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All the Dead Voices: Communicating Across the Grave in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

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All the Dead Voices:
Communicating Across the Grave in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

By

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B.A., Montana State University, 1999
M.A., Trinity College, Dublin, 2002

Advisor: Geraldine Higgins, Ph.D.

An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

All the Dead Voices:
Communicating Across the Grave in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

By Michelle R. Miles

"All the Dead Voices" is an exploration of the various fashions in which three contemporary Northern Irish poets—Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon—have consulted, ventriloquized, adapted, and ultimately *translated* the buried speech of the dead into living verse. I argue that the vessel of the ancient Classics has, like Charon's skiff, ferried these writers to underworld shores and facilitated their own creative resurrections alongside those of the shades they encounter, both during the period of the Northern Irish Troubles and in its aftermath.

This dissertation interrogates the ethics of translation and argues that while most critical response to the work of the three poets has investigated the relationship between politics and aesthetics in their verse, less attention has been devoted to the role that the translation and adaptation of Greek and Roman Classical texts has played in their artistic development, despite the increasing number of such works in their respective oeuvres. This oversight has come both as a result of the under-evaluation of the creative energies requisite in translation as a literary mode and due to an over-emphasis on the critical approach of identity politics to Northern Irish poetry. It is my hope that this dissertation goes some way towards addressing these omissions.

The cultural, temporal, and linguistic distance of ancient Mediterranean texts from the present moment has offered each Northern Irish poet a degree of aesthetic distance from historical event, allowing him to approach his "own dead" through the trope of *nekuia*—Classical underworld journey. Responding to the political and aesthetic question of what it means to bear witness to a traumatic event, this dissertation argues that the translation and adaptation of ancient Greek and Roman texts is both the poets' means of bearing witness to the deaths of those who have gone before and an instinctive grappling with the imperative of their own survival in the aftermath of these losses.

Finally, I offer a reading of Heaney's, Longley's, and Mahon's use of lyric poetry (and occasionally, theatrical dramatization) as means of translating trauma—experienced, witnessed, and survived—into bold threads of grief that together, create a survivors' tapestry reminding audiences of the capacity of formal poetic rhythm and structure to accommodate the most searing measure of human experience—a truth Classical writers knew well.

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Acknowledgments

William Butler Yeats closes his poem, "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited," with touching sentiment: "Think where man's glory most begins and ends / And say my glory was I had such friends." No lines are more representative of my feelings at this time. I wish to express my profound gratitude to my advisor and friend, Geraldine Higgins, for the wise and gentle fashion in which she has guided both my work and encouraged me to push my ideas—and the words that express them— towards true clarity and insight. I thank Ron Schuchard for the light of his example: brilliant, humble, human, he has shown me that my love of literature has a vital place in the academy that is worth fighting to maintain. Professors Higgins and Schuchard have been by my side, rooting me on since the moment we met. They have consistently believed in me when my own faith has wavered. It is simple: I am here now because they were there then. I thank Bill Chace, too, for his inspiring example; an unforgettable figure in the classroom, he has offered the same insight, diligence, and wit with which he teaches to his review of my written work, and I am forever grateful for his attention—always immediate and ever sound. I am indebted to Lou Ruprecht for so much. Both friend and guide for many years now, I wish to thank him, above all, for his enthusiasm and energy in this project and his characteristically novel approach to academic scholarship. His support for my voice has given me confidence in the next stage of my journey, and I thank him for his living proof that creativity is twin to compassion.

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For My Brother
Sean-Michael Miles
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Then, Now, and Always
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All the Dead Voices:

Communicating Across the Grave in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

Memento Mori: The Classical Configurations of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon

An Introduction

Samuel Beckett's predilection to hamstring the language of his dramatic dialogues, to eviscerate hyperbole and purple modifiers from his script in order to scrape clean the bones of words reveals an ironic lyrical capacity in the following passage cited from *Waiting for Godot* (1948):

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[silence]

VLADIMIR: They all speak together.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.

[silence]

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

[silence]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about our lives.

The characters' back-and-forth reads less like conversation and more like a restive breeze; Estragon and Vladimir are hollowed men, roughly hewn flutes through which the rustle and whisper of dead voices blow beneath the scrim of dialogue. Beckett's poetic tenor is unmistakable in this skeleton lyric; his protagonists—living and suffering men, traumatized survivors—are tuned to the pitch of the dead, their voices an eerie blend sounding the trials of this world and suggestive of mysteries beyond the grave.

Inspired by these lines, by Beckett's tilt towards poetry and his ability to conjure up a creative space where the voices of the living mingle with the voices of the dead, this dissertation will explore the various fashions in which three contemporary Northern Irish poets—Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon—have summoned, evoked, consulted, ventriloquized, adapted, and ultimately *translated* the buried speech of the dead into living verse. I will argue that the vessel of Classical text and trope has, like Charon's skiff, ferried these writers to underworld shores and facilitated their own creative resurrections alongside those of the shades they encounter.

Indeed, the individual and collective work of Heaney, Longley, and Mahon proves the truth of Beckett scholar Shane Weller's claim: "Death is not the obliteration of hope but its precondition" (85).

"Those Many Tongues of Elsewhere": Theories of Translation from Ancient Rome to Contemporary Northern Ireland:

In his 2008 Kemp Malone Lecture at Emory University, Stephen Greenblatt argued that we never look more like ourselves, more from and demonstrative of our own cultural idiom than when we don the vestments of another nation or era. Ancient Romans themselves seemed to have recognized this truth, if in an exaggerated form. According to Sian McElduff, Roman translators of Greek literature were uninterested in the direct transcription of texts, but stimulated by the challenge to showcase the superiority of Roman culture.[1] As free translators, these ancient scholars believed that linguistically equivalent translations were a distant second best to those versions that competed with their original transcriptions (2).

In the ancient world, "word-for-word rendering" was foregone in favor of what Horace, according to Lawrence Venuti, describes as an effort to "construct poetic authorship" (*The Translation Studies Reader* 4). The ethical questions implicit in the minds of most translators today regarding a necessary faithfulness to the mood, style, and rhetorical gesture of an original source material simply were not raised by Romans when working with literary texts (4).[2] Cicero was succinct: *non verba sed vim*—"Not the words but the force" (McElduff 14).

While this Roman conception of translation may strike a contemporary audience as bearing too heavy a note of hubris, the importance of finding solid individual footing as a translator has remained a constant across the epochs. Nobel Prize-winning poet, Seamus Heaney, has spoken of the significance of earning what he terms a "voice-right" before a fresh iteration of an established text can be found: "The erotics of composition,"

he extrapolates, “are essential to the process [of translating], some pre-reflective excitation and orientation, some sense that your own little verse-craft can dock safe and sound at the big quay of the language. And this is as true for translators as it is for poets attempting original work” (Introduction, *Beowulf* xxvi).[3] While Peter McDonald argues that there is a danger in too easily universalizing the Classics, in bending them to fit the needs of a personal or an historical moment,[4] I contend that it is precisely the perceived flexibility and universality of Classical texts that has ensured their survival and allowed contemporary writers to find their own voices in inherited waters.

Heaney believes that this capacity for translation to cross the otherwise seemingly intractable borders of language and of national allegiance is a distinctly modern observation, “one in which conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order” (xvii). But though used to powerful effect by modern and contemporary writers, the practice of introducing extra-cultural and linguistic materials into one’s own individual and national idiom is a practice artists have been engaged in for centuries.[5] And while the ethical questions implicit in the minds of most translators today regarding a necessary faithfulness to the mood, style, and rhetorical gesture of an original source material must not be overlooked, Greek and Roman Classics have proven, in the case of Northern Irish poets, a fertile and flexible space in which to conceive of alternative responses to the otherwise intractable demands of poetry and politics.[6] The translation and adaptation of these texts has likewise proven a fit means by which to address the suffering and grief of a divided community plagued by violence and haunted by loss—and the poet’s place within it.

The "Fifth Province" as Precedent: The Field Day Theatre Company and Brian Friel's *Translations*:

In 1980, a group of enterprising artists including Stephen Rea, Brian Friel, David Hammond, Seamus Heaney, and Tom Paulin came together to found a theater company in the Northern Irish city of Derry. Keen to stage drama that was, as Seamus Deane explains "outside the confines of the established theatre and, through that, to begin to effect a change in the apathetic atmosphere of the North,"[7] the company chose to introduce itself with a new play by Friel entitled, *Translations*. The drama was an immediate popular and critical success: it set the stage for extended conversations addressing the role of translation in contemporary Northern Irish writing and its relationship to the political intractability and sectarian violence that dominated in the region in the last quarter of the twentieth century. A discussion of the presence of Classical epic in the lyrics of Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Mahon and a consideration of the role that the translation and adaptation of Greek and Latin texts have exercised in their poetry, is strengthened by a review of the play and its layered historical contexts.[8]

Opening in Derry's Guildhall Theatre on the heels of one particularly bloody decade and teetering over the brink of another, *Translations* received enthusiastic accolades from diverse demographics. The positive initial reception of Friel's play was surprising given the politicized subject matter of its material. Set in 1833 in the tiny town of Baile Beag (or Ballybeg), the drama is ostensibly concerned with the British Land Ordnance Survey of the early nineteenth century when the Royal Engineers were sent to Ireland by the Crown to map the territory in the English language. But beneath this

historical specificity, the play unfolds as a discussion of identity politics and the oft-painful link between language and self-conception, both within the individual psyche and within a collective national consciousness; these were issues that proved to resonate with audience members across the board and regardless of sectarian affiliation. Describing the opening night performance, Desmond Rushe writes: "there was *no* evidence of a sectarian divide in a distinguished audience […] There were tears shed during the performance, and the standing ovation at the end was initiated by the Unionist lord mayor" (555).[9]

Rushe attributes the early and broad appeal of Friel's *Translations* to the international reputation of the playwright and the unspoken but deeply registered emotional import of the moment; not only was a well-known artist "coming home," as it were, but the deep wounds of the contemporary moment seemed cautiously assuaged by the act of gathering to honor the theatrical success of one of Derry's own. However briefly, the strain of sectarian politics loosened its grip as people congregated[10] to inaugurate a theater company that aimed to transcend national, political, and religious boundaries in favor of the creation of a "fifth province," an imagined or "hypothetical" space that would, according to Eric Binnie, "neither accept the North / South division, nor ignore the separate traditional strengths of those on either side" (565).[11]

The curtain rises on *Translations* to reveal a hedge school classroom where Manus, the hard-working eldest son of headmaster Hugh O'Donnell, is coaxing a mute Sarah to speak her first words. Sarah's efforts are strained, but eventually she succeeds in uttering—softly, then with increasing confidence—the word that marks herself: her name. It takes a certain amount of time for the audience to perceive that the dialogue,

while written and performed in English is meant to be understood as unfolding, for the characters themselves, in Irish. This meta-textual flourish is more than clever: it is an active example of the usurpation of the Irish language by English; in order for an audience (even, and perhaps particularly, a contemporary Irish one) to understand the play, it must be performed in English—the colonial tongue that ultimately enveloped the native language of the island.

By the end of the play, Sarah has succumbed to silence, and her name is no longer ready on her lips but repressed in the face of the British invasion. Like Sarah, the Irish language—and the Irish people who speak it—are threatened with extinction. Heaney explains the import of Sarah's return to silence thus: "It is as if some symbolic figure of Ireland from an eighteenth-century vision poem, the one who once confidently called herself Cathleen Ni Houlihan, has been struck dumb by the shock of modernity" (*Harrington* 559). Her fate and Ireland's own are linked to language, and as some have suggested, *Translations* is ultimately the story of the death of the Irish tongue.[12]

Declan Kiberd notes that one of the sharp ironies inherent in Friel's use of English dialogue—meant to be understood as Irish language—is that it indicates a text, namely the play itself, which operates *as if* it has already been translated without there actually being any original Irish language version (624). The effect of this trompe d'*oreille* is vertiginous and prompts questions concerning the presence of translation, in all of its varied forms, in Friel's play as well as in extended conversations about the mode. If, as Walter Benjamin suggests, translation is a mandatory condition of the original text,[13] what is to be made of a text that lacks an original—that is already always a translation *in medias res*? To answer this question, it is helpful to look towards the other non-English

languages at play in Friel's drama and to consider the fashion in which they are presented.

As headmaster of a small but industrious hedge school facing the growing external pressures of the institutionalization of an anglicized public school system, Hugh O'Donnell's lessons reach beyond the basics of mathematics and literacy and include forays into Latin and Greek. The eldest of his pupils is Jimmy, a late middle-aged bachelor who attends O'Donnell's classes largely for the camaraderie they offer. He may be the most impoverished of the attendees, but his knowledge of the Classics is rich and extensive; indeed, Jimmy speaks more frequently in Greek and Latin than he does in Irish, living between the covers of ancient epics, and more at ease in the worlds of Homer and Virgil than in the imperiled circumstances of nineteenth century Ireland.[14]

Unlike Irish, which appears in the text as English, Latin and Greek remain in their original forms, often (though not always) indirectly translated by the surrounding dialogue.[15] The effect of this presentation is to render the Classical languages "foreign" and in need of translation, while Irish *and* English share a more familiar, even ironically, *native* status—and this, despite the fact that to the students in O'Donnell's school, English is the truly unknown discourse. By so presenting these varied—and politically loaded—tongues, Friel astutely places the audience in a different relationship to the languages of the play than the characters' own, thus further enhancing the hyperbole of the English-as-Irish motif. In similar fashion, the playwright is able to offer an implicit commentary on the nature of "living" and "dead" languages: whereas Irish is the "living" tongue of the characters, the language is "dead" in so far as it is given English

embodiment; Greek and Latin, in contrast, are spoken in the play—both *by* the characters and *to* the audience—and thus are, ironically, more alive than Irish itself.

But to Maire, a young woman determined to improve her living standards, either through marriage or emigration, English is the language of the future. Quoting Daniel O'Connell, "the Liberator," Maire concurs: "'The old language is a barrier to modern progress.' He said that last month. And he's right. I don't want Greek. I don't want Latin. I want English" (335). Indeed, English is the promise of the National School system, and despite all uncertainties regarding the presence of the Ordnance Survey committee in Ballybeg, Hugh and Manus both consider abandoning the hedge school and teaching in the new program.[16] While Hugh's younger son, Owen, is seen as a figure who has "sold out" to the imperial system for joining the Royal Engineers as their translator, his betrayal is rather a matter of degree than an exception. In the light of hindsight and with the knowledge of the extensive usurpation of the Irish language by the English, the actions of each of Friel's characters seem to balance out when viewed in the broader historical scope. However, what do remain sharply delineated are the boundaries between the various languages the play "speaks" and the attempts to translate between tongues "living" and "dead."

In his introduction to Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton's edited collection, *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, Kiberd discusses what he argues is the island's age-old relationship between Classical languages and political subversion:

> Bardic poetry had been filled with learned references to the texts of ancient Greece and Rome […] The collapse of the bardic schools after 1600 in no way blunted this commitment to the Classics. On the contrary, it gave to their study (still linked to the study of Irish) the glamour of an outlaw activity (allied to the more usual virtue of defending ancient tradition). That combination proved a potent mix in the centuries of colonial rule which followed. (vii-viii)

Introduced in the mid-seventeenth century, the Penal Laws forbade Roman Catholics from congregating, either for religious or educational purposes. The hedge school system—in which Hugh O'Donnell and his class take part—evolved secretly in response to Britain's punitive restrictions. As the use of Irish was prohibited, Greek and Latin, Kiberd explains, transitioned naturally from scholarly pursuits into channels of rebellion against the omnipresent colonial pressure of the English language. In *Translations*, this fraternity of languages is made explicit when the British soldiers go so far as to mistake Latin for Irish when they hear it spoken (340). The Roman empire never did reach Ireland, but Friel's play—and Kiberd's scholarship—suggest that the Irish have inherited its language and, in the face of British oppression of their native tongue, turned to Latin (and elsewhere, to Greek) as an alternate code of self-delineation.[17]

While there is a measure of historical license[18] taken by the playwright in the staging of *Translations*, Friel's linking of the Irish people to Classical languages is accurate—if sharply ironized.[19] The play succeeds not only artistically, but it provides an incisive commentary on the relationship of language acquisition to national enfranchisement. The manner in which this theme colors the work of other Northern Irish writers, and in particular, those endeavoring to locate a pitch-appropriate voice

during and surrounding the time of the Troubles is revealing. Kiberd explains: "[Friel] believes that culture can be causative, can have political consequences: so when he discusses language, he sees it as a specific basis for all the politics which may ensue." He views Friel as one of many Ulster artists who think as such:

> Northern Irish writers are more conscious than their southern counterparts of [the causative nature of art], because they grew up in a state where the speaking of Irish was a political act […] The language did not enjoy the levels of support in schools or government which it had in the south. Writers, accordingly, were aware of a cultural deprivation from birth and sought to repair it as best they could. (616)

In the following chapters, I will explore the fashions in which Northern Irish writers—and for my purposes, Northern Irish poets, in particular—have dealt with this hobbled linguistic and cultural inheritance through the translation and adaptation of Greek and Roman Classical texts and tongues into a personalized and distinctly Northern Irish idiom. Specifically, I will argue that this creative engagement with Classical translation has facilitated an alternative response to the national contention between politics and art by providing the poets under consideration with a loophole through which to evade an otherwise seemingly intractable duality—adoption of the politic or of the pen.

Plato's Poets and Their Contemporary Counterparts:

The role poetry plays in a society has been under debate for centuries. Plato grappled with this difficult question in *The Republic* as he strove to outline the ideal constitution of the Acropolis, but poetry proved an unwieldy force and thus remained a

renegade in the philosopher's city. At a later historical moment, though one much closer in time and place to that of the poets I will discuss in this dissertation, William Butler Yeats wrote a verse entitled "To Ireland in the Coming Times" which engaged with this age-old debate of poetry's position in society by highlighting his own role as a poet in a eulogy to his nation's history:

> Know, that I would accounted be
>
> True brother of a company
>
> That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong […]
>
> Nor I be any less of them,
>
> Because the red-rose bordered hem […] (ll. 1-3, 5-6)

Though Yeats insists poetry and poet occupy a center position in the roll call of history, he does so in a tone of voice that is perhaps one note too defensive to conceal that he may be as much in need of self-convincing as the Ireland he addresses.

Yeats's poetic uncertainty surfaces again in section five of his sequence, "Meditations in a Time of Civil War." Describing a meeting between himself and a soldier during an era of Irish civil war, the poet expresses an anxiety about the position he occupies in a violently conflicted historical moment. Though the initial tone of the poem skitters lightly across the surface of Falstaffian allusion and the give-and-take of quotidian door-side conversation, "The Road at My Door" is a profoundly pensive piece that contains underpinnings of self-accusation.

The "[…] Lieutenant and his men / Half dressed in national uniform […]" stand in the poet's doorway, "cracking jokes of civil war / As though to die by gunshot were / The finest play under the sun" (ll. 4-5). The bitterness of the poet's description of the

soldiers is sharp in intonation and betrays the sublimated sense of superiority of a man of the mind over men of "mere" action. But the tone soon shifts, and in a poem of three short stanzas, Yeats turns on his heel as an arrogant self-assurance succumbs to hesitation and self-doubt:

> […] Stand at my door, and I complain
> Of the foul weather, hail and rain.
> A pear tree broken by the storm.
>
> I count those feathered balls of soot
> The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
> To silence the envy in my thought;
> And turn towards my chamber, caught
> In the cold snows of a dream. (ll. 8-15)

As these closing lines of the poem reflect, Yeats is preoccupied with an "envy" he feels towards those who take an active part in civil struggle. This envy turns inward, and in an image of isolation, the poet is depicted as retreating from the world and moving towards the chilly captivity of his own imagination.

Plato may have cast the poet out of the city and Yeats, in the mood, confined him to the suspect dimensions of his own mind, but despite their differences, both in historical framework and philosophical emphasis, the two men seem to share the belief that an artist is often at odds with his community and estranged from a fixed and unequivocally efficacious role within it. While a New Critical school of thought would contend that poetry can, and indeed, must be read free from all context save the rigors of its own text, it would be difficult to deny the relevance of that same context to a poet himself,

especially when the poet in question originates from a region as politically charged as Northern Ireland. When this is the case, the personal quandary of the artist is rapidly takes on a communal dimension.

To complicate matters even further, it is frequently the same community from which the artist perceives himself estranged that calls upon him to lend a voice. This contradictory challenge may be one of the reasons poets stand divided against themselves, on the one hand committed to "doing the world some good," and on the other, aware of the potential dangers and diminishments involved when a politic and a poetic are mixed (Heaney, *Finders Keepers* 70). One of the problems inherent in this particular combination is that it forces an attentive poet continually to struggle to achieve a balance between a loyalty to the integrity of his art and a personal participation in history. This is no easy détente to maintain.

While we may not be able to pinpoint the role a poet plays in a society, we are nevertheless attuned to the effect his words have on that society. As such, selfish demands are often placed on artists that insist on an engagement of history, not in general, but of "our own" history, in particular. And while Heaney, Longley, and Mahon all empathize with the need of a suffering community to put poetry on trial and demand proof of its efficacy, they likewise assert, each after his own fashion, that the poetic craft should not—indeed, cannot—be limited to the role of political peddler. In "The Redress of Poetry," Heaney testifies on behalf of poetry's role, plays not as foot soldier of history but as herald of a complementary kingdom of the mind whose unique contribution to human existence lies in the realm of the imagination:

> [Activists] will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of their point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales […] governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable. The nobility of poetry, says Wallace Stevens, 'is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.' It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. (*Finders Keepers* 256-257)

This viewpoint underlines a resistant seed at the heart of poetry—and one that links with the historically rebellious tenor of the Classics in Ireland noted by Kiberd—that far from refusing an engagement with history promises to contribute to its creation. While the poet may well be entrenched in a particular historical moment, Heaney's lines suggest that one of poetry's most profound virtues is its capacity to offer new and liberating visions of reality and inspire audiences to seek original solutions to seemingly intractable obstacles. As Heaney sees it: "A good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the simultaneously" (48-49). This metaphor is telling characteristic of the Northern Irish poet as a borderline figure, an individual who is neither entirely here nor there, but necessarily, somewhere in between.

In his essay, "Something to Write Home About," Heaney tells the story of the legendary Hugh O'Neill, the last Irish earl to take a stand against England. Hunted by the British on the grounds of treason and seeing little way out of a confrontation with fate,

the Earl of Tyrone, as the poet has it, cleverly orchestrates a meeting with his adversaries on his home turf in the forests of Louth and Armagh. The Queen has sent a favorite, the Early of Essex, to deal with O'Neill, and the two finally meet on the banks of the River Glyde. But instead of a furious clash between foes, Heaney describes their meeting as "a mysterious turn, a hiatus, a frozen frame in violent action" where two men who had once been friends meet in the clutch of history (55).

Though both earls' political roles are preordained by their historical contexts, Heaney pauses in his description of their encounter and offers a manner of narrative still-life where fate is suspended, "both men […] alone and exposed to the consequences of their actions" (55). The poet imagines O'Neill on horseback, knee-deep in the current, pausing midstream to converse with his adversary on the opposite shoreline. The words that pass between the men are inconsequential, lost in the rush of water and wind. What is of the essence in this scene is our desire, in its evocation, for the men to somehow

> […] be released from the entrapment of history. We want the sky to open above them and grant them release from their earthbound fates. And even if we know that such release is impossible, we still desire conditions where the longed-for and the actual might be allowed to coincide. A condition where borders are there to be crossed rather than contested. (56)

This hunger is older than we readily realize. Plato may have exiled the poets to the outskirts of his city, but far from despairing of such an assignment, Heaney, Longley, and Mahon have chosen to turn their outposts to creative and ethical advantage. This re-evaluation of the potential of writing from the borderlines of a nation in order to rethink our actions and encounters, our roles, within that nation is ancient, indeed.

As ethicist and Classical scholar Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. postulates in *Symposia: Plato, The Erotic, and Moral Value* (1999), the modern world has become so preoccupied with notions of "good" and "evil," of "my side" and "your side," that it has by and large lost touch with the fact that "Most of us live most of our lives in this rather more intermediate moral domain, a place Plato called *metaxu*, "in between." Most of the moral life takes place in this vast arena of "in-between-ness." Where ethics is thought to be nothing more than the confrontation with hard cases and with calamity, this rich and rather obvious fact is easily forgotten" (11).

Certainly, moral ambiguity, or at the very least, the lack of a universally recognizable moral absolute, is a notion with which we are ill at ease at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Though we may attest to the necessity of maintaining cultural, religious, and political diversity in the face of an ever more homogenized global community, we are deeply perplexed as to the actions we should take when this diversity results in conflict and sectarianism. When impasse occurs, we have a tendency to look for "the good" and extricate "the bad." This black and white approach to morality often has the effect of further compounding the very issues it seeks to address.

As Ruprecht and other ethicists have begun to suggest, we may need to return to a Greek sense of ethics, one that emphasizes the *metaxu* nature of conflict and acknowledges the fruitfulness of standing midstream, especially when evaluating the "hard cases." This task is one that poets such as the three under consideration in this dissertation, poets (self-) exiled from predetermined social positions, poets writing from

and across the borderlines, are acutely equipped to fulfill; they do so nowhere more powerfully than in their translations and adaptations of ancient Mediterranean Classics.

Louis MacNeice's claim that "[a] poem may be a bridge to the Unknown but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known" (*The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* 25) may be applied to the contemporary poet's journey to the threshold of the Classical underworld; the bridge that surfaces as a connection between the known and the unknown, the past and the future, is that which connects the living world with that of the dead. And while what happens beyond the grave is out of reach for most mortals until individual death has shifted their experience from one realm to the next, a select few, including Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante, have been called to the borderland between the realms to bear witness to the stories of the dead, and in listening to and absorbing their ghostly plaints, to promise to return to the world of the living in order to retell and revive the legacies of the shades. In this dissertation, I will argue that this epic hero's journey is *the* journey of the poet. It was in Homer's time, and it is so now.

I am keen to consider the ethics of translation and will attend to the fashions in which Heaney, Longley, and Mahon have each addressed their own creative processes in this regard. I am curious whether the responsibility to the dead voices—both literally, of Homer, Virgil, and Dante and figuratively, of the ancient underworld shades they encounter—may shed light on the *responsible tristia* of the Northern Irish poet writing about instances of sectarian violence and death in his own community. How does a poet tell the story of his "own dead?" Does he do so at a slant, by superimposing another cultural and poetic treatment of death upon his own? Is the anguish of his personal story

sustained, in part, by the tellings that have come before? Is his essentially the same story that has always been told and is now translated into a new idiom? These are some of the questions I seek to answer.

Kiberd echoes many of these same queries when he reflects upon the taste of the ancient Irish *filí* for iteration over original creation: "These writers [from 1200 to 1600] put no great premium on originality of theme or thought; rather, they invested their best energies in refining an ever more complex form of metre" (vii). As a result, Kiberd explains, Irish bardic poetry was replete with versions of well-known Greek and Roman stories; far from wearying before new tellings of old tales, these early poets strove to improve upon the familiar stories with each reengagement. Translations and adaptations thus structurally fortified the bridges between the Classical world and the Celtic and facilitated a rich ferrying of stories and corollary mores that continues to this day.

I am curious whether the responsibility to the dead voices—both literally, of Homer, Virgil, and Dante and figuratively, of the ancient underworld shades they encounter—may shed light on the *responsible tristia* of the Northern Irish poet writing about instances of sectarian violence and death in his own community. How does a poet tell the story of his dead? Does he do so at a slant, by superimposing another cultural and poetic treatment of death upon his own? Is the anguish of his personal story sustained, in part, by the tellings that have come before? Is his essentially the same story that has always been told and is now translated into a new idiom?

In an attempt to respond to these questions, I will trace the footprint of Classical texts through the work Heaney, Longley, and Mahon. Focusing on the pressure, both internally and externally exerted upon these poets to address violence perpetrated and

endured by their native communities, I will consider the relationship of the poet to private and /or public death. In so doing, I hope to respond to the unique connection between poetry and politics in Northern Ireland, and in particular, move towards an understanding of why the poetic genre—and in particular, the lyric—is arguably called upon more than any other to turn the event of private death into public narrative history.

[1] McElduff explores this theme in detail in her doctoral dissertation, "Surpassing the Source: Roman Theories of Translation" completed for the University of Southern California in 2004.
[2] See p. 13 of McElduff's text for discussion of the direct translation of religious texts.
[3] In his introduction to Michael Henry Heim's 2004 translation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Michael Cunningham writes:

> A translation, any translation, is filtered through a particular sensibility, and so the discrepancies, as they accrue, must be, at least to some extent, an expression of whatever the translator brought to the job. However multilingual we may be as readers, we find ourselves faced with a fundamental, inescapable responsibility. We must understand that any book, and especially a great one, is a complex and highly personal exchange between its writer and its readers. None of us reads precisely the same book, even if the words are identical. Readers, too, are part of the ongoing process of translation, the one that originates in the author's mind." (xiv)

[4] For an incisive treatment of Longley's Classical bent, see Peter McDonald's essay, "Lapsed Classics: Homer, Ovid, and Michael Longley's Poetry," included in Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine's collection, *The Poetry of Michael Longley* (2000).
[5] Water Benjamin's suggestion in *Illuminations* (1968) that translation is a mandatory condition of the original text stands in striking contrast to the contemporary colloquial (and secular) assumption that translation exists to transmit or communicate (and significantly, these terms are not synonymous, not only in Benjamin's perspective, but neither are they in ancient Roman conceptions of translation) information from one language to another (16).
[6] In interview with Dennis O'Driscoll for the recent memoir, *Stepping Stones* (2008), and asked about the presence or absence of territorial treatment of subject material between Northern Irish poets, Seamus Heaney eludes to "the common ground of the old school Classics" (167). Unlike the more home-based and territorialized sense of duchas, the Classics, according to Heaney, have been a ready home for many Northern Irish poets, particularly in their later work.
[7] For a solid introduction to the works for Brian Friel and the strained political and cultural atmosphere in Northern Ireland at the time of Field Day's inception see Seamus Deane's introduction to *Selected Plays: Brian Friel* (1980), 20-21.
[8] Indeed, it is with a consideration of Friel's drama where all discussion of Classical translation and adaptation in Northern Ireland must begin.
[9] This unbiased audience reception of Translations was especially ironic given the fact that the play opened in the Guildhall, the city-center administration building, which had often been the target of sectarian attacks (see Desmond Rushe's "Derry Translations" in John P. Harrington's edition of *Modern Irish Drama* [1991], 554-555).
[10] Both Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley were in the audience at the Guildhall on the opening night of Translations.
[11] See Eric Binnie's "Friel and Field Day," collected in Selected Plays: Brian Friel. He draws his own commentary on the origin of the Field Day Theatre company from Ulf Dantanus's Brian Friel: The Growth of an Irish Dramatist (see footnote 1.)
[12] See Deane's introduction to *Selected Plays: Brian Friel* (1980), 21 and Nesta Jones's analysis of the play in A Faber Critical Guide: Brian Friel (2000), 68.
[13] Benjamin argues that translation is not a genre but rather a mode that by definition requires one to "go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability" (16).
[14] Not only is the indigenous community of Ireland threatened by colonial invasion, but the potato blight that will lead to the devastating famine of the 1840s is just on the horizon, as is the looming inevitability of emigration. In "Ulster Ovids," John Kerrigan underscores the proliferation of Latin language and text in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century, depite these perilous circumstances: "In the Ireland shown by Friel […], Latin was read and spoken at the lowest social levels. As one observer in 1824 reported, 'A tattered Ovid or Virgil may be found even in the hands of the common labourers'" (*The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (1992), 237-38.
[15] In conversation, Geraldine Higgins has noted that one of the essential—and critically overlooked—problems with Friel's use of Greek and Latin "is that the etymological games employed by Hugh would not be possible in the Irish language since it is not a romance language."

[16] Ultimately, the teaching position goes to neither father nor son, but to a man praised for his skill in curing bacon. Kerrigan suggests that "Hugh's failure to get the headship stands for the replacement of indigenous schooling by a proto-Thatcherite system which prizes utility above knowledge, business above cultural aspiration. The demise of the hedge-school system at Baile Beag in 1833 will lead, by a single movement, to a loss of popular Latinity and decline in living Irish" (*The Chosen Ground* 237).

[17] Rui Carvalho Homem treats this theme as well in *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland: Dislocations in Contemporary Writing* (2009): "[Translations] anticipates the inclination shown by Irish writers and intellectuals in our time to claim a privileged relationship with other, non-Anglophone, European cultures, so as to counter the gravitational pull of English culture and literature. Friel's dramatic fiction of a search for empowerment and self-definition through a relationship with other places thus becomes an enlightening antecedent for recent Irish writing that addresses, referentially and intertextually, the elsewheres that energize Hugh's discourse. This is prominently the case with the translations of texts from 'the warm Mediterranean […]" (2-3).

[18] In Inventing Ireland, Kiberd comments upon P.J. Dowling's 1968 historical survey, The Hedge Schools of Ireland, which revealed that by the mid 1830's, English had already largely replaced Irish as the language of educational instruction, even in the majority of hedge schools that remained. Nevertheless, Kiberd underlines the fact that there were indeed schools like Hugh O'Donnell's, though few and far between (615).

[19] Rushe writes: "While the master and his students cannot speak English, they can converse in the languages of Homer and Virgil. They know nothing of Shakespeare, but they can quote Ovid. While this is an authentic reflection of how things were, it may raise questions of dramatic credibility (italics mine). Indeed, it has already raised an objection which also has much to do with injured ethnic pride […]: 'I would have believed more readily in the historical accuracy of the picture had the English officers been less oafishly unlatined. As it was, I took the piece as a vigorous example of corrective propaganda: immensely enjoyable as theater if, like much else in Ireland, gleamingly tendentious'" (556-557).

CHAPTER ONE

"Among shades and shadows stirring on the brink": Seamus Heaney, Translation, and The Diviner's Craft

"You can legislate to your heart's content about how translation should be done, but the practice is going to ignore or outflank the theories."

~Seamus Heaney[1]

In his debut volume, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Seamus Heaney's poem, "The Diviner," depicts the artist as one singled out by fate, a humble but magical figure—"professionally // Unfussed"—whose innermost self is tuned to the pitch and rush of underground waters (ll. 4-5). Hazel rod in hand and to the wonder of all who observe,

> […] The pluck came sharp as a sting.
> The rod jerked with convulsions,
> Spring water suddenly broadcasting
> Through a green hazel its secret stations. (ll. 5-8)

Twenty-five years later, Heaney's *Seeing Things* (1991) begins with a kindred stirring wood—this time, the wand of the underworld, namely Virgil's golden bough. Seeking access to the realm of the dead, the poet-pilgrim is informed that though "the way down to Avernus is easy / […] to retrace your steps and get back to upper air, / This is the real task and the real undertaking" ("The Golden Bough" ll. 3, 5-6). The emphasis in both poems is on the poet as diviner and voyager and the sense in which his is arguably more

fated calling than willful pursuit. In the words of Virgil's prophetess via Heaney's adaptation,

> ['…] If fate has called you
> The bough will come away easily, of its own sweet accord.
> Otherwise, no matter how much strength you muster, you won't
> Ever manage to quell it or fell it with the toughest of blades.' (ll. 27-30)

There is a peculiar shadow hanging over these lines; to be an artist, Heaney's poems suggest, is to be elected one of history's witnesses, a figure of survival called to translate the suffered experiences of self and other into the shape of narrative. But if a privilege, the poet's role is also a daunting one: his voice carries the charge of many hauntings.

While most critical response to Seamus Heaney's work has worried the friction between politics and aesthetics in his Troubles and post-Troubles verse, traditionally, less attention has been devoted to the role that the translation and adaptation of Classical texts has played in his artistic development, despite the increasing number of such works in the poet's oeuvre. The reasons for this limited concentration are difficult to explain but may be connected to the intense scrutiny under which the ethic of Heaney's individual voice and vision have long been subject.[2] Furthermore, when Heaney's forays into translation are addressed, they tend to be so on the political-cultural level, largely overlooking both the literary-historical and spiritual aspects of their utterance (Brown, *The Literature of Ireland* 23). Building upon Brown's definition of translated texts as "obviously made things" whose communal value amplifies with each iteration, I will argue that Heaney's versions of Classical texts during and in the wake of the Northern Irish Troubles emerge

as a means of translating death into various narratives of survival—survival of the text, of the poet, and by extension, of the voices of the dead.

This chapter will interrogate the link between Heaney's ventriloquism of the voices of the dead and his own reluctant, aesthetic survival and development in the wake of their passing. In particular, the poet's encounter with what may be termed his "own dead"—once blood-and-bone acquaintances, friends, and family—who have stirred from the torpor of their respective fates to variously challenge, rebuke, and support the artist in his encounter with their deaths will be considered through the trope of Classical underworld journey. Responding to the ethical and often political question of what it means to survive a traumatic event, I posit that Heaney's work with translation and adaptation of Classical texts is both a means of bearing witness to the deaths of those whom he has loved and an instinctive grappling with the imperative of his own continuation as both man and poet in the aftermath of their loss.

