DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Seamus Heaney and American Poetry

Laverty, Christopher

Award date:
2019

Awarding institution:
Queen's University Belfast

Link to publication

Terms of use
All those accessing thesis content in Queen’s University Belfast Research Portal are subject to the following terms and conditions of use

- Copyright is subject to the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988, or as modified by any successor legislation
- Copyright and moral rights for thesis content are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners
- A copy of a thesis may be downloaded for personal non-commercial research/study without the need for permission or charge
- Distribution or reproduction of thesis content in any format is not permitted without the permission of the copyright holder
- When citing this work, full bibliographic details should be supplied, including the author, title, awarding institution and date of thesis

Take down policy
A thesis can be removed from the Research Portal if there has been a breach of copyright, or a similarly robust reason.
If you believe this document breaches copyright, or there is sufficient cause to take down, please contact us, citing details. Email: openaccess@qub.ac.uk

Supplementary materials
Where possible, we endeavour to provide supplementary materials to theses. This may include video, audio and other types of files. We endeavour to capture all content and upload as part of the Pure record for each thesis.
Note, it may not be possible in all instances to convert analogue formats to usable digital formats for some supplementary materials. We exercise best efforts on our behalf and, in such instances, encourage the individual to consult the physical thesis for further information.
Seamus Heaney and American Poetry

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
The School of Arts, English and Languages
Queen's University Belfast
2018

Christopher Laverty
BA (Hons.) MA
**Declaration**

I declare the following research is my original work, submitted to the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen’s University, Belfast, for PhD.

Christopher Laverty

November 2018
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Fran Brearton for her advice and reassurance for the past three years as she supervised this thesis. My work has benefitted immeasurably from her knowledge, judgement, and imaginative suggestions. I would also like to thank Dr Philip McGowan for encouraging me to develop the ideas of my MA dissertation into this thesis. His advice and enthusiasm for this project has given me confidence I will bring forward into new challenges.

I am also grateful to my family and especially my parents, Breige and Malachy Laverty, whose own hard work and faith in me has been an example and a source of strength. I would like to express thanks to my friends for their help and support for the past three years. I am particularly grateful to Hannah Loudon, whose generosity and assistance at the final hour was greatly appreciated.

I dedicate this work to Peter Browne Murray for standing by me as I challenged myself.
Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand Heaney’s relationship with the American tradition by close attention to his intertextual relations with the US writers who influenced him, alongside a consideration of those he elides – and the reasons for such elision. The chapters that follow will show how the dominance of certain arguments in Heaney criticism – to which he himself has contributed – has limited critical understanding of the Irish poet’s US influences and his experiences in America. While Heaney’s American exemplars may be fewer in number and diversity than previously thought, this research demonstrates that they are greater in the intensity of their influence than existing criticism recognises.

Though I contend that five American writers have influenced Heaney to a degree not yet understood – Frost, Ransom, Roethke, Lowell, and Bishop – this thesis will also consider over-estimations of the significance of other writers, as in the case of Heaney’s 1970-71 Berkeley residency, a point which is often misidentified as Heaney’s first confrontation with American writing. The existing critical argument assumes that American writing had, until then, been largely invisible to Heaney and that he approved of the Bay Area poetry he encountered; I suggest in Chapter One that these are inaccurate premises for a discussion of Heaney’s Californian experience. Rather, as Chapter Two evidences, the examples Heaney discovered in the 1950s and ’60s of Frost, Ransom, and Roethke formed the basis for a poetics that remains largely unchanged throughout the Irish poet’s career. Lowell and Bishop, though not key influences until later, were also discovered in the 1960s while Heaney was reading, teaching, and even publishing about American poetry before his Berkeley residency.

Chapters Three and Four demonstrate how Lowell and Bishop provided examples serviceable to Heaney’s needs during different phases, becoming the enabling voices behind his public verse, firstly in the 1970s and later in the 1980s and ’90s. While Chapter Three argues that Heaney masks rather than loses his admiration for Lowell, as Lowell’s popularity waned, Chapter Four examines the degree to which he misreads Bishop, a poet who is now understood more sensitively than in her lifetime. Chapter Four concludes the thesis by arguing that Heaney’s misreading of Bishop, the only female poet to whom he gives significant praise, is in part a result of his need to fortify the poetic theory he originally drew from Frost, essentially rendering Bishop a shadow of his own self.
# Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations .................................................. vi

Introduction ................................................................. 1

Chapter 1
‘[A] centrally heated daydream’:
Snyder, Bly, Ashbery
I ................................................................. 15
II ................................................................. 38

Chapter 2
‘Atlantic seepage’:
Frost, Ransom, and Roethke
I ................................................................. 51
II ................................................................. 53
III ................................................................. 64
IV ................................................................. 72

Chapter 3
‘[s]houlder to shoulder’:
Heaney and Lowell
I ................................................................. 89
II ................................................................. 91
III ................................................................. 101

Chapter 4
The ‘better judgement’ behind the ‘walk on air’:
Heaney and Bishop
I ................................................................. 126
II ................................................................. 130
III ................................................................. 140
IV ................................................................. 149
V ................................................................. 156

Conclusion ................................................................. 171

Bibliography ............................................................... 176
## List of Abbreviations

for frequently cited works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Crediting Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>Door into the Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN</td>
<td>Death of a Naturalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBCP</td>
<td>Elizabeth Bishop Complete Poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FK</td>
<td>Finders Keepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW</td>
<td>Field Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GT</td>
<td>Government of the Tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL</td>
<td>The Haw Lantern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Preoccupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>The Redress of Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLCW</td>
<td>Robert Lowell Collected Poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Station Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>The Spirit Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Stepping Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Seeing Things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WO</td>
<td>Wintering Out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In her 2012 study *In Gratitude for All Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe*, Magdalena Kay argues:

Heaney’s critics insist on the American influence […] with a tenacity that is surprising given the lack of evidence for many such claims. The search for echoes of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly does not yield much fruit; the mention of Louis Simpson in ‘Making Strange’ hardly invites one to an influence study; Heaney’s great admiration for William Carlos Williams is certainly worth mentioning, yet Williams’s short lines sound nothing like Heaney’s drill-like stanzas of the 1970s.¹

Kay’s observations highlight that, for too long, criticism has looked for the American element of Heaney’s achievement in the wrong places, due in large part to the dominance of certain theories that remain widespread in Heaney criticism. That these valid and overdue objections appear in a study of Heaney’s Eastern European influences only further underscores the need for an equivalent study on Heaney in relation to the American tradition. As the major studies on Heaney’s poetry began appearing in the 1980s and 1990s, critics expressed their sense that more attention should be given to the role the American tradition played in Heaney’s artistic development and professional success. Although commentators generally acknowledge that the American academy played a crucial role in shaping Heaney’s fortunes, more tangibly defining America’s significance in a comprehensive study of his poetry has never been attempted. Much of the difficulty lies in confronting the scale of the topic itself and the extent to which Heaney’s American success has defined him. In the introduction to a collection of essays published in 1986, Harold Bloom described Heaney as deserving ‘of the same attention as his strongest American contemporaries’;² a decade later Durkan and Brandes noted Heaney’s ‘immense international scholarly reception’ and found he was already ‘one of the most often taught (contemporary) writers in England and perhaps in

the English-speaking world, notably in America. His residencies at Berkeley 1970-71 and Harvard University, where he was on the faculty in various positions from 1979 until 2006, are the focus of much existing commentary and were emphasised in obituaries on both sides of the Atlantic following his death on 30 August 2013. Adrian Higgins’s comment in the Washington Post obituary that Heaney was ‘no longer an important Irish poet, but a writer with an international reputation’ reflects the tendency to consider Heaney a figure of global significance, a status attained in part through the favourable treatment of the American academy and US market-forces.

In 2001 the New Statesman reported that Heaney generated nearly two-thirds of all sales of contemporary poetry in the United Kingdom, a statistic the BBC reported as well. In America at the same time, 17,000 copies of the first edition of Electric Light (2001) were printed, compared to only 6,000 for Field Work (1979) that was published there in 1981. In 2009, Patrick Crotty observed that ‘only the ultra-canonical Yeats, Eliot and Auden have enjoyed the sort of High Street profile that brought Heaney’s Beowulf and District and Circle into the hardback non-fiction best sellers’. For Crotty, Heaney’s international fame makes the achievement of Frost and Hughes – with whom his success is often compared – appear ‘national rather than global’; thus Heaney ‘cuts a singular figure’ in the poetic world. Indeed, neither Frost nor Hughes gained such ‘fanatical media coverage’ on both sides of the Atlantic in their lifetime, nor won the Nobel Prize – the ultimate gesture of approval from the literary establishment. As Crotty illustrates, there are persistent ‘conspiracy theories’ regarding Heaney’s unprecedented internationalism, such as those espoused famously by Desmond Fennell

---

4 Adrian Higgins, ‘Seamus Heaney, Nobelist whose poems were the essence of the Irish soul, has died at 74’, The Washington Post, 30th August, 2013. Web.
8 Ibid, p.38.
10 Crotty, ‘The Context of Heaney’s Reception’, p.44.
in 1991 when he implicated the powerful ‘academic-poetic complex’ for Heaney’s success, or Michael Allen’s suggestion that Heaney benefited from the ‘premium’ that was ‘placed on a “green” Irish identity in American literary circles’ and ‘wide-spread Irish-American recruitment to the teaching and graduate study of Irish writing in the US’ in the 1980s.

Given the size of Heaney’s US readership, combined with the admiration of American critics such as Bloom and Helen Vendler, who ranks North (1975) with ‘Prufrock and Harmonium and North of Boston in its key role in the history of modern poetry’, it is unsurprising that many critics have focussed on Heaney’s professional career as much as the poetry at the centre of it. Like his early absorption of American poetry, however, Heaney’s American success did not occur in a vacuum. It is likely that Heaney first encountered contemporary American poetry in the anthologies that were in circulation in the 1950s and ’60s, in which different versions of what constitutes American poetry (and what its relationship with the English tradition might be) were promoted and contested. Indeed, it was largely through anthologies in the 1970s that the view of Northern Irish poetry as a unique phenomenon developed, while, later, anthologies helped create a transatlantic poetic canon into which Heaney could be easily positioned when his American reputation was strengthening in the 1980s. In their extensive research into the connections between American and Northern Irish poetry, Edna Longley and Elmer Andrews stress the role of anthologies in shaping conceptions of American verse as variously continuous with, and divergent from, the English/Irish tradition. In his examination of how definitions of ‘American tradition’ developed during the twentieth century, Andrews emphasises the significance of Cleanth Brooks’s ‘New Critical’ Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939), noting that ‘Brooks sees his tradition as an English one, and is suspicious of claims about American literary nationalism.’ The ‘all-American editorship’ of New Poets of England and America (1957) restated their sense of American poetry’s continuity with the English tradition in

their preference for ‘academic poets and metrical verse’; because of this, Andrews notes, it ‘was touted as the flagship of Anglo-American New Formalism.’

By the beginning of the 1960s, however, an important shift had occurred within American poetry. Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960) presented for the first time to a wide readership the American avant-garde and categorised poets into five distinct schools: ‘the Black Mountain Poets’, ‘the San Francisco Renaissance’, ‘the Beat Generation’, ‘the New York Poets’, and a fifth group with ‘no geographical definition’. Many of the poets Allen includes were also highlighted in Donald Hall’s *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962) two years later: Gary Snyder, John Ashbery, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley. These anthologies probably shaped Heaney’s reading list when he arrived in Berkeley in 1970, a period critics tend to emphasise as significant to his development. The same year Donald Hall’s anthology appeared, Alvarez famously contrasted the jaded British poetic scene with a vibrant American one in the introduction to his *The New Poetry* (1962), an extremely influential text in shaping perceptions of British poetry in this era. Earlier, Auden had offered a similar view when he highlighted the radical diversity of the American poetic scene in his *Faber Book of American Poetry* (1956) as the feature that made it distinct from the English tradition. Auden declares that ‘[f]rom Byrant on, there is scarcely one American poet whose work, if unsigned, could be mistaken for that of an Englishman’, adding ‘no two poets could be more unlike each other than Longfellow and Whitman’. Andrews argues that by the 1960s – when Heaney was an apprentice at the Group – the views promoted by Auden and Alvarez (and seemingly confirmed by the new anthologies of experimental American poetry) had become the ‘generally accepted argument’: American poetry was concerned with ‘authenticity, exploration, the creation of an individual vision’ while ‘the British/Irish poet emphasizes native values and traditions, suspects experiment and newness for its own sake, and values perfection of the craft’.

---

16 Michael Allen, Michael Parker, Henry Hart contributed articles that established the main argument around Heaney’s Berkeley residency. All work discussed in Chapter One.
With this context in mind, it is hardly surprising that the first critics to examine American influence on Heaney’s poetry have tended to argue that the looser forms of the more avant-garde schools of US poetry offered a useful alterity. Heaney’s prose and interview accounts of his 1970-71 academic appointment in California – discussed at length in Chapter One – have contributed to the narrative that he took inspiration from the more experimental US writers in the aftermath of his Berkeley residency.\textsuperscript{19} However, in her own examination of American influence on the early poetry of Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, Edna Longley identifies an important opposite trend:

all three poets from Northern Ireland have picked up echoes of familiar religious and cultural dynamics in the American poetry that seems most important to them at this period. These echoes they adopt, adapt, or resist. Second, they all prefer more concentrated and formal kinds of American poetry. And they go further; they pull American tendencies to prophecy (Stevens, Crane) or discursiveness (Frost) back towards a tighter lyrical structure, one that is highly aware of its own patterns.\textsuperscript{20}

In some later interviews, Heaney is more willing to admit that his preference is for a formal poetry and he remained, therefore, ‘suspicious’ of ‘a Whitmanian optimism-and-overflow poetry’\textsuperscript{21} after his Californian encounters. Longley stresses the unique position of Northern Irish poets within the British/Irish scene and argues that they benefited from the availability of American poetry anthologies at a time when they were developing their own unique voices. She also defines Northern Irish poetry more generally as ‘the product of multi-ethnic fertilisation’, drawing ‘on all the available literary traditions’\textsuperscript{22} to express its unique inheritance and complex affiliations.

The sense of Northern Irish poets as a distinct group was developed in the 1970s and was later consolidated by notable anthologies published in the 1980s. In his 1972 \textit{Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry}, Derek Mahon expresses views echoed later by Longley: ‘Northern poets’, he argues, are a ‘group apart’ and possess ‘an inherited

\textsuperscript{19} In interviews with James Randall and Randy Brandes as well as in prose Heaney has consistently highlighted the examples of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly, discussed at length in Chapter One.


The duality of cultural reference.23 The rising visibility of Northern poets in the 1970s and the tendency to ascribe to them a ‘regionally defined aesthetic’24 was, as Fran Brearton highlights, ‘something from which they have benefited’.25 The trend has not been without controversy, however. Brearton notes John Montague’s claim in his 1974 Faber Book of Irish Verse that ‘the poems of Longley, Mahon, Heaney and Simmons share an epigrammatic neatness which shows the influence of a limited British mode’ while Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (1982) was contentious for its praise of Northern Irish poetry and, indeed, for its inclusion of Northern Irish poets under the ‘British’ category. Andrews notes that Morrison and Motion trace ‘signs of rejuvenation in the ‘British’ scene’, somewhat controversially, ‘not to America or Europe, but to Northern Ireland.’26 In their introduction, Morrison and Motion praised the Northern Irish poets’ ‘greater imaginative freedom and linguistic daring’ and for reasserting ‘the primacy of the imagination’.27 Peter Porter argued on the contrary that Northern poets had been given a ‘fool’s license’28 to sentimentalise death and history due to the political violence; even Heaney himself noted ‘we cannot be unaware […] of the link between the political glamour of the place [Ulster], the sex-appeal of violence, and the prominence accorded to poets.’29 Heaney’s refusal to be included in Morrison and Motion’s anthology in ‘An Open Letter’30 – quite a Lowell-like stunt – merely intensified these already-burning controversies. Nonetheless, a few years after Morrison and Motion’s anthology, Northern Irish poetry’s reputation was further cemented by Paul Muldoon’s The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry (1986) in which seven out of a total of ten poets were Northerners.

---

30 Heaney famously declared ‘Be advised / My passport’s green. / No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast The Queen’ in ‘An Open Letter’, Field Day Theatre Company Pamphlet no. 2 (September 1983).
Though it may be impossible to determine the degree to which Northern Irish writing attained such acclaim and international prominence because of the inbuilt hybridity Mahon and Longley identify, it is certainly true that Heaney’s first successful verses benefited not only from the example of Kavanagh but from the English Hughes and the Americans Frost and Roethke. Heaney’s clear aptitude for fusing Irish, British, and American influences may have indeed been the result of his exposure to the texts Andrews and Longley highlight in which national canons were hotly contested and remade; his sense that writers from ‘opposing’ traditions could be synthesised may have also made him attractive to Helen Vendler, his most powerful ally in the American academy. Andrews notes of Vendler’s own anthology, *The Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1985), that she rehearses ‘many of the arguments already made by Auden, now given the canonizing imprimatur of the Harvard academy’ and adds that Vendler’s selection was controversial for its omission of Pound, Williams, and Olson: ‘nothing to represent the Objectivists, Projectivists, or Language poets.’

Strengthening his argument that Vendler’s collection would probably ‘chime with poetic tastes and expectations this side of the Atlantic’, Andrews cites John Kerrigan’s important observation that ‘a tradition of strong poetry leading back through Stevens to Coleridge, Keats and Wordsworth is implied’. In her earlier study of Stevens, Vendler draws directly on Shelley’s image in *Defense of Poetry* of ‘one great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.’ Vendler shares this sense of poetry with Heaney, whose own conceptions of tradition and influence are underpinned, as Michael Cavanagh notes, by the belief that ‘poetry’s sources run deeper than any one source can account for’. It is Vendler’s similar view that allows her to assimilate Heaney into the canon of greats and

---

declare him in her 1988 study to be ‘as much the legitimate heir of Keats or Frost as of Kavanagh or Yeats.’\footnote{Helen Vendler, The Music of What Happens (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.149.}

Heaney’s borderless professional success, epitomised by his friendship with Vendler, has led some critics to put undue emphasis on his periods of academic appointment in the US in the search for American influence on his writing; a border-crossing career might have at its root a poetics braced by many diverse influences. This thesis insists, however, that the ‘American’ element of Heaney’s achievement is best approached by attention to the very few American poets who have made their presence felt on his work rather than events in his career, and suggests that, contrary to some existing criticism, only a small number of formally conservative US poets – all discovered in the 1960s – made a significant impact on Heaney. Though the American exemplars discussed in the chapters that follow may be fewer in number and less diverse than previously thought, the intensity of their influence is considerably greater than criticism has recognised. Moreover, while it is impossible to determine the true extent to which Heaney’s American influences or allies contributed to his success there, through sustained analysis of his work a clear picture emerges: American poets were central to the formation of Heaney’s formal poetics in the 1960s and helped him consolidate later aesthetic developments, often in response to difficult circumstances. Edna Longley’s comment that Heaney’s years as an undergraduate in Belfast and poet-apprentice in The Group laid ‘the ground for reciprocities’\footnote{Edna Longley, Poetry and Posterity, p.249.} with America, therefore, contains more truth than has yet been fully recognised.

Installing himself as a commentator, Heaney has contributed to an interpretation of his Berkeley 1970-71 residency as a period in which he deliberately took inspiration from the unfamiliar and antithetical poetics of the Bay Area to diversify his poetics. His eventual appointment at Harvard is seen as the conclusion of this hybridity and the consolidation of his status as the ‘transatlantic poet laureate.’\footnote{Fennell, Whatever you Say, Say Nothing, p.25.} The sense of America as something to be reckoned with at the outset of Heaney’s career has been created by the major studies of Heaney’s poetry in the 1980s and 1990s and persists today. Andrews’s chapter-length discussion of Heaney in his recent study is a useful summation of many
of the existing arguments surrounding Heaney’s American influences and highlights the need for a much longer study. Though Andrews is more cautious than some earlier commentators in his analysis of Heaney’s Berkeley residency, he too focusses heavily on Heaney’s inconsistent interview comments; the sustained comparative close-readings in Chapter One allow new conclusions to be made about this period. Chapter One contends Heaney had tactical reasons for controlling the perception of his Californian sojourn and argues the significance of the residency is better framed in terms of what Heaney resists in the new poetry he reads and his reasons for doing so. Ultimately, Heaney does not import experimental examples, nor does he reject contemporary US verse because it was ‘so very different from the formalist British/Irish model with which he was familiar’ as Andrews contends; rather, he elides the examples of Snyder and Bly because their poetry is incompatible with the principles laid down in him by earlier American influences that had already permanently shaped his understanding of formal poetry’s relationship to reality.

Chapter Two argues that by 1970 Heaney was wedded to a formal poetic that was antithetical to, but no less ‘American’ than, the poetics he encountered in Berkeley. The chapter examines the significance of Heaney’s education and poet-apprenticeship in the 1950s and ’60s to suggest the influence of Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, and Theodore Roethke has been considerably underestimated. Though critics have been more willing to discuss Frost’s influence than most of Heaney’s other American models, it is only when Frost is considered alongside other significant models in this phase – Ransom and Roethke – that his significance can be more accurately measured. In her longer and valuable consideration of Frost’s influence on Heaney and Muldoon, Rachel Buxton emphasises through her intertextual readings Frost’s significance as an aesthetic model for his ‘sound of sense’ principle and formulations of poetic inspiration in reflexive images. Heaney’s adoption of these mannerisms can be used as the starting point for much more than comparative reading with Frost’s work; this discovery begins a pattern of behaviour in which Heaney seeks out or rejects American poets as models on the basis of their concurrence with Frostian formal poetics. Frost’s lessons, therefore, foreground the discussions in Chapters One and Two. Existing

criticism has also tended to see Heaney’s absorption of Frost as a conscious political-cultural manoeuvre; Chapter Two argues Heaney’s attraction is based more simply on shared themes. Quoting Edwin Fussell’s definition of the American poet as ‘a non-Englishman (frequently an anti-Englishman) writing in the English language’, Buxton argues ‘the fact that Frost was not English, and more specifically not writing in Standard English, was a part of his attraction.’ Though these are useful points in a consideration of the transatlantic undercurrents flowing between Ireland and America in a wider sense, Buxton’s argument borders on ascribing to Heaney a critical sense of his influences that, in this early phase at least, he did not possess.

In Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics (2009) – a study that includes a useful summary of Heaney’s relationship with Lowell – Michael Cavanagh makes several helpful observations about Heaney’s broader sense of influence. Cavanagh notes Heaney is ‘evasive of declaring direct influence’ and admits debt ‘only when he is questioned point blank’. Citing instances from Heaney’s prose where he aligns himself with another poet or compares one writer to another, Cavanagh argues ‘Heaney softens the direct connection by insisting on unconscious intellectual formation’ so that the poets he admires become, ‘like him, unconscious inheritors.’ Here, Cavanagh identifies the element in Heaney’s handling of his influences that links him with Vendler: his Romantic belief in something proximate to Shelley’s ‘one great mind’. For Heaney, Cavanagh argues, this concept is:

an important and self-sustaining half-fiction that he has developed over decades: that poetry’s sources run deeper than any one source can account for, and poetry therefore is more culturally sanctioned than it would be if it came from a single person, or if it were chosen from a single source. To put it another way, Heaney’s criticism creates a world in which his own poetry is expected and hence accepted. The point to all of Heaney’s evasions, then, is a kind of affirmation of poetry as an ongoing and essentially changeless

---

41 Ibid, p.51.
42 Michael Parker also argues Heaney was deliberately ‘seeking out non-English models’ when he discovered Frost, Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993), p.24.
43 Cavanagh, Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics, p.28.
cultural phenomenon. Its ultimate defense is its longevity: it was always there, and it will remain.47

Though Heaney grew more wary in later phases and formulated answers to deflect questions relating to his indebtedness to American writers, his sense of poets as ‘unconscious inheritors’ is evidenced as early as the 1960s by the invisibility of tradition as an issue in his absorption of influence. That many of his most important exemplars were American and belonged to another tradition neither problematised nor enriched his adaption of their models until ‘Bogland’, as Chapter Two demonstrates.

The following thesis is therefore structured to reflect the American element of Heaney’s achievement as it emerges through careful analysis of his poetry, focussing on phases in which certain American poets become extremely important to him. While Chapter One re-evaluates existing criticism, it also examines Heaney’s rejection of more experimental American writers and his reasons for doing so. Chapters Two, Three, and Four scrutinise Heaney’s relationships with individual American writers, and his academic appointments in America are discussed only when they overlap with periods in which the influence of US poets can be felt on his work. For instance, though the significance of the Berkeley residency to the development of Heaney’s verse has been overestimated, Chapters One and Three show that Robert Lowell’s example was becoming increasingly important to the poetry Heaney was developing in California, some of which appeared in Stations (1975) and North. Similarly, while Heaney’s residency at Harvard is not a time in which he acquires new American influences, the period will be discussed in the context of his succession of Elizabeth Bishop on the faculty – an American poet whose influence continues to be overlooked on his later poetry – and of his evidently growing consciousness of her work at this time.

The research in the following chapters is also flexible in its approach to the theory of influence, since influence manifests itself in various ways on Heaney at different stages of his development. While Cavanagh reads Lowell’s influence as a Bloomian ‘quarrel’ in which the younger poet seeks to surpass the elder, he stresses that it would be wrong to view Heaney in strictly Bloomian terms, noting that he more generally conforms to Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist model of influence in which female

writers, ‘traditionally lacking confidence in their legitimacy or sense of authority, seek not to “fight” earlier authors […] but to build bridges to them’. While Heaney’s acquisition of American voices in the 1960s certainly involves bridge building, Chapter Three contends that Lowell’s influence is complicated by a deliberate masking rather than by a Bloomian struggle for supremacy. Though traces of Lowell’s presence in Heaney’s writing fade after the 1970s, the admiration for his divisive achievement remains; Bishop’s influence, on the other hand, involves a significant misreading, as does his treatment of Sylvia Plath whom he positions as a foil to Bishop in The Government of the Tongue. Chapter Four concludes this thesis by suggesting that existing criticism has failed to recognise Bishop’s significance to Heaney’s work or register the pace with which Bishop scholarship is evolving today. Due in part to the publication of material unseen in her lifetime, Bishop is now understood much more sensitively than she was at the time of Heaney’s published analyses of her poetry; Chapter Four asks how developments in our reading of Bishop might in turn increase our understanding of the two poets’ relationship, suggesting finally that Heaney’s later poetry benefits from a productive misreading of his only female influence, American or otherwise. While this thesis casts doubt on the methodology and interpretations offered by the earlier assessments of Heaney’s American connections, significant patterns do still emerge in the chapters that follow from which fresh conclusions can be drawn. The fact that Heaney’s American exemplars are largely formalist, male, and canonical evidences not only his conservatism but the underestimated impact of his education and early years as a teacher in Belfast before his real American journey had begun. It also suggests his unreliability as a self-commentator and points to the self-sustaining nature of critical narratives: as Heaney remarks in Stepping Stones, the poet, ‘[j]ust by answering’ contributes to the emergence of a dominant theory.

Finally, it is the writers within Heaney’s American pantheon itself that trouble many of the conventional approaches to the US tradition one might expect to adopt safely in this context. For instance, in interview with O’Driscoll Heaney places himself

49 Asked by O’Driscoll if he is surprised for the age’s preference for Bishop over Lowell, Heaney replies ‘Lowell’s taking the punishment that’s always handed out to the big guy eventually’, SS, p.280.
50 SS, p.126.
more in the ‘redskin’ camp than the ‘paleface’ one, drawing on Philip Rahv’s essay where he delineates two main schools within American poetry: the redskins, who are ‘spontaneous’ and ‘emotional’, and the palefaces, who are approximate to ‘an intellectual in the European sense’. For Heaney, these useful (albeit problematical) classifications involve a stance towards poetic form, the redskin generally being more ‘open’ than the paleface; yet, as James Randall points out to Heaney during a 1979 interview, the poet he identifies as redskin alongside – Lowell – defies such easy categorisation. Heaney is more willing to acknowledge Roethke’s ‘open and closed’ twoness than Lowell’s, while Frost, famously dismissive of open forms, is admired by Heaney because of his irreverence for traditional English forms and gentility rather than respect for them. Frost also troubles any argument that holds Heaney’s American influences to be the product of his community background in Northern Ireland. In a discussion of Frost, Heaney, Brodsky, and Walcott, Tyler Hoffman notes that, though Frost often appears ‘in the guise of postcolonial poet’, by the end of his career he stands for ‘the colonial violence of the US’, valid arguments against any basic reading that might see Heaney’s attraction to Frost as based solely on a shared political stance towards an older imperialism.

Bishop does not conform to rigid categorisations either, nor, indeed, to the pattern of influence already established in Heaney by the time her influence manifests on his work. She is ‘the “in” figure’ at Harvard when Heaney arrives there, yet, unlike Frost, Lowell, or Heaney, she remained outside the literary-academic ‘establishment’ for much of her career. She also published little compared to Lowell or Frost and was less prominent than Heaney when he began to take inspiration from her achievement in the 1980s and ’90s. However, what was then a politically expedient association for Heaney, as Bishop’s star rose in the era when ‘critics were intent upon exposing the

---

51 SS, p.217.
55 SS, p.85.
57 SS, p.279.
discriminations entailed by a writer’s gender or minority status’,\textsuperscript{58} has at its core a reading of her work that today is noticeably flawed. This final irony concludes a series of ironies that underpins Heaney’s America: while his residencies in the US are red herrings in the quest to locate American influence on his work, American writers were important to him from the start and limited his experimentation with the looser verse forms he was rumoured to have been influenced by; while attention was focussed on his professional success in the American establishment and marketplace later in his career, genuine American influences on his more visionary poetry have been consistently underestimated. What follows, then, offers a more definitive account of Heaney’s American journey than has yet been attempted, challenging earlier criticism while offering a new perspective from which to approach Heaney in relation to his wider influences.

Chapter 1

‘[A] centrally heated daydream’: Snyder, Bly, Ashbery

He fords
his life by sounding.

I

Critical arguments regarding Heaney and America are rooted in assessments of his 1970-71 residency as visiting lecturer in the University of California, Berkeley. The crossing, which Heaney describes as ‘exactly what I was ready for’,\(^2\) was orchestrated by Tom Parkinson, a Yeats scholar at Berkeley and friend of John Montague’s whom Heaney met at a poetry reading in the University of York.\(^3\) Existing criticism tends to argue the Californian residency functioned in two ways: to liberate Heaney from constraining Anglo-Irish formalism, and to enliven the political impulse of his verse. Michael Parker’s assertion that ‘Heaney's work during the period in which the poems of *Wintering Out* (1972) were being composed was deeply affected by political and literary experiences in the United States’\(^4\) is in line with the arguments of Henry Hart, Michael Allen, and Jonathan Allison, all of whom published commentary, discussed in this chapter, on Heaney’s Berkeley residency in the 1990s. The poets most often credited by Heaney and his critics as formal exemplars in California are Gary Snyder and Robert Bly, the latter of whom is usually invoked in discussions of the prose collection *Stations* (1975) which, like *Wintering Out* (1972), was begun in California but not published until four years later. Heaney has contributed to this narrative of awakening; his willingness to comment on this period of his life has resulted in a critical argument that relies heavily on his interviews and a selective reading of the two collections. When *Wintering Out* and *Stations* are considered in a reading that is alert to the broader picture of Heaney and American poetry, however, a counter-narrative emerges. Rather than adopting the mannerisms of fresh examples, the Irish poet, already

---

\(^1\) ‘Gifts of Rain’, *WO*, p.23.
\(^2\) *SS*, p.136.
\(^3\) Ibid.
adept in American verse and a confident formalist, elides most of what he encounters in Berkeley; far from alleviating the pressures of the home crisis, the West Coast brings them into painful focus, highlighting problems without offering credible solutions. In straining to see the kinds of American connections in these collections Heaney has hinted at, critics obscure the genuine American influences that were operative in his poetry from the start. Ironically, it is the deeply lodged Frostian concept of the poem as ‘a momentary stay against confusion’ – what John Dennison has recently termed Heaney’s view of poetry as ‘an ameliorative and restorative response to – adequation of – the inimical reality of life’ – that pulls Heaney away from the examples of Snyder and Bly and guides him towards more formal American poets in later decades.

Despite early assessments of Wintering Out as disappointing in its lack of risk-taking, later commentary was more favourable and praised Heaney’s ability to draw on an expanding range of influences in an ambitious development. An early reviewer attacked Wintering Out as ‘unsatisfactory’ and disappointingly ‘transitional’ for failing to ‘tackle head on’ the outbreak of political violence in Northern Ireland while Seamus Deane, in a more mixed response, nonetheless wrote that the poems of Wintering Out ‘express no politics’. The view of the collection as evasive – an accusation to which Heaney was vulnerable due to his year spent abroad – is largely forgotten because of the reassessments of Wintering Out and Stations in the major studies of Heaney’s poetry that were appearing in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the commentary from this era cites the poet’s own comments, such as the following made during a much-cited 1979 interview with James Randall:

[t]he year 1970-71 I spent in Berkeley and that was also a releasing thing […] I became very conscious of the poetry of Gary Snyder. I saw Snyder; and Bly was living in Bolinas that year. He read a couple of times around

---

the Bay Area. The whole atmosphere in Berkeley was politicized […] There was a strong sense of contemporary American poetry in the West with Robert Duncan and Bly and Gary Snyder rejecting the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry and going for the mythological […] that meshed with my own concerns for I could see a close connection between the political and cultural assertions being made at that time by the minority in the north of Ireland and the protests and consciousness-raising that were going on in the Bay Area. And the poets were a part of this and also, pre-eminently, part of the protest against the Vietnam war. So that was probably the most important influence I came under in Berkeley, that awareness that poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance.10

Although Heaney does not explicitly credit Snyder or Bly with formal influence, his description of ‘a releasing’ function has led critics to understand the impact of West Coast poetry in formal terms, as a loosening agent on the verse line and stanza shape of Wintering Out and Stations. Heaney reinforced this interpretation in a 1988 interview with Randy Brandes in which he depicts his Berkeley residency as a project of self-improvement, explaining the ‘venture to America was to encounter the other, to put the screws on my own aesthetic.’11 While the visual appearance of Wintering Out and Stations does indicate a stylistic shift, it is largely through a use of Heaney’s commentary rather than the poetry itself that existing criticism has argued Bay Area poetry influenced his forms.

Heaney’s retrospective self-analysis appears to have influenced the response to Wintering Out and Stations ever since. In his 1992 study, Henry Hart contends that Heaney was ‘inspired by the technical examples and ideological concerns of Bly and Snyder’,12 relying on Heaney’s interview with Randall to stress the significance of the Berkeley residency. Jonathan Allison uses a quotation from the same interview with Randall as an epigraph for his 1996 article where he too argues American poetry offered Heaney fresh solutions in the early 1970s, making the bold assertion that US poetry offered the Irish poet ‘a poetic energy and a radical political environment which could […] provide a bracing example for a young poet trying to find his or her own voice’,13

adding ‘American poetry represented for Heaney an invigorating alterity’\(^\text{14}\) to English/Irish models. Michael Parker bolsters his similar position with the extra claim that Heaney’s ‘attention to the parish and to traditional forms was a strength, but one in danger of becoming a shortcoming, especially when set alongside the more ambitious, cosmopolitan vision, voicing, and allusion in Derek Mahon’s and Michael Longley’s early work’; thus the stylistic departure of *Wintering Out* ‘indicates a conscious effort on Heaney’s part to enlarge the scope and scale of his poetic program.’\(^\text{15}\) As a poet of global significance in the 1990s, Heaney certainly would have approved of such an interpretation of his first crossing to America.

Indeed, the argument developed by Hart, Allison, and Parker remains in place today. In his 2013 study, Richard Rankin Russell applies the Californian theory to the later *North* where, he suggests, Heaney is still drawing on the American examples he was exposed to during his 1970-71 residency. More recently, Robert Tracy has exemplified the seductiveness of the narrative in his article ‘Westering: Seamus Heaney’s Berkeley Year’ where he plumbs the original title of the final poem in *Wintering Out* ‘Easy Rider: Westering’. Tracy compares Heaney’s Californian sojourn to the 1969 film of the same name, passing through ‘the nineteen-sixties America of new styles, hair lengths, music, political activity, and sexual behaviour’ and argues that, despite the title change to simply ‘Westering’, ‘the free-wheeling spirit’\(^\text{16}\) of this idealised West Coast survives in the poetry of *Wintering Out*. Although there is clearly a stylistic shift in the poetry of *Wintering Out* that is obliquely linked to Heaney’s time abroad, the persistent critical argument is lacking in two ways. Firstly, Heaney’s American influences predate his Berkeley residency and are more deeply rooted in his form than existing commentary has recognised. Secondly, criticism has miscalculated the influence of Snyder and Bly on Heaney’s poetic form and overlooked the continuities of *Wintering Out* and *Stations* with Heaney’s earlier volumes. Indeed, much of the significance of the Berkeley residency can be redefined in terms of what Heaney *resists* rather than adopts in the contemporary US poetry he confronts, as his reluctance


to engage with new examples highlights the narrowness and yet the centrality of the American tradition by which he is truly enabled.

Critics tending to Heaney’s American experiences underestimate the impact of his exposure to American poetry as an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, discussed in Chapter Two, and his competency as a critic of American poetry in the 1960s. Several years prior to his Californian crossing, Heaney was publishing reviews of key influences Roethke and Lowell as well as a lesser known 1965 commentary on the work of Edward Lucie-Smith, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Marianne Moore. In his analysis of *The Dream Songs*, Heaney praises Berryman’s portrayal of an American society ‘careering down the rails of materialism’ while Moore, he argues, has written ‘good poetry since 1915’ and he continues to be ‘impressed with the subtle playing off of line endings against the easy cadences of the American voice.’

Heaney’s confident generalisations reflect his overlooked experience as a teacher as well as a student of American writing in Belfast. Appointed to the Queen’s faculty in 1966, Heaney was given responsibility for ‘the First Arts poetry lectures, and taught Modern Literature seminars’; the set texts recorded for the First Arts module in the Queen’s Calendar for the academic year 1966-67 include Faulkner, Eliot, and Frost alongside British and Irish writers as required reading. Heaney was also joined on the teaching faculty by Michael Allen who taught ‘American Literature at Queen’s university – a number of such posts having been created to promote American studies throughout Europe.’ Edna Longley also characterises Allen as ‘an influential character in Belfast’, becoming a ‘friend and mentor of poets’ while Heaney describes Allen affectionately as ‘the reader over my shoulder’. It was during this period of teaching that Heaney also began his research into ‘the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness’ that, in an often cited passage from ‘Feeling into Words’, he claims led him to an idea of the bog as an answering myth in ‘Bogland’.

---

18 SS, p.102.
19 Queen’s Calendar 66-7, Special Collections, The McClay Library, Queen’s University, Belfast.
22 ‘Feeling into Words’, *P*, p.55.
It is surprising, then, that by 1970 when he was composing *Wintering Out*, Heaney should feel like American poetry was ‘other’\(^{23}\) since he had spent many years studying, teaching, and responding in verse to American writing. A possible summation may be that Heaney’s later depiction of himself across his prose and interviews as ‘consciously hoping for liberation’\(^{24}\) in the new, ‘antithetical’\(^{25}\) example of ‘Snyder and Bly’ and the ‘California spirit’\(^{26}\) was an attempt to manage the perception of his actions and poetry; a conscientious uprooting to expand his sources to equip himself for the political fallout at home might have been considered more respectable than self-preservation by retreat. He might also have wanted to install a more positive narrative in place of the problematic statements he made in two *Listener* articles from 1970 and 1971 in which he complains of California’s ‘rip-off generation’ and the ‘grotesquely violent rhetoric’\(^{27}\) of the Black Panthers, a sharp contrast to the image of Heaney in California preserved today. Whatever the reason for Heaney’s later reinvention of the period, the critics estimating the American influence on *Wintering Out* and *Stations* would benefit from Jung’s caveat ‘that what a poet has to say about his work is far from being the most illuminating word on the subject.’\(^{28}\)

Indeed, even two of the more obscure poems in *Wintering Out* – ‘Broagh’ and ‘Gifts of Rain’ – fail to provide strong evidence for the widely claimed influence of Gary Snyder; despite their surface-level experimentalism, they do not push into new areas but, rather, develop the poetics of adequacy exhibited by Heaney’s first two collections. Snyder rose to prominence in the 1950s among a diverse group of young artists in San Francisco and is noted as a significant presence around campus by W. J. Rorabaugh in his account of life at Berkeley in the 1960s, launching the Human Be-In in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in January 1967 by blowing on a conch shell. While at Berkeley in 1970-71, Heaney recalls he learnt ‘to hear and respect’ Snyder by attending his readings, coming to see the ‘disposition of the verse on the page as a

---

\(^{23}\) Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, *Salmagundi*, p.16.


\(^{25}\) Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, *Salmagundi*, p.16.

\(^{26}\) Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Ploughshares*, p.20.


musical notation of sorts’; he also attended parties organised by Tom Parkinson where Snyder and other writers gathered.

