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‘Breaking Bread with the Dead’: W.H. Auden,
Seamus Heaney and Yeats’s legacy

Sally Connolly

IN HIS COMMONPLACE book *A Certain World* (1970), W. H. Auden observed that, ‘Poets seem to be more generally successful at writing elegies than any other literary genre. Indeed, the only elegy I know of which seems to me a failure is “Adonais”’.¹ This ‘failure’ is elucidated in an earlier essay, ‘Yeats as an Example’ (1948), in which Auden identifies and explores W. B. Yeats’s poetic legacy. He argues that Yeats’s greatest achievement was to transmute the ‘occasional poem’ from ‘an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial *vers de société*’ into ‘a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest’.² To illustrate his point he compared Yeats’s elegy ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’ (1918) with Shelley’s ‘Adonais’ (1821). The former, he argues, ‘never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting [. . .] and at the same time the occasion and the characters acquire a symbolic public significance’, whereas he finds that in ‘Adonais’, ‘both Shelley and Keats disappear as people’.³ Thus, Auden deems ‘Adonais’ to have failed in its poetic purpose not only because the dead poet disappears twice, first in death itself, and then again behind the elegy’s devices and didacticism, but also because the living poet is subsumed by his own act of commemoration. Though Auden saw Yeats’s greatest poetic achievement as the resistance of

¹ W. H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Viking, 1970), 149.

² W. H. Auden, ‘Yeats as an Example’, *The Kenyon Review* 10 (Spring 1948), 187–195 at 193.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

the disappearance of the elegized and the elegist, in the first line of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939), we read not of the poet's death, but of how he 'disappeared in the dead of winter'. Before a close reading of the opposing influences of disappearance and survival in Auden's elegy and the influence of Shelley's 'Adonais' upon it, we will look briefly to Yeats's elegiac legacy.

In his landmark study of the genre, *The English Elegy* (1985), Peter Sacks pinpoints 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' (1918) as *the* early twentieth century elegy that 'dispensed with many of the comforting fictions of the genre'.⁴ Yeats plays with our elegiac expectations by adhering in many aspects to generic convention, yet ultimately rejects the consolatory function such conventions had, traditionally, served. In the twelfth and final stanza the poem ruptures and Yeats's grief can no longer be formalised, causing the poem to be truncated like the life that it ostensibly celebrates:

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
Or boyish intellect approved,
With some appropriate commentary on each;
Until imagination brought
A fitter welcome; but a thought
Of that late death took all my heart for speech. (VP 327-8)

No longer does grief set the elegiac process into motion, but rather vice versa. The poet must rely upon—'I had thought'—the elegiac conceit of the pathetically fallacious 'bitter wind' rattling the shutter to prompt remembrance and bring to mind episodes to recall in the proper elegiac fashion with 'some appropriate commentary on each', so as to fulfil generic expectations. Yet Yeats does not need the elegiac element to recall and recreate Gregory. The young man is still very much in his mind and 'but a thought' of his death silences the poet, while yet, at the same time, prompting Yeats to a consummate act of speech. The dead now seem all too close and cannot be constrained by the depersonalising conventions of consolation. W.

⁴ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 300.

David Shaw sees this 'breakdown' in speech as a 'breakthrough' in modern elegy, since 'Yeats's broken, contingent conduct of his elegy is the perfect way of expressing the broken, contingent nature of every life'.⁵ Yet perhaps it is another of Yeats's poems that has had a far more profound elegiac influence his successors: 'Under Ben Bulben' (1938). Though not an elegy occasioned by the death another, Yeats's late poem functions like a pre-emptive elegy which not only attempts to control his posthumous influence on, and reception from, future generations, but also dictates to his inheritors from beyond the grave, instructing:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds. (*VP* 639)

Yeats seals his self-designed sepulchre by inscribing what would go on to be his own epitaph: '*Cast a cold eye | On life, on death. | Horseman, pass by!*' (*VP* 640) Yeats's contingent and ambivalent elegy for Gregory, along with his self-elegy 'Under Ben Bulben', created the elegiac agenda that Auden was to address in his poem for the dead poet.

'YEATS AS AN EXAMPLE' AND 'IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS'

In 'Yeats as an Example' Auden is acutely concerned with the dynamics of artistic inheritance and the reaction of the poet to the work of other poets, living and dead. Auden uses Yeats as an example rather than as an exemplar, and though he takes care to pinpoint his poetic legacy as the synthesis of the personal and symbolic within elegy, this appraisal is undermined by an assertion that prefaces it: 'When a poet [. . .] reads a poem written by another, he is apt to be less concerned with what the latter actually accomplished by his

⁵ David W. Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 147.

poem than with the suggestions it throws out upon how he, the reader, may solve the poetic problems which confront him now'.⁶ The 'poetic problems' that the figure of Yeats had posed Auden as an elegist nine years previously were twofold: Yeats had already attempted to enshrine his reputation in an elegy of his own fashioning, and the politics that he had espoused were deeply problematic for anyone that sought to address his legacy. In later years Auden could joke in the final stanza of 'Academic Graffiti' (1952):

To get the Last Poems of Yeats,
You need not mug up on dates;
All a reader requires
Is some knowledge of gyres
And the sort of people he hates.⁷

However, in 1939, the year of Yeats's death and the eve of the Second World War, his political views threatened to damage irreparably his reputation as a poet. It was through his elegy that Auden would attempt to answer these problems, and reassert Yeats's poetic potency, in the very form that Yeats modified for the twentieth century and made available to his successors: that of the personal and yet symbolically significant elegy.

Auden argues in 'Yeats as an Example' that, 'former hero-worship, as in other spheres of life, is all too apt to turn into an equally excessive hostility and contempt', and goes on to diagnose the problem inherent in such antipathy:

As long as we harbor such a resentment, it will be a dangerous hindrance to our own poetic development, for, in poetry as in life, to lead one's own life means to relive the lives of one's parents and, through them, of all one's ancestors; the duty of the present is neither to copy nor to deny the past but to resurrect it.⁸

'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' demonstrates how an elegy for another poet can fulfil a cathartic function, by rehabilitating the reputation of

⁶ Auden, 'Yeats as an Example', 187.

⁷ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. by E. Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991) 686.

⁸ Auden, 'Yeats as an Example', 187-8.

the dead poet and also by helping the living exorcise any resentment that they may feel towards their immediate precursors (there are very few anxious elegies addressed to the shades of long-dead poets). In this way an elegy for a precursor poet, which on first reading may appear agonistic, could ultimately be restorative rather than reactionary. The dialectic that Auden established in his criticism between copying and denying is particularly informative and, as we shall see, Auden resurrects and rehabilitates the image of Yeats in his elegy by alternating between these two impulses.

