

*Sally Connolly*

# GRIEF & METER

ELEGIES FOR POETS AFTER AUDEN

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Sir, you are tough, and I am tough.

But who will write whose epitaph?

—Joseph Brodsky, "To a Fellow Poet"

## INTRODUCTION

Trochee, trochee, falling: thus  
Grief and metre order us.  
—Seamus Heaney, “Audenesque”

W. H. Auden set sail for America on the steamship *Champlain* on January 19, 1939. As his traveling companion Christopher Isherwood recounts in his diary, when they arrived seven days later into the biting cold of New York Harbor, after weathering blizzards in the Atlantic, the snow-cruised ship looked “like a wedding cake.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the first poem Auden wrote to inaugurate his new life in the New World was not an epithalamion in celebration of a marriage, but an elegy on the occasion of a death. W. B. Yeats died on the French Riviera two days after Auden’s arrival in New York, and this spurred him to write the elegy “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.”

This book makes the case that Auden’s elegy is one of the most significant and powerful examples of elegy in English since John Milton’s “Lycidas” (1638) was published some three hundred years previously. The influence of “Lycidas,” however—a poem that initiates the pastoral tradition in English elegy traced later in this introduction—was generic rather than formal. By contrast, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” offers elegists after Auden a poetic form that directly treats the death of a poet.

There are, of course, other instances of formally influential elegies. For example, the heroic quatrains of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) came to be known as elegiac quatrains after Thomas Gray, while Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850) went on to lend its name to the *abba* envelope quatrains in which it is couched. The significance and specificity

of the formal influence of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," however, is quite distinct from these examples. The trochaic tetrameter quatrains of the third section of Auden's elegy become shorthand not only for elegy per se but for elegies for poets in particular. Not only the form but also the structure of Auden's tripartite elegy for Yeats becomes a model for elegies for poets after 1939, and we can find examples (such as Joseph Brodsky's "Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot" [1965]) that are wholly patterned after "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

Contrary to Auden's assertion in his elegy for Yeats that "poetry makes nothing happen" (36), this book argues that elegies—especially for poets—do indeed make something happen. The very word "poetry" is taken from the Greek *poiēsis*, a derivation from an ancient form of the verb "to make," so one can turn Auden's line on its head by glossing it as "making makes nothing happen": that is, the creation of poetry generates something out of nothing. This is why some of the earliest words we have for poets in English, such as *scop* (shaper) and *makar*, place the onus on poetry as an action and a craft. It is my central contention that these poems are not just catalysts for change within the genre of elegy; what is being crafted most vigorously in these poems for poets is a poetic tradition itself.

Auden, the first poet considered in this study, suggests at the close of his elegy for Yeats that "With the farming of a verse" the poet can "Make a vineyard of the curse" (58–59). "Verse" from the Latin *versus* is as etymologically freighted as "poetry." It suggests both a line of poetry and a furrow tilled in the earth. Seamus Heaney (the final poet in the genealogy of poetry that I trace) picks up on and elucidates Auden's agrarian image in the closing couplet of his second "Glanmore Sonnet": "Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, / Each verse returning like the plough turned round" (13–14). Elegies for poets are the formal crucible in which the making of *poiēsis* most obviously and productively interacts with the repetition and return of *versus*. These poems open up new ground—the "pastures new" (193) that Milton's lamenting swain turns toward at the close of "Lycidas"—as they go over old ground. That is not to say that other genres such as the epic do not propel poetic innovation. Nowhere is this drive more apparent and forceful, however, than in elegies for poets. This book traces the recurring and productive tension between *versus* (repeating) and *poiēsis* (revising) exemplified by and explored in Auden's elegy and the line of elegies engendered by his poem.<sup>2</sup>

The elegizing of poets is one of the oldest and most enduring aspects of the English poetic tradition. Many of the most influential and best-known poems, such as "Lycidas" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" (1821), are in memory of other makers and form the core of the canon. This book asks why and how these poems are imbued with such power and significance. It is the first book, in fact, to focus solely on elegies for poets and the role they play as a specific sub-genre of elegy. Indeed, so important are these poems that it might be more accurate to regard them as a meta-genre within the elegiac tradition, akin to *ars poetica*. For they not only perform the immediate mourning work of elegy but also serve as a synecdoche of the entire poetic canon as they manifest, transmit, and challenge that tradition and comment upon the worth of poetic careers and their legacy. As we shall see, in many ways these elegies make poetry happen.

This study begins in 1939 for two primary reasons. The first, and most important, is that the publication of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in that year reconfigured the elegy for the modern era as radically as Milton's "Lycidas" did for his. Auden's elegy is significant because it self-consciously explores what it means for the innovative making of *poiēsis* to interact with atavistic repetition of *versus*—both explicitly and formally—in a modern context and in doing so creates a new form for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The trochaic tetrameter *aabb* quatrains of the third and final part of Auden's elegy, moreover, provide this study with a formal pulse and structural backbone (though I do also consider elegies for poets that take many other shapes). I repeatedly consider this form's various incarnations and variations upon it—for example, Brodsky's elegy for T. S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney's for Brodsky.<sup>3</sup> Auden's elegy initiates this study, secondly, because it is at this moment that elegies for poets take on an entirely new additional purpose. As we will see, these poems are frequently the vessels through which the transatlantic poetic exchanges of the twentieth century have been effected just as surely as the SS *Champlain* delivered Auden upon America's shore. This study traces a line of literary descent from Yeats through Auden's elegy down to Heaney's 2001 elegy, "Audenesque," for Brodsky, and, in turn, the elegies that are now being written for Heaney after his death in 2013.

My use of Auden's poem also underscores the issue of the idea of "form" for the purpose of this book. By "form," I mean most simply the prosodic shape and external structure of a poem. Of course, this is an obvious over-



simplification since forms are akin to spells as well as shapes, loaded with associations and allusions. The tetrameter quatrains of the final section of Auden's elegy for Yeats thus calls to mind Yeats's own elegy "In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen," William Blake's "The Tyger," and William Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle" among others. Broadly speaking, though, the prosodic and structural aspect of "form" can be considered as something relatively fixed. There is, however, another aspect to my conception of "form" that has profound implications for the purposes of this book: that is, form as a verb, the act of making and shaping. When I use the word "form," then, I intend to invoke the idea of both poetic product and poetic process.

In *Distant Reading* (2013), Franco Moretti helpfully asserts that "forms are the abstract of social relationships: so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power" (59). My formal analyses of the poems that follow are profoundly invested in the dynamics of the relationships explored and established by these elegies and consider how these forms both transfer and generate power. Of course, Moretti is writing about nonpoetic forms considered from a distant perspective: his is a comparative morphology conducted through the study of quantitative evidence that intends to trace the genesis of forms (and particularly that of the novel). This study is thus not only the first consideration of elegies for poets but also an intervention into the debate about the status and importance of close reading versus that of distant reading. My work defends and exemplifies how formalist readings can also be used as a tool to trace and understand the genesis of forms and genres over time.

### Genealogy

Certainly, elegies for poets have been previously considered. In *The Life of the Poet* (1981), a study of poetic careers, Lawrence Lipking calls them "*tombeaux*," drawing on the static image of the poet's tomb after Stéphane Mallarmé's exploration of the form in his poems occasioned by the deaths of Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine. Lipking notes that a "long chain of *tombeaux* stretches generation through generation from the ancients to the present, preserving a vital record of what poets inherit," and claims "a history of poetry could be strung together, in fact, from *tombeaux* alone."<sup>4</sup> Helen Vendler also alludes to this "chain of public literary commemoration . . . forged of the golden links of

elegy,"<sup>5</sup> an image that points to the dual nature of such poems: although each link in this poetic chain is independent and can be appreciated in isolation, being part of a chain gives it a larger purpose and a correspondingly greater strength.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Vendler's image of a linear chain stretching out, I would instead like to propose the image of a genealogy, a branching and intersecting tree of influence and indebtedness, generated by, and traceable through, such poems. This is superior to the image of a chain since the idea of a genealogical tree of poetry has several important conceptual implications. Such a reading, first of all, allows for a far more complex and nuanced account of these poetic relationships than has previously been considered. Rather than the procession of elegies suggested by a static "chain," my concept of genealogy focuses on the processes taking place within these poems. This model of a poetic tradition is organic rather than orderly and is flexible enough to consider the more subtle and oblique shades of influence and entanglement than, for example, Harold Bloom's approach. This genealogy, second, also embeds within itself the idea of poetic roots reaching back into the canon far beyond one's immediate precursors. Third, the idea of poetic roots in these poems also allows for the consideration of deracination from one's native tradition that we find, for example, in Brodsky's frequent elegies for English language poets. Finally, genealogy is etymologically indebted to the idea of generation that is central to my reading of these elegies, not only in the sense of successive generations of poets writing elegies for each other but also in the sense of how these poems engage in generating and regenerating poetry itself.<sup>7</sup> The genealogy of poetry I consider here is as much concerned with relationships between poems and the interplay of their formal dynamics as it is with the relationships between dead poets and their elegists.

In keeping with the concept of a multibranched genealogy, I have termed such poems for poets "genealogical elegies" rather than "professional elegies" as some recent critics have called them.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, it is not my intention to invoke moral philosophy or the ghosts of Nietzsche and Foucault (although I do agree with the latter when he writes that "genealogy . . . operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times").<sup>9</sup> In family genealogies, descendants have little say in their progenitors' identity and can only dutifully trace their lineage in retrospect (which is why Michel Foucault also asserts that genealogy "is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary," while

these poems are anything but).<sup>10</sup> Genealogical elegists, in contrast, adopt their own poetic parents, forge (sometimes in both senses) their own poetic lineage, and reveal an acquisition of influence by selecting which forebears to address in their elegies.

Genealogical elegies are, inevitably, Janus-faced, simultaneously casting back into the past and projecting into the future. As Lipking observes, "Few significant poets die without an elegy from a spokesman for the next poetic generation."<sup>11</sup> This book asks why poets frequently seek recourse to elegy in the event of the death of their precursors or contemporaries: are genealogical elegies inevitably acute manifestations of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" or unabashed demonstrations of an adoption of influence? (It should be noted, though, that Bloom's argument does not directly relate to elegies for poets, nor elegy in genre, but to the poetic tradition as a whole.) Does elegiac engagement lead to some kind of expiation of influence or yet further entanglement with the dead poet?

Often what is at stake in genealogical elegy is not the fate of the dead poet's reputation but rather that of the living as the elegist makes canon fodder of the dead. Michelle Turner Sharp convincingly argues in relation to Shelley's "Adonais" that "in elegy, a poetic voice confronts the threat of its own dissolution, and works to forge an enduring, living form by which its author merits inclusion into a pantheon of the poets."<sup>12</sup> So rather than just consoling the living, such poems also seek to challenge them if the living also happen to be fellow poets. These poems also continually revisit the *locus horridus* of anxiety over the centrality (or rather, the lack thereof) of poetry in society. Thus, genealogical elegy is concerned not only with the death of the poet but also with the possible death of poetry itself.

One of the oldest tropes in elegy is that of the inefficacy of language when faced with inexpressibly awful loss. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in those poems through whom, as Auden writes in his elegy for Yeats, language lives. For as Brodsky argues, the death of a poet is "something more than a human loss. Above all, it is a drama of language."<sup>13</sup> David Kennedy goes on to consider this drama, explaining that "in the case of elegies for poets, one individual's poetry continues because another's cannot. Elegy is therefore in its own way a species of enquiry into limits and into how to pass through an originary aporia. This, in turn, helps to reveal elegy as an overt dramatization of issues of representability and nonrepresentability that underwrite all poetry."<sup>14</sup> The theoretical course this book charts will consider

what "species of enquiry" genealogical elegies undertake and how these elegists dramatize the effect of the death of the poet on poetry and language. Aporia, of course, literally means to be without a way through, lacking a passage; genealogical elegy foregrounds form and the craft of making in order to provide a way through this "originary aporia."

## Elegy

Before detailing the methodology I adopt to analyze these genealogical elegies, it is important to get a grasp of the slippery genre of elegy itself, in terms of its own messy history as well as the rich critical framework for understanding this tradition. Of the three main language-based commemorative modes—epitaph, eulogy, and elegy—it has the most complex history, conflicted consolatory agenda, and frequently thwarted formal expectations. The classical elegy starts out not as a poem occasioned by a death but rather as a metrical form, the elegiac distich (a couplet consisting of a hexameter line and a pentameter line), that could be applied to any subject but tends most often to the mournful. In Roman times, the elegy continued to have shades of the plangent and plaintive but was almost invariably concerned with the matter of loving rather than mourning (Ovid's *Amores* in elegiac couplets are an example of this). It is not until we find ourselves in late-sixteenth-century Britain that we find the word "elegy" used to mean a poem of meditation upon, and in commemoration of, a death. At this moment, poets seized upon many of the pastoral trappings of Greek lament, most often in elegies that were addressed to dead poets. The pastoral tradition establishes a matrix of objective correlatives for elegy, and thus the poem becomes a sort of psychological scavenger hunt where consolation is achieved and the dead ultimately distanced from the mourning mind through the interpolation of a series of intermediating objects and tropes. The various paraphernalia of pastoral elegy might include a repeated elegiac refrain; a description of the "laureate hearse" decked out in floral finery; an interrogation of the muses who fell asleep during their watch over the (now, unfortunately, dead) subject of the elegy; an enumeration and description of the procession of mourners; and nature's horrified reaction to the death—John Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy"—which causes Spring in Shelley's "Adonais" to fling down "Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were" (137) in disgust at John Keats's death.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the longed-for consolation is

often achieved through the apotheosis and objectification of the mourned, frequently through stellification.

The elegy is enacted, of course, to effect consolation and closure, but even at the earliest stages of the elegy in English we find intimations of the genre's insecurity over its own purpose. In Milton's elegy "Lycidas," commissioned on the death of Edward King, his colleague (and fellow poet) at Cambridge, there is a disturbing unease about elegy's efficacy when the mourning Swain states, "For so to interpose a little ease, / Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise" (152–53). This tallies almost exactly in sentiment with the description of elegy as a "sad mechanic exercise, / Like dull narcotics, numbing pain" that we find more than two centuries later in Tennyson's long elegiac sequence *In Memoriam* (5.7–8). This insecurity is amplified in elegy at the very time Tennyson wrote, due to the Victorian crisis of faith, and yet further harm was inflicted upon elegy's ostensibly consolatory agenda by the psychic shock of two world wars. Poems about the dead become increasingly melancholic and "anti-elegiac" (as Jahan Ramazani has put it) during and after the First World War as they resist consolation and, like Dylan Thomas, refuse to mourn successfully by way of protest.<sup>16</sup> The speaker of Robert Hass's poem "Mediation at Laguintas" (1979) muses, "All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking" (1–2). But the way in which we think about that loss and elegize our dead is constantly changing, and the genealogy of poetry traced through this study provides an excellent example of how that change is brought about. Perhaps one of the most enduring and productive tensions in the genealogical elegy is enacted between the procrustean aspects of *versus*—such as formal and pastoral conventions—and the protean nature of *poiesis* and the various functions such poems serve.

For the purposes of this present study, I construe my definition of elegy specifically in relation to the idea of genealogy. Since I consider poems primarily concerned with issues of influence and inheritance, I also take into account related genres that manifest these genealogical tensions—such as homage and Dantean encounters with the dead. I also ask how a genealogical elegy for a poet differs from one occasioned by the death of prose writers. For example, in chapter 4 I consider the elegy for Herman Melville that Robert Lowell converts into "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," and in chapter 5, Seamus Heaney's encounter with James Joyce's shade in *Station Island*. In both of the above examples, the prose writer is not the main

subject of the elegy but is rather being used as a proxy for another poet: we find the shadow of Milton lurking behind Melville and the shadow of Years behind the presence of Joyce.

A self-reflexive genre, elegy traditionally includes digressions on its own functions and forms. This quality is heightened in genealogical elegy. The form the poem takes may itself be a tribute to the memorialized poet, by alluding to verse forms, metrics, and images used by the deceased. As a result, the living poet may sometimes become a medium for the voice of the dead through a strange sort of imitative alchemy. Such poems may even go so far as to shade into homage, a distinct but related genre in which the author bows down before the dead poet and acknowledges his or her eminence and influence over the living.<sup>17</sup> Elegy, in contrast to homage, tends to assert the rights and display the talents of the living author more directly. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge observes, elegy "*may* treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject *for itself*; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself."<sup>18</sup>

Genealogical elegies also often border on the territory of what Lucy Brock Briodo identifies in a 2012 interview as the "*Widerruf*": "the refutation of a given poem . . . by one's own."<sup>19</sup> These poems frequently display a critical engagement not only with a specific poet but also with specific poems; for example, Heaney's "Audenesque" is as much a commentary on "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" as it is an elegy for Brodsky. Indeed, as Lipking observes, "Until comparatively recent times (the seventeenth century, let us say) [*tombeaux*] account for the greater part of that criticism we call 'practical' or 'descriptive' or 'close reading'" (138). Thus, elegy is a genre with criticism in its very DNA.

