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Postal Poetics in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

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Postal Poetics in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry

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A.B., Kenyon College, 2008

Advisor: Geraldine Higgins, Ph.D., and Jill Robbins, 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

Postal Poetics in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry
By Benjamin Grayson Clary

This dissertation interrogates contemporary poetry from Northern Ireland produced primarily between the Good Friday Peace Agreement (1998) and Brexit (2016): a period marked by the apparent loosening of national borders and their return. If political poetry written during the Troubles reflects on sectarian violence, what shape does political poetry take in this new period? I argue that we can read a quest for alternative forms of community in contemporary Northern Irish poetry and, in particular, this quest becomes explicit in the form and trope of the letter, what I term a "postal poetics." Building on the work of Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and others, I contend that a postal poetics suggests a critically utopic sense of community through its emphases on poetic address, its navigation of the private/public divide, and its foregrounding of the intersection between the poetic and communicative functions of language. I explore the appearance of this postal poetics, in particular, in the work of Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson, and Leontia Flynn. I close by turning to the appearance of postal poetics beyond Northern Ireland in the work of the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali and the Latinx poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz. Postal Poetics not only maps the changing contours of poetry from Northern Ireland, it highlights the importance of critical engagement with a robust body of contemporary postal poems.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: A Postal Poetics

The taking of the Post Office was a symbolic act, for nowhere was the Crown as near ubiquitous as on postage stamps, these little emblems of the temporal realm that drop daily through your letter-box, representing complicated fiscal arrangements and mechanisms for their delivery.

—Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory*

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially a dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward.

Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality.

Such realities are, I think, at stake in a poem.

— Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen"[1]

In his editorial for the inaugural issue of the literary journal *Archipelago*, poet and editor Andrew McNeillie describes its focus on issues "at the margins, in the unnameable constellation of islands on the Eastern Atlantic coast, known variously in other millennia as Britain, Great Britain, Britain and Ireland, etc; even, too, too readily, the United Kingdom (including the North of partitioned Ireland), though no such thing ever existed, other than *in extremes* during wartime, but in the letter."[2] McNeillie emphasizes the politics of naming, how names reveal relations of power. He chooses "the unnameable constellation," later changed to "the unnameable archipelago," as an epithet for the islands of Ireland and Great Britain. This choice of descriptor subverts the traditional power relations that privilege Britain and express a more nebulous web of geo-political connections. Just as the original Greek term referred to the sea (*pélagos*) that

[1] Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory* (London: Granta Books, 1998), 37. Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, tr. Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester, England: Carcanet Press, 1986), 34-35. Derrida discusses this work and others by Celan in his *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

[2] Andrew McNeillie, "Editorial," *Archipelago* 1 (Summer 2007), vii.

contained the islands, "the framing of an island archipelago draws attention to fluid cultural processes," what Gilles Deleuze notes is "a model of a world in process."[3] The archipelago is "a force of metamorphosis," as conceived within archipelagic theory, and McNeillie taps into this potential by reframing the islands that make up the United Kingdom as an archipelago.[4]

Archipelago was first published in 2007, well into what could be called the era of devolution. Although the term "devolution" has been operative in British politics throughout the latter-half of the twentieth century, 1998 marks a turning point in the political landscape of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In that year Westminster granted Scotland and Wales devolved (though limited) legislatures, and the Good Friday Peace Agreement, adopted in Northern Ireland, tentatively put an end to the three decades of sectarian violence commonly known as the Troubles with stipulations for a devolved legislative body and a power-sharing government. The semi-autonomous regions that emerge from this wave of devolution seem to herald the waning of hard borders and a certain iteration of imperialistic nationalism, and thus the possibility for new political configurations.[5] And yet, the success of the "leave" campaign in the 2016 "Brexit" referendum (the common name for the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum) coincided with a resurgence of English nationalism

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[3] Jonathon Pugh, "Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago," *Island Studies Journal* 8.1 (2013), 11; Gilles Deleuze quoted in Elaine Stratford, et. al., "Envisioning the Archipelago," *Island Studies Journal* 6.2 (2011), 121.

[4] Pugh, "Island Movements," 15. Archipelagic studies has steadily emerged as a significant field of study. Its theoretical origins can be traced to the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly the former's essay "Bartleby; or The Formula," and the work of the Martinican poet and thinker Édouard Glissant who builds on the Delueze and Guattari while positioning their thought in an Afro-Caribbean context (see *Poetics of Relation*, in particular). A number of scholars have started to think about British and Irish literature from this type of framing. See, in particular, John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Allen, Nicholas, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith, eds. *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[5] One could argue that devolution is a concession to Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalism, although it seems to. The political effects of devolution are open to interpretation. Coakley, Laffan, and Todd's edited volume of essays on devolution, *Renovation or Revolution: New Territorial Politics in Ireland and the United Kingdom* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), is organized along the very question of whether devolution marks a revolution in political form or merely a renovation of the existing form of politics.

and hard borders, particularly in the case of Ireland, where the threat of a renewed customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland jeopardizes the gains of the Good Friday Peace Agreement.

In the specific context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, though bearing broader implications, the contemporary Irish philosopher Richard Kearney notes that, "we cannot … expect to transform the political *reality* of the nation-state without a corresponding revision of its political *imaginary*."[6] For Kearney, the Troubles is a conflict between competing nationalisms and the solution is to imagine a formation of political community that would be a radical departure from the prominence of nationalism. I contend in this dissertation that we can read an urgent quest for alternative forms of community in contemporary, devolution-era Northern Irish poetry. As Seamus Heaney writes in his poem "The Settle Bed," "whatever is given / Can always be reimagined, however four-square," and poets, as this quote demonstrates, are in a prime position to reimagine the world as *otherwise* than it currently stands.[7] That is, building on the work of Theodor Adorno, Isobel Armstrong, Walt Hunter, and Robert Stilling I locate within poetic form the impulse to reimagine and reshape the given material of reality, including the human relationships that bind it together.[8] In particular, this quest for alternative forms of

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[6] Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.
[7] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 321.
[8] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Adorno's paratactic text is notoriously hard to summarize but I have in mind such moments as, "By its form alone art promises what is not; it registers objectively, however refractedly, the claim that because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible" (82) and, "Form is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom" (143). Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). Armstrong's book is part of a group of texts loosely gathered under the umbrella term, "new formalism." For a description of this, see Marjorie Levinson's review essay "What Is New Formalism?" in *PMLA* 122.2 (Mar., 2007), 558-569. In her book, Armstrong pushes back against the anti-aesthetic tendency in contemporary leftist literary theory by proposing "an alternate aesthetic discourse" that would access "the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse" (1, 2); cf. Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). In the introduction to his book, *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), Walt Hunter states that his project "argues for the recognition of a global poetics in which the global is built into the literary form of the poem itself and is inseparable from its making" (2). Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial*

community becomes explicit in the form and trope of the letter, part of what I term a "postal poetics," in the work of Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson, and Leontia Flynn, among others. I argue that a postal poetics suggests a critically utopic sense of community through its emphases on poetry and address, the public/private divide, transmission and translation, and the poetic franking of date and place.

i. The Intersection of Aesthetics and Politics in Northern Irish Poetry:

The coincidence between the outbreak of the Troubles and a literary "renaissance" in Northern Ireland led to a robust debate on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Irish poetry.[9] This debate has unfolded along a spectrum anchored by two opposing critical positions. On the one hand, critics such as Seamus Deane argue that literature is inherently political, and the responsible poet engages the implicit politics of language and literature through their writing.[10] On the other hand, Edna Longley has famously argued that poetry should be autonomous from the political sphere. This autonomy does not entail a political quietism; rather, it is the source of

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Poetry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) also contends that, "for a diverse group of writers and artists from across the formerly colonized world and its diaspora … the notion of beginning at the end, of being caught between the decadence of old European empires and the unformed possibilities of postcolonial cultures, marks one of the most important founding conditions for a postcolonial poetics. …As the rift between the interests of postcolonial artists and the interests of postcolonial nations widened, the oppositional aesthetic sensibility of decadence offered a position from which to assert the autonomy of the imagination against the apparent failures of cultural nationalism. The cosmopolitan and transnational modes of affiliation often associated with literary decadence likewise enabled these writers and artists to reclaim beauty and artifice as means to extend their art beyond the limitations of the nation-state" (2)

[9] See Fran Brearton, "Poetry of the 1960s: The 'Northern Ireland Renaissance,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 94-95, for a good discussion on the question of the validity of the "renaissance" label and that of whether the Troubles should be used as a category for delineating the poetic output of a specific time period. See also Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[10] Seamus Deane, "General Introduction to *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing,*" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 1 (Derry, Northern Ireland: Field Day Publications, 1999), xix-xxvi.

political critique. Poetry comments upon politics insofar as it stands outside and above it.[11] Poetry, in this instance, is equated to the lyric and the question thus becomes, as Clair Wills puts it, that of the relationship "between 'private' lyricism and 'public' and political statement."[12] The private sphere of the lyric is identified as a "place of truth and generalizable individual experience" and its formal qualities suggest a "refuge" from the political tumult of the "public sphere."[13] For the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, these are the operative assumptions in the interpretive frameworks brought to bear on their work. The role of the lyric in Northern Irish poetry, however, is problematized through the poetry of those who emerged after this first generation—Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian—and their disruption of traditional lyric conventions. This disruption is taken up by Clair Wills and, more recently, Eric Falci as a chance to rethink the relationship between poetry and politics in Northern Irish poetry, since both argue that the experiments in lyric form pursued by the second-generation poets are strategies employed to navigate a politically complex and intransigent situation in the North.

In *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (1993), Wills critiques the traditional approaches taken in the debates on aesthetics and politics in Northern Irish poetry by suggesting that they fail to attend to "the ways in which literature plays a role in defining the nature of the public and political itself."[14] The poetry of the second generation of Northern Irish poets, she goes on to write, "has a critical function in so far as it intervenes in, and comments on the construction of the political sphere," and it does this in large part through its formal

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[11] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), 185; Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 30.
[12] Wills, *Improprieties*, 15.
[13] Wills, *Improprieties*, 14-15. The critical theorist Jürgen Habermas has worked throughout his career on the public sphere, beginning with his first work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). For a contemporary engagement with theories of the public sphere, look at Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
[14] Wills, *Improprieties,* 9.

qualities.[15] Whereas, in the critical paradigms through which the first-generation poets are read, the "private lyric poem" authentically grounds the poet's voice in a position from which they can speak of broader public and "communal concerns," the poets of the second generation reconfigure "the 'privacy' of the lyric" and call it into question.[16] For them personal experience in the lyric is not "authentic" but "arbitrary." Nor is personal experience a "'refuge' from the social and political world"; rather, it is "constituted through it."[17] Wills maps the various courses this reconceptualization of the private lyric space takes in the formally diverse poetic corpuses of Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Tom Paulin. In *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry*, Eric Falci builds on Wills's work and postulates the syncretic term, "counterlyric," to describe the poetic efforts of the second generation. He begins by defining the attributes of lyric poetry as "compaction, pronomination, and tension."[18] The counterlyric, he argues, "uses one aspect of lyric practice to thoroughly disrupt another while simultaneously keeping it in play."[19] This disruption, primarily, has the effect of separating "a poem's utterance from its act, or […] counter[ing] what it says with what that saying ends up doing."[20] As such, the space opened by these poems is not one of "resolution," but rather the poems "model an oblique engagement with the world by continually upsetting their own pretendings."[21] Both critics thus turn to the political implications of poetic form in their respective studies of the second generation of Northern Irish poets. For my own purposes, I am particularly influenced by Wills's account of how poetry can

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[15] Wills, *Improprieties*, 9.
[16] Wills, *Improprieties*, 37.
[17] Wills, *Improprieties*, 37-38.
[18] Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5. The poets on whom Falci focuses his study are Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. It should be noted that the latter poet is from the Republic of Ireland, although Muldoon, McGuckian, and Carson have all translated her work from the Irish language into English
[19] Falci, *Continuity and Change*, 8.
[20] Falci, *Continuity and Change*, 4.
[21] Falci, *Continuity and Change,* 16.

delineate and interrogate a community's boundary, and Falci's emphasis on lyric self-disruption, when certain effects of the poem run counter to each other.

The postal poem, as I will articulate below, is similarly notable for its use of formal elements as a means of political engagement. The first epigraph to this introduction, by Ciaran Carson, points to the significance of the postal system in modern Irish history and in the political imaginary. Carson references the taking of the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin by armed Irish republicans on Easter Monday 1916 and the subsequent declaration of an Irish Republic free from British rule. This event was the beginning of a week-long battle, now known as the Easter Rising, which, though it ended in immediate defeat for the Irish republicans, proved the catalyst for the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and the Civil War (1922-1923). The result was the creation of the Irish Free State, eventually becoming the Republic of Ireland in 1949, and the partition of Northern Ireland, which remained under British control. As Carson notes, the GPO was selected as the site of an armed rising because it was a potent symbol of the British Empire.[22] The post office, in turn, became an additional symbol of independence from or continued belonging to that empire in the Irish imagination. As such, references to the post in Irish literature have, regardless of intention, an inevitable political hue.

Postal poetry is surprisingly quite present in the sphere of contemporary Northern Irish poetry. Aside from the poems and poetry collections from Seamus Heaney, Ciarian Carson, and Leontia Flynn on which I focus in this dissertation, there are the following: Michael Longley's poetic sequence "Letters," included in *An Exploded View* (1973); Derek Mahon's "Yaddo Letter" and "The Hudson Letter" (1995); E. A. Markham's *Letter from Ulster and the Hugo Poems* (1993); Paul Muldoon's "90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore" published in *Horse*

[22] Andrew A. Kuhn, "The Postal Imagination of Lady Gregory, Thomas Clarke, and Rabindranath Tagore: Writing the Irish Post," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 58.2 (2015): 220-240.

Latitudes (2006); and Ciaran Carson's epistolary novel, *The Pen Friend* (2009). In the present context, Longley's "letters" to friends and fellow poets James Simmons, Derek Mahon, and Seamus Heaney are indicative of the possibilities of postal poetry.[23] Fran Brearton notes that the sequence, and particularly the letter to Mahon, interrogates "the distance between private and public" in a manner akin to W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland*.[24] In an unsent letter to Marie Heaney, Longley explains that *An Exploded View* "explored the notion of an artistic community, a poetic sodality," and this impulse was poignantly articulated in "Letters." This "sodality of the imagination" (in Brearton's phrasing) offers "a way of reintegrating self and other, of healing fractures," as the Troubles reached fever pitch in the early 1970s. The letters "try to define Belfast to itself," Brearton clarifies, and they "attempt to transform the poetic community to which they are addressed into a home from home."[25] While this is an analysis of an individual case, Brearton's comments are indicative of a larger connection among letters, poetry, and community in Northern Irish poetry. This dissertation seeks to draw out this connection and to map a "postal poetics" that is operative in the contemporary poetry of Northern Ireland and beyond.

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[23] For two excellent discussions of Longley's "Letter" poems, see Gavin Drummond, "The Difficulty of We: The Epistolary Poems of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon" *Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005): 31-42, and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 179-183.

[24] Fran Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley* (Highgreen, Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), 78, 80, and 91. Gavin Drummond's "The Difficulty of We: The Epistolary Poems of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon." *Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005): 31-42, offers good background on the poetic interchange between Mahon and Longley through recourse to archival material.

[25] Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 86.

ii. Postal Poetics:

In the remarkable quotation by the German poet Paul Celan, which provides the second epigraph to this introduction, he compellingly figures the poem in postal terms as "a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea." Poems, in Celan's conception, are not necessarily situated within the formal mechanisms of transmission and delivery that are organized within the postal services. It is unclear, even, if they will reach any reader since as a message in a bottle they are thrown to the tides of chance. Nonetheless, they are letters motivated by a sense of hope that propels them "toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality." There is much to unpack in this statement, but for the present purposes I read this as an articulation of a desire for a community-to-come and the poem's approach towards a point where utopic longing and reality coincide. In fact, Celan's statement gestures towards a significant sense of intersection. According to the structural theorist Roman Jakobson, the poetic function of language suspends the communicative function of language; the poetic function draws attention to language as language, whereas the communicative function uses language as a vessel to transmit a meaning or index something external to language.[26] Communication, then, would be a state of language that is contingent upon reality, while poetry would be (relatively) autonomous from reality. But Celan notes the unavoidable intersection of these two functions of language. According to him, language is inherently dialogic and since a poem is "an instance of language" it necessarily contains a trace of this dialogic origin. Therefore, the poetic function is only ever

[26] See, Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of MIT, 1960), 350-77; Roman Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" in *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 368-378; Linda R. Waugh, "The Poetic Function in the Theory of Roman Jakobson," *Poetics Today* 2.1a, "Roman Jakobson: Language and Poetry" (Autumn, 1980), 57-82. See also, Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, ed. and trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 9-10.

partially autonomous. The autonomy it does possess, however, has the potential to disrupt, subvert, or alter the communicative ("practical") function of language in a way similar to the Russian Formalist Victor Shlovksy's concept of poetry's capacity for "defamiliarization."[27] That is, poetry can extract language from its "normal" context and reframe it, such that it prompts the reader to see the world anew or to imagine shaping it in different configurations. Postal poetry, in my view, is significant for the way in which it foregrounds the intersection of the poetic and communicative functions of language; it is primed to engage the transformative capacity of poetry.[28]

Other critics besides me have noted how the letter operates in a literary context. Janet Gurkin Altman, in particular, coined the term "epistolarity" to indicate "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning."[29] Altman and others, however, have primarily focused their work on the height of the epistolary genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries within the history of the novel. (In many ways the rise of the epistolary genre is commensurate with the rise of the novel as a literary form).[30] There is a much longer tradition of epistolary poetry that begins with the Roman poet Horace, who wrote his *Epistles* in the first century B.C.E. As with the novel, the critical literature on epistolary verse tends to concentrate on the seventeenth and eighteenth century with the apex being Alexander Pope's *Moral Essays* and his "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot." The image one gets from the criticism and theorizations on "epistolarity" is that the

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[27] Victor Shlovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12 and 18.

[28] My thinking around postal poetics is shaped, in part, by Jahan Ramazani's work in *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayers, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), where he pushes back against Bakhtin's belief that only the novel can be considered dialogic by demonstrating the ways that poetry exists in a dialogic relationship with other genres and "extrapoetic forms of language." "[A] dialogic poetics," he suggests, " would be true both to the specificity of individual poems as poems and to their immersion in the welter of myriad cultural forms" (15).

[29] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1982), 4.

[30] Key epistolary novels include: Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* (1794), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

most significant contributions to the genre are a handful of novels in the eighteenth century. In spite of what the criticism suggests, though, there is a surprisingly large and rich body of modern and contemporary letter poems that deserve much greater attention than they have received. [31] One of the goals of this dissertation is to begin to counter what I perceive as an imbalance in the criticism. Although I believe the contemporary poems under consideration belong to a longer lineage of epistolary writing, I refrain from labeling them as "epistolary" poems; rather, I call them "postal" poems. In part, this is to suggest that there is something unique about the set of contemporary poems that employ different forms and tropes of the letter. After all, the means of communication expanded tremendously after the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries to encompass the telegraph, telephone, email, and other forms of digital messaging. "Postal" thus indexes these proliferating systems of communication in addition to the actual message communicated. Having a more expansive descriptive category also allows me to place into conversation poets who write poems in the form of letters and those who write poems that include a significant use of the post office or letter as symbol or metaphor, but that would not be considered epistles.

Furthermore, "postal" echoes Jacques Derrida's meditations on the "post," which he performs in "Envois," the first section of *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*.[32]

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[31] There are several critics who have begun to shed light on more contemporary examples of the epistolary genre. Linda Kauffman's *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) interrogates examples of the epistolary in twentieth-century fiction (she reads Roland Barthe's *A Lover's Discourse* and Jacques Derrida's "Envois" from *The Postcard* as theory employing tropes from fiction). The Jamaican poet Kei Miller explored the epistolary genre in contemporary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from the Caribbean in his doctoral dissertation. The poets he focuses on are Lorna Goodison, James Berry, and Louise Bennett. Kei Miller, "Jamaica to the World: A Study of Jamaican (and West Indian) Epistolary Practices" (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2012). Rachel Bower's monograph, *Epistolarity in World Literature, 1980-2010* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), looks at the work of John Berger, Amitav Ghosh, Michael Ondaatje, J.M. Coetzee, Alice Walker, and Monica Ali.

[32] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Pres, 1987). Several texts that have helped me in my understanding of this challenging text by Derrida are: Gregory Ulmer, "The Post-Age," *Diacritics* 11.3 (Autumn 1981), 39-56; David Wills, "Post/Card/Match/Book/"Envois"/Derrida," *SubStance* 13.2.43 (1984), 19-38; and, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei,

"Envois" is comprised of a series of fictional letters prompted by Derrida's encounter with a postcard reproduction of an image by the medieval English monk and artist Matthew Paris that depicts Socrates transcribing at a desk while Plato stands behind him whispering into his ear.[33] Although Derrida declares at the beginning that his reader should view the "envois" as a preface to a yet unwritten book, clocking in as a whole at over 200 pages, they are much more expansive and much less coherent (in the sense that they do not cohere around several definitive ideas) than this declaration would make it seem.[34] Among the various topics he considers through the frame of the "post" are: codes, teleology, *Geschick* [destiny], destination, eroticism, couriers, the police, surveillance, anonymity, waywardness, the failure of arrival, etc. "I think the postal and the post card on the basis of the destinal of Being," he writes at one point, a reference to Heidegger's idea of the sending of being.[35] The "postal," therefore, is part of Derrida's project of deconstructing the history of Western philosophy and metaphysics (hence the importance of the inverted relationship of Socrates and Plato on the post card) and goes far beyond an analysis of the epistolary genre and the institution of the postal service, which are nonetheless contained within a broader history of postal ontology—"the post is an epoch of the post."[36] Whereas Derrida writes that, "mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself," I am more intrigued by the use of the postal *as* a genre in poetry.[37] Still, I find productive Derrida's discussion of the addressee and the porous border between the public and

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ed., *Going Postcard: The Letter(s) of Jacques Derrida* (Goleta, CA: Dead Letter Office, Babel Working Group, an imprint of Punctum Books, 2017).

[33] For a description of this initial encounter, see Derrida, *The Post Card*, 9.

[34] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 3. He goes on to describe the book that the "envois" would preface: "It would have treated that which proceeds from the *postes*, *postes* of every genre, to psychoanalysis." He continues to clarify the aim as "less in order to attempt a psychoanalysis of the postal effect than to start from a singular event, Freudian psychoanalysis, and to refer to a history and a technology of the *courier*, to some general theory of the *envoi* and of everything which by means of some telecommunication allegedly *destines* itself" (3)

[35] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 55. For instances in "Envois" where Derrida touches on the broader concerns of deconstruction that are operative in this work, see Derrida, *The Post Card*, 22, 29, 62, 191.

[36] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 63.

[37] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 48.

private spheres as concentrated in the postcard, as well as his identification of the post with larger systems of political power.

"What I like about post cards," Derrida writes, "is that even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter."[38] That is to say, the post card is "half-private half-public."[39] Since it is addressed to a specific person, the author partially employs a private code of shared references (acquaintances, knowledge, event, etc.). And yet, a post card is mailed openly so that anyone could read it even if they do not fully understand it. The sending of a letter, according to Derrida, similarly contains "the possibility of going astray" and not reaching its intended addressee, who is "immediately multiple, anonymous."[40] These qualities inherent to the post are significant for a postal poetics. Just like a post card, a postal poem traverses the border between the private and public spheres. Recalling the work of Clair Wills mentioned above, these poems are in an opportune position to critique this border and/or reshape it. While the postal poem can be addressed to a specific person (such as W.H. Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron" or Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz's letter poems to each other, "Envelopes of Air"), it nonetheless circulates openly and acquires new readers/addressees in different contexts. Other poets more purposefully invoke an autonomous addressee as in Leontia Flynn's "Letter to Friends" or Seamus Heaney's "An Open Letter," which is intended for public consumption in

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[38] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 79. Although, here, he links the post card and the letter via simile, elsewhere, he collapses any distinction between post cards and letters, noting that the latter is *always* the former.

[39] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 62. For a compelling discussion of this effect in relation to the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, see Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature*, 176. He cites Michael Warner's work on the construction of publics in support of his argument: "In letter correspondence, the addressee has 'a fairly clear empirical referent,' in this case friends known personally by Heaney. 'But for another class of writing contexts—including literary criticism, journalism, theory, advertising, fiction, drama, most poetry—the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal.' This second mode of address, 'in principle open-ended,' is what generates publics."

[40] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 65, 79. He describes this in terms of deconstruction, when he writes that, "In the beginning, in principle, was the post, and I will never get over it … and it begins with a destination without address, the direction cannot be situated in the end. There is no destination, my sweet destiny // you understand, within every sign already, every mark or every trait there is distancing, the post, what there has to be so that it is legible for another, another than you or me, and everything is messed up in advance, cards on the table" (29).

spite of its specific address to Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison. This situation strikes a similar chord to Jonathan Culler's description of the "triangulated address" endemic to lyric poetry, an "address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else."[41] The ritualistic bent of lyric, though, tends to obfuscate the reader as the poem's addressee, whereas the postal poem explicitly draws attention to it. In this way, it inclines towards Bonnie Costello's recent work on the "palimpsestic" quality of the pronoun "we" in Auden's poetry: "poetry can keep its inclusive 'we' open and flexible, a space of the common, a space Buber says is 'on fire' with the dynamism of human speech."[42] That is to say, poets capitalize on the post card's tendency to go astray as a way of creating a community around the event of the poem.

While the post office has a specific place in the Irish political imaginary, Derrida theorizes a general connection between postal and political systems.[43] "The question of Power," he writes, "[…] is first of all that of the post and telecommunications."[44] Riffing on the connotations of the "post"—"sites of passage or relay among others"—he notes that posts exist as nodes ("sites") of power where someone is posted to keep guard and ensure the smooth functioning of a system, although the post is also where the letter can go astray and the system not function properly.[45] Towards the end of the "envois," Derrida writes of his aim in the yet-to-be-written-book that, "all the posts [*tous et toutes les postes*], the institutions, the computers, the

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[41] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015),186.
[42] Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 185.
[43] Geoffrey Bennington, in "Postal politics and the institution of the nation" in *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 121-37, discusses the political implications of Derrida's postal thought through an examination of Eugène Vaillé and Montesquieu, the latter of whom wrote in *Of Politics*: "It is the invention of the post which has produced politics." Andrew Mitchell, in "Meaning Postponed: *Finnegan's Wake* and *The Post Card*" *James Joyce Quarterly* 44.1 (Fall 2006), 59-76, similarly focuses on the political undercurrents of Derrida's *The Post Card* through a reading of Joyce and the figure of Shaun the Post from *Finnegan's Wake*, in particular.
[44] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 103. See also his comment that, "Each time it is a question of *courier*, in one guise or another, there is police, royal police—and a basilica, a royal house, an edifice or edification of the law, the place in which justice is rendered (with merchants near the lower porticos) or a temple, a religious metropolis. All of it, if possible, in the service of the king who disposes the *courier*, the seals, the emissaries as well as of the addressees, his subjects" (71).
[45] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 27.

powers … the States, this is what I am assessing, or computing, what I am sorting out in order to defy all sorting out [*tris*]."[46] The *postal*, in effect, is the disruption of the *post*; the fact that the post card can go astray means that the system cannot close.[47] The correlation between the post and political systems, by which I also include the politics of the literary publishing system, is significant for this dissertation. Both Ciaran Carson and Agha Shahid Ali depict the post as a site of politics, while the other poets under consideration discuss politics through postal forms. If postal poetry, as I contend above, produces disruptive linguistic effects from its intersection of the poetic and communicative functions of language, the transmission of postal poems through postal systems, even if only as metaphor, implies further politically-hued systemic disruption. The work of Mary Favret, which I discuss further in the third chapter, focuses, in part, on the proliferation of politically subversive societies via the postal system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the governmental efforts to quash these radical elements.[48] With the political undertones of "postal" from Derrida, I believe that postal poetry has the capacity to perform a similarly subversive function by creating a community *via* the figure of the post, which posits an alternate shape to society than that provided *by* the post. "We are a crowd, you and I," writes Derrida, "and this is good, an immense dispersed collection."[49]

The question of the nature of community is one that a series of thinkers and philosophers in the contemporary continental tradition have focused on considerably: from Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, who engage with earlier work by Georges Bataille, to Giorgio Agamben

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[46] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 194.
[47] See Bennington's penultimate comment, "If the doctrine of the general will were not troubled by the necessary possibility of the letter's not arriving, then the state would be absolute and have no relation to anyone outside: it could not strictly speaking be a *nation*, and it would have no history, and thus no narration. In order to have a name, a boundary and a history to be told at the center, the state must be constitutively imperfect. The closure of the state becomes the frontier of the nation, and, as we have seen, the frontier implies that there is more than one nation" (130).
[48] Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, politics and the fiction of letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[49] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 186.

and Roberto Esposito.[50] Contending with the link between a romantic sense of community—a homogeneous group of people having something in common—and the "closure" of community that results in "totalization" (viz.,totalitarianisms of both the politically left and right varieties), these thinkers seek to articulate the possibility of a radically open community based on difference, not sameness.[51] In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy frames this possibility in terms of "communication" as opposed to "communion." Whereas the latter entails a "fusion" of "singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being," the former entails a "compear[ance]" of "finitude" that "is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance … it appears, it present itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication."[52] Although rendered in abstract terms, Nancy's position privileges the vulnerability that comes with "exposure" over the defensive posture of "closure." One of my contentions is that the type of closure that Nancy and others attempt to resist is indicative of nationalism. In order to move beyond nationalism, therefore, the poets under consideration similarly must think of community under different terms.

Thomas Claviez provides a clarifying reading of Nancy in his contribution to *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Community*. "The political [in Nancy]," he writes, "is

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[50] For a collection of Bataille's writing on community, see Georges Bataille, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. by Andrew W. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

[51] Many cite the German Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's study *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887; often translated as *Community and Society*) as one of the first articulations of the romantic concept of the community. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), famously defines the nation as "an imagined community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Robert J. C. Young, in his contribution to the collection of essays titled *The Common Growl*, critiques Anderson's unquestioned identification between community and nation: "It becomes clear that community is not in itself an attribute of a nation, and never offered as a test as such; rather, a nation has to possess one ore more common attributes…Insightful as his analysis is, Anderson remains within the ideological formations of the nationalism he describes, while assuming the identification between community and nation first proposed by Stalin." Young, "Community and *Ethnos*," in *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Precarious Community*, ed. Thomas Claviez (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 21-22.

[52] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 28-29.

designed to keep open and alive the tension between the potential and its actualization, since the taking place of the potential in its actualization always engenders the danger of closure."[53] True community always exists, in part, as potential community or the "community to come."[54] This is why Nancy and Blanchot both emphasize the term *désoeuvrement* (unworking). It refers to the fact that community is "that which no longer has to do with production, nor with completion, but which encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension."[55] Significantly for the purposes of my project, Claviez further describes this approach to thinking community in poetic terms as the difference between metaphor and metonymy. A metaphoric community would entail that people "share a third [term] that implies either a transcendent abstraction, an essence, or a dynastic and patriarchic geneaology," becoming part of a totality, whereas a metonymic community entails that people "are contiguous and contingent upon each other," remaining fragmentary and open to the other without being absorbed in a totalizing term that erases difference.[56] Both Nancy and Claviez turn to communication and poetry respectively as a means of envisioning a radical sense of community. This tradition of thought and its relationship to language inform the following work on the political significance of postal poetics and the suggestion of a critically utopic community that subtends it.

Postal Poetics, then, emerges from the work of Altman, Derrida, and others, but I bring their thinking to bear on contemporary poetry and highlight the political implications of postal

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[53] Thomas Claviez, "Toward a Poetics of Community," introduction to *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Community*, ed. Thomas Claviez (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 4.
[54] Young, "Community and *Ethnos*," 18-19. Young cites Agamben as the source of the term "community to come," going on to explain that, "like democracy, it is always in the process of being constructed for the future but not yet in the now." The term has its origins in Derrida's formulation of the concept of "democracy to come" in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). For a reading of the political implications of this phrase, see John Lechte, "The Vicissitudes of 'Democracy to Come': Political Community, *Khôra*, the Human," *Derrida Today* 4.2 (2011): 215-232.
[55] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 76 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.
[56] Thomas Claviez, "Metonymic Community? Toward a Poetics of Contingency," in *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Community*, ed. Thomas Claviez (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 46.

theories. A letter is often addressed to a specific person but, as Derrida contends, inherent to the letter is its possibility of going astray and thus being read by others. In the context of a postal poetics, this possibility means that the poem's address is emphasized while also being open to including a number of anonymous addressees. It is through this mechanism that poets can experiment with creating a new community around the event of the poem. This has further implications for the division between the private and public spheres. Although letters and poems originate in privacy they always intersect the public sphere. Derrida notes that the transmission and circulation of letters through the post renders them more public (in his specific case, to the eyes of the postal worker, the censor, and other anonymous addressees who come to read them). As such, postal poems traverse the line between these two spheres and call it into question, remaking it in the process. Postcards and letters that travel through the post are often *franked* with the date and place of posting, canceling out the postage in the process, or contain in the message the date and place of composition. Postal poems employ date and place as a way of marking this intersection between the private and public spheres, the world of the poem and the world beyond. Postal poetry, in the end, is a point of intersection where the poetic function of language disrupts the communicative function—poetry comes into contact with the mundane—and suggests the possibility of re-envisioning the world.[57]

iii. Chapter Breakdown:

The chapters of this dissertation are structured in chronological order by birth date of the poets. Seamus Heaney is commonly thought to belong to the first generation of poets to emerge in the

[57] T. S. Eliot writes in "The Dry Salvages," the third part of his *Four Quartets* sequence, that "to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint," *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (Orland, FL: Harcourt, 1991), 198.

so-called "Northern Ireland Renaissance."[58] Northern Irish poets, Ciaran Carson to the second generation, and Leontia Flynn to the third generation. By organizing it this way, I intend to show the progression of postal poetics from the Troubles to the era of devolution, with an emphasis on this latter period, and how the different poetic generations respond to each other as they strike out for new poetic and political territory.