In contrast to Heaney’s catechistic poetics, however, Snyder’s poetry takes inspiration from the Zen Buddhism in which he was formally trained and is noted for its experimentation with metre and lineation, finding ‘solace in the breadth of the individual and the rhythms of natural processes’ while it is defined generally as ecologist, owing to its emphasis on the rugged landscapes where Snyder spent much of his working life. Contributing to the argument for influence, Heaney has claimed the American examples in Berkeley taught him ‘to trust the “nature” aspect’ of his poetry. A new confidence is certainly illustrated by the poems ‘Fodder’, ‘Anahorish’, ‘Toome’, and ‘Broagh’ which he calls ‘Ulster myths of belonging’, in the manner he earlier defined ‘Bogland’ as an ‘answering Irish myth’ to the American Frontier. In line with this, criticism has also noted the uniqueness of these poems in Heaney’s oeuvre: Corcoran praises the ‘astoundingly inventive’ poems as ‘among the most original poems Heaney has written’ while O’Donoghue, recognising the ‘considerable cunning’ with which Heaney deploys his knowledge of linguistics in ‘Broagh’, notes the etymological sequence as ‘a procedure that was short-lived in Heaney’s poetry’, perhaps a result of Heaney’s ‘one-off adventure’ in Berkeley. The most discussed of these poems, ‘Broagh’, however, when compared with the widely anthologised Snyder poem ‘Piute Creek’, exposes the chasm between the two poets’ thinking.

‘Piute Creek’ is typical of Snyder’s naturism and yet in both form and sentiment it diverges from the poetics Heaney is developing in ‘Broagh’:

One granite ridge
A tree, would be enough
Or even a rock, a small creek,

---

29 SS, p.146.
30 SS, p.141.
33 SS, p.125.
34 ‘Feeling into Words’, P, p.55.
35 Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p.88.
37 Ibid p.67.
38 SS, p.136.
A bark shred in a pool.
Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted
Tough trees crammed
In thin stone fractures
A huge moon on it all, is too much.
The mind wanders. A million
Summers, night air still and the rocks
Warm. Sky over endless mountains.
All the junk that goes with being human
Drops away, hard rock wavers
Even the heavy present seems to fail
This bubble of a heart.
Words and books
Like a small creek off a high ledge
Gone in the dry air.39

The communion being forged with nature is, without introspection or signs of deliberate poetic craft, an attribute that led Colin Falck to read ‘Piute Creek’ as ‘pure Beat-1950s-speak’.40 The abandonment of art in favour of nature is consistent with Snyder’s belief that ‘sensitivity and awareness are not limited to educated people’, and that inspiration can be derived not just from ‘the books I’ve read’ but ‘the jobs I’ve done’.41 Indeed, the declaration in the second stanza that ‘A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen’ supplants the speaker’s ‘I’ with an Emersonian ‘eyeball’ to better grasp a nature devoid of the cluttering effects of ‘Words and books’ and ‘All the junk that goes with being human’. Reflecting on this section, Lars Nordström reasons ‘Piute Creek’ ‘affirms the supremacy of the wilderness in its encounter with the insignificant “words and books” of the personal self […] the wilderness setting “truly seen” through the poetic form takes on the “meaning”, not anything else.’42 By following the demands of its content intuitively towards broken syntax and repetitive description, ‘Piute Creek’ is underpinned by a poetic at odds with Heaney’s; Snyder’s is one that lacks the axiomatic belief in poetry’s dualistic relationship with the world, making it an unlikely source for even the most experimental verses of Wintering Out.

In contrast to Snyder’s effort towards formal transparency, ‘Broagh’ predictably impresses a shape upon experience through poetic form. In the sophistication of its linguistic ploys and emphasis on human history, ‘Broagh’ is at odds with ‘Piute Creek’ in many other significant ways. Far from eschewing civilisation in preference for ‘the world of pre- or sub-human nature’ as Snyder does, Heaney accesses nature through etymology and re-enshrines the word as the original symbol:

Riverbank, the long rigs
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford.

The garden mould
bruised easily, the shower
gathering in your heelmark
was the black O

in Broagh,
its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
hard to manage.

Unlike the varied stanzas and eleven sentences of ‘Piute Creek’, Heaney’s compact quatrains are comprised of only two. In contrast to Snyder’s rejection of ‘Words and books’, words are both the means and the subject matter of ‘Broagh’ which savours its own aural qualities as it progresses. Etymology and sound provide the layers of signification that enable the speaker to access ‘the windy boortrees / and rhubarb-blades’, thus the power of words to ‘mean’ and yet not to ‘be’ is the tension out of which ‘Broagh’ springs.

O’Donoghue, who gives extensive attention to the place-name sequence of Wintering Out, notes it ‘has always been recognised that the most important of these

44 WO, p.27.
poems is “Broagh” as it embodies ‘the full Northern Irish linguistic complex.’

Building on Tom Paulin’s discussion, O’Donoghue corrects John Wilson Foster’s early misreading of ‘Broagh’ in which he argues that a mistaken Heaney believes the velar fricative gh is ‘a native Irish rather than English sound’; rather, Heaney’s point is precisely that for the native Irish sound (as at the end of ‘Lough’), familiar locally ‘to Protestant and Catholic alike’, the Old English spelling system can offer only an approximation from within the resources of its own orthography. This is the now-obsolete Germanic velar fricative, as in Chaucer’s ‘knight’ [/knixt/], which of course has no historic relation to the sound at the end of the Gaelic word bruach, ‘riverbank’. The supplying of this non-native orthographic form is no help with the re-creation of the pronunciation to which spelling, in its clumsy way, aspires.

Unmoved by the loosening California spirit, then, ‘Broagh’ instead resembles a technical exercise, drawing on the conscientious study of the English Language that Heaney’s Queen’s undergraduate notebooks reveal: hardly ‘Beat-speak’. Holding ‘Words and books’ tightly, ‘Broagh’ could not share in Snyder’s easy dismissal of ‘the junk that goes with being human’ either, since the gh being plumbed is significant precisely because it reveals the word as ‘pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.’

Throughout his criticism, Heaney draws on the examples of Eliot’s auditory imagination and Frost’s mouth-cave to suggest the social dimension of poetry resides in such linguistic excavation, since it is the drawn-on, pre-verbal sounds which allow the poet to move ‘beyond ego’ and carry ‘individual utterance away’ towards the communal. Snyder’s effort to strip language bare of human signature to access a purer experience of nature is therefore, in Heaney’s thinking, doomed by its very method. The closing phrases of each poem distil the clash of sensibilities: while Snyder’s speaker is ready to ‘rise and go’ freely into nature, Heaney’s phrase ‘hard to manage’ reads as a commentary on what has been an ambitious text. Although ‘Broagh’ does make use of a shorter line and more flexible rhythm than the poetry of his previous volumes, this alone cannot substantiate the claim for Snyder’s influence. It should be remembered that the

45 O’Donoghue, Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry, p.62.
47 Ibid, p.64.
poems of *Wintering Out* were some of the first to be written outside of Hobsaum’s Belfast Group environment where rougher textures and tighter rhythms were encouraged. The stylistic shift of *Wintering Out* may be better understood, then, as a natural retuning and it is therefore speculative whether the US poetry of the Bay Area accelerated this process.

Similar conflicts arise when Snyder’s ‘Riprap’ is compared to ‘Gifts of Rain’, despite its adoption of a fragmented lineation typical of the American poet. ‘Riprap’, the title poem of Snyder’s 1959 collection, is named after an innovated pathway Snyder describes as ‘a cobble of stones laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in mountains’. Snyder uses lineation to mimic such a footfall:

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks,  
    placed solid, by hands  
In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
    in space and time:  
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall  
    riprap of things:  
Cobble of milky way,  
    straying planets,  
These poems, people,  
    lost ponies with  
Dragging saddles —  
    and rocky sure-foot trails.

Visibly, Snyder’s ‘rocks’ and ‘words’ and ‘thoughts’ and ‘things’ are synthesised in an imitative form in which poetic lines are locked in place like the stone path itself. Such a form recalls Olson’s assertion that ‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT’ in his highly influential ‘Projective Verse’, an essay Heaney read and which appeared in William Carlos Williams’s *Autobiography* (1957), a writer he also claimed he was ‘coming to grips with’ in his 1979 interview with

---

50 Snyder, epigraph to *Riprap* (Kyoto, Japan, 1959).  
James Randall. Indeed, Williams’s famous phrase ‘no ideas / but in things’\textsuperscript{54} from ‘A Sort of Song’ is reworked in the final lines of ‘Riprap’:

\begin{verbatim}
    The worlds like an endless
    four-dimensional
    Game of Go.
    ants and pebbles
    In the thin loam, each rock a word
    a creek-washed stone
    Granite: ingrained
    with torment of fire and weight
    Crystal and sediment linked hot
    all change, in thoughts,
    As well as things.
\end{verbatim}

Not only, then, do ‘thoughts’ begin in ‘things’, for Snyder the two enter a fluid relationship in which they are mutually defined: a contradictory doctrine to that on which Heaney builds his poetics. This chasm has implications for Heaney’s wider navigation of the American poetic tradition since, as Nick Selby has recently suggested, Snyder’s insistence ‘that poem and world are complexly interwoven’ is indicative of ‘the defining struggle of modern American poetics, namely to find an accommodation between the poem and the world of things.’\textsuperscript{55} For Snyder’s style of commitment to this struggle, however, Falck argues:

\begin{quote}
Snyder can be wearisome – and one begins to hear a Whitmanian cataloguing going on somewhere in the background – when he uses the kind of fragmented description and rhythmically invertebrate lay-out on the page that was first patented by William Carlos Williams].\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Troubling the critical argument that Heaney was enabled by this style of US verse, Heaney has on occasion indicated that he shares Falck’s sentiments, claiming that despite dedicating himself to Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ – where such a form is propounded – he found it ‘a toil […] I could see what I ought to feel but I couldn’t really feel it.’\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Falck, \textit{American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: The Poetry that Matters}, p.141-42.
\textsuperscript{57} Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, \textit{Salmagundi}, p.17.
One should be wary, therefore, of making bold claims for the significance of the stanza formation adopted by ‘Gifts of Rain’; while it represents a stylistic departure for Heaney it does not constitute the abandonment of traditional forms in favour of Olsonian experimentalism. Written during his year in Berkeley where he began to understand the ‘disposition of the verse on the page as a musical notation of sorts’ through hearing Snyder ‘read his own work’,58 ‘Gifts of Rain’ resembles, at least superficially, many of the American poet’s verses:

Cloudburst and steady downpour now
for days.
Still mammal,
straw-footed on the mud,
he begins to sense weather
by his skin.

A nimble snout of flood
licks over stepping stones
and goes uprooting.

He fords
his life by sounding.

Soundings.59

The first of the poem’s four sections shares internal characteristics with Snyder’s naturism as well. The voice, hovering on the page, is associative, while the wet ‘mammal’ is the undefined center of a blank space without human presence. In Harold Bloom’s 1986 collection of essays on Heaney’s poetry – in which he describes Heaney as deserving ‘of the same attention as his strongest American contemporaries’60 – P. R. King praises ‘Gifts of Rain’ in terms which strongly echo those applied to contemporary US verse. King notes ‘the loose-limbed stanza pattern’ employed is ‘more open than Heaney’s previous style’ and, through this ‘freer’ style, he is ‘beginning to transpose description by exposition into a truly metaphorical, symbolic level of meaning where the meaning cannot exist apart from its image in the poem’.61 Yet, in the following three sections (all of which are longer) Heaney returns to traditional verse patterns, moving through a series of couplets, quatrains, and tercets in which his descriptions cohere. In

59 WO, p. 23.
the second section, a human actor appears ‘wading lost fields’ with his ‘spade’, while, in the third, a wider human presence emerges where the ‘I’ of the poet considers a local ‘antediluvian’ past until, finally, Heaney maps the etymological paths to history:

The tawny guttural water
spells itself: Moyola
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale
in the utterance,
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists
through vowels and history.

The first section’s experimentalism, therefore, is not the discovery of new possibilities beyond traditional stanza patterns it appeared to be; rather, the fragmented lines and vague description serve to heighten the impact and clarity of the formal stanzas which, concluding the poem, stand victorious over the former. The later sections of ‘Gifts or Rain’ also trouble King’s assertion that the poems of Wintering Out ‘will not mean, but be’, since, like ‘Broagh’, these lines savour rather than purge the signifying power of words. ‘Gifts of Rain’ diverges from Snyder’s example in message as well as form. Neither ‘Gifts of Rain’ nor ‘Broagh’ perform the regression Snyder’s poems do to a pre-human nature; they are instead incompatible tokens of local value that function to take pride in heritage. Indeed, Gray’s observation that ‘Riprap’ is ‘remarkable’ for what it is willing to ‘omit […] elaborate figures […] close-woven argument […] irony or introspection’ highlights the chasm between Snyder and Heaney, since these are chief characteristics in the latter’s burgeoning political forms which more clearly emerge in Stations and North.

Similar difficulties arise in the attempt to locate a debt to Bly in Stations. As in the case of Wintering Out, the critical discussion around the collection has evolved alongside Heaney’s interviews in which he stresses the significance of American poetry, virtually overwriting an earlier narrative. In the chapbook’s introduction, Heaney admits the ‘delay’ in publication was partly due to the arrival of Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian

---

62 Ibid.
*Hymns* (1971), a work of ‘complete authority’ in the form ‘new’ to Heaney. His insecurity with the material is also reflected by the choice to publish in the chapbook form and to collect only seven of the twenty-one poems in *New Selected Poems 1966-197* (1990) and eleven in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (1998). Although Bly is not mentioned in the original book’s introduction, Heaney’s discussions of Bly have shaped responses to *Stations* ever since. In his 1986 study, Neil Corcoran cites Bly as an influence during this period, a claim he repeats in an updated study published in 1998; Thomas C. Foster directly compares *Stations* with the prose poetry of Hill and Bly in his 1989 study while Henry Hart discusses Heaney’s debt to Bly in a longer analysis of *Stations* in a 1989 article that later appeared as a chapter in his *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (1992). That same year, Jeffery A. Triggs examined Bly and Heaney’s poetry comparatively in ‘Hurt into Poetry: The Political Verses of Seamus Heaney and Robert Bly’ while, the following year, Bly is highlighted by Michael Parker’s *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (1993) and his 1998 article on Heaney’s American influences. Heaney’s remark in *Stepping Stones* (2008), then, that it was ‘under the influence of Bly’s prose poems that [he] experimented with [his] own’, merely reinforced the California narrative in which Bly is a formal influence. On closer analysis, Heaney appears to have taken little more than the idea of writing in the form from Bly, since *Stations* diverges from the American’s example in critical ways.

Indeed, in his chapter-length discussion of *Stations*, Hart argues the poems were written during a ‘critical juncture in [Heaney’s] career, when he was allowing his formalist training to absorb the Whitmanesque spirit of the sixties’ and that the prose form itself ‘depends on the sort of freedom Heaney must have felt in California’. Although Hart emphasises Heaney’s multiple sources and some of the significant differences between Heaney’s prose poetry and Bly’s, grasping the significance of these divergences and their implications for Heaney’s navigation of the American tradition is a task that remains to be undertaken. Stephen Fredman’s delineation of the prose poem in an American context is useful here:

[r]ather than endeavouring to master reality, the American poet who writes in prose more properly confronts the times by a heroic accommodation – a

---

65 SS, p.141.
scrupulous surrender to language and to the world [...] the American poet uses prose not to give evidence of genius and the ability to impose order but instead to create, through attentive receptivity, a space of permission in which the world is allowed to appear through language. In this context the eschewal of verse can be seen as a conscious abnegation of the tremendous ‘disciplinary’ force within verse [...] the language is writing the poet, instead of the other way around.67

This is certainly the tradition into which Bly’s prose poetry steps or, rather, in Bly’s words, leaps, since it is designed to ‘leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again’ in order to increase ‘the speed of association’.68 The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry In English (a volume to which Heaney contributes an essay on Lowell) describes Bly as an ‘important figure’ for this exploration of the unconscious, adding ‘because of Bly’s efforts [...] America has had a poetry of the “deep image” – an image that comes from the unconscious mind and that communicates a meaning that is not logical.’69 Bly’s prose poetry, to return to Fredman’s terms, surrenders ‘to language and to the world’, finding in the prose form the freedom necessary to communicate thoughts in a way that would be impossible in traditional verse. Heaney’s Stations could not be characterised in these terms.

Stations shares many concerns with Wintering Out and North, taking up the themes of a rural childhood, the maturation of the artist, split loyalties in a divided society, and the collision of personal experience and political history. The collection, therefore, does not communicate anything that Heaney has not already said more successfully in earlier volumes. The critical difference is that Bly’s concept of prose poetry is predicated, as Fredman goes on to explain, on a suspicion of poetic form as constraining; Heaney does not share this feeling. The result is a prose very similar to his formal poetry, inviting scansion due to its abundance of traditional features and suggesting a reluctance to embrace the new mode. Indeed, other than a section in the career-summarising District and Circle (2006), Heaney would not return to the prose genre and would ultimately pursue formal polish in his subsequent collections. In his

later discussion of American poetry with Brandes, Heaney admits that his ‘prejudice’ is for formal poetry that ‘practices force within a confined area’ and thus he understands the aims of a verse such as Bishop’s, an antithetical achievement to Bly’s. Despite its prose form, Stations betrays this ‘prejudice’ in its insistence on an overarching structure, shaping what ought to be left unshaped by virtue of the form itself. The use of a well-worn biblical narrative as an organising tool is something to which Bly and Snyder would object while the choice also indicates the more likely and proximate influence of Joyce, evident in the volume’s movement through images of a Catholic childhood. As with his commentary on Wintering Out, Heaney may have been managing the reaction to Stations by emphasising an American influence to differentiate Stations from Mercian Hymns.

In his essay ‘Englands of the Mind’, first delivered as a lecture in Berkeley in May 1976, Heaney reflects on Hill’s Mercian Hymns in a manner highly revealing of his own insecurities. The Irish poet’s commentary on Hill is marked by the contradictory desire to both identify with and differentiate himself from his English contemporary. Although he does not mention his own prose collection published one year prior, Heaney praises Mercian Hymns for the ‘double-focus’ of ‘a child’s-eye view’ and ‘the historian’s and scholar’s eye’ that it shares with Stations. Heaney is also at pains, however, to stress Hill’s ‘territory’ as his ‘own West Midlands’, a ‘medieval England’ facing ‘the Celtic mysteries of Wales’ and brought to life in an ‘English Romanesque’ style of ‘verbal architecture’. There is a sense throughout ‘Englands of the Mind’ of Heaney dealing with a dangerous and proximate Other in Hill, one who is an uncomfortable mixture of sameness and difference: different because of his pedigree and ‘Englishness’ and similar in his deployment of a Joycean ‘hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations’. The shared debt to what Heaney calls ‘the Joycean precedent set in Ulysses of confounding modern autobiographical material with literary and historic matter’ may be his most regretted vulnerability, since Stations relies so heavily on ‘the Joycean epiphany’ he admires. In an obvious debt to Joyce, Stations

---

70 Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, Salmagundi, p.17.
71 In his commentary on Stations, Hart notes this irony, noting Snyder ‘mocked and renounced’ such biblical myths in poems like ‘Milton by Firelight’, p.106.
72 ‘Englands of the Mind’, P, p.159-60.
maps the poet’s growing consciousness of language in tandem with the growth of an Irish consciousness, exemplified by ‘Cloistered’ where the ‘duty priest’ is testing ‘his diction against pillar and plaster’ while the student mortifies his ‘elbows on the hard bevel’ and ‘The Stations of the West’ where a forlorn Heaney sits ‘on a twilit bedside listening through the wall to fluent Irish, homesick for a speech I was to extirpate.’ However successful Heaney felt these verses to be when they were being explored in California, upon discovery of Mercian Hymns he claims to have felt dominated by Hill’s ‘authority’, ‘weighty elegance’, and ‘command’, complaints that recall Stephen Dedalus’s objection to his own English Other: ‘[t]he language in which we are speaking is his before mine’. Indeed, throughout the discussion of Hill Heaney betrays his wish to sidestep a powerful adversary and this could be, ultimately, why he invokes Bly in conversations about Stations. In emphasising the American poet he heard read in California, Heaney can limit comparison with the English one and survive by hiding, in Hart’s memorable description of the prose form, in ‘the border’ area, ‘disguising’ himself through ‘blending' origins.

Whatever the reason, the divergences between Heaney and Bly’s efforts in form become apparent when Heaney’s ‘Nesting-ground’ is compared to Bly’s early prose poem ‘Sunset at a Lake’, collected in Silence in the Snowy Fields (1962):

The sun is sinking. Here on the pine-haunted bank, the mosquitoes fly around drowsily, and moss stands out as if it wanted to speak. Calm falls on the lake, which now seems heavier and inhospitable. Far out, rafts of ducks drift like closed eyes, and a thin line of silver caused by something invisible slowly moves toward shore in the viscous darkness under the southern bank. Only a few birds, the troubled ones, speak to the darkening roof of earth; small weeds stand abandoned, the clay is sending her gifts back to the center of the earth.

Bly’s full embrace of the prose form is evidenced by the striking variance in sentence length, with the first comprised of just four words and the fourth 31, as the reader

---

74 Stations, p.20.
75 Ibid, p.22.
76 Ibid, p.3.
78 Ibid, p.163.
80 Hart, Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions, p.100.
follows the ‘thin line’ out ‘toward the shore’ of the blank page itself. The spatial and temporal indicators ‘Here’ and ‘now’ create an immediate and authentic representation of the scene; with no human presence cluttering the picture, the sense is of the poet as a canvas on which nature will be tabulated through a co-operative rather than interpretative language. In the ‘inhospitable’, ‘pine-haunted’, ‘vicious darkness’ and the arrival of ‘troubled’ birds on the ‘darkening roof’ there is a sense of the ominous about Bly’s portrait, yet we are denied insight into what this might mean for a human observer, the vital element of Heaney’s pastoral.

The fourth poem in Stations, ‘Nesting-Ground’, is in this sense typical of Heaney’s early lyrics:

The sandmartins’ nests were loopholes of darkness in the riverbank. He could imagine his arm going in to the armpit, sleeved and straightened, but because he had once felt the cold prick of a dead robin’s claw and the surprising density of its tiny beak he only gazed.

He heard cheeping far in but because the men had once shown him a rat’s nest in the butt of a stack where chaff and powdered cornstalks adhered to the moist pink necks and backs he only listened.

As he stood sentry, gazing, waiting, he thought of putting his ear to one of the abandoned holes and listening for the silence under the ground.82

Like the earlier treatment of a rural childhood in Death of a Naturalist (1966) and Door into the Dark (1969), the influence of American poets Frost and Roethke is more obvious than Bly’s, despite the new prose form. The opening image of the ‘sandmartins’ nests’ is evocative of Frost’s ‘The Exposed Nest’, an important poem Heaney much more directly references in the later sonnet ‘On the Spot’, while the imagined ‘arm going in’ recalls Roethke’s meddling speaker in ‘Moss-Gathering’, a poem which, again, provides a direct model for Heaney’s ‘Death of a Naturalist’ where ‘the spawn can ‘clutch’ the child’s ‘hand’.83 The ‘rat’s nest’ among ‘chaff” and ‘powdered cornstalks’ of ‘Nesting-Ground’ also echoes the experience of the child in ‘The Barn’ who is ‘chaff” among the ‘great blind rats’,84 while the final image in which the boy

82 Stations, p.7.
83 DN, p.15.
84 DN, p.17.
puts ‘his ear’ to ‘the ground’ repeats the conclusion of ‘Land’ from Wintering Out. Because it is so typical of Heaney’s earlier verses and noted influences, ‘Nesting-Ground’ has the appearance of a rough draft before the usual formal pressures have been applied. Even in this condition, however, ‘Nesting-Ground’ makes use of the traditional formal devices Bly’s ‘Sunset at a Lake’ rejects, even indenting new lines to impose shape. Sibilance is deployed effectively throughout, with the first use in ‘sandmartins’ nests’ being reinforced a line later by the isolated ‘sleeved and straightened’. Heaney’s characteristic fondness of aural contrast is exploited throughout, with the harsh consonants in ‘cold prick’ working against the soft, drawn-out vowel sounds of ‘claw’ and ‘gazed’, bookending the internally rhymed ‘surprising density or its tiny beak’. The onomatopoeic ‘cheeping’ of the birds before the cluster of assonance created by ‘he stood sentry, gazing, waiting’ also puts ‘Nesting-Ground’ in a more traditional category of prose poetry than Bly’s. The most significant contrast, however, is Heaney’s insistence on a Joycean child-artist who is developed through the short poem from a mere observer who ‘only gazed’ and ‘only listened’ to the suggestive final image of him ‘listening for the silence’, a silence which anticipates the discovery of the poet’s voice in nature. As most of Heaney’s pastoral to this stage has been (and how most of his political poetry in North will be), ‘Nesting-Ground’ is ultimately a drama of the self, contrasting sharply with Bly’s bare portrait in ‘Sunset at a Lake’.

Even Bly’s less formally experimental poetry is at odds with Heaney’s aims in Stations. ‘Counting Small-Boned Bodies’, from Bly’s award winning The Light Around the Body (1967), reflects the horror of the Vietnam war; when compared with Heaney’s efforts to convey the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in Stations, a chasm is exposed. Where Heaney’s political treatments in Stations are entrenched in the guilty introspection of the artist, Bly finds the use of surreal, ‘deep images’ he developed in Silence in the Snowy Fields to be apposite to his needs:

> Let’s count the bodies over again.
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> The size of skulls,
> We could make a whole plain white with skulls in the moonlight!

> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
Maybe we could get
A whole year’s kill in front of us on a desk!

If we could only make the bodies smaller,
We could fit
A body into a finger-ring, for a keepsake forever.  

Although mostly in tercets, the poem’s lines are erratic in their length and rhythmical vigour. Any momentum the poem develops emanates from the repeated ‘If only we could make the bodies smaller’ which achieves the incantatory effect of a war cry. Bly’s method in ‘Counting Small-Boned Bodies’ is to critique the war effort through imitation of an imagined leader who can only dream of a more efficient, mechanised death in the surreal images of ‘skulls’ arranged ‘in the moonlight’. Triggs argues the poem’s effectiveness comes from this ‘disturbing clash of syntax and diction […] The repeated syntax of conditional sentences suggests a kind of reasonableness very much at odds with the poem’s flux of horrible images’, adding that the ‘weightlessness of the unconscious’ is put to effective use. Bly also avoids explicit personal commentary or consideration of how one may be complicit in the distant horrors; his aim is, simply, to portray the banality of evil, a need his deep images serve well.

Heaney’s ‘England’s Difficulty’, however, depicts contemporary violence by interpenetrating personal history and communal experience. In the poem, Heaney traces a divided society through remembrance of his own childhood initiation into a community of ‘carefully enunciated passwords’ and ‘speech with checkpoints’ during a WWII bombing. In contrast to Bly’s withdrawal in ‘Small-Boned Bodies’, ‘I’ is the first word of ‘England’s Difficulty’ and recurs three times in the labyrinth of introspection and dialogue that follows. Heaney’s poem is, in contrast to Bly’s, extremely self-conscious, with memory and speech worked-up for effect:

‘He’s an artist, this Haw Haw. He can fairly leave it into them.’
I lodged with ‘the enemies of Ulster’, the scullions outside the walls. An adept at banter, I crossed the lines with carefully enunciated passwords, manned every

---

speech with checkpoints and reported back to nobody.\(^87\)

The intimate memory and contemplation of split loyalties make ‘England’s Difficulty’ an integral but ambiguous element in the overarching structure of *Stations* as a Catholic examination of conscience. Like the speaker witnessing the German bombing of the ‘Orange parts’, there is, on another level, a crisis of identification at the centre of the poem. William Joyce – nicknamed ‘Haw Haw’ – was an Irish-American Nazi propagandist who affected an English accent in his broadcasts;\(^88\) referred to here as ‘an artist’ there is a difficult parallel being made with the predicament of Northern Catholics, “‘the enemies of Ulster’”, and in particular with Heaney who, as an Irish poet writing in English (who is also putting stress on his American connections at this time) shares a complex identity with William Joyce. In the final lines where the ‘carefully enunciated passwords’ of daily life in a divided society are considered, there is a suggestion that this subterfuge equipped Heaney with his present status as a Northern poet. The degree to which this has enabled him to weaponise the English language – here a doubly Joycean idea – is left open-ended. Moving ‘among the big concepts’, Heaney finally ‘reports’ his feelings ‘back to nobody’ to conclude the poem on an unstable identifier. The final lines also echo the sentiments of the more successful ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’ from *North*, again giving the impression of *Stations* as supplementary rather than an independent collection, with many of the poems acting as expositions to formal verses. ‘England’s Difficulty’, then, once more raises questions regarding what Heaney achieves through the prose form, doubts which are only amplified by a comparative reading with Bly’s poetry, since the American poet discovers not just a sense of freedom in the looser style but a new horizon of conscientiousness with its own terminals for fresh supply.

Of all the poetry from this era, ‘A Northern Hoard’ in *Wintering Out* most encapsulates the counter-Californian narrative and anticipates the style of *North*. The

\(^{87}\) *Stations*, p.16.

\(^{88}\) Mary Kenny notes William Joyce as a ‘pro-Nazi traitor’ who earned ‘the negative distinction of being the last man ever to be hanged for high treason by the British Crown’ but argues, ‘[w]hile the press went on treating ‘Lord Haw-Haw’ as a splendid joke well into the second half of 1940, the BBC and the British authorities in general were more alarmed at the impact of William’s increasing popularity.’ *Germany Calling: A personal Biography of William Joyce, ‘Lord Haw-Haw’* (Dublin: New Island, 2003), p.1 and p.150.
sequence, which has never been reproduced in full in any of Heaney’s collected poems editions, develops the guilty introspection and sparser form that would be central to the better known bog body sequence of the later volume. ‘A Northern Hoard’ is also significant for referencing Heaney’s real feelings of exile in California during the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, making its omission from later collections particularly noteworthy. The sequence is marked by self-examination throughout, with Heaney anticipating his decision to ‘uproot’ from the site of ‘gunshot, siren and clucking gas’ to Wicklow in 1972 and his painful ‘crawl’ from America to Belfast to ‘confront’ the ‘lumpy dead’ he has ‘deserted’; though ‘abroad’ he is ‘a black stump of home.’ Far from showing signs of the influence of contemporary US poetry, the first section ‘Roots’ establishes an apocalyptic tone through a conspicuous invocation of ‘The Second Coming’. Heaney is ‘turning’ from the ‘din’ of violence where ‘the fault is opening’ and envisions, much like Yeats, a part-human monster against whom we are ‘helpless in our old Gomorrah.’ The word ‘dream’ appears twice in the five quatrains of ‘Roots’, foreshadowing the second section ‘No Man’s Land’ which dramatises ‘a dream’ Heaney remembers having ‘in California’ in which he ‘glimpsed in the mirror a wounded man falling towards me with his bloodied hands lifted to tear at me or to implore.’ In the poem, Heaney excoriates himself for how he has ‘shut out / their wounds’ fierce awning, those palms like streaking webs’, and asks ‘why do I unceasingly arrive / late to condone / infected sutures / and ill-knit bone?’ a phrase that betrays a political self-awareness despite its surreal imagery.

Indeed, the final section ‘Tinder’ turns its focus inward to the poetry itself in a manoeuvre that would become typical of Heaney’s political verse. Heaney laments an earlier stage of his development where ‘We picked’ the poet’s Shakespearean ‘flints’ while ‘Huddled at dusk in a ring’ in an address that appears to be directed at Heaney’s fellow Group member Michael Longley. Reflecting on his earlier poetry, Heaney references the Frostian ‘cave-mouth’ from where he ‘sparked a weak-flame-pollen’ while often the effort ‘failed, our knuckle joints / Striking as often as the flints’, an

91 The phrase ‘igneous days’ probably references Michael Longley’s metaphor in relation to the poetry of Northern Ireland being either ‘igneous’ or ‘sedimentary’. Heaney quotes Longley in ‘Lowell’s Command’, GT, p.129.
image in which the lower stakes of the past imply the higher ones of the present. In another ploy that would have met Hobsbaum’s New Critical standards, Heaney approximates the margin between success and failure to the difference of ‘tinder’ and ‘cinder’, flame and ash divided by a single letter. Despite these pressures, ‘Tinder’ concludes ‘A Northern Hoard’ on a measured note of possibility, squarely facing ‘new history’ with its ‘iron, / cast-offs, scraps, nail, canine’ and suggesting, for the Northern poet, bomb shrapnel may be the gruesome tools for, as well as the subject matter of, an adequate poetry.

II

North, usually seen as an internationalising book in Heaney’s career, built on the stylistic progression of Wintering Out and Stations under the noted influence of Robert Lowell, a contemporary poet sporting his own successful political verse and whose friendship would change Heaney’s fortunes. Recently, however, Richard Rankin Russell has extended the Californian argument to North, suggesting Heaney’s ‘time at the University of California Berkeley, in 1970-71’ led him to identify with ‘the African American civil rights movement’ and thus he incorporated ‘images of blackness’ in the political poetry of North to ‘subtly [imply] the cultural and political blackness of Northern Ireland Catholics’ who have been historically ‘mistreated by the British and by some Protestants in Northern Ireland’ and – as suggested by ‘Strange Fruit’ – been ‘“fed” on’. There is little in Heaney’s comments on the racial politics in Berkeley 1970-71 to suggest he had the epiphany of racial empathy Russell claims; as with the earlier criticism on this period, bolder claims obscure the more easily demonstrable debt to American poetry which more often lies on a basic textual level. For instance, Russell reads Wintering Out’s ‘Servant Boy’ as a double statement on both the experience ‘of

93 Ibid, p.162.
94 Writing in the 1970 article ‘Views’, Heaney posits ‘[i]n contrast to the revolutionary language of America, the revolutionary voice of Ireland still keeps a civil tongue in its head’ while in his interview with James Randall he scoffs ‘I mean everyone wanted to be a Red Indian, basically’; p.20. In SS Heaney is also flippant, recalling how one ‘could hardly eat a salad on campus because of solidarity with the Chicano lettuce pickers […] couldn’t walk a hundred yards without encountering a couple of Black Panthers preaching […] there were taboos of all kinds that the campus liberal had to observe’; p.137.
servants in Ireland and Britain’ and the Black minority in America, since the ‘boy’ of
the poem’s title was an ‘appellation’ used ‘to emasculate’ the ‘grown black men’ of the
‘American south’. Servant Boy draws on Frost’s ‘Death of a Hired Man’ directly, a
poem Russell does not mention. Similarly, the sonnet ‘Strange Fruit’ is better
understood as the product of Heaney’s fascination with Lowell’s Near the Ocean than
the wider struggle of African-Americans. Though it is possible to argue Heaney bases
his imagery on the song lyrics his title invokes, the title poem of the volume he calls
‘one of the greatest collections of poems in the last fifty years’ – and a generally
overlooked influence on many poems in North – shares more obvious similarities with
Heaney’s sonnet, a form which should itself alert us to Lowell’s significance.

Lowell’s speaker in ‘Near the Ocean’ observes the ‘severed radiance’ of a
disembodied female ‘head’ raised ‘to please the mob’ while Heaney in ‘Strange Fruit’
beholds ‘the girl’s head’ preserved by the bog, overwhelmed by ‘What had begun to
feel like reverence’; Lowell notes the ‘crisp hair’ he is ‘afraid / to touch’ while Heaney
is entranced by ‘the wet fern of her hair’; Lowell’s subject becomes a ‘gorgon head,
fish ed up from the Aegean dead’ while Heaney also invokes a Greek context in his
identification with ‘Diodorus Siculus’; Lowell’s female body is ‘beheaded and
despoiled’ while Heaney’s ‘Beheaded girl’ in the final image is ‘outstaring axe / And
beautification’. Both Russell and Gail McConnell in their long readings of ‘Strange
Fruit’ note the effectiveness of Heaney’s use of present tense, the former critic
suggesting the ploy allows the girl to ‘outstare both the speaker and her various
audiences’ and thus she ‘rejects our reverencing’ while the latter argues the ‘present
continuous tense of the verb “outstare” in the published version intensifies her powers
of witnessing and perception, even while the repetition threatens to dissolve them. Heaney might have been aiming for the accuracy of Lowell’s summarising remark that

95 Russell, Seamus Heaney’s Regions, p.168.
96 Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, Ploughshares, p.16.
98 N., p.32.
99 Russell, Seamus Heaney’s Regions, p.175.
100 Gail McConnell, ‘Heaney and the Photograph: “Strange Fruit” in Manuscript and Published Form’, Irish University Review, 47 Supplement 2017, p.444.
the ocean, like the bog, ‘can only speak the present tense; / nothing will age, nothing will last’.

Both McConnell and Russell also give attention to Heaney’s extensive drafting of ‘Strange Fruit’. Focusing on the devotional Christian imagery of earlier drafts, Russell posits Heaney scaled back such references for risk of ‘committing blasphemy’ by ‘over-reverencing’; it is also plausible that Heaney might have done so to avoid problematic equivalencies. If a question remains regarding why Heaney would reference a suffering he cannot identify with nor is prepared to explore in depth, Lowell’s Near the Ocean’s preface may provide another answer: ‘[t]he theme that connects my translations is Rome, the greatness and horror of her Empire […] How one jumps from Rome to the America of my own poems is something of a mystery to me.’ Heaney’s associations between conflicts in North are often similarly nebulous. Russell’s commentary, though it does highlight Heaney’s range of references during this phase, is indicative of the fault line running through the earlier Heaney studies in which the attempt to find evidence for American reciprocities results in a critical perspective strained from over-reading, causing real intertextualities to be overlooked.

Stones Heaney considers the impact Vendler’s ‘enthusiastic salute’ to North as a catalyst for his American success, admitting that ‘star critics and reviewers’ such as Vendler and Harold Bloom developed his audience there, while ‘sponsorship by friends at different universities’ increased his visibility in America in the late 1970s. The most notable of Heaney’s associations with American universities was to be with Harvard, where he taught alongside Vendler under various titles until 2006. In ‘the milieu’ of the Harvard faculty in the 1980s, Heaney gravitated towards the example of Bishop who he replaced on the faculty in 1979 following her mandatory retirement. Inducted as an honorary member and named Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poet of 1979, John Ashbery was to many the more obvious successor to Bishop in the role. Indeed, Heaney’s appointment led Fennell to claim that ‘on the American East Coast, he has nudged aside John Ashbery to succeed Robert Lowell as the poet Laureate of the academy.’ Nonetheless, Ashbery becomes important to Heaney’s sense of American poetry in the 1980s; Heaney’s elisions of the American poet during this era map his increased self-assurance and grasp of shifting critical fashions.

The tension running through Heaney’s treatment of Ashbery is the result of a clash of poetic sensibilities, one that is compounded by the latter’s ubiquity in America and his proficiency in an antithetical style. In contrast to his previously expressed aspirations for experimentation in Berkeley, while at Harvard Heaney pursued formal polish in a verse denser in its literary allusion, consciousness of etymology, and sophistication of metaphor. By contrast, Ashbery’s verse, although valued by some of the same ‘star critics’ as Heaney’s,109 deploys a range of experimental techniques to undermine traditional concepts of poetry as an earnest artistic endeavour. David Lehman’s remarks on Ashbery’s critical response provide a useful starting point to the consideration of Heaney and the American poet:

---

106 SS, p.277.
107 SS, p.287.
The public recognition Ashbery has lately received has hardly deterred a highly vocal set of critics from registering their displeasure, with arrows aimed at what might be called his poetic integrity; the poet continues to be censured, misunderstood, and in some quarters suspected of being a deliberate obscurantist or even a masterly charlatan […] These are critics who, while reluctant to acknowledge the limitations of their particular methodologies, throw their hands up in despair upon sight of Ashbery’s poetry; as their attempts at extracting conventional meanings are frustrated, they are afraid of being ‘had’.

When his comments on Ashbery across twenty-five years are examined, a clear picture emerges of Heaney as one of the ‘frustrated’ critics Lehman describes. Indeed, when asked by O’Driscoll about his 1985 description of Ashbery’s poetry as ‘a centrally heated daydream’ that ‘is also sorrowful, it knows it’s inadequate’, Heaney responds ‘I wasn’t trying to demean him, just pointing out that he wasn’t prepared to deliver jeremiads’; when asked ‘[d]id you struggle with Ashbery […] if only because your students admired him greatly’ he responds ‘I could make nothing of it, nor did I make much of an effort’.

In contrast to Heaney’s relatively consistent comments on Olson, however, he revises the terms in which he rejects Ashbery across years of prose and interviews where there is often a sense of his feeling threatened by the American poet, who often mocks and trivialises the kind of ideas about poetry’s efficacy, tradition, and role in society that underpin his own thinking. Heaney is, therefore, right to say Ashbery ‘knows’ his verse is inadequate, since Ashbery challenges such concepts of poetry’s transcendent capabilities in his own work. Indeed, he shows awareness of his reputation as an outlaw in poems like ‘Flow Chart’ where he decrees ‘ignorance / of the law, far from being any excuse, is the law’. Attacking his critics, Ashbery boasts ‘All along I had known what buttons to press, but don’t / you see, I had to experiment’, adding ‘Others, recognizing my disinterest, nonetheless accused / me of playing mind-games only the skilled / should ever attempt.’ To cope with the challenge Ashbery offered,

112 SS, p.282.
113 SS, p.281
114 SS, p.282.
Heaney mobilised a more carefully pitched vocabulary in which to critique him. In Heaney’s 1988 interview with Randy Brandes, for instance, he remarks ‘I understand more, now that I have been in America for 5 or 6 years, [Ashbery’s] popularity’, adding ‘he registers a bemused, disappointed but untragic response to the evacuation of meaning from most people’s lives.’\textsuperscript{116} Understanding Ashbery’s popularity is not equivalent to understanding his poetry. Far from developing admiration for Ashbery, the American poet becomes the focal point of Heaney’s wider anxiety about American poetry in the 1980s.