### The Critical Context

My approach to elegy develops upon and conflates the earlier psychoanalytical models advanced by critics such as Peter Sacks and Jahan Ramazani with the more recent historico-cultural considerations of the elegiac genre such as those extended by Max Cavitch. Sacks points out at the start of his landmark work *The English Elegy* (1985) that "most studies of elegy tend to describe rather than interpret the genre's conventions."<sup>20</sup> I take this turn to the analytical to be the inception of recent elegy studies. Rather than anatomizing elegy, Sacks considers the compensations and consolations

afforded by what Freud termed "the work of mourning" in elegy. Ramazani develops this psychoanalytical paradigm in *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), expanding the model by focusing more on the melancholic unwillingness to detach one's ego from the lost in modern and contemporary elegy. These elegists, he argues, "focus their antipathy on the psychological structures and literary devices specific to the elegy. Preeminent among their targets is the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation. . . . [They] tend to enact the work not of normative but of 'melancholic' mourning—a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (3–4). Extending the idea of "anti-elegy" that he had earlier developed in relation to Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923), Ramazani associates this anti-consolatory strain with what he identifies as "the economic problem of mourning—the guilty thought that they reap aesthetic profit from loss, that death is the fuel of poetic mourning" (6). The issue of aesthetic gain is felt with particular urgency in genealogical elegies, but the transactional nature of such elegies does not always necessarily elicit guilt on the part of the elegist. Particularly helpful for the purposes of this present study is the way in which Ramazani unites psychoanalytical and generic approaches in his work, which, as he explains, "holds a number of advantages. Ideally, these paradigms should not only complement but also correct each other, genre criticism restraining the psychoanalytic tendency to reduce all elegiac artifice to emotion, pathology, or biography, and psychoanalysis restraining the generic tendency to reduce all elegiac feeling to trope, code or convention. Put more positively, genre criticism honors the aesthetic specificity of the elegy, while psychoanalysis recognizes its bearing on life" (23). My approach to elegy is particularly invested in the "aesthetic specificity" manifested by and through these elegies for poets. I am, however, always mindful of the "bearing on life" side of the bargain, since psychoanalytic approaches are not only pervasive when considering the work of mourning in elegy but also crucial to the dynamics of influence and indebtedness that are played out in genealogical elegy.

Recent developments in elegy studies have tended to turn away from psychoanalysis as the main tool to analyze elegy, for, as David Kennedy explains, such an approach often "has the effect of distancing the genre from politics and society" (*Elegy*, 104). R. Clifton Spargo takes account of some of the "wider cultural, economic and social relations" (104) Kennedy finds

lacking in elegy in *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (2004) by identifying an "ethical turn" in literary treatments of mourning. He argues that the anti-elegiac breakdown in elegiac literature is not a manifestation of melancholic mourning but rather that such a refusal to mourn is an ethical maneuver and "unresolved mourning becomes a dissenting act, a sign of an irremissible ethical meaning."<sup>21</sup> Spargo laments that "there . . . is a tendency to treat the ethical dilemma or problem as if it were properly a matter for aesthetic resolution" (9). I would, however, argue that there is no place more fitting for "aesthetic resolution" than an elegy for a poet and that this turn to the aesthetic is, in many ways, an ethical move on the part of the genealogical elegist, as such poems manifest an ethical responsibility not only to the dead poet but also to the world of poetry at large. Rather than disavowing the psychoanalytical, I accept both the pervasiveness and the usefulness of this approach when considering both matters of mourning and influence. However, I avoid the distancing pitfalls to which Kennedy alerts us by expanding upon Ramazani's complementary (and corrective) hybrid approach. The New Formalist methodology that I outline below enables me to take wider cultural contexts into account (such as Heaney's interrogation of the nature of Anglo-Irishness in his elegies in chapter 5) while also placing an onus firmly on formal considerations.

In *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), Max Cavitch takes up where Sacks ends in his epilogue to *The English Elegy* when he wrote that "to undertake a study of the American elegy would be to open yet another book" (312). Rather than Sacks's Freudian model, Cavitch adopts a historicist approach to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American elegy, considering the work of mourning in relation to developments in American culture during that period. As he argues, "An important point that goes missing in Sacks' theory of elegy is that even when elegiac gestures themselves seem unrigorous or psychologically inauthentic, they may reward patient criticism with insights into the pressures that maintain form as well as those that distort or subvert it" (28). It is exactly these pressures and the way in which they maintain the elegiac form that we find so keenly expressed in, and manifested by, genealogical elegy.

Cavitch is also particularly helpful in relation to one of the greatest problems elegy poses: the issue of genre itself. As he rightly argues, "No longer taken to be the inert residue of some instance or version of the struggle over the relation between particulars and universals, genre now refers to

the struggle itself. . . . Genre is understood not as a strictly substantive term but also as a processual one. The 'work' of genre, like the work of mourning, refers here to a dynamic activity as well as to a cultural artifact" (20). Genealogical elegies are where the work of mourning and the work of genre intersect, as these poems continuously redefine what an elegy can and should do.

Such elegies consider the fate not only of the dead poet's words but also of that of the audience for poetry in general, the "unpopular art" with an audience of "a few thousand" that Auden laments in his elegies for Louis MacNeice and Yeats. "Who would I show it to" reads the unpunctuated entirety of W. S. Merwin's heart-wrenchingly concise "Elegy." In *Dying Modern* (2013), Diana Fuss says her "meditation on elegy seeks to answer this disquieting question" (8) as she considers the relationship between the elegiac interlocutor and his or her audience. The central claim of *Dying Modern* is that the consolatory fictions of three different types of voice—the dying, reviving, and surviving—are a bulwark against the elegiac critical paradigm that asserts we are "beyond consolation" in the face of loss (as Melissa Zeiger has it in her book of the same title). These poems dare to speak in the face of unspeakable loss but do not refuse the closure of successful mourning or succumb to a melancholic attachment to the lost.

No consideration of recent elegy studies would be complete without mentioning the audaciously monumental *Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (2010). The major studies of the genre thus far have tended to use various strategies to rein in the more unruly aspects of elegy by limiting their consideration to, say, the poetry of a nation as Sacks does; a particular period, as is the case in Ramazani's study; or a specific theme in elegy, such as sexuality and gender, as Zeiger does in *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (1997). In the *Handbook*, editor Karen Weisman seems far more interested in breaking rather than drawing boundaries, adopting an extremely eclectic, wide-ranging editorial approach. As expansive as Weisman's handbook is, elegies for poets are only glancingly considered once in the collection's seven hundred pages in Erik Gray's essay "Victoria in Black: Poetry in an Elegiac Age." As we will see, in many ways genealogical elegy is one of the best vehicles for displaying the "audacity of elegy" (Weisman, 5). Though broadly thematic in the occasion of their composition, they are also often engaged in transnational and transhistorical transformations of the elegiac genre as can be seen in Joseph Brodsky's "Elegy for John Donne" in chapter 2.

The issue of aesthetic and poetic inheritance is central to, and unavoidable in, any examination of elegies for poets. We shall see the adoption of influence and its related anxieties repeatedly played out through and by genealogical elegies. My work builds on the pervasive Freudian approach that Bloom, Sacks, and Ramazani employ and on the psychoanalytical model of criticism they use in relation to the adoption of influence and the expiation of anxiety manifested by, and to some degree discharged through, these genealogical elegies. Such poems afford the elegist a means by which to curate their aesthetic lineage and apotheosize poetry as well as the dead poet. In his 1997 preface to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom laments "how weakly misread" (xxiii) his work has been, so I would like to misread him strongly. My approach to the issue of influence and anxiety in these genealogical elegies is, essentially, what Bloom himself would have called a "misprision." For though Bloom mentions elegies for poets in passing in his chapter on *Apophrades* in *The Anxiety of Influence* (150) and considers "Lycidas" briefly in his preface to the second edition of the *The Map of Misreading* (1975), his theory pertains to poetry in general rather than elegy in particular. My work thus particularizes the consideration of influence and anxiety in relation to this most influential and anxious of genres while also taking into account far more comradely and celebratory aspects and possibilities.

An important finding of this study has been the identification of a distinctive and significant Anglo-American line of descent in genealogical elegy, with British poets often elegizing American ones, yet rarely the other way around. Many of these poems function as a means of mediating, effecting, and tracing transatlantic poetic exchanges. There have, surprisingly, been very few studies of Anglo-American poetic relations. In their introduction to *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations since 1925* (2004), editors Steve Clark and Mark Ford point out that "the paucity of studies addressing literary interrelations . . . is indicative of an apparent reluctance to analyze in detail the traffic in poetic rhetoric between the two countries. Both British and American critics seem more comfortable with narratives that define their respective poetries in isolation from each other, and this separation has come to be institutionalized in universities on both sides of the Atlantic."<sup>22</sup> My concept of "a genealogy of poetry" provides just such an alternative narrative and, vitally, functions as both foundation and framework for a study of transatlantic poetic



traffic. Despite the isolationist claims of poets and critics on both sides of the ocean, their respective poetic traditions are highly interdependent, and nowhere is this entanglement more apparent than in genealogical elegy. Moreover, as I shall demonstrate in my reading of such poems as Auden's elegy for Yeats and Brodsky's for Eliot and Lowell, these elegies may be used to chart this cross-pollination.

### Methodology

All of these critics address themselves for the most part to the elegiac genre in general and not to elegies for poets in particular as I do. In contrast to Spargo, I argue that the turn in genealogical elegies is (and always has been) toward the aesthetic rather than the ethical, and in particular toward the formal aspects of poetic influence. I do not intend to invoke Kantian aesthetics and considerations of beauty (though many of these poems are, in their way, beautiful) but rather use "aesthetics" to mean the formal craft of poetry. As Matthias writes in his "Elegy for Seamus Heaney," "Heaney's poem for Brodsky, dead / Lives in turns, not Grecian urns" (19–20). We should not forget the act of making embedded in Donne's image in "The Canonization" of the "well-wrought urn" (33); "wrought" can be read not only in its adjectival sense but also as the past participle of "work." I am closely in accord here with Heather Dubrow's proposal in the foreword to *New Formalism and Literary Theory* when she suggests "replacing an emphasis on the aesthetic with an adoption of the writer's emphasis on craft or *techné*" and maintains that "talking in terms of craft as opposed to the aesthetic draws attention to poetry as process" (xvi). This is in line with the argument for aesthetic autonomy that Auden makes in his elegy for Yeats when he writes of how "Poetry makes nothing happen: It survives / In the valley of its making" (36–37) and the manner of its survival is as a process, "a way of happening, a mouth" (41). As we shall see, one of the main ways poetry "survives" is through genealogical elegy, where the making of *poïesis* fuses under pressure with the repeated forms of *versus* and new forms are created and the genre pushed into new territory.

This book's aesthetic intervention in the study of elegy is enabled by a New Formalist approach. By New Formalism I do not mean, of course, the poetic movement of the 1980s and '90s but rather the recent critical movement. Marjorie Levinson's overview "What Is New Formalism?" published

in *PMLA* in 2007 invites us to consider what might be meant by the term; this was a challenge, for, as she points out, "new formalism is better described as a movement [since it] does not advocate for any particular theory, method, or scholarly practice."<sup>23</sup> One of the greatest flaws Levinson found in New Formalism at that point was an unwillingness to retheorize and redefine the idea of form itself. This study in many ways attempts to do exactly that in relation to genealogical elegy. Recent developments in New Formalism such as Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick's collection of essays *New Formalism and Literary Theory* (2013) and Fredric Bogel's *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (2013) seek to address the omissions Levinson identified by reconciling the macrocosmic contexts of New Historicism with the microcosmic focus of New Critics and, particularly in the case of Bogel, theorize and demonstrate the scholarly practice of New Formalism.

In many ways, I realize, I have been a New Formalist *avant la lettre*, for many years combining my training in close reading with broader critical approaches and contexts. The methodological features of New Formalism are particularly well suited to the consideration of these genealogical elegies. Such an approach enables me to incorporate and integrate aspects of, for example, Sacks's psychoanalytically inflected account in conjunction with the kind of historical perspective that Cavitch brings to bear on his consideration of the elegiac genre even as I foreground the centrality of the poems' formal features in my analysis.<sup>24</sup> By performing a series of New Formalist readings, this study demonstrates that genealogical elegies perform the work of catalyzing form and convention into a living genre that not only commemorates the dead poet but also carries the living poet, and propels poetry itself, forward.

Group Phi point out in their collaborative essay "Doing Genre"<sup>25</sup> that New Formalist criticism is extremely "well adapted to foregrounding the mutations of genre. When formal analysis reveals the way genre calls on and exceeds taxonomy it reveals pressures in the feedback loops of genre and history. Emphasizing the mutuality of form and history positions criticism to ask what it might mean when people *do* a given genre" (59). The mutations of genealogical elegy, the way in which the received tradition is "modified in the guts of the living," as Auden describes the fate of Yeats's poems, are my chief concern here. As these poems draw on the formal history of elegy, they simultaneously transcend its generic boundaries. The "pressure" in the "feedback loop" thus created drives this tradition forward.



Group Phi go on to suggest that as much as we “do genre,” it, in turn, “does” us: “Constructing genres more in terms of process than of template or taxonomy—more as actions than as objects—requires us to reframe a host of elegant noun labels (sonnet) as clunky transitive verbs (I sonnet this day; I sonnetize your silence and my doubts).” Though Group Phi concede “the exercise is grammatically inelegant,” it is extremely helpful, since “it does not imagine writers casting about for apposite forms, but rather poets caught up by sonnets, played by them, ensonneted” (59). This study considers what happens not only when dead poets are elegized but also when living poets are enelegized and genre-ated. Group Phi also consider the nature of making and quote Bruno Latour’s description of the creative act: “Whenever we make something we are not in command, we are slightly overtaken by the action. . . . That which overtakes us is also, because of our agency, because of the *clinamen* of our action, slightly overtaken, modified” (60). In this way, enelegized poets are overtaken by the elegiac endeavor; and such poems, though by their very nature conventional, are often the most formally innovative works of their era, not only enshrining the reputation of the dead poet but also embodying the poetics of their time.

### The Yeatsian Line

Rather than tracing, say, a Whitmanic or Dickinsonian line, this study focuses on a primarily Yeatsian line of descent created by and through these elegies and the transatlantic exchanges that this particular genealogy generated. Since I am fundamentally interested in genealogical elegies that grapple with and manifest formal influence and aesthetic indebtedness, Yeats is an utterly unavoidable starting point for any consideration of recent elegy. In many ways he functions, as Bloom argues in relation to Milton, as “the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles” (*Anxiety of Influence*, 32) for twentieth-century poets. The Yeatsian line passes through Auden, down through the genealogical elegies of Joseph Brodsky and into the present day in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and, in turn, those elegies that have been written for him.<sup>26</sup> Heaney, vitally, claims descent through his elegies not only to the British and Irish traditions but also to the American, and particularly the figure of Robert Lowell, for whom he writes two elegies (Brodsky also writes an elegy for Lowell).

This necessitates a genealogical extension into the rich American loam of mid-century elegies for poets written by Lowell and his friend and contemporary John Berryman. This also affords us the occasion to consider the reasons for the proliferation of shorter forms of genealogical elegy, such as Berryman’s brief elegiac dream songs and Lowell’s *History* sonnets for poets, in the middle of the twentieth century.

Berryman and Lowell’s poems for dead poets are also central to any consideration of genealogical elegy because they elegized so many of their contemporaries, among them Delmore Schwartz, Dylan Thomas, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and Sylvia Plath. Berryman’s inclusion also provides an opportunity to consider not only the elegiac relationship between precursor and successor (such as Auden and Brodsky) but also the elegiac dynamics at play between contemporaries (as, for example, is apparent in the differing ways in which Berryman and Lowell elegize Randall Jarrell). Berryman, headed off for a fellowship at Cambridge University three years prior to Auden’s move to America in 1939, additionally offers a useful counterpoint. His transatlantic passage, as was the case with Auden, is also framed by his relationship to Yeats, which, in the case of the young Berryman, approached an obsession.

