from American and European predecessors and contemporaries. As early as 1916, Thomas MacDonagh was publishing work in which he called for a study of literature written in what he termed the "Irish Mode". He described such writing as

... distinctly a new literature, the first expression of the life and ways of thought of a new people, hitherto without literary expression, differing from English literature of all the periods not with the difference of age but with the difference of race and nationality. That race is the Irish race, now mostly English speaking.⁴³

While "Northern Irish" as a cultural identity was yet to be established, MacDonagh looks towards the future of the literature of the region: "I could not trust myself to set out with certainty Irish characteristics, or to point out the probable trend of the literature. This is an age of beginnings rather than achievements [...] An age of beginnings: what the next age or the

41 Shelley, The Major Works, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," 114-119, "Ode to the West Wind," 412-4.

42 Molino, 25.

43 Thomas MacDonagh, Literature in Ireland: Studies in Irish and Anglo Irish (Dublin: Talbot P, 1916) 8, 23.

ripeness of this may bring, one can only guess at.”⁴⁴ Almost ninety years later, Edna Longley began to identify Northern Irish poetry as a distinct literary tradition, as can be seen later in this chapter. Specific poets, such as Patrick Pearse, W.B. Yeats, Thomas Kinsella, Patrick Kavanagh, John Hewitt, John Montague and Louis MacNeice will be mentioned in the following chapters as Irish predecessors to the Northern Irish elegists, and the influence of other poets such as W.H Auden, Robert Frost, Robert Lowell and Osip Mandelstam will be noted where appropriate.⁴⁵ However, this introductory chapter is a fitting place to mention two specifically Irish poetic traditions that have been utilised by Northern Irish writers in their development of the genre of elegy. These are the *aisling* and the *dinnseanachas*. These have both been used by most of the poets covered by this study, including Ciaran Carson.

Carson’s work shows a preoccupation with Irish literary forms; indeed, the poet’s first language is Irish, and this is a recurring theme in his poetry. Much of his work might be read as an extended elegiac meditation upon the political situation in Northern Ireland, and in this context, Carson makes use of the *aisling*, a poetic dream vision in which Ireland, appearing as a woman in distress, appeals to the dreamer, lamenting the current state of the country.⁴⁶ It is closely linked to traditional music, which is perhaps where Carson’s interest in the form was fully established: the early part of his career was spent working for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, studying traditional Irish music. The poet’s musical involvement with the form can be witnessed at his public readings, where he will often play a traditional *aisling* on his flute. One poem in The Twelfth of Never which makes use of the *aisling* tradition commemorates the event in Irish history to which a number of Carson’s fellow Northern Irish elegists have also turned, the 1798 Rebellion.⁴⁷ In Carson’s poem “1798”, the *aisling* can be read as a kind of elegy.⁴⁸

I met her in the garden where the poppies grow,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
And her cheeks were like roses, or blood dropped on snow;
Her pallid lips were red with Papal Spanish wine.

44 MacDonagh, 13.

45 Ronald Schuchard mentions a number of these writers as precursors for contemporary Irish poets in “The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry,” Irish University Review 34.2 (2004) 291-314.

46 Seamus Deane defines the *aisling* thus: “In this kind of poem, the poet dreams of a fair lady who comes to him in a vision. She represents Ireland and speaks of the day when she will be rescued from her misery by help from beyond the seas [...] Yet this poetry is less an expression of an unrealistic hope than it is an expression of a permanently rebellious attitude towards the existing order,” A Short History of Irish Literature (London: Hutchinson, 1986) 23. Paul Muldoon refers to “the genre of political love poem known as the *aisling*, a word generally translated as ‘dream vision’, but which might be more accurately termed a ‘vision-voyage’”, and then goes on to remark that “[o]ne of the conventions of the *aisling* form is that much is made of the possible identity of the *spéirbhean*, or ‘sky-woman’, who appears to the poet, who in turn takes the opportunity to show off his grasp of classical mythology, enquiring if she’s Helen, or the wife of Orpheus, or one of the nine muses of Parnassus, *na Naoi mBéithe*. Though the possibility of any one of multiple identities seems to be allowed for, it always turns out that the ‘sky-woman’ is a version of ‘Ériu’ or the ‘Sovranty of Ireland’”, To Ireland, I (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 73, 82.

47 Ciaran Carson, The Twelfth of Never (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1998); see, Heaney, “Requiem for the Croppies” and McGuckian, “Shelmalier,” Shelmalier, (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1998) 75, for example.

48 Ciaran Carson, “1798,” Collected Poems, (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2008) 377.

Lulled in these wild flowers, with dance and delight,
I took my opportunity, and grasped her hand.
She then disclosed the eyelids of her second sight,
And prophesied that I'd forsake my native land.

Before I could protest she put her mouth to mine
And sucked the broken English from my Gaelic tongue.
She wound me in her briary arms of eglantine.

Two centuries have gone, yet she and I abide
Like emblems of a rebel song no longer sung,
Or snowy blossoms drifting down the mountainside. (1-14)

This poem, like the others in the collection, is a sonnet written in alexandrines, and using a Petrarchan-style rhyme scheme. These formal choices, especially in rhyme scheme, place the poem closer in style to the Italian sonnet form favoured by Milton, rather than the Shakespearian English sonnet. The poem is unsettling, and the meaning seems to drift like the “snowy blossoms” in the final line. David Butler has noted the tricky nature of Carson's language, as he compares the poet to an Irish predecessor, James Joyce:

...since the publication of *The Irish for No* in 1987, Carson's poetry has been in continual dialogue with Joyce. In particular, Carson's foregrounding of the treacherous nature of language and translation, and his dominant conceit of the city as semantic construct, relate closely to similar concerns in Joyce. Much as occurs with the latter half of *Ulysses*, *The Twelfth of Never* marks a departure for Carson in formal rather than in thematic terms, indeed the collection adopts many of the strategies developed therein by Joyce, notably in relation to the fragmentation and distortion of the popular ballad. [...] Carson's approach to contemporary history is identifiably Joycean insofar as it assembles a montage of discourse from which the lyric, interpreting “I” is conspicuously absent.⁴⁹

The speaking voice of “1798”, while it might be superficially identified with Carson in phrases like “my Gaelic tongue”, is, as Butler points out, placed at a remove from the poet himself. The *aisling* form allows for this, since the speaker is presumably recounting a vision rather than a conscious experience. However, even this is problematic, as the reader is not explicitly given a dream framework for the encounter. The poem can only be identified as an *aisling* by its references to convention: the speaker encounters a woman in a surreal, dream-like setting; the description of her cheeks “like roses, or blood dropped on snow” and her lips as “red with Papal Spanish wine”, links her to emblems of Irish nationalism; the woman has “second sight” and prophesies that the speaker would “forsake my native land”. Significantly, these references to the *aisling* tradition appear predominantly in the octave of the poem. In the sestet, the speaker is trapped in a limbo-like existence with the woman and looks back on a historical rebellion with a sense of futility, existing like “emblems of a rebel song no longer sung”. While the poem was never a straightforward *aisling*, it becomes more problematic at its volta, as the reader is brought from the eighteenth-century setting of the Rebellion, during which period the literary

49 David Butler, “Slightly out of Synchrony: Joycean Strategies in Ciaran Carson's 'The Twelfth of Never',” *Irish University Review*, vol. 33. 2 (2003): 337-355 (337).

genre of the *aisling* flourished, to the contemporary setting, looking back on two centuries of civil unrest.

The sense of powerlessness in the final line might reflect the experience of Carson himself, looking back on a long history of violence, and the songs that it has inspired. In subverting some of the expectations of the *aisling* genre, Carson's poem is imbued with an overwhelming sense of loss. Rather than calling upon the speaker to fight for his country, the woman in the vision foresees that he will "forsake" it, and indeed causes this to happen. One possible reading might be that the *aisling*-woman might represent poetry itself, which suggests the troubling idea that poetry can offer nothing in the face of violence, and indeed, causes a kind of impotence in the poet, stealing him away from reality. In the light of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, this would seem to be a bleak view of the relationship between violence and art. However, this reading is countered by the very fact that the poem appears within a sequence of carefully crafted sonnets, which itself comes at the midpoint of a prolific career: Carson's commitment to the craft of poetry seems to be evidence of his underlying belief in the power and promise to be found within his art.

The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature gives the following definition of the *dinnseanchas* form, which is explored more fully in relation to Carson's work in the fourth chapter of this study:

Dinnshenchas: (lore of prominent places), a term used generally to refer to toponymic lore abundantly preserved in early Irish narrative and learned literature, and more specifically to denote the large corpus of this kind of lore which was assembled in the 11th or 12th-cent. known as *Dinnshenchas Éirenn* [...] Place-names are explained by reference to legends which are linked to them by means of pseudo-etymological techniques, where sometimes fictitious stories are adduced to explain the existing names, with the result that some of these legends are only to be found in the *Dinnshenchas*, where they serve their explanatory purpose. It was part of the body of knowledge medieval Irish poets were expected to master, and the importance attached to the material is reflected in its presence in many of the major manuscripts. The dinnshenchas reflects a mentality in which the land of Ireland is perceived as being completely translated into story: each place has a history which is continually retold. The dinnshenchas is the storehouse of this knowledge, but the mentality which it expresses is to be found throughout all phases of Irish literature...⁵⁰

The *dinnseanchas* has been important for a number of the poets in this study, and has been a way in which contemporary poets have looked not only to the Irish literary tradition, but to their Irish predecessors who have also written in traditional forms. The engagement with inherited forms, from both the English and Irish traditions, is one of the unifying characteristics of the Northern Irish elegy, as poets work in relationship with the literature that has preceded them.

The primary way in which literary relationships will be traced throughout this study will be in following the development of five key themes, which can be found in the elegiac work of each of the poets covered in this thesis. Five themes common to Northern Irish elegy are: the

50 It should be noted that there are various spellings of the word, and I have chosen the most common one. See "dinnshenchas," The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature, ed. Robert Welch (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996) 149-50.

poet as spokesperson; identity and exile; art's relationship with violence; public versus private loss; and parents and ancestors, both biological and literary.⁵¹ It is immediately clear that each one of these themes can be further sub-divided, and that while they might be studied as distinct aspects of the literature, they are also inter-related and in many ways inseparable. A preoccupation with poetic form and lyric conventions is an overarching concern in this thesis.

Edna Longley wrote in 1979 that

Various observers have noted the surprising endurance or resurgence in Ulster of the traditional forms of the lyric poem – down to Michael Foley's tagging of Heaney Longley and Mahon as “the tight-assed trio”. Before 1969 poetry was less obviously “An eddy of semantic scruple/In an unstructurable sea”, yet despite “that darkening arcade/Hung with the failures of our trade” Ulster poets have continued to polish their tools. This, I believe, has less to do with awareness that confessional diarrhoea is no answer to “an unstructurable sea”, or with an historic conservatism, than with the fact that certain Ulster poets have not yet exhausted the refreshing possibilities of “ancient salt” perceived at the point where Larkin and Hughes left off.⁵²

Nearly three decades later, she commented on the way in which such engagements with form and genre have helped to establish Northern Irish poetry as a literature in its own right, distinct from the British, Irish and American traditions from which it has developed: “I suggest, then, that Northern Irish poetry collectively dramatizes the protean nature of form as it remakes tradition, whether form goes with Muldoon's aleatory twists or Mahon's 'hissing chemicals inside the well-wrought urn’”.⁵³

One of the key consolations inherent within elegy is the power of poetry itself; the comfort that might be found in a well-constructed piece of art, which may serve as a lasting memorial to what has been lost. This self-conscious characteristic of the genre calls for a reading which looks at each poem in detail, taking into account the building blocks of metre, rhyme, punctuation, graphology: seeking to interpret the decisions taken by each poet as a work of remembrance is constructed and performed. At a time when the religious consolation found by Milton does not always seem to be adequate, comfort might be found in the very writing of an elegy. In studying a literature that is grounded in poetic form, which is evidenced by both the inclusion and subversion of traditional techniques, the most fitting approach for this study is to take a broadly formalist stance, subjecting the poetry itself to close scrutiny. This is not exactly the New Formalism promoted by Dana Gioia and his adherents, but something closer to what Bernard O'Donoghue defends in his book on Heaney as “mov[ing] towards a less biographical, more formalist kind of analysis, based on the scrutiny of the poetry itself”. He adds to this explanation: “By formalist I mean an approach founded entirely on the terms of traditional linguistic analysis [...] I am not concerned to review the broad field of existing Heaney

51 A further aspect of the relationship between art and violence in Northern Irish elegy is the fact that a number of Troubles poems are also ekphrastic poems.

52 Edna Longley, “Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees,” *The Crane Bag* 3.2 Anglo-Irish Literature: Perspectives (1979):54-60 (54).

53 Edna Longley, “‘Altering the past’: Northern Irish Poetry and Modern Canons,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 35, Irish Writing since 1950 (2005):1-17 (16).

criticism, except where it impinges expressly on language".⁵⁴ The readings in this thesis will take in more biographical and historical context than O'Donoghue does, placing the theoretical practice somewhere between that of O'Donoghue and Michael Parker, employing a new formalism in which the 'new' includes an aspect of new historicism.⁵⁵

Overview of the thesis

The following study is divided into parts as it focuses in turn on three successive generations of poets. The first generation is represented by Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. While there are a number of other writers who could be included in this generation, the work of these three poets provides strong evidence for the development of a distinctly Northern Irish elegy. These three poets are perhaps the most important predecessors for successive generations of Northern Irish elegists. The first poet to be considered is Seamus Heaney, in a chapter which aims to take in a whole poetic career, through which might be traced the development of a specifically Northern Irish strain of elegy. While subsequent chapters will not have the space to follow the entire trajectory of poets' careers in this way, Heaney's elegiac career might be used as a starting point for this study, against which the work of his contemporaries can be compared and contrasted. A key aspect of Heaney's poetic endeavour, which he has passed on to many of the other poets studied in this thesis, is his determination to stretch the boundaries of lyric poetry. Following this is a chapter which conducts two highly focused studies into the elegies of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. The place of artifice in elegy is considered in relation to Longley's *Troubles* elegies, looking closely at form and poetic technique in a selection of poems. Mahon's characteristic irony is discussed in relation to his elegiac need for community, taking into account the paradox that occurs when a writer often associated with exile and detachment comes to write about the communal losses in Northern Ireland.

The second generation is represented here by Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon.⁵⁶ Carson's elegies for Belfast are read in a discussion of the destruction and reconstruction that occurs during the process of remembering. This study explores the idea that elegies might be written not just for individuals or societies, but also for places and temporal spaces. Carson's intense interest in poetic form is shown to be intricately related to his elegiac practice. The chapter on Muldoon might be read as a parallel piece to the Heaney chapter, surveying a poetic career which has interrogated the connections between art and suffering. Muldoon's on-going

54 Bernard O'Donoghue, Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 3.

55 I refer here to the approach taken by Michael Parker in his books Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993) and Northern Irish Literature, 1956-1975, 2. vols (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

56 While Tom Paulin would also be an important figure within this generation, Carson's and Muldoon's work alone provides more than adequate evidence for a continued engagement with the genre of elegy.

interest in the relationship between art and violence can be, and has been, directly linked to his Northern Irish heritage. For Muldoon, as for the other poets discussed here, the question of how to be a Northern Irish poet is constantly explored, and writing in an elegiac mode is one way in which this might be achieved. Muldoon raises questions of poetic responsibility, and challenges them by often writing in the persona of a “trickster”. He also challenges poetry itself, on a formal and linguistic level, in an interrogation of the lyric. As his career develops, he includes not only the local threats of Troubles violence within his elegies, but also the global threats of disease, violence and terror.

Medbh McGuckian, whose poetic career has developed alongside these second generation poets, is nevertheless discussed in the final part of the thesis, in relation to the group of third generation poets which includes Sinead Morrissey, Leontia Flynn and Colette Bryce. While McGuckian's long and prolific career marks her out as a prominent writer from the second generation of Northern Irish poets, her work became more overtly political in the mid-1990s, and it is this aspect of her poetry upon which this study focuses. The final section, therefore considers some of the elegiac poems of McGuckian, and uses her work as a way of accessing the third generation of Northern Irish elegists. McGuckian continues to challenge the lyric mode, albeit in different ways to her contemporaries and predecessors, writing difficult poems which often seem to resist interpretation. As McGuckian's poetry might be seen as the least immediately accessible of all the poetry covered here, the thesis considers some of the ways in which her work might be read, before her poems are discussed as part of a wider elegiac trend in Northern Irish poetry. Following this, there are a series of career overviews of three poets who have more recently become established within contemporary poetry. This section focuses on selected elegiac poems from the work of Morrissey, Flynn and Bryce, tracing the lines of continuation from previous generations, and noting ways in which this generation works to develop the genre of elegy, working in the same broad themes that have been charted throughout this thesis.

The final chapter will draw together the findings of each individual study, and consider whether the recent peace process in Northern Ireland means an end to Troubles writing; whether, indeed, there will be a fourth generation of Northern Irish elegists. The thesis, then, proposes that Northern Irish elegy is a distinctive genre of contemporary poetry, which has developed during the years of the Troubles, and has continued to be adapted and defined during the current peace process. It argues that the practice of writing elegy for the losses of the Troubles has established a poetic mode in which Northern Irish poets might now explore losses of a more universal kind. One example of this is the emphasis on self-elegy and human mortality found in the later collections of first and second generation Northern Irish elegists. It is also seen in the elegies dealing with global issues of violence, loss and injustice written by the most recent generations of Northern Irish poets. The thesis raises questions about the role of elegy in a culture in which poetry itself is increasingly marginalised. When the responsibilities

of a poet are already under discussion, elegy, as a particularly public and communal type of writing, raises additional questions about the purpose of poetry in contemporary society. This thesis explores the contention that, in the Northern Irish context, elegy has a clear social and political function, helping to work through some of the losses experienced by a community over the past half-century.

Part One: The First Generation

Chapter One

“Unjust Ulster hurt him into poetry¹”: Seamus Heaney's Elegies

One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.²

Seamus Heaney is Northern Ireland's best known poet. From early in his career he has been a spokesman for poetry, and now in his seventies he seems to be following in the footsteps of his predecessor and fellow Nobel Prize-winner, W.B. Yeats, in becoming a “smiling public man”.³ Heaney's position in the canon of contemporary literature has become cemented over recent decades as he has received various accolades, and has become a “fixture” in the national curriculum for secondary schools in the United Kingdom.⁴ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, suggesting reasons for the success of Heaney's poetry, notes that

There was a homely, unassuming and reassuring feel to the poetry; it had the right qualities to catch the eye of school poetry-book anthologists and absorb the devotees of “practical criticism”. Being a genuinely “parochial” poetry concerned with the local and the ordinary, it was, as Patrick Kavanagh said of such poetry, universal because it dealt with fundamentals.⁵

Heaney is a poet through whom the development of the Northern Irish elegy might be charted. His entire career has been marked by a consideration of loss; while his first collection was given the elegiac title Death of a Naturalist, his most recent, Human Chain, contains not only an elegy for a close friend, but also explores the ageing poet's own mortality.⁶ Permeating Heaney's work are the losses suffered by communities as a result of the political conflict that has taken place in the North of Ireland.⁷ As Heaney is now in the “late” phase of his poetry, it is possible to begin to survey his long career, to trace consistencies and key themes, and also to mark important stages of development. A study of Heaney's poetic trajectory is a secure foundation upon which a broader survey of the genre of elegy in Northern Irish literature might be constructed.⁸

- 1 Edna Longley, “North: ‘Inner Émigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur?’” *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis, 4th ed. (Bridgend: Seren-Poetry Wales P, 2001) 63-95 (70).
- 2 Robert Frost, “After Apple Picking,” Selected Poems, ed. C. Day Lewis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) 67-8.
- 3 W.B. Yeats, “Among School Children,” The Poems, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1990) 261-3.
- 4 David Sharrock, “Seamus Heaney laments loss of Ireland's ancient spirit to onward march of the Celtic Tiger,” The Times, March 3, 2008, accessed 19/10/2010 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article3471385.ece>>.
- 5 Elmer Andrews, “Introduction,” Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 1.
- 6 Death of a Naturalist (London: Faber, 1966, rpt. 1973, 1976); Human Chain (London: Faber, 2010).
- 7 Bernard O'Donoghue writes: “In Northern Ireland, increasingly, Heaney represents the public context as imposing more strain on the poetic language than it will bear [...] As a consequence, at several stages of his writing career we find Heaney expressing a craving for adequate poetic language,” Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry, 49.
- 8 Another aspect of Heaney's career which supports his role as a spokesperson for Northern Irish literature

Literary relationships between Northern Irish elegists can be traced by following the five key themes identified in the introductory chapter, which can be found in the work of each poet. The first of these themes has already been mentioned in relation to Heaney: The poet as spokesperson. The other themes - identity and exile; art's relationship with violence; public versus private loss; and parents and ancestors, both biological and literary - can all be found in the elegiac poetry of Heaney, together with an active exploration of poetic form. Therefore, the work of Heaney is a fitting starting point for this inter-generational study of Northern Irish elegy. Heaney and his fellow Northern Irish writers acknowledge a host of predecessors, coming not only from Irish and English literature, but also from European and American traditions. Michael Molino points out that

In Heaney's verse, the influences of tradition are too strong and too much a part of his personal and cultural consciousness to be ignored. Tradition entails the beliefs and practices of the culture as well as the fact that it is not derived from a single, stable origin. Consequently, each time the speaker in one of Heaney's poems forges a new utterance that excavates tradition that speaker both regenerates and subverts tradition in a complex interplay of sameness and difference – what Derrida calls “originary repetition”.⁹

The particular tradition upon which this thesis focuses is that of elegy, and it will be argued that Heaney and his contemporaries both “regenerate and subvert” traditional elegy as they develop the genre in response to Northern Irish history and politics. As Heaney is now writing in the late stages of his career, his *oeuvre* can be held in comparison to the life's work of other major literary figures, particularly that of Yeats. One noticeable aspect of Yeats's late work is the element of self-elegy, as the ageing poet uses poetry with which to explore his increasing awareness of mortality. This observation might be made more broadly: it could be suggested that the mature work of any poet, particularly an elegist, moves towards self-elegy. Broader still, perhaps any elegiac poetry is ultimately mourning its own author, as the poet is forced into an awareness of death, and the need for memorial. Poetry itself is perhaps intrinsically elegiac, in the sense in which it records a moment in time that is repeatedly finished and lost with every reading.

Heaney's body of work exemplifies this elegiac tendency inherent in poetry, as seen in his first collection, Death of a Naturalist, which marks a loss of childhood innocence. Indeed, with its rural setting, this debut volume might be compared to the kind of idyllic pastoral youth remembered in conventional elegies like Milton's “Lycidas”. Henry Hart is quick to point out that Heaney's use of the pastoral is problematic, however, in a way that reflects some of the problems of Northern Ireland:

His quest for father-hood and poethood travels a dialectical path between pastoral and antipastoral traditions. Although he elegizes his early, innocent naturalism, which is traditional pastoralism thinly disguised, its death prepares the way for a more mature

is the large amount of prose that he has published. While the tight focus of this thesis demands that the primary literature to be considered will be elegiac poetry, the prose writing, as well as interview responses of each poet, will be taken into account as a source of valuable secondary material.

9 Molino, 4-5.

naturalism in tune with the struggles raging all around him.¹⁰

The “dialectical path” that is identified here is an aspect of Heaney's poetry that is simultaneously lauded as a strength, and criticised as a weakness. Ramazani calls him “a poet of strenuous balance”, and, as will be seen, Heaney's own literary criticism shows him to be a writer who is continually negotiating the often conflicting demands of art and the violence of his contemporary political situation.¹¹ For some readers, Heaney's poetry is too partisan in its politics, for others, it does not go far enough in addressing the troubles of the North. These are dilemmas faced by many of the poets discussed in this thesis. Hart goes on to point out that

in *Death of a Naturalist*, his poems often begin in rural splendor, only to fall into painful recognitions of enervating labor, decay, starvation, sexual turmoil, and fears of natural and political catastrophe [...] The cultivated formal elegance of the poems themselves offers substitutes, while still bearing witness to the real world's pressures.¹²

Hart's mention of “formal elegance” hints at one of the driving motivations behind the genre of elegy. Sacks writes at length about the elegist's desire to weave a poetic commemorative wreath as the mourning process is outworked during the course of the elegy.¹³ Heaney and the other poets in this study engage with a range of formal practices in their elegies, as they endeavour to create lasting works of art which can serve to memorialise and pay tribute to the losses suffered as part of the collective experience of Northern Ireland.

Heaney's role as a representative of Northern Irish poetry, whether it was self-appointed or endowed upon him, is nevertheless one which he has taken seriously.¹⁴ He has helped to form a literary tradition that is particularly Northern Irish, and which might now be considered in its own right, rather than as a sub-category of either Irish or English literature.¹⁵ Neil Corcoran takes this argument further, suggesting that “as a Northern Irish Catholic, [Heaney] lies at an oblique angle to the English poetic tradition”, and therefore “must consequently labour to create his own personally sustaining ‘tradition’ of sought-out exemplars”.¹⁶ Heaney's prose writing gives some idea of the range of influences and predecessors to whom he is indebted, and

10 Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse, 1992) 4.

11 Ramazani, 335. Ramazani also writes: “Time and again Heaney is vexed by this ethical conundrum, particularly in his elegies – how to make song amid and even from suffering without occluding it, how to elegize the dead without desecrating them,” 334.

12 Hart, 11.

13 Sacks, 18-19.

14 Helen Vendler, for example, writes that the conditions in Northern Ireland between 1966 and 1996 “forced Heaney [...] into becoming a poet of public as well as private life,” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998)

1. Edna Longley comments on an interview in which Seamus Deane encourages Heaney to “commit” himself to a political stance: “The Deane interview epitomises the intensive pressure on Heaney, including his own sense of duty: to be more Irish, to be more political, to ‘try to touch the people’, to do Yeats’s job again instead of his own,” “North: ‘Inner Émigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur?’” 93. Neil Corcoran, writing about North, suggests that Heaney’s “role as a public spokesman and commentator was increasingly demanding both a scrutiny of his own responses and position and a consideration of the kinds of language appropriate to the occasion,” *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1998) 53.

15 In 2005 Edna Longley suggested that “Perhaps ‘Northern Irish Poetry’ is a narrative whose time has (almost) come; or its time for closer reading,” “‘Altering the past’: Northern Irish Poetry and Modern Canons,” 10.

16 Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales P, 1999) 99.

as Corcoran points out, the word “exemplary” is used by Heaney in essays on W.B. Yeats, Osip Mandelstam, Robert Lowell, James Joyce and Dante. He adds that

The word “exemplary” functions in his criticism as a primary signifier of one of its essential qualities: its self-referential intimacy. In coming to poetic terms with himself by considering the example of others, in revealing his authors as “confidants and mentors” (as the *Preoccupations* foreword has it), Heaney is constructing a bolstering imaginative system of self-instruction, self-declaration, self-evaluation and self-rebuke.¹⁷

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Heaney pays tribute to many of his poetic predecessors and contemporaries. He cites Yeats's poem “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, and declares that

It is a proof that poetry can be equal to *and* true at the same time, an example of that completely adequate poetry which the Russian woman sought from Anna Akhmatova and which William Wordsworth produced at a corresponding moment of historical crisis and personal dismay almost exactly two hundred years ago.¹⁸

Heaney does not have an entirely unproblematic relationship with his fellow Nobel laureate, however. Although “Robert Lowell famously called Heaney ‘the best Irish poet since Yeats’”, O'Donoghue highlights the fact that “the essay ‘Yeats as an Example?’ appends a question mark to the title of an essay by Auden, indicating uncertainty about his relationship to the major Anglo-Irish poet”.¹⁹

An Irish predecessor with whom Heaney seems to be more closely aligned is Patrick Kavanagh. Heaney writes:

Kavanagh gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life. [...] Without being in the slightest way political about its intentions, Kavanagh's poetry did have political effect. Whether he wanted it or not, his achievement was inevitably co-opted, north and south, into the general current of feeling which flowed from and sustained ideas of national identity, cultural otherness from Britain and the dream of a literature with a manner and a matter resistant to the central Englishness of the dominant tradition.²⁰

Another, specifically Northern Irish, predecessor for Heaney was John Montague, an Ulster Catholic whose life moved him between rural Northern Ireland and various international locations, including New York and Paris. Frank Ormsby writes that Montague

was the first poet from north of the Border to write in depth about the rural community in which he grew up. He identifies with the people he describes, but is also sufficiently distanced from them by education to see them not only as individuals but also as representatives of a dying culture. [...] He is both elegist and celebrant.²¹

Like Montague, and like a number of his Irish and English contemporaries, Heaney found that his education set him apart from the rural community of his parents. The Education Act of 1944, which allowed children from working-class backgrounds to obtain a grammar school education,

17 Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 97.

18 Seamus Heaney, “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture, 1995,” *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 - 1996*, (London: Faber, 1998) 447-67 (464).

19 O'Donoghue, 25, 26.

20 Seamus Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” *Finders Keepers*, 134-144 (140).

21 Frank Ormsby, “Introduction,” *Poets from the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1979) 7.

was a major factor in Heaney's literary development. During his school and university years, Heaney was able to encounter a broad range of literary influences.

Outlining the course of Heaney's formal education, Michael Parker suggests that the poet combined the “‘male’ robustness from English and Anglo-Welsh influences such as Hopkins and Hughes, Dylan Thomas and R.S. Thomas” with “‘feminine’, Celtic influences” from the Irish tradition to discover his “full poetic voice”. He also notes the importance of the undergraduate Heaney's choice to study the poetry of Robert Frost, whose influence can be traced throughout his work.²² Heaney's poetic development might be compared to that of Wordsworth:

For both poets early hopes and enthusiasm for liberating political change left them with a taste of ash in the mouth. In the aftermath of the massacres of September 1792 and January 1972, which left the ideals of the French Revolution and Civil Rights campaign smeared with blood, Wordsworth and Heaney found in poetry a healing, an assuaging, an enabling influence which could still “confer dignity on what might otherwise be derelict and distressing”.²³

Heaney's academic career led him to teaching posts at various institutions, including the University of California, Berkeley. This experience enabled the poet to encounter not only the American poetic tradition, but also to evaluate, from a distance, the Irish and English literature that he had been immersed in.²⁴ In addition to Frost, significant American poets within Heaney's development are Robert Lowell, Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams. For some readers, the evidence of some these poets' influence comes across rather too strongly in some of Heaney's work.²⁵ However, many critics would agree that the features which Heaney admires in other poets are often successfully adapted and assimilated into his own work, and are used in the establishment of his poetic voice. Parker notes, for example, that Heaney's “reading of the work of these [American] poets – and that of William Carlos Williams, in particular – resulted in a stylistic shift towards ‘a more relaxed movement’ in his verse, and his adoption of the ‘little quatrain shapes’ which figure so prominently in *Wintering Out* and *North*”.²⁶

Later in his career, and particularly as the political situation in Northern Ireland worsened, Heaney looked to writers from similarly troubled contexts for ways in which poetry might be made “adequate” to the circumstances in which he wrote.²⁷ Osip Mandelstam was to become a particularly “exemplary” figure for Heaney:

Mandelstam is himself the “inner émigré” whose poetry cannot be considered without reference to his political circumstances. It is the same attraction as a writer such as Milosz

22 Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 20-21, 23.

23 Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 18.

24 Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008) 142-3.

25 “It has to be said that it is worrying to see a poet of Heaney's maturity as overwhelmed by another's influence as is pervasively apparent in *Field Work*, where repeatedly he is knocked clean out of his own voice into pastiche of the compelling tones and idiom of the American. [...] Lowell's influence is too often [...] undigested.” Andrew Waterman, “The best way out is always through”, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 23.

26 Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 93.

27 Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 154.

has, enabling Heaney to universalise the dilemma of artistic freedom by debating it outside an Irish context. [...] Of all twentieth-century poets, Mandelstam can least be read without reference to the circumstances of the time in which he wrote. So in invoking his aesthetic, Heaney is also raising the association of the writer who was forced, finally, in his poetry to oppose the political realities around him.²⁸

Writing in the early 1990s, Parker noted that Heaney's "perspectives have been enlarged by his contacts with Eastern European writers such as Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub, and by his friendships with the Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky, and the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott".²⁹ It is poignant to note that a number of these poetic figures are elegised in Heaney's 2001 volume Electric Light.

I

Ramazani writes that

Even before political violence prompted the major elegies of *North* and before personal losses and violent deaths occasioned the elegies of later collections, Heaney worked in the elegiac mode. Indeed the very title of his first collection announces his elegiac propensity...³⁰

Death of a Naturalist heralds the start of Heaney's long career as poet and elegist. From the outset, Heaney follows elegists before him in looking to poetry itself for the promise of consolation.³¹ The elegiac mode is conveyed not only in a general sense of "pastoral lament", as noted by Hart, but in poems that deal with real death; both historic and national losses, and also extremely personal ones. "At a Potato Digging" and "For the Commander of the Eliza" recall one of the great tragedies of Irish history, the Potato Famine.³² "At a Potato Digging" uses the description of a modern-day harvest of healthy potatoes, "white as cream" (23) to remember the "blighted root" (33) which caused the Great Hunger of the mid-1800s.³³ The potatoes themselves, which are "To be piled in pits; live skulls, blind-eyed" (29), are directly compared with the starving population:

Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in 'forty-five,
wolfed the blighted root and died. (30-3)

This poem seems to be a precursor to Mahon's "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford", where a forgotten crop of mushrooms becomes symbolic of the "lost people of Treblinka and

28 O'Donoghue, 137, 141-2.

29 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 212.

30 Ramazani, 335.

31 Iain Twiddy notes: "The cultural initiations in *Death of a Naturalist* placed poetry as a consolation for the loss of an ancestral mode of existence." "Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral." Essays in Criticism 56. 1 (2006): 50-71 (51).

32 Death of a Naturalist, 31-3, 34-5.

33 Corcoran observes that in this poem "the present is made transparent to the past," The Poetry of Seamus Heaney 26.

Pompeii”.³⁴ In Heaney's poem, the conflation of Ireland's historical narrative with contemporary events is a technique which will be developed throughout his career as one way of writing about the Troubles of the twentieth century. In writing elegies for Ireland's historical dead, Heaney is preparing skills which he will continue to develop as he is compelled to begin mourning the victims of contemporary violence and political struggle.³⁵

Included in Heaney's debut collection is a moving poem of personal loss, “Mid-Term Break”, which mourns the death of the poet's young brother, and ends with the line “A four-foot box, a foot for every year” (22).³⁶ Ramazani compares this poem to one in Heaney's next collection, “Elegy for a Still-Born Child”, pointing out that while neither elegy follows “the genre's orthodox structure”, they nevertheless strive to overcome the “dissonance” of death by ending with conclusive, if not consolatory, images.³⁷ Perhaps the best known poem from this second volume, Door into the Dark, is another national or political elegy, “Requiem for the Croppies”.³⁸ This poem marks a key stage in Heaney's development of the Northern Irish elegy, and therefore deserves a close reading.

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley –
No kitchens on the run, no striking camp –
We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
The people, hardly marching – on the hike –
We found new tactics happening each day:
We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
And stampede cattle into infantry,
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.
Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave. (1-14)

Building upon the techniques used in the Potato Famine poems of his first collection, Heaney again turns to Irish history, this time the 1798 Rebellion of the United Irishmen.³⁹ The violence of the revolutionary republican uprising of the late eighteenth century was “reborn in the 1916 Rising”, and Heaney's poem was written just as the fiftieth anniversary of 1916 was being commemorated.⁴⁰ Heaney's method has developed: rather than making direct comparisons

34 Derek Mahon, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” Collected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery P, 1999, rep. 2008) 89-90.

35 This technique of distancing is a central aspect of elegy, according to Sacks: “few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living”, 19.

36 Death of a Naturalist, 28.

37 “Elegy for a Still-Born Child,” Door into the Dark, 31-2; Ramazani, 336.

38 Door into the Dark, 24.

39 An interest in this historical event shaped Seamus Heaney's childhood, where he would hear songs and poems about it in his home, and he even played the part of a United Irishman in a local drama production as a teenager. See John Hobbs, “United Irishmen: Seamus Heaney and the Rebellion of 1798,” The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies 21.2 (1995): 38-43 (38).

40 Ramazani, 336. Heaney writes that in 1966, “most poets in Ireland were straining to celebrate the

between the present and the past, he centres his entire poem around the historical event, allowing the reader to deduce any implied political allegories.⁴¹ Indeed, the reader is expected to have a certain amount of background knowledge in order to understand the poem: “croppies” being the nickname given to the rebels due to their closely cropped hair. Heaney's poem was originally titled “Requiem for the Irish Rebels (Wexford, 1798)”, which gives it a much clearer historical context.⁴²

While the “Requiem” of the title is in keeping with the requiem mass of Catholic mourning rituals, the phrasing of the title, and indeed the sonnet form of the poem, is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's First World War poem, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”.⁴³ Although the majority of “Requiem for the Croppies” contains factual detail, the image of mass blood-shed is given figuratively: “The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave”. Here, the idea of blood staining the landscape is similar to that in Owen's “Spring Offensive”, where the buttercups on the battlefield catch the soldiers' blood.⁴⁴ While “Anthem for Doomed Youth” adheres fairly strictly to the Shakespearian sonnet form, Heaney's is closer to a Petrarchan sonnet, ending with a sestet of alternating rhyme-words, rather than a concluding couplet. The rhyme scheme of the poem serves to emphasise key words: “hike”, “pike”, “cannon”, “thrown”, “coffin”, “conclave” and “grave”. These words alone almost tell the story. While the majority of the lines are end-stopped which emphasises these rhyme-words, the alternating rhyming pattern works against this to keep the momentum of the poem going, holding it in a state of tension as individual elements work against each other. The generally iambic rhythm works with this to give the poem a nervous energy, which seems entirely fitting both for the subject matter, and in view of the poet's intense personal interest in what he is recounting.

These formal choices are linked to the fact that the poem is an elegy. As such, the neat rhyming couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet would sound at odds with the chaos and disorder of the violent deaths described in the poem. The Petrarchan sonnet ends on slightly less conclusive note. Furthermore, the Petrarchan sonnet was used to great effect in many of Milton's elegies.⁴⁵ A strict form like the sonnet might seem an unlikely choice for a poet writing about extreme emotions of loss, anger and grief, but Milton's exemplary use of the sonnet shows that the structure can help to contain and regulate such emotion, as well as providing an established poetic process by which the poet can work through their mourning. In the line “The hillside

anniversary of the 1916 Rising,” “Feeling into Words,” *Finders Keepers*, 14-25 (23).

41 Parker notes that “the poet follows the example set by Yeats in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, harking back to an earlier, less trammelled phase in the national struggle, one more conducive perhaps to mythic treatment,” *Northern Irish Literature*, I, 66.

42 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, I, 66.

43 Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” *The complete poems and fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, vol. 1 *The poems* (Oxford: Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth P, 1983) 99.

44 See in particular lines 30-31: “earth set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood”, Wilfred Owen, “Spring Offensive,” *The complete poems and fragments*, 192-93.

45 A famous example of this is “Sonnet XIX,” or “Methought I saw my late espoused saint,” Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 347-8.

blushed, soaked in our broken wave” (12), nature itself seems to respond to death. This convention is found in “Lycidas”, and indeed the “broken wave” might be a momentary allusion to the waves beneath which the subject in Milton's poem drowned. “The hillside blushed” can be read as a euphemistic repetition of the fact that is stated in the line just before it: “Terraced thousands died” (11). Heaney is again using elegiac convention in shrouding the details of the death in figurative language. The repetition of the fact of death is also a feature commonly found in elegy. Sacks gives a number of explanations to account for the use of repetition as an elegiac convention: “Repetition creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death”; “repetition [...has] the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion”; it is part of the “highly important phase in mourning in which the griever must be convinced of the actual fact of loss”.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most elegiac aspect of the poem is the image of resurrection, or at least, new life that supersedes the mourned death, found in the final lines. While the dead are buried “without shroud or coffin” (13), the “barley” (14) in their pockets does not die with them, but continues to commemorate their lives after they have died. This is a consolatory image recalling the natural cycles of death and re-birth – a cycle which is emphasised by the circular structure of the poem. It also alludes to elegy's traditional connection with fertility rites.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the image of barley might also be a metaphor for elegy itself. Heaney is perhaps hinting that while the croppies were buried without “shroud or coffin”, the poem he is writing might act as a figurative shroud or commemorative wreath, reinstating the dignity of the dead, and providing them with a lasting memorial. The idea that elegy itself might be created, or “woven”, to form a poetic wreath is discussed by Sacks, and images of weaving and construction are often found in elegies; they are seen in some of Heaney's later poems.⁴⁸

II

Heaney's 1974 lecture “Feeling into Words” describes the beginning of the poet's career as a Troubles elegist. Speaking of the outbreak of violence in 1969, the poet declares:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. [...] I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. [...] Some of these emblems I found in a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started, in 1969.⁴⁹

46 Sacks, 23-4.

47 “Probably the greatest influence on the form of elegy has been the rituals associated with the death and rebirth of vegetation gods; and features of this influence are to be found even in those elegies that are not strictly pastoral,” Sacks, 19.

48 Sacks, 19.

49 Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 23-4.

Heaney is here referring to his discovery of P.V. Glob's now well-known archaeological study, The Bog People.⁵⁰ This book provided the poet with fitting images with which he might begin to speak about his own experience: "It provided an historical perspective enabling him to 'cope with' and confront the contemporary 'Troubles', and created a sense of continuity, kinship, affirmation at a time of social and political disintegration".⁵¹ Ramazani certainly reads Heaney's "bog" poems as Troubles elegies:

Heaney mourns the dead preserved since the Iron Age under the peat of Ireland and Jutland, many of them ritually killed in sacrifices for the Mother Goddess. In these obliquely occasional poems, he also mourns casualties of the sectarian killing that has blighted Northern Ireland since 1969, murders on behalf of Mother Ireland and Mother Britannia. [...] Like traditional elegists, Heaney refracts the pain of recent death through the prism of ancient and archetypal loss.⁵²

The bog poems, including "The Tollund Man" from Wintering Out, and "Bog Queen", "The Grauballe Man" and "Punishment" from the subsequent volume, North, initially seem to be even further removed from Heaney's contemporary situation than the ones which deal with Ireland's history.⁵³ However, they can also be read as a development in Heaney's already established elegiac technique, as Ramazani suggests. It seems that it was important for Ramazani to provide detailed readings of these poems in his survey of Heaney's elegiac writing, as the poet had not yet produced the more obviously elegiac work of his latest phase of writing. The material that was not available for Ramazani, found in the four collections published since 1991's Seeing Things, conforms more easily with the genre of elegy, and is therefore of more relevance to this thesis.

The bog poems produced a range of responses. Andrew Waterman notes that Heaney is able to use the images of "grotesquely mutilated corpses [...] as frank emblems for the commonplace human atrocities of Ulster in the 1970s".⁵⁴ Other readers are aware that there is a good deal of "anxiety" behind this apparent "frankness".⁵⁵ Ciaran Carson, in his review of North, took exception to Heaney's new Troubles poetry: "Heaney seems to have moved – unwillingly, perhaps – from being a writer with the gift of precision, to become the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for 'the situation', in the last resort, a mystifier".⁵⁶ Many readers, however, gave Heaney more credit for his volume, and for the ways in which he faces up to the social responsibilities that he encounters as a poet

50 P.V. Glob, The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London: Faber, 1969).

51 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 91.

52 Ramazani, 337-8.

53 Heaney, "The Tollund Man," Wintering Out (London: Faber, 1972, rpt. 1973, 1975, 1978 and 1980), 47-8; "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Punishment," North (London: Faber, 1975) 32-8. Corcoran includes the poems "Come to the Bower," "Strange Fruit" and "Kinship" as further bog poems. These are found on pages 31, 39 and 40-5 in North.

54 Waterman, 19-20.

55 O'Donoghue, 67.

56 Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?" The Honest Ulsterman 50 (1975):183-6 (183).

of the Troubles.⁵⁷ While the bog poems may have provided a set of emblems with which Heaney was able to start addressing the situation in Northern Ireland, other poems in North deal more directly with the losses suffered throughout the Troubles, making use of elegiac conventions. One such piece is the elegiacally named “Funeral Rites”.⁵⁸ Ramazani writes:

Pining for ceremony, for social and literary funerals “footing slow,” Heaney recovers for his elegies more customary rhythms and tropes than most contemporary elegists. Yet he twists the tattered gauze of poetic tradition around a strong awareness of irredeemable violence. As Yeats's Irish inheritor, Heaney is a poet of strenuous balance, ever teetering between the poles of beauty and atrocity, elegy and anti-elegy.⁵⁹

Ramazani's comments draw on the language of the poem. “Funeral Rites” is a tripartite poem, comprising three sections of quatrain stanzas. It deals in the first section with childhood memories of “dead relations” (3) and “the black glacier / of each funeral” (30-1), before moving into the present-day violence of the Troubles in the second part:

Now as news comes in
of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms... (33-6)

The “neighbourly” losses of the Troubles begin to merge with memories of ancient deaths towards the end of the second section, as the funeral procession “drags its tail / out of the Gap of the North / as its head already enters / the megalithic doorway” (57-60). The third section of the poem places the speaker back in the Scandinavian setting of the bog poems:⁶⁰

When they have put the stone
back in its mouth
we will drive north again
past Strang and Carling fjords,

the cud of memory
allayed for once, arbitration
of the feud placated,
imagining those under the hill

disposed like Gunnar
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound
though dead by violence

57 Ramazani notes that: “[t]hough Heaney's archetypal elegies recoil from politics in the journalist's or the social scientist's sense of the word, they are deeply political in their analysis of the elegist's power relations with the dead. Heaney is willing to represent the politics of sacrifice not as an extrinsic reality available for objective report and evaluation but as an immanent reality, a cultural practice instanced in the elegist's harvesting of beauty from death. [...] Heaney takes the poetics of self-accusation and self-implication further than Yeats does, seldom permitting himself the grand self-justifications of Yeats's bardic mode. Indeed, Heaney's thirst for accusation is so great in the bog poems that every effort at expiation seems not to quench but only to increase his thirst,” 343.

58 Heaney, “Funeral Rites,” North, 15-18.

59 Ramazani, 335.

60 Corcoran acknowledges that Heaney's linkage of “the violence of the Vikings and the violence of contemporary Northern Ireland” has “been the focus of derogatory critical commentary, notably from critics otherwise as polarized as Edna Longley and Seamus Deane,” The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 64.

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon. (61-80)

This final section might offer some of the consolation which might be expected from a traditional elegy. It seems to suggest that the “neighbourly murders” mourned in the second section might finally be laid to rest, “the cud of memory / allayed for once” (65-6). The image of Gunnar turning his “joyful face / to look at the moon” in the closing lines might suggest a kind of transcendence, and even hope of an afterlife. Parker comments that the poem “ends with an image of resurrection, a further reminder of how the poet retains a love of Christian myths and respect for Christ's values, despite the lamentable behaviour of ‘Christians’ in Ireland”.⁶¹ Corcoran, however, warns that “Funeral Rites” is “only ‘optative’; it urgently desires an end to the terrible cycle, but it can imagine such a thing only in a mythologized visionary realm”.⁶² These stanzas are loaded with complex meanings, signalled by the presence of words like “feud” (67); “dead by violence” (72); “unavenged” (73) and “honour” (74). Indeed, the reference to Gunnar, a heroic warrior from Old Norse legend, is an ominous allusion to long-held grudges and a culture centred upon honour and revenge.⁶³ Heaney is once again searching for adequate emblems with which to depict the violence of his contemporary context.

North contains two longer sequences of poems about the Troubles: “Whatever you say, say nothing”, and “Singing School”.⁶⁴ These poems seem to deal more directly with the poet's own experiences of violence and loss in Northern Ireland, and his struggle to find a way to express these experiences. It is perhaps the first-person directness of “Whatever you say, say nothing” which prevented it from being included in full in Wintering Out. The tone of the opening section of the poem is accusatory: accusing “an English journalist”, (2), “media men and stringers” (5); “politicians and newspapermen” (10), all of whom discuss the “long campaign” (11) in clichéd media-speak:

Who proved upon their pulses “escalate”,
“Backlash” and “crack down”, “the provisional wing”,
“Polarization” and “long standing hate”. (13-15)

The accusations are also levelled at the poet himself, and his fellow citizens:⁶⁵

Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,

61 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 131-2.

62 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 67.

63 See Njal's Saga, ed. and trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin, 2002).

64 Heaney, “Whatever you say, say nothing,” “Singing School,” North, 57-60; 62-73.

65 Parker notes: “His annoyance at [the journalists'] intrusiveness and their clichés is nothing compared to the scorn he heaps on himself and his fellow countrymen,” Seamus Heaney, 144.

Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours
On the high wires of first wireless reports,
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

“Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree,”
“Where's it going to end?” “It's getting worse.”
“They're murderers.” “Internment, understandably...”
The “voice of sanity” is getting hoarse. (16-24)

The anger heard here can be linked closely to conventional elegy. Milton, in “Lycidas”, devotes a substantial section of the poem to an invective against the corrupt clergy of his day.⁶⁶ Heaney follows him in speaking out against his contemporary experience. The second section of the poem is even blunter about the situation, opening with the statement: “Men die at hand” (25). The poet seems angry, not only with those planting bombs, but with his own community: “We tremble near the flames but want no truck / With the actual firing” (31-2).⁶⁷ The way in which Heaney mimics the responses of his “neighbours” in an ironic, satirical way is also reminiscent of Byron, as are the jarring rhyme words he chooses. This produces an almost comic tone, which seems at odds with the conventions of elegy. However, this complicated tone is one that can be identified as characteristic of Northern Irish elegy, where irony plays a key role. This will be seen particularly in the work of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon in later chapters. Although irony is not usually seen in Heaney's work, as he often writes in an intimate, conventionally elegiac tone, in this poem it foregrounds one of the defensive strategies used by other Northern Irish elegists.

At the end of the second section, Heaney again seems to be making a statement about the responsibility of the artist in such a highly-charged context:

I believe any of us
Could draw the line through bigotry and sham
Given the right line, *aere perennius*. (50-2)

This final Latin phrase might be translated as “more lasting than bronze”, and therefore links the poem that is being written to other works of memorial art, designed to commemorate that which is impermanent. However, it simultaneously distances the poet from his people, and even from the average reader, making an allusion which demands a certain level of learning to understand. The third section of the poem returns to a self-incriminating tone, however. The poet steps back from his artistic idealism to face up to the reality of his situation. He wryly acknowledges the role of public spokesperson that he has stepped into, rhyming “Seamus” (58) with “famous” (60), but simultaneously chastises himself for his apparent inability to speak out about his situation:

Yet for all this art and sedentary trade

66 See Sacks, 110.

67 These sentiments will be revisited in “The Strand at Lough Beg,” *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979, rpt. 1980) 17-18.

I am incapable. The famous

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the “wee six” I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
and whatever you say, say nothing. (59-64)

In this third section, the poet once more declares “I sing”, in an echo of ancient epic poets and elegists, yet he admits that in the culture of his community, it is safer to say “nothing” of any importance. The final section of the poem consists of the lines that were printed as an epigraph to Wintering Out:

This morning from a dewy motorway
I saw the new camp for the internees:
A bomb had left a crater of fresh clay
In the roadside, and over in the trees

Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.
There was that white mist you get on a low ground
And it was déjà-vu, some film made
of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up
In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,
Coherent miseries, a bite and sup:
We hug our little destiny again. (77-88)

This poem ends with none of the consolation that might be expected from elegy. The conventional final image of the afterlife is not only denied, but is parodied in the question “Is there a life before death?” The “destiny” of the final line is certainly not a transcendent image; it is “little”, miserable, and seemingly irredeemable.⁶⁸

In “Singing School”, Heaney aligns himself to two predecessors, Wordsworth and Yeats, in his epigraphs.⁶⁹ These two poets, representing, perhaps, the English and Irish traditions, are quoted recounting their poetic education. This is the theme of the sequence, which might be read as both a statement of poetic purpose, and also as an evaluation and summation of the first stage of Heaney's career as an elegist in Northern Ireland. Part I of the sequence, “The Ministry of Fear”, recounts the poet's education, and is dedicated to one of his contemporaries, Seamus Deane. The poem opens with a reference to another predecessor: “Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived / In important places” (1-2). The mention, this early in the sequence, of four writers who have each been important to Heaney's own poetic development provides insight into the way in which he has gained his voice. “The Ministry of Fear” continues to detail the poet's first attempts at writing something that sounds authentic:

68 Parker writes: “His decision to end ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’ with the dedicatory verses from Wintering Out indicates his fear that the dykes, ramparts, stockades and camps are likely to remain in place for a while yet,” Seamus Heaney, 145.

69 Indeed, as Parker points out, the title of the sequence is taken from Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium” and “refers to the Platonic idea of the soul enriching itself through the contemplation of great works of art,” Seamus Heaney, 146.

I tried to write about sycamores
And innovated a South Derry rhyme
With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*. (24-6)

The threat felt by Catholics living through the early years of the Troubles is applied directly to the experience of Northern Irish poets, trying to find a way in which their experience might be expressed:

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear. (55-7)

Parker reads "The Ministry of Fear" as a poem which deals with the poet's first-hand experience of the 1947 Education Act which allowed Catholic working class children like himself to access a higher standard of education, but which emphasised his status as an "outsider":

Interrogations by police and priests experienced or witnessed in childhood and in early manhood give way in the later sections to stern self-questionings from and about the present. Accused and self-accused, he attempts to defend himself from the charge of evasion by asserting his identity as a creative artist, and invokes the aid of major figures from native, English and European tradition to justify and verify his stance.⁷⁰

The final three sections of the sequence each recount different stages in Heaney's development as a Northern Irish elegist. Following on from the Orangemen of part three and the Constable of part two, "Summer 1969" remembers "the Constabulary cover[ing] the mob / Firing into the Falls" (1-2). The poet, however, "was suffering / Only the bullying sun of Madrid" (2-3) at the time. The guilty poet speaks elegiacally for the losses suffered at home, while he has escaped to safety, seeming to feel the weight of responsibility.

I retreated to the cool of the Prado.
Goya's "Shootings of the Third of May"
Covered a wall – the thrown-up arms
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted
And knapsacked military, the efficient
Rake of the fusillade. In the next room,
His nightmares, grafted to the palace wall –
Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking; Saturn
Jewelled in the blood of his own children,
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips
Over the world. Also, that holmgang
Where two beserks club each other to death
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished
The stained cape of his heart as history charged. (20-34)

Heaney turns to art in his search for "images and symbols adequate to our predicament". This is a development of the technique used in the bog poems, which is noted by Corcoran.⁷¹ "Summer

70 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 146

71 Corcoran writes in a footnote: "There is one sense in which the bog poems, for all their extraordinary originality, share in what is virtually a sub-genre of post-war poetry: the poem about the photograph [...] These in turn share in a long Western European tradition of 'ekphrastic' poetry, poetry about works of art," The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, n. 5, 36.

1969” is linked to the bog poems not only through the use of ekphrasis, but also in the image of a “holmgang”: this is a kind of duel found in Norse legend, from which the “beserks” are also taken, and Heaney again makes mention of the heroic code of “honour”, which was introduced at the end of “Funeral Rites”. Significantly, both the fighters in this image are “greaved in a bog, and sinking”: this is a conflict from which there can emerge no winners. The “stained cape” of the final line is a symbol of the broken-hearted artist, but it might also be linked to the mantle of the elegist found at the end of Milton's “Lycidas”. Heaney wishes to follow the example of Goya and the other predecessors mentioned in this poem, and use his artistry to make a mark upon the “history” that is being written all around him.

Parts five and six of “Singing School” continue to relate the poet's journey towards maturity. “Fosterage” is dedicated to Michael McLaverty, a Northern Irish writer who taught at the same school as the student teacher Heaney, and who was another influence upon the poet's literary education. McLaverty is heard to say “Go your own way. / Do your own work” (5-6). In voicing this, Heaney permits himself to write in the way he sees fit. Following this statement of purpose, however, the final part of the sequence sounds uncertain and vulnerable, as seen in the title: “Exposure”.⁷² The poet seems to lament the role into which he has been placed:

If I could come on a meteorite!
Instead I walk through damp leaves,
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate.

How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs? (10-24)

Here, the mention of “*tristia*” is perhaps the most significant allusion to Heaney's influences in the light of the current study. “Tristia” is a long poem by Ovid, which might be translated as “sorrows” or “troubles”. It was written in the elegiac couplet, the meter from which the genre of elegy was named. Ovid's “Tristia” laments the poet's experience as an exile. This gives Heaney a wealth of political connotations. This is compounded by the fact that the name “Tristia” was also chosen by Osip Mandelstam for his second volume of poems, which also focused on the experience of a political exile.⁷³ Another reference to Mandelstam is made in the

72 “The transition from ‘Fosterage’ to ‘Exposure’ is a journey from certitude to uncertainty,” Parker, Seamus Heaney, 149.

73 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 81.

poem:

I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre...

Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose. (30-3, 37-40)

The Russian poet became an “internal émigré” after writing a poem which criticised Stalin, being exiled within his own country. In comparing himself to a political exile or an outlaw from Irish history, the poet conveys the vulnerability of his position. The sense of exile in this poem has been linked to the fact that Heaney moved his family to the Republic of Ireland during the height of the Troubles. Corcoran writes that “Singing School” “explores some of the conditioning cultural circumstances of the poet's own biography, culminating in ‘Exposure’, a classic modern poem on a poet's anxiety about the place and function of his own art in relation to an ideal of civic responsibility”.⁷⁴ The poem ends ambiguously; if there is any consolation to be found here, it is “meagre” at best.

III

Following the recognisably political messages of North, Heaney's fifth collection, Field Work, saw the poet developing the Northern Irish elegy in a different direction. Having written more generally about the situation in the North, Heaney now deals with the individual and personal losses encountered as a result of the violence. Field Work is characterised by its many elegies for close friends and relatives: these are still Troubles elegies, but the politics of the Troubles are viewed through a first-hand knowledge of grief, and a poetic outworking of mourning. The change of tone in Field Work might be highlighted by a comparison between the statement of artistic purpose in “The Harvest Bow” with that in “Whatever you say, say nothing”.⁷⁵ While the poem from North speaks emphatically about wanting to “draw the line through bigotry and sham” (51), the image of the plaited straw harvest bow brings a gentler message: “*The end of art is peace / Could be the motto of this frail device*” (25-6). O'Donoghue notes that in Field Work, Heaney is “giving a voice to the voiceless”:

After all, what elegy does is to give voice to the terminally voiceless. There are two senses in which this book is elegiac: first the obvious one, that it contains some of the finest elegies in modern English poetry (in an area, incidentally, where modern Irish poetry is particularly strong: for example, Longley, Muldoon and Michael Davitt); but the book is elegiac, too, in

74 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 79.

75 Field Work, 58.

its homesickness for Ulster.⁷⁶

What is incidental for O'Donoghue is the key aspect of the current thesis, underlining the argument that “modern Irish poetry is particularly strong” in the genre of elegy.

Having identified the need for an elegiac response to the Troubles in the opening poems of *Field Work*, Heaney goes on to write the most conventional and traditional elegies of his career so far. “The Strand at Lough Beg” and “Casualty” are perhaps the most useful poems to concentrate upon, but it is important to note the inclusion of “In Memoriam Sean O’Riada” and “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge” in this volume; poems whose very titles place them firmly within the elegiac tradition.⁷⁷ Similarly, “Elegy”, written for Robert Lowell, and “A Postcard from North Antrim”, dedicated in memory of Sean Armstrong, continue the elegiac mode of the collection.⁷⁸ “Casualty”, like previous elegies, is in three parts. The first section remembers a shared past: time spent in the pub. Heaney praises the dead man in a manner reminiscent of traditional elegies, albeit in a more understated way: “Casualty” grieves for a “dole-kept breadwinner / But a natural for work” (14-15), who could order another drink “without / Having to raise his voice” (5-6).⁷⁹ Heaney’s remembered past is not as idealised as the conventional pastoral images of shepherds tending their flocks together: even while he was alive, the subject of the poem was distanced from the poet by education: “Incomprehensible / To him, my other life” (21-2). Death gives the poet more perspective, as he realises that his “public” poetry is written for, and read by, people like the dead man:

But my tentative art
His turned back watches too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry. (36-42)

Although the poem seems to be written in long stanzas of unequal lengths, on closer inspection, the alternating rhyme-scheme would also allow for the poem to be broken down into quatrains. Heaney perhaps chose not to print his poem in four-line stanzas to allow the rhymes to have a more subtle effect, and at times he increases this effect by using slant-rhymes such as the one seen above: “art/bits”. This is particularly effective here, allowing the moment of death to be introduced in an unexpected way, and also highlighting the relationship between art and violence.