After establishing the relevance of trauma theory to my overview of Heaney's engagement with the Classics, I begin with a discussion of "Ugolino," the poet's translation of Canto XXXII from Dante's *Inferno* in light of the escalating violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the increased pressure Heaney experienced to respond to the historical moment. Cognizant of the poet's literal journey south into the Republic of Ireland and the manner in which it coincided with his figurative journey inwards and downwards in the footsteps of Dante, I will read Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* (1983) in the context of Classical journey with the Dantesque pilgrimage, "Station Island," (1984). I will argue that the poet hones in on the cautiously proximate stance he believes the artist need take when writing from and of a politicized and grief-

torqued climate. As Bernard O'Donoghue notes, part of Dante's appeal for Heaney consists in the fashion in which he has allowed the latter poet to "universalize the dilemma of artistic freedom by debating it outside an Irish context" (*Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* 137). Moreover, Dante's appeal is by its very nature outside many obdurate contexts—historical, political, cultural, and linguistic; his is the testimony of the survivor, and as such, of true and evolving interest to Heaney and reader alike. The final treatment of the poet's Dante will review his translations of the first three cantos of the *Inferno* included in Daniel Halpern's 1993 collected edition and regard the manner in which this work continues to inform his endeavors.

Subsequently, I will examine two of Heaney's adapted Classical texts: *Midnight Verdict* (1993) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) and will consider, in particular, the relationship of death, voice, and resurrection to the translation of Classical narratives. Ascertaining the harmonic of this triumvirate—one that Cathy Caruth contends is fundamental to understanding the reverberations of trauma in a survivor[3]—is key to an invigorated reading of Heaney's work with Classical texts and the special tenor with which they stage interaction with the dead. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of selected poems from *District and Circle* (2006) and *The Human Chain* (2010) in an effort to assess the evolution and continuing trajectory of Classical translation, underworld journey, and encounter with death in Heaney's oeuvre. It is my belief that the reader's journey through Heaney's Classics is paramount to a rich understanding of both the poet's signature aesthetic and the relationship of Northern Irish poets in general to the torn themes of death, grief, and survival.

Translating Trauma: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Heaney's Poetic Proximity

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not only the result of the bludgeon of unforeseen event, but equally—even more so—a state brought about by the "enigma of survival" (58).[4] Building on Freud's contention that psychologically, trauma is a shock to the mind's experience of time wherein the abruptness of an accident interferes with the normal processes of conscious assimilation, Caruth suggests that the subsequent, compulsive mental repetition of the traumatic event is the psyche's attempt to reconcile the forces of destruction with those of survival.[5] "[T]rauma" she writes, "consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*. What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's survival" (64).

In other words, trauma may be understood as the human psyche's response to a devastating wrinkle in time where the mind is kept outside the loop of experience, only to sustain its material blow as an aftershock and be forced into a position psychoanalysts refer to as introjection (i.e. an unconscious process of incorporating that which is external to the self into its deepest core). For my purposes, I would like to suggest that this is precisely what has occurred for Northern Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney, figures whose lives were often tangential to the literal violence of the Troubles but whose artistic responses to the sustained trauma of the period function as traumatic witness to both literal and symbolic casualty.

Trauma studies facilitate a conception of translation as both a process and a performance of survival whereby the blunt impact of suffered historical event is ferried

into the realm of communal narrative. In this sense, the poet functions as a survivor who bears witness to the trauma inflicting his community, translates historical event into narrative, and as Caruth has it, "passes the awakening [i.e. 'the imperative to survive'] on to others" through the vehicle of his text (105, 106). In this light, survival may be read as an act of translation (the translation of lived experience into narrative memory), and translation (narrative itself), as an act of survival. When Classical texts are introduced into this equation, Caruth's insight (via Freud) that "individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history" comes into compelling relief (71).

A poem such as "Mycenae Lookout," included in Heaney's post-ceasefire volume, *The Spirit Level* (1996), exposes this vulnerable yet vested vantage point of the artist-as-witness by adopting the guise of Agamemnon's estranged sentry. With the peripheral acuity of his post, the watchman witnesses the delayed return of his master and his subsequent bloody death at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and her power-savage consort, Aegisthus. The effect of this authorial slant is destabilizing, for it requires the reader to occupy the oblique position of the lookout who likewise serves as the poem's speaker. The symbolism of this station is evident from the opening lines of the poem which underscore a tension between the conflicting claims of the community over which the watchman (read, poet) stands guard as well as the painful, trapped, and reverberative effect these claims exercise on his conscience. His tone is apprehensive and foreboding, the verse plodding and staid, and the overall effect implies a state of suspension and suffering:

Some people wept, and not for sorrow—joy

That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy,

But inside me like struck sound in a gong

That killing-fest, the life-warp and world wrong

It brought to pass, still augured and endured. (ll. 1-5)

As Eugene O'Brien suggests, Heaney's watchman—drawn from the pages of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*—is a character both "infected by the cycle of violence" and "a liminal figure" whose attention is directed beyond the horizon, both literally and figuratively (122). Posted on a hillside high above Mycenae, the sentry has been instructed to inform Queen Clytaemnestra of the beacon flash that will signal the return of King Agamemenon to Argos and to the gruesome death that awaits his homecoming. The physical suspension of the watchman is matched by a state of psychological paralysis, and as the opening lines of Heaney's poem reveal, the imprisoned nature of his mentality stems from an uneasy and haunted conscience.

Dreaming "of blood in bright webs in a ford, / Of bodies raining down like tattered meat / On top of me asleep […], the watchman reveals a mind plagued by an internalized sense of violence and impending doom. As Sarah Broom notes in her essay, "Returning to Myth: From *North* to "Mycenae Lookout," while the watchman in Homer's version of the tale was a "hireling" of Aegisthus and in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a servant loyal to Agamemnon though conscious of the suffering of Clytaemnestra, Heaney's sentinel figure is "loyal to no one's cause" save the demands of his own conscience (62). But far from finding release and freedom in this relative independence, the watchman's agony increases under the growing burden of his silence, his traumatic witness, and his ultimate survival beyond the murder of his king.

Though distanced from the literal violence that unfolds, the watchman is nevertheless a pivotal figure to the scene; he *must* survive, for it is his direct observation of events that will translate coarse circumstance into narrative and thus, into history. Indeed, the sentry's witness to Agamemnon's brutal slaughter is as intrinsic to the scene as is the king's demise. As Caruth observes, the term "survivor" conveys a distinct tenor of the elect whereby the question, "What does it mean to survive?" may be translated into a parallel query: "What does it mean to be chosen?" (68). The latter is an inquiry with which Heaney has been variously engaged since his earliest poetic endeavors; it is a question that appears frequently in the poet's oeuvre, and most tellingly in the guise of Classical underworld journey.

In *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (2010), Terence Brown connects nineteenth-century Irish nationalism and contemporary forays into translation. He notes that while Terry Eagleton, Roy Foster, and other prominent literary critics and historians have tended towards political-cultural treatments of history, it is fruitful to attend to literary historical discussions of nationalism in Ireland. Brown perceives a synchronicity between the practices of Modernism and Irish Revivalism, namely, a predilection to discard realism in favor of a mythic—if fragmentary—imaginative landscape (22-23). This is where translation comes into play. Brown explains that during the Irish Literary Revival, "Literary production conducted in the context of national feeling accordingly revived and translated texts to allow them to exist once more in the timeless spirituality of the nation's continuous being" (23). Furthermore, he argues

that it was the very "impersonality of translation" that attracted revivalists engaging in the literary mode:

> This is because the spirit of the nation, assumed to be present in redactions, versions, editions, translations, is vested with a spiritual power greater than the individual can muster himself or herself. This 'religious' truth which allows the construction of an objective, impersonal work to be superior to the work of individual vision accounts for the prevailing ambition in the period to write a sacred book of the people. (23)

Brown extends his definition of translation beyond the years of the Revival into a discussion of modern and contemporary literature, which eschews historical realism and fractures the "romantic notion of a text as an expressive phenomenon rooted in the unitary organic self of an originary creator" (24). And this proves particularly the case when considered in light of the relationship between the dead and a new iteration of their voices.

Addressing primarily the flux of Irish language translations into English, Brown contends that critics such as Stan Smith have adeptly perceived that translation invites a sense of "unmediated rapport with the dead"—both with those who have written the narratives and those that lie within their pages or behind their inspiration (24). In order to illuminate this argument, Smith convincingly retraces T. S. Eliot's footsteps from "The Waste Land" back to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The critic pays special attention to Dante's influence on Eliot's compound ghost, contending that the multiplicity of personages coalesced into a single, representative voice, which the former modeled in the *Commedia*, were considered by the latter to be fundamental to the successful iteration of

a long poem (Smith 9). This idea, coupled with Brown's discussion of the respective quests of revivalists and modernists for a sacral, communal text offers a suggestive angle from which to consider the poetry of a contemporary figure such as Seamus Heaney, an artist routinely, even prescriptively, singled out for his personal ethos, its connection to his signature voice, and the potential impact that voice may have on its audience.

"Under all allusion to a traditional text," argues Helen Vendler, "lies the fear that the primal cultural context is in danger of being forgotten, and that the poet, in consequence, has a responsibility to bear it out of the ever-threatening fire of oblivion" ("Seamus Heaney and the *Oresteia*" 120). This insight takes on added import when considered in light of the critical penchant to subject Heaney's artistry to urgent moral pressures. Bearing Vendler's assessment in mind, I will suggest that the poetic resurrection of dead voices and ancient stories is more than an act of ventriloquism befitting the survival of ancient narratives. Rather, translation itself is an imperative performance of the stories of the dead in the tongues and through the lenses of the living. While these translations and adaptations are first and foremost artistic ventures, they are likewise demonstrative of the survival and maturation of an artist in a politicized context where personal and communal imperatives coexist, particularly in relationship to the processing of death and grief in the wake of traumatic event.

Translation is a genre in which both past and present experiences are reconfirmed and instances of death given an enhanced and enduring credence by taking artistic shape in the tested vessels of Classical narrative. Indeed, the translation and adaptation of Classical narratives has proven fit means by which Seamus Heaney and his Northern Irish contemporaries have negotiated the murky waters of aesthetics, politics, and loss

during and beyond the decades of the Troubles. Sounding his voice in the waters of these resurrected stories, Heaney has ensured not only the survival of narratives elemental to Western literature but that of his very self in the aftermath of public and private loss. In order to escape the static binary of politics versus aesthetics in the poet's verse, one does well to turn to Heaney's involvement with translation. I contend that the poet himself has done so organically as a means of witnessing and surviving trauma.

Heaney's Dante:

1. "Ugolino"

In 1984, Seamus Heaney was appointed to the prestigious Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. That same year, the poet's mother, Margaret Heaney, passed away while her son was on a promotional tour for the successive publications of *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and *Station Island* (1984).[6] This conflicted personal moment coincided with a period of escalated political unrest in Northern Ireland, and the double locus of suffering deepened a particular acoustic long present in Heaney's verse. A poet, in Brown's words, ever "anxious to do the world some good" while simultaneously "troubled by his art's apparent incapacity to make things happen," Heaney's characteristic unease regarding the capacity and value of his own vocation seemed only to increase in tandem with the escalation of the Troubles ("The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue" 182).[7] However, so too did the means of his creative resilience.

Ten years prior, Heaney had given a lecture for the Royal Society of Literature entitled "Feeling Into Words." He spoke of the onset of the Troubles in the late 1960s as

an historical juncture where "the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our own predicament" (*Finders Keepers* 23). He continued:

> I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry […], it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. (24)

As the tumultuous years progressed, Heaney's search for adequate symbols to represent the "predicament" facing Northern Ireland became an intensely personal preoccupation, but the pressure he felt to speak for his community was likewise a response to the external demands that same society placed on his poetry. And though Heaney was pointedly chastised by a number of literary critics for the politically portentous, even malign nature[8] of his writing, his poetry was at least as frequently cited for its deflection of engagement with the daily realities of his readership.[9] At moments, the proximity of politics to poetics seemed untenable.

While Heaney definitively accrued the light of public scrutiny with the publication of *North* (1975), it was in his next volume, *Field Work* (1979) that his engagement with "his own" dead came into more explicit focus. Family, friends, and acquaintances whose lives were obliterated in the crossfire of the Troubles began to haunt Heaney's verse alongside an increasingly pressing need to take a stand in relationship to events. As Neil Corcoran points out, it was in *Field Work* that Heaney began to tune his ear to the pitch of Dante, the forebear who emerged as and has remained a major presence in much of the poet's subsequent work and a formidable model for the

possibilities of political, religious, and aesthetic engagement (*The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 84).[10] Corcoran cites Heaney's own explanation for his fascination with Dante:

> What I first loved in the *Commedia* was the local intensity, the vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades, the way personalities and values were emotionally soldered together, the strong strain of what has been called personal realism in the celebration of bonds of friendship and bonds of enmity. The way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent commitment. ("Envies and Identifications" 18)[11]

As such, it was Dante's poise and the unique vista from which he perceived history and lyric that initially inspired Heaney during his early years at Glanmore (1972-1976).[12] While in this instance, a choice rather than a public mandate, Heaney followed his predecessor's footprints closely when he found himself, like Dante, in a state akin to exile. No longer living in Northern Ireland at the physical center of the sectarian conflict, Heaney began to explore the issues of politics and aesthetics at both a literal and an imaginative slant. And as he moved into his actual and artistic middle-life, he turned increasingly towards the Classics as a template by which to express the times.[13]

Having suffered the judgment of his detractors for a move south to the Republic of Ireland that coincided with the onset of the Troubles, Heaney's poetry in *North* sounded a new note of uncertainty, despite his critics' claims to the contrary. In the final poem of the volume, "Exposure," the narrative voice lays bare a conflicted soul: "I am neither internee nor informer / An inner émigré […] // Escaped from the massacre" (ll. 30-31, 33). Heaney's "responsible *tristia*" indicates a mindset trapped in tension

between self-indictment and self-defense. While the bog bodies of *North* had served as undeniably powerful—even controversial—figures of political allegory, Dante's presence in *Field Work* ironically undercut its own symbolism at the very moment of its making; mysteriously, the thirteenth-century Florentine became Heaney's contemporary, mentor, and confidante, his presence as substantial as his successor's own. Furthermore, Dante assisted Heaney in the transition from what Tony Curtis refers to as "procrastination" and "equivocation" to a new level of "commitment" both to the historical moment and to the capacity, indeed, the responsibility of the poet to respond to it (101).[14]

When discussing Eliot's interaction with Dante, Heaney concisely captures the appeal the Italian poet holds for future generations of writers in general and in his own case in particular. The "ultimate attraction," Heaney notes,

> is to the way Dante could turn values and judgments into poetry, the way the figure of the poet as thinker and teacher merged into the figure of the poet as expresser of a universal myth that could unify the abundance of the inner world and the confusion of the outer. (*Finders Keepers* 174-175)

For a poet long embroiled in the struggle to maintain his balance between the push of politics and the pull of the pen, Dante's example suggested that a fruitful suspension of either extreme was both artistically possible and ethically desirable.

Following *Field Work*'s traumatized personal elegies, including "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "Casualty," the poem "Ugolino," unearthed from one of the cruelest layers of Dante's hell, reads as both brutal self-indictment and as an instance of moral intractability that matched the bleak mood of the decade. The poem opens with an image of unsurpassable psychological malady:

> […] I walked the ice
>
> And saw two soldered in a frozen hole
>
> On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,
>
> Gnawing at him where the neck and head
>
> Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,
>
> Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread. (ll. 1-6)

Literally feasting on the source of his rage, Count Ugolino, imprisoned for acts of treason by Pisa's Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini and left to starve alongside his four small sons, is doomed in Dante's hell to suffer the insatiable maw of his own wrath. Far from finding an easy sympathy with his horrid plight, the poet joins his predecessor in bearing witness to a figure so loathsome that the gruesome nature of his punishment serves to underline the vileness of the cycle of vengeance: in outrage against defilement, Ugolino defiles.

Dante's schema, in which he punishes sinners with hyperbolic versions of the sins that they once committed, renders Ugolino's case more complex, however. In death, as in life, the Count is punished through continued interaction—wherein both sides are culpable—with the Archbishop. It is difficult to imagine a horror more visceral than Ugolino's insatiable feast: with simultaneous lust and disgust, the Count scavenges greedily upon his adversary's nape, wiping his blood-covered mouth against the Archbishop's hair as he lifts his head—but never his gaze—from his vile task to address the poet-pilgrim. Equally villainous, both he on the perpetrating end of this frightful act and he on the receiving find themselves locked in an eternally destructive circuit of pain, disgust, and wrath. Jorge Luis Borges insists that it is the very moral ambiguity of

Ugolino's situation that lends the darkest note to his fate.[15] If the witnesses to the scene, the survivor and poet-pilgrim—and we the reader, by extension—cannot unequivocally condemn the Count, neither can we fully pity his wretched state. Instead, the ethics of reader response is suspended somewhere in between, conflict and strife themselves serving as the terminus of the vision in lieu of facile resolution.

As Peggy O'Brien contends, the extremity of Ugolino's suffering in the ninth circle of hell is predicated upon Dante's choice to "[pair] him off with an old enemy, also locked in the frozen lake of the ego, each cannibalizing the other, the implication being that egotism is insatiable" (216). The sinners' co-dependency and mutual culpability underscore the ambiguity inherent in human discord; neither party is alone in meriting blame or enduring the consequences of his own actions. The resulting allegory is one that is particularly representative of the implications of inter-communal strife in general, and in the hands of a Northern Irish poet, specifically, of the Northern Irish Troubles.[16]

Curtis argues that "Ugolino" is best read as an elegy for the Irish nation, ever more nightmarish for its intractable web of internecine rivalry (103). There is indeed a lack of honest dealing on both the side of the Archbishop and that of the Count; only Ugolino's children are motivated by selfless instincts, prepared to sacrifice themselves to sate their father's hunger. However, their brave gesture is one for which he sheds no tears. The poem closes with a sense of doom and fated inevitability, for while "the sins / Of Ugolino, who betrayed your forts, / Should never have been visited on his sons" they were, and the cycle of revenge suggests that they ever will be (ll. 101-103).[17] Significantly, Heaney concludes *Field Work* with an image of moral intractability. A volume in which the poet begins with an insatiable hunger and a spirit of kinetic

energy— "I ate the day / Deliberately, that its tang / Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb" ("Oysters," ll. 23-25)—ends with a villain trapped in a "jail / Which is called Hunger" where "The bad dream and my future's veil was rent" ("Ugolino," ll. 38-39, 43).

Michael Parker believes that part of the poem's import depends upon its ability to bring an ancient and exaggerated symbol of sin into a disturbingly keen depiction of contemporary reality. He writes:

> 'Ugolino' takes us far from *Field Work*'s lyric centre […] Despite its remote setting in one of the iciest recesses of Dante's Hell, one quickly adjusts to the surreal violence, the familiar intractable territory. The two figures of the second and third line, locked into an all-consuming hatred, might easily be a Republican and a Loyalist paramilitary, an I.R.A. man and a Brit.[18] (176)

Such political readings of Heaney's "Ugolino" are reinforced by the aforementioned earlier verse, "The Strand at Lough Beg," in which the poet encounters the shade of his murdered cousin, Colum McCartney. There, the allusion is to the *Purgatorio*, and to a stage in the journey of life after death that Heaney will return to in "Station Island." But in "Ugolino," he begins his interrogation of himself and his ghosts; neither their innocence nor their crimes matter most, but rather the stories they have to tell, and his own role in their telling:

> 'You,' I shouted, 'you on top, what hate
> Makes you so ravenous and insatiable?
> What keeps you so monstrously at rut?
> Is there any story I can tell
> For you, in the world above […]?' (ll. 10-14)

This query reveals Heaney's sense of poetic responsibility to history and indicates the capacity, indeed, the duty—wished for or lamented—that he believes the artist must assume to historical event and its record. This commitment will surface later in the poet's oeuvre when he begins his translation of the initial cantos of the *Inferno*.

2. "Station Island" via *Sweeney Astray*

On March 1, 1976, the British government withdrew the "special category" status by which political prisoners were designated in Northern Ireland in an effort, as Parker writes, "to 'criminalize' the violence—and thus to deny it *mystique*" (178). This denial of political status was met by an equally symbolic mode of resistance; the internees of the H-Block at Long Kesh Prison ushered in a campaign of protest that began with a refusal to wear prison-issue clothing (i.e. "on the blanket"), escalated to a "dirty protest," in which participants defiled their cells with excrement, and culminated in a series of hunger strikes which left ten men dead within a matter of months.

Eerily similar to the miscalculation made by the British government in the wake of Dublin's Easter Rising in 1916,[19] the hunger strikers' deaths and the British policy of abjuring all responsibility for them left an international audience stunned by what appeared to be, at best, a chilly colonial disregard.[20] In the wake of these events, it became increasingly difficult for a poet to abstain from addressing his polity. In hindsight, Heaney has commented that "It was a moment for poetry to strike through social and political concerns, and to say [the hunger strikers'] was an *awesome* sacrifice (interview with Miller 23). Still, in the blur of the moment, the poet vacillated between

the ethics of vocalizing the plight of the internees and overstepping both his capacity and his role as an artist by doing so.

In 1983, the poet published his translation of the ancient Irish epic, *Buile Suibhne*, which he entitled *Sweeney Astray*. Intrigued by both J. G. O'Keefe's bilingual edition of the poem (1913) and Flann O'Brien's novel adaptation of the Sweeney character in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), Heaney honed in on a narrative that encapsulated his sense of the artist's plight at a moment in his own writing life when such a model was propitious. As I have observed, Heaney's affinity with Dante during his early years in Wicklow stemmed in part from his need for an artistic guide who had encountered circumstances of displacement similar to his own. While many Irish figures (including Joyce, Beckett, and Kavanagh, to name a few) would have fulfilled the poet's need for a peer in exile, it was the very temporal and cultural distance of Dante's example that facilitated a hermetic depth of vision in Heaney when working with the ancient Irish poem. As such, while the poet's engagement with the historio-mythic Sweeney does not lend itself transparently to a Dantean reading, the texture of Sweeney's plight may be usefully considered along the grain of the Florentine's precedent.

Enraged to discover that Ronan Finn is consecrating a new church ground, Sweeney—King of Dal-Arie and a representative of the transitional generation between pre- and early-Christian Ireland—rushes to the cleric's side, seizes his illuminated psalter, and dashes it into a lake. This act of sacrilege is followed by the heinous murder of an acolyte and the cracking of Ronan's sacred bell by Sweeney's spear toss. The cleric responds to these outrages by cursing Sweeney to a lifetime of madness and flight. Transformed into a bird-man, Sweeney is both physically and spiritually *translated* from

historical figure to mythic archetype; the symbolism of his metamorphosis is significant. As Heaney explains in his introduction to the story, "insofar as Sweeney is […] a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation" (vi).

Part lunatic, part prophet, mad Sweeney is emblematic of the suffering aesthetic of the poet. Cassandra-like, he is doomed to speak the truth, but in the riddle of verse. Nourished by watercress and stream alone, fate casts Sweeney as a solitary figure, suffering his ascetic plight as much from inner compulsion as from external mandate. This state of mind and person is strikingly similar to Heaney's own in his early years living in the Republic. And just as Sweeney goes against current social convention to strike out on his own, Heaney, too, must risk offending members of his social and religious community in order to move towards creative maturity.

Curtis distinguishes between the externalized prose sections of the work and the internalized passages of poetry and contends that the vividness of the narrative lies in the tension between these two threads of voice (142). Indeed, Sweeney's refusal to abandon his nomadic state even and especially when given the opportunity to do so underlines his predilection for a life of vision, however lonely and painful. Addressing his pursuer, Lynchseachan, Sweeney declares: "I prefer the scurry / and song of blackbirds / to the usual blather of men and women" (38). And even when the plight torments Sweeney most, he confesses: "The world goes on but I return / to haunt myself. I freeze and burn. / I am the bare figure of pain" (61). As was the case for Dante, Heaney—through Sweeney—experiences again the considerable survivor's price of poetic vision.

While *Sweeney Astray* does not explicitly take on the topic of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the translation nevertheless draws on the mood of the moment and serves to prime Heaney for his more direct address of the Troubles in "Station Island." With the surge of sectarian violence, the horrors of internment, and the consequent hunger strikes ever-present in the minds of the poet and his readers, Heaney ironically discovers himself positioned as a popular moral compass at the same time that he seeks ethical direction. In this context, both *Sweeney Astray* and "Station Island" become texts that immediately expand beyond their aesthetic circumstances, simultaneously allowing and forcing Heaney to evaluate the relationship of his artistic production to the waxing glare of public and political light.[21]

Broken into three distinct sections, *Station Island* is a volume that negotiates the exchange between the living and the dead and the role the poet has as mediator and translator—as witnessing survivor—between these contrasting constituencies. Although the poet neither travels directly to the underworld himself in this collection nor translates another writer's account of such a journey, Heaney's intimate encounter with various shades and mythical tropes of underworld descent is instructive in terms of the developing relationship between death, translation, and Classical narrative in his oeuvre. Understanding this configuration allows for a more complete sense of Heaney as traumatic witness and survivor to the Northern Irish Troubles and to his calling as a poet.

The first section of the book is dedicated to biographical lyric, with many of the poems arising from the circumstances of daily life (Corcoran 110). However, it is also in this section that the poet offers what may be read as a manifesto for the volume in its

entirety. As he confesses in "Away from it All," "*I was stretched between contemplation / of a motionless point / and the command to participate / actively in history*" (ll. 22-25).[22] The purgatorial landscape and mood that dominates the second and title sequence of the collection is apparent from the outset and continues into the final section of the book where Sweeney—read, Heaney—reemerges to vocalize "the throb of his breakthrough / going on inside him unstoppably" ("Sweeney Returns," ll.11-12). Collectively, the three portions of *Station Island* function as a meditation on pilgrimage and the dangers and discoveries courted by all spiritual sojourners. Whereas *Sweeney Astray* is emblematic of the extreme isolation and individuality of the artist, *Station Island* is a more communal text in which the figure of the poet mingles freely (though not without trepidation) with the spirits of the dead.

"The Underground," opens *Station Island* with a hauntingly playful Orphean allegory in which the poet chases his new bride through the deep belly of the London underground railway: "There we were in the vaulted tunnel running, / You in your going-away coat speeding ahead / And me, me then like a fleet god gaining / Upon you before you turned to a reed" (ll. 1-4). But the carefree harmony of these lines is spiked with a sense of looming abandon, even peril, as the young wife loses "button after button" on her flaming red honeymoon coat (l. 6). The lyric concludes with the pair "in a draughty lamplit station / After the trains have gone" where the poet likens himself to "the wet track / Bared and tensed as I am, all attention / For your step following and damned if I look back" (ll. 13-16).

Instead, the poet looks forward into the volume. "The Underground" invites the reader into an intoxicating underworld, a subtle gesture that combines contemporary

experience with ancient epic. As the reader hurries after the poet and his red-jacketed muse, she soon finds herself immersed in a landscape and poetic architecture evocative of Dante's underworld, and through his shade, of Virgil's own. In "Station Island," both poet guides preside over Heaney's pilgrimage to Lough Derg, but as suggestive ghosts rather than decisive presences; the masters of epic never directly set foot in the poem. Rather, the contemporary poet-pilgrim appears decidedly alone, his alienation emphasized through his counter movements to those of his fellow pilgrims and his attending ghosts. If this is a more peopled volume than *Sweeney Astray*, it is nevertheless an introverted one where the visceral nature of the characters obliquely obscures their reality as mere projections of the poet's peripatetic mind.

This perpendicular positioning of the creative self with other figures inhabiting the verses occurs prior to "Station Island" in a poem such as "Sandstone Keepsake," where the speaker imagines himself the subject of the indifferent scrutiny of a watchtower guard, who fixes his field glasses on the poet and determines him "one of the venerators," therefore apparently harmless and dismissible. Likewise, the narrative voice of "Making Strange" is self-aware in a fashion that leads to guided internal promptings from "a middle voice," which presses the poet to "'Be adept and be dialect" and to "Go beyond what's reliable / in all that keeps pleading and pleading […]'" (ll. 9, 11, 17-18). As such, the reader is subtly primed for the ironic solitude of "Station Island," a poem of communal pilgrimage and literary precedent that nevertheless strikes a note of excoriating abandonment—one that I will later argue is intrinsic to the archetypal survivor. While Dante is present in the verse through structural and thematic association, he is so only by virtue of his physical absence. From the outset, "Station Island" is

positioned as the poet's private quest; like the watchtower guard, the reader presides over this most personal of journeys in a position of witness and potential judgment.

The setting of "Station Island" draws directly from historical experience, its explicit topography that of the religious pilgrimage to the island of Lough Derg (otherwise known as St. Patrick's Purgatory), a centuries-old journey undertaken by Catholics in the North of Ireland and by Heaney, at least twice in his youth. In an extended interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, the poet discusses the significant gestational period of the poetic sequence, noting that the suggestion of such a verse had been in his mind since at least 1966 when he penned the lines, of "Lenten Stuff": "Now I can only find myself in one place, / Lowbacked island on an inland lough. / A cold chapel takes up half the island" (ll. 1-3). However, it took another decade and a half before the sequence came to fruition on the page, and pointedly, at a moment when the perennial struggle between nation and artist had reached a fever pitch.

Heaney cites Berryman's address to Yeats's shade in "Dream Song" as emblematic of his own mindset at the inception of "Station Island": "'I have moved to Dublin to have it out with you, / majestic Shade.'" He confesses: "I always had a hope that I'd get as free as Sweeney, and that I could inhabit his voice or have his voice inhabit me. Sweeney's flight had a similar purgatorial element, but in the end it carried him to where he could tell his story freely and thoroughly. When I started 'Station Island' I was after that kind of freedom and thoroughness" (O'Driscoll 236). And although the enticement of absolute artistic freedom would, by definition, evade a poet of conscience such as Heaney, a consequent explicitness of voice is evident in the direct speech of "Station Island."

In an interview with Corcoran upon publication of *Station Island*, Heaney confesses his hunger "to write a bare wire" poetry, free from the "Keatsian wooly line" of instinct and representative of an increasingly probing inner dialogue (110). As such, there is a direct—and at times, prosaic—quality to the verse of "Station Island" that both diverges from the richer texture of Heaney's previous lyric and complements what Eugene O'Brien refers to as the poet's "sustained meditations structured around the 'circumstances' of Heaney's adult life" (60).[23] The solitary aspect of the poem is punctuated by the visitation of the ghosts of several historical personages—either noted literary figures or individuals of specific personal significance—who approach the poet while he undertakes his pilgrimage to Lough Derg.[24] Heaney's conversations with these varied dead facilitate his own internal dialogue; the encounters prompt the private conversation of the poet with various aspects of himself.

The first of these spirits is a figure called Simon Sweeney, a herald of sorts who abruptly appears "at the side of a field // with a bow-saw, held / stiffly up like a lyre" (ll. 10-12). The initial identification of the shade is accurately made by the narrator, but the balance of knowledge remains Sweeney's own as he bombasts: "'Damn all you know' [...] / 'I was your mystery man / and am again this morning" (ll. 21, 24-25). The dark silhouette recalls the pilgrim's "First Communion face" and the fear with which the child-turned-wayfarer once regarded him. Chillingly familiar,[25] the mad "old Sabbath-breaker / who has been dead for years" (ll. 19-20) does not meet the pilgrim's gaze, but the communication between the acquaintances is nevertheless explicit; as the narrator turns to witness the approach of his fellow pilgrims, a numb and moving collective of women in a "motion saddened morning," Sweeney both warns his charge of potential

misstep and like a master of ceremonies, announces the rules of successful passage: "Stay clear of all processions" (ll. 53, 65)! However, the press of the crowd functions as a narcotic, and Sweeney's advice dissipates with the peal of church bells.

In conversation with Miller, Heaney explains that while the religious aspect of the pilgrimage certainly stemmed, in part, from the poet's personal experience and Catholic upbringing, it factored less directly than one might initially imagine in his poetic version of events: "all I needed was a journey," Heaney says, "a place that would be both a realistic setting and a congregating area for all kinds of shades" (qtd. in E. O'Brien 62). Like Dante, Heaney sought a space that was simultaneously profane and transcendent, a terrain upon which he—the living, searching poet—was primed to intersect with the wandering dead. As we will see, Heaney sought the very space of survival itself.

In his introduction to his collection of essays, *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* (2009), Michael Thurston distinguishes between two versions of what he terms, "the Underworld descent tradition," namely, the *nekuia*, an encounter between the questing living and the summoned dead, which significantly does not necessitate a voyage to the underworld, and the *katabasis*, in which the living figure does literally descend into Hades[26] (2). According to Thurston, both *nekuia* and *katabasis* are essential components of the Underworld journey of all artists, and the former is tellingly manifested in "Station Island."[27] As the poet-pilgrim of the sequence persists in his circular, purgatorial wanderings, his encounters with the shades of the dead are projected onto the literal and above-ground Irish terrain of Lough Derg.[28] As such, the setting for Heaney's poem incorporates the literal and local

geographical context that is the poet's signature with the shared mythic space of the underworld.

Swift on the heels of his opening conversation with Sweeney, and with an abruptness characteristic of dreams, the poet-pilgrim suddenly finds himself seated in a parked car on a "high road" where he catches a glimpse of a figure fast approaching along the horizon (ll. 76-79). Dressed in an overcoat and boots, the man is described as "bareheaded, big, determined / in his sure haste along the crown of the road" (ll. 80-81). Sensing an impending challenge, the narrator finds himself inexplicably outside of the car. The passive voice of the lines "The car door slammed. I was suddenly out / face to face with an aggravated man" underscores the sense that is predominant throughout the poem that the self is somehow devoid of volition, acted upon rather than acting against (ll. 83-84). Like a dream, the vision seems driven, predestined. But paradoxically, the dreamer both advances the plot and remains subject to its otherworldliness.

Much as the ghostly dead who surface before the questing figure in Classical instances of Underworld journey seem locked in a pattern of what happened and to whom, there is a similar fated sense to the archetypal pilgrim's own voyage that paradoxically precludes him from exercising agency at the same time that it is contingent upon his curiosity. Thurston argues that "[t]he tradition of the descent into the Underworld is a tradition of revision, of innovation against the horizon of the past" (6). To this it must be added that the received stories of the dead are altered the moment they are heard by the passive ear of the living as a result of their simply having reentered history, the realm of change. Each iteration of a tale is unique, and multiple versions reverberate against one another in a fashion that simultaneously fortifies the immediate

and the inspiring context. While the poet-pilgrim, on the one hand, seems chiefly inert, on the other, he retains an authority that enchants the dead: he maintains the ear of the living, and thus, has a hand in ensuring the legacies of the dead.

The gruff figure approaching along the ridgeline sweeps the poet up midstream, raving with considerable disorientation about a series of tense night-watches and neighborly diatribe that reads as applicable to the historical moment of the Troubles, though in truth the memories come from a much earlier time. A barren roadside, a parked car, and the rough approach of an over-coated and purposeful stranger are details that collectively conspire in an archetype of paramilitary violence. Over the poet's shoulder, we fear the worst, until suddenly the identity of this man becomes clear to the pilgrim and is revealed indirectly to the reader as William Carleton, the first of several literary predecessors the poet will encounter:

> 'Your *Lough Derg Pilgrim*
>
> haunts me every time I cross this mountain-
>
> as if I am being followed, or following.
>
> I'm on my road there now to do the station.' (ll. 90-93)

When the narrator announces his intention, Carleton's shade responds with astonishment, even disdain, at the redundancy of cultural habit: "'O holy Jesus Christ, does nothing change?'" (l. 94). At pains to calm his all-seeing self, the ghost ultimately admits to the poet that "'[This] is a road you travel on your own'" (l. 102). Thus in contrast to Dante, Heaney,[29] like all those who have preceded him, must ultimately go it alone. However, *like* Dante, this poet's journey has a distinct air of the predestined; his resistance[30] to the

precautions of the shades he meets, and in particular, to the warnings of the dead who were once artists, too, must likewise be read as part of the predestined pattern.

The stench of “hanged bodies rotting on their gibbets [and the] // hard-mouthed Ribbon men and Orange bigots” that accosted the senses of the living Carleton have taken on new forms in Heaney’s time, but their goading presence has maintained a menacing tenor (ll. 104, 106). The brutality of the era in which Carleton lived aggravates Heaney’s own historical moment, and both poets share a learned lesson: “If times were hard,” explains Carleton, “I could be hard too” (l. 109):

> ‘I made the traitor in me sink the knife.
> And maybe there’s a lesson there for you,
>
> 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.’ (ll. 110-114)

The didactic tone of Carleton’s message functions in at least two ways. First, it underscores the mentoring role of the deceased artist in the life of the living; secondly, the direct address serves in much the same fashion as do Heaney’s Greek choruses (e.g. *The Cure at Troy* and *Burial at Thebes*) by allowing the poet a means to address his audience in a point-blank fashion, though at an essential slant (O’Driscoll 421).[31]

However, “‘I have no mettle for the angry role,’ Heaney explains, as though his similarities to the brooding Carleton ultimately fracture with the varied directions each have taken in response to their parallel plights (l. 115). Likewise, the latter’s subsequent description of his original stomping grounds so clearly matches with the former’s own—“[…] ‘I come from County Derry, / born in earshot of an Hibernian hall // where a band

of Ribbonmen played hymns to Mary" (ll. 116-118)—that the passage calls further attention to the autobiographical setting of "Station Island," while simultaneously revealing that Carleton's and Heaney's respective responses to the shared elements of their histories diverge significantly.

Though Heaney apparently shares little of his predecessor's fury and violent diction, he does tip his hat to Carleton. Admitting to the crossover between life and literature, Heaney explains to the shade that "A lot of what you wrote / I heard and did" (ll. 124-125), a confession to which his predecessor responds with the numbing repetitive "I know, I know, I know, I know" (l. 130). Insisting that Heaney "try to make sense of what comes / Remember everything and keep your head'" (ll. 131-132), Carleton's shade abruptly turns and departs, "headed up the road at the same hard pace" (l. 145).