As I trace this Yeatsian line of elegies, I consider how the use of the genealogical elegy develops over the course of each poet’s career and the elegiac trajectory that they take. I repeatedly ask what the elegy makes the enelegized poet do and how the “farming of a verse” advances and particularizes the elegiac form in each case. The structure of this book, consequently, is rather like cat’s cradle, a game of variations on a theme where parallel threads are held in generative tension. The main circular, recursive thread is, of course, the dynamic at play between the procrustean constraints of *versus* and the protean aspects of *poïesis*, but there are other related and subordinate strands that are woven through the main thread. These strands—such as the interplay between genre and form; anxiety and influence; process and product—come to the fore at various points in this study. The image of the cat’s cradle is particularly useful since it allows for form to act as both noun (the shape made) and verb (the act of making the shape). The game is also an interactive process that depends upon passing a form from one set of hands into those of another. The point of the game, of course, is to avoid a formal dead end (such as the “two crowns” move) and to come up



with permutations that invite further participation and the creation of new forms; Auden's elegy for Yeats is just such a poem, as is the elegy that concludes this present study: Paul Muldoon's elegy for Heaney.

Each chapter, then, traces the different iterations that genealogical elegy takes. I consider how the elegists I study particularize and individuate the genealogical elegy in their own hands and to what ends over the course of their poetic careers. For example, I begin with a chapter on Auden that establishes the central tension between *versus* and *poiesis* that runs through all of the poems subsequently considered. I consider the formal legacy established by the trochaic tetrameter quatrains of the final section of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," and also analyze a feature particular to Auden's use of genealogical elegy: the manner in which he considers the disappearance of the maker and the survival of the maker's poems in his elegies for Yeats and Louis MacNeice.

Ensuing chapters explore the inaugural quality of his elegy for Yeats, not only in the context of Auden's career but also in terms of its formal influence on poets who have succeeded him (such as Brodsky's reworking in "Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot"; Heaney's elegy "Audenesque: in memory of Joseph Brodsky"; and Matthias's "Elegy for Seamus Heaney"). Though "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" may be read as a paradigm of agonistic and anxious modes of inheritance, the other elegy I consider in chapter 1, "The Cave of Making: *In Memoriam Louis MacNeice*" (1964), offers us an example of a far more benign and comradely version of the genre. In this way, Auden not only sets the formal tempo of this study but also establishes two very different yet related elegiac templates for the twentieth century.

Brodsky's first encounter with Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" was a poetic epiphany for the exiled writer. The second chapter examines how this experience profoundly influenced his elegiac aesthetic and altered the trajectory of the young poet's life and work. I focus on how and why Brodsky frequently directed his elegiac interest toward those who shared his exiled state (such as Eliot in England and Auden in America) and show how, in Brodsky's iteration of genealogical elegy, the form becomes a way of translating himself—both linguistically and geographically—into the Anglo-American poetic tradition (as in his elegy for Robert Lowell). For Brodsky, elegies for makers function as both passport and calling card as they enable him to insinuate and establish himself in a new poetic milieu.

I then turn, in the third chapter, to Berryman's elegies for poets. Specifically, I consider the way in which what I have termed "the anxiety of identification" inflects his versions of the genealogical elegy addressed to his contemporaries. Berryman's first published poem was an elegy for Hart Crane, and he was an obsessive elegist throughout his poetic career. Berryman provides an example of a poet laboring anxiously in the shadow of his modernist forebears (for example, in his dream songs for Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Williams Carlos Williams). He is also, of the elegists considered here, the one with the most significant relationship to Milton's "Lycidas," and I show exactly how Berryman explores the influence of that poem in his short story "Wash Far Away," before turning to the anxiety of identification played out in his poems for Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Dylan Thomas. Picking up again on the Yeatsian line this study traces, I also demonstrate how Berryman's great formal innovation in *The Dream Songs*, and the repetitive *versus* from which these elegies for poets draw much of their power, is taken directly from Yeats. Not, however, the tetrameter beat of "Under Ben Bulbin" that Auden seized on in the final quatrains of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," but rather the triple sestet form often used by Yeats in the "Words for Music Perhaps" sequence from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

Though Lowell was irrefutably a "master elegist" (as Heaney describes him in his own elegy for Lowell), he rarely writes true elegies for other poets. Chapter 4 establishes why, when it comes to other writers, enelegized Lowell is often more a portraitist than an elegist. These poetic portraits do more, however, than merely depict the dead and are profoundly concerned with matters genealogical. Such poems enabled Lowell to sidestep the generic expectations of elegy, establish his own agenda, and depict his poetic family tree. The poem occasioned by the death of another poet has always been a conflicted, critical, and competitive genre that inevitably asserts the poetic potency of the living poet at the expense of the dead one. However, Lowell's poetic portraits manage to avoid the commemorative imperatives and competitive impulses of elegy while still enabling him to explore the ideas of artistic inheritance and indebtedness that have traditionally been the preserve of genealogical elegy.

The fifth chapter explores Seamus Heaney's variations on the form, and, in particular, how the pattern of Yeatsian elegy and Dantean encounter



played out in his earlier elegies is synthesized and resolved into a mode of valedictory leave-taking in his later poems for dead poets. Heaney provides the fitting endpoint for my main consideration of the genealogical elegy since he acts as an elegiac node through which many of the strands of this book pass. He, like Auden and Berryman before him, has a complex relationship with Yeats's poetic legacy (he is, after all, one of those "Irish Poets" Yeats addresses at the close of "Under Ben Bulbin"), and I examine the tangential approach Heaney adopts in relation to his Irish precursor. Heaney also draws together many of the Anglo and American aspects of this book, particularly in his elegies and eulogies for Lowell. Finally, I turn to look at Heaney's elegy "Audenesque" in memory of Brodsky, a poem that both appropriates the form of Auden's elegy for Yeats and considers the assertions made by Auden in his poem.

I conclude with an epilogue that considers Muldoon and Matthias's elegiac responses to Heaney's death in the summer of 2013 that casts forward and considers how these poems manifest, transmit, and transmute elegy for the twenty-first century. These two poems are excellent illustrations of my contention that poets create genealogical elegies not only for their own sake and in honor of their precursors, but also for their poetic inheritors, the coming generations in the genealogy of poetry. Matthias's poem, couched in the trochaic tetrameter quatrains of Auden's for Yeats, uses the tension of repeated *versus* to power his *poiesis* beyond the transatlantic borders of the Yeatsian line considered by this present study and transnationalizes the genealogical elegy. In Muldoon's case the unrhymed septet stanza form of "Cuthbert and the Otters" appropriates and modifies a form used by Heaney in his translation of Robert Henryson's sixteenth-century *The Testament of Cresseid*. Thus, like Auden's for Yeats, Muldoon's elegy for Heaney establishes a new form for genealogical elegy.

### Genealogical Elegy and Gender

Many of the poets who follow the implicitly competitive line of genealogical elegy, including all the poets examined in this book, are male. This is an important issue because it speaks to the formal and cultural characteristics of the genealogical elegy that are the subject of this study. Although one can certainly find elegies written by female poets for other poets, "relatively

speaking, the classic elegies are young men's poems," as Gregory Woods observes, and are most commonly written by young men about other young men.<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Goldberg likewise considers the gender issues related to elegiac pairing, noting, "Nothing intrinsic to gender may necessitate that these pairs be male couples, nothing, that is, except for the general absence of women from the kind of canonical discussions that mark these pairings" (498). If, as Sharp argues, "elegy is an inaugural genre, most attractive to a poet on the cusp of his (or her) literary career," it seems that female poets are less likely to use an elegy to announce their arrival in the poetic arena than are their male counterparts.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly notable since, as Zeiger points out, "mourning has been women's work since at least classical antiquity." Nonetheless, in the genealogy of elegy, she explains, "women as characters and authors are systematically written out of the picture. If, as [Celeste M.] Schenck argues, elegy is a male initiation ritual and achieving a successful elegy stands for being a successful male subject, then women have been positively barred from the traditional genre, and the elegies of women poets must be read as a countertradition with a revisionist agenda."<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, including female poets in this study could serve to address the traditional absence of women in the genealogical elegy and even elevate the "countertradition" Zeiger discusses. Such inclusions, however, would necessitate a significant generic expansion of the genealogical elegy that I consider here. While such an expansion may be warranted and desirable for future scholarship, it is beyond the scope of this study's focus on a type of elegy that emphasizes competition and vocational concerns. Schenck identifies and discusses related issues in her consideration of gender and elegy. "In modern poems," she notes,

the Freudian model of sons succeeding their poetic fathers by violent means replaces the Greek homosexual pattern, but in all cases the elegiac initiation scene is a masculine one. . . . The masculine elegy is, from the moment Moschus announces he will sing for his master Bion, above all a vocation poem. . . . Built upon a different set of internalized relations with predecessors, the female elegy is a poem of connectedness; women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead, whereas male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own. (15)



The female elegy described by Schenck—a genre characterized by the logic of connection and identification—could, of course, become the subject of another study that considers this alternative aesthetic. Such a study might follow the line of thinking advanced by Elizabeth V. Young in her analysis of Aphra Behn's elegies, where she substitutes a metaphoric of pregnancy and birth for Sacks's "Oedipal pattern." As Young notes, "With the death of her subject, the female poet loses part of herself, her past, but that loss is converted into the birth of a poem, which transforms the poet into a mother, bound to her poems as to offspring, nurturing them as they go into the world and interact with a community of readers" (228–29). This figurative mode is, of course, not available in the same way to male poets as it is to female ones. For reasons that others have also examined in more detail, it appears that when faced with the death of another poet, female poets are more likely to compose a verse encomium, valediction, or envoi rather than the kind of genealogical elegy examined in this Yeatsian line of descent.<sup>30</sup>

Considering the kinds of issues raised by Schenck and Young has enriched our knowledge not only of female elegists but also of a larger literary history that remains mired in imagery usually recognized as traditionally male. Such studies thus address the traditional succession of literary texts that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have associated with paternity and hierarchy (5). While I endorse such advances, building on them here would entail a reconception of literary history that is not at issue in this book. It has thus not been my goal to trace a wholly patrilineal line of descent in genealogical elegy at the expense of considering female examples of the form. Rather, it is a feature of this study that reflects characteristics of genealogical elegy itself.

### A Brief History of Genealogical Elegy

Having outlined the interventions and scope of this study, I turn now to a brief (though by no means exhaustive) overview of the long, conscious, and self-reflexive tradition to which genealogical elegists contribute. This selective survey will highlight its enduring preoccupations and also provide a frame of reference that I will repeatedly draw on over the course of this study.

In the English tradition, William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makaris" (1508) provides an early example of a poem concerned with the deaths of

writers—including among their number Chaucer and Gower—yet Dunbar's central apprehension is personal rather than poetic. His repeated refrain "Timor mortis conturbat me" ("Fear of death confounds me") reveals that the poem's underlying import is not the nature of posthumous renown that might be afforded one through the enduring excellence of one's own verse, but rather the transience of human life: "Our plesance heir is all vane glory, / This fals warld is bot transitory" (5–6). Moreover, the continued existence of the works of a Chaucer or Gower highlights that it is the loss of the life that created them that is Dunbar's primary concern. Although Dunbar suggests "that we for dede dispoone, / Eftir our deid that lif may we" (98–99), the preparations that we are to undertake remain unexplored, and thus we can only assume that Dunbar has in mind spiritual purity rather than authorial achievement (though, admittedly, in a poem that was to afford him centuries of life after death). Vitally, Dunbar chooses the Scots Gaelic word "makaris" to apply to the poets he laments. The word and its aesthetic connotations of *poësis* and making are central to this consideration of genealogical elegy.

Taking the seventeenth century (particularly following the publication of Milton's "Lycidas" in 1638) as the starting point of elegy in its modern sense, we can find many early examples of professional apprehension (both anxious and acquisitive) in genealogical elegy.<sup>31</sup> Such poems almost seem viral in their patterns of creation and transmission and frequently cluster about an initiating cornerstone elegy, including several major ones discussed below: Milton's "Lycidas" for Renaissance poets, Shelley's "Adonais" (1821) for the Romantics, Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis" (1865) for the Victorians, or Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" for the line of twentieth- and twenty-first-century descent explored in this book. In a 2004 interview, Seamus Heaney described such talismanic elegies as having a canonical function akin to a portcullis;<sup>32</sup> the following chapters will consider "Lycidas" and "Adonais" in the light of the influence that these "portcullis poems" have exerted on twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century elegies for poets. For their own literary coterie, such poems seem as unassailable as fortifications, yet for subsequent generations genealogical elegy may provide a means of ingress into a tradition.

The first significant clusters of such poems in the English canon came at a time when the role of the writer and the posthumous fate of his writing



were being reappraised because of the changing nature of the dissemination of texts, a moment of confluence that tells us much about genealogical elegy. Indeed, the first two elegies examined here—Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us" and Hugh Holland's "Upon the Lines and Life of the Famous Scenic Poet, Master William Shakespeare"—were written to preface the 1623 publication of Shakespeare's First Folio, itself one of the first exercises in defining and celebrating a writer's reputation for posterity.<sup>33</sup> As Holland writes in the very volume that will ensure the point he makes, "For though his line of life went soone about, / The life yet of his lines shall never out."<sup>34</sup>

As can be inferred from the titles of the two poems written on this literary occasion, both poets are expressly concerned with the fate of Shakespeare's written remains rather than the assuaging of personal grief. Jonson's poem cunningly broaches the matter of professional competitiveness at curtain up, starting with a question about his own suitability as an elegist, succeeded by a concession of greatness, and followed by a correction of his initial approach:

To draw no envy, Shakespeare, on thy name,  
Am I thus ample to thy book, and fame;  
While I confess thy writings to be such,  
As neither man, nor Muse, can praise too much.  
'Tis true, and all men's suffrage. But these ways  
Were not the paths I meant unto thy praise. (1–6)

Jonson adumbrates all of the possible misapprehensions—including "silliest ignorance" (7) and "blind affection" (9)—to which such an approach might leave Shakespeare's reputation open. Jonson's final reservation—"Or crafty malice, might pretend this praise, / And think to ruin, where it seemed to raise" (11–12)—reveals the underlying tension at the heart of many genealogical elegies while simultaneously defending against any accusation of those very same tensions. Though elegies for poets frequently evaluate the dead in terms of comparison to precursors and contemporaries and apotheosize them into a pantheon of masters, Jonson elevates Shakespeare above and beyond convention and calls upon the classical masters to do him honor, rather than honoring Shakespeare by comparing him to the classics:

And though thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek,  
From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke  
For names; but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus,  
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,  
Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead  
To life again, to hear thy buskin tread,  
And shake a stage. (31–37)

Jonson takes care, however, not to espouse any easy doctrine of poetic inspiration and makes it clear that Shakespeare's excellence is as much earned as inherent: "he / Who casts to write a living line, must sweat / (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat / Upon the muses' anvil" (58–61), "for a good poet's made, as well as born" (64). Again, as with Dunbar, the onus is upon the making, the process rather than the product. Yet this praise could, it appears, be taken to apply as much to his own work as to that of Shakespeare. Jonson ends by apostrophically invoking Shakespeare, almost a muse in his own right, to "Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage, / Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping stage" (77–78), foreshadowing what was to become Shakespeare's inviting, intimidating, and unavoidable influence. Thus, even in this early example of genealogical elegy, we find the problems and preoccupations that will go on to inform many of those that follow.