The second section of the poem recalls the funerals of the thirteen dead – victims of Bloody Sunday: “Coffin after coffin / seemed to float from the door / Of the packed cathedral...”

76 O'Donoghue, 84.

77 *Field Work*: “The Strand at Lough Beg,” 17-8; “Casualty,” 21-4; “In Memoriam Sean O’Riada,” 29-30; “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge,” 59-60.

78 *Field Work*: “Elegy,” 31-2; “A Postcard from North Antrim,” 19-20.

79 It is noted, however, that Heaney draws a parallel in this poem between the craft of poetry and the craft of fishing.

(5-7). This helps to set the context for the individual death mourned in the poem, as well as extending the elegy to mourn for the communal losses suffered as a result of the Troubles. Indeed, the mass funeral is pictured as an event which draws the grieving community together in solidarity, “Like brothers in a ring” (13). In stark contrast to this, the subject of Heaney’s poem refuses to comply with the curfew set by the IRA, his “own side”, and the poem seems to question the degree to which he was responsible for his own death:

But he would not be held
At home by his own crowd
Whatever threats were phoned,
Whatever black flags waved.
I see him as he turned
In that bombed offending place,
Remorse filled with terror
In his still knowable face,
His cornered outfaced stare
Blinding in the flash. (14-23)

The poem goes on to ask this question even more forcefully: “How culpable was he / That last night when he broke / Our tribe’s complicity?” (32-4).⁸⁰ The final section of the poem opens with a guilty admission: “I missed his funeral” (1). The procession of “quiet walkers / And sideways talkers” (2-3) must only be imagined, yet they perform a key elegiac role. Sacks suggests that processions and lists in elegies help to mark “a sense of distance” from the death, thereby assisting the mourner to work through his grief towards a sense of consolation.⁸¹ In “Casualty”, the walkers themselves

move in equal pace
With the habitual
Slow consolation
Of a dawdling engine... (7-10)

This “consolation”, small as it may be, allows the poet to return to happier memories of his subject: “that morning / I was taken in his boat [...] I tasted freedom with him” (14-5, 18). In giving this final image of the fisherman, the poet seems to be “Working you, slow mile by mile, / Into your proper haunt / Somewhere, well out, beyond...” (23-5). The word “haunt” suggests a kind of ghostly afterlife, as does the word “beyond...” with its ellipsis suggesting a continuation of existence, elsewhere. This idea is reinforced by the imperative of the final lines, addressing the dead man:

Dawn-sniffing revenant,
Plodder through midnight rain,
Question me again. (26-8)

While this might be heard as a disconsolatory realisation that a dialogue with the dead is no longer possible, it might equally be read as a suggestion that the dead man is still able,

⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the dead man’s culpability when his death is revisited in Human Chain: “Louis O’Neill / In the wrong place the Wednesday they buried / Thirteen who’d been shot in Derry...” “Route 110,” Human Chain, 56.

⁸¹ Sacks, 19.

somehow, to commune with the poet. Indeed, this has already been enacted at the end of the second section, in answer to the poet's question about culpability:

“Now you're supposed to be
An educated man,”
I hear him say. “Puzzle me
The right answer to that one.” (35-8)

While this might be a small comfort, it is nevertheless an elegiac consolation; and in continuing to explore the “right answers” to the questions raised by the Troubles, Heaney is able to remain in communion with those who have lost their lives in the conflict.

“The Strand at Lough Beg” has been called “the most nearly classical elegy” in Field Work. Stephen Regan identifies it as the “elegy that most clearly adheres to classical precedents and yet at the same time offers the most striking revision of elegiac myths and emblems”.⁸² The debt to tradition is acknowledged in the epigraph from Dante's Purgatorio, and also in the dedication: “in memory of Colum McCartney”, which labels the poem as an elegy.⁸³ After the epigraph, which anchors the poem in classical tradition and in an elegiac pastoral landscape, the first lines are set firmly in the twentieth century: “Leaving the white glow of filling stations / And a few lonely streetlamps...” (1-2).⁸⁴ Heaney takes the pastoral setting of the conventional elegy and “de-idealizes” it, striving for an “authentic” pastoral.⁸⁵ The poem is tripartite, with three stanzas that echo Milton's “Lycidas” in their “loose pentameter and sporadic rhymes”, and correspond to the “three major elements” of elegy found in “Lycidas”: “a responsive natural world, an inadequate contemporary society, and a transcendent consolation”.⁸⁶ Like Lycidas, McCartney died “Where you weren't known and far from what you knew” (14), and the first stanza attempts to retrieve him from the “high, bare pilgrim's track” (5) to the familiar “lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg” (15).⁸⁷ While the scene of the attack is threatening, with images of pursuit, “Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads...” (6), the landscape of Lough Beg is gently mournful: “Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew” (16). The conventional “waters” and “yew” combine with allusions to Irish (rather than classical) mythology, in the evocation of Sweeney.⁸⁸ The poet speculates upon the killing: “What blazed ahead of you? A

82 Thomas Foster, Seamus Heaney (Dublin: O'Brien P, 1989) 91. Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy,” Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator, ed. Jason David Hall and Ashby Bland Crowder (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 9-25 (16).

83 Jon Stallworthy, “The Poet as Archeologist: W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney,” Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney, ed. Robert F. Garratt, Critical Essays on British Literature (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1995) 172-86 (184).

84 This recalls another elegy: Auden's “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, which opens with images of “airports”, “public statues” and scientific “instruments”: W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” Collected Shorter Poems 1927 - 1957 (London: Faber & Faber, 1966) 141-3.

85 Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 346. See also Seamus Deane, “Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold,” Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays, ed. Michael Allen, New Casebooks (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1997) 64-77. Heaney is aided by the fact that McCartney had worked as a cowherd, and therefore does not have to be “mythologised” to be placed in a pastoral setting.

86 Regan, 18. Joseph Kishel, “Yeats's Elegies,” Yeats Eliot Review 7 (1981): 78-90 (79).

87 Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 344-5.

88 See Regan for the legend of the “seventh-century Irish king [...] transformed into a bird and banished

faked roadblock?" (9). These questions introduce a sense of the mourner's guilt: he had not been present, and had not been able to prevent the death. This is Heaney's version of conventional questioning, where fellow mourners are interrogated and blamed for their lack of protection.⁸⁹ Here, "far from what you knew" (14) carries a tone of self-accusation for the poet who had moved away from the troubled North.⁹⁰

The second stanza, therefore, marks an attempt to return both subject and mourner to the pastoral community of their shared youth. Heaney is more successful in returning McCartney than in reintegrating himself: instead of repeating Milton's first person plural, "we [...] fed the same flock" (23-4), the pronouns are almost exclusively second person: "you and yours" (23). Just once, the poet acknowledges, "For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy..." (23), and even here, "yours and mine" seems an afterthought. A reason for this reluctance to identify with a community of

Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground... (26-8)

is found in the complex position which Heaney occupies. The conventional invective against an "inadequate contemporary society" is directed at his own community. In the Irish conflict, "yours and mine fought shy, / Spoke an old language of conspirators / And could not crack the whip or seize the day" (23-5). Yet this is not wholly condemned: there is an implication that these peaceful "talkers in byres", who use their guns only as "duck shooters" (18), should not have to be involved in sectarian violence.⁹¹ The anger at his community's apparent inadequacy hints at a deeper anger towards a political situation which places communities in such positions.⁹² Heaney uses convention to engage the political situation whilst expressing his grief. As Foster notes, "the poem, after all, seeks to be elegiac, not incendiary".⁹³

Vendler sees in the poem "oscillations [...] between murder and peace", as comforting, pastoral images alternate with violent ones.⁹⁴ The "duck shooters", although part of the pastoral community, are remembered as threatening: McCartney was "scared to find spent cartridges, /

from Ulster," 17.

89 Sacks, 103.

90 Regan, 18. See also Blake Morrison: "The poetry in *Field Work* is deeply conscious of that move into the Republic and the countryside. [...] it was not surprising that the move should be seen by some as a betrayal of the Northern Catholic community and should have aroused in Heaney feelings of unease and even guilt," *Seamus Heaney*, (London: Methuen, 1982) 71-2.

91 John Hildebidle remarks upon the way the sequence of elegies in *Field Work* "emphasizes the murderous actuality of Heaney's former home; and worse yet the unpredictable intrusion of violence even into relatively unpolitical lives," "A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry," *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garratt, Critical Essays on British Literature (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1995) 39-55 (41). Corcoran sees this stanza as "a rueful acknowledgement of his family's incapacity for facing some of the violent realities of sectarianism," *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 94.

92 In a sense, Heaney might be seen as speaking for, rather than against, his community. See Andrew Murphy, *Seamus Heaney*, 2nd ed, Writers and their Work (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000) 57. See also Morrison on Heaney's ambivalence towards his role as "public spokesman," 15.

93 Foster, 92.

94 Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 60.

Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected” (20-1). This sense of premonitory fear is increased by the description of the duck hunters who “Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes” (19), evoking not only ghosts, but also the flowers of mourning, and the “rushes” that will later be plaited in an elegiac act of weaving.⁹⁵ The pastoral is further “de-idealized” as even youthful memories are coloured by an awareness of death. Indeed, reference to guns or shooting appears in each section of “The Strand at Lough Beg”, as armed violence permeates the poem. However, the elegy is “a notable achievement”, in that it “rises above the vagaries of the current strife and invokes a profound sense of loss”.⁹⁶ While Heaney does not hide the death within an overtly “mythologised” subject, such as Lycidas or Adonais, he nevertheless ensures that his poem engages with a tradition of mourning extending beyond his personal experience, as he attempts to achieve consolation.

Beginning the final stanza, Heaney works again to establish McCartney within the elegiac landscape:

Across that strand of yours the cattle graze
Up to their bellies in an early mist
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in dew. (29-33)

The “strand of yours...” recalls the comfort in “Lycidas”: “Henceforth thou art the genius of the shore” (183). Heaney implies (albeit tentatively) that McCartney's spirit lives on in the landscape. The speaker switches to present tense, and it is a “haunted present”, which acknowledges the ghostly presence of the dead man: “we work our way through...”⁹⁷ Re-creating the scene, Heaney is more successful in imagining himself into the poem. This is an act of labour: he has to “work his way” in, and in this stanza he is most self-conscious in his performance of elegiac mourning, as he searches for consolation. Having already evoked the consolation of “Lycidas”, “Drowning in dew” seems again to link McCartney's death with that of Milton's subject. Indeed, the image of water is repeatedly associated with death: Lough Beg half-shining “Like a dull blade with its edge / Honed bright” (33-4); the “brimming grass” (38) and “moss / Fine as drizzle out of a low cloud” (41) used in ritual washing.⁹⁸ Where the first two stanzas seem to depict a “realistic” or “unmythologised” subject, the third stanza acknowledges the performative nature of the work of mourning. At the same time, Heaney refuses to deny the horror of the death. The cattle “turn their unbewildered gaze” to the attack, as McCartney is found “on your knees / With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes”

95 See Parker: “The second section relocates the young victim in the landscape of his boyhood, only to recognise the chill portents to his future,” *Seamus Heaney*, 160.

96 Tony Curtis “A More Social Voice: *Field Work*,” *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis, 4th ed. (Bridgend: Seren-Poetry Wales P, 2001) 97-127 (110).

97 Regan, 20.

98 This combines the elegiac image of water with classical allusion, as his act of washing mimics that of Virgil in Dante's *Purgatorio*. See Carla de Petris, “Heaney and Dante,” *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garratt, *Critical Essays on British Literature* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1995) 161-71 (162).

(36-7). “Unbewildered” acknowledges Shelley's realisation that nature does not join in mourning. This is also found in the “rushes that shoot green again” (43) which echoes the “Fresh leaves and flowers [that] deck the dead Seasons' bier” in “Adonais” (158).⁹⁹ Twiddy points out that in this poem, “Using the natural to mourn makes violent death seem natural to the land, or violent death natural to Northern Ireland”.¹⁰⁰

While the final stanza seems to question elegiac mourning, it nevertheless engages conventionally consoling elements of earlier poems. Half-way through, the poet enters the poem: “I turn because the sweeping of your feet / Has stopped behind me” (35-6). This implies that the unexpected death has caused a response: his action, “I turn”, is galvanised by the “stopping” of his cousin's feet. McCartney's death leads him to “perform” the rituals of mourning: “I [...] wash you, cousin” (40). These images serve as metaphors for the work of mourning Heaney is performing in writing his elegy. They are followed by another figurative act: “I lift you under the arms and lay you flat” (42). The first stanza made it clear that Heaney was absent as McCartney died, so this is an imagined “lifting”, hinting at both the Christian resurrection in “Lycidas”, and the poetic commemoration offered as consolation in “Adonais”.¹⁰¹ Both themes are present as “With rushes that shoot green again, I plait / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud” (43-4). The “scapulars”, or priestly vestments, continue the implicit religious consolation, while “plaiting” serves as the elegiac image of creation, as the poet recognises that his own poetic power might be a source of consolation. The word “shoot”, although it might “disarm” the violent act that led to McCartney's death, is also a reminder of on-going conflict.¹⁰² This is superseded, however, by the promise to “plait” the scapulars. This metaphor for the elegiac work of mourning might be read as Heaney's affirmation that elegy is an essential response to his situation. In this, he echoes the desire at the end of “Oysters”: that his experience “Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb”.¹⁰³

Heaney's response to Colum McCartney's death is analysed in the title poem of his 1984

99 It might simultaneously be argued that the “rushes that shoot green again” provide an image of renewal and redemption. See Curtis, 112.

100 Twiddy, 62.

101 Curtis sees “obvious associations with the laying out of Christ at this point,” 112. Andrew Murphy suggests that “the consolation offered here [...] is metaphorical and highly mythologized,” 62. Regan states that “Heaney is careful [...] not to make any precise allusion to Christian resurrection,” 19. Corcoran notes that here, Heaney “must lift the actual weight of the Irish countryman ‘under the arms’” as he is forced to “confront directly [...] the actual circumstances of sectarian murder,” The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 93.

102 Regan, 21. Deane writes: “In Field Work, all trace of consoling or explanatory myth has gone [...] The violence itself is pervasive, a disease spread...” 71. For Parker, however, the Field Work elegies “demonstrate Heaney's refusal to allow bullet and bomb to have the final word,” Seamus Heaney, 159. Ramazani understands that “For Heaney, the poet's social responsibility amid public killing is to mourn and care for the dead – to write their elegies without, however, obscuring death or feigning innocence,” Poetry of Mourning, 334.

103 See Morrison's description of Heaney as “an embalmer or anointer, his gifts offered to the dead rather than the living, his task to provide fitting burials rather than to think of means to prevent them,” 77. “Oysters,” Opened Ground, 145-6.

collection, *Station Island*.¹⁰⁴ Having reached a point of consolation at the end of “The Strand at Lough Beg”, Heaney seems to denounce it in part VIII of “Station Island”.¹⁰⁵ The two poems are linked by more than their common subject. Corcoran remarks: “Dante is of crucial value to Heaney as the greatest of all poetic communers with the dead”.¹⁰⁶ While the *Purgatorio* is used to authorise the lakeside setting of Lough Beg as a site of mourning, “Station Island” engages Dante on a structural level, as the poet’s “purgatorial progress” leads him through a series of encounters with ghosts from his past.¹⁰⁷ The ghost of McCartney speaks accusingly:

you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
and saccharined my death with morning dew. (73-5)

Like “The Strand at Lough Beg”, “Station Island, VIII” engages with elegiac conventions. The subject is a “pale-faced boy” (52), emphasising his premature death. McCartney describes the “red-hot pokers [which] blazed a lovely red / in Jerpoint the Sunday I was murdered” (53-4), recalling the conventional “red or purple flower” associated with the “death of a young man”.¹⁰⁸ This image is part of the following accusation:

You were there with poets when you got the word
and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood
was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews.
They showed more agitation at the news
than you did. (56-60)

The mention of “poets” recalls the “mountain shepherds” in “Adonais” (262): fellow poets who form a procession of mourners. McCartney’s reminder that “your own flesh and blood / was carted” reinforces Heaney’s sense of guilt, with the awareness that it could have been his own life lost, had he stayed in the North. While it engages elegy, the poem questions traditional consolation. Vendler describes McCartney’s attack as “the most vindictive and guilty of Heaney’s ‘second thoughts’ about his own writing, as it indicts the genre of elegy itself”.¹⁰⁹ It might be argued however, that the attack is more subtle than this: Heaney specifically questions elegy written in the lyric form, which “saccharine[s]” death (75), as is seen in the ghost’s later accusation.

Heaney describes his grief process, leading to his writing of “The Strand at Lough Beg”. He compares his response to that of his fellow poets:

...they were getting crisis
first-hand, Colum, they had happened in on
live sectarian assassination.
I was dumb, encountering what was destined. (60-3)

104 “Station Island,” *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984) 61-94.

105 Line numbers refer to “Station Island, VIII”, not the entire sequence.

106 Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 85.

107 Barbara Hardy, “Meeting the Myth: *Station Island*,” *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis, 4th ed. (Bridgend: seren-Poetry Wales P, 2001) 149-63 (155).

108 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 120

109 Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 96.

This is described in the sensational language of news reporting: “crisis”, “first-hand”, and “live sectarian assassination” which, given the entire space of line 62, appears as a headline.

Heaney's “dumbness” suggests a more authentic grief. The first step in his work of mourning was to translate his loss onto a familiar scene: “I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg / and the strand empty at daybreak” (65-6). “I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake” (67) identifies the poet himself with the scene of his poem, suggesting that the writing of an elegy is performed more for the elegist's benefit than the subject's. Being “dried-up” is the antithesis of Milton's “sacred well” (15), the source of cleansing elegiac water. Heaney seems to suggest that the elegy was a necessary step in releasing grief. This is challenged, however:

You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly you
[...] you whitewashed ugliness... (68-71, 73)

Here, the ghost attacks the lyric mode of poetry that had been used in his elegy, juxtaposing Heaney's “evasion and artistic tact” with brutal “fact”: “The Protestant who shot me through the head”. While Heaney does not give a direct response, he provides justification in “verb, pure verb”, displaying skill and craftsmanship in the writing of the poem, and creating his poetic consolation by producing elegiac poetry in a more obviously dramatic mode, which actively contends with the accusations made against the previous poem.¹¹⁰

Heaney writes accomplished poetry, demonstrating his technical ability. McCartney's “rebuke [...is...] couched in a careful variation of the ottava rima stanza”.¹¹¹ “Station Island” as a whole contains free verse, blank verse, rhymed quatrains, Heaney's own version of terza rima, and sonnets. While it might be true to say that McCartney “forces Heaney to reconsider his allegiances and responsibilities as a poet”, “Station Island” can be seen as “a necessary poem for Heaney to have written”, which “brings him to that point of newly steadied illumination”.¹¹² Parker questions whether the poem denounces elegy, suggesting it be read as one of the competing discourses of a poet writing in the post-modern period.¹¹³ Vendler identifies the ghosts as Heaney's potential “alter egos”, suggesting that he is “testing the poet's vocation against that of other actual lived lives”, “clarifying” his sense of calling.¹¹⁴ Ramazani's reminder that McCartney is “after all, Heaney's latest artful creation”, brings Heaney's poetic authority into perspective.¹¹⁵ McCartney “calls into question all the rich bulk of elegiac record in Heaney's poems”, but cannot silence him: indeed, “it is directly after that that Heaney touches

110 See Regan: “The function of this encounter is not to cancel the elegiac response in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, but rather to test the adequacy of lyric modes of writing against the competing claims of narrative, dramatic poetry,” 21.

111 Hildebidle, “A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry,” 52.

112 Andrew Murphy, 63. Corcoran, 125.

113 See Parker, “I am extremely doubtful whether he is in fact repudiating the earlier poem,” *Seamus Heaney*, 201.

114 Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 93, 98.

115 Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 347

bottom – and begins to rise”.¹¹⁶ This interrogation may have given voice to severe criticism, but it does not deter Heaney as an elegist. Indeed, as Parker notes, the period following the publication of Station Island, while it was “an intensively creative one”, was also marked by loss: “The deaths of his mother in the autumn of 1984 and of his father in October 1986 left a colossal space, one which he has struggled to fill through poetry”.¹¹⁷ The collections The Haw Lantern and Seeing Things contain a number of poems which memorialise Heaney's parents, and two examples stand out particularly clearly: the sonnet sequence “Clearances”, and the title poem of the following volume, “Seeing Things”.¹¹⁸ Parker writes about these collections:

Critics have noted, and Heaney himself has commented on, a greater sense of ease and release within these last two volumes, a “freeing up” which may not be unconnected with bereavement. No longer constrained perhaps by his feeling for parental feelings, he appears less tentative, more candid in his observations on Catholic and Nationalist tradition.

While Parker observes that there are “other factors at play” in the development of Heaney's poetic voice, the “freedom” to eulogise his own parents might be seen as another key stage in Heaney's career as an elegist.¹¹⁹ Corcoran notes some of the connotations implicit in the use of the word “clearance” in the poet's mourning for his mother: “‘clearance’ is both the freeing from an obstruction and the giving of permission. In the title of the sequence, these senses are allied to others: a clearance is the settlement of a debt or claim, and it is a piece of cleared ground.”¹²⁰

IV

Almost every critic writing about “Clearances” makes comparisons between Heaney and Tony Harrison, both poets whose education allowed them access to an academic vocabulary and range of experience that remained completely alien to their working-class parents. In writing a sonnet sequence, Heaney's choice of form might be compared to that of Harrison, who wrote sixteen-line sonnets to eulogise his parents in The School of Eloquence.¹²¹ O'Donoghue acknowledges this “obvious comparison”, but argues that there is a difference between the two poets' attitudes: “Harrison sees linguistic difference as a dividing force which can be used as a weapon; Heaney sees its potential, as in all verbal effects, of positive application. Linguistic difference can achieve alliance as well as hostility”.¹²² This observation of Heaney's desire to “achieve alliance” through language might be applied more broadly to the body of elegiac work produced by the poet. The idea of “alliance” might also be applied to the way in which Heaney

116 Hildebidle, 52.

117 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 211.

118 “Clearances,” The Haw Lantern (London: Faber, 1987) 24-32; “Seeing Things,” Seeing Things (London: Faber, 1991) 18-20.

119 Parker, Seamus Heaney, 211-12. Another example of this view is found in Molino: “Thus, ‘Clearances’ at once mourns the death of Heaney's mother but also sweeps clean ties to the past, certain fidelities that are no longer viable,” 187.

120 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 155.

121 Harrison, from The School of Eloquence and other poems (London: Rex Collings, 1978).

122 O'Donoghue, 113.

engages with the elegiac tradition in “Clearances”. For Ramazani, this sequence is probably “Heaney’s finest achievement in elegy”: “Returning to the sonnet form and resuming numerous elegiac conventions, Heaney proves himself ever more willing to participate in ancient poetic company and reject the anti-traditionalist assumptions of many modern poets”.¹²³ Ramazani picks up on the point made by Parker and Corcoran, that the death of parents may in some way be seen to be “freeing” to the poet, and ties it in with the ideas of fertility which Sacks saw as foundational to the work of mourning, and which were noted in earlier poems like “Requiem for the Croppies”. “Death is not death but liberation, general transmission, or the survival of phallic potency.”¹²⁴

While the dedicatory verses of the sequence acknowledge Heaney’s debt to his mother, the first sonnet in the sequence locates the family history firmly within the broader context of the religious tensions that have long existed in Northern Ireland.¹²⁵ The poem remembers a “cobble thrown a hundred years ago” (1) at a great-grandmother who married outside of the Catholic “tribe”. This stone “keeps coming at me” (2), in an image which acknowledges both family memories, and the more troubling recurrence of sectarian violence that the poet has witnessed in his own lifetime. The stone itself is the only part of the memory which remains as a physical presence for the poet: “Inherited on my mother’s side / And mine to dispose with now she’s gone” (11-12). This stone, a symbol of violence and prejudice, has perhaps now been re-classified as a memorial stone, commemorating not only the lives of those who once held it, but also remembering an act of union within one family that had much wider political implications.¹²⁶ If it is seen in this way, as a symbol of hope, the poem ends with a message of love that might, elegiacally, transcend tribal and political barriers, an image of redemption for the Northern Irish community. The second poem in the sequence imagines the poet’s mother, as a “bewildered homing daughter” (12) is greeted by her parents in “Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead” (9). While the tone of the poem is allegorical, and similar in style to the “parable” poems found elsewhere in *The Haw Lantern*,¹²⁷ it nevertheless hints at the idea of an afterlife existence, ending with the image of the poet’s dead relatives sitting down “in the shining room together” (14).¹²⁸ The third sonnet fulfils the elegiac function of remembering a shared past existence, as the poet recalls a moment of childhood intimacy: “While the others were away at Mass / I was all hers as we peeled potatoes” (1-2). The volta of the poem recalls the Catholic faith of Heaney’s mother, bringing the reader with a jolt into the more recent memory of her final days: “So while the parish priest at her bedside / Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for

123 Ramazani, 353.

124 Ramazani, 353.

125 Henry Hart observes that in this sequence, “the domestic drama is played out on a much larger stage,” 198.

126 Parker suggests that although the poet “cannot perhaps keep faith with [his great-grandmother’s] faith, he is prepared like her to run the gauntlet in following his conscience,” *Seamus Heaney*, 215.

127 See, for example, “Parable Island,” and “From the Land of the Unspoken,” *The Haw Lantern*, 10-11; 18.

128 Parker sees this as a kind of “transfiguration,” *Seamus Heaney*, 215.

the dying...” (9-10). However, the sestet follows the structure of the octave: while it begins with an acknowledgement of Catholic ritual, it quickly returns to the private memories of the poet:

I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives. (12-14)

It might be suggested that this moment of communion, or even inspiration, between mother and son supersedes the religious observances of Catholicism, and offers the humanist poet a greater sense of consolation.

The fourth sonnet in the sequence is the one which has prompted the most comparisons with Tony Harrison. However, where Harrison seems to suggest an unbridgeable linguistic divide between himself and his parents, Heaney gives his mother more credit for her mispronunciation of the language of his literary world. He suggests that her linguistic “inadequacy” is at least partly affected, in an effort not to “betray / The hampered and inadequate by too / Well-adjusted a vocabulary” (5-7). This effectively draws the mother onto the same “side” as her son: both of them consciously adjust their language to suit the other members of their rural community. Paradoxically, this affectation for the sake of peace also serves to highlight the differences between them, and actually heightens the tension in the relationship.¹²⁹ A sense of linguistic camaraderie, juxtaposed with a sense of alienation, is voiced in the final lines of the poem: “I’d *naw* and *aye* / And decently relapse into the wrong / Grammar which kept us allied and at bay” (12-14).¹³⁰ The form of the sonnets changes subtly half-way through the sequence: while the first three are divided into octave and sestet by a stanza break, the remaining five are printed as fourteen-line verses. This allows Heaney more freedom with his placement of the volta. The fifth and sixth poems of the sequence continue in the elegiac remembering of the shared past of the poet and his subject. In the fifth, another domestic task is transformed into an action of intimacy, as the two figures fold sheets together:

So we’d stretch and fold and end up hand in hand
For a split second as if nothing had happened
For nothing had that had not always happened
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
Coming close again by holding back... (8-12).

One problematic aspect of mourning a parent, from a psychoanalytical point of view, is the erotic charge that can be heard in the expressions of love and loss. Here, Heaney is aware of the complex emotions involved in a mother-son relationship, and emphasises the momentariness of the pair’s physical intimacy: “just touch and go”; “coming close... by holding back”. The hints at this desire for proximity are heard again in the sixth sonnet, which remembers “our *Sons and Lovers* phase” (3), and the closeness of “kneeling next / To each other up there near the front /

129 See Hart, 198.

130 Corcoran sees that the mother and son are enacting a power-struggle over language in this poem. He suggests that: “The sonnet, we might say, effects a clearance, repays a debt, by refusing elegy to sentimentalise the actual, even intractable human difficulty,” *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 161.

Of the packed church” (5-7). Corcoran points out that

The sonnet sequence in English is characteristically the vehicle of love poems, not elegies; and, as the annotation of the “*Sons and Lovers* phase” in sonnet 6 makes plain, what is being recorded here is, to some degree, a love affair too. [...] In the line – a paradoxical one – “Coming close again by holding back” there is, nevertheless, a balance maintained between affection and recoil; and the relationship we are shown in “Clearances” is constrained as well as comforting.¹³¹

The focus on religious rituals, particularly those of washing (“Dippings. Towellings. The water breathed on.” (10)), combined with the biblical quotation, “*Day and night my tears have been my bread*” (14) at the end of the sixth sonnet foreground the moment of loss that comes in the seventh poem. This poem is particularly poignant as the poet's mourning voice is joined by that of his bereaved father, following the elegiac convention of calling on fellow mourners to join in the work of grieving. The father's utterance is highlighted as an uncharacteristic expression of love:

In the last minutes he said more to her
Almost than in all their life together.
“You'll be in New Row on Monday night
And I'll come up for you and you'll be glad
When I walk in the door... Isn't that right?”
His head was bent down to her propped-up head.
She could not hear but we were overjoyed.
He called her good and girl. (1-8)

The octave of this poem fulfils a number of elegiac functions. The mention of “we” situates the poet within a community of mourners. By allowing his father to voice his love for the dying woman, the poet is able to counter any accusations of Oedipal attachment, of which he has been wary throughout the sequence. The volta of this sonnet comes in the middle of the eighth line (which has been prepared for by the formal changes in the previous sonnets), emphasising the sense of invasion caused by the death:

Then she was dead,
The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned
And we all knew one thing by being there. (8-10)

While the moment of death comes as something of a shock, both formally and emotionally, it provokes a sense of lightness and release in the sestet of the poem. The absence felt by the community of mourners is described as a transcendent moment, an emptiness that paradoxically invokes a sense of potential:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (11-14)

The final poem of the sequence deals with the poet's response to the loss of his mother, and the creation of this “space” caused by her absence.

131 Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 158-9.

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge about the wall flowers. (1-4)

While the “space / Utterly empty” initially seems to refer to the poet's loss of his mother, it is given more specific meaning as the poet identifies a real, physical space: that left in his garden by a tree that has died.¹³² The translation of his feelings of grief onto a tangible space of absence seems to show the poet's first steps of dealing with his loss. He transfers an emotional and intellectual sense of absence onto a physical setting, one which he can interact with, “walking round and round” in it. While this repetitious action might be seen as a melancholic refusal to move on from the point of loss, it might conversely be seen as a progression of his mourning, as the poet seeks adequate “images and symbols” to communicate his loss, as he had long been doing in his elegies for Northern Ireland. Parker describes this as Heaney seeking “an *objective correlative* for his feelings of loss”.¹³³ While the felling of the chestnut tree is remembered as an act of devastating destruction, “the shocked tips and wreckage of it all” (9), it provides, nevertheless, a space filled with the potential for new life. This image of a death in nature, which prepares for the renewal of life through the cycles of fertility and re-birth, allows for a muted elegiac consolation. There is a sense in which the lost tree, and by implication, the poet's mother, continues to exist in an unknown place:

Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for. (12-14)

The idea of a “bright nowhere”, “silent” and “beyond” human experience, is not exactly the heaven of the Christian faith found in “Lycidas”, but it is nevertheless “luminous as well as negative”.¹³⁴

Molino writes that:

Memory has always played an important role in Heaney's poetic imagination – from the recurrent memory of his father and grandfather in “Digging” whose actions metaphorically forecast his own poetic work, to his physically absent but spiritually present mother whose ramifying soul directs her son's imagination toward otherworldly things. In [...] *Seeing Things*, memory – often sparked by or linked to powerful sensory perceptions – is perhaps the most potent poetic stimulus.¹³⁵

“Seeing Things” is another three-part elegy, one of many written in memory of the poet's father. It is highly self-conscious about the act of writing, and the elegy as an artefact, which is reflected in the title, with its emphasis on both seeing, perceiving, and on the “whatness” or

132 Heaney describes this tree, whose felling left a “luminous emptiness”, which became a “placeless heaven” in his imagination, in his essay “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988) 3-14.

133 Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 217.

134 Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 157.

135 Molino, 190.

“thingness” of things.¹³⁶ This is an elegiac mode of writing, which draws the reader's attention to the construction of the poem itself, and enacts a poetic weaving of the text in order to create a memorial for the dead. In the second part of “Seeing Things”, as Vendler notes, the description of the stone carving of Jesus raises questions about the purposes of art as symbolic and representational.¹³⁷ Before Heaney reaches these aesthetic considerations, however, the first part of the poem concentrates upon a memory of a shared experience. While it is shared, however, as the poet describes a ferry-ride using first person plural pronouns (“We sat tight” (5); “our ferryman” (11); “What guaranteed us” (14)), it is not clear whether the subject of the elegy – Heaney's father – was one of the passengers sharing in this journey. Indeed, the anonymity of the group of travellers, and their “ferryman” (11), brings to mind the more sinister image of Charon's ferry which takes dead souls to the underworld. This sense of otherworldliness is emphasised in the closing lines of the section:

It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads. (19-22)

This part of the poem is haunted by premonitions of death. It is allied to the elegiac tradition, not only through its use of Classical imagery, but also through the water-journey, which brings to mind the drowned subject of Milton's “Lycidas” and also the fearful journey at the end of Shelley's “Adonais”. Its self-conscious language prepares for the mode of representation encountered in the stone-carving described in part II of the poem. Vendler voices the questions raised:

Is there, the poem asks, a mode of representation which would be not literal but hieroglyphic, as the carved lines in stone are symbolic of, rather than mimetic of, liquid? [...] The poet urges himself to trust the comparable “utter visibility” of language – in “lines hard and thin and sensuous” – and to believe that his reader can supply the implications.¹³⁸

The last part of the poem finally introduces the subject of the elegy, but again he is somewhat obscured by a sense of mythology and unreality: “Once upon a time my undrowned father / Walked in our yard” (1-2). As Ramazani notes, it might seem strange in an elegy that Heaney remembers an incident from his childhood in which his father is made somewhat impotent: “this is a moment when a farming accident has severely shaken his father's customary authority and self-possession”.¹³⁹ However, this memory allows the poet to continue the meditation upon mortality which has been running through the poem, and reinforces the need for an artistic memorial in the light of the fragility and transience of human life. Even in recalling a childhood memory, the grieving poet cannot deny his loss: his father's step is

136 This emphasis on the philosophical idea of “quidditas” is a preoccupation of one of the next generation of Northern Irish poets: Paul Muldoon.

137 Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 142.

138 Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 142.

139 Ramazani, 359.

“unguided, his ghosthood immanent” (13). While this premonition of death is remembered as a threat, after the father's death, the idea of “ghosthood” might paradoxically be returned to as a consolation. Indeed, the remembered encounter in the closing lines of the poem suggests a hope for a kind of ghostly afterlife for the father, enabling the relationship to be continued even after death:

That afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after. (21-5)

The “happily ever after” of the final line chimes with the “Once upon a time” of the start of this section, enclosing the whole memory within the framework of perhaps the most knowingly artificial genre of all stories: the fairy tale. This results in an elegiac paradox. While the seemingly contrived setting of the poem might seem to deny a sense of authentic grief and consolation, the attention that is drawn towards the construction of the poem emphasises the labour that has gone into creating a work of mourning. As Ramazani notes, Heaney works to make the conventions of the elegiac tradition fit with his experience of grief:

However heavy the burden bequeathed by one's parents, the inheriting child can remake it, or so Heaney hopes to convince himself. However rigid the lines and however square the boundaries of this quidditas, the imagination can disassemble and reconstruct it. Contending thus that material and biological inheritances can be transformed imaginatively, Heaney would also prove in his elegiac poetry that the literary equivalents of the settle bed are subject to metamorphosis – even the most cumbersome of elegiac topoi, such as the pathetic fallacy, oedipal submission, and poetic inheritance.¹⁴⁰

The Spirit Level, as Corcoran notes, seems to mark another development in Heaney's career as a Northern Irish elegist, as he seems to react against the heightened, detached sense of lyric artistry that can be heard in Seeing Things.¹⁴¹

...these poems compact the experience of an original childhood world with the later knowledge brought by history and literature. The density of the compaction is new in Heaney's work, and it returns it very vividly to those social, historical and political contingencies which it appeared a large part of the effort of *Seeing Things* to raise itself clear of. [...] Altogether, these poems appear to want to inflict pain or damage once more on a previous lyric perfection, as Heaney long since, at the time of *North*, admired Robert Lowell for inflicting damage in his “sonnets”.¹⁴²

The “social, historical and political contingencies” which Corcoran mentions here are, of course, Northern Ireland's Troubles, which, while still present in the previous volumes, had not been as emphatically foregrounded as in collections like North and Field Work. In The Spirit Level, however, the violence of Heaney's contemporary situation is once more focused upon. One poem draws together a number of Heaney's key preoccupations: childhood memories, the contemporary conflict, poetic form, and previous generations, both biological and literary; these

140 Ramazani, 360.

141 The Spirit Level (London: Faber, 1996).

142 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 192-3.

themes are all found in “Two Lorries”.¹⁴³ The two lorries of the title represent the “doubleness” of the poem’s message: one lorry is that of the flirtatious “coalman” (3), whose advances to Heaney’s mother represents one kind of danger to the family, while the second carries “a payload / That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes” (22-3) during the contemporary conflict. The choice of the sestina form for this poem is significant.¹⁴⁴ The “doubleness” of the narrative is reflected in the structure of the sestina, which is a kind of double-stranded form, as Margaret Spanos has noted:

The conjunction of the squared and circular forms, both of which have traditional claims to emblematic significance, has created a composite form, the reader’s experience of which is in fact emblematic: the poetic tension (form) transmits an intuition of the emotional tension (content) it describes. [...] This makes the sestina the perfect emblematic poem which, on all poetic levels, is what it means.¹⁴⁵

The strict pattern of repetition demanded by the sestina is also one that lends itself to the seemingly inescapable circle of violence experienced in Northern Ireland during recent decades. Heaney noted, when speaking about Elizabeth Bishop’s “Sestina”, that the form is marked by its “inexorable formal recurrences”.¹⁴⁶ For this reason also, the sestina is a fitting form with which to write poetry about generational inheritance, and this is seen in the poem by the mention of Heaney’s biological mother, and also by the debt that Heaney owes to Elizabeth Bishop as an exemplary writer of the sestina. While the poem is not strictly an elegy in the traditional sense, it is a clear example of Heaney pushing the boundaries of poetic form in order to re-visit both personal and public memories of loss.

V

Heaney’s 2001 collection, Electric Light, sees the poet returning to, and openly acknowledging, more of the predecessors and literary ancestors to whom he had looked as he began to develop his poetic techniques.¹⁴⁷ Iain Twiddy notes that the collection sees Heaney taking “poetic stock”, observing that “[t]he poems that return to the bucolic spaces of his first collection, and Electric Light’s three eclogues, a genre which traditionally announces the beginning of a poetic career, can be seen to reannounce an *ars poetica* while continuing its evolution”. Twiddy sees this to be connected to Heaney’s role as a Northern Irish poet: “Heaney’s recent work has examined the ability of the eclogue and the pastoral elegy to unlock cycles of violence and stalemate, and to advance the possibilities of integration”.¹⁴⁸ Acknowledging literary and political predecessors, “The Loose Box” names Patrick Kavanagh and Thomas Hardy, as well as

143 The Spirit Level, 13-4.

144 See Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, 196.

145 Margaret Spanos, “The Sestina: An Exploration of the Dynamics of Poetic Structure,” Speculum 53.3 (1978): 545-557 (549, 551).

146 Heaney, “Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop,” The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures (London: Faber, 1995) 164-85.

147 Electric Light (London: Faber, 2001).

148 Twiddy, 51-2.

remembering Michael Collins, the Irish nationalist leader who was killed in the Irish Civil war, “ambushed at Beal na Blath”.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, “Ten Glosses” alludes to Shakespeare, Wilfred Owen, W.H. Auden, Irish mythology and Catholic liturgy, as well as to Heaney's friend the songwriter David Hammond.¹⁵⁰ More openly allusive is “The Bookcase”, which seems to bear tribute to a host of Heaney's poetic forebears in a directly literary way, noting their books on his shelves:¹⁵¹

The jacket of (was it Oliver and Boyd's?)
Collected Hugh MacDiarmid. And the skimmed milk

Bluey-white of the Chatto Selected
Elizabeth Bishop. Murex of Macmillan's
Collected Yeats. And their Collected Hardy.
Yeats of “Memory”. Hardy of “The Voice”.

Voices too of Frost and Wallace Stevens
Off a Caedmon double album, off different shelves.
Dylan at full volume, the Bushmills killed.
“Do Not Go Gentle.” “Don't be going yet.” (7-16)

Later, the poem also mentions “the Venerable Bede” (23) and “Synge” (37). Strangely, but perhaps significantly, in the context of elegy, the poem ends by imagining the bookcase as “a raft for books, a bier to be borne” (42). This perhaps hints at an idea of salvation that might come from literature, or, conversely, of the salvation which literature itself has come to need, and which might be provided by the poet himself. It also seems to signify that the poet is consciously taking on the responsibility that has been left to him by previous generations of writers, and that this is something of a burden to be “borne”.¹⁵²

Electric Light is, like earlier collections, split into two parts, and the second part of the volume is mainly dedicated to elegies for Heaney's literary forebears. This seems to mark the beginning of Heaney's “mature” or “late” phase as an elegist, as he now has to mourn for friends from a previous generation, and also contemporaries, whom he has outlived, and even succeeded. The volume contains elegies for Ted Hughes, Joseph Brodsky, Zbigniew Herbert and a group of Scottish poets, Norman MacCaig, Iain MacGabhainn, Sorley MacLean and George Mackay Brown, as well as those for less public figures.¹⁵³ Twiddy quotes Heaney's comments on the poems of this collection:

Heaney says that *Electric Light* is firmly conscious of “*mortalia*”, of “people and things we must pass away from or that have had to pass away from us”, and as much as these things have historical and political resonance, they also anticipate the poets who will succeed Heaney, and the type of poetry he and they will write.¹⁵⁴

149 Electric Light, 14-6. This poem also bears resemblance to Paul Muldoon's “Gathering Mushrooms”; see the Muldoon chapter for more detail.

150 Electric Light, 54-6.

151 Electric Light, 51-2.

152 The implied water imagery in the word “raft” also links the poem to “Lycidas”, and perhaps more closely to the “bark” at the end of “Adonais”.

153 See, Electric Light, 61-3; 64-6; 67; 68-9; 75-6; 77-8.

154 Twiddy, 58.

While the tone of the volume “perhaps reflects the confidence drawn from a thirty-five-year career, and the award of the Nobel Prize”, Twiddy notes that “there is also a more uncertain energy in the collection, one which is directed once more to the question of the poet's ethical responsibility, and this is an issue which Heaney has not so far managed to settle to his satisfaction”.¹⁵⁵

In Heaney's next collection, District and Circle, the poet can be seen to continue to struggle with a sense of ethical responsibility, and one that has, if anything, become broader even as the conflict in Northern Ireland has begun to die down.¹⁵⁶ As Kevin Murphy notes in his review of the volume:

The political violence of Ireland that Heaney had addressed so powerfully if obliquely in *North* (1975) returns here as much a global as a national concern, with the terrorism of 9/11 in America and July 7 in England compelling Heaney to search his origins, both literary and biographical, for steadying images in the midst of what he has called our “new age of anxiety”.¹⁵⁷

Murphy reads the poem “Helmet” as “an unironic, dry-eyed, and fittingly public elegy for the 343 firefighters who died at the World Trade Center”, and the title poem “District and Circle” as alluding to “the July 7 bombings” on the London Underground.¹⁵⁸ The collection continues to acknowledge the global nature of Heaney's poetic inheritance, with poems titled for or dedicated to Rilke, George Seferis, Wordsworth, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, Czeslaw Milosz, Pablo Neruda, W.H. Auden and Constantine Cavafy. Contrasting this are the large number of poems which make mention of figures from Heaney's childhood community. For a poet who has also written extensively in prose in his critical works, it is unsurprising that in this collection there are also a number of prose poems, which generally consist of reminiscences from the poet's past.¹⁵⁹ “The Tollund Man in Springtime” might also be seen to revisit Heaney's poetic past, and performs an act of revision: where the earlier poem “The Tollund Man” was formally sparse and politically pessimistic, the sequence in District and Circle seems to be “fleshed out”.¹⁶⁰ Heaney devotes a six-part sonnet sequence to the Tollund Man and allows him to speak. The message that is now heard is one of renewal and rebirth:

In the end I gathered
From the display-case peat my staying powers,
Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,
My old calloused hands to be young sward,
The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored
By telling myself this. (45-50)

155 Twiddy, 69.

156 District and Circle (London: Faber, 2006).

157 Kevin Murphy, “Book Review: District and Circle: Poems,” The Recorder 19.2 & 20.1 (2007) 185-201 (186).

158 Murphy, 189, 192.

159 These passages bear some resemblance to the prose found in some of Ciaran Carson's collections, although, on the whole, Heaney recalls a pre-Troubles era.

160 District and Circle, 55-7.

Heaney combines the elegiac trope of the vegetation god of fertility, which was already mentioned in “The Tollund Man”, acknowledging the man's death as a ritual sacrifice, with the elegiac consolation to be found within the power of poetry itself: the speaker here “got restored” through the words that he told himself. Murphy notes that “circling back to this earlier icon has released a new sense of creativity in dealing with contemporary issues”.¹⁶¹

The final poem of District and Circle, “The Blackbird of Glanmore”, might also be read as an elegy, and a specific type of elegy that foregrounds the coming collection, Human Chain: self-elegy.¹⁶² This poem might therefore be read as a clear journey-marker for Heaney's poetic career; it is perhaps with this poem that he moves into his “late” phase of poetry. The poem picks up on key moments in Heaney's career: the move to Glanmore in the Republic of Ireland; the “little stillness dancer – / Haunter-son, lost brother” (14-15), about whom one of Heaney's early elegies was written; and the blackbird itself, a motif in Irish poetry, and now selected as the logo for the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast. The childhood memory of a blackbird prompts the poet into a momentary vision of himself, “A shadow on raked gravel // In front of my house of life” (29-30). This haunting realisation of mortality gives way to a kind of farewell, as Heaney pictures the blackbird appearing in the garden of this imaginary house, perching “in the ivy when I leave” (36). This seems to be an emphatic statement of mortality with which to end a volume, and it is a sense which is reinforced in Heaney's most recent collection, particularly in the light of the stroke that the poet suffered five months after the release of District and Circle.

The title of Human Chain refers to a moment of community experienced by the poet at the time of his stroke. Having stayed in Donegal with a group of friends to celebrate Ann Friel's seventy-fifth birthday, Heaney awoke having suffered a stroke and was carried downstairs to the ambulance by Desmond Kavenagh and Peter Fallon, friends whose arms helped to form a “human chain” of support.¹⁶³ These friends are acknowledged in the dedication of the volume: “for Des and Mary, Peter and Jean”.¹⁶⁴ Peter Fallon is a fellow poet, and one who also writes pastoral elegies, which seems to foreground Heaney's role as an elegist in this most recent collection. As has already been mentioned, Human Chain might be read as “late” Heaney, and might therefore be read as a summing-up of a life's work, and an acceptance of the poet's own mortality. Such ideas have been suggested by Robert McCrum in a recent interview with Heaney: “With three score years and ten behind him, Heaney is in a quasi-mystical mood, ready to take stock of his life and the address the question of growing old as a poet”. McCrum's article also describes a scene which highlights the importance of poetic posterity for Heaney:

161 Murphy, 193.

162 District and Circle, 75-6.

163 See Robert McCrum's interview with Heaney: “A life of rhyme,” The Observer 19 July 2009, accessed 10/11/2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/19/seamus-heaney-interview>>.

164 Indeed, the dedications of all of Heaney's poetry collections would provide a list of many important figures from Heaney's poetic community.

“On the table of his attic study [...] there are three piles of poetry books: he wants to pass on good first editions of his life's work to his children”.¹⁶⁵ This is literary inheritance in a very literal sense, and it highlights an elegist's concern for his works to “outlive” him, and to remain as a kind of memorial. The detail of “good first editions” also hints at Heaney's awareness of the monetary value that his work now holds, which must contribute to a sense of consolation that might be found in the “worth” of the poetry that he has written, and will continue to produce. A number of the poems in Human Chain make use of motifs found in earlier work. “The Conway Stewart” consists of a detailed description of a fountain pen, which brings to mind the famous “squat pen” from the early poem “Digging”.¹⁶⁶ Where “Digging” marks the beginning of a poetic career, however, “The Conway Stewart” marks a farewell, remembering a “parting” (15) between the young poet and his parents as he leaves home for boarding school. The final image of the poem is of the pen being used to write to “them, next day” (18). This is a muted elegiac consolation: while the parting which has taken place might be seen to foreshadow the final parting caused by death, the act of writing, as a continuation of a relationship, is offered as a way of assuaging this loss. The sequence entitled “Album” returns to memories of the poet's parents, remembering them both in old age and in their younger years.¹⁶⁷ The remembered loss of his parents is perhaps given a new significance, as the poet, having entered his seventieth year, is now approaching the ages at which his parents died.¹⁶⁸

The poem “Chanson d'Aventure” is perhaps the most prominent self-elegy in the book, detailing the poet's encounter with his own physical frailty at the moment of his stroke.¹⁶⁹ This poem is structured like many of Heaney's earlier elegies, with three sections that simultaneously lament the losses encountered by the poet, and celebrate the realisation of renewed love for his wife that the situation prompts. The first section draws on the love poetry of Donne, which is juxtaposed with the technology inside the ambulance in which the couple are carried to the hospital:

Everything and nothing spoke,
Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast, no transport
Ever like it until then, in the sunlit cold

Of a Sunday morning ambulance
When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne
On love on hold, body and soul apart. (7-12)

Heaney's mixture of word-play (on “transport”, for example) and melodramatic literary quotation serves simultaneously to both lighten and heighten the seriousness of the situation, and the depth of the emotions described. The second section of the poem is perhaps less ambiguous in tone: repeating the word “Apart”, in another literary quotation, this time from

165 McCrum, “A life of rhyme”.

166 Human Chain, 9.

167 Human Chain, 4-8.

168 See McCrum, “A life of rhyme”.

169 Human Chain, 14-16.

Keats, Heaney describes the loss of feeling in his hand, which lay “flop-heavy” (9), and which isolates the speaker from his wife, unable to give or receive physical comfort. This physical isolation perhaps foregrounds the complete separation that will be encountered in death. The final section of the poem elevates the poet's circumstances by re-casting them in a Classical setting, as is conventional in elegy. Rather than imagining himself as a mythical figure, however, Heaney more characteristically aligns himself with a work of art: the statue of the “charioteer at Delphi” (1) who holds “Bronze reins” (5) and stares emptily ahead. This elevated metaphor is contrasted with a more homely one: while the recovering poet's “physio” sessions give him the “straight-backed posture” (7) of the statue, they also remind him of the “timbered grips” (12) of a plough on his family farm, and the memory of “another's hand on mine” (10). As has become customary for Heaney, images from art and literature flow freely into memories of his biological predecessors, and again, in an image of what is assumed to be the poet's father, the poem ends with an acknowledgement of loss and mortality, even within an image of recovery and restored strength.¹⁷⁰

The poem “Miracle” pays tribute to the “human chain” of friends who supported him in his illness.¹⁷¹ As Parker notes

In this Heaney draws an analogy between his recent, traumatic experience and an incident in Luke's gospel where the loyal friends of a paralysed man lower him down on a stretcher into Christ's presence. From the outset, attention is fixed not on “the one who walks away”, but on “those ones” who made his restoration possible.¹⁷²

Parker suggests that as well as biblical allusion, or even “appropriation”, there are heard here echoes of Milton's “Sonnet XVI”, as well as elements of Thomas Hardy and of Yeats. Heaney, therefore, is seen to react to the experience of his stroke by turning to the same poetic predecessors by whom he has been supported throughout his career.¹⁷³ The title poem deals with the same theme of friendship and community in a more oblique manner, picturing a “human chain” of “aid workers” (2) passing “bags of meal” (1) in an unidentified humanitarian crisis.¹⁷⁴ This image is a universalised metaphor for global issues of suffering and tragedy, towards which Heaney and many of his fellow Northern Irish elegists have turned their attention following the relative peace experienced in Northern Ireland in recent years. However, the poem can also be made to stand for the even more universal experience of death, imagined as “A letting go which will not come again. / Or it will, once. And for all” (11-12).

A number of poems in Human Chain follow in the pastoral tradition that has already

170 The presence of the poet's father in this poem might be related to Heaney's recollection of his reaction to his stroke: “I cried, and I wanted my Daddy, funnily enough. I did. I felt babyish,” McCrum, “A life of rhyme”.

171 Human Chain, 17.

172 Parker, “In the Stillness of Long Evenings: Seamus Heaney's Poetry since 2006.” Paper presented at the Contemporary British and Irish Poetry Conference, Queen's University, Belfast, 15 – 17 September 2010.

173 Indeed, a number of the poems in this collection make use of a sonnet-like twelve-line stanza, which might be seen as a nod towards Milton and other predecessors who have experimented with the sonnet form.

174 Human Chain, 18.

been noted in earlier collections, especially in the Virgilian eclogues of Electric Light.¹⁷⁵

Dennis O'Driscoll, in conversation with the poet, has asked about the importance of Virgil throughout Heaney's career:

DD: *In his citation for your 2005 Irish PEN Award, Tom Paulin suggested that Virgil's Aeneid has been "a seminal and founding text" for you, and that your oeuvre has been a Virgilian epic journey. Are you conscious of having undertaken such a journey?*

SH: Not conscious. [...] But there's one Virgilian journey that has indeed 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.¹⁷⁶

"The Riverbank Field" is annotated in Human Chain with "*after Aeneid VI, 704-15, 748-51*", and follows Heaney's established technique of transposing the classical pastoral poem into the rural setting of the poet's childhood: "I'll confound the Lethe in Moyola" (3).¹⁷⁷ Virgil is involved in another literary descent into the underworld in the "Inferno" section of Dante's The Divine Comedy. Parker notes that: "In 'The Riverbank Field' and throughout the 'Route 110' sequence, Heaney deploys a verse form, the tercet, acquired from Dante. Instead of *terza rima*, Heaney writes in decasyllabic blank verse". He continues, linking Heaney's use of Virgil and Dante with another of his poetic predecessors: "In a recent, useful analysis of Heaney's ongoing dialogue with Virgil and Dante, Gareth Reeves has suggested that Heaney favours Osip Mandelstam's view of Dante as a 'poet of the local and vernacular'".¹⁷⁸ The Classical poets are made "local" in the "Route 110" sequence, as the poet narrates the memory of purchasing "a used copy of *Aeneid VI*" (I. 9) from "Smithfield Market" (II. 1) in Belfast. The sequence is named after the number of the bus that the young poet used to take home: "Route 110, Cookstown via Toome and Magherafelt" (III. 12), and it progresses like a journey through the poet's memories from childhood, adolescence, and the Troubles of his adult life. The "brakelights" of a first car are compared to "red lamps swung by RUC patrols / in the small hours on pre-Troubles roads" (VIII. 7-9), and directly following this memory is a poem remembering two victims of paramilitary bombs, John F. Lavery and Louis O'Neill (who was previously elegised in "Casualty"). The deaths of these civilian victims of the Troubles prompt questions from the poet as to how they should be memorialised: "And what in the end was there left to bury / of Mr Lavery...?" (IX. 1-2). Heaney seems to echo Michael Longley's poem "Wounds" in comparing these civilian dead with those that have died fighting as para-military soldiers, remembered by their comrades:

not to be laid

In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot

175 See Twiddy.

176 O'Driscoll, 389.

177 Human Chain, 46-7.

178 Gareth Reeves, cited by Parker, "In the Stillness of Long Evenings: Seamus Heaney's Poetry since 2006."

Fired over on anniversaries
By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled. (IX. 9-12)

Although this poem does not seem to end with the kind of consolation expected in an elegy, it does raise elegiac questions of how the dead might, and should be commemorated. Its placement within a longer sequence of poems also allows for consolation to be to be sought in the subsequent sections: it might be found in “Virgil’s happy shades” (X. 1) encountered in the following poem, in the otherworldly riverbank scene in section XI, and in the arrival of the “age of births” (XII. 1) in the final poem of the sequence. “Route 110” as a whole might be seen as elegiac, and even self-elegiac, in the sense that it looks back over the poet’s life and work, it ends with the conventionally consoling image of death as a kind of new birth:

XII

And now the age of births. As when once
At dawn from the foot of our back garden
The last to leave came with fresh-plucked flowers

To quell whatever smells of drink and smoke
Would linger on where mother and child were due
Later that morning from the nursing home,

So now, as a thank-offering for one
Whose long wait on the shaded bank has ended
I arrive with my bunch of stalks and silvered heads

Like tapers that won’t dim
As her earthlight breaks and we gather round
Talking baby talk.

One of the final poems of Human Chain is an elegy for Heaney’s friend David Hammond. It was Hammond with whom Heaney was going to record some songs when Belfast was bombed in 1972, and who felt that he “could not raise his voice at that cast-down moment”.¹⁷⁹ This experience, and the subsequent questioning regarding the purpose of art in the midst of suffering, was to be vital in the development of Heaney’s role as a Northern Irish elegist. The short poem “The door was open and the house was dark” bears the dedication “*in memory of David Hammond*”, and serves as a meditation upon loss.

The door was open and the house was dark
Wherefore I called his name, although I knew
The answer this time would be silence

That kept me standing listening while it grew
Backwards and down and out into the street
Where as I’d entered (I remember now)

The streetlamps too were out.
I felt, for the first time there and then, a stranger,
Intruder almost, wanting to take flight

179 Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker,” The Government of the Tongue, xi-xxiii (xi).

Yet well aware that here there was no danger,
Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming
Emptiness, as in a midnight hangar

On an overgrown airfield in late summer.

The “silence” and “Emptiness” of the poet's grief might be compared to the “space” left by the death of his mother recalled in “Clearances”. The key difference here is that the emptiness is not “luminous” and full of potential, but is “not unwelcoming”. The double negative suggests an unwillingness to admit that the emptiness of death is one that also awaits the poet. The final image suggests an ending, with “overgrown” and “late” bringing connotations of dis-use, and the absent flying craft hinting at an ascension or final departure. This is also the sense given in the final lines of the collection's closing poem, “A Kite for Aibhín”, which ends as the “string breaks and – separate, elate - // The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall” (18-19). If these aerial metaphors are symbols of dying, then even though they continue to focus on the isolation of death which was heard in “Chanson d'Aventure”, they also suggest a positive note of freedom, which is heard in the word “elate”, and in the sense in which the emptiness is “not unwelcoming”.

It has been possible to trace throughout Heaney's poetic career a consistent engagement with, and re-writing of, the elegiac tradition. In this sense, Heaney has been exemplary to his contemporaries and to future generations. Molino writes: “Excavating tradition is both an act of discovery as well as an act of violence. So too is the act of inscription and reinscription. Through a new text, tradition can be perpetuated, truncated, interrogated, or reinscribed”.¹⁸⁰ Heaney's acts of discovery and violence upon the Northern Irish elegy have laid the genre open for future generations of poets.

180 Molino, 25.

Chapter Two

“And did we come into our own...?”: The Northern Irish Elegies of Michael Longley and

Derek Mahon

To Derek Mahon

And did we come into our own
When, minus muse and lexicon,
We traced in August sixty-nine
Our imaginary Peace Line
Around the burnt-out houses of
The Catholics we'd scarcely loved,
Two Sisyphuses come to budge
The sticks and stones of an old grudge,

Two poetic conservatives
In the city of guns and long knives,
Our ears receiving then and there
The stereophonic nightmare
Of the Shankill and the Falls,
Our matches struck on crumbling walls
To light us as we moved at last
Through the back alleys of Belfast?¹

While Seamus Heaney's work often seems to fit neatly into the conventions of elegy – indeed, he might almost be used as a case study with which to exemplify Peter Sacks's theories – the poetry of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon is perhaps more challenging to assess. The three poets have often been linked with each other, due to the co-incidence of the starting points of their careers, and their shared interest in, and engagement with, traditional poetic form.² Gavin Drummond notes that they have “often been thought of as something of a homogenous group; this impression is probably largely due to their early association with the Belfast ‘Group’”.³ As he goes on to point out, however, both Longley and Mahon have distanced themselves, to differing extents, from Philip Hobsbaum's poetry workshop, of which Heaney was thought to be the “star pupil” – indeed, Mahon did not actually attend sessions of the Group. Nevertheless, the relationships between the poets have played an important role in the development of their own poetry, and indeed, of a Northern Irish poetic tradition. Terence Brown points out that the careers of Longley and Mahon “display similarities and differences as they have responded to lives lived in a period when the status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom has been in constant question”. He goes on to remark that:

The historical and personal experience with which their work engages, however, is certainly related (whatever their differing career trajectories) to the political crisis of a period in which the relationship between Britain and Ireland has been profoundly affected by the Northern Irish problem. How they both relate imaginatively to the North, to Ireland and the

1 Michael Longley, from “Letters,” *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006) 53-61 (58).

2 Edna Longley points out that the three poets were called the “tight-assed trio” by Michael Foley in a reference to their use of traditional poetic forms, “Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees,” 54.