Auden concludes his argument in 'Yeats as an Example' by comparing Yeats to Gerard Manley Hopkins. He finds Hopkins to be a 'minor poet', arguing that his innovations in form were so idiosyncratic as to be an aesthetic dead end, and therefore concludes, 'he cannot influence later poets in any fruitful way; they can only imitate him'. However, he contends that Yeats is, though problematic, a 'major poet' since he 'not only attempts to solve new problems, but the problems he attacks are central to the tradition, and the lines along which he attacks them, while they are his own, are not idiosyncratic, but produce results which are available to his successors'.⁹ We will now explore how Auden engages with the 'results' that Yeats's legacy made available to him, and how he attacks the problem not only of reconciling Yeats the man to his poems, but also the larger problem 'central to the tradition' of how to elegize a precursor. We will then address Auden's allusions to his other elegiac forebears, with particular reference to Shelley's elegiac approach to Keats, and finally examine the manner in which the 'results' that Auden attained in 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' were to make Yeats's poetic legacy approachable and available to Seamus Heaney.

W. H. Auden sailed into New York harbour on 26 January 1939. Two days later, W. B. Yeats died in Roquebrune on the French Riviera and was buried far from his preordained spot under the shadow of Ben Bulbin in County Sligo. Though composed on 4 September 1938, 'Under Ben Bulbin' was first published in *The Irish Times* on 3 February 1939. 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' initially appeared in *The New Republic* on 8 March 1939. This version omits

⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

the second of the poem's three sections (the stanza which starts 'You were silly like us'.) Auden submitted the manuscript of 'The Public v. the Late Mr. W. B. Yeats', a critical appraisal of the dead poet's greatness, to *The Partisan Review* on 18 March 1939. In *Later Auden* Edward Mendelson plausibly speculates that the second section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' was composed at roughly the same time. The poem was published in its final tripartite form (though not its final version, discussed below, which was published in 1966 in Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*), in *The London Mercury* in April 1939.

'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' was to be an inaugural and catalytic poem for Auden. It was the first poem that he wrote on the cusp of his new life in America, and it was to initiate an elegiac frenzy that would last for a year, during which time he would go on to write poems for Voltaire (February 1939), Herman Melville (March 1939), the playwright Ernst Toller (May 1939), and Sigmund Freud (September 1939). 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' draws much of its potency from earlier elegies for poets, in particular the very elegy that Auden appears to discountenance in an act of classic Bloomian misprision: 'Adonais'. However, before Auden was able to show how 'The words of a dead man | Are modified in the guts of the living', he had to disinter the dead poet from a poetic tomb of his own creation: 'Under Ben Bulben'. Ironically, it was to be through the assimilation of Yeats's innovation of personal individuation in elegy that Auden was to exhume the figure of the dead poet from his self-ordained place in the canon. Thus, Auden's elegy performs an act of restoration on, rather than desecration of, the reputation that Yeats had attempted to place beyond the reach of his successors.

The first section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', Lawrence Lipking contends, is notable in the 'utterly un-Yeatsian way in which it commemorates Yeats', as it denies the style, form and tone of Yeats's poetics.¹⁰ Auden describes a frost-bound landscape, like that of 'Adonais', but instead of a pastoral locus, Yeats's death takes place in a frozen urban wasteland far from the mystical settings of his poems. Auden immediately sets Yeats not in the context of death, as

¹⁰ Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 154.

'Adonais' does with Keats in its first line ('I weep for Adonais—he is dead!'), but rather in the far more modern contexts of loss and absence: 'He disappeared in the dead of winter'. Indeed, the first death that we read of in the poem is not that of the poet but rather that of the 'dying day'. In the first stanza of 'Adonais' time also dies, as the hour of Keats's death is commanded by Shelley to tell of how, 'with me | Died Adonais' (l. 6-7). In 'Adonais' we read that 'Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down | Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were' (l. 136-137). In Auden's elegy the pathetic fallacy is updated, and mechanical 'instruments' are anthropomorphised and able to 'agree | The day of his death was a dark cold day'. Nature seems indifferent to the poet's death, as 'Far from his illness | The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests'. Unlike the deciduous trees of Shelley's spring, Auden's evergreen woods will never shed their buds in imitation of autumn. Mendelson suggests that Auden's wolves hark back to 'the grim wolf with privy paw' (l. 128) in Milton's 'Lycidas'.¹¹ However, Auden's pack of wolves may owe far more to Shelley's metaphorical transformation of Keats's critics in 'Adonais' into 'herded wolves, bold only to pursue' (l. 244), since Auden follows this line with a passage concerned with the ways in which Yeats's work will be read and received after his death.

As Auden begins to set the scene not only of the poet's death, but also of the ongoing life of his work, he repeatedly refers to elegiac convention through the very act of subverting generic expectations and motifs. In this way he modifies the words of not only Yeats, but also of other dead poets, and particularly those of Shelley, in his own guts. In this Auden could be seen to be alluding once again to Shelley's method in 'Adonais', since, as Michelle Turner Sharp argues, 'rather than appropriating or creatively refashioning the tradition, Shelley cites it'.¹² The ancient elegiac conceit of pastoral artificiality had caused Shelley and Keats to disappear in 'Adonais', and though 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' starts with a disappearance, the survival of the poet's words is envisaged in this first section in a landscape both quotidian and contemporaneous. The

¹¹ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 7.

¹² Michelle Turner Sharp, 'Mirroring the Future: Adonais, Elegy, and the Life in Letters', *Criticism* 42 (Summer 2000), 299-316 at 308.

effect is to normalise rather than distance the death. The autocratic figure of Yeats is brought closer to us in a world we recognise as our own.

Yeats had endeavoured to control his posthumous reputation in 'Under Ben Bulben' by attempting to create what Lipking has called a '*tombeau*' after Stéphane Mallarmé's exploration of the form. However, as Lipking notes, 'Poets may try to design their own memorials, but all they can be sure of is the body of their work; the monument, the way the work will be remembered, must be left to other hands. Very quickly the poet ceases to control his fate'.¹³ In his final poems Yeats often seems to express fears about losing control over his words. 'Under Ben Bulben' lays down the law for Yeats's inheritors, while 'The Man and the Echo', is fundamentally concerned with the distortion and misrepresentation of meaning after the moment of utterance. However, this is exactly what Auden celebrates in his elegy. Auden recognises and—unlike Yeats—accepts that the poet becomes something else in death, and in this acceptance reconfigures notions of literary fame for those that follow him. Death alienates the poet from the body of work which has defined his or her existence. Thus, Yeats's final afternoon of illness is his last one as 'himself'. On the instant of his death 'he became his admirers'. His poems only exist 'modified' in their 'guts' in an act of textual transubstantiation, given over to their interpretations and 'unfamiliar affections', beyond authorial intention. Thus 'By mourning tongues | The death of the poet was kept from his poems' as they continue to exist independently of the life that created them. (However, it must always be remembered that the reader's knowledge of a poet's death inevitably affects his or her reading of their poems.) Ramazani contends that in depicting an artistic rather than otherworldly afterlife Auden 'converts Yeats's worry about controlling his inheritance into the key to his immortality', and that as Auden's elegy adopts and adapts Yeats's innovations in the elegiac form it 'enacts the theory of reception that [Auden] enunciates'.¹⁴ Auden's mourning tongue not only recites, but also ingests Yeats's

¹³ Lipking, 138-9.