In the first chapter, "Dispatches from the Margins: Seamus Heaney's Postal Poems," I explore Heaney's fascination with communication as expressed in his poetry, particularly in what I identify as his "postal poems." Heaney had a fascination with letters and other means of communication, as can be gleaned from an examination of his archives. This fascination makes its way into his poetry, although it has so far failed to garner much critical attention. As such, I contend that Heaney's postal poems from throughout his career deserve a deeper look. In this chapter I look at "A Postcard from North Antrim" from *Field Work* (1979), "An Open Letter" (1983), published as a Field Day Pamphlet, "A Postcard from Iceland" from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), "Mycenae Lookout" and "Postscript" from *The Spirit Level* (1996), and "Beacons at Bealtaine," a poem composed for the celebration of the 2004 European Union Expansion celebration in Dublin. In particular, I explore how these poems reflect Heaney's current thinking about community and the role of poetry. Because the poems span several decades from the 1970s to the 2000s, I demonstrate how this thinking changes as well as what remains the same. In many ways, this Heaney chapter establishes the stakes that will be taken up by the other poets in this dissertation. But it also demonstrates the operation of postal poetics in the years leading up to the "era of devolution." Nonetheless, I contend that Heaney, throughout his career, subverts borders by imagining ever more expansive and inclusive iterations of community.

[58] See fn. 9 above.

The motif of letters runs throughout Ciaran Carson's oeuvre, crystallizing in the figure of his father, William Carson (a.k.a. Liam Mac Carráin), a Belfast postman. I begin chapter one, "Following in the Footsteps of the Postman: Ciaran Carson's Year of the French," with a narrative from Carson's early collection *Belfast Confetti*: his father's subversive act of *franking* or "stamping" a letter in Northern Ireland in the 1950s with the mark of the Republic of Ireland. I read this as a pivotal moment and one that informs Carson's poetic craft, especially his practice of translation, which he describes in, frankly, postal terms. From this moment which establishes the theoretical stakes of the chapter, I turn to two twinned poetry collections that Carson published in 1998, *The Alexandrine Plan*—his translations of alexandrine sonnets by French symbolist poets—and *The Twelfth of Never*—original sonnets employing the alexandrine form. I argue that Carson franks his poems with a foreign poetic form that has the effect of placing in conversation 1998, when the question of the shape of political community is paramount, with other revolutionary hinge moments. One such moment, in particular, is the 1798 Irish Rebellion. Carson's poetic franking subverts the traditional nationalist messages of 1798 and instead creates the space in which new forms of community may arise.

In the final chapter, "Leontia Flynn's 'Letter to Friends,' or Political Community in the New North," I turn to a member of the youngest generation of poets from Northern Ireland who began publishing in the beginning of the 21st century, Leontia Flynn. I begin with Flynn's statement given in an interview that she would like to write "a public-minded poem" in the vein of W. H. Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron." She does write such a poem in "Letter to Friends," collected in *Profit and Loss* (2011). I read the epistolary form on which she settles as the culmination of a search for a form adequate to the political situation of the New North. Flynn, in fact, barely mentions the Troubles and instead turns to the urgent politics of environmental and

financial collapse. What makes Flynn's efforts unique is the ambiguous addressee of her poetic letter, the open-ended "friends." Based on the work of Costello, I argue that Flynn invites the reader into a community that is never completed or closed off. Flynn articulates not only a new set of concerns for political poetry in the New North. She also initiates a new community that eschews national borders by her turn to epistolary poetry.

Postal poetics is operative in contemporary poetry beyond Northern Ireland. Thus, in the coda, I cast my gaze to a wider poetic horizon to draw connections between the Northern Irish poets under consideration and other contemporary poets building community through the poetry of letters in various forms. In particular, I discuss the work of the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali and the collaboration between the indigenous American poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz, "Envelopes of Air," recently published in *The New Yorker*. Ali provides a fascinating comparison to my examination of Northern Ireland in *The Country With No Post Office,* where he focuses on another liminal space in conflict, Kashmir, and uses the figure of the post office to discuss the idea of home and its absence. I turn, finally, to "Envelopes of Air," in which Limón and Diaz reflect on the question of "home" in the initial months of the Trump presidency. While their collaboration coincides with the themes I draw out of the other poets' work, it marks the only instance I am aware of where a true poetic correspondence is published as a single poetic sequence. As such, they push postal poetics into unique territory and expand its possibilities. In the end, this "postal" and transatlantic network of authors demonstrates the importance of interrogating and looking beyond national borders if they are to articulate new forms of community.

Dispatches from the Margins: Seamus Heaney's Postal Poems

> Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us:
> Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,
> Subtle discrimination by addresses
> With hardly an exception to the rule
>
> That Norman, Ken and Sidney signaled Prod
> And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire Pape.
> O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,
> Of open minds as open as a trap,
>
> Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,
> Where half of us, as in a wooden horse
> Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,
> Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.
>
> —Seamus Heaney, from "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"[1]

> The poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the reality we inhabit.
>
> ——Seamsu Heaney in "The Government of The Tongue"[2]

In *Stepping Stones*, the collection of interviews between Seamus Heaney and Dennis O'Driscoll, the poet recounts how he crafted the poem "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," which was originally published in the *Listener* in 1971 before appearing in the poetry collection *North* (1975). The poem, he describes, "was a digest and carve-up of a set of verse letters I'd rattled out

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[1] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 124. Throughout this chapter, whenever a poem is included in *Opened Ground*, I cite from that version for ease of access to the reader. I cite the originally published versions, only when they have been uncollected in later volumes of selected poems.

[2] Seamus Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue," in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 93. Heaney is commenting on a quote by Anna Swir. For a discussion of this context, see Stan Smith "The Distance Between: Seamus Heaney," in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 228.

to friends shortly after I landed back from Berkeley in the late summer of 1971."[3] Although this composition process extracted the content of the poem from the explicit framing of the "verse letter," the poem nonetheless indicates Heaney's preoccupation with various means of communication. A postal connotation, for example, adheres to the opening of the poem—"I'm writing this just after an encounter / With an English journalist in search of 'views / On the Irish thing'"—with its implicit addressee and a nod to the occasion for writing. This opening prompts a consideration of the contrast between the journalistic and poetic mode of writing.[4] But nowhere in the poem is the attention to communication more condensed than in the verses from its third section that provide this chapter with its epigraph.

In the poem's third section, Heaney describes the "Northern reticence" when it comes to "the Irish thing" (i.e. the Troubles) and the extremely subtle codes by which those who live there communicate with each other and navigate the conflict. Where one lives, one's name, and one's school, all of these pieces of personal information communicate something about the community and allegiances of the person in question. As Heaney writes, it is a "land of password, handgrip, wink and nod." In the final verse quoted in the epigraph, which is the closing verse of Section Three, Heaney translates the contemporary political situation into the register of myth through reference to the Trojan War. As such, he places the Catholic community of Northern Ireland

[3] Seamus Heaney and Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 123. The poem was originally published in the October 14, 1971 issue of the *Listener* under the title "Whatever you say, say nothing – Seamus Heaney gives his views on the Irish thing." For an excellent conversation of the significance of this initial publishing context and the revisions made for its eventual inclusion in *North*, see Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 169-178.

[4] See Jahan Ramazani's chapter on "Poetry and the News" in his *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), where he discusses poems from Heaney and others.

within the Trojan horse, "whispering morse."[5] In the context of this poem, Heaney surely intends the reference to Morse code to signal the coded and guarded nature of living in Northern Ireland amidst intense sectarian violence. But Morse code is also a language developed to communicate via telegraph by modulating the duration of the electrical pulse transmitted along telegraph wire. Heaney references Morse code again in his Nobel lecture, "Crediting Poetry" (1995), when he opens the lecture by positioning his childhood "in suspension between the archaic and the modern." He identifies his family's radio set as a means of ingress by which the modern world enters the rural farm in Co. Derry, before reflecting on "the voice of a BBC newsreader speaking out of the unexpected":

> And that voice too we could hear in our bedroom, transmitting
> from beyond and behind the voices of the adults in the kitchen; just
> as we could often hear, behind and beyond every voice, the frantic,
> piercing signaling of Morse code.[6]

Here, the poet invests Morse code with the status of a metaphysical substrate out of which communication, the "voice," emerges; a system of dots and dashes is communication distilled into its most elemental form. Radio transmissions become the means of Heaney's encounter with the world beyond his local surroundings, which "in turn became a journey into the wideness of language."[7] But the radio, as Heaney describes it and its effects on his younger self, establishes communication as a central impetus to his poetic endeavors. I begin with these two examples because I contend that communication is a far more significant preoccupation for Heaney than has heretofore been commented upon.

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[5] Suhr-Sytsma points to this verse, the location of the biggest revision for the version of the poem that appears in *North*, as the means with which Heaney nudges the poem out of the realm of occasional verse and into that of lyric poetry (178).
[6] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 415.
[7] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 416.

In this chapter, I focus particularly on a subset of poems relating to communication in Heaney's oeuvre: his postal poems. His archives in The Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Book Library at Emory University and the National Library of Ireland in Dublin reveals a poet who is fascinated by letters and correspondence.[8] Freya McClements recently wrote for *The Irish Times* about Heaney's longtime tradition of crafting his own holiday cards. He composed them "for family and friends," she writes, "each one in a style reminiscent of his collections of poetry and featuring an image from a favourite artist—or his children's artwork—together with a line of text from a new poem or other work in progress."[9] Similarly, Irish cultural critic and newly appointed Heaney biographer, Fintan O'Toole notes that the poet's "favourite communication mode was the fax," and that his publisher, Faber and Faber, kept a designated fax machine for messaging with him.[10] Heaney also wrote a number of postal poems throughout his career—"A Postcard from North Antrim," "An Open Letter," and "A Postcard from Iceland," for example. But, in spite of his biographical fascination with letters and letter writing, Heaney's postal poems are infrequently commented upon and usually grouped among his lesser works in both the poet's own estimation and that of critics. For example, none of the aforementioned poems are included in *Opened Ground*, Heaney's selected poems that cover the first two thirds of his career. It is a selection that tends to emphasize the lyrical quality of the poet's verse over the occasional quality of some of his more pointed works. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, in a chapter on the first generation of Northern Irish poets in *Poetry, Print and the*

[8] I owe this observation to Geraldine Higgins who has worked extensively in the Heaney archives for her 2014 Heaney exhibition at Emory University, "Seamus Heaney: The Music of What Happens," and her subsequent Dublin exhibition, "Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again," which opened in the summer of 2018 and is currently ongoing as of the writing of this dissertation.

[9] Freya McClements, "Seamus Heaney: The Christmas card maker," *The Irish Times*, 8 December 2017, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/seamus-heaney-the-christmas-card-maker-1.3330340

[10] Allison Flood, "Seamus Heaney's biographer races to see faxes before they fade," *The Guardian*, 14 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/14/seamus-heaneys-biographer-races-to-see-poets-faxes-before-they-fade

Making of Postcolonial Literature, contends that, "the apparent aesthetic autonomy of collected poetry must be recognized […] as a contingent effect of its presentation rather than a natural feature of lyric."[11] Suhr-Sytsma's analysis fits into his larger project of foregrounding the poetry's original publishing context within print media as a way of emphasizing the socio-political context in which a poem is created and with which it stands in a dialogic relationship. This type of contextualization obtains in Heaney's postal poems, as well, since a primary element of the postal genre is its temporality and heightened awareness of concurrent or surrounding events, which is signaled by the franking or inclusion of a date and place. Therefore, even though Heaney opts to reject his postal poems from a selection that aims at establishing a poetic reputation for posterity—such an aim inherently requires a certain amount of poetic autonomy so that the poetry in question can "speak" to a reader regardless of whether or not they are the poet's contemporary—his postal poems have an important role in an interpretation of Heaney's career and the politics of his poetry.

As suggested above, Heaney positions himself and is read by most critics as a lyric poet *par excellence*, a poet whose lyric poems often transcend the socio-political context of their creation and resist or challenge a predominantly political reading. Whether this tendency is called transcendence, autonomy, or decontextualization, it is regularly cited as an important property or effect of the lyric poem (although the lyric is a genre whose definition remains ambiguous and contentious within literary theory and poetics).[12] Lyric's propensity for transcendence leads to the belief that the lyric is an inherently apolitical genre or, at the very least, that any political significance is secondary to its aesthetic significance. A number of critics,

[11] Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print and the Making of Postcolonial Literature*, 167.
[12] In particular, see Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "Lyrical Studies" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.2 (1999), 521-530, where the two scholars push back against the idea of the "lyric as a transhistorical genre" and instead emphasize "the uses to which that genre may be put" (523).

however, push back against this idea and contend that the lyric contains political significance in both form and content. Most notably, Theodor Adorno locates the political edge of lyric poetry *in* its autonomy and the utopic possibilities that such autonomy can bring into play rather than *in spite of* lyric autonomy.[13] Compellingly, it is this very interplay between autonomy and engagement that, I believe, lends Heaney's lyrics such powerful force. The tension between these two poles—autonomous/engaged—crystallizes for Heaney in a confrontation that he has with a passenger on the train to Belfast and that he includes in "Flight Path," a poetic sequence from *The Spirit Level* (1996). "When, for fucks sake, are you going to write / Something for us?" demands the passenger, to which Heaney responds, "If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself."[14] Heaney initially expresses an autonomous poetic stance—he is a poet first and foremost for himself instead of a mouthpiece for a specific community, in this case, the Catholic community of Northern Ireland. But by including this exchange within a poem—injecting the act of poetic creation into the world of the poem—Heaney problematizes the issue of poetic responsibility and draws it into his poetic project. In essence, he continually reflects on the nature of community in his poetry regardless of his inclination toward poetic autonomy. Eric Falci highlights this reflective propensity as an important element in Heaney's poetry that complicates the political criticism the poet receives. Although in Falci's analysis the work of "radically problematiz[ing] lyric form itself" is reserved for the second generation of Northern Irish poets, he suggests that contrary to the accusation that Heaney possesses "an unreflective tendency toward unity" (*pace* David Lloyd), the poet's "bids for unity and wholeness…quite conspicuously fail to achieve unity or self-identity, and this signals a rethinking rather than an

[13] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-1992), I: 37-54. Jonathan Culler discusses Adorno's theory of the lyric in his chapter "Lyric and Society," in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[14] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 385.

abandonment of poetry's political charge within changed circumstances."[15] That is to say, Heaney's poetry is political by his very act of reflecting on the relationship between poetry and politics and, more importantly, by leaving that border in a state of constant negotiation.[16]

In this chapter, I argue that Heaney's oft-neglected postal poems, situated within the broader category of his interest in poetry as communication, are a prime site for this reflective act; they are a place where he continuously seeks to understand and enact the communities in which he is a part, even the community to come. As stated earlier, many of these poems remain uncollected or left out of career retrospectives (such as *Opened Ground* or the later *Selected Poems 1988-2013*). This omission could be read as a qualitative assessment of their value. Heaney may have thought many of his postal poems read as more occasional pieces or operated outside of a "lyric" tonal register and, as such, deviated from a much more lyrical poetic project. These poems, however, should not be dismissed outright. In fact, I believe that they represent key moments to witness the evolution of Heaney's understanding of political community and the role of poetry in shaping that community. This understanding, in turn, subtly undergirds his lyric poems. As such, there is no clear boundary between the public poem and the lyric poem in Heaney's oeuvre. Part of the larger argument of this project is that the "postal" poem operates

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[15] Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42-43, 46. For David Lloyd's critical essay on Heaney, " 'Pap for the dispossessed,' Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity," see Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 13-40.

[16] My thinking on this issue has been influenced greatly by John Dennison's *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Beginning with Heaney's statement on his "search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament [the Troubles]" and moving to an excerpt from his essay, "George Seferis," Dennison notes: "It is hard to overlook the continuity between the two formulations, made almost twenty years apart. Indeed, the difference is largely one of tone: the younger Heaney's appeal to the adequate image or symbol is urgent and somewhat beleaguered where the older poet is composed and resolute in his public commitment to the order and possibilities of 'an adequate response'. It is this reiterated idea that threads throughout the whole of Heaney's thought, from his earliest conceptual formation as a catechumen and undergraduate student of literature to the expansive affirmations of his late cultural poetics. The later poetics offer a number of figuratively suggestive, usefully ambivalent terms for poetry's social function (the 'government', 'redress', and 'crediting' of poetry), but it is this idea of *adequacy*, of poetry as an ameliorative and restorative response to—adequation of—the inimical reality of life in the public domain, that proves most consistently central to Heaney's developing poetics" (4).

somewhere in between the private sphere and the public sphere—one informs and becomes part of the other. Whereas the other chapters in this dissertation are temporally restricted to post-1998 poetry, I take a much more expansive view of Heaney's oeuvre, beginning with "A Postcard from North Antrim" from *Field Work* (1979), before moving to "An Open Letter" (1983) published as a Field Day Pamphlet, and "A Postcard from Iceland" from *The Haw Lantern* (1987). I then look at *The Spirit Level* (1996) as a pivotal text, reading "Postscript" alongside the tentative 1994 IRA ceasefire and Heaney's 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature as a postal poem which gestures cautiously toward the possibilities of a post-Troubles society. Finally, I conclude with "Beacons at Bealtaine," a poem composed for a celebration in Dublin of the European Union Expansion on 1 May 2004. I interpret this last poem as postal, even though Heaney delivered it in person, because of its important statement about welcoming otherness into the Irish community and the role of "beacons" as an early messaging system as depicted in "Mycenae Lookout" from *The Spirit Level*. By mapping the trajectory of Heaney's oeuvre in this way—a trajectory that Geraldine Higgins describes as moving from "the earth-bound bog poems of his early work to the airiness and uplift of crediting marvels in his later career"—I show the way in which Heaney's ideas of political community and the role of poetry within it shift from the Troubles to the Good Friday Agreement and beyond.[17] These postal poems, therefore, establish the questions taken up by the other poets in this study and the stakes upon which they rest.

[17] Geraldine Higgins, "Feeling Into Words: Remembering Seamus Heaney," *Irish Studies South* 1 (August 2014): 75.

i. "A Postcard from North Antrim" and "An Open Letter":

Appearing four years after the publication of *North*, *Field Work* (1979) is regularly cited as one of Heaney's best single volumes of poems. The collection marks a turn in Heaney's writing and poetics away from the dominant aesthetic vision of his first four books—*Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, and *North*. Heaney has stated these four collections are, in a way, one volume, bound by a single poetic vision and approach.[18] Whereas the earlier collections largely turn inwards and down into the layers of history and myth, *Field Work* is remarkable for its outwardly social turn. Helen Vendler describes this as a difference between Heaney as "archaeologist" and Heaney as "anthropologist," going on to note that in *Field Work*, "his poetry becomes recognizably that of an individual man engaged in ordinary domestic and social relations."[19] These "social relations" and the various communities in which he participates—whether that is the intimate community of the family, a community of artists, or the community of Northern Ireland—are what Heaney maps through his "anthropological" gaze. Subsequently, the social focus of the content results in a "more sociable kind of address," according to Neil Corcoran. [20] Whereas communication in *North* is highly coded, as seen in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," communication is more open in this collection. Gone are the references to Morse code, passwords, and smoke-signals. Instead, Heaney replaces them with letters and postcards. For example, he remarks on writing letters to his wife, Marie, from California in "The Skunk"—

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[18] See, Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), where he quotes from an interview between Heaney and John Haffenden in which the poet says, "I am certain that up to *North,* that was one book; in a way it goes together and grows together" (127). See also Richard Rankin Russell, *Poetry and Peace: Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, and Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), where he confirms the critical consensus around this view while simultaneously complicating the view that *Field Work* marks "a major shift in [Heaney's] poetry," by pointing to aspects of the later poetry that are already present in the earlier work and preoccupations from the earlier poems that persist into the latter 237.

[19] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 59. Similarly, Neil Corcoran remarks that, "the self-communing, mythologized 'I' of *North* is replaced by a more genuinely personal personal pronoun, a more openly and intimately conversational self" (*The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 128).

[20] Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 127

"After eleven years I was composing / Love-letters again"—and he writes an elegy for his friend Sean Armstrong, "A Postcard from North Antrim," which takes its inspiration from the titular postcard.[21] This last poem, in particular, is a window into Heaney's evolving thought on community and how it appears in his poetry after spending so much time among the Iron-age, Scandinavian communities of the bog bodies and the constraints of his "tribe," which so occupied his imagination in the earlier collections.

"A Postcard from North Antrim" is among the collection's numerous elegies, written after Armstrong, a Belfast social worker, was murdered. His "candid forehead stopped / A pointblank teatime bullet," write Heaney, demonstrating the shocking proximity of the sectarian violence to the more mundane aspects of life in the North. Heaney, though, begins the elegy with a description of the image on the front of the postcard:

> A lone figure is waving
> From the thin line of a bridge
> Of ropes and slats, slung
> Dangerously out between
> The cliff-top and the pillar rock.[22]

Derrida suggests that the reader of a postcard never knows which side is more important: the image on the front or the message on the back. Here, the two coincide. In this opening stanza, Heaney describes "*The Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge*" that is the image on the postcard that he figures as emblematic of Armstrong's vulnerable position in a liminal space in society: working for reconciliation as a social worker. This type of position seems to be inherent to Armstrong's personality, since Heaney describes him in the fourth stanza as a "Drop-out on a come-back, / Prince of no-man's land / With your head in clouds or sand."[23] He is someone who lives by his

[21] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 168; and, Heaney, "A Postcard from North Antrim," in *Field Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 19-20.
[22] Heaney, *Field Work*, 19.
[23] Heaney, *Field Work*, 19.

own rules on the margins of conventional society. Heaney, though, imbues this portrait of his friend with an ambivalent edge by suggesting that Armstrong has his head in the clouds or buried in the sand. Both idioms have somewhat pejorative connotations, the former suggesting a dreamer who is divorced from reality and the latter someone who willfully ignores what is happening around them. Heaney clearly admires his friend but the ambivalence arises from, I believe, Heaney's own sense of uncertainty about what Northern Ireland needs to move forward.

Heaney presents a portrait of the deceased and, as to be expected with an elegy, he extends this portrait from the individual to their place within society.[24] In fact, for a poem that starts with "a lone figure" it significantly ends on a communal note. Intriguingly, though, Heaney uses the elegy to consider a series of alternate shapes that community can take, and thus puts it at odds with the current shapes of community in Northern Ireland. In "Casualty," immediately following upon "A Postcard," Heaney writes an elegy for the fisherman Louis O'Neill who was killed in a pub bombing that the IRA performed in retaliation for the events of Bloody Sunday. Significantly, O'Neill, a member of the Catholic community, ignored a curfew put out by the IRA and thus rejects compliance with his "tribe"—"he would not be held / At home by his own crowd," writes Heaney before asking, "How culpable was he / That last night when he broke / Our tribe's complicity?"[25] Whereas Heaney will go on to push back against the pull of "tribal" community in his portrait of the thoroughly individualistic O'Neill, he posits different types of community that arise around the figure of Armstrong. Although the first two stanzas of the poem connect the image on the postcard to Armstrong, Heaney has second thoughts about the appropriateness of it to stand for his friend. In the third stanza he asks rhetorically if the ideal

[24] Jahan Ramazani, "Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 602-619. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
[25] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 148-49. For an excellent reading of this poem, see Russell, *Poetry & Peace*, 239-43.

domain to represent his friend is not a rope bridge in North Antrim but Armstrong's houseboat in Sausalito, California. "Should we discover you," Heaney inquires, "Beside those warm-planked, democratic wharves / Among the twilights and guitars."[26]

Although it is not explicitly named, Sean's houseboat most likely existed within the Richardson Bay Houseboat Enclaves, which back in the 1950s through the 1970s were populated mostly by hippies, beat poets, and other "drop-out[s]" and "prince[s] of no-man's land." Heaney subtly invests the image with a utopic feeling by characterizing the wharves as "democratic," indicating a truly hybrid community in which all are welcome—in fact, the author of an article on the history of the Richardson Bay community describes it at this time as "a sort of anarchist commune."[27] If this picture departs from that of The Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge in its particulars, a single person versus a community of people, it nonetheless shares a similar locale: the liminal space of the shore where land and water meet. The rope bridge near Ballycastle in Antrim County connects the mainland to the small island of Carrick-a-Rede and, as such, the figure on the rope bridge is suspended over the water in between two landmasses. Furthermore, this figure is suspended in air, almost at a nexus where all three elements meet.[28] The houseboat enclaves similarly take shape on the shore where the houseboats float upon the water and seemingly extend the land. This liminal space emerges as a site of possibility, where nothing is

[26] Heaney, *Field Work*, 19.
[27] Jeff Greenwald, "Livin' on the Dock of the Bay," *Smithsonian Magazine* April 3, 2012, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/livin-on-the-dock-of-the-bay-171787735/.
[28] Russell, *Poetry & Peace*, 238. "Starting with *Field Work*, Heaney seeks out a symbolic but still real elevation, trusting that his poetic powers have matured fully enough so that he can, at least in crucial moments, leave his native ground and imagine a new realm of airy opportunities. In his 1979 interview with James Randall, Heaney recalled writing a letter to the Irish playwright Brian Friel after *North* was published that claimed, 'I no longer wanted a door into the dark—I want a door into the light.' Yet the process of approaching higher, airier elevations, he realized, must be conducted through a continued gazing at the ground, at particular places, even dark ones."

fixed but rather in flux. It is a locus of creation that exists at a geographic, cultural, and legal edge.[29]

At the beginning of the fifth stanza, Heaney directly and imperatively addresses Sean—"Get up from your blood on the floor"—before indexing another houseboat. It is unclear if this boat exists in a memory or in the present based on Heaney's use of tense: "Here's another boat … by the lough shore."[30] He goes on to describe the houseboat compellingly as an extension or transposition of Sausalito to Antrim, telling Sean that it is "your local, hoped for, unfound commune." It is a miniature portrait of a community that has yet to come to fruition. Although Heaney grounds this houseboat within the spatial category of the "local," the term is inflected with a transnational element due to its paralleling of California and the inherent transnational connotations of a sea-worthy ship perched on the shore. It is a version of the local that is made strange through the imaginations of both men. Sean hoped for this "commune" to come into being, Heaney tells us, but its materialization is deferred to the future since it remains "unfound." Perhaps the imperative for Sean to rise from the dead that begins the stanza is Heaney's signal that Sean—or someone like Sean—is needed to show people once and for all to the "unfound commune."[31]

In the final stanza, Heaney continues to exhibit different types of community and, as such, the poem ends on a communal note. Heaney reveals that he first began his romantic relationship with his future wife, Marie, at one of Sean's parties: "I got my arm round Marie's shoulder / For the first time."[32] If the earlier references were to a community of many people, this is a reference to a community of a different kind: the community of lovers and the family.

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[29] There have been a number of legal battles over rights for the residents of the Richardson Bay Houseboat Enclaves.
[30] Heaney, *Field Work*, 20.
[31] Heaney, *Field Work*, 20.
[32] Heaney, *Field Work*, 20.

Seemingly, the community of lovers is dominated by an exclusionary turn inwards that preempts broader articulations of plurality.[33] But Heaney places him and Marie within the larger social gathering in which they took part, writing that the two of them were "crowded on your floor," buttressed by the community of friends that had gathered around them. In the final three lines, Heaney describes Sean singing out the chorus from a bawdy rugby song: " 'Oh, Sir Jasper, do not touch me!' / You roared across at me, / Chorus-leading, splashing out the wine." The chorus, though, is the community *par excellence*; in Greek tragedy the choral part represented the communal response to the events as they unfolded and placed them within the mores of the polity. It is significant, then, that Heaney closes his portrait of Sean by describing him as "chorus-leading" and giving the faintest suggestion of the ritual pouring of libations, "splashing out the wine." Sean is leading the chorus, the partygoers, in a state of revelry, but Heaney imbues this stanza and the poem as a whole with a transformative air that adds poignancy to Sean's actions and suggests he is a model for transforming Northern Ireland.[34]

Heaney foregrounds the poem's postal form in its title. It is "a postcard"—although it is hard to believe all nine seven-line stanzas would fit on the back of any card—and he addresses a specific person several times throughout the poem, thereby heightening its sense of dialogue. The first address is a comment on the postcard—"A postcard for you, Sean"—a standard trope of letter writing. The address in the second half of the poem, however, approaches a more immediate register: "Get up from your blood on the floor" and "Now recite me *William Bloat*, / Sing of *the Calabar* // Or of Henry Joy McCracken." With heightened emotion, Heaney appears

[33] The second section of Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, tr. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), 27-56, is titled "The Community of Lovers."
[34] The topic of the Greek chorus takes on particular significance in light of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney's translation of Sophocles's play *Philoctetes*. For a discussion of Heaney's version, see Marilynn Richtarik, "Reality and Justice: Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*," *Estudios Irlandeses* 13 (March 2018 – February 2019), 98-112, and Alan Peacock's "Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer," in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 263-79.

to address Sean unmediated and in the moment. While legible within the elegiac poem and imbuing it with a sense of resurrection, this choice in diction raises the question of the card's deliverability. The postcard of the Carrick-a-Rede Bridge in North Antrim is quite literally a "dead letter"—a term indicating an undeliverable letter. As an elegy, its message is undeliverable to the person to whom it is addressed. Bernard O'Donoghue, however, reveals an important aspect of the elegy genre, specifically in discussing Heaney's elegies in *Field Work*. "What elegy does," he writes, "is to give voice to the terminally voiceless." This comes after O'Donoghue notes the profusion of "figures of the 'unsaid' and inarticulate" that populate the poems collected in *Field Work*, such as that found in the seventh stanza of "A Postcard."[35] Heaney thus creates a vehicle to send his friend's voice out into the world, giving it a continued life after his death. This particular role for the postcard is further emphasized by the fact that Heaney frames the origin of the letter as *from* North Antrim, but at this point Heaney and his family were living in Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland, where they had resided since 1972. Of course, he could have found the card in the Republic of Ireland or brought it home with him from a trip to North Antrim, but the ambiguity in terms of origin and destination serves a poetic and political purpose. Heaney unmoors the letter from a fixed position and thereby positions it in a liminal space such as Sean's houseboat on the shore. The poem itself is an image of a "local, hoped for, unfound commune," a community to come that would begin to arise on the margins of the current one.[36]

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[35] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 84.

[36] Intriguingly, Heaney writes in *Crediting Poetry* that, "Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body" (Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 430). Richard Rankin Russell notes in *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) that Heaney links poetry to boats throughout the collection *Seeing Things* (164).

In "A Postcard from North Antrim," the Troubles prompt the occasion for the poem and cast a shadow over it, while remaining largely unspoken. Heaney, however, addresses the conflict more directly in *An Open Letter*, published as a pamphlet by the Field Day Theatre Company in 1983.[37] The poem is a response to Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's decision to include him in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), which they edited. Taking issue with the adjective that the editors apply to him, "British," Heaney crafts an intriguingly uncharacteristic poem that is explicitly political but with the occasional tone of light verse. The unique nature of the poem would seem to place it on the margins of Heaney's oeuvre and, in fact, it remains uncollected in retrospective volumes of Heaney's verse.[38] This status may suggest that we dismiss the poem as an aberration, and yet, it is a highly compelling poem for the very reason that it is a rare instance in which Heaney explicitly and candidly addresses the politics of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the oddness of the poem can be attributed to the fact that it is a blatantly public poem from a poet best know for poems of private lyric beauty. Heaney employs the form of the letter-poem and, as the form would entail, he addresses it to specific recipients, Morrison and Motion, and signs his name to it. For all that, it is marked as an "open" letter, meant to circulate at large, and because of that intention it traverses the boundary between the public and the private spheres. As such, Heaney positions himself to articulate the contours of political community in Northern Ireland at the beginning of the 1980s.

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[37] Originally published as Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter*, Field Day Pamphlet 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1983) and republished in Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Richard Kearney, et al., *Ireland's Field Day* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). All citations in this chapter will be to the latter edition.