In the third section of the poem, the narrator finds himself again surrounded by Catholic icons. The click of rosary beads and the familiar murmurs of voices emanating from confessionals—the "intimate smells of wax at body heat" (l. 150)—combine in a mood of reverie. The poet's mind wanders with the susurrations of prayer, and he recalls a talisman from his childhood, "a toy grotto with seedling mussel shells / and cockles glued in patterns over it," (ll. 156-157) which once belonged to the child-self of Heaney's Aunt Agnes, a relative who died of tuberculosis in her youth (O'Driscoll 247). The poet describes the honored object with vivid, time-arresting imagery; indeed, as he explains to O'Driscoll, wrapped in tissue paper and hidden in a sideboard in his parents' room, the "['seaside trinket'] had the status of relic in the house" (247).

This tiny amulet becomes the third ghost in the sequence to visit the poet, and dominates the passage with a visceral intensity not unlike that which quickens the human

shades throughout the rest of “Station Island.” The narrator recalls the trinket’s patterns as “pearls condensed from a child invalid’s breath / into a shimmering ark, my house of gold / that housed the snowdrop weather of her death” (ll. 158-160). Touching it was like “touching birds’ eggs, robbing the nest / of the word *wreath*, as kept and dry and secret // as her name which they hardly ever spoke” (ll. 164-166). The memory of this particular childhood trespass becomes “a white bird trapped inside me / beating sacred wings,” an image that is triggered by the litany of prayer (ll. 167-168). The pilgrim’s thoughts swirl, eventually returning him to the present moment at Lough Derg, though in a more transcendent mood than he was in prior to this reverie; he “[thinks] of walking round / and round a space utterly empty, / utterly a source, like the idea of sound” (ll. 171-173). The still, even devotional beauty of these lines is immediately upset as the poet arrives at a darker simile where the atmosphere of reflection is sharply undercut by negative imagery:

> like an absence stationed in the swamp-fed air
> above a ring of walked-down grass and rushes
> where we once found the bad carcass and scrags of hair
> of our dog that had disappeared weeks before. (ll. 174-177)

Here, memory bares its teeth. At once grief-inducing and shocking, the image of the deceased animal reminds the reader of the unflinching violence of nature; the dog’s bleak fate has seared the mind of the poet and the loss is poignantly yoked to the cruel and wasteful loss of a child to disease.

The purgatorial nature of “Station Island” is omnipresent in Section III, in particular, through the visceral juxtaposition of innocence with death. Indeed, sin itself

appears to be an arbitrary prerequisite for entrance into this troubled zone of liminal afterlife. (As is the case with Dante's pre-Christian dead, to be born outside of a particular illumination does not preclude punishment for its omission). Great sufferings experienced in life must now be indefinitely endured in death. However, if this is Purgatory, there will be no comforting indulgences earned for the dead through the poet's pilgrimage. Rather, the fate at stake is gradually revealed to be the living poet's own, and the jury he faces will be one comprised of the dead, both those lost to daily circumstance and those taken by violence.

At the outset of section IV, tones of resistance and anger ricochet off the grieving shadows of the poet's perspective. Turning his back to "the stone pillar and the iron cross" (l. 179), the pilgrim is prepared to renounce not only his stations, but also his faith. Both the first and the second stanza of this fourth section open with the word "blurred," a repetition that signals the poet's increasingly unsure footing to the reader. The mental cacophony that confounds the poet is revealed through his resistant emotional encounter with the shade of a young priest. The curate's family pronounces the word "Father" with fawning relish, and "the sunlit tears of parents being blessed" is definitively, if gently, satirized (ll. 182, 183). This glorification of the cleric stands in sharp contrast to the self-denunciating poet, whose lips are "ready to say the dream words *I renounce…*" (l. 180).

Whether the priest (or the poet, or both) is tempted by a renunciation of sin or of God remains unclear, but what does strike the reader immediately is the fluent fashion in which the poet weaves compassion with irony in his depiction of the young cleric. "[G]lossy as a blackbird, / as if he had stepped from his anointing / a moment ago" (ll. 184-186), the religious figurehead is swiftly juxtaposed with his secular shoes and his

name, as local and rooted as "an old bicycle wheel" unearthed from a ditch (ll. 190-191). The poet opens his arms wide, as if ready to embrace the priest, but he is dumbstruck, unable to "say the words" (l. 194). The silent strain between the two figures is tangible, and the wisdom or omniscience that the poet holds above or beyond the young cleric is palpable if unvoiced. Indeed, what can be said to the ghost of a man on the cusp of his dreams whose death has been foreshadowed, fulfilled, perhaps even preordained?

Fresh from missionary work in a shapeless and generalized Africa, the priest has returned home from life-altering experiences to rural Ireland. He, too, finds words evasive:

> […['The rain forest,' he said,
> 'you've never seen the like of it. I lasted
>
> only a couple of years. Bare-breasted
> women and rat ribbed men. Everything wasted. (ll. 194-197)

Awe turns to loss in the same stanza. The priest comments on the squander and blight of his surroundings, of his very self: "I rotted like a pear." Not spoken but "sweated," his masses revolve in his memory as his breath comes "short and shorter" (l. 198-199).

In Dantesque fashion, the ghost of the cleric rehearses the painful reel of memory for Heaney's audience. The reader senses the gravitas of the act of bearing witness—both as artist and survivor—to the occasion of another human life, and most poignantly, to an individual's death. Pointing out that he is "older now than you [the priest] when you went away," the poet once again blends his childhood memories with the wisdom of the contemporary moment (ll. 207). Remarking on the improbability of both a life cut short and the incongruity of that very life itself, the poet notes "a strange reversal"

(l. 208). As he begins to blend his words and thoughts with the cleric's own, he admits that he never could picture the young priest in distant mission work, but rather, only as he was when he came home to visit, a chastened figure returning to rest, "doomed to do the decent thing," to call on neighbors and serve as a source of exotic relief for the members of an ensconced community (l. 212). In this fashion, a local youth grown into "some sort of holy mascot" is depicted as a figure who ratified something in others that the poet finds challenging to credit in himself, namely, an underscoring of a cultural status quo (l. 216).

Vendler believes that "Station Island" is a poetic sequence in which Heaney engages in a kind of role-play and tries on various personas that may have been his own had he not become a poet. However, this *jeu des masques* is not undertaken carelessly; each ghosted figure to encounter the pilgrim presents an alternative psychology that is trapped in a privately doomed circuit and primed to challenge the poet's own. Extending Vendler's insight, Peggy O'Brien argues that "the assumption of different masks serves at a deeper level to define a spiritual as well as a psychological purpose. Experimentation with new identities happens just as much through acts of translation as through acts of ventriloquism with regard to the various ghosts" (175-176). Of particular interest to O'Brien is the co-dependent nature of translation and the inherent humility that its practitioner must assume:

> The implication is that the self is no longer sufficient to save itself. Spiritual, paternal guides are needed to lead consciousness beyond the ego, just as grace is said to visit a mortal body. In many instances throughout Heaney's oeuvre, other poets and other cultures enable him to take adept steps sidewise outside the

> conditioned and too familiar. These temporary displacements have a consistently beneficial effect. (176)

Beneficial though this effect may be, the circumstances of its delivery are harsh, at times leading to extremes of spiritual and moral self-flagellation.

This internal castigation is often projected onto and delivered through the voice of one of the shades the poet-pilgrim encounters. For instance, after his chastisement of the priest, the cleric turns the judgment back on the poet. "'And you,' he faltered, 'what are you doing here / but the same thing? / What possessed you? / I at least was young and unaware" (ll. 220-221). The point at stake is that the ghost of the priest explains his choices as part and parcel of the conventions of his culture and his religion, but he argues, if the poet is acutely aware of the dangers of these false moves, he himself is the one who has most grievously misstepped. The cleric's question is clear: "[…] And the god has, as they say, withdrawn. // What are you doing, going through these motions?" (ll. 224-225). Indeed, it is a question addressed to the self, and one to which the poet can only answer by moving on. As O'Brien notes, it is "the ghosts of friends and relations, who on the whole plunge the poet further down into his personal hell" (199).

Section V opens with a gentle, Orphean encounter with an old school master, Barney Murphy. Calling, "Master," the poet-pilgrim halts the step of this newest shade to cross his path. However, the ghost does not turn to face the summons. Instead, the pilgrim must walk round the figure and approach him directly, once again, poised to face the music—thus far, so critical—delivered by the shades of the dead. The poet begins to chat with his master not as the schoolboy he once was, but as the like-aged man he now is. In the spirit of fairness and equality, he explains, "'You'd have thought that

Anahorish School / was purgatory enough for any man,' […] 'You've done your station'" (ll. 264-266). But with a whisper of the old birch trees of memory, the shade is gone, and the reader—through the poet-pilgrim—is reminded that there is indeed a sobering boundary that separates the world of the living from that of the dead, and no attempt to assuage an abashed spirit through casual banter will serve to erase it.

The poet is drawn into the present moment as he again finds himself facing backwards and into the advance of his fellow sojourners. Companionless both in the world of the living and the world of the dead, the poet is paired instead with his memory as the very condition of his survival. He recalls a second master whom the reader soon deduces is Patrick Kavanagh, a figure, "slack-shouldered and clear-eyed" (l. 291) who, like the ghost of Carleton, rebukes the poet for the timorousness of his life's journey: "Forty-two years on / and you've got no farther!" (ll. 293-294). There is no note of reconciliation at the end of this section; instead, the poem adds up to yet another critical rebuke ostensibly stemming from the shades but in truth, issued from the poet-pilgrim's most interior self. Provocatively, while the poet is able to reiterate the stories of the dead, it is the dead themselves who ventriloquize the inner diatribe of the poet. The ferocity of Heaney's encounter with the shades of both Carleton and Kavanagh serves as a reminder that unlike Dante, self-positioned in Virgil's protectorate, this poet-pilgrim must face his journey alone, without even the imaginative projection of a guide—his is decidedly a twentieth-century foray into dystopia.

Awash in memories of childhood, the pilgrim's thoughts turn to the intimate memory-horde of sexual awakening. The image of a girl floats through his mind, buoyed on a current of word play: "Freckle-face, fox-head, pod of the broom, / Catkin-pixie,

little fern-swish" are striking lines as they simultaneously emanate from a mature artistic mind and capture the youthful rush of desire that is somehow pre-word, pre-thought, full sensory impression (ll. 298-299).[32] In this section, the poet's mind flits back-and-forth between the diction of childhood, a distinctly Classical refrain—"*Till Phoebus returning routs the morning star*"—and Catholic liturgical language—"As a somnolent hymn to Mary rose" (ll. 319-320). If there is a barrier between these various discourses, it is unselfconsciously transgressed; rather, the poet is revealed as a product of both his religious background and his artistic predilections and wanders in the "No Man's Land" of his own evolving moral landscape.

This section of the poem aligns the sexual maturation of the man with the aesthetic arrival of the poet. Here, the narrative voice is distinctly eroticized; however, passion blends with composure by the close of the poem. And though the whole of "Station Island" reveals a poet still profoundly at odds with the ethics of his vocation, the concluding phrases of this section feature an artist released (or self-releasing) into his own idiom, an act that will have a set of formidable consequences. In the final lines, a figure that had "knelt for years at [the] keyhole," of desire, "Mad for it, and all that ever opened," suddenly finds himself in charge of steering his own creative destiny (ll. 326-327). The earlier dream-state passivity of the poet is here released into creative agency. "*Like somebody set free*," the poet-pilgrim has come of age, "Translated, given, under the oak tree" (ll. 338-339).

Sections VII, VIII, and IX are the most naked and lacerating portions of the poetic sequence. Indeed, it is as if the poet—now fully, if temporarily, "translated" from the world of the living into the realm of the dead—has so entirely committed himself to his

pilgrimage and "given" the vessels of mind and body over to this fated journey and whatever haunting revelations it has in store that any remaining escape routes into a comfortable aesthetic have been blocked. In these three sections of "Station Island," the poet-pilgrim encounters his aforementioned "own dead." And the implication is clear: in some fashion, the poet fears he has failed each of these men at the hour of his death. He now comes in service to their shades and their stories, his survival and testimony, sending living breath through their grave-hushed voices.

The first of these ghosts is William Strathearn, a figure the poet refers to as a friend from the "extra-literary, rural, parochial-hall part of my life."[33] Gazing into the water in an attempt to gather his wits, the poet-pilgrim senses a presence "entering into my concentration" (l. 345). Though the reflection of this shadowy companion fails to appear in the surface of the pool, he is fully visible when the poet turns and faces him directly. While "shocked" at the sight, the poet seems to have done more than merely recognize the ghost. Rather, it is as though he has conjured the figure himself: "[…] he spoke / my name. And though I was reluctant / I turned to meet his face and the shock // is still in me at what I saw" (ll. 346-349). The vision he encounters is horrific, startling in its intimacy: "Easy now,' // he said, 'it's only me" (ll. 351-352).[34] With a forehead "blown open above the eye" and blood dried against the cheek, Strathearn tells his story of his mid-night murder at the hands of off-duty policemen (l. 350).

Though the shopkeeper's demeanor is gentle and he does not suggest that the poet is to blame for the circumstances of his demise, there is nevertheless, in this section, a flicker of self-rebuke that will metastasize into the floodlights of artistic accountability that saturate later work, such as Heaney's "The Flight Path" (with the lines: "So he

enters and sits down / Opposite and goes for me head on. / 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us?" [27-30]).[35] However, in "Station Island," the poet is still in the relatively early stages of negotiating this imperative. As is the case with Strathearn's ghost, this later query is one he poses he to himself, thus confirming Vendler's argument that all characters in "Station Island" and beyond are in fact aspects of the poet with which he need contend; Heaney's grief and loneliness are emphasized by his own shadow-casting of ghosts.

While in subsequent collections, such as *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney will raise a more defensive and arguably confident voice in response to the expectations of his readership ("If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself"), in "Station Island," the grief-stricken note of deep personal accountability muffles more strident rebuke. At the close of this section, the poet-pilgrim's plea to Strathearn's ghost is stark and intimate: "Forgive the way I have lived indifferent- / forgive my timid circumspect involvement" (ll. 416-417). Indeed, so close has the poet led the reader into the inner recesses of his psyche that this apology does not seem unwarranted. The reader has come to concur with the pilgrim: poetry risks culpability.

This "perfect, clean, unthinkable victim" of the shopkeeper is joined in kind by two additional ghosts in Section VIII (l. 415). The first is the shade of an archaeologist friend of the Heaney family who lost his life to illness at the age of thirty-two. Since the apolitical nature of his fate, his case is therefore of a different sort than that of the poet's other "personal dead," he joins the ghosts of William Strathearn and Colum McCartney in the core section of "Station Island" where Heaney wrestles with his own survival in the wake of others' deaths.

The fear the pilgrim recalls having experienced upon visiting his dying friend in hospital, is one of extreme nakedness and exposure. Twice in this section, the poet uses the word "banter," and both times, the term refers to a failed attempt to dance lightly around the topic of the archaeologist's imminent death. Aware of having "somehow broken / covenants, and failed an obligation," the poet confesses to his half-knowledge those many years ago that the friends had met for the final time (ll. 446-447). Still, he pleads with the ghost for semi-absolution in evoking the final "long gaze and last handshake" that was meant to "appease [the] recognition" that they would not meet again (ll. 449-450). But the ghost will not affirm the falsity. Indeed, he cannot; the true tragedy is the silence of the grave. The poet-pilgrim will suffer the consequences of his actions whether he regrets them or not; after all, as poet, he has determined his own punishment. Wandering not only through a literal purgatorial landscape, the poet also stands, so "Station Island" suggests, somewhere between a victimized humanity and a dictating godhead. As such, the archaeologist's query reverberates across the surface of the poem: "Ah poet, lucky poet, tell me why / what seemed deserved and promised passed me by" (ll. 462-463)?

The appearance of the shade of the poet's murdered cousin, Colum McCartney, in Section VIII further underscores the poet's profound self-rebuke of his own aesthetic responses to traumatic, historical—and personal—event. Temporarily silenced in the middle of Section VIII, the poet-pilgrim admits that he cannot speak (l. 463). Instead, he meets the eyes of his dead cousin who immediately asks: "Now do you remember" (l. 476)? He leaves the poet no time to respond: "You were there with poets when you got the word / and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood / was carted to

Bellaghy from the Fews" (ll. 477-479). The poet responds quickly and in kind, calling the ghost by name and making excuses for his behavior: "'[…] I was dumb, encountering what was destined'" (l. 485). However, these heartfelt pleas fall on unforgiving ears, and McCartney's ghost closes the section with the eviscerating words only the trying bonds of family can invoke:

> 'You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact.
> You confused evasion and artistic tact.
> The Protestant who shot me through the head
> I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
> 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.' (ll. 490-497)

Ringing with signature intimacy and the ferocity of self-indictment, the section closes as the poet wakes, rousing himself to the new company of fellow pilgrims, drifting wearily into the night.

Section IX is a nebulous mélange of elements in equal parts political and fantastical. Commencing with a monologue that can be attributed to the reflective shade of a hunger striker trapped in a signifying form reminiscent of the bog bodies of *North*, with a "brain dried like spread turf" and a "stomach / Shrunk to a cinder and tightened and cracked," the first-person narrative voice oscillates between victim and perpetrator (ll. 501-502). Both "Under the prison blanket" and on a familiar road between Toome and Glenshane, the speaker is suddenly "a white-faced groom, / A hit man on the brink"

(ll.505, 509, 511-512). But after the opening stanza, "This voice" is again subject to the poet-pilgrim's narrative recall and is revealed to belong to the laid out body of what is presumably hunger striker Francis Hughes (l. 515).[36] The "maimed music" of grenades stipples the portrait of the dead as the speaking voice becomes increasingly agitated by the growing distance between his (non-) actions and the deep record of the deceased's own sharp, brief life (l. 526). Here, the many-hued voices of the dead are translated by the poet—survivor and traumatic witness to the Troubles—into narrative, both public and private.

It is important to recall that Dante's *Purgatorio* is closer to heaven than to hell.[37] While tormented by a sense of numbing stasis, its inhabitants will eventually ascend to Paradise.[38] Unlike subsequent iterations of Catholic purgatory where the fate of the sinner is indefinite, in Dante's Classical version the souls of the dead remain in internal and evolving motion. Indeed, some readers of Dante have gone so far as to suggest that the shades are trapped according to their own inner standards and dictates; they are the ones who ultimately know best when they are ready to move on in their journey.[39] In this light, Section IX of "Station Island" might be read as the final thrashes of the poet's own trial in purgatory.

Replete with self-admonishment, the poet-pilgrim cries out: "'I repent / My unweaned life that kept me competent / To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust' (ll. 535-537). He continues: "'I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming,'" (ll. 558-560). The section closes with a complicated split encounter with the self. "Drunk in the bathroom during a party, / Lulled and repelled by his own reflection," the poet lurches himself back

into the present moment of his pilgrimage (ll. 563-564). But there remains an afterglow of this divided self that the narrator is unable to eviscerate. Rather, the subject fragments at the same time that it most constitutes itself. And it is here that translation receives its most direct address in the poem, as the poet, through the lens of history, bears witness to the death of an earlier, more innocent self.

In Section X, translation is addressed in an empirical fashion when the poet-pilgrim recalls a mug that rested on a shelf of his family home during his childhood. Ever-present and unremarkable, the poet recalls his surprise when one evening it was transformed into a theatrical prop, a treasured vessel over which a performing pair swore their love. "Dipped and glamoured from this translation," the utilitarian is reborn into metaphor; just as through fasting to the death, the hunger striker was able to transform his body into a poignant political statement, there is a hovering suggestion as the poem draws towards a close that this pilgrimage, too, can be stripped of its literal nature and redressed in the light of metaphor (l. 580). In the penultimate section of "Station Island," the message is "to salvage everything, to re-envisage / the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift / mistakenly abased..." (ll. 596-598) and to "'Read poems as prayers,'" as acts of translation (l. 600).

In Section XII as the poet concludes his pilgrimage and steps worn and wondering from the boat, he is met by the final shade on "Station Island." "Like a convalescent," the poet-pilgrim reaches for the icy, outstretched hand of the ghost of James Joyce, "but whether to guide / or to be guided I could not be certain" (ll. 641, 645-646). Appearing as blind as Tiresias, the straight-backed figure prompts the poet towards his continued mission:

> […] '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. (ll. 659-663)

Insisting that "You lose more of yourself than you redeem / doing the decent thing," Joyce reminds the poet-pilgrim to "Keep at a tangent" and "fill the element / with signatures on your own frequency" (ll. 687-690). And with these words, the pilgrimage is complete. The poet has returned to the world of the living both chastened and strengthened, shifted forward through translation with a nod to Joycean metempsychosis.

3. *The Inferno: Cantos I, II, and III*:

Heaney takes Joyce's counsel to heart, moving forward in his subsequent explorations of Dante only so far as he is able to work without either betraying his predecessor's artistic note or compromising his own earned idiom. Reflecting upon his translation of "Ugolino" and the contemporary event of the Long Kesh hunger strikes that occasioned the poem, the poet expresses his conviction that though "[t]he creative act is witnessed by history, and the writer writes to be read," art—be it original or a translation—must first and foremost cohere to its own aesthetic imperative: "The sine qua non," says Heaney, "is personal rapport and writerly excitement" (*Stepping Stones* 425). For this reason the poet both began and discontinued his translation of Dante's *Inferno*.[40]

In the early 1990s, Daniel Halpern and James Merrill commissioned twenty contemporary English-speaking poets to translate Dante's *Inferno* into their respective native tongues, and Heaney was asked to contribute. Though the project was compelling in theory, as Halpern explains in his preface to the collection, it was frustrating in execution for the artists to attempt to arrive at a collective verse structure and idiom by which to tell the tale, one that remained both true to the original and representative of their own individual voices. As a result, each poet went his or her own way, and the final product is an uneven patchwork of rhyme and signature impulse. In justification, Halpern writes, "The idea behind this translation of the *Inferno* is to put one of our 'sacred' texts back into the hands of the keepers of the language, poets themselves" (viii). For Heaney, who translates the *Inferno*'s opening three cantos, the outset of Dante's journey, the narrative did indeed ring true to his moment of poetic development; however, this proved to be the case only for the introductory material—the portion that is aimed at poets in particular.

While it is the subsequent horrors of Hades that terrify most readers of Dante's *Inferno*, it is in the initial canto of this fiery epic that the poet arguably makes his boldest gesture, for it is here that the rules of the game are stated and the master of ceremonies inaugurated. While the quiescent reader may be drawn quickly past the setting of the scene, compelled by the torments and horrors rumored to lie within, surely all poets who have crossed the threshold of the *Inferno* have paused transfixed by the summons of the tale. The story is a familiar one: some will be saved; others will be damned. However, the *Inferno*'s initial summons is made to one whose fate is grayer, to one who suffers

through a sort of living hell (i.e. a survivor), which ironically requires experience of the actual realm itself in order to be alleviated into artistic expression.

While the *Inferno* as a whole is a story of legendary and unsurpassable strife, the opening cantos may seem dim in comparison to the miseries that lie within the forthcoming circles of hell. Though still resolutely among the living, Dante—and all subsequent translating poets in new versions of the tale—already suffers the condemnation of artistic mid-life. In Heaney's words, the text opens as such:

> In the middle of the journey of our life
>
> I found myself astray in a dark wood
>
> where the straight road had been lost sight of.
>
> How hard it is to say what it was like
>
> in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled
>
> the very thought of it renews my panic. (ll. 1-6)

Lest we misunderstand the degree of the speaker's misfortune, the poet reminds us that this is a place as "bitter almost as death itself is bitter" (l. 7). This comparison is naturally ironic given the fact that the poet-pilgrim has not yet experienced—nor even visited—the realm where death reigns. Rather, we see here the tortuous capacity of the artistic imagination and the depths to which inadequate expression of the god within can drive the poet. In Heaney's case, the violence afflicting Northern Ireland, coupled with his increasing notoriety as a poet rendered these initial passages of Dante's troubled wanderings highly applicable to his own state and therefore of interest to the poet as a translation project.

Stumbling through a pre-dawn forest, ascending a peak which requires the "firm foot always be the lower one beneath" (l. 30), the poet trudges towards an unannounced summit, only to encounter three archetypal beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a "she-wolf" (l. 48). While at this stage the sins of avarice, lust, and envy have already been cast in animal form, the poet is preoccupied with the fiercer demon of his own tormented soul. Nevertheless, there is a dim flicker of hope even in these early strophes of the *Inferno*: the leopard does not charge; the lion does not bite; the she-wolf resists her feast. And most importantly, just at the moment when the pilgrim wearies and readies himself to turn back and retrace his steps to whichever Netherland from whence he came, a guide arrives in the form of Virgil, a poet, as Heaney's translation notes, that remains the "light and glory of other poets" (l. 82). Insisting that all he has learned of his vocation has come from Virgil's post-mortem tutelage, this poet-pilgrim—here, an amalgamation of Dante and Heaney—moves forward into the epic surefooted in the tread of his precursor.

Virgil can determine what the subsequent poet can handle, and Heaney knows, as did Dante, that a poet needs merit his moment. Heaney translates, "'But why should I go? Who grants me passage? / I am not Aeneas and I am not Paul. / My unworthiness is plain for all to judge [...]'" (Canto II, ll. 31-33). But surely so did Virgil confess—and Dante, too—and all those who were to follow in their stead. Though Virgil makes mention of cowardice and the fashion in which it often "weighs on a man, makes him distrust / an honorable course and turns him from it" (ll. 46-47), he ultimately fortifies the newest poet-pilgrim through an evocation both of this journey's precedent (his own, Aeneas's, and Odysseus's, too) and of honor (the love of Beatrice and her divine cohort). By the close of the second canto, Dante is prepared to follow Virgil wherever he will

lead. As in "Station Island," the poet relinquishes his agency to poetic precedent, that of a personage who has learned in death what the living writer seeks in troubled mid-life.

Burdened by metaphor, the distressed poet who strives toward his vision atop a mountain peak must paradoxically descend further into misery in order to be properly fortified for the ultimate ascent. Indeed, his is a voyage that proves a crucial stage on the exemplary artist's path. He will discover the truth of Beatrice's insight: "Only things with the power to do harm / deserve our fear, and those things alone— / nothing else, for nothing else is fearsome" (Canto II, ll. 88-90). In this fashion, the poet's journey to the underworld deviates from the trajectories of the shades he encounters. While their course has been charted by literal death, thus rendering them subject to the intractable fates they encounter, the poet will likewise suffer, though in an alternative fashion. While his physical self risks no injury, his artistic self is forced to contend with an issue larger than his own insecurities, namely, the fate of the legacies of those who have gone before. He need not fear this task, but he is called to embrace it as uniquely—and suitably—his own.

Dante's appeal, as O'Donoghue reminds us, is by its very nature extrinsic to historical and political contexts; his is the testimony of the survivor, and *that*, I contend, is the work of a poet. The epistemological seduction of this appeal is not limited to Dante's influence alone. Miller notes the vacillation between an inherited literary and historical chronology, what he calls "a deep past," and the immediate and present moment (42).[41] Both, he contends, are essential to understanding Heaney's artistic trajectory. Nowhere does this dictum prove more revealing than in relationship to the poet's work with translation and adaptation, work that I believe defines the role of the survivor of traumatic event. And while this may indeed be true for critics setting out to

chart the poet's evolution as a writer, it is important to keep in mind Heaney's avowal that while the present moment does inform the reproduction of a Classical text, the Classical text need remain true only to itself. In other words, a translation is just only insofar as it adheres to an internal unity, as I argue, is the case with traumatic witness and survival and the authentic poetic voice. For Heaney, what he was unable to sustain in a direct translation of the *Inferno*, did indeed come—if not readily—to him in two of his following adaptations, namely, *The Midnight Verdict* (1993) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004).

***The Midnight Verdict*:**

The Midnight Verdict is a compilation of two Classical worlds, one stemming from Brian Merriman's Irish language comedic epic, *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*) and the other based upon Ovid's account of the love and trials of Orpheus and Eurydice. Originating in these two culturally and linguistically independent sources and broken into three sections, Irish language text and Classical myth blend artlessly, as do tragedy and comedy, through the narrative framework of love and loss. Indeed, certain stories survive as a direct result of their ability to transcend their linguistic, historical, and political circumstances by virtue of their applicability to all instances of traumatic witness.

As Heaney explains in a prefatory note to his translation, all three strands of *The Midnight Verdict* came from "a single impulse" to hone in on Merriman's original tale, both linguistically and thematically. As his ear and imagination began to sift through *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche*, Heaney detected notes from Orpheus's lyre sounding beneath the

surface of the text. In particular, the poet explains that the final section of Merriman's otherwise playful comedy takes a darker turn, one that echoes the circumstances of Orpheus's own death.[42] The combination not only of languages and narratives but of comedy and tragedy as well reveals a text through which Heaney was able to work with creative ease.

If it is the poet's unique responsibility to engage with the stories of the dead, one of the first artists to do so was certainly Orpheus. And significantly, his artistry was born out of a combination of aesthetic impulse and personal loss. Indeed, it was the untimely death of the poet's beloved bride—and the horror that he had impossibly survived it—that consumed him with the requisite despair to seek her in the underworld; music (i.e. poetry) proved both his driving force and his price of admission. His plea to Hades was one of comparison: surely, the dark god, too, knew love and loss through the figure of Persephone. No deity yoked to death could fail to note the lament of the living remainder.

Orpheus sounded his cry through song, and as the lovesick poet poured his grief across the strings of his lyre, the rapt attention he received from underworld gods and ghosts alike instantly revealed the boundary-crossing power of music and verse. His aesthetic plea was met with great favor and respect, earning the grieving Orpheus a conditional success: Eurydice would be permitted to rise from Hades and follow her devoted bridegroom back into the mortal respite of daylight, but she would sink again irrevocably if Orpheus cast even the most fleeting of gazes at her over his shoulder. The couple's fate is a familiar pillar of Western literature: he looked, and she was gone forever.

Heaney's own treatment of this ancient tale of love and ruin focuses primarily on Orpheus's plight upon losing Eurydice for the second and irrevocable time. Perhaps above all, Orpheus serves as the archetype of the coping artist. Consumed with grief at the loss of his bride and guilt at his own culpability in cementing her fate, the suffering poet spurns all women-kind and turns to his lyre. This devotion to art comes at a considerable price; while his passion for Eurydice metamorphoses into a fevered fidelity to his verse, Orpheus is immune to the desires his love songs provoke in his audience. Ultimately, his imperturbability unleashes the fury of the Bacchantes, and the poet is torn limb from limb by the delirious mob. This fate suggests that the very instance of survival comes with an obligation to share an account of suffering with others. Simply put, the personal is insufficient: trauma is suffered individually but survived collectively. In *The Midnight Verdict*, Heaney playfully superimposes Orpheus's violent end onto Merriman's tale, and in so doing, offers a variant of both narratives through the cross-translation of each. Though the gesture is artistic, the affect is existential.

Explaining his creative process, Heaney comments on the fashion in which he "started to put bits of the Irish into couplets and, in doing so, gradually came to think of the Merriman poem as another aspect of the story of Orpheus's death" (Translator's Note). And while the blend of Irish comedy with Greek tragedy induces a peal of ironic laughter, there is a distinct note of grief to the final passages of the text wherein Orpheus is mourned. In the wake of the maenads' fury, the natural world is stunned by the poet's demise:

> For Orpheus then the birds in cheeping flocks,
>
> The animals in packs, the flint-veined rocks

> And woods that had listened, straining every leaf,
>
> Wept and kept weeping. For it seemed as if
>
> The trees were mourners tearing at their hair
>
> As the leaves streamed off them and the branch went bare.
>
> And rivers too, they say, rose up in floods
>
> Of their own tears, and all the nymphs and naiads
>
> Went disheveled in drab mourning gowns. (40-41)

Orpheus is released from his suffering, free now to drift beneath the earth and closer to the dark eternity where resides his greatest love. As Heaney has it, "The poet's shade fled underneath the earth / Past landmarks that he recognized, down paths / He'd travelled on the first time, desperately / Scouring the blessed fields for Eurydice. / And when he found her, wound her in his arms / And moved with her, and she with him, two forms / Of the one love, restored and mutual" (41).

However desired Orpheus's reunion with his bride, death has hushed the grieving lyricist's beguiling melodies, and the living—though no longer competing with art for Orpheus's attention—are newly bereft in the wake of his song. Indeed, it takes the refrain of subsequent poets, such as Heaney, to resurrect and reiterate his keen. One may well have counseled Plato: poets are systemic. They embody the human trial of survival, and where one falls, another arises.

***The Burial at Thebes*:**

The link between love and death, loss and art is mesmeric, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Heaney's latest theatrical engagement with Classical adaptation. In

2004, the poet was commissioned to translate Sophocles's *Antigone* for the centenary of the Abbey Theatre. When asked by O'Driscoll if this particular play—arguably the most frequently adapted of all Sophoclean drama to the modern and contemporary stage—was a text with which the poet had previously desired to work, Heaney answered in the negative.[43] In truth, he explained, he would have preferred to offer an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* but was specifically requested to complete the Sophoclean trilogy that Yeats had begun (422).[44]

Heaney's hesitation, at least in part, stemmed from the overworked status of the Greek drama. (Indeed, in the last twenty years in Ireland alone at least five versions of *Antigone* have been produced). And although he accepted the task, Heaney struggled to locate an apt and compelling voice in which to write, one that would be both faithful to the original text and tuned to the pitch of his own contemporary poetic. Short of the proper note, this newest adaptation of Sophocles's masterful *Antigone* could not be completed.

On the eve of rescinding the commission, Heaney suddenly discovered an unexpected refrain sounding in his thoughts, one that would serendipitously facilitate his adaptation of *Antigone*. As he explains in a November 2005 essay he published in *The Guardian*, "A tuning fork sounded when I remembered the opening lines of *Chaoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire* [Eileen O'Connell's *Lament for Art O'Leary*] […] This stricken, urgent keen for a murdered husband, beaten out in line after three-stressed line, gave me the note I needed for the anxious, cornered Antigone at the start of the play" (Groarke 11).[45] It was this nuanced blend of rage and grief with its searing call for justice that Heaney ascertained in the voices of both women; the paired pitch of their sensibility

struck solidly with the poet. And so, the adaptation took wing on an arc connecting an ancient Irish language text with an archetype of Classical Greek tragedy.

The curtain rises on sisters Antigone and Ismene. Dawn is breaking as the women whisper in anxious voices. Antigone is desperate:

> Ismene, quick, come here!
> What's to become of us?
> Why are we always the ones?
>
> There's nothing, sister, nothing
> Zeus hasn't put us through
> Just because we are who we are—
> The daughters of Oedipus.
> And because we are his daughters
> We took what came, Ismene,
> In public and in private,
> Hurt and humiliation—
> But this I cannot take. (1)

The event over which Antigone rages is King Creon's prohibition of the burial of her brother, Polyneices. Felled by the sword of the fourth sibling, Eteocles, Polyneices is posthumously charged with the crime of treason. Though each brother has died at the hand of the other, only Eteocles is granted the proper rites of the dead. Creon's verdict is rash not only in the ferocity with which he condemns his own kin, but in his unconscionable act of supplanting divine decree with civic mandate. Certain of the support of her sister, Antigone's anger flares upon her discovery of Ismene's

acquiescence to Creon's order, demanding "Are we sister, sister, brother / or traitor, coward, coward?" (4). And while clearly the cautious Ismene is herself beset by grief, she restrains her lament and obeys the law, claiming

> In the lands of the living, sister,
> The laws of the land obtain—
> And the dead know that as well.
> The dead will have to forgive me.
> I'll be ruled by Creon's word.
> Everything else is madness. (5)

As a child of Oedipus, Ismene knows well the "mad" price of operating outside the boundaries of social conventions; she has no wish to return to the doomed fate of her father's kin. Instead, she will risk the wrath of the dead.

While "Station Island" is a poem where Heaney wanders at length among shades, *The Burial at Thebes*, though it circles the territory of death, is decidedly ensnared in the realm of the living. The grief that sears Antigone's heart—and through her, the audiences' own—is sharpened by the absolute impenetrability of life beyond the grave outside of the partial access granted through the performance of sacral rites. Indeed, the spirits of Polyneices and Eteocles neither take shape nor voice in the drama; whereas "Station Island" is a sequence peopled with projections of the poet's own mind, *The Burial at Thebes* abandons this degree of inner revelation—intrinsic to lyric poetry—in favor of an externalized, unflinching portrait of the isolation inherent in surviving the death of kin. Resolutely stationed off the shoulder of her brother's ghost, Antigone is not

only implacable: she is impervious. Free of fear and stalwart in her convictions, she proclaims to her cautious sister:

> The land of the living, sister,
> Is neither here nor there.
> We enter it and we leave it.
> The dead in the land of the dead
> Are the ones you'll be with longest.
> And how are you going to face them,
> Ismene, if you dishonour
> Their laws and the gods' law? (6)

Denying Antigone's accusation, Ismene counters that while drawing breath, one is subject to the laws of the living, and though the audience cannot entirely fault the latter for her attention to the directives of the state, she is nevertheless portrayed as a figure cowed by authority, attentive less to true justice than to manmade decree. However, it is in her life that she has suffered as Oedipus's daughter; warily, she will take her chances with death.