3 Gavin Drummond, “The Difficulty of We: The Epistolary Poems of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35 *Irish Writing since 1950* (2005): 31-42 (31).

rest of the world in such a period, when violence was endemic, takes the critic to central aspects of their work.⁴

An extract from Longley's "Letters" is given as the epigraph to this chapter, a poem which was first published in the New Statesman in 1971, as violence in the North was escalating. It seems to suggest that both Longley and Mahon shared a similar experience in responding to the Troubles. Both came from Protestant backgrounds, and therefore did not have the same emotional involvement with the Civil Rights movement as Heaney did, which is evident in the reference to the "Catholics we'd scarcely loved" (in the original version, this line read "The Catholics we scarcely loved"). Longley compares them both to "Sisyphus", connoting an awareness of the futility of trying to fix "an old grudge" like the one that had once more erupted in Northern Ireland.⁵ He highlights the apparent absurdity of two "poetic conservatives / In the city of guns and long knives", seeming to suggest that the well-wrought literary creations that the two men might offer are scant consolation in the face of the violence suffered by the Northern Irish community. Drummond points out that Longley's poem "takes for granted Mahon's agreement", and he highlights Mahon's response to the editor of the New Statesman, published the following week:

Sir, A casual reader of "Two Letters" [the poem's original name] by my friend Michael Longley (NS, 3 December) might be forgiven for drawing one or two erroneous conclusions. Mr. Longley, with all the best will in the world, appears to attribute to me attitudes to which I do not, in fact, subscribe. I refer to lines 6 and 9 of "To Derek Mahon" – "The Catholics we scarcely loved" and "Two poetic conservatives". The implications of line 6, as it stands, are frankly untrue, not to say damaging, and the overtones of line 9 tendentious and misleading. No one likes to see his view misrepresented, however innocently. Mr. Longley may speak for himself; he doesn't necessarily speak for me.⁶

Mahon's reluctance to be pigeon-holed into a particular viewpoint is evident in his body of work as a whole: indeed, he is often said to be a poet of exile, alienation and detachment.⁷ Where Longley's poem accepts that there is no single homogenous group of Northern Irish poets, pointing at the differences in politics between the two men and Heaney, Mahon's reaction to the poem points out the difficulties of finding any single coherent poetic community in Northern Ireland. Longley's classical references create a sense of distance between the literary world of poetry and the physical reality of the Troubles, while Mahon is even further detached from the contemporary setting, in his refusal to align himself with any clearly stated opinion or political stance.⁸

4 Terence Brown, "Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness", The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 133-48 (133).

5 "Sisyphus" is a figure from Homer who was condemned to perpetually roll a boulder up a hill, and who therefore symbolises futility. "Sisyphus", The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World, ed. John Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 224.

6 New Statesman, 10 December 1971, 821, cited by Drummond, 40.

7 See, for example, Hugh Haughton, The Poetry of Derek Mahon (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

8 Mahon has described this sense of ambiguity: "When growing up, my bunch of friends would have thought of ourselves as anti-unionist because we were anti-establishment. We would have been vaguely all-Ireland republican socialists. But then, when theory turned into practice, we had to decide where we

These general observations about the two poets' approach to their roles as poets in Northern Ireland might be clarified further by concentrating upon their work as elegists. Longley, in the above poem, identifies himself as a “poetic conservative”, and his highly wrought elegies might perhaps be subject to Samuel Johnson's condemnation of Milton's “Lycidas”: “Where there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief”.⁹ Mahon writes poems that are difficult, ironic and angry, and his refusal to be easily categorised, seen in the letter quoted above, is reflected in his poems of loss. While these two poets produce poetry that might be read as anti-elegiac when compared to the work of Heaney, this chapter seeks to argue that they are, nevertheless, key figures in the development of Northern Irish elegy, influencing not just their own generation of poets, but also those who follow them. The study of Heaney's elegy in the previous chapter explored ways in which he engages with the five key aspects of Northern Irish elegy as identified in the introduction to this thesis. In different ways, both Longley and Mahon also write poetry that deals with these themes: identity and exile; the poet's obligation to be a spokesperson on behalf of either political or poetic ideals; art's relationship with violence; public and private loss; and biological and literary parents and ancestors. The structure of the chapter takes the form of two brief studies, concentrating upon a selection of each poet's well-known works. The discussion of Longley's work will focus on the use of artifice in his elegies for Northern Ireland, and the section on Mahon will explore the ways in which his ironic expressions of grief can still be read as contributions to the genre of Northern Irish elegy, and how a poet of detachment and exile might nevertheless be included in the community of Northern Irish elegists.

stood and I never did resolve it for myself. Marching for civil rights was terrific, but bombs and killing people? I never put a name to my own position and I still can't, which suits me fine. From time to time you get a kick from some critic for not being sufficiently political, or for being a closet unionist or a closet republican. There was a time when people – much more English people than Irish – would ask, 'Why don't these Ulster poets come out more explicitly and say what they are for?' But there is all this ambiguity. That is poetry. It is the other thing that is the other thing,” Nicholas Wroe, “A sense of place,” The Guardian, Saturday 22 July 2006, accessed 15/12/2010
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview11>>.

9 Samuel Johnson, “Milton,” The Lives of the English Poets, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, ed. Stephen Fix, vol. XXI (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2010) 99-204 (176).

“Wrapped like a present”: Artifice in Michael Longley's Troubles Elegies.

Elegy might be described as the literary site of collision between life and death, where the author comes to terms with the “heavy change” that enters a mourner's experience when faced with bereavement.¹⁰ It deals with themes of intense psychological importance: death, memorial and a fitting consolation. In the light of these definitions, the connection between artifice and elegy might not seem immediately apparent. Indeed, to suggest that the grief expressed is in some way “artificial” might seem an affront to the loss suffered by those mourning the death. A reader of elegy might suppose that this genre, above all others, demands of its poet a high degree of sincerity and authenticity. However, the artifice in Longley's elegies for the Troubles in Northern Ireland does not necessarily devalue its subject matter, but rather heightens the reader's awareness of the role that the elegist, and indeed poetry, can play in responding to tragic events.¹¹ Douglas Dunn suggests that for a number of contemporary writers, “a conspicuous engagement with the artistry of poetry [...] is not a grafted on, willed, enforced virtuosity in *how* they say what they say; it is a crucial part of *what* they are saying”; “the actual performance of writing [...] is part of a moral project”.¹²

Longley himself has voiced strong opinions about poetry written about the Troubles; in 1974 he wrote to the editor of the Hibernia condemning Padraic Fiacca's anthology of Troubles poems, The Wearing of the Black, suggesting that Fiacca “buzzes around the Ulster tragedy like a dazed bluebottle around an open wound”.¹³ Longley's disapproval for Fiacca's treatment of the Northern Irish conflict and the poetry written about it suggests that he feels a deep and serious sense of responsibility as an elegist writing about the Troubles. Richard Rankin Russell writes that “[e]very Northern Irish poet writing in the last three decades has had to come to terms with the conflict in the province”, adding that “Longley's work towards reconciliation, especially in his poetry, has been relatively overlooked”.¹⁴ This chapter seeks to take into account the way in which Longley's highly formal elegies might be seen as the poet's contribution towards reconciliation and consolation for those who have suffered during the Troubles.

Peter MacDonald warns against reductive readings of Northern Irish poetry, ones which focus on “cultural identity” and “politics” rather than on the poems themselves, writing that:

10 Fran Brearton, Reading Michael Longley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006) 145. For “heavy change”, see “Lycidas,” line 37.

11 Neil Corcoran writes that: “The necessity of establishing credentials before presuming to speak for the Northern dead is a moral compunction articulated in Longley's elegies as a disruption of elegiac decorums or an oddly unsettling variation of register,” English Poetry since 1940 (Harlow: Longman, 1993) 185.

12 Douglas Dunn, “Longley's Metric”, The Poetry of Michael Longley, ed. Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine, Ulster Editions and Monographs Series: 10 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2000) 13-33 (14).

13 Longley, “Letter to the Editor,” Hibernia 10 December 1974. Cited in Richard Rankin Russell, “Inscribing Cultural Corridors: Michael Longley's Contribution to Reconciliation in Northern Ireland,” Colby Quarterly 39.3 (2003):221-40.

14 Russell, “Inscribing Cultural Corridors,” 223.

In literary studies as in political analysis, it is always easier not to think than to think, and it is quite possible not to think in academically profitable ways: whole schools of not-thinking about literature have established solid institutional presences by finding new ways to ignore the difficulties and perplexities of literary analysis and evaluation.¹⁵

This challenge to “think” about the poetry seems particularly fitting in the case of Longley, for whom form and techniques of composition are so important.¹⁶ This study will focus on five pieces, representing both his “first” period of writing in the 1970s and his work from the 1990s. Each engages with the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and is a highly self-conscious creation, concerned with its own making. And in each, the attention drawn to the poem's artificial nature seems to enhance its elegiac purpose. The poems chosen are “Wounds”, “Wreaths”, “The Ice-cream Man”, “Ceasefire” and “The Fishing Party”.¹⁷

“Wounds”, written in 1972, is Longley's “first poem directly concerned with sectarian killing”, and is one of his most anthologised works.¹⁸ The poem is a “double” elegy, whose two stanzas are inter-related on a number of levels.¹⁹ Throughout, the poet contrasts two scenes of conflict: the first stanza's “Ulster Division at the Somme” (3), fighting for Britain in the First World War; and the second stanza's “Troubles”, civil conflict that has claimed the lives of the “Three teenage soldiers” (21) and the “bus-conductor” (27). The poet's father, mourned throughout both stanzas, provides a sense of continuity, as Longley ensures that his poem “mediates public utterance through private grief, and mediates between past and present”.²⁰ The father is a “belated casualty” (14) of the “Great War”, and dies “for King and Country, slowly” (16) beside a new generation of “teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer” (21-22). Indeed, Longley has spoken of the continuing effects of this war: “Looked at from the next century, we will be thinking in terms of the fifty or sixty years war [*sic*] that began in 1914”.²¹ Fran Brearton finds his relationship with the “war poets” to be influential upon Longley's own struggle to “engage” with the violence in Northern Ireland: “his reflections on poetry are

15 Peter MacDonald, Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 4-5.

16 Longley has said, for example, “I had long been preoccupied with form – pushing a shape as far as it would go, exploring its capacities to control and its tendencies to disintegrate”, and “Poems should be as well-made as chairs”; “A true poet is set free by form,” “A Tongue at Play,” in How Poets Work, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren-Poetry Wales P: 1996) 111-21 (112); “Michael Longley” in John Brown, In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon, 2002) 87-96 (88, 91).

17 Michael Longley, Collected Poems, “Wounds,” 62, “Wreaths,” 118-9, “The Ice-cream Man,” 192, “Ceasefire,” 225, “The Fishing Party,” 228.

18 Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 68. For examples of anthologies, see Padraic Fiacca's The wearing of the black: An anthology of contemporary Ulster poetry (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974), and Frank Ormsby's A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1992). Longley has raised strong objections to Fiacca's “voyeuristic and opportunistic parasitism”, while recommending Ormsby's “extraordinary anthology” as the “best commentary on the ‘Troubles’”: see Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 61, and Brown, In the Chair, 93.

19 Jonathan Hufstader, Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence (Lexington: The U P of Kentucky, 1999) 94.

20 Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 98.

21 Michael Longley, “Michael Longley, Interviewed by Dillon Johnston,” Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement, ed. James P. Myers Jr. (New York: Syracuse U P, 1999) 51-63 (53).

virtually interchangeable with those of other earlier twentieth-century war poets". In drawing attention to this relationship between his poetry and that of earlier conflicts, Longley highlights the "dilemmas", both moral and stylistic, that he faces as a writer of the Troubles, and in uncovering the artistic process, cultivates a sense of candidness towards his audience.²²

While the first stanza of "Wounds" is removed spatially and temporally from the Troubles of the mid-twentieth century, it is coloured by contemporary conflict. Indeed, the screams of sectarian loyalty heard in the poem, "Give 'em one for the Shankill!" (6), are uttered by soldiers fighting a foreign enemy in an international war. Similarly, the second stanza links current conflict back to the battlefield, as the poet buries "three teenage soldiers" (21) alongside his war-veteran father, throwing in "military honours of a kind" (18), substituting "A packet of Woodbines", "a lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (23-24) for his father's "badges, his medals like rainbows" (19). Terence Brown observes that "the killing fields of that war [the Great War]... have constituted for this poet a kind of metaphor for all conflict".²³ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews sees that: "Death has not demoralised but provoked respectful remembrance, spirited imagining, the demonstration of an urbane and stylish control".²⁴ In presenting himself as a war-poet, and in writing with a sense of formal control, Longley authenticates his response to the deaths that he is elegising.

Each stanza of "Wounds" has a priest: in the first this is obviously the "London-Scottish padre" (9), and in the second, the poet fulfils the role.²⁵ Both padre and poet are unable to prevent the violence, but attempt to restore order after the chaos caused by death. The padre moves "Over a landscape of dead buttocks", "Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick, / With a stylish backhand and a prayer" (12, 10-11), while the poet buries "teenage soldiers... their flies undone" (21-22). The two figures are contrasted, however: while the padre's "stylish backhand" might seem almost careless, and a merely momentary recognition of the dignity earned by the battle-dead, the poet's figurative "burial" of the dead within his elegy is understood to be a painstaking work of memorial, which, presumably, goes further in restoring dignity and order. The images of burial and the mourning rituals ensure that the poem lies within the elegiac tradition. Further engagements with conventions of elegy can be identified. The dead figures remain nameless, and are identified instead by lists of emblems or images, for example the father's "badges, his medals [...] / His spinning compass" (19-20); the soldiers' "packet of Woodbines [...] / A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (22-23); the "bus-conductor's uniform" and "his carpet slippers" (27-28). This use of synecdoche effectively reduces each of the dead figures to a non-specific victim of armed conflict, identified only by their job, which perhaps

22 Brearton, The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 262-3.

23 Brown, 143-4.

24 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Conflict, Violence and 'The Fundamental Interrelatedness of all Things'," The Poetry of Michael Longley, 73-99 (85).

25 Kennedy-Andrews, 85.

results in the elegy's mourned figure being society itself, as it suffers the consequences of violence. The practice of listing is consistently used by Longley: in "Wounds", it serves to reduce each of the mourned subjects to a collection of "insignificant material objects", which, Parker argues, presents the experience of death as one where "human bodies and minds [...are] violated and dispersed".²⁶ The process of elegy is one of artificial re-construction, an act of creation to counteract the fragmentation caused by death. In this light, artifice becomes the poet's strongest weapon against grief.

Dealing with such a sombre subject, it is unsurprising that the elegy provides little traditional consolation.²⁷ Indeed, the Christian images of resurrection and a heavenly afterlife found in elegies like "Lycidas" seem to be rejected, as Longley observes the religious antagonism that has led to the conflict. The poem is not entirely bleak in its conclusions, however. The last sentence is vital in conveying a sense of hope: "To the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said" (33-34). The suggestion of remorse on the part of the killer points to the potential for reconciliation. It also conveys the poet's desire to be active in reconciliation, by carrying out the work of elegy. The words "Sorry Missus" are not reported as a direct quote, but as a suggestion of what *might* have been said, which is emphasised by the poet's "I think". The poet self-consciously uses poetry to create, or re-create, a version of the events in a way that might bring hope and comfort. This is the work of elegy, as poetic artifice is constructed in order to come to an understanding of the experience of loss. The use of elegiac techniques as a way of responding to the Troubles occurs in a number of Longley's poems, as he is forced to return on multiple occasions to themes of violence, conflict and loss.

"Wreaths", published at the end of the 1970s, deals with the increasing fragmentation of Northern Irish society, as private lives continue to be impacted by the effects of sectarian violence. Like "Wounds", it treats multiple subjects, and this is reflected in the structure of the sequence. The first section is entitled "The Civil Servant". Like the other sections, "The Greengrocer" and "The Linen Workers", and as in "Wounds", it identifies the dead by their role in society.²⁸ However, the mourned subject in "The Civil Servant" is more individualised than the "bus-conductor" in the earlier poem: his death is described as a loss of experience specific to him – "The books he had read, the music he could play" (4). This might be a condensed and understated version of the praise found in traditional elegies like "Lycidas" and "Adonais", where the mourned subject's (specifically musical and literary) talents are remembered, as the elegist recognises the artistic potential left unfulfilled. Death enters in the second line, and the

26 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, I, 209.

27 Brearton writes that: "The 'bewilderment' of the bus-conductor's wife and of the poet's father, which unites the actions in both stanzas if only in their incomprehensibility, is there too in the poet's refusal to make sense of the events through conventional forms of consolation," Reading Michael Longley, 100-1.

28 Corcoran suggests that: "The implication of the titles is presumably that in Northern Ireland nobody is truly invisible behind a function, since your job can place you in front of a bullet," English Poetry since 1940, 186.

reader is not offered poetic tact or euphemism, but instead is given factual and brutal detail:

He was preparing an Ulster Fry for breakfast
When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:
A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,
The books he had read, the music he could play. (1-4)

As in “Wounds”, this death sees violence invading and “violating” the domestic.²⁹ Indeed the “shock” of the death “violates the lyric poem too, which is rhythmically disruptive and musically discordant, as well as uncompromising in the plainness of its description”.³⁰ The “bullet” in the third line is perhaps unnecessary detail, as it has already been implied by the word “shot”. However, it demonstrates the intrusion of death into the scene. The seemingly gratuitous description, as the “bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull”, displays an initial step in the mourning process: a repetition of the fact that the mourner has been bereaved, in order that he might accept the loss and begin a journey towards consolation.³¹

The loss of dignity in violent death, made explicit by the “dead buttocks” and “flies undone” of the soldiers in “Wounds”, is implicit in the bus-conductor’s “carpet slippers” and the civil servant’s “breakfast”: private details of life that are not normally part of one’s public persona. This sense of violation is found not only in the death of the civil servant, but also in the aftermath, in the second stanza:

He lay in his dressing gown and pyjamas
While they dusted the dresser for fingerprints
And then shuffled backwards across the garden
With notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes. (5-8)

Here, it is not the killer who invades the private space of the home, but “they”, fellow “servants” of the state. Longley responds to the funeral procession traditionally found in elegy where, for example, in “Adonais”, the dead subject’s fellow poets make their lament. This mourning role is neglected by the figures who “shuffle” through the stanza, however: they attend the death only in an official capacity, and their efforts to reinstate order and civil justice, depicted by their paraphernalia of “notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes”, obliterate the individuality and humanity of the dead man, reducing him to a set of statistics. After ignoring him in their search for evidence, they remove his body from the scene, depersonalising it further as they “rolled him up like a red carpet” (9).³²

The final lines focus on the response of “his widow”. Her private grief is demonstrated as she “took a hammer and chisel / And removed the black keys from his piano” (11-12). This image, offered in an understated manner with no particular sense of emotional climax, is

29 See MacDonald: “When the Troubles enter Longley’s poetry, the dominant perspectives are domestic ones,” *Mistaken Identities*, 133; and Brearton: “‘Home’ is a violated space,” *Reading Michael Longley*, 99.

30 Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 145.

31 Sacks, 23-4.

32 Brearton notes that “it is the treatment of the victim as object that is so profoundly disturbing in the aftermath of the killing,” *Reading Michael Longley*, 145.

nevertheless rich in symbolic possibilities: black being the colour of mourning, a reminder of death, and also, in musical terms, connoting a minor, mournful key. The destruction of the black keys suggests a desire to banish death, but the violence carried out upon the object which is the image of the dead man's "art" also represents his violent death. The reminder of this wasted artistic potential takes the reader back to the elegiac tone at the start of the poem. However, the destruction is perhaps anti-elegiac: commonly elegy contains images of construction, and re-construction, as a poetic "wreath" is woven to memorialise the subject.³³ Brearton notes that the widow's action "lies outside the normal codes of grieving because grief itself is not reducible to a formula. It has a ritualistic aura to it; but it is a 'ritual' which has no meaning beyond its futility".³⁴ Here, there can be heard echoes of another of Longley's laments for the Troubles, which begins, "There can be no songs for dead children".³⁵

"The Greengrocer" eulogises another man identified by his occupation. As opposed to the civil servant and the bus-conductor of "Wounds", he was killed at his place of work. This is stated in the opening lines: "He ran a good shop, and he died / Serving even the death-dealers..." (1-2). Unlike the previous subjects, this man is named: "Jim Gibson", and the poem does not state whether he is Protestant or Catholic – he is not associated with "Ulster" in the way the civil servant has been, and he is recommended to customers who "may shortly be setting out / For a small house up the Shankill / or the Falls" (8-10). The mention of these neighbouring roads, the first regarded as strongly Unionist, the second as staunchly Nationalist, identifies the conflict behind the killing, but does not apportion blame. Indeed, the visitors who might be travelling to either location are pictured as "Astrologers or three wise men" (7), suggesting the dignity of both sides of the divided community. Again, the victim or subject of the elegy seems to be Belfast itself. The "wise men" follow on from the Christmas imagery in the first stanza:

He ran a good shop, and he died
Serving even the death-dealers
Who found him busy as usual
Behind the counter, organised
With holly wreaths for Christmas,
Fir trees on the pavement outside. (1-6)

The Christmas setting gives a secondary meaning to the "Wreaths" of the poem's main title, as the "holly wreaths", decorations normally used to celebrate a joyful occasion, are now a memento of tragic loss. The "holly wreaths" also present an example of "artifice" that is nevertheless endowed with a sense of significance, and representative of a shared cultural experience. The Christmas imagery allows for the greengrocer to be seen as a Christ-like

33 Sacks, 19. See also Ramazani's description of "melancholic" mourning in modern elegy: "the modern elegy resembles not so much a suture as 'an open wound,' in Freud's disturbing trope for melancholia," *Poetry of Mourning*, 4.

34 Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 146.

35 "Kindertotenlieder," *Collected Poems*, 61.

martyr in his death, as he “died / Serving even the death-dealers”. The parallel between this small-business man and the “death-dealers”, however, might imply that even the killers are merely doing their job, making the killing seem more like a transaction than an emotionally charged event. This might suggest desensitisation, as the poet notes the regularity with which such violence occurs.

While the “Dates and chestnuts and tangerines” (12) might be bought by either Catholics or Protestants as part of the religious festival that both groups celebrate, therefore implying a hope for peace and unity, they also highlight the fact that the Northern Irish conflict is one that exists between two groups who share so much in common.³⁶ Indeed, Longley, as one of the many liberal Protestants who took part in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, in protest against the inequalities faced by Catholics in Northern Ireland, seems keen to emphasise that the lines of conflict between Catholic and Protestant, and Nationalist and Loyalist, are often blurred. Before the establishment of the state of Northern Ireland in 1922, not just Catholics, but also some Protestant groups were in favour of a united Ireland; revolutionary leaders such as Wolfe Tone and Thomas Russell were Protestants, and Presbyterian and dissenting church groups fought together with Catholics during the Irish Rebellion of 1798. Longley’s elegiac poetry seems to provide opportunities for members of the divided community to focus upon aspects of a shared cultural heritage in order to move towards reconciliation.

“The Linen Workers” is the most complex of the three sections. It embodies some of the characteristics of Longley’s poetry highlighted by Neil Corcoran:

Longley sometimes bewilderingly swerves between realism and fantasy, personal lyric and mythopoeia, narrative and parable, genuinely topographical and imaginary location. The metamorphoses of tone and mode tend to foreground the poetic act itself, the making of the poem...³⁷

While the title suggests it is a group elegy, like the earlier “Wounds”, its focus is the poet’s father. This section of “Wreaths” is the most public and also the most private part of the poet’s mourning. As well as mourning for the poet’s father, the poem also refers to what Heaney has called one of the “most harrowing moments in the whole history of the harrowing of the heart of Northern Ireland”.³⁸ In January 1976, a minibus of linen workers was held up by masked men, and any Catholics were called forward. Only one of the workers was a Catholic, and although he and his Protestant colleagues presumed that the paramilitaries were Protestants, he stepped forward, and was to be the only occupant of the bus who was not killed by the gunmen. Heaney, in his Nobel Lecture, recounts that

36 Conversely, Kennedy-Andrews suggests that “the simple act of naming things the greengrocer sells in his shop – ‘Dates and chestnuts and tangerines’ – has a soothing and reassuring effect. As in ‘Wounds’, Longley emphasises the way violence breaks in upon the peaceful routines of domestic life, but through his devotion to the small details of ordinary people’s everyday lives, he affirms the *lares*, spirits of hearth and home, reasserting the binding force of community and the unquenchable life-force itself,” 86.

37 Corcoran, 185.

38 Heaney, “Crediting Poetry,” 455.

in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we'll not betray you, nobody need know what faith for party you belong to.³⁹

Although Longley does not make any of these details specific, it might be assumed that he was also aware of the story of solidarity shared between the workers, and this adds further complexity to his poem: the elegy perhaps mourns for the potential for reconciliation embodied by the linen workers' support for one another which was extinguished in an act of terrible violence. On the other hand, he may have chosen to write about this particular atrocity in order to reveal that there are "grounds [for] a potential reconciliation between the opposing cultures in Northern Ireland".⁴⁰ This sense of a potential for reconciliation might be found in a number of specifically Christian images throughout the sequence, from the Christmas "wreaths" of the second section, to the "bread" and "wine" in the third.⁴¹ Longley seems keen to highlight the shared cultural experiences of Protestants and Catholics, rather than their differences.

There is a sense in which the "speaker's feeling for his father teaches him how to feel for the anonymous linen workers".⁴² Simultaneously, the sense of public grief seems to cause the poet to return to the site of his personal grief, as he "once again" (13) prepares his father's body for burial. The image of "teeth" is repeated in each stanza, first imagined as "Christ's" as he ascends into heaven (1), then as "my father's false teeth / Brimming in their tumbler" (6-7), then as the "set of dentures" (11) which lay at the roadside following the killings of the "ten linen workers" (9), and finally returned into the "dead mouth" of the poet's father, as he is "once again" (13) laid to rest. The progression of this image highlights the process of reconstruction carried out as the elegist performs his work of mourning.

The first three stanzas of "The Linen Workers" seem to prepare for the final one, in which the poet's father is ritually mourned in an imagined "embalming" scene:

Before I can bury my father once again
I must polish the spectacles, balance them
Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth. (13-16)

The elegist seems to find comfort in performing rituals of burial, and in reconstructing the dignity and individual identity of the mourned subject.⁴³ There are a number of issues to be worked through before arriving at this point, however, which are tackled in the preceding lines. In the first stanza, Christ is presented irreverently, as, "Through a cavity in one of his molars /

39 Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," 456.

40 Russell, "Inscribing Cultural Corridors," 227.

41 Russell writes: "While Longley is not an orthodox Christian, his search for patterns and paradigms for forgiveness and renewal in pursuing his ethical vision does sometimes embrace essentially Christian images. [...] Longley's recognition of the healing, unifying force of the Eucharist suggests his perception of the way in which the spiritual and material worlds are interconnected..." "Inscribing Cultural Corridors," 236-7.

42 Kennedy-Andrews, 86.

43 Kennedy-Andrews, 87.

The wind whistles” (2-3), which strips the ascension image of its majesty.⁴⁴ More ridiculously, “he is fastened for ever / By his exposed canines to a wintry sky” (3-4). This renders Christ impotent and helpless. However, it also links him to the dead subjects previously mourned, in their lost dignity: the civil servant “rolled [...] up like a red carpet”, and the nakedness of the dead in “Wounds”. Therefore, there is also a tone of pity, and a sense of victimhood. The surrealism of the imagery is another of Longley's uses of artifice, allowing him to express potentially subversive sentiments without having to align himself with a definitive view-point or party-line. Instead, he might be seen de-familiarise or unsettle established responses to religion, questioning and refiguring traditional Christian conventions, just as he is interrogating the elegiac tradition, in order to provoke his readers into engaging with the situation at hand, and to explore the ways in which it might be thought about. This is a crucial aspect of the work of a poet dealing with the sensitive issues thrown up by the Troubles.

The opening of the second stanza, “I am blinded by the blaze of that smile” (5) suggests the poet's humility in the face of the suffering experienced by the victims of conflict. The image of teeth appears again, now as the poet's father's, pictured “outside of his body, a deadly grin” (8). In both stanzas, the teeth take on a sinister agency: Christ's render him helpless, fastening him to the sky, and the father's “wore bubbles” and “a deadly grin” (7-8), which suggests that they, too, might take on their own existence. This is an extension of synecdoche: the teeth stand for the person that they belong to, seeming, indeed, to overpower them. This happens again in the third stanza, where the nameless “linen workers” are represented by a list of debris:

When they massacred the ten linen workers
 There fell on the road beside them spectacles,
 Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:
 Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine. (9-12)

Here the dead are signified by the objects they carried, making them, again, symbolic of the wider community. Indeed, Kennedy-Andrews is reminded by these “commonplace” objects of “the concentration camps: ultimately, Longley's poem is an elegy to all victims of violence”.⁴⁵ This links Longley's poem to others like Mahon's “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”, and to sections of Muldoon's “Incantata”.⁴⁶ The fact that a number of Northern Irish elegists seem to link the experience of victims of the Troubles with those who have suffered during other war situations serves a dual purpose: not only does it treat the Northern Irish community with the same sense of respect as one might give to a victim of war, thus heightening the sense of horror and loss caused by the Troubles; it simultaneously provides a gentle reminder that the conflict in the North of Ireland has resulted in kinds of suffering that has also been experienced by other communities and nations throughout history, and that the experience of violence is one that is

44 For Hufstader, “Longley here is grotesquely reflecting on orthodox Christian belief – the ascension of Christ's whole body into heaven – in such a way as to satirize those beliefs and their power to wreak violence,” 96.

45 Kennedy-Andrews, 87.

46 See the following chapters for references to these poems.

shared by a great many communities across the world. Longley ensures that his imagery takes in both the universal aspects of suffering, and also those specific to his situation: the emblems that make up the Northern Irish community are not just “personal effects”: as well as the “spectacles” and “small change”, there are the “Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine”. This links the violence back to the sectarian conflict by using symbols of the Eucharist, celebrated by both Catholics and Protestants, yet simultaneously hints at the potential for reconciliation.

Immediately following this image, the fourth stanza seems to look for consolation in the re-burial scene. The restoration of the father's “spectacles”, “money” and “false teeth” to their proper places on his body suggests a ritual of preparation for an after-life existence. These actions, linked so closely to the images of the previous stanza, also suggest the poet's desire to respond to public events, which he does by translating them onto his personal situation. There is a sense in which the poet's need to mourn for his society is met, to some extent, as he mourns for his private loss.⁴⁷ The poet is clear that this is a re-burial: “Before I can bury my father *once again*” (13), emphasising the fact that the act is a figurative, performed one, drawing attention to the poem itself, which has become the vehicle for mourning. Indeed, “Wreaths” shows the poet's awareness of the consolation that might be found in elegy, as a created work that can offer memorial and reconstruction after the dispersal caused by death.⁴⁸ Each section has a different structure: “The Civil Servant”, written in three four-line stanzas of unrhymed, loose hexameter; “The Greengrocer”, two six-line stanzas of tetrameter, with sporadic internal and end rhymes; “The Linen Workers”, with its four four-line stanzas and sense of para-rhyme, but no clearly organised rhyme scheme. These varying forms give a sense of the plural nature of the losses mourned and the fragmentation caused by them. However, they still work together as one poem. In these respects, the form is reminiscent of W. H. Auden's “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, where the sections of various metre and disparate settings work together to create a single picture of mourning.⁴⁹ In this attention to poetic form, Longley might perhaps be seeking some form of elegiac consolation in the power of poetry itself; in the way in which a well-made poem might provide a lasting memorial to the dead, skilfully crafted in honour of those who are commemorated.

“The Ice-cream Man”, published in Gorse Fires (1992), continues Longley's elegiac treatment of the “Troubles”. Again, the subject is identified by his role in the community, and, like the greengrocer, is killed at his shop in central Belfast. Indeed, there are a number of

47 Brearton sees a connection between cycles of private and public mourning, seeing that “each burial of his father is also a bringing of the memory of him back to life, one which rather than healing the wound, reopens it each time, keeping it green”, which parallels the situation as “the violence in Northern Ireland perpetuates itself,” Reading Michael Longley, 147. Corcoran writes: “The linen workers are felt for because the father is felt for; and the poem knows that a public elegy can only be written from such private sources when the public horror is sent to invade the private grief,” 187.

48 Brearton suggests that there is in Longley “a belief in imaginative compensation – poetry displacing conventional religious consolations,” “Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance',” The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry, 94-112 (106).

49 W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” Collected Shorter Poems, 141-3.

similarities between this poem and the second section of “Wreaths”. Both ice-cream man and greengrocer serve the families of Belfast, providing luxury goods. Their roles are seen as a-political and non-sectarian.⁵⁰ The list of Christmas goods is perhaps echoed in the opening line of “The Ice-cream Man”: “Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach” (1). This list also serves the elegiac function of recollecting an idealised past.⁵¹ Unlike the previous elegies, however, “The Ice-cream Man” is addressed to a fellow-mourner. The poem is brief enough to quote in full:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
 You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
 They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
 And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
 I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
 I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
 Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
 Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
 Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
 Yarrow, lady's bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel. (1-10)

The elegy seems to be written for the “you” of lines 2, 4 and 5, who might be a lover or a child.⁵² The mourned subject is set at a distance, having existed only peripherally to this relationship between speaker and addressee. Although the ice-cream flavours feature in the speaker's memories, the remembered relationship is the (presumably continuing) one between the “I” and “you”.⁵³ The remembered pleasure is distanced from present reality of grief by the caesura in the second line, after which death intrudes upon the scene: “They murdered the ice-cream man”. However, the impact of the death is partially absorbed by the fact that it appears in the middle of a long sentence which stretches over three lines. This keeps the momentum moving towards the image of the “carnations”, forcing the reader to arrive at the work of memorial without dwelling on the actual death. It also returns focus to the addressee, and away from the dead man.

The second half of the poem, containing a long list of “wild flowers”, performs a number of elegiac functions. Where a pastoral elegy like “Lycidas” looks to nature for consolation, before turning to religion or philosophy, Longley introduces the image of “the

50 Brearton gives background to the poem, detailing the killing of “an off-duty RUC officer shot by the IRA whilst looking after his brother's ice-cream shop...” but points out that the “politics behind the killing are invisible in the poem itself,” *Reading Michael Longley*, 182. While this information links the poem with “The Fishing Party”, in dealing with the murder of an “off-duty policeman”, sectarian allegiances do not seem to play such an important role in “The Ice-cream Man”.

51 Sacks, 99.

52 In actual fact, the poem is addressed to Longley's youngest daughter. Hufstader misreads this poem when he understands that with the “you” in the second line, the poet “addresses himself”, which leads to a confusion about line 5, “I named for you all the wild flowers...”, which he believes is addressed to the dead man. Hufstader's mistake leads to an unconvincing reading, and destabilises his argument that “Longley's difficulty here lies in locating the lyric voice, the speaking self,” 97-8.

53 John Lyon notes that the poem “is written *not* for the dead man, but for the person who lays carnations outside his shop – for Longley's daughter [...] Thus the poem's attempt to assuage is oblique, at a remove from the death itself,” “Michael Longley's Lists”, *English* 45 (1996): 228-46 (242).

Burren” in juxtaposition to the urban scene of the first half of the poem.⁵⁴ As in “Lycidas”, the list of flowers mimics the action of shrouding the body, and of creating a memorial wreath for the mourned subject.⁵⁵ There is a sense in which the violence of the death is hidden, if not soothed, by the beauty of the flowers. The “Burren”, in the west of Ireland, is contrasted with the Belfast setting of “the Lisburn Road”, and although the poet does not explicitly state the fact, it might be inferred that this peaceful setting is where the poet was at the time of the death. If this is the case, then there might be an expression of guilt here: the speaker could not prevent the death, having been elsewhere, in safety.⁵⁶ If this takes the reading too far, it is at least possible to say that the change of scene from Northern Ireland to the Republic introduces a sense of escapism, at the same time as providing a marked contrast between the rural peace of the Burren and the violence taking place in the city of Belfast. The poet “named for you all the wild flowers...” which shows his awareness of his duty to comfort his addressee. John Lyon finds that “Longley is as much concerned, in this elegy, to recover, for the griever, an adequate means to *express* grief as he is to *alleviate* that grief”.⁵⁷ The expression of grief, however, might be in itself an alleviation of grief: the opportunity to speak about a traumatic loss might be seen as a kind of cathartic experience. This would certainly seem to fit with the psychoanalytic theories of the “work of mourning” which Sacks applied to the writing of elegy.⁵⁸ If Longley’s concern to express grief might be linked to a self-conscious performance of the grieving process, then there might be a positive offer of healing or consolation to be found in the poem.

The way in which the elegy ends a list of flowers that are added to the addressee’s “carnations”, might initially suggest that the poet is aware of the inadequacy of his work of mourning. However, there can be heard a tentative hope in the power of poetry. While the addressee laid real “carnations” at the scene of the murder, the poet’s bouquet of “wild flowers” exists only in language, as he “named” each plant. The preservation of memory within language is acknowledged to be an artificial act, which in re-constructing, must destroy the original: “The flowers are recited, or inscribed, in order to remember, but with each name becoming present, the reader discards the presence of the previously present one”.⁵⁹ Despite their purely literary existence, however, the “wild flowers” supersede the “carnations” by taking over the poem, until the stanza itself becomes a floral tribute, or “wreath of words”.⁶⁰ In this sense, the poet seems to imply the superiority of poetry as a form of memorial: the dead “carnations” can be only a temporary gesture, whereas the living flowers of the “Burren” are

54 Edna Longley links this poem with Seamus Heaney’s “The Strand at Lough Beg”, writing that: “Both elegies turn to the natural world for help with mourning and protest,” Poetry and Posterity (Tarsent: Bloodaxe, 2000) 133.

55 Sacks, 19.

56 Sacks, 22.

57 Lyon, 243.

58 Sacks, 1.

59 Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 183.

60 Longley, “A Tongue at Play,” 114.

immortalised by the permanence of poetry.⁶¹ This realisation of the potential for lasting memorial found in elegy is perhaps one of the ways in which the poem begins to provide consolation, as the poet realises that the art that is created by Northern Irish elegists might be able to influence positively those who read it.

This sense of the power of poetry is one which Longley has spoken of in relation to his poem "Ceasefire":

when I was writing it, it was at the time when there were rumours of an IRA ceasefire, and I wrote it partly because I do have some sense of the magic of poetry in the world – hoping that it would make some tiny, tiny, miniscule, unimportant contribution to the drift towards a ceasefire. And I sent it to The Irish Times and hoped that they would print it, in the hope that if they did print it somebody might read it and it might change the mind of one ditherer on the IRA council.⁶²

The elegy was finished less than a week before the IRA ceasefire declared on 31st August 1994, and was published in the Irish Times just a few days after the announcement.⁶³ It differs from the poems already discussed in its adoption of Homeric legend as its ostensible subject matter. The poem is a sonnet, with its quatrains and couplet separated into numbered stanzas. It is written in an iambic hexameter which becomes increasingly ordered as it approaches the perfectly iambic final couplet. The even-numbered lines are rhymed in couplets, with the alternate lines left unrhymed. Each feature of the poem's form, therefore, simultaneously acknowledges traditional expectations while retaining a sense of departure by the adoption of formal irregularities. It allows the poem to be located in both the traditional and the contemporary poetic, and draws the reader's attention to the artistic accomplishment of the poet.

It is possible to read the poem and the scene described, Achilles' return of Hector's corpse to his mourning father, Priam, as a mere re-rendering of the familiar portion of Homer's *Iliad*. An awareness of the poem's contemporary context, however, encourages the reader to consider the poem as one of Longley's Troubles elegies.⁶⁴ Therefore, in subject matter, as well as form, "Ceasefire" inhabits both the literary past and the political present. The use of mythic figures to represent a mourned subject is one of the most long-standing conventions of the English elegy: Milton casts Edward King as "Lycidas"; Shelley re-imagines (or even consumes the identity of) Keats, portraying him as "Adonais"; Matthew Arnold transforms Arthur Hugh

61 Neil Corcoran calls this catalogue of flowers "a *tour de force* which paradoxically calls no attention to itself, but only to its object." He continues, suggesting that the poem connects with "the Milton of the elegiac strewing of flowers in 'Lycidas', and the Shakespeare of Ophelia's last appearance in *Hamlet*, 'larded all with sweet flowers', and of Perdita's catalogue of flowers in *The Winter's Tale*. The persistence suggests Longley's resourcefulness as the discoverer of potential in a long English tradition of the melancholy collocation of human death and botanical life," Poets of Modern Ireland, 160.

62 Sarah Broom, "Interview with Michael Longley by Sarah Broom," Metre: A Magazine of International Poetry 4 (1998):17-26 (21).

63 Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 210.

64 Indeed, Longley has said: "The moments in Homer that I've tried to render into English feel quite contemporary to me. They release in me strong immediate emotions and allow me to say things about the here-and-now that I wouldn't otherwise be able to manage – personal/political statements," In The Chair, 90.

Clough into “Thyrsis”.⁶⁵ The difference in Longley's poem, and what it has in common with his other Troubles poems, is that there is no specific contemporary victim for whom the elegy mourns. Rather, the experience of loss, as one that is shared by an entire community, is reflected by the story of Priam and Achilles. The poem deals with the universal experience of grief as a result of conflict.

Longley's organisation of the events in his poem results in an emphasis on the mutual grief of the two men: “Syntactically, the poem displaces the individual ego to the margins”.⁶⁶ The opening quatrain focuses on Achilles' empathy:

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building. (1-4)

This shared “sadness” gives the poem a sense of a single community, divided by a conflict in which everyone is a victim. As Edna Longley comments, “the poem explores the moment and meaning of ceasefire in a way which speculates about the *mutual* conditions for an end to war”.⁶⁷ The sense of community is continued as Achilles prepares the body for funeral rites:

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak. (5-8)

and in the third stanza, the two men are depicted as equals, even “as lovers”:

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation... (9-12)

Longley's re-ordering of events means that the final couplet takes the reader back to the start of the encounter, as documented by Homer, where Priam

...earlier had sighed:

IV

“I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.” (12-14)

Here, in the last line of the poem, is the first time the killing of Hector is openly acknowledged: the previous stanzas focus on the rituals of mourning, rather than the actual death. This

65 For “Thyrsis” see Matthew Arnold, *The Scholar-Gypsy and Thyrsis* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 28-51.

66 Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 211.

67 Edna Longley, *Poetry and Posterity*, 303.

chronological shift brings the reader back to the beginning of the episode, suggesting the circularity of violent conflict.⁶⁸ It might seem to cancel the work of mourning in the previous stanzas, and might, furthermore, suggest a sense of pessimism about the contemporary ceasefire. Indeed, an awareness of the myth reveals that Achilles' ceasefire was a temporary one, necessitated by the need for both sides to mourn their dead; effectively a chance to clear the battlefield ready for a return to war. In his choice of this particular ceasefire as source material for his *Troubles* poem, Longley seems aware of the fragile nature of the newly declared peace in Northern Ireland.⁶⁹

There is, nevertheless, some sense of consolation in "Ceasefire", which comes from Longley's use of elegiac technique; specifically, his focus on the performance of mourning rituals. Achilles' washing of the body is a ritual found in both traditional and contemporaneous elegies, for example, Seamus Heaney's "The Strand at Lough Beg".⁷⁰ Having the body "laid out in uniform" performs a similar ritual to the one at the end of "Wreaths", where the mourner seems to reconstruct the subject after the fragmentation of death. In Hector's case, it is the man responsible for the mutilation and violation of his corpse who begins the process of re-assembling and memorialising him. There is a reminder of this in line 5, "Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands", echoing the cliché, "taking Hector's *life* into his own hands", which is, indeed, what has happened. This is repeated in the final image, as Priam must "kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son". This instance of synecdoche is commented on by Edna Longley: "the ambivalent poise of 'Ceasefire' pivots on 'hand': used for caring and killing".⁷¹ Priam is given the body "Wrapped like a present", and this mimics the shrouding that takes place in many elegies. The ugliness of death is shielded from view, often by something beautiful, like flowers. Here, the body becomes a "present", which makes the granting of the opportunity to mourn an act of grace, a gift. It also has the effect, as in "The Civil Servant" and also Robert Lowell's elegy "Sailing Home from Rapallo", of objectifying the body, thereby creating a sense of artistic detachment.⁷² Steven Matthews notes the poem's emphasis upon "beauty":

What is striking here is that aesthetic appreciation plays a crucial part in that move towards reconciliation and conversation between the two sides. [...] The poem claims, then, a deciding role for the aesthetic within the larger continuum of understanding between the warring sides.⁷³

This suggests a hope in the possibility of reconciliation, and an opportunity for grief to be shared through the performance of, specifically poetic, mourning rituals.

68 See Brearton's comment in n. 40 about cycles of violence in Northern Ireland.

69 See Brearton: "The possibility of transformation carries with it the possibility of failure; a story told can always be retold," *Reading Michael Longley*, 213.

70 See Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 119-20. Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 152-3.

71 Edna Longley, *Poetry and Posterity*, 303.

72 Lowell's elegy for his mother ends with the image: "The corpse / was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil", Robert Lowell, "Sailing Home from Rapallo", *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin, 1977 rpt. 1989) 408.

73 Steven Matthews. *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation: The Evolving Debate, 1969 to the Present*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 1-3.

“The Fishing Party” is found in The Ghost Orchid (1995), in which “Ceasefire” is also collected. While both poems can be identified as Troubles elegies, they contrast starkly at the levels of form and diction. “The Fishing Party” may be quoted in full:

Because he loves off-duty policemen and their murderers
Christ is still seen walking on the water of Lough Neagh,
Whose fingers created bluebottles, meadow-browns, red
Admirals, painted ladies, fire-flies, and are tying now
Woodcock hackles around hooks, lamb's wool, badger fur

Until about his head swarm artificial flies and their names,
Dark Mackerel, Gravel Bed, Greenwell's Glory, Soldier
Palmer, Coachman, Water Cricket, Orange Grouse, Barm,
Without snagging in his hair or ceasing to circle above
Policemen turned by gunmen into fishermen forever.

(1-10)

Where “Ceasefire” is given a mythical setting, “The Fishing Party” is firmly placed in Northern Ireland, both geographically, in the mention of “Lough Neagh”, and politically, in the characters with which the poem is peopled, “off-duty policemen and their murderers”.⁷⁴ Unusually for an elegy, the grammatical subject of the poem is not the mourned dead, but “Christ”. Indeed, the complex grammatical structure of the poem draws attention to the accomplishment of the poet, with the entire piece existing as a single ten-line sentence.⁷⁵ The themes of the first stanza, “policemen and their murderers” and Christ's creative work in nature, are repeated in reverse order in the second, albeit with a more surreal, self-consciously poetic tone, as the poet describes Christ creating “artificial flies” for fishing, and “Policemen turned by gunmen into fishermen forever”. In the second stanza's revision of these themes there can be seen an elegiac shift in focus from the natural to the artificial. This follows the pattern set by poems like Shelley's “Adonais”, where the poet, finding no comfort in the natural world, looks to philosophy and metaphor as he faces up to his grief. The emphasis on creation, both in the natural and in “artificial” contexts, draws attention to the poem's own “created-ness”, the piece of artifice that has been constructed as a response to the deaths mourned. This, again, is an elegiac commonplace, as the act of creating poetry is held up for inspection, and explored as a method of performing the work of mourning.

Although there is no fixed metrical or rhyming pattern, the lines are given a measured pace by their roughly iambic rhythm, and there are generally six or seven feet per line, giving “The Fishing Party” a classical, conventionally mournful register.⁷⁶ Internal rhymes and

74 See n. 43 for the link between the mourned subject in both “The Fishing Party” and “The Ice-cream Man”.

75 John Lyon remains unconvinced regarding the accomplishment of this poem: “while ‘The Fishing Party’ attempts more than ‘The Ice-cream Man’, it achieves less,” 245. However, the poem may not be as “vulnerable” or “precarious” an attempt at elegy as Lyon believes.

76 Various critics comment on Longley's preferred line-lengths and rhythms, and their relationship to classical metre; one such example is Dunn: “Longley's ‘metric’ is based on a classical if also uniquely personal interpretation of the history of poetry in the English language, and on his own intimate acquaintanceship with the poetry of Rome and Greece,” 33.

repeated sounds give the poem a sense of order, and attention is drawn to the construction of the images: for example, in the Hopkins-esque sound-play of “Woodcock hackles around hooks, lamb’s wool...”. This intricate language works with the theme of creation to draw attention to the fabric of the poem itself. The conventional image of “water” is found in the second line, and is integral to the poem. Water is bound up with the figure of Christ, and with the Northern Irish setting, and is linked to the act of making fishing “flies”. Water provides the opportunity for the positive act of creation, while at the same time existing as a hunting ground for the fishing party, who will use their “artificial flies” to catch the fish that live in it. Longley uses elegiac tradition, but adapts and complicates it to fit his purpose.

The use of lists is one of the most noticeable features of the poem, as the list of natural creations – “bluebottles, meadow-browns, red / Admirals...” - appears to be superseded by the names of “artificial flies”: “Dark Mackerel, Gravel Bed, Greenwell’s Glory...”. Just as the “real” carnations in “The Ice-cream Man” are replaced by the “named” wild flowers, here the “names” of the artificial flies “swarm” on the page. Like the “teeth” in the final section of “Wreaths” that pin the ascending Christ to the sky, here the “artificial flies and their names” are made to “swarm” about Christ’s head “without snagging in his hair”. This seems to render Christ once again helpless, and even corpse-like. Indeed, the fingers that once “created bluebottles” and a natural order that the book of Genesis calls “good”, are now dismantling that creation to make “artificial flies” that will harm and kill the fish that they also, presumably, created. Therefore, when Christ’s biblical promise to make his disciples “fishers of men” is echoed in the final line, it might sound more like a cliché than a consolation.⁷⁷ The presence of “gunmen” in the final line means that any comfort in the “for ever”, in its tentative suggestion of an after-life, is severely muted by the reminder of violent death.

There are, however, suggestions of hope found in “The Fishing Party”. The poem describes Christ in the present tense: he “is still seen walking on the water of Lough Neagh”. This miraculous image makes Longley’s treatment of Christ complex, with the attitude of faith that it brings to the poem, despite the apparent rejection of a Christian consolation. It also implies that the speaker is still able to visit the Lough, and indeed, that he is a member of a real “Fishing Party” taking place there. This might suggest that despite the horror of the conflict in which “off-duty policemen” lose their lives, there is opportunity for life to carry on. Fly-fishing in a time of conflict might in itself be a political statement, a refusal to allow violence to hold sway. The idea of life continuing after a death is central to elegy, and, indeed, to the mourning process. It also provides the elegist with a sense of purpose: to use the time he has to create a lasting work of memorial for those he has lost, and, in time, for himself.

While these “Troubles” elegies wrestle with the idea of finding hope or meaning within the conflict they describe, they are not without a sense of quiet faith, even if in nothing else, at

⁷⁷ See Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17.

least in poetry's potential to produce something positive out of otherwise devastating loss. Longley himself has mentioned his faith in the potential power of a "well-made poem": "I like Ezra Pound's equating of an artist's technique with his sincerity".⁷⁸ What has been taken from these readings is a sense in which the artifice involved in elegy is an integral part of the offer of consolation that the genre hopes to provide, as it can allow the poet the right amount of distance from what might seem an impossible subject, releasing him into a positive act of creation.

78 Longley, "A Tongue at Play," 120.

II

“A quest for community⁷⁹”? Derek Mahon as a Northern Irish Elegist

Born in Belfast in 1941, Derek Mahon is a poet whose work has been shaped by his experiences of sectarian strife in the city in which he grew up, and which he subsequently left and has lived away from for large portions of his adult life. He has written poems which might be classed as elegies, and his body of poetry itself might even be identified as elegiac in tone. Seamus Deane writes that “[l]ost lives are Mahon's obsession. His poetry is an attempt to fulfil them”.⁸⁰ Some of Mahon's best-known poems are responses to individual deaths, and he has been described as a poet with a “constant concern with loss, the precariousness of existence, distance, limitation, mortality...”. Richard York, who wrote this description, points out that Mahon's “volume of selected poems in fact opens with an elegy for MacNeice and ends with one for Camus”.⁸¹ Despite the prevalence of these themes and concerns in his work, however, it is difficult to define Mahon as a typical elegist: his work seems to resist neat labels, constantly subverting expectations, and deliberately provoking complex responses in the reader by the masterful use of irony, ambiguity and the poet's competitive, almost combative relationship with literary predecessors and contemporaries.⁸² Mahon clearly responds to the elegiac tradition, but perhaps does so in ways that have not been tried before, and which therefore add to the development of a strand of poetry that responds to the particular context in which it has been written: Northern Irish elegy. To read Mahon as an elegist requires one to consider a response to the tradition of poetic mourning that neither conforms wholeheartedly to the conventions highlighted by Peter Sacks, nor rejects them straightforwardly in the spirit of melancholic “anti-elegy” identified by Jahan Ramazani. To read Mahon as a Northern Irish elegist perhaps also requires a reconsideration of the ways in which a writer might be a part of that particular literary community. Mahon's poetry seems to invite a less rigid response to tradition, and an acknowledgement of the plurality often identified in his poetic voice.

Perhaps what makes Mahon's poetry of loss hard to reconcile with the conventions of

79 Daniel Tobin, “In the Back of Beyond: Tradition and History in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” *Irish Quarterly Review* 88.351 (1999): 295-304 (298).

80 Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985) 162.

81 Richard York, “Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon,” *Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, ed. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 6 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 1998) 85-98 (88).

82 See Brendan Kennelly: “Probably the single most difficult problem for anyone seeking to get into Mahon's poetry is trying to define the quality of his voice, as it is indeed with most poetry. There are many elements in that voice. In his best poems all these elements are held in a calm and dignified balance. It is a quiet voice, not too dramatic. It is a consciously educated voice. It is learned but not pedantic. It is self aware and self mocking. It is perhaps too ironic to be noticeably passionate, and yet there is no doubt of its intensity. It is the kind of voice that craves an eloquent linguistic precision and often finds it. It is a voice of conscience, scrupulously examined, stylishly projected, rhythmically elaborated, a pleasure to hear, mysterious to think about.” “Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective,” *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (Barnes & Noble: Totowa, 1989) 143-52 (148).

elegy is his determinedly detached position, which is often made clear by the use of irony in his poetry. This, as has been found with Longley's overt use of artifice and well-wrought poetic form, might seem, initially, to detract from the poems' capability to express, and provide consolation for, genuine grief. Mahon explicitly engages with ideas of existentialism and metaphysical detachment, often writing from the position of an aesthete or an "outsider", merely observing a community from which he has been (self-) exiled. While Heaney's move to the Republic of Ireland allowed him to explore his position as an "inner émigré", much of Mahon's poetic identity seems to be caught up with a sense of exile and displacement, as he has spent portions of his life living and working in Europe and the United States, as well as in the Republic of Ireland. However, this is only one aspect of his voice; there is also a sense in which he seems compelled to revisit Northern Ireland, and feels a sense of obligation to respond to the losses experienced there.⁸³ Deane notes that "Mahon does not enjoy or seek to have a sense of community with the kind of Ireland which is so dominant in Irish poetry". Instead, "his versions of community depend on the notion of a disengagement from history achieved by those whose maverick individuality resisted absorption into the official discourses and decencies". Mahon creates his own literary community made up of "rebels haunted by a metaphysical dread". However, as Deane goes on to comment,

[Mahon] was born into an historical community, that of Northern Irish Protestantism, and his most deeply felt poems derive from his sympathy for its isolation and its fading presence rather than from straightforward repudiation of its stiff rhetorical intransigence. The plight of his community was, of course, defined by the conflict of the last fifteen years and Mahon, with some reluctance it would seem, was drawn to a contemplation of it.⁸⁴

Fran Brearton adds that "to locate Mahon within the community and within history can expand the notion of what community is".⁸⁵ While Deane's comments on Mahon's sympathy for Northern Irish Protestantism might be coloured more by his own ideology than the poet's – earlier in the chapter he writes about "the forces of atavism, ignorance and oppression which are part of [Mahon's] Northern Protestant heritage" – they nevertheless encourage a consideration of what community might mean to Mahon.⁸⁶ Far from being an exile with no sense of community, Mahon seems to enhance our understanding of what a literary community might be, when he is considered in relationship with some of the predecessors to whom his work alludes. Indeed, his use of plural voices, which is discussed below, points to the existence of multiple literary communities within Northern Ireland, which exist independently of, yet alongside, the communities that are grouped around sectarian and political beliefs. For example, Mahon's distancing of himself from Longley's "Two Letters" highlighted his refusal to be categorised as

83 Kathleen Shields writes about the ambiguous relationship that Mahon has with "his people": "To separate and to concede some join, or to propose a join only to separate again, these are the central movements of Mahon's thought," "Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging," *Irish University Review* 24.1 Derek Mahon (1994): 67-79 (71).

84 Deane, 159-60.

85 Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 188.

86 Deane, 156.

a poetic conservative, or as a protestant, and might seem to be a statement of self-exile. However, for the younger poet Sinead Morrissey, whose atheist upbringing and desire to experiment with poetic form might also lead to her rejection from a narrowly defined Northern Irish poetic community, Mahon's broadening of the definition of a Northern Irish poet allows her to be, along with himself, part of a literary community which is not merely identified by certain formal practices or sectarian allegiances.⁸⁷

Mahon's exploration of "home", and the way in which he seems to analyse his responses to home (and find them wanting), produces a sense of unease and disengagement, as can be seen in the final lines of "Spring in Belfast":

...this desperate city
Should engage more than my casual interest,
Exact more interest than my casual pity.⁸⁸

Here, the very fact that he feels that his response *should* be more than "casual" not only suggests that he is currently unsympathetic, but also that he struggles to find even the desire to be sympathetic towards "my own" (1): the people he walks among, yet remains separate from. Mahon does not wish to be a spokesperson for the Northern Irish community, as it seems that Heaney has become. This reticence is noted by Gerald Dawe:

Mahon is widely regarded not only as one of Ireland's finest poets; his critical reputation is to be acknowledged, as one of the most significant poets writing in English today. His influence upon a younger generation of poets writing in Ireland, and elsewhere, is also noticeable. Yet there is a profound irony in all this because over the last decade and a half, Mahon has receded further from the "literary scene" on both sides of the Atlantic. He no longer gives poetry readings and at his own request his books of poetry are no longer sent for review to newspapers, periodicals and other media. Mahon spurns the blandishments of media attention, refusing interviews, book launches and maintaining an almost Beckettian silence in relation to his work which he believes should speak for itself.⁸⁹

Dawe's essay goes on to compare Mahon with a number of his predecessors; as well as Beckett, Pound, Swift and Basho are mentioned, which adds to the sense found in Deane's comments that Mahon can be read as operating as one of a community of writers who have worked to subvert generic expectations. The second stanza of "Spring in Belfast" gives a sense of this stubborn determination not to respond in the expected manner: "There is a perverse pride in being on the side / Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up" (6-7). The beginning of the final stanza initially sounds like a statement of intent: "One part of my mind must learn to know its place" (16), but even the "must" of this declaration is undermined by the plurality suggested in "One part of my mind": Mahon seems to be unwilling to commit to any single position. Any sense of conclusion that might have been anticipated at the end of the poem is further weakened by the ambiguity in the final lines. Aware of what might be expected of him, the poet refuses to

87 See chapter five for more details on Sinead Morrissey.

88 Derek Mahon, "Spring in Belfast," *Collected Poems*, 13.

89 Gerald Dawe, "Derek Mahon: Keeping the Language Efficient," *Journal of Irish Studies* 21 (2006): 14-22 (16).

be dictated to, and will not conform, while at the same time he betrays a sense of vulnerability in his awareness that his response does not, and is perhaps unable to, measure up to the required standard. It seems that Mahon's adoption of an "outsider-like view" has made him an important predecessor for successive generations, as is noted by Dawe.⁹⁰ When considering Mahon as engaging in a quest for community, it is possible to see that even his efforts to detach himself from certain traditions and conventions of Irish poetry, he succeeds in creating an alternative community, attracting other writers to his particular poetic vision. This creates a paradox in which the very detached and ironic character of Mahon's poetry is what allows him to be joined in literary communities with both his predecessors and with the younger poets who admire his work.