[38] Russell, *Poetry & Peace*, 296-97. "Heaney … has since 1990 tried even more than Longley to separate his poetry—usually much more private and personal—from his prose—often public and explicitly political … Heaney's purposeful publication of these cultural and political commentaries [including *An Open Letter*] in the more ephemeral media of newspapers, journals, and pamphlets enabled him to exercise public responsibility even as he sometimes seemed to eschew that responsibility in his poetry and even as he condemned himself for doing so in poems such as 'Punishment.'"

Critics of Heaney's early poetry, including Blake Morrison, have long noted that he regularly stymied the expectation placed on him to speak about the Troubles from the Northern Irish Catholic position. In the beginning of *An Open Letter*, Heaney remarks on the explicitly political nature of the poem as a departure from his regular practice: "it is time to break / Old inclinations not to speak." His rhetorical performance of choosing to break from past practice comes after several stanzas of hesitation and equivocation:

> For weeks and months I've messed about,
> Unclear, embarrassed and in doubt,
> Footered, havered, spraughled, wrought
> Like Shauneen Keogh,
> Wondering should I write it out
> Or let it go.
>
> Anything for a quiet life.[39]

The question of whether or not to speak about politics is very much the driving force of this poem that begins with an epigraph from the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard who locates "the source of our first suffering … in the fact that we hesitated to speak."[40] Heaney takes this statement as something of a challenge and he overcomes his hesitation in the seventh stanza of the poem after a pointed self-accusation, "Your silence is an abdication."[41] It is unclear if the responsibility he is in danger of abdicating is a personal and/or poetic one. After all, it was Blake Morrison who "defined" the poet's "inclination" to avoid political commitment in his poetry.[42] And, it is this pull among personal responsibility, public responsibility, and poetic responsibility that drives the ethical impetus behind much of Heaney's poetry.

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[39] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 24.
[40] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 21.
[41] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 24.
[42] Heaney articulates this in the eighth stanza of *An Open Letter* (24), but for the original comments see Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982).

The poetry anthology that is the focus of Heaney's criticism is a metonym for the broader political landscape across the British/Irish archipelago.[43] Heaney articulates this metonymic connection that, in turn, implies a significant relationship between poetry and politics. Initially, Heaney reveals, Morrison and Motion considered using the title "*Opened Ground*" for the anthology before settling on their final title. It is an intriguing choice since it is a phrase taken from Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets, 1"—"Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground." Heaney takes umbrage that this potential title is "supplanted in the end / By *British* verse," since "British" erases this phrase from an Irish poet. (It is worth noting that Heaney uses the phrase for his collection of selected poems published in 1998). The initial choice of title, however, also suggests an unbounded quality to the poetry contained within the anthology that would reveal the diversity of the Irish/British archipelago and disrupt British hegemony over it. The fact that the final generic title reinscribes this hegemony is all the more galling to Heaney. This tension between diversity and uniformity, which commits violence through erasure, is at the heart of Heaney's letter. To what extent are Northern Irish poets considered British poets? He answers:

> […] as far as we are part
> Of a new commonwealth of art,
> Salute with independent heart
> And equally
> Doff and flourish in your court
> Of poesie.[44]

Heaney's ironic answer points to the implicit distinction between literary culture and material politics that is expressed through the Penguin anthology. The conditional statement that Heaney employs at the beginning of the stanza indicates that the political reality of Northern Ireland is at

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[43] Eugene O'Brien, in *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), reads *An Open Letter* within the context of Ireland's status as "postcolonial." In particular, he pushes back against Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin who decide not to include Ireland in the set of "postcolonial" nations, per their definition of the category, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[44] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 25.

odds with the perceived role of Northern Ireland in "a new commonwealth of art" that conceals this political reality.

And yet, Heaney acknowledges a particular irony with his resistance to being called a British poet. After all, he admits, his publisher is that monolith of British poetry, Faber & Faber, and he regularly publishes his poems in British periodicals such as the *London Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. That is, his "audience is…A British one."[45] However, he "demurs" all the same, advising Morrison and Motion that, in spite of being a fixture of the British literary scene, "My passport's green." What follows is a complex expression of Heaney's position that fluctuates between a seemingly nationalist one, in the broad sense of the term, and an anti-nationalist one. In the same stanza he wishes "No harm to her [The Queen] nor you who deign / To *God Bless* her as sovereign," but he also provides a caveat to this initial sentiment by raising the specter of English violence wrought upon Ireland:

> Except that from the start her reign
> Of crown and rose
> Defied, displaced, would not combine
> What I'd espouse.[46]

Heaney's choice of diction in this stanza frames his stance as one of reluctant involvement. Everything hinges on the conjunction "except." He wishes "no harm" and he would leave it at that but the affronts to Ireland are too many not to speak out.[47] Instead of emphasizing an objective tallying of wrongs, Heaney foregrounds his subject position—"What I'd espouse"—and how those wrongs are filtered through it. And prior to this moment, he explicitly states this tactic in a parenthetical aside—"I'll stick to *I*. Forget the *we.*"[48] But the specter of this "we"

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[45] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 25.
[46] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 26.
[47] Heaney may perhaps be thinking, in particular, of the 1981 hunger strike by Provisional IRA and INLA prisoners held in Maze Prison and that resulted in the deaths of ten of them.
[48] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 25.

continues to trouble Heaney and this tension is what drives the poem. The postal form of the poem, in fact, heightens this tension since a letter traditionally emerges from the voice of an "I." However, since a letter also straddles the line between the private and public spheres—all the more in this case where the status of the letter is one of intentional open circulation—it necessarily places the "I" and the "we" in dialogue, if not conflict.

Heaney's poetic persona deeply feels the wrongs committed against Ireland, while simultaneously desiring a position of political and artistic independence.[49] From this vantage point he is able to deconstruct a simplistic or overly romanticized notion of political nationalism.[50] Midway through the poem, Heaney makes an intriguing statement on the complicated relationship he has with his "*patria,*" Ireland: "The whole imagined country mourns / Its lost, erotic // *Aisling* life…"[51] The significance of these lines rests on Heaney's use of the adjective "imagined." Benedict Anderson notably defines the "nation" as "an imagined community" where its "members…will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[52] Heaney refers to Ireland as an "imagined country" and, as a writer, he is particularly attuned to the ways in which culture shapes the imagined community and how it mediates the communion of its members. [In fact, almost all of Heaney's references in *An Open Letter* are literary in origin]. As

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[49] Russell's contention in *Poetry & Peace* is that Heaney and Michael Longley both claim a space for artistic independence and it is through this that their writing gains ethical and political significance (12).

[50] O'Brien's reading of *An Open Letter* is part of a larger contention that postcolonial theory must not simply reverse the binary of colonizer/colonized, what he terms an "either/or" view, and instead must embrace the complexity of "both/and." Heaney, according to O'Brien with whom I agree, accomplishes this type of "both/and" thinking in *An Open Letter*, and this emphasis on thinking in conjunction, "allows each side of the binary opposition which is ultimately signified by selfhood and otherness to interact, to permeate each other, and, it is hoped, to transform each other in a manner which can only be of value to future culture and society and to notions of intersubjective truth" (146).

[51] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 26. The *aisling* is an Irish poetic genre, popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the poet has a vision of Ireland in the figure of a woman who speaks with him. In the nationalist tradition, the *spéirbhean*, the beautiful woman who appears to the poet, often urges those who listen to come to her aid and defense (i.e. the defense of Ireland).

[52] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

such, he is critical of an overly romanticized notion of this communion that would diminish the complex contradictions that exist within. At one point in the poem, Heaney takes to task the British poet and critic Donald Davie, that "Poet of water nymph and shire," for holding such views.[53] Heaney turns to the Greek myth of Leda to describe the Troubles, recalling W. B. Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" and, especially, its apocalyptic last stanza. In the myth, Leda gives birth to two sets of twins after copulating with Zeus, who appears to her in the form of a swan, and Heaney uses this to highlight the "twinned" nature of Northern Ireland: "One island-green, one royal blue / […] // One a provo, one a Para / One Law and Order, one Terror."[54] But, he immediately pivots to calling the appropriateness of the myth into question, writing, "It's time to break the cracked mirror / Of this conceit," further concluding that "It leads nowhere."[55] His use of a mirror as the image for this conceit instantly troubles the metaphor. A mirror better correlates to a mimetic capability of literature instead of a mythic one: it reflects back to the reader an image of their reality and their place within it. And yet, in this instance, the mirror is cracked, introducing a distortion and impacting its functionality. There are profound implications at work here. A mirror is framed, which determines the image that is reflected in it. The image that people present about the "reality" of the Troubles, thus, is framed by a certain narrative ("the conceit") that includes certain things while excluding others. Moreover, the image is broken, riven by a crack. This means that the fracture is the prominent feature and, while it actually

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[53] In particular, Heaney is responding to Donald Davie's essay, "Poet: Patriot: Interpreter," *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (Sep., 1982), 27-43. In the essay, originally delivered as a conference lecture, Davie critiques what he sees as the rise of "international language" within literary studies. According to Davie, literary and cultural critics (implicitly left-leaning) erroneously consider the *patria* as something that has been or should be superseded in favor of a cosmopolitan internationalism. He, however, believes firmly in the *patria* and in patriotism, contending that scholars who ignore the *patria* divorce themselves from national literary traditions and subsequently debase the richness of national language by flattening it for "international" consumption. The phrase, "the pang of ravishment," which Heaney reflects on in *An Open Letter*, comes from this essay by Davie.

[54] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 27.

[55] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 27. This line is a reference to the first chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* where Stephen Dedalus remarks that a cracked mirror before him "is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookinglass of a servant." For a further discussion of Joyce in relation to *An Open Letter*, see Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 235.

exists, it distorts the appearance of everything around it. Heaney, thus, implies that the conceptual framework of the Troubles is part of the problem and that writers need to both draw attention to that framework and provide others that would complicate it.

As mentioned above, the postal apparatus Heaney employs emphasizes the poet's attempt to navigate the border between the personal and public spheres. He addresses the "open letter" to specific people and signs it with his own name, "Seamus," as anyone would with a real letter. The force of his argument, in fact, comes down to his name, "But British, no, the name's not right."[56] And yet, this is not just a dialogue between Heaney and his editors; he intends this letter to circulate openly and it is this openness that disrupts binary thinking around stable identities on multiple levels.[57] Throughout the poem, Heaney positions himself and Ireland within a broader network of connections. For example, he refers to the Roman colonization of Britain—"*Britannia*"—and thus places national origins in historical context while implying a certain hybridity that runs underneath. Furthermore, he writes his postal poem in a stanza form popularized by the Scottish poet Robert Burns and subsequently named after him. Bernard O'Donoghue suggests that the importance of Heaney's turn to the "rough" Burns stanza lies in the fact that it represents "the simple countryman's reaction to being called British – and not just British, but the very thing that makes modern British poetry what it is."[58] In his essay on Burns, "Burns's Art Speech," Heaney recalls his early encounters with the Scottish poet whose use of vernacular speech resonated with him. Burns's use of "wee" as the opening word to his poem "To a Mouse, On Turning Her Up in Her Next, with the Plough, November, 1785," Heaney

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[56] Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 29. This line comes immediately before Heaney's signature: "Yours truly, Seamus."
[57] O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing*, 142-43. "It is the relationship of the two contexts [Irish/British], the contextual intersection, that will eventually transform both texts and subjectivities into a new openness of identity, an openness which is presaged in the title of the pamphlet."
[58] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, 92-93.

writes, "dispossess[ed] the rights of written standard English and offer[ed] asylum to all vernacular comers."[59] More importantly, though, the older Heaney notes that in Burns he identified elements common to Northern Irish speech, including Ulster Scots, Elizabethan English, and even Irish and Scots Gaelic. "Even if we grant the deeply binary nature of Ulster thinking about language and culture," he writes, "we can still try to establish a plane of regard from which to inspect the recalcitrant elements of the situation and reposition ourselves in relation to them."[60] Poetry is the source of such a plane of regard and Heaney sees in Burns an indication of a "common language" that could help reconcile the different factions of Northern Ireland.[61] By using the Burns stanza, Heaney opts for a form that will figuratively allow his postal poem to circulate openly across community lines. At the end of *An Open Letter*, Heaney, though, takes this a step further and places the Irish-British archipelago in an international context by referring to a fable by the Czech poet Miroslav Holub as evidence for his belief in the importance of correctly naming things.[62] Thus, not only does he subvert the binary thinking that creates restrictive identities by emphasizing the plurality of the Irish-British archipelago, he goes a step further by breaking the frame of regionalism and establishing "a plane of regard" on the Troubles from an international point of view.

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[59] Seamus Heaney, "Burns's Art Speech," in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 378. This essay was originally published in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Even though it appeared over ten years after the publication of *An Open Letter*, it is clear from the essay's content that Heaney was quite familiar with Burns from early on in his life.

[60] Heaney, "Burns's Art Speech," 386.

[61] Heaney, "Burns's Art Speech," 383.

[62] The fable in question is Miroslav Holub's "On the Necessity of Truth," in which a man in a cinema protests, to the annoyance of the other viewers, that a beaver on the screen is dubbed a muskrat by the narrator, proclaiming that "Names were not for negotiation. / Right names were the first foundation / For telling truth" (Heaney, "An Open Letter," *Ireland's Field Day*, 29). For a discussion of the importance of this international element see Richard Rankin Russell who cites Michael Molino: "In this regard, Michael Molino argues that *An Open Letter* signifies Heaney's growing internationalism, observing that, 'while he refuses to exclude his Irish voice, Heaney opens new vistas for himself and other writers when he speaks of a 'new commonwealth of art' and when he alludes to writers such as Miroslav Holub" (*Seamus Heaney's Regions*, 237).

ii. "A Postcard from Iceland" and "Postscript":

"A Postcard from Iceland," included in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), bears a similar formula in its title to "A Postcard from North Antrim." This does not mean, however, that they should be read as mirror images of each other. Rather, *An Open Letter* appears almost as a hinge upon which the Iceland postcard pivots away from the tight focus of the earlier postcard from Antrim into a more expansive and rhizomatic way of thinking about place and community.[63] Such a turn accords with the tenor of *The Haw Lantern*, which the critic Helen Vendler deems "Heaney's first book of the virtual," noting his departure from a poetics focused on "the tactile and the palpable" towards one of the imaginary and the spiritual.[64] The collection, however, also evinces Heaney's fascination with liminal space. Stan Smith pointedly notes the political implications of the liminal space inhabited by Heaney in this collection: "In *The Haw Lantern* Heaney goes … beyond the margins altogether, to deconstruct those blarney-laden tales of nativity, decentering and redefining a self-regarding Irishness."[65] It is the inhabiting and traversal of this space that is touched on by the postal poems in the collection. Although the postal poem I focus on is "A Postcard from Iceland," the four parable poems in the collection—"From the Frontier of Writing," "From the Republic of Conscience," "From the Land of the Unspoken," and "From the Canton of Expectation"—can also be grouped in this category.[66] As Neil Corcoran writes, these poems "could be called strange letters too, letters here in the sense of fictional missives or

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[63] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari contrast the rhizome to the root: "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very differet from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order," and, furthermore, "[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7).

[64] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 113.

[65] Stan Smith, "The Distance Between: Seamus Heaney," in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen, New Casebooks series (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 234.

[66] Stan Smith has a compelling reading of these poems in "The Distance Between," 225-29.

messages from a foreign correspondent travelling in mysterious and dangerous places."[67] These missives of parable poems are political in an abstract sense, but they also explore an otherworld of art and show how the poet traverses the border between that world and the "real" one.[68]

"A Postcard from Iceland," as Heather Clark notes, "surely alludes to *Letters from Iceland*" by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice; and, she suggests that "MacNeice's legacy is profoundly addressed" in the poem, "which is perhaps a postcard to MacNeice himself."[69] Auden and MacNeice use Iceland as an external vantage point from which to reflect on the state of England—its culture, politics, and identity—and Europe more broadly, under the encroaching shadow of fascism. Heaney's use of *Letters* as an inter-text to "A Postcard from Iceland" suggests a similar move of leaving a place in order to reflect more clearly on it, even though he never explicitly refers to the situation in Northern Ireland in the poem.

The poem begins with Heaney testing the stream near a hot spring in Iceland where, "the whole mud-slick muttering and boiling" is the only sound he can hear.[70] This description of the immediate natural environment recalls the active, squishy landscapes that so regularly provided the settings for Heaney's earlier poems, such as "Death of a Naturalist" or the bog poems. In the context of this collection and its turn away from a poetics firmly grounded in the local landscape, it is striking that Heaney writes that he "could hear nothing / But…" the noise of a natural environment that seems to mimic that of his home in Co. Derry. Breaking into this aural-scape is the voice of his Icelandic guide who tells Heaney the etymology of the word "lukewarm": "And I think you'd want to know / That *luk* was an old Icelandic word for hand." Stan Smith notes

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[67] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 147.
[68] Russell, *Poetry & Peace*, 12. "Consistently testifying to their faith in poetry's power, Longley and Heaney have shown how art constitutes an extraordinary reality in its own right, separate from yet inextricably tied to our ordinary world."
[69] Heather Clark, "'Going North': MacNeice and Heaney," in *New Voices in Irish Criticism 3*, ed. Karen Vandevelde (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 35. Stan Smith suggests that the poem "reads like an ironic postscript to Auden and MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland*" (223).
[70] Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 37.

Heaney's propensity for turning to etymology in his critical writing and suggests the significance this turn has for him: "It effects a kind of destabilization on the ground of language itself, unsettling what he calls the 'sovereign diction' with alternative, subversive voices."[71] The injection of an etymology into the poem "A Postcard from Iceland" achieves this unsettling and, moreover, prefigures an idea that Heaney would go on to articulate in his introduction to *Beowulf* (2000) and that he first had while a student at Queen's University, Belfast. In that introduction, Heaney recalls listening to a lecture on the history of the English language during which he learned that the word "'whiskey' is the same word as the Irish and Scots Gaelic word *uisce*, meaning water, and that the River Usk in Britain is therefore to some extent the River Uisce (or Whiskey)." This linguistic constellation—or as he puts it, "a kind of linguistic river of rivers … a riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak"—had a transformative effect on the young Heaney and suggested a significant political lesson:

> The Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Saxon antithesis were momentarily collapsed, and in the resulting etymological eddy a gleam of recognition flashed through the synapses and I glimpsed an elsewhere of potential … The place on the language map where the Usk and the *uisce* and the whiskey coincided was definitely a place where the spirit might find a loophole, an escape route … away into some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one's language would not be a simple badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or official imposition, but an entry into language.[72]

Heaney suggests a collapse of binary thinking ("duality" and "antithesis") and its deleterious political effects in Northern Ireland achieved through a dive into the layered multiplicity of language (etymology). "A Postcard from Iceland," admittedly, presents a slightly different situation from the one Heaney draws in the introduction to *Beowulf*. Whereas in the latter case,

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[71] Smith, "The Distance Between," 223.

[72] Seamus Heaney, "Introduction," to *Beowulf* (New York: W. W. Norton), xxiv-xxv. This part of Heaney's introduction comes from an essay, "Further Language," originally delivered as a keynote lecture, which appeared in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 30.2 (Fall 1997), 10.

his linguistic material is explicitly tied to Irish and Scots Gaelic and how it has seeped into the English language, in the former he begins with an Icelandic word that found its way into Middle English and remains in common usage today. Iceland is less pointedly a portal through which to deconstruct the conflict in Northern Ireland. And yet, the influx of Nordic and Saxon cultures into the Irish-British archipelago in the eighth and ninth centuries has long figured in Heaney's poetry.[73] By demonstrating that history is a process of fluctuation involving the intermingling of cultures, Heaney implicitly undermines the fixity of essentialism, and his "Postcard form Iceland" contains this idea in embryonic form: it is the message he is sending out into the world.

The reference to the hand in the etymology of the Icelandic word *luk* establishes a symbol that Heaney returns to at the end of the poem. Without ever mentioning Northern Ireland, he reflects on community, peace, and reconciliation. These themes are encapsulated in a symbol of peaceful hospitality and fellowship with which Heaney ends the poem:

> And you would want to know (but you know already)
> How usual that waft and pressure felt
> When the inner palm of water found my palm.[74]

He plays on the etymology of "lukewarm" to suggest that the "hand" of the water familiarly grasps his own: "that waft and pressure" of the water's palm. If, as I propose, we read Heaney's interaction with the Icelandic stream as indicative of a type of thinking that subverts borders and binary definitions of community, then the ending of the poem posits a vision of community based on a hospitable welcoming of the other. After all, Heaney is the stranger in Iceland and his diction makes clear that the Icelandic river is the actor in this scenario: it finds his palm and reaches out to him. This act is iterative since the postal nature of the poem repeats the turn to the

[73] Clark contends in "Going North" that "Heaney has in fact 'rewritten' *Letters from Iceland* into *North*, in which he continues a dialectic posed earlier by MacNeice regarding the writer's necessarily apposite sense of place and placelessness within society, culture, nation, and locality" (31).
[74] Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 37.

other. The brevity of the poem makes it easy to imagine it on the back of a postcard and Heaney ambiguously addresses it to a "you" in the final lines of the poem. This differs from his earlier postal poems. Although the poems circulate publicly and thus acquire new recipients, both "A Postcard from North Antrim" and "An Open Letter" are addressed to specific people. The anonymity of "A Postcard from Iceland," however, renders it all the more open. Heaney dedicates *The Haw Lantern* to his friends, Bernard and Jane McCabe, with the two-line poem: "The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves. / Us, listening to a river in the trees."[75] Here, Heaney expresses this type of openness by rendering the river airborne. It is as if this prefatory poem frames what follows and the stream from "A Postcard to Iceland" is similarly rendered ethereal. It emerges from an "elsewhere of potential" and it reaches out as an invitation of friendship to any and all who encounter it.

The Spirit Level, published in 1996, was the first collection to appear after the ceasefires of 1994 (from both the Provisional IRA and the Loyalist paramilitaries, although violence would resume in 1996) and after Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. These events clearly had an impact on Heaney and in *The Spirit Level* he surveys this moment of tentative hope with a laureate's eye in a way that departs from the tone and tactics of *Seeing Things*. Whereas he had begun to more prominently "credit marvels" within his poetry, the title of *The Spirit Level* implies that the marvelous needs to be balanced by that which is grounded or, as one critic describes it, Heaney's impulse towards "transcendence" is matched by his investment in "transience"—an ontological grounding in space and time from which transcendence is possible.[76] Bernard O'Donoghue pointedly notes that, *The Spirit Level*

[75] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 267. This is the only collection in *Opened Ground* that bears a dedication.
[76] These terms are employed by Juan Ráez-Padilla in his article "On Transience, Transcendence, and Sublunar Metaphysics: Seamus Heaney's *Spirit(ual) Level*," *Mosaic* 50.2 (June 2017), 241-57. Neil Corcoran and others have identified *The Spirit Level* as a "return to the earth" or a re-grounding for Heaney. Helen Vendler, on the other hand,

"contained some of the most searingly outspoken poems of public statement Heaney had written since the Bog Poems."[77] The public nature of the poems, especially in a period of possible communal change, is pertinent to the present study, and I read the final poem of the collection, "Postscript," as a postal poem. The entire collection, in fact, has a postal quality to it ("To a Dutch Potter in Ireland" could be read as a missive). Neil Corcoran identifies the collection as thoroughly imbued by the topic of translation. (Translation, with its connotation of carrying something from one place to another, will be more deeply connected to the postal interpretive framework in my next chapter on Ciaran Carson). Moreover he notes that Heaney's aesthetic shifted into a more conversational style with *The Spirit Level* marked by "a newly forceful demotic" and "the sturdy, stubborn replacement of the oracular tone of 'Squarings' [the prominent sequence in *Seeing Things*] with what appears at times almost a deliberate brusqueness, off-handedness or reductively colloquial discursiveness."[78] As Heaney surveys the Troubles from a place where he can also see the possibility of a real and lasting peace, he brings poetry that much closer to communication.

"And some time make the time to drive out west / Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore," writes Heaney in the opening lines of "Postscript."[79] These lines frame the entire poem as the continuation or re-opening of a written message after its initial closure. Helen Vendler convincingly reads the poem as a response to his earlier poem "The Peninsula" from *Door into the Dark*, which similarly concerns a drive along the west coast of Ireland. (They also are both poems of sixteen lines, although the earlier poem is written in quatrains while the later one does

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notes that the collection is infused with an attitude of "keeping going" as the Troubles appear to, perhaps, be nearing their end.

[77] Bernard O'Donoghue, "Crediting Marvels or Taking Responsibility: Vocation and Declarations of Intent by Seamus Heaney after *Seeing Things*," in *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 206.

[78] Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 192-93.

[79] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 411.

not contain any stanza breaks). "The Peninsula" finds the poet mired by writer's block: "When you have nothing more to say, just drive / For a day all round the peninsula." What emerges from this drive is not so much a cure to writer's block as it is an affirmation of sense perception and, seemingly, a declaration of poetic practice: "now you will uncode all landscapes / By this: things founded clean on their own shapes."[80] Vendler and, in turn, Rand Brandes interpret Heaney's "rewrite" from the perspective of a poet who has reached middle age. "It is not writer's block that now afflicts the poet," opines Vendler, "but rather the tendency of the preoccupied middle-aged heart to shield itself against feeling," which "the power of perception" will counter.[81] This is certainly an important element of the poem. But I believe critics have ignored or deprioritized the political and postal implications of the poem by focusing on these biographical connotations.

"Postscript" could refer to its status as an addendum to "The Peninsula" or it could refer to an implied letter to the Friels. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney remarks that the poem originated in a weekend drive with his wife, Marie, and Brian and Anne Friel, "along the south coast of Galway Bay."[82] I believe both interpretations apply, but the title also suggests that it is an addendum to the collection as a whole, in which case I think it is significant that the poem upon which it follows is "Tollund." This, too, is a poem that has been read as a rewriting of his earlier "The Tollund Man" from *Wintering Out* (Heaney will also later publish "The Tollund Man Revisited" in *Electric Light*). In the earlier poem Heaney imagines that when he eventually travels to Denmark and sees the Tollund Man bog boyd, "In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home."[83] The year of *Wintering Out*'s publication, 1972, remains the

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[80] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 22.
[81] Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 25; Rand Brande, "The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems," in *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Eugene O'Brien (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 343.
[82] Heaney and O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 366.
[83] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 63.

deadliest year of The Troubles and this poem reflects that environment of violence. The later "Tollund" however is explicitly dated "September 1994," which means Heaney places it in the immediate aftermath of the Provisional IRA ceasefire declared on 31 August 1994. In the first stanza, Heaney remarks that while he and Marie stood in Tollund Moss it felt "[h]allucinatory and familiar," hearkening back to the imagined encounter with the "Tollund Man" in the early 1970s.[84] But the hope of a new political dispensation makes this a radically different experience of "Jutland fields."

Heaney writes in "The Tollund Man Revisited" that this "could have been a still out of the bright / 'Townland of Peace', that poem of dream farms / Outside of all contention," referring to a poem by the Northern Irish poet John Hewitt. He thus connects Denmark to Northern Ireland again but does so through an image of a peaceful community. "[W]e stood footloose," Heaney writes, "at home beyond the tribe," where they are "more scouts than strangers" who are ready "to make a new beginning."[85] His choice of syntax is noteworthy. The "tribe" is a term regularly and ambivalently employed by Heaney in his poetry and prose to signify a community that is intimate, insular, and atavistic—perhaps most famously used in the poem "Punishment" when, describing his reaction to the tarring of young Irish Catholic women who were caught fraternizing with British soldiers, he notes that he "would connive / in civilized outrage" while simultaneously "understand[ing] the exact / and *tribal*, intimate revenge."[86] To be "beyond the tribe," then, is to go beyond the narrow boundaries that define a particular community. For a poet who has long reflected on the themes of "home" and "exile" (self-imposed or forced), to describe himself as "at home beyond the tribe" is to mark a tidal shift in the understanding of what constitutes "home" by accepting a much more open sense of belonging. But Heaney makes clear

[84] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410.
[85] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410.
[86] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 113, emphasis added.

this is not just his personal viewpoint that has evolved. Repeating the same construction he used to introduce the Hewitt poem, Heaney transposes the map of Northern Ireland onto the Danish landscape: "It could have been Mulhollandstown or Scribe," he writes, denoting places in Northern Ireland.[87] Therefore his use of the first-person plural pronoun—"we stood footloose"—is open-ended enough that it not only refers to Seamus and Marie but also to the community of Northern Ireland. They are unmoored—"footloose"—from a restrictive connection between community and land, and thus they stand on a threshold ready "to make a new beginning."[88] "Postscript," then, immediately follows upon this articulation of a threshold of possibility and extends it.

The place where the action of "Postscript" unfolds is the "Flaggy Shore," a naturally liminal space where ocean and land meet. Heaney draws attention to this liminal quality and underscores the dynamism that is evident in early autumn,

> […] when the wind
> And the light are working off each other
> So that the ocean on one side is wild
> With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
> The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
> By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
> […].[89]

"[O]n one side" is the ocean and on the other is stone; but this difference is not as stark as it would first appear and Heaney imbricates both land and water with each other. For example, the inland lake is characterized in the language of stone as "slate-grey." The blurring of boundaries is underlined by Heaney's emphasis on the dynamism of the scene, represented particularly by the prominence of wind and light within the poem—elements of motion. Both elements stir up the ocean so that it is "wild / With foam and glitter" and a "flock of swans" is described as

[87] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410.
[88] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410.
[89] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 411.

"earthed lightning." Positioned in this landscape, the implied lyric "I" could almost be described, borrowing a term from the previous poem, as "footloose," uncoupled from a specific place with emphasis on nature in flux. It subtly mirrors the position of "at home beyond the tribe" from "Tollund" by showing an understanding of space in transformation, never settled, never capable of being contained within a border; it is a space that is on the edge of land and water, where Ireland ends and the larger network of the Atlantic ocean begins.

In keeping with its postal quality, "Postscript" is addressed to an implied "you"—Heaney actually employs the pronoun once in the thirteenth line—from an implicit lyric "I." The journey with the Friels along the coast of the bay occurred after visiting Mt. Vernon, Lady Gregory's summer house that sits on its shore. Vendler notes that the location's connection to Lady Gregory, the description of the landscape, the general themes of the poem, and the reference to swans indexes W. B. Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" as an inter-text. But for her, Heaney's swans are "communal"—described by the poet as a "flock"—whereas Yeats's swans are paired "lover by lover."[90] Seamus and Marie, Brian and Anne, the biographical context would suggest the "lover by lover" granularity instead of community. However, Heaney masterfully conceals this information from the reader by making both the speaker and addressee "anonymous" and thereby subtly prioritizing the communal implications of "flock."[91] Whereas the impulse of the reader is to interpret the anonymous speaker as the poet's voice, the anonymity of the addressee opens the address to a much wider group in a similar fashion to Heaney's use of the pronoun "we" in "Tollund." As such, the reader senses that Heaney is speaking to the community of

[90] Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 26. I generally agree with this reading but it should be noted that while Yeats emphasizes their pair-bonding, he nonetheless writes that "Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine-and-fifty swans." The emphasis is on their pairing—although since there is an odd number there will be one swan that remains alone—but they could be said to be an unspoken flock. For the full poem, see W. B. Yeats, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, ed. James Pethica, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 54-55.

[91] Vendler expertly notes the function of anonymity in the poem.

Northern Ireland: *The Spirit Level* is a letter to Northern Ireland and the postscript is his wish for the community.