The 1616 publication of Jonson's own Folio, a project with which, it is believed, the playwright had been much involved, had also made him one of the first writers to experience literary posterity in the form of publication within his own lifetime, which may have made this topic of particular interest to him. In any case, the concerns he exhibits regarding authorial control and influence, in relation not only to his own work but, as demonstrated in his elegy for Shakespeare, to the work of fellow poets, are similar to those we will later see exhibited by Yeats in "Under Ben Bulben" ("Irish poets learn your trade, / Sing whatever is well made," 69–70). Indeed, it is Yeats's attempt to control his posthumous influence that triggers the very elegy that the following chapters take as their starting point: Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

Yet the next group of elegies for a poet was occasioned by the death of a writer who cared little for publishing his verse or controlling his literary reputation. John Donne died in 1631, and his poems—which had circulated

in manuscript form during his lifetime—were first published in 1633 in *Poems By J. D. With Elegies on the Author's Death*. Donne was one of the chief exponents of the elegiac genre in the sixteenth century. His *Elegies* (mid-1590s) are in imitation of Ovid's, and as such are concerned with love rather than death. Yet his elegies for individuals such as Lady Markham and Prince Henry and *The Anniversaries* in memory of Elizabeth Drury are some of the first and finest examples of elegies occasioned by the death of another in the modern English language. Consequently, those who sought to commemorate him were (as Auden was to be with Yeats three centuries later) aware of not only his poetic achievements but also, and most keenly, his elegiac legacy. As Izaak Walton writes at the close of "An Elegie upon Dr Donne,"

Oh my frailtie! let  
My flesh be no more heard, it will obtrude  
This lethargie: so should my gratitude,  
My vowes of gratitude should so be broke;  
Which can no more be, than *Donnes* vertues spoke  
By any but himselfe; for which cause, I  
Write no *Encomium*, but an *Elegie*. (75–81)

The most celebrated and best-known poem collected in the volume is Thomas Carew's "An Elegie upon the death of the dean of St Paul's Dr John Donne" (1633). Although Carew exhibits concerns about the right to inherit similar to those of Moschus in his elegy for Bion, rather than placing himself on the vacated throne, he defines Donne's achievement in terms of those who, due to Donne's excellence and posthumous influence upon English poetry, will henceforth be disowned: "thou art gone, and thy strict lawes will be / Too hard for Libertines in Poetrie" (61–62). While Carew sees Donne's poetic legacy in terms of his "fresh invention" (28), the nature of poetic originality will go on to provide the elegists of poets with one of their most intractably thorny problems: how to write an elegy sufficiently excellent to approach the originality of a poet such as Donne. For if one were to succeed, the elegy (to the extent that such poems are intended to celebrate the achievements of the dead rather than the living) would, to some degree, fail. Carew's solution—to celebrate Donne in an elegy much like Donne's—is, however, by no means a "servile imitation." In writing a poem that is clearly his own, he provides those elegists who were to follow him with a means of celebrating the poetic achievements of the deceased

without placing their elegizing voice directly in competition with that of the dead poet.

The year 1638 was a defining moment for the genre, as two memorial volumes for dead poets were published that year: *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago*, in which "Lycidas" was first to appear, and *Jonsonus Virbius, or, The Memorie of Ben: Johnson Revived by Friends of the Muses*.<sup>35</sup> Although Milton's poem will be considered at more length in relation to the works of Berryman and Lowell in chapters 3 and 4, in this introductory consideration of the genre it is vital to note how radically Milton altered the nature of genealogical elegy. As we have seen, before 1638, elegies for poets, though by no means straightforward, were for the most part fundamentally concerned with the dead poet's work and its posthumous fate. Though sometimes structured around the expression and expiation of grief, these poems exhibit few of the conventions of pastoral elegy that were to become pervasive in elegies for poets after Milton. This transformation was swift, as later that very year we find Lucius Carey taking up Milton's pastoral mode in his elegy for Jonson.

In his essay "A Poem Nearly Anonymous" (1933), John Crowe Ransom claims that the formal innovations of "Lycidas" mark it as the first truly modern poem. Its wildly variant line lengths and rebellious unwillingness to rhyme ten consecutive lines border, he argues, on technical "treason."<sup>36</sup> Milton's modernity does not stop there. Spargo rightly reads "Lycidas" as anti-elegiac, warning, "There is a risk . . . that in characterizing anti-elegy as peculiar to the modern movement, we might underestimate the degree to which anti-elegiac protest is inherent in the tradition of elegy almost from its inception" (131). The "fresh woods" and "pastures new" (193) created by and described in "Lycidas" are the direct antecedents of the "different kind of wood" (20) and "farming of the verse" (58) that appear in Auden's elegy for Yeats, as we find Milton considering how genealogical elegy opens up new poetic ground.

Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" was likewise deeply influenced by "Lycidas." It is ostensibly a prospect poem that meditates upon the fate of common men ("The rude Forefathers of the hamlet," 16). However, it warrants inclusion in this overview of genealogical elegy since the poem becomes a self-elegy, which, like Yeats's "Under Ben Bulbin," concludes with the poet's own epitaph. A review of the poem from the *London Advertiser* of March 5, 1751, noted "this Piece comes nearer the Manner of



Milton than any thing that has been published since the Time of that Poet: Whoever will look into the *Lycidas* of that Author, will not fail to see a striking Likeness, and to own that this *Elegy* does not suffer in the Comparison."<sup>37</sup> As Sacks rightly points out, Gray's indebtedness to Milton is apparent in the figure of the "Miltonic Pensive, a melancholic solitary courting prophetic vision" (133–34), but the prophecy pertains to the living poet rather than the dead of the country churchyard. Just as Milton's "uncouth swain" wishes at the start of "*Lycidas*" that "some gentle muse / With lucky words favour [his] destined urn" (19–20), here Gray closes his mediation with the image of his own death. It is left to "some hoary-headed Swain" (97) to report the circumstances:

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;  
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dirges due in sad array  
Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.  
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,  
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn." (109–16)

The abandoned *locus amoenus* is recognizably that of "*Lycidas*" where the uncouth swain and *Lycidas* "were nurs'd upon the self-same hill, / Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill; / Together both, ere the high lawns appear'd" (23–25). Could it be possible that Gray's speaker is the uncouth swain of Milton's elegy? Gray's survivor, the hoary-headed swain, commands us to read the epitaph, but the parenthetical reassertion belies his anxiety about the act of reading itself, a preoccupation throughout the "*Elegy*" since it is due to illiteracy that "some mute inglorious Milton here may rest" (59) in the churchyard. For if one cannot read a brief epitaph, one surely would have little interest in the literary legacy of the dead poet. Thus, Gray's "*Elegy*" is one of the first to exhibit an anxiety over the audience for poetry that will often be revisited in genealogical elegy (for example, only a "few thousand" will think of the day of Yeats's death "As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual" [29] in Auden's elegy for him). Gray's self-elegy is not just concerned with the fate of the poet but with the audience for, and fate of, poetry itself.

The next major touchstone in this progression of genealogical elegies is Percy Bysshe Shelley's "*Adonais*" (1821) (whose influence on Auden will be discussed in chapter 1). It should be noted that Shelley's appropriation of Milton's pastoral form came after a century and a half in which the genre had largely fallen out of fashion. Though the figure of the mourned John Keats often seems to disappear behind the poem's pastoral paraphernalia, "*Adonais*" provides genealogical elegy with a novel conceit by turning from the conventional, consoling trope of an author's living on in his work to Shelley's assertion that Keats was killed by his critical reception rather than by consumption. Yet Shelley also seems to undermine Keats's potential for posthumous renown by describing his thoughts as dying with him:

Oh, weep for *Adonais*!—The quick Dreams,  
The passion-wing'd Ministers of thought,  
Who were his flocks, whom near the living streams  
Of his young spirit he fed, and whom he taught  
The love which was its music, wander not—  
Wander no more, from kindling brain to brain,  
But droop there, whence they sprung; and mourn their lot  
Round the cold heart, where, after their sweet pain,  
They ne'er will gather strength, or find a home again. (73–81)

Unlike Jonson's appraisal of Shakespeare, Shelley's elegy sees Keats's achievements almost purely in terms of his reception by immediate precursors and contemporaries: the young poet is figured as the inheritor of Milton and mourned in the poem by the as-yet-living Byron, Thomas Moore, and Leigh Hunt. His apotheosis is not, like Shakespeare's, to a realm beyond precursors; rather, he merely takes his position among the ranks of poets who have died young—"inheritors of unfulfilled renown" (397)—such as Chatterton (who died at eighteen), Philip Sidney (at thirty-two), and Lucan (at twenty-six). As Spargo argues, the main "revisionary contribution" made by Shelley to the elegiac tradition was to "investigate the terms of self-interested mourning," terms "whereby the poet's defences are alerted not only to the other's plight, but to the very cause of poetry itself" (147). It is this self-interest that frequently leads genealogical elegy to worry about the role of poetry in society as a whole.

Yet "*Adonais*" closes with an unabashed assertion of the power of poetry. In particular, Shelley demonstrates the enduring importance of Milton's



"Lycidas" as he draws heavily upon the earlier elegy's language. The "perfidious bark / Built in th'eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark" (100–101) that is ultimately blamed for King's death in "Lycidas" is modified and incorporated by Shelley at the close of "Adonais." Life itself becomes "the eclipsing Curse" (480), while Shelley's spirit becomes the "bark [that] is driven, / Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng" (488–89). The echoes are as unmistakable as the implications: Shelley depicts his melancholic alienation at the close of his elegy in the most Miltonic of terms. Of course, "Far from the shore" suggests both an extraordinarily prescient identification with Edward King's actual fate (given that Shelley was to die in very similar circumstances the year after the publication of "Adonais") and a repudiation of the consolation afforded him through apotheosis in "Lycidas." Though King's bones are "Wash[ed] far way" (155) in Milton's elegy, he is ultimately apotheosized into a kindly "genius of the shore" (183) to guide those in "the perilous flood" (185). Shelley eschews this guidance as he is driven "far from the trembling throng" (489). Rather than being singled out by Phoebus, who touched the uncouth swain's "trembling ear" (77) before instructing him in the difference between earthly fame and heavenly renown, Shelley is driven "darkly, fearfully, afar" (492) from the trembling masses concerned with reputation at the close of "Adonais."

The continuing influence of "Lycidas" is also apparent and decorously gestured toward in the title of Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis: A Monody, to Commemorate the Author's Friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, Who Died At Florence, 1861," which echoes the structure of Milton's subtitle: "In this Monody the Author bewails a learned Friend, unfortunately drown'd in his Passage from *Chester* on the *Irish* seas, 1637." Although Arnold once more rehearses Milton's pastoral tropes in this poem, "Thyrsis" is probably most noteworthy in the Miltonic line of descent traced here for being the first elegy occasioned by the death of a poet close to the elegist. This problem of how genealogical elegy may also mediate personally proximate loss will be considered in more depth in relation to Berryman's *The Dream Songs* in chapter 3.

In 1866, five years after Clough's death, A. C. Swinburne heard erroneous reports of Charles Baudelaire's demise (he was not to die until 1868) and immediately flung himself into the composition of a premature genealogical elegy, "Ave Atque Vale." Although Swinburne was not close to Baudelaire, he was much enamored with, and influenced by, the work of the French

Symbolist and created what Lipking calls a "quite classic *tombeau*," in which "Swinburne imagines a visit to the grave, loads every line with allusions to Baudelaire's poems, proclaims his immortality, comforts him with having escaped from the troubles of life, and submits himself to his spirit."<sup>38</sup> Thus, "Ave Atque Vale," though replete with many of the traditional topoi of pastoral elegy, is also a good example of the allusive aspect of genealogical elegy that will become pervasive in the twentieth century, particularly after "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which imbues the form with a strongly imitative quality in its atavistic third section. Swinburne, however, both alludes to Baudelaire and nods toward Moschus's lament for Bion when he asserts that poetry has died with the mourned poet: "Now the dim gods of death have in their keeping / Spirit and body and all the springs of song" (37–38), a claim that he, like Moschus, necessarily contradicts through the very creation of the elegy in which he makes this assertion.

Swinburne's classical tone is, in turn, alluded to by Thomas Hardy in his own elegy for Swinburne, "A Singer Asleep" (1910). According to Hardy, Swinburne's innovations are within a traditional framework, but his "Fresh-fluted notes" were crafted by "a minstrel who / Blew them not naively, but as one who knew / Full well why thus he blew" (19–21). T. S. Eliot described the dilemma that faced young poets at the outset of the twentieth century as "where do we go from Swinburne?"<sup>39</sup> Sacks suggests "we might look for an answer to Eliot's question" in Hardy's "A Singer Asleep," which exhibits "precisely the kind of absorption yet modernization of Swinburne that Eliot invoked. As such, the elegy accurately reflects its author's position as one of the most significant links, beyond Swinburne, between Victorian and modern poetry."<sup>40</sup> And the very question that Auden asks himself at the outset of his poetic career is where to go from Hardy.

In his essay "A Literary Transference" (which appeared in the *Southern Review* in 1940), Auden explained the formative and catalytic effect that the verse of Hardy had on his work, and describes the way in which Hardy's poetic style provided him with a means of imaginatively bridging the gap between Georgian and Modern poetry.<sup>41</sup> However, Auden starts by explaining that he is unable to "write objectively about Thomas Hardy because I was once in love with him" (78). Though Auden concludes his essay by calling Hardy "my poetical father" (86), he harbors no Oedipal resentment. Instead, Auden finds Hardy exemplary in what he regards as "his rhythmical clumsiness" and "outlandish vocabulary," since, he argues, "the young



learn best from those of whom, because they can criticize them, they are not afraid" (85). Hardy's formal ungainliness made him a valuable learning tool for the young Auden, even if his admiration made it impossible to approach his poetic achievements objectively. Tellingly, when Auden attempts to sum up what he values most in Hardy, he looks not to his poetry but rather to his "hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height," apparent in his plays and novels, "as in the stage directions of *The Dynasts*, or the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native*" (83).

Auden was never to write an elegy for Hardy. Though to some extent Auden's admiration may have made the elegiac objectification of the older poet impossible, it could be argued that the main reason that Hardy's death on January 11, 1928, did not prompt Auden to elegy was the nature of his indebtedness. Hardy was an approachable figure and his poetic innovations seemed accessible, since the younger poet felt able to criticize him. W. B. Yeats provided Auden with a very different kind of poetic archetype: foreboding, unimpeachable, and aloof, a poet who had sought to place himself beyond criticism. It is to this complex poetic relationship and the foundational genealogical elegy it spawned that I now turn.

## I

## W. H. AUDEN

*Criticism & Celebration*

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" has been the touchstone genealogical elegy of the twentieth century and beyond. For the purposes of this study, Auden is vital since his great elegiac innovation, the way in which he modifies, revises, and particularizes the form in the two poems considered here—"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and "The Cave of Making"—is accomplished by seizing on the very idea of *poiesis* itself. These poems make the case for the craft of poetry as an act of making. This making subsumes the poet like the dyer's hand, all the while foregrounding the aesthetic autonomy of the work, which can then endure the poet's death untainted by the life. This chapter thus demonstrates that it is this formal and aesthetic autonomy that is the saving grace of poetry in both these poems, enabling Auden to divorce the messy and often unseemly lives and opinions of the makers from their acts of making.

Auden underscores the notion of the poem as a made thing in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" by foregrounding the *versus* of inherited forms through the rigid beat of the trochaic tetrameter that hammers throughout the quatrains of the final section ("Earth receive an honoured guest / William Yeats is laid to rest," 42–43). These stanzas, of course, metrically echo both the *abba* quatrains of the first part of Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle" and the *aabb* quatrains of Blake's "The Tyger," but Auden transmutes this shape into something especially elegiac and authoritative. Shakespeare's imperative "Let" ("Let the bird of loudest lay," 1; "Let the priest in surplice white," 13) becomes an allowance accorded specifically to poetry and poets ("Let the Irish vessel lie / Emptied of its poetry," 44–45; "Let the healing

through elegy. Yet this very work shows that he found the form hidebound by convention and susceptible to the same kind of careerist competitiveness he had found so unpleasant in the character of Roethke. Instead, he created a new kind of genealogical elegy that enabled him to celebrate the lives of poets, distilling the quintessence of their characters into a fourteen-line "snapshot" of an evanescent moment "heightened from life." Though, as Lowell admits, this form can seem "lurid, rapid, garish, grouped," it also shows the dead poets as they were, free from the dutiful and glorifying ceremony of elegy and instead touched by "the grace of accuracy" (16). In his sonnet snapshots, Lowell gives the dead poet back their "living name" (23).

In a 1971 interview, responding to questions about Norman Mailer's seemingly hostile portrait of him in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Lowell praised it as "the best, almost only thing written about me as a living person": "His story is actually, not literally, true. Accuracy isn't measuring faces through the eye of a needle. I am flattered I didn't step on Mailer's corns more; I was treated with kindness. Is the frame of a portrait a coffin?"<sup>50</sup> Lowell's own art enabled him to turn the poet's coffin into the frame of a portrait. Such poems may be, to Lowell's eye, careworn and shabby, but are also "threadbare" in the sense that they lay bare the threads of poetic connectedness that form the canonical canvas on which Lowell creates his portraits. As such links are revealed, Lowell seems to provide a positive riposte to the question he poses himself in another *History* sonnet, "In the Back Stacks (Publication Day)" (*Collected Poems*, 590): "Is it enough to be a piece of thread / in the line from King David to Hart Crane?" (8-9). Genealogical elegy weaves the tradition together and helps us trace these threads.