Another way in which "Spring in Belfast" prompts a consideration of Mahon's multi-voiced poetry is the fact that the poem has been published in several revised versions. Haughton notes that "[n]early all of Mahon's poems have been published in multiple versions, with texts and titles continuing to mutate over the years".⁹¹ In the light of elegy, this practice of continual revision raises some questions. It might be said that elegy, more than any other genre of poetry, sets up a contract between the writer and reader, as the reader should be convinced, on some level, of the authenticity of the grief that is being expressed. It was possible to see in Longley's elegies, for example, that even extremely artificial expressions of mourning can be accepted as "sincere", as the construction of a highly-wrought poem might be seen to be a fitting tribute or monument to the dead subject. In the case of revision, however, the monument of the original elegy is dismantled or tampered with. The revision of elegies might seem to suggest a sense of incomplete mourning, or a kind of melancholic grief.⁹² The sense in which Mahon's poetry contains plural voices adds to a sense of contingency and uncertainty. Nevertheless, the continual revision of the work, and the repeated tackling of themes of loss and identity suggest that Mahon retains a faith in the medium of poetry as a site upon which complex ideas and emotions can be wrestled with. Haughton's approach to Mahon's work is to treat the poems published in editions of *Collected* or *Selected Poems* as canonical, which is the same approach taken in this chapter, although mention will be made of variant texts.⁹³

In the letter quoted in this chapter's introduction, Mahon disassociates himself from both the political and poetic communities within Northern Ireland. As has been seen in "Spring in Belfast", however, there is also an antithetical desire for community to be heard in his work.⁹⁴

90 Dawe, 21.

91 Haughton, 4.

92 This type of grief might come close to the "resistant mourning" described by Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 157-62.

93 "Spring in Belfast", for example, was previously published as "Poem in Belfast"; "In Belfast"; and "Spring Vacation"; see Kathleen Shields, 69.

94 Brown suggests that this poem depicts the way in which Mahon's city of birth prompted his poetic career: "It is as if Belfast is entered in his world as the obverse of poetry, as a manifestation of a version of modernity which induces deracination, as the place that set him wandering to the many locations that over

Daniel Tobin describes the effect of paradoxical urges both towards and against the traditions of politics and poetry upon Mahon's writing:

His metaphysical and historical skepticism, as well as his existential malaise, constitute the imaginative ferment for his affirmation of tradition as an alternative to transcendental systems of value. At the same time, the very trauma of historical, metaphysical and geographical displacement that spurs his "rage for order," by his own estimate, renders the artist's work marginal if not circumspect. As such, Derek Mahon's is a poetry forever in crisis, caught as it is between the ideal order of tradition and a possibly debilitating awareness of displacement.⁹⁵

Denying the "transcendental" consolation of religious faith, Tobin argues that Mahon and his contemporaries wish to place their faith in the poetic tradition, but that their very awareness of the times in which they live deprives them of this comfort. In terms of elegy, this lack of consolation is a serious issue, and one which would seem, necessarily, to result in the kind of melancholic poetry of mourning described by Jahan Ramazani. For Tobin, however, and as this chapter will go on to explore, Mahon's use of irony and displacement, rather than resulting in anti-elegy, can actually be read as a statement of affirmation.

Unquestionably, there is a restlessness in Mahon's work relative to place that far exceeds whatever sense of displacement may be found in the work of either Michael Longley or Seamus Heaney, the contemporaries with whom he is most often connected. [...] Yet, it is the very psychic and artistic distance in Mahon's poetry that enables him, as it were, to raise both place and the sense of displacement out of mere locality and make them exemplary. [...] Beneath the surface of Mahon's vaunted irony abides the poet's imperative to answer the often unjust and violent conditions of history with the circumscribed, trenchant, though nonetheless assuaging authority of art.⁹⁶

Tobin sees that "Mahon's appeal to tradition within the context of what might be called a postmodern poetic of dispersal reveals itself as a quest for community".⁹⁷ Read in this light, Mahon's poems of loss, however subversive their relationship to the conventions of the elegiac tradition, and however alienated they might seem to be from the Northern Irish community as a whole, might be seen, nevertheless, to engage with, and to make a vital contribution to, the development of the Northern Irish elegy.

Mahon's development of the genre of elegy can be traced in his poems as he also works to develop his own poetic practice, and his personal and political responses to the increasing tensions and outbreaks of civil violence within the Northern Irish community. He has spoken of his initial reluctance to write "Troubles poetry", and discussed some of the ways in which, as the situation escalated, he felt compelled to begin to formulate a poetic response:

I felt very far from home in those years [the late 1960s]. [...] I felt "beaten up". I wonder if others felt the same. I felt that I had been guilty of something I wasn't aware of. [...] It was extremely upsetting, especially when the death toll started mounting. I couldn't deal with it. [...] One of the damnable things about it was that you couldn't take sides. You couldn't take sides. In a kind of way, I still can't. It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka

four decades have engaged his restless, peregrine imagination," 134.

95 Tobin, 295.

96 Tobin, 296.

97 Tobin, 298.

and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungiven and Magherafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it. [...] I was not prepared for what happened. What happened was that myself and all our generation (particularly in the North) were presented with a horror, something that demanded our serious grown-up attention. But, as I say, I was not able to deal with it directly.⁹⁸

Mahon's development of the genre of elegy is characterised by the same sense of obliqueness and ironic detachment that can be seen throughout his *oeuvre*. When the young poet found that, confronted by the Troubles, he was “not able to deal with it directly”, he did not therefore refuse to deal with it at all, but worked instead to develop a way in which he could respond.

“In Carrowdore Churchyard (*at the grave of Louis MacNeice*)” is an early elegy and is one of Mahon's best-known poems.⁹⁹ It was written during Mahon's final year at Trinity College, Dublin, before the outbreak of the Troubles, and is one of his “first fully achieved poems [...] in which he said he found his voice”.¹⁰⁰ Richard York declares that “it is not surprising that one of Mahon's first major achievements is his reflection on the death of MacNeice [...] not surprising because of Mahon's constant concern with loss, the precariousness of existence, distance, limitation, mortality”.¹⁰¹ Its title declares the poem to be an elegy, and it also conforms to a closely regulated stanza structure, with its regular iambic metre and strict rhyme scheme. Mahon has said of his writing style:

I am an out-and-out traditionalist. [...] It's important to me what a poem looks like on the page. I'm interested in organization. I'm interested in at least the appearance of control, orchestration, forceful activity; something intense happening, something intended and achieved – purposefulness instead of randomness. [...] I like there to be a certain gravity somewhere in the offing, some residual echo of traditional form.¹⁰²

In writing an elegy for a fellow poet, Mahon takes on the traditional role of elegist as exemplified by Milton, Shelley, and Matthew Arnold, in their poems for Edward King, John Keats and Arthur Hugh Clough. Mahon's subject, however, differs to some extent – where the three canonical elegists mourn for a contemporary who was “cut down in his prime”, and whose death is lamented as a tragically premature loss of the young writer's potential, Mahon's elegy is written for a poetic predecessor who enjoyed a prolific career before his untimely death in middle-age. Indeed, MacNeice is one of the writers to whom Mahon's own poetry is often seen as “indebted”, as Neil Corcoran writes:

In [“Carrowdore Churchyard”] Mahon instances MacNeice's “fragile, solving ambiguity”, but he clearly acts for Mahon too as an exemplar of estrangement: uniquely among the contemporary Northern poets who have registered the influence, Mahon has taken on something of MacNeice's visitor's or tourist's attitude to Ireland. MacNeice's at least partly outsider status when he comments on Ireland seems to Mahon a liberation rather than a limitation...¹⁰³

98 *In the Chair*, 115-6.

99 *Collected Poems*, 17.

100 Haughton, 32.

101 York, 88.

102 *In the Chair*, 117-9.

103 Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940*, 187.

Hugh Haughton describes “In Carrowdore Churchyard” as a “poem about place and poetic identification”. The poem obviously identifies Mahon with MacNeice, but also with other Northern poets. It is the result of a writing challenge between Mahon, Longley and Heaney, after the three had visited the grave of their predecessor, and it seems to be a site where Mahon engages in literary competition: with his contemporaries, with poetic tradition, and with the subject of his elegy, MacNeice himself. As Haughton writes, the poem “established Mahon's voice not only in relationship to his major Northern predecessor but his friends and competitors”, and he goes on to say that

The poem displays no personal grief (they had only met briefly), but certainly claims – or reclaims – MacNeice for the young poet. Like Shelley's *Adonais* or Auden in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, the elegy allowed him to formulate a distinctive *ars poetica*.¹⁰⁴

Brearton notes that “Mahon, like MacNeice, negotiates several different contexts and traditions – English, American, Irish, and Northern Irish – drawing on all of them to avoid ‘idol or idea, creed or king’”.¹⁰⁵ This suggests, almost paradoxically, that Mahon's poetry develops from relationships with individual literary predecessors like MacNeice, and that through this process, it simultaneously avoids aligning itself with any one voice or tradition, but instead remains open and multi-faceted. It is possible to gain insight into the relationship between Mahon and MacNeice through the allusions to MacNeice's work in Mahon's elegy. This, in turn, can lead to a consideration of the ways in which Mahon's identification with MacNeice influences his own poetic practice, specifically as he approaches the theme of elegy from the contemporary context of the Troubles.¹⁰⁶

There are many conventional features of elegy that can be identified in Mahon's poem, yet intermingled with these are aspects of the poem which make it, simultaneously, a rather unconventional elegy. This can be seen in the first stanza:

Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,
 However the wind tugs, the headstones shake.
 This plot is consecrated, for your sake,
 To what lies in the future tense. You lie
 Past tension now, and spring is coming round
 Igniting flowers on the peninsula. (1-6)

The first word, “Your”, makes the elegy unusual in addressing the dead subject, speaking to him in the second person, rather than about him in the third. This links Mahon's elegiac practice to that of Thomas Hardy, who, in his desire for dialogue with his dead wife, wrote a series of poems in which she is directly addressed.¹⁰⁷ Mahon seems to allow MacNeice to be heard in the

104 Haughton, 37-8.

105 Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 191.

106 Haughton writes that: “Mahon is a highly allusive poet, with an investment in many forms of intertextuality, including quotation, translation, adaptation, mimicry, ekphrasis, and revision. His poems, even from early on, tend to be packed with quotations, echoes, reworkings, translations, and allusions, including to themselves,” 3.

107 See Thomas Hardy, “Poems of 1912-13,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Harry Thomas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993) 66-86.

elegy, but there is not the same sense of dialogue: instead there seems to be a sense in which Mahon himself speaks the dead poet's language.¹⁰⁸ As Brendan Kennelly has put it: "Mahon's original self begins in his tribute to Louis MacNeice".¹⁰⁹

There is a tension in this initial stanza between, on the one hand, hints at a consolatory "future tense" and on the other, a seeming negation of the possibility of an afterlife. The statement in the first two lines exemplifies this. The dead man is told "Your ashes will not stir [...] / However the wind tugs..." implying that there is no re-animation, of any kind, after death, and yet the image of "high ground", with its connotations of being raised up, even resurrected, is allowed to appear as the central clause of this first sentence. It is as if Mahon wishes to start his poem by setting the two ideas in opposition. A kind of poetic or even philosophical "tension" seems to be suggested later on in the stanza, as Mahon uses the very word: "what lies in the future tense"; "You lie / Past tension now" (4-5). As "lies" is followed by "lie" in the same line, the reader is prompted to consider the alternative meanings of the word: it may, ostensibly, be used as a statement of location, but "You lie" might also carry a brief undertone of accusation that the subject has concealed or misrepresented something, before the reader is drawn over the line-break to complete the phrase, "You lie / Past tension now". The opposition set up between "future tense" and "Past tension" works in a similar way to the opening lines: the consolatory and hopeful suggestion that the poet's grave is consecrated "To what lies in the future tense" is deflated by the bleakness of "You lie / Past tension now". Indeed, Mahon's use of tenses in this stanza is complex: "will not" in the first line is followed by the "tugs" and "shake" of the second line, reining the sentence from the future tense back to the present. Line 3 has "is consecrated" in the present tense, but this describes an action done in the past – the "is" could be replaced by "has been" – and in the following line, the sentence continues into "what lies in the future tense". The very next verb in line 4 reverts back to the present tense, "lie", and is emphasised by the "now" in the following line, but complicated by the "Past" that comes at the beginning of line 5. Finally, "spring is coming round / Igniting flowers", is also present tense, but is a description of a process which will continue into the future, which means that the stanza ends where it started, in an unspecified future tense. This destabilises the temporal setting of the poem, and gives it a characteristically detached and non-committal tone.

The final image of "spring" ties the elegy to elegiac tradition, as the natural cycles of the seasons are often invoked as a consolatory image of renewal and re-birth. The "flowers on the peninsula" are part of this image, but they are also present as a more sombre elegiac trope – that of the wreath of flowers that is used to shroud the dead body.¹¹⁰ The verb attached to the flowers, "Igniting", links back to the "ashes" in the first line, and reiterates the connection

108 This sense of allusion is felt at a formal level, as Edna Longley notes: "Mahon has undoubtedly absorbed and refined MacNeice's use of the six-line stanza..." *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 178.

109 Kennelly, 146.

110 Sacks, 19.

between them and the dead body, with an image of cremation.¹¹¹ Indeed, the idea of natural processes continuing after the death of the subject might not be as consolatory as initially thought: while Milton's elegy "Lycidas" looks to nature for comfort, Shelley's speaker in "Adonais" comes to the realisation that nature is not involved with or even particularly affected by the loss that he mourns, and the arrival of spring signals to him that nature is oblivious to the grief and suffering that he is experiencing. Spring, therefore, becomes a dis-consolatory image, and one which intensifies the mourner's feelings of isolation from the world. The second stanza of the poem continues and develops these themes:

Your ashes will not fly, however the rough winds burst
 Through the wild brambles and the reticent trees.
 All we may ask of you we have; the rest
 Is not for publication, will not be heard.
 Maguire, I believe, suggested a blackbird
 And over your grave a phrase from Euripides. (7-12)

The first two lines of this stanza seem to repeat the opening lines of the poem, but are perhaps even more emphatic in their denial of a consolatory after-death existence: not only will the ashes not "stir" (1), but they will not "fly", however "rough" the winds. Unlike the first stanza's opening sentence, this one does not admit any ideas of resurrection or re-birth. Mahon includes this re-iteration, in which the statement seems to become more certain in its second utterance, perhaps because, as Sacks notes, repetition is part of the "highly important phase in mourning in which the griever must be convinced of the actual fact of loss".¹¹² The violence in the image of the "rough winds" that "burst / Through the wild brambles and reticent trees" gives nature itself a destructive characteristic, which echoes the tone at the end of the first stanza.¹¹³

The central lines of this stanza introduce the idea of poetic immortality as a potential consolation: "All we may ask of you we have", but even this is quickly undermined by the idea of a kind of censorship or loss as the mourner acknowledges that "the rest / Is not for publication, will not be heard". This chimes with the elegiac idea that the loss of an artist or poet represents an unfulfilled potential, a loss of the art that might have been produced had death not intervened. The "we" in line 9 suggests a poetic community left behind to mourn the death. Knowing the context of this poem, one might suggest that the "we" applies to Mahon, Longley and Heaney, but this group could easily extend to encompass Northern Ireland, or indeed the entire literary community. The idea of a community of mourners is a common one in elegies, found not only in traditional poems, but also in the work of Mahon's contemporaries, for example, in Heaney's "The Strand at Lough Beg". In Shelley's "Adonais", a group of Keats's fellow-poets processes through the poem, with each mourner offering a tribute to the

111 The image of cremation is fitting for MacNeice, whose body was, on 7 September 1963, cremated, with his ashes being subsequently "laid to rest in Irish soil – the Carrowdore churchyard grave of his mother and maternal grandfather," Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1995) 480.

112 Sacks, 23-4.

113 In an earlier draft, Mahon has "reverend trees" – and while this affects the sense of the scene, perhaps tying in too neatly with the churchyard setting, the violence of the wind is present in both versions.

dead man. In Mahon's short poem, there is not space for an entire procession, but it is hinted at by the mention of "Maguire" in line 11, a fellow mourner who makes his own suggestions for the ways in which the subject should be commemorated.¹¹⁴

In the second half of Mahon's elegy, the poet seems to draw closer to the figure of the dead man himself, and yet also manages to define his own work as distinct and separate from that of his predecessor. He does this by use of allusion, taking images from the work of MacNeice and, just as he does later in his career with Shelley in "A Lighthouse in Maine", Mahon develops the images so that they conform to his own particular demands. The third stanza begins with an incomplete sentence, which seems to carry on from the thoughts at the end of the second:

Which suits you down to the ground, like this churchyard
With its play of shadow, its humane perspective.
Locked in the winter's fist, these hills are hard
As nails, yet soft and feminine in their turn
When fingers open and the hedges burn.
This, you implied, is how we ought to live –

The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,
Each fragile, solving ambiguity. So
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new. (13-24)

In this early poem, Mahon uses a technique which he will return to as he develops his craft, that of alluding to another poet.¹¹⁵ This practice of allusion and engagement with poetic predecessors is one that is found in the work of all the Northern Irish elegists studied in this thesis. In an elegy for a fellow poet, it is perhaps inevitable that the dead subject of the poem will be invoked by means of allusions to his own poetry. The image in the third stanza of the changing seasons, as the hills which are "hard as nails" in "winter's fist", become "soft and feminine in their turn / When fingers open and the hedges burn", echoes the image of "igniting flowers" in the first stanza, this time comparing spring more overtly with its antithetical season – winter being the season of death, spring representing new life. In this stanza, therefore, Mahon continues to keep his poem in tension, balanced between the opposite poles of life and death. In doing this, Mahon "captures some of the MacNeice manner". York sees in these final stanzas not only a "worthy tribute to the master", but also a "spirit of contestation".¹¹⁶

The complex relationship between Mahon and MacNeice has been commented upon by a number of critics: Edna Longley names Mahon as the "heir and disinheritor" of MacNeice,

114 For the role of the funeral procession in elegy, see Sacks, 19-20.

115 See Brendan Kennelly: "Where is Mahon in his poetry? I said he is a poet of the perimeter, meditating on the centre, with a mixture of amusement and pain. He is not, or he is very rarely, at the centre of his poems. [...] So how then does he actually say anything? How does the peripheral stance convey a central statement? In different ways: and one of his principal ways is that of invoking the help of other poets, other poems," 150.

116 York, 89, 90.

and York writes about the hint of rivalry that comes across in Mahon's elegy for his predecessor.¹¹⁷ Mahon's description of the churchyard with its "humane perspective" seems to be an indirect tribute to the dead man, whose burial place "suits [him] down to the ground". With this playful language, Mahon seems to be confident in interpreting the work of MacNeice, who has been called "the humanistic source of much Ulster poetry".¹¹⁸ Mahon "reads" his predecessor: "This, you implied, is how we ought to live", as he goes on to produce his own rendering of an image in MacNeice's famous poem, "Snow": "The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow, / Each fragile, solving ambiguity". MacNeice's "Snow" is "a puzzled confrontation with an inconsistent, 'incurable' reality, which itself puzzles the reader and makes demands on him".¹¹⁹ Describing an experience: "The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was / Spawning snow and pink roses against it", MacNeice's poem expresses a sense of confusion and even incomprehension regarding the world with which he is confronted:

World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
 Incurably plural. I peel and portion
 A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
 The drunkenness of things being various.¹²⁰

In MacNeice's poem there is ambiguity, but it does not sound like Mahon's "fragile, solving ambiguity". While York points out that Mahon's sentence is itself grammatically ambiguous, Mahon's two-line interpretation of MacNeice's words seems to ring with a greater sense of authority and conclusion than we hear in "Snow", giving Mahon's poem "a dignity and calm, a sense of inevitability and value, which is no doubt apt to an elegy".¹²¹

The closing lines of Mahon's elegy bring, as convention would expect, some hints at consolation. The scene moves from the "bombed-out town" of MacNeice's London during the Blitz, to an "all-clear" signal. The "all-clear" is declared to the "spring, / Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new". This final line brings images of restoration, ritual cleansing, and even continuing life, and the poem ends on the positive word "new". However, the "all-clear" is brought to the "empty holes" of spring, and the "choked mud" in the final line ensures that a sense of desolation and loss is intrinsically linked with any consolatory image, which diminishes any sense of comfort. Although the actions in the final line seem to be attributed to the dead subject: "you bring / The all-clear [...] / Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new", it becomes clear that the dead man is unable to do these things. Indeed, the beginning of the final sentence reminds us of this, bringing up "the pneumonia of the ditch" as a reminder of

117 Edna Longley, quoted by Richard York, "Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon," 89.

118 Brendan Kennelly, 145.

119 York, 90.

120 Louis MacNeice, "Snow," *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007) 24.

121 York, 90.

the illness that killed MacNeice. It therefore becomes clear that any creative action has to be done by the still-living poet, and in drawing attention to his own actions, Mahon ends his elegy in the same way that poets before him have done: seeking to find consolation in his own creative ability to “keep the colours new”.

What Mahon does with MacNeice in this elegy is similar to Shelley's treatment of Keats in his elegy “Adonais”. Writing about “Adonais”, James Heffernan suggests that “Shelley consumes as well as re-creates the personality of Keats” in order to secure his own place in literary immortality.¹²² In elegies written for a fellow poet, it is perhaps to be expected that there will be a degree of competition involved; that, while wishing to memorialise the dead subject, the elegist will also be wishing to establish his own reputation. This can also be said about Milton's “Lycidas”, which might be read as an exploitation of the death of Edward King in order to prove Milton himself to be a serious poet.¹²³ Mahon does not seem to use his poem to express personal grief for MacNeice, but instead sets himself up against the literary past and present in order to find his own voice. It might therefore be suggested that “In Carrowdore Churchyard” does for Mahon some of the key things that famous elegies have done for their authors: in allowing the poet to set himself in competition against a dead, and therefore now impotent, precursor, it provides a way in which Mahon can establish his poetic career.¹²⁴ It also does this by providing a set of conventions with which Mahon can engage, and crucially, conventions which he can manipulate and mould to conform to his own purposes as he develops the genre to suit his particular situation. This early engagement with elegy, then, might be said to characterise the way in which Mahon would later call upon poetic tradition as the political situation in Northern Ireland began to demand more of a response from the poets of the region.

Mahon approaches elegy from a number of directions. “A Lighthouse in Maine” does not overtly mourn a human death, being one in a series of poems which deal with other works of art.¹²⁵ The poem ostensibly describes the scene in Edward Hopper's painting, “Highland Light” (1930). However, it is characteristically multi-layered in its intertextuality. Another well-known work of art is referenced in the final stanzas of the poem:

You turn a corner and
There it is, shining
In modest glory like

The soul of Adonais.
Out you get and
Walk the rest of the way. (46-51)

122 See Introduction, n. 35.

123 Sacks argues that in writing an elegy for fellow-poet Edward King, Milton's “ambition was not merely to write a consummate pastoral poem but to secure immortality,” (90-1).

124 This would seem to differ from Heaney's use of poetic predecessors and contemporaries in developing his career: while Heaney's method seems to be more like collaboration, Mahon's fits more closely with Harold Bloom's theories of anxiety of influence, as the poet competes with, and seems to try to overcome, his literary ancestors.

125 Mahon, “A Lighthouse in Maine,” *Selected Poems* (London/Oldcastle: Viking/Gallery P, 1991) 142-3.

The mention of “Adonais” in Mahon's poem makes reference to the final stanza of Shelley's poem:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the eternal are.¹²⁶

Shelley's poem progresses through the conventional stages of elegiac mourning: lamentation, praise and consolation. It follows the pattern of Milton's “Lycidas” in focusing firstly upon the natural world and then upon an aspect of contemporary society, before moving towards a transcendent consolation.¹²⁷ In mourning a fellow-poet, the speaker of “Adonais” seeks comfort not only for the loss of the dead subject, but also for the anticipated loss of his own life, and poetic career. The transcendent consolation in “Adonais”, rather than being based upon the idea of a heavenly afterlife, seems to come from the promise of a literary immortality, as the poet's works are passed on to posterity, and survive after his physical death.

The “abode where the eternal are” at the end of “Adonais” is not, as might initially be expected, a Christian heaven, but the dwelling place of dead poets; “The inheritors of unfulfilled renown”, now “robed in dazzling immortality”. Adonais is welcomed into this “kingless sphere” and bidden, “Assume thy wingèd throne, thou Vesper of our throng!”¹²⁸ This triumphant image of Adonais reigning in death is repeated in the final lines of the poem: “The soul of Adonais, like a star / Beacons from the abode where the eternal are”, but in the stanzas that come before these final lines, Shelley introduces a note of uncertainty which hangs over the final consolation, threatening to undermine it. Considering the tomb of the dead subject, the speaker asks “What Adonais is, why fear we to become?”, before instructing himself that:

52

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. – Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek![...]

53

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?
Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here
They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!
[...]
'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,
No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

126 Shelley, “Adonais,” *The Major Works*, 545.

127 Kishel, “Yeats's Elegies,” 79.

128 “Adonais,” 543.

That Light [...],
 The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me,
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.¹²⁹

Here, the speaker seems to be considering suicide, which is a distinctly un-elegiac mode in which to finish a poem. Elegy traditionally offers the poet the opportunity for catharsis and to poetically progress through the stages of mourning in order to regain a sense of perspective: encouraging the mourner to return to the “land of the living”.¹³⁰ Even in the final stanza, with its image of metaphysical consolation as “the soul of Adonais [...] Beacons” to him, the speaker is “borne darkly, fearfully afar”. Shelley offers a striking and memorable image in response to the loss that he mourns, but cannot, it seems, fully commit to believing in his own promise of immortality.

This brief overview shows that Mahon has picked a complex image to make allusion to. Mahon's treatment of Shelley's troubled consolation further complicates the image. The final two stanzas of “A Lighthouse in Maine” are not the only ones to carry echoes, or perhaps revisions, of Shelley's poem. Early in the poem, as the scene of Hopper's painting is described, Mahon writes:

The north light
 That strikes its frame

 Houses is not
 The light of heaven
 but that of this world... (11-15)

This seems to re-write the claim in Shelley's poem that “Heaven's light forever shines”, ensuring that Mahon's tone remains “down-to-earth” and understated, in comparison with Shelley's transcendent and metaphysical images. Again, a few stanzas later, Mahon describes light, this time that given off by the lighthouse itself:

Night and day it sits
 Above the ocean like
 A kindly eye, keeping

 And giving the rainbow
 Of its many colours,
 Each of them white. (34-39)

This also corresponds to “Adonais”, which dramatically claims that

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.

Again, Mahon's tone seems to deflate the high rhetoric of Shelley's radiantly white “Eternity”, reducing the lighthouse beam's “rainbow / Of its many colours” to being merely “white”. This,

129 “Adonais,” 544-5.

130 See Sacks: “The work of mourning [...] is largely designed to defend the individual against death,” 16.

indeed, is what Mahon does with the figure of Adonais himself. The lighthouse is described throughout the poem in deliberately earthly, non-transcendent ways: “approached by a dirt road” (3); “Bleached stone against / Bleached sky” (4-5); “It might be anywhere [...] But it is in Maine” (1 and 40, 42). In the final simile, it is found, “shining / In modest glory like // The soul of Adonais” (47-49). The word “modest” seems to be central to the way Mahon treats Shelley: in Shelley's poem, the “soul of Adonais”, far from shining modestly, burns “like a star”. The grand idea of the soul acting as a “Beacon” or spiritual “lighthouse” to guide the “spirit's bark” of the fearful poet is a far cry from the “modest glory” of the lighthouse in Mahon's poem. Mahon has stripped Shelley's image of its grandeur, and of the comfort, imperfect as it was, that might have been found in it. This sense of a loss of comfort, and the solitariness that is found in Shelley's “I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar” is found in the final lines of Mahon's poem: “Out you get and / Walk the rest of the way” (50-51). Where Shelley's poem seems to be written primarily to provide comfort and reassurance for the poet himself, Mahon's is addressed to a second person, as if the speaker is merely a guide:

You make a right
Somewhere beyond Rockland,
A left, a right,

You turn a corner... (43-46)

This gives the poem a very different tone to Shelley's: where the reader of “Adonais” seems to have been allowed to witness the speaker at his most vulnerable (“Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?”), Mahon's speaker remains detached and aloof. This happens on a formal level, in the use of short, clipped lines, and sentences stretched over stanza breaks, giving a sense of fragmentation.¹³¹ Mahon also creates this sense of detachment by offering few concrete details about the lighthouse: that it “might be anywhere” is stated twice; it is not struck with “The light of heaven”, “Nor is its task / To throw a punctual / Glow in the dark” (16-18); “Though built to shed / Light, it prefers / To shelter it” (22-24). Even the directions given to the addressee are vague: “You make a right / Somewhere beyond Rockland”. The poet seems determined to reveal the bare minimum of details about the lighthouse, seeming to “shelter” the poem's light, rather than shed it.¹³² In this poem, Mahon seems reluctant to provide his reader with easy answers. He seems to provide only clues, and the encouragement that the reader should search for the “lighthouse” on their own. However ironic and cold the tone of this poem, it might nevertheless be heard to contain a desire of community between the poet and his reader,

131 Mahon re-published this poem as part of a sequence entitled “Art Notes”, in which he re-orders the short lines into longer, almost perfectly iambic pentameter ones, *Life on Earth* (Oldcastle: Gallery P, 2008) 31.

132 Neil Corcoran notes that the “effort of detachment” in Mahon's poems means that “the poetry has little truck with the tropes of exile familiar from a great deal of modern Irish literature,” “Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs Series: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2002) 231-48 (231). This creates a paradox which is characteristic of the poet: Mahon exiles himself from Irish literature by refusing to comply with that literature's conventions of exile.

spoken as it is in the second person, and seeming to prompt an active engagement in the offer of directions.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, Mahon has said about his poetry: "It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungiven and Magherafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it."¹³³ The poem to which Mahon is referring here is "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford".¹³⁴ This poem was placed at the very end of Mahon's 1975 collection, The Snow Party, about which Deane has commented: "it eventually becomes clear that the predominant emotion of most of these poems is grief".¹³⁵ Parker points out that it "has been widely acknowledged as one of the most accomplished, enduring poetic meditations of the last half century", and goes on to comment on its form: "Structurally it is composed of six stanzas, each consisting of ten decasyllabic lines, each employing varying patterns of rhymes and half-rhymes".¹³⁶ While Terence Brown declares that "the poem builds with an assured gravity into a modern threnody for universal victimage", it might not easily be read as a traditional elegy.¹³⁷ It does not fit the conventions as closely as Longley's "Wreaths", which deals with individual deaths, and mourns them in a number of traditional ways. It is not even obviously a Troubles poem. Seamus Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies" shows that Troubles poems might make only oblique references to the contemporary political situation; Mahon is even more oblique than Heaney. Indeed, Mahon's subjects are "a thousand mushrooms", forgotten in an abandoned shed. These mushrooms are elegiac figures which stand for human suffering, those lost peoples of "Treblinka and Pompeii", and by implication, the victims of Northern Ireland's Troubles. Haughton notes that "[l]ike Heaney's Bog people, this image of mushrooms multiplying in the darkness becomes something like a Yeatsian 'fitting emblem of adversity', but without the reassuring chthonic and territorial resonances of Heaney's".¹³⁸

Mahon's poem is dedicated to J.G. Farrell, whose novel Troubles focuses on the Hotel Majestic, a symbol of the Anglo-Irish Big house.¹³⁹ The hotel in Farrell's novel is burned to the ground amidst the upheaval of the IRA attacks and the reprisals of the early twentieth century. Mahon's poem is set in "the grounds of (just such) a burnt-out hotel" (11), long after these "civil war days" (22). The opening line of the poem seems, tentatively, to offer hope, while simultaneously giving a sense of aftermath and suffered violence: "Even now there are places where a thought might grow" (1). This hope, despite suffering, is embodied by the anthropomorphised mushrooms, which "crowd to a keyhole" (13). While there are other living things present in the poem, like the rhododendrons and rooks, the mushrooms are the only ones

133 In the Chair, 115-6.

134 Mahon, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," Collected Poems, 89-90.

135 Deane, 161.

136 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, I, 231.

137 Brown, 141.

138 Haughton, 115.

139 J. G. Farrell, Troubles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, rpt. 1981).

given human qualities. Yet they remain mushroom-like in their humanness: they wait in “a foetor / of vegetable sweat” (21-22), their “pale flesh flak[es]” (31), they are “magi, moonmen” (43), “Web-throated, stalked like triffids” (45). Consequently, while in some ways the mushrooms are symbols of universal suffering, Mahon complicates our response by making them, simultaneously, alien and detached from our experience.¹⁴⁰

While the poem is a complex response to the suffering caused by political violence, it can, nevertheless, be seen as a development in the genre of Northern Irish political elegy. While it makes no direct reference to the dead of “Dungiven and Magherafelt”, the nod to Farrell and the mention of “civil war” foreground Ireland's political history, while the “Indian compounds” (6) in the first stanza allude to British imperialism. Crucially, the “people of Treblinka and Pompeii” (54) are symbolic of all victims of events and regimes against which they have no power to stand. All of these can be read as oblique references to Mahon's contemporary situation, just as Heaney used the Irish rebels of 1798 to write a poem about the 1916 uprising. As Haughton points out, the poem “offers a [...] sense of double vision, investing a local Irish setting with disturbing images of global horror”, and he goes on to highlight the significance of the poem's setting:

The poem nowhere mentions contemporary violence, but 1972 was the bloodiest year in the conflict, with the imposition of direct rule from Westminster, an escalating IRA bombing campaign, the British Army's Operation Motorman leading to a violent Protestant backlash and the introduction of internment for Loyalists. In other words, the horrific violence of the Anglo-Irish war and Civil War was being re-enacted, a brutal reminder that the Treaty of 1921 had left unresolved differences in Ireland to fester and grow, like the mushrooms in Mahon's poem (as the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973, would also do).¹⁴¹

Having identified some of the political aspects of the poem, it is also possible to trace the various elegiac characteristics that Mahon has chosen to include.

The elegy is defined as a “song of lamentation for the dead, usually mourning the loss of a personal friend or public figure, though sometimes offering a melancholic reflection on a lost way of life”, and it is traditionally “characterized by a temporal movement from lament to consolation”.¹⁴² Mahon's poem mourns for a loss greater than the death of one individual. Like Longley's elegies, which seem to mourn the fragmentation of society, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” is an elegy for the Northern Irish community, which has “come so far in darkness and in pain”. It laments the lost “lives” that the mushrooms “had to live” (58), and it also offers a form of poetic consolation similar to the one found in elegies from Milton's “Lycidas” to Heaney's “Requiem for the Croppies” and Longley's “Wreaths”; the consolation that a poem has been created in memory of what has been lost. The register of the poem, like that of “A Lighthouse in Maine”, is understated, subverting the elegiac tendency to elevate the mourned

140 Parker makes a similar point: “Mahon's poetic strategy depends on establishing distance and proximity, on exciting pity for and identification with the mushrooms' plight,” *Northern Irish Literature*, I, 232.

141 Haughton, 112, 115.

142 Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy,” 9; Marjorie Perloff, “The consolation theme in Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory',” *Modern Language Quarterly* 27 (1966): 306-22 (306).

subject to a mythological position. Instead, Mahon uses the figure of mushrooms, “the refuse of the ruined civilization”, with which to mourn.¹⁴³ Deane notes that in “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”, the “grief [...] is rescued from sentimentality by the precision with which it is articulated, the lovely matter-of-factness of detail which makes it ordinary and lets its intensity live in that”, citing lines like “A trickle of masonry, a shout from the blue / Or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane” (29-30).¹⁴⁴ In this use of precise, seemingly mundane detail, Mahon uses a technique similar to one found in some of Paul Muldoon's poems. The specificity of description in the work of both poets paradoxically causes the reader to feel, on the one hand, intimately involved in the scene described, whilst on the other hand it leaves the reader with a sense of distance as the abundance of factual detail might ultimately be seen as the poets' refusal to disclose any authentic emotion.

In the final stanza, the poet is begged by the mushrooms “to speak on their behalf / Or at least not to close the door again” (52-53). This seems to be what compels poets to write political elegies about the Troubles. There is a responsibility to speak about, or at least not to cover up, the situation. In writing an elegy, the poet creates a memorial to those who “have come so far in darkness and in pain” (57): the elegy preserves and immortalises those “naïve labours” (60). This, of course, is a simplified reading, and Mahon does not allow us such a neat conclusion. The pronouns in the final stanza are plural; the mushrooms beg not “me”, but “us” (51). This is characteristic of Mahon, who seems to insist that the reader shares this burden of responsibility with him: it is not just “you with your light meter and relaxed itinerary” (59), but also “us”, as witnesses of the poem, who are begged to “do something” (52). Parker writes that “the poem's stilted parting line can be construed as a challenge to the narrator, artist and audience, a demand for compassion, a reminder of shared obligations towards the casualties of history...”¹⁴⁵ Mahon does not claim that his poetry alone can provide a fitting memorial for victims of political violence; he seems, rather, to suggest that consolation might only be found in a communal effort to express the bereavements of the Troubles.

Parker notes the way in which “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” can be read as Mahon's attempt to define the role of the poet within a context of violence and conflict, saying that the poem

displays an acute consciousness of the moral ambiguities such a role entails. In presuming to speak for others, in exposing and subjecting them to his flash light, the narrator-artist – like the critic – may be seen as acting exploitatively, as committing a “kind of imaginative violence”. Yet to acknowledge that is not to devalue the poem's considerable moral force or commitment to the forgotten.¹⁴⁶

Deane is also aware of the ambiguous relationship between art and violence, noting that “contact with violence is regarded by some as a stimulus to the deep energies of creation.

143 Deane, 157.

144 Deane, 162.

145 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, I, 233-4.

146 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, I, 234.

Avoidance of it is regarded as a form of imaginative anaemia". He recognises that Mahon is "alert to these attitudes", yet he argues that the poet's "only loyalty is to the abandoned, the community which poses no threat to independence but which indeed liberates it".¹⁴⁷ Haughton warns that this poem should not be read merely in the light of Northern Ireland's Troubles:

The mushrooms dramatize the claims of the politically oppressed "To do something, to speak on their behalf", but they also speak for the masses of the dead from other eras [...]. To anchor the poem in the North of Ireland is to rob it of its own mobility on behalf of the immobilized, its generation of a metamorphic model, which allows it to imagine and represent a different scale of historical witnessing in other times and places.¹⁴⁸

Mahon's ironic and detached view gives him a broad poetic perspective which allows him to take in not only the horrors of a local conflict, but also more global injustices and atrocities. In this sense, his work is linked to that of later generations of Northern Irish poets, whose elegies for the victims of violence develop out of their immediate context and accommodate more universal images of suffering. This will be seen particularly in the work of Paul Muldoon, and of the generation of post-Peace Talk poets. Robert Faggen writes that

The willingness to question the value and power of art in relation to the atrocities and demands of reality has been part of the rhetoric of poetry for centuries but has come into renewed focus in the twentieth century primarily as a result of its war and genocide.¹⁴⁹

The first part of this thesis has served to show that one of the ways in which a generation of Northern Irish poets have wrestled with the question of art's relation to violence is through developing a genre of elegy which is tailored to their particular twentieth-century context. The following sections of this study will go on to show how successive generations have continued this work of mourning.

147 Deane, 162.

148 Haughton, 117.

149 Robert Faggen, "Irish poets and the world," The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry, 229-49 (241).

Part Two: The Second Generation

Chapter Three

“Mutilation of the body and the city”: Remembering and Dismembering Ciaran Carson’s Belfast¹

As west and east
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.²

Ciaran Carson, born in 1948, “represents a generation of poets who entered into adulthood in a context of extreme political turbulence”.³ This generation has written about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, following on from Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and perhaps most importantly, Seamus Heaney. Carson’s work is meticulously crafted, but in his approaches to form, tone and even diction, he seems to set himself apart from the previous generation. His poetic vision, which focuses almost exclusively upon Belfast, is on the one hand lighter and more playful in tone than Longley’s explorations of grief, or Heaney’s self-interrogating quest for appropriate “images and symbols”; on the other hand, Carson’s matter-of-fact, even dispassionate, recording of some of the horror and human cost of the Troubles gives his poetry an unsettling character, and the poet comes close, at times, to a Mahonian sense of detachment and irony. Parker, writing about the poem “Dresden”, is struck by “how markedly different it is in style from so many of the other ‘war’ poems of the period, particularly those of the Heaney-Longley-Mahon generation, and yet how conscious of their work”.⁴ While many critics employ the term “postmodern” to describe Carson’s work, he seems to resist this categorisation, as Tom Herron notes:

In Ciaran Carson’s poetry the categories of the subject, of consciousness, and of the body are always already dispersed, always already in circulation, and indeed, often in danger of disappearance. Much has been written about Carson’s postmodernism, or post-structuralism, but suffice to say that such neat definitions raise more problems than satisfactory answers, in that the poetry is more a play of modern and postmodern, traditional and innovative, oral and semiotic. But in asserting the post-humanism of the poetry this is not to erase the traces of the human subject in all its integrity or of a sense of community or civility.⁵

Carson’s poetry, like that of his fellow Northern Irish elegists, approaches the Troubles with the complexity that the difficult subject seems to demand, and requires sensitive reading.

1 Rand Brandes, “Ciaran Carson,” [Interview] *Irish Review* 8 (1990): 77-90 (87).

2 John Donne, “Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness,” *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith, (London:Penguin, 1996) 347-8.

3 Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 165.

4 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, II, 119.

5 Tom Herron, “The Body’s in the Post: Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Dispersed Body,” *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*, eds. Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999) 193-209 (201).

Like Mahon's work, the majority of Carson's *oeuvre* might be classed as elegiac, from the debut collection The New Estate, with its highly formal meditations upon Ireland and the poet's childhood, to Until Before After, which makes use of Carson's recent minimalist style, providing reflections on the illness and loss encountered in later life.⁶ Carson has entered the "mature" phase of his writing, and the trajectory of his career might be compared with that of his predecessors, particularly Heaney; as the poet approaches the later years of his life, the tone of his work tends increasingly towards self-elegy. Taken from his most recent volume, "The hinge" shows the mature Carson's tendency to reflect upon his own mortality:⁷

The hinge

is what the door
depends on this

I know that
I will not

know until
I find a door

whose hinges
are so super-

naturally
oiled I breathe

these words
upon it

whereupon
it swings (1-14)

This exemplifies Carson's recent collections, which have tended towards the short line, and which seem, in their imagist style, a far cry from his earlier extended lines.⁸ However, in this poem, and in the volume as a whole, are found some of the themes which run throughout Carson's work: a fascination with words and the power of language, and an awareness of the fragility of life.

For the current study, it is necessary to focus upon just one aspect of Carson's elegiac poetry, and this chapter will therefore consider the way in which Carson writes Troubles elegies which mourn not only for individuals, but for the losses experienced by an entire city.⁹ Stephen Regan has provided the following definition of elegy: "a song of lamentation for the dead,

6 Ciaran Carson, The New Estate (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1976); Until Before After (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2010).

7 Carson, Until Before After, 31. While I have not reproduced the titles of most of the poems that I have quoted in entirety, they are necessary when quoting poems from the two most recent books, as the title of each poem marks the beginning of the sentence. They are therefore given in italics at the beginning of each poem, where appropriate.

8 In fact, this fourteen-line poem might be read as a Carsonian sonnet, and there are many ways in which these short-lined poems relate, both formally and thematically, to the earlier work, as will be seen later in the chapter.

9 See Carson's interview with Frank Ormsby, The Linen Hall Review, 8.1 (1991): 5-8.

usually mourning the loss of a personal friend or public figure, though sometimes offering a melancholic reflection on a lost way of life”, citing Thomas Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” as an example of the latter kind.¹⁰ Expanding upon this, it is suggested that Northern Irish elegies, which are by their very nature poems that are deeply connected with a particular geographic and temporal space, might serve as works of mourning both for people and for places.¹¹ In Carson's case, Northern Irish elegy is used to work through the grief encountered in, and by, Belfast throughout the Troubles. The poetic form of *dinnseanchas* was identified in the introduction to this thesis as one of the Irish influences that has helped to shape Northern Irish elegy as a genre, and this tradition of “place” poetry is one in which Carson is interested.¹² Alex Houen notes that

Carson is just one of a number of younger poets [...] who began to address Northern Ireland's Troubles by questioning the sort of archetypal underpinnings presented in Heaney's approach. For Carson [...], this has also involved a further examination of the *dinnseanchas* in the context of postmodern claims about linguistic arbitrariness, internationalism, and narrative fragmentation.¹³

When asked by an interviewer whether he is “trying to synthesise fragmentary experiences [of Belfast] into a cohesive narrative?” and if it is “important for you that things which may otherwise be lost are fixed into poetic memory?” the poet's response was that:

I'm interested in the city of the imagination. I have a dream version of Belfast which in many ways I can negotiate more successfully than the real Belfast. Walking around any city is a kind of narrative, and the very actuality of the city provides cohesion. And most of my books have some overlying or underlying structural principle. Fragments strewn over a familiar landscape.¹⁴

Carson's poetic project seems to be one of gathering or re-membling disembodied fragments of the city, made up of various memories and mementos, and creating an elegiac text in which Belfast can be “fixed into poetic memory”.¹⁵ Carson seems to be drawn towards the act of remembering due to the very fact that

memory is a complex phenomenon, which has various, and at times contradictory, implications for individuals, cultures and nations. Memory recovers and re-covers, it hurts and it heals, it haunts and empowers. Memory brings together the past and the present. But it also leads us towards the future.¹⁶

10 Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy,” 9.

11 Michael Böss notes that “memory is closely linked to place. Places evoke memories of the past,” “Relating to the Past: Memory, Identity and History,” *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, eds. Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Lene Yding Pederson (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) 20-33 (27).

12 Kathleen McCracken notes that “Carson has been referred to as a modern *dinnseanchai* and may well be likened to a latter-day Joyce, chronicling the actual and cognitive geography of his ‘high place’”, “Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional,” *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature vol. 2, Irish Literary Studies vol. 43 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 356-72 (363).

13 Houen, 254.

14 Nick Topping, “Out of the Pub, and into Qub: Nick Topping Talks to Professor Ciaran Carson,” *Fortnight*, no. 420 (2003):16-17 (16).

15 See McCracken, 362. See also Carson's comments on *Belfast Confetti* and dismemberment in his interview with Brandes, 87.

16 Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Lene Yding Pederson, “Introduction: Memory as Re-

In mapping Belfast, Carson is both remembering and dismembering the city, but with the final aim, this chapter seeks to illustrate, of creating a body of work which will stand as an elegiac memorial for a city wounded by Northern Ireland's Troubles.

Carson's poetry is highly literary and indebted to a wide range of sources: the long line in The Irish for No and Belfast Confetti is often attributed to the inspiration of C. K. Williams, while the use of very short lines in Breaking News, On the Night Watch and Until Before After might owe something to William Carlos Williams and other imagist poets.¹⁷ The re-working of the sonnet in The Twelfth of Never, For All We Know, On the Night Watch and, arguably, Until Before After, links Carson to the elegiac sonnets of poets ranging from Milton to Tony Harrison, as well as to his predecessors Heaney and Longley.¹⁸ Carson's poetry also makes use of French and Latin and translates from the Classics and from poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, as well as from Irish writers, old and new. He has named Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Keats, Robert Frost and Derek Mahon as influences, among many others.¹⁹ However, despite this broad range of influences, Carson's poetry does not have the same "internationalist" character as that of Mahon, or Louis MacNeice.²⁰ This is perhaps because, unlike many of his fellow Northern writers, Carson has remained in Belfast throughout his career. His poetry, while drawing on a wealth of poetic tradition, is "almost obsessively urban", and he has been called the "one truly urban Belfast poet".²¹

Another characteristic of his poetry, which seems to sit in contradiction with the highly educated references with which it is packed, is the voice in which it is delivered. The speaking voice in many of his poems is characteristic of Belfast. Carson's poetry is spoken in "bar talk"; he seems to aim for a vernacular, story-telling diction, which is aided by the lengthy lines of the poetry of his mid-career, the "long, convoluted narratives and an orientation towards aural

covering," Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present, iix-xvii (xvi).

17 Hufstader points out that whereas "Whitman and Ginsberg, and after them Williams, use the long line for self-exposure and self-criticism, Carson's early long line, like much rambling narrative, consists of stratagems for avoiding direct speech. The more we hear, the less we know," 221. Steven Matthews has also pointed out that Carson's new, "very short lines" might be inspired by the "slim, arterial forms" of Heaney's North. Matthews acknowledges that the link between Carson and North had previously been made by Carson's "intelligently sceptical review" of the collection, and suggests that Carson continues to write in an almost combative relationship with Heaney, "Bodies of Work," Poetry Review, 100.1 (2010) accessed 03/02/11 <www.poetrysociety.org.uk>. The Irish for No (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1987); Belfast Confetti (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1989); Breaking News (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2003); On the Night Watch (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2009).

18 For All We Know (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2008).

19 A number of critics have noted the way in which Carson seems to create his own literary tradition, in a manner reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges; see Patricia Horton, "'Faery lands forlorn': reading tradition in the poetry of Ciaran Carson," Ciaran Carson: critical essays, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts P, 2009) 161-81.

20 Neil Corcoran points out: "The way Carson uses literature may imply that literature is almost what his poems aspire not to be." "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson's The Irish for No", The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland, ed. Neil Corcoran, (Bridgend: Seren-Poetry Wales P Ltd, 1992) 213-33 (232).

21 Broom, 165. Hufstader, 219.

effect”.²² Carson has spoken about this: “my aim was, in that poetry that deals with the ‘Troubles’, to act as a camera or tape-recorder, and present things in a kind of edited surreality. An ear overhearing things in bars. Snatches of black Belfast humour”.²³ This fascination with language might be seen as one of the ways in which Carson, and others of his generation, are indebted to the groundwork done by Heaney: “For Carson and Muldoon, that sense of new possibility which owes something to Heaney’s use of the vernacular in his poetry liberates their ironic, contingent relation to things”.²⁴

“Contingency” is a key idea in Carson’s poetry, relating to language, identity, and the political situation in Northern Ireland.²⁵ In dealing with these themes, Carson focuses on Belfast, and its ever-changing physical nature. His fascination with the geography of Belfast is captured in the constantly repeated trope of the map. Maps can act as a “snapshot” of the city, preserving it in some way, even while the features that they detail may cease to exist in the physical realm. The map is also a metaphorical, “mental” one in Carson’s poetry, as the poet himself becomes the record of lost streets and neighbourhoods. The theme of memory is tied up with the idea of mapping the city, and the poem as a map is juxtaposed with the physical entity of “Belfast” as a kind of memorial to stand against the impermanent, ever-changing city.²⁶ This

22 Broom, 165. See also Carson’s comments: “When I did come back to writing it was as through trying to accommodate bar-talk. Speech and slabber can be entirely odd and strange if you hear it right, or maybe I mean wrong. Sitting in a pub, you can tune into some ostensibly ordinary conversation, and it can become weird and wonderful. I wanted to get that into the poetry,” *In the Chair*, 145.

23 *In the Chair*, 148.

24 Matthews, *Irish Poetry*, 194. However, John Goodby argues that it was necessary for Carson to “break free” from the influence of Heaney: “Heaney, like Antaeus, cannot be challenged successfully on his own terrain. Only a radically new style – one in which the critique of myth is implicit in anti-lyricism, in foregrounded commercial detritus, in the bricky streets and alleys of Belfast – would enable Carson to break free of the older poet’s gravitational power,” *Irish poetry since 1950 : From stillness into history* (Manchester and New York: Manchester U P, 2000) 192.

25 Houen expands on this idea: “If the writings of Northern Ireland poets such as Carson and Muldoon are saturated with the conditional and the subjunctive, it is precisely because potentiality in Northern Ireland is a very real concern. All the more reason for paramilitaries and security forces alike to try and map situations. But, as Carson points out, in ‘Turn Again’, the possibility of mapping is frequently undermined by the city’s own shifting contours [...]. So while the image of the map arises throughout Carson’s work, mapping itself is invariably made provisional [...]. How to chart the dangerous potentiality of Belfast, then? This is the problem that Carson surveys in a number of poems that continue in the line of the *dinnseanchas*. It is not just an issue of urban cartography, but of delineating variables of political terror itself,” 261.

26 McCracken writes: “With a virtuosity that rests comfortably equidistant between the grounded syllabics of Heaney’s verse and Muldoon’s concentrated sleight-of-hand, he has invented a poetry in which the experience of language and place are effectively, often ironically, transposed, one becoming a ‘map’ of the other,” 362. See also Shane Murphy: “Cartography in [Carson’s] work has many functions: it marks out territory and records the location of peace-walls, security banners and republican/loyalist enclaves; it is an *aide mémoire*, facilitating an ultimately doomed project of reclamation, retrieval and remembrance; it instigates a reflection both on the inexactitude of memory and on the intersection between story and history. Carson realises what cultural geographers have increasingly come to accept, that a map is not a text which presents a simple mimetic representation of a territory. A map constructs the world rather than simply reproducing it, since the knowledge which it embodies is socially constructed. And a map can be redrawn in any number of ways and can symbolise change rather than fixity,” “Sonnets, centos and long lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson,” *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 189-208 (204).

desire to create a lasting artefact in the face of provisionality is one of the key aims of elegy.²⁷ Carson's Belfast poems exhibit profoundly elegiac qualities in dealing with loss, fragmentation, and the need to construct something lasting and permanent as a consolation in the face of the transience that is experienced in the city.

The elegiac practice of mapping Belfast can be traced throughout Carson's work, beginning in his 1987 collection The Irish for No. "Belfast Confetti" describes the "labyrinth" of the city: "Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street [...] Crimea Street".²⁸ "Smithfield Market" goes further in connecting the idea of a map of Belfast with the "labyrinth" of mythology:

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered I glimpsed
a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in
the labyrinth.²⁹

Carson subverts the elegiac method of mythologising his subject: instead of using a Classical figure to elevate his poem, he reinforces the sinister implications of the "labyrinth" by implying that the city is inhabited by "[s]omething" monstrous. In the light of the Troubles, the Minotaur might be an "adequate symbol" for the violence that has inhabited Belfast.³⁰ The repetition of the street names throughout Carson's poetry also works in an elegiac way. Repetition is a central element of mourning, as it not only reinforces the idea of loss, but also begins the work of commemoration and memorial.³¹ The street names which recur throughout Carson's poems can be read as cries of lamentation, and also as a commitment to remember and re-member the fragmented city.³²

While the majority of the poems in The Irish for No mention streets and places in Belfast, "The Exiles' Club" stands out as one thoroughly permeated with the theme of mapping the city, and exemplifies the way in which this act of memory relates to the conventions of

27 Christina Hunt Mahony: "Tracing, mapping, and remembering can counteract the threat of eradication of the physical," Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition (Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1998) 82.

28 "Belfast Confetti," Collected Poems, 93.

29 "Smithfield Market," Collected Poems, 99.

30 Corcoran writes: "The city as labyrinth is a staple modern and postmodern figure; but Carson renders it here with an almost Gothic *frisson* by raising the ghost of the labyrinth's original inhabitant. [...] The key to the map of Belfast may offer not a way out but only a way further in to the ungovernable source of its own conflagration. Always out-of-date (as explosions and demolitions eat away the city's fabric) and even when burning, the map of Belfast harbours within itself the most minatory of possibilities," The Chosen Ground, 222.

31 Sacks, 19.

32 Carson himself provides reasons for these repetitions: "For years I've had a series of recurrent dreams about Belfast – nightmares, sometimes, or dreams of containment, repression, anxiety and claustrophobia ... often, I'm lost in an ambiguous labyrinth between the Falls and the Shankill; at other times, the city is idealized and takes on a Gothic industrial beauty. It's a landscape I know almost better than the waking city: so at times I'm disappointed that the complicated scenery of the dream world is not to be found on the 'real' map [...] Certain phrases and images which are repeated in the poems have their basis in those recurrent dreams; and because the dreams take the form of serials, the repetition provides an on-going narrative which is not unlike that of the longer poems," "Interview with Frank Ormsby," 5.

elegy.³³ Here, the names of streets are joined by other names: “Red Heart Stout, Park Drive cigarettes and Dunville's whiskey” (2), “Slate Street School”, the “Nemo Café” (8), and the pawnshop owner, “Paddy Lavery” (9). The act of naming is a work of memorial, and the repetition of these names also acts as a statement of national identity which is described more fully in the poem's companion prose piece, “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii”, in Carson's following collection, Belfast Confetti.³⁴ As Broom notes: “in both pieces a group of Irish in Australia spend their evenings collectively reconstructing the area of their childhood in Belfast”. She goes on to comment that

While there is a sense that such nostalgia might be debilitating, producing only comfortable escapism, there is also a fascination with the way in which mental maps and systems are more dogged in survival than the bricks and mortar of the city, even though they may have no particular claim to accuracy.³⁵

Broom's mention of “escapism” brings to mind the theme of exile, which has been identified as a key theme in the elegies of first generation poets like Heaney and Mahon. The “Irish in Australia”, following the Troubles from a distance, suffer, it might be inferred, the kind of guilt described by Heaney in “The Strand at Lough Beg” and “Station Island”, as he learned of his cousin's death from south of the Northern Irish border. However, these works of collective memory and re-remembering might also be read in a positive light, as John Goodby does: “Belfast is revealed again and again as a site of continual change and imaginative possibility”.³⁶

“Turn Again”, and “Ambition”, both published in Belfast Confetti, each function as elegies for the city.³⁷ “Turn Again”, introduces ideas of metamorphosis, repetition and alternative realities, which pervade Carson's work.

There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was
never built.
A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that
never existed.
Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane,
Stone-Cutter's Entry –
Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there
are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons.

The linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs
by a thread.
When someone asks me where I live, I remember where I used
to live.
Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into
A side street to try to throw off my shadow, and history
is changed. (1-9)

The poem's sonnet-like structure includes a stanza break two-thirds of the way through; with a

33 “The Exiles' Club,” Collected Poems, 107.

34 “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii,” Collected Poems, 160-2.

35 Broom, 169-70.

36 Goodby, 293.

37 Collected Poems: “Turn Again,” 125; “Ambition,” 138-9.

similar effect to a volta (this is, perhaps, the title's "turn"). Each line contains exactly seventeen syllables, giving the poem the visual effect for which Carson is well known, with lines that exceed the width of the page, as well as giving every line (which are, on the whole, end-stopped) the aural quality of haiku.³⁸ Despite this formal consideration, the tone is conversational: the language is not elevated; there are no obvious rhymes or rhythm patterns; the pauses within the lines are placed at different intervals. The tone of the poem might seem light, but it contains darker undertones, and this is achieved by the understated diction. The line "And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons" is, on the one hand, simply a statement of fact, but on the other, an ominous reminder of the unstable political context in which the poem is written: the connotations of the internment of political prisoners in Northern Ireland making it an emotionally-charged image.

"Turn Again" focuses on Carson's favourite trope of the map, and on his particular interest in mapping the city of Belfast. This raises issues of the mutability brought by time; of the provisionality involved in recording moments in history, and even in planning for the future; of the impermanence and constant metamorphosis of a city, especially one facing the disruption of sectarian violence.³⁹ The map in the poem is, from the outset, inaccurate: it "shows the bridge that was never built", which suggests the impossibility of one created artefact representing another. Indeed, in his prose piece "Revised Version", Carson quotes a line from an early poem where he states that "the city is a map of the city": only the city itself can be a true representation of its ever-changing reality.⁴⁰ Carson again quotes himself in an interview, when asked about his obsession with maps: "It's interesting to me that a map is only useful by how far it deviates from reality. The perfect map would be reality – the city as a map of the city. For a map to work, it has to use shorthand, or symbols, or metaphor, and in this it resembles poetry".⁴¹ With an awareness of mis-representation made clear at the start of the poem, Carson investigates the map, "which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed". He explores alternative, perhaps idealised, realities, which links his practice to that of an elegist.⁴²

38 Corcoran cites a private letter from Carson, in which he mentions his reasons for writing in seventeen-syllable lines: "The length of line is a story-teller's deliberate fast-paced gabble. It's also based around *haiku*'s seventeen syllables, and the intention is to have a kind of *haiku* clarity within the line – stumbling-blocks of word-clusters, piling up adjectives, etc," Chosen Ground, 217. Carson also discusses this: "... the long line sometimes aspires to be a haiku. About 17 syllables. Each line can be like a haiku-like unit, so that you have all the precision you need in the context of an apparently long rambly poem," In the Chair, 145.