The final lines of the poem are a "definition of selfhood" but these too can be read within a political context where the "self" is not that of an individual but rather the community of Northern Ireland as they stand on the threshold of a new political dispensation:

> […] You are neither here nor there,
> A hurry through which known and strange things pass
> As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
> And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.[92]

It begins with a liminal position—"neither here nor there"—that coincides with Heaney's description of a landscape in flux where land meets ocean. If this is a glimpse at Heaney's conception of selfhood, then he envisions a radically open self through which "things pass." It does not impose itself upon the world but accepts things that it knows and things it finds strange. Heaney's use of pronominal ambiguity makes the contours of this self extremely elastic to the point that it could be construed as a communal "self." It should be noted that the "big soft buffetings" of wind that will open the heart come in off of the Atlantic Ocean and therefore implicitly place Ireland within a broader network of political and national communities.[93] As such, it would represent an opening up of the communities that comprise Northern Ireland so that they are no longer situated in a binary opposition between self and other, but they are marked instead by what he will go on to identify in a lecture in 2001 as "through-otherness."[94] In fact, the "big soft buffetings" of wind that will "catch the heart off guard and blow it open" come in off of the Atlantic Ocean and thus implicitly place Ireland within a broader network of political

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[92] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 411.
[93] Rand Brandes takes a slightly different view in "The Poetics of Reverie." He identifies the wind of "Postscript" as "the wind of time" encountering the poet in his middle age, whereas the wind of the later poem "A Kite for Aibhín," textually speaking, "comes to the poet from another country and another time, and it speaks another language" (343).
[94] Seamus Heaney, "Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain," in *Finders Keepers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 396-415.

communities so that what is "blown open" is also the enforced insularity of The Troubles. If Heaney's reference to the swans evokes Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole," then the final lines of the poem and its emphasis on the heart suggest as inter-text another Yeats poem with deeply political significance, "Easter, 1916." In his reflection on the 1916 Easter Rebellion and its aftermath, Yeats warns that "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart."[95] It is not too far of a stretch to think that Heaney, for whom Yeats was such a profound influence, would think that the decades of sacrifice and violence during the Troubles have hardened the hearts of all those involved. His "Postscript," then, is an addendum to a letter that not only circulates openly but that is intended to achieve openness, to accompany the winds of change that will suddenly "blow open" hearts and borders that have been closed for too long.

iii. "Beacons at Bealtaine":

On May 1, 2004 the European Union expanded its membership to include ten states from Eastern Europe and the Baltic. Ireland, at the time, was the seat of the Presidency of the Council of the EU (a six-month rotating position among member states). As a result, they declared May 1 a "Day of Welcomes" in Ireland and hosted a celebration in Phoenix Park, Dublin for the addition of the ten new member states.[96] Seamus Heaney composed a poem for this occasion, "Beacons at Bealtaine," and read it publicly before the crowd gathered in the park. Unlike the other poems that I explore in this chapter, "Beacons at Bealtaine" does not initially appear to be in an explicitly postal form. And yet, it is a public poem marked by a specific date like many of the

[95] This moment in the poem is in conversation with an earlier moment when Yeats writes that, "Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream." See Yeats, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, 73-75.

[96] The ten member states that joined the EU as part of the accession in 2004 are: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

postal poems here considered. More importantly, the beacon is a form of messaging, albeit a limited proto-postal form, and Heaney intends his poem to be a beacon—"Like ancient beacons signaling, peak to peak."[97] This means of communication actually appears in the "Mycenae Lookout" sequence of poems from *The Spirit Level*, in which Heaney uses the myth of the Trojan War (particularly its end) as a means of reflecting on the tentative end to the Troubles. Helen Vendler terms it a "post-ceasefire sequence" and deems the lookout in the palace of Agamemnon a "surrogate" for the poet.[98] In the first part of the poem, Heaney writes that the lookout (who is stationed at his *post*) is,

> […] still honour-bound
> To concentrate attention out beyond
> The city and the border, on that line
> Where the blaze would leap the hills when Troy had fallen.[99]

Whereas, in "Mycenae Lookout," Heaney explores the turn away from the violence of the Troubles, in "Beacons at Bealtaine," he explores another hinge moment that marks the possibilities of new beginnings. He notes in his introductory remarks to the poem that it is "what the poet Horace might have called a *carmen sæculare*, a poem to salute and celebrate an historic turn in the *sæculare*, the age."[100] The weight he imparts to the expansion of the EU arises, in part, from the fact that peace in Northern Ireland was made possible largely through the shared

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[97] Seamus Heaney, "Beacons at Bealtaine" *EU Presidency 2004,* https://web.archive.org/web/20041221223016/http://www.eu2004.ie/templates/news.asp?sNavlocator=66&list_id=641 (hereafter cited as: Heaney, "Beacons at Bealtaine."

[98] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 156-57. "'Mycenae Lookout' stands as the emotional centerpiece of *The Spirit Level*. It speaks from the impotent position of the ordinary citizen caught in the crossfire of civil atrocity, and it predicts the endemic resurgence of violence in culture, as well as representing culture's reiterated attempts to cleanse itself of that violence. For this reason I think of 'Mycenae Lookout'—which acts as a summary of troubles concluded—as representing an Afterwards. (The sporadic breakdowns of the ceasefire do not invalidate the political closure it symbolized)."

[99] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 387.

[100] Seamus Heaney, "Beacons at Bealtaine."

membership of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland in the EU, which aided in the dissolution of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.[101]

Further in his introduction, Heaney connects the occasion of the EU Enlargement to the Irish traditions surrounding *Bealtaine*, or "the feast of bright fire." According to *The Book of Invasions*, he explains, the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, the race of early Gaelic gods in Irish mythology, arrived in Ireland on that day. Another tradition holds that, since the day was celebrated by lighting bonfires that were thought to be especially protective, the Irish would "drive" their cattle between them. "So there is something auspicious about the fact that a new flocking together of the old European nations happens on this day of mythic arrival in Ireland," he suggests, "and it is even more auspicious that we celebrate it in a park named after the mythic bird that represents the possibility of ongoing renewal."[102] The "phoenix" is Greek in origin, he goes on to explain, but some speculate an Irish origin for the name of Phoenix Park, in which it "is derived from the Irish words, *fionn uisce*, meaning 'clear water.'" He thus constructs his poem on this "coincidence of language" and on the Irish May Day traditions, weaving these many strands together through the villanelle form in which the poem is written. Since it remains uncollected, I quote it in full:

> *Uisce*: water. And *fionn*: the water's clear.
> But dip and find this Gaelic water Greek:
> A phoenix flames upon *fionn uisce* here.
>
> Strangers were barbaroi to the Greek ear.
> Now let the heirs of all who could not speak
> The language, whose ba-babbling was unclear,
>
> Come with their gift of tongues past each frontier
> And find the answering voices that they seek
> As *fionn* and *uisce* answer phoenix here.

[101] Many critics, commentators, and politicians have noted that "Brexit" has put the Good Friday Peace Agreement into jeopardy with the threat of a renewed "hard" customs border in Ireland.
[102] Heaney, "Beacons at Bealtaine."

> The May Day hills were burning, far and near,
> When our land's first footers beached boats in the creek
> In *uisce, fionn*, strange words that soon grew clear;
>
> So on a day when newcomers appear
> Let it be a homecoming and let us speak
> The unstrange word, as it behoves us here,
>
> Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare
> Like ancient beacons signaling, peak to peak,
> From middle sea to north sea, shining clear
> As phoenix flame upon *fionn uisce* here.

The villanelle is noted for its repetition of end-words. In this case, those words are "clear" and "here." As a result, the deictic adverb is consistently emphasized throughout the poem marking Phoenix Park, and Ireland more broadly, as a central locus of the poem. Therefore the reader's attention is drawn to Ireland as a significant stage on which community comes into being.

This is not to suggest, however, that Heaney implies groundedness or the claim of a people to a specific land. He privileges fluidity instead with the first line of the poem being the Irish word for water, *uisce*. The water may appear "clear" but it bears a complexity within it: "But dip and find this Gaelic water Greek." Rather than focus on purity, Heaney implies a mixed origin reminiscent of the "Atlantic seepage" comprising the Irish bogs in his earlier poem "Bogland."[103] The world is interconnected in a way that complicates essentialist narratives. Intriguingly, Heaney employs the same verb at this point in "Beacons at Bealtaine" as he does in "A Postcard from Iceland": dip.[104] It is as if the courses of water that run through his earlier poems and prose pieces flow together into this poem, carrying with them the meaning they have accrued along the way. "Mycenae Lookout," in fact, ends on a note of men, "…finders, keepers, seers of fresh water / in the bountiful round mouths of iron pumps / and gushing taps," working

[103] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 41.
[104] The earlier poem begins with the line, "As I dipped to test the stream…"

together to dig a well, a source of life for their community.[105] Water here marks a turn to peace and constructive civic enterprise. But, in "Beacons at Bealtaine," it also represents the crossing of borders—"Let them come past each frontier"—and it is the thing that both metaphorically and actually carries strangers to the shores of a new land.

"Strangers were barbaroi to the Greek ear," Heaney states at the beginning of the second tercet. Heaney seems to posit a relationship between the stranger and the Irish citizens who gathered in Phoenix Park (in the role of the Greeks). (Notably, in recent years there have been a large number of immigrants to Ireland from Poland, one of the new member states, and, as of 2014, Polish was the second most common first language spoken in Ireland after English).[106] But he also reminds the Irish of their own history as strangers in a strange land. The May Day hills were burning, far and near," he writes, "When our land's first footers beached boats in the creek." Heaney invokes the mythological history of the arrival in Ireland of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* as recounted in the *Leabhar Gabhála* (*The Book of Invasions*).[107] Essential to the narratives of early Ireland contained in the *Leabhar Gabhála* is the idea that all of the early peoples of Ireland arrived after suffering catastrophe, exile, and wandering. Robert Macalister, in the introduction to his magisterial edition of the *Leabhar Gabhála*, cites the prevailing scholarly view of the text as "merely a quasi-learned parody of the story of the conquest of Canaan by the

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[105] In his essay "Feeling into Words," Heaney equates the poet to a water diviner (*Finders Keepers*, 21). "And if I were asked for a figure who represents pure technique, I would say a water diviner. You can't learn the craft of dowsing or divining—it is a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released. As Sir Philip Sidney notes in his *Defence of Poesy*: 'Among the Romans a Poet was called a *Vates*, which is as much as a Diviner…'"

[106] "Ireland celebrates the tenth anniversary of the largest ever EU Enlargement," Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, April 2014, https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/our-work/casestudiesarchive/2014/april/tenth-anniversary-eu-enlargement/.

[107] The *Tuatha Dé Danaan* are the fifth group of people to conquer Ireland, according to the *Leabhar Gabhála*. "And they came to Ireland, on Monday, the Kalends of May, in ships [and vessels]," as it is written in that ancient text. Heaney's use of the myth is quite compelling. Whereas the *Tuatha Dé* and the related *Milesians* who arrived after them are the "first footers" of the Gaelic race, there existed four other distinct peoples who came to Ireland before them, including the *Fir Bolg* mentioned above. The text of the *Leabhar Gabhála* recounts that after arriving in Ireland the *Tuatha Dé* slaughtered one hundred thousand *Fir Bolg* in the battle of *Mag Tuired*, the contest to determine who would control Ireland. Understandably, Heaney glosses over this violent episode in the story.

Israelites."[108] This estimation helps frame the text as a story of those who have lost their homes seeking a new one and thus identifies its relevance for the contemporary moment in which Heaney first delivered the poem: the Irish were once also strangers in a strange land and therefore should welcome new arrivals to the island. Since the mythic history of Ireland as articulated in that text is woven out of elements from the Biblical books of Genesis and Exodus, as well as other mytho-historic sources, he suggests that Ireland has always been essentially hybrid and thus it can be a home for many.

Heaney also foregrounds the issue of language in the poem. The cultural *other* is determined by linguistic sounds. The Greeks' nominated the peoples of Anatolia *barbaroi*, an onomatopoeia of the sound of the foreign language spoken in the region (i.e. "*bar bar*…") and it has subsequently come to pejoratively refer to those who are culturally, morally, and politically inferior.[109] Heaney resists the cultural chauvinism that circumscribes a specific group within the pale and he extends an invitation to the descendants of those "who could not speak" the Greek language, "whose ba-babbling was unclear." In so doing, he recalls the origin of the word *barbaroi* in the "ba-babbling" of others, but he also invokes the story of the Tower of Babel in his word choice. The scribes of the *Leabhar Gaeilge*, for example, remark that Féinius Farsaid, a forefather of the Gaels, established a school at the site of the fallen Tower of Babel to teach the languages that arose with the dispersal of the nations.[110] Gaedil Glas, Féinius's descendant, is noted as the one "who fashioned the Gaelic language out of the seventy-two languages," using the best elements of each.[111] In this account, the Gaelic language emerges as a truly hybrid,

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[108] *Lebor Gabála Erenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*. Ed. and tr. by R. A. Stewart Macalister (Dublin: Irish Texts Socity, 1956), 2.
[109] For a discussion of the use of "barbarian" in the context of Ireland, see Seamus Deane, "Civilians and barbarians," in *Ireland's Field Day* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 33-42.
[110] *Leabhar Gaeilge*, vol. I, 39, 195; Liam Mac Cóil, "Irish: One of the Languages of the World," in *The Languages of Ireland*, ed. and translated by Michael Cronin.
[111] *Leabhar Gaeilge*, vol. II, 13.

global language. The fall of Babel allows for the possibility of multiple languages and the translation between them and the figure of Féinius Farsaid seems to hover behind the message of "Beacons at Bealtaine": the Irish are in a prime position to facilitate translation and dialogue. Heaney figures the multiplicity of tongues as a "gift" that the strangers bear with them on their journey. Not only does he extend a welcome to those who are foreign to Ireland, he urges the Irish people to welcome the stranger in their midst. "Let them come," he hopes, "And find the answering voices that they seek."

The villanelle, the poetic form in which Heaney writes, performs the very act of accession and interweaving that they are gathered in Phoenix Park to celebrate. The nineteenth-century French poet and scholar Théodore de Banville describes the form of the villanelle, with its repetition of rhyme words and refrain, as a "braid."[112] In the context of the EU Enlargement, Heaney's villanelle, therefore, presents the shape of a hoped-for community. The notion of weaving appears significantly in his earlier volume *Field Work*. In "The Strand at Lough Beag," an elegy for his cousin Colum McCartney, Heaney ends the poem with an act of mourning that simultaneously signals renewal: "With rushes that shoot green again, I plait / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud."[113] Likewise, in "The Harvest Bow," he recounts a memory of his father "As [he] plaited the harvest bow" out of straw. Whereas the plaited green rushes in the earlier poem represent hope, here Heaney tells us the plaited straw represents peace: "*The end of art is peace* / Could be the motto of this frail device."[114] As an image of community the villanelle demonstrates a weaving together of different strands. But it also is characterized by a strict

[112] More precisely, he writes that it is "a braid of silver and gold threads, crossed with a third thread the color of rose" (*On dirait une tresse formée de fils d'argent et d'or, que traverse un troisième fil, couleur de rose!*) Théodore de Banville, *Petit Traité de Poésie Française* (Paris: Librairie de l'Écho de la Sorbonne, 1875).
[113] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 146. See, Russell, *Poetry & Peace*, 246. "The emphasis on the greenness of the rushes ostensibly embraces Irish nationalism but actually signals the volume's concern with new life—in poetry, if not yet in politics—springing from the dead."
[114] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 175.

rhyme scheme that repeats throughout the five tercets and the final quatrain. This strictness, if this is an image of community, possibly veers towards the type of bordered communities that Heaney resists and subverts. "[Let us] move lips, move minds and make new meaning flare," Heaney writes, implying the unpredictably creative and rhizomatic nature of language. While the all of the other rhymes in the poem are full rhymes, as to be expected by the conventions of the villanelle form, "flare" remarkably is a half rhyme with "here" and "clear." Such a disjunction, however slight, enacts the creative quality of "new meanings," which can erupt on a tangent from an initial encounter; he disrupts what is expected. In "Beacons at Bealtaine," an image of a potential community, Heaney notably only uses the pronoun "us," and he crafts a message to the community that has the capacity to continually spread outward to others: "Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare / Like ancient beacons signaling, peak to peak."

These "dispatches" from throughout Heaney's career show varying shapes of community. In "A Postcard from North Antrim" and "An Open Letter," his focus is on the situation in Northern Ireland; although, in his attempts to subvert the binary thinking that dominates that situation, he always views Northern Ireland as transected by a transnational element. Later on, in "A Postcard from Iceland," "Postscript," and "Beacons at Bealtaine," community takes a more abstract form, and yet it is always suffused with the hope for something better, a community that takes shape outside of the bounds of nationalism. I conceive of these postal poems as "dispatches from the margins" because of the marginal places from which Heaney writes them, that is, away from centers of power. Furthermore, these poems occupy a marginal place within Heaney's oeuvre. They are largely absent from retrospective collected editions (although poems like "Postscript" and "Mycenae Lookout" are included), and critics have not paid much attention to the postal

qualities of Heaney's work, let alone his fascination with messages and messaging. They are also marginal in the way they occupy a space in between the real and imagined.[115] "What [poetry] is offering is a glimpsed alternative," Heaney writes at one point, "a world to which 'we turn incessantly and without knowing it.'"[116] In the quote that supplies the second epigraph to this chapter and which Heaney quotes in his essay "The Government of the Tongue," Anna Swir wries that, "[t]he poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the reality we inhabit." I believe Heaney views the poet in terms similar to Swir's as someone who opens unexpected communications between "a glimpsed alternative" and "the reality we inhabit." This role is a postal one and makes of the poet a deliverer of messages between what is possible and what is present.

[115] For a fascinating discussion of Terminus and the state of being in-between, see Seamus Heaney, "Something to Write Home About," in *Finders Keepers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 51-62.
[116] Seamus Heaney, "Frontiers of Writing," in *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 192. He leads into this quote with the following: "even when the redress of poetry is operative in the first sense in which I employed it – poetry, that is, being instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world, poetry as an intended intervention into the goings-on of society – even then, poetry is involved with supreme fictions as well as actual conditions."

Following in the Footsteps of the Postman: Ciaran Carson's Year of the French

"Translation is a serious business for me. It's also serious play. I like play."
—Ciaran Carson in conversation with
Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (2009)[1]

"[E]verything is hieroglyphics…But, what is the poet (I grasp the word in its widest sense), if not a translator, a decoder?"
—Charles Baudelaire[2]

i. Introduction: Postal and Poetical Franking:

The Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson reverses Robert Frost's oft-cited dictum on the untranslatability of poetry in his compact but rich prose piece "The Other" (2001). "Poetry is itself translation," he declares, "carrying a burden of meaning from one place to another, feeling it change in shape and weight as it travels."[3] Carson's phrasing—"carrying a burden of meaning"—hearkens back to the etymological origins of translation; but, it also presents an image that bears a striking similarity to his father, William Carson, a Belfast postman who carried his own burden of meaning daily throughout the city in the form of letters. The elder Carson, in fact, figures prominently throughout his son's oeuvre and often appears as a central source of Ciaran Carson's fascination with language. Regularly invoking childhood memories of his father telling him bedtime stories, for example, Carson emphasizes his father's creative facility with language and implies this is the source of an inherited creative impulse. Likewise, Carson's fascination with his father's occupation evinces sensitivity to the role of the postal

[1] Ciaran Carson and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "For all I know: Ciaran Carson in Conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews," in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 21.
[2] The original reads: "*…tout est hiéroglyphique…Or, qu'est-ce que le poète (je prends le mot dans son acception la plus large), si ce n'est un traducteur, un déchiffreur?*" Charles Baudelaire, "Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains: Victor Hugo," in *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Claude Pichois, vol. 2, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 7 (Paris: Éditions de Gallimard, 1976), 133.
[3] Carson, Ciaran, "The Other," in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, eds. W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Highgreen, Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 235. Robert Frost states in *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry* (1961) that, "I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation," commonly paraphrased as "Poetry is what gets lost in translation."

service as the bearer of language in the form of messages. Language, as transmitted from father to son, is both creative (bedtime stories) and communicative (postal service). Equally important to the poet's development, however, is his parents' decision to raise their children bilingually by speaking Irish "exclusively at home," and thereby necessitating translation as a daily practice for Carson and his siblings.[4] Behind this cultural decision, there is the suggestion of an implicit political significance: a Catholic family in Belfast choosing to strictly speak Irish at home unavoidably bears certain Republican/Nationalist connotations. Casting his father's linguistic choices in a more explicitly political hue, Carson recounts in *The Star Factory* that his father learned Esperanto "to subvert the world dominance of English."[5] In the image of his father, therefore, Carson creates a nexus of poetry, translation, and subtly radical politics. Poetry, for Carson, is literally and figuratively *postal*; and, it is through this postal nature that it gains political significance.

In the poem "Ambition" from *Belfast Confetti* (1998)—a collection dedicated to his father—Carson recounts a strikingly ambiguous story that positions William Carson in a rare political context. The story revolves around his father's month-long suspension from his job for "tamper[ing] with / Her Majesty's / Royal Mail – or was it His, then?" This suspension was the punitive outcome of "franking" a letter—meaning either to cancel the postage by stamping a postmark with date and location or, in its original meaning, to make a mark indicating a letter

[4] See Rand Brandes's interview with Ciaran Carson for *The Irish Review* 8 (1990), in which Carson states that "[I]t was a strange experience to be brought up in Irish when most of the outside world spoke another language…. To a child, things are what they are. But even then, a tinge of the exotic or strange still comes through. I think that from a very early age I was aware that to say a thing in one language was different to saying it in another, that there was always a gap between the form and the reality, the thing expressed" (77).

[5] Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory*, (London: Granta Books, 1998), 64. In an interview with the scholar Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Carson discusses his portrayal of his father: "…my representation of my father in books like *The star factory* and *Fishing for amber* is sometimes more fictional than biographical; though when he read the books he did not demur from this representation, and seemed happy enough, or more than happy, with the character thus portrayed" (Carson and Kennedy-Andrews, "For all I know," 14).

can be posted freely—with the harp symbol from an "Irish ha'penny."[6] Carson, however, renders opaque the intention behind his father's actions. He suggests, on the one hand, that people ascribed the franking to his father's peculiar brand of humor. On the other hand, he also implies that it was a sincere expression of his father's political stance. After all, William Carson's co-workers found no humor in the situation since "they'd always thought him a Republican."[7] This act of franking, regardless of intent, is unavoidably political: a Northern Irish employee of the British Royal Mail marked a piece of mail with a highly charged symbol of the Republic of Ireland. Carson compounds the ambiguity of this situation by locating this scene at a liminal space around the transfer of power from King George VI to his daughter Queen Elizabeth II upon his death in 1952. This temporal positioning indexes not just the transition from one monarch to another, but also the Irish state's transition, several years prior, from Ireland (*Éire*) to a formally declared republic upon the passage of the 1948 Republic of Ireland Act.[8] As a result, the harp becomes an explicit symbol of an enacted republican form of government in addition to its already weighted symbolism in connection to its role in Ireland's cultural and political history.[9] William Carson's action, imprinting a spectral presence of the Republic of Ireland, thus has the symbolic effect of subsuming Belfast, the letter's point of origin, within the Republic of Ireland. With the postal service as a metonymy for the British Empire, the spectral form of the franked Irish harp subverts the normal functioning of the postal system, however scant the

[6] For comparison, see Medbh McGuckian's description of "the harp-embossed bullet mould" in the poem "Cornet Love" from *Shelmalier* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1998), 57.
[7] Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 29.
[8] This act repealed the 1936 External Relations Act, thereby transferring to the President of Ireland the final legal authority held by the British Crown over Ireland. The Republic of Ireland Act, 1948 symbolically came into effect on Easter Monday, 1949 on the anniversary of the start of the Easter Rising, which occurred on Easter Monday, 1916.
[9] See, Mary Louise O'Donnell, "Tuning the harp to suit a changing Ireland," *The Irish Times*, January 16, 2013, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/tuning-the-harp-to-suit-a-changing-ireland-1.961769

material effects may be; he throws a wrench into the works, as it were.[10] In "Ambition," the Irish harp becomes, in effect, a hieroglyph of a republican government, a coded element at odds with the standard code employed by the Royal Mail.

Throughout his poetry, Ciaran Carson deftly wields ambiguity to create multiple layers of meaning, thereby evading any definitive interpretation. As with other Northern Irish poets of his generation writing in the shadow of the Troubles (viz. Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Tom Paulin), ambiguity, irony, and opacity are poetic means of navigating the complexities of a conflict by deconstructing the rigidly binary thinking that contributes to it and shapes it.[11] In an interview with Frank Ormsby from the early 1990s, Carson states that the Troubles, "the war, or whatever you want to call it – civil disturbances," are "as much a war of words as anything."[12] His shifting categorization of the sectarian violence that introduces his statement proves his point. The irony of his flippant aside, "whatever you want to call it," is that on one level description is a matter of subjective choice, but on the other level, those choices have serious ramifications: a war is legally and politically distinct from a civil disturbance. Such a linguistic distinction drove Margaret Thatcher's position during the Maze Prison Hunger Strike in 1981 when she famously declared that, "there is no such thing as political violence…only criminal violence," in answer to the IRA prisoners' demands for political status that would have afforded

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[10] On the conjunction between the British Postal System and Empire, Mary Favret writes that, "the postal system imagined itself as an efficient model for the British empire, coordinating communication and commercial exchange, and setting the standard for 'ordering and controlling a massive workforce.' Simultaneously, England could imagine itself primarily as a network of communication and exchange, its other functions governed by that image" (206-207). See also, Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, (London: Verso, 1993).

[11] Temple Cone makes an intriguing point to this effect in his article on *Belfast Confetti* in which he reads the collection through Foucault's theorization of the *panopticon*: "Carson's self-incriminating rhetoric resists the narrative myopia of nationalist discourse without overstating the efficacy of such resistance. Like a Derridean trace, he hovers between discourses, recombining but never asserting…While Carson's acts of rhetorical resistance may not have the material effect of sectarian acts, they indicate the need for discursive facility to survive in the fluctuating power dynamic of Belfast" (78). Temple Cone, "Knowing the Street Map by Foot: Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti*," *New Hibernia Review* 10.3 (Fómhar/Autumn 2006), 78.

[12] Ciaran Carson and Frank Ormsby, "Ciaran Carson interviewed by Frank Ormsby," *Linen Hall Review* (April, 1991), 6.

them certain rights not conferred upon criminal prisoners.[13] By undermining, or at least complicating, the linguistic sphere of the conflict through the use of irony and ambiguity, Carson and his contemporaries do not evade the political sphere, rather they subvert the political as it currently stands by destabilizing the linguistic articulations of entrenched positions. When it comes to Carson, I maintain that the source of this aesthetic is located in his father and the ambiguous subversions he performs within postal and linguistic systems.

Carson posits his father "as a model for action" and not just as a poetic image in *Belfast Confetti* and later collections.[14] As mentioned earlier, his father embodies a critical attitude to the power structures inherent in language (through his study of Irish and Esperanto) and a playful attitude to language's creative potential (through storytelling). This pairing echoes in Carson's statement that translation is for him both "serious business" and "serious play," included as an epigraph to this chapter. An earnest approach to language and a ludic approach are not mutually exclusive and, when they co-exist, they contain potential for a radical politics of "renewal."[15] But Carson also meditates upon the peripatetic nature of his father's work and it is through his poetry that he decides to follow in the footsteps of his father. As he writes elsewhere in "Ambition," he is beginning "to know the street map with my feet, just like my father."[16]

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[13] Margaret Thatcher, Speech in Belfast, 5 March 1981.

[14] Temple Cone, "Knowing the Street Map by Foot: Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti*," *New Hibernia Review* 10.3 (Fómhar/Autumn, 2006), 83. Cone suggests this is the role Carson's father has in *Belfast Confetti* and, in particular, that he is a model for "ethical action." While I believe Cone is right in his assessment, I don't think he pushes the argument far enough.

[15] In particular, I am thinking of Isobel Armstrong's discussion of play in her exceptional work, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), in which she articulates an "alternate aesthetic discourse" to counter the suspicion of aesthetics that predominates in contemporary theory (particularly from theorists associated with the political Left). Armstrong turns to the epistemological significance of play in the thought of D. W. Winnicott and Lev Vygotsky to explore its role in the "emancipatory" potential of the aesthetic (41). That is, play, a constitutive feature of the aesthetic, inherently compels "the transformation of categories, which constitutes a change in the structure of thought itself: it is not only an aspect of knowledge but the prerequisite of political change" (40-41).

[16] Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 31. See also, Neil Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*," in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*," ed. Neil Corcoran, (Bridgend, Ireland: Seren, 1992): 213-33.

The shifting nature of urban space and its relationship to surveillance in Troubles-era Belfast is one of the most commented-upon themes in the scholarship on Carson's poetry. Within this interpretive framework, William's postal route provides an intimate knowledge of Belfast that would be elided in any attempt to fix the city in a cartographic representation. This approach to navigating the city is then, in turn, passed down to the younger Carson and becomes part of his cartographic poetics. Hearkening back to Carson's translational definition of poetry, however, it is clear that it is not just the act of navigating the city on foot—carrying something from one place to another—that is paramount, just as important is the "burden of meaning" that he carries. His task, as it were, is to carry lines of communication across a city torn by sectarianism and violence; this task, in turn, becomes that of the poet. In the poem "Bed-Time Story" from *Belfast Confetti*, a young version of the poet puts on his father's messenger bag before stating:

> […]. I step into the shoes again, and
> walk. I will deliver
> Letters, cards, important gifts. […]

This is an account of a past action ostensibly from the poet's childhood and, as such, the reader would be justified in reading the future tense ("I will deliver…") as youthful reverie. This anecdote, though, is framed such that the future dreams of the child become the actions of the child-grown-into-poet and thus it becomes an account of actions already taken. Or, with a tinge of the ritualistic (Carson imparts a sense of reverence to his act of putting on his father's shoes), this scene transforms into a pledge or a poetic manifesto. Similar imagery reappears in the poem "Z" from the later collection *Opera et Cetera* (1996):

> The canvas sack on my back reminds me I am in the
> archaic footprints
> Of my postman father. I criss and cross the zig-zag
> precedents.
>
> […]

> In the morning you will open up the envelope. You
> will get whatever
> Message is inside. It is for all time. Its postmark
> is 'The Twelfth of Never'.[17]

Carson imbues this recurring scene with a sense of gravitas and thereby firmly moves the imagery of postal delivery into a metaphor for his notion of the poet's task. The message that the poet delivers is marked with the idiomatic phrase "The Twelfth of Never." This idiom can have either positive connotations, as in something that will last until the Twelfth of Never (i.e. exist eternally), or negative connotations, as in something that will never occur since it takes place on the Twelfth of Never. The postmark, however, is an enigma insofar as it implies both senses. The message "is for all time," but it also originates from a moment that is never supposed to exist. It is thus an eruption in chronology; it is from a date that will never come to pass and yet it has already occurred since the envelope bears its mark. Carson explicitly connects this idiom—"The Twelfth of Never"—to ideas of utopia in the collection that bears it as its title, and which I analyze below. While he is circumspect about utopian promises and the totalizing violence they often entail, I suggest that Carson engages with utopia as a political horizon from which to critique the present.[18] The horizon is always there but unobtainable since it forever recedes as one attempts to reach it. This state of being is the same as that of the postmark from "The Twelfth of Never." It is "for all time" and from beyond time, something that will never come to pass and that, paradoxically, has already been realized, beckoning from the distance. Carson's poet, therefore, is tasked with bringing a message from a liminal and enigmatic space that implicitly critiques the state of present reality.

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[17] Ciaran Carson, *Opera et Cetera* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1996), 36.

[18] I have in mind Julia Kristeva's statement in the opening to her *La revolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1974), 14. "…les questions que nous nous poserons sur la pratique littéraire viseront l'horizon politique don't celle-ci est inseparable, quels que soient les efforts de l'ésotérisme esthétisant ou les refoulements de la dogmatique sociologiste ou formaliste pour les tenir écartés."

Starting from the "postal franking" scene in *Belfast Confetti*, I argue that Carson engages in *poetic franking* in a pair of collections published in 1998, *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never*. Both of these collections are comprised of poems written in the French alexandrine sonnet form. In the former case they are Carson's English translations of French symbolist poetry (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud) and in the latter case they are original poems composed in English. Remarkably, Carson imposes on himself the difficult task of maintaining the constraints of rhyme and meter required by this French form in his English translations/compositions. Just as his father imprints the form of a foreign symbol on the mail, Carson stamps his poems with a foreign poetic form. Just like his father's action, it is both ludic and subtly political. Moreover, as a coded element that does not coincide easily with the standard code, be that postal or poetic, it is disruptive. In the second epigraph to this chapter, Charles Baudelaire claims that the role of the poet is to "translate" or "decode" a world that is shrouded in "hieroglyphics" or symbols. While Carson would agree that the poet and translator share a similar role, he would invert the direction of Baudelaire's logic. The poet's responsibility is to encode the world; or, rather, the poet disrupts the function of the standard codes in which people operate by altering certain elements of it that then demand decoding. The result is that the reader stumbles over the cipher and, in the following pause, they are prompted to re-evaluate the functioning of the standard code.[19] In the case of Carson's poetic franking, the cipher that he interjects is a date as much as it is the alexandrine poetic form. That date is 1798, which signifies the rebellion in Ireland that unfolded during the summer of that year under the leadership of the

[19] My use of the term "cipher" is intended to echo Theodor W. Adorno's use of that term. See Susan Buck-Morss's clarification of this term in Adorno's thought: "The phenomenal 'elements' presented themselves in the 'riddle-figures of that which exists' as components of the concrete particulars. Adorno referred to them as 'codes' or 'ciphers' (*Chiffren*) of social reality, which contained the bourgeois social and psychological structure in monological abbreviation but which needed philosophical interpretation so that their perplexing, given form could be 'deciphered' (*dechiffriert*)," *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 97.

United Irishmen, and that included the arrival of a French fleet in County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland bearing military aid to the rebels. Just as a postmark indicates the date and place from which a letter is posted, Carson suggests he carries a message from 1798 relevant to the political turning point of 1998.