## SEAMUS HEANEY

### *Tangential Elegies & Dantean Encounters*

Seamus Heaney was born in April 1939, the same month the three-part version of W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" was published. The fact that the year and month of Heaney's birth coincide exactly with the publication of the elegy that this book takes as its starting point is not the only serendipitous portent that can be read into that date. As Heaney explains to the shade of another famed Irish predecessor, James Joyce, whom he encounters in his "Station Island" sequence,<sup>1</sup> his birthday corresponds with yet another highly significant date in twentieth-century literature:

there is a moment in Stephen's diary  
for April the thirteenth, a revelation

set among my stars—that one entry  
has been a sort of password in my ears,  
the collect of a new epiphany,

the Feast of the Holy Tundish. (35-39)

It is on this day in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) that Stephen Dedalus records his indignation at being rebuked by one of his teachers at Clongowes College for using the word "tundish" to mean "funnel," a usage that the master tells Stephen is Irish and uneducated. In response, Stephen writes, "That tundish has been on my mind for a long time. I looked it up and find it English and good old blunt English too."



Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us? Damn him one way or the other!"<sup>2</sup> In "Station Island," however, the shade of Joyce warns Heaney off the indulgence of fretting in the shadow of English, arguing that "The English language / belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires" (41-42). He counsels Heaney instead to "Keep at a tangent," expanding on his instruction thus: "When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim // out on your own and fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency" (47-50).

The geometrical metaphor of the tangent touching the circle that Heaney places in Joyce's mouth is an apt description of the tangential tactics that Heaney often adopts and the encountering approach he uses in his poems for dead poets. The idea of the tangent also speaks to the unexpected and indirect branching that my genealogical model allows for and Heaney's elegiac career exemplifies. For as this chapter demonstrates, though Heaney's attitude to elegy is often oblique and sidling, he unquestionably positions himself as an elegiac node through which pass most of the main strands of the Yeatsian genealogy of poetry traced in this book. He elegizes both Lowell and Brodsky in the quatrain form of Auden's elegy for Yeats. Like Brodsky, he too uses genealogical elegy as a tool to triangulate and translate himself geographically. For Heaney this is not only in relation to the transatlantic dimension of his poetic career (though his "Elegy" for Lowell undoubtedly grapples with the dead poet's transatlantic travels and legacy) but also in respect to his own native poetic tradition and his Anglo-Irish precursors, foremost among whom, of course, is the looming shade of Yeats. Heaney is also, of the genealogical elegists this study considers, the most profoundly concerned with the ethical aspects of elegy, and he uses poems that detail encounters with poetic shades as a means to interrogate his own elegiac art and the ethics of aestheticizing death.

As this chapter details, to transmit the "signatures on [his] own frequency" and particularize genealogical elegy in his own hands, Heaney's poems about dead poets initially oscillate between a Yeatsian impulse to elegiac aggrandizement (the very impulse that Auden was so keen to undermine in his own elegy for Yeats) and a Dantean mode of interrogatory encounters with the dead. The latter enables the dead, in turn, to criticize his use of the former. Ultimately, as this chapter will show, the productive interplay between elegy and encounter that we can see in even his earliest poems

for dead poets becomes modified in Heaney's guts and produces a fresh form out of the valley of his making. This new kind of genealogical elegy fuses the *versus* of repetition with the innovation of *poiesis* as Heaney uses his own translations of canonical and premodern works such as *Beowulf* and Dante's *Inferno* to mediate his approaches to the shades of dead writers. This new kind of elegiac address, like the leave-taking of the "familiar compound ghost" (95) of poetic predecessors in Eliot's "Little Gidding," function as "a kind of valediction" (148) that apotheosizes the dead poet into the global and transhistorical literary canon.

Heaney's early elegiac oeuvre is grounded in one of the perennial concerns of Irish elegy, particularly since Yeats: finding a suitable manner in which to commemorate victims of political violence, or, as Heaney has it, quoting Yeats, "a befitting emblem of adversity."<sup>3</sup> It is a concern, as he goes on to explain in his essay "Feeling into Words," for which he found an objective correlative in the violent sacrificial deaths of the bog people of Jutland and went on to explore in his 1975 collection *North*. It was not until Robert Lowell's sudden death at the age of fifty-nine in 1977 that Heaney manifested what he himself has described as "'the Lycidas Syndrome,' whereby one artist's sense of vocation and purpose is sent into crisis by the untimely death of another,"<sup>4</sup> and addressed himself to the particular elegiac problems that arise when faced with the demise of poets.

Lowell not only provided Heaney with the occasion of his inaugural elegy for another poet, but also suggested the manner in which Heaney would go on to address other such deaths. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in his own poems for dead poets Lowell had moved away from the machinery of elegy toward the aesthetics of portraiture. His version of the Brunetto Latini canto in *Near the Ocean*, however, indirectly set Heaney upon the path of the Dantean encounter, and in doing so provided Heaney another "befitting emblem of adversity" through which to mediate his relationships with poetic precursors. As Heaney explained to Maria Fumagalli, this poem gave him the idea to translate the Ugolino episode from cantos 32-33 of the *Inferno* with which he concludes *Field Work* and that later played into his composition of "Station Island."<sup>5</sup> Although not a Dantean encounter with the shade of a dead master, the poem for Lowell in *Field Work* establishes the dialectic between encounter and elegy that we shall see played out in Heaney's earlier genealogical elegies.



*Field Work*: "Elegy" for Robert Lowell

Among the elegies of Heaney's 1979 *Field Work*, two are for poets: the first of these, "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge," written for a young Irish poet killed in the First World War, and the second, his "Elegy" for Robert Lowell. Although it was through Lowell that Heaney first became attracted to Dante, "Elegy" is not a Dantean encounter, but rather a reminiscence based on Heaney's actual last meeting with the living poet. Lowell had visited the Heaneys in Glanmore south of Dublin in County Wicklow, Ireland, just a few days before his death, and this encounter provides a framing device in "Elegy," which begins with a direct apostrophe to the dead poet:

Robert Lowell,  
  
the sill geranium is lit  
by the lamp I write by,  
a wind from the Irish Sea  
is shaking it—  
  
here where we all sat  
ten days ago, with you (4–10)

This recent visit is again described in the final three quatrains (the form, as John Matthias will go on to suggest in his own elegy for Heaney [which is considered in the epilogue] yet another nod to Auden's for Yeats), parenthesizing eight stanzas in which Heaney explores Lowell's poetic craft and legacy as "the master elegist / and welder of English" (11–12). Like Elizabeth Bishop's own elegy for Lowell, "North Haven,"<sup>6</sup> Heaney's both criticizes and yet seems to imitate Lowell's poetics. But while Bishop's elegy is motivated by the spirit of conciliation, Heaney's, while tender and mournful, also seems subtly informed by filial ambition. As Lowell had assumed Frost's laurels, here too Heaney positions himself to inherit Lowell's mantle.

In his address to the London memorial service for Lowell on October 5, 1977, Heaney had spoken of Lowell in terms of his place in a genealogy of poetry, asserting that Lowell's "was a dynastic as well as an artistic voice": "From beginning to end, his poems called up and made inquisition of those fathers who had shaped him and the world he inhabited."<sup>7</sup> And like Lowell's earlier poems for his actual and poetic forebears, there is an inquisitory

aspect to Heaney's approach. As we shall see, "Elegy," with its filial concerns and comments upon Lowell's poetic art, moves from commemorating and collaborating with the figure of the dead master into competing with him through his own devices and language. Heaney argues in his memorial address for Lowell that in death, "all that he stood for goes a-begging, asking us somehow to occupy the space he filled, to assume into our own life values which we admired in his and thereby to conserve his unique energy."<sup>8</sup> By adopting Lowell's voice and poetic values in "Elegy," Heaney appears to offer himself up to "occupy the space he filled."

A comparison of Heaney's elegy with Bishop's is informative. Whereas in "North Haven," Bishop had used allusions to place Lowell in relation to such poetic progenitors as Shakespeare and Marianne Moore,<sup>9</sup> all but one of Heaney's allusions in "Elegy" are to the work of Lowell himself. In the first half of the poem, Heaney quotes lines by other writers about their relationships with fellow writers that Lowell had himself appropriated and modified for his own purposes. Heaney lifts the phrase "heart's iron vodka" (18), for instance, from Lowell's creative imitation of Pasternak's admiring verse epistle "To Anna Akhmatova" (*Collected Poems*, 301–2), which contains the line "the iron / heart's vodka is the sky."<sup>10</sup> His comment in the sixth stanza that "Your eyes saw what your hand did" alludes to the epitaphic concluding line of Lowell's "The Dolphin" (*Collected Poems*, 708), "my eyes have seen what my hand did" (15). In his memorial address, Heaney recounts that Lowell had attributed that line to Hemminge and Condell's preface to Shakespeare's First Folio, even though, as Heaney notes, Hemminge and Condell's line about Shakespeare actually reads "His mind and hand went together," and thus "Lowell bends and refracts [the line] to sustain the deliberated elements in his art" (26).

In "Elegy," Heaney in turn bends and refracts Lowell's lines in a process akin to Lowell's own borrowings from Pasternak, Hemminge, and Condell. The poem's only allusion not refracted through the prism of Lowell's consciousness comes in Heaney's description of "the proud sail of your great verse" (38), a phrase lifted almost unchanged from the first line of Shakespeare's sonnet 86, a poem concerned with poetic competitiveness.<sup>11</sup> The embittered interlocutor of the sonnet, finding himself incapable of composing a love poem fit to capture the heart of his beloved, wonders if it is the excellence of "the proud full sail" of his love rival's "great verse" (1)



that has enfeebled his poetic imagination (even as this meditation upon frustrated poetic ambition becomes, in its very realization, a consummate poetic achievement). While Heaney's allusion could be seen as shorthand for poetic influence and anxiety, in his Lowell elegy the quote is circumscribed by two negatives: "Not the proud sail of your great verse . . . / No. You were our night ferry / thudding in a big sea" (38-40). Thus it is Lowell the man rather than his poetry that is transmuted into the image of a ship. Other than this nod to Shakespeare, Heaney's allusions in the latter part of the poem come from Lowell's writings on the relationship between parent and child. "*A father's no shield / for his child*" (47-48) (the only quotation that, by being italicized, Heaney typographically sets apart as such) comes from "Fall, 1961" (*Collected Poems*, 329, 15-16), while the image of "the child in me" (49) that Lowell supposedly finds in Heaney, marking him out with some kind of filial right to inherit his legacy, is taken from the insomniac *thanatos* of "Night Sweats" (*Collected Poems*, 375): "always inside me is the child who died / always inside me is his will to die" (11-12). Heaney, rather than ultimately aligning the dead poet with his poetic antecedents as Bishop does in her poem, implicitly positions himself in direct relation to Lowell as he transmutes the dead poet into his own poetic father figure. As Paul Muldoon argues, "By the end of 'Elegy,' Heaney has positioned himself as the natural heir to Lowell, the pair of poets standing under the laurel,"<sup>12</sup> the "full bay tree / by the gate in Glanmore." (51-52).

In "North Haven," Bishop directly addresses Lowell's compulsion to "de-range, or re-arrange" (28-29) his verse, in so doing also tacitly and tactfully alluding to his bravery in the face of manic-depressive illness. In "Elegy," Heaney reverses this emphasis, praising Lowell's bravery directly and his revisionary practices obliquely. He sets this tone in the first lines by informing us "The way we are living, / timorous or bold, / will have been our life" (1-3), and later Heaney suggests in prose that Lowell did the latter, boldly charting a course in his poetry through "the ungovernable and dangerous" (44) waters of confessional poetry.<sup>13</sup> The forceful language of "Elegy" mimetically reproduces what Heaney identifies as the mastery of "Lowell's Command" in an essay of that title in *The Government of the Tongue* as Heaney here evokes the power of Caligula's "empire" through his use of masculine adjectives, images, and verbs.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the poem, Lowell is depicted as a master, emperor, gladiator, armorer, welder, father, and captain, who welds, promulgates, fights, bullies, hammers, inveigles, and risks.

In his original version of his memorial address for Lowell (published as a chapbook by Faber & Faber in 1978), Heaney identifies the challenge that he and all elegists must face when addressing their departed poetic companions: "What language can we use now that will be adequate to our loss? . . . We need new words that will subsume the speaker and the spoken to and the spoken for in one trope."<sup>15</sup> In "Elegy," Heaney's problem is to find a language adequate not only to loss but to Lowell, the "master elegist / and welder of English" (11-12). In that address, Heaney, turning to Auden's elegy for Yeats for a befitting emblem of Lowell's death, asserts that Lowell "has become his admirers" (5), and "Elegy" can be read as a manifestation of that very process as Lowell is incorporated into Heaney's language.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, elegy itself unites "the speaking and the spoken to and the spoken for" in a trinity of loss. The emphasis in this section on Lowell's boldness and bravery may at first distract us from the "subsuming trope" that Heaney subtly explores in the poem: in his images of Lowell as "welder" (12) and "armourer" (42), the motif of poetic reworking underpins Heaney's elegy much as the impulse to repeat and revise is made apparent in Bishop's "North Haven." It is easy initially to misread "welder of English" (12) as "wielder," that is, as one exerting force and skill over the medium of language, yet Heaney's deft and deliberate use of "weld" lends an entirely different cast to the nature of Lowell's craft and his role as a maker.<sup>17</sup>

In "Lowell's Command," Heaney continually returns to the image of the poet as smith and alchemist, transmuting base verse into poetic gold through continual reworking. In his memorial address, Heaney argued that "under the ray of his concentration, the molten stuff of the psyche ran hot and unstaunched. But its final form was as much beaten as poured, the cooling ingot was assiduously hammered. A fully human and relentless intelligence was at work upon the pleasuring quick of the creative act. He was and will remain a pattern for poets in this amphibiousness" (9). Here Heaney's rather Yeatsian figure for composition recalls Ben Jonson's image in his elegy "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us" of the poet "who casts to write a living line" and "must sweat, / . . . And strike the second heat / Upon the muses' anvil" (59-61), an image enforced by Heaney's description of "first striking Cal" (16) in his uncollected poem "Pit Stop Near Castletown." Lowell's hand, unlike that of Shakespeare's dyer, is not "subdu'd / To what it works in" (sonnet 111), but rather is marked by its amphibious aptitude in two very



different elements: at home in both the first flush of poetic inspiration and the necessary, though often neglected, remolding. It is this "craft"—both poetic skill and formal vessel—that emboldens Lowell and enables him to set a course "wilfully across / the ungovernable and dangerous" (43–44) waters of the unexplored psyche.

As the poem proceeds, Heaney makes clear that he finds Lowell exemplary for subsequent generations of poets not only for his bravery but also for the way that he carefully fashioned the poetic "armour" that enabled him to be so bold. Lowell's most important innovation comes not in "the proud sail of your great verse" (38), but rather in what Heaney describes in "Lowell's Command" as "the perfectly stretched safety net of poetic form itself" (131). In his obituary for Berryman, Lowell had described the mawkish verses that resulted from his own attempts to emulate Berryman's breakthrough style as "Nets so grandly knotted [they] could only catch logs" (*Collected Prose*, 112). After spending what he described as "a lifetime / knotting, undoing a net of tarred fishrope" ("Fishnet," *Collected Poems*, 645, 11–12), Lowell had learned to fashion the formal net of chain mail that made his honesty and openness possible. In his elegy for Lowell, Heaney also attempts to create a net in which to capture (if only momentarily) his last encounter with his moving target.

It frequently seems possible to discern Yeats's influence over Heaney by tracing Heaney's attempts to outmaneuver his shadow. Nowhere, however, is Yeats's elegiac legacy more apparent than in "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge: Killed in France 31 July 1917," a poem that seems, initially, to sport its indebtedness like a justification. For why else would Heaney address a long-dead Irish Catholic poet in an elegiac mode clearly appropriated from Yeats's elegies for Major Robert Gregory? The answer could be suggested by another poem to which "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" obliquely does homage: Lowell's "For the Union Dead."<sup>18</sup> Like that poem, Heaney's too is initially occasioned by a meditation upon a public monument to the lost. In Lowell's case this was the bas-relief memorial to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his Negro regiment that can be found on the northern side of Boston Common, facing the Massachusetts State House. For Heaney, the object that sets his elegy in motion is the First World War memorial he encountered as a child on Portstewart promenade. Both poets dwell upon how temporally remote loss can be made to seem at an even greater remove

by the acts of public commemoration that seek to preclude that very possibility. Not only the statues and monuments erected in their honor may have this effect, but also literary acts of remembrance that tend to objectify and glorify such deaths. Just as Lowell's poem can be read as a filial rebuke to Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1926), Heaney's meditation upon a long-dead war poet could be seen as an elegiac rejoinder to Yeats's poems for Major Robert Gregory, and as such another means of approaching not only Ledwidge but also the shade of another "master elegist": Yeats himself.