Heaney’s wariness of the ‘new climate’\textsuperscript{117} in which the ‘school of Ashbery’\textsuperscript{118} was growing is evident in his discussion of Lowell’s corresponding decline in popularity. Heaney reasons Lowell’s ‘reputation suffered because of a reaction in critical and academic circles to those New Critical qualities which had originally made him preeminent […] the poetics of indeterminacy were in the ascendant’.\textsuperscript{119} In interview with O’Driscoll he is more explicit, describing his uneasiness with the ‘all speechifying and theory-speak’ life in the ‘milieu of the Harvard English department’ entailed. In the same discussion, he even characterises the \textit{Haw Lantern} as the product of a tension between ‘Derry and Derrida’; though he never ‘actually’ read Derrida and ‘deconstruction’ remains a nebulous concept throughout his commentary, he nonetheless felt vulnerable to the ‘challenge he [Derrida] was offering.’\textsuperscript{120} This concern with changing fashions and the diminished role of poetry in society is at the root of Heaney’s 1981 discussion of James Wright in which he identifies a contagion of ‘disappointment’ and sense of ‘the inadequacy of art’.\textsuperscript{121} Heaney is more critical of Wright than he dares to be of Ashbery, but the specific terms of rejection are similar. For Heaney, Wright’s lack of ‘trust in poetry’s power’ is indicated by his ‘abandonment of traditional forms’; he has been ‘conquered by the weight of the intractable contemporary industrial reality, conquered into being content’\textsuperscript{122} and subsequently his poetry ‘assents to rather than resists the idea that poetry is no longer an active force in

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{116} Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, \textit{Salmagundi}, p.16.
\bibitem{117} Heaney, ‘Robert Lowell,’ in \textit{The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English}, p.315.
\bibitem{118} \textit{SS}, p.281.
\bibitem{119} Heaney, ‘Robert Lowell,’ in \textit{The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English}, p.315.
\bibitem{120} \textit{SS}, p.287.
\bibitem{122} \textit{Ibid}, p.647.
\end{thebibliography}
the life of a society.\textsuperscript{123} Though both Wright and Ashbery are ‘inadequate’ in this final sense, the latter escapes such sustained criticism because he is thought of by Heaney as, at least, a competent craftsman who, he admits, can ably toy with ‘all kinds of traditional sublimities’\textsuperscript{124} in a poetry at once of ‘galleon-like progress’ and ‘paper boat mockery.’\textsuperscript{125} The nautical metaphor is prescient of Heaney’s later definition of poetic form ‘as both the ship and the anchor […] at once a buoyancy and a holding’,\textsuperscript{126} in abandoning, along with Wright, a trust in traditional poetic form and process, for Heaney Ashbery is at best a ship without an anchor, a buoyancy without a holding.

In a later article, however, Heaney claims that ‘enough’ of ‘the idiom of deconstruction’ he was exposed to at Harvard ‘stayed between my ears to change my way of thinking’, meaning he became ‘readier to go with the flow’ as a reader of Ashbery. Where he was once baffled, he claims he became ‘fascinated’ by the ‘doodles’ and how the ‘caesura flipped and somersaulted’; after all, he explains, ‘[g]ravity had been kicked […] even the word gravid’.\textsuperscript{127} Heaney concludes the essay by quoting sonnet II of the ‘Squarings’ sequence of Seeing Things (1992), and implies that this poem was his accommodation for the more agnostic climate that had once threatened him. Yet, the poem itself, far from importing any of Ashbery’s illusions or gymnastics, re-enshrines Heaney’s core beliefs, invoking his older style in defiance of the perceived challenge. Through self-directed speech, the poem can ‘Roof’ itself, ‘Dig in’ and ‘Drink’ its own aural richness in order to ‘drive iron’ and ‘Hang a line to verify the plumb / From lintel’; it will ‘Sink every impulse like a bolt’ and ‘Secure / The bastion of sensation’, just as it secures each line to the page. Heaney’s conclusion ‘Do not waver / into language’\textsuperscript{128} is indicative of the more intense self-reflexivity that pervades his poetry in the 1980s and ’90s. Rather paradoxically, this is a trait it shares with much of Ashbery’s work. The results, however, are very different in the work of each poet, indicating once again the seriousness of their disagreement.

Heaney’s ‘Wheels within Wheels’, also from Seeing Things, is typical of the self-reflexivity he develops during this phase of his career, appearing almost as a

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, p.648.
\textsuperscript{124} SS, p.196.
\textsuperscript{125} Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, Salmagundi, p.16.
\textsuperscript{126} CP, p.466.
\textsuperscript{127} Heaney, ‘Threshold and Floor’, p.267.
\textsuperscript{128} ‘Squarings, ii’, ST, p.56.
reverse engineering of Frostian ideals of inspiration. Even the correspondences between past and present – memory and creation – implied by the poem’s title appear to answer Frost’s instruction to ‘strike a line of purpose through’ one’s ‘experience’ in ‘the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew.’ Heaney begins the first of three sections by recalling, ‘The first real grip I ever got on things / Was when I learned the art of pedalling / (By hand) a bike turned upside down’. There is at once a sense of ordinariness and exhalation to the lines spoken, which hover in the symbolic ‘space between’ the actual remembered activity and the poetic operations that have brought them into being. Invigorated by its own ‘momentum’, the poem brings these ‘wheels’ together through the working of stressed and unstressed syllable ‘against’ each other in iambic pentameter:

Something about the way those pedal treads
Worked very palpably at first against you
And then began to sweep your hand ahead
Into a new momentum – that all entered me
Like an access of free power, as if belief
Caught up and spun the objects of belief
In an orbit coterminous with longing.

The image of ‘belief’ spinning ‘belief’ probably has an origin in Frost’s explanation of every successful poem as a process in which the poet has ‘believed the thing into existence.’ Indeed, the second section depicts the poet at ‘a well’ where, much like ‘For Once, Then, Something’ and ‘Personal Helicon’, he can amuse himself in a symbolic natural world. In the ‘fields beyond our house’ the speaker recalls how the wheels ‘spun’ the earth and ‘showered me in my own regenerate clays’ until ‘the hub jammed, rims rusted, the chain spanned’, leading the poet to lament ‘Nothing rose to the occasion after that’ until, at least, the ‘Cowgirls wheeled in’. Here the need for sexual gratification is tracked against the poet’s urge to make – to be procreative – in a manner that, again, may write back to one of Frost’s doctrines: ‘[a] writer can live alone by writing to himself alone for days and years’ but ‘[s]ooner or later to go on he must be read.’ The image presented here of verse as a shared but self-rewarding activity is

130 ST, p.46.
picked up again by ‘Fosterling’ where the poet, at ‘nearly fifty’, has learned that poems themselves are the ‘marvels’ he seeks ‘To credit.’ Indeed, where poetry was once for Heaney a means of communicating experience it is now experience that helps explain poetic creation.

Compare the sentiments of ‘Wheels within Wheels’ to Ashbery’s ‘Grand Gallop’. The 227-line poem is typical of the poet’s obliquity and what Gray terms his ‘relentless opposition to systematics […] consistency […] and the illusion of meaning.’ Like ‘Wheels within Wheels’, the poem is highly self-reflexive; in contrast to Heaney’s insistence on the past’s prefiguration of the present, however, ‘Grand Gallop’ is suffused by a sense of its inconsequence and provisionality. Like Heaney’s interlocking cycles, Ashbery begins by noting how ‘All things seem mention of themselves’, and, yet, there can only be ‘imperfect knowledge of the featureless whole’ and ‘insufficient details related to large / Unfinished concepts’. The act of sense-making is shown to be futile by a use of many of Ashbery’s ‘experimental techniques’, what Blasing defines as his ‘mixed tones and dictions, grammatical and syntactical inconsistencies, referential instability, mixed metaphors, [and] discontinuous forms’.

Specifically, the disruption of time and movement in ‘Grand Gallop’ provides a useful counterpoint to ‘Wheels within Wheels’. While for Heaney the spinning wheel enters a symbolic relationship with the cycles of time through which meaning is understood, for Ashbery ‘history’ is ‘lacklustre, disorganized’ and will ‘defy / Any notion of continuity.’ In Heaney’s poem, the poet’s movement through time is reified by the predictable, orderly rotation of wheels; in Ashbery’s there is ‘just the movement of the caravan away / Into an abstract night, with no / Precise goal in view’, the poet ‘cannot decide in which direction to walk’. Indeed, in Ashbery’s poem poetry is itself diminished to something which can ‘sometimes occur / If only in creases in forgotten letters / Packed away in trunks in the attic’, an antithetical definition to Heaney’s ‘marvels’. In contrast to Heaney’s sense of poetry as a humanist transcendence of reality, Ashbery’s verse, in Blasing’s phrase, ‘reaffirms exchange value over absolute

133 ‘Fosterling’, ST, p.50.
134 Gray, American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, p.324.
value and use alike and is perfectly consonant with a consumer economy.'

Heaney’s commentary often shows an awareness of this consonance by focussing on Ashbery’s congruity to 1980s’ America; his own success in the same marketplace and academic circles might ultimately, therefore, highlight some uncomfortable truths for the Irish poet.

Indeed, there is a final irony in that both Heaney and Ashbery’s poetry can be described as ‘a poetry of absence’ since Heaney, in this phase, installs poetic form as the silent adequating tool in a self-reflexive verse. While Ashbery is ‘waiting for the wait to be ended’ and showing ‘the carnivorous / Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving / Nothing but a bitter impression of absence’, Heaney has waited for ‘For forty years // to say there, there you had the truest foretaste of your aftermath’ in the memory of a hailstone ‘smarting into absence.’ Heaney, however, feels compelled in his poetry and criticism to provide answers to the ‘big questions’ Ashbery raises; in merely asking these questions through his experimental formal methods, Ashbery’s can never for Heaney be an adequate poetry. This much is evident in Heaney’s carefully chosen terms of elision: Ashbery is a barometer who ‘registers an evacuation of meaning’ in a verse that can only be a ‘response’ or become ‘equal to’ the external: this is not the adequation of reality that should foreground every legitimate poetic effort. Where Ashbery invites us to join in the process of words vanishing into obscurity in fragmented form and syntax, Heaney, during his period of preoccupation with Bishop, develops a formal poetry in which poetic structure is ‘standing over something which it also stands for’, a victory over meaninglessness.

This argument allows Heaney, as Dennison has noted, ‘to advance a moral poetics under the less contentious, perhaps more respectable guise of formalism’, and yet, despite its conservatism, this is paradoxically what brings Heaney to a late recognition of Wallace Stevens – an enabling voice behind Ashbery’s experimentalism

---

138 Gray, American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, p.324.
144 ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, R, p.171.
145 Dennison, Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry, p.104.
and Emily Dickinson. In ‘Crediting Poetry’, Heaney explains that due to the Northern Irish ‘vigilance and realism’ he ‘internalized’, he ‘went for years half-avoiding and half-resisting the opulence and extensiveness of poets as different as Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke’. In contrast to his longstanding grievances with Ashbery, when Heaney’s prose and interview comments on Stevens are compiled, there emerges a picture of the Irish poet aligning himself with Stevens gradually. Heaney’s earlier commentary, however, betrays a suspicion of Stevens, especially when he declares ‘[u]nlke Wallace Stevens, for example, that other great apologist of the imagination, Yeats bore the implications of his romanticism into action’, a statement that could imply the former was a less credible visionary than latter. Yet, in the same 1988 interview where he notes Ashbery’s ‘paper boat mockery’, Heaney determines Ashbery to be ‘oddly enough more historical than Stevens’ whom he is ‘awed’ and made ‘helpless’ by, he ‘cannot see the poetry defined’ as he can see ‘Frost defined against a sky or landscape.’ By the 1980s, then, he was beginning to confront the difficulty of Stevens.

By the time of his Oxford lectures, it is clear an important shift has occurred when Stevens is invoked in the first sentence of the title lecture. Where Stevens was peripheral he is now central to Heaney’s thinking, a fact that is evidenced by a use of ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’ in the opening paragraphs of ‘The Redress of Poetry’ which establish the volume’s key points regarding the place of poetry in society. Although Heaney installs himself as an adjudicator between Stevens and an imagined ‘disaffected heckler’ who is ‘crying out against the mystification of art’, he aligns himself with Stevens neatly during one of the most significant sections of oratory in the volume when writer and disaffected citizen become one to press ‘back against the pressure of reality.’ In this image of a place ‘beyond confusion’, Stevens is included in a critical mosaic comprised of Yeats, Frost, and Hardy, suggesting Stevens might now be as significant to Heaney’s critical thinking, if not his poetic stylings. Indeed, on

147 ‘Yeats as an Example?’, P, p.100.
149 Ibid, p.15.
150 Ibid, p.16.
his friendship with Vendler, Heaney later remarked ‘[s]he doesn’t get as much from Robert Frost […] whereas I have learned from her to pay a lot more attention to Wallace Stevens.’ Elsewhere in Stepping Stones, Heaney considers the new terms under which he can finally enjoy Stevens, claiming ‘the old antithesis between intellect and imagination, reason and feeling’ simply ‘doesn’t come into it’; Stevens has both ‘gorgeous display’ and ‘intellectual hardness’, terms in which he might finally want his own late poetics to be understood.

In a similar way, Heaney brings Dickinson’s example into line with his own poetics as he develops them in his critical writings. In contrast to the steady increase in his acknowledgement of Stevens, Dickinson, aside from an ambiguous mention in a 1976 essay on Stevie Smith, is relatively absent from Heaney’s criticism and interviews until the 1990s. In ‘Dylan the Durable?’ Heaney argues that it is a ‘veteran knowledge […] gathered to a phonetic and rhythmic head’ that makes her poetry ‘devastating as well as endearing’. Later, when he reflects he had credited ‘insufficiently the crystalline inwardness of Emily Dickinson’, Heaney paraphrases Dickinson in explication of McLeish, crediting, through a use of both writers, ‘poetry’s gift for telling truth but telling it slant’. Dickinson’s ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’, like Frost’s ‘stay against confusion’ or Stevens’s ‘violence from within’, is a definition of poetry that encapsulates the sense in which it is for Heaney ‘both cogent and corrective’, the basis of its civic function. In the closing paragraphs of his Nobel speech, Heaney praises Dickinson’s ‘extreme’ pursuit of this ‘truthfulness’ during a discussion of poetry’s adequacy, exposing the nature of the affinity he imagines. Dickinson’s obliquity, the volume of her output, and her technical

153 SS, p.348.
154 SS, p.384-85.
155 Heaney writes that Smith’s poems ‘miss the absolute intensity required by Emily Dickinson’s definition: when you read them, you don’t feel that the top of your head has been taken off. Rather, you have been persuaded to keep your head at all costs.’ ‘A Memorable Voice’, P, p.201.
158 CP, p.454.
162 CP, p.454.
163 CP, p.466.
innovations can, unlike Ashbery’s somersaults, Snyder’s lineation or Bly’s ‘deep images’, be understood as adequating tools. Like Stevens’s ‘oil-on-water’ illusions, Dickinson’s ‘forked lightnings and fissures of association’ contribute to, in Heaney’s increasingly closed-circuit poetics, what Dennison has called the poem’s ‘internal economy of beauty and truth.’

In his late prose, Heaney in many ways embodies the Irish-American or Irish-American-East-European figure he positions himself as in the aftermath of his Berkeley residency. As comfortable citing Stevens and Bishop as he is Yeats and Auden, Heaney at Stockholm appears every bit ‘the finished man’ Peter McDonald sees emerging in The Redress of Poetry. That this finish is achieved through a steady move toward poets whom he feels exemplify his first principles, rather than the strategic assimilation of antithetical models, indicates the formative impact of his education and apprenticeship in Belfast during the 1960s. The ways in which Heaney rejects certain American writers in Berkeley and Harvard also has implications for the existing critical arguments built around his experience of America and US poets. Rather than enlisting a wide range of sources in the pursuit of liberation from local confinements, Heaney uses American space as a non-site in which to better get to grips with home; American writers, at first catalytic to an emergence of self, are then selectively drafted in to supply missing elements in his evolving poetics, allowing him to navigate changing critical fashions and the demands made of a Northern poet. While they are politically ‘neutral’ insofar as they are neither Irish nor British, in another sense American writers become indispensable to Heaney’s political manoeuvring in relation to gender, critical theory, and the relationship between the poet and society. The American exemplars discussed in the chapters that follow, though they may be limited in their aesthetic diversity, are to Heaney as ‘substantial and sustaining’ as poetry itself.

164 Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, Salmagundi, p.15.
166 Dennison, Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry, p.126.
168 SS, p.348.
Chapter 2

‘Atlantic seepage’: Frost, Ransom, and Roethke

[A] momentary stay against confusion

I

Before Heaney took the position of visiting lecturer at Berkeley (1970-1971), American poetry had already been instrumental in the development of his poetics. As a student at St Columb’s (1951-1957), Queen’s University Belfast (1957-1961), and while at ‘The Group’ (1962-1966), numerous poets of different national traditions became strong and well-noted influences on his critical thinking and poetic style. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, three American poets in particular awakened his poetic impulse to a degree not yet understood: Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, and Theodore Roethke. It is possible to trace Heaney’s absorption of vital elements from these writers from his time at The Group to Death of a Naturalist (1966) and Door into the Dark (1969), where their examples were essential to the development of the early Heaney voice. From Frost, Heaney takes a rugged texture and an understanding of poetry’s binary relationship to the world; from Ransom he takes a formal elegy that complements what he has already absorbed from Frost; and through a more critical engagement with Roethke, he develops the child’s-eye pastoral of some of his most anthologised work. All three of these writers offered the seductive combination of an enabling verse of shared themes and inspiring essays on poetic theory, a style of criticism Heaney copied out painstakingly in his student notebooks; in a similar way, his early poems are revelatory of his diligent study of the American writers that would ultimately lead him to discover his individual poetic voice.

Heaney’s early engagement with these writers begins a pattern of influence in which he often looks to American writers – all encountered in the 1960s – to help him develop aspects of his own poetics. In the early verses of Death of a Naturalist, then,

---

2 Elmer Andrews notes that ‘[e]arly critics were quick to point out the influences of Wordsworth, Hughes and Hopkins as well as the examples of Yeats, Kavanagh and Hewitt closer to home, and Frost in America.’ The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, ed. Elmer Andrews (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998), p.8.
Heaney is not only ‘trying on different styles and manners’, as Corcoran noted in 1986, but is gathering what would become the chief components of his entire poetics. While this picture obviously troubles the claim that Heaney’s 1970-71 Berkeley residency was his first confrontation with American verse, his use of American writers in the 1950s and ’60s at times feels rather blind to the tradition, with the installation of poets and specific poems appearing to be guided by intuition and the recognition of shared themes rather than shrewd calculation, as the limited pastiche poetry of his years at The Group evidences. Nonetheless, in the 1960s American poets form the nucleus of Heaney’s poetics, one that remains unchanged throughout his career. Contrary to the Californian narrative, Heaney’s poetic refinements and critical theory become increasingly governed by a need to fortify this original foundation rather than expand into new aesthetic territories.

Among these American poets, Frost’s influence is typically the most acknowledged by critics and by Heaney himself, particularly for his depictions of farming and his ‘sound of sense’ aesthetic principle. Though Frost’s influence has been registered in some developed critical readings and the correspondences between their poems are obvious and well-noted, there is still no definitive commentary on Frost’s role in the development of Heaney’s central poetic theory. Today, it is possible for the first time to treat Heaney’s achievement in its entirety and to examine the artistic ideal that runs through his oeuvre relatively consistently. In this regard, Frost is unique among Heaney’s influences for both the intensity of his influence and his continuity in the role of enabling figure, helping the Irish poet formulate his earliest bucolic images as well as some of his most sophisticated later aesthetic thinking. Frost is also instrumental in the development of what Dennison has recently termed Heaney’s ‘moral

---

poetics’, an ideal that sees poetry as existing in a dialectical relationship with an oppressive reality, one that can be survived only by a perpetual return to the shaping force of poetic form itself. To understand Frost’s influence is also to understand how American influence operates more broadly in Heaney. After the discovery of Frost, in the 1960s Heaney continues to be drawn to formally conservative US poets of shared themes, whose combination of well-known poetry and self-commentary offers him a kind of blueprint for how the major poet operates in society.

Despite Heaney’s numerous mentions of Ransom as another influence who was ‘deeply laid down’ in the 1960s, critical discussions of Ransom’s significance have been limited to brief consideration of the impact of the New Criticism while Heaney was a student rather than on a comparative study of their poetry, despite Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’ being the clear template for Heaney’s ‘Mid-Term Break’. Roethke’s influence is also underestimated in Heaney criticism, owing perhaps to Heaney’s reluctance to credit the less prominent poet as his own stardom rose. Though Roethke is cited in many of the major studies of Heaney, he is usually credited as a corroborating voice rather than an enabling one; however, like Frost’s, Roethke’s influence on Heaney’s 1960s poetry and critical thinking is extensive. Heaney recalls reading Roethke in the Critical Quarterly in the mid-sixties and even reviewed his poetry in 1968 in an article that betrays a deep immersion in the American poet’s achievement. While Roethke’s poetry depicts a botanical childhood world that was familiar to Heaney, his lively prose often draws on the shared influences of Frost and Ransom, making his achievement particularly alluring for an ambitious young imitator.

II

At St Columb’s, Derry, where Heaney boarded 1951-57, his response to syllabus reading was, with the exception of Thomas Hardy and Gerard Manley Hopkins,
relatively unenthusiastic. Heaney reflected poetry lessons were ‘a kind of force-feeding’ that ‘did not delight us by reflecting our experience’ and ‘in fact, were rather like catechism lessons: official inculcations of hallowed formulae that were somehow expected to stand us in good stead in the adult life that stretched out ahead.’ When Heaney arrived at Queen’s University in 1957, Hopkins remained Heaney’s central influence; Heaney’s first poems appearing in university magazines were, self-admittedly, written in ‘Hopkins-speak.’ This changed after a crucial reading of Frost in Laurence Lerner’s American literature class at Queen’s University in 1958. Parker notes the unique appeal of Frost for Heaney at this point in his education:

Heaney was at a stage when he was tentatively seeking out non-English models, and in Frost he discovered an emotional immediacy, an accessibility of language and feeling, a cherishing of the rural and the indigenous, which were to become hallmarks of his own writing.

Frost did in fact have to be sought out as Parker describes, as he was only available for study at Queen’s on a specialist course of American writing that also included Faulkner, Hemingway, and Stevens, a module Heaney chose over one that offered Yeats and Joyce. Seamus Deane also took this course and remembers his own infatuation with Stevens and how Heaney ‘hung smilingly onto Frost’, reflecting on another occasion that ‘almost all Heaney’s poems were pastiches, poems modelled around the contours of poems written by writers he favoured’ – namely Frost. The element most easily transferable was Frost’s ‘sound of sense’, an aesthetic principle that Heaney later saw was complementary to ‘the orthodox idea that the age demanded a bit of roughening up of the utterance, an avoidance of smooth numbers, you were meant to hit the stride of living speech.’ He claims his preference for such a style, however, ‘was going on before I got linked up with The Group and received more explicit encouragement from Philip

---

10 Heaney’s sixth form English Literature teacher Sean B. O’Kelly had himself produced an MA thesis on Thomas Hardy and encouraged Heaney’s love of Hopkins, who he first read in A Pageant of English Verse, one of two poetry anthologies available at St Columb’s at this time. See Buxton, p.43.
12 SS, p.37.
15 Seamus Deane to Rachel Buxton, 3 March, 1991. See Buxton, p.44.
Hobsbaum to roughen up."\(^{17}\) Frost’s influence is easy to detect in both Heaney’s relatively unpolished Group poems and the more successful poetry of his first two volumes, indicating the considerable impact of the American poet’s influence during this phase of Heaney’s development.

Though Frost’s reflexive verse often demonstrates his theory, Frost also explained the ‘sound of sense’ across his letters, interviews, and prose. The principle is the result of Frost’s belief that sentence sounds can say ‘all that the sentence conveys with little or no help from the meaning of the words.’\(^{18}\) To borrow the terms of an earlier letter, Frost believed the ‘abstract vitality of our speech’ is such that it is possible to determine meaning ‘without the words in which they are embodied’, as in overheard voices still comprehensible though they are ‘behind a door that cuts off the words.’\(^{19}\) For Frost, sound is as constitutive of meaning as signification and the true artist exploits this, either by allowing sound to conspire with meaning or by opposing sound with sense to create ‘irony’.\(^{20}\) Frost utilises the ‘sound of sense’ most obviously in his dialogue poems, such as ‘Home Burial’ where sound is used to balance tension in a seesaw orchestration, or ‘The Death of a Hired Man’ where another heated discussion is charged as much by sentence sound as by content. Frost’s ‘The Axe-Helve’ manages even to explain the ‘sound of sense’ while demonstrating it:

He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,
Free form the least knot, equal to the strain
Of bending like a sword across the knee.
He showed me that the lines of a good helve
Were native to the grain before the knife
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay
For the hard work. He chafed its long white body
From end to end with his rough hand shut round it.
He tried it at the eye-hole in the axe-head.
‘Hahn, hahn,’ he mused, ‘don’t need much taking down.’\(^{21}\)

\(^{17}\) SS, p.40.  
\(^{18}\) Frost, Selected Letters, p.140.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid, p.80.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, p.113.  
Like the ‘lines of a good helve’, the sounds necessary for poetry are ‘native’ to ‘the grain’ of language before poetic form ‘Expressed them’. Throughout the poem, Frost’s seamless arrangement of speech-pattern in iambic pentameter exemplifies his lesson that poetic music is not applied ‘from without’ but drawn out from within.\(^\text{22}\) As Buxton notes, this ideal becomes deeply lodged in Heaney’s thinking and is referred to several times in his prose, most memorably in ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath’ where he merges it with Eliot’s auditory imagination to suggest ‘perfectly realized cadences of speech […] connect an individual’s utterance to a common heritage by tapping into a shared ancestry.’\(^\text{23}\)

In many of the poems submitted to The Group for discussion, Heaney is experimenting visibly with a Frostian approach to sound and sense. This is illustrated by the uncollected ‘In Glenelly Valley’, an early poem that elevates a typical rural encounter and attempts to transpose the ‘abstract vitality of our speech’ onto regular metre:

She staggered towards the road as I changed down,
Frantic with joy, still waving. Her mouth a dark gap.
Good God, she wanted a lift. I pulled up.

‘Don’t wait, don’t take her,’ the eldest cautioned
As three bums slid down and the door shut.
‘Thanks, mister. Go on. She’s dotin’, her head’s cut.’\(^\text{24}\)

Several of the more accomplished poems of Death of a Naturalist are also clear imitations of Frost’s rich textures and speech-driven power, such as ‘Death of a Naturalist’ or ‘Churning Day’ where the opening line’s ‘thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast’\(^\text{25}\) typifies the Irish poet’s early and heavily indebted aesthetic. While many feel the younger Heaney ‘lays it on rather thick’\(^\text{26}\) in his use of onomatopoeic language, there is a significant ambition in these early verses to write in

\(^{22}\) Heaney would later borrow this image for his explanation of Mandelstam’s re-canonisation of Dante as ‘sponsor of impulse and instinct’, whose ‘three-edged stanza is formed from within, like a crystal, not cut on the outside like a stone’ in ‘Government of the Tongue, GT, p.94.

\(^{23}\) Buxton, Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry, p.91.

\(^{24}\) Belfast Creative Group Manuscripts 1963-66, The McClay Library Special Collections, MS/1/204.

\(^{25}\) DN, p.21.

accordance with Frost’s ‘sound and sense’ and install the ‘ear’ as ‘the only true writer and the only true reader’ as the American poet instructs.

The ‘sound of sense’ is connected to a more profound lesson Heaney takes from Frost: an understanding of the poem as ‘a momentary stay against confusion.’ The phrase, which appears in Frost’s essay ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’ (1939), is significant for Heaney because it crystallises the binary between art and world that would become the foundation for his own poetic thinking. For Heaney, the poem’s formal infrastructure – constituted in part by its sound system – is critical to its capacity to ‘stay against confusion’; or, in other words, its ability to resist the destructive counter-force of reality depends on the kind of formalism and conceptions of poetry Frost evangelises in his criticism:

[...] the sound is the gold in the ore [...] the resources for that of vowels, consonants, punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, metre are not enough. We need the help of context—meaning—subject matter. [...] It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouément. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood.

As an undergraduate student, Heaney showed a fondness for these kinds of definitive statements of poetry’s efficacy. Dennison notes that many of Heaney’s student notebooks ‘consist primarily of extracts copied verbatim, or occasionally paraphrased, from works of literary criticism, giving an impression of a careful rote learning of the chief problems and answers regarding poetry.’ It is clear from his early poetry that, for Heaney, Frost provided the answer concerning poetry’s relationship to historical reality, not just a stylistic manner. In a later phase when Heaney begins exploring the redemptive possibilities of art in his prose, the spectacle of the poem ‘staying against confusion’ remains crucial because, for Heaney, it is emblematic of how ‘the human spirit holds its own against [the world’s] affront and immensity.’

27 Frost, Selected Letters, p.113.
28 Robert Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.132.
29 Ibid, pp.131-32.
30 Dennison, Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry, p.22.
significance of ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’ on Heaney’s critical thinking is easy to observe given how often he cites it, in several early poems he is also using Frostian ideals to facilitate a verse that often talks ‘about itself to itself’, as he acknowledges much ‘modern poetry’ does in ‘The Fire I’ The Flint’.

Heaney’s ‘The Diviner’ does precisely this and, in its clear reverence for the American poet’s principles, can be read productively against ‘Mowing’. Like Heaney’s early poem, Frost’s sonnet rides the tension between the superstitious faith in inspiration and the craftsman’s practicality at the heart of the poetic process, finding a neat analogy in the land itself:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;  
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—  
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.  
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:  
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak  
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,  
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers  
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.  
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.  
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.  

The sense of indeterminacy generated by ‘What was it’, ‘I knew not well’, and ‘perhaps’ is played against the declamatory notes of ‘never’, ‘no’, and ‘fact’ as well as the certainty suggested by the poem’s formal tautness. The fuller meaning is contained in the relationship between the second line and the penultimate one. As Richard Poirier argues in his long and incisive reading, the ‘odd syntactical bareness’ of the line ‘The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows’ makes it sound like a ‘fact’, disguising its true obliquity in plainness. The sentence, perfectly strung across the metre, is a kind of impregnable loop. Though ‘fact’ and ‘dream’ should be opposites, here they are made indivisibly as one by ‘is’, while knowledge of ‘The fact’ is attributed to ‘labor’,

---

excluding the labourer. This repeats the formula of the opening image of the labourer’s ‘scythe whispering to the ground’ where what is whispered is between land and tool, not land and speaker. Frost’s ‘sound of sense’ idea applies doubly therefore to both the incomprehensible whisper and the unknowable ‘fact’. The whisper is a sound without word-embodiment and yet it is understood by the speaker (like the voice behind the door) while the penultimate line exhibits ‘the sound of sense’ by sounding conclusive without the expected clearness of meaning. The ‘clarification’ offered by the whisper and the ‘fact’, then, is ‘foreknew only with some sort of emotion’, just as Frost describes in his prose. More significantly, the poem’s final line offers the instructive image of the labourer – the poet – withdrawing from the scene: as the bounteous land provides for the labourer, so language does for the poet who knows how to harvest its interior riches, the ‘gold in the ore’. It is appropriate, therefore, that the poem’s final word is ‘make’, since ‘poem’ derives from the Greek poiein meaning ‘to make’.

In his own prose Heaney explains that his diviner, like Frost’s mower, ‘resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised.’ Divining, like Frost’s mowing, involves the interplay of faith and craft, of the practical and the poetic ways of sensing. Moreover, as Frost enjoys how ‘Mowing’ ‘has a definition of poetry’ written into it, Heaney explains his choice to quote ‘The Diviner’ in ‘Felling into Words’ is due ‘not for its own technique but for the image of technique contained in it.’ From the opening lines of ‘The Diviner’ it is clear Heaney wishes to employ a more reflexive method than elsewhere in Death of a Naturalist when ‘the arms of the V’ turn letter into image resourcefully. The phrase ‘without a word’ also stands out for its parallels to Frost’s whispering and its suggestions of a language comprised not just of words but of something more innate and mysterious:

Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck
Of water, nervous, but professionally

---

36 Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.131.
40 DN, p.36.
Unfussed. The pluck came sharp as a sting.
The rod jerked down with precise convulsions,
Spring water suddenly broadcasting
Through a green aerial its secret stations.

In a clear parallel to Frost’s whispering scythe, Heaney’s hazel stick becomes an instrument through which nature broadcasts its secrets. The poem’s final image of ‘bystanders’ turned diviners – agnostics turned believers – encapsulates the faith-craft dichotomy that shapes Frost and Heaney’s poetic thinking. Indeed, in a similar move to Frost’s punning closing line, Heaney’s poem ‘ends with a verb, “stirred”, the heart of mystery; and I am glad that “stirred” chimes with “word”, bringing together the two functions of \textit{vates} into one sound.’

The similarities between ‘The Diviner’ and ‘Mowing’ are so overt that Heaney’s poem almost appears designed to exemplify Frost’s dictums that a poem ought to ‘[run] a course of lucky events’ and ‘[end] in a clarification of life’ when the poet, like the diviner, has ‘believed the thing into existence.’ Indeed, Eugene O’Brien recently has noted Heaney is attracted by Frost’s ‘fusion of […] the rational and the emotional, of the conscious and the unconscious’; rural craftwork is a natural corollary to Frost and Heaney’s aesthetic ideals, then, since it reifies the most abstract elements involved in poetic creation.

Throughout Heaney’s 1960s’ poetry connections with Frost are similarly obvious. Many of the successful poems submitted to The Group and those that were later collected in \textit{Death of a Naturalist} are clear attempts to ape Frost’s stylings while some even enter into conversations with specific Frost poems. Buxton has argued that Frost is behind the ‘hardened resignation’ and ‘clean craftedness’ of ‘The Early Purges’ and ‘Mid-Term Break’ while the more direct dialogues of ‘Personal Helicon’ and ‘Blackberry Picking’ with ‘For Once, Then, Something’ and ‘After Apple-Picking’ respectively have led many commentators to note the depth of Frost’s influence. Frost also guides the progress achieved by \textit{Door into the Dark}, with the volume’s title being

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{‘Feeling into Words’, \textit{P}, p.48.}
\footnote{Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.132.}
\footnote{Frost, ‘The Four Beliefs’, p.145.}
\footnote{Buxton, \textit{Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry}, p.46.}
\end{footnotes}
the clearest of many references to the American poet. ‘The Forge’ – where Heaney uses the phrase – and ‘The Thatcher’ build on the mode established by ‘Digging’ and ‘The Diviner’ in which poetic activity is paralleled with a rural trade in the manner of many Frost poems, such as ‘Mowing’, ‘Mending Wall’, or ‘The Code’. In the rural trade poems of Heaney’s second volume, however, the poem’s power to ‘stay against confusion’ is mirrored by a resistance to obsolescence or the encroachment of modernity, as in ‘The Forge’ when the blacksmith ‘recalls a clatter / Of hoofs where traffic is flashing’ before returning to his work. Such moments bring to the collection’s Frostian pastoral some added contemporary resonance.

Heaney’s invocations of Frost in the ‘The Wife’s Tale’ and ‘The Plantation’ are more significant, however. In ‘The Wife’s Tale’, Heaney begins to develop the possibilities of character-voicing and dialogue, albeit with limited success:

‘I declare a woman could lay out a field
Though boys like us have little call for cloths.’
He winked, then watched me as I poured a cup
And buttered the thick slices that he likes.
‘It’s threshing better than I thought, and mind
It’s good clean seed. Away over there and look.’
Always this inspection has to be made
Even when I don’t know what to look for.

Heaney has admitted that he modelled this dialogue on Frost’s examples, though his own poem feels less confident in its ventriloquizing for female characters. Responding to the criticisms of his gender politics, Heaney later claimed he would ‘stand by’ some of his depictions of women in Door into the Dark, adding that ‘The Wife’s Tale’ ‘gets something right about man/woman companionship and contesting.’ The poem suffers, however, from both stylistic and ideological problems, as Corcoran notes in his early study where he offers a fair, critical response:

[w]hen Heaney speaks as a woman […] it still seems very much his own voice doing the talking, and I am reminded of Randall Jarrell’s comment on Robert Lowell’s ‘The Mills of the Kavanagh’s – ‘You feel, ‘Yes, Robert

46 Heaney’s volume title probably derives from Frost’s ‘Door in the Dark’ which begins ‘In going from room to room in the dark, / I reached out blindly to save my face.’ The Poetry of Robert Frost, p.265.
47 DD, p.19.
48 DD, p.27.
Lowell would act like this if he were a girl’; but whoever saw a girl like Robert Lowell?’ The wife in ‘The Wife’s Tale’ would talk like this […] if she were Seamus Heaney; and she would talk like this […] if she were Seamus Heaney imitating Robert Frost. That sudden veering of this presumably Irish wife’s voice into the North of Boston accents of one of Frost’s women is perhaps a technical sign of the poem’s failure of empathy: for all that the men are ‘grateful’ in the poem’s Breughelian closing line, there seems something too authoritatively directing in the husband, and too humbly subservient in her[.].51

Reflecting today on some of these shortcomings of Door into the Dark and the volume’s dependence on Frost throughout, one wonders if the American poet’s influence might have inhibited rather than enabled the young Heaney, particularly in poems such as ‘The Wife’s Tale’, and delayed rather than accelerated his arrival at an original and contemporary-sounding line.

In ‘The Plantation’, however, through Frost Heaney begins to experiment with the kind of productive displacement he would develop much later in his prose. Heaney does this in ‘The Plantation’ by trying to harness the power of what Poirier describes as Frost’s ‘spectatorial poems, those in which a wandering figure tries to locate a “home” by exercise of vision’.52

You had to come back
To learn how to lose yourself,
To be pilot and stray – witch,
Hansel and Gretel in one.53

As plain-sounding as the poem’s final lines may be, ‘The Plantation’ is germinal of the concepts Heaney outlines in ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’ where he argues dislocation is critical for ‘the evolution of a higher consciousness in response to an apparently intolerable conflict.’54 There is also an element of Frost’s spectatorial vision about Heaney’s later idea of a placeless heaven. The ‘luminous emptiness’ and ‘warp and waver of light’55 he describes is one of many examples of his use of a Frostian place of writing to service the writing of place. Though ‘The Plantation’ borrows most obviously from Frost’s early poem ‘Into My

---

51 Corcoran 1986, Seamus Heaney, p.57.
53 DD, p.49.
54 ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’, FK, p.112.
Own’ where the speaker wishes to ‘steal away’ into the ‘vastness’ of a forest where ‘They would not find me changed from him they knew’; Frost develops his spectatorial vision in the later poem’s ‘The Most of It’ and ‘Directive’, the latter of which becomes central to *The Redress of Poetry*. Drawing much instruction from the poem in his introduction, there is also a submerged debt to Frost in one of Heaney’s rhetorical peaks in the collection when he envisages a Northern Ireland ‘beyond confusion’, again drawing on Frostian notions of poetic space to ‘stay against’ a difficult reality.

In later phases, Frost retains his place as a critical influence on Heaney, though it is more in balance with his other models. The conclusion of ‘Station Island’ illustrates this, where Frost’s thinking is still evident. After his many encounters with dead relatives, friends, and artists, Heaney, the ‘convalescent’, emerges and takes ‘the hand’ of a figure who, though widely read as Joyce, cuts a very Frostian image. The Joyce figure in ‘Station Island’ is described as ‘cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite’; Heaney later defines Frost as the embodiment of ‘charm, intelligence, decoy – and I think that’s very good equipment for a poet to have.’ More specifically, the closing images of ‘Station Island’ borrow heavily from Frost’s ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, much like the poetry of his first two volumes. Heaney is advised by this figure to ‘strike’ his ‘note’ as he emerges ‘free into space / alone with nothing I had not known / already’ as a ‘shower broke in a cloudburst’; Frost describes inspiration as the impulse to ‘strike a line of purpose’ through experience ‘in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew’ while ‘in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from a cloud’. Given Heaney’s early fixation with Frost and his admiration of his ‘teacherly quality’, the American poet’s role among the Irish advisors of ‘Station Island’ feels predestined. Still, as recently as 2016, Helen Vendler recalled that Heaney ‘surprisingly’ revealed to her that Frost was his favourite poet. Having few closer confidants or critical

---

57 ‘Frontiers of Writing’, *R*, p.190.
58 *SI*, p.92.
59 *SS*, p.453.
60 *SI*, p.93.
61 *SI*, p.94.
62 Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.132.
63 *SS*, p.453.
observers, Vendler’s surprise is indicative of a wider failing to measure Frost’s true impact on Heaney’s poetry beyond the intertextualities of his 1960s poetry. Heaney’s later essay ‘Above the Brim: On Robert Frost’, written during his Oxford series but not collected in *The Redress of Poetry*, shows how thoroughly his aesthetic thinking grew in parallel with Frost’s, indicating the much deeper levels of connection between their poems. Indeed, when Dennison observes that it is Heaney’s ‘idea of adequacy, of poetry as an ameliorative and restorative response to – adequation of – the imimical reality of life in the public domain, that proves most consistently central to Heaney’s developing poetics’ he highlights Frost’s centrality, since it is Frost who first provided Heaney this concept through the image of the poem in binary opposition to experience. For better or worse, it is this dialectic that governs Heaney’s poetic thinking for the rest of his career, with later influences being selected on the basis of their malleability to this original principle.