I pursue this argument of poetic franking by first positioning Carson's two volumes within the context of the vital subset of Irish literature on the 1798 Irish Rebellion. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Irish writers constructed ballads, plays, poems, and novels on the theme of the Rebellion. Prior to the 1916 Easter Rising, these works were often linked to a narrative of prolonged struggle for national independence. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, 1798-themed literature emerged prominently from Northern Ireland and was used as a means to reflect on the violence of the Troubles. Carson's *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never*, I maintain, belong to this tradition and comment upon it in ways both subtle and overt. 1998, then, becomes Ciaran Carson's "Year of the French" in a way that subverts the traditional meaning ascribed to the events encompassed by that name. From there I move to Carson's practice of translation and its implementation in *The Alexandrine Plan*, reading it in conjunction with theoretical interventions by Walter Benjamin and Tejaswini Niranjana. In particular, I focus on his translations of sonnets by Rimbaud due to his continual interest in the poet and the explicit nature of the poems as historically situated. I demonstrate how the strictures of the alexandrine form allow for, if not compel, politically subversive renderings. These versions maintain the spirit of the radical politics of the originals and suggest Rimbaud's messages from the past have significant bearing on the present moment. Finally, I turn to the 1798 poems in *The Twelfth of Never* in which Carson explicitly plays with and undermines a traditionally reverent narrative of the historical role of the 1798 Irish Rebellion in order to

suggest alternatives possibilities at the hinge moment of 1998, the bicentennial of the Rebellion and the year of devolution. As such, through his poetic franking, Carson poetically reveals a "present-as-revolutionary-possibility."

In an interview from 2000, Carson connects the significance of this message from "the Year of the French," the local epithet in the west of Ireland for the 1798 Rebellion, with that of the French Symbolist poets. "It struck me that their negotiations with the idea of a republic, with freedom, whether it be of language or morals, with drugs, were directly related to ourselves, now," he writes, before concluding that, "I thought of these very French poets as being very Irish."[20] The idea of a republic is a spectral presence over *The Alexandrine Plan*. Adorning the cover of The Gallery Press edition of the book is Claude Monet's painting *La rue Montorgueil à Paris, Fête du 30 juin 1878.* A canvas of vibrantly shimmering blue, white, and red, the painting depicts the street exploding with the Tricolour, the flag of the French Republic, unfurled from the windows looking onto Montorgueil. The celebration on 30 June was for "the republic's definitive triumph" over the *crise du seize mai*, President Patrice MacMahon's attempted legislative coup in 1877. Paired with this painting is the *Rue Saint-Denis, fête du 30 juin*, similar in design to the Montorgueil painting but for "Vive la Rep[ublique]" scrawled in gold on a Tricolour in the foreground. The spectral presence of this phrase haunts the other painting and, subsequently, *The Alexandrine Plan*. In the shifting political tides of post-Good-Friday-Agreement Northern Ireland, Carson thus returns to prior moments of radical possibility. One such revolutionary hinge moment is the 1798 Irish Rebellion, which encapsulates the possibility of two political paths: had the rebellion been successful, Ireland could have become an

[20] Ciaran Carson and John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland: Salmon Publishing, 2002). For a slightly different answer given by Carson to the question of what inspired his translations of French Symbolist poetry see, Carson and Kennedy-Andrews, "Introduction: For all I know," 21.

independent republic instead of being formally united with Great Britain in 1801, the actual result, with the rebellion's collapse and defeat. Carson connects this moment to other revolutionary hinge moments in *The Alexandrine Plan*, such as the 1848 Revolution in France, the beginning of the French Third Republic in 1870, and the Paris Commune of 1871. At one point Carson considered giving the collection a more martial sounding title, but even though he did not choose this title the alexandrine poetic form can still be read as "invading" the English language through Carson's deft poetic craft. Similarly, in *The Twelfth of Never*, a collection which retains the use of the alexandrine form, he reevaluates this earlier event in Irish history by engaging with its many appearances within the Irish ballad tradition and he explicitly places it in conjunction with its bicentennial year in two contiguous poems titled "1798" and "1998."

A certain strand of poetry criticism seeks to position poetry as essentially ahistorical and thus apolitical. Poetry occupies an aesthetic realm, so the argument goes, that is independent from the historical realm. In the case of highly aesthetic and opaque poetry, such as that of Medbh McGuckian, this argument is more easily made; others criticize McGuckian's poetic opacity as a dereliction of the poet's duty to respond to politics. But, in her poem "Drawing Ballerinas," McGuckian responds to critics of both varieties by titling the poem after a statement from Henri Matisse (included as a note at the bottom of the poem): "The French painter, Matisse, when asked how he managed to survive World War II artistically, replied that he spent the worst years 'drawing ballerinas.'"[21] The implication of McGuckian's reference to this statement is that all poems, especially those that appear on the surface to be apolitical, bear the trace of history and politics to the extent that they are produced within an historico-political context and shaped by it. But, what of those poets, like Carson, who explicitly reference this historico-political context in the form of dates? In the Irish context, for example, Nicholas Grene describes dates as

[21] Medbh McGuckian, *The Soldiers of Year II* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2002), 94-95.

"moveable markers" used by W. B. Yeats to different effects within the "poetic code."[22] Jacques Derrida, discussing the poetry of the German poet Paul Celan, makes a number of striking observations about poetic dates in his essay "Shibboleth," dedicated to the poet. The essay encompasses a range of topics—circumcision, shibboleths (or passwords), idioms, proper names, gifts, signatures, ciphers, dates, and constellations—through which he weaves a web of connections while performing compelling readings of several of Celan's poems and prose texts.[23] Of particular note for the purpose of this chapter is his insistence on the intrinsic relationship between dates and letters. [24] There is a postal quality, therefore, to the date and the poem in which it appears. "The date (signature, moment, place, gathering of singular marks) always operates as a *shibboleth*," Derrida contends, before further clarifying,

> "It shows that there is something not shown, that there is ciphered singularity: irreducible to any concept, to any knowledge, even to a history or tradition, be it of a religious kind. A ciphered singularity that gathers a multiplicity *in eins*, and through whose grid a poem remains readable—thus giving multiplicity to be read."[25]

A date, Derrida suggests, is always a singular or unique event and, thus, "unrepeatable."[26] And yet, a singular event is marked with "coded signs" (viz. the code of a calendar) such that it allows for the possibility of commemoration and a return to this singular moment on its anniversary.[27] As such, Derrida describes the date as a "ciphered singularity." Only because it is ciphered can the irreducible singularity of the event be read, that is, de-ciphered. [28] A calendrically coded date,

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[22] Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8. "Dates for Yeats were not matters of record but movable markers to be included or withheld, rendered accurately or falsified, depending on the literary purpose in hand."
[23] The poems: "Shibboleth" "In eins" ; the prose: "Meridian" "Bremen…"
[24] "…a date is never without a letter to be deciphered," writes Derrida, somewhat elliptically.
[25] Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," tr. by Joshua Wilner and rev. by Thomas Dutoit, in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 33.
[26] Derrida, "Shibboleth," 2 and *passim*.
[27] Derrida, "Shibboleth," 18.
[28] Derrida, "Shibboleth," 19.

however, can be read as indexing multiple events: the public commemoration of the start of the Easter Rising on Easter Monday, for example, coincides with the annual religious commemoration and celebration of the events of Easter Week and, possibly, a private celebration of someone born on 24 April (the date on which Easter Monday fell in 1916).[29] This is what Derrida means when he describes the "ciphered singularity" as "gather[ing] a multiplicity" in one [*in eins*]; the date is singular and multiple at one and the same time. Because it has multiple points of reference (or access), the ciphered poem is open in its address so that its many addressees can read it. It may be sent under the banner of a private address, but its message quickly circulates publicly.

The gathered multiplicity under one ciphered date, however, can also be described as a *constellation*. Derrida, in fact, makes this connection when he describes a constellation in the vocabulary employed throughout his essay: "several heterogeneous singularities are consigned in the starry configuration of a single, dated mark."[30] In the case of Carson's poetic franking in *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never*, he figures 1998 as a constellation: the year contains both the bicentennial celebration of the 1798 Irish Rebellion and the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement. Derrida's use of "constellation" certainly refers to Walter Benjamin for whom the concept of the "constellation" proved so highly significant. Benjamin, however, offers a more robust indication of the radical possibilities of the constellation-as-method than does Derrida. In his later work, Benjamin posits historical materialism as a counter-method of interpreting history

[29] Derrida, "Shibboleth," 10. "Several singular events may be conjoined, allied, *concentrated* in the same date, which therefore becomes both the same and an other, wholly other as the same, capable of speaking to the other of the other, to the one who cannot decipher such an absolutely closed date, a tomb, closed over the event that it marks. Celan calls this gathered multiplicity by a strong and charged name: *concentration*."
[30] Derrida, "Shibboleth," 35.

to that of traditional historicism.[31] Historicism, according to Benjamin, relies on a linear theory of progress that imposes an image of history as a continuum of causality and that thus views the present as "given."[32] Historical materialism, however, "blasts the epoch out of the reified 'continuity of history'" by constellating the past and present together in a flash of "revolutionary explosive potential."[33] The present is no longer causally determined as "given" but appears instead as "revolutionary possibility," undetermined and open to radical change.[34] Whereas Derrida views the constellated heterogeneous fragments as collected under a single ciphered date, Benjamin is more explicit in articulating that the constellation positions the past in relation to the present in order to reveal the fractures in the latter through which revolutionary hope enters. Just as the date of posting appears on the letter in the stamped postmark, Carson's poetic franking allows him to bring past dates into conjunction with the present. The introduction of these past dates, in a manner akin to Benjamin's constellation, disrupts the present by revealing its contradictions and the possibilities for change.

ii. The 1798 Rebellion in Irish literature:

In the lead-up to the centenary celebration of the 1798 Irish Rebellion, members of the planning committee asked the playwright George Bernard Shaw if he would join them in organizing the commemorative events. He responded on a postcard that he did not have "the slightest interest" in participating in the centennial festivities and that, "Until Irishmen apply

[31] The works I have in mind are *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*) and "On the Concept of History" (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*). In terms of the latter work, see theses XVII and XVIII(a), in particular, for Benjamin's explicit discussion of the "constellation."
[32] Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (I)," *New Left Review* I.128 (July-August 1981), 59-60.
[33] Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 53; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474. It is designated [N9a, 6]
[34] Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (I)," 59-60

themselves seriously to what the condition of Ireland is to be in 1998 they will get very little patriotism out of yours sincerely GBS."[35] Shaw's impulse to turn his attention away from the past and towards the possibilities of the future is laudable. The difficulty, however, is that 1798 has never been entirely in the past. As the historian Kevin Whelan notes, "It is precisely because of its enduring relevance that 1798 has never passed out of politics and into history."[36] While one can question whether such a neat distinction between politics and history exists, it is clear that Whelan implies that the struggles and concerns that motivated the 1798 Rebellion are immediately contemporary and not distantly concluded. The effects of the armed conflict are still being felt and the narratives that arose from it provide symbolic weight and an interpretive framework to events that unfolded between then and the present moment. 1798 thus occupies a prominent role in the national imaginary and finds expression in cultural and literary artifacts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among this output are a significant number of works from Northern Ireland during a period that coincides with that of The Troubles. Seamus Heaney wrote a number of poems that deal with 1798, most notably "Requiem for the Croppies," which was written in 1966 for the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising.[37] Heaney's works are joined by other 1798-concerned poetry such as Tom Paulin's *Liberty Tree* (1983), Medbh McGuckian's *Shelmalier* (1998), and Carson's two collections. There are also such noteworthy dramatic works as Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (1984), and Gary Mitchell's *Tearing the Loom* (1998). Critics have begun to examine the

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[35] R. F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 212-13.

[36] Kevin Whelan, "Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion in County Wexford," in *The Mighty Wave: The 1798 Rebellion in Wexford*, eds. Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 9. Similarly, in a review of a 1996 production of Stewart Parker's play *Northern Start*, a fictionalized account of Henry Joy McCracken's final hours before being captured by the British told through a pastiche of major Irish dramatists, Fintan O'Toole notes that Parker's stylistic choices signify that, "the events of 1798 are still being, literally, played out." Fintan O'Toole, "Social realism bites the dust" *The Irish Times*, City Edition, October 12, 1996.

[37] For a diary entry on Heaney's thoughts related to 1798, see NLI MS 49,493/142, Notebook Dated 1973-89.

significance of twentieth-century literature that deals with the 1798 Rebellion but they have focused primarily on novels (such as Eoghan Ó Tuarisc's *L'Attaque* (1962) and Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* (1979)) and drama thus far. Moreover, these studies have not been from the perspective of what 1798 means to Northern Ireland in 1998, as the year of the Good Friday Peace Agreement. In part, this focus on literary forms other than poetry stems from an underlying assumption regarding the correlation between national and narrative continuity: national history is posited as narratively continuous and, therefore, the analysis of the mechanics of narrative can extend to the history of the nation.[38] Lyric poetry's perceived status as semi-autonomous and formally distinct, however, means that it can disrupt such continuity. As such, I contend that the potential for discontinuity inherent to lyric poetry makes it an ideal resource for reimagining the possibilities of political community and the forms it takes outside of the traditional framework of the nation state. If lyric poetry stands in a position to provide alternative modes of political community, then those collections published in 1998 by Ciaran Carson (and Medbh McGuckian) implicitly reflect on a liminal space as the community conceives of the forms it will take in a "post-Troubles" era.

Because the rebellion was intimately tied to the counties in the Northeast of Ireland it is easy to imagine the fascination that 1798 holds for contemporary Northern Irish writers. After all, the province of Ulster in the late eighteenth century, notes one critic, was a "hotbed of revolutionary activity."[39] In 1791 members of Belfast's Scottish Presbyterian merchant class formed the United Irishmen, the organization at the vanguard of Irish revolutionary politics and the eventual source of the Rebellion's leadership. Their Belfast-based radical newspaper, *The*

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[38] For an example of this argument see, Radvan Markus, *Echoes of the Rebellion: The Year 1798 in Twentieth-Century Irish Fiction and Drama* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2015), passim. It is the only monograph to date that exclusively explores modern and contemporary literature with the 1798 Irish Rebellion as its theme.
[39] Guy Beiner, "Disremembering 1798? An Archaeology of Social Forgetting and Remembrance in Ulster," *History and Memory* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 2013), 12.

Northern Star, was seen as the Society's "principle organ" aiding the spread of northern-born radicalism throughout Ireland. Although government forces largely suppressed the growing radicalism in 1797 during the "dragooning of Ulster," remaining rebel forces rose in the northern Counties of Antrim and Down under the leadership of Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, and Henry Munro during the summer months of 1798.[40] It is not simply a matter of local pride in the region's radical history, however, that sparked such an outburst of literary works focused on the rebellion. Rather, these northern writers engage with violent sectarianism by interrogating its roots in the past. That is, the Troubles are an extension of ideological categories that began to coalesce at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The rebellion, after all, provided the pretext for the formal union of Ireland with Great Britain (legislatively achieved by the Acts of Union 1800) and the persistence of this status for Northern Ireland after the 26 southern counties of Ireland gained its freedom from Great Britain was the major source of conflict between the Republican and Loyalist communities. Furthermore, the latter-half of the 1790s saw the emergence and hardening of sectarian divisions that would be mobilized during the Troubles. If 1795 witnessed the gathering of Theobold Wolf Tone and other leaders of the United Irishmen on Cave Hill where they swore an oath to never relent until achieving Ireland's independence from England, it also witnessed the birth of the Protestant Orange Order as an explicit counterpoint to northern radicalism. Whereas the United Irishmen would eventually be largely co-opted into the narrative of Irish Nationalism, the Orange Order became the primary vehicle of Protestant Loyalism in the North.[41] By engaging with 1798, therefore, contemporary Northern poets are able to interrogate the political crisis of the Troubles by exploring its roots in

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[40] I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202.

[41] It should be noted that the United Irishmen, the leadership of which was made up of predominantly Scottish Presbyterians of the merchant class, have also been interpreted as representing a strain of Protestantism that would not be synonymous with Loyalism.

the past. Moreover, through 1798, they access a moment of unrealized potential since, in the words of Wolf Tone, the aim of the United Irishmen's project was to "substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter."[42] By referring back to this fundamental aim, the possibility that 1798 represents for a number of the poets under consideration is that of solidarity across sectarian lines in place of division and animosity.

This current of possibility reappears prominently several decades later in and around 1998. The coincidence of the bicentennial year of the 1798 Irish Rebellion with the passage of the Good Friday Peace Agreement renders the missed opportunities of the former event all the more poignant; the radical potential of the past reappears as the tentative possibility for a peaceful renewal of Northern Irish society. In her prefatory note to *Shelmalier*, Medbh McGuckian speaks to this coincidence: "I found that what I had written in the form of epitaph and commemoration or address for the present-day disturbances in the North, fitted like an egg into its shell that previous whirlwind moment when, unbelievably, hope and history did in fact rhyme."[43] McGuckian treats the state of the "present-day disturbances" with circumspection, but she notes that the content of the present moment fits into the form of the past. This is a moment of birth, as suggested by her choice of simile, and it hints at the particular anxious hope that attends such moments. The epigraph to the collection, on the page opposite McGuckian's statement, likewise focuses on the advent of a longed-for future. James Hope, a leading member

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[42] Beiner, "Disremembering 1798?" 13.

[43] Medbh McGuckian, *Shelmalier*, (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1998), 13. McGuckian echoes lines from Heaney's *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 77:

> History says, Don't hope
> On this side of the grave,
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up
> And hope and history rhyme.

of the United Irishmen who evaded capture after the failure of 1798 and continued to organize for national independence and the rights of the working class, invokes the "sound of moral force which," he claims, "will be heard like the sound of the cuckoo." That is, the egg that is laid in the present will hatch at a future date, "and the song will return with the season."[44] Carson discusses this idea of a return or renewal in his review of *Shelmalier*. "If McGuckian has a political stance, it is in her askance language, which undermines the syntax of received ideas," he writes before concluding that, "by her own deliberate estrangement from the language, she continually renews its possibilities."[45] Following Carson's logic, the renewal of linguistic possibilities subtly leads back to a renewal of political possibilities. By "undermin[ing] the syntax of received ideas," the poet is, in effect, critically opening a space in which those ideas can be rearticulated into a new shape. While Carson is describing McGuckian's aesthetic, clearly, that the same description could be applied to Carson's poetry in the same period, if not *in toto*.

I provide the forgoing background on the 1798 Irish Rebellion in order to frame the literary and political context of Carson's *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never*. In both collections, I suggest, Carson "undermines the syntax" of the traditional narrative of 1798 and, by constellating 1798 with 1998, taps into it as a source of radical poetic and political possibility. Of the two collections, *The Twelfth of Never* is the one Carson most clearly connects to 1798. He does this by *franking* his poems with titles that reference the events of that year and its commemoration within the ballad tradition that followed, such as "1798," "The Year of the French," "The Wind that Shakes the Barley," and "The Rising of the Moon." *The Alexandrine Plan*, however, is less overtly linked to 1798 since its initial context is nineteenth-century French

[44] McGuckian, *Shelmalier*, 12.
[45] Ciaran Carson, "This Great Estrangement," review of *Shelmalier*, by Medbh McGuckian, *Verse* 16.2 (Spring 1999), 31.

symbolist poetry. While there is no explicit 1798 reference, I maintain that it can and should still be read within this context. The specter of 1798 lurks throughout the collection in its year of publication (1998), its French connection, and the alexandrine form that runs throughout both collections and establishes a dialogue between them. As such, Carson franks his poems with the alexandrine and, through this act, firmly ties poetic franking to the act of translation. It remains to be seen how Carson employs a ludic and subversive practice of translation in *The Alexandrine Plan* and how this leads into the more overt politics of *The Twelfth of Never*.

iii. Ciaran Carson Translating Rimbaud

Since the publication of *The Alexandrine Plan* in 1998, translation has taken on an increasingly large role in Carson's poetic practice.[46] Following the appearance of this volume, he published translations of Dante's *Inferno*, the ancient Irish epic poem *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Brian Merriman's Irish-language long-poem *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), the French poems of Jean Follain, and Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. The practice of translation, however, has regularly found its way into the collections he published prior to 1998. For example, *Belfast Confetti* (1998) contains Carson's versions of Japanese haiku; *First Language* (1994) opens with an original poem written in Irish to which Carson gives the title "*La-Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi*," thereby foregrounding the question of translation, before going on to versions of poems by Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Ovid, among his original poems; and, finally, *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) includes

[46] Critics of Carson's work, thus far, tend to shy away from a sustained engagement with translation theory as an interpretive frame through which to read his *oeuvre*, opting instead to focus their attention on the themes of space, mapping, and surveillance that are prevalent throughout his poetry. Those who have given critical attention to Carson's use of translation generally fall into two camps. On the one hand, there are those like Neal Alexander who see translation within the terms of "ambilocation" or "between-ness" and thus subordinate it to larger spatial concerns. Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 176-77. On the other hand, there are others like John Goodby who view Carson's work as motivated by the notion of "translation as ontological condition." John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness Into History* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2000), 295.

versions of poems by the Romanian poet Ştefan Augustin Doinaş among those based on Latin epigrams and a series of poems employing the International Radiotelephony Spelling Alphabet. Such ubiquity of translation in his work coincides with Carson's belief in the integral relationship between poetry and translation, and the influence of his father. But, in *The Alexandrine Plan* translation is not just a common denominator to his poetry, rather Carson uses translation as a poetic strategy to subversive effect.

In the introduction to his translations of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Carson indexes the moment in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Task of the Translator" when he states that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of language."[47] Or, as Carson glosses it, "one's 'own' language begins to seem another."[48] Benjamin emphasizes that it is not the translator's task to transmit information from one language to the other, but to locate the "intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original."[49] It is this echo that unsettles the domestic language (that language into which the translator is translating) and renders it foreign. Translation theorists who have come after Benjamin and are influenced by his work—Antoine Berman, Paul Ricœur, Jacques Derrida, Lawrence Venuti, and Tejaswini Niranjana—reveal the ethical and political significance of "foreignizing" translations, an undercurrent that runs subtly through Benjamin's original essay. A translation that domesticates the foreign language, in effect, exerts its power over the foreign language by occluding and neutralizing its difference; such erasure reinforces the dominant ideology and the binding together of language and political

[47] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hanna Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 75.
[48] Ciaran Carson, *In The Light Of* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2012), 13. He goes on to connect this idea to Rimbaud's famous, grammatically confusing statement, "*Je est un autre*" ["I is another"] from the *lettre du voyant*.
[49] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 76.

power. By making space for the foreign language to enter the domestic language while retaining its foreignness, the translator introduces a disruptive element that reveals the connection between language and power *and* reveals the fissures or sites of contradiction within this relationship.[50] According to Benjamin, this result is achieved by focusing on the word instead of on the smooth intelligibility of the sentence.[51] If a writer subordinates the individual words that comprise a sentence to its broader meaning, his argument goes, then a focus on the unique words in the process of translation dislocate them from that meaning and disrupts the process of subordination—of both a linguistic and inherently political variety.

Carson's translations of French symbolist poetry, I suggest, are intentionally "foreignizing" in the Benjaminian sense of the word.[52] By maintaining the meter and rhyme-scheme of the French alexandrine—a line of 12 syllables divided evenly into two hemistichs of 6 syllables and collected in pairs of lines alternating between *rimes masculines* and *rimes féminines*—Carson takes the strict rules of French syllabic verse and compels English accentual verse to abide by them while achieving rhymes that are far easier to create in French.[53] Due to the differences in the two languages, these rules are at odds with the natural rhythms and rhyming possibilities in English. Carson, thus, pushes English up to a certain breaking point and creates the conditions for otherness to enter through the fractures of the target language. A

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[50] For example, Venuti describes achieving a "foreignizing" translation by "disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language" (*The Translator's Invisibility*, 20). In *The Scandals of Translation: Toward an Ethics of Difference*, Venuti cites Jean-Jacques Lecercle's notion of the "remainder" in a discussion of the effects of a "foreignizing" translation on the target language: "The linguistic variations released by the remainder do not merely exceed any communicative act, but frustrate any effort to formulate systematic rules. The remainder subverts the major form by revealing it to be socially and historically situated, by staging 'the return within language of the contradictions and struggles that make up the social' and by containing as well 'the anticipation of future ones' … Good translation is minoritizing: it releases the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves…" (10-11). For more on Lecercle's theory of the linguistic remainder, see *The Violence of Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[51] Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," 79.

[52] Walter Benjamin, in fact, appears to be a major influence on Carson.

[53] Attridge, Derek, "Dryden's Dilemma, or, Racine Refashioned: The Problem of the English Dramatic Couplet," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 9 (1979), 62-63. See also Peureux, Guillaume Pereux's article on the "Alexandrine" in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed.

foreignizing translation is achieved by recourse to a foreign poetic form. But this form contains its own history, which Carson indexes when he engages with the French Symbolists treatment of the alexandrine. Rimbaud, for example, rebelled against the strictures of the form and quickly moved from "loosening" its rules in his poetry to a complete "dislocation."[54] Metonymically identifying the alexandrine form with the prevailing social and political form of his day, Rimbaud's subversion of poetic form is part of a broader subversion of the dominant conservative politics in favor of radically leftist politics (although, the young Rimbaud would most likely be hard-pressed to systematically articulate his preferred political platform).[55] Carson, therefore, not only disrupts English verse with a challenging poetic form, he smuggles in a poet who actively subverted that form.

The critic Tejaswini Niranjana notes a substantial parallel between Benjamin's conception of the task of the translator and his conception of the constellating activity of the historical materialist. The act of "citing or quoting" in historical materialism "is akin to *literalness* in translation," she suggests.[56] Just as the translator's task of providing a "'literal rendering of the syntax' splinters the linearity and symmetry of the sentence," the historical materialist's task of citation disrupts the linearity and homogeneity of history.[57] If this correlation is correct, then Carson, in effect, constellates his present moment of 1998 with a series of different aesthetic and political revolutionary moments in his translations of Rimbaud: "The Year of the French," the subversion of the alexandrine, the beginning of the French Third Republic

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[54] This rebellion is initiated by Victor Hugo and continues with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and others. Plessen, Jacques, "The Tribulations of the Alexandrine in the Work of Rimbaud: A Contest between Innovation and Convention," *Convention and Innovation in Literature* (1991), 260-61. See also, David Evans, *Rhythm, Illusion and the Poetic Idea: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 131-161.

[55] Evans, *Rhythm, Illusion and the Poetic Idea*, 132; See also, Plessen, "The Tribulations of the Alexandrine in the Work of Rimbaud," 253 and passim; and, Robert St. Clair, "Le Désordre du val: réflexions sur la blessure de l'histoire et le temps révolutionnaire dans un sonnet de 1870," *Parade sauvage* 23 (2012), 27-28.
[56] Niranjana, *Siting History*, 155. Also see her discussion of Derrida's thinking around citation.
[57] Niranjana, *Siting History*, 119.

after the collapse of the Second Empire, and militant debate over the nature of that new republic in the event of the Paris Commune (1871).

Although Carson translates the work of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud in *The Alexandrine Plan*, I will focus only on his translations of the latter.[58] This is due in large part to Carson's longstanding interest in the poetry of Rimbaud, which is not as readily apparent for Baudelaire and Mallarmé. For example, he includes a translation of Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* ("Drunk Boat") in his collection *First Language*, he gives Rimbaud a cameo in the "Letters from the Alphabet" sequence in *Opera et cetera* (1996), and, of course, he will later translate Rimbaud's collection *Illuminations* as *In the Light Of* (2012).[59] The significance of the French poet for Carson is noted by the Northern Irish poet and critic Alan Gillis when he writes that "Carson's poetry has long been rooted in aspects of *symbolisme*, but of a kind more unhinged than Yeats's, more influenced by Rimbaud."[60] The eight sonnets Carson translates from Rimbaud's "Cahier de Douai" (also known as the "Recueil Demeny"), a collection of Rimbaud's early poetry composed between spring and fall 1870, are far more historically situated than those he chose from Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Half of them explicitly treat of the Franco-Prussian War and often invoke politically satirical portraits of the Emperor Napoléon III. These are poems that are noticeably franked with a date and a place, positioned in a historical constellation with the present of 1998. In his introduction to *In the Light Of,* Carson suggests the revolutionary potential within Rimbaud's work. "Rimbaud was avant-garde before the Avant-garde," he writes, "a surrealist before Surrealism; and, environmentalist *avant la lettre*, his critique of industrial

[58] For a good overview of *The Alexandrine Plan*, see Élisabeth Delattre, "*Traduction et recréation dans* The Alexandrine Plan *de Ciaran Carson*," *Sources: revue d'études Anglophones* 15 (2003), 152-65.
[59] Carson, *Opera et cetera*, 27.
[60] Alan Gillis, "Acoustic Perfume," in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 258.

society…is still relevant today."[61] Rimbaud is both an aesthetic innovator and trenchant social critic, in Carson's assessment; his message remains pertinent to contemporary society. Carson makes a nod to Rimbaud's critical impulse, but criticism serves to clear space for something "better" to take its place. In his letter to Paul Demeny of 15 May 1871, Rimbaud writes that "Poetry will not lend its rhythm to action [*ne rhyhtmera plus l'action*], it *will be in advance*."[62] Poetry's role, for Rimbaud, will change from representing and organizing actions after the fact to originating actions in the vanguard. It will, in effect, break from a mimetic impulse and transform the world.[63] While Carson may not believe in the transformative nature of poetry as sincerely as Rimbaud does, there is, nonetheless, a creative implication to the act of "constellation" that delineates new shapes and patterns among a collection of fragments.

Cason rearranges the selected Rimbaud poems from their original order to create a narrative around the experience of war and conflict. He opens with a poem from Rimbaud's "bohemian cycle"—*Au Cabaret-Vert*—before turning to several poems about the Franco-Prussian War—*Le Dormeur du val*, *L'Éclatante Victoire de Sarrebrück*, *Le Mal*, and *'Morts de Quatre-vingt-douze…*'—and then ending with a return to bohemianism—*Ma Bohème*, *La Maline*, and *Le Buffet* (this last technically occupies a category unto itself). Within the context of 1998, Carson's versions of Rimbaud's war poems suggest that they are in conversation with The Troubles in Northern Ireland. Such a reading is suggested by choices Carson makes in order to

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[61] Carson, *In the Light Of*, 12.

[62] Arthur Rimbaud, *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition*, Fowlie, University of Chicago Press, 378-79. Oliver Bernard translates the same line as, "Poetry will no longer take its rhythm from action; *it will be ahead of it*!" (13). Rimbaud employs a neologism *rhythmer* that is difficult to satisfactorily translate into English. Fowlie's translation lands closest to expressing the active role poetry takes in rhythm-ing action.

[63] Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 29. It is worth noting that the date of Rimbaud's letter to Demeny places it in the middle of the Paris Commune (28 March 1871 – 28 May 1871) and that the letter contains the poem "*Chant de guerre Parisien*" ("Parisian War Song"). Steve Murphy, whose work has been indispensible for my understanding of Rimbaud, has long been interested in the question of the relationship between Rimbaud and the Paris Commune. This question is explored most fully in his *Rimbaud et la Commune* (2010). On this question, also see Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2008).

find the echo in the target language of the effect Rimbaud intended in the original. The initial poem, "The Green Bar" (*Au Cabaret-Vert*), for example, positions the reader in a vaguely Irish space when Carson translates "la table / vert" ("the green table") as "the shamrock / Table." But, the presence of the French on the verso facing Carson's version prevents the translated poem from sliding fully into Irish territory by keeping it in a liminal Franco-Irish space that unsettles a definitive placement.[64] At the bottom of the French version is Rimbaud's date-stamp of the poem's composition "*Octobre* 70." Carson leaves this off his translation but it nonetheless remains part of the translated poem, echoing across the page division from verso to recto. While Rimbaud intends "1870" by this mark, his truncation of the date to "70" creates the possibility for the poem to be re-contextualized within the 1970s. Carson compounds this confusion by further signaling the latter half of the twentieth century when he writes, "I admired the tacky '50s décor," for, "*je contemplai les sujets très naïfs / De la tapisserie*."[65] He thus further suggests a contemporary reading of the poem that places it and the poems that follow in the context of the beginning of The Troubles. The reader therefore experiences the date of the poem, and those that follow, as both 1870 and 1970: a constellation of armed conflict across Ireland and France.