¹⁴ Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 187 and 183.

words, modifying them in his own guts. Thus, as the dead poet becomes his admirers, his admirers, also, to some extent, become him, as they incorporate and resurrect the dead poet's poetics. As Lipking explains, 'That equation marks the logic of the *tombeau*; of literary history itself'.¹⁵

Auden takes this most national and mystical of poets and makes him international and demystified. Death encroaches on him like urbanization ('The squares of his mind were empty, | Silence invaded the suburbs') and instead of being interred whole 'Under Ben Bulben', he is dismembered and 'scattered among a hundred cities' in an act of intellectual atomization. In this Auden appears to owe much to Shelley's description of the nature of literary fame in 'Adonais'. As Sharp points out: 'Where *Lycidas* posits the false surmise that ushers in a vision of a body lost and broken by the ocean waves, *Adonais* posits the plurality and volatility of reading as what smashes Keats's body into atoms, but also shapes the enduring form of his immortality'.¹⁶ In the earlier stages of inconsolability in 'Adonais', the elegising swain laments that: 'The quick Dreams, | The passion-winged Ministers of thought, | Who were his flocks [. . .] Wander no more, from kindling brain to brain' (l. 73-78). The notion of 'kindling' calls to mind the image in Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' of the 'mind in creation' as 'a fading coal'. Shelley posits that it is by the working of 'some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind' that awakens the mind to the 'transitory brightness' of creation.¹⁷ Keats's ideas are rekindled in the course of 'Adonais' not by the 'mourning tongues' of his readers, but rather by the 'barbed tongues' (l. 213) of his critics, the very tongues that Shelley finds murderous in their critical intent. Auden, unlike Shelley, does not think that criticism kills. Yeats is undone by 'illness': both physical, and, as Auden goes on to detail in the latter half of his elegy, intellectual. However, Auden does envisage a critical as well as appreciative reception for the words of the dead man, as his words are, like prisoners of war, 'punished under a foreign code of conscience'. This reference to criticism not only presages the

¹⁵ Lipking, 160.

¹⁶ Sharp, 311.

¹⁷ P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 699-717 at 713.

ideological bent of contemporary critical theory but also subtly turns the tables upon Yeats, who had, in life, subjected Auden to his own critical appraisal.

As editor of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935* (1936), Yeats chose to include three of the twenty-nine year old Auden's poems in his decidedly idiosyncratic and anachronistic selection: 'It's no use raising a Shout', 'This Lunar Beauty' and 'The Silly Fool'. However, this was not a gesture of unqualified approval: in his introduction, he suggests that Ezra Pound 'has a great influence, more perhaps than any contemporary except Eliot, [and] is probably the source of that lack of form and consequent obscurity which is the main defect of Auden, Day Lewis, and their school'.¹⁸ Though he goes on to state that this is 'a school which, as will presently be seen, I greatly admire' and cautiously praises Cecil Day Lewis, Charles Madge, Lewis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and George Barker ('I can seldom find more than half a dozen lyrics that I like, yet in this moment of sympathy I prefer them to Eliot')¹⁹ no further elaboration upon his admiration for Auden is to be found. Might we infer, then, that Yeats thought inclusion in his selection tacit approval enough? Auden does not appear to have shared this opinion. In 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats', Auden's public prosecutor calls *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* 'the most deplorable volume ever issued under the imprint of that highly respected firm'.²⁰

The idea of the 'foreign' is also particularly telling in the context of the self-imposed exile that Auden was writing under, and as Michael Murphy argues, 'The elegy is [. . .] a record of Auden unpacking his suitcase from the journey across the Atlantic'.²¹ Yeats's fittingness as an elegiac subject may have been geographical as well as temporal. Not only did the first days of Auden's new life in America overlap with the last days of Yeats's, but in death Yeats also offered Auden an example of the possible fate of the expatriate

¹⁸ *The Oxford Book Of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, ed. by W. B. Yeats (Oxford University Press, 1936), xxvi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

²⁰ *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Volume 2, Prose*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3-7 at 3.

²¹ Michael Murphy, 'Honoured Guests: The Elegy as Homecoming in W. H. Auden and Joseph Brodsky', *Symbiosis* 3.1 (April 1999): 13-25 at 16.

poet. Mendelson argues that the landscape described in the first few stanzas of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' is recognisably that of New York harbour 'in the dead of winter, while a light snow disfigured the public statues'.²² Murphy shares this view, arguing that though Yeats died on the French Riviera, 'with its stark vision of a city in the grip of winter, the description is more a record of Auden's first impressions of New York than Yeats's last of the earth'.²³ However, it could be argued that the topography of the first section owes more to the Old World than the New. The frozen 'brooks' of Auden's poem seem more likely to be tributaries of the Thames than the Hudson, while the 'provinces' of Yeats's body seems likely to refer to the 'Province' of Northern Ireland, and 'The squares of his mind' to Dublin's Georgian squares. The Statue of Liberty may be the most widely recognized public statue in the world, but Auden is deliberately unspecific and writes in the plural of how 'snow disfigured the public statues'. Rather than being a description of New York, Auden's landscape seems to be a direct descendant of James Joyce's depiction of a snow-muffled Dublin in 'The Dead' (1914).

In Joyce's story, Gabriel Conroy points to a statue of Daniel O'Connell, 'on which lay patches of snow' on his way home from a family gathering.²⁴ The allusion not only establishes the theme of Irish insurgence that Auden will go on to develop in the elegy's second section, but also picks up on Joyce's symbolism. In the final paragraph of 'The Dead' the drifting snow elicits an epiphany, as Gabriel Conroy's 'soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead'. The 'disfiguring' snow of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' blurs the distinction between the commemorated and the commemorator, the public figure and the private man, and the cityscape of Dublin and New York, as it casts its mantle over the living and the dead. Auden's reference to the French stock exchange, 'the Bourse', in this section's final stanza, marks a turn towards the country of Yeats's death, while the 'ranches of isolation' and 'raw towns' in the poem's second section, seem to

²² Mendelson, 3.

²³ Murphy, 15.