III

Heaney develops his verse most successfully through imitation of Frost and Ransom in his early elegies. Frost’s “Out, Out” provided Heaney a particularly useful template. Heaney recalls that his first experience of reading the poem in an undergraduate seminar was extremely formative, recalling ‘that kind of rural tragedy was familiar to me when I was growing up – and I suspect that the death in a road accident of my young brother Christopher predisposed me to the poem’. He remembers how the final ambiguous lines of the poem – ‘And they, since they // Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs’ personally resonated with him, and recalls how ‘Lerner regarded this as a symptom of emotional callousness, but as far as I was concerned, it was the correct rendering of the fatalism and resignation, the slightly punch-drunk resolution, of the too-often assailed.’ Heaney returns to the poem many years later in ‘Above the Brim’, emphasising its ‘documentary weight’ before adding ‘I did not mistake the wintry report of what happened at the end for the poet’s own callousness.’ In the 1960s, Heaney

---

65 Dennison, *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry*, p.4.
66 See Buxton, p.45.
68 See Buxton, p.45.
even tried to duplicate Frost’s rendering of fatalism in ‘Amputation’, an early poem from his years at the Group that contains elements of his more successful early elegies, particularly ‘Mid-Term Break’ which commemorates his brother Christopher. Though the latter poem borrows most directly from Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’, it is possible to trace the development of Heaney’s elegy from the less successful early poem ‘Amputation’.

As Hoffman notes, in its choice of title, ‘“Out, Out”’ immediately ‘calls attention more obviously to its status as a borrowed text’.\(^70\) The Macbeth reference has the effect of raising ‘important questions […] even before reaching the body of the lyric as to how to hear the words spoken on the page.’ It is in this ambiguity and in Frost’s richly textured language – the elements Heaney would most obviously borrow – that much of the emotional force of the poem is contained:

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.\(^71\)

From the start, Frost deploys a range of effects to create the scene through sound. The onomatopoeic ‘snarled and rattled’ and alliterative ‘dust and dropped’ effectively evoke the noisy industrial environment while the snarling ‘buzz saw’ becomes menacing through sibilance, foreshadowing its role in the poem’s climax in which it seems ‘to leap’ greedily at the boy’s hand. Indeed, the double appearance of ‘snarled and rattled’ in line seven creates a nursery-rhyme joviality very much at odds with the bloody violence. Heaney would later exploit a similar opposition of sound and sense to great effect in ‘Mid-Term Break’, making his tragedy appear incongruous much as Frost does here:

The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little – less – nothing! – and that ended it.

The phrase ‘Little – less – nothing!’ mimics the failing heart-beat of the boy in a more chilling demonstration of the ‘sound of sense’ while the answering phrase – ‘that ended


it’ – diminishes the boy’s life to ‘it’, anticipating the response of the bystanders who, ‘since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs’. For Heaney, such resignation was the ‘correct rendering’ of the emotions involved, one that he reproduces in his own poem.

As its title suggests, ‘Amputation’ has explicit thematic parallel with Frost’s, centring on an accident in an industrial environment that would cause the loss of a limb. Formally, too, the poem mimics Frost’s through its dependence on sound as a texture to intensify its dramatic narrative. Heaney opens on the image of the injured man, describing his ‘high slung / Limbs, blotched dressings’ and ‘scars mauve as a tongue’, echoing his vowels resourcefully. The description of the accident itself is particularly reliant on Frostian sound control and an unflinching depiction of violence:

He worked a loud mill that smashed quarry stones.  
Foot slipped between locked rocks. Jammed as a wedge  
He screamed in the grinding jaw; with a sledge –  
Shaft levered himself back, dragging pulped bones.

Here the ‘jaw’ and later the ‘sawed-off knee’ are particularly evocative of Frost’s “Out, Out”’. The choice, however, to shift from quatrains to tercets to represent the lost limb feels overworked in contrast to Frost’s expert management of pace and empathy. Similarly, Heaney’s conclusion, in its use of a hackneyed gambling metaphor for fate’s indiscrimination – a game in which ‘death still holds the trump’ – lacks the emotional impact of Frost’s “Out, Out”’. ‘Amputation’ is nonetheless a useful snapshot of Heaney’s apprenticeship in the mid-sixties where the ‘unabsorbed’ influence of Frost is most easily discerned.

The kind of Frostian authenticity Heaney is straining for, however, could only be achieved by going closer to the event in his own life that made him, in his own

---

72 See Buxton, p.45.
73 ‘Amputation’ could also refer to Stewart Parker. Parker, who had his leg amputated while he was a 19-year old student, completed an undergraduate degree in English at Queen’s 1959-61 and attended Hobsbaum’s Group 1963-64 with Heaney. Although his amputation was to prevent the spread of a bone cancer known as Ewing’s Tumour, Marilynn Richtarik notes that stories of how Parker lost his limb abounded and made him ‘something of a celebrity on campus’. Richtarik, Stewart Parker: A Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.34.
74 Belfast Creative Group Manuscripts 1963-66, The McClay Library Special Collections, MS/1/204.
75 Corcoran 1986, Seamus Heaney, p.47.
words, ‘susceptible’ to elegies for ‘dead children’. Heaney recalls reading Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’ at a Group meeting, a poem that more closely mirrors his personal tragedy and one that bears many key resemblances to ‘Mid-Term Break’. In conversation with O’Driscoll, Heaney recalls reading Ransom’s poetry at Group meetings, adding that he was ‘very devoted to ‘Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter’ and ‘Dead Boy’’. ‘Mid-Term Break’ bears undeniable resemblances to Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’ and could be characterised as a pastiche of its source, the kind Heaney admits to writing in response to Hughes’s influence around this time and recalled by Seamus Deane. ‘Mid-Term Break’, first published by Kilkenny Magazine in 1963, was a needed success for Heaney at this early stage in his career. Ashby Bland Crowder claims Heaney was less ‘polished’ in comparison to the other Group members who, according to Michael Longley, often engaged in ‘aesthetic bullying’ of Heaney.

Though today ‘Mid-Term Break’ is much better known than its source, Ransom has been flagged by critics focusing on this period in Heaney’s development. Best known for his extremely influential The New Criticism (1946), Ransom’s critical theory is widely seen as the dominant force over the young Heaney’s conceptions of poetry during his years at Queen’s University. Laurence Lerner, the inspiring teacher who taught Heaney American poetry, explains:

[The extreme reaction to this [historical approach to criticism] was known as the New Criticism. This insisted on studying poems as self-contained entities. The reading of a poem was seen as the direct impact of the words on the receptive reader, with no interference from outside sources. A really purist ‘new critic’ might even want to conceal from his students the name of the author and the time when a poem was written, so that nothing would sully the effect of the words on the page. The result of this was a sensitive, sophisticated awareness of the nature of the reading experience – poems regained their individuality[.]

---

76 SS, p.427.
77 SS, p.75.
82 Mike Murphy, ‘Michael Longley’ in Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy (Dublin: Lilliput, 2000), p.124.
Though Lerner adds that few critics would be ‘single-minded’ enough to abandon the historical approach entirely, he concludes ‘the intrinsic approach has to be primary’, indicating the nature of his own teaching. Indeed, Edna Longley notes such ‘traces of New Criticism’ were permeating the Irish academy ‘in late 1950s and early 1960s Ireland’ when Heaney was being educated; thus, when he was later ‘discovered’ in America ‘the ground for reciprocities was well-laid.’

Longley also stresses the New Critical approach of Philip Hobsbaum’s Group meetings, where the age’s emphasis on ‘the concentrated lyric, verbal complexity, fusion of form and content’ influenced the manner of ‘close reading, practical criticism and vigorously contested value-judgements’ to which new writing was subjected. In line with this, Crowder notes Heaney’s early ‘revisions are in accord with the Oxbridge New Criticism principles that prevailed in the Belfast Group’. The critical tendency, then, is to view Ransom as a powerful if distant force over Heaney due to the spread of critical theory; in truth, ‘Dead Boy’ is the primary source for one of Heaney’s best-known poems, making Ransom an oddly overlooked figure in the emergence of the Irish poet’s individual poetic voice.

The cold simplicity of Ransom’s title ‘Dead Boy’ suggests a subversion of elegiac conventions, indicating connections with Frost’s ‘“Out, Out”’ from the start. The first quatrain develops this tone, beginning with the neutral declaration:

The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction,
A green bough from Virginia's aged tree,
And none of the county kin like the transaction,
Nor some of the world of outer dark, like me.

A boy not beautiful, nor good, nor clever,
A black cloud full of storms too hot for keeping,
A sword beneath his mother's heart – yet never
Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping.

In contrast to Frost’s ‘“Out, Out”’, however, Ransom’s clean stanzas possess the formal polish and smoother texture Heaney would adopt in ‘Mid-Term Break’. Similarly, though the voice retains some flexibility to convey contradictory emotions, the speaker’s delivery is not as conversational or as self-consciously narrated as Frost’s.

---

85 Crowder, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Revisions for Death of a Naturalist’, p.97.
Ransom’s poem also differs in how it gains control over the reader’s emotion. While Frost creates pathos by exhibiting the helpless innocence of the child (‘big boy / Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart’), Ransom focuses on the interiority of the speaker. In his own reading, Gray argues the shifting ‘diction, metaphor, and metrical effect’ are an effort to portray the ambivalent emotions of the speaker’s ‘complex personality, who can love the dead boy yet recognise his frailty; regret his death but know his world was doomed in any case’. This provides an important lesson for Heaney who in ‘Mid-Term Break’ achieves emotional impact by highlighting the speaker’s subjective experience rather than the fatal accident itself, as Frost does.

For the speaker confronting the child’s body, the physical details of family resemblance unobserved in life are magnified in a mise-en-scène Heaney later recreates:

A pig with a pasty face, so I had said,  
Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretence  
With a noble house. But the little man quite dead,  
I see the forebears’ antique lineaments.

The elder men have strode by the box of death  
To the wide flag porch, and muttering low send round  
The bruit of the day. O friendly waste of breath!  
Their hearts are hurt with a deep dynastic wound.

Ransom’s depiction of the child’s ‘little’ corpse in his ‘box’ – barely a coffin – is particularly effective and something he would duplicate in ‘Mid-Term Break’. The unsentimental image of the child as a ‘pig with a pasty face’ serves only to heighten the impact of the conventional elegiac moments by varying the poem’s emotional fabric, creating a realistic psychology of grief that avoids obvious grasps for the reader’s sympathy. The Yeatsian ‘waste of breath’ saves the poem from what might have been emotional exhibitionism, insisting that the death here is one in balance with a ‘poor’ life.

‘Mid-Term Break’ applies these lessons to create a much more effective elegiac form than that adopted by ‘Amputation’. One of the poem’s clearest parallels with ‘Dead Boy’ is the similar function of the speakers, through whose eyes the reader experiences the complicated emotions of personal grief. Much of the poem focuses on

---

Heaney’s adjustment to what he describes as the ‘representative status’ of being ‘the eldest’, a ‘responsibility […] laid upon me almost formally the morning my brother Christopher was buried.’

Driven ‘home’ from school by ‘neighbours’ and ‘embarrassed’ by his new role, Heaney recalls:

In the porch I met my father crying –
He had always taken funerals in his stride –
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

In contrast to the thick texture and dramatic action of ‘Amputation’, ‘Mid-Term Break’ achieves emotional force through flatness and restraint, much like ‘Dead Boy’. As Heaney mirrors the setting of Frost’s ‘“Out, Out”’ in ‘Amputation’, ‘Mid-Term Break’ borrows Ransom’s setting very directly, with the significant action taking place on the ‘porch’ in both poems. Similarly, Heaney’s depiction of a ‘baby’ who ‘cooed and laughed’ approximates to Ransom’s ‘pig with a pasty face’: both devices create a sense of incongruity to maximise emotional impact and, in the case of ‘Mid-Term Break’, to evoke the speaker’s sense of confusion in the solemn adult environment.

There is a similar rejection of gratuitousness in the concluding lines where the child is finally seen, ‘paler now’, without ‘gaudy scars’ and wearing only ‘a poppy bruise on his left temple’. In contrast to the graphic imagery of ‘Amputation’, there is a lexical precision and a quieter formal authority possessed by ‘Mid-Term Break’ that would characterise Heaney’s later elegies. Indeed, the differences between drafts of the poem evidence this development, particularly when ‘an ambulance’ becomes ‘the ambulance’. As Crowder notes this ‘mere change from indefinite to definite article’ contributes significantly to the effectiveness of the poem as ‘the’ suggests ‘it is not just any ambulance; it is the one that brings home the dead body of his four-year-old brother Christopher’. This careful adjustment indicates the evolution of Heaney’s emotive skills through imitation of Ransom, a poet who emphasises in his prose the need for ‘attention to the local particularity of [the poem’s] components.’ The most obvious debt to Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’ in ‘Mid-Term Break’ is the child’s ‘four foot box’, a phrase that is repeated in the poem’s moving final line, ‘A four foot box, a foot for

89 DN, p.28.
90 Crowder, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Revisions for Death of a Naturalist’, p.102.
every year.’ An addition to the poem’s tercets, the line implies severance and, in its stark conclusiveness and steady footfall, exemplifies Ransom’s lesson that ‘the meter-and-meaning process is the organic act of poetry, and involves all its important characters.’\(^{92}\)

Foster argues the emotional restraint of ‘Mid-Term Break’ is indebted to ‘contemporary British and Irish verse’ in its use of ‘defensive, tight-lipped’\(^{93}\) understatement; however much Heaney’s efforts in ‘Mid-Term Break’ resemble those of his more proximate contemporaries, the similarities with ‘Dead Boy’ – a poem Heaney was ‘devoted to’ – are overt enough to indicate Ransom’s poem was a direct source on which Heaney modelled his own attempt in the form, implying the wider role American poetry was serving during this period of the Irish poet’s career. In his early pastiche poems, particularly ‘Amputation’ and ‘Mid-Term Break’, one senses Heaney’s excitement at the discovery and absorption of elements he recognises in Frost and Ransom’s poetry. Indeed, the extent of these poems’ indebtedness suggests that, while at the Group, Heaney was immersed in a reading-in-order-to-write phase of development in which enjoyment lay in the rapid acquisition of new methods without the self-consciousness that characterises his treatment of later influences, particularly Lowell. While in ‘Amputation’ he continues to experiment with the ‘sound of sense’ principle and the starkness of Frost’s approach to tragedy, ‘Mid-Term Break’ represents a more significant progression by treating real personal trauma. More directly influenced by Ransom, ‘Mid-Term Break’ is still ultimately a result of the lesson Heaney takes from Frost: the belief that the satisfactory rendering of tragedy in formal verse can be a means of allowing ‘the human spirit’ to hold ‘its own against its affront and immensity.’\(^{94}\) Though Frost’s influence is more submerged in ‘Mid-Term Break’, then, it is nonetheless one of Heaney’s most successful early formulations of verse as a ‘momentary stay against confusion’.

\(^{94}\) Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, p.21.
Theodore Roethke’s significance to Heaney’s early poetry also continues to be underestimated in criticism. Though the major studies on Heaney’s work identify the American poet as a prominent figure at this time, the brief attention given to Roethke’s influence is usually focussed on Heaney’s essay on Roethke’s *Collected Poems*, ‘Canticles of Earth’, originally published in 1968, rather than on sustained comparative analysis of their poems. In their early studies, Blake Morrison lists Roethke among twelve poets from the 1950s and ’60s who offer Heaney elements he can move ‘forward’ with ‘into a new domain’⁹⁵ while Corcoran tries to go further, drawing brief comparison between Heaney’s early lyrics and Roethke’s ‘Greenhouse’ sequence from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) ‘which similarly elaborate a psychology from a symbolically suggestive childhood world of vegetable process.’⁹⁶ Corcoran begins a trend in criticism that persists today to ascribe some debt to Roethke’s greenhouse lyrics before moving on to the better-noted early influences of Wordsworth, Kavanagh, Hughes, and Frost.⁹⁷ This despite Roethke’s clear role in ‘Bogland’, a significant early poem which uses Roethke’s ‘In Praise of Prairie’ to formulate an answering Irish consciousness. Indeed, Corcoran himself is one of a smaller group of critics who notes Roethke’s significance to the poem, while Jonathan Allison also argues ‘Bogland’ wishes to define itself ‘against’⁹⁸ rather than in accordance with its American model. Though the critical consensus is that ‘Bogland’ represents a major artistic breakthrough for Heaney for its development of an Irish identity and its discovery of the bog metaphor, surprisingly little effort has been made to trace Roethke’s influence through other significant poems during this phase of Heaney’s career.

This could be the result of Heaney’s inconsistent comments on Roethke throughout his prose and interviews. While his 1968 review betrays his admiration for Roethke’s pastoral and, in *Stepping Stones*, he describes Roethke as ‘one of the invoked

---

spirits” after the publication of his posthumous collection *The Far Field* in 1964, in intervening years Heaney was more reluctant to credit Roethke as a significant influence. For instance, in his 1993 study, Parker cites Roethke as an important figure during Heaney’s years at the Group, and even presents ‘Death of a Naturalist’ alongside Roethke’s ‘Moss-Gathering’ – a poem from the greenhouse sequence of *The Lost Son* – to expose their shared themes and stylistic features. Parker then, however, quotes from a 1985 correspondence with Heaney in which he claims, ‘I don’t know that I was influenced’, Roethke merely ‘corroborated’ or ‘helped to trust’ what was pre-existing. Parker then characterises the similarities between the two poets’ work as evidence of ‘an equal commitment to’ shared themes rather than direct influence. In a 1981 interview with John Haffenden Heaney is similarly evasive, venturing only brief answers when asked about Roethke’s importance to his work before offering:

> I think that it’s a very, very delicate matter for a writer – how to conceive and perceive himself, to what extent self-consciousness, self-knowledge, self-criticism, self-exposure, should be mixed or meshed; to what extent in an interview like this you should tell how much you know. You have to preserve a cellarful of life of your own […] I think that the drama and interest of the self may be the real subject [in *The Lost Son*], but in this country, the self is closely involved with the society that produces it, and is banded into a communal life.\(^{102}\)

Aside from the revealing ‘self-consciousness’ here, Heaney’s definition of the poetic self he seeks, in contrast to Roethke’s, as ‘closely involved with the society that produces it’, echoes comments he made around this time about Lowell and his own ambitions for a fresh approach in *Field Work*.

> In a 1979 interview, Heaney notes ‘in any poet with authority there is a declaration of the self as well as a divination of what produced the self’\(^{103}\) while in 1981 he credits Lowell for his victory in precisely this task, admiring his ability to take the ‘intense elements of his own experience and rendered them symptomatic’.\(^{104}\) In the

---

99 SS, p.85.  
100 Seamus Heaney to Michael Parker 30/10/85 quoted in Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, p.57.  
101 Ibid.  
phase when his poetry had grown more sophisticated and politically conscious, then, Heaney may have been less comfortable citing an earlier American influence who, despite the developments of his later poetry, was considered by some to be a ‘gifted minor poet among gifted minor poets’ and whose work was often ‘criticised for the narrowness of its range’. Indeed, Heaney’s anxiety may be rooted in the narrowness of his own early work when, in his own words, his political instincts were ‘underground’ and ‘the private county Derry childhood part’ of his identity dominated the latent ‘aggravated young Catholic male part’. Nonetheless, Roethke is crucial to Heaney’s formation of this former ‘part’ of himself, expanding his early poetic identity and enabling him eventually to tackle the more complex themes broached by ‘Bogland’. More than any other poet during this era, Roethke helps Heaney develop the childhood psychological grammar that drives Death of a Naturalist and encourages the Irish poet to go beyond the confines of his Frostian poet-as-labourer model, allowing him ultimately to explore the roots of his filial and national ‘self’.

Heaney was probably attracted to Roethke because of his similar understanding of verse as a defensive construct that is rooted in a primitive human consciousness, a concept that, by the mid-sixties, was already deeply lodged in the Irish poet’s thinking. Indeed, it is notable that in his essay ‘Some Remarks on Rhythm’ Roethke draws on both Frost and Ransom to articulate a poetic theory very similar to Heaney’s, one that meshes Frost’s ‘sound of sense’ to Eliot’s auditory imagination in a style of invigorated prose-poetics Heaney would soon begin to develop himself:

‘It’s nonsense, of course, to think that memorableness in poetry comes solely from rhetorical devices, or the following of certain sound patterns, or contrapuntal rhythmical effects. We all know that poetry is shot through

---

108 In his essay, Roethke recalls hearing Robert Frost read Shakespeare and imporing the audience to ‘listen’ to the ‘hiss’ of his language, Roethke reasons this is what Eliot has called “the auditory imagination”: the sinuousness, a rhythm like the tail of a fish, a cadence like the sound of the sea or the arbor bees – a droning, a hissing, a sighing’ (p.80).
with appeals to the unconsciousness, to the fear and desires that go far back into our childhood, into the imagination of the race.109

In the later essay ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: On Sylvia Plath’ Heaney argues:

I have mentioned before the poet’s need to get beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography. At the level of poetic speech, when this happens, sound and meaning rise like a tide out of language to carry individual utterance away upon a current stronger and deeper than the individual could have anticipated.110

Not only do both poets express the same view of poetry as an access point to a shared auditory memory, they do so through strikingly similar vocabularies and prose-rhythms. In the same essay, Roethke notes ‘we find this primitiveness of the imagination cropping up in the most sophisticated poetry’;111 Heaney claims he seeks exactly this ‘language for poetry that tends to brood and breed, crop and cluster, with a texture of echo and implication, trawling the pool of the ear with a net of associations.’112

In his description of rhythm Roethke also mobilises a vocabulary very similar to Heaney’s in his later definition of poetic technique in ‘Feeling into Words’. Roethke defines rhythm as the ‘entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature’, adding that it ‘involves certainly stress, time, pitch, the texture of words, the total meaning’113 while technique, Heaney argues,

involves not only the poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art.114

In ‘Canticles to the Earth’, Heaney makes it clear he sees these ideals embodied by Roethke’s achievement, ‘whatever else’ it ‘may have lacked’,115 and holds Roethke

111 Roethke, On the Poet and His Craft, p. 81.
113 Roethke, On the Poet and his Craft, p.78.
114 ‘Feeling into Words’, P, p.47.
115 ‘Canticles to the Earth’, P, p.190.
'outside movements and generations’ though he is ‘destined to grudging notice because he echoed the voices of other poets’.116 Most significantly, Heaney recognises that Roethke’s verse is underpinned by a shared belief in formal poetry as the ‘considerable human achievement’,117 something that leads him to anoint Roethke’s poetry as a mode of ‘staying the confusion and fencing off emptiness.’118

This Frostian sense of verse as a defence against a threatening reality is exemplified by Roethke’s ‘Big Wind’ from his greenhouse sequence. In the poem itself the greenhouse and the poetic imagination of which it is symbolic must ‘stay against’ the external threat posed by a storm. These symbolic implications are made apparent in the first line where Roethke asks:

Where were the greenhouses going,
Lunging into the lashing
Wind driving water
So far down the river
All the faucets stopped? – 119

Roethke destabilises the greenhouses (which elsewhere serve as the arena of the childhood imagination) and encodes their vulnerability into the language itself, offsetting the repeated soft consonants in the first line with the harshness of ‘Lunging’ and ‘lashing’. The opening sentence also establishes an unusual use of the past tense in a sequence otherwise devoted to capturing immediacy, a subversion Blessing notes as crucial to the effectiveness of poem. He defines the use of such a mode as a ‘strategy which allows [Roethke] to give order and meaning to the events of the night.’120 Indeed, the countermeasures taken to defend against the storm listed from the sixth line on are in a correspondingly modulated language and follow ‘…stopped? – / So’, an enjambment that visually marks the dialectic on the page. In answer to the excesses of the storm, the human activity is rendered in an orderly, levelled-out description:

So we drained the manure-machine
For the steam plant,
Pumping the stale mixture

117 Roethke, On the Poet and his Craft, p.44.
118 ‘Canticles to the Earth’, P, p193; emphasis added.
Into the rusty boilers,
Watching the pressure gauge[.]

The efforts to protect the greenhouse take the form of reliance on machinery, just as Roethke depends on his poetic tools of rhythm and texture to bring order to chaos and stave off the existential threat represented by the wind. The greenhouse’s symbolic status is reinforced in the concluding lines where its physical limits are dissipated in repoeticised language. The speaker describes how it ‘hove’ and went on ‘ploughing’ and ‘bucking’ to survive the storm, eventually transforming into a vessel that ‘sailed until the calm morning, / Carrying her full cargo of roses.’ Roethke therefore puts his greenhouse in jeopardy only to strengthen its power through this survivalist drama, imagination and reality now the victorious and defeated. Indeed, the image of the sailing greenhouse calls to mind Heaney’s elevated description of poetic form’s indispensability, both ‘the ship and the anchor […] at once a buoyancy and a holding’. 121

Heaney stages a very similar battle between the creative fortitude of the poet and the external onslaught in ‘Storm on the Island’, an early poem that highlights this shared sense of poetry’s instrumentality. Like Roethke’s speaker, Heaney’s listens to the ‘tragic chorus in a gale’ as wind ‘pummels’ his ‘house’. 122 Again, the reflexivity of the image is made clear in the opening lines where the monosyllabic ‘We are prepared: we build our houses squat’ highlights the line’s iambic feet and the sense in which poem and ‘house’ are one. Just as Roethke’s speaker turns to practical measures to defend against the storm, Heaney instructs ‘Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate’, a line where, again, through effective consonance and metrical regularity the poem itself becomes the well-made structure in which the speaker shelters. Though ‘Storm on the Island’ reflects a poetic thinking that remains largely unchanged throughout Heaney’s career, it also experiments with a Frostian style of narration in the phrases ‘you know what I mean’ and ‘You might think’, appeals to the reader that feel uneasy but are useful in highlighting the Irish poet’s debt to his American formalists in this era. In the final lines, Heaney emphasises the same dialectic in ‘Big Wind’ as ‘wind dives / And strafes invisibly’ while he is ‘bombarded by the empty air’, clarifying, ‘it is a huge

121 CP, p.466.
122 DN, p.51.
nothing that we fear.’ Though Heaney would develop more subtle and sophisticated forms of reflexivity in his verse, ‘Storm on the Island’ serves as a useful example of his early devotion to his aesthetic ideal and, to use the terms he applies to Roethke, his commitment to ‘fencing off emptiness’ through formal verse. Whether he consciously modelled the poem on Roethke’s ‘Big Wind’ or not, the overt similarities highlight a striking correspondence in thinking that suggests a deeper affinity than is usually acknowledged.

Roethke’s poems of ‘childhood and death’ – for Heaney his ‘best work’ – have influenced Death of a Naturalist beyond any doubt. Roethke’s explanations of his method in crafting the greenhouse sequence illuminate significant parallels with Heaney’s often frightened child’s-eye pastoral. Roethke describes how his grandfather and his sons came to Michigan from Prussia in 1870 and began greenhouses that grew to be ‘the most extensive in that part of America.’ For the young Roethke, they were ‘both heaven and hell’, a place ‘where austere German-Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful.’ Recalling how he wanted to write a sequence of poems set in the greenhouses that told of experiences ‘at once literal and symbolical’, Roethke elaborates:

I began a series of longer pieces which try in their rhythms, to catch the movement of the mind itself, to trace the spiritual history of a protagonist (not ‘I’ personally but of all haunted and harried men); to make this sequence a true and not arbitrary order which would permit many ranges of feeling, including humour.

Roethke admits he found the task of creating ‘a reality, a verisimilitude, the “as if” of the child’s world, in language a child would use’ to be ‘enormously difficult’, and one that necessitated the development of new ‘technical devices’ like ‘rapidly shifting metaphor’ to allow themes to come alternatively ‘as in music’. Not only, then, did Roethke’s sequence portray a world approximate to Heaney’s own, in his devotion to

---

124 Roethke, On the Poet and his Craft, p.7.
125 Ibid, pp.8-9.
126 Ibid, p.36.
127 Ibid, p.36.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid, p.12.
capturing the child’s psychology Roethke offered him something he could add to the examples of Frost’s rural trades, Kavanagh’s farming, or Hughes’s animal portraits.

For this reason, Roethke’s ‘Moss-Gathering’ has been noted as a probable source for Heaney’s ‘Death of a Naturalist’. The child speaker in ‘Moss-Gathering’ undergoes a partial revelation (like the ones made in several of Heaney’s early poems) where the speaker begins to see himself as belonging vaguely to a cycle of nature that confuses and horrifies him. Loosening moss ‘with all ten fingers’, moss-gathering is, like Heaney’s digging, ‘a sexual metaphor, an emblem of initiation, like putting your hand into the bush and robbing the nest, one of the various analogies for uncovering and touching the hidden thing.’ The relish with which the child describes the activity is offset in line seven by the reflection ‘something always went out of me when I dug loose those carpets’:

And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging back over the logging road,
As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swampland;
Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration.

Such an image could easily have inspired the child’s disappointment at the ‘rat-grey fungus’ in the concluding lines of ‘Blackberry-Picking’ or the more overtly sexual horror experienced by the child in ‘Death of a Naturalist’. In a clear parallel to Roethke’s guilt and fear of reprise for disrupting ‘some rhythm, old and of vast importance’, Heaney’s speaker confronts ‘The great slime kings’ gathered to take ‘vengeance’ for the earlier robbery of ‘jampotfuls of the jellied / Specks’ from the ‘flax-dam’:

Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat

---


131 ‘Feeling into Words’, P, p.42.


133 *DN*, p.20.
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.\textsuperscript{134}

The corresponding theme of discovery and horror as well as the acquisition of Roethke’s child’s voice could even allow these two passages to be read as one monologue, with each child’s emotions becoming mapped in shared vocabulary and syntax that, in both poems, conspire to destabilise the innocent ‘I’.

The parallels between Roethke’s ‘Root Cellar’ and Heaney’s ‘The Barn’ are equally striking. In Roethke’s poem, a nursery-rhyme language is mobilised to represent the child’s nightmarish experience in the ‘dark’ cellar, as ‘dank as a ditch’, where ‘Shoots dangled and drooped’.\textsuperscript{135} Heaney’s barn is a clear equivalent. While Roethke’s child observes ‘Bulbs’ breaking ‘out of boxes’ and ‘hunting for chinks in the dark’, Heaney’s discovers ‘an armoury / Of farmyard implements’ that become ‘bright objects’\textsuperscript{136} as his eyes adjust to low light; Roethke describes ‘Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks’ while Heaney begins on the image ‘Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory’; Roethke’s speaker recoils at ‘a congress of stinks’ while Heaney’s experiences ‘cobwebs clogging up’ his ‘lungs’; Roethke depicts the shoots of plants ‘with long evil necks, like tropical snakes’ while Heaney animates ‘two-lugged sacks’ as ‘great blind rats.’ Heaney’s recreation of the child’s terror in ‘The Barn’ appears as if it has been consciously modelled on Roethke’s earlier poem, suggesting again that he was determined to take up Roethke’s challenge of capturing ‘the spring and rush of’ experience in short lyrics ‘written from the viewpoint of a very small child: all interior drama; no commitment; no interpretation.’\textsuperscript{137} The accessible childhood dramas like ‘The Barn’ or ‘Death of a Naturalist’ allow the volume to move beyond the idealisation of a rural world or the celebration of craftspeople and have ensured Heaney’s place on school syllabi ever since their publication.

Heaney is more willing to extend Roethke’s models elsewhere in \textit{Death of a Naturalist}, particularly in his treatment of the father figure. Indeed, it is through a

\textsuperscript{134} DN, p.15.
\textsuperscript{135} Roethke, \textit{Collected Poems}, p.36.
\textsuperscript{136} DN, p.17.
\textsuperscript{137} Roethke, \textit{On the Poet and his Craft}, p.41.
contemplation of patriarchal continuity that Heaney begins to formulate his original poetic self in ‘Digging’, a poem that echoes Roethke’s ‘Old Florist’. Though ‘Digging’ abandons the child’s-eye vision taken from Roethke’s greenhouse sequence, Heaney’s poem still shares many revealing parallels with ‘Old Florist’. In Roethke’s poem, the father is seen from the perspective of the child in awe with his various feats of skill and strength. A ‘hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums’, the father is imagined ‘pinching-back asters’ and ‘planting azaleas’ or ‘Tamping and stamping dirt into pots’.138 The child’s ‘or’ recurs seven times in the poem’s ten lines, underscoring the seeming endlessness of his labour and talent. The language itself is made overtly masculine through a conspicuous use of a thicker texture, as the father chooses to ‘pick or flick / Rotten leaves’ or ‘make the dust buzz’ at will. Aside from the parallel activity in ‘Digging’, Roethke’s portrayal of his father in ‘Old Florist’ also echoes Heaney’s ‘Follower’ where the child is in the ‘shadow’ of the ‘expert’139 father who performs impressive displays around the farm. In his comparative reading of ‘Old Florist’ and ‘Digging’, however, Michael O’Sullivan argues the poets take ‘alternative approaches to similar events’, claiming Heaney writes of ‘unproblematized regeneration’ while Roethke ‘is content to leave the reader with a meticulous description of the act of gardening’;140 ‘Old Florist’ can be better understood as a model for ‘Digging’ by more sensitive attention to the role of the father throughout The Lost Son.

Roethke’s more famous depiction of his father in ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ – a poem Heaney knew141 – contextualises the subtleties of ‘Old Florist’. The better-known poem has been subject to contradictory readings since its publication, with some arguing the rhythmical joviality indicates the child’s enjoyment of his father while others see the form as an ironic framework for a suppressed drama between an abusive alcoholic father and a terrified child:

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

139 DN, p.24.
141 See SS, p.85.
We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.  

As Bobby Fong notes, the lively iambic trimeter has led one group of critics to see the father as clownlike and to ‘visualize the scene in all its comedy’ while another read the poem as ‘a play of words on the page where waltzing and romped are juxtaposed with battered and scraped and beat, where the child is “waltzed off to bed” holding on “like death.”’ Though Fong credits the poem for its ability to sustain multiple readings, he concludes his article by citing Snodgrass’s observation that, throughout the volume, Roethke regresses ‘into areas of the psyche where the powerful thoughts and feelings of the child […] remain under the layers of rationale and of civilized purpose’, with the suggestion that the lexical glitches of ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ are part of the wider effort to express feelings and memories that have been repressed in the manner now understood to be common in trauma. We can discern a similar attempt to evoke the child’s sense of fear as well as pride in his father in ‘Old Florist’, where he stamps dirt and drowns insects in spit. Throughout the sequence, in fact, the greenhouse is as menacing as it is fascinating; in this half-imaginary world of ‘heaven and hell’, the father’s literal absence might imply his symbolic presence among the horrors. Though there is no suggestion of physical abuse in Heaney’s depictions of his father, examining the child’s view of the father figure was a chief concern of his early poetry, not just in ‘Digging’ or ‘Follower’ but in the uncollected ‘Boy Driving his father to Confession’ where he catalogues ‘chinks in the paternal mail’.

Indeed, like Roethke does in The Lost Son, in ‘Digging’ Heaney tackles the son’s deeper anxieties by drilling metaphorically into the genetic memories represented by planted vegetation, hence the ‘living roots’ that ‘awaken’ in the poet’s ‘head’. Far from ‘unproblematized’, ‘Digging’ addresses the conflicted feelings of the son who

---

142 Roethke, Collected Poems, p.43.
143 Bobby Fong, ‘Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz”’, College Literature, Vol. 17 No. 1, Winter 1990, p.79.
146 Belfast Creative Group Manuscripts 1963-66, The McClay Library Special Collections, MS/1/204.
147 DN, p.13.
breaks with filial tradition; like Roethke’s poems about his father, pride and fear exist in tense proximity. A clear equivalent to Roethke’s ‘hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums’, Heaney’s father is a ‘straining rump among the flowerbeds’. As Roethke’s florist can ‘flick and pick / Rotten leaves’, Heaney’s digger is ‘nicking and slicing’. Though ‘Digging’ utilizes a similar rugged texture to depict the father/grandfather as a masculine ideal (‘the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat’), commentators have highlighted the note of ‘guilt and betrayal’ in Heaney’s insistence on the pen-as-spade metaphor, willing continuity in a drama of inadequacy (‘I’ve no spade to follow men like them’) and determination (‘I’ll dig with it’) in which the father labours ‘Under’ the poet. Corcoran notes that, in its effort to forge a connection between pen and spade, ‘Digging’ is trying too hard: what should be all casual ease in fact sounds quite uneasy and that, ‘despite itself’, the poem betrays the son’s ‘insecurity’. Given the many correspondences between Death of a Naturalist and The Lost Son, however, it is also possible Heaney’s ‘insecurity’ is consciously affected; what are usually taken as accidental clues in ‘Digging’ may in fact be part of a deliberate effort to install a realistic psychology, an attempt to recreate what Heaney calls the ‘kind of Freudian nod-and-wink to the reader’ of The Lost Son. Indeed, ‘Digging’ is rather more knowing than other poems in the volume in its fusion of American and Irish influences. Montague’s ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Model Farmer’ from Poisoned Lands (1961), as well as ‘Old Florist’, appears to have influenced Heaney’s early conceptions of poetry-as-agriculture:

I shall come into my provincial own
And mutter deep
In my living sleep
Of the tradition that I keep.
My tiny spud will comfort me
In my fierce anonymity.

Though in ‘Feeling into Words’ he self-deprecatingly characterises ‘Digging’ as a ‘big coarse-grained navvy of a poem’, Heaney tries again to blend Roethke’s influence

---

149 Corcoran 1986, Seamus Heaney, p.52.
with Montague’s in ‘Bogland’, a poem which develops the central idea in ‘Digging’ of
the poet as archaeologist with much greater success.

In ‘Feeling into Words’, Heaney admits before writing ‘Bogland’ he ‘had been
reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American
consciousness, so I set up – or rather, laid down – the bog as an answering Irish
myth’, though he stops short of acknowledging that ‘Bogland’ more specifically is an
‘answering’ poem to Roethke’s ‘In Praise of Prairie’. Where Heaney’s ‘eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon’, Roethke’s horizons ‘have no strangeness to the eye, / Our
feet are sometimes level with the sky’; bog that ‘keeps crusting / Between the sights
of the sun’ contrasts with Roethke’s ‘field of barley spread beneath the sun’; the Irish
‘ground itself is kind, black butter/ Melting and opening underfoot’ in contrast to
American ‘ankles bruised from stubble of the grain’. The most significant textual
correspondence is the final word of each poem: Roethke’s ‘feud we kept with space
comes to an end’ neatly closes the poem by capitulating to the blank space of the page,
whereas Heaney’s closing description of the bog as ‘bottomless’ implies the endless
possibilities of the bog metaphor that he would soon discover. While several critics
have noted the poem’s debt to Roethke’s ‘In Praise of Prairie’, the influence of
Montague’s ‘The Quest’ is less acknowledged. Critics who read ‘Bogland’ alongside its
American model tend to characterise Heaney’s poem as a significant shift in his use of
influence, arguing that Heaney defines himself in opposition to Roethke’s ‘In Praise of
Prairie’ and, in doing so, begins to assert a strong Irish poetic identity. More recently,
Andrews has suggested that, though Heaney intends ‘to counterpoint Irish and
American cultural perspectives’, he ironically ‘finds himself probing deep transatlantic
flows circulating between Ireland and America’. Given his use of Montague – a
genuinely Irish-American poet – alongside the deployment of Roethke, Heaney’s
transatlantic connections may be more deliberately made than Andrews implies.

152 ‘Feeling into Words’, P, p.43.
154 DD, p.55.
156 Elmer Andrews, Northern Irish Poetry: The American Connection (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,
2014), p.68.
In his comparative reading of ‘Bogland’ and ‘In Praise of Prairie’, Andrews argues Heaney ‘in fact deconstructs rather than consolidates ideas of stable (Irish) identity and meaning’ and that his ‘highly wrought quatrains merely heighten the irony of the poet’s final recognition of the need to think in, and beyond, the boundaries of nationally imposed poetic structure.’ The dissolution rather than reinforcement of national boundaries is where Montague is of assistance to Heaney, since the older poet had already been to Berkeley and absorbed American influences, as Heaney understood:

Irish poets of the 1950s were very deliberately involved in absorbing and coming to terms with American poetry. John Montague had been a graduate student in Berkeley; Snyder and Creeley and Carlos Williams were among the people he had met and been influenced by. There was genuine cross-fertilization there because Montague perceived that these writers could help to develop a new ecology in Irish poetry, more erotic, more Olsonian, a ‘global regionalism,’ as he called it.

The ‘bottomless’ earth in ‘Bogland’ might refer then to the possibilities of what Andrews calls ‘the Atlanticism that invades the poem at the end’, as ‘Bogland’ is in a sense ‘built’ on both Roethke’s ‘In Praise of Prairie’ and Montague’s ‘The Quest’.

Montague begins ‘The Quest’, ‘Under the Cretan earth the animal dwelt / That was more than flesh, fabled as myth’ while Heaney exhibits the bog’s almost supernatural preservation of the extinct ‘Great Irish elk’, whose ‘skeleton’ has been taken ‘Out of the peat’. Montague continues ‘Beneath the sharp rocks he searched and pried / Every sun-sapped rigorous mountainside’ while in ‘Bogland’ Heaney insists ‘Our unfenced country / Is bog that keeps crusting / Between the sights on the sun.’ While Montague’s ‘city’ loses ‘interest’ as his quester ‘disappears / Scarcely knowing what the search intends’, in a similar tone Heaney admits ‘They’ll never dig coal here’, even matching Montague’s ‘monster’ with ‘the cyclops’ eye / Of a tarn’. Indeed, Heaney is particularly indebted to Montague’s final two quatrains where this monster appears:

With torch and toughened hands

---

158 Ibid, p.68.
161 Montague, Poisoned Lands, p.39.
Well equipped:
Layer after layer of the darkness
He stripped,

And came at last, with harsh surprise,
To where in breathing darkness lay
A lonely monster with almost human terror
In its lilac eyes.