Shaped by the same suffering as her sister, Antigone has nevertheless inherited a different mindset. For this bold child of Oedipus, the rule of civic law has lost any merit it may once have had. Lustful for power, Creon labels his inherited kingdom in the false absolutes of good and evil[46] while Antigone perceives and operates in shades of gray. From the outset of the drama, Antigone senses her looming fate and is mesmerized by the prospect of an alternate empire:

> I will bury him myself.
>
> And if death comes, so be it.
>
> There'll be a glory in it.
>
> I'll go down to the underworld
>
> Hand in hand with a brother.
>
> And I'll go with my head held high.
>
> The gods will be proud of me. (5-6)

In Sophocles' tragedy and Heaney's adaptation, the only completed burial we witness is in fact Antigone's own as she is walled up in a remote cave that will serve as both death chamber and tomb. But first, she does her best to bury her brother's corpse and offer him the respected funeral rites of the dead. Antigone knowingly acts against Creon's edict. When confronted, she reminds her uncle that true justice is "Justice dwelling deep / Among the gods of the dead. What they decree / Is immemorial and binding for us all" (21). For Antigone, the matter is existential: "Was I going to humour you," she asks Creon, "or honour gods" (21)? She is resolute in her decision and admits to the just action of attempting to bury her brother, come what may.

Insisting that "[t]he dead aren't going to begrudge the dead," Antigone refuses the binary of internecine rivalry; she is unflinching, definite that "[t]here is no shame in burying a brother (23)." Still her actions set in motion a chain of events that ultimately conclude with three suicides: her own, that of Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed, Haemon, and Creon's wife, Eurydice. For although Tiresias attempts to dissuade the king from a disastrous course of action, Creon refuses to listen to any voice save that of his own blistering pride: "Not if Zeus himself were to send his eagle / To scavenge on

that flesh [Polyneices's corpse] and shit it down / Not even that would put me back on my word" (44). It is at this point that any slight sympathy for the king's efforts to maintain order in his kingdom is dispelled. Creon has crossed an ethical threshold and pays dearly for his transgressions not only with the total ruin of his family, but with the unfathomable price of his own survival in the wake of their demise. Flooded with guilt, if not entirely convincing remorse, Creon pleads for the swift end that is likely to elude him:

> The quicker it comes, the better.
> I want to hurry death.
> I want to be free of the dread
> Of wakening in the morning.
> Waking up at night.
> All I pray for now
> Is the dawn of my last day. (55)

As the curtain drops, the shattered king reaffirms his faith in the laws of the gods, reminding future transgressors that like him, "Fate will flail them on its winnowing floor / And in due season teach them to be wise" (56). As for Creon, fate has a particularly torturous plan in mind, for his will be the punishing horror of a survivor of trauma. Although he pleads for a swift death, the curtain falls on his request leaving little promise of any such end.

District and Circle and The Human Chain:

In 2006 Heaney published *District and Circle*, a collection of poems structured, according to David Wheatley, around "the blessed world of the poet's youth and how to protect and cherish its memory" ("Orpheus Risen from the London Underground," *The Guardian*). While Heaney's tread is, as ever, tender afoot images resurrected from his childhood, the volume is in fact more restless than Wheatley's review suggests. As the title poem reveals, the collection is one in which time hurtles all passengers—including the poet—forward at lightening speed. Again offering invigorated dimension to the concept of translation, Heaney's survivor-poetic thunders forward through this collection; its movement is inertia driven by the twin vessels of the past that has ferried him here and the future that will deliver his vision to further shores.

A verb-laden poem, "District and Circle" traverses a tiered world, each level teeming with motion. An allegory of underworld journey itself, the belly of the London underground transit system opens its nethermost reaches to the poet, facilitating the translation-as-transport energy that marks the volume and the poet's role as traveler and witness. Like the poet-pilgrim of "Station Island," the narrative voice rises from a peopled mass without relinquishing its essentially solitary note:

> Posted, eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts
>
> Of escalators ascending and descending
>
> To a monotonous slight rocking in the works,
>
> We were moved along, upstanding.
>
> Elsewhere, underneath, an engine powered,
>
> Rumbled, quickened, evened, quieted. (ll. 15-20)

The kinetic thrust of the verbs in the poem's second stanza hurries the reader forward, swift on the heels of the poet-traveler until "[…] deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging," Heaney finds his father's face in his own reflection and muses on the translation of one generation into the next, a metempsychosis of body and soul (l. 57). With a "[h]aulage of speed through every dragging socket," the poet finds himself

> […] transported
>
> Through galleried earth […], the only relict
>
> Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,
>
> Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
>
> By blasted weeping rock-walls.
>
> Flicker-lit. (ll. 65-69)

The energy of transport in "District and Circle" continues into Heaney's most recent collection, *Human Chain* (2010). Published in the wake of his personal experience sustaining a stroke, the volume is rich with measured self-awareness; the poems read as offerings, a poignant series of images unveiling the architecture of human passage through time. The "human chain" of "pushy newcomers / Jostling and purling underneath the vault" of the earth's surface which winds through "District and Circle" intersects with the poet's own lifeline in "Chanson d'Aventure." Secured to an ambulance gurney and hurtling through streets, the poet is both shocked out of time and embedded in its relentless wheel. Consistent is the language of movement, of imperative transport:

> Strapped on, wheeled out, forklifted, locked
>
> In position for the drive,

> Bone-shaken, bumped at speed […]
>
> Everything and nothing spoken,
> Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast no transport
> Ever like it until then […] (ll. 1-3, 7-9)

Paradoxically, nothing "ever like it until then" proves a fitting epigraph for the practice of translation itself. Although each version, each adaptation of a given text is constructed upon shared narrative scaffolding, fresh iteration is fresh utterance, old stories ever giving way to unique reconfiguration.

Throughout his lifetime, Seamus Heaney has chosen to revisit old stories, neither to simply offer up images of political and social harmony, nor to draw point-blank analogies to the violence afflicting Northern Ireland, but instead to invite to a new way of seeing. Heaney is a poet who suffers the sear of circumstance. Vulnerable, wizened, perhaps still angry and certainly grieving, he belongs to his community as a survivor, not a Catholic or Protestant community, a nationalist or a loyalist one, but a Northern Irish community united in a precarious détente of difference, yoked together in the wake of immeasurable loss. As both poet and survivor, Heaney repeatedly descends to the underworld. There, "[a]mong shades and shadows stirring on the brink / […] waiting, watching, / Needy and ever needier for translation," Heaney bears witness to the stories of the dead and ultimately rises again, his throat full with their otherwise silenced voices ("Route 110," ll. 130-132). And despite his continuing uncertainties about the merit and obligations, the responsibilities and the necessary freedoms of practicing as a poet in the wake of violence, his use of translation and adaptation, particularly of Classical pilgrimage to the underworld proves his way of suffering the questions.

[1] Denis O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (2009), 297.
[2] For more on the nature of this scrutiny, see below, as well as my master's thesis, *Working the Border: An Exploration of Shape Shifting and Translation in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Trinity College, Dublin: 2002).
[3] My reading of trauma and its effect on the survivor is informed by Cathy Caruth's seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996).
[4] "In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91).
[5] In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth constructs her discussion around two of Freud's stranger texts, namely, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).
[6] For a detailed discussion of this period of Heaney's life, see Michael Parker's *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (1993), 177-181.
[7] "For Heaney has always been a poet anxious to do the world some good, troubled by his art's apparent incapacity to make things happen. He has known from the beginning that the peculiar power of poetry is to offer a kind of liberating music, a lyric occasion which can seem free of all moral motions, secure in it's own self-delight" (Terence Brown, "The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue." *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Elmer Andrews, 182).
[8] Bernard O'Donoghue writes: "Although widely (and, in my opinion, rightly) regarded as Heaney's finest and most original collection, *North* was greeted with a virtually unanimous vote of no confidence in his native Ulster: Edna Longley and Ciaran Carson were fierce in their criticism of the collection, while Paul Muldoon did not venture beyond its dedicatory section when selecting work for his anthology *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986). An essay by James Simmons, entitled with characteristic combativeness 'The Trouble with Seamus', lays a long list of unsubstantiated charges—including 'violent nationalism' and 'reactionary politics'—at Heaney's door, contending that he is a poet without 'moral centre' who 'may turn out to be an almost total irrelevance […]" (*The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* 67-68).
[9] As quoted in my introduction: "[Activists] will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of their point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales […] governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable. The nobility of poetry, says Wallace Stevens, 'is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.' It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (*Finders Keepers* 256-257).
[10] See Neil Corcoran's *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (1998) for a compelling discussion of *Field Work*'s correlation with Dante (83-109).
[11] Seamus Heaney, "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review*, vol. 15 no. 1 (Spring 1985), 5-19.
[12] Helen Vendler discusses Dante's influence on the poet during his middle years in depth in *Seamus Heaney* (1998), 73. For an additional compelling treatment of the subject, see Joseph Heininger's "Making a Dantean Poetic: Seamus Heaney's "Ugolino," (51).
[13] Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter in relationship to Longley's oeuvre, there is something about these universal tales that a poet needs grow up to meet.
[14] In reference to *North*, and in particular, "Exposure," Curtis writes that "The final poem of this sequence is the most important expression of the slow process of politicization that Heaney has been going through before the publication of *Field Work*. He, like Yeats of 'Easter 1916', acknowledges the fact that he must now be a politically committed poet; no mere observer of The Troubles. He is a Catholic and born into the tribe of Eire and the Falls Road. To avoid the implications of his birth and necessary loyalties would be to deny his ancestral being. […] For too long he has procrastinated […] There's no equivocation now about that commitment: The questions have been asked" ("A More social Voice: '*Field Work'*." *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (2000). Ed. Tony Curtis, 101).
[15] Borges contends that the essence of Ugolino is to be found in the line "*Poscia, piu che'l dolor, pote il digiuno*," loosely translated as "fasting did more than grief had done." While modern and contemporary

critics, Borges argues, have read this line to suggest that when faced with extreme hunger, Ugolino consumed the corpses of his children, early commentators understood that the meaning was instead that hunger killed where grief could not. However, Borges argues that Dante knew no more regarding the Count's fate than we do. He concludes: "In real time, in history, whenever a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates and loses the others. Such is not the case in the ambiguous time of art, which is similar to that of hope and oblivion. […] In the darkness of his Tower of Hunger, Ugolino devours and does not devour the beloved corpses, and this undulating imprecision, this uncertainty, is the strange matter of which he is made. Thus, with two possible deaths, did Dante dream him, and thus will generations dream him" ("The False Problem of Ugolino." *Selected Non-fictions*, 277-279).

[16] O'Brien continues: "Reading cantos xxxii and xxxiii sets in motion a vortex of analogical thought and association about Irish history larger than the whirlpool of the Troubles, and it is this larger historical sense that gives the 'Ugolino' its resonance as a poem" (216). As such, the local and historically based specifics of the conflict are here presented in their particularity at the same time as they are universalized in application, and in much the same way as Heaney early admired in Dante's own writing.

[17] Michael Longley's poem, "The Helmet," likewise underscores the hereditary nature of violent conflict.

[18] Parker continues: "If we pursue the analogy, as Heaney intends, Ulster becomes the 'nightmare tower', its innocent and guilty inhabitants plagued by moral famine, spiritual dearth. There, the 'future's veil' is 'rent', and children and young men can still be regarded as 'legitimate targets', despite the fact that the sins of fathers 'Should never have been visited on his sons" (177).

[19] Sixteen leaders and participants in the Rising were intermittently executed by the British government in the weeks following the uprising. With the instant martyrdom of these men, that which had been a rebellion receiving uncertain support from the Irish people was quickly transformed into a unified outcry against Britain's colonial atrocity.

[20] Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's rigid responses to the hungerstrikes and eventual reaction to the prisoners' deaths were consistently icy. At the onset of the hungerstrikes, she stated: "I want this to be utterly clear—the government will never concede political status to the hungerstrikers or to any others convicted of criminal offenses" (qtd. in Mckittrick and McVea 141). Upon receiving news Sands death, she announced: "If Mr. Sands persisted in his wish to commit suicide, that was his choice" (143).

[21] Discussing "Station Island" with O'Driscoll, Heaney is quick to pinpoint the particular mindset out of which the poem was written:

> I needed to butt my way through a blockage, a pile-up of hampering stuff, everything that had gathered up inside me because of the way I was both in and out of the Northern Ireland situation. I wasn't actively involved, yet I felt dragged upon and put upon by it […] 'Station Island' was taken on […] in order to have it out with myself, to clear the head, if not the decks. (235-236)

[22] This admission is followed by words sharp with self-rebuke: "'*Actively?* What do you mean?'" (l. 26).

[23] "Whereas in *North*, [Heaney] used his art to utter the concerns of his tribe, in ["Station Island"], he will attempt to transform that consciousness through a focus on his own growth." (Eugene O'Brien*, Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, 60).

[24] O'Brien is keen to note that while Dantean in association, "Station Island" operates in reverse fashion to the Classical trips to the underworld upon which it is based. Whereas in *The Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil and Dante respectively journey to the underworld in order to encounter the dead, the poet in "Station Island" is himself sought out by the shades, most of whom have advice to offer rather than narrative to reveal (62).

[25] Heaney tells O'Driscoll that the figure of Simon Sweeney is "something of a composite," named after a traveller that frequented Heaney's home country during his childhood, but also evocative of "an old neighbour called Charlie Griffin who used to be forever roaming the hedges with a bowsaw, cutting branches and dragging them home for firewood" (240). For more on Heaney's memories of Sweeney, see O'Driscoll, 240-241.

[26] Thurston explains, "The word *nekuia* derives from the Greek word for death in order to name the invocation of the shades. It distinguishes an episode of invocation from an actual physical descent, which is called a *katabasis*, from the Greek "*katabanein*" (which combines the preposition "*kat*," meaning "to go down," and the verb "*banein*" or "to go") (p. 4).

[27]As Margaret Atwood writes in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002): "[...] *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with

mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156)

[28] For a discussion of the connection between Lough Derg—and in particular, the chill of its location—and the cold regions of Dante's innermost Inferno, see Peggy O'Brien's treatment of *Tractatus* (190-191).

[29] It is fair to read this narrative voice as autobiographical, or at least as intended to directly reference the archetypal image of the Northern Irish Catholic poet with which Heaney has been pressed throughout his career to contend.

[30] Thurston describes the poet-pilgrim's response to the promptings of his literary predecessors as at best, "ambivalent" (166-167).

[31] "That's it exactly. The choral ode, the choral mode, allows for and almost requires a homiletic note that you would tend to exclude from personal lyric. So the quotable element in the lines comes in part from that unrestrained element" (See conversation with O'Driscoll for a more complete discussion of the presence and potential of the Greek chorus 421). For a discussion of the role of Heaney's use of an "ideally female" chorus and the fashion in which the dialogue used in *The Cure at Troy* is revealing of "the effects of intransigence within and between communities," see Lorna Hardwick's article, "'Murmurs in the Cathedral': The Impact of Translations from Greek Poetry and Drama on Modern Work in English by Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney," *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36.1 (2006), p. 211.

[32] Peggy O'Brien contends that in "Station Island," Heaney "rehearses the raw frankness of, say, 'Mycenae Lookout'" (165). While the argument O'Brien makes regards the fashion in which Heaney uses uncharacteristically rough language to mark "the violence and hypocrisy of home," I also see elements of the same blunt word choice in both poems, particularly as instanced in the "Cassandra" episode of the latter and Section V of "Station Island" (165).

[33] In interview with Karl Miller, Heaney continues: "[Willaim Strathearn was] one of the people I gradually lost touch with as I moved on to live in Belfast during the Sixties, and then down to Wicklow, and into a different swim. For all the Troubles 'content', the poem is a kind of dialogue with myself" (25-26).

[34] Vendler's aforementioned contention that the shades in the poem are really aspects of Heaney is intriguing in this passage; it is as if the terror will begin to subside the moment the poet recognizes himself in the face of the ruined man.

[35] However, Heaney insists that one of the main concerns he felt in writing Section VII of "Station Island" was the level of accurate historical detail he gave to the poem and his own relationship to the politics of its dissemination. In interview with Miller he explains:

> One thing I worried about […] was whether to make the killers in the poem members of the RUC—since it had been rogue members of the police force who had committed the actual murder. Policemen who were paramilitaries when off-duty, as it were. That was why Strathearn had answered the door in the middle of the night. He saw uniforms and presumably felt safe, although what was about to occur was a sectarian assassination. He was killed because he was an easy Catholic target, living in a largely Protestant village. But even so, I felt that if I blazoned that into the poem, it would constitute an inflammatory, propagandist, almost pro-IRA gesture. It would be taken as saying that all the RUC were what the graffiti called them—murderers. So, for better or for worse, I left the thing bare of political markings. Within the first circle of readers, of course, in Northern Ireland, most people would have known the incident on which it was based. Anyhow, I've never regretted the decision. And I'm inclined to elevate it into a proof of the rightness of Aristotle's claim that the poet is different from the historian, that the poet deals with what *typically* happens. (26)

[36] For an intimate discussion of the Heaney family's relationship to hunger striker Francis Hughes and the politics of such an affiliation see the poet's interview with O'Driscoll (260-161).

[37] "To many modern ears, the word 'purgatory' speaks hardly less than 'hell' of sin and suffering. Yet nothing could be further from Dante's understanding. At every point, the *Purgatorio* emphasizes the redemption of human nature and reveals the possibilities in human beings that are eclipsed and eroded by sin" (For a more complete discussion of the discrepancies between Dante's depiction of the various abodes of the afterlife and that of traditional Christian doctrine, see the Introduction to Robin Kirkpatrick's recent translation of the *Purgatorio* (xii-xiv).

[38] As Kirkpatrick explains, "[…] the *Purgatorio* is concerned more with recovery and regeneration than with pain. Dante's Purgatory is emphatically not a place of trial or examination. All the souls who are

admitted here will eventually arrive in Paradise. Penance, therefore, must be seen as a form of training for a full participation in and enjoyment of the truth of existence" (xiv).

[39] Kirkpatrick writes: "In the course of their penance, the protagonists in *Purgatorio* painfully but purposefully, through self-knowledge and effort, recover the reality of their own existences. They actively choose to be where they are, and indeed it is they themselves—not some divine adjudicator—who decide when their penance has been sufficient" (xv).

[40] When asked by O'Driscoll why he desisted in his translation of Dante's *Inferno*, Heaney responded:

> Because I didn't know Italian, because I couldn't gauge tone, because I was at a loss about all the little particles strewn around the big nouns and verbs. That's what I told myself, at any rate. I soldiered on for four hundred lines or so, consulting my Sinclair and my Singleton; but after I'd done three cantos, there was a realization that I couldn't achieve what I wanted, which was to get a style going that would be right for me and for the material. I couldn't establish a measure that combined plain speaking with fluent movement. I just couldn't match the shapes that the bright container of the *terza rima* contained. For a big job like that, you need a note that pays you back, if you know what I mean: you need to be making a music that doesn't just match the original but verifies something in yourself as well. (425-426)

[41] Miller continues: "You might say that the topical and the primordial meet and merge in what you do, and that the subject-matter which we should be allowed to find there considerably depends on this—with neither of them needing to be seen as inherently more important or more poetic than the other" (42).

[42] For a concise discussion of *The Midnight Verdict* see Heaney's conversation with O'Driscoll (313-314).

[43] Heaney had previously worked with a Sophoclean text in 1990 when he staged a version of *Philoctetes* called *The Cure at Troy* with the Field Day Theatre Company. The play was deemed a success, but received considerably less attention than a new collection of poetry would have and tended to be treated as a break from Heaney's trademark genre. However, like the translated and adapted texts discussed in this chapter, *The Cure at Troy* should instead be read as a continuing part of the poet's trajectory.

[44] W.B. Yeats adapted *Oedipus at Colonus* to the Abbey's stage in 1926 and *Oedipus the King* in 1928.

[45] Like the Greek heroine, O'Connell's keen is driven by the degradation that has met her husband's corpse upon his assassination. As Groarke explains, "Eileen is more than the product of her historical and cultural moment: however much we ask her to she cannot be pressed to speak only of her class and Gaelic tradition. Instead, she does what all poets do: with a glance backwards and a hard look inwards she makes of immediacy and impulse a form of words that speaks across context and tradition to attest to the intensitiy of the living moment" (Introduction to *Lament for Art O'Leary* 14).

[46] O'Driscoll notes the Bush-influenced tenor to Heaney's version of Creon's dialogue "'I'll flush 'em out,' he says. / 'Whoever isn't for us / Is against us in this case'" (3). The poet extrapolates that what has been referred to as the "wonders of man" chorus that follows the king's decree prohibiting the burial of Polyneices was touched by the American presidential rhetoric following the September 11, 2001 attacks (424-425). Lorna Hardwick discusses the parallels which Heaney draws (and a none too subtle fashion) between King Creon's treatment of Polyneices and President Bush's approach to dealing with political detainees in Irag and Guantanamo Bay. Hardwick cites the harsh polarities of Creon's speech—"Whoever isn't for us / Is against us in this case" (*The Burial at Thebes* 3) as particularly redolent of Bush's controversial idiom. For a brief discussion of the fashion in which Heaney's version of the play references the imperialism of Tony Blair's England during this same period, see Hardwick (212).

CHAPTER TWO

“Walking backwards into the future like a Greek”:

Michael Longley’s Classical Twinnings

“I have been Homer-haunted for fifty years. […] Translation has been fundamental to my imaginative development.”

~Michael Longley[1]

In “Sleep & Death,” a lyric born from book XVI of Homer’s *Iliad*, Michael Longley grants the procession of grief its due measure; he does so with signature elegiac tenderness and in an act of unabashed—and equally characteristic—textual doubling:[2]

Zeus the cloud-gatherer said to sunny Apollo:
‘Sponge the congealed blood from Sarpedon’s corpse,
Take him far away from here, out of the line of fire,
Wash him properly in a stream, in running water,
And rub supernatural preservative over him
And wrap him up in imperishable fabrics,
Then hand him over to those speedy chaperons,
Sleep and his twin brother Death, who will bring him
In no time at all to Lycia’s abundant farmland
Where his family will bury him with grave-mound
And grave-stone, the entitlement of the dead.’
And Apollo did exactly as he was told:

> He carried Sarpedon out of the line of fire,
>
> Washed him properly in a stream, in running water,
>
> And rubbed supernatural preservative over him
>
> And wrapped him up in imperishable fabrics
>
> And handed him over to the speedy chaperons,
>
> Sleep and his twin brother Death, who brought him
>
> In no time at all to Lycia's abundant farmland.

Longley's attention to the formalities of both ritual and rhythm in this poem from his most recent volume, *Snow Water* (2004), is exemplary of his enduring approach to Classical translation and his gravitation towards the mode when addressing death and its painful aftermath. The poet's sensitivity to the sustaining momentum of mourning duties is reflected in the steady movement of the verse, in its enjambment and the lulling susurration of conjunction and clause. While Longley insists his Greek and Latin are "worse than rusty," his lyric reveals a fluency in the languages and landscapes of the original texts that sets him apart from his Northern Irish contemporaries similarly engaged with translation and adaption of the Classics in light of the Troubles.

In a 1985 interview for *The Honest Ulsterman*, Longley confessed: "At Trinity I did as little work as possible and called myself a lapsed classicist."[3] However, as Peter McDonald claims, "like religion, a classical education can never be erased" (35). This estimation suggests that Longley's dexterity with Classical idiom has a degree of the rote. Nevertheless, his transformation of ancient epic into the compressed precision of contemporary lyric requires an incisive focus and near-religious attendance to the ethos and cadence of the original material that supersedes mere academic training. Longley's

intimate bond with Classical literature intersects in compelling fashion with both his biographical and historical moment and has facilitated the development of a distinctly tragic lyric voice that challenges readers to reconsider the relationship of poetry to death.

Born a twin in 1939 to English parents in Belfast, Longley was raised—and has consistently resided—in Ulster. A poet who came of age during a decade of momentous political turmoil and artistic emergence in Northern Ireland, Longley has paradoxically been read as a both an iconic figure of his regional poetic origin and as, in his own words, "a bit of an outsider."[4] The poet's childhood sense of incongruence with his surroundings has persisted for the artist, serving to shape both his poems and the perspective from which they are born. And while Longley is perhaps the only major poet of his generation who has remained in Northern Ireland throughout his writing life, his poetic voice is distinctively circumspect, unbound by conventional approaches to regional and religious identity.[5]

In his introduction to the collection, *The Poetry of Michael Longley* (2000), Alan J. Peacock addresses the inevitable critical comparisons that arise between Longley and his contemporaries and posits that often, such juxtapositional analyses are made in a fashion that undercuts the very tenets of Longley's poetic merit (x-xi).[6] When considered alongside a figure such as Seamus Heaney, for example, a poet of homegrown diction and rooted Irish voice, Longley is read by some critics as a writer of archly stylized verse with an artistic gaze problematically lifted from the political moment of his surroundings. This criticism begs revision for at least two reasons: first, it undermines the poet's assiduous treatment of human suffering during the decades of the Troubles by ignoring the temporal and cultural distance from lived event he requires[7] in order to do so;

secondly, it precludes the capacity of formal poetic rhythm and structure to accommodate the most searing measure of human experience—a truth Classical poets such as Homer knew well.

As Robert Fagles notes in the preface to his translation of the Homeric epic, "The violence of the *Iliad* can be overpowering, […] yet, Homer makes that violence coexist with humanity and compassion, as close together as the city at war and the city at peace emblazoned on Achilles' shield" (xiv). This coexistence of opposites—the intimate proximity of war and peace, destruction and creation, death and love—are, in the words of Bernard Knox, "implicit in every situation and statement in the poem, and they are put before us, in something approaching abstract form, [as] an image of human life as a whole" (Introduction 62).

I suggest that Longley's work with Classical translation and adaptation is, like Achilles' shield, a mosaic of complex twinnings that bespeaks a manifold poetic vision resistant to political binaries. In particular, I will argue that Longley's lyric is a contemporary enrichment of Classical epic, as filtered through a tragic sensibility. This twinned and tragic aspect of the poet's voice has yet to receive adequate consideration by critics, though his ever-increasing involvement with the practice of translation makes such scholarly attention imperative. It is my hope that this chapter will go some small way towards addressing this critical oversight.

Furthermore, I will posit that while Longley's poetry is indeed shaped by a personal, often profoundly intimate lens, summary identity politics[8] are a falsely restrictive framework through which to view the development of his work; such a critical approach interrupts the poet's fluent blend of languages, cultures, and literary genres and

fails to address the shifting moral borders of his verse. Longley is a poet whose knowing touch with language resurrects not only the mesmeric plot and rhyme of Classical text, but also the unmatched treatment of human complexity that Homer and other ancient storytellers succeed in portraying. A lifelong student of the Classics, Longley's lyric pitch is tragic. Lorna Hardwick contends that his choice to "[focus] on themes of problematic homecoming (*nostos*), and recognition (*anagnōrisis*), and the implications for social and personal relationships" is a key element of what makes many of Longley's poems "Greek" (205).[9] I will suggest that it is what makes his poems "Irish," as well.

Commencing with a brief overview of Longley's boyhood introduction to Classical literature and his consequent progression to Trinity College, Dublin where he read Classics, this chapter will explore the poet's lifelong engagement with ancient Greek and Latin poetry. In particular, I will trace Longley's translation and adaptation of Homeric epic across the decades to show how his evolving interactions with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have shaped his response to the violence of the Troubles and fostered the development of a fingerprint conscientiousness, both ethical and aesthetic. Longley's relationship with Ovid's oeuvre and its tumultuous matrix of metamorphoses will likewise be explored. Advancing chronologically, the chapter will approach Longley's intercourse with Classical epic as does his reader, through the fusion of tragedy and lyric. By so doing, it is my hope that the role poetry may play in sustaining the impact of death—both individual and communal—and in translating loss into legacy will shine through as one of Longley's primary aesthetic and ethical contributions.

When describing his initiation in Classical studies at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Longley speaks nostalgically:

> During each class we would slowly translate ten or twenty lines, and then read the Greek aloud. Somehow the Homeric sunshine broke through all that cloudy donkeywork. I loved the sound of the Greek, the bumpy hexameters, the clash of the broad vowels, the way lips and tongue are vigorously exercised, hammer and tongs. And of course I adored the stories. ("Lapsed Classicist" 98)

Longley's early foray into Classical studies instilled a respect for formal finesse, for the fashion in which Homer's epics transcended their time and place, travelling all the way to Ireland where they were "filtered through the shabby fanlights of [James Joyce's] *Ulysses*" and into Longley's nascent lyrics (98).

The cross-cultural and atemporal aspect of ancient Mediterranean epic touched Longley's poetic sensibilities from the start. The poet has described the study of Classics as "character-forming like long-distance running," and as such, it is unsurprising that several decades of focused effort and patient gestation were required for Longley to produce the Homeric lyrics that propel his collections, *Gorse Fires* (1991) and *The Ghost Orchid* (1995) and continue into his most recent volumes, *The Weather in Japan* (2000) and *Snow Water* (2004). However, too often, the poet's early work with Classical translation and adaptation is overlooked, an omission Fran Brearton is at pains to correct in her illuminating study, *Reading Michael Longley* (2006). While it is possible, she suggests, to read Longley's first four books as sounding the inaugural tenor of his career, and his subsequent volumes—separated by a twelve-year hiatus from publishing that will

be discussed at some length below—as notes in a new direction, this dichotomy is misleadingly simplistic (11).

Indeed, Longley has been forthcoming about his gestation of the Classics. In a 1995 interview with Dermot Healy, he explains: "The Classics [have] left me with some images and themes and with a sense of syntactical possibilities […] but it [has] taken me many years to pick up the resonances and implications" (556). In an effort to avoid the pitfalls of cursory criticism that falsely bifurcates Longley's work, this chapter will begin where did the poet, namely, at the timeless intersection of love, loss, and language.

***No Continuing City*: Early Twinnings and Longley's Singular Lyric:**

In 1968, Michael Longley published a pamphlet of nine poems entitled *Secret Marriages*, a slender collection, which hailed a poet of sensibilities presciently attuned to our human measure of joy and despair. Introducing the collection—and veritably, his poetic voice—Longley notes that "[t]hese poems already have an air of 'end of the road' rather than 'en route' about them. The next stage in logical progression would be a blank page and dead silence: they enjoy already the brevity of epitaphs" (2). The formal compression of these poems is deceptive; like all that is finely wrought, precision and hard-earned simplicity can bewitch by their eloquence, and even Longley's earliest work reveals a degree of stylistic sophistication that continues to inveigle critics.[10] However, in *Secret Marriages*, as well as his subsequent full-length collection, *No Continuing City* (1969), Longley emerges as a poet attuned to love's variable demands—those of the living and of the dead—who has taken his cue from Classical literature. Indeed, as Brendan Corcoran contends, "[i]t may be that […] the 'secret marriage' underlying this

brief prophetic work may be the coupling of these two kinds of utterance: the love poem and the elegy" (336).[11]

In his 1996 essay, "A Tongue at Play,"[12] Longley articulates the enduring allure of "the ancient Roman notion of the poet as '*musarum sacerdos'*-'the priest of the muses,'" a concept that he contends "implies a religious dimension to art, but a religiousness that is in no way institutionalized; in no way totalitarian […] (8).[13] The tenacious stereotype of conservatism facing both Classical theme and poetic formalism (this despite, as noted in the introduction to this dissertation, what Declan Kiberd calls the "outlaw activity" of the Classics in Ireland)[14] attenuates the human chord belying the vatic tone of this statement.

If, indeed, the divine is present in Longley's intellectual conception—and personal manifestation—of the artist, it is so as tempered witness (and occasional, reluctant participant) rather than as overt creator; he notes the etymological precedent for this claim: "the Scottish word *makar* is a straight translation of the Greek *poetes*. The poet oscillates between notions of craft and vision" (*Tuppenny Stung* 120). Herein lies a clue to reading Longley's young verse in conjunction with his later work: the elegy and the love poem coalesce—like all of Longley's many twinnings—in the body of lyric; as such, they stand joint witness to grief and to survival.

No Continuing City is a title drawn from chapter 13, verse 14 of St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews: "For here we have no continuing city, [but we seek one to come]" (64).[15] The increasingly heated sectarian climate of Northern Ireland leading up to the outbreak of the Troubles in the late summer of 1968 is felt in the volume, and while Longley, like his Northern Irish poetic contemporaries, resists an overt historical contextualization of

his oeuvre, his words nevertheless leave room for precisely this manner of artistic foresight.[16] In *Tuppenny Stung*, Longley issues the following sharp retort to critics who demand a more overt political engagement from his poetry, but he concludes with an admission of definitive responsibility:

> I find offensive the notion that what we inadequately call 'the Troubles' might provide inspiration for artists; and that in some weird quid pro quo the arts might provide solace for grief and anguish. Twenty years ago I wrote in Causeway: "Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. They fail to realize that the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it […] He is not some sort of super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened. Rather, as Wilfred Owen stated fifty years ago, it is the artist's duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation." (73)

Longley is quick to follow this defense of poetry as a time-worn art and never a hasty journalism, with words that further underscore his sense of responsibility: "[Though] the poet's first duty must be to his imagination, he has other obligations—and not just as a citizen. He would be inhuman if he did not respond to tragic events in his own community, and a poor artist if he did not seek to endorse that response imaginatively" (73-74). Furthermore, Longley notes that these matters have import far beyond the critical reception of a poet's oeuvre: "In the context of political violence the deployment

of words at their most precise and most suggestive remains one of the few antidotes to death-dealing dishonesty" (74).

One of the provocative critical issues to arise from Longley's explanation involves the selection of these words—of languages and narratives—he and other Northern Irish poets of his generation have chosen to employ. While Heaney began by digging into the literal and figurative earth upon which he was born and raised, for Longley, there has never been a singular point of poetic (or self) origin; rather, where there is one, there have always already been two—a positioning, as I argue below, that is ancient and very Greek, indeed.[17] Understanding Longley's ever-twinned lens is instructive when reading the his poetry in general and his interaction with Classical epic through the body of lyric in particular; this double view becomes indispensible, to use Margaret Atwood's phrase, when "negotiating with the dead."

No Continuing City opens with a dedication to Longley's wife in which the poet introduces one of the initial pairings that swiftly become his trademark: "*[...] / My children and my dead / Coming of age / In the turn of your head / As you turn a page*" ("For Edna," ll. 5-8). Yoked by love, young life and imminent shade are conjoined at the outset of this volume, meeting in the composite purview of bride and groom. Indeed, the possessive, grief-honed affection of Longley's phrasing "*my children and my dead*" resonates with Heaney's attention to the chorus of his "own dead." Brearton notes Longley's inheritance of George Herbert's aesthetic, "In my end is my beginning," a caduceus-shaped reading that is substantiated by the personal and historical circumstances surrounding the debut of this volume in 1969 (27).[18]

The opening poem of the collection, "Epithalamion," sets a cyclic mood that has remained with Longley throughout the years. This neophyte but remarkably mature verse[19] links beginning and end time in simultaneously literal and eschatological senses: biographically, Michael Longley and Edna Broderick were married in 1964, just a year after the poet finished his studies at Trinity, where "Epithalamion"—a title evoking Classical Greece—was originally published as his final contribution to the journal *Icarus*; textually, the poem underscores the haunting though human link between nubile (and shared) love and inevitable (solitary) death:

> I hold you close because
> We have decided dark will be
> For ever like this and because,
> My love, already
> The dark is growing elderly. (ll. 31-35)

Insisting, even and perhaps especially in this marriage bed, that lovers—like Penelope and Odysseus, embodiments of human beings at their most exquisitely revealed—"too must hazard all," Longley introduces not only his first substantial volume of poetry but simultaneously establishes the tenor of his lyric, which will both accompany and facilitate his maturing poetic (l. 41). Significantly, Longley's lyric is born a twinned mode—a form, I believe, that is shaped by the poet's intimate knowledge of and interaction with Classical epic and its relevance to contemporary poetry—a relevance roused by tragic historical circumstance.

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In his Nobel address, *Crediting Poetry* (1995), Seamus Heaney asserts that poetry has "the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it…that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are in earnest of our veritable human being" (29). This sentiment seems particularly apt in light of lyric poetry, a genre where the intimacy and rawness of self-experience is offered to the public gaze. Helen Vendler's assessment of the poetic form is relevant here:

> A lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader. It is, then, the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader. And it is the most universal of genres, because it presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer's shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader's own. (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* xlii-xliii)

In *Invisible Listeners*, Vendler emphasizes the lyric's characteristic solo voice, but she adds that the effectiveness of this "single voice" is predicated upon the multiple "tones of voice" with which it resonates (qtd. in Baker and Townsend xii). Vendler's description of lyric is theatrical, an intriguing point of emphasis when Longley is the one poet in this study who does not overtly experiment with adaptations of Classical drama. Indeed, it is as if the lyric form itself is always already both private and performative and thus, another of Longley's many twinnings. This sensitivity to the layers of lyric takes on considerable import in acts of translation.

As David Baker and Ann Townsend write in their introduction to *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*, "Lyric poetry's beauty stems in part from its interiority and its compression; it represents the mind at its most focused and direct. Yet lyric poetry is

also highly connective, clarifying, and enlightening to audiences across the gulf of years" (xi). As such, the lyric form has lent itself to the treatment of universal experiences, in particular, love, loss, and death. The lyric shape-shifts naturally from love poem to ode to elegy; seamless adaptor, the poetic form is elastic, equally fit to contract at moments of pain or pleasure, and to dilate in order to perpetuate the legacy of the dead across the centuries.

Baker and Townsend eloquently suggest that all "[p]oetry is literally made of time," with the lyric embodying this "most abiding subject" of temporality (xv). They further postulate that nevertheless, "it is conventional to look to lyric poetry for immunity from the damages and corruptions of time, to 'step out of time' into the lyric's still space'" despite the irony of this gesture (xv). This analysis is compelling when extended to the work of the Northern Irish poets; in particular, Longley's translation and compression of Classical epic into lyric form is engaged in an act of temporal suspension, thus eliding the imperative to address the conditions of contemporary social violence by inhabiting age-old narratives that speak to something deeper, something fundamentally human, about intractable suffering. And though the poet does not choose to work directly with Classical dramatic tragedies, his lyric itself absorbs their tenor. In short, Longley's lyric may be read as a bridge—akin to my reading of Classical translation—between the particularities of individual circumstances and the universal human predicament of enduring loss that Northern Irish poets are attuned to articulate and that the Greeks have taught us are tragic.