Yeats wrote four poems in honor of Lady Gregory's son, a member of the Royal Flying Corps, who had died in action over Italy in 1918: "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (a monologue), "Shepherd and Goatherd" (a pastoral eclogue), "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (an elegy), and "Reprisals" (a bitter reappraisal of Gregory's death in the light of British atrocities in Ireland during the 1920s). Yeats seems particularly concerned to tease out the tensions and paradoxes implicit in Gregory, like Yeats a Protestant Irishman, a cuckoo in Ireland's nest, fighting and dying in the name of Britain. This theme reaches its apogee in "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" (*Variorum Edition*, 328), where Yeats seeks solace in imagining Gregory in a state of informed equanimity, aware that "Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love" (3–4). Gregory's sacrifice is not forced due to conscription nor fueled by patriotism—"Nor law, nor duty bade me fight, / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds" (9–10); rather, his bravery is born of a kind of consoling ontological equilibrium:

I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death. (13–16)

Heaney's elegy for Ledwidge picks up on and amplifies many of Yeats's concerns. However there is a crucial difference. Ledwidge, like Heaney, was a Catholic. He, like Gregory, signed up out of principle, but as the war drew on he grew increasingly disillusioned. His dilemma was (as Heaney quotes from one of Ledwidge's own letters of June 1917) "To be called a British soldier while my country / Has no place among nations" (41–42).<sup>19</sup> Heaney is not concerned to explore Ledwidge's fate as a poet but rather uses him



as a means of obliquely broaching the various political and religious concerns that he will revisit in his elegies for those killed by sectarian violence. He thinks of him "in [his] Tommy's uniform, / A haunted Catholic face" (29–30) and dwells upon his Boyne birthplace, the site, of course, of the battle between William III and James II in 1690 that led to the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. However, Heaney approaches Ledwidge in the elegiac mode suggested by Yeats without recourse to the Dantean encounter, a mode that could be seen to provide a ready-made framework for addressing the deaths of Catholics and the politically alienated. The notion of using Dante in this manner must have started to germinate in Heaney's mind at about the time of *Field Work*, since he takes lines from Dorothy L. Sayers's translation of the *Purgatorio* as an epigraph for "The Strand at Lough Beg," an elegy for his cousin Colum McCartney, who was killed in the Troubles. The very idea of Purgatory, of course, has no place in Protestant theology, and as such provides Heaney with a particularly Catholic kind of redemptive possibility (though in "Station Island," Heaney has McCartney criticize him for drawing the "lovely blinds" (76) of the *Purgatorio* over his death since the possibility of aesthetic rather than theological redemption diminishes the horror of his murder). Michael Cavanagh even goes so far as to suggest that Heaney's reading of the *Purgatorio* triggers his sequence of poems about artists and poets, arguing that since it is a work fundamentally concerned with "the resurgence of art" and "full of artists," it "initiates a period of art-and-poetry veneration in Heaney. With the appearance of *Field Work*, artists and poets . . . begin to appear in his poetry and to be addressed as masters as they are in Dante."<sup>20</sup>

"In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" is framed by Yeats's sense of personal loss—he starts "in our house" naming "the friends that cannot sup with us" (1–2) and ends dumbstruck with the thought of Gregory's death, which "took all my heart for speech" (96)—Heaney is at a far greater remove from his subject. Yet "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" is, in many ways, as much about the crisis of identification that dawns on Heaney as a Catholic born north of the border as it about the death of Ledwidge. Heaney embeds a version of himself in the poem and, in doing so, obliquely identifies with the dead poet. However, this identification is with Ledwidge the Catholic rather than Ledwidge the poet, since Heaney appears as an unknowing child, rather than as a self-aware poet, upon whom the significance

of the monument is wasted: "It all meant little to the worried pet // I was in nineteen forty-six or seven" (8–9). There is none of the competitiveness of the Lowell "Elegy" apparent here, and Heaney only refers to Ledwidge's poetic vocation in the poem's closing lines. Indeed, Heaney seems deliberately to avoid such a reading by quoting from Ledwidge's letters from the front lines rather than from his poems.<sup>21</sup> His primary significance to Heaney is as a cultural paradox, a puzzle that Heaney senses within himself and addresses through his verse:

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains  
 Criss-cross in useless equilibrium  
 As the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze  
 I hear again the sure confusing drum  
  
 You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans  
 But miss the twilit note your flute should sound.  
 You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones  
 Though all of you consort now underground. (45–52)

While Yeats defines and sets Gregory into solid elegiac archetypes—"Soldier, scholar, horseman" (78, 86)—Heaney values Ledwidge for his ambiguity. The possessiveness of "our dead enigma" (45) suggests that Ledwidge has taken on a paradigmatic quality not only for Heaney but also for his community, a community that, in turn, might be defined by its willingness or otherwise to empathize and identify with Ledwidge's dilemma.

Heaney juxtaposes this enigmatic exemplar alongside a sense of the futility of consolation and reconciliation. Unlike Gregory, whose equanimity in the face of death in "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" comes from having "balanced all" (13), in Ledwidge, balance is achieved and equilibrium reached but to no productive end. The same schisms still blight the Irish nation and "Ireland has her madness and her weather still" (35) just as Auden had written forty years earlier in his elegy for Yeats. Consequently, the memorial does nothing more than remind Heaney that little has changed, and that he too can hear the call to arms of the same "sure confusing drum" that led Ledwidge to his death, the oxymoron heightening the reader's own sense of confusion. The pastoral reference to Ledwidge's "flute"—his verse—is little more than an elegiac grace note nodding toward Yeats's "Shepherd



and Goatherd," included by Heaney only in order to underscore an essential difference. Ledwidge, unlike the Protestant, Anglo-Irish Yeats and Gregory, is not "keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones" (51). Rather, like Heaney, his ear is naturally attuned to a native Irish-Catholic cadence. As Heaney explained in an interview with Karl Miller, he thinks of that idiom "as a kind of guttural bough—as opposed to a golden bough. It's a kind of passport through the perils of the fake speech you are bound to encounter, a register that stays reliable."<sup>22</sup> Yet it matters little in death. Like Colonel Shaw—whose father wanted "no monument / except the ditch, / where his son's body was thrown / and lost with his 'niggers'" (49–52)—perhaps the most meaningful monument to Ledwidge is not a statue, nor a place in a Catholic cemetery, nor even an elegy, but rather his burial site alongside his fallen comrades-in-arms regardless of their different religions.

Heaney, encouraged by the possibilities suggested to him by Lowell's imitation of Dante's encounter with his former teacher, closes *Field Work* with his first attempt at translating Dante ("Ugolino" 61–64). The passage he selected is the stark and horrifying encounter between the Dante *personaggio* and Count Ugolino in the frozen waste of Coctyus in the depths of Hell, reserved for the worst sinners of all, those who have been treacherous. The punishment-in-kind, or *contrapasso*, that the damned traitors suffer is to be frozen in place while others gnaw upon the backs of their skulls, literally to backbite and be backbitten in perpetuity. Although Heaney had told Fumagalli that he had chosen this episode as a correlative to the treachery of the situation in Northern Ireland, earlier in the collection he also refers to this passage to illustrate treachery in the world of poetry. In "An Afterwards,"<sup>23</sup> Heaney envisages that a poet's widow might indulgently imagine how

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle  
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain;  
For backbiting in life she'd make their hell  
A rabid egotistical daisy-chain. (1–4)

In this poem, the widow, "Aided and abetted by Virgil's wife" (10), visits her husband locked in the ice, who seems not to have learned anything from his punishment. Like Latini, he is far more concerned with earthly renown than eternal damnation, with competition rather than contrition, as he asks of her, "My sweet, who wears the bays / In our green land above, whose is the

life // Most dedicated and exemplary?" (11–13). Though Heaney also earlier alludes to the *Purgatorio* in "The Strand at Lough Beg," "An Afterwards" is Heaney's first poem that takes a Dantean encounter with the dead as its subject. As such, it demonstrates that in Heaney's imagination, these interrogatory encounters, suggested to him through the influence of other writers, were inextricably entangled with the deaths of poets and the exploration of poetic competitiveness from the very start.<sup>24</sup> And in "Station Island," Dante was to offer Heaney a way of dealing with inspirational anachronism: his fear of being a latecomer at the fast on Lough Derg.

*Station Island: Dantean Encounters with Thomas Hardy,  
William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, and James Joyce*

Since St. Patrick's time, pilgrims have taken retreats on Station Island, also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, an island located in Lough Derg, County Donegal, where barefoot and fasting penitents visit a succession of "Stations" at which they reflect on their sins and pray for absolution. In his "Station Island" sequence (the long title poem of the 1984 collection of the same name), Heaney conflates this Catholic quest with tropes and structures appropriated from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to describe a series of oneiric encounters with Irish shades, many of whom are also writers, among them William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, and James Joyce.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Berryman and his melancholic alter ego Henry, Heaney is not haunted by the dead in "Station Island." Instead it is Heaney who seems to haunt them, as he interrogates the shades that he meets on his way around the island.

The poems in the collection that precede this Dantean sequence show Heaney taking a tangential approach, working his way through other modes of addressing dead writers before embarking upon his way around Station Island and dealing directly with the dead. "Granite Chip" (21) is the first of a sequence of poems entitled "Shelf Life" (21–24) in which Heaney explores the strange power possessed by objects left behind by the dead. The granite chip of the title carries such power because it has been "hammered off Joyce's Martello / Tower" in Sandymount, south of Dublin. The shard is a "flecked insoluble brilliant" (5) with "Jaggy, salty punitive // and exacting" (8–9) qualities, almost a synecdoche of what Joyce stands for in Heaney's



mind, an object he feels simultaneously attached to and alienated from, as divergent and contiguous as a tangent, something "I keep but feel little in common with" (6). The very reason that Heaney is comfortable exploring his feelings toward Joyce, not only in "Granite Chip" but also later in "Station Island," may rest upon this ambivalence, the ability, as the granite chip says in the poem's final line, to "*take me or leave me*" (13).

Heaney's decision to write a poem occasioned by a fragment taken from the Martello tower points toward a deliberate substitution of the figure of Joyce for Yeats, since the image of the tower in Irish literature immediately and unavoidably suggests Yeats's Thoor Ballylee. Responding to the question "How do you face up to Yeats?" in a 1979 interview, Heaney joked, "I don't face up to him, I turn my back and run."<sup>26</sup> Yet Heaney's poetry and critical essays demonstrate that Yeats's shade cannot be so easily evaded, as Heaney repeatedly contends with many of the same issues that Yeats had, including what it means to be an Anglo-Irish poet working in an adopted language and tradition, what if any power poetry has to influence politics, and the fate of a poet's words and influence after death.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the main reason that Heaney appears more comfortable casting the Irish-Catholic Joyce than the Anglo-Protestant Yeats in the role of arch-Irish literary forebear is that Joyce was a novelist first and a poet second.<sup>28</sup>

When asked in an interview why he had never written a poem directly about Yeats, Heaney replied that although he had repeatedly assailed the figure of Yeats in prose, when it comes to poetry, "Yeats is just like a mountain range in the offing, lying there, there's no way I can address Yeats in any way. It's like an English poet addressing Shakespeare, with Yeats it's like a finished deposit. It's perfect in the Latin sense, it's done. I can't imagine Yeats being addressed."<sup>29</sup> One of the reasons that Heaney seems to suppress the figure of Yeats and any anxiety he may have felt toward him in his own poetry is suggested by "The Birthplace" (34–35), an oblique and hesitant approach to the shade of Thomas Hardy. In this poem, Heaney's relationship to and thoughts about Hardy are mediated not by an object, as in "Granite Chip," but by a place: the house in which Hardy was born and to which he returned to write his early novels. As in Brodsky's "York," the actual and imaginative territory of the dead writer is revisited by an act of poetic pilgrimage. Although such poems frequently shade into pastiche, here Heaney seems to do homage to Hardy's prose rather than his

poetry, as Heaney imagines himself and his wife "like one / of his troubled pairs, speechless / until he spoke for them" (10–12), and his only reference to Hardy's work is to *The Return of the Native*.<sup>30</sup> Heaney's pilgrimage to the birthplace of Hardy and such novels as *Far from the Madding Crowd* is described as a process that first appears akin to catharsis:

We come back emptied  
To nourish and resist  
The words of coming to rest:

*Birthplace, roofbeam, whitewash,  
Flagstone, hearth.* (28–32)

Yet these words of place do not nourish Heaney or give him a place to rest, but call upon him both to revivify these words and to resist the lure of the fixed and familiar. Note too the careful circumlocution of "The words of coming to rest," which are emphatically not words dealing with loss or absence that we might associate with Hardy's poetry, but rather words with far closer ties to the world of Wessex and the novels.

Unlike Hardy, however, the hectoring Yeats of "Under Ben Bulbin" offers elegists no alternative way to engage his legacy as a writer (he is not, we note, berating "Irish playwrights"), and thus seemingly must be addressed head on and unequivocally, as Auden does in his elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." Auden, however, had the advantage of being able to objectify the condition of Irishness as a means of addressing and explaining Yeats, claiming that "mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" (34). Heaney has no such distancing device. Indeed, what it means to experience Irishness subjectively, and how Irish writers broach that very subject, is one of the major concerns in the "Station Island" sequence that follows.<sup>31</sup> The Irish shades of "Station Island" not only are interrogated by Heaney, but in turn test and probe the nature and validity of his commitment to what it means to be an Irish poet. In these poems, Heaney is able to explore and harness what in his poem for Ledwidge he calls "the typical strains" of the Irish consciousness in a productive and ultimately cathartic manner by using a mode suggested by the *Commedia*. In particular, "Station Island" is fundamentally informed by the redemptive possibilities of art explored by Dante in the *Purgatorio*, a work that starts with the assertion that in Purgatory, "dead poetry" may



"rise again" ('ma qui la morta poesi resurga,' 1.320), a claim borne out by the penitential poets (among them Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel) that the Dante *personaggio* comes across in the cornices of the seven mortal sins.

Although Heaney meets not only artists and writers upon St. Patrick's Purgatory, each encounter is unavoidably framed by poetic artistry, a duality that reaches its height in section 8 of "Station Island" (81–83) when the shade of Colum McCartney (the cousin murdered at a fake roadblock in Northern Ireland) takes issue with him over "The Strand at Lough Beg." In this poem, McCartney accuses Heaney of confusing "evasion and artistic tact":

"The Protestant who shot me through the head  
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you  
who now atone perhaps upon this bed  
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew  
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*  
and saccharined my death with morning dew." (72–77)

The "strain" under which Heaney labors here is, of course, the fear of elegiacally exploiting the dead, of being artistically complicit in the murder by using McCartney's death as an occasion for poetry.<sup>32</sup> Yet the Dantean model in which McCartney's confrontation with Heaney takes place both suggests and demonstrates a way of sidestepping many of the accusations of complicity that might be leveled at elegy, as these encounters in Heaney's poetry are not an elegiac imposition upon the dead but rather a means of engaging with them on their own terms. Like Dante in the *Purgatorio*, in "Station Island" Heaney not only explores the rebirth of "morta poesi" but also confronts the problem of how to deal with the legacies of *poeti morti*. For, as Heaney explains in "Envies and Identifications," it was Dante's example that inspired him "to make an advantage of what could otherwise be regarded as a disadvantage, namely, that other writers had been to Lough Derg before me" (256).

William Carleton is the first of such writers whom Heaney meets on his journey about the island (section 2, 64–66). In a scene reminiscent of Lowell's "Skunk Hour," Heaney finds himself sitting on the brow of a hill in a parked car, meditating upon his surroundings, when he catches sight of an indistinct "something" that "came to life in the driving mirror" (3). Once again Heaney takes a tangential approach to the shade of a dead

writer, whose quickening is witnessed out of the corner of Heaney's eye, refracted in a rear-view mirror—a metaphor, perhaps, for the backward-looking nature of influence anxiety. As in Eliot's description of the "familiar compound ghost" of his predecessors, the shade starts to solidify into a distinct and threatening "someone," "walking fast in an overcoat / and boots, bareheaded, big, determined / in his sure haste along the crown of the road // so that I felt myself the challenged one" (4–7). Heaney is careful here not to impose upon the dead, but instead lets Carleton accost him. The challenge that Carleton poses for Heaney comes into focus "as the thing came clear" (15) and, recognizing Carleton, Heaney exclaims in a line with particular relevance to genealogical elegy, "Your *Lough Derg Pilgrim* // haunts me every time I cross this mountain— / as if I am being followed, or following" (15–17).<sup>33</sup> The uncertainty of his relationship to the earlier writer in this last line is, of course, redolent of the very same ambiguities that Auden calls into play in his instruction to "follow poet!" in the final stanza of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." What Heaney appears to be gesturing toward with his description of this strange haunting is the diachronic duality at the heart of artistic influence that Eliot identifies in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered."<sup>34</sup> Heaney simultaneously acknowledges and avoids the snares of influence anxiety by dwelling on the latter half of this bargain in "Station Island," itself the "new work" requiring the subtle realignment of the works of previous Irish writers.