²⁴ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1992), 126.

take the reader across the Atlantic to the American frontier of Auden's imagination. In the final section of his elegy for Yeats, Auden returns to the 'Earth' of Ireland, where the 'Irish vessel' of the poet's dead body will rest 'emptied of its poetry'.²⁵

Auden, like Shelley, had not been close in life to the poet he chose to memorialise in death. As Sharp argues, 'what concerned Shelley most about Keats was not his fate as a person but as a writer, a fate that Shelley feared he would share'.²⁶ Auden's elegy exhibits a different kind of concern, that of Yeats's fate as a person and, in turn, the effect that this could have on his legacy as a writer. Unlike the poet that Shelley summons 'Who in another's fate now wept his own' (l. 300), Auden is not motivated by his own fear of the critic's 'barbed tongues' (l. 213). Instead, his 'mourning tongue' is far closer in intent to that of Dante, the poet by whom Auden chose to be judged in his *New Year Letter* (1940).

In the seventh circle of the *Inferno*, Dante meets the charred figure of Brunetto Latini, his old teacher. Latini, like Yeats, had dictated a doctrine of literary fame in his lifetime, enshrining his own reputation in his book, the *Tesoro* (The Treasure), 'nel qual io vivo ancora' ('In which I still live').²⁷ Dante assures the shade of his fallen master that his tongue ('mia lingua') will make his indebtedness clear upon his return to the land of the living. However, Dante never fulfils his promise beyond recounting the fact of it and the circumstances under which it was made, a tacit criticism of the hollowness of Latini's earthly aspirations. Auden's mourning tongue eschews Yeats's own attempts to ensure his enduring fame, and, as Lipking argues 'When Auden wrote his *tombeau*, Yeats's own must have still been ringing in his ears, and intentionally or not, his argument responds to Yeats's at every point'.²⁸ Auden's mourning tongue was

²⁵ Yeats was originally buried on the Riviera. Nine years later, after the war, his coffin was disinterred and returned to Ireland to be buried in Drumcliffe graveyard. However, there has been recent speculation that the body re-interred in Ireland was not in fact that of Yeats.

²⁶ Sharp, 310.

²⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XV, l. 119-120.

²⁸ Lipking, 154. Stan Smith argues that 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' is a 'direct and unexpected response' to another of Yeats's last poems, 'The Man and the Echo' ('Persuasions to Rejoice: Auden's Oedipal Dialogues with W. B. Yeats' in W. H. Auden, *The Language of Learning and the Language of Love: Uncollected Writing, New*

to prove persuasive. The ‘familiar compound ghost’ that T. S. Eliot encounters on the cinder path in ‘Little Gidding’ (1945) conflates the shade of Brunetto Latini with that of a chastised Yeats.²⁹ Instead of speaking of the fame endowed by his earthly achievements the fallen master speaks of how: ‘I am not eager to rehearse | My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten. | These things have served their purpose: let them be’. Instead, like Auden, the familiar shade envisages poetic endurance in terms of inheritability and modification: ‘For last year’s words belong to last year’s language | And next year’s words await another voice’.

This first section ends with Auden asserting an impoverishment of reception and convention. Auden depicts a diminishing readership of ‘A few thousand’ who will remember the day of Yeats’s death, ‘As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual’. As with the poet’s initial ‘disappearance’, Auden ends this movement by striking a note of strangeness rather than sadness. The section is sealed with a reassertion of elegiac convention—that of the refrain: ‘O all the instruments agree | The day of his death was a dark cold day’.³⁰ However, the convention is emptied of emotional import, since the mechanical devices merely record, rather than react to, the death.

One of the most striking aspects of ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ is the markedly different tone that Auden adopts in each of the poem’s three sections. The addition in April 1939 of the short, second section, an apostrophe to Yeats, was to fundamentally alter the structure and possible interpretations of the poem. The first version, published

Interpretations, ed. by Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 155–63 at 156).

²⁹ In *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978) Helen Gardner informs us ‘the drafts make it clear that he began with Yeats in mind and worked towards a greater generality’ (p. 67). In a letter to his editor John Hayward on 27 August 1942, Eliot explained why, in his final draft, he chose not to make the dead master’s identity entirely unambiguous: ‘I think you will recognise that it was necessary to get rid of Brunetto for two reasons. The first is that the visionary figure has now become somewhat more definite and will no doubt be identified by some readers with Yeats though I do not mean anything so precise as that. However, I do not wish to take the responsibility of putting Yeats or anybody else into Hell and I do not want to impute to him the particular vice which took Brunetto there’. [i.e. homosexuality] (quoted in Gardner, 64–65).

³⁰ Auden removed the slightly Yeatsian cadence of this line when he altered it in his *Collected Shorter Poems* to ‘What instruments we have agree’.

in March 1939, offered up Auden's poetic voice in the *vers libre* of the first section in immediate opposition to Yeats's voice in the tetrameter quatrains of the final section, drawing what Mendelson considers to be 'an absolute contrast between the dying impotence of the poet and the reviving power of verse' in a Modernist version of the classical eclogue.³¹ However, the second, newer section interposed between the two original parts mediates between Auden's and Yeats's poetic voices, as Auden directly addresses the dead poet. This not only dilutes the eclogic contrast between the two poets, but also undermines many of the consolatory assertions that Auden had already made in the elegy's final lines, casting 'doubt on the final claims of triumph by proposing a less theatrical idea of success'.³² Crucially, the addition of this section offers the reader an insight into the way in which Auden read and reacted to himself, and reflects the catharsis of resentment expiated by his initial turn to elegy. As we shall see in relation to the poem's third part, Auden's self censorship of the *Collected Shorter Poems* version of the poem is also revealing. The earliest version 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' first denies and then copies the dead poet. This middle section seems to have been generated out of the dialectic between the two. What it 'resurrects' is not the figure of Yeats, but rather what Auden regarded as the fundamental and enduring essence of poetry. Thus the poem in its final form functions as a kind of trinity, embodying as it does firstly the voice of the son, and finally the voice of the father, the quarrel between the two making apparent in the middle and mediating section the spirit that imbues and outlives them both.

In this later interpolated section Auden makes Yeats approachable, puncturing the older poet's self imposed imperiousness, describing him as 'silly like us', far from being a poet seer. Mendelson argues: 'Almost every poem Auden wrote in the weeks before and after his arrival in New York portrayed the *agon* of an artist in combat with his gift',³³ and here too Auden writes of how Yeats's gift 'survived it all', obstacles social, physical, and psychological: 'The parish of rich

³¹ Mendelson, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14. The poems Mendelson is referring to are 'The Novelist', 'The Composer', 'Rimbaud', 'A. E. Houseman' and 'Edward Lear'.

women, physical decay, | Yourself'. However, as Auden will later go on to speculate in his 'Postscript' to 'The Cave of Making' (1964) his elegy for Louis MacNeice, the poetic temperament may be born of such difficulties and temptations, rather than in spite of them, ('many a fine | expressive line | would not have existed, | had you resisted'). Though 'mad Ireland hurt [Yeats] into poetry', the poetry created out of this turmoil cannot alter anything: 'Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still'. Yeats's poems are just as unlikely to be able to change Ireland's weather as her politics: 'For poetry makes nothing happen'.