Dates continue to haunt the poems that follow "The Green Bar" as they shift into a more martial register. Also marked with "Octobre 70" is "Le Dormeur du val" (translated by Carson as "The Sleeper in the Valley") and "L'Éclatante Victoire de Sarrebrück" (translated as "Poster Advertising the Amazing Victory at Sarrebrück"). The former, fairly unchanged through Carson's translation, begins as a rural idyll before suddenly revealing that the sleeping soldier

[64] See the chapter "Ní Dhomhnaill along the spine" in Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152-185.
[65] Note, though, how Carson imbricates the French and Irish by including the French loanword *décor* and visibly marking it as foreign by including the acute accent of the "e."

along the riverbank reposes in the eternal sleep of death.[66] The latter poem is a far more satirical take on the Emperor Napoléon III, written as Rimbaud's description of a propagandistic print being sold for 35 cents in Charleroi, Belgium. The original poem takes the wind out of the sails of military might: the "amazing victory" for the French at Sarrebrück occurred in early August 1870 whereas Rimbaud is viewing the print in October, after the disastrous defeat of the French at the Battle of Sedan with the capture of Napoléon III and the collapse of the Second Empire. Carson retains the satirical edge of the original, although he invests the portrait of the Emperor with a sense of poignancy by describing him as "a bourgeois Thanatos" in place of "Féroce comme Zeus et doux comme un papa" to achieve the necessary rhyme. This description signals beyond a specific individual to an inherent aggressive tendency within society (per Freud's use of Thanatos in *Civilization and Its Discontents*). Carson similarly replaces the slang and technical terms contemporary to Rimbaud with others more legible to his readers at the end of the twentieth century. The use of these terms and phrases—"squaddies," "red poppy field guns," "Up the Huns!"—allows Carson to bring the poem's message to a modern audience but they also place the First World War within the poem's web of references. The reader, however, would be mistaken if they assumed Carson intended merely to update Rimbaud's poem by transposing it into a parallel context. Unsettling any attempts to securely locate the temporal context of the poem, Carson rewrites the third stanza of the poem to include a reference to the Napoleonic Wars (particularly the Anglo-Spanish War, 1796-1802 and 1804-1808) from a soldier who jokingly "rules Brittania" and "demands that all Hispania / Be Napoleonized." Carson, thus, constellates the original reference to the Franco-Prussian War with key military conflicts from the point of view of the United Kingdom.

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[66] For an excellent discussion of "Le Dormeur du val" see, Robert St. Clair, "Le Désordre du val: réflexions sur la blessure de l'histoire et le temps révolutionnaire dans un sonnet de 1870," *Parade sauvage* 23 (2012), 25-45.

The relationship between *The Alexandrine Plan* and the 1798 Irish Rebellion, as mentioned above, is quietly suggested by the epithet given to the latter, "The Year of the French." In "Sarrebrück," Carson extends his poetic vision back to the final years of the eighteenth century and the initial years of the nineteenth. This backwards gaze continues, in a fashion, in "1870," Carson's translation of "'Morts de Quatra-vingt-douze….", a poem which refers to the French Revolution. The poem, a powerful statement of Rimbaud's radical republicanism, significantly engages with the questions of political legitimacy, filiation, and the uses of national memory; these questions are all pertinent to Ireland and the bicentennial celebration of 1798. The original poem responds to an article by Paul de Cassagnac, the Bonapartist editor of the conservative journal *Le Pays*, who urged political unity among the various factions across the French political spectrum on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War by invoking the memory of those who had fought and died for the newly formed French Republic at the end of the previous century.[67] This context is marked by Rimbaud's inclusion of a quote from Cassagnac's article as an epigraph to the poem: "…Frenchmen of '70! Bonapartists! Republicans! Remember your forefathers of '92…"[68] For Rimbaud, an ardent republican, this appeal is made in bad faith by the mouthpiece of a political party whose interests are diametrically opposed to the working class and other members of the republican left.[69] If he follows Cassagnac by invoking the dead of 1792 ("Morts de Quatre-vingt-douze") in the opening line, he also departs from Cassagnac by invoking the revolutionary violence of the Terror in 1793 ("Morts de Quatre-vingt-treize").[70] Moreover, Rimbaud's appeal to the "dead of Italy" later

[67] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Ménagerie Impériale*, 47(?). Cassagnac's article appeared on 16 July 1870, the same day on which the French government declared war against the Prussians.
[68] Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, trans. Bernard, 101. The French Revolutionary army defeated the Prussian army at the Battle of Valmy in 1792.
[69] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune*, 110, 116-118.
[70] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune*, 110; Murphy, *Rimbaude et la ménagerie impériale*, 51.

in the poem emphasizes this disjunction in the narrative, by recalling both the victories of Napoléon I's Italian Campaign and the opposition of Napoléon III to Garibaldi's Italian Republic through his support of the Pope.[71] Rimbaud disrupts the false revolutionary lineage that Cassgnac employs to defend the (un-revolutionary) Second Empire, but he does not critique this lineage in its entirety, only the ends it is made to serve. At the close of the poem, Rimbaud inscribes the place and date of composition: "Done at Mazas, 3 September 1870." Mazas Prison, "the new Bastille of the revolutionaries," held numerous republican prisoners and thereby imparts revolutionary legitimacy to the poem, even though Rimbaud was imprisoned there for failure to pay a train fair and not as a political agitator as he was happy for others to believe.[72] The avowed date of composition, moreover, places the poem in a transitional space between the fall of the Second Empire (September 2) and the birth of the Third Republic (September 4).[73]

If Rimbaud embraces a certain tradition of republican rhetoric that memorializes violence sustained and committed in defense of republican ideals, Carson inflects his translation with an ambiguity that may question the efficacy of violence and the rhetoric that would celebrate it. Extracting "Morts de Quatre-vingt-douze…" from its original context, Carson eliminates the epigraph, as well as the note regarding place and date of composition, and retitles it "1870." These elements, however, remain in the original version on the facing page, haunting the translated text.[74] Carson, in effect, establishes a critical distance from which his version can be in conversation with the original. From the opening line, he announces a marked shift in tenor. Rimbaud writes, "Morts de Quatre-vingt-douze et Quatre-vingt-treize / Qui, pâles du baiser fort de la liberté" [Dead men of '92 and '93, / Who, pale from the hard kiss of freedom]. Here the

[71] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune*, 110; Murphy, *Rimbaud et la ménagerie impériale,* 52.
[72] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la ménagerie impériale*, 55.
[73] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la ménagerie impériale*, 54; Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune*, 110.
[74] See fn. 64.

spiritual is liberated from the corporeal through the transfiguring "kiss of freedom" and what remains is the "pale[ness]" of a marble statue, a commemoration of a sacrifice. Rimbaud's act of invoking the noble dead in the opening of the poem positions them as if they were statuary upon a pedestal; they remain a single coherent unit by taking up the entirety of the top-most line and the commentary that follows supports their placement as an ideal above the mundane. Carson quietly subverts the veneration of the original by translating the line as "You dead of '92 and '93, who, pale / And silent from the pungent kiss of liberty…" This choice is necessitated, in part, by the meter and *abab* rhyme scheme of the first quatrain. But the effect is one of subversion. Because of this distribution of the rhythmic stress, the final stress falls on "pale," which receives an added emphasis from the fact that it is the only line in the first quatrain whose end differs from the original. The reader is thus prompted to dwell on the "paleness" of the "dead of '92 and '93" and to ask from whence this paleness arises. Carson's choice of "pungent" as a translation of the French "*fort*" further evokes the acrid smell of putrefaction and thereby transfigures the "paleness" of marble statuary—the idealization of the republican dead at their apotheosis—into the "paleness" of dead flesh, recalling the physical cost of armed conflict stripped of romance. [75]

Death takes on the tint of ritual sacrifice in Rimbaud's poem, complemented by the promise of resurrection. He writes at the end of the second and beginning of the third stanzas:

> Ô soldats que la Mort a semés, noble Amante
> Pour les régénérer, dans tous les vieux sillons;
>
> Vous dont le sang lavait toute grandeur salie
>
> […O soldiers whom Death, noble mistress, has sown in all the old furrows, so that they may be regenerated; you whose blood washed clean every defiled greatness…][76]

[75] While Bernard translates *fort* as "hard," another reasonable translation would be "strong." Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, tr. and ed. Oliver Bernard (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 101.
[76] Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, 101-2.

The revolutionary soldiers are "sown" by Death in the "old furrows" for their regeneration. The language of resurrection through the harvest recalls that of Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies," in which the rebel "croppies" are buried with barley seed in their coat pockets, "And in August the barley grew out of the grave."[77] The sacrifices of the past come to fruition at a future date. By addressing the dead later in the poem as "Christs with soft and somber eyes," Rimbaud underscores the Christological reading as interpreted through a revolutionary cause akin to the symbolism that the leaders of the 1916 Rebellion tapped into when they framed their campaign within the narrative of Easter week. Carson resists such a messianic teleological arc by again departing quietly and powerfully from the original, writing of "Soldiers cast by Mistress Death into the Zone / Of Furrows, to become regenerated matter." The action performed by "Death," in this case, is "casting" instead of Rimbaud's "sowing," the latter implying a sense of tender care anticipating a future yield. Carson's choice suggests a colder relationship between death and the soldiers since among the many meanings of "cast" are those of to project with force and "to throw off" or away.[78] Such coldness persists into the "matter" that Carson emphasizes at the end of the line. The spiritual element in Rimbaud's poem has been cast off, the soldiers are mere matter and their decomposition returns them to the material Earth. Under Carson's gaze, death appears not as the necessary prelude to the "imminent Republic" (a term Carson will use in *The Twelfth of Never*) but rather in its full material reality.

The skepticism with which Carson approaches an uncritical rhetoric that justifies violence achieves its strongest expression in the final stanza. The strictures of meter and rhyme compel him to engage in some of the most striking displacements of the collection. I cite first from Rimbaud and then from Carson:

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[77] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 23.
[78] OED, *cast* (v.), I.1.a & III. "Cast" can also refer figuratively to the casting of seed (1a) or to the casting of a vote (1f).

> Nous vous laissions dormir avec la République,
> Nous, courbés sous les rois comme sous une trique.
> — Messieurs de Cassagnac nous reparlent de vous!
>
> We were about to leave you in your obsolete
> Republic, we who are downtrodden by the feet
> Of kings. — O men of the Republic, we need you![79]

"République" stands out in sharp relief in the original, capping the opening line of the final stanza with its majuscule. Not only does the thematic focus hone in on "Republic," the first and only time the word is used in the poem save for the epigraph, the repetition of "Nous" [we] intensifies the link between the present generation and the return of the Republic. Repeating the move with which he opens the poem, Carson allows the meter and rhyme to nudge the words that would traditionally take an emphasis from their place at the end of the line to the beginning of the next. Thus "Republic" appears at the beginning of the second line and the emphasis falls instead on "obsolete," a word that does not appear in the original and that creates an unsettling tension as the slight pause that attends the line break disrupts the connection between the adjective and its object. Carson implies that the "obsolete / Republic" not only no longer exists, but no longer has a use; it has been passed over and improved upon. Similarly, the "kings" are moved from their original position in the second line, where they receive the immovable stress that falls on the word preceding the caesura, to the beginning of the third line and Carson chooses to rhyme "obsolete" with "feet," thereby switching the tool of the kings' oppression from the cudgel [*trique*] they originally wielded. He demotes both republic and monarchy and calls into question any simple political reading that could be made of Rimbaud's poem.

The strength of the poem lies in Carson's ambivalence between skepticism and hope. His poetic subversion extends beyond revealing the violence within the rhetoric of republicanism and

[79] Carson, *Alexandrine Plan*, 20-21. Bernard translates this stanza as, "we were leaving you to sleep alongside the Republic; we, cowering under monarchs as if under cudgels.—Messrs de Cassagnac are talking to us about you again!" (Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, 102).

other political causes to target all conventional poetic and political structures. The "feet" of the kings that tread upon the people suggests, purposefully or not, the poetic foot as the foundation of the poem and the strictures of a poetic tradition that determines that form. If iambic pentameter is the quintessentially "English" organization of those poetic feet, then Carson begins to undermine its power by extending the line from pentameter to hexameter and by starting six of the fourteen lines with a trochee instead of an iamb.[80] Strikingly, the first instance of the use of a trochaic foot to open a line in the poem occurs with the word "Broke" ("Broke with your wooden clogs the yoke which countervailed…"). If Carson achieves this destabilization, it is in order to open up a space for "newness to enter the world," an idea he alludes to in the two tercets that close the sonnet.[81] Departing ever so slightly from the original final line of the first tercet—"Ô million de Christs aux yeux sombres et doux"—which he translates as, "O million sombre Christs whose eyes dreamed of the new." He makes the end of the English line, "new" (/n(j)u/), rhyme with the French, "doux" (/du/), but this rhyme inflects the translated line with a new impetus. Rimbaud's Christ figures possess "soft [gentle] and somber eyes" and this image coincides within the larger messianic narrative of the sacrifice and resurrection. Carson, though, shifts the emphasis from sacrifice to the fact that they "dreamed of the new," for to dream of the new is to break with both past and present and to imagine a better world. Rimbaud's acerbic wit reveals in the final line of the poem the hypocrisy of the self-serving bonapartist Messieurs de Cassagnac appealing to the radical republicans in their hour of need, and he places the blame of disturbing the rest of the noble dead at their feet and the regime they represent.[82] Erasing the reference to the Cassagnacs, however, Carson ends by writing, "O men of the Republic, we need

[80] Michael Longley pursues a similar strategy in the poem "Ceasefire," but for the purpose of evoking Greek epic literature instead of the alexandrine.
[81] I borrow the phrase from Homi Bhabha's essay "How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 303-337.
[82] Murphy, *Menagerie*, 48-49.

you!" He constructs an entirely different final line but one that articulates a central idea of the poem. Significantly, the rhyme that links the final lines of both tercets brings into conjunction "you" and "new." What the present generation requires is those who dream of the new direction that history can take. In 1998, it does not serve the people of Northern Ireland to uncritically remember the standard narratives of 1798, which would perpetuate the animosities that gave rise to the Troubles. Instead, it is better to remember the dream of the new and to dream it again at a liminal moment.

The dream of the new and the search for it subtly occupies the lyric figure of "On the Road" ["Ma Bohème"], the poem that follows "1870."[83] Rimbaud originally categorizes the poem as a fantasy in a parenthetical subtitle. For Rimbaud, the genre is "a way of seeing reality with the eyes of the imagination and especially to imagine how that reality could become different [*autre*]."[84] The lyric voice is possessed by a fantastically odd figure as he wanders along the road wearing his "has-been-through-the-wars ex-Army greatcoat." This description is entirely of Carson's making, for all Rimbaud writes is that the coat had become "*ideal*" [ideal, perfect, dream-like] in the sense that it is so threadbare it has become immaterial.[85] It is a change that casts a shadow over the youthful and bohemian tone of the original poem. Carson contrasts this original tone with the suggestion that the figure of the poem has emerged from the violent conflicts of the preceding pages. In a draft copy of the poem, Carson makes a marginal note equating the poem's central figure to Christ.[86] It is as if he sees this bohemian wanderer as kin to the "million sombre Christs whose eyes dreamed of the new." Somberness, in this instance, does

[83] My work on this poem has benefited greatly from the chapter-length analyses of Rimbaud's original by both Steve Murphy and Benoît de Cornulier. See, Murphy, *Strategies de Rimbaud*, 121-35; and, Cornulier, *De la métrique à l'interprétation*, 43-60.
[84] Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune*, 139 (translation mine). For a different take on the "*faintaisie*" subtitle, see Evans, *Rhythm, Illusion and the Poetic Idea*, 149.
[85] Murphy, *Strategies de Rimbaud*, 128.
[86] See Emory University's Rose Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Ciaran Carson Papers, Manuscript Collection No. 746, Subseries 2.3, "Translations," Box 18, Folder 75.

not give way to world-weariness. Remarkably, a sincere optimism remains in the poem as the lyric "I" strikes out in new directions. As one critic of Rimbaud contends, this lyric "I" is quite similar to the subject of Charles Perrault's fairytale *Le petit Poucet* (Hop-o'-My-Thumb) who is able to find his way back home thanks to previously dropping pebbles and breadcrumbs to mark his path.[87] But Carson's Hop-o'-My-Thumb-like figure does not scatter breadcrumbs, nor does he "cast" soldiers into the furrows like Mistress Death in "1870." Instead,

> … I became a dwarf who scatters rhymes along
> The Milky Way. In the Great Bear, I sang my song,
> As huge stars shivered in the rustling universe.

The lyric "I" does not scatter isolated stars, but scatters stellar "rhymes" that possess a form much like a constellation possesses form. In Rimbaud's original, the lyric "I" claims that his "auberge" [inn] is "la Grand-Ourse" [The Great Bear—Ursa Major]; he sleeps under the stars. Concealing Rimbaud's simile, however, Carson repositions the lyric "I" *within* the constellation and imbues poetic rhythm with the power to effect the movement of the stars. These constellations are not intended to indicate the direction of a homeward journey. Although clothed in the raiment of past wars, the lyric "I" shapes the future through the constellations of new poetical forms.

Rimbaud, again using the image of constellations, will address this search for the new in the later poem "Le Bateau ivre," a poem that Carson translates as "Drunk Boat" and includes in his earlier collection *First Language*. At the end of his version, the lyric "I" exclaims:

> … I've drifted off the ancient
> parapets of Europe!
>
> Sidereal archipelagoes I saw! Island skies, who madly
> welcomed the explorer[88]

[87] Benoît de Cornulier, *De la métrique à l'interprétation: Essais sur Rimbaud* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2009), 48.
[88] Carson, *First Language*, 37.

The lyric "I" drifts away from the old and into the new. By describing the constellations as "sidereal archipelagoes" [des archipels sidéraux], the lyric "I" further highlights the role of the constellations in this search for the new. They are both navigational patterns and part of the new horizon beckoning to be explored as the "drunken boat" drifts away from continental Europe and amid island chains. Archipelagoes and constellations are both patterns constructed out of individual items. Recall Benjamin's radical use of the constellation to indicate the historical materialist's task of bringing past and present together in an "explosion of revolutionary potential." Carson, in *The Alexandrine Plan*, creates "sidereal archipelagoes" as a means of exploring the new and exploding standard historical and national narratives. By translating the poetry of French Symbolists, Carson links together previous moments that saw "negotiations over the idea of a republic" with the present of 1998 in Northern Ireland.

Recall that Andrew McNeillie, in his opening editorial to the literary journal *Archipelago*, circumvents the complex politics of naming for Britain and Ireland by describing them as "the unnamable constellation of islands on the Eastern Atlantic coast" (later shortened to "the unnamable archipelago"). The "sidereal archipelagoes" of *The Alexandrine Plan*, then, allow Carson to create the possibility for new political configurations among "the unnamable archipelago." He stamps his letters with incongruous times and places, subverting and disrupting the mechanisms of authority, while also transmitting a message to his contemporary readership that the future does not have to merely repeat the past.

iv. *The Twelfth of Never* and Carson's "The Year of the French"

The Twelfth of Never, Carson's companion volume to *The Alexandrine Plan*, contains 77 original sonnets written in the French alexandrine form. The title, as mentioned earlier, is an

idiomatic expression indicating "a future date that will never come to pass."[89] Using this idiom as the banner of his poetry collection, Carson foregrounds the deferral of Irish political utopias—those "imminent republics"—for which countless strive and, yet, which never fully come to pass. He casts a critical eye on these utopic strivings while taking seriously the hope for a better world that they articulate. If utopia literally indicates no-place (ou-topos), Carson similarly is occupied with a no-time (ou-chronos) or "never." This temporality is emphasized by the epigraph Carson places at the opening of the collection, a definition for "St Tib's Eve" as given by *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*: "Never. A Corruption of St Ubes. There is no such saint in the calendar as St Ubes, and therefore her eve falls on the 'Greek Kalends,' neither before Christmas Day nor after it."[90]The meaning is deferred through an etymology that attempts to secure a foundational meaning and, yet, continually encounters further idiomatic expressions for "never."[91] The calends, for example, is the first of the month in the Roman calendar, not the Greek one. Carson, however, does not use this reference to disavow history; he suggests that History consists of a plethora of timelines that flow into and out of each other. After all, the French Revolutionaries instituted a Revolutionary calendar in place of the traditional one, the "St Tib's Eve" definition refers to the ecclesiastical calendar, the Gregorian calendar was selected over the Julian, and folk history is what gives 1798 the moniker of "the Year of the French" in the west of Ireland (Beiner). In the first poem of the collection, "Tib's Eve," a direct continuation from the epigraph, the poet further suggests that the poems in the collection occur in a dream space and time—perhaps induced by the poppies which suffuse the collection. "Somnambulists," he writes, "we stumble through this paradise / From time to time," a land "Where everything is

[89] Julia C. Obert, *Postcolonial Overtures: The Politics of Sound in Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015) 44.
[90] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 12.
[91] For a further discussion of this epigraph, see Stan Smith, "'Cruising to the podes': Ciaran Carson's Virtual Realities," in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 118.

metaphor and simile."[92] Carson thus positions *The Twelfth of Never* as a poetic journey through a liminal dream space, which dislocates poetry from any mimetic obligation to history. This dislocation, along with that of the French alexandrine poetic form, allows him to play with the traditional narratives of Irish history—especially the nationalist narrative surrounding 1798—and, moreover, to "re-mix" Irish ballads and his own earlier published poems to critically subvert the "status quo" at a moment of political possibility.

Whereas in *The Alexandrine Plan* the connection to "the Year of the French" is fairly elliptical, the connection to the 1798 Rebellion and its bearing on Ireland in 1998 is much more explicit in *The Twelfth of Never*. This is nowhere more apparent than in the pair of poems "1798" and "1998" that appear just under halfway through the collection, and which alongside "1795" are the only poems to be franked with a specific date. From the opening line, Carson vests "1798" in classic motifs from the Irish poetic tradition, such as those found in *aisling* poems—in which Ireland is figured as a woman—or nineteenth century ballads. "I met her in the garden where the poppies grow," begins the poem. The female figure, or *spéirbhean*, has lips that are "red with Papal Spanish wine" (recalling James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen") and, as is common to the *aisling* tradition, inflames a romantic desire in the lyric "I" that is simultaneously a nationalist desire to protect Ireland from foreign invaders. This combination of the erotic and the political appears, for example, in the recollection of the lyric "I" that the *spéirbhean* "put her mouth to mine / And sucked the broken English from my Gaelic tongue."[93] Likewise, in "The Rising of the Moon"—named after the 1798 ballad and subsequent play by Lady Gregory—a mysterious woman "urges" the lyric "I" to "go out and revolutionize /

[92] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 13.
[93] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 39.

Hibernia."[94] The lyric "I" does this by joining "the People of No Property" after the woman "spread the madder red skirts of her liberty / About my head so I was disembodied."[95] Strikingly, the lyric "I" is bereft of proprietorship over their body and Carson seems to be commenting on the immateriality of symbolism; or, as the lyric "I" in "1798" puts it, "yet she and I abide, / Like emblems of a rebel song no longer song."[96] For all of their traditional elements, however, there is an uncanny quality to these poems signaled by the poppies that are present in the places where the lyric "I" meets the *spéirbhean* in both "The Rising of the Moon" and "1798." Carson notes that the lyric "I" encounters the *spéirbhean* by a "clear crystal fountain, / Where poppies, not potatoes, grew in contraband."[97] This substitution of the potato with the poppy suggests an underlying hallucinatory quality to this iconic symbol of Ireland, and the occurrence of Irish nationalist tropes adorned with poppies, in turn, calls into question a traditional nationalist appeal to the narrative of 1798 from the vantage of its bicentennial year.

Carson constellates 1798 with 1998 by immediately following the poem bearing the former date as title with that which takes the latter date as title. The bicentennial year literally and figuratively appears as a hinge moment since the reader must "turn the page" on "1798" to arrive at "1998." In the enigmatic latter poem, Carson replaces the *spéirbhean* with "the President," possibly a reference to Mary McAleese elected to the Irish Presidency in 1997 and who explicitly sought to "build bridges" between Ireland and Britain on the issue of Northern Ireland. The poem is constructed around an uncanny version of the Christian Eucharist—many criticized McAleese for taking communion in the Anglican Cathedral of Dublin in 1997. Stepping onto the Montgolfier balloon—the first hot-air balloon invented by the French

[94] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 19.
[95] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 19.
[96] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 39.
[97] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 19.

Montgolfier brothers—the President is "borne high / Above the madding crowd."[98] And, although "she showers them with beads / Of mistletoe and amber, opium poppy seeds," there is a sense of tentatively overcoming conflict by, in a sense, rising above it.[99] The real dramatic weight of the poem, however, is achieved in the shifting pronouns. Unlike many of the other poems, Carson does not explicitly announce here the presence of the lyric "I." The poem begins instead with a more objective voice. By the third stanza, however, this voice shifts into a third person plural: "Then all of us imbibe the haemoglobin wine / […] / Where we combine in knowing what is yours is mine."[100] The subject is "we" and the action emphasized is the combination of singularities into this plural subject position. Ownership is rendered neutral through joint ownership and the reader, with some adjustments, could easily map this analogy onto the Northern Irish peace process. But the communal subject splinters again in the final stanza:

> This is why we can commune so easily, I think:
> Already, you've partaken of our President.
> You ate her bread. You licked her salt. You drank her drink.[101]

The "we" differentiates into an "I" and a "You," without, however, fully disrupting the communion between them ("we can commune so easily"). Carson thus shows the tentative fragility of community in the final moments of the poem, suggesting the year 1998 as a threshold moment. True community requires an "I" and a "You," but the "I" can easily descend into solipsism and retreat into a fear of the "You" without care and attention. If Carson has franked these poems, expressing his father's penchant for linguistic subversion, "1998" demonstrates the significance of translation as an act of maintaining lines of communication between people.

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[98] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 40.
[99] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 40.
[100] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 40.
[101] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 40.

Throughout *The Twelfth of Never*, Carson employs a strategy of dislocation and estrangement—he fractures the traditional tropes and narratives, recombining them so that the reader observes them askance. The radical intention of this dislocation is strongly apparent in the poem "The Wind that Shakes the Barley," which borrows its title from a nineteenth-century ballad about the 1798 Rebellion. The traditional narrative involves a young man who is torn between his romantic love for a woman and his new national love for Ireland, eventually choosing the latter because he is unable "to bear the shame / Of foreign chains around us." Whereas the political symbolism of the original ballad is highly legible, Carson's remixed version is eerily and uncannily subversive in its disruption of any stable meaning. At the beginning of the poem, the lyric "I" meets Captain [Oscar] Wilde in Dublin, bedecked "in a dogskin coat and rabbit stole," and wearing a green carnation on his lapel.[102] Immediately Carson shifts the poem's location from its original rural setting to an urban one. More importantly, though, the encounter with Wilde activates a network of references that pertain to the ambiguity of things being other than they seem. The effect of this strategy is to sever the tight link between a sign and the thing it signifies allowing for a ludic subversion of essentialist meaning.

Uncanny doubling is the primary thread that runs throughout this sonnet and that creates in its own way a fairly hallucinatory reading experience. Wilde, Carson writes, "looked the very image of a fairy child," or a changeling.[103] In Irish folklore, the fairies are said to take a human child and replace them with an identical-looking changeling. The lyric "I" sits Wilde in their lap, "all the better for to see him," the same rationale given to Little Red Riding Hood by the wolf who is disguised as her grandmother. ("All the Better to See You With" also happens to be the

[102] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 32.
[103] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 32.

title of one of Carson's poems in *Belfast Confetti*).[104] This motherly lyric "I" kisses Wilde's "bonsai hands"—bonsai is the Japanese art of replicating the proportions of larger trees in miniature—and they feel "his wooden limb," an artificial appendage and a *double entendre*. In a final act of doubling, Wilde "murmur[s], with the voice of a ventriloquist, / *Just read my lips: the Eagle does not hunt the Gnat*."[105] The ventriloquist throws their voice, ostensibly separating it from their body, but Carson here further separates the act of hearing ("the voice of a ventriloquist") and the act of reading ("just read my lips"). Furthermore, the message Wilde's ventriloquist voice imparts is a Roman proverb from Erasmus, which, in its original Latin, Carson uses as a title for a poem from *Opera Et Cetera* that ends with the hunt for a mythical beast, "the Lesser-Spotted / Fly-catching Eagle."[106] The effect of this persistent doubling is instability since things are not as they initially appear. The reader thus must question everything: What is real? Can we trust Wilde? Can we trust the lyric "I"? How are we to read Carson's poems if he will remix them at a further date?

"The Wind that Shakes the Barley" is shrouded in ambiguity, if not outright ambivalence. But, this ambiguity aids Carson in his critical endeavor. The target of this criticism, I suggest, is nationalism. By this statement, I do not mean Irish Republican Nationalism specifically, of which Carson can appear both sympathetic and skeptical throughout his poetry and prose. Rather, I intend all iterations of Nationalism, which promulgates the existence of an essential relationship between a people and a territory that is founded on sameness and exclusion. This is not unique to Irish Nationalism for, as the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney notes, British Unionism is as much a form of nationalism as the Irish variety and, thus, moving beyond the

[104] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 32; Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 23-25.
[105] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 32.
[106] Carson, *Opera et Cetera*, 45. Carson titles the poem in Latin: "Aquila Non Capit Muscas."

Troubles entails "a dismantling of *nationalisms*."[107] Carson, in this poem in particular, works to dismantle the link between a symbol and an essential meaning. For example, his inclusion of the detail that Captain Wilde was wearing a green carnation indicates an apocryphal story about the premiere of Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan* and that is now part of the Wilde mythos. Wilde, so the story goes, asked one of his actors and several people who were to be in the audience to wear green carnations. When asked about the symbolism of the flower, Wilde responded that there was "none whatever, but that is just what nobody will guess."[108] This suggestion of Wilde's love of playful artifice, in the present context, calls into question the more apparent symbolism of traditional poetic narratives of 1798, such as those found in W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. More pointedly, by linking Wilde to Japanese cultural references, Carson raises the specter of Wilde's criticisms of *japonisme*, the late nineteenth-century British rage for Japanese culture, in his essay "The Decay of Lying." In that essay, Wilde writes, "the whole of Japan is an invention," emphasizing further on that "there is no such country, there are no such people."[109] Wilde's declaration is positioned within his larger argument that life imitates art and not the other way around. As such, cultural objects actively engage in shaping the "reality" they claim to transparently represent. This casts doubt on the status of Ireland within the context of the poem. The green carnation, for example, scans as "*green* car-*na*tion" [with the stressed syllables italicized], suggesting that the green nation is,

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[107] Richard Kearney, *Post-Nationalist Ireland*, 9 and *passim*.

[108] Beckson, Karl, "Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920,* 43.4 (2000),387 *et passim*. Although Beckson interrogates the veracity of the "green carnation" anecdote, suggesting its probably inflated role in Wilde lore, he nonetheless offers a thorough account of the many possible meanings the flower possessed as Wilde's chosen symbol. *The Green Carnation* (1894) was adopted as the title of Robert Hichens satirical novel of Wilde and his circle, and it would later be taken up as the title of a biopic of the writer that appeared in 1961 and that had the explicit intention of vociferously advocating the decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain. For a discussion of the film, see: Stetz, Margaret D., "Oscar Wilde at the Movies: British Sexual Politics and *The Green Carnation* (1960)," *Biography*, 23.1 (Winter 2000), 90-107.

[109] Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow, Scotland: HarperCollins, 2003), 1088.

fundamentally, an empty symbol. Carson, however, does not resign himself to a nihilistic meaninglessness; he knows all too well the material effects of the various and competing beliefs about Ireland. Instead, the point is that there is no such country as Ireland, to borrow Wilde's phrasing, which is not mediated through its cultural representation. The implication is radical: by altering the representation of Ireland within the political imaginary, the artist changes what Ireland is. Carson's strategy in *The Twelfth of Never*, then, is to let loose Irish symbols so to alter the reader's view of Ireland.

The thread I pursue in this chapter documents one of the ways Carson does this: "undermining the syntax" of a nationalistic narrative of 1798. Such a strategy reaches its apex in the poems "The Year of the French" and "Legions of the Dead" at the end of the collection. The reader would expect that the former poem, taking its title from the epithet given to the 1798 Rebellion, would focus on that rebellion in Ireland. Carson, however, dislocates the traditional meaning of "The Year of the French" by focusing on Napoleon's 1798 campaign against the British in Egypt. The Egyptian campaign, though, is not entirely disconnected from the events in Ireland. Napoleon, after all, faced a choice in 1798 regarding where he would engage the British. Although Wolf Tone, on behalf of the United Irishmen, petitioned the French for a full-scale invasion of Ireland, Napoleon eventually decided to meet his enemy in Egypt with the hope that it would open access to British colonial holdings in India and the Middle East were he successful. Had Napoleon decided in favor of invading Ireland the Irish Rebellion would have perhaps succeeded. But, this is not Carson's point. Not only does he paint local politics in a transnational hue, he darkens the traditionally favorable image of the French as liberators by equating them with the British: both are imperial powers fighting over control of foreign territory.