When Carleton takes a combative approach to Heaney and accuses him of defensiveness ("whoever you are, wherever you come out of, / for though there's something natural in your smile / there's something in it strikes me as defensive" [37–39]), Heaney counters by explaining that he has "no mettle for the angry role" (40). Though Heaney admits that he, unlike the Protestant prose writer, is "tuned" to an Irish Catholic key (the "obedient strains" of "Ribbonmen" playing their "hymns to Mary" [43]), he is keen not to set himself in opposition to Carleton, instead drawing on their shared experience: "A lot of what you wrote / I heard and did" (46–47). Thus Heaney takes what might be expected to be an agonistic artistic relationship and defuses it into a far more benign form of influence, even giving Carleton the last word. When, placated by Heaney's conciliatory gestures and assertions of commonality, Carleton advises Heaney "to try to make sense of what



comes. / Remember everything and keep your head" (56–57), Heaney takes him literally and rattles off a jumbled, associative list of memories, which Carleton, in a slight return to his earlier bombastic form, interrupts:

"All this is like a trout kept in a spring  
or maggots sown in wounds—  
another life that cleans our element.

We are earthworms of the earth, and all that  
has gone through us is what will be our trace."  
He turned on his heel when he was saying this

and headed up the road at the same hard pace. (64–70)

Carleton's pronouncements seem to accord exactly with Heaney's musings on writers "being followed, or following" (17) and Joyce's later advice to "fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency" (section 12, 49–50). Consequently, there can be little doubt that the "element" to which Carleton refers in the above lines is the medium of writing. Thus the spring of inspiration is kept fresh and the wound of artistic indignation is kept clean by "another life" (66)—the writer who has inherited that element. Any anxiety Heaney might have had must have been considerably assuaged by this realization, which he places in the mouth of an author who had visited and written about Station Island long before Heaney was born. Carleton's departure in the final lines shows the theory in practice, his movements echoing those executed by Brunetto Latini, Dante's former mentor, who "turns around and runs" away after his encounter with Dante at the close of *Inferno* 15, here revived in a fresh context by Heaney.

The next writer Heaney comes across in his progress about the island is the poet Patrick Kavanagh in section 5 (72–74), who in 1942 had written the posthumously published poem "Lough Derg." Kavanagh, one of the generation of poets who wrote in Yeats's shadow and feared they would be remembered as little more than his progeny, baits Heaney over his indebtedness, although, as with Carleton, Heaney uses those jibes to reveal the possibility of a far more kindly relationship between the two poets.<sup>35</sup> Heaney describes Kavanagh as a "third fosterer" (56)—third, that is, after the shades of Heaney's old schoolteacher Master Murphy and an unidentified "master" who quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins to him—a phrase that conjures a sense of beneficent rather than antagonistic paternalism. And

indeed, Kavanagh's ribbing is tempered by a "clear-eyed" (57) empathy for the younger poet's predicament:

"Sure I might have know  
once I had made the pad,  
you'd be after me  
sooner or later. Forty-two years on  
and you've got no farther!" (57–60)

The phrase "you'd be after me" embeds an ambiguity that encapsulates Heaney's thoughts about being followed or following: Heaney may predate on Kavanagh's poetic turf, but because Kavanagh predates Heaney in the chronology of Irish poetry, Heaney cannot help but be "after" him.

Though Heaney's apparent concerns that "Station Island" might be an exhausted poetic locus are alleviated in and through his encounters with Carleton and Kavanagh, the two Irish writers who had previously made the subject their own, Heaney elsewhere admits a further anxiety about the poem: "the pastiche element, writing a poem so obviously an echo of *The Divine Comedy*."<sup>36</sup> Heaney seems to circumvent this anxiety by not trying to copy or directly addressing Dante but having Dante fulfill the role of poetic guide, a role that Virgil had previously served for Dante.<sup>37</sup> Though Dante does not appear as an identifiable persona in "Station Island," as he does elsewhere in Heaney's poetry, his presence is structurally and prosodically apparent throughout the poem.

Although it is nearly impossible to execute a convincing approximation of Dante's terza rima in English due to the relative sparsity of rhyming words compared to Italian, Heaney's attempt in his translations of the *Commedia* and sections 2, 4, 7, 11, and 12 of "Station Island" is by no means infelicitous or ungainly.<sup>38</sup> Though Heaney rhymes or part-rhymes the first and third lines of his tercets, the middle line—which in Italian would rhyme into the next stanza, thus imbuing the whole with a sense of uniformity and ongoing momentum—is left to stand alone. Heaney also attempts to prevent "Station Island" from being read as a Dantean pastiche by (as he told Karl Miller) making "it very plain in its diction, and entirely matter-of-fact in its narrative" (34). In these ways, Heaney uses Dante in a similar fashion to the way Dante used Virgil. Dante had taken Virgil's description of a voyage to the underworld in book 6 of the *Aeneid* as his inspiration for the *Commedia*, conflating Virgil's mythical journey with Catholic theology; couching



his epic in Tuscan, his *vulgari eloquentia*, rather than Latin; and populating the result not only with historical characters but also with contemporary European figures and Florentines Dante knew.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in "Station Island," Heaney marries the golden bough with the "guttural bough" of his own everyday idiom and fills St. Patrick's Purgatory with Irishmen in order to legitimate his claims to Dante.

Yet as we shall see in his encounter with the unnamed shade of Joyce in section 12 of "Station Island," Heaney's perception of what it means to be Irish is also perhaps the largest stumbling block he must struggle with in his path to literary reconciliation and redemption. When Heaney returns to the mainland in this final section, he chooses the familiar ghost of Joyce to instruct him and commend him to his future poetic endeavors. The shade of Joyce guides him onto terra firma as Heaney grasps the hand "stretched down from the jetty" (2) and senses once more "an alien comfort, as I stepped on ground" (3), Joyce does not let go once Heaney is safely ashore; rather, Heaney finds "the helping hand still gripping mine, / fish-cold and bony, but whether to guide / or be guided I could not be certain" (4-6). With this echo of his earlier ambiguity over who is being followed and who is following, Heaney here once more reasserts his uncertainties regarding the processes of literary influence. The immediate reason for this confusion is that "the tall man in step at my side / seemed blind though he walked straight as a rush / upon his ash plant, his eyes fixed straight ahead" (7-9). After the first unsettling image of being led by the blind, the reader begins to partake in the protagonist's process of recognition as we too share the dawning realization that the shade is that of the singular figure of Joyce rather than Eliot's "familiar compound ghost." This certainty grows when we subsequently read that the very sight of the figure triggers the remembrance of "His voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers" (13), even though "he did not speak yet" (14), clearly a reference to the circular flow or "riverrun" of *Finnegans Wake* (1939). (The singling out of the vowels in Joyce's speech is further elucidated in an interview in which Heaney explains that he thinks of "the English influence as a kind of consonant and the Irish experience as a vowel.")<sup>40</sup> And all doubt is dispelled when the figure hits "a litter basket // with his stick" (18-19), his actions echoing those of Stephen Dedalus in the "Circe" section of *Ulysses*, when Stephen appears to wreak the destruction of the entire universe with his own ash plant stick.<sup>41</sup>

Yet Joyce's purpose in Heaney's poem is to instruct rather than destruct, and this action heralds the end of the spell under which Heaney has encountered the shades of Station Island and the start of Joyce's advice to Heaney:

"Your obligation  
is not discharged by any common rite.  
What you must do must be done on your own  
  
so get back in harness. The main thing is to write  
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
that imagines its haven like your hands at night  
  
dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.  
You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.  
Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,  
  
let others wear the sackcloth and the ashes.  
Let go, let fly, forget.  
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note." (19-30)

Nonetheless, Joyce's assertion of the preeminence of the individual writer's actions over the "common rite" and shared subject matter of his Irish literary predecessors appears somewhat belied by the allusive echoes that Heaney places in Joyce's own mouth. While encouraging Heaney to "Take off from here" (27) unaided and alone, Joyce himself appears to be flying on borrowed wings. His pithy counsel to "Let go, let fly, forget" (29) would seem to owe much to Virgil's instruction to the Dante *personaggio* to "non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa" (3.51). Although this is usually translated as "Let us not talk of them, but look, and pass on," in Heaney's translation of the first three cantos of the *Inferno* published elsewhere, he renders the line thus: "Let us not talk of them. Move on. Observe."<sup>42</sup>

Joyce's assertion of necessary and generative forgetfulness contradictorily owes its authority to an act of poetic echoing and remembering. There can be little doubt as to Heaney's subtle undermining of Joyce's import when his poetic protagonist responds to these instructions: "It was as if I had stepped free into space / alone with nothing that I had not known / already" (31-33). For Heaney does not divest himself of his literary lineage, although this appears to be the sense up to the line break and is initially suggested by



a cursory reading of the double negative "nothing"/"not." Rather, Heaney describes himself as simultaneously liberated from, and empowered by, the influence of his ancestors, foremost among them the very writer who effected this revelation: James Joyce. The fact that the entire sense of these lines hinges upon a "nothing" that is in fact a very great something is a further nod to this indebtedness, just as Joyce's swipe at a "litter basket" with "his stick" (18–19) and Stephen's similar actions in the Nighttown brothel transmutates their ashplant sticks into the Nothung sword of Wagnerian legend.

To read of a significant "nothing" in this context seems to gesture toward a patrilineal act of inheritance on the part of Heaney—but an inheritance that requires the legatee to refashion Joyce's legacy, to forge in the smithy of his own soul a new kind of consciousness. Yet this consciousness is not to be, as it was for Stephen Dedalus, the "uncreated conscience of [his] race." Rather, Joyce goes on to warn against succumbing to the alluring siren-call of Irishness when the Heaney character apparently misapprehends Joyce's earlier advice and instead of striking out alone, cannot resist turning to Joyce and telling him of the "revelation / set among [his] stars" (37): the fact that his birthday falls on the same day that Stephen writes of the tundish in his diary at the close of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce's impatient response to "Keep at a tangent" (47) and to "fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency" (49–50) breaks not only the spell of Station Island but also what Heaney refers to elsewhere as the "prescriptive myth of Irishness," the very conception of nationhood that Yeats, that other looming figure of Irish letters, had sought to foster.<sup>43</sup> In this manner, Heaney uses Joyce in order to deconstruct the siren song of a particularly Yeatsian version of Irishness.

Heaney does go on to follow Joyce's advice exactly in the poem that immediately follows: "The First Gloss" (97) of "Sweeney Redivivus" (97–121), a series of glosses on the seventh-century Ulster king that Heaney hopes (as he explains in his notes) "can survive without the support system of the original story" (123). The first poem both describes and enacts the manner in which Heaney strikes out on his tangential trajectory:

Take hold of the shaft of the pen.  
Subscribe to the first step taken  
from a justified line  
into the margin. (1–4)

The Dantean encounters of "Station Island" therefore seem to have effected an artistic catharsis for Heaney, and his meeting with the shade of Joyce could be regarded as the moment of poetic peripeteia. That is not to say that the shade of Yeats has been utterly exorcised, but rather that Heaney, armed with Joyce's advice, seems to feel "justified" and able to approach the shade of Yeats tangentially in his later collection, *Seeing Things* (1991).

### *Seeing Things*: Encountering Philip Larkin and Questioning Yeats

In *Seeing Things*, Heaney is often concerned with translations in language and space, and although the collection begins and ends with two of Heaney's own translations of trips to the underworld, one from Virgil's *Aeneid* and the other from Dante's *Inferno*, the intervening poems are not concerned with an exploration of the underworld. The poem that immediately follows upon Heaney's translation of Aeneas's descent, in fact, is titled "The Journey Back" (7), which refers not to Aeneas's return or Heaney's but details another encounter with a poetic shade: that of Philip Larkin, who had died six years previously.

Much hinges upon the caesura in the first line: "Larkin's shade surprised me. He quoted Dante." Whether Heaney is startled by the encounter itself or by the fact that Larkin's shade uncharacteristically quotes Dante is unclear. Perhaps he is most surprised by the fact that Larkin quotes from the first few lines of Heaney's own translation of canto 2 of the *Inferno*. Whereas *Station Island* had used a Dantean framework and adopted the Dantean encounter as a structuring device, here Heaney uses Dante in an unexpected and markedly different way.<sup>44</sup> Larkin and Heaney—despite having known one another in life—do not converse. Rather, other than the contextualizing first line quoted above, the poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue, with the meter of the Dante quote dovetailing into Larkin's voice in an English form of terza rima:

"Daylight was going and the umber air  
Soothing every creature on the earth,  
Freeing them from their labours everywhere.  
  
I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty  
And not a thing had changed, as rush-hour buses



Bore the drained and laden through the city.  
I might have been a wise king setting out  
Under the Christmas lights—except that

It felt more like the forewarned journey back  
Into the heartland of the ordinary.  
Still my old self. Ready to knock one back.

A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry." (2–14)

The Dante *personaggio* is not "alone" in this passage but, like Aeneas with the golden bough, he has Virgil to guide him, not only the presence of Virgil as his guide ("maestro") but also the knowledge of Virgil's own textual exploration of the underworld ("autore"); hence Larkin's reference to "the forewarned journey back" (11) alludes to a journey presaged in the very passage translated by Heaney in the immediately preceding poem. This is the first instance of a feature that will go on to become the defining characteristic of Heaney's later poems for poets: the wholesale borrowing from and allusion to canonical and pre-modern works in Heaney's own translation. Nowhere is what Corcoran describes as the lack of "specific cultural freight"<sup>45</sup> that is particular to poetry in translation more useful or more apparent than in Heaney's genealogical elegies.

In Heaney's prose work, Larkin often stands as an example of the allure and influence of Yeats upon those that follow him, a topic that Heaney examines (albeit it in a highly oblique manner) in a poem titled "Settings" in the second section of the "Squarings" sequence.<sup>46</sup> "Settings" is explicitly a meditation upon the fate of the soul and consists of eight questions, couched in the boxy twelve lines of five feet divided into four tercets that Heaney called a "Squaring." This form abruptly halts at the point at which a sonnet would usually reach a resolution in its closing couplet and thus is formally well suited to its querulous content. As was the case in Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and Brodsky's "Elegy for John Donne," Heaney is particularly concerned with the fate of the maker's soul as he speculates about where the spirit dwells—"Inside or outside / Things remembered, made things, things unmade?" (1–2). This is followed by another question—"What came first, the seabirds' cry or the soul // Imagined in the dawn cold when it cried?" (3–4)—that appears to answer the first one, as

Heaney alludes to the Old English poem "The Wanderer," a poem both made and remembered. His musing upon one of the soul's possible final resting places—"On dungy sticks / In a jackdaw's nest up in the old stone tower // Or a marble bust commanding the parterre" (5–7)—calls to mind once more the shadow of Thoor Ballylee and gestures toward the marmoreal inapproachability in which Yeats had sought to seal his poetic reputation at the end of "Under Ben Bulbin."