Werner Wolf suggests "the lyric covers a vastly heterogeneous textual corpus that is moreover in a continuous process of development and ranges from traditional lyric forms such as the sonnet to free verse and various experimental forms, of which the twentieth century with its notorious transgressive tendencies has produced so many" (23).[20] This observation is compelling in light of Longley's formal development from *No Continuing City* to his subsequent volumes, *An Exploded View* (1973), *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976), and *The Echo Gate* (1979). In particular, Wolf's insight regarding the boundary-shattering capacity of lyric may be applied as a temperate response to critics—such as Philip Hobsbaum—who have described Longley's early formalism shaped by Classical example, however tentatively and shaded with admiration, as stultifying.[21]

Several of the poems included in *No Continuing City* seem to anticipate—somewhat ironically—Hobsbaum's criticism in that they deal ostensibly with the tension between progression and stasis; they may also be said to hint at the sustained period of writer's block that Longley will suffer through much of the 1980s and that his work with translation will go some way towards remedying. In "The Ornithological Section," the poet describes the frozen wings of mounted birds in a museum of natural history. Humankind is likened to these stilled forms, immortalized by craft in the midst of flight:

> We, with our histories left to spend,
> Would have our actions thus defined
> By that response in which they end,
> Would have these birds, these lively dead,
> Who hesitate before they go
> For ever out of sight and mind,

Whose long delays concern us so,

As our biographers instead. (ll. 33-40)

"In life, in death" these birds, these forms of "heavenly bric-à-brac, / Without their guts, without their fears," read as stand-ins for human beings, while the posthumous taxidermy that they undergo may be understood as the same stuffed stillness that false poetry can create. However, the acerbic, even self-castigating tone of this poem relaxes at its close, "Where science ends and love begins" (ll. 14, 1-2, 48). Indeed, it is as though the verse itself hushes to the rush of its own practiced wings.

In "A Personal Statement" the poet continues the physical inventory he begins in "The Ornithological Section," though here, he turns the lens upon himself, insisting that "I am, in fact, // More than a bag of skin and bone […] // […] I the vicar in command, / The prophet in my country, / The priest at hand" (ll. 10-11, 28-30). Written for Seamus Heaney—a poet, as we have seen, likewise torn between the twin commitments of the aesthetic and the civic—the poem reads in a Platonic fashion, both dividing and personifying the self: "Body and Mind, I turn to you. / […] / Whatever you think, whatever you do, / Include me in on it, / Essential two" (ll. 36, 38-40).[22]

In the volume as a whole, this desired pairing—another instance of Longley's twinnings—is only sporadically sustained; in subsequent poems, the authorial voice veers between a distanced, even removed, omniscience and an immersed and fully permeated immanence, as in "Narcissus," where "Unweatherbeaten as the moon [the poet's] face / Among the waterlogged, the commonplace," is "submerg[ed] in mind and pool like treasure-trove. / My face as sole survivor floats above" (ll. 1-2, 7-8). With a nod in the direction of Stephen Dedalus's depiction of "the artist [as] the God of the creation, [who]

remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails," Longley's abstracted young poet is more tempered, sorely cognizant—indeed, soon to the point of paralysis—of the tenor of his own voice taking shape in the hot flair of history, what he terms in his subsequent volume, *An Exploded View* (1973), "[t]he stereophonic nightmare / Of the Shankill and the Falls " ("Letter to Derek Mahon," ll. 12-13).

This variable remove at which the poet places himself in relationship to historical event is represented throughout *No Continuing City* in alternative and highly metamorphic forms that facilitate Longley's lyric development in light of Classical epic. Initially, the dichotomous paring is between the figure of a bird soaring high above a troubled earth and a submerged, water-anchored self; it is as though the love with which "The Ornithological Section" closes provides an updraft for poems that follow, including "The Osprey,"—who "lives, without compromise, / His unamphibious two lives—[…]"— and the swallows of "Persephone," which the poet "see[s] through a skylight in my brain / […] turn[ing] above their broken home / And all my acres in delirium" (ll. 1, 3-4).

This tentative omniscience sounds a distinctive doubled note of parental / child grievance in a poem such as "In Memoriam," where Longley recalls his father's battlefield injury during the First World War: "To shrapnel shards that sliced your testicle. / That instant I, your most unlikely son, / In No Man's Land was surely left for dead. / Blotted out from your far horizon" (ll. 25-28). The poet's voice alters again when Longley's plural vision demonstrates a predilection for shape-shifting, and in particular, for ventriloquising Classical voices. In *No Continuing City*, Longley reveals an ear

attuned to Homer; in particular, the autobiographical explorations of the young poet find a ready template in Odysseus's journey.

In "Odyssey," Longley's voice is that of the epic's namesake:

> Amateur witches and professional virgins,
>
> Sirens and shepherdesses—all new areas
>
> Of experience (I have been out of touch)—
>
> Ladies, you are so many and various
>
> You will have to put up with me, for your sins,
>
> A stranger to your islands who knows too much. (ll. 1-6)

This final line of the poem's opening stanza is representative of the omnipresence of Homer throughout the volume, and indeed, the poet's future verse. Here, casting his voice as Odysseus's own, and variously, addressing his readers as Nausicaa or Narcissus ("My face as sole survivor" (l. 8)), as Circe, with "The cries of the shipwrecked enter[ing] my head" ("Circe," l. 1), or the narrator of "No Continuing City"—a "medium" for the voices of the women whose very words the poet appropriates "[from] their mouths," (l. 32)—Longley embarks upon a metamorphic voyage that grows complex and illuminating over the course of his subsequent volumes. And while Brearton convincingly argues that "forms […] have always worked as a medium for experimentation, and for risk-taking [in Longley's poetry], in ways which have made him profoundly influential on, as well as contemporaneous with, [a] postmodern generation," I posit that it is this preference for malleable viewpoints and voices that has returned Longley, time and again, to Classical narrative (9).

Poetic Sodality and Precarious Voicings: Longley's Middle Verse:

While in his first major collection, *No Continuing City*, Longley reveals an ear attuned to multi-dimensional, cross-temporal, and intercultural voices, in his second volume, *An Exploded View* (1973), the poet moves inward, initially navigating the varied interfaces between himself and fellow Northern Irish writers, and subsequently, the confluences within his own psyche.[23] In the opening poem of the collection, "To the Poets," Longley minces few words:

> The dying fall, the death spasm,
>
> Last words and catechism—
>
> These are the ways we spend our breath,
>
> The epitaphs we lie beneath— […] (ll. 1-4)

Attuned to the gravity of bearing poetic witness, this second major volume introduces the occupational hazards of ventriloquising voices, both those of the living and those of the dead. It likewise underscores the oft-unbearable pressures placed on the singular poetic voice writing in a time and from a place of political crisis. Both themes are explored throughout *An Exploded View*; their complex development influences Longley's succeeding collections and informs the tragic ethos by which they are constituted.

In his arresting and intimate epistle series, "Letters,"[24] Longley articulates the varied pitches of his friendships[25] with Northern Irish poets Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and James Simmons; in so doing, his acuity is tempered by the dismayed riposte of his best friend upon the poems' publication.[26] In the controversial series, Longley allies himself and Mahon with an unsavory—if plausible—youthful sectarian affiliation:

And did we come into our own
When, minus muse and lexicon,
We traced in August sixty-nine
Our imaginary Peace Line
Around the burnt out houses of
The Catholics we'd scarcely loved,[27]
Two Sisyphuses come to budge
The sticks and stones of an old grudge,

Two poetic conservatives
In the city of guns and long knives, […] ("To Derek Mahon," ll. 1-10)

While Mahon disparaged the lines, both publicly (in the *New Statesman*) and privately (through personal correspondence),[28] Longley's capacity to capture the painfully intimate psychology of the moment, come what may, indicates his deep investment in the early 1970s to sounding a note of what he terms "poetic sodality" with his peers.[29]

In a letter written to Marie Heaney in late 1975 or early 1976, Longley expresses a sincere debt to his friendships with Mahon and Heaney; he also admits to occasional disillusionment at their differences:

> My friendships, first with Mahon, then with Heaney, have been of central importance to me and contributed greatly to my own development as a man and poet: that's what my second book [*An Exploded View*] was all about. It explored the notion of an artistic community, a poetic sodality, though as I admitted in an Irish Times interview, this was probably a fiction, because, frankly, there didn't seem to me to be any takers! I realize of course that there are cultural reasons

> why I should need such a fiction and why my colleagues might find it an embarrassment. Given all that, their poetry matters to me and to my poetry since my talent is not homogenous like theirs: I have to borrow roots! What I'm talking about, I think, is friendship lifted into the imagination… (Longley papers, collection 744).

While this letter was ultimately never sent, it is reveals not only Longley's profound investment in his friendships with fellow poets, but also his inclination—even compulsion, particularly at this troubled intersection of biographical and historical moment—to view poetry as a joint enterprise.

Longley has confessed that part of the drive behind the "Letters" sequence was his pressing desire to overtake the writer's block he felt encroaching. In subsequent correspondence, he has reflected upon his trepidations at the time:

> My first serious writer's block came when I had just finished *No Continuing City*. I chucked my teaching job and in February 1970 retreated to a remote cottage in the Wicklow hills to flirt with the Muse. When she didn't come on holiday with me, I was in worse shape than ever—not writing and now without an alibi. (qtd. in Drummond 36)

This despairing and lonely moment was interrupted when Mahon appeared unannounced at Longley's retreat with the proposal of a verse-correspondence, which the latter admits, "began the thaw [then] really got me flowing" (37).

In his most recent volume, *Snow Water* (2004), Longley articulates in a single line what may be read as the guiding principle of his relationship to his poet-peers, both past and present: "The dead poet forgives the thieves their hunger" ("The Pear," l. 10). And

while the dramatic personal-if-public fallout of the "Letters" sequence sharply educated Longley on the limitations of a shared craft at a pivotal moment in his development, it likewise opened an alternate door of poetic sodality with narratives—and voices—from the distant past. In short, Classical translation offered Longley a means of personal creative resurrection through the vessel of resurrected ancient verse.

In the later portion of *An Exploded View*, Longley offers a poem that serves as a compass by which his subsequent work with Classical narrative may be read. As such, "Altera Cithera" merits quoting in full:

> A change of tune, then
> On another zither,
> A new aesthetic, or
> The same old songs
> That are out of key,
> Unwashed by epic oceans
> And dipped by love
> In lyric waters only?
>
> Given under our hand
> (With a ballpoint pen)
> After the Latin of Gaius
> Sextus Propertius,
> An old friend, the shadow
> Of his former self

Who—and this I append

Without his permission—

Loaded the dice before

He put them in his sling

And aimed at history,

Bringing to the ground

Like lovers Caesar,

Soldiers, politicians

And all the dreary

Epics of the muscle-bound.

Reviving the partnership of love poem and elegy that directed the course of *No Continuing City*, Longley consummates the thwarted collaboration he envisioned with his contemporaries by invoking his long dead Sextus Propertius. Though a mere shade—"the shadow / [o]f his former self"—the Latin love poet and elegist is an "old friend" to Longley. As such, permission to build upon his work, to metamorphose his ancient verse into a contemporary and Northern Irish idiom is acquired from Longley's reading of his predecessor's assimilation of Classical epic into personalized lyric. The poems that follow "Altera Cithera," particularly those that commemorate the poet's "own dead"—kin and community yoked together through the internecine violence of the Troubles—make manifest the "poetic sodality" Longley has long sought with his living peers and ultimately best found, with his dead. This discovery, I believe, has much to do with

Longley's decidedly Greek conception of tragedy and the role poetry may play in sustaining its blow and translating loss into legacy.

Heroes, Poets, Tragedy and Translation:

If the lyric has long been body to love poem and elegy, it is the epic that has traditionally narrated our ultimate journey to the underworld. Conventionally, it is warrior-heroes the likes of Odysseus and Aeneas who venture prematurely to these eerie abodes, bravely seeking encounter with their loved and their lost. But occasionally, the pilgrim is cast rather as a poet, a mortal figure granted temporary passage into the gut of death, charged with the task of bearing witness to the stories of the departed and resurrecting their legacies in the land of the living. The examples are familiar: driven by the searing pain of losing his bride Eurydice to death, Orpheus was one of the first artists to descend to Hades; Virgil, too, traveled to the underworld—not once, but twice—and as Dante's trusted guide. But while both hero and poet-pilgrim are clearly artistic creations, it is the former who we have been coaxed to regard as the archetypal tragic figure.

Indeed, Fitzgerald's contention that Achilles is "clearly the model for the tragic hero" resonates with Homer's contemporary audiences. After all, as the translator notes, "his stubborn, passionate devotion to an ideal image of self is the same force that drives Antigone, Oedipus, Ajax and Philoctetes to the fulfillment of their destinies" (63). However, as Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. reminds readers, ancient Greek tragedy was more preoccupied with the (suffered, shifting) middle of stories than with their (heroic) ends. He explains:

> [T]ragedies do not necessarily end badly. They begin badly. They originate at a point of calamity and outrageous human suffering. But they can be, and often are, resolved. [Indeed,] nearly half of the surviving Greek tragedies end well. [...] Tragedy, unlike disaster, involves a choice. Tragedy is something harder, infinitely rarer, a challenge thrown in the face of the brute facticity of the world. If Hamlet is tragic—and he most assuredly is—then it is not because of what the world does to him; it is because of what he is, what he does, and how he does it. His tragedy derives, in large measure, from who he is. 'Character is destiny,' said Heraclitus, some three millennia ago. (*Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision* 15-16)[30]

It is this indeterminate middle-ground that literature's various poet-pilgrims would have us to understand as the true realm of tragedy. Rinsed "[i]n lyric waters," the "dreary / Epics of the muscle-bound" take shape in the infinite reiteration of the poet's journey to the land of the dead.

Michael Longley's vision is tragic in this Classical sense: it is, to use Ruprecht's definition, both "an invitation to suggestive new ways of thinking about our world" and a manifestation of "the experience of redemptive, rather than merely radical suffering" (15-16). Through the lens of Classical tragic lyric, Longley achieves a sodality that reaches beyond the poetic and successfully yokes a grieving community to an attentive readership. After a period of sustained gestation, translation emerges in the poet's subsequent volumes as a well-girded bridge not only between languages and cultures and literary genres, but likewise, between the living and the dead.

Resurrecting Homer: Longley's *Gorse Fires* (1991) and *The Ghost Orchid* (1995)

The poet published his fourth volume of poetry, *The Echo Gate*, in 1979; he published his fifth, *Gorse Fires*, in 1991.[31] John Banville spoke for most, declaring the volume well "worth waiting twelve years for" (*Bookseller*).[32] The poet's careful and extended efforts are clear as one negotiates the collection. Longley's attention to the structure of the book is palpable, and more than most, the volume requires attentive consideration to its entirety and in its original layout.[33] An intricate weave, the lyrics blend experiences of loss—personal and public, intimate and historical—with variations on passages translated and adapted from Homer's *Odyssey*. *Gorse Fires* is a profound testament to the fashion in which Classical epics have found a ready home in contemporary Northern Irish lyric, particularly when the proximity of the poet—physically, psychologically, and temporally—to personal loss as well as sectarian violence may otherwise hinder direct engagement with the circumstances in his oeuvre.

Trained as a Classicist, Longley's translations of Homer are evocative and precise. And while each of the many Greek-drawn poems in the volume stand alone, taken together, they form a tapestry woven from both ancient and contemporary threads. The format by which Longley presents the poems is explicit: with few exceptions, each Homeric lyric is paired with a personal one (set on the facing page) that is connected in mood—and often, in diction—to its partner verse.[34] A conversation between the twinned poems is readily perceptible, and the reverberative effect sounds through the volume as a whole; each poem is a kind of echo chamber for all those that come before and after it in the sequence.

The initial poem in the volume, "Sea Shanty," begins in true Homeric fashion: with a passionate evocation of dawn that combines timeless imagery with a modern setting: "I would have waited under the statue of Eros / While the wind whistled in my bell-bottoms, / Taken my bearings from the blink of daylight / Her thighs and feathery maidenhair let through" (ll. 1-4). But the past-conditional of the diction readily shifts the mood of the lyric; the beloved and inspirational County Mayo landscape of Carrigskeewaun becomes the "high ground" that overlooks "Lesbos rising among the islands" (ll. 5-6). While this collage is mesmeric—it is as if the islands of Ireland, of Scotland and England, the Arans, and the Isle of Man share a sea-scape with Ithaca—the tone is one of loss and exposure. Having woken from the soft-splendor of "pillows of sea pink," the poet shivers, pulling himself together to muster the pronouncement: "I am making do with what has been left me" (ll. 9, 14). With this confession, the tone is set as one of a survivor's utilitarian abandon, as Longley moves forward in *Gorse Fires* toward the first poem-pairing.

In "Remembering Carrigskeewaun," the intimate details of hearth and chimney, "a windpipe / Fluffy with soot and thistledown" (ll. 2-3), where "Home is a hollow between the waves, / A clump of nettles, feathery winds, / And memory no longer than a day" (ll. 8-10) are summoned, resonating with a note of deep nostalgia and a pull toward the ached-for home that can only be a modern-day Ithaca. The lyric is brief, but its message is clear; in the final line, the memory reveals itself to be that of a writer sitting before a page that is lit, in his mind's eye, by "the townland of Carrigskeewaun / […] by the Milky Way" (ll.12-13).

The facing poem entitled "Homecoming" begins where its partner verse leaves off: with the stars. This time, however, it is dawn and instead of private memory, we find Homeric narrative. "And the searfaring ship drew near to Ithaca, to home / And that harbour named after the old man of the sea" (ll. 2-3). Beneath the mantle of "long-leaved olive" and before a cave with "two ways in, one looking north where men descend / While the other faces south, a footpath for the gods" (ll. 8, 12-13). The poem draws to a quiet close, which eloquently understates the momentousness of Odysseus's return home. "[L]ifted out of his hollow" (a word that echoes in both poems) and fast asleep, the weary wanderer is laid gently in the sand by his loyal shipmates, and the poem is hushed with unspoken but imminent joy (l. 15). It is subtle, but taken together, these two lyrics of homecoming with paired if differing images of dreamers (in the first, the realistic reverie of the artist and in the second, the literal dream-state of the mythic voyager) evoke a poignancy available to neither vision on its own, namely, the blend of public narrative with private reflection.

In an essay entitled "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych" and included in the 1985-86 publication of *Salmagundi*, Seamus Heaney writes: "The actual poetic task is to find a way of melding the intuitive and affection-steeped word-world of personal memory with the form-hungry and projecting imagination […]" (41). Longley's poem-pairs accomplish precisely this powerful détente. Having evoked the *Odyssey* in the aforementioned treatment of home, the poet continues with the same theme and structure as he pays tribute to the interior home-scape of birth, death, and the slippage between. In the second of his poem-pairs, Longley again presents a lyric drawn from Homer, following a more personalized poem. Though iterated from a vatic third-person point of

view, “The Man of Two Sorrows” is an intimate poem reminiscent of Heaney’s “Limbo”: here, a woman attempts to arrest the birth of her child by “squatting all night on a stepping stone / That flattens his head, headstone pressing fontanel / Waters breaking under water that nearly drowns him, / Until the morning when he is born and she dies / And the drops of first milk vanish in the river” (ll. 4-8).

The facing poem, “Eurycleia,” initially seems to be paired incompletely with “The Man of Two Sorrows,” but it is precisely in the space where the twinned lyrics slip, not quite matching up—the first, the poem of a mother’s death upon the birth of her child, and the second, a lyrical version of a loyal maidservant’s rediscovery of her master after decades of separation—that the catch in the throat that is love can be heard:

> Eurycleia fetched a basin, poured cold water into it,
> Added hot water, and got ready to wash his feet […].
> His wet-nurse cradled his foot in her hands and touched
> The scar, and recognizing him she let go of his leg
> Which clattered into the basin—water everywhere,
> Such pain and happiness, her eyes filling with tears,
> Her old voice cracking as she stroked his beard and whispered
> ‘You are my baby boy for sure and I didn’t know you
> Until I had fondled my master’s body all over.’ (ll. 1-12)

The water imagery and its associations with birth and rebirth connect the two poems and call out to other lyrics in the volume, such as “The Hip Bath,” where “a coalminer’s black body / Folded into the hip-bath, a blink of white eyes / And then darkness, warm water coloured by darkness / And the hands that trickle down my dusty spine” (ll. 1-4).

Odysseus's bath proves a ceremony of rebirth, and the bonds of kinship fortify both the returned hero and the succeeding Homeric poems in Longley's collection. This poem-pair likewise facilitates Longley's treatment of personal subject matter, namely, the poet's vexed relationship with his own mother and his deep bond with his childhood caretaker.

The poet begins his autobiographical sketch, *Tuppenny Stung* (1994) with a poignant confession: "I begin by loving the wrong woman" (15). A young housemaid called Lena—"a natural and devoted surrogate mother"—took charge of him as a child, filling in for an exhausted and depressive mother who spent her energy contending with Longley's twin brother, Peter. It was not until forty years later, in the spring of 1979 and in the final weeks of his mother's life, that the poet learned of her early attempt to abort the pregnancy:

> She gave me X-ray pictures in which shadowy shapes of Peter and me curl up and tangle about five months after conception ('Tuppenny Stung for a penny bung,' my father had said.) [At the news of my mother's attempt to terminate the pregnancy,] I registered neither shock nor pain. Somehow this knowledge made it easier for me to hug her dying lopsided body. It was like a courtship, and I accompanied her on my arm to death's door. (29)

This passage brings forward primary themes in Longley's poetry: namely, love and death, Eros and Thanatos, and the ready crossover and blend of the two.

Having lost her own mother at a very young age, Longley's mother was raised by her father's second wife, a fiercely jealous woman who resented any attention garnered by the child. In explanation of the compromised connection with his own mother, the

poet elaborates: "My mother's childhood was an unrelieved misery: daily humiliations, mental and physical cruelty. My heart goes out to the little girl cowering in a corner, sobbing at the top of the dark stairs" (19). Longley's compassionate description of his mother is striking beyond its moving utterance; it is demonstrative of his awareness of "The fundamental interconnectedness of all things" ("According to Pythagoras," l. 21), a line that Peacock suggests "might be said to be the informing vision of Longley's poetry, […] implicitly, heuristically and self-effacingly pursued" (Introduction, *The Poetry of Michael Longley* xiii).

This interconnectedness is often revealed through the combination of a temporal fluidity in Longley's verse and the shape-shifting nature of the characters he depicts. In an online educational forum established to assist Irish students studying for their Leaving Certificate Exams, Michael Longley explains the relationship between Homer's words and his own in *Gorse Fires*:

> In differing proportions but always, I hope, with reverence, I have […] combined free translations from Homer's *Odyssey* with original lines. I don't put 'after Homer,'[35] because they're my own […] The story of Odysseus has always enthralled me […] Moments in *The Odyssey* chimed with emotions that I would have found almost impossible to deal with otherwise: heartbreak, paranoia, bitterness, hatred, fear. Homer gave me a new emotional and psychological vocabulary […] I try very hard to capture in English that's alive the texture and feel of the Greek. (*Teachnet*, "Laertes")

It is telling that in early drafts of "Eurycleia" (in mood and manner, one of the most maternal of Longley's poems), the lyric was alternatively entitled both "Lena" and

"Nurse,"[36] the first, ultimately too overt an allusion to autobiography, and the second, perhaps too impersonal. "Eurycleia" succeeds as a middle ground between the two aforementioned extremes; the final title illustrates the capacity for Homeric allusion to facilitate the expression of naked emotion and lived experience through the aesthetic veil of Classical epic. The poet's manuscript draft materials bring these Classical elements into sharp thematic focus.

The final version of "Eurycleia" is broken into two sections: the first, a close translation of Book XIX of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus's aged nursemaid, Eurycleia, discovers her master's identity as she bathes his body; and the second, the poet's six-line confessional memory of his own childhood caretaker, Lena. "I began," this section commences, "like Odysseus by loving the wrong woman / Who has disappeared among the skyscrapers of New York / After wandering for thousands of years from Ithaca" (ll.13-15). Longley's *Tuppenny Stung*, published three years after *Gorse Fires*, brings the identity of this young, Fermanagh-born and Manhattan-bound woman to light, but her story is there in the fair copies of the poem. Indeed, an early version of the lyric is scarcely recognizable out of context. The unpublished poem, "Lena," merits full quotation:

> Lena was the maid
> From Fermanagh who
> Came to look after me
> During World War Two.
>
> Beside the brown wireless
> She improvised a stool
> Out of a soap-box,
> And would sit there still,

Crow's-feet and a grin
Teaching me to pray
As Catholics do,
If I had my way.

She never killed spiders
Because she believed
They suckle their young
And need to be loved.

Slowly she weaned me
From bottle to cup
And said, "Bring us down
A picture of the Pope!"

When I picked my nose
And gazed at her eyes
I refused to accept
That anyone dies. (ll. 1-16)

There is little in this draft of the poem that links it to the *Odyssey*, but the handwritten copy of "Lena" is followed by a matching typescript of the poem where the title is crossed out and "Eurycleia," substituted.[37] The titular alteration is the sole change in this intermediate draft, but by this stage of the writing process, it is evident that Longley has found his register in a blend of personalized memory and classical reference.[38] The poet's evolution of a personal lyric from the complex and private realities of experience and memory into the enriched but equally intimate adaptation of an archetypal scene of Homeric homecoming (*nostos*) and recognition (*anagnōrisis*) is accomplished and further developed in subsequent verses.

In the heart of the volume are four poems for parents—two for the poet's own parents and two in honor of Odysseus's mother and father. Together, they are moving instances of the powerful stylistic and semantic means by which Longley snares the "texture" of Homeric epic through the use of what Michael Allen calls the poet's "long line."[39] Longley himself attributes his career-spanning appreciation of the long line to the formidable effect created when one sentence carries a single, swelling emotion.[40] These parental poems are fine examples of precisely this semantic and metrical cast.

Once again introducing the first pairing with a personal lyric entitled "Northern Lights," the poet offers a single stanza, emotionally compressed (while semantically extended) and replete with longing. He begins midstream:

> When you woke me up and showed me through the window
>
> Curtains of silk, luminous smoke, ghost fires
>
> A convergence of rays above the Black Mountain,
>
> The northern lights became our own magnetic field—
>
> Your hand on my shoulder, your tobacco-y breath
>
> And the solar wind that ruffled your thinning hair. (ll. 1-6)

The poet's private conversation with the memory of his father is nearly audible; the reader is invited in to stand in the corner of the lyric and listen.

The facing poem, "Laertes," increases the private and somehow pained mood of "Northern Lights." The *Odyssey* is the archetypal public, shared narrative space. But it, too, contains moments of intimacy between characters that the reader almost abashedly witnesses; Odysseus's reunion with his aging father is one such narrative moment, and

Longley's poem sensitively captures its vulnerable grace. It too, opens as if in answer to a question:

> When he found Laertes alone on the tidy terrace, hoeing
> Around a vine, disreputable in his gardening duds, […]
> Sure sign of his deep depression, a goatskin duncher,
> Odysseus sobbed in the shade of a pear-tree for his father
> So old and pathetic that all he wanted then and there
> Was to kiss him and hug him and blurt out the whole story,
> But the whole story is one catalogue and then another" (ll. 1-2, 5-9).

Instinctively, Odysseus turns (like the narrative voice in "Northern Lights") to images of childhood "spent traipsing after his father / And asking for everything he saw" (ll. 11-12).[41] As the poem draws to a close, the intimacy of memory turns to the deeply personal shock of Laertes's recognition of his son, "Who drew the old man fainting to his breast and held him there / And cradled like driftwood the bones of his dwindling father" (18-19).

Hardwick argues that while Longley's deployment of Homeric recognition scenes has at times been read as "'an allegory of the Belfast condition'," the *anagnōristic* poem sequences are profoundly multi-layered:

> Longley's 'translations' of the Homeric recognition paradigm of testing, deception, foretelling, and recognition also involve a reflection on the notions of recognition in relation to individual subjectivities and to the psychology of human rememberings and tracings of identity and consciousness. The Homeric recognition of persons and identities is in Longley's poetic technique elided into

> moments of apprehension when past and present come together in a mutually illuminating gesture. The multiple frames of reference include those refracted in the ancient text and those added in migrations through time, place, and language […] Peeling back the layers involved in metaphorical recognitions involves identifying strands of cultural memory and aspiration that problematize the notion of *nostos*. (205-206)

As such, the poem-pairs must be read in light of both the personal and the archetypal, the privately experienced and the communally suffered.

The next two poems in *Gorse Fires* turn to visions of the mother, again captured through a private then public, Odyssey-driven lyric. The poet eschews chronological constraints, instead, skipping in time between past and future perception; for example, "The Balloon," offers the unpredictable vision of Longley's mother as a child, free from the struggles of her young life and prior to facing her challenging years as a mother, who is coaxed to joyousness by the vision of a balloon, floating above her and "cast[ing] no shadow," (l. 3) which carries the poet, her grown and unknown son. "You are a child in the dream and not my mother," a phrase twice repeated in a poem of a mere ten lines (ll. 1, 8). Akin to a time traveler, Longley both co-exists in the moment of his creation and stands apart from it, able to read his experiences along with those he depicts from an imaginative distance. Nevertheless, the poet's delicate step across the threshold of lived experience and into the image-scape of his poems has inevitably been tempered by his personal and historical moment. In the paired lyric, "Anticleia," Longley travels for the first time in the volume to the underworld, shadowing Odysseus: "And so many souls of

the anemic dead come crowding in / That you hold them back with your bayonet from the blood / Only to recognize among the zombies your own mother" (ll. 6-8).

While in "The Balloon," the poet calls out to his mother, reaching back to the dream of her as a child, in "Anticleia," the stretch is forward—that of a son aching to touch the ghost of his mother. Both gestures are unredeemable. Captured in the latter poem are the legendary, futile three attempts of the hero-son to embrace his mother-shade. And while both "The Balloon" and "Anticleia" use a second person form of address, it is in Longley's description of this excruciating scene that the contemporary poet stands out most clearly as a figure calling out to the archetypal Odysseus, his comrade of sorts, across the centuries:

> You lunge forward three times to hug her and three times
>
> Like a shadow or idea she vanishes through your arms
>
> And you ask her why she keeps avoiding your touch and weep
>
> Because here is your mother and even here in Hades
>
> You could comfort each other in a shuddering embrace […] (ll. 10-14)

The poem closes with a mingled personal and vatic query: "Will she explain that the sinews no longer bind her flesh / And bones, that the irresistible fire has demolished these, / That the soul takes flight like a dream and flutters in the sky, / That this is what happens to human beings when they die?" (ll. 15-18). It is as if Odysseus's inner cry is translated into the poet's own plea: might not the dead be capable of shedding some insight on the sufferings of the living? The poems in *Gorse Fires* may be read as varied responses—both private and public—to this implicit question.

Following "Anticleia" is a collection of poems that deal explicitly with the wounds of World War II, each assisting the volume in its movement towards the more collectively painful waters of public exposure. The beauty of the poems contrasts with the horror of the themes and underscores the absurdity of violence and the untenable contingencies of war. And although by no means mere preparatory material, this brief series of poems—coming themselves on the heels of personal memory bitter-sweetened by visions of homecoming—prime the reader for the final lyrics in the book, those which deal most explicitly with contemporary sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. In the volume's concluding Homeric poem-pairs, this temporal suspension is explored with a continued descent into the Classical underworld.

In his interdisciplinary study of the underworld entitled *The Descent to the Underworld* (2001), Evans Lansing Smith argues that "The descent to the underworld is the single most important myth for Modernist authors" particularly in the aftermath of World War I when the political, artistic, and often personal consequences of surviving the war insisted upon the reshaping of artistic idiom (7). Alternately, according to Smith, "an ancestral crypt, an inferno, a temenos (i.e. a sacred site of initiatory transformation), or as a cornucopia of the archetypal forms of the mind, which give shape and significance to life and art," the underworld is ubiquitous, in all its guises, in Modern and contemporary literature, as it is famously so in the Classics.

Northern Irish poets such as Longley, Heaney, and Carson have called powerfully upon ancient accounts of *nekyia* (and importantly, not only is Homer's underworld adapted to the Northern Irish context, but as is discussed in this dissertation, Virgil's and Dante's, too) in order to address the flare of sectarian violence and subsequent political

intractability in Northern Ireland. In the closing poem of *Gorse Fires*, Longley produces a lyric of epic sweep. Like "Laertes" and "Anticleia," the line of "The Butchers" is long, though here is added a prose-like rhythm to the verse that succeeds in mirroring Homer's original text.

Originally entitled "The Shankill Butchers,"[42] Longley drops the sectarian specificity in the final title of the poem, thereby rendering the lyric both less descriptive of the violence in Northern Ireland and chillingly, more universal. It need not matter which man stands for which "side; this is an old story and Longley's readership knows it well:

> When he had made sure there were no survivors in his house
> And that all the suitors were dead, heaped in blood and dust […]
> Odysseus, spattered with muck and like a lion dripping blood
> From his chest and cheeks after devouring a farmer's bullock
> Ordered the disloyal housemaids to sponge down the armchairs (ll. 1-2, 4-6)

The cool-headed efficiency with which Odysseus purges his home of the scene of slaughter cuts like a blade through the reflective mood that has shaped the rest of the volume. Telemachus assists his father in the vile business of cleansing the home of all sign of the suitors. This process involves the hanging of the housemaids, an ugly business left to the son, as if a father's wrath and vengeance need be ceremoniously passed down to the next generation. And while the women are hung, "like long-winged thrushes / Or doves trapped in a mist-net across the thicket where they roost / Their heads bobbing in a row, their feet twitching but not for long," Odysseus and his son disfigure the corpse of Melanthios and "Fumigat[e] the house […] so that Hermes / Like a

clergyman might wave the supernatural baton" and rally the dead for their final journey to the underworld (ll. 11-14, 18-19).

As the souls of the suitors and handmaids are woken and escorted by Hermes to their final, fiery abode, they are not silent. Instead, "Like bats gibbering in the nooks of their mysterious cave," the dead murmur with desperation. Worrying their memories like talismanic stones, these ghosts are locked in the circuit of what happened, how and to whom. Privy to data, they are nevertheless unable to translate private event into lasting—potentially immortal—narrative: this task is set for the living, for the survivors. And the poet becomes the medium through which this transition from rough death record to storied elegy begins to quicken. Longley takes this task of poetic witness seriously in *Gorse Fires*, as he does in his subsequent volume, *The Ghost Orchid* (1995). By so doing, he moves in an evermore tragic—and Classical—direction.

In 1992, Michael Longley was invited to contribute to Michael Hoffman and James Lasdun's anthology, *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, a collection published in 1994. Indeed, many of the poems that ultimately found their way into *The Ghost Orchid* first flickered in the light of this assignment. Initially commissioned to offer a version of "Baucis and Philemon," Longley's engagement with Ovid proved fertile, and six additional Ovid-influenced verses ("Perdix," "Spiderwoman," "A Flowering," "Ivory & Water," "Phoenix," and "According to Pythagoras") were penned.

Buoyed by the success of *Ghost Fires*, Ovid's example arrived at a fortuitous moment for the poet, further fueling what Brearton calls Longley's "formal

preoccupation with change and mutability" (188). Commencing with "Form" the poet sets a mission statement for the collection:

> Trying to tell it all to you and cover everything
>
> Is like awakening from its grassy form the hare:
>
> In that make-shift shelter your hand, then my hand
>
> Mislays the hare and the warmth it leaves behind.

Here, Longley addresses not only the reader to whom he offers his series of poems, but simultaneously, his exemplary predecessor. As Longley notes in "After Horace," "We postmodernists […] // Since our fertile imaginations cannot make head / Or tail of anything, wild things interbreed with tame […]" (ll. 1, 6-7); indeed, such was the case with the Ovid who knew well the power of shape-shifting and its place in artistic resurrection.

"Metamorphosis is also to do with translation," continues Brearton, "which is always, as Longley is aware, about transformation into and out of another language, time, and place, about taking on the shape of another and simultaneously reshaping it oneself" (189). Indeed, this energy of transformation is snared in several of the poems in *The Ghost Orchid*. In "Perdix,"—"that story about the failure of wings" and the power of progeny—(l. 1), the gods protect the newest incarnation of the craftsman, and this despite Daedalus's seething jealousy; in "According to Pythagoras," corpses disintegrate, giving way to new life as "[a] she-bear's cub is a lump of meat whose stumpy / Non-legs she licks into shape in her own image," (ll. 1, 13-14) while "Ovid's lovely casualties" begin with "Arachne [who] starts with Ovid and finishes with me" ("A Flowering," l. 3; "Spiderwoman," l. 1). Indeed, Longley speaks for all poets when he notes: "We borrow,

faraway places in gravelly sea" ("A Pair of Shoes," l. 4). This statement proves particularly true in the case of Northern Irish poets working with the translation and adaptation of classical texts.[43]

As it was for Heaney, the time leading up to the 1994 ceasefire proved a moment of historical import that Longley felt driven to address in his poetry. Seldom considered an explicitly political poet, Longley stepped directly into the public spotlight when he submitted his celebrated lyric, "Ceasefire," to the *Irish Times*. The poet explains the impetus behind the poem:

> I concentrated into a sonnet all that I wanted to borrow from this episode [of Homer's *Iliad*]. Because at that time we were praying for an IRA ceasefire. I called the poem 'Ceasefire' and, hoping to make my own minute contribution, sent it to the *Irish Times*. It was the poem's good luck to be published two days after the IRA's declaration. Almost always a poem makes its own occasion in private. This was an exception, and I still find warming the response of several readers, some of them damaged or bereaved in the Troubles. (qtd. in McDonald 46).