Heaney’s ‘pioneers’ who ‘keep striking / Inwards and downwards’ thus represent, if not a ‘global regionalism’, then a canon of multinational influences, and though ‘Every layer’ seems ‘camped on’ already, the possibilities of the Atlantic currents running through Heaney’s poetics at this stage already are as ‘bottomless’ as the ocean itself.

Clearly, ‘Bogland’ marks a new assurance in Heaney’s writing in that it represents his first conception of himself as intrinsically different from his American influences and allows this difference to become productive. His more critical engagement with Roethke in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* also suggests this influence may not have been as dominant or indeed as smothering as Frost’s; ‘Bogland’ is much more successful and personally prophetic than ‘The Wife’s Tale’. His reluctance in later phases to credit Roethke for his true assistance in this stage suggests that Roethke may be to Heaney what Hardy was to Auden:

[m]y first Master was Thomas Hardy, and I think I was very lucky in my choice. He was a good poet, perhaps a great one, but not too good. Much as I loved him, even I could see that his diction was often clumsy and forced and that a lot of his poems were plain bad. This gave me hope where a flawless poet might have made me despair. He was modern without being too modern. His world and sensibility were close enough to mine […] in imitating him, I was being led towards not away from myself, but they were not so close as to obliterate my identity. If I looked through his spectacles, at least I was conscious of a certain eyestrain. Lastly, his metrical variety, his fondness for complicated stanza forms, were an invaluable training in the craft of making.\textsuperscript{162}

Unlike Auden, Heaney may have been uncomfortable admitting the degree to which he was inspired by a poet who was less critically favoured than himself until the much later *Stepping Stones* interviews, a book which has since become an end-of-life reflection on his career.

Re-evaluating this first phase of Heaney’s poetic development today, one is reminded of Dennison’s analysis of his student notebooks. Noting Heaney’s disciplined study of Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and Matthiessen’s ‘The Achievement of T.S. Eliot’, Dennison posits Heaney developed his own critical thinking by copying extracts of critical theory ‘verbatim […] giving an impression of a careful rote of learning of the chief problems and answers regarding poetry.’

In much the same way, Heaney develops his poetics through a swift accumulation of vital elements: from Frost, Ransom, and Roethke he was able to take his first voice, an elegiac form, and a successful pastoral. The critical argument that Heaney freed himself of constraining Anglo-Irish formalism in Berkeley through a virginal confrontation with American poetry is, therefore, an extremely problematic basis on which to begin any discussion of Heaney’s poetic growth or consideration of his influences. Keeping ‘Bogland’ in mind, the developments of Wintering Out and Stations are slight and, in the wider view, inevitable, since, as O’Donoghue noted, the trend that emerged in Heaney’s collections was towards a poetry of formal polish over the rougher textures of his 1960s’ poetry, the latter of which he admittedly took from Frost but was encouraged to develop by Hobsbaum, a figure who concurred with the age’s preference for a Hughesean sensibility, a movement Heaney was ‘co-opted into’ after the publication of Death of a Naturalist.

Aside from this stylistic fine-tuning, Heaney’s later aesthetic choices only consolidated what was laid down by his American influences in the 1960s. In Field Work, for instance, Heaney’s many elegies for dead friends and relatives bare the traces of ‘Mid-Term Break’ mixed with the looser stanza patterns of Lowell, a poet who practiced another kind of violence against the English lyric. Indeed, the interaction of Roethke and Montague in ‘Digging’ and ‘Bogland’ foreshadows the later positioning of Lowell and Yeats, two writers who become associated in Heaney’s thinking and work together productively to shape his public verse in the 1970s. These patterns underline what is already clear by the end of the 1960s: American writers are emboldening influences who help Heaney navigate the challenges that come with and after, in his

163 Dennison, Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry, p.22.
own phrase, the discovery of ‘delighted utterance.’ To observe Heaney’s transparent acquisition of American models in this first phase is to see him at his most limited but also his least self-conscious, at the stage Eliot describes:

[a] very young man, who is himself stirred to write, is not primarily critical or even widely appreciative. He is looking for masters who will elicit his consciousness of what he wants to say himself, of the kind of poetry that is in him to write. The taste of an adolescent writer is intense, but narrow: it is determined by personal needs.

Ultimately, Frost, Ransom, and Roethke each spoke to Heaney’s ‘personal needs’: they possessed the ‘truth to life’ he claims he sought in the beginning, influencing not just his first poetry but his first conception of poetry as ‘an upfront representation of the world’, a world that poetry must always stand ‘its ground against.’

---

165 Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, p.15.
167 *CP*, p.450.
Chapter 3

‘shoulder to shoulder’: Heaney and Lowell

In the 1970s, Robert Lowell became the enabling voice behind Heaney’s political form and poetic persona. Though Lowell’s influence was widely noted after the publication of *Field Work* and has been examined by recent criticism, the challenge of understanding Lowell’s role fully and in the pattern of Heaney’s other American influences remains. Lowell is unique among Heaney’s models in that he provided both an example and a warning, illustrating the potential reward and the high cost of the boldness for which Heaney respected him; thus, Lowell serves as the model for both the daring political verse of *North* and the less problematic political elegy of *Field Work*. Lowell’s decline in the 1970s may have offered a useful guide against which to measure one’s risks, but Heaney’s later mixed commentary on Lowell is often underpinned by a sense of injustice at the ‘new climate’ which has held the American poet’s reputation in abeyance ever since. The public friendship between the two poets in which each praised the other’s work in the manner of sponsorship also created a difficult position for Heaney later, as Lowell became an increasingly discredited figure towards the end of his career and after his death in 1977. The tension between loyalty to Lowell and the need for survival permeates *Field Work*, a volume which adopts the elegiac political form that anticipates the more reticent poetry he develops later through Bishop. Indeed, Bishop often provides a counterbalance to Heaney’s more guarded commentary on Lowell, though there is always a lingering nostalgia for Lowell’s reign as the ‘poet challenger of his generation’.

---

1 SI, p.83.
3 In 1966 Heaney published ‘Prospero in Agony’, a review of *For the Union Dead*, in *Outposts* 68 (Spring) and later gave a review of *The Dolphin, History*, and *For Lizzie and Harriet* on the radio broadcast *Imprint* for which Lowell thanked him personally; SS, p.217. Later events discussed in main text.
In a period when the poetics of indeterminacy were in the ascendant, and critics were intent upon exposing the discriminations entailed by a writer’s gender or minority status, Lowell’s ‘canonical’ steadfastness and cultural certitudes did not win many advocates. Indeed, the new climate favoured the more tentative art of his great friend and influence Elizabeth Bishop, a poet whom he unfailingly honoured and inevitably overshadowed when he was alive.  

Like much of Heaney’s commentary on Bishop and Lowell, there is an impression of the Irish poet not as impartial critic but as an interested party in the fluctuating reputations. Ultimately, this is because Bishop and Lowell come to represent the twin elements at the core of Heaney’s own persona which are competing for supremacy in Field Work: the ‘timorous’ and the ‘bold’.

Heaney recalls reading Lowell in the 1960s and engaging in lively discussions about his work in The Group, a time when Lowell’s collections were ‘part of the air we breathed’. Heaney also reviewed Lowell’s poetry before the two met in 1972 and developed a public friendship with him in the years leading up to his death in 1977, after which Heaney delivered a memorial address and continued to publish dedicated essays. Given this extensive history, it is unsurprising that mentions of Lowell in Heaney criticism are frequent, with long discussions appearing in most major studies published in the 1990s. Henry Hart gives extensive attention to the relationship between the two poets in a long reading of ‘Elegy’ while Neil Corcoran’s 1998 study contains seventeen mentions of Lowell. Bernard O’Donoghue emphasises Lowell’s significance for Heaney’s poetics more broadly, arguing that ‘Epilogue’ from Day by Day (1977) is the embodiment of Heaney’s ‘aesthetic ideal’ and becomes his essential apologia for art. More recently, Stephen James, Michael Cavanagh, Elmer Andrews, and John Dennison have all contributed significantly to furthering understanding of Lowell's

---

6 FW, p.31.
7 SS, p.217.
9 Heaney’s essay ‘Full Face’, a review of Lowell’s Day by Day (1978), was originally published in the Irish Times 1 April 1978 and was later collected in P; an extract from the memorial address was published in The New York Review of Books as ‘On Robert Lowell’, 9 February 1978, web; ‘Lowell’s Command’, originally delivered as part of the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture series given at the University of Kent 1986, was published by Salmagundi 80 (Fall 1988) pp.83-101 and collected in GT.
influence. Lowell’s name began appearing more regularly in commentary after the publication of Field Work where his influence is underscored by ‘Elegy’; possibly because of this dedicated poem, Field Work remains the focus of most critical analysis of Lowell’s influence, despite the American poet’s equally important role in both parts of North (1975).

II

In his chapter length discussion of Lowell and Heaney, Cavanagh argues ‘Life Studies is the model for the unmythical second half of North, the volume immediately preceding Field Work, especially for sequences such as “Singing School.”’ 12 Though Cavanagh is right to emphasise the impact of Lowell’s personal-historical treatments in Life Studies (1959), Heaney’s admitted ‘Lowellizing’ 13 is just as apparent in Part I of North. In fact, Heaney’s ‘Lowellizing’ is so accomplished in the biographical, notebook style of Part II that it can be illustrated, not only through comparative analysis of probable models and derivative poems (as can be done easily with Heaney’s Frost and Roethke inspired work), but by reading a Heaney poem alongside a later Lowell one. Given that Heaney had almost certainly not read Lowell’s ‘Since 1939’ before he wrote ‘Summer 1969’, the parallels are striking. Besides the dated titles, the poems both rely on the stock Lowell elements of a conversational style, interwoven private and public historical treatment, and references to other artists. In an unusually relaxed voice, Heaney begins, ‘While the Constabulary covered the mob / Firing into the Falls, I was suffering / Only the bullying sun of Madrid’, 14 a holiday 15 on which ‘Each afternoon’ was spent reading ‘The life of Joyce’. Lowell also begins by situating private history in relation to a wider conflict, recalling ‘We missed the declaration of war, / we were on our honeymoon train

13 SS, p.218.
14 N, p.64.
15 Corcoran notes the holiday was paid for with prize money from the Somerset Maugham Award Heaney won the previous year, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.250.
west"\footnote{RLCP, p.740.}, where he reads the ‘Poems of Auden’. While Heaney draws parallels with the Spanish Civil War through another reference to a writer, Lorca, who was executed during the conflict, Lowell considers the ‘rot of capitalism’ and historical ‘Munich’ within ‘our unfinished revolutionary now’.

For Heaney, too, the present is a poor match for a nobler past as he shelters in the public galleries of ‘the Prado’ where Goya’s graphic depictions of national conflict speak subliminally of the Irish crisis when ‘two beserks’ are ‘greaved in a bog, and sinking’. There is for Heaney, as there is for Lowell, a sense of the present’s impotency as the ‘celebrities’ on ‘television’ – the Lowellian detritus of contemporary life – are beamed into ‘the flat’ for the poet to watch powerlessly. By contrast, Heaney beholds in Goya’s work ‘Saturn / Jewelled in the blood of his own children’ and ‘Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips’ while Lowell, also seeking an antidote to the monotonous present, imagines ‘The Devil’ surviving ‘his hollow obits’ and hobbling ‘cursing to his demolition’. Both poems also make use of a similar closing image. Heaney recapitulates his subjects of bullfights, public art, and history when he concludes ‘He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished / The stained cape of his heart as history charged’ while Lowell, writing back to his opening line, concludes ‘if we see a light at the end of the tunnel, / It’s the light of the oncoming train.’ Though there is a sense of defiance in the younger poet’s final image and annihilation in Lowell’s, the closing images are startling similar. Indeed, Lowell even indicated his approval of ‘Summer 1969’ when he read and provided commentary on the poem during his presentation of the Duff Cooper Memorial Award to Heaney in 1976, reinforcing associations between the two in the minds of commentators.\footnote{SS, p.xxvi.}

The sonnet ‘Fosterage’, dedicated to Michael McLaverty, adopts so many Lowellian stylings that it again requires no specific source to illustrate the American poet’s influence. Corcoran notes that Heaney’s expressed desire to wreck ‘the melodious grace of the English iambic line’\footnote{Frank KINAHAN, ‘An Interview with Seamus Heaney’, Critical Inquir\textit{y}, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring, 1982, p.412.} in \textit{North} was aided by the example of Lowell’s ‘violences upon the English sonnet’,\footnote{Corcoran, \textit{The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study}, p.63.} a point James borrows.\footnote{Corcoran, \textit{The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study}, p.63.} The sixteen-
line ‘Fosterage’ for Michael McLaverty from North’s ‘Singing School’ sequence certainly owes a considerable debt to Lowell’s blank sonnets, also typically dedicated to writers. In its use of midline pauses and stops, ellipsis, dialogue and writerly introspection, ‘Fosterage’ shares many formal attributes with Lowell’s ‘Randall Jarrell’, a poem also dedicated to a mentor in the ‘School’ sequence\(^\text{21}\) of Notebook (1969):

> The dream went like a rake of sliced bamboo,  
> slats of dust distracted by a downdraw;  
> I woke and knew I held a cigarette;  
> I looked, there was none, could have been none;  
> I slept off years before I woke again,  
> palming the floor, shaking the sheets. I saw  
> nothing was burning. I awoke, I saw  
> I was holding two lighted cigarettes. . . .  
> They come this path, old friends, old buffs of death.  
> Tonight it’s Randall, his spark still fire though humble,  
> his gnawed wrist cradled like Kitten. ’What kept you so long,  
> racing the cooling grindstone of your ambition?  
> You didn’t write, you rewrote.... But tell me,  
> Cal, why did we live? Why do we die?’\(^\text{22}\)

Viewed side by side, the similarities with ‘Fosterage’ (as well as Heaney’s later encounters with writers in ‘Station Island’) come into sharp focus. Lowell’s sonnet is notably more melancholic than ‘Fosterage’ – in line with much of his later poetry – with Jarrell’s ghost speaking of Lowell’s revisions in the past tense while, conversely, McLaverty provides encouragement for a young Heaney, investing the poem with a sense of possibility and trust in the future:

> ‘Description is revelation!’ Royal  
> Avenue, Belfast, 1962,  
> A Saturday afternoon, glad to meet  
> Me, newly cubbed in language, he gripped  
> My elbow. ‘Listen. Go your own way.  
> Do your own work. Remember  
> Katherine Mansfield—I will tell  
> How the laundry basket squeaked ... that note of exile.’  
> But to hell with overstating it:  
> ‘Don’t have the veins bulging in your Biro.’  
> And then, ‘Poor Hopkins!’ I have the Journals  
> He gave me, underlined, his buckled self

\(^{20}\) James, Shades of Authority: The Poetry of Lowell, Hill, and Heaney, p.179.  
\(^{21}\) The sequence also contains a sonnet for Lowell’s other Kenyon school contemporary Peter Taylor.  
\(^{22}\) RLCP, p.532.
Obeisant to their pain. He discerned
The lineaments of patience everywhere
And fostered me and sent me out, with words
Imposing on my tongue like obols.23

Though rarely anthologised, Heaney has indicated his fondness of ‘Fosterage’ by collecting it in both New Selected Poems 1966-1987 and Opened Ground. In Stepping Stones, he remarks ‘Fosterage’ was ‘consciously modelled’ on Lowell’s sonnets and ‘could equally have been called “Michael McLaverty”’ in line with the dedications in Notebook, adding that he tried to replicate the ‘head-on approach’ of their ‘portraiture’.24 Allison discovers in Heaney’s manuscripts that at one time the poem was titled ‘Michael McLaverty’25 before eventually becoming ‘Fosterage’, highlighting the true extent of Lowell’s influence. In both ‘Summer of 69’ and ‘Fosterage’, then, Heaney is using Lowell’s form and persona to build himself into the confident public poet he sees embodied by his American exemplar.

North more often takes inspiration from the collections of Lowell’s middle era. Heaney’s ‘A Constable Calls’, for instance, might have a more direct source in Lowell’s depictions of New York police officers in Near the Ocean (1967), a collection from, in Heaney’s terms, ‘Lowell’s poetic prime’,26 a stretch that also included Life Studies and For the Union Dead (1964). In Lowell’s ‘The Opposite House’, the speaker watches an ‘abandoned police stable’27 with ‘broken windows’ growing ‘luminous / with heraldry and murder’ in the ‘New York’ night scene. In the final stanza, a ‘stringy policeman’ is punningly ‘crooked / in the doorway, one hand on his revolver’ before ‘Two’ more ‘on horseback’ appear to ‘sidle / the crowd’ and the ‘Deterrent terror’ of ‘an armed car’ plods into view. In ‘A Constable Calls’, the officer’s bicycle similarly becomes an extension of his threat, indicated by the thickly laid-on consonantal stresses in the description of its ‘mud-splasher / Skirting the front mudguard, / Its fat black handlegrips’28 as the child-speaker stares at ‘the revolver butt.’ Like Lowell’s ‘Opposite House’, Heaney’s final image shows the RUC officer’s menacing departure as ‘His boot

23 N, p.66.
24 SS, p.215.
26 ‘Lowell’s Command’, GT, p.139.
27 RLCP, p.391.
28 N, p.61.
pushed off / And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked’, an image in which the ‘Deterrent terror’ is indicated by a confident, Lowell-like repetition. In the following poem in Near the Ocean, ‘Central Park’, Lowell creates an equivalency between the city’s ‘delinquents’ who brandish ‘knives’ and the thuggish police officers who lie in wait with clubs. Indeed, the central park of Near the Ocean becomes microcosmic of a violent society in which there is a contagion of paranoia: a contemporary America that has much in common with the Northern Ireland presented by Part II of North.

The representation of police officers in Near the Ocean is part of Lowell’s broader critique of American society, one afflicted with inequality, crime, fear of its past, and potential nuclear annihilation. The volume thus supplied Heaney an example highly serviceable to his need in the mid-1970s for a stylish and contemporary public verse that could encapsulate the problems and history of a complex society. For his innovation of this kind of verse, Gray finds Lowell to be in possession of the ‘the finest historical imagination’ and:

the most powerful capacity for juxtaposing past and present, public and private, and discovering significance in the juxtapositions. In his hands, autobiography becomes a spiritual biography of his times, he transforms his life into myth and that myth becomes emblematic, the story of a nation.

Heaney admires precisely this ‘shaping intelligence’ of Lowell; how he took the ‘intense extremes of his own experience and rendered them symptomatic’, a habit that is indicative of his ability to ‘perceive himself historically, as a representative figure.’ For Heaney, Near the Ocean is the apotheosis of these qualities, ranking above all of Lowell’s other collections. In a eulogy originally delivered at a memorial in 1977, Heaney praises Lowell for tackling ‘the historical present, which he then apprehended with refreshed insight and intensity, as in his majestic poem ‘For the Union Dead,’ and many others, especially in the collection Near the Ocean while, later, he even

29 In the first stanza of Lowell’s ‘Fall 1961’, RLCP, p.329, the ‘grandfather clock’ goes ‘tock, tock, tock’ while a similar repetition occurs in ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow’ when the ‘cuckoo clock’ goes ‘Tockytock, tockytock’, RLCP, p.163.


describes the volume as ‘one of the greatest collections of poems in the last fifty years […] a kind of triumph of meter, of intelligence, and of morality.’

Lowell’s reflections on the difficult writing process of Near the Ocean indicate a significant parallel with Heaney as he determined to tackle equally public themes in North:

[m]y next book, Near the Ocean, starts as public. I had turned down an invitation to an Arts Festival at the White House because of Vietnam. This brought more publicity than poems, and I felt miscast, felt burdened to write on the great theme, private though almost ‘global.’

Given the common opinion that Wintering Out expressed ‘no politics’ despite its stylistic developments, Heaney may have felt similarly ‘burdened to write on the great theme’ and to move on, in his own words, ‘from a personal, rural childhood poetry’, to ‘reach out and go forward from a private domain and make wider connections, public connections.’ Moreover, Heaney has praised Lowell’s refusal of President Johnson’s invitation as the fulfilment of ‘the role of the poet as conscience’, noting that the event demonstrated poetry’s capacity to call ‘upon policy to account for itself.’ Following the White House controversy, Near the Ocean was received positively by critics; and to return to the terms of its praise in contemporary reviews is to be put in mind once again of Heaney’s ambitions when he began composing the poems of North a few years later. Reviewing the collection in 1967, Harriet Zinnes argues ‘despite the dark tone’ there is ‘one sense in which the poet shows joy: he is in firm control of his art.’ Writing ‘in closed form’ and with ‘neoclassical restraint’, Zinnes claims Lowell ‘has mastered a poetic tradition and triumphed in it with contemporary brilliance.’ Jay Martin’s characterisation of Near the Ocean as choosing ‘invention over memory’ to tell of ‘the horrors and attractions’ of ‘Western civilisation’ also highlights its potential use as a model for Heaney as well. Indeed, Martin’s comments underline the usefulness of Near

---

37 Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, p.16.
38 ‘Lowell’s Command’, GT, p.130.
39 Ibid, p.139.
the Ocean for Part I as well as Part II of North, where Lowell’s influence has not been registered in any developed critical readings.

More specifically, Near the Ocean appears to have influenced the controversial gender politics of the bog body sequence of North, where ‘Strange Fruit’, ‘Punishment’, ‘Act of Union’, and ‘Bog Queen’ all draw on the volume’s title poem (itself part of a sequence) and the translation ‘Cleopatra’. In addition to the obvious parallels between Lowell’s beheaded Gorgon in ‘Near the Ocean’ and the severed head of ‘Strange Fruit’, the third stanza of Lowell’s multi-layered drama could be embedded easily in many of the poems of Part I of North:

We hear the ocean. Older seas and deserts give asylum, peace to each abortion and mistake. Lost in the Near Eastern dreck, the tyrant and tyrannicide lie like bridgroom and the bride; the battering ram, abandoned, prone, beside the apeman’s phallic stone.\(^{43}\)

The collection’s ‘most difficult poem\(^{44}\) according to Hilda Link, ‘Near the Ocean’ has clearly influenced Heaney’s lexical choices in his bog body poems, with Lowell’s ‘battering ram’\(^{45}\) appearing in the eighteenth line of ‘Act of Union’ while the ‘bridegroom’\(^{46}\) of ‘The Betrothal of Cavehill’ and the ‘insatiable bride’\(^{47}\) of ‘Kinship’ could also have an origin in these lines. The influence of ‘Near the Ocean’ is most visible, however, in Heaney’s controversial ‘Punishment’. To borrow Patricia Coughlan’s analysis, Heaney’s method of combining ‘an erotic disrobing narrative (as in Renaissance and other love poetry) and a tone of compassionate tenderness\(^{48}\) may be rooted in Lowell’s ‘Near the Ocean’, which also formulates the masculine poetic self against an objectified female. The ‘last heartthrob’ that ‘thrills through her flesh’ in the

\(^{42}\) Lowell also has a poem in For the Union Dead titled ‘The Severed Head’, one Heaney would definitely have read by this time since he reviewed the collection in 1966.
\(^{43}\) RLCP, p.394.
\(^{45}\) N, p.43.
\(^{46}\) N, p.45.
\(^{47}\) N, p.33.
Lowell’s first stanza is echoed by ‘the wind / on her naked front’\(^{49}\) in the first quatrain of ‘Punishment’, while the ‘slack breast’ exposed before ‘the brother / and sister’ in ‘Near the Ocean’ is also recalled by Heaney’s ‘betraying sisters, / cauld in tar’ at ‘the railings’. Indeed, Lowell’s image of a severed head, raised ‘to please the mob’ is paralleled by Heaney’s public spectacle of ‘tribal, intimate revenge’; in ‘Punishment’, as much as ‘Near the Ocean’, ‘the double audience is seen as brutal, applauding not the destruction of a monster but the fact of death itself’.\(^{50}\) The ‘compassionate tenderness’ Coughlan notes in ‘Punishment’ is also shared by ‘Near the Ocean’, as Lowell’s ‘monster loved for what you are’ approximates to Heaney’s ‘Little adulteress’ to whom he says ‘I almost love you’. Most significantly, Lowell’s sand functions in the same way as Heaney’s bog. As the sand of the ‘Atlantic Ocean’, along which the poet and his wife walk (‘the sandfleas scissoring their feet’), was that on which ‘the lost Atlantis’ (‘corruption from the past’) was built, in ‘Punishment’, the contemporary Bogside where women are tarred and feathered is built on the graves of earlier victims of ritual violence.

For making these associations in Lowell’s freer manner, Ciaran Carson accused Heaney of glossing over ‘the real differences between our society and Jutland’ and claiming, ‘suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution.’\(^{51}\) Heaney’s loose connections were probably encouraged by the translations in *Near the Ocean* in which the parallels between the horror of Rome and contemporary America are left to form freely in the mind of the reader. While most obviously a potential source for ‘Bog Queen’, the fantasising direct address and characterisation in ‘Cleopatra’ may have also influenced the style of ‘Punishment’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{but Caesar tamed your soul:} \\
\text{you saw with a now sober eye} \\
\text{the scowling truth of his terror,} \\
\text{O Cleopatra, scarcely escaping,} \\
\text{and with a single ship, and scarcely} \\
\text{escaping from your limping feet, on fire,} \\
\text{Cleopatra, with Caesar running on the wind,}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{49}\) N, p.30.  
\(^{50}\) Hilda Link, ‘A Tempered Triumph’, p.441.  
\(^{51}\) Ciaran Carson, ‘Escaped from the Massacre!’*, The Honest Ulsterman*, No. 50 (Winter), pp.184-85.
Besides the neat quatrains, Lowell’s depiction of ‘Cleopatra’ as both a dangerous Queen and a ‘tamed’ victim of colonialism is a clear parallel with ‘Punishment’ and the sequence of Part I of *North* more generally where Ireland is, to return to Coughlan’s terms, both ‘the death-bringing’ goddess (‘Sword-swallower, / casket, midden, / floe of history’) and the victim of ‘rape-narratives’ (‘the big pain / That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.’) While Heaney’s Cathleen ni Houlihan obviously draws on its Irish forbearers, the significance of Lowell’s contemporary example in *North* should not be overlooked as it proves the extent of his influence on Heaney prior to *Field Work*, where it was already being more carefully managed.

Heaney’s friendship with Lowell strengthened around the time of *North*’s publication and continued until his death in 1977. Most notably during this period, Lowell attended the Kilkenny Arts Week as Heaney’s guest in 1975 and presented Heaney the Duff Cooper Memorial award for poetry in 1976. In a review of *North*, Lowell even praised Heaney as ‘the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats’. Although Lowell’s praise undoubtedly boosted Heaney’s profile, the terms of endorsement were controversial in Ireland. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney reflects that Lowell’s phrase ‘rankled all round, and probably, come to think of it, helped to sharpen the quills of the honest Ulsterman […] I didn’t take aboard just how badly Lowell had rocked the boat.’

---

52 *RLCP*, p.400.
54 ‘Kinship’, *N*, p.33.
56 ‘Act of Union’, *N*, p.43.
57 *SS*, p.216-17.
58 *SS*, p.xxvi.
60 In a review of *Station Island* (1984), Paul Muldoon wrote that Heaney ‘should resist more firmly the idea that he must be the best Irish poet since Yeats, which arose from rather casual remarks from the power-crazed Robert Lowell’. Paul Muldoon, ‘Sweeney Peregrine’, *London Review of Books*, 1-14 November 1984, p.20.
61 *SS*, p.166.
original form’. Despite winning the approval of Lowell and Vendler, then, *North* received strong criticism at home, leading Heaney to reflect in 2008 the ‘bitter drive’ behind the negative attention was an attempt to balance the ‘praise’ he was ‘overwritten with’, adding that, occasionally, these reviews were designed ‘to draw attention to the commentator or the columnist rather than the work in question’.

In the 1970s, however, Heaney did not dismiss his critics so robustly; rather, his sensitivity to such criticism is indicated by his swerve away from the controversial style of *North* towards the elegiac forms of *Field Work*. Indeed, during a discussion of his bog poems in 1979, Heaney reasons, ‘I want to pull back from all that because I have begun to feel a danger in that responsible, adjudicating stance towards communal experience’, adding, ‘I just feel an early warning system telling me to get back inside my own head.’ Heaney’s comments are revealing for two reasons: firstly, he distances himself from the dangerous poems of *North* by claiming they were the result of not being sufficiently in one’s ‘own head’ while the phrase ‘adjudicating stance towards communal experience’ echoes his explanations of the reaction against Lowell during this era. In his review of *Day by Day*, Heaney, perhaps thinking of himself, reflects there was ‘a conflict between [Lowell’s] love of literature and his sense of his times, between his predilection for the high rhetorical modes of poetry and the age’s preference for the democratic and demotic.’ In a later essay, he notes Lowell’s ‘triumphalism of tone’ could ‘provoke resistance by its very assuredness’ and argues his ‘reputation suffered because of a reaction in critical and academic circles against those New Critical qualities which had originally made him pre-eminent’, deducing that Lowell was a victim of the age’s preference for a ‘more tentative art’ exemplified by Bishop. In its apparent conciliation to the audience’s call for a more ‘tentative’ political form, *Field Work* indicates Heaney was willing to evolve in a way that Lowell was not, the former poet seemingly tracking his choices against the latter’s.

---

63 SS, p.161-162.
64 Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, p.17.
65 ‘Full Face’, *P*, p.221.
Due to the poets’ public friendship, the dedicated ‘Elegy’, and the Glenmore Sonnets sequence, it is unsurprising that Lowell’s influence was noted so extensively in reviews of Field Work.\textsuperscript{67} Lowell notably provided Heaney feedback on draft versions of the Glenmore Sonnets prior to publication, admiring how they appeared to have ‘come through a grief’ but advising they undergo a formal ‘knocking about’.\textsuperscript{68} Even the title of the volume itself is a reference to Lowell. As Meg Tyler notes, the line ‘Now the good life could be to cross a field’ from Glenmore Sonnet I echoes Lowell’s ‘Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy’ where he writes ‘to live a life is not to cross a field’.\textsuperscript{69} Given that Field Work exhibits a more careful handling of Lowell’s influence than the controversial North, the volume’s title appears to chime with the understatement that negotiating the challenges of life and relationships are more difficult than crossing fields – or writing poetry – thus suggesting Heaney, in his fourth volume, is weighing up whether to ‘cross’ boundaries or toe lines. Indeed, when the volume’s evocations of Lowell are compiled and considered in the wider picture of the poets’ relationship, a much more complex influence emerges than does in North, one that has multiple tensions at its core.

Despite some later rebukes of Lowell’s controversial sonnets,\textsuperscript{70} Heaney has also claimed they ‘were Lowell’s strongest influence on my writing’;\textsuperscript{71} he even admits, in a 1979 interview, that, ‘at one stage’, he had ‘envisaged [Field Work] as a book composed entirely of sonnets’\textsuperscript{72} in the style of Lowell’s ’70s collections. In the same part-review part-interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, Heaney outlines his ambitions for Field Work in terms that echo his later analyses of Lowell’s verse: he explains he wanted ‘to use the first person singular, to use ‘I’ in the poems and make it closer to the ‘I’ of my own life […] that I use in conversation’ and ‘to bring the actual autobiographical facts more to

\textsuperscript{67} Lowell’s influence throughout Field Work was noted in contemporary reviews by several commentators. One of the most noteworthy of these reviews by James Fenton’s who warned that Lowell’s influence on Heaney was dangerous and advised the Irish poet to avoid the ‘striving for greatness’ that ‘destroyed’ Lowell. ‘A Dangerous Landscape’, Hibernia, 25 October, 1979, p.14.
\textsuperscript{68} SS, p.216.
\textsuperscript{70} In correspondence with Corcoran, he describes Lowell’s sonnets as ‘an error in the end’, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study, p.257.
\textsuperscript{72} O’Driscoll, ‘In the mid-course of his Life’, p.13.
the fore but to try to fortify them by some kind of technique’, noting ‘in any poet with authority there is a declaration of the self as well as a divination of what produced the self’. Later, he credits Lowell for his success in precisely this task, venerating the American poet’s ability to take the ‘intense elements of his own experience and [render] them symptomatic’, his retention of a ‘social dimension’ despite his public themes, and his attainment of ‘authority not by the assimilation of literary tradition but upon the basis of the roused poetic voice.’ By the late 1970s, then, Heaney recognised that these other elements of Lowell’s riven achievement might, if imported correctly, still be useful for a potential imitator willing to reinvent his own public verse.

In contrast to Lowell’s emboldening role in *North*, in *Field Work* Heaney borrows heavily from Lowell’s elegiac form. The invocations of the American poet in *Field Work* also indicate a gestation; while images and phrases of Lowell’s are echoed strongly throughout *North*, in *Field Work* Heaney adopts different Lowellian tones and manners to fit each occasion. At times, this ‘ventriloquizing for Robert Lowell’ is not entirely successful, as in ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’ which, as both Hart and Cavanagh have noted, aims for the ‘bronze note’ of ‘For the Union Dead’. In one of the most comprehensive readings of the poem, Axelrod argues ‘For the Union Dead’ ‘unites the personal, historical, political, and literary materials episodically present throughout the *For the Union Dead* sequence into a single grand entity, an emanation of total consciousness’ and that, through the monument of Colonel Shaw, Lowell is able to confront ‘the ambiguities of the American past’. This would be an apt description of Heaney’s aims for ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’, a poem in which Ireland’s complex history is traced through the similarly memorialised soldier Francis Ledwidge. Characteristically, Lowell’s poem is successful because of his ‘command’ – a word Heaney often uses to describe Lowell – of converging histories, with the layers of the past becoming united in Lowell himself as much as by the image of Colonel Shaw, the

---

73 Ibid.
76 *SS*, p.194.
79 Ibid, p.162.
80 Cavanagh notes Heaney’s uses of the word in ‘Lowell’s Command’, *GT*, arguing that it ‘seems to mean several things’. See Cavanagh, p.111.
poem ultimately eclipsing the statue as the public monument. Beginning with the boarded up ‘South Boston Aquarian’, Lowell widens his gaze to ‘the tingling Statehouse’ which faces the statue of ‘Colonel Shaw’:

Two months after marching through Boston, half the regiment was dead; at the dedication, William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone in the city’s throat. Its Colonel is as lean as a compass-needle.

Lowell is satirising William James’s description of the union soldiers as being ‘so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing as they march’ in a speech Axelrod describes as being ‘several notches more optimistic in [its] idealism than any of the major poems about Shaw dared to be.’ Eviscerating James’s rhetoric by turning Colonel Shaw into a ‘fishbone’ in the ‘throat’, Lowell then adds a caveat:

Shaw’s father wanted no monument except the ditch, where his son’s body was thrown and lost with his ‘niggers’.

In ‘For the Union Dead’, then, Lowell re-memorialises Shaw not as a symbol of patriotic martyrdom but of ‘man’s lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die’, a suicidal note to dispel the earlier rhetoric. The confidence with which Lowell attacks the tradition of Shaw poetry may come from his genuine familial association with the statue, as its pedestal bears a line from his great-granduncle James Russell Lowell’s poem ‘Memoriae Positum’. Bridging past and present, the younger Lowell can also meditate on ‘the last war’ for which ‘There are no statues’ (and in which he famously refused to serve), as well as ‘the drained faces of Negro school-children’ on his ‘television set’, giving the poem its powerful contemporary resonance.

81 RLCP, p.376.
83 Axelrod, Robert Lowell: Life and Art, p.168.
When he credits Lowell’s sweeping historical treatments, Heaney often praises the ‘authority’\textsuperscript{84} he feels comes from Lowell’s ancestry as much as his art, describing him as a ‘prince’\textsuperscript{85} and a ‘silvered Brahmin from Boston’.\textsuperscript{86} As Cavanagh notes, Heaney admires Lowell’s ‘pedigree’\textsuperscript{87} and sees it as the power source of his public verse;\textsuperscript{88} it is the Irish poet’s inability to assume an equivalent role, however, that problematises his attempted translation of ‘For the Union Dead’ into an Irish context. Cavanagh describes ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’ as a ‘wholly successful and moving poem’ that utilizes the ‘relaxed, loosely organized, seemingly extraneous anecdotal style, the “drifting style”’ that Lowell acknowledges he took from Elizabeth Bishop\textsuperscript{89} while Hart goes further in his comparison, claiming Heaney’s poem ‘in some ways is a rewriting of Lowell’s ”For the Union Dead”’,\textsuperscript{90} ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’, despite its praise and conspicuous similarities, does not reach the magisterial heights of Lowell’s poem, which Heaney himself calls one of the ‘finest public poems of our time’.\textsuperscript{91} Heaney begins by juxtaposing the ‘imagined wind’\textsuperscript{92} with the ‘real winds’ that ‘buff and sweep’ the ‘bronze soldier’, much as Lowell examines the idealisation of Shaw in art versus the terrible reality of his death. Like Lowell, Heaney incorporates a personal drama into his historical treatment, recalling how ‘Aunt Mary’ took him ‘Along the Portstewart prom’, reflecting now that Shaw is a ‘dead enigma’ in whom ‘all the strains / Criss-cross’.

The devices that feel spontaneous in ‘For the Union Dead’, however, feel stage-managed in ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’. Self-conscious of his lack of Lowell’s

\textsuperscript{84} ‘Lowell’s Command’, \textit{GT}, p.138.
\textsuperscript{86} ‘Lowell’s Command’, \textit{GT}, p.139.
\textsuperscript{87} Cavanagh, \textit{Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics}, p.111. Cavanagh notes Heaney’s admiration for Lowell’s ‘breeding’ is widespread in his prose and often becomes ‘a little vulgar’.
\textsuperscript{88} Bishop calls Lowell ‘the luckiest poet I know’ for the advantage of heritage, exclaiming ‘all you have to do is put down the names’ to appear ‘significant, illustrative, American etc.’ \textit{Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell}, eds. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.247.
\textsuperscript{89} Cavanagh, \textit{Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics}, p.114.
\textsuperscript{90} Henry Hart, \textit{Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions}, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p.127. Hart quotes ‘Prospero in Agony’ where Heaney is resistant to ‘For the Union Dead’, reasoning ‘Heaney's personal and literary bonds with Lowell obviously grew closer over the years’, p.123. Writing in 1966, Heaney finds Lowell’s poem to be lacking in ‘the impregnable quality that comes when a poet is perfectly achieved’, adding that the ‘transitions, if not arbitrary, are not inevitable and the rhythm in the middle stanzas does not body forth the ominous tone.’ ‘Prospero in Agony’, \textit{Outposts} 68 (Spring), pp.21-23.
\textsuperscript{91} ‘Lowell’s Command’, \textit{GT}, p.140.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{FW}, p.59.
‘dynastic’ right to ‘speak like a curator of American history’, Heaney overworks his smaller drama of childhood memory to legitimise his claim to the statue and the history it memorialises. The awkward phrase ‘It all meant little to the worried pet / I was in nineteen forty-six or seven’ also feels too knowing in its recreation of Lowell’s ‘personal growth from childhood moral innocence to adult moral anguish’, while, rather ironically, the sequence in which Ledwidge is imagined in his ‘Tommy’s uniform, / A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave’ commits the crime for which Lowell excoriates James: hearing the bronze statue breathe. Heaney’s quatrains, much neater than Lowell’s, also fail to gather the same impressive momentum. The fourth stanza, for instance, contains three full stops while the later quotations appear cumbersome rather than seamless. Though it could be argued that the clipped lines are Heaney’s deliberate attempt to dampen Lowell’s ‘triumphalism of tone’, supplanting what he terms ‘the high rhetorical mode’ for the more favoured ‘demotic and democratic’, the close imitation of Lowell in the final stanzas suggests these problems might simply be the result of an uneasiness in the stately register rather than a conscious deviation from the source. In an effort to import Lowell’s ambiguity and appearance of haphazardness, Heaney spells out what should be implied, offering Ledwidge’s ‘useless equilibrium’ where the historical ‘strains / Cross-cross’ rather than a final resolution, this despite his careful management of the poem’s other elements. In this way, the author of ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’ too often exposes himself as the awed reader of ‘For the Union Dead’, aping many of its features without the sense of freedom and danger in which Lowell excels. Heaney also dropped the fifth stanza for republication in *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*, indicating his discomfort with the material and the degree to which he is outmatched in this mode by Lowell.