This is one of the most contentious and misquoted statements on poetry in the twentieth-century. It has provided Auden's successors with a crucial point of engagement with his poetic legacy. Much depends on what Auden may have meant. In his poem 'Letter to Walt Whitman' (2002), Mark Doty muses: 'Is it true then, what your descendant said, | that poetry makes nothing happen?' However, in figuring Auden as Whitman's descendant (and, in turn, himself as a descendant of them both) Doty implies that poetry makes something happen by the way it inevitably influences succeeding generations of poets. Paul Muldoon looks beyond the bounds of the influence of verse upon other verse when in his poem 'Anseo' (1980), he describes one of his school friends who has joined the IRA as 'fighting for Ireland, making things happen'. Yeats's romanticized version of the mythic age of Celtic heroes has, even if unintentionally, served propagandist purposes. To understand what Auden may have meant we must look beyond the resources of the poem to Yeats's own beliefs, Auden's other pronouncements, and the historical and literary contexts in which this startling assertion was made.

Auden was to expand upon the idea that 'poetry makes nothing happen' twice in the year that followed the publication of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'. In 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats', the defence counsel informs the jury that, 'art is a product of history, not a cause [. . .] it does not re-enter history as an effective agent',³⁴ while in 'New Year Letter' (1940), Auden asserts that 'Art in intention is mimesis | But, realised, the resemblance

³⁴ *Complete Works*, 7.

ceases; | Art is not life and cannot be | A midwife to society'. Auden's intention may have been to rebut the question that Yeats puts to his conscience in 'The Man and the Echo' (1938): 'Did that play of mine send out | Certain men the English shot'. The play referred to is, of course, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). Muldoon inverts Yeats's logic in '7 Middagh Street' to reveal what he regards to be its inherent fallacy: 'As for his crass, rhetorical || posturing, 'Did that play of mine | send out certain men (*certain* men?) || the English shot...?' | the answer is 'Certainly not'. || If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead | would certain men have stayed in bed?' However, Stephen Gwynn's contemporary account of attending the first production of the play at the Abbey Theatre demonstrates that Yeats's concerns in the 'The Man and The Echo' were informed by contrition rather than conceit. Gwynn wrote: 'The effect of "Cathleen ni Houlihan" on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot'.³⁵ Consequently, it is clear that the inherent danger of the play had been recognized years before Yeats wrote 'The Man and the Echo'.

Louis MacNeice seems closest to the mark in his monograph on *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* when he accuses Auden of protesting too much: 'As was natural in a poet who had abruptly abandoned the conception of art as handmaid of politics for the conception of art as autotelic, [Auden] overstates his case'.³⁶ MacNeice avers that: 'It is an historical fact that art can make things happen and Auden in his reaction from a rigid Marxism seems [. . .] to have been straying towards the Ivory Tower'. In 'Persuasions to Rejoice: Auden's Oedipal Dialogues with W. B. Yeats', Stan Smith takes us into further into the motivating psychology that lay behind Auden's turn to the Ivory Tower:

By 1939 Auden shared a similar anxiety [to Yeats], for, as he veered towards pacifism, he had become more and more distressed (as his notorious rewriting of 'Spain' later that year was to reveal) about his own propaganda role

³⁵ Stephen Gwynn, *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936), 158-59.

³⁶ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 225

in sending men to commit 'the necessary murder' on behalf of the Spanish Republic. The revised version of this poem 'Spain 1937', the added date carefully dissociating the author from his past, was to appear immediately before the Yeats elegy as the first poem in a section of 'Occasional Poems' at the end of *Another Time*.³⁷

In the light of these facts Auden's statement starts to look like wishful thinking. The 'intellectual disgrace' that Auden refers to in the final stanzas of his poem may refer not only to the disgrace of Yeats's political sympathies, or of disgrace of the politicians who, in 1939, had led Europe into a 'nightmare of the dark', but also, possibly, to Auden's own shame. Not only the shame of his own intellectual disgrace, but also of his actual disgrace, in the face of the accusations of cowardliness levelled at him after his decision to abandon Britain on the eve of the Second World War.

As MacNeice points out, there can be little doubt that poetry does make something happen. Indeed, there may be no better example of poetry making something happen than in the case of elegy: a poetic form traditionally enacted in order to effect the result of consolation. Elegy's agenda may have changed over the past century, but one of its defining features continues to be its purposefulness, be it in wresting the laurels from the hands of a dead poet, as in the case of professional elegy, or making a political point, as in the elegies of the AIDS activist Paul Monette. Even if we take Auden at face value, and accept that 'poetry makes nothing happen' within the confines of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', the reader still finds that the very statement of poetry's powerlessness makes something happen. Auden's assertion inverts elegy's traditional inefficacy trope (the 'false surmise' of Milton's 'Lycidas') by implying that this may, in fact, be its greatest strength. It is the very powerlessness of poetry that exculpates Yeats, a poet who had based his poetic credo around his own self-perceived poetic potency. Auden had already asserted that the dead poet has no power over how his poems may be interpreted, but the question of interpretation is unimportant if poetry is not a productive 'effective agent', but rather, as Auden thinks, a by-product of humanity that manifests itself as a mimetic

³⁷ Smith, 159. Smith attributes the observation about the dating of 'Spain' to Nicholas Jenkins.

process. Auden adopted and amplified the ambivalent tone that Yeats took in his elegies, such as 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', and incorporated his advances in synthesising the personal and the symbolic into his own poetics. In 'On Being Asked for a War Poem', (1916) Yeats responds to the title's request by asserting that: 'I think it better that in times like these | A poet's mouth be silent'. Auden modifies Yeats's self imposed 'silence' inside a *tombeau* of his own contrivance by placing his word in the mouths of the living, realising that poetry is a contingent and mimetic process, 'a way of happening, a mouth'. Poetry continues to exist, surviving 'In the valley of its saying', long after the mind that conceived it has been extinguished and the mouth that originally uttered it has been silenced.

'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' takes a strikingly different tone and form in its final section and offers the reader an excellent example of the atavistic element often present in professional elegy. Elegy is in itself atavistic, born of the resurrection of an ancient form, and elegies for poets are often where this strain is most apparent. Critics have repeatedly and convincingly asserted that Auden echoes Yeats's voice in these stanzas. Lipking argues that Auden draws on Yeats's prosodic legacy, putting his 'linguistic virtues to use' as 'the broken, hesitant rhythms and urban images of the beginning are healed into daring, old-fashioned quatrains', while Sacks contends that in reverting to the 'ceremonious slow march of Yeats's rhymed tetrameter quatrains' that Auden is 'ecologically trying to surpass the looser, sceptical voice of the preceding two sections'.³⁸ However, according to this criterion he deems the poem to fail, at least to some degree, since he finds this final section to be 'the least satisfying'. Though 'the opening voice of Auden' in the first section suggests 'the terms on which he may succeed the figure he has mourned', Sacks argues that in the ecologically necessary third section, the 'caricatured version of Yeats's voice', creates a kind of aesthetic indigestion and is ultimately included 'at the cost of marring his poem'.³⁹

Though Auden's form undoubtedly draws upon Yeats's verse, and in particular 'Under Ben Bulbin', the whole section reads like a

³⁸ Lipking, 158. Sacks, 303.