39 See Broom on "Turn Again": "Carson's Belfast is a city where nothing is stable and the mind's attempts to schematise or make sense of the city, whether through mental maps or physical maps, are always thwarted by the pace of change, the instinct towards secrecy and the degree to which maps incorporate ideological agendas," 168.

40 "Revised Version" (from Belfast Confetti, 1989) Collected Poems, 173-6 (176); "The Bomb Disposal" (from The New Estate, 1976) Collected Poems, 40. See also Goodby: "Only Belfast is adequate to Belfast, and maps of the city, as 'Turn Again' and 'Revised Version' suggest, are inaccurate as soon as they are conceived," Irish poetry since 1950, 293.

41 "Interview with Frank Ormsby," 5.

42 Milton, for example, remembers an idealised pastoral youth in "Lycidas".

Indeed, the poem has a mournful tone, as the poet remembers what the city has lost: “Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone”. The image of the map is a starting point for an exploration of memory: while the opening line's “There is a map...” seems to refer to a specific physical object, the poem is constantly drawn into a description of Belfast itself: the lost streets in the fourth line are present on the map, and therefore “are gone” refers to the present reality of the city. If the map is an unsatisfactory representation of the city, the poem itself is a consoling construction, as it is able to take into account the changing nature of the city, while acknowledging the aspects that have been lost, thereby preserving them in memory. The second part of the poem returns the focus to the physical nature of the map: “The linen backing is falling apart”. However, this is undermined by the repetition of “falling apart” in the mention of “the Falls Road” which “hangs by a thread”.⁴³ The hyphen in the line seems to separate the sentence into literal and figurative descriptions; so while “hangs by a thread” might be read literally, the fact that it sounds like a cliché (i.e. a “dead” metaphor) ensures that the clause is read as such. The way in which “*Falls Road*” repeats “*falling apart*” emphasises the idea of disintegration on a civil level, taking place in the “real” city, rather than merely on the linen-backed map of the poem. Carson's formal decisions also emphasise this sense of vulnerability, as the seventeen syllables of the line ensure that the sentence itself “hangs / by a thread”.

Finally, the “map” of the city ceases to be a physical record, but one which exists in memory only: the poet himself becomes the map. “I remember where I used to live.” The “someone” in lines 7 and 8 might be an innocent passer-by, but with the repeated questions, “someone asks me where I live”, “asks me for directions”, and the poet's desire to “throw off my shadow”, there is an implied threat. This is reminiscent of “Question Time”, where the poet is required to remember details of the Falls Road area of Belfast when interrogated by armed paramilitary fighters. In “Question Time”, he must produce an accurate mental map in order to preserve his own life.⁴⁴ In this experience, the poet embodies the map:

The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies. Eventually I pass the test.⁴⁵

This interrogation can be read into the final sentence of the poem. “I turn into / A side street” might ostensibly describe the poet's journey, but the line break encourages the idea of

43 As Corcoran notes: “here the ‘linen’ backs the Belfast map since Belfast's economic development through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely dependent on the linen trade. In ‘Turn Again’ the figure of the map follows Belfast's social history into the present moment, however, with its implications of disintegration, directionlessness and pursuit,” *Chosen Ground*, 222.

44 Broom notes that while Carson recognises the inadequacy of the representation that a created thing can offer, his poetry simultaneously “recognises the necessity – and the inescapability – of the human effort towards representation, and much of his poetry is concerned with the workings of memory: the continuous construction and re-construction of mental maps of the past and the present. The mental map, as opposed to the physical one, has the potential to be fluid and provisional, continually responsive to the contingencies of event,” 169.

45 “Question Time,” (from *Belfast Confetti*, 1989) *Collected Poems*, 165-70 (170).

metamorphosis: the poet transforms into a part of the city. This reading might be continued for the remainder of the line: “to throw off my shadow”. While the “shadow” might represent the questioner of the previous lines, it might also be the poet's shadow, his personal set of experiences within the city, and he therefore desires to escape by affecting a metamorphosis by which “history is changed”.⁴⁶ The desire for transformation, which is present throughout the poem, and introduced in the title, is felt strongly as the poem concludes. There is a sense in which that which has been lost, or is continually being lost, might be preserved. This is introduced in the image of the map, which becomes a mental map, or memory, which in turn is re-constructed by the poet himself as he creates the poem.⁴⁷ While this conclusion is provisional - the poet is aware that his own creation is counter to the “reality” of the city - it nevertheless suggests a sense of consolation in the act of poetry, in its ability to provide an alternative reality, a space for memory. Therefore, while contemporary elegies might seem to move away from the consolatory image of a heavenly city offered in Milton's “Lycidas”, Carson's “Turn Again” represents a clear engagement with the elegiac tradition in his search for a way of writing about the loss and confusion experienced in an increasingly fragmented and impermanent city.

“Ambition” has more recognisable features of elegy and is more politically explicit than “Turn Again”. The poet remembers his father, in a poem permeated by images of the Troubles. Carson's relationship with his father, or the sense of the relationship that is conveyed through his poetry, links his work to that of Michael Longley: many of Longley's elegies are for his father, and, as has been seen in the poem “Wreaths”, the poetic act of mourning for victims of the Troubles seems to be bound up with the poet's private grief. Carson's father was alive as “Ambition” was written, and his depiction of the father-son relationship differs from Longley's in a number of ways. While Longley's father fought in the First World War, enabling his son to consider the casualties of the Troubles in relation to the losses of an international conflict, Carson's father worked as a postman in Belfast, developing an intimate knowledge of the city. However, while Longley's father-son relationship is understood to be depicted purely from the son's perspective, Carson's is presented in a more complex way.⁴⁸ There is distance between the figure of the poet and the figure of his father in poems such as “Ambition”, and the father's voice is one of the many plural voices for which Carson allows space.⁴⁹ In contrast, there is a

46 Hufstader, writing about “Question Time”, observes that “To become the map of the past is to experience obsolescence, death,” 237. If this is the case in “Turn Again”, then the poem might also be read as self-elegy.

47 See Houen on the potential for the poem to become a map, 262.

48 Carson's father has been called by Parker a “recurring, but enabling presence” in the collection Belfast Confetti, but this comment is later qualified by the observation that in “Ambition”, the “son's relationship with his father is constantly defined through alternating images of separation and closeness,” Northern Irish Literature, II, 124.

49 The compilation of both the poet's and his family members' memories in this poem might be related to ideas of identity formation, like those put forward by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who “demonstrated how individual memories – and, by implication, identities – were interwoven with

more consistent tone in Longley's poetic voice, which tends to speak for, and therefore homogenise, the various subjects of his poetry.

“Ambition” is labyrinthine and highly allusive. There are references which require the reader to work hard for an understanding: like the term “sfumato” (20), which is casually placed in one of the poem's long lines.⁵⁰ The poem appears to be assembled from fragments of narratives and personal memories, and has a disjointed tone. Taken out of their immediate surroundings in the poem, a number of images seem to fit the expectations of elegy: the “coffin nails” (5); the mention of “birth or resurrection” (30); the “black armband” (56); and the words “mourned” (57) and “funeral” (67), for example. In addition, there are clear references to the Troubles or at least to a state of civil unrest: “mobile checkpoint” (22); “He was reported” (39); “tit-for-tat campaign” (55); “internee”(64). However, while individual phrases and images can be labelled as elegiac, or political, the poem as a whole is harder to pin down. Each image is contextualised within the poem by the way in which it links to other images: the “coffin nails” – cigarettes – described at the start of the poem not only link the smoker's habit to death, but also relate to memories of the father's experience as an “internee”, which in turn recalls the memory of the poet's internee uncle. The theme of death is therefore related on a number of levels to the political situation, yet without any overt political statement being made.

While the poem initially seems to be rambling and random, it is organised by its recurring themes, and the various layers and locations of memory fit into an overall structure. The poem begins and ends with the journey of the poet and his father up Belfast's Black Mountain. Within this setting, the focus is on the shared activity of smoking, and the memories of imprisonment that this brings up:

We'd been smoking “coffin nails”, and he'd been talking of his
time inside... (5)

...my uncle was
inside for seven years.
At his funeral they said how much I looked like him: I've got
his smoker's cough,
At any rate. And now my father's told to cut down on the
cigarettes... (66-68)

The number seven repeatedly appears alongside these images. In the first mountain-top scene, the poet's father goes on to remember that “inside”, “seven cigarette ends made a cigarette” (7), which leads into one of the father's many aphorisms: “*Keep a thing for seven years, / You'll always find a use for it*” (7-8, original emphasis). The corresponding mountain-top scene at the

collective memories and identities, and how individuals were continuously revising their personal memories so that they came to fit with the remembered past of the groups and communities to which they belonged,” Michael Böss, 24. This seems especially relevant in the context of the remembering of the past that has been carried out by the various groups and communities involved with the Troubles.

⁵⁰ Carson uses the term to describe the effect of looking through a “breathed-on” window. A definition of the term is: “the technique of allowing tones and colours to shade gradually into one another”, “sfumato,” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th ed, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 1314.

end of the poem similarly recalls one of the father's sayings, and again it is linked to the number seven: “*God never opens one door but he shuts another: my uncle was inside for seven years*” (66, original emphasis). The theme which leads out of the first scene, and subsequently leads into the final scene, is that of a journey. The first remembered speech from the poet's father

...reminds me
Of the saint who, when he had his head cut off, picked up his
head and walked
With it for seven miles. And the wise man said, *The distance
doesn't matter,
It's the first step that was difficult.* (8-11)

This idea travels across the stanza break into the following line: “Any journey's like that” (12). The first step on this journey of memory takes Carson, characteristically, directly into the suburbs of the city, as time is described as a “road / [...] fraught with ramps and dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti” (13-14). The journey through the city arrives at a “suburban tennis match” (16), and the poet seems to find himself observing the domestic interior of the city:

...The window that my nose is pressed against
is breathed-on, giving
Everything a sfumato air. I keep drawing faces on it, or
practising my signature. (19-20)

The way in which the poet describes “drawing faces” or “practising my signature” on the glass through which he views the city seems to imply that he is writing his own meaning onto the scene.⁵¹ Indeed, this is what Carson is doing with each of the memories that he gives voice to in the poem: while there are certainly plural voices within the poem, it is the poet who has inherited them, and has ultimately crafted them into his finished work.⁵² This is mirrored at the end of the poem, where the theme of journey is once more linked to the physical geography of Belfast, and to the sense of the inheritance that the poet has gained from his father:

Threading
Through the early morning suburbs and the monkey-puzzle
trees, a smell of coffee lingers,
Imprisoned in the air...

...I think

I'm starting, now,
To know the street map with my feet, just like my father. (57-59, 60-61)

With the word “Imprisoned”, the theme of journey leads the poem back to the father's memories, and to the overarching framework of the journey up the mountain.

Within this structure, the central section of the poem deals more directly with the

51 Whether he is looking out onto the street from inside, or outside looking in, the same reading can be made of this action.

52 This is, arguably, a common feature of elegy, as can be seen in the example of Shelley's “Adonais”, where Shelley seems to consume and reconstruct the figure of Keats for the purposes of his poem, and also in Thomas Hardy's elegies for his wife, Emma, where the dead woman's voice appears to be heard, ventriloquized through the poet's writing, as he seeks to re-create what he has lost (or what, indeed, he never actually had, i.e. a loving relationship with his wife).

Troubles, and with a sense of the poet's experience being intermingled with his father's, which seems to equip him in his response to the city and the political situation. The "road" of time, which initially takes the poet into the Belfast suburbs, subsequently leads him into more dangerous territory: "a mobile checkpoint" (22). He is interrogated by soldiers in a scene which echoes Carson's previously mentioned works, "Turn Again" and "Question Time". The information demanded resembles the experience of the poet's father, who, as the poem later discloses, was wrongly imprisoned for seven weeks while "it was his younger brother they were after all the time" (65). The checkpoint interrogation sounds as if "The one they're looking for is not you, but it might be you. Looks like you / Or smells like you" (25-26). This thought, perhaps initiated by the soldiers' demand for "Your father's name" (24), evokes a childhood memory:

And suddenly, the posthumous aroma
of an empty canvas
Postman's sack – twine, ink, dead letters – wafts out from
the soldiers'
Sodden khaki. (26-28)

While this image connects the poet's memory of an interrogation with memories of his father, and also links these memories with a sense of threat in the words "posthumous" and "dead letters", Carson is also doing something more complex with this image. Herron, writing about the ways in which poetry might deal with acts of atrocity, writes about the need for an elegist mourning a violent death to reconstruct and "reformulate" the body of the victim, as an "inversion" of the act carried out by the killers, who have "undone the protection of body and clothes; they have publicized their privacies, and have sent these body images into the postal system of infinite media reproduction. They are the post-men".⁵³ While Herron, in this instance, is discussing Longley's "Wreaths", his suggestions might be applied to Carson's poem. The word "postman" is foregrounded in "posthumous", and it is this smell of death that is coming from the soldiers – men trained to kill. Carson's Catholic family was on the receiving end of punishment from the state, with the two brothers (Carson's father and uncle) interned as political prisoners and it might therefore be expected that the poet, albeit subtly, portrays the representatives of the state as killers.

This effect is momentary, however, and the sheer humanity of the soldiers is emphasised: "It's obvious they're bored: one of them is watching Wimbledon / On one of those postage-stamp-sized TV screens" (28-29). While the switch to tennis might seem unexpected, it has already been introduced in the "suburban tennis match" of the previous stanza. As well as continuing the link with the poet's father, with the "postage-stamp" of a screen, it allows an oblique discussion of the features and functions of language; one of Carson's key preoccupations. The language used by a disembodied voice – the "unseen talking head" (30) of

53 Herron, 197.

the sports commentator - is highly figurative, as the language of sport seems to echo the language of violence. Indeed, Carson emphasises the individual words used in lines 30-31: "He's using words like / *Angled, volley, smash* and *strategy*". Carson highlights the way in which the language of sports commentary is often cliché-ridden, and in this poem he follows the practice of fellow elegists in breathing new life into these "dead" metaphors. Placing sporting clichés back into the context of physical intimidation and civil warfare, the language of violence, which had been somewhat diluted, is re-appropriated for the Troubles. Arriving back where it started, having been forced through these cultural appropriations, the violent language seems to have taken on extra layers of meaning.⁵⁴

Language is one of Carson's key interests. He has commented that "a lot of poets, [...] are unaware of the beauty and sophistication of 'ordinary' speech".⁵⁵ Ordinary speech, for Carson, however, seems to be highly literary; something that he admits in the same interview:

I hope part of the effect of the poems is to reinstate speech into poetry, and in my own speech I refer to literature as well as to more mundane things like drinking and the dogs. Literature is just another element in a universe of discourse ... but the references are not entirely irrelevant.⁵⁶

One way in which the diction of "Ambition" might be classified as literary is by tracing the elegiac language in the poem. As well as the obviously death-related images already noted, there are references to the seasons: "a winter taste / In summer" (3-4); "that otherwise / Unnoticeable faint cloud on the summer blue" (47-8); "It's nearer to a winter blue" (40); "the blazing / Summer hauled him one step at a time into a freezing furnace" (70-1). The seasons are often mentioned in elegies: in Milton's "Lycidas", they are a consolatory image, as the winter landscape seems to join in the grieving for the lost subject, and spring is an image of the spiritual "new life" that the dead will receive in heaven. Shelley's "Adonais" makes this more problematic, as it acknowledges that the seasons do not stop to mourn, but continue in the natural cycle, free from the finality of death. Carson's use of the seasons is yet more complex, as the seasons of summer and winter are juxtaposed, and neither seems to provide any consolation. Indeed, the references to the seasons seem to carry threatening connotations. A further, more specific, seasonal reference which has strong links with elegy is the mention of Christmas.⁵⁷ Christmas is an especially poignant time of year for those mourning a death, and in Carson's poem, it provides a further link with past memories of his father: "The Christmas post of Christmas Past" (56). To reinforce this connection between seasons and memories of his father, and with the recurring theme of cartography, a few lines later

54 See Houen: "Carson offers new ways of thinking about the Troubles in terms of the relation of violence to textuality," 272.

55 Interview with Frank Ormsby, 7.

56 From Ormsby interview, 5-6.

57 Perhaps the most famous example of Christmas being used as an elegiac marker of time is found in Tennyson's "In Memoriam", *In Memoriam; A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Erik Gray, (New York: Norton, 2004). This idea is expanded upon in the chapter which covers the elegies of Medbh McGuckian.

sleigh-bell music
Tinkles on the radio, like ice cubes in a summer drink. I think
I'm starting, now,
To know the street map with my feet, just like my father. (59-61)

Within "Ambition" are some of the most characteristic elements of Carson's Belfast poetry, and many of these are key themes in the developing genre of Northern Irish elegy: the relationship between art and violence, and the language that links the two; public and private losses, as the experience of individuals during the Troubles, and specifically internees, can be read as a broader expression of the losses experienced by the city at large; and the exploration and mapping of relationships with both biological and literary parents and ancestors, as well as the mapping of the city in which these relationships have taken place.

The form of poems like "Turn Again" and "Ambition" have been much discussed: Carson's long line is one of his particular contributions to Northern Irish poetry. As with his predecessors, form remains an integral concern for Carson, and his collections chart his experimentation with different techniques. Each of his books tends to contain poems written in just one form. While The Irish for No and Belfast Confetti showcase the new-found long line, later collections The Twelfth of Never and For All We Know might be read as extended sonnet sequences. Breaking News, like the most recent book Until Before After, is written in extremely short lines and stanzas, with little punctuation.⁵⁸ The poems in these books are almost minimalist, providing the reader with a few powerful words and little punctuation, in what seems to be the extreme opposite of the earlier collections.⁵⁹ Brearton has referred to them as Carson's "skinny-dipping poems".⁶⁰ As one of the most notable characteristics of elegies like "Lycidas", "Adonais" and "In Memoriam" is their ambitiousness of scope, a minimalist elegy might seem paradoxical. The lengthy traditional elegy seems to provide space for appropriate respect to be paid to the dead, and for the mourner's grief to be fully explored and outworked. Can these effects be achieved in an extremely short poem? What are the implications of writing elegies in the self-consciously pared-down form that Carson uses in his later collections? One response is that Milton's "Lycidas" was not written purely as a memorial to Edward King; Sacks argues that it is also an act of self-promotion, the young poet producing a substantial work that

58 Breaking News also contains the longer sequence, "The War Correspondent", but this is omitted from the current study in the interests of brevity.

59 David Butler finds that: "The sparseness is astonishing, more akin to the harsh restraint of Ungaretti's war poems than to William Carlos Williams, with whom the writing has been compared." "In Times of Trouble," The Poetry Ireland Review 77 (2003):79-83 (79). Butler's comparison with the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti links Carson with a poetic predecessor whose writing career was inspired by his experiences of war.

60 Fran Brearton: "Carson's skinny-dipping poems here – a dramatic shift away from his earlier handling of the long line – have an extraordinary rhythmic power and force, the poems drilling down the page to make the experience of reading this book something of a roller-coaster ride. (If there are elements of William Carlos Williams here, it's Williams in a bruising encounter with the rough edges of Belfast.)" "News of the World," The Irish Review, 31, Irish Futures (2004): 141-47 (142).

would establish his literary reputation.⁶¹ In writing in a form which might establish him within a contemporary literary tradition, Carson follows Milton, albeit responding to twentieth-century Imagism, following precursors like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. Indeed, after Tennyson's "In Memoriam", elegies began to be written in much shorter forms, a key example being Hardy's elegies for his wife.⁶² Furthermore, Carson seems to aim for a different kind of elegy than those written by traditional elegists; one that is marked by its bluntness and brevity, and its refusal to sentimentalise. There has been a shift towards shorter elegies as the form of contemporary poetry in general has moved away from the expansive style of Milton's great masterpieces.⁶³ This chapter will continue tracing Carson's elegiac project of mapping Belfast as his poetic form undergoes significant changes.

The first poem of Breaking News, "Belfast", approaches the central theme of the city:⁶⁴

east

beyond the yellow
shipyard cranes

a blackbird whistles
in a whin bush

west

beside the motorway
a black taxi

rusts in a field
of blue thistles (1-10)

Despite the formal differences between this poem and earlier pieces, it deals with themes that recur throughout Carson's work. The poem's title names the topic for which Carson is most famous. In the two lines "east" and "west", Carson provides a panoramic view which might be compared with the "cinematic" treatment of Belfast seen in earlier poems like "Ambition".⁶⁵ Where the sheer amount of detail found in earlier poetry might be an attempt to divert the reader's attention, encouraging an interrogatory reading style, the omission of details in this poem might similarly prompt the reader to search for meaning and work to construct a coherent

61 Sacks, 90-1.

62 See Longley and Mahon chapter, n. 95.

63 Perhaps the shortest elegy of the twentieth century is W.S. Merwin's "Elegy": "Who would I show it to", quoted by Helen Vendler in her essay "Matter on Various Length Scales: Poetry," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 145. 4 (2001): 389-401. This embodies some of the reticence and melancholic grief which Ramazani finds in modern elegy.

64 Collected Poems, 431.

65 See Parker's comments on the "choreography" of "Ambition", Northern Irish Literature, II, 127. John Knowles prefers to describe the effect of "Belfast" as "photographic": "Like [William Carlos] Williams, Carson uses short lines to break up and interrupt the natural phrases of his poems. The white space created between and around the lines slowing his phrases down, almost to a standstill," "Unexpected Carson," Fortnight, no. 416 (2003):29.

reading.⁶⁶ While the two styles may not seem to have much in common, they might be linked by the similarities that both bear to the haiku: the long lines of “Turn Again” each contained seventeen syllables, working like a succession of haiku verses; the minimalism of “Belfast” ensures that emphasis is given to each syllable of the poem, as words, rather than sentences, become the basic unit of the poem's structure, which again resembles the haiku.⁶⁷ Where earlier Belfast poems raise ideas of remembering and dismembering the city, often using the trope of a map, this poem, which seems to detail single remembered images of the city, appears to have been itself dismembered, existing only in fragments of information.⁶⁸ And like earlier poems about Belfast, this one might also be read as an elegy for the city.

The poem's images might be linked to the pastoral setting conventional in elegy: the “blackbird [...] / in a whin bush”, and the “field / of blue thistles”. However, these natural settings have been invaded; the blackbird is seen “beyond the yellow / shipyard cranes”, while a “black taxi // rusts” in the field. The poem might therefore lament the way in which industrialised society has encroached upon nature. This opposition between industry and nature might be just one aspect of a more complex message. The entire poem is, in fact, structured around a set of oppositions: “east” is mirrored by “west”, and these geographical opposites are superimposed upon a city well known for its sectarian and religious divisions. Belfast, the poem might imply, might just as easily be split between “Catholic” and “Protestant”. If this meaning is there in the poem, then it works as an elegiac reminder of the ways in which the violence of the Troubles has dismembered and fragmented the city. If the poem does conform to elegiac expectations, then it might be reasonable to look for elements of consolation, and these might be hinted at in the structure of the poem. Just as “west” echoes “east” in an image of modern industrial society being, at least partly, redeemed by its proximity to natural beauty, the poem might hint that the two sides of the sectarian divide have more similarities than differences, and that both the Catholic and Protestant communities have many positive attributes.

Several other poems in Breaking News make good use of Carson's short line in communicating some of the tensions and horror felt by residents of Belfast during the Troubles. Indeed, Carson has explained that the “short-lined poems came out that way in the small hours of the morning, like bullet points, often written to the sound of a surveillance helicopter over my house in North Belfast. Urgent monitory rhythms”.⁶⁹ “Breath” and “Minus”, give a sense of the

66 See n. 17 of this chapter.

67 See David Wheatley: “A smaller unit than the already tiny line is the individual word or letter, and throughout *Breaking News* Carson reflects on the materiality of the signifier on the micro-level,” “‘Pushed next to nothing’: Ciaran Carson's *Breaking News*,” Ciaran Carson: critical essays, 45-65 (48).

68 Brearton says of the collection: “Words are in bits, maybe even poems as well; and, in the end, people themselves are hacked and mutilated,” “News of the World,” 142.

69 Topping, 16. Carson continues in this interview: “Now, I ask myself what my writing would have been like had I lived off the Stranmillis Road instead of the Antrim Road. Perhaps a lot of the anger – in my version of Dante's *Inferno*, for example – would not have been there. And *Breaking News* would not have

tension felt in a city that has been marked by civil unrest.⁷⁰ “Breath” describes a the feeling of relief as

watching
helicopter

gone

there's a
clear blue

space

above
my head

I feel

rinsed

clean

you know
that quiet

when the
washing-machine

stops
shuddering (1-17)

The sparseness of this poem captures the sudden silence following the helicopter's departure. The thin line of poetry, surrounded by exaggerated white marginal space, might be seen to perform one of the key functions of elegy: making an absence into a presence to be found on the page.⁷¹ “Minus” returns to the scene of “Breath”, picturing the poet again in a darkened room, but this time there is “no / helicopter // noise” (1-3). Here, the absence of the helicopter paradoxically provides an even stronger sense of the presence of the Troubles: the speaker is awake and watching the sky in anticipation of being disturbed.⁷² The brilliance of the moon

been written. On the other hand, maybe I would have written some lovely poems about swans”. This characteristic combination of honesty and flippancy points to the way in which Carson’s personal experiences of Belfast can be directly related to the elegiac tone of his poems. In another interview, Carson gives more reasons for his use of the short line in *Breaking News*: “Maybe I just felt I'd gone as far as I could along that line. As it happens, I was re-reading Carlos Williams at the time. I'd always been attracted to the freshness of his writing. And as it happened, the first poems that emerged in the short line were conceived when a helicopter used to come and perch above my house night after night. I could hear some kind of minimalist staccato beat going on throughout that unceasing din. But I think maybe the lines were a kind of attempt to register some kind of fractured reported speech,” “For all I know: Ciaran Carson in conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews,” *Ciaran Carson: critical essays*, 13-17 (21).

⁷⁰ *Collected Poems*, “Breath,” 441, “Minus,” 462.

⁷¹ See Sacks's explanation of this idea, xi-xiii.

⁷² David Butler comments on the various silences created in the collection, suggesting that: “The accumulation of such silences might be read as a metaphor for the wait-and-see unreality of the post-ceasefire’s endless, arcane manoeuvring,” “In Times of Trouble,” 79. Butler’s comment serves to show that the presence of the Troubles can be felt even in “post-ceasefire” Northern Ireland.

might be linked to the cold and indifferent nature that is encountered in Shelley's "Adonais", as the poet realises that there is no consolation in the natural world.⁷³ Carson's poem implies a similar sense of isolation and grief.

Another poem in Breaking News might be linked with the work of a fellow poet, and also with a fellow artist of violence. "*Francisco Goya: The Third of May 1808, 1814*" describes a painting of Spanish civilians being executed by French troops during Napoleon's invasion of Spain.⁷⁴ The same painting is described in Heaney's sequence "Singing School":

Goya's "Shootings of the Third of May"
Covered a wall – the thrown-up arms
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted
And knapsacked military, the efficient
Rake of the fusillade.⁷⁵

Heaney's description is found within a longer poem which explicitly refers to the Troubles, and which expresses an elegist's guilt at his absence from the violence of 1969, having been in Madrid. In alluding to Heaney's poem, Carson is able to pick up on the theme of art's depiction of violence, yet his poem does not carry the same weight of public responsibility. Indeed, the tone of Carson's poem seems defiant and almost triumphant:

behold
the man

who faces
the stream

of light
white-shirted

arms
flung

open
to receive

the volley
offering

the firing-squad
his ghost

he is not
blindfolded (1-16)

The lack of punctuation makes demands of the reader, who must decipher the grammar of the sentence. The stanza breaks often separate units of meaning, for example "the stream // of light" and "white-shirted // arms / flung // open". In offering fragments of meaning, Carson

73 The line "so cold" in "Minus" is also strikingly similar to the final lines of William Carlos Williams's poem "This Is Just To Say": "so sweet / and so cold," The Collected Poems, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, vol. 1 1909 – 1939 (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000) 372.

74 "*Francisco Goya: The Third of May 1808, 1814*," Collected Poems, 463.

75 Opened Ground, 140.

effectively dismembers Goya's painting into its constituent parts, and then reassembles – or re-members – them as he constructs his poem. Carson can be seen to take this practice of dis- and re-membering even further. His lack of punctuation and his stanza divisions suggest that multiple readings might be made; while it is possible to identify the individual units of meaning on a second or third reading, an initial reading might result in groupings of lines like “the stream // of light / white-shirted // arms”, which provides a surreal and darkly humorous re-rendering of Goya's painting. In this effect, Carson's poem is linked with the absurdity and black humour of his earlier work. This poem, therefore, can be linked to Carson's more explicit Troubles poems not only by the allusion to Heaney's more overtly political reference to Goya, but also in the way in which he employs the same elegiac techniques of memorial and reconstruction that have been seen in previous work.

While “*Francisco Goya: The Third of May 1808, 1814*” relates to Heaney, “Last Effect”, might be compared to the work of Longley, and in particular, to the poem “Wreaths”.⁷⁶ The poem's concentration upon a “watch” (2) is reminiscent of the items which belong to the dead mourned in “The Linen Workers”:

When they massacred the ten linen workers
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.

Longley uses these personal “effects” as objects which signify their dead owners. In Carson's poem, the watch similarly represents a life that has been lost. However, while the details are specific both to a particular watch – this one has a “bullet- / dented case” (5-6) – and an individual life, which ended “yesterday” (19), the poem contains so few personal details that it might be a universal statement of loss. In “Last Effect” Carson conveys multiple complex meanings. The imperative to “feel / the weight” (3-4) of the watch requires a response from the reader, which might be interpreted both literally, as referring to the weight of the physical entity being described, or figuratively, implying the seriousness of the topic under discussion: death. Again, “arrested” (11) carries connotations of ill health, as in “cardiac arrest”, and also links to the political situation in Northern Ireland, where being “arrested” is linked to sectarian violence, and perhaps to Internment. As well as these implied meanings, there is also a literal sense in which the hands of the watch have been stopped, due to the presumed act of violence which has left the dial “glassless” (9), and is connected with the moment of the subject's “death”. Just as the punctuation and stanza groupings of other poems in this collection make alternative readings possible, here “death” (15) is inextricably linked with the word that it is placed next to: “salvation” (14). By removing punctuation, Carson maximises the number of possible interpretations. Although “salvation” and “death” are linked by proximity, Carson does not allow for the straightforward connection that would provide the religious consolation that is

⁷⁶ “Last Effect”, *Collected Poems*, 464; Longley, “Wreaths”, *Collected Poems*, 119.

sought in traditional elegy. Death is linked to short-sightedness, both in the “Braille” (7) of the watch-face, and in the fact that the subject “failed / to see” (20-1) towards the end of the poem. A lack of punctuation makes it unclear what the subject did not see, but these lines are linked by rhyme to the unanswerable question with which the poem ends. The penultimate stanza, “O what is time / my friend” (22-3), takes on a studiedly artificial tone, both archaic and ironic, simultaneously elevating the poem's diction, yet at the same time placing it in danger of sounding like sarcasm or pastiche. Both these lines, with the reference to “time”, and the final lines, “when faced with / eternity” (24-5), raise grand philosophical concepts, yet also make use of simple puns in a poem which has been describing a pocket-watch. The word “eternity” might seem to be the most conventionally elegiac consolation with which to end a poem, linked as it is to the idea of an after-death existence, and reinforced in this religious reading by the earlier mention of “salvation”. However, if it is something to be “faced”, as the previous line suggests, “eternity” might also be a threat of oblivion and isolation, similar to the bleak loneliness heard at the end of “Adonais”. Carson simultaneously utilises and subverts the conventions of elegy in this poem.

The threat of oblivion is made more explicit in “Exile”:⁷⁷

night
after night

I walk

the smouldering
dark streets

Sevastopol
Crimea

Inkerman
Odessa

Balkan
Lucknow

Belfast
is many

places then
as now

all lie
in ruins

and
it is

as much
as I can do

77 “Exile,” *Collected Poems*, 466.

to save
even one

from oblivion (1-24)

This returns to Carson's favourite theme of Belfast. There is a sense of aftermath: the streets are still "smouldering", and "all lie / in ruins".⁷⁸ The list of street names recalls those heard in earlier works, but in this format, they are given a heightened significance, each standing alone on the page, leaving the reader to re-connect the words to their meanings.⁷⁹ The list of names acts as a further interrogation of the practice of mapping a city: presented in this way, the physical layout of the city loses its importance as the spatial pattern of the streets becomes merely a temporal phenomenon: these streets are as subject to decay and destruction as any living organism.⁸⁰ The connotation of the Crimean war adds a further dimension of critique upon the Victorians who mapped out and planned these streets' construction: the naming of these Belfast streets is seen to be a project of imperial superimposition.⁸¹ The lament for their loss might also be an acknowledgement of a lost empire, or conversely, might be a work of mourning for other victims of imperial ambition, such as the inhabitants of the Crimean peninsula. Where the streets have been named after British "victories", those who feel themselves to be suffering as a result of British imperialism might read them in an entirely different light; perhaps as reminders of British oppression. Indeed, Heaney has described the situation in Northern Ireland as "the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power".⁸² In this way, Carson's poem links to the work of Longley and Mahon, in mourning for casualties of wars across European history, and in drawing comparisons between the experience of the Troubles for Northern Irish people and the experience of war across

78 See Knowles, 29.

79 The list of street names might also be linked to Anne Devlin's short story "Naming the Names", in which the narrator, when questioned about her involvement in a killing carried out by a paramilitary group, will not, or cannot, name the people who carried out the attack; instead she can only list the street names of Belfast, "Naming the Names," *The Way-Paver* (London: Faber, 1981 rpt. 1986) 93-119.

80 The list in this poem might also link it to the work of Longley. Brearton has commented upon the elegiac effect of listing in Carson's poem: "It is perhaps no coincidence that poems such as 'Exile' or 'War' begin to look like lists themselves, brief inventories of words that rescue fleeting moments from oblivion. *Breaking News* accumulates these moments; in doing so the collection itself gathers strength much as the process of listing serves as a stay against forgetfulness," "News of the World," 144.

81 This argument would certainly be adopted by various socialist and Marxist movements within Northern Ireland, who would argue that the current peace process is a continuation of British imperialism. For example: "The reality for the British was that their 'peace process' was in fact a major imperialist offensive designed to forge a new capitalist stability and roll back all the gains of the anti-imperialist struggle," John McAnulty, "Northern Ireland: not peace, but an imperialist offensive," *Workers' Liberty* 21 December, 2009, accessed 07/02/2012 <<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2009/12/21/northern-ireland-not-peace-imperialist-offensive>>. Similarly, the first point on a "Basis for a Statement on the Situation in Northern Ireland" which was passed at the Dublin Conference of the SLA, October, 1971 by DR O'Connor Lysaght, states that "The Northern Irish situation is a natural product of British Imperialism's hold on Ireland." Robert Dorn (DR O'Connor Lysaght), "Irish Nationalism and British Imperialism," 1973, *Arguments for a Workers' Republic*, accessed 07/02/2012 <<http://www.workersrepublic.org/Pages/Ireland/Trotskyism/robertdorn5.html>>.

82 Heaney, "Feeling into Words," 24.

Europe.

The theme of salvation, which was heard in “Last Effect” might be seen to return in “Exile”, yet this time there is no religious connotation; perhaps, in this poem, it would be more appropriate to link the word “save” from the penultimate stanza with the idea of “salvaging”. Indeed, it is the poet himself who struggles to “save / even one // from oblivion”. Here, there is no question of an afterlife, as in “Last Effect”, perhaps because the poem is more obviously referring to the losses of individual streets, rather than of human subjects. Yet, in mourning for the city, it must be assumed that Carson counts human loss as part of the suffering that has been experienced by Belfast. While the focus on “oblivion” at the end of the poem sounds particularly final, there is, nevertheless, some hint at an elegiac consolation in this poem, in the sense that, while the poet’s efforts are down-played – “it is // as much / as I can do” – it does seem possible that by writing elegies, he is able to perform small works of salvation, or salvage, for the city. In his poetic works of memorial, which enact a literary re-membering of Belfast, Carson is perhaps able to find consolation in the promise of poetry.

In the collections which follow Breaking News, Carson writes from the perspective of relative peace, following the political negotiations during the 1990s. His recent poetry continues to bear the marks of the Troubles, although he finds ways of writing which are increasingly oblique, and which continue to experiment with form. His 2008 collection For All We Know might be read as a sonnet sequence, although it is uniquely arranged into two sets of identically named poems, and tracks the progression of a fictional relationship. The book has been compared to the earlier collection, The Twelfth of Never:

Nearly 10 years ago, Ciaran Carson published a remarkable book-length sonnet sequence, The Twelfth of Never. [...] It offered another remarkable take on Carson’s mapping of the Northern Irish experience, a mapping that has evolved and transformed with each new book. In his latest collection, For All We Know, he successfully returns to the sonnet sequence. But now the effect is very different: more austere, more ambitiously structured, obsessed with an almost claustrophobic circling of character and event. The tone of the new work is melancholic, hushed, elegiac.⁸³

One poem from the collection which seems to comment on the Troubles from a post-peace talk perspective is entitled “Peace”:⁸⁴

Back then you wouldn’t know from one day to the next
what might
happen next. Everything was, as it were, provisional,

slipping from the unforeseeable into tomorrow
even as the jittery present became history.

What kinds of times are these, you’d say, when a conversation
is deemed a crime because it includes so much that is said?

And all the unanswered questions of those dark days come

83 Charles Bainbridge, “In a pane of moonlight,” The Guardian Saturday 12 June 2008, accessed 19/01/2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/21/saturdayreviewsfeatures.guardianreview31>>.

84 Collected Poems, 533.

back
to haunt us, the disabled guns that still managed to kill,

the witnesses that became ghosts in the blink of an eye.
Whom can we prosecute when no one is left fit to speak?

I read in this morning's paper, you said, of a stables
in England which had been set on fire. An eyewitness spoke

of horses whinnying, of hooves battering on the doors,
doors padlocked and bolted against all possible escape. (1-14)

While the poems in this volume, like the ones in The Twelfth of Never, are variations on the sonnet, they make more radical departures from the traditional form than in the earlier collection: while they are generally fourteen lines long, they are written in fourteen-syllable lines, and tend not to use regular rhyme. The longer lines give the poems something of the appearance of the earlier collections. The memories described can be linked with the events of the previous decades in Northern Ireland, which is implied by the use of loaded terms like “provisional”, and “disabled guns”, both of which were heard frequently in the media reportage of the on-going peace deals and calls for weapons decommissioning during the 1990s.

However, the poem is taken from a sequence which traces the relationship of a fictional couple, Gabriel and Nina, and while he is Irish, and Catholic, she is half-French, half-English, and has a complex set of memories of her own. Therefore, the “jittery present”, in which “a conversation is deemed a crime” might refer to multiple contexts of civil unrest and political instability. Furthermore, by using fictional characters, Carson distances himself from any assumptions that the poems are directly related to his personal memories and experiences of Belfast and the Troubles. While it might be expected that poetry written during the relative peace of a new century in Northern Ireland might be able to explore the memories of the Troubles with a greater openness, the poems of For All We Know deal with loss in a guarded and oblique way. Despite the fact that this poem is entitled “Peace”, there is little consolation in it. A sense of injustice pervades the piece, as witnesses of “those dark days” have “become ghosts in the blink of an eye”, and the reader is left with the unsettling question, “Whom can we prosecute when no one is left fit to speak?” This question is one which might be applied to a number of twentieth- and twenty-first century contexts, and brings to mind other victims of injustice, like the “lost souls of Treblinka and Pompeii” who are mourned in Mahon's poem “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”.⁸⁵ Indeed, where Mahon uses mushrooms as a kind of objective correlative for all voiceless, powerless people, Carson seems to use the image of horses locked in a burning stable in a similar way, to figure the helplessness of those trapped in a volatile political situation.

Carson's 2009 volume On the Night Watch takes his engagement with both poetic form and with the themes of memory and loss to a further level of obliquity. As Matthews notes, the

85 Mahon, Collected Poems, 89-90.

work is part of Carson's "by-now-familiar numbers game":

We are presented with sonnets gathered in three forty-two poem "Movements" – a perfectly ratio-ed whole. The book is formally, as in other ways, a homage to its dedicatee, Seamus Heaney. For these are sonnets containing very short lines, so combining two forms which Heaney has mastered: the blank verse fourteen-liner, and the slim, arterial forms of the poetry of the *North* era.

Matthews notes the connection between Heaney's North and Carson's review of it, suggesting that where Heaney "had famously dug down into the turf to bring out the victims of perennial violence, Carson's work here, post-Troubles, seems more anxious to let things rest".⁸⁶ In On the Night Watch, it is certainly harder to identify direct references to the Troubles than in some of Heaney's poetry, but there are, nevertheless, references to many of Carson's career-long preoccupations, and these are tied together by his use of form, and often by a sense of an extended, elegiac reflection upon themes of memory and loss. As Matthews mentions, the poems in the book are interconnected by a number of repeated themes and images: the city under siege; sirens; blips and dashes of code; surveillance. These images appear in various related contexts, recalling the violence in Belfast, the suffering of those in prison camps, and the experience of hospital treatment for a serious illness. The central theme of memory is referenced in a number of ways. Details and phrases recur, some of which are repeated from earlier collections: the poem "Watch" mentions a "helicopter", although the scene is now a bedside vigil.⁸⁷ The medicinal herb "eyebright", alternatively called "Euphrasia", which has traditionally been used to cure a bad memory, appears with striking frequency throughout the book. Also relating to memory are the poems about forgetting and remembering which tend to deal with the construction of a city.⁸⁸

In a review of Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's edition of critical essays on Carson, published in the same year as On The Night Watch, Neal Alexander observes that

Carson first made his name as a brilliant anatomist of the city and urban experience, subjects that continue to occupy an arguably central role in his aesthetic; but recently he has emerged as a Borgesian miniaturist of the universal, exploring the fractal worlds within worlds created in and by language.⁸⁹

Carson himself discusses the "Borgesian" idea that "the author is 'a recreator or editor' of other works" in an interview with Jenny Malmqvist: "I don't think any writer has anything new to say, but then again any utterance, no matter how often it has been uttered by others or oneself, is necessarily new, because the circumstances, and the times that are in it, are new".⁹⁰ The readings made throughout this chapter have identified ways in which Carson the "anatomist" is at work in both his early and late poems, re-constructing fragments of the exploded city in

86 Steven Matthews, "Bodies of Work".

87 "Watch," On the Night Watch, 50.

88 "I Have Forgotten," is a prime example, On the Night Watch, 43.

89 Neal Alexander, "[Review] Ciaran Carson: critical essays," Irish Studies Review, vol. 17.3 (2009): 401-3 (401).

90 Jenny Malmqvist, "Interview with Ciaran Carson," From the Small Back Room: A Festschrift for Ciaran Carson, ed. W.R. Irvine (Belfast: Netherlea, 2008) 52-8 (55-6).

creating elegies, or poetic memorials of what has been lost and dispersed. The recurring images of Belfast have a cumulative effect, giving a sense of organic growth which counteracts the destruction and decay that is witnessed in the city itself. This is felt in another elegiac meditation upon the city: “In Ruins”.⁹¹

In Ruins

but not
beyond salvation

as when after
the explosion

everything is
dormant that is

until the days
that are to come

fireweed
London Rocket

& convolvulus
erupting from

the nooks
& crannies (1-14)

This poem, like “Last Effect” and “Exile”, makes mention of “salvation”, and seems to find consolation in the idea of vegetation growing from the ruins of an exploded city. This image of renewal might be traditionally elegiac, and there is a hint that it might be applied not only to a city, but also to an individual. Coming towards the end of a volume which has meditated upon physical frailty and human illness, it might be assumed that the “ruins” of the title could apply to a person. Indeed, the image of the bomb-site is given as a comparison: “as when after / the explosion”, and the poem could be likening a suffering human body to a war-damaged city. If this is the case, then the ideas of salvation and renewal for a human subject would seem to be further gestures towards the conventions of elegy. However, Carson does not allow for such a reassuring reading. The plants mentioned carry troubling connotations: “fireweed” and “London Rocket” sound almost like incendiary devices, reminiscent of the “explosion” of the earlier lines, and “convolvulus” brings to mind physical convulsions, as well as being commonly known as bind weed, a parasitical plant. These plants are destructive, “erupting” from the spaces where nothing else might live. Rather than being consoling, this image of rampant vegetation might suggest that the body, and the city, are ultimately passive and unable to resist the violence enacted upon them.

Carson's most recent volume, *Until Before After*, is a progression in his experimentation with form, and with the themes of memory and memorial. Colin Graham has commented: “In

91 *On the Night Watch*, 117.

recent years Ciaran Carson has written books of poetry that are determinedly books rather than collections. Each has its own sound and rhythm, and each has an intricate coherence". He goes on to note the overarching structures of the book:

[the poems] are grouped in threes on facing pages, and the book is in three sections, "Until", "Before" and "After" – the word "until" appears in every poem in "Until", "before" in every poem in "Before", and "after" in each poem in "After", drawing attention to the tripartite structure of the book, and suggesting that a greater pattern is at work.⁹²

A further formal feature is that each group of three poems contains two poems written in five two-line stanzas, printed on the left hand page, with a fourteen-liner printed on the opposite page. The titles, while they link with the first line of their own poem, might also be linked with each other.⁹³ While it might seem a superficial observation to note that the tripartite structure is one that is commonly found in elegy, this link is reinforced by the fact that Carson's book addresses ideas of illness, death and personal loss in perhaps the most explicit terms of his career. Graham notes that "Until Before After strives for a meaningful structure, just as its poems search for a meaning beyond life and after death".⁹⁴ While some of the poems seem to deal with the poet's own sense of mortality, such as "The hinge", which was mentioned at the start of this chapter, the majority of the poems appear to deal with the illness of a loved one, sometimes spoken in the voice of the sick person.⁹⁵ Combined with these elegiac themes are some of Carson's recurring fascinations. The poem "At death's door" provides a meditation upon language and its relation to death:⁹⁶

At death's door

is but
a frame

of words and not
the thing

itself if thing
it be

and if
so whosoever

92 Colin Graham, "Lingering on the threshold," *The Irish Times*, Saturday 22 May 2010, accessed 03/02/2011 <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/0522/1224270852465_pf.html>.

93 For example, one group of three poems contains the titles "Not in" "That frame" "Of discord", which work grammatically, if elliptically, as a sentence. Indeed, the contents pages themselves, listing the titles of the poems, might almost be read as an extended version of one of Carson's short-lined poems.

94 Colin Graham, "Lingering on the threshold".

95 Graham suggests that the book "considers the death and loss of someone who is so central to life that time and meaning become almost incomprehensible when they are gone". While this can certainly be inferred from the poetry, Carson himself explained at a reading in Belfast in September 2010 that many of the poems were written during a period in which his wife was seriously ill, but that she had subsequently recovered. In this case, the elegiac poems would seem to be pre-emptive elegies, anticipating the loss of an ill person. This idea is more fully explored in relation to Medbh McGuckian's elegies in my final chapter.

96 *Until Before After*, 35.

utters it
until it

swings to
has not yet

gone into beyond
the words (1-14)

This poem captures some of the unspeakable nature of death, a challenge faced by any elegist. The title is a commonly used cliché, and unlike his earlier reinvigoration of such “dead” metaphors in the poem “Ambition”, here Carson further deconstructs the phrase, effectively decommissioning and dismembering it. Nevertheless, Carson proves not to be overwhelmed by the daunting task of putting the unsayable into words: indeed, the poem ends emphatically with “the words”, as if the poet, having acknowledged the fact that language might be deconstructed into near meaninglessness, nevertheless determines to work with it to achieve his purpose. The placing of this poem early on in a long sequence shows that the poet is committed to his task.

A number of qualities that have come to be identified as characteristic of Carson's work are to be found in the poems of this most recent book. He acknowledges his debt to one of his predecessors, noting at the end of the collection that a number of poems are lifted verbatim from the journal of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Another poem, “An airman”, might be indebted to Yeats's elegy for Major Robert Gregory, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”.⁹⁷ As well as making allusions to literary predecessors, Carson picks up on themes that have appeared in his own earlier work, and most notably, the image of the city. This is heard in the poem “It is”.⁹⁸ Here, the idea of a multi-layered city with various possibilities and alternative realities, first heard in the poems of *The Irish for No*, is heard in conjunction with the ominous, recurrent sound of the “helicopter // beat” (6-7). The repetition of the word “city”, which appears three times in this brief poem, reinforces the suggestion that there are multiple definitions of the city, or that it has been fragmented or dismembered into multiple parts.

The book ends with a poem which might be read on three levels: either as a straightforward work of mourning, as a pre-emptive elegy in the face of illness, or finally as a self-elegy.⁹⁹ It is perhaps fitting to suggest that the poet does all three things, simultaneously.

I open the door

into hall and
over threshold

after threshold
slowly oh

so slowly I bring

97 “An airman,” *Until Before After*, 51; W. B. Yeats, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” *The Poems*, 184-5.

98 “It is,” *Until Before After*, 58.

99 “I open the door,” *Until Before After*, 119.

you heavy

step by step up
the seventeen

steps of that
flight once trodden

so swiftly as
year after year

to our room
full of light (1-14)

Read as an elegy, the poem suggests the moment of death as a transition “over threshold // after threshold”.¹⁰⁰ The flight of stairs and the final image of the “room / full of light” would seem to fit with the elegiac expectations of a transcendent ascent into an after-death existence. If taken literally, it could be interpreted that the speaker is bearing a loved one's body home for a final time before the rituals of the funeral can take place. However, the sense of homecoming, together with the concrete physical details of the house, “the seventeen steps” to “our room”, suggests that the speaker is bringing his subject home alive, having survived a serious illness, or having finished treatment for a terminal condition. Encountering the frailty of the human body makes the poet aware of mortality; not simply in anticipating the loss of a loved one, but also in acknowledging the inevitability of his own death. While a recognition of impending loss might seem to be a bleak way in which to end a collection of poems, the tone of this piece is calm and even hopeful. Within the brief line, “year after year” can be heard the recollection of a lifetime's companionship, and in the description of “our room”, Carson implies all the connotations of a mature love. This poem is particularly poignant in giving a sense of the celebration which can come at the end of a life.

In 2003, and perhaps responding to the critical readings of his Belfast poetry, Carson commented:

Sometimes I feel that I don't know the city now at all. [...] Anyway, the place I grew up in has largely disappeared off the face of the earth. Industrial Belfast is no more. But of course you can make those places live again in your imagination, or in writing.¹⁰¹

For Carson, the work of mourning a city that has been lost due to the violence of the Troubles, and also through the more prosaic dismembering of new industry and commercialisation, has become the central aspect of his poetry. His project has been to gather the dismembered fragments of Belfast and reconstruct them in a memorial of what has been, or what could have been. In the process, he has undertaken the elegiac work of constructing his own poetic identity,

100 The image of crossing the threshold brings connotations of another rite of passage, marriage. This reinforces the tone of mature love in the poem, as well as providing an image of the beginning of a life together, to complement the ideas of endings that are suggested in the final lines.

101 Topping, “Out of the Pub and into Qub”, 17.

preparing himself to be commemorated within the body of his poetry.¹⁰² Carson is Belfast's self-appointed elegist, and, in the mature phase of his career, is now reviewing a poetic life that is almost symbiotically linked with the city.¹⁰³ This, together with his striking experiments with the line, the scope and the range of his elegiac poetry, makes him one of the most distinctive innovators of the Northern Irish elegy.

102 McCracken noted, early on in Carson's poetic career, that it is possible "to regard his linguistic mapping of place and self as a fulfilment of Ruskin's prescription for a truthful map of the world, a truthful map of the heart", 357. Mapping Belfast, it seems, has always been part of a larger project of discovering and memorialising both the city and the poet himself.

103 At the end of the interview, when asked whether his body of work might be read as a "larger, integrated story", Carson replies: "If it is, it's the story of my life," Topping, "Out of the Pub and into Qub," 17.

Chapter Four

Paul Muldoon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist

Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.¹

The idea of Paul Muldoon as a “revolutionary traditionalist” is taken from Jefferson Holdridge’s recent book-length study of the poet’s work, the first to include his ninth and tenth collections, Moy Sand and Gravel and Horse Latitudes. As Holdridge introduces the latter collection, he traces preoccupations which have been characteristic throughout Muldoon’s career, and with which he continues to wrestle as he moves into the later phase of his writing:

Muldoon’s poetry increasingly burns with the question of art’s complicity in suffering. Is an artist a purveyor of atrocities? Answering this question creates some of Muldoon’s best poems, which are great because they are so deeply self-indicting; this is true throughout his career, but especially evident in this volume.²

Muldoon draws on the traditions of elegy as he develops a distinctive style of poetry. The way in which he has called upon the conventions of elegy in poetry that relates to the Northern Irish Troubles has in turn influenced the ways in which he has subsequently dealt with more general issues of suffering.³ While Muldoon’s most recent work follows the poet’s move to America, complicating or even calling into question his identity as a Northern Irish poet, it can be seen that even when writing from vast geographical and cultural distances, Muldoon’s work is still crucially defined by his experience of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. This might be related to terms of the Good Friday Agreement, in which the British and Irish governments recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland.⁴

In Northern Ireland, following the 1998 agreement, the nationality of those born there can become a plural identity, both Irish and British, “as they may so choose”. For a poet like Muldoon, this “both/and” formula opens up further possible identities, as he might now be seen as both an Irish and an American writer. At the same time, just as many of the poems seem to

1 W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” Collected Shorter Poems, 141-3.

2 Jefferson Holdridge, The Poetry of Paul Muldoon (Dublin: Liffey P, 2008) 173-4.

3 Helen Vendler observes that “[h]is youth in Northern Ireland may account for Muldoon’s sense that art and violence are inextricably connected,” “Fanciness and Fatality,” The New Republic 9 Nov. 2006, accessed 25/03/2010 <http://www.powells.com/review/2006_11_09.html>.

4 The Agreement, Article 1(vi), accessed 01/02/2012 <<http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>>.

challenge contemporary poetry itself, Muldoon's elegies stretch the boundaries of Northern Irish elegy in a number of directions, echoing his predecessors in calling for an art-form which might be adequate to the poet's particular experiences of grief. Iain Twiddy notes that Muldoon's recent "domestic elegies have assumed a monumental scale", following the "small-scale consolation" found in some of his earlier poetry.⁵ Expanding on Twiddy's point, this chapter will trace the development of Muldoon's elegiac technique to illustrate how the losses of the Troubles might influence the way in which elegy is approached by a Northern Irish poet. While some of Muldoon's greatest elegies are found in his "mature" work, it would be an oversimplification to say that Muldoon's later poems are ones in which the private life of the poet is privileged over the public concerns found in his earlier writing: his poetry has always combined references to both personal and national events in ways that are often unsettling and provocative.⁶

Muldoon, like Ciaran Carson, can be difficult to read. He often seems to embody the "trickster" character found in many of his poems.⁷ Like Derek Mahon, he is difficult to categorise, seeming to be and to do multiple things at once, while arguably making no definitive statements at all. While he is often labelled "postmodern", there is greater subtlety than this term suggests to be found in his heavily allusive work, with its intricate and complex use of form and diction.⁸ In *To Ireland, I*, Muldoon describes a "central tenet of the Irish imagination, that what you see is *never* what you get. [...] There's a discrepancy between outward appearance and inward reality. It's what I'm tempted to call 'Eriny'".⁹ The Muldoonian sense of irony in his prose work is encountered, to an even greater extent, in his poetry. Muldoon often seems to offer a number of different meanings, giving sets of optional details in many of his poems: whatever he might be saying, it is possible that he is also saying the opposite at the same time. His poetry, even more than Mahon's, is multi-layered and multi-tonal. Moreover, poems are often circular in structure, allowing for endless repetition and revision. This opens up the work to a variety of critical readings, and even mis-readings, as commentators privilege their own

5 Iain Twiddy, "Grief Brought to Numbers: Paul Muldoon's Circular Elegies," *English*, vol. 55 (2006) 181-199 (181).

6 Clair Wills notes that as early as his second collection, *Mules*, "Muldoon's personal life history (partly fictionalised) is channelled into a consideration of the way to write poetry in Northern Ireland, as he rejects both literal and allegorical, or emblematic registers (earth and stars) in favour of a mixed marriage between the two," *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998) 61.

7 See, for example, Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 107-8. Muldoon famously admitted: "Of course I sometimes make little jokes and I do, quite often, engage in leading people on, gently, into little situations by assuring them all's well and then – this sounds awfully manipulative, but part of writing is about manipulation and leaving them high and dry, in some corner at a terrible party where I've nipped out through the bathroom window," Clair Wills, Nick Jenkins and John Lanchester, "An Interview with Paul Muldoon," *Oxford Poetry* 3.1 (1986/87): 14-20 (19-20).

8 Vendler writes: "Critics have found Muldoon useful as an example of post-this and post-that (post-colonialism and postmodernism, mostly): but he is both too mercurial and too traditional to be so easily confined and defined. He looks more often backward rather than forward, and delights in tracking today back not only into yesterday, but into yesteryear and yester-era..." "Fanciness and Fatality".

9 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 4, 6.

agenda as they approach his work. It is with an awareness of this danger that this study concentrates on the elegiac in Muldoon. Whatever else might be found in the work, it seems clear that in poems which reference elegists like Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, Swinburne, Cowley, Hardy, Dunn and Yeats, as well as alluding to MacNeice, Heaney, Longley and Mahon, Muldoon aligns himself in some way with the genre of elegy, and uses it to inform his distinctive poetic voice; a voice which “at times seems to number compassion, art and meaning alongside its many individual casualties”.¹⁰

I

In Muldoon's early poetry, it is possible to trace the beginnings of the poet's engagement with the techniques of elegy as a response to the perceived role of a “Troubles” poet. In his second collection, Mules, the poems are linked by a concern with hybridity and doubleness; the idea of occupying multiple states simultaneously.¹¹ These themes pervade “Lunch with Pancho Villa”, as Muldoon appears to question the role of a poet in times of political upheaval, a theme which a number of his contemporaries, most notably Heaney, have also wrestled with.¹² “At Master McGrath's Grave” is one of the more obviously elegiac poems in Mules.¹³ The collection was published in 1977, and, “among other events – responds to the death of Muldoon's mother from cancer in 1974, and the intensifying conflict in Northern Ireland”.¹⁴ While “Lunch with Pancho Villa” responds to the political situation, the poem of mourning that engages most consistently with the tradition of elegy is not one commemorating the poet's mother.¹⁵ “At Master McGrath's Grave” remembers a prize-winning greyhound. The title marks it as an elegy, alluding to other graveside meditations, perhaps most notably, Mahon's “In Carrowdore Churchyard (at the grave of Louis MacNeice)”.¹⁶ If Mules explored both private and public loss, Why Brownlee Left continues in this vein, with its preoccupation with breakdown and departure.¹⁷ One poem which combines autobiography with political themes is “Anseo”.¹⁸ The poem takes the form of three interlinked sonnets; perhaps a stylistic forerunner of the “series of twelve intercut, exploded sestinas” which make up “Yarrow”, Muldoon's elegy for his mother.¹⁹ Violence and creativity are bound together in this piece. The poet's childhood memory focuses on a contemporary, Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward, or “our little Ward-of-Court” (14), who is

10 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 97.

11 Mules and Early Poems (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest UP, 1985).

12 “Lunch with Pancho Villa,” Poems 1968-1998 (London: Faber, 2001) 41-2.

13 “At Master McGrath's Grave,” Poems 1968-1998, 56-7.

14 Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 42.

15 She will be more successfully elegised twenty years later in the long poem, “Yarrow”, discussed later in this chapter.

16 Mahon, “In Carrowdore Churchyard (at the grave of Louis MacNeice),” Collected Poems, 17.

17 Why Brownlee Left (London: Faber, 1980). See Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 61.

18 “Anseo,” Poems 1968-1998, 83-4.