"The Year of the French" is told from the point of view of a common soldier, their national allegiance left ambiguous. Never an "I" but always a "we," Carson emphasizes the communal subject of the military unit over the individual. The first two stanzas are imbued with a sense of leisurely enchantment as the anonymous soldier describes how the soldiers ingest opium in the evening under the gaze of the pyramids and hallucinate "Hieroglyphic forms flit[ing]" around the military encampment to the "droning of innumerable bees" and the "strumming of innumerable lyres."[110] This hallucinatory enchantment begins to shift towards boredom by the end of the initial stanzas, as the soldier remarks that, "To pass the time we would count the stars in the sky." The poem's tone, however, continues to morph from enchantment to boredom to eventual melancholy. An em dash placed at the close of the second stanza signals the transmutation of "the stars in the sky — " to "Galactic battalions of those fallen in war," a powerful suggestion given the context of impending battle. Such a context prompts the soldiers to hallucinate "the footsteps of their walking mummied dead" as they reflect on the all too present reality of death.[111] The soldiers, however, attempt to resist the encroaching grip of death:

> Murmuring the names of our selves, that they might be known,
> We'd carve them with our bayonets on a Pharaoh's head.
> Let you trace them in a future black as the Rosetta stone.[112]

The ecstatic hum of opium visions changes to a murmur that is motivated by the desire of the anonymous soldiery to be remembered. An implement of war is metamorphosed into a writing implement and the soldiers use it to graffiti their names on the sculpted head of a Pharaoh. Perhaps this is Carson's own "Ozymandias" in which Shelley famously reflects on the transience

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[110] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 82. The hallucinatory language is, in fact, quite reminiscent of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Baudelaire's "Correspondences" (a poem Carson translates twice, in *First Language* and then in *The Alexandrine Plan*), and Mallarmé's "Sonnet en –yx" (translated by Carson in *The Alexandrine Plan* and "Riddle of the Pyx").
[111] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 82.
[112] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 82.

of worldly power. It would be more accurate, though, to say that Carson's poem embodies Benjamin's position in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" where he writes that the task of the historical materialist is "to brush history against the grain."[113] That is to say, the historian should not empathize with the great names of history that emerge from the ruling classes, rather they should read the traces of the "anonymous toil" of those who lived and suffered alongside the elite in cultural artifacts. For Carson, the Napoleons and Humberts, the Cornwallises and Nelsons are of a piece with the Pharaoh whose monumental head persists through history. It is with the many people who will live and die at the orders of these "great men" that Carson is concerned.

Carson ends "The Year of the French" with a reference to the Rosetta Stone—an ancient Egyptian stele that provided the means to decode Egyptian hieroglyphics and subsequently became a symbol for translation writ large. He picks up this thread in the following poem, "Legions of the Dead," which opens with the line, "The key to Hieroglyphic and Demotic was the Greek," implicitly acknowledging that the Rosetta Stone was discovered by the French in 1799 during Napoleon's Egyptian campaign.[114] Written on the actual stele is a decree from Ptolemy V attesting to his divine status and Carson retains the idea of reading history against the grain that he suggested in the previous poem. Questions of power, militarism, imperialism, and translation, thus, appear intertwined. At the opening of the second stanza, the lyric "I" declares, "My Irish is corrupted by the English tongue."[115] What follows is a cascading list of mythic and historical figures often touching on Irish history, each line a separate thought connected by an em dash: Emperors, Pharaohs, Norse invaders, the Red Hand of Ulster, and the High Kings of Ireland all make an appearance. The connection between these references is unclear. Are they meant to be similes for the lyric "I"'s corrupted Irish language? As in, the imposition of the

[113] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.
[114] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 83.
[115] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 83.

English tongue is figuratively equivalent to the "Rape-and-pillage dragon-boats of Ancient Norse"?[116] Such a reading would suggest that Carson wishes to fully resist the English language by reverting to an uncorrupted Irish. But, the examples he employs do not create a lineage of cultural purity. According to one myth, the Celts can trace their origin back to Scota, the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh; and, the Norse invaders undoubtedly shaped Irish culture through various hybridizations. By invoking examples of the hybrid nature of Irish culture, Carson subtly pushes back against any sort of claim to Irish cultural purity.

The emphasis on hybridity extends to translation and this list ends, in fact, with a fragmentary thought that obliquely references the Tower of Babel: "The indecipherable babble of days of yore." In Irish myth, an Irishman, Féinias Farsaidh, was present at the fall of Babel and set up a school to teach the new multiplicity of languages in its aftermath.[117] Translation, then, acquires the hue of an ethical imperative within the Irish tradition; it is incumbent on people to learn and teach the multiplicity of languages. Carson imports this ethical imperative into the poem and ties it to the task of reading history against the grain in the poem's final stanza:

> Their armies were composed of hieroglyphic men
> Like us, who marched through history, and saw kings fall.
> Opposing soldiers are at one within our regimen.[118]

In this stanza, Carson posits several oppositions. There is the stated opposition between armies and soldiers but there is another implicit opposition between the common soldiers and the kings. As in the previous poem, Carson suggests that the kings who pit armies against each other in opposition are, in fact, the ones who should be opposed. The act of translation appears obliquely in the description of the "hieroglyphic men" who populate these armies, referring back to the

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[116] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 82.
[117] MacCóil, Liam, "Irish: One of the Languages of the World," in *The Languages of Ireland*, eds. Michael Cronin and Cormac Ó Cuilléanain (Dublin; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2003), 129.
[118] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 82.

Rosetta Stone at the beginning of the poem. Within the structure of the poem, "hieroglyphic" occupies a pivotal space at the end of the stanza's first line: it is a bridge between the references to "Their armies" and our armies ("Like us"), which open the first and second lines respectively. The description of the soldiers as hieroglyphs entails that traces of them persist, waiting to be uncovered and translated—similarly to the names carved on a pharaoh's head. It is tempting to read this stanza as a statement of the power of translation to overcome antagonistic attitudes towards difference. It is more realistic, though, to think of the emphasis on translation as a statement about a radical practice of writing. Recalling that for Carson poetry is equivalent to translation, it appears that the role of the poet is to disrupt traditional narratives (i.e. read history against the grain) and to create the conditions for understanding and living with difference; the goal of translation is essentially communication with others. This is the itinerary Carson pursues throughout *The Twelfth of Never*, particularly in regards to disrupting traditional accounts of Irish history that aid in reifying sectarianism.

v. Conclusion:

Poetry and translation are both tasked with carrying a burden of meaning between one place and another in Carson's view. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that this task bears a postal quality based on the lived example of William Carson, the poet's father. That is to say, Carson franks his poems with an explicit or implicit date and time; through subversively franking his poems with nontraditional codes, he disrupts the traditional systems within which the poem circulates; and, he intends his poems as messages to others, establishing bridges of communication. This strategy is particularly at play with Carson's 1798 collections, *The Alexandrine Plan* and *The Twelfth of Never*. By franking poems published in 1998 with the mark

of 1798, Carson constellates the two dates such that they poetically inform each other. The two dates are inherently connected since the latter is the bicentennial year of the former. But, as demonstrated, Cason pursues an itinerary that disrupts the traditional narratives that developed around the 1798 Rebellion. In the same year as the Good Friday Peace Agreement, Carson makes the implicit statement that the society of Northern Ireland is on the threshold of a hinge moment requiring a change in orientation if Northern Ireland is to move beyond the confining framework of the past. What, though, are the effects of such a statement? If, as Heaney noted, "No lyric has ever stopped a tank," what is the role of poetry in the era of the Good Friday Agreement?[119]

In the final poem of *The Twelfth of Never*, "Envoy," Carson turns to the reader in direct address. "Now you've travelled through the Land of Nod and Wink," he writes, warning the reader of the result of this travel: "You'll find that everything is slightly out of synch."[120] Carson imbues poetry with the power to shift perspective and to alter the reading practices of its consumers. He subverts the authority invested in particular worldviews, altering the way the readers of his poetry, in turn, read the world. Such subversion is articulated in the second stanza of this final poem:

> These words the ink is written in is not indelible
> And every fairy story has its variorum;
> For there are many shades of pigment in the spectrum,
> And the printed news is always unreliable.[121]

Impermanence and variability take the place of a self-satisfied assurance in knowing the ways of the world. For the reader, Carson's remixing of narratives, franking of poems, and radical translations result in shifting their perspective "slightly out of synch." Disrupting the smooth

[119] Seamus Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue," in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 207.
[120] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 89.
[121] Carson, *The Twelfth of Never*, 89.

functioning of his readers' perception just as his father's subversive franking disrupted the smooth functioning of the postal service, Carson prompts his readers to look at the world askance, to "read it against the grain." Such a disruption reveals the chinks and fissures in the traditional binary schemas by which the world of Northern Irish society had been organized and in the traditional narratives of 1798. Poetry may have never stopped a tank, but poetry can, as it were, metamorphose that tank into a bridge; it is, in Carson's words, a matter of "serious play," of imagining things differently. At the hinge moment of 1998, Carson asks his audience to imagine society differently, to return to the early potential of the United Irishmen's project and reclaim missed opportunities.

Leontia Flynn's "Letter to Friends": Postal Poetics and Political Community in the "New North"

> "Art for art's sake, as he [the Irish writer] understands it, whether it be the art of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* or of the imaginer of Falstaff, seems to him a neglect of public duty. It is as though the telegraph-boys botanized among the hedges with the undelivered envelopes in their pockets…" –W. B. Yeats[1]

In a 2008 interview the contemporary Northern Irish poet Leontia Flynn is asked which poem from literary history she wishes she had written. "I would like to be able to write a properly long poem," Flynn responds, "—not Paradise Lost long—but a good sized public-minded poem: MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal' or Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron.'"[2] Flynn does craft such a poem in the form of "Letter to Friends," the centerpiece of her third collection *Profit and Loss* (2011). Throughout the collection, Flynn explores the themes of home, transience, mental illness, sexuality, motherhood, familial history, technology, and communication, the latter poignantly rendered through her evocation of her father's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. These broader issues coalesce through her epistolary poem into a pointed analysis of Belfast in the initial decade of the boom years of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent global financial crisis of 2008. Flynn's chosen poetic models for the poem, Auden and MacNeice, have a long history of influence in contemporary Northern Irish poetry. MacNeice, in particular, is integral to the work of the first generation of poets in the "Northern Renaissance": Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley.[3] Likewise, both Auden and MacNeice have been identified as significant influences on Paul Muldoon. If MacNeice and, to a lesser extent, Auden are seen as important poetic forebears to the Northern Irish poets active during the Troubles (1969-1998), what do they

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[1] W. B. Yeats, "Notes and Opinions," *Samhain*, November 1905, 12.
[2] "My Cultural Life: Leontia Flynn," interviewed by Culture Northern Ireland, November 27, 2008, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/literature/my-cultural-life-leontia-flynn-0.
[3] There are significant differences within the influence of MacNeice on the Northern Irish poets that came after him. For a good treatment of these differences, see *Louis MacNeice and His Influence* (1998) and, in particular, the chapters by Richard York, Michael Allen, and Neil Corcoran.

offer to Flynn as a poet writing after the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accords? More specifically, what draws her to their writing in the late '30s, and why does she turn to the epistolary poetry of Auden, in particular, as a model for her own "public-minded poem"?

Flynn's epistolary poem takes as its moment of inspiration her experience of clearing out a previous flat, but it quickly moves from there to broader concerns such as economic justice and global climate change. It exists in an intriguing temporal space. Set in the summer and fall of 2008, it is positioned after the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland in May 2007 and the beginning of the global financial crisis. The single-stanza proem that precedes the three longer sections of the poem strikingly articulates this liminal position:

> It's summer. So of course torrential rain
> has fallen now for days; it's turned the roads
> to rivers, burst the river banks, swamped drains
> and drowned in a cataclysm of soupy floods
> a traffic tunnel opened weeks ago.
> The cars are stranded on this motorway
> turned waterway – the pass is an *impasse*.
> And so to pass the time I watch the slow
> drip and dissolve of stuff that floats away …
> my face is reflected in the steamy glass.[4]

Flynn describes a rainstorm of biblical proportions and emphasizes the faintly apocalyptic undertones of the metaphor with her quick succession of menacing verbs—"burst," "swamped," and "drowned"—before qualifying the ensuing flood as a "cataclysm." The catastrophe is one of disruption—"the pass is an *impasse*"—where the image of disrupted traffic indexes ruptured communication, stalled action, and immobility. But the storm is not just catastrophic, it is transformative insofar as it transmutes the roads to rivers. This image is repeated twice, first over the second and third lines and then again over the sixth and seventh, with Flynn's deft use of enjambment emphasizing the transformative turn. The world is navigable, Flynn seems to be

[4] Leontia Flynn, *Profit and Loss* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 35.

saying, but it requires a change in orientation. The image with which she ends the stanza (her reflection in the window) implies that the personal and public spheres are each imbricated in the other. In the context of Flynn's poetic practice and poetry in the "New North," the change in orientation towards which she gestures can be extended to a reassessment of poetic forms and the relationship between poetry and politics.

Flynn's "Letter to Friends" is a significant poetic statement that seeks to reimagine "political" poetry in the "New North" so as to transcend the established categories of Troubles-era poetry. She shifts our attention from sectarian violence and its haunting traces to issues of economic injustice and environmental catastrophe. In this shift, she turns to poetic forebears in Auden and MacNeice who, in their writing of the 1930s, tackle such "global" issues as economic inequality and the rise of Fascism in Europe. For both Auden and MacNeice these issues necessitate a search for a poetic form adequate to their representation that offers guidance in Flynn's own quest for a poetic form that would allow her to break new poetic and political ground and, subsequently, break free from the old animosities of the North. I argue that, through her turn to epistolary verse, Flynn goes beyond a mere critique of contemporary political issues in order to re-envision community in twenty-first-century Northern Ireland. Rather than resting on essential definitions of the communities that comprise Northern Ireland (such as Protestant/Loyalist and Catholic/Republican), Flynn renders the borders of those communities less opaque as she casts her gaze on the community to come. The inherently social aspect of letters, as well as Flynn's ambiguous usage of "friends" and the first-person plural ("we"), invites the reader to be a part of this possible community. Although grounded in Belfast and Northern Ireland, Flynn's opening of community to the Other poses the questions of who will participate in the community of the "New North" and how the community will share in the

broader global community as linked by networks of finance, communications, and weather patterns. As Bonnie Costello writes, poetry does not merely emerge from or "reflect" existing communities; it "also imagines and formulates *potential* community."[5] The collection's political impetus, which emerges from the alternative community Flynn articulates in "Letter to Friends," effectively revitalizes political poetry in Northern Ireland.

I first position Flynn's poetry within contemporary debates regarding Northern Irish lyric poetry in order to delineate the stakes of her impetus to find new poetic forms through which to grapple with urgent political questions. In particular, the poems "The Peace Lily" and "The Floppy Disk" from Part One of *Profit and Loss* acutely posit this rupture from inherited political models. "The Yanks" and "The Vibrator" subtly introduce the social and political issues that will emerge prominently in "Letter to Friends." After establishing this foundation, I examine the resources that Flynn draws out of the work of Auden and MacNeice from the 1930s. Since Flynn adopts the more social and participatory poetic forms employed by her two predecessors, namely the letter, I focus particularly on Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron." The discussion of this poem prompts a larger critical engagement with theories of the epistolary genre and community to establish the significance of Flynn's use of the form. Mary Favret recovers the "revolutionary politics" of letters that the "sentimental fiction of letters" traditionally obfuscates.[6] Although her work is based in nineteenth-century literature, I bring it to bear on Flynn's "letter" in order to elucidate the generic role of women within the epistolary genre, the position of the increasingly centralized Post Office in the control and administration of the expanding British Empire, and the radical corresponding societies that were a network of political "friendship." The "letter" in

[5] Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13.
[6] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10.

Flynn's hands is a vehicle of community; thus I look to contemporary debates on the nature and future of "community" within Continental Philosophy as articulated by Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito. In particular, I focus on the community as forever incomplete—without closure—and the importance of friendship to this "unworking" [*désoeuvrement*]" of community.[7] As I argue, it is such a conception of community that finds expression through the work of Flynn.

My reading of "Letter to Friends," 1) examines the poem as Flynn's articulation of a search for poetic form *à la* Auden and MacNeice. I identify Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* as an unspoken third influence on Flynn's long poem, an influence that is far from anomalous. Keats and Byron both belong to the generation of Young Romantics who followed on the heels of the older Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. In choosing to write her epistolary poem in the Keatsian ode form, therefore, Flynn continues to position herself as part of a "younger" generation that breaks out for new poetic territory. Her invocation of the ode form, a contradictory genre that has traditionally encompassed both private and public spheres, explores the question of poetic and public address. 2) I discuss the political issues arising during the course of the poem: the precariousness of modern life, the ecological and social ravages of global capitalism run amok, the consumerism of modern Belfast obscuring persistent class inequality, and the digitization of existence. 3) I consider the very epistolarity of "Letter to Friends." I argue that, through pronominal ambiguity, Flynn creates a dynamic potential community that involves the reader as "friend." This argument is pursued through recourse to Bonnie Costello's compelling recent work on "the communal possibilities of lyric" as found in Auden's use of the

[7] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.

first-person plural pronoun ("we").[8] I conclude by invoking Flynn's belief in the significant role of poetry for revolutionizing or, at the very least, revitalizing the networks of communication that are essential for the potential community-to-come.

i. The State of Lyric Poetry in the New North:

The critics Clair Wills and Eric Falci both highlight important elements of lyric poetry from the second generation of Northern Irish poets.[9] These elements are the lyric's intervention in the construction of the public sphere and the way in which the lyric sets about deconstructing itself, respectively. Both critics, however, develop their analyses in correlation to a specific political and poetic moment. The problem they articulate is one in which the lyric poem in Northern Ireland must reckon with both a broader post-modern moment, with its collapse of grand narratives, and a local situation marked by its obdurateness. The poetry produced out of this situation, by interrogating the private/public divide and countering lyric conventions, is marked by an attempt to navigate the demands of personal conscience and communal responsibility. What happens, though, when the situation changes, communal lines become less entrenched, and the violence that had urgently demanded a response from the conscientious poet dissipates? In other words, what form does political poetry take when it is no longer dictated by the contours of The Troubles? "The role of conscience for a society which does not care to hear," notes Miriam Gamble, "is equally essential as, and more difficult than, speaking for and to a populace which audibly demands one's contribution."[10] Flynn, in *Profit and Loss*, assumes this

[8] Costello, *The Plural of Us*, 13.
[9] For a fuller discussion of Clair Wills and Eric Falci, refer to the introduction to this dissertation, 4-6.
[10] Miriam Gamble, "'A Potted Peace/Lily'? Northern Irish Poetry Since the Ceasefires," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 669.

role of "conscience" for a distracted and deaf society. Her "political" poetry is compelling by the very fact that no particular community is demanding her contribution.

Contemporary poetry in Northern Ireland is, in many ways, marked by a sense of searching. Writing of Flynn's earlier work from *These Days* (2004) and *Drives* (2008), Gamble remarks that Flynn's is an "aesthetics of transition" and that her "poetic persona [is] both unsure of its own features and 'salivating' for a sense of vocation."[11] In the lyric poems within the first part of *Profit and Loss*, Flynn's poetic persona seems surer of her vocation than in her earlier collections. But, she is equally sure that there is a rupture between the Irish poetry that has come before her and the poetic and political needs of the contemporary moment. In "The Floppy Disk," Flynn reflects on this "castaway" technology ("How young it is to be so obsolete") that metaphorically represents Irish poetry:

> […]
> I will take it between my finger and my thumb
> and post it with a click through the squarish slot
>
> of the oh-so-recent, stunningly useless past;
> the moment before the moment before now
> whose code is lost. The words that tapped and flashed,
> like a frantic bird against a window pane,
> translate back to the gesture of the hand
>
> stalled on the keys, like the spirit on the water.
> Like the shouts and groans that issue from the mine
> after the prop has snapped, the floppy disk
> is the love-note still sealed in its envelope.
> […][12]

Through the action of taking the disk "between my finger and my thumb," Flynn alludes to Heaney's early poem "Digging," in which he writes: "Between my finger and my thumb / The

[11] Gamble, "'A Potted Peace / Lily?'" 678 and 672.
[12] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 25.

squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it."[13] Heaney's is often read as an *ars poetica*, a statement of his poetic craft that is grounded in familial inheritance and agricultural labor. The pen, a metonymy for poetry, is equated to the spade wielded by his father and his poetics is, in turn, a digging through the layers of local and Irish history. If Heaney goes to great lengths to establish a patrilineal continuity, Flynn swiftly severs such continuity in "The Floppy Disk." The "code is lost" by which to read the "oh-so-recent, stunningly useless past." Both form—the technology of the floppy disk and disk drive—and content—what is written on the disk—appear obsolete. That which had seemed urgent is rewound until it reaches the "stalled" moment of fingers hovering above the keys. This could be read negatively as "stalled" action but it is also highly anticipatory. When paired with the simile that equates the hovering fingers to the hovering spirit of God on the water—"And the earth was without form … And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"—this line seems to emphasize a reading in which the process of writing is translated back into a moment of beginning that calls for new form to be given to chaos. [14] Flynn follows this simile with another strikingly paradoxical one, in which she likens the floppy disk both to "the shouts and groans" after a mine collapses and to an unopened "love-note." The first simile, the mine collapse, contains the echoes of the past calling out in the midst of disaster. Technology may no longer be able to read the message on the disk, but it nonetheless remains there. Such an image recalls Auden's famous line from "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" where he proclaims, "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making."[15] Poetry survives, as do the voices of the past. But, in an interesting slippage, Flynn follows her first simile with a second: the floppy disk is an unopened love-note and, as such, it is a loving gift whose energies have yet to be accessed. "Floppy Disk" operates on a series of similes that point to Flynn's

[13] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 4.
[14] Genesis 1:2, KJV.
[15] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed, Edward Mendelson (New York: The Modern Library, 2007),246.

engagement with the poetic past of Northern Ireland, initially starting with the implied simile that poetry from the recent past is like a floppy disk. Poetry is thus a technology, and while a certain type of poetry may be "obsolete," the concerns it once expressed survive "in the valley of its making" and contain resources of support for the future. This preoccupation with the rupture of communication between the older and younger generations takes a hauntingly personal turn in Flynn's account of her father's struggle with Alzheimer's that "sees him revert to a spoken Anglo-Saxon."[16]

The poems that make up the first part of *Profit and Loss* are formally compelling. Each poem is composed of one-to-five stanzas of five lines each (with the exception of "The Superser" which is comprised of three five-line stanzas and a single additional line). Gamble observes that twenty-nine poems in *These Days*, Flynn's earliest collection, "are single- or two-stanza poems fed through a ten-line framework, as though to suggest that every subject taken on is forced into the same-size factory mould."[17] While the focus is on a ten-line stanza (nevertheless, a multiple of five), it is noteworthy that twenty-nine reappears as the number of five-line stanza poems in Part One of *Profit and Loss*. Gamble's analysis of the poems in the earlier collection in terms of automated production is highly compelling and fits into the larger economic impetus of the later collection. It strikes me, however, that something else is happening in these poems. Flynn foregrounds the stanza as a poetic unit through her unwavering commitment to constructing poems out of five-line stanzas. Since the original meaning of *stanza* in Italian is "room" and in Part One, Flynn navigates rooms in places she has called home (as well as other constructed spaces such as an examination room, a cathedral, and a bullring), the emphasis on the stanza follows a certain architectural impetus in which the rooms Flynn discusses in the content of the

[16] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 28.
[17] Gamble, "'A Potted Peace / Lily'?" 679.

poem are compounded by the formal rooms in which the poem is written.[18] Five-line stanzas also are "uncommon and have no agreed name."[19] As such, I suggest that Flynn's adoption of the stanza form highlights an attempt to break new poetic ground and to find a form that allows her to explore content commensurate with the "New North." Fran Brearton describes Justin Quinn's use of the five-line stanza in the sequence "Days of the New Republic," from *The O'o'a'a' Bird* (1995), as "test[ing] out stanzaic shapes for a new order," while noting, however, that "the five-line stanza is the form of a number of Mahon's and Longley's early 'signature' poems … notably in other words, poems preoccupied with 'home.'"[20] The connection to the early work of Longley and Mahon does not necessarily undermine the argument that Flynn is searching for a form to make her own. On the contrary, the implicit relationship between the five-line stanza and the questions of "home" in the earlier poetry of Longley and Mahon gets reactivated in Flynn's work, which also is preoccupied with the question of home, both as to the nature of post-Troubles Belfast and as to the very possibility of a "home" place in a globalized world marked by transience and migration. As in "The Floppy Disk," something of the past persists into the present—both the echoes of violence and the gift of affection—but it requires a new form to mold it into a shape attuned to the present.

The lyric poems in Part One of *Profit and Loss* compellingly avoid any explicit engagement with Northern Irish politics in the past or present. In the few places that are politically charged, Flynn engages politics at a slant. In her backwards glance we do not find those particularly freighted dates around which communal memory has coalesced in Northern Ireland and in the Republic: Bloody Sunday (1972), The Easter Rising (1916), The Irish

[18] Cf. Vona Groarke, *Other People's Houses* (Old Castle, County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Press, 1999).
[19] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45.
[20] Fran Brearton, "'The Nothing-Could-Be-Simpler Line': Form in Contemporary Irish Poetry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 638-39.

Rebellion (1798), The Battle of the Boyne (1690). The cover image is a flock of geese in flight and while this recalls "The Flight of the Wild Geese"—the Jacobite army's escape from Ireland to the European Continent at the end of the seventeenth century—it resonates far more with the migratory movement of contemporary life that simmers thematically throughout the collection. Flynn's historical gaze takes us back no further than the Second World War. The Troubles are glaringly absent as she transitions from the post-war period to the post-Troubles period inaugurated by the Good Friday Agreement. The absence of explicit reference to The Troubles, however, does not signal an apolitical poetry. The references she does include index the absences. The Troubles appear in the collection like a black hole representable only through its surrounding gravitational effects, an un-representable absence at its heart. These tangential historical references and politically salient omissions pose the question of how to engage poetically with politics outside of the categories that were operative during the Troubles. Flynn, therefore, enacts a shift from the politics addressed in Troubles-era poetry to those that necessitate a response in post-Trouble poetry.

The only poem from Part One that points towards sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland is "The Yanks," an account of Flynn's father's experience as a young boy during the Second World War.[21] She begins by locating the experience in time and place: "It's 1944," and the American ("Yank") G.I.s are "stationed at the Ballykinlar camp."[22] Although in 1944 Ballykinlar housed American troops, it was previously the site of the first and largest internment camp established by the British in Ireland to house I.R.A. and *Sinn Féin* prisoners during the Irish War of

[21] For an excellent account of this period in Irish history, see Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).
[22] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 17.

Independence (1919-1921).[23] Her father and his siblings, Flynn tells us, are a source of good-natured amusement to the G.I.'s who gift them coins. Their mother, though, forces her children to return the gifts to the soldiers. Flynn emphasizes this confused ambivalence in the children. Even though "[t]hey learn the Yankee pop-tunes on the wireless," they also graffiti a swastika on their family's store and display "the Eucharistic Congress Flag at victory." The International Eucharistic Congress took place in Dublin in 1932 and is identified as "a flashpoint in the formation of a specific Irish Catholic identity" in the simmering sectarian tensions in the North.[24] While Flynn codes these actions as subversive in their sympathy to Irish Republicanism, she also identifies the performers of these actions as children who are in a burgeoning state of political consciousness. The action of receiving coins and throwing them back appears twice as if to emphasize that it is an action performed mechanically—because mother said so—without a full awareness of the coincidence between action and political significance. Political belief is passed from Flynn's grandmother to Flynn's father, but Flynn only mentions that she receives from her father the Yankee pop-tunes—"those old pop-tunes he used to sing to his babies"—which he has since forgotten due to Alzheimer's disease. Whether or not Flynn also received a political education from her father, Irish politics remains in the *past* within the confines of the poem. What does draw a trajectory from the past to the present, however, is an economic politics of global (American) consumer culture. The gifts the soldiers present to the children are money and "pop-tunes," which get passed down to Flynn and her siblings in turn. The poet presents this transmission of pop-culture artifacts as if to suggest that economic politics were always there beneath the more noted sectarian variety.

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[23] Liam Ó Duibhir, *Prisoners of War: Ballykinlar Internment Camp 1920-1921* (Blackrock, Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 2013),

[24] David G. Holmes, "The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Irish Identity," *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 4.1 (Spring, 2000), 55.

Flynn addresses post-ceasefire Belfast in "The Peace Lily." The poem simultaneously invites and resists a reading inflected by the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. When read alongside of the poem "The Vibrator" that follows it, "The Peace Lily" represents, I suggest, a hinge on which the collection turns by enacting a shift from Troubles-era political concerns to post-ceasefire ones. Flynn dedicates "The Peace Lily" to the poet Michael Longley and this dedication places it implicitly in conversation with Troubles-era poetry and Longley's own attempts to navigate poetically the relationship between the personal and public spheres. The two five-line stanzas that make up the poem perform an uncanny doubling, existing as almost-but-not-quite mirror images of each other. Passed among friends, the flower in question is a lasting remainder of moves and departures, an impromptu gift. It is rooted, but insofar as it is rooted in a pot instead of the ground it is movable, simultaneously at-home and not-at-home. This liminal state is echoed in the marginalized position the plant occupies in its various locations: "It rustles – '*Hello?... Hello?*' – with calm neglect."[25] At first this neglect seems detrimental to the lily, which "throws up its waxy leaves towards the light." If the lily symbolizes the Peace Process through its connotations of rebirth, purity, and hope, it appears to be jeopardized: a failure to take root and flourish. Such a reading would, in fact, represent the setbacks that plagued the power-sharing government stipulated by the Good Friday Agreement. However, by the end of the second stanza the situation has altered ever so slightly. "[L]ook, she thrives / in the corner of the room," Flynn tells us. Peace flourishes, she seems to say, when it is not the focus of too much attention, when it has the chance to develop and grow into itself.

The transition between the first and second stanza also entails a remarkable shift in gender. Whereas in the first stanza the lily is referred to in the neuter ("it"), in the second it is gendered female ("she thrives"). The final lines of the poem articulate and reinforce this

[25] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 14.

transmutation: "The potted Peace Lily / throws up her waxy flowers like spears of light." The plant is composed of light, having photosynthesized the light towards which it was reaching in the first stanza. Although peace has taken root, the vague militancy of "spears of light" could undermine that very peace. In the context of Flynn's dedication to Longley, such a simile brings to mind the numerous poems in which he strategically employs the themes and tropes of ancient Greek literature as a means of obliquely commenting on the violence of the Troubles.[26] Flynn, however, distances herself from this usage, first by emphasizing that it is a simile—"her waxy flowers *like* spears of light" (my emphasis)—and then by using the feminine which departs from the masculine heroics that fuel the martial tropes of epic literature. In fact, the only murder in Flynn's collection is "The Notorious Case of Robert the Painter," in which a non-political murder framed as a particularly brutal instance of violence against women. Flynn privileges the female voice and pushes back against the largely male-dominated Irish poetry scene of the previous generation by marking the position of women within the "New North."[27] Although she dedicates the poem to Longley, it can be read as a desire to strike out in new poetic territory away from the types of poetry that emerged in response to the Troubles.

This desire is carried over to the poem "The Vibrator," which immediately follows "The Peace Lily." It slowly dawns on the poem's protagonist, in the midst of clearing out her flat, that she failed to pack the eponymous sex toy, "its battery-powered heart" still beating somewhere within. More so than in other poems from Part One, which is subtitled "A Gothic," Flynn

[26] See, "The Butchers," "The Helmet," and "Ceasefire" as particularly good examples of Longley's use of this strategy.

[27] This is a rich topic that deserves to be unpacked further. See, in particular, Flynn's monograph on fellow Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, *Reading Medbh McGuckian* (Newbridge, Kildare, Ireland: Irish Academic Press, 2014). See also, Ruth Hooley, ed., *The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985); Linda Anderson and Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado, eds., *Female Lines: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland* (Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, Ireland: New Island Books, 2017); and Angela Bourke, ed., *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, vols. 4-5, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2005).

deploys generic tropes of Gothic literature only to subvert them. She walks through the cleared-out flat like a "mournful ghost" and the beating "battery-powered heart" of the vibrator cheekily echoes Poe's story of "The Tell-Tale Heart," while simultaneously evoking the trope of the hysterical woman (the vibrator, after all, was initially developed as an instrument for use in the cure of hysteria). In the second of three stanzas, Flynn shifts into an apostrophic form of address: "Oh cruel Gods!" "Oh vulgar implement," "Oh dirty gift," "Oh gift – surprise! for next week's settling tenants." The laudatory gesture of the ode stands in tension with the shifting referents used to describe the vibrator, which is initially described with the cold utilitarianism of "implement" and dismissed as "vulgar" before transforming into a "dirty gift" and then finally just "gift." The positive connotations of a gift are shaded by the slight irony with which Flynn unveils this unwanted "gift" for the next tenants. That irony, however, also reveals a smirking pleasure at the thought and this is underscored by the cascading succession of "Oh"s that mimics the rising pleasure of orgasm. It is striking, therefore, that in the midst of this Flynn announces in a parenthetical aside that the next tenants are, in fact, "four Polish men paid peanuts by the hour," adding, "for in Belfast too The Market holds its sway." The aside works to cue the reader in to the language of value that is woven throughout the poem: Flynn's realization about the vibrator strikes her, "loud as a two-pence piece / in a metal bucket," and this coin in the first stanza rings out in the consonance with "peanuts" in the third stanza: peanuts / pence / piece. There is also an implicit scalar comparison between four Polish immigrants who will have to pool their resources to live in an apartment that Flynn who apparently could afford on her own. In her introduction to *Improprieties*, Wills suggests that the use of "forms of sexuality deemed 'improper' or impolite" in the work of Muldoon, McGuckian, and Paulin become means through which they question "the propriety of political processes, national concepts of community, and

the very basis of the idea of home."[28] Similarly, Flynn uses the masturbatory pleasure of the vibrator to establish a stark contrast between the utilitarian market economy and a pleasurable gift economy.[29] Reading this poem alongside "The Peace Lily" shows that not only does Flynn foreground a female voice and perspective, she also subtly shifts our attention from sectarian politics and its literary representation to the economic politics of the Celtic Tiger and the 2008 Banking Crisis that precipitated its collapse. Flynn will eventually amplify this thematically political shift to great effect in "Letter to Friends."

ii. Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron," Epistolarity, and Community:

Louis MacNeice and W. H. Auden, the two poets named by Flynn as models for how to craft a "public-minded poem," are regularly identified as key poetic influences on Heaney, Mahon, and Longley. The Belfast-born MacNeice, in particular, is a significant figure who represented to those first-generation poets a history of Northern Irish poetry and a model for how to cast a critical eye on one's country and the nationalism which subtends it.[30] (This latter element is most evident in "Section xvi" of *Autumn Journal* in which he engages in a trenchant critique of early twentieth-century Ireland.) While MacNeice is most prominent among those named as influences on the poetry that emerged from the "Northern Renaissance," Auden also makes his mark. Mahon, in particular, draws on the urbanity of the latter poet, while Longley and Heaney do so to a lesser extent, although Heaney praises the "rhythmic disjunctions" and

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[28] Wills, *Improprieties*, 3.
[29] See Georges Bataille's theory of "general economy" as opposed to "restrictive economy" in *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2007) and Marcel Mauss's book that influenced Bataille's work on this topic, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000). Erin Mitchell makes a similar observation about this poem in "Leontia Flynn's Poetic 'Museums': Losing, Saving, and Giving Away Belfast's Trash," *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 18:2 (Samhreadh / Summer, 2014), 115.
[30] Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 127-141.