³⁹ Sacks, 304.

palimpsest of voices and allusions. Auden echoes poets other than Yeats, and, crucially, places the words in Yeats's own cadences. Thus, Auden's elegy ends by apotheosising the dead poet into the ranks of the 'Great master', by making Yeats's poetic voice ventriloquize them. Indeed, by the time of 'A Thanksgiving' (1973) Yeats has become a named member of the pantheon that Auden venerates. The first lines of this third section, 'Earth, receive an honoured guest, | William Yeats is laid to rest', not only reconfigures the scattered poet so he may be buried whole, but also is a direct allusion to Tennyson's 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington'.⁴⁰ Auden conflates the words of a dead man (speaking of another dead man) with the voice of Yeats. Thus Yeats is buried not only in the earth but also into a fitting position in the poetic canon. In excising Yeats's middle name Auden seems almost to divorce the poet from his poems by creating an alternative avatar, one of William Yeats the man rather than William Butler Yeats the poet.

The following three stanzas (culled from the *Collected Shorter Poems* version of the poem) incorporate Yeats into an inverse poetic pantheon, including Rudyard Kipling and Paul Claudel, whose personal 'views' could have damaged their reputations as writers. However, this ignoble band have been, or will be, rescued by the action of time which: 'Worships language and forgives | Everyone by whom it lives'. Though Auden dismisses the importance of this statement in the next stanza by calling it a 'strange excuse', Joseph Brodsky seizes upon it in his prose homage to Auden, 'To Please A Shadow', as the most striking line of poetry that he had ever read. In 1964, on being found guilty of 'social parasitism' at a show trial in Leningrad, Brodsky was sentenced to five years hard labour and exiled to Norinskaya in the northern Archangel province of the (then) USSR. A friend in Moscow thoughtfully sent him an anthology of English verse with which to occupy his mind. Brodsky confesses that he was, 'intending to read Eliot [. . .] But by pure chance the book opened to Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"'. This coincidental encounter was to be an epiphanic experience for the young poet and was to have a profound bearing upon his subsequent life and poetry:

⁴⁰ 'Who is he that cometh, like an honor'd guest' (Section VI, l. 1).

I remember sitting there in the small wooden shack, peering through the square porthole-sized window at the wet, muddy, dirt road with a few stray chickens on it, half believing what I'd just read, half wondering whether my grasp of English wasn't playing tricks on me. I had there a veritable boulder of an English-Russian dictionary, and I went through its pages time and time again, checking every word, every allusion, hoping that they might spare me the meaning that stared at me from the page. I guess I was simply refusing to believe that way back in 1939 an English poet had said, "Time . . . worships language," and yet the world around was still what it was.

But for once the dictionary didn't overrule me. Auden had indeed said that time (not *the* time) worships language, and the train of thought that statement set in motion in me is still trundling to this day. For "worship" is an attitude of the lesser towards the greater. If time worships language, it means that language is greater, or older, than time, which is, in its turn, older and greater than space. That was how I was taught, and I indeed felt that way. So if time—which is synonymous with, nay, even absorbs deity—worships language, where then does language come from? For the gift is always smaller than the giver. And then isn't language a repository of time? And isn't this why time worships it? And isn't a song, or a poem, or indeed a speech itself, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time? And aren't those by whom language "lives" those by whom time does too? And if time "forgives" them, does it do so out of generosity or out of necessity? And isn't generosity a necessity anyhow? [. . .] I could go on and on about these lines, but I could do so only now. Then and there I was simply stunned.⁴¹

It is often assumed that Auden excised these stanzas because of the reference to Paul Claudel, who had died in 1955. However, the case could also be made that the idea of time worshipping language was antithetical to the notion that poetry makes nothing happen. In choosing the latter over the former twenty-seven years after he had first set out to write his elegy, Auden seems once again to be wilfully asserting poetry's powerlessness. However, Brodsky's stricken astonishment twenty-five years after Auden wrote his elegy would seem to prove incontrovertibly that time *does* worship language. Indeed, poetry turns upon this very fact, and nowhere is this more apparent than in elegy, particularly in elegies for the poets through whom language has lived.

Both Murphy and Anthony Hecht compare Auden's command

⁴¹ Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin 1986), 357-83 at 363-4.

'Follow, poet, follow right | to the bottom of the night', to William Blake's: 'Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright | In the forest of the night'.⁴² Though these lines are indeed metrically similar, the line's import seems to be informed by Dante's voyage into the underworld with Virgil. The command is intriguingly ambiguous. Though it seems likely that the 'poet' addressed is Yeats, Auden could be instructing Yeats's successors, and possibly even himself, to follow in the dead poet's footsteps. Mendelson makes a case for Auden alluding to Milton throughout 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'. He argues that this is particularly apparent in the poem's final section, where he asserts that Auden is echoing Milton's 'baroque manner and metaphors'.⁴³ However, though Auden's 'baroque manner' is undoubtedly atavistic, it could be argued that the figure of Shelley casts a far more apparent shadow over the elegy than that of Milton. Mendelson posits that Auden's repeated references to tears in the final part of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' allude to the tears of 'Lycidas'. Milton's lachrymal motif incorporates not only the 'melodious tear' (l. 14) of the grieving, but also the tears of the lamented Lycidas, which are wiped 'forever from his eyes' (l. 181), by saints at the close of Milton's elegy. Indeed, it is this obliteration of tears that leads, in the immediately following line, to the cessation of the shepherd's weeping and the transformation of the dead poet into 'the genius of the shore'. Yet the similarities with 'Adonais' seem equally, if not even more, striking.

Shelley initiates 'Adonais' by blending the tears of the writer with the tears of the reader in his first few lines: 'I weep for Adonais—he is dead! | Oh, weep for Adonais! though our tears | Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!' Crucially, though these initial tears 'thaw not' Adonais's frost-bound mind, Shelley establishes a vital trope, connecting tears and the melting of frozen thought and emotion, a motif that Auden will go on to rework in his elegy for Yeats. In the first section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' it is the landscape that is frost-bound rather than the figure of the dead poet. However, in the final section of the poem Auden's verse seems to incorporate and modify Shelley's lachrymal motif. Where

⁴² Murphy, 'Honoured Guests', 21. Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 147

⁴³ Mendelson, 7.