19 Lynn Keller, “An Interview with Paul Muldoon,” Contemporary Literature 35.1 (1994): 1-29 (9).

beaten so often by the school Master that “After a while, nothing was spoken; / He would arrive as a matter of course / With an ash-plant, a salley rod” (20-22). A particularly cruel aspect of his punishment is that he is made to “cut / [the] stick with which he would be beaten” (18-9).

Rather than rejecting his punishment, Ward makes this violent act into a work of art, producing

finally, the hazel-wand
He had whittled down to a whip-lash
Its twist of red and yellow laquers
Sanded and polished,
And altogether so delicately wrought
That he had engraved his initials on it. (23-8)

This “education” has a more lasting effect than the Master perhaps intended, as it leads to Ward's adult life of violence: when the poet meets his old classmate years later, “He was fighting for Ireland, / Making things happen” (34-5). There is a comparison between the seemingly futile creative act of whittling a rod for his own back, and the quasi-military activity that Ward is now involved in, which is tied up with the allusion to Auden's “poetry makes nothing happen”. It might be implied that the poet is envious of the way in which Ward has given his life for a cause, even to the extent of “living in the open, / In a secret camp / On the other side of the mountain” (31-3). Muldoon here seems to question the role that poetry might play within the context of the Troubles.

“Gathering Mushrooms” is an elegiac meditation in Muldoon's fourth collection, *Quoof*.²⁰ It builds on the links between art and violence that had already been explored in poems like “Anseo”, and reflects the political situation of Northern Ireland in the early 1980s. Wills writes:

Quoof reveals Muldoon to be as suspicious as ever about poetry's transformative, healing properties, but also more than ever in need of a cure. The sickness in this volume is in part the violence and brutality in Northern Ireland... Muldoon is clearly responding here to central images in Northern Irish culture in the early 1980s – the damaged bodies of victims of bombs and shootings, but also the use of the body by Republican prisoners in the dirty protest and the hunger strikes.²¹

“Gathering Mushrooms” contains less physical violence than other poems in the volume, but reads as a political elegy for a number of reasons. One obvious reference is to Mahon's “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”: although, where Mahon's poem returns to the abandoned shed of an “expropriated mycologist”, Muldoon's traces through layers of memory to encounter his own father “coaxing a mushroom – a flat or a cup – / the nick against his right thumb...” (39-40).²² Like Mahon, Muldoon questions the poet's responsibility in times of civil conflict, and, perhaps to an even greater extent, struggles to find satisfactory answers. One elegiac aspect of

20 *Quoof* (London: Faber, 1983). “Gathering Mushrooms,” *Poems 1968-1998*, 105-6.

21 Wills, 88-89. See also Holdridge: “Muldoon's penchant for violence in his poetry reaches its height in this fourth collection of poetry, which was published in 1983 right after the hunger strikes in Ireland,” 61.

22 Muldoon claims that this “similarity is really an accident”, but it would seem that the links are a little more intentional than this comment suggests; see Wills *et al*, “An Interview with Paul Muldoon,” 17; Mahon, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” *Collected Poems*, 89-90.

Muldoon's poem is the idea of transformation, and its related theme, transcendence. This happens at a number of levels, from the graphological to the thematic. The text itself transforms from roman to italic font in the final stanza, an example of form being used to emphasise a change of state, as the speaking voice becomes one heard in a drug-induced vision. The poem is made up of five fourteen-line stanzas, which correspond to the sonnet, but adapt the traditional form. The rhyme scheme is far closer to the sonnet than that of "Anseo", and follows the content of the poem, with the stanza that conforms least well to the sonnet rhyme scheme being the penultimate one in which the protagonists ingest the hallucinogenic "psilocybin" (25). Transformation also takes place in the repetition of images: the "hand-embroidered" (2) table cloth of the first stanza being taken up in the second stanza as the "priceless collection of linen" (22) blown "sky-high" (21) by a "fire-bomb" (20), both of which contrast strikingly with the final stanza's "*soiled grey blanket of Irish rain*" (68).²³ Similarly, the "horse manure" (9) used by the farmers is re-envisioned in the "*soiled grey blanket*" (68) of the dirty protests. The major source of transformative imagery comes from the hallucinatory experience of the protagonist. In this state of drug-induced transcendence, the speaker seeks to escape not only the horrors of the present but also the sense of loss which accompanies his memories of the past. The final vision might be compared to the transcendental state experienced by the soul of Lycidas, at the close of Milton's poem. Muldoon's vision is less than comforting, however; as Kendall notes, "[h]allucinations in Quoof usually access a world which is brutal and grotesque".²⁴ The song heard in the final stanza brings scant consolation: "*If sing you must, let your song / tell of treading your own dung*" (62-3). Indeed, the final line, "*Lie down with us and wait*" (70) is reminiscent of the bleak ending of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting", set in a purgatory-like state: "Let us sleep now...".²⁵

"A Trifle", also in Quoof, has met with a variety of interpretations.²⁶ Kendall suggests that it responds to issues of responsibility raised by Heaney:

When a bomb explodes in Belfast, Heaney worries whether he ought to abandon his recording; some years later he writes an essay about his decision, and the anecdote leads into a lofty discussion of Art and Life. As its title suggests, "A Trifle" is less self-important.²⁷

The use of a pun for the title highlights Muldoon's interest in double or multiple meanings, and brings a sense of provisionality to his poetic voice.

Our office block is the tallest in Belfast;
when the Tannoy sounds

23 This idea of transformation is also discussed by Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 100, and Kendall, 99.

24 Kendall, 100.

25 Owen, "Strange Meeting," The Complete Poems and Fragments, I, 148-50.

26 "A Trifle," Poems 1968-1998, 120-1. Indeed, John Lyon has used it as an example of the difficulty of interpreting Muldoon's poetry, citing various divergent readings: "All that: Muldoon and the Vanity of Interpretation," Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2004) 10-24.

27 Kendall, 91.

another bomb alert
we take four or five minutes to run down
the thirty-odd flights of steps
to street level. (3-8)

The “four or five minutes” and “thirty-odd steps” sound like pedantic details, but actually fail to describe a precise image. Stephen Burt notices that Muldoon regularly offers a range of possible details, rather than a single, definitive version: “Muldoon's poems, with their slippery, shifting shapes, explore frustrated or confused identities, presenting people who do not yet know who they are or what to do”. Burt also describes “Muldoon's delight in double and multiple lives – and in lives that prove hard to pin down...”²⁸ Despite the use of a first-person, narrative style, “A Trifle” does not sound genuinely autobiographical. This is perhaps due to the fact that despite the proliferation of details, the poem remains determinedly understated. The extract quoted above is the second of three sentences which make up the fourteen-line poem. While the first and last sections of the poem refer to specific events, this central section suggests a regularly expected event: “another bomb alert”. Kendall notes that “the approximations suggest a routine mindless and monotonous”, as it features one of “those who go about their everyday lives amidst the ever-present threat of violence”.²⁹ The register is “everyday”, with the phrase “I had been meaning to work through lunch / the day before yesterday” (1-2) emphasising the mundane setting, and making the speaker an “everyman” figure.

The fact that these poems, along with the title poem of the collection, are variations of the sonnet form is an important aspect of Muldoon's poetic response to the Troubles. Wills notes that

[m]any of the poems in the book explore the difficulty of escaping from cultural forms which have determined personal life for Catholics in Northern Ireland (as well as Protestants). A crucial question for Muldoon is whether the poet is trapped in the same way, or is he able, by breaking down and breaking through forms, to find another way of thinking? (The play with and against the constraints of the sonnet form is central to this theme.)³⁰

One response to Wills's question is that Muldoon might exercise control over poetic form as a reaction to the helplessness experienced regarding the cultural forms which seemed to dominate life in 1980s Northern Ireland. This poetic response is one that can also be recognised as a key element of the elegiac tradition. Elegy, as a poetic outworking of mourning, and a desire on the mourner's part not only to lament a loss, but to seek consolation, often looks to poetry itself for comfort. Many elegies are written with a high degree of formal construction, found not only in the regular stanzas used in Shelley's “Adonais”, but also in Yeats's adaptation of a stanza pattern used by Cowley in his elegy “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, and Heaney's use of

28 Stephen Burt, “‘Thirteen or Fourteen’: Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence,” Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays, 6-25 (7, 21).

29 Kendall, 92.

30 Wills, 100.

sonnets in “Clearances”.³¹ Muldoon's development of traditional forms can therefore be seen as a poetic reaction to themes of loss and destruction that is closely linked with elegy.

II

“The Soap-Pig” appears towards the end of Muldoon's fifth collection, Meeting the British, and is perhaps the most conventional elegy that had so far been published.³² The poem mourns Michael Heffernan, a “Drama Producer” (16) at the BBC, where Muldoon had “somehow wangled a job” (18). This link between the careers of the two men allows the poem to be read as a “brother-poet” elegy, following the tradition of “Lycidas”, “Adonais”, and “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”. Certainly, the poem is full of remembered shared experiences, many of which are artistic or musical, for example:

he and I had shared
a hotel room. When he slipped
off his shirt
there were two unfashionably-broad lap-
els where the surgeons had sawn
through the xylophone

on which he liked to play
Chopin or *Chop-*
sticks until he was blue
in the face; be-bop, doo-wop... (49-58)

Another memory combines a sense of the dead man's fascination with words of every kind, with a dark sense of humour:

He like to listen at full tilt
to bootleg tapes
of Ian Paisley's assaults
on Papes,
regretful only that they weren't in quad.
His favourite word was *quidditas*. (25-30)

This poem, with its multiple locations, and international points of reference – Mary's “pigs from all parts of the globe” (72) – is, nevertheless, coloured by the Northern Irish Troubles. There is an ironic contrast in the above extract between Heffernan's fascination with the violent invective of a leading political and religious figure, and the philosophic notion of “quidditas” (meaning “essence”, or more literally, “what-ness”). “Quidditas” implies a settled, unifying characteristic, a clear-cut definition; whereas the conflict in Ireland, upon which so many of Ian Paisley's and others' words have been spent, remains in a state of unsettled tension, with vastly different viewpoints that are yet to be reconciled.

The fact of death enters dramatically in the first stanza, disrupting the peaceful,

31 Yeats, The Poems, 181-4; Heaney, The Haw Lantern, 24-32.

32 Meeting the British (London: Faber, 1987); “The Soap-Pig,” Poems 1968-1998, 167-70.

domestic setting:

I must have been dozing in the tub
when the telephone
rang and a small white grub
crawled along the line
and into my head:
Michael Heffernan was dead. (1-6)

Like many elegists, Muldoon introduces the fact of death in euphemistic, figurative language: the news is like a “small white grub”. However, even this brings connotations of death and decay, and the idea of the news entering the mourner's head as if it were a flesh-eating maggot emphasises its invasive nature: when faced with another's death, one is forced to recognise one's own mortality. When the statement of fact does arrive at the end of the stanza, this repetition, in plainer language, signals an initial step in the mourning process: an acceptance of the fact of death. While the first stanza's setting, “in the tub”, might seem like a slightly unnecessary detail, it is in fact, linked to the central metaphor of the poem. Muldoon uses the soap-pig almost as a metaphysical conceit which extends throughout the poem, and comes to signify the relationship that had existed between the mourner and his dead subject.³³ In addition, the use of this inanimate object as a metonym which is a memorial to a person now lost to the poet is expanded at the end of the poem, and applied to the “father's wobbling-brush” (124) and the “mother's wash-stand” (126). The soap-pig itself also serves as a memorial to various failed relationships: “the soap-pig I carried / on successive flits / from Marlborough Park (and Anne-Marie)” (61-3); “the camomile soap-pig / that Mary, in a fit of pique, / would later fling into the back yard” (78-20). The poem meditates upon the idea of memory, and asks whether tokens of relationships can provide a satisfactory consolation for the one who has suffered loss. Muldoon, as he holds such objects up for inspection, finds that they, too, are subject to time and decay, and prove to be inadequate memorials for his lost and dead. This is emphasised by the deconstruction of his writerly furniture (both in the sense of his office, and in the sense of his poetic techniques) in the penultimate stanzas:

For how he would delib-
erate on whether two six-foot boards
sealed with ship's
varnish and two tea-chests
(another move) on which all this rests

is a table, or merely a token
of some ur-chair,
or – being broken –
a chair at all... (110-8)

The stanza reduces the emblem of Heffernan's memory to nothing more than a quickly eroding object: “And the soap-pig? It's a bar of soap, // now the soap-sliver / in a flowered dish...” (120-

33 See Wills, “The soap-pig is a kind of body, at once fragile and enduring, which becomes symbolic not only of the body of Michael Heffernan, but of the friendship between him and Muldoon,” Reading Paul Muldoon, 127.

2).³⁴

This poem comments on both memory and poetry in a way that has become a central part of the elegiac tradition, and in a way that seems to relate particularly to the troubled political situation in Northern Ireland. Just as Carson's poems engage with the idea that "remembering" is simultaneously a creative and destructive action, Muldoon's soap-pig is being consumed even as its regular use makes it a reminder of what has been lost. This links to the idea of consumption that has been discussed in James Heffernan's study entitled "'Adonais': Shelley's Consumption of Keats".³⁵ This essay argues that Shelley is motivated, in part, by his own desire for literary renown, and that he re-writes the life of Keats to suit his purposes, rather than to immortalise the dead poet to assuage a sense of grief. It might be suggested that this is part of the elegiac process in general: the poet tries to create something that will provide a lasting monument for both subject and writer, as the event of a death brings mortality into sharp focus, as has been seen at the start of "The Soap-Pig".³⁶ In the context of Northern Ireland, the capacity that elegy has for commemoration and memorial suggests that it has a role to play in bringing perspective to a complicated and drawn-out political conflict.

"7, Middagh Street" is the long poem with which Meeting the British closes.³⁷ Muldoon finishes each of his collections with an extended poem, and these have become longer and more complex with each publication.³⁸ It is important to note the prominence of these poems in Muldoon's *oeuvre*, for a number of reasons, not least for their "intrusive" presence in the body of work.³⁹ Another reason, which is central to this study, is the fact that the long poems become increasingly elegiac, to the extent that "Yarrow", with which The Annals of Chile culminates, is simultaneously one of Muldoon's most impressive works of poetry and one of the century's great elegies. In more recent work, the final long poem of Horse Latitudes is also an elegy. The collections that follow Madoc: A Mystery are full of poems of loss, and seem to be developed from the engagements with the elegiac tradition found in Muldoon's earlier work. Meeting the British was published in the year that Muldoon moved to America, and the

34 Campbell notes: "Finding a memorial or memento, as monument or even sliver, might be what we would look for at the end of an elegy. Could this be the achieved 'new body' of the poem? Muldoon maintains a resolute suspicion of the monumental in his poems," 175.

35 See Introduction, n. 35.

36 See Wills, "...as the soap-pig is 'worked' into a lather, so Michael Heffernan is worked into the poem. While one body disappears, Muldoon creates a new body to endure. He builds a monument which at the same time acknowledges movement, loss, the process of things slipping away," 129. See also Muldoon's own description of what takes place in "The Soap-Pig": "it's as much about my response to Michael Heffernan, whom the poem is mostly about. It's almost in danger of seeming to be more about me and seeming self-absorbed and self-engaged. I suppose that's the risk the poem takes – it's always on the edge," quoted in Kendall, 135.

37 "7, Middagh Street", Poems 1968-1998, 175-93.

38 Indeed, Madoc: A Mystery (London: Faber, 1991), the collection that comes a few years after Meeting the British, contains just seven short lyric poems, and devotes the majority of the volume to "the 246-page title poem [which] is an ugly, opaque, sprawling epic, spanning two continents and half a century, while offering a potted history of Western philosophy from Thales to Hawking along the way," Kendall, 149.

39 Kendall, 149.

theme of departure and transition, which has always been heard in his poetry, seems to be especially prominent.⁴⁰ The volume is dedicated to the poet's father, and contains a number of elegies for him, as well as the elegy for Michael Heffernan, which has already been discussed. The title of the volume highlights some of the complexity that is found in Muldoon's treatment of the themes of Britain, Ireland and America: the reader might initially assume that the poet has decided, finally, to write more openly about the "political relationship between Britain and Ireland", but finds, instead, that the title-poem refers to a meeting between the British and the Native Americans in the eighteenth century.⁴¹ As usual, the poet plays the role of the "trickster". It is clear, however, that Ireland is not left out of the volume: indeed, the issues of British colonisation in America can be seen as a direct parallel to the historical context of the Troubles. Ireland's voice is also heard throughout the volume, perhaps most obviously in "7, Middagh Street", where Muldoon returns to W.H. Auden's elegy for Yeats, and once again uses the work of his predecessors to raise questions about poetic responsibility.

"7, Middagh Street" contains seven sections, the first spoken in the voice of Auden, and the final section in the persona of Louis MacNeice. When looking at the idea of a poet's purpose or function, it is necessary to look at both sections of this poem: if quoted out of context, Muldoon could be understood to be saying a range of contradictory things. Muldoon gives Auden a tirade against Yeats's pomposity:

And were Yeats living at this hour
it should be in some ruined tower

not malachited Ballylee...

As for his crass, rhetorical

posturing, "Did that play of mine
send out certain men (certain men?)

the English shot. . .?"
the answer is "Certainly not".

If Yeats had saved his pencil lead
would certain men have stayed in bed? (64-6, 71-77)

This outburst leads to a statement about the relationship between history and art, which might be tempting for a critic to use as evidence of Muldoon's own beliefs: "For history's a twisted root / with art its small, translucent fruit / and never the other way round" (78-80). However, Muldoon gives hints that he does not fully share "Wystan's" view, as he allows Yeats's voice to echo throughout his poem. The reference to Yeats's elegy "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" as the "Carson" section leads into the "Louis" section of Muldoon's poem seems to be part-parody and part-tribute to the forerunner of Northern Irish elegy: "two girls, I

40 The mirroring of Auden's move to America in "7, Middagh Street" with events happening in Muldoon's life adds to the sense of dislocation.

41 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 116.

thought, two girls in silk kimonos. // LOUIS // Both beautiful, one a gazebo” (393-4).⁴²

The final section of Muldoon's poem makes numerous references to Yeats's poetry, and seems to draw rather different conclusions to those heard in the first section.

In dreams begin responsibilities
it was on account of just such an allegory
that Lorca
was riddled with bullets
[...]
For poetry *can* make things happen –
not only can, but *must* ... (482-5, 492-3)

Muldoon's poem goes on to link the poetry of Lorca with the art of Salvador Dali (another of the voices heard in the poem), seeming to argue that art and violence are inextricably linked.⁴³ However tempting it might be for a critic to quote Muldoon's "Wystan" out of context, it is perhaps even more appealing to believe that the words of "Louis" in "7, Middagh Street" can be attributed to the poet himself. Muldoon does not allow such an easy reading. The fact that the two, contradictory voices are heard in his poem does not mean that Muldoon takes either view. Indeed, it might be that he occupies both positions simultaneously. Wills points out that the poem begins and ends with the same line: "Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir", which is spoken by the two poet figures, "Wystan" and "Louis", making it circular in structure, "like a serpent with its tail in its mouth", as is also seen in "Lunch with Pancho Villa".⁴⁴ This sense of multiple identities seems fitting for the Northern Irish poet embarking upon American citizenship. It also allows for Muldoon to align himself with multiple poetic predecessors, not just Auden, Yeats and MacNeice, but the many others that appear throughout the poem: Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Shakespeare, Hart Crane and Ovid, to name but a few. The constant awareness of a poetic tradition that has preceded him seems to call for a reading of Muldoon's poetry in the light of T.S. Eliot's views on the poetic tradition, and also Bloom's theory of poetic influence; Bloom's emphasis on anxiety, however, seems to be superseded in the work of many Northern Irish poets, especially Muldoon, by a sense of wilful and joyful communion with poetic tradition.⁴⁵ These readings also add to Muldoon's work as an elegist, as a central aspect of the writing of elegy is in responding to the conventions of the genre, and the elegies that have gone before.

III

42 See "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz": "Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle" and "We the great gazebo built, / They convicted us of guilt; / Bid me strike a match and blow," W.B. Yeats, The Poems, 283-4. Later on in Muldoon's poem, "Louis" reports Edward Carson saying "Bid me strike a match and blow".

43 This seems to be linked to ideas found in Heaney's poem "Summer 1969", where Goya's paintings of civil unrest are described as the poet attempts to confront the realities of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and in which Lorca is also mentioned, Opened Ground, 140-1.

44 Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 159.

45 T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence.

Muldoon's collection The Annals of Chile comes four years after Madoc: A Mystery, a volume which is almost entirely taken over by its long title-poem.⁴⁶ Indeed, "Madoc: A Mystery" remains Muldoon's longest poem to date, and might be seen as the climax of his tendency towards extended poems, which had been developing throughout his previous collections. The Annals of Chile picks up on themes from earlier collections with its two long poems, both elegies for significant women in the poet's life. Where "Madoc: A Mystery" is a fantastic narrative, telling the story of what might have happened, had Coleridge and Southey's plans for an American "Pantisocratic" colony been realised ("filtered through a history of Western philosophy from 580 BC to the present day"), the poems in The Annals of Chile return to the autobiographical style of some of Muldoon's earlier work.⁴⁷ This is not a regression to previous form after the achievement of "Madoc"; it is a development. Twenty years after her death, Muldoon finally writes an elegy for his mother. Indeed, the journey undertaken in "Madoc" mirrors the path of the poet's life as he moved to America, and might therefore represent the distance that was necessary for Muldoon to travel – both geographically and poetically – before he arrived at the point of encountering his loss in poetry. "Yarrow" appears at the end of The Annals of Chile, coming after "Incantata", Muldoon's elegy for a former lover.⁴⁸ However, it was written first, and took longer to complete, as the poet drew upon twenty years of grief. In writing his poem, Muldoon questions not only himself, and his responses to loss, but also holds elegy itself up for scrutiny. Wills comments on the way in which elegy is handled in the collection as a whole:

In contrast to a conventional elegy, where recovery is at play in a double sense – as the retrieval of the past, and as the healing of the bereaved person through the retrieval – in these poems there is an overwhelming sense of the failure of remembrance to preserve the past and thereby heal its wounds: poetry fails to achieve the consolation or revelation which can no longer be delivered by faith. [...] The language of cure is explicit in *The Annals of Chile*. At a fundamental level the volume is about healing, and the failure to heal. [...] But the notion of a cure involves ideas of improvement or making progress as well as the achievement of an encompassing perspective, and Muldoon is suspicious of both. Instead he seems to be looking for ways of returning to the past which are not based on notions of discovery and development.⁴⁹

As well as taking issue with the idea of elegy as a consolatory, healing process, Muldoon also uses the two long poems, and particularly "Yarrow", to highlight the problematic position of the female subject in what has been a male-dominated genre. Sacks's theories on elegy, which are largely indebted to psychoanalysis, suggest that any mourned figure is associated with the mother, while death is associated with the father, which makes the (male) mourner's sense of loss and antagonism towards death into a kind of oedipal struggle. Sacks points out that "so

46 The Annals of Chile (London: Faber, 1994).

47 Kendall, 157.

48 Poems 1968-1998, "Yarrow," 346-92; "Incantata," 331-41.

49 Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 159.

many traditional elegies perform a multiple exclusion or occlusion of figures representing the mother".⁵⁰ If elegy has traditionally been written by men, for men, with the mother figure featuring only symbolically, then the genre must be revised when the mourned subject is a woman, and specifically, the mourner's mother.⁵¹

Eavan Boland has identified another problem affecting both "Yarrow" and "Incantata" – the existence of women as "objects" in Irish poetry:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. [...] The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture. [...] Dark Rosaleen. Cathleen ni Houlihan. The nation as woman; the woman as national muse.⁵²

The woman as an emblem of Ireland is seen particularly in nationalist poetry, for example Patrick Pearse's "Mise Éire" ("I am Ireland").⁵³ Muldoon has to negotiate between the received notions of a woman's place in both the elegiac and the Irish traditions. "Yarrow" confronts these issues in a characteristically "tricksy" way. Muldoon deals with a vast range of images, ranging from the "grain in the shaft of [his father's] rake" (37, 246), and mundane rural childhood memories, to the death of Aladdin at the hands of "the Caliph of Baghdad" (499); from Yeats to Basho to Nabokov to characters from the Wild West; from his "ma", to an unnamed lover, "S___", to Maud Gonno, to Sylvia Plath. The poem is divided into one-hundred and fifty sections, and exhibits characteristics of the sestina and terza rima forms. Images are prompted by previous images, and memories are constantly revisited and revised.⁵⁴ The circular structure, which has been commented on by many critics, is a feature which Muldoon picks up on in his reading of Joyce's "The Dead", as he sees "the image of Patrick Morkan's horse going round and round the statue of King William, as an image of political paralysis".⁵⁵ This idea is pertinent to this study: Muldoon writes elegies in the context of the political paralysis surrounding the Troubles, and the lack of resolution in politics might reflect in the similar lack of consolation to be found for those mourning personal loss against the backdrop of seemingly irreconcilable civil conflict.

While "Yarrow" is identified as an elegy for the poet's mother, she does not occupy the

50 Sacks, 8, 321.

51 It is revised further when the elegy is written by a woman, as will be seen in the next chapter.

52 Eavan Boland, Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995, 2006) 134, 136.

53 Patrick Pearse "I Am Ireland," The Penguin Book of Irish Verse, ed. Brendan Kennelly, 2nd ed (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1981) 295. See also Thomas MacDonagh, P.H. Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Sir Roger Casement, Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, ed. Padraic Colum and Edward J. O'Brien (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1916).

54 A number of critics have commented on the circularity of Muldoon's poems, see Fran Brearton, for example: "it seems as if Muldoon is trying to draw his entire *oeuvre*, through concentric circles, into one Great Wheel – and habitual modus operandi in which he leaps, seemingly arbitrarily, from 'something else' to 'something else again,'" "For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents," Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays, 45-61 (45).

55 Muldoon, To Ireland, I, 54.

majority of the poem. Indeed, of the one-hundred and fifty sections (each printed on a separate page in *The Annals of Chile*), only thirty seem to refer to the mother. This is slightly fewer than the number of sections which mention the lover, “S_____”. It is unclear which figure appears in some sections, which refer only to “her” or “she”. The mother is rarely given a name: in the poem, “my ma” occurs eight times, while “mother o’mine, mother o’mine” (398) is found at the start of the fifty-second section, and the woman’s first name, “Brigid” (1043), is heard once in the one-hundred and thirty-fourth section. This results in the majority of the references to the principal female figures in the poem becoming ambiguous, if not interchangeable.⁵⁶ This sense of a universal female figure means that the other women in the poem – Plath, Maud Gonne, the “hornless doe” (518) or *aisling* in the sixty-seventh section – seem to merge and become exactly what Boland has identified – an emblem for a nation which calls out to the poet: “‘O come ye back,’ I heard her sing, ‘O come ye back / to Erin’” (576-7). Muldoon, however, cannot be accused of the objectification of the female figure in a simple manner. “Yarrow” comes across as an intensely self-aware poem. In his longer poems, Muldoon confounds normal reading procedures. While proponents of reader-reception theory might suggest that the reader is part of an interpretative community, and that culturally, we inherit strategies of reading, Muldoon challenges the idea that a single interpretation can be made, constantly extending the range of reference in his work, and making meaning proliferate until there seems to be an almost infinite number of possible interpretations.⁵⁷ Indeed, it is unclear who the intended reader is. A poem such as “7, Middagh Street”, with its ventriloquism of Auden, Britten, Dali and MacNeice, might suggest an academic audience, or at least an audience acquainted with “high” culture, which knows its poets, composers and artists. However, this is undermined by the inclusion of Gypsy Rose Lee’s voice, which represents the “low” culture of burlesque dancing. In a more complex manner, “Yarrow” does not seem to appeal to any particular audience, and certainly does not operate at a level to which the poet’s mother could have related.

The term “fabulation” might almost be applied to Muldoon’s longer poems. “Yarrow” does something similar to Salman Rushdie’s novels, with its vastly disparate settings, which range from rural Ireland to the quasi-mythical adventures involving the New World, Aladdin, Ignatius of Loyola, Don Junipero Serra, and many others.⁵⁸ The reader encounters characters ranging from “Lancelot du Lac” (108) to “Wild Bill Hickock” (255) and the American boxers “John L. Sullivan” and “Jake Kilrain” (202). Muldoon also references Irish figures from

56 This process resembles the “tendency for one event or character to blur and bleed into another”, to which Muldoon gives the name “imarrhage,” *To Ireland, I*, 74.

57 See Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980).

58 Salman Rushdie is one of many contemporary novelists whose work includes elements of fantasy and myth combined with “real” historical characters, places and events. Others include Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. I understand “fabulation” to mean something distinct and separate from “postmodern”. Another term that might be useful in this context is used by Muldoon to describe the writing process of Joyce, “conglomewriting”. See *To Ireland, I*, 56

“Connor MacNessa” (1148) to “Patrick Pearse” (357).⁵⁹ A theme linking these characters is violence, and this ties the poem to the Troubles. One of the many voices heard in “Yarrow” is an aggressively nationalistic invective, found, for example, in the sixty-eighth section:

“How much longer,” she cajoled, “must we rant and rail
against the ermine
yoke of the House of Hanover?”

When might the roots of Freedom take hold?
For how much longer must we cosset
Freedom's green shoot and Freedom's little green slip?” (523-8)

And again in the ninety-seventh:

That was the year Yeats said to Plath, “*Mi casa es su casa*”:
all the way from Drumcliff old “Hound Voice”
could be heard: “How much longer will the House of Saxe-

Coburg-Gotha try to break the spirit
of the Gael?
How much longer must we Irish vent

our spleen against their cold, their rook-delighting heaven?
When will we have at last put paid
to Milady's great-grandfather's foes?” (He meant “great-great”.) (750-8)

These extracts exemplify the complex way in which Muldoon presents information in “Yarrow”. Nationalist rhetoric is spoken in a range of voices; in the above passages, for example, it is spoken first by an *aisling*-figure and second by Yeats.⁶⁰ The first extract echoes Muldoon's earlier poem, “Aisling”, where the encounter with a dream-lover is tainted by promiscuity and venereal disease, mirroring the sickness in a nation where prisoners are starving themselves to death as a political protest.⁶¹ Elsewhere, Muldoon writes about the *aisling* as a “vision-voyage”:

This delight in the idea of the “vision-voyage” coincides with a delight in ventriloquism, or voice throwing, that allows the individual to make manifest a multiplicity of points of view, including political points of view, allowing him or her the freedom to shape-shift...⁶²

The adoption of the *aisling* genre within the elegy is used not only by Muldoon, but also by Carson and Mahon, as it seems to offer a wider range of voices with which to speak, providing a safety in numbers: the poet's “true” voice might very well be heard in the poetry, but is one of

59 This range of characters might be related to the “Cyclops” episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* which, as well as containing some of the nationalist sentiments which shall be commented on later, also contains long lists of characters, combining historical and mythical figures, as well as a mixture of Irish and “exotic”: for example in the list of the “many Irish heroes and heroines” whose images adorn the girdle of the fantastical citizen/Cyclops figure can be found “Cuchulin”, “Dante Alighieri”, “the Mother of the Maccabees”, “the Last of the Mohicans”, “Muhammed”, “Dark Rosaleen”, “Herodotus”, “the Queen of Sheba” and many more seemingly disparate figures. *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 295.

60 The invective spoken by the *aisling*-figure echoes a number of voices found in Irish literature, but might perhaps be most closely linked to some of the nationalist rhetoric heard in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*, which contains passages like: “- And as for the Prooshians and the Hanoverians, says Joe, haven't we had enough of those sausageeating bastards on the throne from George the elector down to the German lad and the flatulent old bitch that's dead?” *Ulysses*, 329.

61 Muldoon, “Aisling,” *Poems 1968-1998*, 126-7.

62 Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 73.

many, and is thus disguised.

The Yeats extract here is further complicated by the epithet “Hound Voice” which is used for Yeats, yet which in Yeats's poem of that name refers to “the women” who presumably joined his nationalist cause.⁶³ Muldoon has Yeats ask “How much longer must we Irish vent / our spleen against their cold, their rook-delighting heaven?”, again co-opting words from Yeats's “The Cold Heaven”, a poem which deals with imagination, memories and ghosts, some of the major themes of “Yarrow”.⁶⁴ Muldoon creates further distance between the words attributed to Yeats and his own, as he corrects a factual detail at the end of the stanza: “(He meant ‘great-great’)”. Just as in “A Trifle”, which gives a paradoxical sense of pedantic detail combined with the imprecision of a range of options, one of the voices heard in “Yarrow”, which might be attributed to the poet or narrator, is concerned with inconsequential detail: “either *Ad Major* / or *Ad Majorem De Gloriam*, I can't remember which” (17-8); “a sprig of *Achillea millefolium*, as it's classed” (42); the “pink (less red / than mauve) or off-white flower” (44-5), to give a few examples. The inclusion of phrases from other languages, such as the Latin in these examples, and the Spanish attributed to Yeats in the ninety-seventh section is another distancing technique, and a further experimentation with meaning. The distance is created for the reader who has to find a translation, and raises questions about the purpose of language itself. If the plant called “yarrow” is also known as *Achillea millefolium*, which is its correct name? Are the two names interchangeable or do they bring subtly different meanings to the poem? I suggest that they are both interchangeable and distinctly separate, and one of the effects of this is to give a sense of the poet's double or multiple identities, which consist of overlapping and inter-connected, yet at times seemingly incompatible, elements.

This leads to what should be the major subject of the poem: the poet's mother, and the way in which she is mourned. As previously mentioned, only about one-fifth of the poem seems to refer directly to the mother figure, and around a third of the poem refers to Ireland and the poet's experience there. These references are interspersed with the wide range of “exotic” characters that have already been discussed. For example, in the first five sections of the poem, the setting leaps from the rural family farm of the poet's childhood, to “the altar where Montezuma's / daughter severed her own aorta...” (13-4), to “Ignatius / of Loyola” (15-6), to

63 Yeats, *The Poems*, 388-9. Muldoon takes up the reference to this poem later on in “Yarrow” when an indignant speaker asks:

How dare you suggest that his “far-off, most secret,
and inviolate rose” is a cunt:
how dare you misread

his line about how they “all gave tongue”;
how dare you suggest that *Il Duce* of Drumcliff
meant that “Diana Vernon” and Maud Gonne gave good head.

Whoever is speaking here – the section is enclosed within quotation marks in the poem – it is Muldoon himself who is giving voice to these particularly nuanced readings of Yeats, again admitting further degrees of complexity to the interpretation of his own poem.

64 Yeats, *The Poems*, 176.

“Tutankhamen” (20), “Aladdin” (21), “Ali Baba” (22), “Cicero” (25) and “Charlemagne” (27), to an imagined destruction of the family farm-yard, to a memory of the poet's parents ordering seeds, to the poet's “den in St John's, Newfoundland” (41). The sudden, disorientating changes in geography and history (indeed, switching between fact and fiction) is matched by the unexpected alterations in register. The poem begins:

Little by little it dawned on us that the row
of kale would shortly be overwhelmed by these pink
and cream blooms, that all of us

would be overwhelmed, that even if my da
were to lose an arm
or a leg to the fly-wheel

of a combine and be laid out on a tarp
in a pool of blood and oil
and my ma were to make one of her increasingly rare

appeals to some higher power, some *Deo*
this or that, all would be swept away by the stream
that fanned across the land. (1-12)

All would be swept away: the altar where Montezuma's
daughter... (13-4)
[...]

For all would be swept away: the barn where the Pharoahs
had buried Tutankhamen... (19-20)
[...]

All would be swept away, all sold for scrap:
the hen-house... (28-9)

The first section sets a semi-apocalyptic scene, imagining that “all of us / would be overwhelmed” by an accident that had the potential to happen, but had not, in fact, taken place. The sense of mere possibility is underlined by the indeterminacy of the image: “if my da / were to lose an arm / *or* a leg” (my emphasis). While there seem to be echoes here of Frost's “Out, Out –”, which describes a boy's hand being cut off by a buzz-saw in a farming accident, Muldoon's poem describes only a sense of foreboding about such an incident.⁶⁵ A sense of hysterical fear is given in the idea that “all would be swept away by the stream / that fanned across the land”. This impending doom might be attributed to a number of things. As the poem is an elegy, it might be argued that the greatest threat to the figures in the poem, and indeed the

⁶⁵ Muldoon makes much more explicit allusions elsewhere in his poetry, which would suggest that more subtle echoes like this might be attributed with some certainty to his reading of Frost. Within the 131st section of “Yarrow”, for example, Muldoon writes: “in Frost's great poem, 'The Most of It', the 'talus' / refers not to the heel...” See Frost, “The Most of It,” Selected Poems, 220-21 (“Out, Out-,” 86-7).

poet himself, is death, which has already overtaken the parents. In keeping with traditional elegy, the poet-mourner's earliest memories take place in a rural, pastoral setting. While the pastoral quality of the Muldoon family's farm might not be as idyllic as the landscapes of "Lycidas" or "Thyrsis", it is nevertheless a remembered space that is now under threat as loss and destruction loom large. The sense of threat also seems to be connected with the political situation in Northern Ireland: Muldoon grew up during the height of the violence in the second half of the twentieth century. This political and civil uncertainty could be pictured as a "stream / that fanned across the land". The mention of the mother's "increasingly rare // appeals to some higher power", which are portrayed as a futile act in the face of the inevitability of destruction, also signifies an absence of religious faith, at least for the poet. The fact that the word "*Deo*" is used, rather than "God", seems to further distance the poet from his parents, giving them an educated, academic vocabulary which does not convincingly represent their diction. It also gives an ironic, cynical tone to the idea of "some higher power, some *Deo* / this or that". This cynicism regarding religion robs the elegy of some of its powers of consolation. Indeed, Muldoon's poem might be seen to conform to Ramazani's description of a "melancholic" elegy: "they attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself".⁶⁶

The effect of this overwhelming "stream" of destruction seems, perversely, to be a creative force in Muldoon's poem, however. The next three sections begin with the refrain-like "All would be swept away", the repeated "All" seeming to encourage the poet continually to expand his frame of reference until it includes all the exotic names already mentioned, and spans time and space in an ever-increasing survey. After the sudden "zooming out" in the second and third sections, the fourth section brings the reader abruptly back to the simplicity of the childhood farm-yard. The effect of this, with the entirely mundane details of the "hen-house improvised from a high-sided cattle-truck / the coils of barbed wire, the coulter // or a plough" (29-31) is to make the farm scene seem like a "reality" in comparison with the "fabulation" of the previous images. This final repetition of "All would be swept away" sounds like an anti-climactic realisation of loss. This is similar to the experience at the end of George Herbert's devotional poem "Prayer (I)", which, after a series of elaborate metaphors, simply defines prayer as "something understood": the deliberately understated closing phrase made powerful by all that has gone before it. Herbert's poetry provides an interesting counter-point to Muldoon's. In poems like "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)", Herbert seems to wrestle with the temptation to write with extravagant style, and condemns himself for "Curling with metaphors a plain intention", and seeming to hear God tell him "*How wide is all this long pretence!*".⁶⁷ It is

⁶⁶ Ramazani, 4.

⁶⁷ George Herbert, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides, Everyman Classics (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1974, rpt. 1988), "Prayer (I)," 70-1, "Jordan (I)," 75, "Jordan (II)," 116-7. Quotations taken from "Jordan (II)".

commonly acknowledged, however, that despite the fact that the majority of Herbert's poems call for plain and modest language in devotion to God, they use highly sophisticated poetic techniques with which to preach this message. Muldoon's poems are certainly not devotional, at least in the Christian sense, but they also use language in complicated ways, often saying one thing and meaning another, or indeed saying many other things, and constantly drawing attention to the act of writing itself.

When Tony Harrison came to elegise his parents, he was forced to confront the distance that he, a “scholarship boy” and now acclaimed poet, felt from his working-class origins. He recalls his early volume *The Loiners*, about which critics have written such things as: “*The Loiners* explores sexuality with a frankness and concentrated attention that are astonishing. The whole sequence is a major achievement of structural coherence and compelling local detail”.⁶⁸ Perhaps more important to Harrison, however, is his mother's response to his work, which appears in an elegy for her: “*You weren't brought up to write such mucky books!*”.⁶⁹ Similarly, when memorialising his father in “Book Ends I”, the poet twists the meaning of his mother's words which describe him and his father, “*You're like book ends, the pair of you*”; where she had intended to say that the two men were alike, Harrison suggests that, as with a pair of book ends, what comes between his father and himself are the “books, books, books” of his educational and literary career.⁷⁰ Muldoon seems to face similar issues when mourning his parents. The early poems “At Master McGrath's Grave” and “Gathering Mushrooms” highlight the class issues that are present in Muldoon's work, particularly issues that are unique to Ireland, and these seem to be raised each time the poet's work turns towards the autobiographical. Muldoon's response to class differs from Harrison's in a number of ways. A major difference is in the style and diction with which the two poets elegise their parents. Harrison seems to make a conscious effort to write in a language that his parents used, the “tongue that once I used to know / but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's”.⁷¹ The seemingly over-sentimental, even “mawkish” tone that Harrison takes in his elegies seems to be intentional, part of the “shock” value of his poetry, which, elsewhere, has concentrated on explicitly sexual imagery and obscene language. Although it has a similar effect, Muldoon's approach to elegising his parents seems to tend to the opposite extreme: where Harrison sounds self-conscious, almost patronising, in his adoption of his parents' diction, Muldoon's use of scholarly language – even putting Latin words into his mother's mouth – as well as the sexual images and profanity that are included within this elegy, seems to place an insurmountable barrier between the academic poet and his parents.

68 Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 41.

69 Tony Harrison, “Bringing Up,” *Collected Poems* (London: Viking-Penguin, 2007) 178.

70 Harrison, “Book Ends I,” *Collected Poems*, 137.

71 Harrison, “Wordlists II,” *Collected Poems*, 128. In an aside in his article on Harrison, Nicholas Lezard notes that the poet “speaks ‘five or six’ languages, not counting the dead ones. And one hesitates to use the word ‘dead’ in this context around Harrison, who quotes freely from them in both his speech and his work,” “Interview: Fire in his Belly,” *The Independent*, Sunday 11 April 1999, accessed 26/02/2010 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interview-fire-in-his-belly-1086505.html>>.

This reading of “Yarrow” began with the suggestion that twenty years after her death, Muldoon is finally able to elegise his mother; this statement is now seen to be problematic. This is just one reading of the poem. Nevertheless, “Yarrow” can be made to offer up many conventionally elegiac images. The highly self-conscious tone is elegiac, both in terms of the sense in which the poet is exploring his own memories and dissecting his grief, and in the sense in which attention is drawn towards the very act of writing itself.⁷² The twenty-fifth section begins:

In a conventional sestina, that plaster of Paris skull
would almost certainly reveal the dent
where my da took a turf-spade to poleaxe

one of McParland's poley cows
that had run amuck on our spread,
bringing it to its knees by dint of a wallop so great

it must have ruptured a major vein,
such was the spout
of, like, blood that hit him full in the face. (193-201)

This draws attention to the very fabric of the poem in a number of ways: the “conventional sestina” mentioned at the beginning seems to be a reference to the way in which “Yarrow” is constructed, which has been described as a “series of exploded sestinas”.⁷³ The conditional tone of the sentence, “In a conventional sestina...”, “would almost certainly...” creates a paradox: the stanza tells of what a different poem *might* “reveal”, but in doing this, proceeds to tell a story that is fully imagined with a child-like relish for violent and brutal detail. The sense of provisionality with which the section opens seems to be almost entirely forgotten by the time the final line is reached: what began in something like the self-conscious poet's voice seems to end with a naïve, and somewhat sinister, enthusiasm for bloodshed. This combination of voices even within one section of the poem might suggest the range of possible identities that the poet accesses. In the context of Northern Ireland, this potential for different reactions within each individual might be fundamental to the possibility of a peaceful resolution of conflict: each person has a responsibility and capability to work towards peace. Conversely, this also means that each individual has the potential to react with violence. The poem “Anseo” focuses on the different paths followed by the speaker and his classmate, Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward: the former going on to confront the Troubles in his writing, and the latter taking physical and violent action in fighting for the nationalist cause. While “Anseo” seems to compare the figure of the poet to the “man of action”, the multiple, and often violent, voices within “Yarrow” seem to suggest that the poet himself has the potential to engage with, and perpetuate, the conflict. The self-consciousness in “Yarrow”, then, might also be linked to a sense of responsibility, or,

72 Campbell: ““Yarrow” moves to its conclusion aware of the great generic pressure towards the consolations of immortality which inhabits the achieved forms of elegiac convention,” 181.

73 Keller, “An Interview with Paul Muldoon,” 9.

indeed, Muldoon's awareness of irresponsibility, and unsuitability for the task of a "public poet" of the Troubles.

The self-consciousness found in "Yarrow" also includes the many literary references. While the poem is ostensibly about the poet's biological mother, and includes as much, if not more, material about his father, the poem is also full of literary predecessors, a number of which have been mentioned already. Edna Longley, writing about some of Muldoon's earlier work, states that his poetry "questions its own authority along with origins, foundations, heritage, precedent, preceptor and pedigree", and, remembering that the dedication of his first collection was "For my Fathers and Mothers", she goes on to point out that "Muldoon's puns and rhymes endow words themselves with multiple identities, strange bedfellows, surprisingly extended families, and his poems unfold through associations that unsettle the reader".⁷⁴ Fran Brearton notes that when asked in interviews, "Muldoon's citations of influence themselves tend to come in the form of an unstoppable list, a chain of more-than-coincidences [...], and a refusal to close the list at the tail". She goes on to suggest that both biological and literary antecedents "always exist in Muldoon's work in a complex symbiotic relationship in which myth plays a vital connecting role". Referring to Bloom's theory of influence, Brearton explores relationships between Muldoon and some of his literary fathers and mothers: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Edna Longley, for example.

The subject of "Yarrow" – lament for the loss of the mother/lover – pushes Muldoon (both here and in "Incantata") to acknowledge in his debts, and draw more directly on Michael Longley's own elegiac and stylistic practice, with its syntactical (and temporal) distortions, than on Heaneyesque modes of assuagement. It does so partly because Longley shares Muldoon's sense that mothers are "difficult"...

However, she warns against the "seductiveness" of reading Muldoon in the light of Bloom:

Muldoon does not simply replicate Bloom's essentialist gender terms in his own "anxiety of influence"; the terms are adopted with a deliberate "knowingness", implicitly applied to his precursors, parodied, and ultimately collapsed.⁷⁵

Indeed, Muldoon's poetry responds as much to critical predecessors as it does to literary ones. The way in which Bloom's theory is engaged with in "Yarrow" is one example of this. Bloom writes: "Like criticism, which is either part of literature or nothing at all, great writing is always at work strongly (or weakly) misreading previous writing".⁷⁶ Muldoon performs a deliberate misreading of a wide range of "previous writing", including that of Bloom.⁷⁷ While in some

74 Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 167, 179. Longley argues, in the chapter entitled "When Did You Last See Your Father?": Perceptions of the Past in Northern Irish Writing 1965-1985", that "genealogical obsessions pervade Irish culture", noting the profusion of works, particularly by Northern Irish writers, which detail the often problematic relationships between sons and fathers, both biological and literary.

75 Brearton, "For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents," 46, 47, 56, 59.

76 Bloom, xix.

77 Elsewhere in his prose writing, Muldoon also seems to engage with, and adapt, Bloomian ideas of influence: "Now I'd like to suggest that the extraordinary appetite and aptitude for 'intertextuality' among these writers goes beyond a mere interest in the allusive, or the parodic, but is symptomatic of several

ways he can be seen to exemplify Bloom's theory, he goes beyond it, seeming to invert or subvert it by exhibiting a wry "anxiety of theories of influence" as he loads his poem with such a great weight of allusion, quotation and reference to predecessors that it seems liable to collapse into an infinite number of meanings – enough to render any of them, and any application of theory, meaningless. Stephen Watt describes Muldoon's use of allusion as something which the poet seems compelled to do: "Allusion, as today's techno-geeks might put it, is as 'hard-wired' in his writing as strands of DNA are in the genetic code". Watt links this to the particular pressures placed upon poets who wrote in response to the Troubles: "Quite obviously, the Troubles, for Northern Writers and artists, was 'ungetroundable,' but so too was the drive to understand this moment by way of other histories, other struggles, other writing".⁷⁸

While this reading of "Yarrow" has gone some way in analysing the poem as an elegy, it has been necessarily circuitous as it has followed some of the circular arguments and trails of allusion with which the poem operates. "Yarrow" is full of repetitions, both on a structural level and in terms of characters, images and phrases. Repetition is closely linked to memory, with the recurring, refrain-like lines, "That must have been the year"; "That was the year"; "All I remember".⁷⁹ The poet's memories of his childhood are a repeated theme, as are the more painful recollections of his mother as she suffered with the cancer that killed her: "All I remember was the linen cloth, at once primed and puckery / where her chin rested on the pattern" (1081-2); "a young R.N. / hooks an I.V. into her arm" (1130-1). Even in these phrases, Muldoon retains a detached, ironically self-aware tone: the usage of hospital-jargon such as the abbreviations "R.N." and "I.V." foregrounds the poet's fascination with language, as he seems to pay more attention to the process of writing than he did to his mother as she died. This highlights a sense of guilt which runs throughout the poem, and has already been noted in

deep-seated senses. The first is of concomitancy. There's a sense of two discrete coexistent realms. Two texts. Concomitant with that, though, is the fact there's no distinction between one world and the next. Or one text and the next. If there's a fine line between the notions of 'allusiveness' and 'elusiveness', it's so fine it's constantly breaking down. Concomitant with that is a touching disregard for the figure of the author. Joyce belongs in Bowen, Bowen, Allingham, and those anonymous ninth-century poets in Beckett. All, indeed, are anonymous. Their very disregard for their 'selves' allows them to mutate and transmogrify themselves, to position themselves, with Amergin, at some notional cutting edge," To Ireland, I, 24-5. Muldoon is also seen to make "respectful references" to "the theoretical Bloom of The Anxiety of Influence" in The End of the Poem, according to John Constable, "Horse Latitudes, by Paul Muldoon and The End of the Poem, by Paul Muldoon," Use of English 59.1 (2007): 77-87.

78 Stephen Watt, Beckett and contemporary Irish writing (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2009) 131. In a further development, Muldoon is now a literary precursor of a new generation of poets, and not just Northern Irish ones: Daljit Nagra's poem "Yobbos!" describes the bizarre experience of being accused of carrying "*Some Paki shit, like*", when observed reading Muldoon's "Yarrow" on a London tube train, Look We Have Coming to Dover! (London: Faber, 2007) 11.

79 Wills picks up on this when she mentions "the circular verse forms which Muldoon employs throughout the volume: the villanelle, the sestina, terza rima – all are based on repetition, doing things, not just twice but again and again. These circling forms, as Muldoon employs them, are filled with the obsessiveness of powerful emotion. One of the implications here is that it is wrong to think of formal control as the antithesis of authentic feeling – indeed that tightly controlled and 'conventional' forms may be the best vehicle for the expression of overwhelming feeling. But there is, I think, something else at issue here – the question of memory as repetition," Reading Paul Muldoon, 172.

relation to Harrison's elegies for his parents. This is picked up again in the line "'Ovarian,' did I write? Uterine" (1078). Here, the poet seems to berate himself for mis-remembering the central detail of his mother's illness in his attempt at producing emotive poetry.⁸⁰ Indeed, the poem as a whole could be read as an admission of guilt: the multiple digressions and the counter-plot involving the lover "S___" which are coloured by sex, drugs and violence, might all be considered as interests and choices of which the poet's mother would not have approved. These function partly as reminders of the distance experienced between mother and son, and which remains between them, decades after her death. There seems to be no cure for this pain of separation, for which the poet seems, simultaneously, to blame himself and his mother. The mother's voice is heard in the poem as one which nags her son: "Stay clear of those louts and layabouts" (316) and even undermines his poetic career:

"Nevermore," my ma chipped in, "will the soul clap its hands
for sheer joy
as it did for Yeats and William Blake..." (976-8)

This seems to deny the power of modern poetry, and while it is not perhaps offered as a serious statement, it links Muldoon's poem with Ramazani's discussion of modern elegy: can writers like Muldoon write elegies as Yeats did?

The circularity of the poem continues up to the final stanzas, where previous themes are revised, and which even seem to imagine a kind of transcendence and escape:

In a conventional tornada, the strains of her "*Che sera, sera*"
or "The Harp that Once" would transport me back
to a bath resplendent with yarrow

(it's really a sink set on breeze- or cinder-blocks):
then I might be delivered
from the rail's monotonous "alack, alack";

in a conventional envoy, her voice would be ever
soft, gentle and low
and the chrism of milfoil might over-

flow
as the great wheel
came full circle... (1162-73)

Just as in the twenty-fifth section's opening, "In a conventional sestina", here the one-hundred and forty-ninth section gives a range of alternative possibilities for the ending of the poem: in either a "tornado" or an "envoy" (which are both types of concluding stanza) the poem might be

80 The 136th section of "Yarrow", previous to this correction, reads:
The bridge. The barn. Again and again I stand aghast
as I contemplate what never
again will be mine:

"Look on her: Look, her lips.
Listen to her *rôle*
where ovarian cancer takes her in its strangle-hold."

given some kind of resolution, either as the poet is “delivered”, or as the mother's comforting voice is heard.⁸¹ The image of the “great wheel / [coming] full circle” suggests that these are the consolations that the poem has been aiming towards. However, the stanza does not end here: instead it falters into uncertainty as the poet admits

there's no more relief, no more respite
than when I scurried, click, down McParland's lane
with my arms crossed, click, under my armpits... (1180-2)

Even the consolatory images at the start of the section are vague and easily undermined by the multiple options given: her “‘*Che sera, sera*’ / or ‘The Harp that Once’”; the “breeze- or cinder-blocks”.

In the final section the poem again broadens out from the narrow focus of childhood memory until it becomes little more than a list of disparate images, as the poet finds it “harder and harder to pin down” (1190) any final meaning. The final lines speak of this loss of meaning in terms of an ancient ship-wreck:

there's something about the quail's “Wet-my-foot”
and the sink full of hart's-tongue, borage and common kedlock

that I've either forgotten or disavowed;
it has to do with a trireme, laden with ravensara,
that was lost with all hands between Ireland and Montevideo. (1193-7)

While this might seem to be a rather inconclusive ending to such a long poem of mourning, it responds, on a number of levels, to elegies that have gone before it. Perhaps most obviously the sunken boat echoes Shelley's frail and vulnerable “spirit's bark” as it is “driven / Far from the shore” at the end of “Adonais”.⁸² Another, fainter, echo is that of William Cowper's “The Castaway”, which, after relating the tale of a “wretch” lost at sea, ends with the lines “We perished, each alone: / But I beneath a rougher sea, / and whelmed in deeper gulfs than he”.⁸³ In Cowper's poem, the lost figure ultimately stands for the poet himself. Similarly, in Muldoon's poem, there is a sense in which loss is all-pervasive, and that not only has the mother, the past, and even meaning itself been lost, but that the poet, too, is lost. However bleak this conclusion might be, it is made defiantly, even violently. Muldoon gives the reader two options as to what he is doing with memory: things are either “forgotten or disavowed”. If memories are “disavowed”, this makes the poet active in his reconstruction of the past, and even in the way in

81 It should be noted that the “soft, gentle and low” voice is perhaps not solely that of Brigid Regan, bearing in mind the multiple allusions to Shakespeare's *King Lear* throughout the poem that are noted by Stephen Watt; indeed, these lines directly echo Lear's description of Cordelia: “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in a woman” (*King Lear*, 5.3.272-4, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed, *The Complete Works* (Boston, M.A.: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) 1297-1354 (1342)). Watt acknowledges that in “Yarrow”, this woman's voice is not always soft and gentle, but “can ‘take down’ even the most formidable of animals and therefore also leave a psychological mark or wound on a grieving son”, *Beckett and contemporary Irish writing*, 134.

82 Shelley, “Adonais,” 545.

83 William Cowper, “The Castaway,” *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook, (London: Longman, 1994) 316-9.

which he deals with loss. Wills comments that:

“Yarrow” creates a way of returning to the past which isn't based on development, discovery, revelation – a form of restitution which allows the past to breathe. The return to the past is neither the recovery of a lost origin which will tell us who we are, nor a therapeutic replaying of a “forgotten” trauma which will help to break its hold. If repetition is to bring about change, Muldoon suggests, it is not by taming the violence within, but by appropriating its force.⁸⁴

However bleak the poem is, and however (un-)successful the mourning has been, Muldoon nevertheless leaves the reader with an impression of power, intention and poetic mastery.

Ramazani writes that “[s]corned recovery and transcendence, modern elegists neither abandon the dead nor heal the living”.⁸⁵ Muldoon shows that it is possible to re-write the elegy in a way that befits his painful experience of loss.

“Incantata”, the other major elegy in The Annals of Chile, might be seen as a more “authentic” portrayal of grief. Where “Yarrow” appears decades after the death of its subject, “Incantata” mourns Mary Farl Powers, who died just two years before the volume's publication. Kendall notes that the poem was written over five days, and “seems to be the closest Muldoon has ever come to fulfilling Wordsworth's concept of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. As a result, ““Incantata” has a higher prevalence of technical blemishes than readers of Muldoon's work are accustomed to expect”.⁸⁶ However, it might be argued that these “technical blemishes” are not necessarily a weakness in the poetry. Just as Harrison uses a kind of calculated insufficiency of language to highlight the complicated relationship that he had with those he mourns, Muldoon's choice of rhyme and rhythm, when sounding clumsy, may be chosen specifically for that effect. The unpolished tone of parts of the poem might be the most fitting way in which to express grief authentically. “Incantata” sounds more like a conventional elegy than “Yarrow”. If the poem is a result of a more instinctive, emotional reaction to loss, and it expresses this reaction by using more of the expected techniques of elegy than the longer poem, then “Incantata” shows that elegy is still the default mode for expressing grief. One traditionally elegiac aspect of “Incantata” is the glimpses of consolation that it seems to offer. Where “Yarrow” ends on a bleak, albeit defiant, note, “Incantata” ends with a moment of communion between the mourner and his subject: “you might reach out, arrah, / and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink” (359-60). Wills suggests that

[“Incantata”] is perhaps the climax of Muldoon's concerns with how poetry can help us live our lives, with what it can do in the face of violence and loss. The subject of this poem too is the search for relief – for a way of living in the knowledge of mortality, and for a balm to heal the dying body. [...it] is at once a lament for all the misery of past generations, and a reflection on the limits of poetic remembrance and aesthetic transfiguration. [...] The constant recurrence of the same verbal patterns and grammatical structures gives the poem a magical “incantatory” aspect. In this sense, “Incantata” can be seen as a successor to

84 Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 181.

85 Ramazani, 4.

86 Kendall, 209, 210.

Quoof's ambivalent representation of poetry as a shamanistic cure, a way to ward off evil.⁸⁷

For Kendall, “‘Incantata’ finally does manage to reach the intended audience: Mary. Its emotive conclusion grants a moment of communion with the dead, imaginatively achieved even while acknowledged as impossible”.⁸⁸ This point highlights another major difference between the two elegies: where the intended audience of “Yarrow” is hard to define, and does not seem to include the poem's subject, “Incantata” is written in the second person, reading like a three-hundred and sixty-line monologue from the poet to his former lover.

There are a number of straightforward comparisons to be made between the two poems. Both are based on circular forms, although where “Yarrow” consists of one-hundred and fifty sections of either two, three or four stanzas, loosely based on *terza rima* but employing sestina-like word-play, “Incantata” is made up of forty-five eight-line stanzas which follow the rhyme pattern *aabbccddc*.⁸⁹ The form of “Incantata” links it to the “stadium stanza” of Cowley's “On the Death of Mr William Harvey”, also used in Yeats's “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”.⁹⁰ Like “Yarrow”, “Incantata” makes a range of references, but unlike “Yarrow”, the breadth of reference and allusion does not alienate the poet from his subject: indeed, the majority of allusions to artists, composers, literary works and geographical locations are made as the poet recalls moments from the life that he had shared with his lover. Where childhood memories are juxtaposed with adult experience in “Yarrow”, memories and experiences can be one and the same thing for the speaker of “Incantata”. Indeed the allusions in “Incantata” are more consistent and accessible than those in “Yarrow”, generally having a connection with art, music, literature and language, and often having associations with Ireland and Irish culture. Muldoon sets his subject apart from the “*hoi polloi*” (69), however, “for whom Irish ‘art’ means a High Cross at Carndonagh or Corofin / and *The Book of Kells*” (70-1), suggesting that she, and by implication, “true” Irish art, cannot be constrained and simplified into any particular set of emblems or stereotypes. As with all Muldoon's elegies, “Incantata” is coloured by the poet's experience of Ireland, for example in the eleventh stanza:

I remember you pooh-poohing, as we sat there on the *Enterprise*,
my theory that if your name is Powers
you grow into it or, at least,
are less inclined to tremble before the likes of this bomb-blast
further up the track: I myself was shaking like a leaf
as we wondered whether the I.R.A. or the Red
Hand Commandos or even the Red
Brigades had brought us to a standstill worthy of Hamm and Clov. (81-8)

Here, Muldoon weaves references to the Troubles – the “bomb-blast”, the “I.R.A.” – together with strands of detail from increasingly disparate settings to create an effect that has already

87 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 181.