Heaney is much more successful at adapting Lowellian traits in elegies for family and friends in *Field Work*, particularly ‘The Harvest Bow’. In its extensive use of the elegy form, *Field Work* most obviously borrows from *Life Studies*, a collection that, as Jahan Ramazani notes, is ‘dominated’ by elegies, ‘especially for [Lowell’s]

---

93 ‘Lowell’s Command’, *GT*, p.132.
96 ‘Full Face’, *P*, p.221.
97 The phrase also recalls Lowell’s image of ‘an oasis in his air / of lost connections’ from ‘Memories West Street and Lepke’, *RLCP*, p.187.
father, mother, and grandfather.\textsuperscript{98} Though Heaney has praised Lowell’s elegising capabilities, referring to him as ‘the master elegist’\textsuperscript{99} in his own deferentially titled ‘Elegy’, Lowell’s elegies are more emotionally complex than Heaney’s. Ramazani argues Lowell’s father is the subject of ‘sustained attack in \textit{Life Studies}’, with many poems designed to ‘humiliate his father’\textsuperscript{100} whose resignation from the Navy and social fall was a source of family embarrassment. The personal style and loose forms of \textit{Life Studies} are themselves weaponised against Lowell’s father, who is described in the book’s prose sequence as possessing ‘the dumb depth of one who trusted in statistics and was dubious of personal experience’\textsuperscript{101} and who ‘disdained the “effrontery” of Amy Lowell’s “free verse”’.\textsuperscript{102} Ramazani also argues Lowell, in this way, ‘prosecutes his “war” at the discursive level, making his style the “masculine” opposite of his father’s effeminacy.’\textsuperscript{103} Though Heaney’s ‘The Harvest Bow’ obviously lacks this antagonism, Lowell’s less freighted elegy for his grandfather ‘Dunbarton’ shares many features with Heaney’s later and, today, better-known poem. Although Lowell positions his grandfather against his father at the outset, (‘He was my father. I was his son’),\textsuperscript{104} the poem grows into the paternal tenderness that characterises ‘The Harvest Bow’. On one of their ‘yearly autumn get-aways’, Lowell and his grandfather visit ‘the family graveyard’ during their ‘Indian Summer’ together. Recalling his grandfather’s ‘cane’ that was ‘more a weapon than a crutch’ and how the they ‘defied the dank weather’ together by raking the ‘leaves of our dead forebears’ for ‘bonfires’, Lowell depicts his grandfather as the archetypal and mellowed older figure that Heaney’s father becomes in the later poem. The livelier sound patterns of Lowell’s fourth stanza provide a particularly striking formal parallel:

\begin{quote}
At the graveyard, a suave venetian Christ

gave a sheepdog’s nursing patience

to grandfather’s Aunt Lottie,

his Mother, the stone but not the bones

of his Father, Francis.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{99} \textit{FW}, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{100} Ramazani, ‘Lowell as Elegist’, p.102.

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{RLCP}, p.126.

\textsuperscript{102} Ramazani, ‘Lowell as Elegist’, p.103.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid}, p.102.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{RLCP}, p.168.
Failing as when Francis Winslow could count them on his fingers, the clump of virgin pine still stretched patchy ostrich necks over the disused millpond’s fragrantly woodstained water, a reddish blur, like the ever-blackening wine-dark coat in our portrait of Edward Winslow.

The counting ‘fingers’ before the tongue-tying ‘clump of virgin pine still stretched patchy ostrich necks’ may even be the source of Heaney’s hand-woven ‘love-knot of straw’.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, Lowell’s playing of forceful, ‘masculine’ texture against ‘feminine’ intricacy could easily have inspired the rich texture and tenderness of ‘The Harvest Bow’. Heaney’s setting is an equivalent to Dunbarton, with the child speaker moving ‘between the railway slopes / Into an evening of long grass’ as his father begins ‘Whacking the tips of weeds and bushes’ with his ‘cane’. Like Lowell’s ‘admiral at the helm’, Heaney’s father is a male ideal with ‘Hands that aged round ashplants’ in a drama of fraternal affection. Even the intricate plaiting of ‘the harvest bow’, reflective of the father’s laconic nature, is coarsened ‘as it tightens twist by twist’ in tightly woven sestets. Indeed, in its flutter of percussive repetitions the phrase ‘that original townland / Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand’ implies the close relationship between the poem and the bow: as the poem invests the bow with its symbolic power and imitates its form, it becomes the dwelt-upon aesthetic object capable of transcendence. Invigorated by its own momentum of sound and sense, ‘The Harvest Bow’ produces one of Heaney’s most ambitious Ars Poeticas:

The end of art is peace
Could be the motto of this frail device
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—
Like a drawn snare
Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

In line with the earlier treatment of the father-son relationship, the device is both ‘frail’ and, ‘like a drawn snare’, robust; the ‘feminine’ element serves to highlight what is precious about the ‘masculine’ relationship. Hart argues the poem ‘owes some of its

¹⁰⁵ FW, p.58.
pastoral quiet to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “To Autumn” and, to this list, one could add not only the examples of Yeats’s ‘Samhain 1905’ and Lowell’s ‘Dunbar’ but, just as obviously, Frost’s ‘The Exposed Nest’. There, freshly cut ‘hay’ is made to ‘stay […] against the breeze’ as a ‘screen’ for young birds, in a kind of parable explanation of Frost’s definition of poetry as a ‘momentary stay against confusion’ which, in the prose-poetics of ‘Lowell’s Command’, echoes the harvest bow by becoming ‘art’s frail “stay against confusion”’. Heaney’s explanation of the phrase ‘The end of art is peace’ in interview illustrates how intermingled his ideal is with Frost’s:

[[]]he greatest art confronts every destructiveness that experience offers it and in Thomas Kinsella’s terms, ‘digests it.’ So, when we salute art with joy, we acknowledge that it has managed to overcome all the dice that were loaded against it. Can you write a poem in the post-nuclear age? Can you write a poem that gazes at death, or the western front or Auschwitz – a poem that gives peace and tells horror? It gives true peace only if the horror is satisfactorily rendered. If the eyes are not averted from it. If its overmastering power is acknowledged and unconceded, so the human spirit holds its own against its affront and immensity. To me that’s what the ‘end of art is peace’ means and understood in those terms, I still believe it.

For Heaney, then, the harvest bow takes on significance far beyond that implied by its role in his poetic drama of childhood memory, underscoring how productive the elegy form had become by the time of Field Work. Lowell’s elegies in Life Studies, however, lack these transcendent moments. Even Lowell’s grandfather in ‘Grandparents’ (the poem which directly follows ‘Dunbar’) is playfully caricatured rather than ‘satisfactorily rendered’ in Heaney’s loftier terms, highlighting what is clear throughout Lowell’s volume: the elegy form does not serve the ameliorative role for Lowell that it does for Heaney. Rather than becoming the positive intervention in the world implied by the image of the harvest bow on the dresser, Lowell’s elegies denigrate their subjects in verses that are often slack compared to the ‘staying’ formality of ‘The Harvest Bow’,

---

106 Heaney has said he enjoys the ‘triple take’ of the line ‘The end of art is peace’ because ‘Coventry Patmore said it, Yeats used it and I used Yeats using it.’ Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, Salmagundi, No. 80 (1988), p.21.
109 GT, p.130. Added emphasis.
troubling Heaney’s softened image of Lowell as his aesthetic soulmate. Lowell’s role elsewhere in *Field Work* suggests this divergence is not the result of a misreading but a wilful blindness to Lowell’s ‘intense elements’\(^\text{111}\) as Heaney cultivates his own public verse, ventilating Lowell’s influence through several others.

Heaney develops the redemptive possibilities of ‘The Harvest Bow’ in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, an elegy that has several ambiguous layers of association with Lowell. Cavanagh notes Heaney borrows Lowell’s ‘series of adjectives’ and ‘heavy allusiveness, the ellipses, the practice of talking to people in poems, the occasional portentous questioning, the use of the unattributed quotation, and Lowell’s love of resounding closing lines.’\(^\text{112}\) ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ incorporates nearly all of these features very successfully. Beginning with lines from Dante’s ‘Purgatorio’,\(^\text{113}\) Heaney, with Lowellian control of pace and empathy, recreates an imagined version of the real-life drama in which his second-cousin Colum McCartney is murdered:

```
What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down
Where you weren’t known and far from what you knew:
The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,
Church Island’s spire, its soft treeline of yew.\(^\text{114}\)
```

O’Donoghue calls these ‘haunting lines’\(^\text{115}\) while Corcoran describes them as the ‘most moving Heaney has written’\(^\text{116}\). The questions, speculation, enjambment and comma use are certainly effective; while Heaney anxiously lists the possible warnings leading up to McCartney’s last moments, the enjambed ‘stalling / Engine’ cleverly recreates the scene and generates a dynamic mixture of rush and pause before the chiasmic ‘Where you weren’t known and far from what you knew’. A similar ploy is used later when the ‘sweeping’ of ‘feet’ behind Heaney stops in a deadening midline pause before the

\(^{113}\) Heaney has spoken about the influence of Lowell’s translations on him during this period, claiming that if he ‘hadn’t encountered’ Lowell’s ‘Brunetto Latini’ canto in *Near the Ocean*, ‘there would be no ‘Ugolino’ in *Field Work.*’ See SS, p.218.
\(^{114}\) *FW*, p.17.
funerary ritual in which he can ‘dab’ McCartney ‘with moss / Fine as drizzle’ and ‘plait / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.’ The flexibility and heightened literary tone of the final lines recalls Heaney’s descriptions of Lowell’s Day by Day as ‘shimmering’ with ‘a received literary language’117 in verses that are ‘freed but not footless, following the movement of the voice’.118 ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ could have easily borrowed its formula of poignant exposition, writerly supplication, direct address and naming from ‘For John Berryman’ where Lowell admits, painfully, ‘I used to want to live / to avoid your elegy’, concluding ‘To my surprise, John, / I pray to not for you, / think of you not myself’.119

Ostensibly, then, it is odd that Heaney’s later self-rebuke in ‘Station Island’ for the Lowell-like indulgence of ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ is made through another adaption of Lowell. In ‘Station Island’, McCartney’s ghost chastises Heaney who was ‘with poets’ when he ‘got the word’ for how he ‘whitewashed ugliness’ in the earlier poem and ‘confused evasion and artistic tact’.120 The poet Heaney was ‘with’ when he got ‘word’ of McCartney’s death was in fact Lowell, whom Heaney hosted at the 1975 Kilkenny Arts week; but the phrase ‘you confused evasion and artistic tact’ is an echo of Lowell’s ‘Unwanted’ where he laments a time when he ‘was surer’ of ‘farfetched misalliance / that made evasion a revelation’.121 Perhaps aiming for the dramatic impact of ‘Dolphin’ where Lowell half-remorsefully writes ‘my eyes have seen what my hand did’122 or the self-quarrelling ‘Epilogue’ where he asks himself, ‘why not say what happened?’,123 there is even an element of self-flattery about the dialogue of ‘Station Island’. Heaney might see himself as similarly engaged in Lowell’s worthy search for ‘the grace of accuracy’, an ideal which necessitates the extreme revising for which the American poet was renowned. Indeed, in response to O’Driscoll’s question on this subject, ‘[d]id you really feel you had been guilty of over-aestheticizing his death, or was this a dramatic dialogue set up to explore the whole idea of public poetry’, Heaney

118 Ibid, p.222.
119 RLCP, p.737.
120 SI, p.83.
121 RLCP, p.831.
122 RLCP, p.708.
123 RLCP, p.838.
responds ‘It was set up, exactly as you say.’124 Though in ‘Station Island’, then, Heaney appears to concede he was ‘drunk on words’125 in Field Work – the accusation of Robert Johnstone, made in one of the few negative responses to ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ – this is something he may rather proudly feel he shares with his divisive American exemplar.

Indeed, literary extravagance is the characteristic of Lowell’s poetry Heaney most strongly emphasises in the uncollected tribute ‘Pit Stop near Castletown’. The poem, which epitomises their male comradery (‘pissing like men / Together and apart against the wall’),126 was eventually printed in 2003 and conflates ‘two things’ that happened on Lowell’s last visit to Heaney: ‘[o]ne was the stop we made near the gates of the demesne so that he and I could relieve ourselves by the side of the car; and the other was a quick coded exchange’.127 ‘Pit Stop near Castletown’ suffers from many of the same formal problems as the collected ‘Elegy’ but is more deeply self-involved. Recalling how, ‘shoulder to shoulder’, Lowell ‘intimated he’d probably not be / Returning to Caroline’, Heaney then turns attention to his own propensity for rhetorical excess:

    Literary, first-striking Cal, at your
Memorial service later on that autumn
I said the cabbie who’d ferried you to the door
And waited to be paid already had been
Paid in the coin of language, that East River was Styx
And so on, rising to the occasion

    Perhaps too highly. Mary McCarthy’s verdict —
As reported back to me, at any rate —
Took my rhetoric and wrung its neck:

    ‘The biggest cover-up since Watergate.’

124 SS, p.221.
126 ‘Pit Stop Near Castletown.’ Agni No. 57, 2003, p.4
Three of the poem’s eight tercets focus on Heaney’s memorial address for Lowell, underscoring Heaney’s increased consciousness of the perception of their friendship. Rather than revising his stance on the American poet, however, the poem identifies the same shared fault as ‘Station Island’, one that, indeed, becomes hardly a fault at all. Just as Lowell’s decline in popularity is the result of his pronounced ‘literary’ streak and ‘rhetorical assertiveness’ (‘the New Critical qualities that originally made him preeminent’), Heaney’s ‘rhetoric’ has its neck ‘wrgn’ and is criticised by a line which puns on the earlier scene by the side of the car, thus robbing the accusation of power. There is also some trickery of enjambment, as the break across ‘irremediably // Literary’ and ‘rising to the occasion // Perhaps too highly’ on both occasions softens the redressing element and allows the positive to be read in isolation. Indeed, it is the poem’s layout – the poetic ‘climate’ – that distorts Lowell’s qualities, turning his strengths into weaknesses. Nonetheless, Heaney’s choice not to publish the poem until many decades after the described events took place indicates his wariness of re-entering this difficult terrain.

In the earlier tribute collected in Field Work, ‘Elegy’, Heaney credits the American poet’s literariness by citing many of his verses, in a sense not only elegising Lowell but Lowell’s style of elegy. Commentary on ‘Elegy’ has been mixed, with most critics sensing a note of ambivalence in the tribute but differing in their speculations on what it reveals about the relationship. Heaney begins by considering the advantages of living the ‘bold’ life embodied by Lowell, recalling how the ‘master elegist’ had ‘sat / ten days ago’ where he presently writes, a device that feels designed to create a sense of authenticity despite the poem’s obvious self-consciousness. Indeed, like ‘Pit Stop near Castletown’, ‘Elegy’ broaches Lowell’s difficulties carefully when Heaney praises Lowell for ‘promulgating art’s / deliberate, peremptory / love and arrogance.’ The attribution of ‘peremptory’ – a word Heaney uses to describe Lowell elsewhere – to art rather than Lowell himself is a subtle manoeuvre that shifts negative connotations away from the poet. More telling is the citation of ‘Dolphin’ in the following line, the

129 Henry Hart argues ‘Elegy is ‘certainly no gullible obeisance to the American poet’ (p.124), while Cavanagh discerns a desire to ‘rival’ as well as credit Lowell (p.114). Andrews reads ‘Elegy’ as ‘an interesting record of mixed feelings – both of hero-worship and an implicit sense that, pace Bloom, Heaney is determined to define his own style against that of Lowell’ (p.96).
130 FW, p.31.
title poem of a collection controversial for its use and manipulation of personal letters. In the poem itself, Lowell offers a measure of remorse:

I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself—
to ask compassion . . . this book, half fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting—
my eyes have seen what my hand did.\(^{131}\)

In his memorial address, Heaney says the poem’s final line ‘branded itself’ on him, praising its ‘two musics that contend but do not overpower each other’,\(^{132}\) the ‘bronze note, and perhaps even brazen note, of artistic mastery’ and the note of ‘human remorse’ that recognises the ‘price which poetic daring involves’.\(^{133}\) It is this ‘poetic daring’ Heaney finally praises in ‘Elegy’, admiring Lowell for how he ‘bullied out / heart-hammering blank sonnets / of love for Harriet // and Lizzie’. In ‘Lowell’s Command’, Heaney also refuses to confront the sense in which Lowell’s sonnets are deeply problematic, mentioning them only to explain they will not be the focus of his discussion because they feel ‘too much under the sway of an imposed power’, adding he felt ‘driven off the field of my reader’s freedom by the massive riveted façade’.\(^{134}\) There is a clear moral dimension to the reproduction and manipulation of private material in *The Dolphin* which, in both prose and verse, Heaney is reluctant to engage with, discarding Lowell’s sonnets finally on an aesthetic basis only. This is in sharp contrast to the wider condemnation of *The Dolphin* by Bishop\(^{135}\) and Adrienne Rich, the latter of whom wrote of the title poem’s final lines:

I have to say that I think this bullshit eloquence, a poor excuse for a cruel and shallow book, that it is presumptuous to balance injury done to others with injury done to oneself — and that the question remains, after all — to

---

\(^{131}\) RLCP, p.708.  
\(^{133}\) Ibid.  
\(^{134}\) ‘Lowell’s Command’, *GT*, p.141.  
\(^{135}\) Bishop wrote to Lowell: ‘One can use one’s life as material—one does, anyway—but these letters—aren’t you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn’t changed them … etc. But art just isn’t worth that much.’ *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, p.708.
what purpose? The inclusion of the letter-poems stands as one of the most vindictive and mean-spirited acts in the history of poetry, one for which I can think of no precedent: and the same unproportioned ego that was capable of this act is damageningly at work in all three of Lowell’s books.136

By contrast, Heaney admires Lowell for this ‘daring’, though he acknowledges it became extremely unpopular, depicting Lowell as a martyr for poetry’s ‘love and arrogance’ whose unwillingness to compromise was finally his undoing. This, ultimately, is Lowell’s most important lesson for the younger poet through the subsequent decades.

The last lines of ‘Elegy’ recall the terms of the eulogy of which, by the time of the ‘Pit Stop’, Heaney had grown self-conscious:

you found the child in me
when you took farewells
under the full bay tree
by the gate in Glanmore,

opulent and restorative
as that lingering summertime,
the fish-dart of your eyes
risking, ‘I’ll pray for you’.

This scene of torch-passing, which Corcoran derides as a ‘poetic laying on of hands’,137 brings to mind Heaney’s remark that one ought to ‘occupy the space [Lowell] filled somehow, to assume into our own life the values we admired in his, and thereby conserve his unique energy.’138 In the years that followed, Heaney abandoned this endeavour, as he never republished ‘Elegy’ in later collected poems editions and his comments on Lowell became increasingly guarded.139 Ultimately, ‘Elegy’ feels uneasy not because of an encoded challenge to the elder poet or a desire to avoid appearing too influenced by him, as earlier commentators have intimated; rather, the poem suffers because of its contradictory efforts to both hide and reveal the nature of admiration, a tension that characterises much of Heaney’s discussions of Lowell. The resulting

139 In correspondence with Corcoran, Heaney describes Lowell’s sonnets as ‘an error in the end’, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.257.
portrait is one that neither satisfies Lowell’s harsher critics nor best represents his talents, however misdirected they may have been in the final stages of his career. Indeed, the Lowell that remains in ‘Elegy’ is, as Cavanagh notes, a kind of enigmatic ‘Mr. Poetry’, a role baggy enough to fit even this slightly ill-defined version.

Critical responses to Heaney’s ‘The Skunk’ have also been mixed, with many commentators sensing the poem is in a significant but ambiguous dialogue with Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ from Life Studies. Blake Morrison discerns ‘a very Lowell-like title’ at work while Henry Hart observes ‘The Skunk’ ‘has some of the religious connotations of’ Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’, though ‘Heaney is more contented, and more enthusiastic than Lowell about the religious alliance of sacred and profane, Christian and pagan.’ Michael Cavanagh offers a long comparative reading of the two poems based largely on Hart’s insights, noting at the outset that the ‘parallels in the two books of poems [Life Studies and Field Work] are sufficiently compelling that they encourage us to be adventurous.’ He argues that Heaney offers in ‘The Skunk’ ‘a Catholic’s vision to rival a Protestant’s’, noting that the poems diverge at the level of mood, tone, and form. The connection between the two skunk poems, however, may be better understood in terms of their self-perceived importance in each poets’ development rather than in thematic or formal terms. Lowell himself considered ‘Skunk Hour’ to be a significant moment of poetic reinvention in his career, composed at a time when he felt his existing poetry was ‘distant, symbol-ridden, and wilfully difficult.’ His old poems, he explains, ‘hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humourless, and even impenetrable surface.’ Lowell felt that ‘Skunk Hour’, with its flexible voice and deep introspection, enabled this needed ‘breaking through’ of ‘the shell of my old manner’.

‘Skunk Hour’ begins with a description of a New England coastal town in decline that progresses in loosely-arranged, conversational stanzas:

Nautilus Island’s hermit

---

140 Cavanagh, Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Poetics, p.112.
142 Hart, Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions, p.131.
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son’s a bishop. Her farmer
is first selectman in our village;
she’s in her dotage.\textsuperscript{146}

The new tangential style exhibited by the gloomy logging of detail in place of Lowell’s former literary obliquity leads the speaker of ‘Skunk Hour’ to dark insights into private torment, as Lowell begins to draw on several sources to depict a painful existence that neither art nor religion can redeem. Moving from the flat, seemingly aimless descriptions of the opening stanzas, the speaker emerges in a car park where he watches ‘love-cars’:

A car radio bleats,  
‘Love, O careless Love. . . .’ I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .  
I myself am hell;  
nobody’s here—

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes’ red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

Finding no salvation in the ‘Trinitarian Church’, the speaker identifies with the squalor of the skunks. Staples argues this palpable sense of anguish ‘arises not so much out of a departure from reality as from an overly sensitive appreciation of its sordidness’, therefore the scene is ‘invested not with a horrible fantasy, but rather an explicit naturalism’.\textsuperscript{147} Building on the suicidal suggestions of the ‘hand’ at the ‘throat’, the identification with the skunks is no transcendence of human torment; rather, the speaker is envious of the skunks’ obliviousness to their own conditions and the pointlessness of their lives. Lowell claims to have not consciously ‘intended’ the allusion to ‘Satan’s feeling of sexual deprivation while he watched Adam and Eve in the Garden’\textsuperscript{148} implied

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{RLCP}, p.191. \\
\textsuperscript{147} Hugh B. Staples, \textit{Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years} (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p.83. \\
\end{flushright}
by the line ‘I myself am hell’, but admits the scene in the carpark was deliberately based on ‘an anecdote about Walt Whitman in his old age’. In fact, the speaker’s identification with the skunks recalls lines from Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they’re so placid and self-contain’d, I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago[.] An ironic twist on Whitman’s optimistic depiction of a prelapsarian existence, Lowell uses his own flexible form to chart a suffering that is unique to humanity and for which there is no remedy. Like the skunks, he is animal and ugly; unlike them, he is burdened by a painful awareness of his condition.

Heaney has admitted that the skunk in his own poem is ‘a kindlier, slinkier one altogether’ than Lowell’s. Why, then, does Heaney associate his light-hearted comedy with Lowell’s much darker poem? At the time he was composing the poems of Field Work in the aftermath of North, Heaney was experiencing artistic frustrations comparable to Lowell’s in 1957 and desired for his next volume a freer voice in a more personal poetic manner, as Lowell did prior to the breakthrough of ‘Skunk Hour’; a desire to incorporate ‘the first person singular […] to bring the actual autobiographical facts more to the fore but to try to fortify them by some kind of technique’. The ‘technique’ of ‘The Skunk’, however, is in many ways the opposite of that employed by Lowell in ‘Skunk Hour’: the skunk, by representing Heaney’s absent wife, does not highlight isolation but rather connects the speaker to the outer human world while the feelings of sexual longing and loneliness are valorised through invigorated poetic

---

150 Lowell, Robert Lowell Collected Prose, p.228.
153 Lowell recalls ‘Skunk Hour’ was begun in mid-August 1957; in March he had been giving readings on the West Coast, a tour on which he began to resent his earlier style, Robert Lowell Collected Prose, pp.226-27.
language rather than debased in flat description or intense self-loathing. An overlooked reference in the final stanza of ‘The Skunk’ provides the clue necessary to understand its dialogue with ‘Skunk Hour’:

It all came back to me last night, stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.155

When the speaker brings the reader from California to the marital bedroom through the intoxicating power of sensory description (‘The aftermath of a mouthful of wine / Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow’), the ‘head-down, tail-up hunt’ echoes the poem which Lowell claims inspired his breakthrough in ‘Skunk Hour’, Bishop’s ‘The Armadillo’:

The ancient owls’ nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down[].156

Lloyd Schwartz has noted the confusion surrounding the dedications of ‘Skunk Hour’ and ‘The Armadillo’, and corrects the widespread erroneous claim that Bishop’s poem is a response to Lowell’s.157 In truth, ‘Skunk Hour’ was inspired by ‘The Armadillo’, a poem which originally appeared in the New Yorker in June 1957; when it was later collected in Questions of Travel (1965), Bishop merely reciprocated Lowell’s dedication. Lowell credits the ‘rhythms, idiom, images, and stanza structure’ of ‘The Armadillo’ for liberating him from his constraining style, even calling it ‘a much better poem’158 than his own. By invoking the poem which inspired ‘Skunk Hour’, then, Heaney may be implying that he simply desired an equivalent move towards a verse that could incorporate his own everyday experience in a correspondingly conversational style. Indeed, in its neat quatrains and steadier progression, ‘The Skunk’ much more closely resembles Bishop’s poem than Lowell’s, suggesting Heaney’s reference may even be a coded acknowledgement of his need to develop the more restrained and less

155 FW, p.48.
156 EBCP, p.103.
dangerous style he sees in Bishop’s work. It remains ironic that the first clear use of Bishop – Heaney’s only significant female influence – has gone unnoticed and appears in a poem of questionable gender politics. Whether Heaney sees himself as an heir to Lowell and Bishop by this stage of his career or he simply desired to forge a middle-ground between two writers he depicts largely as opposites, ‘The Skunk’ is significant in Field Work for highlighting Heaney’s rising sense that Lowell’s influence needed to be balanced with the corrective force of others.

One of Field Work’s most successful poems, ‘Casualty’, also ventilates Lowell’s emboldening influence through another’s. Dedicated to Louis O’Neil, a local angler who was murdered in a bomb attack, ‘Casualty’ encapsulates the shift in Heaney’s poetic persona from the ‘artful voyeur’ of atrocities to restrained elegist and prefigures the ghost-meetings of ‘Station Island’. Praised by critics, Heaney considers the poem to be a formal breakthrough as well. His various remarks about ‘Casualty’ in Stepping Stones are revealing of Lowell’s complex role in the poem’s composition. Admittedly using Yeats ‘The Fisherman’ as a ‘tuning fork’ to ‘keep in step with’, Heaney eventually dismisses O’Driscoll’s suggestion of ‘yielding too much’ to Yeats, replying ‘I was more conscious that I was ventriloquizing for Robert Lowell.’

Reflecting on the long period of revision, he explains, ‘I knew I would have to write something [for O’Neil], but wasn’t sure how it could be done’, the answer lay in devising ‘a new kind of poem’ that, through its ‘plotted shape, and the narrative and metrical built-upness’, allowed him to shift ‘from one position to another’. Heaney also invokes the poem during a discussion of the various categories of ‘political’, ‘civic’, and ‘public’ verse. Situating Lowell as a ‘public’ poet for rising ‘to the occasion of the res publica’, Heaney then admits he would like his own work to be ‘nominated for the ‘public’ slot’ too, concluding ‘Casualty’ ‘is a public poem of the sort I’d aspire to.’

Though he feels it to be a Lowell-like public elegy, ‘Casualty’ has a useful counterpoint in ‘Ford Madox Ford’, another poem from Life Studies that again exposes crucial divergences. The two poems rely on a very similar framework, yet Lowell’s

---

159 SS, p.194.
160 SS, p.214.
161 SS, p.215.
162 SS, p.385.
163 SS, p.386.
elegy underscores the ultimate failure of the artistic effort while Heaney’s ‘Casualty’ demonstrates the redressing power of art. ‘Ford Madox Ford’ begins with an opening ploy typical of Lowell’s elegies:

The lobbed ball plops, then dribbles to the cup ....
(a birdie Fordie!) But it nearly killed
the ministers. Lloyd George was holding up
the flag. He gabbled, ‘Hop-toad, hop-toad, hop-toad!!
Hueffer has used a niblick on the green;
it’s filthy art, Sir, filthy art!’
You answered, ‘What is art to me and thee?
Will a blacksmith teach a midwife how to bear?’
That cut the puffing statesman down to size.[164]

The image of a gold ball dropping is a device that, as Rudman notes, playfully ‘sets the poem into motion’[165] but also demonstrates the inevitable force of gravity – a miniature death – from the outset. Ford’s comment in the opening lines ‘What is art to me and thee?’ similarly prefigures the poem’s conclusion where the shortfall between his life and literary achievement is exposed, the latter unable to redeem the former. With great dexterity, Lowell moves between the events of Ford’s career and laments his missed opportunities. The depiction of Ford in ‘war’, for instance, is more pathetic than heroic, as we learn he was ‘five times black-balled for promotion’ and ‘mustard gassed voiceless’. Ford’s audience, once ‘football-size’, has now ‘shrunk to a dozen’, a comment freighted with artistic self-reflection that leads to a deeper contemplation of art’s inefficacy:

But master, mammoth mumbler, tell me why
the bales of your left-over novels buy
less than a bandage for your gouty foot.
Wheel-horse, unforgetting elephant,
I hear you huffing at your old Brevoort,
Timon and Falstaff, while you heap the board
for publishers. Fiction! I’m selling short
your lies that made the great your equals. Ford,
you were a kind man and you died in want.

In the exchange rate between art and life, art cannot so much as ‘bandage’ the injuries sustained in reality, yet, Lowell insists, it was ‘your lies that made the great your equals.’ The phrase has the twin effect of elevating Ford to greatness while diminishing his ‘Fiction’ to ‘lies’, encapsulating the shortfall entirely. The sweet-sounding monosyllabic final line, therefore, is Lowell’s admission that his poem cannot be corrective to this problem either, suffusing the elegy with a sense of its own failure in the knowledge that it is doomed by its very method. The final word ‘want’ paradoxically allows the sense of loss to reverberate beyond the poem’s conclusion, leaving Ford’s honour unrestored.

Like ‘Ford Madox Ford’, ‘Casualty’ is formally dexterous, with three sections that shift temporally, tonally, and in and out of rhyme schemes. In the opening section, the alternately rhymed trimetric lines delineate O’Neill’s character in a manner similar to Lowell’s portrait of Ford. O’Neill is described as ‘a dole-kept breadwinner / But a natural for work’\textsuperscript{166} with a ‘deadpan sidling tact’, terms that foster pathos while remaining open to the comic element. The description of O’Neill as ‘Sure-footed but too sly’ is reflexive on the metric feet and subtly defines the poet in relation to his subject, a ploy used to greater effect in the poem’s conclusion. Despite these parallels, however, Heaney depicts a more intimate relationship with the elegised subject:

\begin{verbatim}
But he would not be held
At home by his own crowd
Whatever threats were phoned,
Whatever black flags waved.

…

He had gone miles away
For he drank like a fish
Nightly, naturally
Swimming towards the lure
Of warm lit-up places,
The blurred mesh and murmur
Drifting among glasses
In the gregarious smoke.
How culpable was he
That last night when he broke
Our tribe’s complicity?
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{166} FW, p.21.
'Now, you’re supposed to be
An educated man,’
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me
The right answer to that one.’

While Lowell reflects on the futility of the artistic life through the elegised figure, Heaney links his artistic responsibilities with O’Neill’s culpability in his own murder for breaking his ‘tribe’s’ paramilitary curfew. It is a measure of Heaney’s confidence and ambition that he should enter such terrain and, in ‘Casualty’ at least, overcome anxiety to shut down into definite conclusions. His formal choices in ‘Casualty’ indicate a rising confidence as well. Corcoran considers the poem in relation to Yeats’s ‘Fisherman’, noting, ‘not only do both involve fishermen, but they share a metre and the subtle and tactical deployment of pararhyme, although Heaney varies the rhyme scheme itself.’ Given Heaney’s comment that he was more ‘conscious’ of ‘ventriloquizing for Lowell’ in ‘Casualty’, it appears Lowell is functioning at a level beyond that of Yeats, encouraging Heaney to be bolder in his use of his Irish exemplar. Indeed, Heaney admires ‘the destruction [Lowell] had practised upon the lyric’, seeing in Lowell a poetic bravery he wished to import. Furthermore, though the reference to O’Neill’s fishing does provide a textual link to Yeats’s poem, the terms of Heaney’s descriptions of O’Neill recall the more local ‘Elegy’, where the phrase ‘the fish-dart of your eyes’ echoes O’Neill’s ‘fisherman’s quick eye’. The description of O’Neill’s ‘turned back’ watching Heaney’s ‘tentative art’ also echo the terms of Heaney’s Oxford Companion essay for Lowell in which he describes the age’s preference for ‘tentative art’ over Lowell’s ‘overweening triumphalism of tone’. In ‘Casualty’, then, when O’Neill’s ‘turned back’ implicates Heaney’s ‘tentative art’ as an insufficient tool to treat the brutality of his murder, Lowell is, to reapply the dichotomy outlined in ‘Elegy’, both an encouragement for Heaney to be less ‘timorous’ and a warning against being too ‘bold’, or, to use the terms of Heaney’s later essay, neither too ‘tentative’ nor too ‘triumphant’.

The final lines of ‘Casualty’ form a section for which there is no equivalent in Lowell’s ‘Ford Madox Ford’. In fact, Heaney’s sentimental recollection of O’Neill and valorisation of the poetic effort is precisely what Lowell’s final word ‘want’ implies the absence of in ‘Ford Madox Ford’. Moving seamlessly from O’Neill’s funeral to a distant memory of a fishing trip, Heaney recalls:

I was taken in his boat,
The screw purling, turning
Indolent fathoms white,
I tasted freedom with him.
To get out early, haul
Steadily off the bottom,
Dispraise the catch, and smile
As you find a rhythm
Working you, slow mile by mile,
Into your proper haunt
Somewhere, well out, beyond...

The language in this final section recapitulates the preceding themes and images and offers a final coherence. The boat trip, now recalled, seems to have foretold of O’Neill’s death: the ‘purling’ screw recalls the ‘Purring’ hearse, the ‘white’ fathoms recall his ‘knowable face’ blinded ‘in the flash’, as the ‘rhythm’ of the boat slowly working ‘mile by mile’ recalls the ‘equal pace’ of the ‘quiet walkers’ on procession. In another sense, the language reflects on the line’s momentum, suspending the ‘Incomprehensible’ chasm between pub and poetic life to reunite Heaney and O’Neill. As the ‘screw’ tightens on board so does the verse, with ‘purling’ echoed by ‘turning’ as ‘rhythm’ and texture thickens ‘Steadily’, ‘mile by mile’ to a new state of ‘freedom’. Invigorated and redemptive poetic language, Heaney insists, is O’Neill’s ‘proper haunt’, not the violent scene of his death or the confrontational forms of North. The final phrase ‘Question me again’, a plea that underscores O’Neill’s value as an interlocutor, is in sharp contrast to Lowell’s ‘died in want’; Heaney effectively restarts the redemptive poem ‘again’ while Ford’s honour is left unredeemed.

In both ‘The Skunk’ and ‘Casualty’, then, Heaney engages more critically with Lowell’s example. Though probably unconscious in the former instance and deliberate in the latter, the reformulation of Lowell’s example performed by both poems suffuses
Heaney’s ‘ventriloquizing for Robert Lowell’ with fresh suggestions that he was speaking through Lowell rather than Lowell through him. The more mixed handling of Lowell’s influence in Field Work contrasts with his power over Heaney in North, where he is drafted in to supply an urgently needed political style without consideration of his problematic extremes. In fact, the belief in poetry’s binary relationship with historical reality Heaney outlines in Crediting Poetry in a sense distils his clash with Lowell. Heaney argues there that adequate poetry should ‘touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed’; in Lowell’s poetry, the ‘unsympathetic reality of the world’ is often internalised, not stayed against in formal verse. Like the earlier influences of Hughes, Frost, and Roethke, Lowell is an older, male, canonical figure; unlike them, Lowell often abandons his formalism in fits of nihilism or introspection, as in ‘Skunk Hour’ or the long prose section of Life Studies. Heaney’s reluctance to squarely face this difficulty indicates the urgency of his need in the 1970s for an emboldening model who exemplified his ideals, revealing him to be, even at an early stage of his career, a poet of settled convictions, determined to develop his original principles.

Nonetheless, the Lowell-inspired elegies of Field Work would shape much of Heaney’s later work while he would also continue to produce sonnets that came to more closely resemble Lowell’s. There is also a strong sense of self-portraiture to Heaney’s later evaluations of Lowell as ‘the last American to be a dual citizen of the university and the world beyond it’ and as a figure of ‘authority as well as celebrity’. As Heaney too became ‘at home in Harvard’ and his stature rose in the years following Lowell’s death, the American poet’s steep decline offered a figure against which to measure one’s own success and calculate one’s own risks. Though Lowell’s influence persists beyond Field Work, it serves Heaney best not when it dominates him but when it is redressed by the corrective forces of other influences, especially an important female one. Finally, therefore, Lowell’s influence is unique in that it possesses the quality that

---

170 SS, p.194.
171 CP, p.467.
172 SS, p.273.
Heaney claims is that of poetry itself: the ‘power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it’. 173

173 CP, p.467.
Chapter 4

The ‘better judgement’ behind the ‘walk on air’: Heaney and Bishop

And suddenly you’re through, arraigned yet freed\(^1\)

I

In the 1980s and 1990s, Elizabeth Bishop replaces Robert Lowell as the chief American influence on Heaney’s poetry and critical thinking. Yet, despite Heaney’s endorsement of her work in ‘The Government of the Tongue’ (1988) and the dedicated ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’ from his Oxford lecture series, later collected in *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), the relationship between Heaney and Bishop has received comparatively little attention. In *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (2009), Bishop warrants only four brief mentions (compared to nine mentions of Lowell) while, in much recent Bishop criticism, Heaney is cited only as a colleague of Bishop’s at Harvard during her final year and as an advocate of her achievement. Indeed, aside from a 1992 PhD dissertation exploring the uses of animal imagery in Heaney and Bishop’s poetry,\(^2\) the attention given to the connection has been limited to the citation of Heaney’s approval of Bishop’s achievement. On Heaney’s side of the Atlantic, Tom Paulin has noted ‘the formal authority and the subtlety of the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon often carries an invisible tribute to a poet [Bishop] who is often described as a poet’s poet’.\(^3\) This chapter will demonstrate that, in the case of Heaney, Bishop’s influence is highly visible through the poetry of *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), and *The Spirit Level* (1996) and in light of Heaney’s literary-critical response to her work.

Bishop’s emergence as an influence on Heaney repeats the pattern of Lowell’s in several ways. As Lowell became significant for Heaney after his Berkeley residency, during which time he largely resisted the fashionable poetics of minor poets, Heaney is drawn to Bishop in similar circumstances at Harvard where, again, he gravitated

\(1\) *HL*, p.6.
towards a figure he felt exemplified his principles rather than seeking out new models. As he did with Lowell, Heaney read Bishop in the 1960s and even taught her poems at Queen’s University before the two began a brief friendship in 1979 at Harvard where he replaced her on the faculty as guest lecturer. A brief friendship began between the two, with Bishop attending Heaney’s readings and Heaney sending Bishop poems which appeared in *Station Island* (1984) as well as an uncollected dedication to her titled ‘A Hank of Wool’:

i
‘Hank?’ I hear you say,
all tact and masquerade.
‘Sounds like a name for a cowboy.’

But didn’t you hold the wool—
shop wool, ticketed bought wool—
until your shoulders ached?

I used to sit like a hermit
with my two arms held out
to stretch the hank between them.

ii
To unwind it, Elizabeth,
come back in a cardigan
knitted grey or brown

so that we can imagine
the click and flash of needles,
see them like fireflies

in our tranquil recollection
of those supple mysteries
knit one, drop one, slip one…

iii
Then say goodbye to Maine,
to shade-card map-colours
of blue and green,

to the doll’s afghan
in different coloured squares
your grandmother who ‘knitted things for soldiers’

---

4 SS. p.279.
taught you to do, with little sermons.
‘But I resisted this.
So then I would unravel lots of rows–

and I’ve never knitted since.’

Though it wasn’t published until 1980, in the 1979 cover letter Heaney sent to Bishop he explains he felt ‘A Hank of Wool’ contains ‘one or two images which we probably share.’ In his Stepping Stones interviews, Heaney explains the poem grew out of a childhood memory of his aunt Mary winding wool into a ball, ending with hands outstretched as ‘a gesture of homage to Elizabeth’; the poem, he felt, ‘was OK as a personal salute, maybe, but I just didn’t think it got a proper purchase.’ As Heaney intimates, the poem itself is not entirely successful, partly because this 1980 version appears to have incorporated or ‘woven’ Bishop’s response to an earlier version of the poem into the lines as dialogue. Heaney tells O’Driscoll that he ‘had a first go at it in the summer of 1979’ but ‘then got a letter from her […] telling how her grandmother in Nova Scotia had taught her to knit […] little coloured squares that would be stitched together into patchwork items to send to soldiers.’ The claim in the opening line that he can ‘hear’ Bishop’s voice feels uneasy while the later naming device in line ten is awkward in its personal address. The images in the poem’s middle section are more effective but the inclusion of biography and literary allusion in the final lines also feels strained. Indeed, ‘A Hank of Wool’ has many of the same problems as ‘Elegy’, a poem written one year prior that suffers from being too influenced by Lowell’s own elegies. In fact, the close-woven dialogue and commentary as well as the naming of ‘Elizabeth’ in ‘A Hank of Wool’ mirror the stylings of many of Lowell’s dedicated sonnets in History (1973).