While Longley confesses that his greatest Homeric love lies with the *Odyssey*, he insists that the *Iliad* is the outstanding epic of death (*Teachnet*, "Ceasefire"). The scene from the latter that he translates into his own poetic idiom in "Ceasefire" is that of King Priam's painful encounter with Achilles upon the death of his son.

Longley's sonnet encompasses not only the love of a father for his murdered son, but also, the courageous realization that all human beings—perpetrator and victim

alike—are cloaked under the same mantle of suffering while at war. As much as "Ceasefire" is a poem of sectarian division, it is shared space of empathy between combatants: "Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears/ Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king/ Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and/ Wept with him until their sadness filled the building" (ll. 1-4). Having come for the body of his son, Priam falls at the feet of the man who has killed his child. And while the poem is expertly poised, refusing a collapse into easy sentimentality, the message is one of shared grief and shared responsibility—a tragic moment, indeed.

In a poem-pairing of sorts, "Ceasefire" is preceded by a "The Helmet," a piece that echoes with the same sort of violent inheritance passed from father to son that is evidenced in "The Butchers." Here, Priam holds Hector, not as the corpse he will become, but as a newborn child who is frightened by the war-helmet that his father wears. And while the baby "howl[s], terrorized by his father," his parents laugh, entirely disassociated from the symbolic import of their child's cries (l. 3). The poem closes with chilling lines, underscored by the reader's knowledge of the haunting fate that awaits Hector on the very next page: Laughing, Hector "Took off his helmet and laid it on the floor to gleam / Then kissed the babbie and dandled him in his arms, and / Prayed that his son might grow up bloodier than him" (ll. 6-8).

Both poems draw on Homeric myth in part to illuminate the present in the pained sectarian connotation of the closing lines of "Ceasefire," Hector's final address of Achilles: "'I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'" (ll. 13-14). Longley's assessment of the reception of "Ceasefire" is revealing:

> Normally the poems I write make their occasion in private; this poem had some pubic impact. That was a refreshment for me and it pleases me that I have made a very tiny contribution to things being better in Ireland. I do believe that poetry makes things happen. I sent ["Ceasefire"] to the *Irish Times* in the hope that they would print it, in the hope that if they did print it somebody might read it and it might change the mind of one ditherer on the IRA council. And by coincidence the IRA did declare a ceasefire […] When I published my poem […] I got a letter from the father of Paul Maxwell, the sixteen-year-old-boy who had been blown up with Lord Mountbatten. Those letters matter more to me than any amount of criticism I might receive in literary journals or attention in the public world. (*Teachnet*, "Ceasefire)

Longley is not alone in his belief that a poem *can* touch the political moment—that it *can* indeed make something happen. Like Homer, like Heaney, he is moved to capture in verse the stories of the dead who are no longer able to testify to the gravity of their loss and the larger significance of their personal, suffered experiences. Specifically, lyric has proven a uniquely equipped poetic form by which Longley has adapted the Classically epic journey to the underworld into a contemporary, but authentically tragic idiom. Like the twinned lovers, Baucis and Philemon—"Two trees […] grafted together"—epic and lyric, past and present, living and dead unite in Longley's verse and stand as eternal symbols of loss sustained though love.

By the close of *Tuppenny Stung*, Longley is surefooted in his poetic journey; "[w]alking backwards into the future like a Greek," the poet's most recent collections,

The Weather in Japan (2001) and *Snow Water* (2004) continue to underscore his commitment to the voices of his "own dead."[44] It is Longley's sense of what he terms in "Sleep and Death," "the entitlement of the dead"—of both kin and purported foe—that continues to fuel the poet's interaction with the translation and adaption of Classical texts in his lyrics. Like his Northern Irish contemporaries, Longley's verse is steeped in a vision that endeavors to syncopate the past with the present and the personal with the poetic. Transgressing the borderlines of cultural, language, even genre, his poetry offers compelling new vantage points from which to view the horrors of the Northern Irish Troubles[45] without ever sacrificing the integrity of a personal aesthetic.

Longley's translations neither offer up images of political and social harmony, nor draw any explicit comparisons between suffered experience and its poetic treatment. Rather, the poet's lyrical adaptations of Greek and Roman Classical epics—mediated through the light of an ancient conception of tragedy—are invitations to new ways of perceiving the role and function of the lyric in contemporary Northern Ireland. In true tragic form, the destiny of the region is unclear: though we know the beginning of the Troubles' narrative, we do not—indeed, we cannot—know the end. Ultimately, however, Michael Longley's vision reminds his readers of the clear and fruitful twinning of the Classical past with the Irish present and of the living world with that of the dead. As such, we are invited to renew our faith in the capacity of poetry to weather trauma and usher us forward into ever-new iterations of our questing selves.

[1] From Michael Longley's "Lapsed Classicist" (97, 110). The poet continues: "Versions that reflect my preoccupations at a deep level feel to me like my own poems, especially when, as is usually the case, I combine free rendition of source texts with original lines" (110).
[2] Peter McDonald discusses Longley's "close repetition [of] Homer," in "Cold Comfort," his review of *Snow Water*, as a space where "care takes over where carnage has left off—but twice, and with a ritualistic attention to particulars mirrored in the act of verbal repetition" (qtd. in Brearton 244). Fran Brearton comments that "The poem's structure uncannily evokes the two chaperons, Sleep and Death, an effect compounded by its other subtle doublings: cloud and sun, fire and water" (244).
[3] Interview with Robert Johnstone, "The Longley Tapes," *The Honest Ulsterman* 78 (Summer 1985), 17. Cited in McDonald, 35.
[4] "'Because of my English connection', Longley explained in a recent interview, 'I am slightly ill at ease in Ireland, and the same applies in England because I am from Ireland. In this community which I am still exploring and trying to understand I still feel a bit of an outsider'" (qtd. in Andrews 79).
[5] In his essay, "Conflict, Violence, and 'The Fundamental Interrelatedness of all Things,'" Andrews argues that Longley's lifelong residence in Northern Ireland—indeed, he is the only member of The Group (i.e. Longley, Heaney, Mahon, and Muldoon) who has remained in the North throughout his writing life—has had both predictable and unforeseen effects on his verse; the critic contends that "it would indeed be a surprise if the experience of almost thirty years of civil unrest, political violence and sectarian bloodletting [in Northern Ireland] did not impinge upon his work" (73). However, he goes on to say that perhaps surprisingly, only a very limited number of Longley's poems deal directly with the Troubles—a criticism others have extended. It is also important to note that Longley has spent extended periods in his country home in County Mayo, a landscape that shapes many of his poems.
[6] In his autobiography, *Tuppenny Stung* (1994), Longley explains the mixed reception he received in Philip Hobsbaum's Group:

> When my turn came [to share my poetry] I was expecting sharp criticism, but was rather surprised by the ferocity of Hobsbaum's attack and the incomprehension which my work seemed to inspire in everyone else. Just before Hobsbaum left Belfast for Glasgow he admitted that I was really quite good, but up until then I had been encouraged to think of myself as a degenerate sophisticate. This merely confirmed me in my ways—in fact I used to look forward masochistically to the seasonal maulings. I can honestly say that I did not alter one semi-colon as the result of Group discussions. (41)

[7] Given Longley's sustained residence in Northern Ireland and his physical proximity to the violence of the Troubles, this requisite imaginative distance may be all the more imperative.
[8] Fran Brearton's analysis of the dangers of adopting the pitfalls of identity politics in her *Reading Michael Longley* (2006) are particularly illuminating on this matter:

> The politics of identity […] have been discussed, it would seem, almost to the point of exhaustion, and a certain weariness as regards 'identitarianism' in Irish poetry criticism is also now in evidence. But weariness is only permissible when the terms of the debate have been exhausted. If there is a repetitiveness about notions of Irish poetry, it has tended to emerge from a reluctance to accommodate exceptions that do not prove the rule. In Longley's case, that he has not been easily incorporated into some versions of the 'Irish tradition', that he remains seemingly difficult to 'place', suggests that his Irish-English heritage still proves a disruptive force, and that he causes, as does Yeats with his literary Anglo-Irishness, ideological unease in certain quarters. (11)

[9] Lorna Hardwick. "'Murmurs in the Cathedral': The Impact of Translation from Greek Poetry and Drama on Modern Work in English by Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney." *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 36, No. 1, Translation (2006), 204-215.
[10] Russell notes that Longley's early poetry has received scant scholarly attention. Indeed, he cites only three critics, namely, Michael Allen, Fran Brearton, and Renee Fox, who have offered considered readings of *Secret Marriages* and *No Continuing City*. Both Allen and Brearton, according to Rankin, contend that Longley's explicit rhyme scheme contributes to a "diminution of rhythm [that] might be symptomatic of the drying-up of poetic imagination" (Allen) and / or a "repressive [collection] of short poems that, however successful they may be in and of themselves, ultimately prove to be a closed circuit, trapped inside their own forms like a voice trapped inside its own head" (Brearton) (here, footnote 8, 319). For a rich discussion of Longley's early critical reception, see Russell's chapter, "Lighting Out for the Unknown Territory: Longley's *No Continuing City*." 59-89.

[11] For a compelling treatment of the presence of elegy in Northern Irish poetry, see Corcoran's doctoral dissertation, "Ships of Death: The Elegiac Poetics of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley" (Emory University, 2003). Also, see Russell, who suggests that "[t]hese early poems, then, in their purposefully subtle yokings of form and content, are themselves 'secret marriages' performed by the poet as aesthetic priest, an inherently Joycean position, one shared with Seamus Heaney […] (63).
[12] The title of this essay is drawn from Longley's "Letter to James Simmons," a poem included in *An Exploded View* (1973). The lines read: "(Words a bow-tie round a cancer): / […] That poetry at play / With lip and tooth, is here to stay, / […]" (ll. 50, 53-54). In addition, as Brearton notes, "A Tongue at Play" may be fruitfully read against Heaney's "The Government of the Tongue," even at the level of the title (26).
[13] This citation is drawn from a draft of Longley's essay found in Emory's MARBL collections, Manuscript Collection No.744, Box 38, Folder 10. As quoted in its published form, the line reads: "Horace calls the poet *musarum sacerdos*, priest of the muses '[…] the Scottish word *makar* is a straight translation of the Greek *poetes*. The poet oscillates between notions of craft and vision" (*Tuppenny Stung* 120).
[14] While poetic formalism has been one of Longley's trademarks since his earliest volumes, the innovation of his work as been largely underestimated by cursory critical reviews that equate the formalism of his verse with a cautious conservatism. Rather, as Brearton argues, "forms […] have always worked as a medium for experimentation, and for risk-taking [in Longley's poetry], in ways which have made him profoundly influential on, as well as contemporaneous with, [a] postmodern generation. Indeed, Brearton suggests that the novelty of Longley's style points towards a greater affinity with Paul Muldoon's verse than it does with that of the other Belfast Group poets (9).
[15] This translation comes from the King James Bible; the original Greek reads as follows: *ou gar exomen hode menousan polin, alla ten mellousan epizetouman*, literally, "for we do not have a present city here, but we seek the future [city]" (Ruprecht). Russell reads the ellipses that Longley substitutes for the latter half of the epigraph as representative of "a punctuation that itself suggests continuation. On a historical level," he continues, "the use of this half-verse may imply that Longley's native Belfast, sinking as it was into violence in 1969, simply could not continue on that course or would cease to exist as it had previously" (64).
[16] Twinned in more ways than one, Michael Longley's and Seamus Heaney's biographies appear, at first glance, most auspicious for Irish poets—particularly for those of Northern decent. Born in 1939, both men share the year of their birth with that of the death of William Butler Yeats. In addition, both poets' first substantial collections appeared in the latter half of the 1960s, coinciding with the advent of the Troubles. While it is tempting to read these poets as prodigal sons of both Irish history and art, their uncanny biographical details have likewise contributed to occasional negligent scholarship. Like Heaney, Longley has been forced to weather the expectations (and recriminations) of his political and religious constituencies. He has also endured cursory identity-based treatments of his work from scholars who are seduced by his Irish / English heritage and his Protestant faith (Brearton 13).
[17] In *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision* (1994), Louis A. Ruprecht , Jr. draws attention to the fact that "The Greek language has one mode of discourse that we no longer possess, 'the dual.' Duality—as distinct from the singular as it is from the plural—possesses a completely distinctive form in this dialect. To be two together," he explains, "is as different from being three as it is from being alone" (40).
[18] On August 12, 1969, the loyalist sectarian group, the Apprentice Boys, marched through the city of Derry, thus provoking the siege of the Catholic Bogside and ushering in a period of grievous and accelerating violence; August 12 was also the day on which Longley delivered a lecture at the Yeats Summer School in Sligo where his comments on the "decline of the subordinate clause"—given the violence of the day's events in Derry—struck the wrong note. For a complete discussion of this combustion of Troubles violence and the effect it had on Longley's work and reception, see Brearton (51-52).
[19] Brearton writes: "On one level, "Epithalamion" is a formal experiment designed to test the limits of Longley's technical skill as it developed in the early 1960s. He deliberately invents a difficult stanza shape; the inflexible ababb rhyme scheme provides its own rigorous challenge; and, finally, the poem's complex syntactical structure is tightly linked to the overall movement of the poem" (14).
[20] See Werner Wolf's "The Lyric: Problems of Definition." *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*. Ed. Eva Müller-Zettelmann (2005), 21-56.

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[21] As Richard Rankin Russell notes in his recent study, *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland* (2010), Hobsbaum—and The Group itself—had a muted impression of Longley's poetry. However, his response nevertheless seems to anticipate the criticism of future scholars:

> At the time it seemed to me that Michael's literariness, demonstrated in this poem, rather got in the way of his experience… The inhibition, it appears now, was not a literariness *per se* so much as a reliance on rhyme. The rhymes in themselves cannot be faulted, and the craft of the early poems seems on the surface to be most assured. But there has been a breakthrough, at a time well advanced in this poet's working life, with the remarkable collection *Gorse Fires*. This seems to me qualitatively superior to any of the previous books, and it cannot be a coincidence that the poems in *Gorse Fires* are on the whole unrhymed. There may have been in the past some inhibiting pressure that was later removed. ("Belfast Group" 176)

[22] This bird-man creature is likewise reminiscent of the figure of Sweeney from the *Buile Suibhne*, a being treated in Heaney's 1983 translation of the Irish classic and published as *Sweeney Astray*. Heaney's adaptation is discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation.

[23] Fran Brearton suggests that "[m]etamorphosis is also to do with translation, which is always, as Michael Longley is aware, about transformation into and out of another language, time, and place, about taking on the shape of another and simultaneously reshaping it oneself" (189). This insight is revealing of Longley's early poetic development.

[24] For a comprehensive treatment of this Longley, Heaney, and Mahon's epistolary poetry, see Gavin Drummond's "The Difficulty of We: The Epistolary Poems of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon." *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 35, Irish Writing since 1950 (2005), 31-42.

[25] In an interview with John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (2002), Longley confessed: "In my forty years of writing, nothing (apart from my marriage) has been more important than that first friendship with Mahon" (89). As a result, the temporary falling out between the poets was deeply unsettling for both men.

[26] Following the publication of "Letter to Derek Mahon," the aforesaid sent the following response to the editor of *New Statesman*:

> A casual reader of [the poem] by my friend Michael Longley (*New Statesman*, Dec. 3d), might be forgiven for drawing one or two erroneous conclusions. Mr. Longley, with the best will in the world, appears to attribute to me attitudes to which I do not, in fact, subscribe. I refer to lines 6 and 9 of "To Derek Mahon"—"The Catholics we scarcely loved" and "Two poetic conservatives." *The implications* of line 6, as it stands, are frankly *untrue,* not to say *damaging*, and the overtones of line 9 *tendentious* and *misleading*. No-one likes to see his *view misrepresented*, however innocently. Mr. Longley may speak for himself; he doesn't necessarily speak for me. ("Letter to the Editor" 821, [italics mine])

[27] Drummond notes that Longley eventually made the small but noteworthy confession of altering the line from "the Catholics we scarcely loved" to "the Catholics we'd scarcely loved" (42).

[28] Note 26 records Mahon's public response; privately, he writes to Longley:

> […]This is not a matter of censorship. Seamus, here last week put it like this: by dedicating a poem to someone you make him in a sense co-author of the piece; you associate him, will he nill he, with the contents of the poems, thus giving him some measure of, yes, proprietary right. It's not something I would claim in the ordinary course of events (nor would anyone); but the circumstances are exceptional. So let's change the lines, like a good man: it's the only just solution. (Derek Mahon, letter to Michael Longley, (n.d. [Dec. I971]): 'Micko, Let's be quite clear about the letter/poem business', Longley Papers, Box I, Folder 7)

Though blindsided by Mahon's response, both stung and angry, Longley refused to change the lines, and the poem was published as written.

[29] Drummond says that Longley's phrase "sodality of the imagination," is revealing of a larger need registered, however unconsciously, by Northern Irish poets who came into their poetic voices during the late 1960s, to share in an artistic community (if not a in political or religious one). The critic cites the numerous dedicatory poems that arise between Heaney, Longley, Mahon, and James Simmons at this time and points out the intriguing detail that the dedicatees are seldom—if ever—referred to by name in these verses; Drummond argues that this "absent second person plural" approach creates "a feeling of throwing down the gauntlet to all of them, a poetic challenge" (33-34).

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[30] In *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision: Against the Modern Failure of Nerve* (1994), Ruprecht distinguishes between the ancient Greek conception of tragedy and our modern tragic posture: "While we may despair, and rightly so, of ever adequately defining what constitutes a 'tragedy,' there are things that tragedy surely cannot be. It is not simply about suffering, which is spectacle or *pathos*, nor is it simply a depiction of the radical absence of closure in human matters, which is *farce*. Rather, pathos and farce are converted into tragedy when they are read in the light of deeper meaning, in the light of values that are 'absolute,' and the conviction that we all still inhabit a common universe of such values" (65).
[31] In reference to the considerable gap between Longley's publication of *The Echo Gate* and *Gorse Fires*, Brearton writes: "That gap has not been without its consequences. The absence of any new collection by Longley in the 1980s, a decade in which 'Irish Studies' was itself consolidated in the academy, may be seen as one reason for the comparatively limited critical attention paid to his work at that time, compounding the problems Longley's complex sense of identity had already caused for certain critical perspectives. (The 'twelve year silence' narrative can sometimes operate, not very successfully, as a kind of critical alibi for the delay in paying proper attention to his earlier work.) More importantly now, in terms of reading Longley's poetry, the long gap between collections has tended, in both practical and critical ways, to obscure the continuities between his 1970s poetry, and the work published in the 1990s. In that sense, describing the period as a 'twelve year silence' could be more misleading than helpful" (162).
[32] *Gorse Fires* received the Whitbred Poetry Prize in the year of its publication (1991). *No Continuing City* (1969), *And Exploded View* (1973), *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976), and *The Echo Gate* (1979) preceded the volume.
[33] In a 1996 interview with Peter McDonald in *Thumbscrew*, 12, Winter 1998-1999, Longley explains the interwoven nature of his later collections:

> In my first four books I had indulged a tendency to write short intense lyrics and then arrange them in sequences. Something different began to happen in *Gorse Fires*—some kind of involuntary denial of the urge to string poems together in rosaries. The book emerged like a big patchwork. I wanted any given poem to draw resonances from other poems ten or twenty pages in front or behind. I was aiming for a deeper cohesiveness. In more confident moments the book looks to me like one big poem, although each piece has its own title and independence. This process was taken further in *The Ghost Orchid* (7).

[34] A perusal of the draft table of contents pages in Longley's manuscript collection held in the Manuscript and Rare Book Library (MARBL) at Emory University's Woodruff Library shows the extent to which both the order and the titles of the poems shifted over time.
[35] See preceding footnote for a draft exception to this rule.
[36] "Nurse" was a tentative title beneath the broader heading "Returns: After Homer." One assumes that at one time, the many Homeric poems found in *Gorse Fires*, were to be collected under this name.
[37] While Longley could well have chosen to pair his autobiographical reverie, "Lena," with its classical counterpart, "Eurycleia," in similar fashion to the poem-parings of "The Balloon"/ "Anticleia" and "Northern Lights"/ "Laertes," to do so would have erased the arguably more subtle interrogation of the role of motherhood that is investigated through the pairing of "The Man of Two Sorrows" with "Eurycleia."
[38] In *Tuppenny Stung* Longley describes the fate of his close relationship with Lena. He writes:

> I last met Lena in 1967 when, on her way to visit relatives in Fermanagh, she called briefly to meet my wife and our first child. My arms melted around her in acceptance and surrender. She was (and, so far as I know, still is) working as a priest's housekeeper in New York. A few years ago Paul Muldoon and I gave a reading there in the Public Theatre. I had thought of contacting Lena, but was anxious that no audience would turn up and that she would be upset and embarrassed on my behalf. The evening turned out to be a considerable success. Lena should have been sitting in the middle of the front row. (16)

[39] Michael Allen's "Longley's Long Line: Looking Back from *The Ghost Orchid*." *The Poetry of Michael Longley*. Eds. Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine (2000).
[40] "From the beginning I have relished making poems out of single long sentences […] all in one sentence to try and get the headlong emotion" (*Teachnet*, "Laertes").
[41] Longley explains the inspiration for the poem thus: "Before she died, my mother told me that when I was a toddler I used to go obsessively into the garden and ask what the names of plants were. I was in Italy in about 1989 and I had a view from the bathroom window of this little villa... and there was this

octogenarian tending his flowers. I had a volume of Homer with me and I wrote the Laertes poem which is also a lament for my father. And that was extraordinary. I really felt as if I had gone back into Homeric times, and I was part of a timeless Mediterranean scene" (*Teachnet*, "Laertes").

[42] Longley's manuscript materials also reveal the poet's consideration of "The Suitors," "The Butchers and the Suitors," "Butchers and Suitors," and "Suitors and Butchers" as alternative titles for the poem.

[43] John Kerrigan argues in "Ulster Ovids, *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, Ovid may fruitfully be read as a "Latin Ulsterman" whose appeal comes both from his "metamorphic imaginings" and his eventual exile from Rome (266, and cited in Brearton, 189).

[44] Brearton notes that in *The Weather in Japan* alone, there are at least fifteen new elegies (215).

CHAPTER THREE

"For even at one remove / The thing I meant was love": Forging Home in Derek Mahon's Classics

"Battles have been lost, but a war remains to be won. The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but between the fluidity of a possible life (poetry is a great lubricant) and the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural. The poets themselves have taken no part in political events, but they have contributed to that possible life; for the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem is a paradigm of good politics—of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time."

~Derek Mahon[1]

Derek Mahon's first complete volume of poetry was published in 1968 under the travelers' title, *Night-Crossing*. Verse from his student days at Trinity College, Dublin, intermingles with poems penned during his subsequent time abroad; throughout, voices are ventriloquized, creating a rich cacophony that reveals an ear attuned to what he would later call "the soft roar of the world" ("Afterlives," l. 2).[2] Mahon's interest in painting stands out in *Night-Crossing*, and the poems susurrate with the imagined inner-workings of Van Gogh and Vermeer (e.g. "A Portrait of the Artist"). The poet further stylizes his ventriloquy when he assumes the voice of Jan Van Meegeren, a Dutch portrait artist indicted for forgery after the Second World War. "The Forger"—and indeed, the volume

in its entirety—may be read as early indication of the role translation will play in Mahon's oeuvre and the relevance of the mode to his sense of personal and artistic revivification throughout the decades of the Northern Irish Troubles and beyond:

> When I sold my fake Vermeers to Goering
> Nobody knew, nobody guessed
> The agony, the fanaticism
> Of working beyond criticism
> And better than the best. (ll. 1-5)

Brashly assured of his artistic skill, Mahon-as-Meegeren parodies the confidence required to "forge" (in multiple senses of the word) another artist's work. Though the poet's tone is playful, even sarcastic, buried within the bluster of the verse is a forthcoming confession that bespeaks his conception of all art as reiteration:

> Not I, but *they* were the frauds;
> I revolutionized their methods.
>
> […] But my genius will live on;
> For even at one remove
> The thing I meant was love" (ll. 15-16, 21-23).

Also included in *Night-Crossing* is a poem following fast on the heels of "The Forger" entitled "An Unborn Child." Dedicated to Michael and Edna Longley and composed on the eve of Mahon's return to Ireland, the latter poem offers a vision of gestational (pre-) consciousness that shares the creative (post-) confidence of the former. "I must compose myself at the nerve center / Of this metropolis, and not forget" attests the child in utero, "[…] the city / […] I keep in touch with it, / Listening to the warm red

water / Racing in the sewers of my mother's body" (ll. 25-30). Claiming innocence—"[…] 'I want to live!'— / This is my first protest, and shall be my last. / […] everything I do / Or say is couched in the affirmative" (ll. 41-44)—it is as if the forger of the previous poem is absolved of any crime in "An Unborn Child," as life itself, like art, is introduced as a theatre of reiteration.[3] Mahon's poetic suggests that the act of forgery is akin to the act of creation: both practices involve the melding of new shapes from pre-existent forms; and significantly, neither application is free from the complex undertow of artistic and ethical responsibility. This analogy is a fruitful lens through which to consider Mahon's prolific work with translation in general and with the Classics in particular.

As Hugh Haughton states, "in a sense all [Mahon's] work is about the adaptation of texts or ideas from elsewhere to the new historical moment" (*The Poetry of Derek Mahon* 368). Whether it stem from the "elsewhere" of country, chronology, or culture, Mahon insists that creation is—literally—a labor of love passed down through the ages between both other poets and earlier versions of one's own self.[4] A notorious revisionist of his personal verse, Mahon's comprehensive engagement with translation and adaptation may be understood as a natural fit and a provocative extension of "the forger's" craft. However, it is arguably in this vein where Mahon's work has been most underestimated. While many critics perceive the poet's revision practices as excessive and a hobble to assimilating his verse,[5] I will argue that Mahon's Classical translations and adaptations encourage the reader to view revision and reiteration as flip sides of the same coin. Together, these interfaces seem to constitute the *modus operandi* of the poet's aesthetic and go a considerable distance towards clarifying his editorial preferences.

Additionally, I will read Mahon's extensive work with Classical translation against the grain of various constructs of Northern Irish communal identity including nation, religion, and language. I will argue that while the poet's engagement with translation and adaptation has conventionally—even by his best critics, such as Haughton[6]—been relegated (however unintentionally) to the periphery of his oeuvre, especially in his early work, the mode is in fact intrinsic to the originality and appeal of Mahon's verse, to what Heaney has referred to as the poet's "sense of bilocation" and to what I will posit is an under-observed and underrated poetics of faith that reinscribes Mahon's relationship to self-exile and to home (*Finders Keepers* 124).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my approach to this chapter must come at a slant, for while the two poets previously treated in this dissertation both deal explicitly with underworld journey and encounters with those I have termed their "own dead," Mahon's case is different. However, I believe it belongs in this work—indeed, is a seminal element of the study—for what it places in the foreground is neglected bedrock to the work of both Heaney and Longley and indeed, of all Troubles poets. Specifically, Mahon's *nekuia* takes place within; the dead he seeks are often poets who have come before, "forgers" themselves who have left their own layered marks on times of crisis and loss, articulating the utterance of history for subsequent generations. Theirs is an agonistic relationship: the living poets, each after their own fashion, seek their ghosted predecessors as guides, as exemplars, and at times, as spirited competitors; both journey and encounter are captured in the trellis of contemporary Northern Irish verse and perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in Derek Mahon's vexed representations of home.

This chapter will trace the poet's relationship to ancient Greek and Roman translation and adaptation in chronological order. I will follow the poet's lead, working primarily from his *Collected Poems* (1999) and noting original versions and variations when pertinent. Along with Mahon's lyric, I will consider two theatrical adaptations, namely, his version of Euripides's *The Bacchae* (1996) and *Oedipus* (2005), a compilation of Sophocles's *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Throughout, I will argue that to translate, to adapt, is an act of resurrection and rebirth, particularly for Northern Irish poets whose mortal hour yokes their verse to the historical moment of the Troubles and whose weave of ethic and aesthetic tethers the modern moment to the Classical past.

Like Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, Derek Mahon was born and raised in Northern Ireland and came into his own as a poet in chronological-if-complex tandem with the onset of the Troubles in the late 1960s. Born in Belfast in November 1941, Mahon has described himself as a "recovering Ulster Protestant […] from County Down" (*The Hudson Letter* 218).[7] Once a self-proclaimed "strange child with a taste for verse," ("Courtyards in Delft," l. 30), the poet is the sole offspring of parents whose lives were shaped largely by their historical circumstances as working-class Protestants in the North.[8] Attuned to the considerable influence such solitariness had on his development, Mahon attests to an early sensitivity to the objects of his environs, what he has referred to as the "numina" of the day-to-day. In an interview with fellow poet Eamon Grennan, Mahon elaborates:

> I think it was important that I was an only child, an only child whose best friends were the objects I've been talking about. It was a quiet house. […] Since there wasn't any hurly-burly of siblings, I had time for the eye to dwell on things, for the brain to dream about things. I could spend an afternoon happily staring. […] I'd see […] things besides, like a coal delivery, the sort of pictorial qualities of coal. That kind of thing—the running of cold water from a kitchen tap, the light. I had time to dwell on these things. (154-155)

A modest, even reticent figure when it comes to self-disclosure, Mahon's interview with Grennan is revealing not only for the autobiographical light it sheds but equally, for its note of transparency and for the rare glimpse into the mind of this private artist that it offers.

As was seen to be the case with both Longley and Heaney, identity politics offer only a limited view of Mahon's poetics, as well. The aforementioned child—"an oddity" in his mother's words and in his own, "a bit of a dead loss in comparison" to typical boys his age[9]—has consciously honed what was once a sense of inadequacy and misfit into a cultivated individualism and artistic perspicacity that is comparatively immune to the pitfalls of standard political-cultural criticism. To phrase it otherwise, while certainly not untouched by the dichotomous categorizations facing his cohort of "Troubles-born" poets, Mahon has arguably had to struggle less ardently—with notable exception[10]—against the pigeonholes of religion, politics, and nation than either Heaney or Longley have done. This is the case, I would argue, in part by nature and in part by design.

While Heaney is a poet instinctually yoked to his native community and ethically haunted by the concurrent tug of and resistance to the strictures of home, Church, and

nation, and Longley, a writer twinned from birth and ever-expressive of a sense of the fundamental duality of his circumstances, Mahon is an exile in the manner of Euripides: his distance has been self-imposed and self-directed. Over the years, Mahon's watchful childhood gaze metamorphosed into a stature of poetic witness that has become a mark of his voice and vision among his contemporaries. Though gregarious and popular with his peers, Mahon has always stood at an angle others, in a manner of creative though complex remove.

When questioned by Grennan about the dedicatory nature of his verse in combination with his signature solitude, Mahon moves to a discussion of his natal community and his eventual estrangement from it:

> Throughout my teens I had a sense of the immediate community—extended family, the neighborhood and so on—but I felt that there was something terribly amiss and lacking and skewed about this whole carryon. It seems a very insufficient community. The question in the back of my mind all the time was, Is this all? Is this it? Is this life? These people, this place? In fact, of course, looking back on it now, there's a lot more vividness in actuality about both the people and the place than, at the time, in my intolerance, I was able to appreciate. A mistake Heaney has never made. But I was an odd fish. Heaney was part of his community growing up—part of the extended family and society—but I found the nature of that society intensely repressive, neurotic. (176)

Mahon cites his embarkation for Trinity College as a moment of semi-conscious leave-taking from one community and movement towards a new one—what would become a close entourage of young writers and mentoring professors, "a circle of readers" in the

intellectual bohemia of 1960s Dublin (175).[11] However, even within this group, Mahon's predilection for solitude shaped his interaction not only with his fellow writers but with the subject and demeanor of his burgeoning verse, as well.

"There is a perverse pride," admits Derek Mahon in the early poem, "Spring in Belfast," in being on the side / Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up" (ll. 6-7).[12] Lines such as these have led some critics, including Michael Silverblatt, to read the poet as "the darkest" of his cohort, penning verse that has been called "despairing and pessimistic," labels which Mahon genuinely contests: "I don't agree that I'm in any sense the darkest. I was always very fond of something Edmund Wilson once said of Scott Fitzgerald: 'His message is despair but his style sings of hope.' You know. Something like that."[13]

In his Nobel address, Heaney famously professed his conviction that "the end of all art is peace."[14] For Mahon, "the end of all art is faith," and this seemingly subtle difference in fact alters the focal point significantly.[15] While peace is a goal, a term of end-time and resolution, faith is a state of being, a positioning of the self in relation to the vicissitudes of the moment, a brace against the gale, a watchful posture *in medias res*.[16] For Mahon—a figure tagged by circumstance as an urban Ulster Protestant, yet by temperament, a lyricist and cosmopolitan existentialist—neither poetry, nor the life which gives it breath, ever exists on a plain of certainty. In his own words: "I think of it in dramatic terms: if you surround yourself with hesitation and constraint and so on, and yet manage to sing through, then you somehow earn the sound you make" (167).

As Grennan notes, a number of Mahon's poems conclude with an image "of somebody going on 'in spite of' […]" in a kind of persistent journey. Akin to the respective trajectories of Heaney and Longley, Mahon's pilgrimage has been lit by the Classical torchlight of his poetic predecessors; his encounter with loss, both personal and communal, and his self-implicating experience of exile allies him to "the unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain"—both the living and the dead ("Glengormley," l. 17). There is a decided undertone of guilt to Mahon's exilic aesthetic that is not present in the same way in either Heaney's or Longley's purview, and in order to catch its pitch, the reader must turn to the poet's vacillating conceptions of home.

"Forms that kneel at noon / In the city not ourselves": Derek Mahon's Homes:

"For a large part of my life," admits Mahon, "I've been *terrified* of home" (Grennan 163). While arguably an inevitable sentiment for an individual born and raised in twentieth-century Belfast—the city, as Michael Longley has it, of "guns and long knives" ("Letter to Derek Mahon," l. 10)—Mahon's fear is complex, and the various fashions in which the perception is detailed in his verse require extended attention. In the aforementioned early poem, "Spring In Belfast," this fundamental anxiety of place paradoxically appears to burgeon from within rather than stemming from explicit external factors. The poem tellingly sets the tone for Mahon's subsequent depictions of home, and as such, merits quoting in full:

Walking among my own this windy morning
In a tide of sunlight between shower and shower,
I resume my old conspiracy with the wet

Stone and the unwieldy images of the squinting heart.

Once more, as before, I remember not to forget.

There is a perverse pride in being on the side

Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.

We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill

At the top of every street, for there it is,

Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible—

But yield instead to the humorous formulae,

The spurious mystery in the knowing nod;

Or we keep sullen silence in light and shade,

Rehearsing our astute salvations under

The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God.

One part of my mind must learn to know its place.

The things that happen in the kitchen houses

And echoing back streets of this desperate city

Should engage more than my casual interest,

Exact more interest than my casual pity.

The conditional appraisal with which the poem concludes is rough and sudden; unnervingly, it is as if the verse is snuffed out by the scorch of self-rebuke, the perfunctory rhyme of "city" and "pity," underscoring the poet's personal disdain. Though God is present, He is so not as beneficent and merciful creator, but rather—after the fashion of Zeus and his Olympian cohort—as petulant arbiter, even co-conspirator.

The internalized fury of the narrative voice in this poem stands in striking contrast to its claim of "casual" indifference, a juxtaposition that points towards a damaged sense of self-esteem. Just as a child who is abused can internalize the horror he experiences as a fault of his own, here, Mahon reveals a misplaced if inherited sense of personal culpability in the violence afflicting his homeland.

When asked by Grennan about the "reverberations" of the term home in the early 1970s, Mahon responds in a manner that assists in the explication of "Spring In Belfast," as well as other poems that treat notions of home:

> In some sense (this may sound very phony) it was almost as if the things that were happening up [North] were happening literally to me. I felt "beaten-up." I wonder if others felt the same. I felt that I had been guilty of something that I wasn't aware of. Although I've never been a motorist, I felt as perhaps a hit-and-run driver must feel when he wakes up the next morning. It was extremely upsetting, especially when the death toll started mounting. I couldn't deal with it. I could only develop a kind of contempt for what I felt was the barbarism, on both sides. But I *knew* the Protestant side; I knew them inside out. I was one of them, and perhaps I couldn't bear to look at my own face among them. So I adopted a "plague on both your houses" attitude. (164)

This resistance to an ingrown sense of (religious)[17] community, surfaces in several of Mahon's early poems: it does so ironically, in "Breton Walks"—"I am man self-made, self made man, / No small-talk now for those who ran // In and out of my muddy childhood. / We have grown up as best we could" (ll. 33-36); ardently, in "A Portrait of the Artist"—"I gasp for light and life / Like a caged bird in springtime / Banging the

bright bars. // […] And the light on my forehead / Is the dying light of faith. / God gutters down to metaphor—" (ll. 3-5, 8-10); resolutely, in "Leaves"—"The prisoner of infinite choice […] // Somewhere in the heaven / Of lost futures / The lives we might have led / Have found their own fulfillment" (ll. 1, 13-16). But throughout, as the poet claims in "Craigvara House," "home is where the heart breaks—" (l. 39).