88 Kendall, 218.

89 See Campbell on the use of form in Muldoon's elegies, 178-9.

90 See Kendall, 210.

been seen in his poetry: a multiplicity of details that paradoxically results in a failure to create a specific stable image. The “Red Hand Commandos”, a loyalist paramilitary group, is offered alongside the “I.R.A.” as a choice of a party responsible for what the reader presumes to be the “bomb-blast” mentioned a few lines earlier. To these two groups is added a third, non-Irish military organisation, the “Red Brigades”. This detail serves to blur the focus that had been on the Northern Irish Troubles. As the sentence continues: “had brought *us* to a standstill”, the conflict described in the stanza is suddenly a private one taking place between the poet and his subject, rather than a public “bomb-blast”. The final detail, “worthy of Hamm and Clov”, undermines even this most recent revelation: the private unravelling of a relationship is now cast in the light of a Beckett play, making the lovers appear two-dimensional and hollow, and the conflict between them somehow inevitable, if not scripted. The stanza seems to unravel and shed meaning as it progresses. This can be read as a comment on a number of things: the lovers' relationship; the political situation in Northern Ireland; indeed, the way in which memory functions, as various details are recalled, pieced together, and re-played.

The subject of “Incantata” is an artist, which allows Muldoon to write a more traditional elegy: many famous elegies are written in memory of fellow artists or poets. Furthermore, Mary Farl Powers suffered a tragically premature death, dying from cancer at the age of 43. This enables Muldoon to pick up on conventions of other elegies which also mourn early and unexpected deaths, which emphasises the loss of potential that the death signifies, especially in terms of artistic output. While it might be argued that elegies like “Lycidas” and “Adonais” mourn a fellow poet whose death presents something of an opportunity for the living poet to secure his own poetic reputation against a now unthreatening rival, “Incantata” mourns a close friend and lover. Links can be made to Muldoon's contemporary, Douglas Dunn, who mourned his wife in the collection Elegies, published in 1985.⁹¹ A few decades earlier, Thomas Hardy's Poems of 1912-13 were written as he mourned the sudden death of his wife, Emma.⁹² Just over half a century earlier than that, Tennyson had published his great work of mourning, In Memoriam, for his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam; an extended and intimate expression of grief that has been described as “not only an elegy but one of the most beautiful love poems in English”.⁹³ As these examples show, Muldoon is certainly not working outside the elegiac tradition in writing an elegy for a loved one.

Watt notes that Samuel Beckett is an important presence in “Incantata”, going as far as identifying him as a “parasitical” presence: “Beckett is thus the worm, as it were, in the blighted potato of Muldoon's text”. However, just as the waves of destruction that overtake “Yarrow” might be seen, paradoxically, as creative agents (in the sense that the poem is constructed from these images), “Beckett's presence in Muldoon's work is an enabling, not debilitating,

91 Douglas Dunn, Elegies (London: Faber, 1985).

92 See Longley and Mahon chapter, n. 95.

93 Tennyson, In Memoriam: A Norton Critical Edition, “Introduction,” xxv.

invasion”.⁹⁴ The language of parasitical invasion is taken from the poem itself, as it mourns a victim of cancer. Cancer invades “Incantata” on a number of levels: the first hint being given in the opening stanza with its image of a “cankered potato” (7). Later on in the poem, the disease is described as an unseen, and unstoppable, enemy: “cancer had already made such a breach / that you would almost surely perish” (139-40). On a structural level, too, “Incantata” is a cancer elegy. Twiddy makes the following connections, following the poem's rhyme scheme:

The shape forms concentric circles from the first to the last stanza. The rhyme scheme of each stanza can be considered as the D.N.A code of that stanza or cell. Cell replication occurs as a cycle, from D.N.A replication through to division. In “Incantata” the central cell replicates and divides, producing the stanza to its left, then replicating and dividing again to produce the cell to its right. The central cell proliferates from the twin allusions to Beckett and Joyce. The howls of “*quaquaqua*” and “*quoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquo*” are the relentless cell replication of cancer. In its attempt to “make sense” of the cancer, the poem expands as a malignant tumour...⁹⁵

Allusions to Beckett and other predecessors might not help Muldoon to “make sense” of his grief, but they provide a means of expression, and might even bring relief. Watt remarks that “allusions to Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell, [...] emerge not so much as indicators of a ‘relentlessly negative’ Beckett, but as imitations of a comic affirmation”, and that “‘Black humor,’ as Mahon describes the source of laughter in Beckett, breaks into these elegies to do battle with cancer, with sorrow, and finally with death itself”.⁹⁶ Another predecessor from whom Muldoon seems to have developed a way in which to write about painful memories is Frost. John Redmond describes the “air of conversational evasiveness” that has been seen in earlier poems, such as the “four or five minutes” in “A Trifle” or the pedantic voice heard in “Yarrow”. This repeatedly occurs in “Incantata”: the “eight or ten or twelve o'clock” (22) in the third stanza; or the “bit of whin, or gorse, or furze” (37) in the fifth. Redmond notes that instead of “a precise, definite answer, we are given some, but only some, idea of whatever is in question”. He goes on to identify Muldoon's source of influence: “As in Frost the idiomatic, conversational style creates an impression of transparency, an impression which proves false as soon as the reader *slows down* and thinks carefully”.⁹⁷ This characteristic might also be linked to Beckett; indeed the “four or five minutes” almost directly echoes the stage direction at the start of the second act of *Waiting for Godot*: “*The tree has four or five leaves*”.⁹⁸ Muldoon, like Frost and Beckett, writes in an evasive and “tricksy” manner, even as he writes in the elegiac mode which is usually expected to provide consolation.

Despite the intertextual allusions and literary echoes heard within “Incantata”, the poem does, finally, seem to offer authentic expressions of grief, and, to a greater extent than “Yarrow”, attempts to secure some kind of consolation. As has often been experienced by elegists, this

94 Watt, 151.

95 Twiddy, 183.

96 Watt, 154, 130.

97 John Redmond, “Muldoon and Pragmatism,” *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 96-109 (100-1)

98 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot, The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986) 52.

encounter with death seems to force Muldoon to face up to his own mortality. He remembers how Mary had “detected in me a tendency to put / on too much artificiality, both as man and poet, / which is why you called me 'Polyester' or 'Polyurethane’” (110-2).⁹⁹ Indeed, there is a sense of deflation in the second half of the poem, directly following the stanza which quotes from Lucky's incomprehensible speech. Stanza 24 begins, “That's all that's left of the voice of Enrico Caruso,” (185) and the rest of the poem takes up this refrain in what Watt terms “a long catalogue of diminished realities”.¹⁰⁰ This list not only echoes the “All would be swept away” refrain of “Yarrow”, but also contains numerous references to shared memories, including geographical locations, food and drink, literature, art, “high” and “low” culture. For Watt, “Muldoon for much of the poem appears to document just how destitute a sumptuous cultural life can be”.¹⁰¹

These stanzas also contain references to particular instances of violence carried out by paramilitary organisations during the Troubles: the “eighteen soldiers dead at Warrenpoint” (line no?) refers to the IRA’s bombing of a British Army convoy on 27 August 1979, while the “remnants of Airey Neave” and of “Mountbatten” (line no?), two British politicians who were killed by bombs planted by the INLA and the Provisional IRA during 1979, Louis Mountbatten’s death taking place on the same day as the bombing at Warrenpoint. The fact that the catalogue was started with the phrase “That’s all that’s left of...” ensures that the “remnants” of these men are seen as fragmentary and incomplete, which might be a reference to the way in which they died in bomb explosions. Here, Muldoon reinforces some of the horror of the conflict, and this might add to Watt’s sense of the destitution of a “sumptuous cultural life”; when held up against the on-going atrocities taking place in Northern Ireland, the poet is perhaps forced to question the value and importance of such interests. The list of people, places, objects and works of art that makes up the second half of the poem might function like the procession of mourners in a conventional elegy. Indeed, they might be seen as counterparts to the

Desires and Adorations,
Wingèd Persuasions and veiled Destinies,
Splendours, and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations
Of hopes and fears, and twilight Fantasies...

which “Came in slow pomp” to mourn the figure of Keats in Shelley's “Adonais”.¹⁰² The poem is full of echoes, not just of previous writers, but of poems by Muldoon – “Mary Farl Powers: *Pink Spotted Torso*” and “The Soap-Pig”, for example – as well as works of art by Mary

99 Watt notes: “As the cancer ate through her like a fungal blight on a potato, as cancer grew to cause ‘such a breach’ in her that she ‘would almost surely perish,’ a new sense of mortality interrupts Muldoon's artificiality and tiresome literary intrigues”, 156.

100 Watt, 153.

101 Watt, 157.

102 Shelley, “Adonais,” 534.

herself.¹⁰³ The reflection upon art is a continual reminder of what has been lost at Mary's death, but it simultaneously works towards something of a consolation. The references to “army-worms” throughout the poem describe one of Powers' most well-known works, Emblements. This is comforting, as the work of art survives as a memorial to the artist, an idea that is reinforced by the references to other visual artists throughout the poem, such as Manet's Le déjeuner sur l'herbe (13).

Watt, like Kendall, sees that there is a form of consolation to be found in the closing stanzas of “Incantata”:

At the end of the devolutions that follow this stanza [i.e. 23], at the end of a long series of diminished realities prefaced by “That's all that's left,” the act of reading remains.

And so does the act of writing or artistic production, as in the final lines of the poem when Powers, fresh from her work on *Emblements*, greets Muldoon fresh from his writing: “that you might reach out, arrah, / and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink”.¹⁰⁴

It might be argued that these readings are a little simplistic, and state the case for consolation much more optimistically than the poem can actually support. The idea of Mary reaching out for the poet's ink-stained hands is phrased conditionally: “than that you *might*...”. It is just one of many options in the catalogue that makes up the second half of “Incantata”. The grammar of this list makes each individual point hard to pin down: after the beginning of the twenty-fourth stanza, “That's all that's left..”, each consecutive stanza consists of fragmentary sentences, each beginning, “Of...”. The forty-third stanza begins the final, long sentence of the poem, and ends with the final “of...”, after which the pattern changes for the last two stanzas: the list becomes a series of comparisons or choices, with each clause beginning “than that”.

... of the furrows from which we can no more deviate

than they can from themselves, no more than the map of Europe
can be redrawn, than that Hermes might make a harp from his

harpe,

than that we must live in a vale
of tears on the banks of the Lagan or the Foyle,

[...]

than that this *Incantata*
might have you look up from your plate of copper or zinc
on which you've etched the row upon row
of army-worms, than that you might reach out... (344-8, 356-9)

The option that “this *Incantata* / might have you look up” is phrased as an option for an alternative reality that is now perhaps unrealisable.¹⁰⁵ It has a similar effect as the penultimate stanza of “Yarrow”, which muses upon the conventions of a “tornado” or an “envoy”. While the very self-consciousness of the language seems to offer the act of writing as a form of

103 “Mary Farl Powers: Pink Spotted Torso,” Poems 1968-1998, 113-4.

104 Watt, 159.

105 In voicing this wished-for encounter, Muldoon's tone is reminiscent of the wistfulness heard in the elegies of both Douglas Dunn and Thomas Hardy as they mourn their wives.

consolation, this is qualified by the conditional tone of the grammar.

However, there is a sense of empowerment in the final stanza that is created by the repetition of images found earlier on in the poem. The second stanza's "army-worms" seem to invade and threaten their creator: "you'd have to seal / the doors and windows..." (11-2). The creatures seem to have a life of their own, over which the artist has no control. This image appears again in the thirteenth stanza: "I thought of you again tonight, thin as a rake, as you bent / over the copper plate of 'Emblems', / its tidal wave of army-worms into which you all but disappeared" (97-9). In the final stanza, she seems to have regained mastery: it is she who has "etched the row upon row / of army worms" (358-9). A hint of the consolation that might be found in art is heard in the nineteenth stanza:

I thought again of how art may be made, as it was by André Derain,
of nothing more than a turn
in the road where a swallow dips into the mire
or plucks a strand of bloody wool from a strand of barbed wire
in the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden
and builds from pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt,
a monument to the human heart
that shines like a golden dome among roofs rain-glazed and leaden. (145-52)

This stanza is one of the most commented-upon of the whole poem.¹⁰⁶ Here, Muldoon uses his now familiar technique of giving the readers a choice between options. However, while he characteristically seems to settle for both, simultaneously: suggesting that art may be made "of nothing more than a turn in the road" *and* "from pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt", this second idea becomes one of the most resonant passages in Muldoon's poetry. The desire to create "a monument to the human heart" is perhaps the primary function of elegy, and the conflation of images from Shelley and Yeats in the shining "golden dome" links the stanza to some of Muldoon's most eminent predecessors. The mention of "the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden" might be seen as a more general reference to conflict and war, and might include the Troubles, which gives the statement of the stanza particular meaning for an elegist from Northern Ireland.¹⁰⁷ The two battles mentioned here are known to be disastrous defeats for Major General William Rosencrans and for Prince Charles Edward Stuart, respectively, and both resulted in heavy casualties. The "strand of bloody wool" left in the aftermath of these conflicts seems to be a fittingly ambiguous use of synecdoche, as it could have come from the clothing of a fighter either side of the conflict – in either battle – and it could be stained in the wearer's blood, or that of his enemy. The universality of this image links Muldoon's usage of historical sites of conflict to Mahon's reference to "Treblinka or Pompeii" in his "A Disused Shed in Co.

106 See Kendall, 211-4. Campbell writes: "The movement from the small-scale to the monumental in 'Incantata' is the closest Muldoon's poetry comes to a poetic act of consolation," 183.

107 The Chickamauga river, which lends its name to the battle, is thought to be a transliteration of a Cherokee word, although its meaning has been disputed. In any case, this provides another link with Muldoon's work, as his 1987 collection *Meeting the British* centred upon the colonisation of North America, which in turn reflects upon the political situation in Northern Ireland.

Wexford". Indeed, as the following stanza begins, "I wanted the mouth in this potato-cut / to be heard far beyond the leaden, rain-glazed roofs of Quito..." (153-4), Muldoon seems to be deciding to undertake the role of a public artist, creating a lasting monument to those who have endured suffering. This "mouth" links to Auden's elegy for Yeats, where poetry survives as a "way of happening, a mouth."

The "mouth" cut into the potato in the first stanza is heard to speak throughout "Incantata" as Muldoon seeks to regain communication with his subject. The image of Mary as a ghost is discussed in stanza 20, where the poet longs for the potato-cut mouth to be heard "wherever your sweet-severe / spirit might still find a toe-hold / in this world" (156-8). The poet checks himself as he voices this desire, as "it struck me then how you would be aghast / at the thought of my thinking you were some kind of ghost..." (158-9). This revelation comes too late, however, twenty stanzas into a poem that is addressed to the dead woman. As has already been mentioned, this need for a dialogue with the dead echoes the elegies of Dunn and Hardy, each of whom addresses his dead wife, and, in the case of Hardy, seems to hear a voice responding.¹⁰⁸ The idea of Mary as a ghostly presence has been encountered earlier in the poem: it is found in stanza openings like "I remember" and "I saw you again tonight". This re-visioning of the dead woman is particularly strong in the tenth stanza, where the figure of Mary is seen "in your jump-suit, thin as a rake" (73) as she "ground a lithographic stone" (75). What is striking in this stanza is not just that she is remembered as an artist, but that her face

blurred into the face of your mother, Betty Wahl,
who took your failing, ink-stained hand
in her failing, ink-stained hand
and together you ground down that stone by sheer force of will. (77-80)

This is a foregrounding both of the idea of a ghostly visitation, and the image of the linking of "ink-stained hands". Here, the hands are "failing", and the "sheer force of will" with which they work might suggest futility and weakness. However, the word "together", as well as the joining of hands, brings an image of physical connection and a sense in which the Mary of the vision is able to meet with her dead mother. When the image of the ink-stained hands reappears in the final stanza, this sense of ghostly communion is carried with it, which adds to the potential for consolation. In "Incantata", Muldoon uses the conventions of the traditional genre of elegy to express and explore his grief at the loss of his former lover. In his outworking of this mourning process, he creates a poem that has characteristics of his best poetry, while bearing the influence of a whole host of predecessors, and indeed, a number of cultures and traditions.

Wills has noted that

Perhaps more than any previous volume, *The Annals of Chile* displays Muldoon's ability to move back and forth between past and present, between intensely private concerns and general issues of contemporary global culture. Indeed his sense of the power of poetry is based precisely on this agility.¹⁰⁹

108 It is noted that all the voices in Hardy's poetry nevertheless originate from the poet himself.

109 Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 185.

It seems that however complex his work might be, poetry remains the trusted location in which Muldoon continues to search for answers.

IV

Holdridge notes that “In *Hay* (1998), Muldoon entered what might be the later stages of his mature style. The Muldoonesque, [...] is now open to parody”. He goes on to say that

The faith in art that characterises the Modernists is something Muldoon finds particularly difficult to hold in place. He comes close to having such a faith in “*Incantata*”, but nevertheless it is not the same belief as Yeats had in what he called the “sacred book” of his poetry. [...] For Muldoon, art does not remain above human suffering, unless, as in a recent poem, “*Turkey Buzzards*”, it is there to feed off it. Poetry is often an expression of that scar. Human suffering is where the aesthetic begins and ends; yet human suffering is messy: unaesthetic, raw meat on the side of the road. This is one of the central paradoxes of Muldoon's art.¹¹⁰

Muldoon continues to wrestle with his poetic response to suffering and loss in his most recent collections of poetry. His ninth volume, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, ends with the customary long poem, “*At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999*”.¹¹¹ This poem begins, “Awesome, the morning after Hurricane Floyd, to sit out in our driveway and gawk”. Although the setting immediately places Muldoon in his “new” life as “American family man”, as the stanza goes to observe: “Asher sleeps on”, this poem follows on from Muldoon's earlier work in a number of ways. As Holdridge has noted: “Behind the poem is Yeats's ‘*A Prayer for My Daughter*’, and its meditation on how best to stay afloat among hostile historical tides”.¹¹² Hurricane Floyd, and its path of destruction, seems to stand for the experiences of loss and dislocation that the poet has had to face. Indeed, it provides a similar image that found in the opening stanzas of “*Yarrow*”: “all would be swept away by the stream / that fanned across the land”. The link with Muldoon's childhood “streams” is continued in the title-poem of the volume: “*Moy*” being the village in Co. Armagh where Muldoon grew up, and the “*Moy Sand and Gravel*” having been “dredged from the Blackwater's bed”, a river in the Northern Irish county that could be linked to the “stream” of destruction in “*Yarrow*”.¹¹³

This brings the chapter to where it started, with Holdridge's remarks about the tenth collection of poems, *Horse Latitudes*:

Muldoon's poetry increasingly burns with the question of art's complicity in suffering. Is an artist a purveyor of atrocities? Answering this question creates some of Muldoon's best poems, which are great because they are so deeply self-indicting; this is true throughout his career, but especially evident in this volume.¹¹⁴

110 Holdridge, 138-9, 141.

111 “*At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999*,” *Moy Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber, 2002) 73-90 (73).

112 Holdridge, 169.

113 Muldoon, “*Moy Sand and Gravel*,” *Moy Sand and Gravel*, 8.

114 Holdridge, 173-4.

This collection deals with the now familiar themes of violence and loss.¹¹⁵ “Turkey Buzzards”, the elegy for Muldoon's sister, has been described as the “most anguished poem in *Horse Latitudes*, a volume suffused by the losses accompanying middle age”.¹¹⁶ In this poem, Muldoon seems to direct his pain and anger directly at art itself, imagining poets, particularly elegists, as carrion birds, feeding off suffering. He seems to include himself as one of those who, like the turkey buzzards of his poem, have “lost / their common touch, they've been so long / above it all”.¹¹⁷ While this poem is perhaps the most damning representation of elegy in Muldoon's work, it nevertheless makes use of the conventions of elegy: emphasising the guilt and self-blame that is heard in poems from “In Memoriam” to “The Strand at Lough Beg”, and containing a powerful invective, against elegy itself, that might rival those found in “Lycidas” and “Adonais”. What must be acknowledged in a reading of this poem is that however morally questionable the art of elegy might be, it is nevertheless a vital part of the poet's response to loss. Taking this into account, it is fitting to end with a reading of *Horse Latitudes*' final, long poem, which is another “cancer” elegy, written in memory of the musician Warren Zevon, but also elegising Muldoon's sister, Maureen, to whom the entire collection is dedicated. The poem is entitled “Sillyhow Stride”.¹¹⁸

The poem engages with strict poetic form: its three parts are each made up of thirty stanzas “written in *aba* tercets that on the page resemble Dante's underworld *terza rima*”,¹¹⁹ and using the ninety rhymes that were first heard in *The Annals of Chile*, notably in “Incantata”.

Chris Preddle notes that

Technical virtuosity need not impede emotion. Muldoon has sometimes been accused of achieving meretricious form without feeling, but the poems in this book are serious about their serious subjects. The form may be ludic or lyric, but no poem is less than thoughtful. And “grief brought to numbers” is fierce indeed in the poems of loss and among the “mounted sorrows” of “Sillyhow Stride”.[...] This long poem is an abundance of creativity, an eloquent profusion of material, motifs, symbols, allusions, associations and repetitions, all brought forth by feeling.¹²⁰

As well as adopting the rhyming pattern of “Incantata”, “Sillyhow Stride” is also addressed to its subject, and is similarly packed with abundant allusions and references, ranging from John Donne, to Auden, to the Grammys, and, in keeping with the profession of the poem's subject, makes mention of musicians and composers, from Stravinsky to Outkast. Indeed, the elegy has been compared with Muldoon's earlier long poems of mourning by a number of readers, for example:

115 See Chris Preddle: “Violence is opposed wherever it happens, whoever perpetrates it: the battles of “Horse Latitudes” span human history on most continents from the middle ages to modern times. [...] ‘Turtles’ looks back to the Troubles. Ireland, its violent history, and the poet's early life there, are present in some degree in at least half of these thirty poems and sequences.” “Riding the Great Horse,” *Poetry Ireland Review* 88 (2006): 95-100 (96).

116 Vendler, “Fanciness and Fatality.”

117 Muldoon, “Turkey Buzzards,” *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006) 78-81.

118 Muldoon, “Sillyhow Stride,” *Horse Latitudes*, 95-106.

119 Vendler, “Fanciness and Fatality.”

120 Preddle, 99, 100.

The lament that gets “Yarrow” going, “All would be swept away”, is echoed by another spirited demonstration against mortality in *The Annals*, the set-piece “That’s all that’s left...” in the elegy “*Incantata*”. Both supply the sort of rhetorical power we associate with Shelley’s “*Adonais*”, and Seamus Heaney has remarked a new “emotional and musical fullness”, welcoming what he sees as an “increasingly rhapsodic spirit” in Muldoon. And by the look of “*Sillyhow Stride*”, the final poem in *Horse Latitudes*, we shall have to live with it.¹²¹

The references to John Donne, which occur throughout the poem (much as Beckett was used in “*Incantata*”) as well as the other literary allusions, ensure that Muldoon maintains a dialogue with poetic tradition. There are also multiple references to American culture, together with colloquialisms and contemporary diction. This can be seen in the opening stanzas:

I

I want you to tell me if, on Grammy night, you didn't get one hell of a kick
out of all those bling-it-ons in their bulletproof broughams,
all those line managers who couldn't manage a line of coke,

all those Barmecides offering beakers of barm—
if you didn't get a kick out of being as incongruous
there as John Donne at a junior prom.

Two graves must hide, Warren, thine and mine corse... (1-7)

In these seven lines can be found examples of a number of particularly Muldoonian characteristics: the para-rhyming of “kick/coke” and “barm/prom”; the word-play in “line managers” and “line of coke”, and “Barmecides” and “barm”; the colloquial language of “one hell of a kick”. This is combined with a quotation from “*The Anniversary*”, spoken in the seventeenth-century language of Donne.¹²² The combination of archaic and modern diction gives an almost flippant tone to the poem. Alongside this seeming playfulness can be heard a note of insistence as the speaker seems to demand a dialogue with the dead man: beginning with the words “I want you to tell me”, and using the subject's name to confirm the urgency with which the poet wishes to communicate.¹²³

The elegy performs a number of traditional functions: there are references to a shared past as the poet remembers “the day we met” (8), and experiences such as “barreling down the autobahn // through West Hollywood / in your little black Corvette” (57-9). Indeed, the references to celebrity culture such as “Hollywood” and “Grammy night” suggest a modern mythology in which the subject is placed, not only in the present elegy, but also in the collective consciousness of contemporary American music fans. This is Muldoon's revision of the Classical mythology into which Milton places Edward King in “*Lycidas*”, and the ancient Irish mythology evoked by Heaney in “*The Strand at Lough Beg*”. Mention is made of the elegiac season of winter, “At the winter solstice...” (65), and this image is linked to one of artistic

121 John Constable, “*Horse Latitudes*, by Paul Muldoon and *The End of the Poem*, by Paul Muldoon.”

122 John Donne, “*The Anniversary*,” *The Complete English Poems*, 41-2.

123 It has been noted, in connection with “*Incantata*”, that this need for dialogue is heard also in the elegies of Dunn and Hardy.

decline: “... as I filed / past a band of ticket scalpers // who would my ruined fortune flout / at Madison Square Garden...” (65-8). The poem is written, like elegies before it, in memory of an artist whose early death brings a premature end to his artistic creation. There is even a mention of the traditional pastoral-elegiac instrument, as the poet describes “a man in a Tibetan / cap, nay-saying a flute” (68-9). Muldoon, himself a rock-musician, mourns a singer whose own songs echo through the elegy, much as the voice of Keats is heard within Shelley’s “Adonais”: the “excitable boy” (164) in the second section, for example, is taken from the name of a Zevon album. The frequent references to images like the “Twin Towers”, “child soldiers” and “Jerusalem” seem to have replaced the violence of the Troubles found in “Yarrow” and “Incantata”, as Muldoon extends his angry gaze to take in global issues of violence, terror, and injustice.

Constable argues that “there is nothing consolatory” in Horse Latitudes; “no obvious gain to set against the losses”.¹²⁴ There are hints at a view of an afterlife within “Sillyhow Stride”, for example in the second section’s “you realized // the flesh is indeed no more than a bruise / on the spirit” (147-9). However, this image is picked up near the end of the poem in a much bleaker attitude:

that individual carrying his cross knowing the flesh is a callus
on the spirit as surely as you knew the mesotheliomata

on both lungs meant the situation was lose-lose... (270-2)

The “individual carrying his cross” is also a repetition of an earlier image in the poem: the “individual dragging a full-length cross // along 42nd Street” (9-10) on the day that the two men first met. This “individual” is seen again at the start of the third section, where now the details have become blurred: “the individual we saw drag / his full-length cross through the under-the-counter culture // of 42nd Street? 42nd or Canal?” (182-4). This offering of a choice of multiple details, seen in previous poems, makes the image vague enough to become a more general symbol: indeed, he becomes “a certain individual”, who might even be Zevon himself. The implied lunacy of his cross-carrying antics might be read as a rejection of the traditional religious consolation offered by elegies like “Lycidas”. The second section of the poem, in which Muldoon recounts his grief for his sister, while still addressing Zevon, seems to further deny any conventional offers of comfort:

I thought of how the wrangling schools

need look no further than her bed
to find what fire shall burn this world—or that heaven
which “is one with” this world—to find how gold to airy thinness beat

may crinkle like cellophane
in a flame, like cellophane or the flimmerings of gauze
by which a needle is held fast in a vein. (102-8)

124 Constable, “Horse Latitudes, by Paul Muldoon and The End of the Poem, by Paul Muldoon.”

This sentence seems to deny the consolation of “heaven”, and even of poetry, as it reduces Donne's “gold to airy thinness beat” to “cellophane or the flimmerings of gauze” in an almost apocalyptic description of death and destruction.¹²⁵

The final fifty-seven lines of the poem comprise a single sentence, which begins with the refrain-like demand for a response from the dead man:

I want you to tell me if grief, brought to numbers, cannot be so fierce,
pace Donne's sales pitch,
for he tames, that fetters it in verse,

throwing up a last ditch
against the mounted sorrows, for I have more, Warren, I have more,
more as an even flame two hearts did touch... (214-9)

The “more” that the speaker has consists of a repetition of images and allusions already heard in the poem, given at break-neck speed, as if re-calling a series of flash-backs at the end of a life. The final stanzas of the poem revolve around the “turkey buzzards” encountered in the elegy for Maureen. Here, however, they seem to have been somewhat vanquished, as they are “waiting for you to eclipse and cloud them with a wink”. This suggests that even after the artistic “consumption” that the dead man will inevitably be subjected to, something of him will remain to “eclipse and cloud” his predators. The final stanza continues from this image:

turkey buzzards waiting for you to eclipse and cloud them with a wink

as they hold out their wings and of the sun his working vigor borrow
before they parascend through the Viper Room or the Whisky A Go Go
each within its own “cleansing breeze,” its own *Cathartes aura*. (279-80)

“*Cathartes aura*” is the Latinate name for the turkey buzzard, recalling Muldoon's technique from “Yarrow” of using alternative names and meanings. Here, while the link with the birds ensures that the poem circles round to end with a reminder of the potentially predatory nature of art, it also brings the etymological (or, at least, an aural) link with “catharsis”. If the elegy is a space in which an artist preys on human suffering in order to create something beautiful (and Milton and Shelley have been accused of something very similar in their writing of “Lycidas” and “Adonais”)¹²⁶, then “Sillyhow Stride” seems to suggest that elegy might also be an opportunity for catharsis and healing, at least on the part of the poet, but, more optimistically, for a global society that is struggling to find ways to deal with the ever-increasing threats of terror, violence, political sickness and physical disease.

“Death is the theme” writes James Fenton in his review of Horse Latitudes, be it “the death of loved ones, the death of horses and mules, deaths on the battlefield, death from

125 The Donne quotation is, significantly, from the poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” The Complete English Poems, 84-5.

126 See, for example, Sacks, 90.

cancer”.¹²⁷ The fact that “death from cancer” can be mentioned in the same breath as the “battlefield”, and indeed, the way in which a cancer sufferer's “battle” with the disease has entered a common vocabulary, suggests the way in which sickness might now be classed as a form of violence that is experienced and endured in contemporary society. It is, perhaps, a step too far to equate sickness and death by natural causes with death as a result of political violence: there are certainly many issues raised by this comparison, like the extreme *unnaturalness* of a violent death during conflict, and the human agency involved in politically motivated killings, amongst others. However, there remains for many mourners a sense of violation caused by death – whatever the cause – which is not a new phenomenon, and is certainly not unique to Muldoon. The way in which Muldoon faces up to the threat of sickness and the private grief caused by disease, and also to the global threats of terrorism and political injustice, can be seen to have developed through his elegiac treatment of the horrifying violence that he witnessed in Northern Ireland as a result of the Troubles. In his highly idiosyncratic use of elegiac techniques, the “trickster” Muldoon takes on the paradoxical role of the revolutionary traditionalist.

127 James Fenton, “A poke in the eye with a poem.” *The Guardian* 21 Oct. 2006, accessed 24/03/2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/oct/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview6>>.

Part Three: The Third Generation and Beyond

Chapter Five

“Every step will be a gamble”: Post Peace Talk Poetry

Medbh McGuckian, Sinead Morrissey, Leontia Flynn and Colette Bryce

You might move from place to place, a mind-boggled rover,
or stay in Belfast where, although the war is over,

the Party of Bollocks and the Party of Balls
are locked in battle for the City Hall.¹

Since peace talks began in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, politics have begun to change. Peace talks have not necessarily meant peace, however, with on-going bargaining between political and religious groups throughout the following decade, a drawn-out decommissioning process for paramilitary groups on both sides, and incidences of violence continuing to take place.² Throughout these years, new poetry has been produced, both by established writers and those just starting their careers.³ Third generation Northern Irish poets are just as concerned with the politics of the region as their predecessors have been, and like the poets before them, face new challenges in responding to a seemingly unresolvable situation.⁴ While the work of these poets may have started to appear after the peace talks, their childhood was lived in the midst of the Troubles, making it perhaps inevitable that the “everyday turmoil of the conflict” would appear in their poems.⁵ As Michael Parker notes:

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- 1 Alan Gillis, from “Bob the Builder is a Dickhead,” *Hawks and Doves* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2007) 35.
 - 2 A bomb-attack on Northern Ireland’s MI5 base which took place in April 2010 has been attributed to the Real IRA, happening “minutes after policing and justice powers were devolved back to Northern Ireland from Westminster,” *BBC* 20 April 2010 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8632221.stm>. Earlier in the same year, the Real IRA also claimed responsibility for the killings of a number of individuals, some of whom had links to paramilitary activity. Stories of unrest and rioting around the time of the 12th July marches continue to occur each year. See, “Riots ahead of Orange Order parades in Belfast,” *BBC* 12 July 2011 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14117990>> accessed 10/08/11. Similar incidents have occurred throughout the fifteen years since peace talks began.
 - 3 Parker notes recent collections from Carson, Paulin, Longley, McGuckian, Mahon, Heaney and Muldoon as a confirmation that “the power, originality and resilience of Northern Ireland’s established poets remains undiminished in the new millennium”. However, he also recognises that “a new generation of writers has emerged, one which is beginning to re-shape the contours of Northern Irish literature,” *Northern Irish Literature*, II, 225.
 - 4 While I am referring to this group as the “third generation” of Troubles poets, Miriam Gamble calls them “first-generation peace poets”. While both epithets apply, this generation is one which lived through years of conflict before the peace talks of the 1990s, even though they now write after the peace process has begun. Therefore, while Gamble’s term takes into account the changed political circumstances which separate these poets from their predecessors, I contend that the links with previous generations are an unavoidable aspect of this generation’s work, and need to be acknowledged. See “The gentle art of re-perceiving: post-ceasefire identity in the poetry of Alan Gillis,” *Irish Studies Review* 17.3 (2009): 361-76.
 - 5 Matt McGuire, “Literary perspectives: Northern Ireland: Shaking the hand of history,” *Eurozine* 21 Jun. 2007, accessed 29/04/2010 <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-21-mcguire-en.html>>. See also Fran Brearton: “After decades of debate about the nature, or existence, of ‘Troubles poetry’, similar speculations about ‘post-Ceasefire poetry’ have inevitably, given the dramatic social and political changes of the past decade, begun to emerge. One irony is that poetry by younger poets from Northern Ireland is often darker and more disturbing than that which precedes it. [...] These are writers born in the early mid 1970s into, and out of, Northern Ireland’s Troubles, whose formative experience was not of a halcyon

While altered political and social conditions since the ceasefires may have led to a diminution in the political pressures and expectations placed on poets, the imprint of the recent past, of “ancestral”, communal and family memory, is still clearly visible in their work.⁶

As these poets make use of the opportunities available to twenty-first century writers, they must, nevertheless, acknowledge tradition: and in facing up to the continued losses experienced in Northern Ireland – those caused by disillusionment and political apathy, as well as by bereavement and injustice – they each respond to the developing genre of elegy.

This chapter begins with the elegiac work of Medbh McGuckian. Although she might normally be identified as belonging to the second generation of poets, taking into account the time-span of her career, not to mention her significance within both Northern Irish and, more broadly, contemporary poetry, it is her later work, published around the same time as debut collections of the third generation poets, that most overtly responds to the political situation. McGuckian is also an influential figure for a number of the poets who follow.⁷ The most well-known Northern Irish poets of the first and second generations are predominantly male; this is reflected in this study. However, when thinking of a third generation, Sinead Morrissey, Leontia Flynn and Colette Bryce are some of the first names that spring to mind. A significant factor contributing to the establishment of these poets within contemporary poetry might be the positive influence of poets such as McGuckian who have, in many ways, laid foundations for Irish women writers.⁸ Another factor in the success of Sinead Morrissey and Leontia Flynn might be the link with Queen's University, Belfast. While many of the first generation of Northern Irish poets have been linked to Philip Hobsbaum's Belfast Group, and while second generation writers Muldoon, Carson and McGuckian were contemporaries at Queen's, these writers from the third generation have been through, or are currently working at, the university. They therefore have personal relationships with many of their poetic predecessors, as well as literary and academic links.⁹ The opening of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's in 2003 only serves to cement the reputation of the University as an important hub for Northern Irish writing. This is by no means the only place to look for new writing however, as Colette Bryce's work shows. Bryce has lived away from Northern Ireland for most of her adult life and

post-ceasefire world but of the worst years of sectarian strife,” “Scissoring the past,” *The Guardian* 11 Aug. 2007, accessed 29/04/2010

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview24>>.

6 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, II, 226.

7 Colette Bryce writes: “Since the publication of her first collection, *The Flower Master* in 1982, and until the late 1990s, McGuckian's was the only female voice to be heard in the poetry of Northern Ireland...,” “Medbh McGuckian,” *Poetry International Web* 31 Jan. 2007, accessed 26/04/2010 <http://uk.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=8479>.

8 Bryce acknowledges that “McGuckian has been an important yet tricky role model for a younger generation of Irish women poets,” *Ibid.* Parker notes that until “the new century and the arrival of younger poets like Sinead Morrissey and Leontia Flynn on the literary scene, critical attention to women's poetry from Northern Ireland has rarely extended beyond Medbh McGuckian,” *Northern Irish Literature*, II, 150.

9 Leontia Flynn's PhD thesis was written on Medbh McGuckian, for example, while Ciaran Carson lends his praise to the back cover of Flynn's debut collection.

this brings yet another perspective to the poetry of this generation.¹⁰

10 Parker notes that this generation's poetry is marked by the fact that “geographical and cultural relocations have enriched their work and enabled them not just to look back on both their own and their parents' experiences, but also to look upwards and outwards to other cultures, places and times,” Northern Irish Literature, II, 226.

“This great estrangement has the destination of a rhyme”: Medbh McGuckian and Elegy

Medbh McGuckian was a contemporary of Paul Muldoon's at Queen's University Belfast. Clair Wills notes: “they became students at the beginning of the Civil Rights protests in the late 1960s in Northern Ireland. Academically, they followed a similar path, studying English, and, significantly, studying under Seamus Heaney among others...”¹¹ Ciaran Carson also studied at Queen's during this time, and McGuckian's poetic career trajectory follows those of her university contemporaries: her first book-length collection The Flower Master was published in 1982, around ten years after Muldoon started publishing, six years after Ciaran Carson's first volume.¹² To date, she has twelve books of poetry in print, as well as a Selected Poems, which rivals the output of Carson and Tom Paulin, and approaches the number of major collections released by Muldoon. She is often linked with this generation on the grounds of her poetry's obliqueness, and even “opacity”, although Wills notes that Muldoon and McGuckian often use contrasting techniques with which to obscure meaning from the reader:

Muldoon's poems reveal none of the surface syntactical confusion of McGuckian's work. In the main he uses metaphors taken from everyday life: clichés, and the language of the media. But underneath the surface simplicity, as he says of Robert Frost, “all kinds of complex things are happening”. In contrast to McGuckian, in Muldoon's work it is not the images, but the grammar which will not fit into a coherent narrative.¹³

McGuckian's work is, by her own admission, “esoteric”, and is often acknowledged to be difficult to read, even in favourable reviews.¹⁴ Her first four books are seen to focus on the “private” discourses surrounding the female body, and domestic, “feminine” settings. While critics like Ashley Tellis, and to a certain extent, Clair Wills, have argued that this early work does allude to public and national themes, it is not until her fifth major collection, Captain Lavender, that references to the politics of Northern Ireland are explicitly foregrounded.¹⁵ Parker notes that this volume “diverges from its predecessors in its more explicit engagement with issues of political and cultural identity”.¹⁶ Beginning to write as a “Troubles poet” in 1994, then, makes McGuckian a forerunner of the third generation of Troubles poets, and also marks the beginning of the “post-peace-talk poetry” which begins to look at the violence of previous decades from the vantage point of an increasingly stabilising political peace process.

11 Clair Wills, Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993) 15.

12 Carson's next book, The Irish for No, which might be seen as the point in which he “found” his poetic voice, came five years after McGuckian's debut, in 1987. Tom Paulin's prize-winning first collection was published in 1977.

13 Wills, Improprieties, 18. McGuckian herself has identified Muldoon as one of her own poetic role-models in an interview with me, conducted at Queen's University, Belfast, Tuesday 14th September 2010.

14 For example, see Peggy O'Brien's article entitled “Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand,” Colby Quarterly 28.4 (1992): 239-50. McGuckian's comments are from her interview with me.

15 This comment refers to a paper given by Ashley Tellis at the British and Irish Contemporary Poetry Conference, September 2010, at Queen's University Belfast.

16 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 144.

McGuckian's literary identity and inheritance is a complex one, writing from a dual perspective, being both a Northern Irish Catholic and a woman poet writing in what has been a previously male-dominated tradition. For these reasons, she is something of a role-model for a later generation of Northern Irish poets. This study will focus upon the elegiac writing that McGuckian has produced in her more overtly political work, in order to situate her within the overall development of the genre of Northern Irish elegy.¹⁷ Captain Lavender, as an entire collection, might be read as an elegy for the poet's father. As has been seen in the work of Longley, Heaney and Carson, however, this personal loss seems to work as a catalyst in provoking McGuckian into writing about the more public losses experienced by the Northern Irish community. Indeed, in using Picasso's statement as the epigraph to her collection: "*I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done*", McGuckian explicitly makes a link between art and violence, labelling her work of mourning as one that is simultaneously public and private. Perhaps to a greater extent than that of her peers and predecessors, McGuckian's loss of her father is bound up with the awakening of her political consciousness: it was at her dying father's suggestion that she began teaching creative writing to loyalist and republican prisoners at the Maze prison in the 1990s.¹⁸ This experience had a "transformative effect on her writing", which is seen not just in Captain Lavender, but in the following collections as well.¹⁹ Given McGuckian's prolificacy, it has been necessary to select a small number of poems for close reading, in order to show how the conventions of elegy are both perpetuated and reconfigured in her work.²⁰

"Porcelain Bells" is the second poem to appear in Captain Lavender.²¹ The poem is dedicated "*for my mother*", and is "an exquisitely controlled, meditative, elegiac sequence, rich in Keatsian ambivalences, ambiguities and sensual details".²² One of the key ambivalences in the poem surrounds the issue of the addressee and the mourned subject: while the poem is

17 It is acknowledged that there are a wide range of ways in which McGuckian's poetry might be read, and it is also observed that it is unlikely that any single reader can provide an exhaustive reading of her work. Leontia Flynn has explored many of the different theoretical approaches that might be taken, and concludes that the poetry might be read for the "sounds and images on the page", without necessary recourse to the poems' extensive source material (Flynn made these comments in an interview with me, conducted at Queen's University, Belfast, Tuesday 14th September 2010). The challenge to which this chapter responds is in discovering what light might be shed on the work by using the genre of elegy as an interpretative framework. In this way, it is possible to contribute to the overall body of McGuckian criticism.

18 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 143. McGuckian has spoken of the relationships that she formed with the prisoners, and of the attitudes to death that she encountered in the prison: "They had a lot of respect for death [...] I found their attitude to death was not casual" (comments from her interview with me).

19 Parker makes reference to an interview with McGuckian, Northern Irish Literature, II, 143.

20 Notable among McGuckian's work, although there is not adequate space to discuss them here, are poems which directly link themselves to loss and grief: "Elegy for an Irish Speaker" and "The Aisling Hat" in Captain Lavender (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1994), and "The Dead are more Alive" and "Monody for Aghas" in Drawing Ballerinas (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2001) for example. Her most recent collection, My Love Has Fared Inland (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2008) might be read as an elegiac meditation upon the house which featured in McGuckian's 1991 collection Marconi's Cottage (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991).

21 Medbh McGuckian, "Porcelain Bells," Captain Lavender, 14-19.

22 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 145.

dedicated to the poet's mother, it is written in the aftermath of her father's death. As an elegy, it is unconventional in that the "you" addressed is a fellow mourner, albeit one who is also suffering from illness, which makes the mourning process multi-layered as it performs both communal grieving for a dead subject, and also a kind of pre-emptive mourning for the still-living primary subject.²³ As well as allusions to Keats, it is possible to find passages that seem to echo Emily Dickinson, in the domestic settings of the poem, and the euphemistic treatment of death. The piece is made up of three sections, "Candles at Three-Thirty" (lines 1-56), "Story Between Two Notes" (lines 57-97) and "Speaking into the Candles" (lines 98-168), and in this regard it mimics the structure of a number of previous elegies: the differing poetic form used in each section is reminiscent of Longley's "Wreaths", and Auden's elegy for Yeats, for example, as well as Muldoon's three-part elegies "At Master McGrath's Grave" and "Sillyhow Stride". As might be said of all these poems, the triple structure is an element that is found in elegies from "Lycidas" to "In Memoriam", as each poet strives to fulfil the requirements of the form: "to lament, praise and console".²⁴

Although McGuckian's elegiac writing might be read in relation to the work of other Northern Irish elegists, there are nevertheless aspects of her work that demand differing approaches. While it might normally be expected that lyric poetry will clarify its meaning at the level of syntax – that complex ideas will nevertheless be clearly articulated – this is not the experience of reading McGuckian. As Robert Brazeau has noted, this poetry "would appear to evade [...] demands for referential exactitude and mimetic reflection". He continues:

For McGuckian, language can strategically exceed the demands of nation and gender and offer alternative social visions that do not conform to existing modes and are incomprehensible within the cognitive horizons that are produced by everyday, ideologically inflected language.²⁵

Brazeau goes on to apply the theories of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Judith Butler in what is a productive reading of McGuckian's poetic practice. He uses "Porcelain Bells" as an example of what he sees as the poet's approach to language:

McGuckian's anti-mimetic language offers the most explicit criticism of the derogation of women's poetry as private or personal found in her poetry. Simply, it is sometimes impossible for readers to imagine that these poems issue from a fixed persona or recognizable speaker, and McGuckian plays with our readerly expectations by defying our attempts to reconstruct a speaking person who is somewhere anterior to the poem. In an example chosen almost at random, McGuckian's "Porcelain Bells" holds out the promise that the speaker will identify or characterize herself, but these characterizing descriptions are only ever offered in very obscure language:

23 McGuckian herself explains that the poem is "not an elegy in the sense that it's not for a dead person, but it's the daughter trying to understand the mother's grief for her husband," (comments from her interview with me).

24 See, "Elegy," *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, 324. The definition continues: "All are responses to the experience of loss: lament, by expressing grief and deprivation; praise, by idealizing the deceased and preserving her or his memory among the living; and consolation, by finding solace in meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values."

25 Robert Brazeau, "Troubling Language: Avant-Garde Strategies in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," *Mosaic* 37.2 (2004): 128.

When I am all harbour, ask too much
go up like the land
to points and precipices
meanwhile is my anchor. (13-16)

In a style that recalls the linguistic unconventionality of e. e. cummings, McGuckian uses the adverb meanwhile as a noun...²⁶

“Porcelain Bells” is a poem to which one might very easily apply theories of language like those of Barthes and Kristeva. Indeed, it might be suggested that much of McGuckian's poetry might display the same characteristics that Barthes looks for in his “ideal text”:

...the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.²⁷

In the stanza of “Porcelain Bells” quoted above by Brazeau, it might be suggested that “we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one”. The obscure language ensures that these lines are open to multiple interpretations, but this fact in itself does not necessarily result in a satisfying or fruitful reading of the poem. Similarly, the majority of the second section of the poem, “Story Between Two Notes”, would seem to display all the attributes of a Barthesian “writerly” text, taking place somewhere outside of the pre-determined understandings with which we might approach language, as the title suggests.²⁸ Lines like “You detour round the language / like a wound closing wearily” seem to appeal to post-structuralist theories like those of Kristeva. The sixth stanza of the section might be compared to the links between music and the semiotic found in Kristeva's Revolution in Poetic Language:

But now, when this music is playing between us,
though I never dream meaning into it,
this winter-quiet that loses itself
completely in sound seems the active beginning
of a normal, if still secret, name. (87-91)

[There are] *two modalities* of what is, for us, the same signifying process. We shall call the first “*the semiotic*” and the second “*the symbolic*.” These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called “natural” language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example).²⁹

The “active beginning / of a normal, if still secret, name” at the end of this stanza seems to

26 Brazeau, 131.

27 Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 5-6.

28 See Barthes, S/Z, 3-4.

29 Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 23-4.

relate back to the opening stanza of the section, which declares to the addressee that

Even after your death when you are alone
your mysteriously-suppressed
name-sickness
will weave itself into all I see. (60-3)

The act of “naming” is an important one for both Barthes and Kristeva, as it is inherent in the way in which language is constructed: naming is the action by which the signified is given a signifier.³⁰ While it is possible, and perhaps even tempting, to apply such complex literary theory to what is undoubtedly complex poetry, this is not the most helpful approach for the current study. While the themes of identity, language, music and naming all lend themselves to a post-structuralist analysis, they might also be read as elegiac traits, and in reading them in this light, it will be possible to place McGuckian's work within the bounds of a thesis which focuses upon the poetic and political context of elegy in Northern Ireland.

Having said this, however, there is a clear link to be made between Barthes' work in The Pleasure of the Text and the way in which Northern Irish elegy functions. Barthes makes a distinction between texts which bring “pleasure” to the reader, and those that bring “bliss”. These terms are the translator Richard Miller's appropriations for the French words “*plaisir*” and “*jouissance*”. Barthes' definitions of these two types of text are stated thus:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.³¹

In the context of elegy, it is interesting that Barthes finds the most fulfilling texts to be those which “impose a state of loss”. Of course, writing *about* loss is not taken to be the same thing as “imposing” loss upon the reader. Yet it seems pertinent that Northern Irish writers, particularly McGuckian, as well as Muldoon and Carson, write elegiac poetry that is complex and difficult to read, and can indeed “bring to a crisis [the reader's] relation with language”. Furthermore, in writing out of a conflict which has itself challenged the historical, cultural and psychological assumptions of those who have experienced it, Northern Irish elegists would seem to be in a position to transfer this political “discomfort” into textual discomfort to be experienced by their readers.

While a post-structuralist analysis of the language used in McGuckian's poems might be a tempting way to read them, another temptation for McGuckian critics seems to have been to conduct, and rely heavily upon, interviews with the poet herself, in order to gain interpretations of the work. This approach has often resulted in even more reductive critical analyses than those of the readers who have liberally applied linguistic theories. A large proportion of the existing work done on McGuckian seems to make extensive use of the poet's explanations of

30 See Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, and also Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).

31 Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 14.

her difficult poems, and takes these at face-value, simply regurgitating them. This can lead to a certain amount of frustration with the poetry itself: it seems to lose its value as a self-sufficient work of art if it is necessary to consult the poet in order to de-code the meaning.³² It might also seem to be a naïve approach which fails take into account the many philosophical and theoretical lenses through which poetry can be viewed, most strikingly, perhaps, Barthes' contention that "the author is dead".³³ Furthermore, it might be suggested that McGuckian herself makes use of interviews to construct a persona in which she provides often oblique responses, which actually add to the difficulty of interpreting her work, rather than providing clarity.³⁴ However, if this is the case, it seems possible to argue that the texts of interviews with the poet might nevertheless be useful for critical analysis, when read in the same way as the prose writing of Heaney, for example, rather than as a historical or biographical document. The theoretical framework of this current study would challenge Barthes, and argue that a certain amount of context regarding the author is necessary when studying a genre of poetry which is so closely linked to the psychological and emotional processes of grief and mourning. For these reasons, an interview was conducted with McGuckian for the purposes of writing this chapter, but care has been taken to subject the text of this interview to the same rigorous critical analysis as any of the other texts utilised in this thesis.

Having made this necessary detour, it is now possible to focus more intently on the qualities of elegy that can be found in the poem "Porcelain Bells". Parts of the poem fit neatly into a reader's expectations of elegy, a good example of which is the opening stanza of the poem:

The year fades without ripening,
but glitters as it withers
like an orange with cloves
or Christmas clouds. (1-4)

The premature fading of the year seems to echo the opening of "Lycidas", and the setting of Christmas brings a paradoxical sense of new birth taking place while the year draws to an end.³⁵ The Christmas imagery fits with the elegiac sense of a bittersweet decay, as the Christingle orange gives off its scent even as the flesh withers and decomposes.³⁶ This is in keeping with the deeply sensuous language that is characteristic of McGuckian's poetry, and the poem is full

32 This issue is not a new one in poetry, compare, for example, T.S. Eliot's publication of notes to his poem The Waste Land.

33 Barthes, "The death of the author," Image, music, text, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 142-148.

34 Suggestions made by Leontia Flynn in her interview with me.

35 See "Lycidas," 3-5: "I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude, / And with forced fingers rude, / Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year". The title "Candles at Three Thirty" is also an allusion to the season, as the early afternoon dusk necessitates the use of artificial light.

36 The withering of the orange seems to work as a memorial in a similar way to the soap-pig in Muldoon's poem, which erodes even as its regular use makes it a reminder of a lost friend. Both McGuckian and Muldoon show an awareness of the fact that even memorials to the dead can themselves become obsolete, and are impermanent. According to the poet, the orange is symbolic of her mother, and the cloves signify the herbal remedies with which she attempted to cure herself, while the "glitters" describes the mother's increasing beauty, despite her illness (comments from her interview with me).

of the mention of light, colour, fragrance and texture. The reference to Christmas also links the poem to the “Greengrocer” section of Longley's poem “Wreaths”, as the festive season brings extra poignancy to the memories of a lost loved one. This effect is also achieved in Tennyson's “In Memoriam”, as the long sequence of poems spans a mourning period of three years, with the passing of time marked by each Christmas celebration.³⁷ The phrase “Christmas clouds” contains a number of possible meanings: it could be read literally, as a description of the winter sky in Belfast, or figuratively, as an image of the memories of the lost that seem especially strong at this time.

The sky imagery is picked up in the second stanza, where a sense of fragmentation is introduced, as “bits” of sky “all but kiss” (5, 8). This fragmentation is reinforced by the sporadic mention of body parts throughout the poem: “waist”, “eyes”, “flesh”, “tress” and “lips” in the first section; “lips”, “ear” and “heart” in the second; and “blood”, “hands”, “mouth”, “limbs” and “eyelid” in the final part of the poem. While in the second and third sections, these words are used in descriptions of either the speaker or the subject, in the first section they are used in abstract descriptions of the landscape. The sense in which the body is dismembered or fragmented to serve the purposes of metaphor seems to hint at the violence caused by the arrival of death, and links McGuckian's elegy to other, more overtly political ones. Body parts make up one of the semantic groupings that run through the poem. Indeed, while McGuckian's writing might not seem to cohere at the level of syntactical meaning, the process of concatenation, in which groups of related images weave the poetry together, binds the work with strands of association. Other such threads running through this poem are the themes of light imagery, of sky and sea, of the uses of language, and of birds. All of these might be seen as elegiac, as they are woven to create the texture of the work.³⁸

“Porcelain Bells” is a complex work of mourning. The fact that the addressee is not a dead person, but a fellow mourner, the poet's mother, gives the sense of a community of mourners, which has become a commonplace in Northern Irish elegy: there is a collective, communal kind of grief to be mourned. The poem often seems to be ambiguous, however, as to whose death it is mourning: the second and third sections address a listener in the second person, and at times seem to address the poet's father as well as her mother.³⁹ The poet seems to link personal loss directly to literary creation, as if art demands some kind of sacrifice or destruction in order to survive:

You are the story I can't write.
Every page of you

37 See Erik Gray's “Introduction,” *In Memoriam; A Norton Critical Edition*, xxi.

38 Sacks, 18-9.

39 While McGuckian herself denies that she ever addresses her father in this poem, it is not surprising that this reading has been made by a number of critics, including Parker. The poem certainly seems to be processing grief for the father's death, even if he is not the “you” addressed by the speaking voice, as McGuckian claims: “I would never have any reason to address my father in this way. I never would have felt so frustrated with him. It's like someone who hasn't died, and at this stage my father has died...” (comments from her interview with me).

has to be torn out of me. (57-9)

Reading these words as being addressed to the mother, they seem to detail the speaker's attempt to deal with the feelings of loss that she feels for a person who, although not yet separated from her by death, exists within a solitary world of sickness. These ideas are found in both the second and third sections of the poem, in lines like: "It is as though you already listen / from the adjoining room" (64-5); "...as if you were living in another town" (103); "You lie alone on a new surface, / sharp as your own edge or a strange birthday.." (113-4). The poet seems to start the mourning process as her mother begins a long and painful journey of dying, as she has described: "once my father died I thought I'd better prepare for my mother's death, even though it was not for about 20 years".⁴⁰

However, the poet also seems to find within herself, or her art, the tentative promise of resurrection as the poem draws to a close:

I will survive this late-speaking love
when morning becomes conscious
it is no longer possible –
when the eternal procession of the sky
passes over it as over nature.
It will not be night
between yesterday and today,
but these less shaken days
I would hold like a resurrection
to my breath.
When you find your way out
of the jewel-groove of your limbs
and the used-up breeze goes past
your icy eyelid,
already no longer anyone's,
I will dive you back to earth
and pull it up with you. (147-63)

Michael Parker notes that in this poem, the speaker "moves continually and understandably between a terrible sense of absence and the consolation that something survives". He notes that there is an attempt to transcend the separation of death in the final lines as

the first person singular subject pronouns figure with increasing prominence, and the dominant tense becomes the future rather than the present. Beautifully, in the closing image father and daughter are united in a single movement, swooping and ascending like birds.⁴¹

While Parker's reading overlooks the ambiguity of the promise to "dive you back to earth", and assumes that it is addressed to the father, rather than the mother, there is nevertheless a sense in which the poet describes a continual relationship and communion with her subject, and is in this sense more overtly consolatory than many of her contemporaries.⁴²

40 Comments from a private conversation with me.

41 Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, II, 145-6. It might be argued here that the future tense of these lines implies that the subject is yet to die, and therefore strengthens the case that the addressee is the mother.

42 Indeed, McGuckian is open about her Catholic belief in the afterlife and in the existence of saints and spirits, arguing that if she didn't believe in these things, "it's not worth writing the poem. Why should I waste my precious time addressing my mother – talking to my mother – and talking about her, if she didn't exist any more?" (comments from her interview with me).

Another poem from Captain Lavender, “Constable's ‘Haywain’” is one of McGuckian's most moving elegies for her father.⁴³ In a recent interview, McGuckian states that the poem “isn't about Constable or his painting *The Haywain*”; the link to the painting is the fact that her father was educated in England, forfeiting the family farm:

To please his family and fulfil his own nature he became a teacher – but he was really a farmer. He was happier in the field. [...] While he didn't buy paintings, he liked getting prints and making frames for them and we had at least four or five different Constable prints. There were two I got when he died.

McGuckian wrote the poem before her father died: “I was preparing in poetry for my father's death”.⁴⁴ In this sense, the poem is performing a similar process to the one in “*Porcelain Bells*”, although it was written earlier. The medical imagery in the first lines relates to the experience of watching her father's health deteriorate. Indeed, she explains the meaning of these lines as follows: “The ‘incised triangle’ in the poem was very physical. It's like what they were doing to him”. The third and fourth lines, relating to “my father's birthdate” (4) are also explained in the interview:

A week before he died, I was sent a form to fill in. It asked me to fill in the parent's birth-date and, if applicable, the date of his death and it was very strange. I felt this was a warning. It was very clinical. The other thing about his birth-date was that he was always wrong about it, he never seemed to know the exact date.⁴⁵

McGuckian is, in both poems, making use of the genre of elegy to do something complex with her emotions: writing about an anticipated loss, she pre-empt's grief. This covers a preliminary stage of mourning that is outside the usual literary understandings of the bereavement process, and indeed, might be seen to challenge traditional psychoanalytical explanations of mourning. In writing a kind of proleptic elegy, McGuckian forces language to perform in ways in which it has not traditionally done.⁴⁶ This “pre-mourning” can be seen to build on the kind of elegiac writing performed by Emily Dickinson.⁴⁷ Where Dickinson might be understood to be trying to enter the very moment of death in her poems, rather than simply responding after a death, McGuckian achieves something different in trying to produce her work of mourning before the

43 Captain Lavender, 36.

44 Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, “Interview with Medbh McGuckian,” The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian (Cork: Cork UP, 2010) 198. Indeed, she says that this was the last poem she wrote before her father's death (comments from her interview with me).