'frozen tears' (l. 95) adorned the dead poet's funeral wreath in 'Adonais', Auden describes how: 'Intellectual disgrace | Stares from every human face, | And the seas of pity lie | Locked and frozen in each eye'. Like the frozen tears of the treacherous in Cocytus, the deepest level Dante's *Inferno*, Auden denies his damned the catharsis of weeping. They too are guilty of a form of treachery in their 'intellectual disgrace'. Their (unshed) tears are not occasioned by the death of Yeats but rather out of (self) pity for the 'nightmare of the dark' that humanity found itself in 1939. Accordingly, it is not the death of the poet that will release the pent up tears, but rather the survival of his gift:

With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice,

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

'Unconstraining' seems to refer more to the liberating influence that Yeats's voice may have on his successors, rather than to any unconstrained quality that his poetic voice may have had. Auden sees the true value of Yeats's voice in how he makes 'a vineyard of the curse', harnessing 'human unsuccess' into 'a rapture of distress'.⁴⁴ It is through the enduring power of the dead poet's verse to catalyse despair into rapture that Yeats may release his readers' frozen tears and let 'the healing fountain start'. The image of the fountain also seems to owe much to 'Adonais'. Shelley refers to his elegy as a 'fountain of a mourning mind' (l. 454), and envisages how at the moment of the poet's death:

⁴⁴ The theme of the poet's *felix culpa* is expanded in Auden's 'P.S.' to 'The Cave of Making: In Memoriam Louis MacNeice'.

the pure spirit shall flow
 Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
 A portion of the Eternal, which must glow,
 Through time and change, unquenchably the same. (l. 338-42)

Both Shelley and Auden are fundamentally concerned not with the death of the poet but rather with the ongoing life of poetry itself. The poet lives on not only in the poems that survive his life, but also in the enduring ‘portion of the Eternal’, that will animate his inheritors. It is this ‘transmitted effluence’, which Shelley informs us, ‘cannot die | So long as fire outlives the parent spark’ (l. 407-409), that Auden rekindles in his elegy for Yeats. Vitaly, Auden rekindles not only the poetic voice of Yeats in this final section, but also those of Tennyson, Blake, Milton, Dante, and, most notably, Shelley. Thus ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ not only describes, but also demonstrates, the survival of poetry after the disappearance of the poet.

Yeats’s legacy is not transmitted as he proscribed and proscribed, but rather by Auden’s critical, yet admiring, elegy, which enacts the very elements of the dead poet’s art that ‘survive’ and presents his legacy in an inheritable form, free from his shadow. Yeats’s reputation is thus restored and his poetic influence ensured, an outcome that had been denied him through his very attempts to guarantee it. For a poet’s legacy is not set in stone, like the epitaph dictated by Yeats at the end of ‘Under Ben Bulben’, or the tomb ordered by Browning’s bishop at St Praxed’s church.⁴⁵ The poet continues to live in what others chose to take from him rather than in what he deigns to leave behind.

⁴⁵ In a letter to Olivia Shakespear of 2 March 1929, Yeats described Browning as a ‘dangerous influence’ (*CL InteLex* 5221; *L* 759) in doing so presaging the wary manner in which Auden and Heaney were to go on to admire him.

YEATS AS AN EXAMPLE?' AND 'AUDENESQUE'

In a 1979 interview Seamus Heaney was asked: 'How do you face up to Yeats?' He replied: 'I don't face up to him, I turn my back and run'.⁴⁶ However, Heaney's poetry and critical essays demonstrate that Yeats's shade cannot be so easily evaded. Heaney was born on 13 April 1939. In the same month the three-part version of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' was published in *The London Mercury*. The coincidence could be regarded as portentous. Auden's elegy takes issue with, and can be read as a key to, many of the concerns that have subsequently gone on to shape and inform Heaney's poetic career. Heaney repeatedly contends with issues such as what it means to be an Irish poet; questions if poetry has the power or, indeed, even the right, to influence the political situation; and muses upon the fate of the poet's words after death and the way in which those words may influence, intimidate, or be incorporated by following generations of poets.⁴⁷ In an interview that took place at Harvard University on 14 October 2004, Heaney described how Auden's elegy for Yeats, along with Milton's 'Lycidas', function in the poet's imagination in a manner akin to a poetic 'portcullis': though on first sight imposing and unassailable, such elegies also provide the inheriting poet with a possible means of ingress to the tradition. As we shall see, for Heaney, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' has provided a way not only to address the death of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, but also to approach the vexed issue of Yeats's poetic legacy.

Yeats could be considered conspicuous in his absence from Heaney's poems. As Colleen McKenna has argued, 'a trawl through

⁴⁶ Robert Druce, 'A Raindrop on a Thorn: An interview with Seamus Heaney', *Dutch Quarterly Review* 9 (1979): 24-37 at 35.

⁴⁷ It must, however, be remembered that whereas Yeats was a Protestant Irishman, Heaney was born a Catholic Ulsterman who subsequently renounced his British nationality, became Irish, and moved South of the border. In a manoeuvre reminiscent of Auden's dismay at being included in (what he thought to be) Yeats's unrepresentative edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Heaney rebuffed the editors of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse* in his poem 'An Open Letter', stating 'be advised | My passport's green'. The poem was first published in *Ireland's Field Day* (Londonderry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1983).

Heaney's *verse* [her italics] in search of the ghost of Yeats, is, with a few exceptions, more likely to yield faint imprints—lingering much like those made by Heaney senior on the beach at Sandymount Strand—rather than overt allusions or imitations'.⁴⁸ When asked about this aspect of his work, Heaney replied that he had repeatedly assailed the figure of Yeats in prose; in a further interview on 2 November 2004 he elaborated on his feelings towards the poet he had so exhaustively been both favourably and unfavourably compared to, commenting: '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'.

Heaney's most extensive exploration of what he finds 'exemplary in [Yeats's] bearing', can be found in his 1978 lecture 'Yeats as an Example?' which was subsequently published in *Preoccupations* (1980). As McKenna notes the title and epigraph of the collection are taken from Yeats's *Explorations*, while the title of the lecture is, of course, a querulous spin on Auden's essay of the same name:

I have to say something about why I put the question mark after the title of this lecture. 'Yeats as an Example' was the title of an appreciative but not ecstatic essay that W. H. Auden wrote in 1940, so my new punctuation is partly a way of referring back to Auden's title. But it is also meant to acknowledge the orthodox notion that a very great poet can be a very bad influence on other poets.⁴⁹

Yet whereas Auden used Yeats as an example not an exemplar, Heaney goes on to mitigate what he regards as Yeats's potentially malign influence by examining the ways in which Yeats could be considered a positive role model for other poets. He argues that Yeats's offers us a model of the 'perseverance' and 'slog-work' required to be a poet and is particularly impressed by his command of forms, and the way in which he 'encourages you to experience a

⁴⁸ Colleen McKenna, 'Seeing "Last Things": Reading Yeats through the Eyes of Seamus Heaney', *YA13* 221-237 at 222.