For Mahon, as indeed for many an Irish writer, distance has proven the portal to accurate aesthetic expressions of home. Still, this relative remove from the epicenter of the region's internecine struggles—however circumstantial—has been accompanied for Mahon by a nagging sense of doubt and guilt. As the poet notoriously confesses in "Afterlives," "Perhaps if I'd stayed behind / And lived it bomb by bomb / I might have grown up at last / And learnt what is meant by home (ll. 45-48).[18] Here, the reader is reminded of Joyce and Beckett and the compulsion for self-exile that both writers experienced—and heeded. The metaphor is a familiar one—we see the painting best when we stand at a certain remove: too close, and all perspective is lost in a sea of color and sensory impression; too far, and the gaze ices over.[19] Artists have long negotiated these complexities of the exilic perspective and to various effect. While literal, physical distance from a homeland, and particularly one afflicted by civil strife as is Ireland, can offer a worthwhile vantage point on circumstances otherwise too vivid, too obdurate to articulate, the practice of translation itself facilitates a veritable remove that poets such as Mahon have found useful to their craft, even "lubricating," as is suggested above.[20]

Indeed, Mahon and his Northern Irish contemporaries have become adept at manning the borderlines between that which is deemed foreign and that which resounds as home. Border country has always been profitable terrain for self-encounter, for

indeed, the stranger we meet in this liminal space is nothing if not decidedly "un-us." The adage is apt: we understand ourselves most clearly against what we are not. Heaney's explanation of this borderland effect is insightful:

> It's hard to grow up in Northern Ireland and not be *forced* into second thoughts, sooner or later. With so much division around, people are forever encountering boundaries that bring them up short. Second thoughts are an acknowledgement that the truth is bounded by different *tearmanns*, that it has to take cognizance of opposing claims. (*Finders Keepers* 51)

Heaney defines *tearmann* as an Irish word for terminus that was initially used to indicate the parameters of land set aside for ecclesiastical purposes (49). He expands this connotation in his essay, "Something to Write Home About," to include the mental and imaginative boundaries individuals construct to demarcate their social, religious, and political affiliations. Indeed, the metaphor is illuminating: much as these *tearmanns* can provide a sense of definition and of home, they may simultaneously contribute to an inability to think outside the box of predetermined affiliations, and therefore assume the dimensions and demeanor of both fortress and prison. This tendency is particularly problematic in the North where stable constructions of homeland consistently cleave in sectarianism, a process that rigidifies essential self-evaluation and "second-thoughts."

While this darker connotation of *tearmann* may seem at odds with the vision of a poet like Heaney whose oeuvre often calls favorably upon his own religious and cultural roots, it strikes a powerful chord with a figure such as Mahon, a poet constitutionally trepidatious regarding constructs of home. After all, as the latter is keen to remind his readers, we are all "[…] dim / forms that kneel at noon," a human collective paying

homage to perceived constructs of personal and public identity, wherever we may be and whatever the circumstances ("Afterlives," ll. 22-23); always, Mahon intimates, "Somebody somewhere thinks of this [place] as home" ("A Garage in Co. Cork," l. 20). To assume otherwise is naïve, suggests his poetic, but the practice becomes dangerously passive in a divided community where notions of identity often manifest as a collection of credentials used to determine one's fate. Still Mahon is clear, even provocative about the potential of self-repositioning: mercifully, "the city [is] not ourselves" (l. 24), he insists, but it *is* a launching point for vision and rediscovery; "[…] this is your / country," claims the poet in "Ecclesiastes," so "close one eye and be king" (ll. 17-28).

"For even at one remove / The thing I meant was love": Mahon in Exile:

Biographically, the poet's move to Dublin to attend university served as a gateway for his subsequent journeys both literal and imaginative. After a childhood and adolescence spent doing the "surly Belfast working-class thing," Dublin struck the student Mahon as "a gorgeous place" and "debonair" (Grennan 160,162). Confessing to scant academic attendance and effort, Mahon and his cohort—which included the likes of Michael Longley, Eavan Boland, and the slightly senior Brendan Kennelly—wrought their first forms independently. Dublin in the early to mid 1960s was a burgeoning poet's dream where the local public houses and shabby student flats[21] served as stages for an aesthetic-driven lifestyle; truly literary-bohemian, the Irish capital fostered a passionate atmosphere of learning and self-discovery. For Mahon, it is no exaggeration to say that his years in Dublin ushered in the world.[22]

In 1965, the young poet—for by now he (and others) knew he was one—moved to Paris to commence further studies at the Sorbonne. This junket was short lived, as Mahon soon recognized that he was not constitutionally disposed for an academic lifestyle; he left the French institution of higher learning the following year and returned to Trinity to promptly complete his degree—however, the poet did not do so empty handed, having gleaned a great deal from what Beckett has termed the "existential lyric" upon exposure to the work of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Despite the misfit of his character with academe, the itch travel continued to agitate the young writer, and he spent the next couple of years teaching in Canada and the United States. However, his dislocation from Ireland was not without its challenges. Aptly coined the "first Irish poet of the modern city," Mahon's share of modern malaise has likewise been apportioned—and was so from a young age (Haughton 7).

One of the most illuminating repositories recording Mahon's conflicted years in North America is the collection of letters he wrote to the Longleys in his absence.[23] Captured in this correspondence is the émigré's frustration with the circumstances of his self-elected remove from his homeland. While conscious of the "enormous poetic energy in America at the time" fueled largely by the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s, Mahon remained "the young Irish poet," a title that tore at his temperamental sense of cosmopolitanism (42). Mahon returned to Canada in late 1966 at the age of twenty-five and to Ireland in the spring of 1967, a complex homecoming made more so by the imminent outbreak of the Troubles.

Mahon's "Whispering Galleries" of Place(s) and Purgator(ies):

In his evocative essay, "Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland," Heaney addresses what he compellingly terms the "detached compassion" of Mahon's poetic (*Finders Keepers* 120). Cautiously endeavoring to coax loose the knot that is poetry and politics in the North, Heaney lingers over his contemporary and friend's idiosyncratic approach to place and the roles, both literal and imaginative, which locale plays in his oeuvre. While Heaney contends that the majority of Northern Irish writers—as a reaction to the tourniquet of their historical, political, and religious circumstances—tend to "vie[w] the world from […] great spatial or temporal distance[s]," he suggests that Mahon angles himself against conventional constructs of place more radically than most (119). Heaney is clear: "We might say that in order for any place to be credible for Mahon, it has to be reimagined in light of other places" (123).

Mahon's second major collection, *Lives* (1972), opens with a poem entitled "Homecoming" in which the autobiographical speaker voices the quiet despair of his return to Ireland. Replete with the banal detritus of contemporary life that is in itself, endemic to Mahon's verse,[24] the poem depicts in exhausted, fragmentary form, the familiar hollowness of homecoming: "Badly distraught / by six-hour flight / (Boston to Dublin)" during which he was "drunk all night / with a crashing bore / from Houston, Tex., / who spoke at length / of guns and sex," Mahon arrives in Ireland to the awareness that "Skies change but not / souls change […]" (ll. 5-12, 21-22). The poem concludes with an acknowledgement of the traveler's lost innocence and inaugurates, as Haughton notes, "the pattern for a career that takes the form of an underlying rhythm of departure and return to Ireland" (56).[25]

As mentioned in the introductory pages of this chapter, Mahon's presence in an exploration of Classical underworld journey must come at a slant, for with rare exception, his pilgrimage to the land of the dead is as subtle and underplayed as the majority of his allusions. Still, if Heaney is correct that Mahon's "dominant mood" is a stance "of being on the outside (where one has laboured spiritually to arrive)," then his work might in fact have the potential to contextualize the presence of *nekuia* in Northern Irish poetry in general by suggesting that the underworld derives its meaning precisely because it sets itself against "life on earth"—tellingly, the title of one of Mahon's more recent volumes (123). Like other journeys and other exiles, the poetic trek to the land of the dead is predicated upon the act of venturing away from one place—the home—and towards another—the unknown. As the Greeks understood it, meaning is derived in the middle, from the state of being in-between;[26] as such, it is surely little wonder that Classical travel suits a poet like Mahon, ever-angled to the various geographies of home, down to the very ground.

Introduced with an epigraph from Greek poet and exile George Seferis's *Mythistorema*, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," begins by lacing fragility with tenacity. The line "*Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels*," rises to the top of Mahon's page as a kind of exhalation from the deep past, its energy resonant of voices from the grave. On the heels of this plea is Mahon's dedication of the subsequent verse to J. G. Farrell, a Liverpool-born writer of Irish descent whose novel, *The Troubles* (1970), details the ruin of the grand Majestic Hotel during the Irish War of Independence in the early 1920s. As such, before the poem itself rightly commences, Mahon has

already—to use Heaney's phrase—"reimagined" the scene to come "in light of [at least two] other places." The epigraph reads as a plea, and the poem that follows in answer establishes the marriage between survival and loss eloquently featured in so many of Mahon's poems of place.

The verse begins on a note of hope that simultaneously, paradoxically provokes a pang of desperation in the breast of its readers:

> Even now there are places where a thought might grow—
>
> Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
>
> To a slow clock of condensation,
>
> An echo trapped forever, and a flutter
>
> Of wild flowers in the lift shaft […] (ll. 1-5)

What Heaney has termed Mahon's "whispering galleries of absence," might likewise be understood as whispering galleries of *places* where the presence of the witnessing, pilgrim-poet yokes otherwise discordant elements such as asynchronous historical circumstances, discourses, and in this poem—even species—to one another in a fashion that is disarming and deeply humane.

Here, the setting is straightforward: the "disused shed" is announced from the start, both in its (abandoned) function and in its location, "deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel" in Ireland's County Wexford. However, the subject of the verse surprises. "A thousand mushrooms crowd[ing] to a keyhole / […] // They have been waiting for us in a foetor / Of vegetable sweat since civil war days […]" (ll. 13, 21-22). Immediately contextualized and personified by the poet—who hovers at an oddly proximate and pluralized distance (what Heaney would term a stance of "irony and compassion")[27]—the

mind does not resist the humanization of the plants; immediately, their anguish is our own. Abandoned—however unwillingly—by their "expropriated mycologist," the mushrooms exist, even propagate, in a kind of horrific parody of the life force that combines the wit of Swift with the bleakness of Beckett. But *this* poet loves them, and his is the energy that pulsates through the poem, lending it its tragic resonance.

Halfway through, we are told "[t]here have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking / Into the earth that nourished it; / And nightmares, born of these [...]" (ll. 31-33). Biologically driven to thrive, the abandoned plants have been wizened by fate; they are forced to contend with the conflict between their instinctive thrust to live ("Those nearest the door grow strong— / 'Elbow room! Elbow room!') and their collective knowledge of the futility of their plight (ll. 35-36). This metaphysical tug-of-war the poet understands, but in his middle-distance, he can do little to alleviate their pain. Instead, he bears it witness:

> A half century, without visitors, in the dark—
> Poor preparation for the cracking lock
> And creak of hinges; magi, moonmen,
> Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
> Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by drought
> And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
> At the flash-bulb firing-squad we wake them with
> Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
> Grown beyond nature now, soft food for worms,
> They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith. (ll. 41-50)

There is an unmistakable note of torture in this stanza, for the suffering the plants sustain is egregious; it has been afflicted upon their innocent lives and reeks of violence unaccounted for. Mahon's reference in the following stanza to Treblinka and Pompeii underscores the dual culprits, man and nature, but the even treatment the two forces are given in the space of the poet's line further upsets any chance of judicial attribution. If Pompeii is a place aggrieved by geography, it is likewise the land of the Romans—ancient colonizers; Treblinka, on the other hand, tells of a terror wholly human in its perpetuation where the random geographical position of one town led to the desecration of its name through an enduring association with genocide.

In the final stanza, the poet speaks directly to his audience: "They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way, / To do something, to speak on their behalf / Or at least not to close the door again" (ll. 51-53). The poet lends his own voice to their silent scream:

> 'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,
> 'Let not the god abandon us
> Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
> We too had our lives to live.
> You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
> Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!' (ll. 55-60)

The verbal torrent of these final lines reveals at least as much the poet's pain of bearing witness—of endeavoring not only to glean the prayers of the lost, the silenced, but to give voice to their existential misery—as it does the victims' plight. As Heaney has it, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," "is about the need to live and be known, the need for

selfhood, recognition in the eye of God and the eye of the world, and its music is cello and homesick" (*Finders Keepers* 120). In an eloquent line of poetic-critical assessment, it is this final word, "homesick," which strikes me as most revelatory of Mahon's complex poetry of place. Indeed, "home *is* where the heart breaks," and the poet's task—one among many as Mahon's verse suggests—is to stand at precisely that compassionate angle of distance (and irony) that lends the ache of return its voice, and the burden of (self-) exile, its due measure. On the heels of Homer, Mahon seems a modern Odysseus, habitually weighing the cost of staying away against the price of going home. And as with this Classical predecessor, of sorts, Mahon's verdict can come as a surprise.

As a Belfast native whose forefathers were shipyard workers, the memory of the Titanic disaster loomed large in Mahon's mind and featured in an early poem, "After the Titanic." Casting his voice as that of a survivor,[28] the nerve-center of the verse is nevertheless one of loss, its tenor foreshadowing that of "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," as well as subsequent poems that bear witness to scenes of hushed disaster. Having endured the blur of traumatic event, the narrator recounts his experience through hearsay. "They say I got away in a boat / [...] I tell you / I sank as far that night as any / Hero […]" (ll. 1-4). The word "hero" registers as hollow, a nominal rattle of bones shaken for historical record while the living figure drifts away, swift as any ghost. His fear is palpable:

> I drown again with all those dim
>
> Lost faces I never understood, my poor soul
>
> Screams out in the starlight, heart

Breaks loose and rolls down like a stone.

Include me in your lamentations. (ll. 16-21)

This final cry of the survivor for inclusion (via the poet) in history's transcript of grief accompanies Mahon as his oeuvre matures. Throughout, it remains connected to the Sisyphean theme of journeys undertaken and *nostos*, wished for and subsequently, endured.

Seamus Deane pinpoints a fundamental paradox in the poet's work: if on the one hand, "Mahon's poetry expresses a longing to be free from history," it simultaneously insists "the only life which can produce art is one that is engaged with history, even (especially?) if it is the history of the victims, the lost, the forgotten" (*Celtic Revivals* 156, 163). Indeed, Mahon's third major volume, *The Snow Party* (1975)—in which "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" first appeared—was published at a volatile moment in Northern Irish history.[29] The Troubles were rampaging, and Mahon was faced with the personally daunting task of returning to the North after a productive tenure in England. As the poet knew well, this return was not without its own risk of shipwreck.

Initially employed as a journalist in Kensington, Mahon and his new wife Doreen had moved to the Surrey countryside where the former was able to focus on his verse with a renewed energy and professional confidence. Largely content, the young family's eventual return to Ireland provoked the expatriate's sense of native misfit and ushered in a series of poems that deal explicitly with the limitations of geography. In "Going Home," the Antrim bound poet says "goodbye to the trees / […] And sawdust, and the last / Gasps of the poisoned nymphs," reluctant to return to a place of origin that provides

no more secure a sense of home than does the land he leaves (ll. 1, 5-6). He confesses to the fantasy of having

> […] often thought if I lived
>
> Long enough in this house
>
> I would turn into a tree
>
> Like somebody in Ovid […]
>
> […] And gaze out over the downs
>
> As if I belonged here too. (ll. 19-22, 29-30)

Instead, the conditional tense follows the poet home to Ireland, a land—like Ithaca—"With nothing to recommend it / But its harsh tenacity" and its audacity to exist, "As if it belongs there [too]" (ll. 43-44, 60).

Reminiscent of MacNeice's own truculent diatribe of the island,[30] Mahon's "Going Home" underscores the fraught nature of belonging which geographical place alternately imposes and forbids. Read against "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," the interplay between stasis and movement at the core of the concept of place is highlighted. Comparatively, set against the *tearmann* of a poem of structured Christian (and specifically Catholic) pilgrimage, such as Heaney's "Station Island," Mahon's verse seems agitated, caught between the polar extremes of immobility and constant transfer, chronically aimless. Its plot—if not its form—is unstructured. However, while this frenzied drift is one of the defining elements of the poet's modernism, its existential tenor situating him at a slight remove from his contemporaries, it is not purgatorial in a Christian sense (i.e. consequential, temporary, suffered) but is rather more resonant, I concur, of Mahon's Classical spiritual bent (i.e. tragic) and as such, goes some way

towards explaining the ever-increasing allure of ancient Greece in his verse. Less concerned with endings and more so—as were the ancient Greeks—with the potential of indeterminacy, of the sport of the middle-ground, the reader is encouraged to consider that exile *can* indeed be self-selected and stylized. As such, it attracts with the flipside of loneliness: the allure of perpetual freedom.

Forcing Homer's Hand: Odysseus's Journey Home:

Unquestionably one of the greatest authorial coups in all of literature belongs to Homer who has managed—and well beyond the grave—to convince centuries of audiences that Odysseus's desire was pure, even simple: he longed to go home. Credit is often given to the wily protagonist for his clever, polytropic ways, but seldom indeed do we raise an eyebrow at the odds of the epic challenges encumbering his return. All nymph-hued counter-evidence aside, we expect Odysseus to be faithful, and we will have him so—faithful to wife, to homeland, and perhaps most importantly of all, to the unspoken rules of exile. For indeed banishment—under whatever crush of circumstance—is a penalty the Classical world suggests is nearly as ruinous a blow as death itself. The threat is clear: when exile is enforced and thus, afflicted rather than elected, the interruption of *nostos* is akin to Christian notions of purgatory; the inability to return home here equates to an (indefinite) erasure of the self.

Forgotten, abandoned, denied like Mahon's mushrooms "without visitors, [and] in the dark," (l. 41) the exile's punishment is to be expelled from the light of communal recall prior to—and indeed, this may be the most terror-laden part—the experience of death itself. However, Mahon's Homeric poems invite their readers to reconsider

Odysseus's extended trials; they do so in light of their adaptor's contemporary and conflicted relationship to place(s), and as such, offer not only a new torch by which to read Homer's hero, but simultaneously, a fresh perspective on the relevance of Classical journey to poets whose private affiliations tend to be overwritten by the capital-lettered projections of home.

In "Calypso," a poem initially published in *Harbour Lights* (2005) and recollected the following year in *Adaptations*, Mahon does not mince words or judgment: "Homer was wrong," he declares—and twice. The first mistake was from the start: "she [Calypso] never 'ceased to please'.

> Once he'd [Odysseus] escaped from Circe's magic castle,
> the toxic bowl, the shape-shifting witcheries;
> from the underworld, from Aeolus' watery roar,
> the high-pitched Sirens' penetrating whistle,
> cliff monsters, divine anger, broken boats,
> on soft, tinkling shingle he crept ashore
> through juniper and parsley, cows and goats,
> and found the hot path to her open door,
> a cart parked in the lane, a smoking fire. (ll. 1-10)

The heady blend of ancient plot and contemporized setting are characteristic of Mahon's more recent work with Classical materials, a juxtaposition that some critics find jarring, less eloquent and formalized than the poet's previous verse, but which I contend expertly reveals the coherence between the ancient world and Mahon's modern vision. Akin to its

earliest iterations, Mahon's description—like Homer's—paints a narcotic scene into which Odysseus naturally, willingly, melts.

"Calypso" continues to unfold in a wry, conversational form loosely reminiscent of the narrative sprawl of the original epic. Though here, Odysseus does admit to "the times he thought about his wife, / remembering their lives in a former life," Ithaca—"'home', not far now as the kite flew,"—begins to blur in the memory of the sated sailor (ll. 41-42, 51). While Mahon declares that "Homer was right about the important thing, / the redemptive power of women," he also underscores the disabusing irony that the "much-sought Penelope in her new resolute life / has wasted no time acting the stricken widow / and even the face that sank the final skiff / knows more than beauty; beauty is not enough" (ll. 61-62, 67-70).

The poem closes with reference to Odysseus's decidedly painless, trouble-free exile in Calypso's lair as "a perpetual summer" where "Stuck in a rock-cleft like a beachcomber," the Ithacan

> […] learned to live at peace with violent nature,
> calm under the skies' grumbling cloud-furniture
> and bored by practical tackle, iron and grease—
> an ex-king and the first philosopher in Greece. (ll. 91-92, 97-100)

The image may be troubling in its indolence and deceit, but it is revealing (however self-deprecatingly) of the poet's own dream of escape and his awareness that more valuable than any kingdom is the richness of the exilic perspective. And here, as Mahon has it, resounds the bard's second error: "Homer was wrong, [Odysseus] never made it back;

or, / if he did, he spent many a curious night hour / still questioning that strange, oracular face" (ll. 108-110).

Indeed, the authority bestowed through a subtle remove from the snares of *patria* is seductive and one the Classical dead knew well. In "Circe and Sirens," Mahon's version of Odysseus's encounter with the shades of Hades, the mood of indolence that shapes "Calypso" likewise drugs the verse. "Dozy with sedatives," wolves and lions "liv[e] out their nodding soporific lives" while Odysseus and his sailors "recov[er in Circe's] magic cup" (ll. 6-8). "Relaxed and sprawled at ease about the house," Odysseus is presented with a dizzying prophecy (l. 9). Instructed to "Sail […] / 'over the water to the Cimmerian coast," he learns of "a grove where rustling willows grow" (ll. 11-12, 15). Circe's instructions are explicit—indeed, we know them well:

> Beside a grim, fast-flowing river bed […]
> dig a trench there out of the leafy mud
> and you will see a multitude of the dead,
> their curious shadows whispering to and fro
> come up to look at you. Amid that host
> speak to your mother and Tiresias' ghost.' (ll. 14, 16-20)

In Mahon's version of the tale, Odysseus "t[akes] the prophylactic" (l. 11) and sets out to encounter the plaintive shade of his mother, Anticleia, accompanied by a host of other sorely abandoned female ghosts including Jocasta, Ariadne, and Phaedra.[31] Elpenor is present and Tiresias, too; the latter's message rings ominously: "'… if you survive,' Tiresias warned, 'the few / remaining dangers you have yet to face / […] / [You] might

retire, sea music in your ears, / […] / and spend [your] old age in sublime disgrace" (ll. 51-52, 58, 60).

Couched in Mahon's signature blend of cynicism and nostalgia is a hint, I believe, for comprehending the poet's oblique approach to underworld descent. Crouching low alongside Odysseus's busy form, Mahon too spills blood, after a fashion, when he resurrects this poignant scene from Homer's immortal epic in the body of his own living lyric. And like the Achaean exile, thirsty forms rush Mahon's offering, anxious as any shade to sample the elixir that will lend them renewed voice. Provocatively, these "retired" ghosts may be driven more than most to sup, for they form a pressing and distinguished cohort of dead poets whose collective whispers have offered Mahon—one of their kind by calling, and by circumstance, wary of social groupings—an alternative form of communal solidarity.[32]

Inheriting Metempsychosis: Conversations Among Poets, The Living and the Dead:

In *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom famously asks her husband Leopold the meaning of the term *metempsychosis*. The couple's resultant conversation has become a literary staple:

> –Show here, she said. I put a mark in it. There's a word I wanted to ask you.
>
> She swallowed a draught of tea from her cup held by nothandle and, having wiped her fingertips smartly on the blanket, began to search the text with the hairpin till she reached the word.
>
> –Met him what? he asked.
>
> –Here, she said. What does this mean?
>
> He leaned downwards and read near her polished thumbnail.

–Metempsychosis?

–Yes. Who's he when he's at home?

–Metempsychosis, he said, frowning. It's Greek: from the Greek. That means the transmigration of souls.

–O, rocks! she said. Tell us in plain words. (77)

Indeed, since Molly asked, Irish writers have done their best to keep her guessing. And Mahon, for one, has proven himself strategically suited to the task. As a poet deeply engaged in practices of revision and reiteration, "transmigration"—both of texts and of voices—is not only a familiar, even organic feature of his verse, but an inextricable one, as well. Still, it is often overlooked that at least half of Mahon's oeuvre involves translation, in one form or another, and it is problematic, indeed, that this considerable body of work is conventionally relegated to the margins of the very criticism that proposes to address it (Homem 66).

However, Mahon has never been a figure overly encumbered by public perception; his gaze has always been inward—and at times, to the detriment of his own wellbeing.[33] Still, the poet's oeuvre is erotic in the ancient Greek sense of the word: his poems are written for invested recipients and tend towards a transgression of borders, chronological, cultural, political, and linguistic.[34] Unbound by conventional *tearmanns* ranging from the quotidian to the metaphysical, Mahon's work frequently sparks at the intersection of love and loss. Like Orpheus, the lyricist's song is almost too rich for the ears of the living, and as such, his most artistically reciprocal conversations are often with earlier texts and the ghosts that people them. Provocatively, the very best of these dialogues tend to take place with the shades of his poetic predecessors.

In "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry," Ronald Schuchard explains that "in spite of disclaimers and distancing techniques, eventually all [Irish poets] must negotiate their art with or play it against some of Yeats's several legacies" (292). Irish writers have dealt with this Yeatsian inheritance in a variety of fashions, but perhaps most famously, through humor and a spirit that often broaches on impertinence. In the poem, "Heraclitus on Rivers," for example, Mahon chastises his precursor for his belief in the permanence and history-shaping dimension of art:

> You will tell me that you have executed
> A monument more lasting than bronze;
> But even bronze is perishable.
> Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
> The very language in which the poem
> Was written, and the idea of language,
> All these things will pass away in time. (ll. 10-16)

Significantly, Mahon sets himself up in a mock-conversation with the Mage, signaling that the best way to grapple with (and competitively, aim to supersede) the legacy of Yeats is to *engage* the poet *as* a contemporary. As Schuchard notes, this need to address Yeats is present to some degree for all Irish poets (and it is certainly true of those under consideration in this dissertation). Furthermore, I believe this critical insight may be profitably extended to the relationship between contemporary Northern Irish poets and those of Classical antiquity.[35] In Mahon's case, as in Heaney's and Longley's, all art may be said to involve the mysterious but fundamental synergy of metempsychosis.

Indeed, this very real sense of "the transmigration of souls" shines through in an early example of the trio's collective response to the beacon of Louis MacNeice—like Yeats, another Irish "Classical" lodestar.

One of Mahon's most celebrated poems, "In Carrowdore Churchyard," is also one of his earliest, and the well-known biographical anecdote from which it stems is meaningful both to contextualizing the verse itself, as well as to introducing the poet's interaction with his "own dead"—the community of ideal witnesses that may be said to constitute Mahon's most trusted sense of home. A gifted recorder of personal history, Michael Longley tells the story best. In *Tuppenny Stung*, the poet recounts his pilgrimage to MacNeice's grave with Mahon and Heaney in 1965. Collectively in awe if boyishly over-confident, the threesome entered into a graveside pact to compose individual elegies for their predecessor; inspired by the worthy—and considerable—nature of the challenge, they agreed to meet the following week to compare their results.

A fellow Northerner, MacNeice's sudden death the previous year had surely rattled the talented poets on the cusp of their own careers, and the challenge was undertaken with a degree of gravitas, each young writer driven to his personal best. However—as memory has it—when they met to share the fruits of their labor, Mahon was the first to read his poem aloud; the moment he finished, the other two tucked away their respective elegies, declaring their slightly-junior friend the immediate and uncontested victor. Indeed, "In Carrowdore Churchyard" remains one of the Mahon's most respected and anthologized poems. Significantly, for the purposes of the current discussion, it reveals a lyricist with an ear attuned not only to the note of his own burgeoning voice, but to his predecessor's pitch, as well:

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

Foreshadowing the direct address seen above in "Heraclitus on Rivers," Mahon speaks informally to the ghost of MacNeice as one would a friend and contemporary. Though a sincere tone of homage is decidedly present—"All we may ask of you we have; the rest / Is not for publication, will not be heard" (ll. 9-10)—Mahon is not cowed by his predecessor's legacy. Rather, he honors it with his own breath, capturing perfectly MacNeice's exquisite sensibilities:[36] "This, you implied, is how we ought to live— // The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow, / Each fragile, solving ambiguity" (ll. 18-20). The beauty of these lines is enhanced by the subtle resurrection of MacNeice's voice, which sounds through Mahon's own. Indeed, the poem arises as a joint creation of the living and the dead, constructed across the bridge of the grave. As such, "In Carrowdore Churchyard" can be read as an act of translation that serves a poignant reminder that all poems—just like all poets—are nourished on the endeavors and by the example of those who have come before. This act of sharing—of "forgery"—Mahon's verse would have us believe—goes some distance towards assuaging the guilt of survival.

The literary precursors evoked in Mahon's verse arrive in many forms and stem from a variety of sources and historical moments. There are living "precursors," such as Heaney, whose archaeological bog poems in *North* immediately erected their own

"monument more lasting than bronze." Dedicated to his contemporary, Mahon's poem "Lives," playfully mocks Heaney's mythological reverence of the buried object, the representative, unearthed, and totemic body:

> First time out
> I was a torc of gold
> And wept tears of the sun.
>
> That was fun […]
>
> Once I was an oar
> But stuck in the shore
> To mark the place of a grave
>
> When the lost ship
> Sailed away. I thought
> Of Ithaca, but soon decayed. (ll. 1-4, 13-18)

Here, Heaney's efforts shed their *gravitas* as Mahon fraternally puts the poet and his resurrected objects in their place. Ventriloquizing this hallowed detritus allows the *poète maudit*[37] to interrogate Heaney's efforts to read meaning into what may in fact be meaningless landscape—"So many lives, / So many things to remember!" (ll. 34-35); Mahon's darkly frolicsome tone is likewise reminiscent of Beckett, a precursor "whose presence," according to Gerald Dawe, "is simply everywhere" in Mahon's oeuvre (Andrews 51).[38]

"An Image from Beckett" evokes "the gravedigger / Putting aside his forceps," while in "Beyond Howth Head," temporarily, "[t]he pros outweigh the cons that glow / from Beckett's bleak reductio—(ll. 11-12, 41-42). "The Sea in Winter," sets a decidedly Beckettian stage as the poet reminds himself to

> […] never forget the weird
> facticity of this strange seaboard,
> the heroism and cowardice
> of living on the edge of space
> or ever again contemptuously
> refuse its plight; for history
> ignores those who ignore it, not
> the ignorant whom it begot. (ll. 49-56)

And lest the parallels between Beckett and Mahon seem too precise, the latter equally often resuscitates the full-throated voice of Yeats.[39] Indeed, "An Image from Beckett" simultaneously carries the Mage's signature, eternally iterable "sweetness and light, / The sweetness and light" (ll. 17-18); alongside the Beckettian "subliminal batsqueak / Of reflex lamentation," "the rich earth / Chang[es], second by second" (ll. 25-26, 28-29) bringing to mind Yeats's "Easter, 1916" and its "Changes minute by minute" (l. 50). Certainly, these aforementioned poets are but a few of the many presences and voices that people Mahon's verse; as Dawe notes other "worldly authoritative figures and figures of authorizing presence [include] Malcolm Lowry, Cavafy, Brecht, Pasternak, Hamsun, Rilke, Rimbaud, Ovid, Pound, Madox Ford, Van Gogh, MacNeice, […] Kavanagh and Clarke," and even here, the list is incomplete (Andrews 50). Throughout,

Mahon's message is clear: "For even at one remove / The thing I meant was love."

This compassionate refrain is reiterated in the long poem, *The Hudson Letter* (1995), an epistolary piece of sorts that features many ventriloquizations, both of individuals and of places. In section XIII, "Sappho in 'Judith's Room'," Mahon—through Sappho—takes "[t]he reed-voiced nightingale [as] my guide, / soft-spoken announcer of spring, whose song I set / against a cult of contention I decried—" (ll. 1-3). Artlessly, the violent swell of history is dismissed in the single breath of a straight question and a ready answer: "A corps of men, a list of ships? Give me instead / my non-violent girls— […] / a finer sight than Homeric bronze" (ll. 5-6, 9). Indeed, Sappho's is an easy confidence: "Nothing was alien to me, nothing inhuman: / what did I teach but the love of women?" (ll. 18-19); her words and manner serve as a reminder that what may best endure beyond the grave is not the account of battles lost or victories won, but rather, "[love] stanzas exhumed from the Egyptian sands," read, centuries later, "in [an] American bookstore," and revoiced by a male poet (ll. 28, 22).

In this Sapphic reverie, we are reminded through her resurrected murmur, of the *nekuia* the poet from Lesbos, too, once took and the invitation that remains for her predecessors to follow:[40]

> Sure, I've been down to the dead kingdom to hear
>
> the grim statistics, and seen with my own eyes
>
> women and children in their extremities
>
> —'cholera, typhus, croup, diphtheria'—[41]
>
> but beyond speech and the most inclusive song,
>
> my theme is love and love's *daimonic* character,

a site of praise and not of grievances

whatever the torment—which we meet, if wise, […]

Girls all, be with me now and keep me warm—

didn't I *say* we'd live again in another form? (ll. 34-40, 58-59)

Adopting Sappho's fearless query, Mahon's verse moves forward, girded by the voices of his predecessors—Irish, European, Classical—either as flesh-and-blood contemporaries, personified ghosts, or more obliquely, as wisps of intratextual reference. Regardless, Mahon's oeuvre is one of genuine metempsychosis to which Molly's ready ear would be well advised to listen. In the "Voices" section of "Alexandria," Mahon's *nekuia* poignantly crystallizes:

Definitive voices of the loved dead

or the loved lost, as good as dead,

speak to us in our dreams

or at odd moments.

Listening, we hear again,

like music at night,

the original poetry of our lives. (ll. 20-26)

"To keep the engine ticking over": Practicing Adaptation:

In Mahon's forward to *Adaptations,* his aforementioned 2006 collection of translated works, the poet reminds his readers that while "These pieces aren't translations, properly speaking, but [rather] versions of their originals devised, as often as not, from 'cribs' of one kind or another," they are nevertheless part of the "equally

venerable tradition" of adaptation that "poets use […] to keep the engine ticking over" (11). This engine, as the collection reveals, can spark both contemporary iterations of Classical texts as well as new versions of earlier lyric within the poet's own oeuvre.

The first poem in the volume, for instance, "*Chorus from* Antigone," opens with a line Mahon's readers have seen before, not only in Sophoclean tragedy, but in the Irish poet's own canon: "Wonders are many and none / more wonderful than man" (ll. 1-2). First encountered in "Glengormley," where the legendary refrain is offset against the suburban banality of "[man] who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge / And grasped the principle of the watering can" (ll. 2-3), here the lines regain a vestige of their original dramatic strength, thus casting anew the early poem of childhood terrain in light of ancient Greek tragedy (N.B. Heaney's reading of Mahon's "reimagined places").

In *"Chorus from* Antigone," the traditional images of "plunging prow," "life-threatening seas," and "rich earth" blend artlessly with contemporary diction—"visionary technology"—and modern fragmentation—"the bear and the octopus / […] A lion bites the dust" (ll. 9, 12, 15)—in a tonally informal fashion that parallels the ease with which the poet has been demonstrated to ventriloquize, to "forge" voices. Similarly, in "Galatea," Mahon's version of Ovid's Pygmalion, the poet reawakens in vivid English the celebrated Latin verse in tandem with the sculptor's erotic coax-to-life of his beloved statue:

> […] Now
> Pygmalion, having devoutly laid
> gifts on the altar, shyly prayed:
> 'Gods, if it's true that you can give

anything, grant I may make love…' […]

Hastening home, the impatient lover
ran to the maid and, leaning over,
embraced her there on her chaste couch.
Her skin seemed warmer to his touch;
his fingers felt her thighs, at which
the ivory grew soft between
his thumbs, as wax melts in the sun
and, gently worked by loving hands,
stretches, relaxes and expands. (ll. 39-42, 47-55)

Like the ivory-turned-flesh of the artist's subject, Mahon manipulates the body of an ancient sculpted tale into contemporary living form in a veritable *act* of translation.

In "Art and Dust," it is Michelangelo via Mahon who speaks not only for himself, but also for Pygmalion, and indeed for all those engaged in creative practice. His (their) message is troubled, but clear: reproduction, adaptation, and reiteration ensure the one form of immortality available to us, namely the survival of our fleeting human gesture in the infinite iterations of art:

How can it be, as long experience shows,
the image hidden in the calcium carbonate
lasts longer, lady, than the artist does
who turns to dust again at the start?
The cause yields to the outcome and withdraws;
nature is conquered once again by art

and, proving this, my very sculpture knows

death and time, faced with work depart. (ll. 1-8)

In light of these immutable conditions of mortality, Mahon's classical translations seem to collectively pose an ontological question paraphrased from Juvenal's *Satires X*: "So which philosopher would we rather know / –the one who, staring from his portico, / laughs, or the one who weeps" ("Human Wishes," ll. 22-24)? While the voice in the poem concludes that it is "easy," and therefore preferable, "to laugh, / [for] if we started weeping there'd be no end to it" (ll. 24-25), Mahon's oeuvre itself (and this is the case particularly with his forays into translation and adaptation) reveals a distinctly tragic inclination that is present, perhaps above all in his creative runs at Sophocles and Euripides.