---

6 Listed as ‘f. 5.1 Heaney, Seamus, 1979 (1 letter, 1 postcard)’ in the Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Archives & Special Collections Library, Vassar College.
7 The images, however, echo an anecdote about ‘a girl who now and again used to come across the fields at night to visit us’ and ‘darn holes in any old socks […] as she talked the bright needle picked up the stitches and carried the wool, criss-cross, criss-cross, over and under, back and forward […] I hope I darned my poems as well as she darned those socks, criss-crossing my lines in verses and stitching them up with ideas and rhymes.’ Originally from a Northern Ireland Schools radio programme ‘People at Work’ and published as ‘A Poet’s Childhood’ in Listener, 11 November, 1971, pp.660-61.
8 SS, p.278.
9 SS, p.277.
10 SS, p.278.
In other respects, however, Bishop differs in crucial ways from Heaney’s previous exemplars. Firstly, Heaney positions Bishop as being stylistically antithetical to Lowell in his critical reading of her work, suggesting he was drawn to her out of a desire to move away from the Lowell-like poetics of *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979). Her sparse publication history – just four collections in her lifetime – and her lack of overt political statements led Heaney to understand Bishop in the traditional view as a ‘tentative’ and ‘reticent’ poet in contrast to Lowell’s ‘overweening triumphalism’. Heaney was probably influenced in this view by the assessments of her achievement in the 1980s by star critics Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, the latter of whom argued in 1983 that Bishop could rival Stevens in the canon of twentieth-century American poetry. As Desmond Fennell notes in his controversial 1991 pamphlet ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1, Heaney had exhibited a ‘reticence’ from the beginning of his career and, during the 1980s, developed this style into the meditative poetry of his 1980s’ collections. Heaney’s more ambivalent critical treatment of Sylvia Plath – the only other woman poet to whom, alongside Bishop, he gives sustained critical attention – in *The Government of the Tongue* exposes the evolution of this strain of poetic thinking during this phase. Aside from fortifying his own poetics through this critical reading, where Plath falters and Bishop excels for Heaney is revelatory of his wider sense of American poetry as well, returning him to the binaries of ‘Bogland’ where the reticent, introvert example is favoured over the extrovert.

Most significantly, Bishop’s influence differs from all others on Heaney in its more carefully balanced power dynamics. Although Bishop’s reputation was growing in the late 1980s when Heaney began to lionise her achievement, his own stature in the international poetry establishment far outstripped hers. By 1994 and less than thirty years into Heaney’s career, there were more than twenty full length critical studies and over fifty dissertations about his poetry. Heaney was even found to have replaced

---

Shakespeare as the most taught writer on English Literature courses in higher education colleges in Britain by 1992, a stature matched by ‘the immense international scholarly reception of his work and by the almost fanatical media coverage of his professional life’.\(^\text{16}\) The first book-length study of Bishop’s work, however, was not published until 1966, despite her poems dating from the 1930s and her collections from the 1940s.\(^\text{17}\) Given that Bishop is today considered one of the most important American poets of the last century, the tendency of contemporary critics engaged in the task of reassessing her achievement to return to Heaney’s analyses of the 1980s and early 1990s raises certain questions; by positioning himself early as an exponent of a rising talent, did Heaney add to his own stock or to hers? Due to Bishop’s dramatic rise in stature since Heaney’s essays appeared and her posthumous publications – which have more than doubled her output – as well as the critical re-evaluation in response to those new materials, more thorough inspection of Heaney’s appropriation of Bishop in prose as well as her influence on his poetry can further understanding of both poets.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, as the traditional portrait of Bishop – to which Heaney has contributed – has been challenged by contemporary critics, consideration of what he consciously borrows as well as what he is blind to in Bishop reveals his own aesthetic ambitions during his much more rapid climb to the top of the academic-poetic rankings.

II

The context in which Bishop emerges as chief influence on Heaney is critical to understanding her impact on him. Heaney recalls he ‘got to know her [Bishop] and Alice Methfessel\(^\text{19}\) during the 1979 spring semester while Bishop, in a letter to


\(^{19}\) SS, p.277.

Although Heaney’s contribution to the university continues to be celebrated at Harvard, his residency there in the 1980s and ’90s as his American reputation strengthened became the focus of some critical scrutiny at home. Michael Allen argues Heaney’s position was a natural progression since ‘America’s intermittent presence in Heaney’s poetry alongside England and Ireland suggests that the verse is searching out some empathy and support there.’ He adds that, in the 1980s, a ‘premium’ was placed on a “green” Irish identity in American literary circles, and this identity may have been augmented by wide-spread Irish-American recruitment to the teaching and graduate study of Irish writing in the US. Citing Vincent Buckley’s declaration that ‘the common opinion back in Ireland’ during this period was ‘that Heaney was “not an Irish poet; he’s a yank now”’, Allen then quotes from an article which depicts Heaney at the centre of an academic sphere of influence:

[Later, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, Harvard's Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, recited some of his verses, which sounded as if Yeats had come back to life; and then, Helen Vendler, a professor of English, told everyone what Heaney meant. At one point, a great silver bowl of champagne went around the room, and hundreds of people sipped from it, as if nobody had heard of communicable diseases. And still later, at the Signet's clubhouse, the undergraduates got intelligently rowdy. They obviously felt, as such undergraduates do, that they were special, as they were.]

Perhaps in response to such reports, Desmond Fennell in 1991 argued that Heaney in the 1980s ‘directed his poetry more to the academic audience gathering around him’ than ordinary readers and accused Heaney of exploiting the influential ‘academic-poetic complex’, headed by Vendler, to consolidate his reputation. Speaking in 1988, Heaney himself admits he is ‘part of’ the ‘vast, inflationary, reputation-making business’ that

---


30 Allen refers to this article as Dialogue 76, 2, 1987. It appears, however, that the article, written by Colin Campbell, first appeared in the New Yorker July 20, 1986.

31 Fennell Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1., p.19.

32 Ibid, p.25.
Allen and Fennell identify, adding ‘I have an impulse to flee from it, even while benefitting from it.’

Across his prose and interviews, Heaney has given many mixed reports about his time at Harvard. Speaking with O’Driscoll, he recalls his uneasiness at ‘all the speechifying and theory-speak’ life in the ‘milieu of the Harvard English department’ entailed, while in an earlier article ‘Threshold and Floor’ he describes how much of the ‘idiom of deconstruction and the challenges of theory’ were ‘coming in one ear’ and ‘would pass through the other’. Much of this recalls his complaints about life in Berkeley in 1970-71 and the Bay Area poetry he was exposed to there; he even derided the politicised atmosphere engendered by the hippy, ‘rip-off generation’ in a 1970 Listener article and later dismissed the poetry of Robert Bly and Gary Snyder as ‘too programmatic.’ In contrast to Berkeley, however, where Heaney was determined to engage with the surrounding poets and their unfamiliar poetics, his discussions of his time at Harvard lack commentary on specific poets. In his Twentieth-Century American Poetry, MacGowan notes that, outside of the prevailing ‘neo-confessional personal lyric’, the ‘more radical’ group of poets at this time ‘developed around the journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’ and ‘saw themselves as the inheritors of a line from high modernism through objectivism, the Black Mountain poets, and poststructuralist critical theory.’ MacGowan points to examples of such writers as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Susan Howe; the index of Stepping Stones contains no mention of any of these poets, in contrast to lengthy discussions of the Bay Area poets. This disparity suggests that, at Harvard, Heaney probably felt more certain of his own poetics and saw in Bishop a rising star whom he felt exemplified his existing aesthetic principles.

Although Bishop is never mentioned in Fennell’s forty-four-page pamphlet, her example falls exactly within the cross-hairs of his aim. In his long explication of Heaney’s ‘reticence’ as the feature which makes his poetry ‘congenial to the American poetry establishment – particularly its queen, Helen Vendler’, Fennell unwittingly

---

34 SS. p.287.
39 Fennell, Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1., p.29.
echoes the sentiments of early assessors, including Heaney himself, of Bishop’s achievement as exemplary in its ‘reticence’ (in this Heaney was probably influenced by even earlier commentators, such as Octavio Paz who titled his essay ‘The Power of Reticence’\(^\text{40}\)). Indeed, the ‘cool chastity, emotional restraint and guilty introspection’\(^\text{41}\) Fennell sees Heaney developing in his 1980s collections are characteristics his verse shares with Bishop’s. If Bishop’s lesson, therefore, is one of reticence then the influence, by its very nature, will be less visible than the ‘rhetorical assertiveness’\(^\text{42}\) of Lowell, in part explaining her absence from commentary. Moreover, Heaney’s Lowellizing had come under scrutiny in reviews of the earlier *Field Work*, while in his review of the later *Station Island* (1984) Paul Muldoon finds the ‘meetings with writers’ to be ‘a touch self-regarding’ and adds that Heaney should ‘resist more firmly the idea that he must be the best Irish poet since Yeats, which arose from rather casual remarks by the power-crazed Robert Lowell’.\(^\text{43}\) James Simmons even published a parody of ‘Station Island’ in *The Spectator* on 13\(^\text{th}\) July, 1985 which included the verse:

\[
\text{I was hoping the next ghost to shake hands}
\]
\[
\text{would equal in fame my previous advisers.}
\]
\[
\text{Yeats? Swift? No, they were Protestants.}
\]

By the time of *The Haw Lantern*, then, not only did Heaney have reason to move away from the ‘overweening’\(^\text{44}\) example of Lowell toward the understatement of Bishop’s verse, he may have also wished to be less visibly under the influence of other writers altogether. Tellingly, ‘Elegy’ for Lowell was collected in *Field Work* but not included in subsequent collections; ‘A Hank of Wool’ was never collected.

Consideration of Heaney’s critical treatment of Plath in *The Government of the Tongue* also highlights the aesthetic principles Heaney felt he shared with Bishop, since he casts the two American poets as opposites. He begins ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath’ by delineating the chief components of his own critical matrix, not mentioning Plath until the fifth paragraph. He conflates Frost, Eliot, Yeats, and Wordsworth in support of his opening thesis:

\(^{44}\) Heaney, ‘Robert Lowell’, p.315.
I have mentioned before the poet’s need to get beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography. At the level of poetic speech, when this happens, sound and meaning rise like a tide out of language to carry individual utterance away upon a current stronger and deeper than the individual could have anticipated.43

This formulation is a combination of Frost’s ‘belief’ in sounds of sense which allow you to ‘say as you go more than you even hoped […] and come with surprise to an end that you foreknew only in some sort of emotion’;46 Eliot’s ‘auditory imagination’ in which sounds penetrate ‘far below the conscious levels of thought […] returning to an origin and bringing something back’;47 and what Heaney calls Yeats’s ‘mask-like utterance which he takes all poetry to be.’48 In his earlier review of Lowell’s Day by Day, Heaney criticises Plath in terms that foreshadow his comments in the later essay: Plath and Berryman ‘swam away powerfully into the dark swirls of the unconscious and the drift towards death, but Lowell resisted that, held fast to conscience and pushed deliberately towards self-mastery’.49 In other words, Plath and Berryman do not, like Lowell, bring something back as Eliot instructs. In ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps’, then, Plath is from the beginning set up to fall short of Heaney’s aesthetic standards. Elsewhere, Heaney’s terms are even less circumspect. Though he never mentions Plath by name, Heaney tells Randy Brandes in a 1988 interview that he seeks a ‘wise feeling’ in poetry that ‘reminds you that writing is writing, it’s not just expectoration or self-regard or a semaphore for self’s sake.’50 In ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps’, Heaney finds Plath’s ultimate failure to be her inability to overcome the ‘dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition’, never achieving the ‘self-forgetfulness’ he values.51 In interview, he goes on to add that his ‘predisposition’ is for the opposite kind of verse, ‘poetry that contains and practices force within a confined area’, thus he understands ‘immediately the aims of the poetry of someone like Elizabeth Bishop.’52

50 ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, p.17. Added emphasis.
52 Randy Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, p.17.
Indeed, where Plath’s poems are for Heaney ‘vehicles of their own impulses’, Bishop’s poems establish ‘reliable, unassertive relations with the world by steady attention to detail, by equable classification and level-toned enumeration’, where Plath’s is ‘a voice speaking excitedly and spontaneously’. Bishop’s voice is ‘reticent and mannerly’. Plath’s speech has ‘an excited air’ while Bishop’s ‘is neither breathless not detached’ but ‘thoroughly plenished’, while Plath never rises above the need for ‘self-discovery and self-definition’, Bishop is ‘self-denying’, in fact, she is ‘opposed to and incapable of self-aggrandizement, the very embodiment of good manners’. Essentially, Heaney favours what he sees as the introversion and social contract in Bishop’s verse over the extroversion and self-consumed energy of Plath’s.

This becomes clear when Heaney quotes Wordsworth’s 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in the closing pages of ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps’:

[n]ot that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.

Plath, then, is at fault in two ways: by starting, as he earlier explains, ‘already composed into “something intended, complete”’, the ‘powerful overflow’ of her poems cannot be ‘spontaneous’ nor are they concerned with what Heaney calls a ‘supra-personal’ purpose. Meanwhile, Heaney praises Bishop for excelling at the precise task at which Plath fails:

---

55 ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath’, *GT*, p.149.
57 ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath’, *GT*, p.158.
63 *Ibid*, p.168
He writes the kind of poem that makes us want to exclaim with admiration at its professional thoroughness, its technical and formal perfections, and yet at the same time she tempts us to regard technical and formal matters as something of a distraction, since the poem is so candidly about something, engaged with its own business of observing the world and discovering meaning.64

This commitment to the ‘business of observing the world and discovering meaning’ – the ‘supra-personal’ – is paramount, and presumably one reason why Heaney overlooks the more problematic elements of Lowell’s achievement. His rejection of Plath’s ‘Daddy’, for instance, as a poem that is ‘so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people’s sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy’65 would be a more reasonable objection to Lowell’s The Dolphin and For Lizzie and Harriet collections, volumes for which Lowell was rebuked by Bishop but never unequivocally by Heaney.

Heaney’s identification with Wordsworth in this context is significant, however, for other reasons. As John Dennison has recently noted, there is a pronounced self-reflexivity to Heaney’s 1975 remark that Louis MacNeice was a ‘frustrated romantic, deprived of belief in beliefs, rejoicing by constructing something upon which to rejoice.’66 To accommodate his ‘inherited commitment to the ameliorative and moral and spiritual transcendence of poetry’, Dennison argues Heaney ‘had by the late 1980s resolved upon a consolidated dualism, the difficult assertion of poetry as “its own reality”’.67 Plath’s verse, for Heaney, lacks this commitment to ameliorative transcendence, never rising above the demands of the self. Heaney’s Wordsworth comparison also highlights the sense in which his reading of Bishop as a poet like himself is problematic. If Plath fails to meet the standard outlined in Lyrical Ballads or Wordsworth’s three stages of development, then it is reasonable to assume that he feels Bishop succeeds in these terms; Bishop, however, self-effacingly describes herself as ‘a minor female Wordsworth’ in correspondence with Lowell on July 11th, 1951.68 The critical consensus today is that this was ‘an easier reputation for Bishop to live with than

---

64 ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, R, p.182.
68 Bishop, One Art: Letters, p.222.
would be, for example, that of a revolutionary lesbian poet’; thus Heaney identifies with what is her unwillingly adopted poetic persona.

Indeed, the newly discovered letters, unpublished poems, and unseen drafts have led contemporary critics to understand her ‘reticence’ not as an aesthetic principle – as Heaney in the traditional view understands – but as a form of self-censorship, given the ‘sexual politics at midcentury’. For today’s critics, the previously unpublished material offers ‘a new psychic grammar through imagery that extends into well-known canonical poems that we can now better understand’.

The publication of new material in Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments has elicited strong objections from Vendler who would rather preserve the image of Bishop as the ‘perfectionist’ poet of ‘prudence’ and ‘fastidious standards’. Vendler adds, ‘[s]tudents eagerly wanting to buy ‘the new book by Elizabeth Bishop’ should be told to go back and buy the old one, where the poet represents herself as she wished to be known’. Vendler’s dismissal is issued despite Bishop’s instruction to her literary executors in her will to publish her unseen work as they see fit, giving them the ‘power to determine whether any of my unpublished manuscripts and papers shall be published’. The role in which Bishop is frozen by Heaney’s still quoted critical appraisal and which Vendler endorses, then, is one that Bishop not only chose reluctantly but is one she herself has been responsible for dismantling.

The traditional image of Bishop fulfilled several of Heaney’s needs during the 1980s, explaining why he is attracted to this portrait of Bishop in the first instance. Reading from the ‘Clearances’ sequence from The Haw Lantern at a 2013 memorial to Heaney held at Harvard, Vendler remarks on his discovery during this period that ‘absence can be brighter than a presence’; Heaney discovers this through Bishop’s poetry about a painful childhood in which she was orphaned and uprooted. Similarly, in Bishop’s early and more restrained poetry of enclosed worlds Heaney sees a formalism

---

71 Ibid, p.4.
to which he can bring a greater social dimension, while in the boundary-crossing and introspection of her travel poetry discovers a model on which he can base his own poetry of ‘home’, another recurring and complex theme in Bishop’s writing. The portrait of Bishop as a ‘a chronically displaced person’ offered by Millier’s 1993 critical biography may have personally resonated with him during his period of long residency at Harvard, as would Millier’s depiction of Bishop’s life and art as a story finally of ‘survival and even triumph’, consistent as it is with his inherited notion of poetry as a ‘momentary stay against confusion’. Indeed, of his ‘Clearances’ sequence, Heaney says that, like all things ‘crucial to the author, it brought me back and forward all at once’; Bishop’s influence operates in the same way, with progression often necessitating a moving backwards through Bishop’s four collections to move forwards with his own. If he, at an earlier stage, looked outwards to his American exemplars Frost and Lowell for a new and useful model, at the stage when Bishop becomes significant to Heaney he is seeking to bring something from America back to Ireland. His comments on Bishop have the same sense of self-portraiture as much of his Lowell commentary in the earlier phase:

[s]he is, of course, deeply aware that every so often the world is bound to shake, and not only with the thunder of waves, but also with the thunder of war or of earthquake or the merciless death of a parent or the untimely and guilt-inducing suicide of a beloved friend. In such circumstances, panic is a natural enough reaction, a reflex impulse to escape from the scene altogether. And yet since one cannot escape one’s times or one’s destiny, such panic has to be controlled, and to control is to set limits, to map a defined space within which one will operate.

For Heaney, re-mapping the ‘space’ in which he operates involves a reimagining of his political form in the 1980s and 1990s. It is during this time that he creates his most celebrated poetry through a productive misreading of the only female poet to whom he gives significant praise, essentially rendering her a shadow of his own self.

---

79 ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, *R*, p.176.
III

In the *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney borrows from Bishop in two main ways. The most obvious of these is the use of travel – a major preoccupation of Bishop’s poetry – in the poems ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ and ‘From the Frontier of Writing’. The other clear instance of influence is in the volume’s opening poem ‘Alphabets’ which mirrors the theme and structure of Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room’. Given that ‘Alphabets’ was written at Harvard in ‘response to a commission to do the Phi Beta Kappa poem for 1984’, it is plausible that, in this instance, the evocations of Bishop are intended to be clear, since she was ‘very much the “in” figure at Harvard and had also delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem ‘The Moose’ in 1972, though she would continue to revise the poem before it was collected in *Geography III* (1976). In its heightening of certain elements of ‘In the Waiting Room’ and apparent elision of others, ‘Alphabets’ is a useful template for much of Heaney’s future uses of Bishop. Indeed, early responses to ‘In the Waiting Room’ tend to focus on the poem’s linguistic ploys, seeing the formal virtuosity and use of a child-speaker as ‘an unconscious acceptance of the responsibility of a poetic vocation’; more recent commentary, however, understands ‘In the Waiting Room’ as a locus of childhood trauma and the culmination of Bishop’s racial and gender politics. Heaney’s ‘Alphabets’ works in parallel with this older, ‘standard’ reading of ‘In the Waiting Room’ and affirms the aesthetic principles he finds in Bishop.

Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room’ first appeared in *The New Yorker*, 17 July 1971. It was, however, based on the unpublished story ‘The Country Mouse’, which did not appear until 1984. The story has crucial parallels with ‘In the Waiting Room’ and reflects more explicitly on Bishop’s unwilling relocation from Nova Scotia to live with her paternal grandparents in Worcester, leading critics to understand the poem today as being similarly immersed in real childhood trauma. Sitting in the dentist’s waiting room, the child waits on ‘Aunt Consuelo’ – a fictionalization of Bishop’s Aunt Florence – and becomes increasingly fixated on ‘the *National Geographic*’ where she discovers

---

80 SS, p.286.
81 SS, p.279.
82 Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, p.188.
‘horrifying’ photographs of ‘black, naked women’ and ‘Babies with pointed heads’ until the young reader’s identity disintegrates and she becomes ‘my foolish aunt’. In his detailed early reading of the poem, Travisano argues the ‘interpenetration of close and distant worlds calls forth a mystical state in which identity is both gained and surrendered’, adding that the questions asked in the poem are ‘fundamental’ and ‘unanswerable’. 

More recent commentators have been less inclined to read the speaker’s questions as unanswerable, seeing them instead as indicative of Bishop’s personal history and politics. Noting how ‘The Country Mouse’ ends by asking the same question asked by ‘In the Waiting Room’ – ‘why was I a human being?’ – critics tend to no longer read the poem as an effort to form an individual identity but as a record of mixed feelings during a traumatic childhood. Kristin Hotelling Zona notes that Bishop’s description of the black women’s breasts was drafted through six versions, first inspiring ‘awe’ in the speaker before they ‘horrified’ her in the final version. Zona suggests that these changes expose ‘the degree to which the image […] both attracted and revulsed Bishop, and the interlacing of blackness and femaleness at the core of this tension.’ The form of the poem also points to a central tension, as the ‘sidelong glance’ taken ‘to see what it was I was’ is preceded by a syntactical crisis of dashes, colons, and questions. ‘In the Waiting Room’, then, is no exhibition of an early poetic epiphany. Rather, it is a poem in which Bishop thoroughly destabilises any sense of coherent identity; in which she ‘resists the appeasement’ of identity binaries, achieving ‘autonomy’ by existing in a deliberately maintained confusion that is ‘inflected with a tenor that is often read as reticence’.

Heaney’s ‘Alphabets’, in its valorisation of the journey from school pupil to poet and its similar framework of linguistic fragmentation, appears to have taken inspiration from ‘In the Waiting Room’ when it was less sensitively understood. Indeed, Corcoran’s description of the poem’s discovery of writing as ‘what makes you “Other”

84 EBCP, p.159.
85 Travisano, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development, p.185.
88 Ibid, p.61.
or strange to yourself”\(^{89}\) echoes many of the early responses to ‘In the Waiting Room’. While Bishop’s sense of strangeness is ‘terrifying’, however, Heaney’s is liberating, suggesting his aim in ‘Alphabets’ is to create a sense of order rather than chaos. Formally, too, the material is repackaged for public delivery, as Heaney’s strict quatrains contrast with Bishop’s tangential stanzas. Though Bishop’s self-questioning in ‘In the Waiting Room’ may be, as Travisano notes, suggestive of the later poetic vocation, Heaney’s premonition of the ‘poet’s dream’ that ‘stole over him like sunlight’\(^{90}\) while ‘ringleted in assonance and woodnotes’ makes such latency explicit. Cast in the same role as Bishop’s ‘National Geographic’, Heaney’s ‘globe in the window’ has the twin effect of dwarfing individual acquisition of language and elevating it to a shared point of origin. The ‘globe in the window’ that ‘tilts like a coloured O’ builds on the effects of the preceding stanzas where ‘Y’ is drawn like a ‘forked stick’ and A, ‘Two rafters and a cross-tie’, becomes ‘the letter some call \textit{ah}, some call \textit{ay}’, allowing the very shape of letters to contribute to signification in a highly dynamic use of language.

The globe not only engenders a sense of scale but is a temporal lever, too, as it becomes the ‘O’ of the child’s mouth who goes on to be a poet, reinforced by the reader (or the reading poet at his Harvard address) who must repeat the sound through the lines that follow in ‘\textit{hosanna}, ‘rose’, ‘school’, ‘wood’, ‘home’, ‘bloom’ and finally, after the ‘globe has spun’, in the ‘wooden O’ where he stands presently, turning the ‘O’ back into a spatial indicator. Vendler praises ‘Alphabets’ as a critical development in Heaney’s poetry, the finished poem synergistically feeding the child speaker’s progress, the ‘slate upon which consciousness will appear through language’.\(^{91}\) Completing the ‘O’ symbolism, the poet’s linguistic revelation is likened to the experience of the astronaut who views ‘from his small window’ the ‘lucent O’ of the planet ‘he has sprung from’. What was seen to be the ‘unanswerable’ element of Bishop’s poem is heightened in Heaney’s cosmic scale while the progression from child to poet is made far less traumatically in ‘Alphabets’ than in ‘In the Waiting Room’, exposing the degree to which Heaney’s reading of Bishop is refracted through the lens of his own concerns.

\(^{90}\) \textit{HL}, p.1.
\(^{91}\) Vendler, ‘On three poems by Seamus Heaney’ \textit{Salmagundi} 80 (Fall 1988), p.69.
In *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney begins to formulate a new poetry of place through a use of travel that is also indebted to a misreading of Bishop. The theme of travel is a well-noted preoccupation in Bishop’s writing, with the interplay between home and abroad in her collection *Questions of Travel* laying the foundations for the contemplations of self and other that emerge in *Geography III*. In *The Haw Lantern*, travel emerges as a main component of Heaney’s writing; travel, like language in ‘Alphabets’, becomes a method of constructive displacement and ‘making strange’. Nicholas Jenkins, writing in 1996, praised Heaney’s use of travel in *The Haw Lantern* highly, claiming ‘Heaney looks increasingly like one of the great travel writers’.  

Stan Smith also praised *The Haw Lantern* for its resourceful ‘twist to this topographic insistence’ in the ‘From’ poems of *The Haw Lantern*: ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ and ‘From the Frontier of Writing’. In these poems, Heaney achieves artistic freedom by merging real and symbolic space, the logical conclusion of the final lines of *Station Island* where he steps ‘free into space / alone with nothing I had not known / already.’ For Bishop, however, travel was as painful as it is liberating, and her travel writing often reflects her sense of isolation and rootlessness. In a letter to Lowell, January 15th 1948, Bishop writes ‘you apparently are able to do the right thing for yourself and your work and don’t seem to be tempted by the distractions of travelling – that rarely offers much in respect to work’, before adding ‘I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated and have known so few of my “contemporaries” and nothing of “intellectual” life’. The outcome of this is a fluid sense of home in Bishop’s writing and, though this has clear transferal for Heaney’s poetry of Northern Ireland (a place ‘that does not exist, a place that is but a dream’), the redemptive possibilities he discovers in his own travel poetry once again suggests his blindness to Bishop’s complexities.

Like ‘In the Waiting Room’, ‘Questions of Travel’ thrives on tension without resolution; as an artist-traveller, the speaker is both preserver and destroyer of the place

---

94 SI, p.93.
she represents. Indeed, Bishop’s working title ‘Problems of Travellers’ emphasises her dilemma. The final version retains a two-part discursive structure: in the first the speaker complains ‘There are too many waterfalls here’ before noting ‘if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling, / the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships, / slime-hung and barnacled.’ The unassuming observation concludes the poem’s first stanza and prefigures its central truth: since things exist in an endless relation to each other, travel, by destabilising these relationships, alters one’s perception of reality. In her study on Bishop’s travel poetics, Kim Fortuny reads ‘Questions of Travel’ as highly conscious of the tradition in which it inserts itself, noting that the questions asked in the second stanza (‘Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / Where should we be today?’) ‘inevitably lead into and out of careful and politicised observations.’ Such a view provides a challenge to Heaney’s depiction of Bishop as a poet who ‘does not go in for the epic panorama, for large historical treatments, for the synoptic view of cultures’. Indeed, Bishop’s reflection on ‘the sad, two-noted, wooden tune / of disparate clogs’ validates personal experience and the individuality of diverse cultures, since ‘In another country the clogs would all be tested. / Each pair there would have an identical pitch.’ After a pathetic fallacy in which the rain, ‘so much like politicians speeches’, comes eventually to ‘a sudden golden silence’, the speaker offers her thoughts to her ‘notebook’:

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?  
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right  
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

The conclusion is designed to subvert the expectation of final resolution and replace it with ‘uneasy heightening of sensation’ Bishop describes as the effect of travel in her letters, allowing tensions to linger even after the poem is concluded. Fortuny observes that Bishop’s travellers often ‘reenact this struggle to read and travel beyond the

---

97 EBCP, p.93.
100 Bishop, One Art: Letters, p.108.
limitations the self imposes’, adding that Bishop’s ‘speakers emerge as human precisely because they fail to control their experience’. 101

More recently, Barabra Page has concurred with Fortuny’s sentiment, arguing that for Bishop it ‘is not a lack of imagination that sets off the traveller, but rather a quest for knowledge that is historical and grounded in experience, not metaphysical.’ 102 Heaney’s use of travel for precisely this metaphysical purpose in The Haw Lantern, then, is probably indicative of a misreading of Bishop’s use of the theme. ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ does not use travel to spatialize the struggle to move beyond the self but to transcend the self from its predicament entirely; the foreign remains ‘inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view’ for Bishop’s speaker while Heaney’s becomes a ‘representative’ able ‘to speak on their behalf’. 103 Despite these divergences, it is clear that the Irish poet has developed the form of ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ and ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ in concert with his critical-literary engagement with Bishop’s work. For instance, Smith notes the deployment of what he calls a ‘middle state’ in the parable poems that begin ‘From’ in The Haw Lantern 104 and, in doing so, unwittingly echoes a particularly revealing insight of Heaney’s in ‘Counting to a Hundred’ where, through quotation of Charles Simic, Heaney explains how there are ‘three kinds of images’: the first is ‘seen with eyes open in the manner of the realists’; the second is seen ‘with eyes closed’ by ‘everyday dreamers’; and the third partakes ‘of both dream and reality, and of something else […] the mingling of the two’. 105 Heaney’s explanation recalls his earlier observation that Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’, after combining the opposite effects of its first two sections, breaks into a third which has ‘a dream truth as well as a daylight truth’. 106

‘From the Republic of Conscience’ makes use of exactly the three-part form he identifies in Bishop’s writing, with the first beginning in the ‘frugal republic’, a place bereft of literary comforts:

101 Fortuny, Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel, p.29.
104 Smith, ‘The Distance Between’, p.226. Smith notes ‘a whole world of difference can hang on such a preposition’, reasoning that the ‘From’ in the titles of these poems can imply Heaney is ‘writing from’ or has ‘come away from’ the place he describes (p.224).
I
When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.

The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.\(^{107}\)

Denied ‘creeping privilege’ and shown ‘a photograph of my grandfather’, one is
reminded of Heaney’s father’s presence in ‘The Stone Verdict’ which, he explains, is
the outcome of his desire to counterbalance ‘all speechifying and theory-speak’\(^{108}\) that
surrounded him in Harvard during the 1980s. The photograph of Heaney’s grandfather
may also be an invocation of the ‘generations’ of ‘not illiterate, but not literary’ ancestry
that ‘in’ and ‘through’ him produce an indifference to the ‘activity’ of poetic writing, as
he explains in an earlier interview with John Haffenden.\(^{109}\) The second section of ‘From
the Republic of Conscience’ redresses the first, staging an allegoric journey through
‘Fog’ and ‘lightning’ until, carried by the ‘sacred symbol’ of the ‘stylised boat’, the
‘public leaders / must swear to uphold the law and weep / to atone for their presumption
to hold office’. This, Heaney suggests, is the fate for ‘public’ poets in Northern Ireland
whom, in ‘Place and Displacement’, he describes as ‘needing to accommodate two
opposing conditions of truthfulness simultaneously’.\(^{110}\)

The simultaneous accommodation of two truths is precisely the effort of the
third section, written in a ‘middle voice’ or ‘third image’ and combining the effects of
austerity and phantasmagoria of the earlier sections:

I came back from that frugal republic

\(^{108}\) \textit{SS}, p.287.
\(^{109}\) John Haffenden, \textit{Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden} (London: Faber and Faber,
\(^{110}\) ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’, \textit{FK}, p.115.
with my two arms the one length, the customs woman having insisted my allowance was myself.

The old man rose and gazed into my face and said that was official recognition that I was now a dual citizen.

These lines express what Heaney calls the need for ‘answerability’\textsuperscript{111} in poetry. After submitting to the frugality of the first section, he can move into freedom; by conceding limits, paradoxically, he can breach them. Heaney then, like Bishop, advocates a poetic role very much at odds with Pascal’s idea of ‘sitting quietly in one’s room’. Heaney, however, goes much further since, unlike Bishop, his independent embassies allow him to be two places at once while, as ‘dual citizen’ and ‘a representative’, he has performed the communion of self and other that Bishop’s speaker knows is impossible. Bishop’s final line, ‘\textit{wherever that may be’}, has the effect of throwing the prior indicators ‘here’ and ‘there’ into an uncertain orbit; Heaney in his final section insists on the more positive and straightforward sense of freedom he desires.

‘From the Frontier of Writing’ also tries to write freedom into existence through symbolic travel. In revisiting an episode from the past, the degree to which Heaney’s poetics have cleared a ‘space’ for him is apparent:

The tightness and the nilness round that space when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect its make and number and, as one bends his face towards your window, you catch sight of more on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent down cradled guns that hold you under cover

and everything is pure interrogation until a rifle motions and you move with guarded unconcerned acceleration –

a little emptier, a little spent as always by that quiver in the self, subjugated, yes, and obedient.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111}SS, p.409.
\textsuperscript{112}HL, p.6.
As Corcoran notes, this section of the poem recalls ‘The Toome Road’ from Field Work where Heaney dramatises an exchange with military personnel at a checkpoint. To understand the shift in direction of ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, it is also instructive to consider Heaney’s even earlier depiction of life in militarised Northern Ireland in his 1971 ‘Belfast’s Black Christmas’ article. There, Heaney writes of feeling ‘fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice’ and relates an experience with the British Army in similarly embittered rhetoric, noting ‘[f]ear has begun to tingle through the place.’ This is echoed by the ‘quiver in the self’ he describes in ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, yet, even in this opening section, there is evidence of a countervailing force. The isolation of ‘space’ in the first tercet implies associations beyond the literal, anticipating the use of ‘space’ in the book’s ‘Clearances’ sequence. Indeed, the poem turns on Heaney’s use of ‘obedient’ which here shifts its meaning to imply obedience to the creative impulse rather than an obedience to an authoritarian one. Its extra significance is indicated by its proximity to the first full stop:

So you drive on to the frontier of writing
where it happens again. The guns on tripods;
the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating

data about you, waiting for the squawk
of clearance; the marksman training down
out of the sun upon you like a hawk.

Again, the use of ‘clearance’ anticipates the later sequence by implying artistic liberation, a sensation that is denied to Bishop but is here reinforced by the rhyming of ‘writing’ and ‘repeating’ with its connotations of renewal and defiance. Finally, the speaker is ‘through’, ‘freed’, ‘past’, and ‘out’. In its multi-directionality, the language discovers the possibilities Smith notes in the poem’s title: Heaney is both ‘writing from’ and ‘coming away from’ the frontier. The final image of ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ where the renewed self and other interact freely on the ‘polished windscreen’ – a surface that is reflective, transparent, and moving – is the kind of device that Bishop also makes use of throughout her poetry. Again, however, the freedom of Heaney’s

---

114 Samuels observes that Bishop often seeks in her verse ‘a fluid, mobile meeting place where the mind, the heart, the eye, and the world converge and diverge in a puzzling, open-ended, but contained and shaped encounter.’ Peggy Samuels, ‘Bishop and Visual Art’ in, The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop, p.173.
speaker contrasts sharply with Bishop’s in ‘Questions of Travel’, who, paralysed by contradictory desires and the weight of knowledge, cannot move free into space as Heaney’s does. In *The Haw Lantern*, then, Heaney repeatedly uses Bishop’s forms to advance his own political-poetic programme through poems that depend on a simplified reading of their source.

IV

Bishop’s example continues to be instrumental in Heaney’s next collection *Seeing Things*, a volume in which he develops the freedom discovered in *The Haw Lantern* and begins to see poetry as a self-rewarding enterprise. In ‘Man and Boy’, ‘Fosterling’, and ‘The Settle Bed’ Heaney becomes increasingly concerned with celebrating the mystery of poetic inspiration itself and finds in Bishop’s models – particularly her early poems that log the work of an interpretive mind – the basis for such a reflexive verse. This produces a vital shift in Heaney’s poetry in which poetic creation becomes less a method of understanding the world of actual experience and more the ‘marvel’ that deserves to be explicated by the world of actual experience. This new trust in poetised thinking as the solution to an unmanageable reality is crystalized by ‘Man and Boy’, an elegy for Heaney’s father that relies on imaginative conceptions of place very similar to those of Bishop’s ‘Poem’ from *Geography III*. ‘Poem’ dramatises the moment of contact between the poet and a painting, with the finished poem becoming the product of the exchange. Throughout ‘Poem’, the materiality of a painting is set in tension with the interiority of the speaker. Unfolding in a logical progression, Bishop reasons ‘It must be Nova Scotia’, as the ‘brushstrokes’ in the ‘foreground’ and the ‘wooden houses / painted that awful shade of brown’ come alive in the mind of the poet yet occupy only ‘half an inch’ on the canvas, much like the poet’s words on the page itself. Recognising, as McCabe surmises, ‘not the place but the perception of it’, the speaker establishes a connection with the artist. Spatial and temporal boundaries are crossed as the two perceptions are ‘coincided’ while the ‘cramped’ picture that was ‘About the size

115 *EBCP*, p.176.
of an old-style dollar bill’ is by the end of the encounter, transcendentally, ‘About the size of our abidance’ and ‘the little that we get for free’:

    I never knew him. We both knew this place, apparently, this literal small backwater, looked at it long enough to memorize it, our years apart. How strange. And it’s still loved, or its memory is (it must have changed a lot). Our visions coincided – ‘visions’ is too serious a word – our looks, two looks: art ‘copying from life’ and life itself, life and the memory of it so compressed they’ve turned into each other. Which is which? Life and the memory of it cramped, dim, on a piece of Bristol board, dim, but how live, how touching in detail – the little that we get for free, the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

In this final stanza, the two ‘looks’ have merged, allowing art to reflect on itself as if it were ‘other’. The picture, like the reflexively named ‘Poem’, is a space in which two experiences can be blended.

Bishop’s co-produced image of home in ‘Poem’ is very close to the concept of place Heaney outlines in ‘The Placeless Heaven: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’. There, Heaney describes identifying firstly with a tree in the front garden of his childhood home and, later, with the empty space where the felled tree had earlier stood. The place with which he ultimately identified, much like Bishop’s place in ‘Poem’, was ‘generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location’, rather it was ‘an imagined realm, even if it can’t be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place.’ The crucial difference is that Bishop’s ‘placeless heaven’ is the result of a troubled childhood and thus the cobbled together picture which emerges collaboratively through painting, memory, and imagination, really is the ‘little’ she has ‘for free’. Heaney, meanwhile, deliberately engenders a ‘placeless heaven’ to reunite with his father, installing the poem as a site of comfort in a way that again suggests a use of Bishop that is rooted in personal needs.

117 ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’, FK, p.135.
‘Man and Boy’ interweaves perspectives much as ‘Poem’ does, using the device effectively to build a dramatic narrative. The correspondences between the poems are particularly significant given that the border-crossing model Heaney uses to effect in ‘Man and Boy’ later serves as his new political paradigm. In the elegy, death becomes a point of contact when the father’s childhood loss of his own father is imagined, bonding the two in grief. Lyrically moving between his memories and his father’s imagined ones, the image and sound of ‘a splash like the salmon’ becomes a source of transportation:

In earshot of the pool where the salmon jumped
Back through its own unheard concentric soundwaves
A mower leans forever on his scythe.

He has mown himself to the centre of the field
And stands in a final perfect ring
Of sunlit stubble.

Heaney’s confidence in the more fluid form is evidenced by his choice to hinge ‘Man and Boy’ around this metaphysical image. Muddling histories, Heaney’s father is imagined as a ‘barefoot boy with news, / running at eyelevel with weeds’ with ‘legs and quick heels’ that are ‘strange’ as Heaney’s and will years later help ‘piggyback’ the poet as a boy. As he did earlier in ‘The Harvest Bow’, Heaney is interweaving a patchwork of father and son, the poem becoming an emblem that can ‘stay against’ loss. Like ‘Poem’, the immediacy of the final lines is vital to their effect. Indeed, Bishop’s revelation, ‘Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!’ is matched by Heaney’s dramatic finale in which he ‘feels much heat and hurry in the air’. As in the earlier travel poetry of *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney has allowed the ‘real’ image to mix with the ‘dream’ image, combining the effects of both to create the third image, one in which it is possible for Heaney to run at ‘eyelevel’ with his father and the ‘visions’ of Bishop and her great-uncle to merge.

Heaney develops this more fluid structure in ‘Fosterling’, a poem which appears to be modelled closely on Bishop’s ‘The Map’. Like ‘Man and Boy’, ‘Fosterling’ exhibits the power of the imagination but goes further by taking poetic inspiration as its

---

119 Robert Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.132.
theme, even revising a statement made in an earlier poem from Field Work. In Bishop’s minimalist portrait of a mind thinking – a theory very significant to her early on – in which the mental processes of the poet are essentially ‘mapped’, Heaney appears to have found the basis for his own reinvention. Indeed, Heaney even taught the ‘The Map’, a poem which dates from 1935 and later appeared as the first poem in Bishop’s debut collection North & South (1946), in practical criticism classes at Queen’s University. From the opening lines of ‘The Map’, it is clear that the interpretative mind of the speaker will replace the map as the spectacle of the poem, as Bishop asks ‘Shadows, or are they shallows’ and considers whether qualities are ‘assigned’ or if ‘countries pick their colours’. ‘Fosterling’ operates within a similar framework as Heaney recalls he ‘loved one picture’s heavy greenness’ at ‘school’, and echoes Bishop’s wonderment when he notes the seeming ‘in-placeness’ of the ‘millhouses’, even ‘more in place when mirrored in canals.’