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 109.

transfusion of energies from poetic form', in the process demonstrating, 'how the challenge of a metre can extend the resources of the voice'.⁵⁰ Heaney goes on to illustrate this point in his conclusion by directing us to, and then quoting in full, Yeats's late poem 'Cuchulain Comforted'. As Heaney writes, 'It is written in *terza rima*, the metre of Dante's *Commedia*, the only time Yeats used the form, but the proper time, when he was preparing his own death by imagining Cuchulain's descent among the shades'.⁵¹ In a similar manner, Heaney was to go on to borrow the metre of Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'. This was not, however, in order to address his own death, but rather to approach the shades of Brodsky, Auden and, ultimately, Yeats. In 1998 McKenna perceptively noted that Heaney's 'dialogue with Yeats is increasingly played out in verse' (*YA13* 226).⁵² This point was incontrovertibly confirmed with the appearance in his 2001 collection *Electric Light* of 'Audenesque: for Joseph Brodsky', a poem which appropriates Auden's formal emulation of Yeats in the final section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'.

Brodsky died from a heart attack in New York on 28 January 1996. In the second stanza of 'Audenesque', Seamus Heaney points out a fearful symmetry in this 'Double-crossed and death-marched date', 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, and particularly 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', appears to have prompted Heaney to borrow from Auden, lending from Yeats. In his lecture 'Sounding Auden' Heaney offers up Brodsky's prose writings on Auden as 'thrilling evidence of what can happen when "the words of a dead man" are modified "in the guts of the living" and a poet finally becomes his admirers', yet perhaps a better example of this modification can be found in Brodsky's 'Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot'.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵² As Heaney explains in 'Brodsky's Nobel: What the Applause Was About' (*New York Times Book Review*, 8 November 1987), 'Poetry is on the whole the fitter instrument for the celebration, prose for the assault' (1, 63, 65).

⁵³ Heaney's T. S. Eliot Memorial lecture delivered at the University of Kent

Brodsky composed 'Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot' on 12 January 1965, six days after Eliot's death in London. The poem was originally published in Russian and first appeared in English translation in Brodsky's 1973 *Selected Poems* (translated by George Kline and with a foreword by W. H. Auden). In 'To Please a Shadow' Brodsky writes of his realization that the structure and form of Auden's elegy for Yeats 'was designed to pay tribute to the dead poet'.⁵⁴ In turn, Brodsky freely admits that 'W. H. Auden's poem *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* was a model for my poem, *On the Death of T. S. Eliot*'.⁵⁵ Consequently, 'Verses' functions both as an elegy mourning the passing of a great Modernist forebear and as an homage to the as-yet-living Auden and the long dead Yeats. The poem is the product of textual stratification, a *cento* borne of Yeats, Auden and Eliot's poetic legacies. It functions much like a vanishing point on what Brodsky would have called the 'plain of regard', a place where the dead poets' concerns and poetics converge.

The elegiac agenda of 'Audenesque' is, however, radically different from that of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' and 'Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot'. 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 relationship posited here is not that between Heaney and Brodsky but rather that between Auden and Brodsky. Instead, whereas the other poems in this chain of elegy addressed the shade of a poetic precursor, Heaney's elegy struggles with the death of a contemporary and friend. In a manner akin to what Auden admires in Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', the deeply personal is transmuted into the profoundly symbolic in 'Audenesque', though Heaney 'never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting' (see above p. 197). Vitality, this outcome is achieved through the

1986, reprinted in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 109-128 at 126.

⁵⁴ Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1986), 362.

⁵⁵ Anne-Marie Brumm, 'The Muse in Exile: Conversations with the Russian Poet, Joseph Brodsky', *Mosaic* 8 (Fall 1974): 229-246. Reprinted in *Joseph Brodsky: Conversations*, ed. by Cynthia L. Haven (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 13-35

appropriation and revivification of Auden's (and, in turn, Yeats's) poetic form.

The poem starts with an assertion of formal immutability: the iambic tetrameter march of the final section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats': 'Wystan's Auden's metric feet' that 'Marched to it, unstressed and stressed, Laying William Yeats to rest'. Auden's use of Yeats's metre gives Heaney a means of expanding on his prose description of, and demonstrating at first hand, the 'transfusion of energies from poetic form'. In doing so Auden's mediating elegy provides Heaney with a means of resurrecting Yeats's poetic legacy through a formal homage which 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'. Heaney asserts that 'Repetition is the rule', borrowing not only Auden's form but also his frost-bound imagery ('Dublin Airport locked in frost'). 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 so unyielding:

[. . .] 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.

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 his concerns are wholly personal rather than poetic, 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' that Yeats feared would

succeed him in 'Under Ben Bulben'. 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 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: 'Worshipped language can't undo | Damage time has done to you'. Brodsky's words may well endure but, on first sight, this seems to be cold comfort to his bereft friend. Yet this inversion is couched in the very form that Brodsky had in mind when he rhetorically mused 'isn't a song, or a poem, or indeed a speech itself, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time?'

In the final stanza Heaney looks beyond Auden's reconfiguration of poetic consolation to a far earlier elegiac antecedent: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

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

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 a consolatory template for mourning a poet, *Gilgamesh* offers Heaney an example of how one might lament the death of a friend. This Ur-text 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. Elegies, like the month of both Brodsky and Yeats's death, are Janus-faced, simultaneously casting back into the past and projecting into the future. Heaney's final stanza functions as a microcosm of this ratio, as he conflates the very distant elegiac past with the immediate poetic future. His final lines no longer seem to be addressed to Brodsky. Rather, he importunes not only Brodsky's poetic inheritors but also his own to break bread with the dead. The image and sentiment are taken from Auden's May 1969 poem 'The Garrison', in which he suggests that thanks to 'personal song and

language', 'it's possible for the breathing | still to break bread with the dead'. Auden expanded upon this in an interview for Swedish television a few months later in September 1969. When the interviewer, Göran Bengtson, asked if Auden felt himself 'to be part of a continuing literary tradition', the poet responded: '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'.⁵⁶

In many ways this statement could be regarded as a philosophical gloss upon the assertions that Auden had made forty-two 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. Heaney goes yet further by suggesting exactly how this poetic communion may happen. His most immediate allusion is, of course, to the kind of textual transubstantiation suggested by Auden in his elegy for Yeats; yet more specifically, it is Heaney's formal appropriation of Auden borrowing from Yeats that enables him finally to break bread with his problematic precursor. For as Heaney explained during a speech at Galway Town Hall in April 1997, and was to repeat at a reading of his elegies for poets which took place at Harvard University on 31 October 2004,

if 'poetry is what we do to break bread with the dead [. . .] surely rhyme and meter are the table manners'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of the Poet* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 291.

⁵⁷ As described by the poet-undertaker Thomas Lynch in his article 'And Nodding by the Fire Take Down this Book', *The Boston Sunday Globe*, 25 January 1998, Section F, p. 4.