Mahon's Tragic Greek Drama:

In a compelling overview of the presence of Greek drama in the oeuvre of Irish lyricists, Peter McDonald notes that the allure of adapting ancient theatre to the contemporary stage has been considerable, particularly among European poets in the twentieth century.[42] While cautioning that it is up for debate whether or not it is these same poets who have produced the most resonant contemporary iterations of Classical tragedy, the critic nevertheless presents a thesis with which many Irish poets who have turned their hand to dramatic translation are likely to agree:

> A poet's Aeschylus, like a poet's Sophocles or Euripides, cannot succeed solely on the strength of its ancient source, and the authority of the translation lies not in

> fidelity to an original, but in the harnessing of that original in the service of a recognizable and distinctive poetic design. (183)

While Mahon's forays into the field have received muted critical acclaim, both the poet's adaptation of *The Bacchae—After Euripides* and his *Oedipus: A Version of Sophocles's King Oedipus and Oedipus at Colonus*, do meet the challenge of McDonald's thesis. Each drama in its own way is revelatory of the poet's fosterage of a stance of creative exile and assists in the realization of his decidedly tragic and Classical vision.

In his interview with Grennan, Mahon registers excitement when articulating what he perceives to be the creative "combination that has the greatest potency," namely, that which blends the Dionysian and Apollonian elements as "hissing chemicals inside the well-wrought urn; an urnful of explosives" (169).[43] Indeed, this description is effective in contextualizing Mahon's choice of *The Bacchae* as a theatrical text suited to his poetic; as McDonald notes, though Euripides's drama is one of unhinged violence that may initially appear to stand in striking opposition to the ethos of a poet alert to the potential of communal constructs to collapse into sectarianism, Mahon in fact understands the play in an edgier fashion. "I believe," he explains, that "poetry and religion are related, at least in origin, as are theatre and dance. When Plato banished the poets what he was banishing was the subversive Dionysian spirit, which is lyrical and unamenable to rational explanation and control." More provocatively still, Mahon continues with the claim that Plato was in truth "banishing a rival religious impulse" that was itself "a form of sectarianism" (Scammell 6).[44]

From the outset, Mahon (via Euripides) accomplishes the tricky feat of aligning his audience with Dionysus. Though certainly—like the Maenads—we are susceptible to

the god's considerable powers of seduction and put off by Pentheus's frigid outrage ("Oh, for fuck's sake! [*to the audience*] I've been abroad, where I heard strange reports / of scandalous goings-on back here in Thebes— / […] / they claim [it] is a religious rite. / I call it some kind of hysteria" [17]), we are revived at the end of the ghastly drama alongside the Bacchantes themselves, stunned by the magnitude of the violence that has been unleashed as well as our temporary participation in its fervor.

Homem notes that unlike Mahon's versions of Molière, *The Bacchae* does not commence with a preface, but instead, is introduced with three illustrative epigraphs from F.W. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, E.R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational*, and Louis MacNeice's *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (88-89). The critic contends that this variation is evidence of Mahon's "sympathy for a breadth of human experience that will not demote the life of the senses" (88). Indeed, the mood that the quotations collectively evoke is one of capacious tension where Apollo—god of balance, harmony, and measure—is at a creative standoff with Dionysus—daemon of revelry, excess, and danger. MacNeice's epigraph on Yeats's late-life inclination (which he finds akin to Euripides's own) to the seductive powers of the later deity is telling: as he has it, both writers "had in old age the elasticity to admit that there was a case for Dionysus." Paired with Nietzsche's tangential rejoinder—"Whenever the Dionysian forces become too obstreperous, as is the case today, we are safe in assuming that Apollo is close at hand, though wrapped in a cloud, and that the rich effects of his beauty will be witnessed by a later generation"'—Mahon's version of the Attic drama is poised on the immortal, creative edge of formalism and release.

The middle quotation comes from E.R. Dodds, an Irish Classical scholar who greatly influenced MacNeice's creative development (which in turn, as we have seen, did the same for Mahon's own). Dodds's words remind Mahon's audience of the eternally contemporary relevance of Euripides's story: "[…] Euripides's description of Maenadism is not to be accounted for in terms of the imagination alone […] the Maenad, however mythical certain of her acts, is not in essence a mythological character but an observed and still observable human type."[45] Taken together, these three aphoristic insights underscore the delicate interface between passionate release and destructive anarchy that exist at the heart of all societies, and certainly of modern Ireland. In the words of J. Michael Walton, the epigraphs present "the idea of […] *The Bacchae* as a barometer of the current social and political moods of any era," in a fashion that I argue aligns neatly with Yeats's conception of Classical tragedy (M. McDonald 21).

In his essay, "The Tragic Theatre," (from *The Cutting of an Agate*, 1912) Yeats articulates his conception of dramatic tragedy as a state of characterless theatre. "In poetical drama," he writes

> there is, it is held, an antithesis between character and lyric poetry, for lyric poetry—however much it move you when you read out of a book—can, as these critics think, but encumber the action. Yet when we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears, and [while] there is much lyric feeling, […s]uddenly it strikes us that character is continuously present in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy […] that of

> Greece and Rome, where its place is taken by passions and motives […]" (*The Yeats Reader* 400)

The Mage's conception of tragedy is relevant to Mahon's *Bacchae*, a play that swells with precisely such manner of passion and motive, luring the reader—again, to borrow Yeats's words—into a state akin "to the intensity of trance. […] We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea. That which is before our eyes perpetually vanishes and returns again in the midst of the excitement it creates" (403).

Certainly, Euripides's drama is one of cataclysmic excitement, its fervor culminating in the devastating madness of filicide. While the adaptation opens with Mahon's characteristic candor, contemporary language and reference, it shares the ruthlessness of its original iteration, delivering matching and brutal blows to both a clueless Pentheus and his passion-maddened mother, Agave. Tiresias is swift to indict Cadmus's young heir for his rebuke of the wily Dionysus:

> If a wise man has something important to say
> eloquence follows as night the day.
> You have the quick tongue of a politician
> yet you are ignorant. A forceful man
> with power and rhetoric at his finger-tips,
> but without wisdom, can destroy the state.
> You sneer at this new god; yet I predict
> that soon he will be a living force in Greece. (18)

Mahon portrays a Pentheus whose tragic flaw lies in his rigid nature and his blind assertion of the law of the city over the fluctuating passions astir in the breasts of the women of Thebes—figures, who despite civic decree, have taken to the hills. Like Creon in Heaney's version of *Antigone*, Pentheus is blinded by his unequivocal allegiance to the authorities of state, and as such, he is as guileless (though not as guiltless) as child. Enraged by the perennial taunt of a masked-Dionysus and rumors of "scandalous goings-on," Pentheus refuses to heed Tiresias's warning—"Pentheus, listen to me. You think coercion / can order human kind? How wrong you are! / Don't be so confident in your opinions; / receive this god in Thebes […]" (19).

We are familiar with the narrative fallout: Pentheus, unable to either accede to Dionysus's presence or to eradicate him completely allows his curiosity get the best of him; dressed as a woman, he unknowingly follows the god himself into the hills only to meet his fate at his mother's delirium-driven hands. In the wake of his grisly murder, Agave and her cohort descend to the city with the youth's dismembered body to reckon with their own destinies. With her child's head in her hands, she wakes to the consequences of her actions and proclaims her own unyielding sentence: "Dionysus will insist that we live apart" (60).[46]

Indeed, Agave pays the price of an exile unlike that of either of the poets who give her voice; hers is a fate of aggrieved banishment and as such, constitutionally dissimilar to both Mahon's and Euripides's own; she is emphatically and, as we are given to believe, punitively-if-justly separated from her home, "the land [she] love[s]" (60). Mahon's choice of tragic text implicitly begs the question: why has a poet whose personal experience of exile proven fruitful to his articulation of both self and nation

chosen to resuscitate a drama that hemorrhages along the very lines that have constituted his own survival? Characteristically enigmatic, Mahon responds to the puzzle of *The Bacchae* with another Classical Greek tragedy.

However, before turning to the poet's Sophocles, it is worthwhile to recall that Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft," published in *The Hunt By Night* (1982), concluded with a stanza that has since been excised.[47] Attached to a poem that subtly captures the poised (and Protestant) provincial world of Pieter de Hooch's seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, the reader is encouraged to heed the call of Dionysus, come what mayhem will:

> For the pale light of that provincial town
> Will spread itself, like ink or oil,
> Over the not yet accurate linen
> Map of the world which occupies one wall
> And punish nature in the name of God.
> If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,
> Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,
> We could sleep easier in our beds at night. (ll. 33-40)

A destined ghost in Mahon's oeuvre, this stanza can be read as a fourth and silent epigraph that haunts *The Bacchae*. Its message likewise serves as a critical reminder of Yeats's sense of the imperative spirit of tragic theatre where "[t]ragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us […] by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance […] and the persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten until they are humanity itself" (403).

As Mahon proclaims in his Introduction to *Oedipus*, "Sophocles's Theban plays aren't only about Oedipus but about Thebes, the human community. […] Everyone suffers directly or indirectly; and Oedipus, the cause of this, will also bring redemption. Destroyer and savior both, through his own suffering he will rescue Thebes; a new life can begin" (9). Commencing on a decidedly—and intriguingly—Christian note, Mahon's version of the serial tragedy reveals a protagonist, if more compassionate than Heaney's Creon in *The Burial at Thebes*,[48] equally deficient in self-awareness. Earnestly proclaiming what resounds as a meritorious manifesto, Oedipus declares:

> I share your grief, believe me; I am quite aware
> of your great suffering and anxiety.
> All suffer, but no-one suffers more than I.
> Each has his personal sorrow, his own grief,
> but I suffer too for everyone gathered here,
> my responsibility being the communal life. (14)

Indeed, though stripped of his fingerprint irony and tenor of self-deprecation, these words could well be Mahon's own. Cast in the bold voice of a guileless king, the contemporary poet lends them both breath and conscience.

While "a faint spark of hope sustains" Mahon's Oedipus, the modern audience is knowledgeable not only of the plot of the unfolding Sophoclean drama, but of the psychological inability of its protagonist to recognize his own culpable role in the troubled fabric of his community (14). Insisting that all "[s]peak openly; [for]the answer concerns everyone," Oedipus is tragically blinded to the personal implications of his statement; like Creon, like Pentheus, he is a character of compartmentalized thought

whose greatest sin may lie in his certitude of his righteous position in the polis. However, as an audience, we are pressed—as Yeats would have it—to look beyond character and into the tragic message of the play. Indeed, Mahon himself draws attention to Jocasta's own tragic perception: "His destiny moves us because it might have been ours; our dreams convince us that this is so" (9).

With a king trapped in the snare of myopic individualism, it is the chorus who voices and bears witness to Thebes's altogether human plight:

> Grim scenes beyond belief,
> infants dead in the womb,
> the people crazed with grief,
> starvation, the stricken home,
> the city a living tomb:
> no end to these miseries
> as soul after soul flies
> into night's cindery skies.
>
> Dawn, and a toxic blight
> covers the ruined earth
> with a perpetual twilight;
> corpses litter the street
> and rats infest the hearth.
> Great gods, hear our prayer:
> ignite some hopeful star,
> illuminate our despair. (18)

These lines attest to Mahon's tragic sensibility as a modern and occasionally jaded writer who nevertheless remains deeply committed to poetry's potential. Alongside Oedipus, Mahon admits to what drives his quest: "I need to know my origin, don't you see" (38)? As we have seen, the poet's search for home, his private "hunt by night," is indirect and ever relational; his work encourages a complex understanding of underworld journey and the poetic resurrection of the voices of the dead. In his own words, Mahon explains the poetic impulse as a manner of faith:

> I suppose it's religious[49]—the notion of art as consolation, the belief that "everything will be all right." I suppose I can't finally seriously believe that we're not immortal. So yes, in some sense everything *is* going to be all right. That seems a really crass thing to say. But it would be pernicious to insist that this was the be-all and end-all; it's not. It's only one of the poetic experiences—although it has a kind of privileged status, I think. (Grennan 172)

As an act of faith, Mahon believes in "administering to that sense" of verse which is hospitable to metempsychosis and to what Cornel West has referred to as our "need for audacious hope [and] the courage to act when doubt is warranted."[50] Indeed, this is the same courage that Heaney indicates in "Cessation, 1994":

> Hope, according to Havel, is different from optimism. It is a state of the soul rather than a response to the evidence. It is not the expectation that things will turn out successfully but the conviction that something is worth working for, however it turns out. Its deepest roots are in the transcendental, beyond the horizon. The self-evident truth of all this is surely something upon which a peace price might reasonably be grounded. (*Finders Keepers* 47)

In undoubtedly one of his most powerful poems, “The Last of the Fire Kings,” Mahon confesses to a desire “to be / Like the man who descends […]:

> Or the man
>
> Who drops at night
>
> From a moving train
>
>
> And strikes out over the fields
>
> Where fireflies glow,
>
> Not knowing a word of the language. (ll. 1-2, 7-12)

Here, the seduction of escape—of self-exile—asserts an incredible pull, a tension that, as this chapter has endeavored to show, is strung along the fret of Mahon’s poetic and in particular, his work with Classical translation. And though, as he professes in “Consolations of Philosophy,”

> There will be time to live through in the mind
>
> The lives we might have lived, and get them right;
>
> To lie in silence listening to the wind
>
> Mourn for the living through the livelong night[,] (ll. 13-16)

for now Mahon remains one of “the fire-loving / People,” charged not with “releas[ing] [either the living or the dead] / From the ancient curse / But [content] to die their creature and be thankful,” having raised his voice and shared their verse (ll. 35, 42-44).

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[1] From Derek Mahon's "Poetry in Northern Ireland." *Twentieth Century Studies*, 4 (November 1970), 93 and discussed at compelling length in Hugh Haughton's *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (2007), 76.

[2] Though published in Mahon's third volume, *The Snow Party* (1975), "Afterlives" captures the poet's early attunement to a plurality of voice and perspective. Understandably, it took Mahon a number of years to fine-tune his ear for such multiplicity. In his own words, "In putting together the *Selected Poems* I tried to manufacture belatedly a homogeneous voice, but, in fact, in those early poems there'd be one man on one page and a totally different person on the next page. To my ear anyway" (Grennan 162).

[3] As noted on page 7 of the introduction to this dissertation, Walter Benjamin argues that translation is a condition of the original text: A translator must "go back to the original [text], for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability" (16).

[4] For an astute contemporary discussion of the presence of translation in Mahon's verse—as well as in the oeuvre of Northern Irish poets, in general—see Rui Carvalho Homem's *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland: Dislocations in Contemporary Writing* (2009). Homem notes Mahon's career-long "notion of 'getting' or 'making' things right, with a bearing on earlier writing (by himself or others)" that may be said to define Mahon's work with revision, translation, and adaptation (97).

[5] Homem calls attention to the scholarly shortsightedness of criticism addressing Mahon's poetic, noting in particular the commentary of Tom Paulin, Edna Longley, and Robert Garratt (see his endnote 3, [216]).

[6] In his essay, "The Importance of Elsewhere: Mahon and Translation," Hugh Haughton suggests that "translation offers a form of virtual reality" to the poet (Andrews 180); I will take this assessment a step further and suggest effective translation is, by necessity, as original as any rebirth—nothing virtual about it. Crucially for my argument, Haughton does not choose to include this essay in his 2007 book length treatment of the poet's oeuvre. In the introductory chapter of the latter work, Haughton explains: "For reasons of space, I will not be looking in detail at Mahon's translation and adaptations here, reserving this for a future study" (a note on the text refers readers, as well, to his earlier essay). Though Haughton is a keen reader of Mahon's work with translation, noting that "the presence of [the poet] as translator and adaptor is everywhere in his collections," his editorial choice to excise a discussion of translated texts from his monograph undermines the relevance—indeed, the intrinsic nature—of translation to Mahon's verse (*The Poetry of Derek Mahon* 4).

[7] All poetry citations come from Derek Mahon's *Collected Poems* (1999) unless otherwise marked. Due to Mahon's extensive practices of revision, poems often vary between collections, so significant differences between versions will be noted.

[8] Mahon's father, who his son has described as "a quiet man," was—like his predecessors—a shipyard worker for forty years. Prior to her marriage, the poet's mother was employed at the York Street Flax Spinning Company, Ltd., a linen mill; after wedding his father, she adopted the customary role of married women at the time in Ireland and left her career to become a housewife (a vocation she approached with what Mahon has called a "pathological" fastidiousness). Both shipyard work and the linen industry are historically Protestant domains in Northern Ireland—and were particularly, in Belfast—during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Mahon, the "blue-to-white collar jobs" his parents held were indicative of the practicality and industriousness fostered in the regional and religious community in which he was born (Eamon Grennan, 'Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry' (interview), *Paris Review* (Spring 2000), Volume 42, Issue 154, 150-178).

[9] Mahon's comment is somewhat tongue in cheek, but about this sense of difference, he continues: "I think that [it] knocked me off the straight (and even narrow) and turned me into an eccentric […] It created a sense of inadequacy, a sense of "well to hell with that then, I'll opt for the place where I can succeed, for other forms of value" (158).

[10] See pages 18-20 and endnotes 26-28 of the Longley chapter for a fuller treatment of one such notable exception. Significantly, this dispute over identity politics was conducted in response to the comments of a fellow poet—and fellow Northern Irish Protestant poet, at that—and not a literary critic or outside reader.

[11] "There was a particular kind of community there, a unique community involving certain very vivid characters: Alec Reid, Con Leventhal, Owen Sheehy Skeffington. These were both teachers and friends. The professor of English then was Phillip Edwards. Phillip was English, a nice man, but much more *inspiring* was a reprobate like Alec Reid or a humanly interesting person like Con Leventhal. We grew up in a very pleasant way. Physically the surroundings were extremely attractive. Beautiful college, beautiful trees, beautiful girls: wherever you fell there was something to please. At the same time, it was a place apart—golden days, golden moments" (160-161).

[12] First published as "In Belfast" in the Trinity student paper *Icarus*, 42 (March 1964), then as "Poem in Belfast (for Michael Longley) in *Twelve Poems* (Queen's University Belfast: Festival Publications, 1965), the poem appeared in Mahon's first book length collection, *Night Crossing* (1968), as "the Spring Vaction" in *Selected Poems 1962-1978*, and subsequently, under the title "Spring in Belfast" in *Collected Poems*. Ron Schuchard notes the above chronology in his article, "The Legacy of Yeasts in Contemporary Irish Poetry," and includes the compelling insight that Michael Longley offered in a lecture "Yeats the Tragedian" (1970): "No one has written better about Belfast than Derek Mahon. His vision of that city is profounder, more critical and more generous than [Louis] MacNeice's I think." Schuchard reminds us of Longley's contention that "In Belfast" should be required reading for all those interested in understanding Northern Ireland (310, 312).
[13] Lannan Literary Videos, No. 38 (Los Angeles, California: Lannan Foundation, 1994). This passage is likewise quoted in and excerpted from Schuchard's "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish poetry" (307).
[14] As Mahon notes in his interview with Grennan, Heaney quotes Coventry Patmore in the line, "the end of all art is peace." Mahon himself explains his own take: "*Peace* in the sense of contributing to the world, to life, which is finally all we have, I suppose. That sort of 'going on.' Though perhaps we shouldn't be talking about peace, but only about faith—the poem, as you said, as an act of faith. So let's forget peace; let's stick with the faith" (174).
[15] Here, faith is discussed in a secular fashion. When asked by Grennan about his own religious beliefs, Mahon responds: "I believe in the words, and in the tunes. I've never seriously asked myself the question, Do you believe in God? I believe in the words and the tunes; that's quite enough for me. As a child, I suppose I brought the same kind of apprehension to these things as to other phenomena: […] The words themselves became facts, objects; and I believed in those objects, those clumped printed objects" (156-157).
[16] This stance is also what makes his faith Classically tragic. Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. explains: "[As] moderns, [we] are obsessed with how things end, and we tend to define something as tragic or comic depending on how the thing ends. Greek tragedy [however, is] not interested in endings but in middles, and knows that tragedies can end all sorts of ways, even with resolution." See Ruprecht's *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision* (1994).
[17] Mahon is clear about the secular nature of his—and perhaps all—Protestantism: "There was a certain amount of churchgoing, although [my parents] went for the look of the thing—it was expected that you would show your face in church once in a while. They were serious about being respectable and being seen to do the right thing, but they weren't really serious church people. I mean, they were Protestants! There's no such thing as a devout Protestant, is there? Protestants aren't devout, they're staunch. So it was all appearances" (Grennan 156).
[18] Several critics have commented upon the discomfiting half-rhyme of "bomb" and "home." As Haughton suggests, "The poem's destination is the word 'home' itself, however, its final word. The meaning of 'home' eludes him (he 'might' have 'learnt' it implies he hasn't). This appears to endorse the criticism by [James] Simmons and others that he has somehow evaded his root. The final lines are double-edged, however. A sense of 'home' that is based on living something 'bomb by bomb' is horrific. The fact that in Belfast 'home' is rhymed with 'bomb', reminds us that in his hometown, the word itself is riven with conflict" (*The Poetry of Derek Mahon* 97).
[19] Mahon elaborates on the dangers of a chilled perspective: "[…] to quote Adrienne Rich, 'the danger of reacting against coldness is that one becomes oneself cold.' I think that happened to me. I'm still a pretty cold fish in some ways—it becomes second nature, first nature, even, to get out of all community, and to turn into an antinomian, nasty character. The dangers are solipsism, inhumanity, intolerance" (Grennan 76).
[20] The same can be said for Heaney upon his move to County Wicklow in 1972 (see Chapter One of this present work for a longer treatment of this subject and a reading Heaney's own manifestations of guilt).
[21] Mahon and Longley shared such a decrepit flat for several years; in *Tuppenny Stung*, the latter describes their Merrion Square abode as littered with unwashed dishes and an oven full of dirty socks (38-39).
[22] Mahon explains the unique nature of his education in Dublin in light of his literary alliances with fellow students and mentors alike:

> I thought of myself as a surly *étranger* in a donkey jacket, with literary pretensions. The way to seem was careless of the academic demands. Some, of course, swotted up furiously at night. I didn't, and that was my mistake. So I drifted away from the academic but, like others, formed my

> own little university within. It was then that I had the notion that "this poetry nonsense you've been tinkering at for the past couple of years at school, if you're going to take it seriously, you can do it here, and people will pay attention." It was a very fertile environment, very supportive. Alec Reid was part of it, in a very personal way; he was great fun, and so *human*. A liberal education, was Alec. (Grennan 161)

[23] These letters constitute but a small portion of the vast collection of un-published material held in Emory University's MARBL collection.

[24] Scholars have noted the presence of contemporary debris in Mahon's poetry. "The Apotheosis of Tins," for example, eulogizes the "the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab, / of wine and Windolene; it is always rushhour" (ll. 12-13). Indeed, in lines such as the following, there is more than a hint of Eliot's influence:

> If we have learnt one thing from our desertion
> by the sour smudge on the horizon,
> from the erosion of labels,
> it is the value of self-definition. (ll. 14-17)

[25] Haughton comments on the influence of Philip Larkin's refrain, "Never such innocence again" (MCMXIV), a telling reference that hyperbolizes the sorrow at the heart of all acts of homecoming.

[26] In *Symposia: Plato, the Erotic, and Moral Value* (1999), Ruprecht offers a compelling reading of the ancient Greek understanding of *metaxu*, "a vast area of in-between-ness" where "most of the moral life takes place" (11). For a treatment of the relevance of *metaxu* to the oeuvre of Seamus Heaney, see my master's thesis, "Working the Border: An Exploration of Shape Shifting and Translation in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney" (Trinity College, Dublin, 2002).

[27] Heaney's reading of the poem merits extended quotation:

> Mahon, the poet of metropolitan allusion, of ironical and cultivated manners, is being shadowed by his unlived life among the familiar shades of Belfast. Do not turn your back on us, do not disdain our graceless stifled destiny, keep faith with your origins, do not desert, speak for us: the mushrooms are the voices of belonging but they could not have been heard so compellingly if Mahon had not created the whispering gallery of absence not just by moving out of Ireland but by evolving out of solidarity and into irony and compassion. (*Finders Keepers* 120)

[28] The role of survivor—fraught with both gratitude and guilt in any case—bears considerable weight in Mahon's poetry due to the conflicted feelings he has as being born a middle-class Protestant in the North.

[29] 1975 was an active literary moment as well: both Heaney's *North* and Boland's *The War Horse* were published that year.

[30] MacNeice's "Autumn Journal," Section XVI rings with his famous rebuke:

> A city built upon mud;
> A culture built upon profit;
> Free speech nipped in the bud,
> The minority always guilty.
> Why should I want to go back
> To you, Ireland, my Ireland? (ll. 101-106)

[31] Homem draws compelling attention to what he perceives as "Mahon's continued attraction to rewriting famous terrible women," a predilection that will be discussed in some detail in my treatment of the poet's version of *The Bacchae* and which is manifested, though outside the purview of this current treatment, in *Racine's Phaedra* (1996). Homem's observation clearly applies to the depiction of Penelope, Calypso, and Helen in "Calypso," as well.

[32] For Mahon, "the place that poetry occupies is not a geographical location; it's a community of imagined readership" (*The Cork Review*, 2.3, June 1981). In the following section, I wish to extend the poet's insight by revealing that Mahon's most accurate sense of place is also a community of imagined *writers*.

[33] Mahon's extended battle with alcoholism has left a poignant trace in his poems (see for instance "No Rest for the Wicked," Homecoming," "Dawn at St. Patrick's," "Noon at St. Michael's," "The Yaddo Letter," "The Hudson Letter," and "Calypso") as well as in critical considerations of his oeuvre. The addiction likewise contributed to the breakdown of his marriage (1972-1985) to Doreen Douglas. As he confesses to his children in "The Yaddo Letter": "'One always loses with a desperate throw.' / What I lost was a wife, a life, an you" (ll. 74-75).

[34] For a compelling treatment of the connection between eros, ethics, and lyric, see Ruprecht's *Symposia: Plato, the Erotic, and Moral Value* (1999).
[35] It is helpful to consider that for Irish writers, William Butler Yeats is a figure of native "Classical" status.
[36] Here, Mahon expertly evokes MacNeice's "Snow" with its gorgeous lines, "World is crazier and more of it than we think / Incorrigibly plural. […] // There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses" (ll. 5-6, 12).
[37] In *Tuppenny Stung*, Longley addresses the unique energy and presence of his poet-friend:

> Mahon embodied for me the spirit of Pan or Puck when he played the tin whistle […] and walked up and down the furniture as weightless. We laughed a lot. A need to undermine Northern Irish middle-class respectability seemed to be at the core of our humour. [… P]ieties of an kind were fit target […] But these were fulfilling rather than happy times. Our friendship and our abilities were often stretched as far as they could go. I admired Mahon's disenchanted vision, but was less attracted than he to the role of poète maudit… Mahon's verve and edginess helped to keep me sane. (38-39)

[38] For a thorough discussion of the presence of Samuel Beckett in Mahon's poetry, see Dawe's "Heirs and Graces: The Influence and Example of Derek Mahon" (Andrews 49-56).
[39] Dawe offers a sharp reading of the tendency of Irish literary criticism to sway between the purported Romanticism of Yeats and Modernism of Joyce and the fashion in which Beckett may be understood to scramble the mix: "The old trick of wheeling out Mutt and Jeff, Yeats and Joyce in the interest of creating what Mahon called (in another context) a 'pleasing symmetry', crumbles when Beckett joins the fathering figures because the whole critical business of what comes next begins to look much more complicated, much more like "the more complex truth' which nobody wants to hear" (Andrews 54).
[40] For a clear link between Sappho's underworld descent and Mahon's own tribute, see Eavan Boland's "The Journey," wherein the Greek poet guides the Irish poet into an underground world replete with

> '[…] women who went out like you
> when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
> recovering the day, stooping, picking up
> teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets –
>
> love's archaeology – and they too like you
> stood boot deep in flowers once in summer
> or saw winter come in with a single magpie
> in a caul of haws, a solo harlequin.' (ll. 65-72)

[41] This line, which ostensibly links Mahon's poem to Boland's "The Journey," where the female shades are responsible for the actions of communal upset and destruction is excised from the *Collected Poems*.
[42] Peter McDonald's "The Greeks in Ireland: Irish Poets and Greek Tragedy," *Translation and Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1995): pp. 183-203.
[43] Mahon is keen to connect this insight to Yeats's poetic: "That's what's so great about Yeats, after all: the Dionysian contained within the Apollonian form, and bursting at the seams—shaking at the bars, but the bars have to be there to be shaken" (Grennan 169-170).
[44] William Scammell's interview with Derek Mahon, *Poetry Review* [Special Irish Issue], 81, 2 (Summer 1991), pp.4-6 is treated in compelling fashion in Peter McDonald, p. 198.
[45] This passage is likewise aligned with Mahon's own resistance to the mythological and preference for nit-and-grit realism.
[46] Homem contends that Pentheus's fate is disproportionately severe, a fact that Mahon turns to socio-critical effect:

> However much stress Mahon lays on Euripides's point that it is futile and misguided to deny the Dionysian, he cannot suppress the horror of the death and dismemberment of Pentheus, nor the *pathos* of Agave's awakening from her Maenadic frenzy and delusion to recognize her son's head in her own hands, and of Cadmus's recomposition of his grandson's body for the sake of proper exequies. This is the point at which the jocular tone of Dionysus's speeches turns sour, together with the whole boisterous element that Mahon whips up throughout his translation. Although he steers clear of the more obvious strategies of refraction occasionally employed by Northern Irish poets for confronting the Troubles through their translations of the Classics, the Irish implication is hardly absent. (90)

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[47] This was the second published version of the poem; originally, “Courtyards in Delft” appeared in a slim volume by the same name in 1981. All iterations of the poem subsequent to that included within *The Hunt by Night* have excised the final stanza.
[48] Compellingly, *Oedipus* is dedicated to Seamus Heaney, so the intratextual references are surely intended.
[49] When asked by Grennan about his personal sense of religious faith, Mahon responds: “I believe in the words, and in the tunes. I’ve never seriously asked myself the question, Do you believe in God? I believe in the words and the tunes; that’s quite enough for me” (156).
[50] I am grateful to Lou Ruprecht’s reminder of these moving lines from West’s 1993 commencement speech at Wesleyan University.

CONCLUSION

“The bloodstained warrior and the gentle philosopher”: Voyaging to the Underworld and the Salvation of the Lyric

In the eleventh book of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the blind visionary, Tiresias, leads a wander-weary Odysseus to an encounter with the kingdom of the dead. One ram and a black ewe are sacrificed; their commingled blood becomes a libation to herald the shades. The souls of those Odysseus has loved and lost hover on the opposite shore of this red river, held at bay by the warrior’s sword. They sip the blood to temporarily animate their speech, and when the words rush suddenly warm from cold and ghostly lips, the dead tell Odysseus of their individual mortal trials, one more heart-wrenching than the next.

Comrades-in-arms rub formless shoulders with their ghosted enemies. Worrying their memories like talismanic stones, the warrior-dead are locked in the circuit of what happened, how and to whom. Privy to data, they are nevertheless unable to translate private event into lasting—potentially immortal—narrative: this task is set for the living, for the survivors. Here, Odysseus becomes the medium through which this transition from rough death record to storied elegy begins to quicken. The polytropic hero of this ancient Greek epic must rise to meet potentially the most trying ordeal yet, namely, surviving the deaths of those who have been lost and translating the details of their miseries into elegy. On the one hand, this is the most human, elemental and elementary of tasks; on the other, as we have seen, it is the unique vocation of the poet.

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In her memoir, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Margaret Atwood addresses her personal revelation that "*all* writing […], is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156). She underlines the fact that while readers and writers of literature alike are familiar with the notion that written texts offer a version of immortality, less observed is the concept that writing itself is, as she postulates, "above all, a reaction to the fear of death" (157). Unlike other forms of art, Atwood continues, writing by definition, exhibits an "apparent permanence […] it survives its own performance" (158). Atwood describes the written word as "a score for voice," a quality that, in her eyes, is inextricably tied to the architecture of narrative and that this dissertation has extended to considerations of the lyric and the dramatic.

When Odysseus travels to the underworld, he does so with Tiresias as his guide. This detail is significant for it takes a prophet, a figure unhinged from the constraints of temporal experience, to see into the future as well as to revisit the past. When Odysseus encounters the shades of the dead, each is entrapped in the endlessly repeating cycle of his own individual narrative. Aching for life at any cost and in any form (note the cry of Achilles: "By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—/ some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—/ than rule down here over all the breathless dead" [ll. 556-558]), the dead are obsessed with ensuring the next best thing: the propagation of their personal legacies. These life narratives are complete, with not only set beginnings, but with proven conclusions. Nevertheless, they are meaningless without iteration in the living sphere, and in this sense, their outcomes remain unknown and distinctly in the

realm of the tragic. Thus, the questions of the deceased as to who survives and what has become of the fate of loved one and enemy alike, take on a pressing imperative.

As the shade of Elpenor explains to Odysseus, the living must tell the narratives of what happened and to whom "so even men to come will learn [our] stor[ies]" (l. 85). Grieved though he is by his encounter with the dead, Odysseus promises he "won't forget a thing" (l. 88). Donning the cloak of the storyteller, the warrior becomes an artist; through his negotiations with the dead, he accepts the challenge facing every writer: to combat the fear and the silencing power of death and to seek to recuperate the loved and the lost through the witness of words.

There is a weight to the poet's calling that is not unlike the warrior's own. In his introduction to Fagles's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, Bernard Knox explains the connection as such: "Like Achilles, [Tiresias] was defying the community, hewing to a solitary line, in loyalty to a private ideal of conduct, of honor. In the last analysis, the bloodstained warrior and the gentle philosopher [and poet] live and die in the same heroic, and tragic, pattern" (64). With the weight of artistic redress in Northern Ireland coming down most heavily on the backs of its poets, the poet's message is powerful, perhaps nowhere more so than in the closing section of Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout."

The fifth and final episode of the poem "His Reverie of Water," is simultaneously the boldest and most recognizably Heaney-like portion of the entire poem. A sensitive weave of Classical images with a revolutionary gesture towards a transcendent post-war vision, "His Reverie of Water" picks up semantically where "The Nights" left off. The caged beast of the watchman's mind gushes with sudden release as the "bloodbath" of war and murder gives way to a vision of water:

> At Troy, at Athens, what I most clearly
>
> see and nearly smell
>
> is the fresh water
>
> A filled bath, still unentered
>
> and unstained, waiting behind housewalls
>
> that the far cries of the butchered on the plain
>
> keep dying into […] (ll. 1-7)

Introduced in the same breath, linked softly with a comma, the enemies of ten-years war blend in the watchman's mind. A bath of blood becomes a bath of "unstained" water waiting to cleans an unspecified "hero" who "surg[es] in incomprehensibly / to be attended to and be alone, / stripped to the skin […] moaning / and rocking […] / accommodated as if he were a stranger" (ll. 7-10, 12) instead of a champion of a horribly defined sectariansim. True to the *Oresteia* and Aeschylus's message of the necessity of what Fagles refers to as "suffering into truth" and "dying into life," Heaney allows "His Reverie of Water" to postulate a very different sort of victory over violence (Introduction, *Oresteia* 16, 18).

The slower, more lyrical and iambic rhythm of the verse harmonizes with the image of a soldier undergoing a sort of ritual cleansing that Heaney soon extrapolates into a communal baptism. Moving from the privacy of the bath, the poet describes a hidden staircase attached to a cliff supporting the Acropolis that he refers to as "the ladder of the future" (l. 22), a "secret staircase the defenders knew / and the invaders found, where what was to be / Greek met Greek […]" (ll. 19-21). The image is one of liminality, a

metaphor for the *metaxu* nature of the human condition and the irrelevance, in the end, of all conflict born of a sense of divided identity. A ladder linking past and future, Athenian and Trojan, "besieger and besieged," shifts from "the treadmill of assault" to a sacred and all-nourishing "waterwheel" (ll. 23, 24).

With a final, lingering image, "[…] the one / bare foot extended, searching" (l. 26), Heaney lets go of the Greeks, leaving them to their reconciliation at the waterwheel in order to turn directly towards his own regional and historical moment:

> And then this ladder of our own that ran
> deep into a well-shaft being sunk
> in broad daylight, men puddling at the source
>
> through tawny mud, then coming back up
> deeper in themselves for having been there,
> like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground […] (ll. 27-32)

No stranger to the metaphor of water, of wells and pumps and renewing springs, Heaney buries the answer of "Mycenae Lookout" in wet earth. Reminiscent of his childhood description of Mossbawn and his own mud-baptism, an initiation that led him to declare his "betrothal [to] the invitation of watery ground" (*Finders Keepers* 5), as well as the early poem, "Personal Helicon," with its image of wells that "[…] had echoes, gave back your own call / With a clean new music in it […]" (ll. 13-14), "His Reverie of Water" ends where in some fashion, his poetry first began:

> I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*,

> until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. (*Finders Keepers* 3)

It is no accident that this powerful image of originary water opens Heaney's latest collection of prose, tellingly entitled *Finders, Keepers*, a phrase the poet repeats in the last stanza of "Mycenae Lookout:" "Finders, keepers, seers of fresh water / in the bountiful round mouths of iron pumps / and gushing taps" (ll. 33-35). And thus, Heaney's vision has come full circle; indeed, it begins and ends with an image—a divination—of water that rings true to the poetry of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, as well. The "round mouths" of the pumps connote an imagery of openness and possibility, a message emphasized in the soft assonance of vowel sound in these final lines. It is as if the very words "hope" and "love," with their own full resonance hover softly in between, "for those fit to read between the lines / For the message, whatever the message is" (*The Cure at Troy* 11).

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* Unless otherwise indicated, unpublished materials used in this project are located in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Robert W. Woodruff, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30302. Collections consulted include: Ciaran Carson Papers (Collection 746), Gallery Press / Peter Fallon Papers (Collection 817), Seamus Heaney Papers (Collection 653), Michael Longley Papers (Collection 744), Derek Mahon Papers (Collection 689). Information about individual items, including titles and locations within the collections, is included in the relevant chapter's endnotes.

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