As Bishop’s speaker essentially constructs the map’s meaning as she perceives it, revising herself as she progresses, Heaney’s ‘land / Of glar and glit’ becomes a similarly internalised place of ‘siling hope’; the ‘lowlands of the mind’ represent the place as it exists within him. Heaney may even have had ‘The Map’ in mind in ‘The Redress of Poetry’ during an explanation of the relationship between poem and reader in which the former is likened to an apple: the taste does not exist in the apple but occurs when the apple makes contact with the palate, much like the poem making contact with the reader. Like the apple, Bishop’s map is symbolic of the exchange in which the former’s meaning is generated through the interaction. The reader, then, in a sense not only decodes meaning but creates it. For Heaney, this is the ‘marvel’ that becomes in ‘Fosterling’ the true ‘music of what happens’, a phrase originally from ‘Song’ in Field Work, a collection dominated by Lowell-esque political elegies. Heaney sees the ‘marvel’ of poetic invention laid bare in ‘The Map’, a model which he

120 Bishop found this principle of ‘a mind thinking’ in Morris W. Croll’s essay ‘The Baroque Style in Prose’. Bishop applied Croll’s analysis to Hopkins’s sprung rhythm in an undergraduate essay and cited passages in defence of her own poetic stylings in a letter to a critical friend, ‘Gerald Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry’, Vassar Review 23, February 1934, pp. 5-7. Tom Paulin notes that Croll’s essay ‘spoke to Bishop like a vocation’ and argues ‘what she admired in the baroque was the “ardour” and dramatic energy and immediacy of an idea as it was formulated and experienced.’ ‘The Poet’s Poet’, web.

121 SS, p.279.

122 ST, p.50.

ultimately uses to shed his own past and move out of the ‘doldrums’. Such a critical engagement suggests a deep absorption with Bishop’s oeuvre and underscores the intensity of Heaney’s need at this time to develop a more liberated public verse.

In ‘The Settle Bed’ he applies Bishop’s lessons more explicitly to the situation in Northern Ireland, creating the newly ‘lightened’ political verse ‘Fosterling’ looks towards. The conclusions he draws from Bishop’s ‘The Monument’ in prose – another poem from North & South – indicate the extent to which he feels the poem to be exemplary of the kind of poetics he was developing in this phase, making ‘The Monument’ a likely source for his own very similar ‘The Settle Bed’. In writing back to Frost’s ‘The Wood Pile’, ‘The Monument’ also accommodates Heaney’s earlier manner, making it particularly inviting for an ambitious imitator. Like ‘The Monument’, ‘The Settle Bed’ deals with the politics of representation and the imaginative transformation of public art. In its meditations on art’s endurance and human mortality, Bonnie Costello argues ‘The Monument’ consciously inserts itself in a poetic tradition that could include Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55, Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, and Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. She adds that ‘The Monument’ may allude to Eliot’s concept of tradition outlined in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and, on close reading, the extent of Bishop’s ‘scepticism’ for Eliot’s concept of an ‘ideal’ becomes clear:

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.
Each is turned half-way round so that
its corners point toward the sides
of the one below and the angles alternate.
Then on the topmost cube is set
a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood,
long petals of board, pierced with odd holes,
four-sided, stiff, ecclesiastical.

In these lines, Bishop reclaims the object as an emblem of temporality rather than immortality. The poem grows without logical progression, revising itself and revealing

125 EBCP, p.23.
physical details without conclusion much as the ‘light’ that ‘goes around it / like a prowling animal’. The steady description deconstructs the monument which, turned in the light, possesses no power of signification; Bishop is at pains to demonstrate, much as she is in ‘The Map’, that meaning is read.

Later we learn that the ‘monument is one-third set against / a sea; two-thirds set against a sky’ in a ‘view’ that ‘is geared’ to include aspects of the surroundings, creating the perspective through which it is to be viewed. The observer completes the circuit by surveying the scene and thus the monument, in Heaney’s phrase, ‘promises nothing beyond what it exhibits’.\textsuperscript{126} an ornament of ‘weathered wood’ located in a particular time and place, lowly in comparison to Yeats’s ‘gold mosaic’ or Coleridge’s ‘stately pleasure-dome’. In contrast to the ‘artifice of eternity’, Bishop’s monument has been eroded by the ‘conditions of its existence’, becoming part of its surroundings before the speaker ponders:

\begin{quote}
It may be solid, may be hollow.
The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.
\end{quote}

All that is sheltered ‘within’ is the artistic effort itself: the impulse to begin ‘a painting’ or a ‘sculpture’ or even the ‘poem’ in which the object appears. The monument, therefore, does not represent a triumph over mortality or a transcendence of our creaturely existence; rather, by inserting itself ‘within this august tradition’\textsuperscript{127} of mediations on art’s endurance, Bishop shows through her revivifying descriptions that all that is constant, paradoxically, is the capacity to reimagine. For Bishop, the renewed, individual effort is itself the ideal. The monument in this way stands in for all art and, in its gradual deterioration, provides the temporal perspective necessary to comprehend human existence.

\textsuperscript{126} ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, \textit{R}, p.171.
\textsuperscript{127} Costello, ‘Bishop and the Poetic Tradition’ in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop}, p.80.
This capacity for transformation is politicised by ‘The Settle Bed’ through a conspicuously similar framework to ‘The Monument’. In ‘The Settle Bed’ Heaney also turns the poet’s imaginative power on a symbolic object but includes a broader context of shared experience:

Willed down, waited for, in place at last and for good.
Trunk-hasped, cart-heavy, painted an ignorant brown.
And pew-strait, bin-deep, standing four-square as an ark.

If I lie in it, I am cribbed in seasoned deal
Dry as the unkindled boards of a funeral ship.
My measure has been taken, my ear shuttered up.¹²⁸

Pace, rhythm, diction and tone all conspire to create a language that mimics as much as it describes the object, just as Bishop does in ‘The Monument’. The ‘four-square’ settle bed – “‘an inheritance’” – is an object correlative for the ‘Sigh-life of Ulster’, with the speaker hearing in the ‘headboard’ the ‘Unpathetic och ochs and och hohs’ of an ‘unwilling, unbeaten’ people, both ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’. The poem, then, from the start asserts a consciousness of itself as an aesthetic object. This parallelism is crucial to the suggestion that imaginative transformation – the kind exhibited by ‘The Monument’ – might dishevel ideologies in the actual. In order to ‘conquer that weight’, Heaney instructs:

Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven
Like some nonsensical vengeance come on the people,
Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is given

Can always be reimagined, however four-square,
Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time
It happens to be. You are free as the lookout.

Heaney’s point is essentially a broadening of Bishop’s in ‘The Monument’: the object has no intrinsic meaning and therefore, in Heaney’s context, poses no danger. The whimsical image of settle beds tumbling ‘from heaven / Like some nonsensical vengeance’ demonstrates that the object, however ‘planked / In the long ago’, can be reimagined and that inheritance can be chosen and redefined. Form and content are as

¹²⁸ ST, p.28.
one in the final image where Heaney offers the place of writing as an answer to the writing of place, a parallel reality:

That far-seeing joker posted high over the fog,
Who declared by the time that he had got himself down
The actual ship had stolen away from beneath him.

These images bring together much of Heaney’s rhetoric about the experience of poetic creation. More significantly, ‘The Settle Bed’ offers the creative operations which have brought it into being as an alternative structure to political thinking, rather than articulating a viewpoint or taking an ‘adjudicating stance toward communal experience’. Indeed, the closing image recalls Heaney’s description of poetic form as ‘both the ship and the anchor […] at once a buoyancy and a holding’, the image of the ‘far-seeing’ lookout who descends to find the ‘ship had stolen away from beneath him’ suggests that one’s situation or identity may also be a matter of perspective. This is, as Heaney explains in ‘Frontiers of Writing’, literally the case for Ulster citizens who live in a place ‘that does not exist’ but is rather an ideological construction of ‘resolved crisis’. That ‘Frontiers of Writing’ is preceded by ‘Counting a Hundred’ in The Redress of Poetry only highlights the extent to which Bishop’s example was facilitating Heaney’s new conceptions of place. Both ‘The Map’ and ‘The Monument’ from Bishop’s more restrained era prove to be ripe models for an ambitious imitator who is willing to pull them in the directions of his own concerns. Invigorated by the developments of Seeing Things, Heaney’s next collection would also draw on Bishop, albeit through a more noticeable process of productive misreading.

V

In The Spirit Level, Bishop’s influence on Heaney reaches a peak of intensity, particularly in ‘The Gravel Walks’ and ‘Two Lorries’. While Heaney admits he took inspiration from Bishop’s ‘Sestina’ while writing ‘Two Lorries’, the American poet’s role in ‘The Gravel Walks’ remains unacknowledged by critics. Drawing on ‘At the

130 CP, p.466.
Fishhouses’, a poem Heaney reads at length in ‘The Government of the Tongue’, ‘The Gravel Walks’ reworks elements of its source to become the kind of apologia for art he believes ‘At the Fishhouses’ to be. Following the death of Bishop’s lover and literary executor Alice Methfessel in 2009, previously unseen correspondences from 1947 between Bishop and her psychiatrist Dr Ruth Foster have come into the public domain. Their careful preservation in a locked box has led Heather Treseler to speculate that it was Bishop herself who saved them, wishing ‘her œuvre to be understood by a future generation alongside the secrets that, in her lifetime, she kept so carefully from view.’ Bishop’s letters are particularly significant for the new light they shed on ‘At the Fishhouses’, a poem on which critics have failed to agree a definitive reading. Revisiting Heaney’s analysis of the poem today, the extent to which he is prepared to fill gaps in critical understanding of the poem with insights that support his own principles is striking. Though critics Linda R. Anderson and Jonathan Ellis commend the perceptiveness and eloquence of Heaney’s analysis, Zachariah Pickard takes issue with Heaney’s reading of the poem as progressing in a ‘one-way motion’ towards its dramatic leap into a new form of knowledge. Pickard argues ‘[t]o know, for Bishop, is to suffer’ while Schwartz also finds ‘At the Fishhouses’ to be ‘a poem so thoroughly immersed in the complexity of human suffering.’

Consideration of suffering is absent from Heaney’s reading since he understands the poem to be about the form of artistic liberation he seeks to replicate, bringing the poem into line with his binary poetics so it may better serve as a model. In ‘At the Fishhouses’, Heaney beholds ‘the most mannerly of poets being compelled by the undeniable impetus of her art to break with her usual inclination to conciliate the social audience’ and understands form to be vital to the impact of the ‘break’ or ‘big

136 Ibid., p.74.
In Heaney’s reading, the foundations of this climax are laid by an opening section of ‘fastidious notations which log the progress of the physical world’.¹³⁹

Although it is a cold evening,  
down by one of the fishhouses  
an old man sits netting,  
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,  
a dark purple-brown,  
and his shuttle worn and polished.  
The air smells so strong of codfish  
it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water.  
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs  
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up  
to storerooms in the gables  
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.  
All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,  
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,  
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,  
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered  
among the wild jagged rocks,  
is of an apparent translucence  
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss  
growing on their shoreward walls.¹⁴¹

Pickard finds the tendency to view these lines as mere description (in contrast with the later luminosity) to be a flawed reading of the poem. Indeed, there is from the start evidence of Bishop’s desire to merge opposites in a kind of middle state, a feat Heaney ascribes only to the concluding lines of the poem. Bishop makes it clear that we are in a symbolic world – not just a ‘physical’ one – through her conjuring of an indeterminate sensory experience. In the ‘gloaming almost invisible’ we are at the limits of perception, a point underscored by the ‘silver’ and ‘apparent translucence’ of the seascape, the place where elements not only meet but mix. The image of ‘wheelbarrows’ being ‘pushed up and down’ sets oppositions side by side and suggests Bishop is, even at this early stage, advocating not a binary position but a kind of amphibiousness. Heaney’s prose provides, as ever, the explanation for why he interprets the first section as a foil to the

---

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.102.  
¹⁴¹ EBCP, p.64
last, despite this evidence to the contrary. Returning to ‘Counting to a Hundred’ where Heaney explains how there are ‘three kinds of images’, one can sense the desire to absorb the form he sees as Bishop’s signature. Heaney was also probably mindful in ‘Counting to a Hundred’ of his earlier observation in ‘The Government of the Tongue’ that the final section of ‘At the Fishhouses’ epitomises this structure by breaking into a final sequence that possesses ‘a dream truth as well as a daylight truth’. The fact that ‘The Gravel Walks’ adopts exactly the structure Heaney sees in Bishop’s work highlights the degree to which his prose in this era was a place in which he workshopped his own aesthetic ideas.

There is much to unpack in the opening lines of Bishop’s final section and Heaney makes much of them both in ‘The Government of the Tongue’ and ‘The Gravel Walks’ where he reworks the components for his own purposes:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,  
element bearable to no mortal,  
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly  
I have seen here evening after evening.  
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;  
like me a believer in total immersion,  
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.  
I also sang ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.’  
He stood up in the water and regarded me steadily, moving his head a little.  
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug as if it were against his better judgment.

Presumably Heaney feels the triadic ‘cold dark deep’ accommodates both the ‘dream’ and ‘real’ elements of Bishop’s vision, becoming a hypnotic aural device while retaining monosyllabic emphasis on physical sensations. This physicality, however, is offset by the ethereal ‘music’ and the mystery of the feelings it produces in the speaker, reified by the depths of the sea element and the creature that dwells within. The scene is also open to the comic, as the curious seal returns to the surface ‘against his better judgement’. However whimsical the image of the shrugging seal may appear, Heaney seizes on this line in his analysis and suggests the episode constitutes the ‘spectacle of a well-disciplined poetic imagination being tempted to dare a big leap’ since it is finally

‘also against the better judgement of the poet’, who will follow the seal into swirls of the unconscious, to stay on ‘the world of the surface’ as well. Heaney reformulates this expression in ‘The Gravel Walks’ where he self-instructs to ‘walk on air against your better judgement’, a phrase that has since become his epitaph. Rachel Buxton notes the complex derivation and multiple meanings of this phrase which has ‘taken on a life of its own’ in the work of Heaney and Paul Muldoon. For Heaney, the phrase in the context of ‘At the Fishhouses’ refers to poetic liberation, since beyond this point the poem takes on an uplift like the one he stages in ‘The Gravel Walks’, with Bishop climbing rungs of her own invention ‘above the stones, / icily free above the stones, above the stones and then the world’. For Heaney, this becomes not just a ‘big leap’ but a ‘walk on air’. The panorama accelerates towards the poem’s conclusion where the water ‘is like what we imagine knowledge to be’, both ‘flowing, and flown’. Heaney reads these final lines as the synthesis of practical and poetic forms of knowledge to exemplify the thesis of The Redress of Poetry neatly, a critical collection which, much like The Spirit Level, believes into existence a state of harmony between reality and imagination.

Overlooking the fact that it is possible to interpret the concluding lines of ‘At the Fishhouses’ as a painful acquiescence to reality as Pickard and Schwartz highlight, Heaney understands the water, drawn from ‘the cold hard mouth / of the world’, to be operative in the same way as it is in Frost’s ‘Directive’, a poem he uses in the introduction to The Redress of Poetry. There he explains that poetic wisdom, like water, offers a ‘clarification, a fleeting glimpse of a potential order of things “beyond confusion”, a glimpse that has to be its own reward.’ In contemplating the cave’s water, then, Bishop is, through the recurrences of sounds that have led her on her ‘big leap’ being returned to what Heaney in another context calls ‘the original springs of our human being.’ In her letters to Dr Ruth Foster, however, Bishop explains she was at Lockeport the day she was inspired to write ‘At the Fishhouses’, thus the seascape of the poem is, as Treseler notes, something ‘seen, not just conceived.’ Treseler adds:

---

144 SL, p.39.
146 Introduction, R, p.xv.
Bishop recounts awaking hungover, then taking a long bicycle ride ‘by way of punishment’ to the ocean shore where she sat on the rocks, ‘cried for a while,’ and visited with an Atlantic seal. That episode, she says, reanimated an earlier dream about a ‘wild & dark’ storm in which she witnessed herself, ‘baby size,’ feeding at Foster’s breast, a posture that she wryly rationalizes must be ‘a common dream about a woman analyst.’ Bishop confides in Foster that this mammary imagery informs ‘At the Fishhouses,’ in which the narrator describes knowledge as ‘drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever.’

This new information troubles Heaney’s reading of the poem and highlights several ironies. ‘At the Fishhouses’ is not set in an imagined allegorical world where the artist makes difficult negotiations, as Heaney contends; rather, the poem has one foot firmly in reality and another in a dream which is itself symbolic of the real relationship between Bishop and Dr Ruth Foster. Much more than was originally thought, then, Bishop allowed her poetry to be shaped by her life and personal needs, the very thing Heaney chastises Plath for in his contest. Heaney’s reading of ‘At the Fishhouses’ highlights the extent to which his critical and poetic writings at this time were in fact driven by his own personal needs and how much this, ultimately, leads him to take inspiration from a Bishop of his own making in ‘The Government of the Tongue’.

‘The Gravel Walks’ demonstrates, through verse rather than prose, the possibilities Heaney feels are contained by Bishop’s masterpiece. Although it has not yet received the same level of critical attention as its source, ‘The Gravel Walks’ is significant for its unmistakable use of Bishop to derive the form that elsewhere serves as the model for Heaney’s political verse. For Pickard, however limited Heaney’s reading of ‘At the Fishhouses’ may be, Heaney ‘does paint the poem as something of an anomaly for her’; ‘The Gravel Walks’ aims to be a similar subversion of expectations in its preference for air over earth, reversing Heaney’s early characterisation of the poet as archaeologist. Moreover, in his Nobel lecture a year before the publication of The Spirit Level, Heaney borrows the phrase again to permit himself the ‘luxury of walking on air’ in contrast, he explains, to his earlier ambitions for a poetry of ‘concrete
reality’, despite his ‘temperamental disposition towards an art that was earnest and devoted to things as they are’. He characterises ‘At the Fishhouses’ in conspicuously similar terms, as the ‘spectacle’ of the ‘most mannerly of poets being compelled’ and ‘being tempted to dare a big leap’. The ‘leap’ Heaney makes in ‘The Gravel Walks’ is therefore not as spontaneous as he would like it to appear; rather, it mirrors the example he had deconstructed in his criticism years earlier.

In line with his reading of ‘At the Fishhouses’, ‘The Gravel Walks’ tries to establish freedom by combining the elements of earth and air. Heaney begins just as he characterises the opening lines of ‘At the Fishhouses’, by ‘layering’ observations and taking readings from ‘different levels and from different angles’ until ‘a world is brought into being’.

River gravel. In the beginning, that.
High summer, and the angler’s motorbike
Deep in roadside flowers, like a fallen knight
Whose ghost we’d lately questioned: ‘Any luck?’

As the engines of the world prepared, green nuts
Dangled and clustered closer to the whirlpool.
The trees dipped down. The flints and sandstone-bits
Worked themselves smooth and smaller in a sparkle[.]

The elements of Heaney’s pastoral are recalled by labouring ‘engines’ set against green vegetation, while the fricative ‘flints’, reinforced by ‘sandstone-bits’, offsets the ‘smooth’ river in ‘High summer’; Heaney’s earlier preference for ‘concrete reality’ is being accommodated before the poem’s ‘cement mixers’ appear. The earthy pastoral then begins to mingle with the lyricism or ‘dream’ truth of the second section, anticipated in the fourth stanza by the momentum-building run of ‘mixed concrete, loaded, wheeled, turned, wheeled’ before ‘Pharaoh’s brickyard’ engenders a new dimension.

Bishop’s entrancing ‘cold dark deep’ would be equally effective in the second section of ‘The Gravel Walks’ which speaks portentously of the ‘Milt of the earth’. Indeed, the poem’s sixth stanza is highly evocative of Bishop’s final, rising

---

151 _CP_, p.450.
panorama above the ‘rounded gray and blue-gray stones’ where dream and reality redress one another:

Beautiful in or out of the river,
The kingdom of gravel was inside you too –
Deep down, far back, clear water running over
Pebbles of caramel, hailstone, mackerel-blue.

These final lines, more clearly than Bishop’s, illustrate the attainment of a duality in which the ‘actual washed stuff’ has been worked into an ‘absolution’ as the poet establishes himself ‘somewhere in between / Those solid batches mixed with grey cement / And a tune called “The Gravel Walks.”’. The implications are the same as those for Bishop’s speaker who confronts the seal in Heaney’s reading, with the poet advocating a position ‘in between’ the cement and music, the solid and the invisible.

Writing in 1996, Nicholas Jenkins notes the significance of the line which precedes those quoted above and titles his review of The Spirit Level after them, ‘Walking on Air’, describing the phrase as ‘an organizing preoccupation for Heaney.’ Jenkins notes that the instruction to ‘walk on air against your better judgement’, aside from its connotations of joy and lightness, ‘conveys an effort of determination and defiance’ and is as much a ‘remaking as relaxing’. Just as he understands Bishop’s ‘big leap’, then, the air walk of ‘The Gravel Walks’ is simply an apologia for the ungoverned tongue and its associations of poetic authority. The air walk of ‘The Gravel Walks’ thus represents the dissolution of parameters and becomes the new perspective from which Heaney will approach the binary identities and political deadlock of Northern Ireland.

‘Two Lorries’ is modelled directly on Bishop’s ‘Sestina’, a poem from which he takes another significant formal lesson, in part at the expense of its nuances. In interview with O’Driscoll, Heaney rejects the suggestion that he found the sestina form ‘restrictive’, claiming ‘[o]n the contrary, it got me on the move.’ His view of the intricate form as liberating, he explains, is influenced, somewhat surprisingly, by Bishop’s ‘Sestina’. He remembers, during a period of stagnation in the composition of ‘Two Lorries’, ‘whipping [‘Sestina’] down off the shelf and going for it head-on, letting
the repeated end-words take me wherever they wanted.’157 He also gives attention to ‘Sestina’ in ‘Counting to a Hundred’ and, as in the case of ‘At the Fishhouses’, situating his reading of the poem within wider critical opinion exposes the particular instruction he takes. Richard Flynn characterises ‘Sestina’ as a ‘bleak poem that refuses consoling wisdom’158 while Jacqueline Vaught Brogan concurs the form is ‘prison-like’,159 yet, in an earlier reading, Susan McCabe finds the ‘proud form’ of ‘Sestina’ ‘testifies to the flexibility and adaptability of the imagination that can create new possibilities with limited materials.’160

Heaney’s analysis is largely in line with McCabe’s, seeing the ‘pain’ as reflexively ‘shut up’ by the sestina’s formal restrictiveness, paralleled in the poem itself by the child’s drawing of an ‘inscrutable house’161 which serves as a shelter:

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.162

Heaney sees the recurrences of ‘child’, ‘grandmother’, and ‘house’ as a ploy to draw attention to the absence of the child’s parents, the source of sadness for the child in the poem. Helen Vendler, writing in 1980, also finds the ‘absence of the child’s parents’ to be ‘the unspoken cause of those tears’.163 Brogan, in her longer and more sensitive reading, understands ‘Sestina’ as a critique of confining gender roles through the

---

157 SS, p.362.
162 EBCP, p.123.
grandmother’s obedience to ‘the stove’ and the ‘genuinely controlling script’ of the almanac, which is reflected by the deterministic framework of the sestina form itself. Such considerations are absent from Heaney’s reading which, again, sees ‘Sestina’ as a formal triumph over suffering. For Brogan, Bishop chooses ‘Sestina’ as the poem’s title to parallel the rigidity of the form with the ‘mindless adherence to cultural conventions’ of daily life; thus, ‘Bishop isn’t subverting the form as such’, rather ‘the form comes to embody the very situation as realized in actual life that she is critiquing – i.e., that of being “con-scripted.”’ More in-depth consideration of Heaney’s formal principles illuminates why he is able to draw inspiration from a poem of which he appears to have only a limited understanding.

In his broad study of poetic form, John Lennard finds ‘Sestina’ to be ‘exemplary in its cycle of repetitions’ and yet ‘distinct in choosing iambic tetramer.’ He notes that the ‘usual preference for heroic sestinas not only grants an extra 39 feet, but increases the distance between every end-word, and every repetition of an end-word – a wide salmon by comparison with [Bishop’s] narrowness of measure.’ Bishop’s anaepstic variances, Lennard contends, ‘infringe only against the metre’ while the ‘successfully regular lines in the first and last sestets’ eliminate the impression ‘of any achieved escape.’ In line with Lennard, Brogan describes Bishop’s sestina as ‘petrified’, likening her use of the form to Dante’s attempt to make the sestina ‘as petrified verbally as the petra it describes’, in contrast to Petrarch’s ‘aims for greater fluidity, seeking ways to reduce the form’s resistance.’ Notably, Heaney gives attention to Dante’s formalism in ‘The Government of the Tongue’ before his long reading of Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’. Rather than understanding Dante in the traditional view as ‘a poet whose tongue is governed by an orthodoxy or system’, Heaney subscribes to Mandelstam’s re-canonicalisation of Dante as ‘the sponsor of impulse

---

166 Ibid, p.250.
168 Ibid, p.106.
170 Brogan refers to Teodolinda Barolini and quotes from Dante and the Origins of Italian Culture in her notes (p.254).
and instinct” whose ‘three-edged stanza is formed from within, like a crystal, not cut on the outside like a stone’, thus the ‘poem is not governed by external conventions and impositions but follows the laws of its own need.’ Such a view leads Heaney to understand the sestina as a site of liberation rather than constraint, the sense of freedom arising not from attempts to reduce the form’s resistance but by successfully mastering the resistances. Heaney’s underlying belief in formal poetry’s ameliorative function – its ‘stay against confusion’ – means that he must understand Bishop’s formal virtuosity as a victory over tribulation and not merely acquiescence to it; to be an exemplar at all for Heaney, Bishop must be redefined as a survivor.

Aside from ‘Two Lorries’, Sonnet III from The Haw Lantern’s ‘clearances’ sequence also appears to have been informed by this interpretation of ‘Sestina’, as it draws on similar images in another closed form:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knees —
Never closer the whole rest of our lives. 174

Parallels with ‘Sestina’ are obvious from the opening sentence where potato peels ‘fall one by one/ Like solder weeping’, answering Bishop’s recurring ‘tears’ in the shared domestic setting. Heaney, as Vendler has recently noted, discovers in this sequence that the absence of a parent can be brighter than their presence, a lesson they both inscribe to the child of ‘Sestina’. Vendler’s description of ‘Sestina’ as a poem in which ‘the blank

172 Ibid, p.94.
173 Robert Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, p.132.
174 HL, p.29
center stands for the definitive presence in her study of Bishop is a better summation of Heaney’s split sonnet, where the blankness of the page between sections provides what Heaney calls in ‘Place and Displacement’ a ‘luminous emptiness’. In ‘Two Lorries’, Heaney uses the repetitions of the sestina form to intersect private and public loss. Much like ‘Sestina’, ‘Two Lorries’ allows its ‘narrative, thematic and emotional meaning’ to be ‘coincident with formal means’; Corcoran adds, ‘even if one is alert to what was once called the fallacy of imitative form, a successful sestina makes a strong case for its viability and validity’. ‘Two Lorries’ is a significant moment in the development of Heaney’s public poetry because it builds on the freedom and confidence won in ‘The Gravel Walks’ to create a parallel between its own formal operations and the political violence of Northern Ireland, using the sestina to embody both the intractable reality and, in its mastery of the form’s rigidity, a transcending of that reality, too. McCabe’s reading of ‘Sestina’ as a survivalist text in which the ‘imagination’, despite ‘limitation’ and ‘facing the apparent finality of loss’, ultimately ‘empowers us with the potential for remaking’, is, like Vendler’s analysis of ‘Sestina’, a more accurate description of Heaney’s poem than Bishop’s. ‘Two Lorries’ achieves a high degree of fluidity, not by diminishing the form’s resistance but, as he finds of ‘Sestina’, by discovering a range of possibility in the end-words and following them to their full conclusions.

In the parallel domestic setting of ‘Two Lorries’, Heaney’s ‘nineteen-forties mother’ is kept around ‘her stove’ by the repeated ‘ashes’ that she, in the third stanza, wipes with ‘a backhand from her cheek’. The end-word ‘ashes’ does not constrain Heaney but instead creates three images: the ashes of the mother’s stove, the coalman’s lorry, and the explosion ‘In a time beyond her time in Magherafelt’ where she appears, ghostlike among the victims of the bombing. The end-word ‘lorry’ is also exploited in this way, becoming a source of movement rather than imprisonment. The ‘lorry’ is, on one level, symbolic of mobility for the mother who, in indulging the flirtations of the coalman, escapes the ‘business round her stove’ in imagined dates ‘to a film in

176 ‘Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland’, FK, p.134.
177 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.198.
178 McCabe, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss, p.211.
Magherafelt’ and, on another, becomes a temporal lever that ‘fastforwards’ the poet to the later bombing. This transformation of the end-words is further evidenced by the variations of ‘load’ which, as Corcoran notes, appears ‘in homonym, rhyme and off-rhyme’ as ‘lode’, ‘lead’, ‘payload’, and ‘explode’. In these recurrences Heaney is accessing areas of the unconscious through a use of language in which the sounds and appearance of words themselves contribute to signification.

This strategy allows the poet to situate his mother at the site of the bombing, bringing together not only ‘dream’ and ‘daylight’ truth but, significantly, personal and communal experience:

A revenant on the bench where I would meet her
In that cold-floored waiting room in Magherafelt,
Her shopping bags full up with shovelled ashes.
Death walked out past her like a dust-faced coalman
Refolding body-bags, plying his load
Empty upon empty, in a flurry

Of motes and engine-revs, but which lorry
Was it now? Young Agnew’s or that other,
Heavier, deadlier one, set to explode
In a time beyond her time in Magherafelt...
So tally bags and sweet-talk darkness, coalman,
Listen to the rain spit in new ashes

As you heft a load of dust that was Magherafelt,
Then reappear from your lorry as my mother’s
Dreamboat coalman filmed in silk-white ashes.

Beginning with ‘Listen’, the envoi tries to harness the ‘resolving power of deliberately articulated sound’ Heaney notes of Bishop’s villanelle ‘One Art’. By reordering the repeated end-words, Heaney can interpenetrate two forms of loss, bringing to his personal grief a wider context of significance and to the public atrocity the tenderness of private mourning. Indeed, ‘Two Lorries’ seems designed to exemplify his belief articulated a year earlier in Crediting Poetry that verse should ‘touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic nature of the

180 Corcoran, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney, p.198.
world to which that nature is constantly exposed’,\textsuperscript{183} with the iron frame of the sestina structure functioning as the silent victory over the latter. ‘Two Lorries’ is, therefore, the conclusion of Bishop’s influence on Heaney. Home is finally, as it is for Bishop’s travellers, a fluid construct while absence becomes presence through the interweaving of memory, imagination, and history. This model serves as Heaney’s new and less problematic way of addressing ‘communal experience’; no longer taking the ‘adjudicating stance’\textsuperscript{184} as he did in an earlier phase, he simply offers the border-crossing poetic structure itself as redirection in a verse admired for its ‘ethical depth and lyrical beauty’.\textsuperscript{185} That ‘Two Lorries’ takes this lesson from ‘Sestina’, a poem that more accurately remains trapped in a pain he does not recognise, highlights the degree to which Bishop’s influence on Heaney became an energy of its own.

Today, Heaney is celebrated in Harvard for his ‘modesty, hard work, and the prosaic tools he used to craft his timeless words’,\textsuperscript{186} terms that strongly echo the traditional view of Bishop as a mannerly poet of reticence and restraint. The contrast, however, between Harvard’s celebration of Heaney and its earlier treatment of Bishop is stark: while Heaney was accommodated in the final stages of his career and is still mourned, Bishop’s request for an extension on the mandatory retirement age of 66 was denied, resulting in a bitter and ‘unceremonious’\textsuperscript{187} exit without readings or gatherings. Bishop, it appears, did not benefit from the persona of modesty and quiet reticence as Heaney later would. Indeed, she remains the unacknowledged ghost-writer of Heaney’s epitaph and, as a mixture of direct quotation and divined inspiration, ‘walk on air against your better judgement’ is an apt summation of Bishop’s influence. While in one sense it is a fiction of Heaney’s own making, in another it is extraordinarily intense. Heaney’s winning of the Nobel prize at a time when Bishop was central to his verse and the continued citation of his commentary by today’s scholars of Bishop – who would undoubtedly consider elements of his analysis to be outmoded – highlights the extent to which each poet has and continues to influence the legacy of the other, albeit invisibly and problematically. That this association persists despite Heaney’s questionable

\textsuperscript{183} CP, p.467.
\textsuperscript{184} Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, p.17.
\textsuperscript{186} Ireland, ‘A Poet’s Own Epitaphs.’ Web.
\textsuperscript{187} Brett C. Millier, Elizabeth Bishop: Life and Memory of It, p.530.
reading of Bishop only adds to the complexity and allurement of the relationship. One wonders whether a less restrained Bishop might have elicited the same objections from Heaney that he levels at Plath, and in turn denied him the ‘reticent’ verse on which he bases his most celebrated poetry.

Conclusion

The balance Heaney had attained by the end of his career between widely-read poet and member of the academic-poetic elite appears remarkably prefigured at the beginning when he came under the influence of several similar figures. Indeed, Heaney may have shared this ambition from the start with his first American influence Robert Frost who, early in his own career, envisioned the kind of success he would later enjoy. In a letter to a friend, Frost explains:

[y]ou mustn’t take me too seriously if I now proceed to brag a bit about my exploits as a poet. There is one qualifying fact always to bear in mind: there is a kind of success called ‘of esteem’ and it butters no parsnips. It means a success with the critical few who are supposed to know. But really to arrive where I can stand on my legs as a poet and nothing else I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands. I may not be able to do that. I believe in doing it – don’t you doubt me there. I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds. I could never make a merit of being caviare to the crowd the way my quasi-friend Pound does. I want to reach out, and would if it were a thing I could do by taking thought.1

As Blake Morrison has noted, Heaney too was able to reach ‘outside that circle to the general reader’ by allowing, like Frost, a ‘simplified’2 version of his work and image to persist, especially in America. Heaney’s parallels with Frost are so clear and widespread that it is even tempting to view the Irish poet’s professional career as a deliberate and well-executed emulation of Frost’s.

Yet, it is the ways in which Heaney is unlike his American influences that are most revealing. Heaney obviously lacks what he terms Frost’s ‘crystal of indifference in himself’; the ‘exclusiveness and isolation’3 that characterised Frost’s relationships and which has imbued elements of his poetry, retrospectively, with a dark moral complexity. Frost’s affectations and enigmatic persona are the focus of Lowell’s sonnet portrait of him, a poem for which Heaney has shown a high level of admiration:

Robert Frost at midnight, the audience gone
to vapor, the great act laid on the shelf in mothballs,
his voice is musical and raw – he writes in the flyleaf:
For Robert from Robert, his friend in the art.⁴

Again, the image of Frost offered here as a performer-poet invites comparison with Heaney at the end of his career; yet Lowell’s poem also highlights Frost’s emotional detachment and references Lowell’s own mental illness, something that has likewise influenced how his later poems are read. Heaney’s achievement lacks an equivalent dimension, nor, either, does it possess the submerged themes or oblique psychology of Bishop’s poetry that are currently enjoying a significant critical re-evaluation.

The level of media attention and book sales Heaney has enjoyed, however, eclipse the achievements of even his most prominent American influences. Heaney’s unique success may also point to the different age in which he was operating; how he benefitted from the increased influence and interconnectivity of radio, television, newspaper and academic publishing in a way that would not have been possible for any poet prior to this, and thereby suffusing his own remark that Dylan Thomas’s brief fame grew as contemporary media platforms were ‘perfecting their alliance in the promotion of culture heroes’⁵ with intense self-portraiture. Leontia Flynn’s tribute to Heaney, ‘August 30th 2013’, addresses many of these issues:

Two texts. I get an email on my phone.
Twitter erupts, it seems, in shards of verse.
Phrases from ‘Postscript’ serve to set the tone
(under 140 characters)
then struggling to the coffee-shop downstairs
we stand like cattle, dumbly looking on
for something on the widescreen’s coverage, where
news breaking here, at length, at length it’s said
after all those reports – online, diverse
and instantaneous – the short word: dead.⁶

Later in the poem Flynn reflects ‘It’s timely’ to hear of Heaney’s death ‘from sources / far flung and disparate’, since his voice ‘made itself heard’ above its ‘fellow voices’; as ‘our networked culture’ pays tribute, ‘perhaps we’re mourning too a passing age’. There

are multiple ironies and losses considered by the poem: while in one sense the scale of
the response to Heaney’s death is proportionate to the success he enjoyed in life, the
increasingly fractured media world of today makes it unlikely that such a level of
recognition will be achieved by a living poet again. Appearing in Flynn’s 2017 volume
_The Radio_, ‘August 30th 2013’ implicitly raises the more difficult question of whether
Heaney’s immense success has helped younger local poets for whom his legacy, in one
way or another, must be reckoned with.

Writing in a 2014/15 edition of _The Irish Review_ dedicated to Heaney, Flynn
recalls that when she herself was ‘attempting to write’, Heaney was ‘too big, too famous
and too much identified as a Northern Irish spokesperson to be taken on board’. Her
reflection that she later ‘“came round”’ to Heaney (‘another way of saying I grew up’)
partly due to the resonance and, as she goes on highlight, the _relevance_ of his ‘critical
defence of poetry’ may reflect the experience of other writers in the generations who
have followed Heaney. Flynn notes the irony of Heaney’s ubiquity on reading lists of
increasingly for-profit university degree programmes given ‘the tenor of all his
arguments about poetry’s freedom, its refusal to cow to an agenda’. As Heaney found
there to be a conflict between Lowell’s love of literature and his sense of his times,
there is an equivalent ‘conflict’ at the heart of his own achievement, something that is
clear as early as 1988 when he reflected:

[r]esidence in America has forced me back on what I am myself. There are
times when I do not understand what is going on in the poetry. At the
beginning I thought I did. Of course, there is a vast, inflationary, reputation-
making business and I myself am part of it too. I have received as many
amplified, overstated praises as the next. But American poets have to
negotiate that language of inflation, in their society and truth in the words
that are wrapped around books. Within the collective unfortunately also in
blurb-speak: there is a disgraceful abdication from truth in the words that
are wrapped around books. Within the collective of poets, there are a few
people I meet who know that this is generally blather and generally very
bad. I have an impulse to flee from it, even while benefiting from it.

---

7 Leontia Flynn, ‘Radically Necessary: Heaney’s Defence of Poetry’, _The Irish Review_ No. 49/50
8 _Ibid_, p.211.
9 ‘Full Face’, _P_, p.221.
As the ‘reputation-making business’ of poetry has moved to the centreless online world, Flynn – and presumably many others – find renewed pleasure in Heaney’s literary-critical conceptions of poetry as self-justified and self-rewarding, something that makes his achievement appear ‘increasingly radical’\(^{11}\) in the current age.

The ideas of poetry’s independence and self-governing power that characterise Heaney’s mature poetic thinking are strikingly prescient in the early poem ‘Writer and Teacher’. Not an entirely successful poem from Heaney’s Group era, ‘Writer and Teacher’ may be a reflection on his early mentor Michael McLaverty, who was the principal of St Thomas’s Secondary School in Belfast during his placement year in 1962-63 when he was a trainee teacher. Indeed, the poem, though it focuses on an external subject, succeeds more in highlighting the young Heaney’s insecurities as an inexperienced teacher and writer himself. Depicting the McLaverty figure as a ‘humble master of two trades’ who ‘evades / The market-place and the headline’ to teach ‘each child to use his eyes’, Heaney’s search for his own identity at a time when he was teaching in St Thomas’s, before his writing career may have seemed possible, is clear to see. The poem concludes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A week’s a chapter in the tale} \\
\text{Where thirty boys drive towards the gale} \\
\text{Of living – once his lessons cease.} \\
\text{‘His work says little that is new’} \\
\text{According to one slick review.} \\
\text{But the pupils are his masterpiece.}\(^{12}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Heaney stresses this writer-teacher’s true accomplishment is not just his work but the transformation of his students; in a similar way, Heaney’s achievement is noteworthy not just because of the poetry at the centre of it but because of the retentiveness of his effort towards self-improvement as a pupil of his influences, particularly his American ones. Indeed, the conclusion of Flynn’s article highlights the degree to which ‘Writer and Teacher’ chimes with Heaney’s later defences of poetry: ‘[Heaney’s] arguments and his authority remind us that – even when it is done at the very highest level – poetry is written in an ‘amateur’ capacity, for love, with all the crazy, impractical, self-

\(^{12}\) Belfast Creative Group Manuscripts 1963-66, The McClay Library Special Collections, MS/ 1/204.
sacrificing standards that this implies.'  

It is undeniable that US writers and the American stage were instrumental in Heaney’s ascendance to this ‘very highest level’; through an intense engagement with the American exemplars explored by this thesis he was able to develop his early pastoral, political form, and the visionary poetry that characterises his most acclaimed volumes. Given the role US poetry played in forming his poetics and latterly how America became the powerbase of the Heaney phenomenon, the Heaney familiar today to ‘the general reader who buys books in their thousands’ and critics alike is, therefore, in a very real sense, an American one.

---

Bibliography

Primary

Poetry


Prose


Interviews


**MSS & Archive Sources**

Belfast Creative Writing Group (1963-6) Papers, MS 1/204, Special Collections, The McClay Library, Queen’s University, Belfast. Print.
Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries. Print.

Heaney Manuscript Collection, MS 20/7/1, listed as ‘Notebook “English Fourth Honours: Modern Literature”’, Special Collections, The McClay Library, Queen’s University, Belfast. Print.

Secondary


https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2015/03/heaney-suite-dedication


Queen’s Calendar 66-7. Special Collections, The McClay Library, Queen’s University, Belfast. Print.