The latter half of the poem turns away from the subject of the poet's soul toward the value of the poet's written legacy, and the final stanza wonders, "What's the use of a held note or held line / That cannot be assailed for reassurance? / (Set questions for the ghost of W. B.)" (10–12). The ambiguity of "held" suggests both duration and durability, a thing retained.<sup>47</sup> Within the confines of the poem, the final line immediately debunks the seeming impossibility of assailing the dead poet's reassurance, as Heaney makes a memorandum to set down the questions as homework for the shade of Yeats. As was the case in the final section of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," where the dead poet is deracinated from his poetic identity and rechristened plain old "William Yeats," here Heaney achieves a similar effect by reducing Yeats to his initials. Although the poem was originally entitled "Small phantasia for W. B.," Heaney seems here to be moving away from the phantasmal Dantean encounter and toward a far more valedictory approach in this, his final interrogatory approach to the shade of the poet. As Adrian Woods Frazier argues, here Yeats, "once seen as an alien majesty, a turn-of-the-century Protestant Anglo-Irishman," has in this poem now "become familiar, wise, ghostly, and possibly helpful."<sup>48</sup>

In the third poem of the "Squarings" sequence (57), we find perhaps one of the most direct expressions of Joyce's instruction to "keep at a tangent" in the deep structure in Heaney's poems. We discover that Heaney has taken the poem's name from the game of marbles, a competition contingent on the oblique and tangential: "Squarings? In the game of marbles, squarings / Were all those anglings, aimings, feints and squints / You were allowed before you'd shoot" (1–3). Though Heaney joked in an interview that keeping a tangent "comes with an Ulster background,"<sup>49</sup> it also appears a vital aspect of his imagery in his poems for poets. Whereas prior to the "Station Island" sequence we find images of nets, snares, and entanglements in the Lowell elegy, references to circles, lines, and tangents can be found



in almost all of Heaney's poems about poets after Joyce imparts his advice. In the context of the Dantean framework, circles, of course, suggest those of hell and the cornices of purgatory. However, from *Seeing Things* onward, such images appear to take on significance as a means of mediating Heaney's relationship to dead poets through metaphors of obliquity, indirection, and suggested circularities. These are, of course exactly the kind of nonlinear relationships that the complex and organic model of genealogical elegy allows for, and that the recursive thread of *versus* and *poësis* enables, in the version of the form created in Heaney's hands.

*Electric Light*: Valedictions for Ted Hughes  
and Joseph Brodsky

Heaney's later poetry also offers many and repeated examples of such circular images. In *Electric Light* (2001), we find Auden's voice described as showing the "growth rings of genius" (12) ("W. H. Auden, 1907–73," 55); Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998) for Sylvia Plath is described as having "The single span and bull's eye" (9) of a familiar bridge ("On His Work in the English Tongue," 61–63); and Brodsky's heart in "Audenesque" (64–66) described as "a frozen well" (42). In *District and Circle* (2006), we find Heaney offering the shade of Auden "the mass and majesty of this world"<sup>50</sup> in "the small compass of a cast-iron stove lid" ("A Stove Lid for W. H. Auden," 1–2). Finally, in a translation of "A School of Poetry Closes: Tadhg Og O'Huiginn's Lament for his master and brother, Fergal Rua,"<sup>51</sup> a fifteenth-century Irish poem that Heaney had read at the funerals of Brodsky, Hughes, and Michael Hartnett (a Munster poet and curator of Joyce's Martello tower), we find this striking image: "Poetry is daunted / A stave of the barrel is smashed / And the wall of learning broken" (12).

In his article "The Peace of the Word is Always With You," Seamus Heaney discusses "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" at length, arguing that the poem's final lines "are a kind of prayer to the shade of the dead poet, asking him to ensure the continuation of poetry itself and to sponsor its constant work of transformation," the continuation and transformation of poetry that is, of course, most ably effected by and through genealogical elegy. He goes on to illustrate the importance of this continuation in relation to such poems by quoting from the O'Huiginn poem:

I began with an elegy for a poet because it is on the occasion of a poet's death than we experience the strongest sense of the poetry's necessity and the greatest gratitude to the poet for having made things, as Rilke said, "capable of eternity." When a poet dies, there is always a certain contradiction between our gratitude for what the art has gained and our feelings of personal loss, and this ambivalence is powerfully expressed in a couple of lines from the fifteenth-century Irish poet Tadhg Dall O h-Uiginn, written in memory of his brother, who was also a poet. His mother's son was dead and so, in O h-Uiginn's words, "Poetry is daunted / A stave of the barrel is smashed / And the wall of learning broken." There is intense grief here, but the images also give a magnificent sense of poetry's immemorial endurance, like the holding action of timber and stone. (12)

Not only has O'Huiginn's made images that hold an "immemorial endurance" but the very fact that Heaney chose to read this poem, in his own translation, at the memorial services of three of his poetic contemporaries and at Boston University's 2010 Robert Lowell Memorial Lecture demonstrates the duration and durability of the held line. However, this is not a line that has been held unaltered. Rather, Heaney keeps at a tangent to the original by rendering it in his own translation, modifying the words of a long-dead poet in his own guts in order to do homage to his dead contemporaries. In this manner he too rehoops the barrel and puts in a new stave. It is this impulse to seek out and translate these enduring works in order to pay tribute to dead poets in a common poetic coinage stamped with Heaney's language that we see in the genealogical elegies of *Electric Light*. Although the opposing strains of Yeatsian elegy and Dantean encounter that had been held in generative tension throughout his earlier poems for deceased poets are still apparent in this and later work, increasingly he seeks a mode that in an interview he identifies as a kind of "valediction": that is, using his own translations of pre-modern canonical works as a way of paying tribute to dead poets.<sup>52</sup>

"On His Work in the English Tongue," written in memory of Ted Hughes, functions in many ways like Lowell's "For John Berryman (After reading his last *Dream Song*)." Both are reactions to the dead poets' work, and in particular those poems concerned with loss and grief: in Hughes's



case, his *Birthday Letters* for Plath. Heaney's reaction to this exploration of grief may initially be the occasion of the poem, but Heaney places Hughes's exploration of bereavement in a far wider context by embedding an early version of his own translation of *Beowulf* into the poem. The passage in question is concerned not with the death of a writer but with the death of a child, an experience that Hughes himself had lived through, and as such it functions much like an allusive correlative, akin to the "befitting emblems of adversity" that Heaney had earlier found in the sacrificial killings of Jutland in relation to the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Heaney describes the action of the "grief-trap" (25) and details his poetic process of trawling the canon and drawing "from his word-hoard a weird tale / Of a life and a love balked, which I reword here" (29–30). The tribute Heaney pays does not merely juxtapose this emotional antecedent from the canon with the events of Hughes's life but also becomes the occasion of a rewording, of a rehooping of the barrel, of Heaney's own work in the English tongue. Heaney ends the poem by quoting Czesław Miłosz's description of poetry: "A dividend from ourselves, a tribute paid / By what we have been true to. A thing allowed."<sup>53</sup>

Heaney's innovations in genealogical elegy reach a zenith in "Audenesque: For Joseph Brodsky" (*Electric Light*, 66–64), an elegy that recalls an encounter with the dead poet and ends on a valedictory note.<sup>54</sup> Yet again we find the *versus* of the rhymed quatrain form and metrical pulse of the third section of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," as Heaney pays homage to Auden and, in turn, also gestures once again, obliquely, toward the figure of Yeats.

Brodsky died from a heart attack in New York on January 28, 1996. In the second stanza of "Audenesque," Heaney points out a fearful symmetry in this "Double-crossed and death-marched date" (7–8), since Yeats and Brodsky shared the same death day. However, this coincidence is probably not what suggested the suitability of Auden's tetrameter quatrains to address Brodsky's death. Rather, Brodsky's life and the manner in which it was profoundly informed by Auden's poetry appears to have prompted Heaney to borrow from Auden borrowing from Yeats.<sup>55</sup> The elegiac agenda of "Audenesque" is, however, radically different from that of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." This is not, as in the case of Auden's elegy for Yeats or Brodsky's for Eliot, a poem that crystallizes the moment of poetic inheritance between the dead poet and the elegist. Indeed, the main poetic dynamic

explored here is not that which exists between Heaney and Brodsky but rather between Auden and Brodsky and, tangentially, Heaney and Yeats. Whereas Auden's poem addressed the shade of a poetic precursor, Heaney's elegy struggles with the death of a contemporary and friend. In a manner akin to that which Auden admires in Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," though Heaney "never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting,"<sup>56</sup> the deeply personal is transmuted into the profoundly symbolic in "Audenesque." Vitally, this outcome is achieved through the appropriation (*versus*) and revivification (*poiesis*) of Auden's (and, in turn, Yeats's) poetic form, enacting and exemplifying the "transfusion of energies from poetic forms," that Heaney had found so exemplary in Yeats's poetry.<sup>57</sup>

The poem starts with an assertion of formal immutability as it marches to the same tetrameter beat used by Yeats at the close of "Under Ben Bulbin" and in the final *aabb* quatrains of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats": "Wystan Auden's metric feet" that "Marched to it, unstressed and stressed, / Laying William Yeats to rest" (2–4) in language "measured" (9) and "constrained" (10). Yet Heaney appears, at least at first, to have got it wrong, for as Meg Tyler points out, "unstressed and stressed" . . . describes an iambic foot but ["In Memory of W. B. Yeats"] is trochaic.<sup>58</sup> Tyler is right, but Heaney goes on to acknowledge another metrical option: "Trochee, trochee, falling: thus / Grief and metre order us" (13–14). By invoking both the iambic and trochaic foot, Heaney can have it both ways and acknowledge the metrical possibilities of Auden's Janus-faced form (which, as detailed in chapter 1, can be read either as acephalous iambs or catalectic trochees). Here too the work of mourning and the craft of making intersect, since the imposition of metrical order on the raw material of loss becomes both an imperative command (an "order") and a means to achieve a kind of rhythmical consolation. In the couplet that then follows, Heaney neatly encapsulates the central and driving tension at the heart of genealogical elegy: "Repetition is the rule, / Spins on lines we learnt at school" (15–16). Spin here, of course, means to both repeat and revise, taking and transforming, weaving together the recursive thread of *versus* and *poiesis* into a new shape in the cat's cradle of genealogical elegy. In this way his use of Auden's use of Yeats's meter gives Heaney a means of expanding and illustrating his prose description of the "transfusion of energies from poetic form." Auden's mediating elegy thus



provides Heaney with a means of resurrecting Yeats's poetic legacy through a formal homage that avoids the anxieties of copying or denying that Auden had identified in "Yeats as an Example" and oscillated between in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

We also find "Repetition too of cold" (17) as Heaney takes and spins not only Auden's form but also his frost-bound imagery ("Dublin Airport locked in frost," 19). Yet Heaney goes far beyond the frozen tears of Auden's elegy, or "the frost which binds so dear a head" in "Adonais," when he envisages Brodsky frozen in an ice that

no axe or book will break,  
No Horatian ode unlock,  
No poetic foot imprint,  
Quatrain shift or couplet dint,  
  
Ice of Archangelic strength,  
Ice of this hard two-faced month,  
Ice like Dante's deep in hell  
Makes your heart a frozen well. (21–28)

Unlike Auden's "healing fountain" or Shelley's "burning fountain"—both images of the enduring power of poetry—Heaney seems to envisage a loss so profound as to freeze over the wellspring of poetry. Yet on further consideration, it seems that this freezing has far more to do with personal grief than with poetry, for in rhyming his assertion of loss with an image of the frigid wastes of Dante's Cocytus, Heaney, like Auden before him, demonstrates the ongoing life of poetry and the power of the held line. Heaney is not one of those Irish poets with "unremembering hearts and heads" (73) who Yeats feared would succeed him in "Under Ben Bulbin." Rather, "Audenesque" is a consummate act of remembering, as Heaney recalls not only drinks, jokes, travels, and puns shared with Brodsky, but also the words, forms, metrics, and cadences of his elegiac precursors. In his penultimate stanza, Heaney inverts the very lines of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" that Brodsky had seized upon as his poetic credo, claiming that "Worshipped language can't undo / Damage time has done to you" (61–62). That Brodsky's words may well endure seems to be cold comfort to his bereft friend. Yet this inversion is couched in the very form that the departed Brodsky had

in mind when he had rhetorically mused, "isn't a poem . . . with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time?"<sup>59</sup>

In the final stanza, Heaney looks beyond Auden's reconfiguration of poetic consolation to a far earlier elegiac antecedent:

Dust-Cakes, still—see *Gilgamesh*—  
Feed the dead. So be their guest.  
Do again what Auden said  
Good poets do: bite, break their bread. (65–68)

Like Auden, Heaney demonstrates the survival of poetry after the death of the poet by placing loss within a literary matrix. Whereas "Adonais" offered Auden an elegiac model for mourning a poet, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* offers Heaney an example of how one might lament the death of a friend. This urtext of loss, dating from the third millennium BC, is one of the oldest surviving narratives in human history and deals with some of humanity's most ancient concerns: mortality and mourning. Heaney's final stanza conflates the very distant elegiac past with the immediate poetic future. Just as in Auden's elegy for Yeats, the last lines no longer seem addressed to Brodsky. Rather, Heaney casts into the future in Auden's Janus-faced form as he importunes not only Brodsky's poetic inheritors but his own to undertake the task that he finds himself incapable of here, of breaking bread with the dead.

This image and sentiment is taken from Auden's May 1969 poem "The Garrison" (*Collected Poems*, 844–45), in which he suggests that "thanks to" "personal song and language" (9, 7) "it's possible for the breathing / still to break bread with the dead" (9–10). In an interview for Swedish television a few months later, Auden expanded upon this point in response to the interviewer's question about whether Auden felt himself "to be part of a continuing literary tradition":

Yes, and the wonderful—the other nice thing about the arts, the invaluable thing about them, is that they're almost the only means we have of breaking bread with the dead. . . . Without communication with the dead, we'd be entirely enclosed in the present, and it's not a fully human life. [As Chesterton said,] "Tradition is the democracy of the dead. It means giving votes to that remotest and obscurest of classes,



our ancestors. It refuses to submit to the arrogant oligarchy of those who simply happen to be walking around.”<sup>60</sup>

In many ways this statement could be regarded as a philosophical gloss upon the assertions that he had made thirty years earlier in his elegy for Yeats. Poetry may make nothing happen, but the held line survives and endures, resonating in the creative imaginations of future generations of poets. In “Audenesque,” however, Heaney goes yet further by suggesting exactly how this poetic communion may happen. His most direct allusion in the closing lines of this poem is, of course, to the kind of textual transubstantiation suggested by Auden in his elegy for Yeats. Yet more obliquely, it is Heaney’s formal appropriation of Auden borrowing from Yeats that enables him finally to break bread with, and tangentially to approach, his problematic precursor as he transmutes *versus* into *poïesis*. In his apostrophic “Eulogy for W. H. Auden” (another poem patterned on “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”), Derek Walcott confides that Auden knew that free verse “is a sign / of awful manners” (41–42). For as Heaney was to explain in a 1997 speech at Galway Town Hall and repeated at a reading of his elegies for poets at the *Harvard Advocate* building on October 30, 2004, if “poetry is what we do to break bread with the dead . . . surely rhyme and meter are the table manners.”<sup>61</sup>

The elegiac achievement of Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” has survived in “the valley of its making” through its repeated formal incarnations in twentieth-century elegy, and flowed down into Heaney’s “Audenesque” and into the twenty-first century. Instead of the Dantean encounters or Yeatsian elegies of his earlier years, in Heaney’s later poems we find him orchestrating a form of valedictory leave-taking as he transmits “signatures on [his] own frequency” and in his own words. His genealogical elegies draw on the *versus* of repeating his poetic antecedents in his own translations while also exemplifying the innovation of *poïesis* as they are revived in an entirely new elegiac context. Though the genealogy of poetry is invariably monopolized and defined by the “arrogant oligarchy” of the present, Heaney’s recent appropriations from the literature of loss demonstrate how, through modifying the words of lost poets in the guts of genealogical elegy, one may indeed break bread with the long dead.

## EPILOGUE

I have repeatedly asked what it means when poets *do* elegies for poets. The various developments in genealogical elegy that I have charted, the way in which it is “modified in the guts of the living,” as Auden describes the fate of Yeats’s poems, draw on the formal history of elegy while simultaneously transcending convention and pushing its generic boundaries. In doing so, genealogical elegies become aesthetic catalysts, points at which poetry is most vigorously propelled and compelled forward; and not only forward but also in the diverse and unpredictable directions that the “branching” of genealogy allows for and enables. This is why elegies for poets such as “Lycidas,” “Adonais,” and “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” are recognized to be some of the most significant and innovative poems of their respective eras and form the core of the poetic canon. These genealogical elegies, which draw attention to their status as made things, have made things, and will continue to go on making things, happen.

Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” reconfigures genealogical elegy for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as powerfully as “Lycidas” did for elegists after Milton. Auden’s elegy for Yeats offers poets an example of an elegy that both bruises and burnishes the figure of the dead poet. Moreover, Auden’s poem serves simultaneously generically progressive and regressive ends. The aporia between these apparently opposing aspects, like the contrast between Auden’s voice in the poem’s first part and Yeats’s in its final part, provides the dialectical tension from which many of the poems examined here draw their power.

One may repeatedly find oppositional dramas played out in these genealogical elegies; these are poems driven by the tension between various sorts of fixity and fluidity. Simultaneously atavistic and innovative, these elegies are both rhizomatic, rooted in the poetic past, while also arborescent, and