45 Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview with Medbh McGuckian”, 198. In my later interview, McGuckian talks about this form as a kind of “omen” of her father's death, which happened a week later (comments from her interview with me).

46 Patricia Rae writes: “I define proleptic elegy as consolatory writing produced in anticipation of sorrow, where the expected loss is of a familiar kind. Its occasion is the need for ‘psychological rearmament’ in the face of a threat, its opening strategy the pragmatic one of marshalling resources already known to be useful in the work of mourning. It records and responds imaginatively to ‘anticipatory grief’”. “Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain,” Twentieth Century Literature, vol. 49.2 (2003): 246-275 (246).

47 Examples of this can be taken almost at random from Dickinson's collected works, eg. “It's coming – the postponeless Creature”; “I tried to think a lonelier Thing”; “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” The Complete Poems, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1975) 186, 260, 369. McGuckian claims Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte as important poetic predecessors for her in the genre of elegy (comments from her interview with me).

actual death has necessitated a response of grief. This is echoed in the first stanza of the poem in the image-rich word “viaticum” (6), which is the Eucharist given to a pilgrim for their journey, but might also signify the sacraments given to a dying person on their final journey towards the afterlife. Metaphorically, the pre-emptive elegy is a kind of poetic sacrament performed on behalf of the one approaching death.

This sense of anticipated loss can be linked to the experience of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. With the irruption of violence in the region in the latter half of the twentieth century, familiar rhythms of mourning were blown into disarray. In the face of prolonged conflict, a sense of grief becomes omnipotent. Even following the peace-process, there have been outbreaks of violence, and deaths due to sectarian conflict. As recently as 2010, when the annual 12th July marches in Belfast led to rioting, a BBC report on the violence summed the situation up as follows: “As one veteran politician put it, this is ‘Northern Ireland’s annual trip to the edge’”.⁴⁸ A sense of the Northern Irish community’s saturation with violence is felt in Seamus Heaney’s “Funeral Rites”:

Now as news comes in
of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms...⁴⁹

The longing for the “customary rhythms” of mourning signals that the experience of grief within the community that has lived through the Troubles has taken on an all-pervasive, disconsolatory aspect, and that loss has become expected as the norm. This is the sentiment that is portrayed in McGuckian’s poem, as she works through the emotions that preceded her father’s death.⁵⁰

In the second stanza of “Constable’s ‘Haywain’”, the poet continues to struggle with the task of writing a pre-death elegy. The “tomb is corpseless” (7), which lends the image connotations of Easter-tide resurrection. The “grave goods, bracelets / of piano strings” (9-10) relate not only to the biographical details provided by the poet at interview, but also bear resemblance to John Donne’s “bracelet of bright hair about the bone”.⁵¹ The image of the piano, both here and in the final stanza of the poem, which stands for the relationship between parent and child that has now been lost, works in a similar way to the D. H. Lawrence poem, “Piano”, which also mourns a parent.⁵² The “amber” (12) at the end of the stanza brings to mind the

48 Mark Simpson, “‘Theme park’ rioting raises old fears,” BBC News Northern Ireland, 14 Jul. 2010, accessed 20/07/2010 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern+ireland-10642007>>.

49 Seamus Heaney, “Funeral Rites,” Opened Ground, 97.

50 In her later collections, McGuckian goes on to write more overt “Troubles” poems, the most notable perhaps being the title poem of Drawing Ballerinas. For a reading of this poem see Helen Blakeman’s essay “Medbh McGuckian and the Poetics of Mourning,” The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry, Ed. Irene Gilsean Nordin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 197-212.

51 McGuckian says about her father: “He had this old piano and carried it into the house. So the piano was like his coffin, it was a symbol for me,” Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland interview, 198. Donne, “The Relic,” The Complete English Poems, 75-6.

52 D.H. Lawrence, “Piano,” The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 148.

theme of memory and preservation. In the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, the language becomes increasingly complex and private. This perhaps reflects the depths of intimacy that existed between father and daughter, which is hinted at as she calls him “my wife-giver / and wife taker” (19-20). The third stanza’s sense that “my I [...] has disturbed the ground [...] as if I owned the willed / or invented death...” (13-7) reflects the poet’s sense of unease about mourning a death before it has happened.⁵³ The final image of “the passionate polygamy / of four hands (ours) at one piano” (23-24) reflects the strength of emotion expressed in this poem, and the extent to which the loss is felt by the poet. McGuckian has explained that

My father died in 1992 and that ended that time when I was preparing for the worst possible experience that I could imagine, that of losing my father. Having experienced that, I could feel him in his afterlife. That afterlife sustained me. So to vindicate him, I could deal with the things that made his life so difficult...⁵⁴

This comment serves to explain the seemingly consolatory images in this poem: “his islandlike afterworld, / his multi-sided water journey” (21-22). Not only does this relate to Constable’s painting, which shows a “water journey” and a small “island”, but also reflects the poet’s belief in a continued existence after death, which enables her to adopt this elegiac language. The consolation in McGuckian’s elegies, then, is perhaps more traditional than that found in the poetry of her contemporaries. While the allusions to poetry and art show that the ability to create an artistic memorial goes some way in comforting the mourning poet, her hope is also placed in a more spiritual kind of immortality. As the above comment goes on to show, the poet’s response to her father’s death is directly related to the way in which her poetry began to be more overtly political. Her grief for her father, and for the losses that he suffered in life due to the situation in Northern Ireland, proved to be a catalyst for her more politicised writing.

The collection entitled Shelmalier was published in 1998 and the prefatory note states that it is about the 1798 Rebellion. McGuckian reveals that her theme is “the dawn of my own enlightenment after a medieval ignorance, my being suddenly able to welcome into consciousness figures of an integrity I had never learned to be proud of”.⁵⁵ Her inspiration came as she taught poetry to political prisoners in the Maze prison, and witnessed their pride in their nation.⁵⁶ This teaching experience was undertaken at the suggestion of the poet’s dying father, and provides a further link between McGuckian’s grief for her father and the beginning of her political poetry.⁵⁷ The title poem is an elegy which links her personal grief with a more public,

53 McGuckian explains: “I feel I’m being very arrogant talking about his death in this way, because it hasn’t happened, and I was very superstitious that I would be bringing it on,” (comments from her interview with me).

54 Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview with Medbh McGuckian”, 203.

55 Medbh McGuckian, “Author’s Note,” Shelmalier, 13.

56 Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview with Medbh McGuckian”, 204.

57 After Shelmalier, McGuckian went on to write Had I a Thousand Lives (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2003), which is described as a “memorial collection, honouring the bicentenary of the resistance organisers Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell”, and “weighs the morality of its heroes’ compulsion towards self-sacrifice in the cause of political advancement”, according to the book’s back cover. This marks a continued poetic engagement with the poet’s national history.

national grief.⁵⁸ It appears to be for a nameless rebel, and McGuckian has sometimes dedicated it at readings to Robert Emmett, the Irish Patriot executed by the British in 1803. However, it might also be read for the poet's father, and understood as a description of his "heroic" death in hospital.⁵⁹

Looked after only by the four womb-walls,
if anything curved in the ruined city his last hour
it was his human hands, bituminous, while all laws
were aimed at him, returning to the metre of a star:
like a century about to be over, a river trying
to film itself, detaching its voice from itself,
he qualified the air of his own dying,
his brain in folds like the semi-open rose of grief.
His eyes recorded calm and keen this exercise,
deep-seated, promising avenues, they keep their kingdom:
it is I who am only just left in flight, exiled
into an outline of time, I court his speech, not him.
This great estrangement has the destination of a rhyme.
The trees of his heart breathe regular, in my dream.⁶⁰

This poem is unusual for McGuckian, as she rarely uses traditional form in this way, and normally avoids regular rhyme schemes. However, it bears many of the characteristics that her readers have come to expect. Clair Wills has commented that "[i]t is hard to imagine a neutral response to Medbh McGuckian's poetry".⁶¹ McGuckian has spoken about the ways in which she uses language, saying, for example that "words are tools that men mostly created to suit themselves and although I buy into them, necessarily, they do not rule me or, at least, I rebel and fight against their empire".⁶² In one interview she declares that "English is an imposed imperial language. I see it as a tyrannical force, the words themselves, so I take them, I squash them, I throw them back".⁶³ In writing politicised poetry, McGuckian struggles not only with the imposition of English as an imperial, colonising force, but also with language as a tool of patriarchy. Here, her choice of an adapted sonnet form might be seen as another instance of "fighting against the empire" of both English and patriarchal imperialism.

McGuckian responds to a newly learned national history by internalising it to produce a private, even erotically charged, meditation. "Looked after only by the four womb-walls" (1) seems to express a desire to mother the subject of the poem; as if she wishes to carry the dying man within her own womb in an attempt both to guard his memory, and also to understand and accept her own history. The first line also blurs the political boundaries between the Anglo-Irish Big House denoted by the name "Shelmaliar", of which the four walls might be a part, and the

58 It also follows in a tradition of Northern Irish sonnets written about the 1798 Rebellion; see earlier chapters for readings of Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies" and Carson's "1798".

59 This suggestion was made by McGuckian in her interview with me.

60 "Shelmaliar," *Shelmaliar*, 75.

61 Wills, *Improprieties*, 158.

62 Brown, *In the Chair*, 178.

63 Sawanie Morris, "Under the North Window: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 23.3/4 (2001): 64-74 (66).

ancient mythical image of Ireland itself being a mother to her people.⁶⁴ Indeed, McGuckian has spoken of Ireland being like a woman lying in her grave for the two-hundred years after her death in 1798.⁶⁵ A few lines later, the “semi-open rose of grief” (8), while it seems to carry erotic connotations, also links the poem to Yeatsian symbolism, as McGuckian has explained: “The rose is an ancient code-symbol for Ireland and for national identity”.⁶⁶ The poem is full of references to Ireland's troubled history: the “ruined city” (2), the “century about to be over” (5), the “kingdom” (10), being “exiled” (11), and a sense of “great estrangement” (13). The fact that these phrases are buried within seemingly impenetrable sentences serves as further evidence of McGuckian's wish to internalise and protect her subject matter.

McGuckian uses the volta of the sonnet to enact a change of focus away from the dying man and onto her own response. At line 8, she begins a quatrain whose first two lines describe the man's dignified death, while the second two lines contrast the poet's disconsolate response, and sense of loss as she is “exiled / into an outline of time” (11-12). The final couplet is as self-reflexive as any found in a sonnet by Shakespeare or Donne, with the “destination of a rhyme” (13) working with the earlier “metre of a star” (4) to produce a poem that is fully aware of its own construction and artifice. The mention of “rhyme” by a poet who tends to reject end-rhyme in her poetry, suggests a tone of cynicism, and an awareness that her poetic response to this death might in some ways be seen to trivialise and simplify the chaotic experience of mourning. In this sense, she seems to echo the accusations in Heaney's “Station Island” that beautiful poetry might “whitewash” the ugliness of death.⁶⁷ The final lines also speak of the way in which the poet's complex relationship with her nation's history has compelled her to write this poem, and end with an image of the way in which memories of the dead can endure, even in the subconscious of the living. The half-rhyme of the final couplet deals with the problem of a potentially trite conclusion; McGuckian's promise of consolation remains ambiguous as her poem draws to a close.

Personal relationships are a key theme in much Northern Irish elegy. It is in this area, however, that McGuckian's work acts as a link between the earlier generations of Troubles poets and those who began writing in the 1990s. Longley, Heaney, Muldoon and Carson all explore their complex relationships with their parents through their poetry; indeed some of their greatest elegies are for mothers and fathers. In each case, this elegiac poetry seems also to mourn for the wider losses experienced in Northern Ireland. As this chapter has shown, McGuckian's poetic work of mourning for her parents, especially her father, is also intrinsically linked with her response to the politics of the North. However, McGuckian's poetry is also characterised by the relationships that she has with her children. This also extends to her political poetry:

64 McGuckian's “Author's Note” states that “Shelmalier” is “a placename for a barony in Wexford”.

65 Michaela Schrage-Fruh, “An interview with Medbh McGuckian,” *Contemporary Literature*, 46.1 (2005): 1-17 (16).

66 Morris, 67.

67 Heaney, *Station Island*, 61-94.

“Shelmalier” might be seen to enact a “mothering” of an Irish rebel, and poems like “The Dream Language of Fergus”, and “To My Daughter, Finding Her Weeping, Because I Would Not Consent to Her Fasting” address, simultaneously, her own children, and wider issues of Northern Irish identity.⁶⁸ McGuckian's poetry of motherhood and female sexuality has opened new poetic avenues for the next generation of Northern Irish writers, and her influence can be heard in the work of Sinead Morrissey, Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn, among others.

68 “The Dream Language of Fergus,” On Ballycastle Beach, revised ed. (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1995, orig. published 1988) 57-8; “To My Daughter, Finding Her Weeping, Because I Would Not Consent to Her Fasting,” My Love Has Fared Inland (Oldcastle: Gallery P, 2008) 50-1.

“Art is waist-deep in the spirit of the times”: Three Third Generation Northern Irish

Elegists

Sinead Morrissey

Matt McGuire introduces the third generation of Troubles poets in the following way:

Born during the 1970s, writers like Alan Gillis, Leontia Flynn, Nick Laird, Sinead Morrissey, and Colette Bryce grew up amidst the every day turmoil of the conflict in the North. One must be wary of offering misleading generalisations here. A diversity of approach and a plurality of themes necessarily makes any sweeping statements about this body of work conditional. Coming to the fore after the Good Friday Agreement, this poetry disproves pejorative readings of Northern Irish writing as prurient or derivative, with the poet extracting the lyrical moment from the unfolding chaos of the troubles.⁶⁹

Bearing in mind McGuire's warning against generalisation, it is possible to take the work of the poets mentioned as examples of the continuing engagement with and development of the genre of elegy in Northern Irish poetry. Of these, Sinead Morrissey was the first to produce a debut collection. There Was Fire in Vancouver was published in 1996, and contains “many poems composed well before the ceasefires”.⁷⁰ Now having published four collections, and having enjoyed critical acclaim, Morrissey is one of the leading figures of her generation, as well as one of its steadily maturing voices.⁷¹ In an early interview, she suggested that she might be able to “offer ‘fresh perspectives’ to the Northern Irish audience”, revealing that she “wasn't brought up in either community as my parents were atheists, so I think that's given me a degree of impartiality”.⁷² This “impartiality” might be seen as an advantage to a poet whose writing often seeks to bridge distances, in terms of both geography and personal relationships, as well as the distances experienced when death and loss are mourned.⁷³ In doing this, Morrissey's work also acts as a kind of bridge which helps to connect the work of her generation to the poetry that has preceded it.⁷⁴

69 McGuire, “Literary perspectives: Northern Ireland: Shaking the hand of history.”

70 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 157. Morrissey, There Was Fire in Vancouver (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996).

71 Parker refers to her “reputation as the most accomplished Northern Irish poet of her generation,” Northern Irish Literature, II, 226.

72 Annamay McKernan, “Fast Movers: Sinead Morrissey,” Tatler Woman 24 Jun 2002, accessed 23/04/2010 <<http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=16;doctype=interview>>. See also Irene De Angelis: “She feels the fact that both her parents belonged to the Irish Communist Party ‘contributed to a sense of dislocation, of belonging to neither community.’ To be neither Catholic nor Protestant was too far removed from the dominant frame of reference. However, dislocation was only ‘one side of the coin’, because Morrissey's family background also left her with a sense of enormous freedom. Asked what lies ‘Between Here and There’, Morrissey answered: ‘Nothing. It's being in between that counts. Its tolerance of transitions [*sic*]’,” “Sinead Morrissey: between Northern Ireland and Japan,” Journal of Irish Studies XX (2005), accessed 23/04/2010 <<http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=278;doctype=review>>.

73 McKernan notes: “Her poems have been likened to journeys, not just from place to place but on a more spiritual level”. Ibid.

74 This is picked up by De Angelis, who links Morrissey's interest in Japan with a host of Irish writers, from Yeats to Heaney, Longley, Ní Dhomhnaill, Boland, Carson, Mahon, McGuckian, Muldoon and others. David Morley also comments on how Morrissey's generation “has had the poems of Heaney, Michael

The Belfast poems in her debut collection certainly seem to respond to Ciaran Carson's poetry.⁷⁵ Morrissey's poems "Belfast Storm" and "My New Angels" both invoke images similar to those found at the end of Carson's poem "Slate Street School", in the lines "It's as though the angels are angry..." ("Belfast Storm," 3) and "My new angels are howling, hard..." ("My New Angels," 6).⁷⁶ As Parker notes, the poem "Europa Hotel" echoes, yet is "lighter in touch and tone than Ciaran Carson's elegy for the bombed-out Smithfield Market".⁷⁷ Although Morrissey does not claim a "Northern Irish" identity, her experiences of growing up in the region are seen to permeate her adult life, even when she is away from the context of Belfast: her poem "English Lesson", for example, begins "Today I taught the Germans about Northern Ireland" (1), and ends "The only honesty is silence" (7).⁷⁸ Although this might suggest that it is impossible to write authentic poetry about such subjects as the Troubles, these themes are prevalent in her work. Her three-part sequence "Thoughts in a Black Taxi" is based on a return to Belfast, just as preparations are being made for the twelfth of July marches. The narrator, occupying a "problematic, liminal position as one who is neither/nor", wants to ask questions of this "organisation" (9), but is aware that her name would place her in a dangerous position.⁷⁹ This awareness leads into memories of earlier mistakes made, of the necessity to conceal her "Catholic" name, and of her school-girl fears as "Six years of the Grosvenor Road in a state high school uniform / Was like having *Protestant* slapped across your back" (23-24). Belonging to neither sectarian group, Morrissey shows awareness of the antagonism shown towards members of both sides.⁸⁰

While the theme of the Troubles that can be traced throughout There Was Fire In Vancouver brings a generally elegiac tone to the collection, there are also more traditional poems of mourning in it. "My Grandmother Through Glass" is an elegiac sequence which might echo McGuckian in its themes of family relationships, particularly given its emphasis on the female figures of the poet's family.⁸¹ In this elegy, death is given as a metaphor: that of passing through a mirror. This seems to make sense of the clichés that are often attached to the

Longley, Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon whispering over their desks since their schooldays," "The whales in Helen's Bay." The Guardian 1 Oct. 2005, accessed 23/04/2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/oct/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview13>>.

75 Indeed, she is further linked to Carson by his acknowledgement of Morrissey's editorial assistance with his 2008 collection For All We Know; see Collected Poems, 591.

76 And I am the avenging Archangel, stooping over mills and factories and barracks.

I will bury the city of Belfast forever under snow: inches, feet, yards, chains, miles.

Carson, "Slate Street School," Collected Poems, 108. Morrissey, There Was Fire In Vancouver, 17, 52. There might also be an echo of Muldoon's poem "The Destroying Angel," Poems 1968-1998, 125-6.

77 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 158. Indeed, Morrissey claims that her own poetry does not attempt to deal with the troubles in the same way as Carson's, because "after a collection like *Belfast Confetti*, you know, it's there and it's been done and been done so brilliantly... I had to do something else," (comments from an interview with me, conducted at Queen's University, Belfast, Thursday 16th September, 2010).

78 There Was Fire In Vancouver, 18.

79 Parker, Northern Irish Literature, II, 159.

80 My interview with Morrissey included the poet giving a description of her childhood.

81 There Was Fire in Vancouver, 42-45.

dead: “*having passed away*” or “*being on the other side*”, for example. It also suggests that after death, a person is cut off and detached from the world of the living, yet simultaneously remains visible, as if preserved behind glass:

You've gone through the glass and into the arms
Of the children who cried to break into your body.
Your mother will be young again.
No negotiation from this side in –

The glass descended and shimmered open
And then froze hard again beyond all normal view.
No doubt your own face changed.
No doubt memory followed you. (53-60)

While the idea of an afterlife “through the glass” might be seen as a consolation, by the end of this poem, the speaker struggles to accept any such comfort:

And even the knowledge that sometime, way back,

Both of us were moon-eyed children
Who played together in the land of glass
Won't kill the awful hush of your departure... (68-71)

Between Here and There, as the collection's title suggests, explores various places, ranging from Belfast to America and New Zealand, as well as Japan, which appears as the title of Part II of the book.⁸² Part I, however, opens with two poems about Belfast, which consider the city and its recent history with a mixture of Mahonian irony and seemingly heartfelt tenderness. “In Belfast” is a poem in two parts,⁸³ the first of which gives a broad view of the city as it “is making money / on a weather-mangled Tuesday” (7-8), and ends with an image of “the river / [...] simmering at low tide and sheeted with silt” (11-12). The second part of the poem focuses on the speaker's personal history, revealing that she has “returned after ten years” (13) after having experienced “a delicate unravelling of wishes / that leaves the future unspoken and the past / unencountered and unaccounted for” (18-20). Although not an elegy as such, the mournful tone is in keeping with Northern Irish elegy, as the poet's personal losses are tied up with the experiences of the city:

This city weaves itself so intimately
it is hard to see, despite the tenacity of the river
and the iron sky; and in its downpour and its vapour I am
as much at home here as I will ever be. (21-24)

This final thought, while it seems to respond to the wish at the end of Mahon's poem “Afterlives”, that “I might have grown up at last / And learnt what is meant by home”, displays a different relationship with the city.⁸⁴ “Tourism” displays a mixture of grief and anger at the painful history through which Belfast has lived, and which it now seems to sell as a cultural

82 Morrissey, Between Here and There (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002).

83 Between Here and There, 13.

84 Mahon, “Afterlives,” Collected Poems, 58-9. Morrissey speaks about the difficulty that she has with identifying herself as a Northern Irish poet (in her interview with me).

experience.⁸⁵

We take them to those streets
they want to see most, at first,

as though it's all over and safe behind bus glass
like a staked African wasp. Unabashedly, this is our splintered city... (10-13)

The speaker's bitter tone seems directed at her own people, rather than at the tourists: "Our talent for holes that are bigger / than the things themselves / resurfaces at Stormont, our week-kneed parliament..." (19-21), although the tone at the end of the poem seems to mock the European visitors that it purports to welcome: "So come, keep coming here." "Diffuse the gene pool, confuse the local kings, / infect us with your radical ideas..." (26, 28-29).⁸⁶ While at times the bitterness and irony seems to echo that of Mahon, there is a difference of tone. The first person pronouns throughout "Tourism" are plural: the use of "we" and "our" implies that the speaker, despite feeling a sense of detachment from the city, is nevertheless accepting Belfast as an aspect of her identity.⁸⁷

"In Need of a Funeral" links Morrissey to both Heaney and McGuckian.⁸⁸ The title of the poem, which also becomes its refrain, is reminiscent of lines from Heaney's poem "Funeral Rites", which struggles with the way in which ordinary mourning practices were put under extraordinary pressure as they were called upon to deal with the losses of the Troubles. As mentioned above, McGuckian deals with similarly difficult emotions as she attempts to preempt her grief for her dying parents. This constant anticipation of bereavement must be common in Northern Ireland, as a result of the continual losses experienced during the Troubles. Morrissey's poem seems to deal with a similar emotion, as she begins:

Even though no one has died and there is no one
to touch in the coffin the way my brother
touched the dead-man relation
whose name we didn't know [...]
I have need of a funeral. (1-4, 6)

This unexplained sense of loss appears to be something the speaker has lived with from an early age; the tone of the opening lines sounds almost child-like, and the third stanza corroborates this, as the speaker remembers that she "stole communion in the cathedral, / not knowing what to do..." (13-14). The fact that, a few lines later, "the man" who "tipped wine / and crushed bread" (16-17) gives her advice, reveals that she only "stole" in the sense that as a child of atheist parents, she was not accustomed to the Christian ritual. The "milk teeth" in line 22 also add to the idea of a childhood memory. However, the second stanza of the poem seems to

85 Between Here and There, 14.

86 Conversely, the ending of the poem might be read as Parker does: "The irony and indignation seem to run out in the last two stanzas, which voice what seems to be a genuine appeal for the European tourists to keep coming, to radicalise the locals, and to endow the province with 'new symbols' and a new identity," Northern Irish Literature, II, 227.

87 This might be linked to the problematic relationship between the poet and the community heard in Heaney's "The Strand at Lough Beg".

88 Between Here and There, 22.

situate the speaker in present-day, adult experience: “I have love in the morning, a candle, a radio / and a child's smile blooms over my fireplace” (9-10). The speaker admits that while, as a mother, “death is not where I wish to go to” (7), she still has “need of a funeral” (12). The images from different stages in the speaker's life, given out of chronological sequence, yet all under-girded by a fundamental sense of loss, perhaps serve to show the way in which the Troubles have permeated Northern Irish experience.

Morrissey's third and fourth collections broaden in their scope to include wider issues of global crisis and conflict, and while simultaneously pausing to concentrate upon more intimate subjects such as motherhood and family relationships.⁸⁹ Reviewers of The State of the Prisons have commented upon the variety of poetic forms utilised in the collection, and David Morley comments on the way in which the “nurturing” of earlier generations of Northern Irish poets can be heard in the “linguistic sensuousness, economy, seriousness, classicism and playfulness” of the poetry of Morrissey and her contemporaries.⁹⁰ The “nurturing” hands of poetic predecessors from further afield than Northern Ireland can also be felt in this collection, most notably, perhaps, in the poem “Driving Alone on a Snowy Evening”, which is subtitled “after Frost”, and takes the American poet's meditation upon life and death to extremes in what appears to be a suicide note: “The car purrs on. I do not brake. / The choice of crash I leave to fate” (9-10). While the final stanzas seem to signify the approach of death, “The view's as white as a winding sheet” (14), the final repeated lines seem to counteract the momentum of the poem in a stubbornly continuing existence: “The heart still beats *repeat repeat*. / The heart still beats *repeat repeat*” (15-16). The end-stopped lines and the rhyme scheme of the poem add strength to a sense of finality throughout this poem, but the final repetition of “*repeat*” paradoxically refuses to end so conclusively. A sense of circularity and perpetual experience is one that is characteristic of Northern Irish elegy, as the on-going nature of conflict and loss seems to be inescapable. Conversely, throughout the generations of Northern Irish poets, there also seems to exist an inextinguishable flame of hope that enables art and memory to continue.

Circularity, as has been seen in the work of Muldoon, especially, can be communicated through the poet's choice of verse forms. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that third generation poets seem to be inclined to experiment with circular forms. In The State of the Prisons, Morrissey uses the villanelle in her poem “Genetics”, and in her following collection, Through the Square Window, she includes the sestina “Telegraph”.⁹¹ Both poems focus on generational relationships and the legacies bestowed by parents upon their children, whether positively or negatively. The sestina is especially suited to poetry which comes out of a seemingly endless conflict, in a society in which generational relationships and ideas of literary and cultural

89 Morrissey, The State of the Prisons (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005); Through the Square Window (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009).

90 Morley, “The whales in Helen's Bay.” Morrissey speaks about the importance of poetic form in her interview with me.

91 “Genetics,” The State of the Prisons, 13; “Telegraph,” Through the Square Window 49-50. Morrissey explains the choice of form for these two poems in her interview with me.

inheritance play an important role. This will be seen again in the work of other third-generation Northern Irish poets. The sense of an inescapable past, which continues to haunt the present and even future generations, is found in Morrisey's poem "Through the Square Window", which opens with the lines: "In my dream the dead have arrived / to wash the windows of my house" (1-2).⁹² The speaker goes on to remark, "I wonder / if it's my son they're after" (7-8). However, by the end of the poem, the dead are gone, and the speaker wakes, "flat on my back with a cork / in my mouth, bottle-stoppered, in fact, / like a herbalist's cure for dropsy" (22-24). The stopping of the poet's mouth seems to be the way in which the dead are vanquished. However, this does not seem to be a satisfactory conclusion. Indeed, earlier in the poem, the poet has realised that the dead are not a threat to her baby: "he sleeps on unregarded in his cot" (10). Rather than feeling threatened by the dead, there is a sense in which the poet feels the need, or a sense of responsibility, to speak on their behalf. This seems to be the same compulsion under which each generation of Troubles poets has given voice to the victims of violence, and it seems to be a continuing incentive for new and emerging Northern Irish poets.

Leontia Flynn

In her brief biography of Leontia Flynn for the Poetry International Web, Colette Bryce notes that "[a]fter taking her MA at Edinburgh, she completed her PhD on the poetry of Medbh McGuckian at Queen's in Belfast in 2004, joining her subject in the distinguished list of poets associated with the University since the 1960s".⁹³ Joining this network of academic relationships, Fran Brearton reviews her colleague's poetry with enthusiasm, declaring that "Flynn's is one of the most strikingly original and exciting poetic voices to have emerged from Northern Ireland since the extraordinary debut by Muldoon..." She makes the further comparison that "[i]n a reversal of strategies adopted by one of her immediate precursors Medbh McGuckian, Flynn makes it seem easy, which, for her readers, can also make it that little bit harder to grasp what she is about". Brearton suggests that, like Muldoon, Flynn is concerned with mothers and fathers, of both a biological and literary kind. While the range of poetic predecessors that are alluded to in Flynn's work is wide-ranging, from Baudelaire to Bishop, she is "not alone among her peers in exhibiting both admiration of, and tendency to react against, the celebrated older generations of Northern Irish poets".⁹⁴

Flynn's first collection, These Days, was generally well received by critics (going on to win the 2004 Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection of the Year), although some readers have pointed out that while "one of Flynn's most praiseworthy poetic gifts [...] lies in her ability to

92 Through the Square Window, 32.

93 Colette Bryce, "Leontia Flynn," Poetry International Web 3 Jan. 2007, accessed 28/04/2010 <http://uk.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=8480>.

94 Fran Brearton, "Fran Brearton Reviews Drives by Leontia Flynn," Poetry Matters, accessed 29/03/2010 <<http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/reviews/reviews-archive/223-fran-brearton-reviews-drives-by-leontia-flynn>>.

appropriate aspects of popular culture and the contemporary era without showiness or excess”, “there is only so much significance to be gleaned from the insignificant”.⁹⁵ Her style has been contrasted with that of McGuckian:

After reading McGuckian's collections, we might come away thinking that the most distracting aspect of reading a poem is not its obscurity but its clarity and that perhaps we need to be a little more disapproving of poems that are too intelligible. Moreover a plain style can be a way of disguising what has not been explored. And it is the straightforwardness of Leontia Flynn's debut collection, *These Days*, which is its weakness and part of its enjoyable “momentum”.⁹⁶

One poem from *These Days* which uses straightforward language to broach one of the key themes in Northern Irish poetry, that of generational inheritance, is “When I was Sixteen I Met Seamus Heaney”.⁹⁷ Flynn recalls witnessing Heaney signing her friend's copy of “Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*” (4), and her short poem ends with the thought, “I had read *The Poor Mouth* – but who was Seamus Heaney? / I believe he signed my bus ticket, which I later lost” (9-10). This casual, teenage reaction to one of the key figures in Northern Irish poetry belies the respect that the adult poet has for her predecessor.⁹⁸ The idea of inter-generational bonds emerges in Flynn's poetry in the form of both biological and literary relationships. While Heaney and MacNeice are named in this collection (and allusions are made to Kafka, Shelley, du Maurier, Plath, Chaucer, Larkin, Forster and Austen, among others) Flynn's parents also make appearances, most notably in the sestina entitled “26”.⁹⁹

“26” provides a link to Flynn's second collection, *Drives*, in which she also uses the sestina form to emphasise generational relationships, just as Morrissey's “Telegraph” does.¹⁰⁰ “26” describes a dream, in which “fragments” (33) of the “past lives of [the poet's] mother and father” (32) are “handed down like a solvable puzzle” (34). The sestina form seems especially suited to the dreamer's re-visioning of past events, as fragments and scraps of information circle around each other, yet never fully cohere into a definitive picture. The tension felt by the dreamer as she repeatedly tries to fashion the pieces of information into something meaningful is reflected in the tension of the sestina form. The sestina is thought to have originated as a circular dance form which developed to combine with a “squared off” form comprising six stanzas of six lines each. In taking this form, Margaret Spanos notes that

the sestina embodies its meaning. The conjunction of the squared and circular forms, both of which have traditional claims to emblematic significance, has created a composite form, the reader's experience of which is in fact emblematic: the poetic tension (form) transmits an

95 Ben Wilkinson, “Leontia Flynn,” *Contemporary Writers* 2008, accessed 27/07/2010

<<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth519D1A6E0527123872PwPj51C95A>>.

96 Michael Kinsella, “Review: Meanings Are Not for Us,” *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 81 (2004): 72-75 (74).

97 Leontia Flynn, “When I was Sixteen I Met Seamus Heaney,” *These Days*, (London: Cape, 2004) 19.

98 In a 2008 interview, Flynn nominates Heaney as the Irish cultural figure she most admires: “My Cultural Life: Leontia Flynn,” cultureofnorthernireland.org, accessed 26/07/2010

<http://www.cultureofnorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art_id=2378>.

99 *These Days*, 49-50. Flynn's multiple literary references, as well as the “potted biographies” found in *Drives* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), link her poetry to both Muldoon and McGuckian in terms of intertextual allusions, while her second collection is dedicated to her parents.

100 “Drive,” *Drives*, 50-51.

intuition of the emotional tension (content) it describes. [...] This makes the sestina the perfect emblematic poem which, on all poetic levels, *is* what it means.¹⁰¹

Flynn's sestina "Drive" might be noted for the way in which the end-words are varied to fit with the themes which drive the poem forward: in the second stanza, "clock" is replaced by "Clough", and "spring" by "Analong", which are both names of places through which the poet's mother will drive. Running parallel to the theme of driving a car is the theme of the biological drives involved with motherhood, and this is also reflected in variant end-words. "Drive" is the key word in the poem, and each time it appears at the end of the line, it performs a different function. The emphasis on journeying, whether literally or metaphorically, is tied up with the passage of time, which has been noted as an integral structural element of the sestina form.¹⁰² This also makes the poem elegiac. The sense of time passing is reinforced in "Drives" with the mention of "the old road and the new road" (11), the contrasting of "age" and "youth", of "beginnings" and endings. However, the story of her mother's life remains unfinished, as at the end of the poem, the poet writes: "My mother watches. She's waiting for a sign..." (39). Even though "she tells this offspring she's nearing the end of the road" (37), the ellipsis at the end of the poem works against the formal closure that is inevitable in the sestina. While the poem has come to the end of its journey, the mother's is still on-going. The poet perhaps looks for consolation, having faced up to the inevitability of mortality, and therefore rejects the closure of death by using a circular form which emphasises the on-going cycle of life as new generations succeed those who have gone before them.

A theme which links Flynn both to her predecessors and her contemporaries is Belfast. In *Drives*, the poem "Belfast" might be read as a continuing conversation with poems like Alan Gillis's "Progress", and Morrissey's "In Belfast" and "Tourism", as well as Carson's "Turn Again", and MacNeice's "Valediction", with lines such as: "The sky is a washed-out theatre backcloth" (1); "Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction" (5); "A tourist pamphlet contains an artist's impression // of arcades, mock-colonnades, church-spires and tapas bars" (8-9).¹⁰³ "Leaving Belfast" similarly seems to respond to poems such as Mahon's "Afterlives" in its complicated relationship with the city:

the skyline in town is the ragged, monitored heartbeat
of a difficult patient; the river holds its own,
and for every torn-up billboard and sick-eating pigeon
and execrable litter-blown street round Atlantic Avenue
there's some scrap of hope in the young, in the good looks of women,
in the leafiness of the smart zones, in the aerobatics of starlings. (3-8)¹⁰⁴

The poem seems to mourn the losses suffered by the city, while simultaneously finding reasons

101 Margaret Spanos, "The Sestina: An Exploration of the Dynamics of Poetic Structure," 549, 551.

102 James Cummins, "Calliope Music: Notes on the Sestina," *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line P, 1999) 133-43 (140).

103 *Drives*, 2. Flynn's poem "Casablanca, Backwards" (page 6) makes use of a similar technique to Alan Gillis's "Progress," *Somebody, Somewhere* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2004) 55. Flynn speaks about the tourist industry in Belfast in her interview with me.

104 *Drives*, 8.

for hope in its regeneration and continued existence. Other poems in the collection also deal with the experiences of growing up during the Northern Irish Troubles: “the Berlin Wall / reminds you, you say, of peace walls in Belfast” in the poem “Berlin”, and in “Boxes”, which describes the rigmarole of completing forms at a customs desk, “You write ‘Yes Please’ for sex?; and ‘Northern Irish’ – ‘N.I.’ / Which also, privately, stands for ‘N[ot] I[n]terested] ...”¹⁰⁵

Drives as a collection relates to the themes traced throughout this study of Northern Irish elegy on a number of levels, as has been seen. “Don’t Worry”, opens with the following stanza:

Don’t worry about the government
or this world of pain
or the flood-water which may come inching
from the swollen river, over distant fields.¹⁰⁶

This makes use of similar imagery to that found at the beginning of Muldoon’s “Yarrow”, and the tone of the poem perhaps takes something from Mahon’s poem “Everything Is Going To Be All Right”, which includes the lines “There will be dying, there will be dying, / but there is no need to go into that”.¹⁰⁷ However, where Mahon’s poem ends with the comforting line “Everything is going to be all right”, Flynn’s poem has a far less consolatory ending: “Oakey dokey?” (12). Indeed, the poem sounds far closer to the sense of rising hysteria heard in Muldoon’s elegy, with its images of impending disaster. A sense that the global issues encountered in “this world of pain” cannot be ignored is one that permeates the poetry of this generation, as is seen particularly in the work of Alan Gillis and Nick Laird. Like almost all of her predecessors, Flynn’s work poetry is also marked by poems of personal loss. In Drives, the poems about her father become increasingly poignant, tracing his memory loss in “A Head for Figures”, and “Drive”, through to an imagined death in “Our Fathers”:

my father holds open
the door of himself
and lets his old ghost
pass through (49-52)¹⁰⁸

Finally, “Spring Poem” remembers a time

When, in morning light, I walked to the bridge
– that old skeleton propped on ribs of steel –
I thought of my dead father;
but neither his loss, my pain, or near dispersal
into competing selves which flew past others,
drove me to the edge. (1-6)¹⁰⁹

This poem seems to mark a successful stage in the mourning process, as the death-wish, which

105 Drives, 21, 22.

106 Drives, 40.

107 Muldoon, “Yarrow,” Poems 1968-1998, 346-92; Mahon, “Everything Is Going To Be All Right,” Collected Poems, 113.

108 Drives, 42, 50, 53.

109 Drives, 56.

Freud identified as a dangerous potential response to loss, seems to have been conquered.¹¹⁰

There is, however, little consolation to be found in this poem, ending as it does with “*oblivion*” (18). In this lack of consolation, Flynn's elegiac poetry stands in contrast to that of earlier generations, as is noted by Peter Denman:

... whereas Longley will suggest the possibility at least of a salvific and transcendental permanence attaching to the objects he names, Flynn fastens on contingencies. There is little promise of consolation; her world is a world of temporality rather than tempering, of transience rather than transcendence.¹¹¹

Colette Bryce

Colette Bryce was raised in the Bogside area of Derry, and as she recounts:

I was born into the current phase of the “Troubles” so I grew up as the war grew up and it was a big part of my life. The “Troubles” were taking place on our doorsteps, literally. There was a constant army presence in our area and houses could be raided at any time.

To this bleak picture, she adds, “But this was normality, it didn't seem strange at the time. I love the town and I grew up in a very close community”.¹¹² In the light of this childhood immersion in civil conflict, it is interesting, as Alan Brownjohn notes, that the Troubles “feature, explicitly only twice” in Bryce's debut collection, The Heel of Bernadette.¹¹³ While Brownjohn might be right in finding the poems “Line” and “Break” to be the only ones of the collection to directly mention the Troubles, there are traces throughout the book of Bryce's engagement with Northern Irish elegy.¹¹⁴ Family relationships are described throughout the book, and the poem “Father, in the face” describes a child's experience of watching her father ageing, which seems, like McGuckian's “Constable's ‘Haywain’”, to be a pre-emptive elegy.¹¹⁵ “The Pieces” is a poem which takes Longley's lists to an extreme, presenting six stanzas of seemingly unrelated items.¹¹⁶ Nestling among more incongruous words are images like “Transit van” (1 and 13) and “ambulance” (21), which carry connotations of violence, particularly given the fragmented structure of the poem.¹¹⁷ The longest, and most notable poem of the collection, however, is “Form”, which opens with the lines

110 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957, rpt. 1962) 24 vols (239-58). This poem complicates the fact that the poet's father is still alive, albeit suffering from dementia. This continues the practice of pre-death elegiac mourning found in the work of both McGuckian and Morrissey. The details about the poet's father were discussed in my interview with Leontia Flynn.

111 Peter Denman, “Review: Praying,” The Irish Review 33, Global Ireland (2005): 141-144 (143).

112 In the Chair, 311.

113 Alan Brownjohn, “Making poetry their province,” The Sunday Times, 20 Feb. 2000, accessed 21/04/2010, Document st00000020010817dw2k002m5, < <http://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>>. Bryce, The Heel of Bernadette, (London: Pan Macmillan-Picador, 2000).

114 The Heel of Bernadette, 4, 5.

115 The Heel of Bernadette, 6.

116 The Heel of Bernadette, 8.

117 The poem also bears some resemblance to Nick Laird's poem “The Search Engine,” On Purpose (London: Faber, 2007) 20, which pieces together seemingly random particles of information.

For some time I have been starving myself,
and not in the interest of fashion,
but because it is something to do
and I do it well. (1-4)¹¹⁸

Ostensibly, the poem is about anorexia, and it makes no overt reference to Northern Irish politics. However, in the light of the hunger strikes of the 1980s, about which Bryce's poetic predecessors have been compelled to write, the poem carries a political undertone.¹¹⁹ This is reinforced by lines like "the hunger isn't a sacrifice / but a tool" (10-11). Muldoon approached the difficult subject by addressing an unnamed figure in the second person: "*lie down with us now and wrap / yourself in the soiled grey blanket of Irish rain*", and as a matter-of-fact description: "a kidney machine / supports the latest hunger-striker / to have called off his fast".¹²⁰ In contrast, Bryce's use of the first person provides a more intimate and moving account of her starving subject, without becoming sentimental or moralistic. As Selina Guinness notes, "the self-justifications of an anorexic or hunger striker rely on, and implicate, the bystander".¹²¹

Wills links Bryce's second collection to one of her Northern Irish predecessors: "The Full Indian Rope Trick opens with a sequence of poems evoking Bryce's youth in Derry, their technique often recalling Medbh McGuckian's early poised and sexy-strange lyrics".¹²² One such poem, "And They Call It Lovely Derry" recalls a trip to Florida where twenty Protestant and twenty Catholic children were "lifted out of a 'war-torn community' / to mix three weeks in a normal society" (4-5).¹²³ Ironically, this marks the young Bryce's first experience of "Racism" (23), and while the shared experience seems to have been generally positive, the final stanza brings a reminder of the seemingly unresolvable sectarian divisions, even between the children of Derry:

We gave a concert on the last night,
[...]
We harmonized on all the songs
but fell apart with the grand finale,
the well-rehearsed "O I know a wee spot ..."
as the group split between London and Lovely. (24, 26-30)

The Troubles permeate this collection, as "1981" serves as a reminder of the hunger-strikes ("a man cowers, says it with hunger, / skin bone, wrought to a bare / statement"), and "Device" describes a home-made bomb as if it is an artwork, "placed, delicately as a gift, under a car in a

118 The Heel of Bernadette, 17-18.

119 Bryce says: "Poetry is political because the people who write it are. [...] Political activism was a big part of life in Derry, it was all around me and I was part of it. My remembered experience was of Thatcherism, the Hunger Strikes, memorials, protests and funerals. A lot of it was about remembering and grieving, some of it was about seeking change," In The Chair, 313.

120 See Muldoon's poems "Gathering Mushrooms" and "Aisling," Poems 1968-1998, 105-6, 26-7.

121 Selina Guinness, "Estranged intimacies," Irish Times, 4 Mar. 2000, accessed 21/04/2010, Document irti000020010811dw3400wg7 < <http://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>>.

122 Clair Wills, "Living below zero," Irish Times, 20 Nov. 2004, accessed 21/04/2010, <http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/104753/living_below_zero/index.html>.

123 The Full Indian Rope Trick (London: Pan Macmillan-Picador, 2005) 6-7.

street that will flare / to a gallery in the memory...”¹²⁴ These poems link violence with art, as those who are seen by the media as “terrorists” are imagined here as artists making use of the only materials they have to hand: the hunger-striker's own body, and the bomber's “circuit kit; 4 double-A batteries”. The opening of “Device”, “Some express themselves like this”, might be read as a desire to move away from the highly nuanced and emotive language used by the media. However, it could also be self-indicting in a Muldoonian manner, as the poet realises that her own art is inextricably linked with, and at times feeds off, the violence of the Troubles.

Bryce's most recent collection, Self-Portrait in the Dark, continues to meditate upon similar themes of violence and identity.¹²⁵ While her upbringing in Derry links her to Seamus Heaney, the sense of exile engendered by her move to England to attend university, and her subsequent moves to Spain and Scotland, give her a sense of internationalism and exile that she shares not only with previous generations of Northern Irish writers, but also with her contemporaries. “When I Land in Northern Ireland” might be compared to Nick Laird's poem “The Immigration Form”, or Flynn's “Boxes”, as well as Mahon's “Afterlives”.¹²⁶ The two most notable poems in the collection, however, are “Harm”, and “Belfast Waking, 6 a. m.”.¹²⁷ Both poems play with the connotations that a reader familiar with Troubles poetry might automatically attach to words like “ticking”, or settings that include a “small white van” and a public telephone booth. The threat of violence in these images is increased by the way in which both poems can be linked to Heaney's sestina “Two Lorries”, in which the childhood memory of the coalman's lorry is conflated with a vision of another “deadlier one, set to explode”, a lorry that carries a “payload / That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes”.¹²⁸ In “The Harm”, Bryce describes a memory from childhood in which potential “harm” might come from both traffic accidents and terrorist bombs. The sestina form of her poem also links it to Heaney's, and demonstrates the way in which Bryce, like her contemporaries, follows in a Northern Irish tradition which values the use of traditional verse forms. The “ticking”, which might stand for the sense of fear and uncertainty engendered by the Troubles, also links to Heaney's poem, “A Constable Calls”. Heaney's poem also deals with a childhood memory of “arithmetic and fear”, when a Protestant policeman makes an official visit to monitor the crops growing on the Catholic family's farm. As the Constable cycles away from the scene, his “bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked”.¹²⁹ The “van” in “Belfast Waking 6 a. m.”, together with the street-scene described, is underwritten by the threatening images of Heaney's “Two Lorries”. As has been mentioned in relation to McGuckian and Morrissey, there is a sense of anticipated violence in these poems, which seems to be an enduring legacy of the Troubles.

It might be said that the poets included in this section are writers seeking to contribute

124 The Full Indian Rope Trick, 11, 12.

125 Self-Portrait in the Dark (London: Pan Macmillan-Picador, 2008).

126 Self-Portrait in the Dark, 30. Laird, On Purpose, 21.

127 Self-Portrait in the Dark, 31-2, 43-5.

128 Heaney, “Two Lorries,” Opened Ground 403-4.

129 Heaney, “A Constable Calls,” Opened Ground, 137-8.

to contemporary poetry in English in the broadest sense, and have not merely set out to represent the region in which they were born. However, as this chapter has shown, the Troubles have been part of their formative experience, and have necessitated a poetic response: and it can be seen that each poet, in their own way, has made use of the genre of elegy with which to do this. Furthermore, these poets, like their predecessors, have been able to use the techniques developed through an elegiac exploration of the losses of the Troubles in order to find ways in which to write about more global issues of suffering and injustice.

Conclusion

“The end of art is peace”: The Future of Northern Irish Elegy

The titles of the newest collections of Longley, (*A Hundred Doors*), Mahon, (*An Autumn Wind*), Muldoon, (*Maggot*) and Flynn, (*Profit and Loss*), make it immediately evident that the elegiac themes of loss, decay and darkness continue to pervade Northern Irish poetry, even into the second decade of the twenty-first century.¹ As has been seen in the careers of Heaney and Carson, and now in Mahon and Muldoon, a common trend for elegists seems to be the movement towards self-elegy in the latter years of the poet's life. Perhaps this is to be expected, as an increasing awareness of human mortality would seem to be inevitably linked to a consideration of death and loss. Having survived the Troubles in Northern Ireland, these writers must now face the prospect of old age and the natural rhythms of life and death, rather than the violent and untimely deaths that they had elegised as young poets.

It might be suggested that, in the context of a peaceful twenty-first century, there is no longer a place for Troubles poetry. There is certainly ambivalence towards the situation in contemporary Northern Ireland, and part of this comes from a desire to market the region as a modern and progressive place. The *easyJet* in-flight magazine of September 2010, for example, prints an interview with the television presenter Graham Little, who says:

I am amazed at some people's perception of Belfast. The Troubles finished a long time ago. It actually has a very low crime rate, and there's a terrific buzz. The Troubles now need to be seen by Belfast as a tourist opportunity. I think we could do much more on that. If nothing else, it helps to reinforce the idea that it's all in the past. [...] The murals are totems to the problems we've had in the past, but I think they have a positive part to play in the city's future. They are fascinating in their own way, and having been symbols of division and misery for years, they may as well now make money for people of both sides as a tourist attraction.²

It is acknowledged that this comment comes from a piece of promotional writing, which has an obvious commercial agenda, but it nevertheless presents a persuasive, contemporary Northern Irish voice. My conversation with Leontia Flynn highlighted the fact that for Northern Irish poets, at least, the themes of violence and loss that were raised as a result of the Troubles are still pertinent issues in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Similarly, the newspaper columns of Nick Laird are often bleak in outlook, and he has argued strongly for the persistence of elegy in his own work:

Anything I try to write is elegiac, as if elegy is the only appropriate tone. So much bad news. The earth is, to put it mildly, fucked. [...] Art is waist-deep in the spirit of the times... In modern nature poetry – perhaps in modern poetry itself – the elegiac tone has come to be the dominant mode, the pervasive mood. Didn't Martin Amis once claim that the modern world meant the only appropriate fiction was comic? It seems in poetry the only tone left is elegiac.³

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- 1 Michael Longley, *A Hundred Doors* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011); Derek Mahon, *An Autumn Wind* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2010); Paul Muldoon, *Maggot* (London: Faber, 2010); Leontia Flynn, *Profit and Loss* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).
 - 2 “Insider's Guide,” *easyJet Traveller* September Issue (2010): 190.
 - 3 Nick Laird, “Last order,” *The Guardian* 27 Dec. 2008, accessed 29/04/2010

A simple review of the news stories to come out of Northern Ireland in recent years shows that acts of violence continue to be carried out; that the marching season remains a time when tension is palpable in the region and when deep-seated prejudices can still arise.⁴ The results of the Saville Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday were published in 2010, condemning the killings of thirteen civilians by British troops, and were seen as a vindication of the victims after the Widgery Report of 1972, which largely cleared the soldiers of any blame.⁵ Before this ruling had been made, however, the people of Derry were continually searching for ways in which to assuage their grief at the losses suffered on 30th January 1972. In 1998, a poetry collection entitled Harrowing of the Heart was published, which presented the poetic responses which came out of this “community in mourning”, which the editors say “reflect the means by which an entire city struggled to cope with the unimaginable events thrust upon them”.⁶ The book's foreword is by Bishop Edward Daly, who writes: “I would like to think that the acknowledgment of the awful reality and pain of the harrowing days and years that all sides have experienced will prepare the ground to nurture and encourage the new life and hope that we are now beginning to experience in the North”.⁷ This collection, which contains the work of Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kinsella, Seamus Deane, Brian Friel and Paul Muldoon, as well as writing contributed from the Derry community, shows that poetry is still one of the primary ways with which the Troubles of Northern Ireland have been faced and mourned.

It has been noted, however, that the elegiac gaze of Northern Irish poets seems to have broadened in recent years to take in ideas and images of global suffering and violence. While the third generation of Northern Irish elegists grew up during the violence of the Troubles, they now write from a post-peace talk perspective. Whether a fourth generation of Troubles poets will emerge remains to be seen. Perhaps it would be more useful, at this stage, to adopt Miriam Gamble's terminology, and identify successive generations of Northern Irish poets as “peace poets”.⁸ However, this appellation remains problematic. As Heaney notes in his poem “The Harvest Bow”, quoting Coventry Patmore (via Yeats): “*the end of art is peace*”.⁹ This sentiment might be read – like Auden's “poetry makes nothing happen” – in various, even contradictory ways. The word “end” might be understood as “purpose”, as in the “chief end of man”, in the Westminster Catechism.¹⁰ Indeed, one of the reasons that Heaney chose to use this aphoristic

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/dec/27/nick-laird-poetry-nature>>.

4 For example: “Riots ahead of Orange Order parades in Belfast,” BBC 12 July 2011, accessed 10/08/11 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14117990>>.

5 See the CAIN website for more details of the Widgery Reports, and The National Archives for the results of the Saville Inquiry: <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/bsunday/irgovt.htm>>; <<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20101103103930/http://bloody-sunday-inquiry.org/>>, accessed 19/08/2011.

6 Julieann Campbell and Tom Herron, eds, Harrowing of the Heart: The Poetry of Bloody Sunday (Derry: Guildhall P, 2008) 10-11.

7 Bishop Edward Daly, “Foreword,” Harrowing of the Heart: The Poetry of Bloody Sunday, 7.

8 Gamble, “The gentle art of re-perceiving”: post-ceasefire identity in the poetry of Alan Gillis.”

9 Heaney, Field Work, 58.

10 Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), The assembly's catechism with notes: or, the shorter catechism

saying might have been the subtle religious echoes that can be heard within it, particularly pertinent during a conflict marked by religious sectarianism. In this case, the phrase might be understood to say that poets' work can help to end war. Conversely, however, the word "end" can be read for its more commonly used meaning, as in "finish" or "termination". This would mean that the condition of peace might cause a cessation in the production of art. In this light, the idea of Northern Irish "peace poets" seems to be an oxymoron. There are a number of responses to this. One might argue that in an increasingly globalised age, national boundaries become increasingly blurred, making it inaccurate to define any of these writers as Northern Irish poets: they are just poets.¹¹ Furthermore, the global character of the more recent poetry to come from Northern Irish writers would seem to counter the suggestion that these are "peace poets". As has been seen in the writing from each generation covered in this thesis, issues of violence, terror and loss continue to be prevalent, even when the focus of the work moves away from the Troubles of the twentieth century. The fact that the work of nine poets from three generations can be brought together in this study suggests that it is not just nationality which binds these writers into a distinctive literary tradition. Each of them has contributed to the emerging genre of Northern Irish elegy, and each of them engages, to some extent, with the five key preoccupations that were identified at the outset: ideas of identity and exile; the poet's role as spokesperson for a community; art's relationship with violence; the relationships between the poet and their biological and literary parents and ancestors; and the central elegiac theme of public and private loss. As well as these common themes, each of the poets in this thesis have utilised and challenged conventional ideas of poetic form. This gives a clear set of characteristics by which future Northern Irish elegy might be identified.

This thesis has sought to build upon Jahan Ramazani's work on Heaney in Poetry of Mourning. While it has argued that contemporary Northern Irish elegy is not simply "melancholic", as much of the material surveyed by Ramazani's book is designated, there remains, nevertheless, a problem with consolation. Ian Twiddy notes that

Consolation involves choosing that consolation over what has been lost, choosing that changed vision of the dead over pain and grief, or the continued attachment to the dead or a former way of life. However, consolation is not always an absolute salve. If it takes the form of vengeance, consolation can involve death. It can call for murder, and in this way also endanger the lives of those seeking vengeance.¹²

composed by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster; with a brief explication of the more difficult words and phrases contained in it, For the Instruction of Youth. Taken out of the larger Book of Prayers and Catechisms for Childhood and Youth. By I. Watts, D.D. London, M.DCC.LXXXV. [1785]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, accessed 19/08/2011
 <<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW120408171&source=gale&userGroupName=duruni&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>>.

11 Responses to this idea were made by the poets in my interviews with Medbh McGuckian, Sinéad Morrissey and Leontia Flynn. See also the website archive of contemporary poetry, PoetCasting, created by a young Northern Irish poet, Alex Pryce, for an example of contemporary British writing. Technological advances, especially surrounding internet- and e-publishing will have a further impact upon "national" literatures. <<http://www.poetcasting.co.uk>>.

12 Twiddy, "Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral," 66.

In the light of the local and global conflicts that have been elegised by Northern Irish poets, this issue of vengeance and perpetual violence is one which must be acknowledged. A desire for retribution might be seen as a refusal to perform the work of successful mourning, as outlined by Freud. This seems to chime with Ramazani's view of melancholic mourning.¹³ However, it might be argued that the persistence of art, even as it exists alongside violence and loss, is a sign of the continuing promise of consolation that is sought by contemporary elegists.

Some, however, do not want their poetry to provide consolation. Indeed, Muldoon has rejected the idea that "the end of art is peace": "I don't believe that at all. I believe in the exact opposite. The end of art is disquiet and discomfort and rearranging the furniture in your head".¹⁴ In a similar vein, Brendan Kennelly writes:

Poetry, by definition, is always breaking through boundaries and categories. To try to inhibit or limit that function is to do violence to the very nature of poetry, to make it the sweet, biddable, musical slave of our expectations. The poetry that deals with violence is more concerned with its own compulsions than with the expectations of others. It will not flatter or comfort or console; it will disturb, challenge, even threaten. Above all, it threatens our complacency. And, in a world that seems hell-bent on its own destruction, that threat to complacent unawareness is a valuable service. We are brought into closer, more articulate contact with fiercely energetic forces which are at work both within and outside ourselves. [...] "Violent" poetry, the poetry of uncompromising consciousness, the poetry of hard, raw reality, continues to do its work of dramatic demonstration, of ruthless bringing-to-mind, of accusation and warning. This work, as I hope I have shown, is difficult, discomfiting, and increasingly necessary.¹⁵

While this description of literature might sound like a damning indictment upon the whole consolatory purpose of elegy, it might also be understood to be saying almost the very opposite. Kennelly's poetry provides a "valuable service" for its readers in threatening "our complacency". It brings us back into contact with "ourselves", providing warnings that, while "difficult" and "discomfiting", are nevertheless "necessary". All of these descriptions might be applied to the elegies of Northern Irish poets, from Heaney to Muldoon to McGuckian. Part of the role of elegy is to call attention to its own texture and creation; to force the attention of the reader towards the violent and often shocking moment of death. As has been found in the work of each of these poets, the consolation comes from the poetry itself; however disturbing, challenging or threatening it is to read.

Elegy, particularly for Northern Irish poets, seems to be a natural response to the human predicament of mortality, be it death from the violence of political conflict, or from the more universally experienced threats of illness and old age. There is, within Northern Irish elegy, a self-conscious awareness of the act of memorialisation, which can be seen in poems like

13 It might also be helpful to consider Sara Wasson's category of "resistant mourning", a third response to grief which is situated between the two options of "mourning" and "melancholia" as suggested by Freud. See *Urban Gothic of the Second World War*, 157-62.

14 Lucy Hodges, "Poetry in motion," *Times Higher Education* 17 November 1998, accessed 16/02/2011 <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=99086§ioncode=26>>.

15 Brendan Kennelly, "Poetry and Violence," *History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Literature*, ed. Joris Duytschaever and Geert Lernout, Costerus New Series, vol. 71 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988) 5-28 (28).

Longley's "Wreaths", and in collections like Carson's Until Before After. It has been argued that Northern Irish elegies have performed particular social and political functions, in providing a mode in which the losses of the Troubles might be worked through by poets themselves, and also in becoming a public platform from which poets might offer consolation to a grieving community. The many anthologies and collections of elegiac poetry from Northern Ireland is testament to the fact that the region can now claim to have developed a distinct poetic tradition.¹⁶ Northern Irish elegy is now an established mode of writing, which seems set to continue to broaden and develop with successive generations. As MacDonagh wrote almost a century ago, "...what the next age or the ripeness of this may bring, one can only guess at".¹⁷

16 See Padraic Fiacc's The wearing of the black and Frank Ormsby's A Rage for Order for two such examples.

17 MacDonagh, 13.

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