"opacity" that Auden exhibits in his early work.[31] This line of influence extends to the work of Paul Muldoon. For example, in the long poem "7, Middagh Street" from *Meeting the British* (1987), Muldoon contemplates the question of artistic responsibility and community from the perspectives of "Wystan" (Auden) and "Louis" (MacNeice) as well as the other members of the bohemian coterie that took up residence at this Brooklyn location in the early 1940s. As Brian Cliff writes, the poem is "centrally concerned with community as the tangled intersection of artistic, personal, and political change."[32] By identifying Auden and MacNeice as her models for "Letter to Friends," Flynn certainly positions herself within a lineage of Northern Irish poetry. And yet, I suggest, she also turns to these two poets as a means of reinvigorating Northern Irish poetry by reflecting the "New North" through new poetic forms. The specific works she cites in her Culture Northern Ireland interview, "Letter to Lord Byron" and *Autumn Journal*, were both written during the late 1930s when their authors were explicitly investigating the relationship between aesthetics and politics.[33] Both works, therefore, can be seen as searching for poetic forms suitable for articulating complexly "global" issues such as the rise of Fascism and widespread financial collapse. The result is a poetics that is inherently social and participatory, and therein resides its political impetus. This is chiefly the case with "Letter to Lord Byron," on which I will focus my analysis.[34] These poems from Auden and MacNeice guide Flynn's search for new poetic forms that allow her to eschew the received poetic and political categories that emerged from the Troubles. They are not just poems that Flynn wishes she had written (per the

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[31] Seamus Heaney, "Sounding Auden," in *The Government of the Tongue, Selected Prose 1978-987* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 120-21.
[32] Cliff, Brian, "Paul Muldoon's Community on the Cusp: Auden and MacNeice in the Manuscripts for '7, Middagh Street'," *Contemporary Literature* 44.4 (Winter, 2003), 614. He further draws a comparison to MacNeice's work in the 1930s, likening Muldoon's poem to a "1980s Northern Ireland version of *Autumn Journal*."
[33] Flynn, "My Cultural Life: Leontia Flynn."
[34] For excellent readings of *Autumn Journal*, see Edna Longley's chapter devoted to the long poem in her *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), and Alan Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

original question by the interviewer), they are letters from the past whose central political problems have yet to be answered and whose aesthetic experimentation goes hand-in-hand with political reimagining.

Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron" was originally published in *Letters from Iceland* (1937), which he co-authored with MacNeice during their travels around Iceland in the summer and fall of 1936. Their brief from Faber was to write a travel book about Iceland but, as W. H. Auden tells Erika Mann Auden in a letter included in the text, travel books are essentially boring since they are all built around the same types of events.[35] The struggle for Auden is how to approach his subject compellingly and distinctively. In another letter, he emphasizes that "the problem of every writer of travels" is the mode of representation.[36] This problem stems not only from the perceived monotony of travel literature, but also from the creeping shadow cast by political events unfolding throughout Europe in the mid-'30s. In a foreword to later editions of *Letters from Iceland*, Auden states that although he and MacNeice were "writing in a 'holiday' spirit, its authors were all the time conscious of a threatening horizon to their picnic—world-wide unemployment, Hitler growing every day more powerful and a world-war more inevitable."[37] The local exists within a global network for the two poets and not in isolation. The subject is both Iceland and global politics as witnessed from the vantage of that Nordic island nation. The question of representation is thus the question of the sufficiency of poetry to articulate increasingly pertinent social and political concerns. In the final analysis, it is a question of poetic form.

The struggle for form vexed Auden considerably as he embarked on his journey and it appears as a meta-narrative throughout the text. As a solution to his writer's block, Auden writes

[35] W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 140.
[36] Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (1985), 218.
[37] Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (1985), 10.

to Erika Mann that he came upon the idea of composing a "chatty" letter in "light verse" addressed to Lord Byron, whose *Don Juan* he had taken with him to Iceland. It would range in topic and provide a "central thread" for the other items that would be included in the book. "This letter in itself,' he explains, "will have very little to do with Iceland, but will rather be a description of an effect of travelling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one's past and one's culture from the outside."[38] Such a move, in fact, is a salient feature of Auden's poetry from the 1930s in which figures of the border and the island are prominent features.[39] In practice, then, the five parts of the poem (condensed to four parts in later iterations) take on such issues in England as the state of poetry, the rise of consumer culture, and persistent wealth inequality, while also featuring a mini-biography of Auden and his critical assessment of the Romantic poets.[40]

Tom Paulin proposes that Auden's critique of Romanticism in the "Letter to Lord Byron" is a critique of the fascistic tendencies of the Romantic hero. Auden's choice of Byron as interlocutor, according to this view, is predicated on the fact that, among the Romantics, Byron best expresses those tendencies in his life and works.[41] Such a critique emphasizes what Paulin terms the "Napoleonic Byron" over the politically radical "Augustan Byron," although Paulin does acknowledge references to the strains of the latter that appear in the poem. Auden, however, seems more invested in the Augustan Byron than the Napoleonic. He explicitly praises Byron's distaste for isolationism and hatred for injustice, proposing that were he alive he "might have

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[38] Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (1985), 139.
[39] John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 173, 178.
[40] Christopher Yu, *Nothing to Admire: The Politics of Poetic Satire from Dryden to Merrill*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147.
[41] Tom Paulin, "*Letters from Iceland*: Going North," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 20 (1976), 66. For the origins of the argument that the Byronic hero is neo-fascist, see Bertrand Russell, *The History of Philosophy*, 620 and 676-77.

walked in the United Front with Gide."[42] John Brannigan emphasizes the parallels between the two poets when he notes that both Byron and Auden position themselves as "deracinated artists"; their hatred for isolationism manifests for both artists in self-imposed exile.[43] While such an account of Byron hints at the political "content" of his writing, there is a formal coincidence between the two poets that is far more striking. As such, Byron becomes a formal model in Auden's own search for poetic form.

"I want a form that's large enough to swim in," Auden declares in his opening salvo to Byron, going on to indicate that the latter poet provides a model for how to swim in uncharted waters. (Not for nothing does Auden describe Byron's credentials as, "poet, *swimmer*, peer, and man of action.")[44] In a later essay on *Don Juan*, Auden praises Byron's use of form, arguing that it was only when Byron adopted the "mock-heroic" *ottava rima* form that his comedic and poetic genius could really flourish.[45] The important element for Auden is Byron's comedic brilliance, a position he elucidates throughout the *Don Juan* essay. This admiration, however, is present earlier in *Letters from Iceland* when he suggests to Byron that he took *Don Juan* to Iceland because Icelanders lack humor and when he confesses to him, "I like your muse because she's gay and witty."[46] John Lucas suggests that Auden identifies in Byron a spirit of "opposition" grounded in a "principle of delight," whereas in England radicalism is most often linked to an "unremitting seriousness."[47] Subversive politics, therefore, is linked to a spirit of play. Auden, again in the *Don Juan* essay, locates this spirit of play in Don Juan's "gift for social conformity."[48] In an argument that echoes Homi Bhabha's reflections on mimicry, Christopher

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[42] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 95.
[43] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 176.
[44] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 97; my emphasis.
[45] Auden, "*Don Juan,*" 394.
[46] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 97.
[47] Lucas, "Auden's Politics," 153.
[48] Auden, "*Don Juan*," 392-93.

Yu suggests that Byron is significant for Auden "because he championed a performative ideal of social action and expression and therefore understood the falsehood of any claims to essential superiority."[49] Don Juan reveals the inherent performativity of the social sphere through his felicity with mimicry. Although Auden writes his letter to Byron in light verse, he does not mimic Byron's use of ottava rima, claiming that he fears he "should come a cropper" were he to try to do so. Rather, he writes in rhyme royal and demonstrates his poetic mastery by using a form traditionally reserved for serious subject matter for comedic purposes instead, thus enacting a further subversion.

The first part of Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron" employs a remarkable metaphor for poetry that reaches to the heart of the political impetus behind the poem. "Parnassus after all is not a mountain, / Reserved for A.1. climbers such as you," Auden writes, "It's got a park, it's got a public fountain."[50] Auden locates Parnassus, the mythical home of the Muses and of poetry, not in the sublimity of the mountain but in the urbanity of the public fountain. Poetry, in this account, derives its inspiration from public space or landscape possessing the traces of the social and economic spheres. Part II of the "Letter to Lord Byron" claims "Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery, / That was, and still is, my ideal scenery."[51] Both Auden and MacNeice in *Letters from Iceland*, according to Paulin, decry the notion that poetry is about "the unimaginative fields" of Romantic poetry and the pastoral tradition, insisting rather that, "it should be human, political and social."[52] The idea of the park and public fountain as the home of poetry is not just a matter of inspiration and its natural source. Auden emphasizes that poetry is constructed, it is given form, and through this form it is, in fact, social and participatory. A

[49] Yu, *Nothing to Admire*, 152.
[50] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 85.
[51] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 85.
[52] Paulin, "*Letters from Iceland*: Going North," 65.

public fountain may be sculpted, but its purpose is realized when it becomes a meeting place. This is a metaphor with a radical proposition: his poetry is a meeting place in which a community comes into being. Christopher Yu notes that Auden's poetry "consistently articulates the hope of a revolutionary reorganization of society."[53] In "New Year Letter" (1940) Auden opposes "the reduction of modernity to a utilitarian calculus of gains and losses" and posits as an alternative "the *polis* of our friends."[54] While in Yu's analysis this is an articulated hope, I suggest that both Auden's recourse to epistolary verse and his formal experimentation in *Letters from Iceland* works towards instantiating this community. This aspect of Auden's verse has powerful ramifications for community in Flynn's "Letter to Friends."

Letters from Iceland may be ostensibly a travel narrative, but its aesthetic and political significance stems from its status as a highly social and participatory artifact. This status exists in large part through the formal organization of the text and its experimental nature. In the preface to the book, Auden and MacNeice downplay the role of the authors in the creation of a travel book and elevate the role of the people they encounter, expressing their gratitude to "those hundreds of anonymous Icelanders, farmers, fishermen, busmen, children, etc., who are the real authors of this book."[55] Tim Young notes that "the radical force of these very first words still impresses" the contemporary reader of *Letters from Iceland*.[56] It is one thing to pay lip service to the multitude of anonymous co-authors of a book, but Auden and MacNeice instantiate the "group authorship" attested to in the preface in the formal organization of the text. "In choosing to organize [the book] as a series of letters to friends and relatives in England," Paulin concludes,

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[53] Yu, *Nothing to Admire*, 140.
[54] Yu, *Nothing to Admire*, 145. See also, W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), 222-23.
[55] Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (1985), 13.
[56] Tim Youngs, "Auden's Travel Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68.

"Auden and MacNeice selected a pre-eminently *social* form."[57] The epistolary form of the text implies it is a work that is meant for circulation and that is written already in dialogue with the *other*. Far from a unified text originating from a sole author, it is a text always threatening towards dispersion.

The prominence of the epistolary form in *Letters from Iceland* signifies its sociality, but this sociality further asks for the participation of the reader. The text Auden is constructing is a "collage," he explains to Byron. This formal choice, according to Auden, is essentially epistolary in nature since as he states, "every exciting letter has enclosures," including photographs as well as, "[p]ress cuttings, gossip, maps, statistics, graphs."[58] This description diverges from traditional accounts of the epistolary genre that tend to focus on the letter itself and downplay or ignore the possible enclosures that accompany it. The collage-object described by Auden resembles Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno's idea of the "constellation." For Benjamin, the idea of constellation was deeply entwined with his engagement with historiography. In contrast to a traditional teleological historiography based on causality, Benjamin posited the task of a radical materialist historiography as the "construction" of constellations in which fragments of the past would be positioned in conjunction with the present to tap their "revolutionary explosive potential."[59] While Benjamin's theory is primarily to do with history (although with attention paid to the aesthetic sphere), it is Adorno who brings constellation to bear on the realm of the aesthetic in such works as "Essay as Form" and its insistence on a paratactic style. The theory of the "constellation" does not reinscribe the division between theory and history or aesthetics, in

[57] Paulin, "*Letters from Iceland*: Going North," 77.
[58] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 84.
[59] Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin,* (Houndmills, Hampshire, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 53. See also Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 253-264; and, "Convolute N" in *The Arcades Project*, tr. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002).

which theory would comment upon the latter from without. Constellation is fundamentally aesthetic. "Benjamin's and Adorno's much-celebrated theory and practice of the constellation," writes Robert Kaufman, "… is for them the most profound work *of* the aesthetic, the literary, and, above all (because of its medium and that medium's relationship to conceptuality), the poetic in lyric mode."[60] The constellating activity, while disrupting the division between theory and aesthetics, disrupts the border between the author and the reader, as well. The critical theorist/poet constructs a constellation among fragments, but this construction invites the reader to make connections between the elements and to draw out the significance of their juxtapositions. In her work on Auden's experience in documentary film and its influence on *Letters from Iceland*, Marsha Bryant makes a similar point about Auden's poetic practice. In Auden's construction of the text, she notes, he "disrupts the expository structure of documentary with unanchored montage," and he eschews the "authoritative voice-over that lends structure to conventional documentaries." As a result, "Auden invites the reader/viewer to construct meaningful relationships among the book's competing parts."[61] *Letters from Iceland* consistently points to a network of other people, named and anonymous, which author the text in collaboration. This plurality is in itself politically significant but it is made even more radical through Auden's active invitation to the reader to participate in what he would eventually term the "*polis* of friends."

If she finds in Auden and MacNeice a desire to find a participatory poetic form commensurate to the political pressures of the time, one that disrupts the boundary between author and reader, then in Longley she finds rendered explicit the themes of friendship and community that are latent in *Letters from Iceland*. These particular elements are found entwined

[60] Robert Kaufman, "Lyric's Constellation, Poetry's Radical Privilege," *Modernist Cultures* 1.2 (2005 Winter), 212.
[61] Marsha Bryant, "Auden and the 'Arctic Stare': Documentary as Public Collage in *Letters from Iceland*," *Journal of Modern Literature* XVII:4 (1991), 539.

with the "epistolarity" of the works by Auden, MacNeice, and Longley.[62] That is, the form of the verse-letter has a significant bearing on the different meanings to be gleaned from the poems. The letter is essentially social in nature. It is a "bridge" between, at the very least, an addressor and addressee; it is a message designed to circulate.[63] On a more fundamental level, this is a question of the relationship between the private and public spheres, a distinction that hearkens back to the Horatian (public) and Ovidian (private) models of verse-epistle.[64] In his highly complex investigation into the metaphysics of epistolarity, *The Post Card*, Jacques Derrida writes that "letters are always post cards: neither legible nor illegible, open and radically unintelligible."[65] The post card's message is written openly on its surface, legible to all who encounter it, and yet it retains a sense of privacy in the coded intimacy of the correspondents' language. The letter always traverses proliferating rings of sociality, like ripples in a lake, from the tightest ring at the moment of contact to broader rings of social groups and multiple publics. Even when addressed to a specific person, the fact that these verse-letters are primed for publication entails their circulation among a wider audience than the ostensible one; the poet intends the letter to reach both the avowed recipient and a community of anonymous readers. Contemporary poets writing letters in verse, therefore, implicitly partake in a conversation around the question of audience that frames their work as inherently public.

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[62] The term "epistolarity" is coined by Janet Gurkin Altman to refer to "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1982), 4.
[63] Altman, *Epistolarity*, 13.
[64] For an intriguing take on the interplay between the private and public spheres in epistolary novels (Richardson's *Clarissa* in particular) see especially the introduction to Christina Gillis, *The Paradox of Privacy: Epistolary Form in* Clarissa (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), 1-13. To get a better sense of the complexity of the different forms and purposes given to the verse epistle by Ovid and Horace see R. A. Hornsby and T. V. F. Brogan's "Verse Epistle" entry in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Roland Green, Stephen Cushman, and Clare Cavanagh, 4th. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[65] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 79. Derrida's work on epistolarity is largely directed toward his project of deconstructing the foundations of Western philosophy. At one point he writes of a "metaphysics of the posts or of postality" that would be "the 'proper' possibility of every possible rhetoric" (65).

The choice of writing in a poetic form that partakes in certain properties of a letter connects each poem, beyond the question of the public/private distinction, to the history of the epistolary genres (both the verse-epistle and verse-novel) that rose to prominence in English literature during the eighteenth century and to the history of the General Post Office that consolidated its power in the nineteenth century through the proliferation of functions and nodes within the postal network. The epistolary genre in the eighteenth century was dominated by, in the phrasing of Mary Favret, a "sentimental fiction of letters."[66] This fiction posited the letter as an interior, thus private, feminine space and, therefore, "detached from *le monde* of business and cities, untainted by discussions of politics and philosophy."[67] But such a view of the "feminine" letter, according to Favret, "disguises…a revolutionary politics."[68] Flynn, of course, is not writing within the timeframe studied by Favret, but her work nonetheless sheds light on subterranean elements within Flynn's "Letter to Friends." If Longley and Mahon are associated with a masculine lineage of writers of verse letters, from Auden to Pope to Horace, then Flynn is noteworthy as a woman writing within this male-dominated scene and must surely be read in light of a lineage of female authors of literary letters who subvert or push back against the "sentimental fiction," such as Helena Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft.[69]

The subversive potential of the letter coincided, in particular, with the French Revolution and the radical political societies that arose from it. These societies were often predicated on the

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[66] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10. Note that Derrida describes the letter not as a specific genre "but all genres, literature itself" (48). This fits within his philosophical project of deconstruction, particularly with his belief that the letter bears within it the possibility to go astray, but it fails to attend to significant particular features of the epistolary genre in a historical sense (185).
[67] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 21.
[68] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 10.
[69] Favret has individual chapters on Helena Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley in her monograph. For a recent account of contemporary epistolary fiction see, Rachel Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980-2010* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

notion of friendship and these fluid networks of "friends" easily morphed into alternative political associations:

> Produced within this network of radical correspondence was a new sense of 'Union,' 'nation' and 'People' that thousands of men – primarily working class – found exhilarating … The proliferation of corresponding societies encouraged communication between various 'friends of the people,' but it also forged a sense of shared identity and political purpose throughout the British Isles…[70]

The emergence of these societies sparked enormous concern among the authorities. If left unchecked, the corresponding societies had the power "to supersede the House of Commons in its representative capacity, and to assume itself all the functions and powers of a national legislature," according to the 1794 Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons. [71] Facing such danger, Parliament reformed the Postal Service to give it greater power and control over "private communication and exchange," thereby ensuring the "radical separation" of private and public realms.[72] "[T]he question of Power…is first of all that of the post and telecommunications," writes Derrida.[73] As it wielded its power over communication and financial exchange, the network of the Post Office also connected the British Empire to its center in London.[74] In spite of the desire for totality, however, systems fail fully to encompass everything within their grasp. Favret notes that letters from among the groups the Post Office

[70] Favret, *Romantic Correspdondence*, 29.
[71] Quoted in Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 30.
[72] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 203 and 206.
[73] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 103.
[74] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 206-207; for an account of "the fragmentary, subversive, and contingent lines of communication," that arose "on the periphery of the British Empire," see Andrew Kuhn, "The Postal Imagination of Lady Gregory, Thomas Gregory, and Rabindranath Tagore: Writing the Irish Post," *English Literature in Transition* 58.2 (2015) 220; for a twentieth-century view of the Post as a network connecting different elements of England and Scotland see Auden's "Night Mail" (1935), a poem written to accompany a GPO documentary on the mail train, and Tony Harrison's later rewriting of this piece as the film poem *Crossings* (2002).

attempted to neutralize and contain still appeared, "and with [them], the letter's tendency to individuate and decentralize established systems of meaning."[75]

Strikingly, Flynn's world of digital finance and communication (and the surveillance state that arises around them) appears as an extension of this earlier nineteenth-century Postal Empire. I posit that Flynn's verse letter, therefore, is in a prime position to disrupt and "decentralize" the "system of meaning" that leads to a commercialized Belfast, global financial collapse, and rising sea levels. While the poem is driven by this critical edge, what is at stake is the possibility of "community." In the criticism of Favret and the poetry of Auden and Longley, the ideal community emerges through the bonds of friendship. Flynn turns to friendship as a means of establishing an alternative community in the dawn of the 21st century.

iii. Flynn's "Letter to Friends":

In the final section of *Autumn Journal*, Louis MacNeice writes to his audience that they should sleep "to-night… / On the banks of Rubicon," for tomorrow everyone must act to realize their ideal world. Under the shadow of encroaching fascism, he concludes with the hope-tinged statement, "There will be time to audit / The accounts later, there will be sunlight later / And the equation will come out at last."[76] Flynn's *Profit and Loss* appears as an auditing of accounts both personal and public. This auditing of accounts is an explicit theme of "Letter to Friends," expressed early on in the poem through the questions "What happened in between, / those and

[75] Favret, *Romantic Corres* 207.
[76] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 83.

these days? What has been gained or lost?"[77] Perhaps she is responding directly to MacNeice's stated belief that the equation will work out with the assured answer, "Not yet." Or, she is not thinking of the '30s and goes back only as far as her own birth. Regardless, Flynn offers an assessment of the contemporary state of affairs in a similar vein to her avowed poetic models. Her poetic gaze penetrates deeply and "Letter to Friends" registers as a lament for a world suffused by the drive for profit (if someone profits, someone else loses). Such a state is not amenable to a true sense of intimate community. But Flynn, nonetheless, identifies the potential for community in friendship and poetry.

The poem is comprised of three sections, beginning with the personal and opening onto the public. The first section narrates the poet's experience of "sifting | through old boxes of junk" in the process of clearing out an old flat, encountering the ephemera and *disjecta membra* of a lifetime. Similarly to Auden regaling Byron with the state of contemporary England, Flynn broadens her attention in the second section to consider the state of post-ceasefire Belfast and the contours of society at large. She ends by focusing on the 2008 global banking crisis and its origin in Iceland before turning her gaze back to the personal and familial: her father's struggle with Alzheimer's and the birth of her daughter. These three sections are unobtrusively woven together by a narrative trajectory that loosely accords with that of the Great Flood and the Biblical account of Noah. Thus it begins in deluge and ends with "A dove, an olive branch, a ray of light."[78] She imbues the poem thereby with a sense of catastrophe and judgment, but also hope. In order to parse the multiple thematic strands that converge in the poem, I first outline its formal elements before moving on to its political concerns. I then turn to the epistolary nature of the verse-letter and explore how Flynn enacts an alternative community through it.

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[77] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 35. Note that Flynn's first collection is titled *These Days* (2004).
[78] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 45.

a. Search for Form

When it comes to "Letter to Friends," Flynn uses a ten-line stanza. As a multiple of five this choice in stanza could be read as signaling a culmination of her search in the poem "Letter to Friends," the centerpiece and anchor of the collection. Upon closer examination, though, the stanza form she employs is that of the Keatsian ode with its rhyme scheme of *ababcdecde*.[79] Although unnamed, Flynn swaps out Auden's interlocutor, Byron, with Keats. This choice of a now canonical form initially appears to undermine any claim to newness. If the five-line stanza is unmoored from a specific tradition, Flynn again affixes her poetry to a tradition. Auden also writes his verse-letter in a canonical form, rhyme royal, but recall that he employs a traditionally elevated form for the purpose of light verse and subverts it by framing it within an avant-garde text. In spite of the initial discrepancy between tradition and innovation, Flynn's selection of the Keatsian ode is, in fact, a harbinger of new poetic avenues.

Hybridity and newness is inherent in the Keatsian ode form. Keats developed his unique form out of his own experiments with the sonnet, crafting a ten-line ode stanza out of "a Shakespearian sonnet-quatrain (abab) plus a Petrarchan sestet (cdecde)."[80] Moreover, the genre of the ode in English verse is far from stable. Rather, it is an inherently hybrid form stemming from both the more communal Pindaric tradition and the more solitary Horatian one.[81] Flynn, therefore, implicitly refers to a tradition of a hybrid form that shuttles between personal and public concerns. In a sense, Flynn is also staying true to her model of "Letter to Lord Byron"

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[79] Erin Mitchell also identifies the form in which Flynn writes, but she emphasizes the ode as a form of "praise." She writes, "in 'Letter to Friends' Flynn sings the praises of a heap of junk destined to become ash, and thus re-attaches that junk to experience and significance." Erin C. Mitchell, "Leontia Flynn's Poetic 'Museums': Losing, Saving, and Giving Away Belfast's Trash," *New Hibernia Review* 18.2 (Summer 2014), 116.

[80] Paul Sheats, "Keats and the Ode," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 90.

[81] See, Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 81-82, for a discussion on the history of the ode form in English verse.

since Keats is a contemporary of Byron. A pattern is emerging in *Profit and Loss*, though, one that invests Flynn's choices of poetic influence with a deeper significance. Auden and MacNeice, Byron and Keats, all belong to a *younger* coterie of poets from the literary movements with which they are associated, as does the Roman Neoteric poet Catullus, of whose work Flynn provides translations in Part Three of her volume.[82] This lineage is one of political and poetic radicalism, at least relative to the poetic predecessors against whom they were rebelling. (Jeffrey Cox suggests that Keats and other members of the Hunt Circle saw Catullus "as a poet of a radical eroticism" on which they modeled their own poetry.[83] While building on the aesthetic innovations of Wordsworth and Coleridge, on the one hand, and Eliot and Pound, on the other, the younger poetic generation espoused a more consistently left-leaning politics.) By positioning herself in relation to Catullus, Keats, Auden, and MacNeice, Flynn taps into these radical undercurrents while subtly making the statement that she is part of a younger generation of Northern Irish poets who are trying to find their own voice while acknowledging the tradition from which they emerge.

The formal precision of Flynn's poetry helps shape what we come to see as a fragmentary subjective experience in a dispersed and heterogeneous postmodernity. Section One of "Letter to Friends" opens with the poet musing about her friends, "and how, when the last millennium rolled over / […] the whole world didn't end."[84] She is watching photos of her and her friends, "newly digitised, / fading across the distance of the screen." Such an opening coincides with Flynn's persistent interest in technology and obsolescence. The apocalyptic event towards which

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[82] *Neoteric* means "new" or "modern."
[83] Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt, and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 186. Cox draws fascinating correlations between Catullus and the poetry of Keats. I am intrigued by Flynn's sustained interest in Catullus—there are three versions of Catullus poems in her most recent volume, *The Radio*, in addition to those in *Profit and Loss*—and it is an element of her recent work that deserves attention.
[84] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 35.

she gestures is Y2K. The event came and went without the widespread disruption in financial and computing systems that many feared, but Flynn strikes a tone of wariness. The whole world didn't end but, nonetheless, in their digitized form each of her friends now seems an "electronic ghost." Apocalypse may have been averted but we may also be heading towards a new one. She ends the stanza with an onrush of questions:

> Things carried on. Were we, perhaps, surprised
> — and are we still? What happened in between,
> those and these days? What has been gained or lost?[85]

This move is reminiscent of the six lines of questions Keats poses to the Grecian Urn at the end of that ode's first stanza, hoping that the urn as "sylvan historian" can reveal its secrets to him.[86] But to whom does Flynn pose her questions? How will she determine what has been gained or lost? What object(s) will be Flynn's "sylvan historian," and what history will it tell?[87]

Flynn begins to answer this last question in the second stanza when she turns to the "boxes of old junk" in her flat she must sift through. "[I]t seemed preserved this stuff, as in a drift / of snow," she writes, positing these objects as artifacts to uncover and study, equivalent to an ancient urn. Among the objects Flynn unpacks and sorts through: photos, student IDs, receipts, "some notes for countries long since using Euro," "concertina'd inventories" for trips, old address books, phone numbers for landlines, ticket stubs, postcards, prescriptions, notices of a "student loan […] in arrears," a hand-drawn map, etc. Instead of a "well-wrought urn," Flynn presents her reader with a box of fragments.[88] Such an image recalls Paul de Man's reading of

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[85] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 35.
[86] Jeffrey N. Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), Norton See Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, […] for an extended discussion of the way in which Keats's ode figures the relationship between art and reality.
[87] Mitchell's argument that Flynn constructs a poetic "museum" of Belfast implies a sort of stasis that belies the political edge to Flynn's act of poetically gathering the fragments of her life and that of the city.
[88] Critics such as James O'Rourke and Jeffrey Cox note that contrary to what a New Critical reading would imply, Keats's urn is always already fragmentary insofar as Keats constructed it from multiple sources. Jeffrey Cox,

Walter Benjamin's "The Task of a Translator," where he suggests that Benjamin's description of language as a vessel broken into many parts is a metonymy and not a metaphor. "[H]e is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality," writes de Man, "he says the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary."[89] Flynn presents objects of a life that remain thoroughly fragmentary and that gain critical strength in their failure to coalesce into a unified object, as the Keats inter-text primes the reader to expect. The items listed by Flynn point to a fundamental transience that harkens back to MacNeice's "Autumn Journal" and the various journeying selves he present therein. But they also beg the question that seems to simmer beneath the surface of Flynn's writing as to whether or not the bureaucratic traces she leaves in any way correspond to her lived experience.

b. Politics

Among the items Flynn sifts through, she writes, is "a photo of me drunk at Marx's grave."[90] The photo of Flynn at Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery is framed as a lark, more a drunken revel while touring London than an act of solemn remembrance. Gamble hones in on Flynn's tendency towards wry humor when she describes Flynn's earlier writing as "winsome," but, she notes, this tone "has tended to distract attention from the seriousness of the matter at hand," which is very much present in her work.[91] Beneath the humor of Flynn's encounter with Marx is a serious concern with global capitalism and its modern digital iteration in the form of derivative finance that runs throughout the poem, aligning it with the economic politics of Auden

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Cockney Classicism: History with Footnotes, 154; and, James O'Rourke, *Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 1998), 65.

[89] Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91.

[90] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 37.

[91] Gamble, "'A Potted Peace / Lily'?" 673.

and MacNeice's 1930s poetry.[92] Towards the end of the first section, Flynn describes finding in the box "a desolate financial paper trail" and following that trail until:

> … hoopla – I shed myself with paperclips,
> with tax and housing benefits, till I've
> left myself bureaucratically quite naked.
>
> Naked – or, worse: flayed. Flinching. Overwrought.
> […]

Flynn's use of "overwrought" here recalls the first lines of the fifth and final stanza of "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought…" Kenneth Burke and Susan Wolfson both note the proliferation of puns within these lines that emphasize the eroticism of the scene.[93] Instead of the eroticism of the "worked up" figures on Keats's urn, Flynn resituates "overwrought" in a context that underlines its meanings of "distraught" and "exhausted by overwork" (*OED* 1). In shedding herself of the financial paper trail she literally "comes apart" (*OED*, "shed," v.1c). This is not a process of paring back to reveal an essential, "naked," self underneath the bureaucracy. The process of shedding oneself is that of flaying: it goes beneath the skin with the implication that the self is at least partially constructed through and by such bureaucracy. In this sinister state of affairs, the abstraction of finance and its hyper-abstracted form in our digital world have seriously physical effects.

Flynn carries this economic concern to the second section of the poem, where she turns to an examination of the present state of Belfast. Such a turn to a civic scene echoes the similar turn in the fourth stanza of Keats's ode, where he imagines a city with a "peaceful citadel" forever

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[92] Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[93] Kenneth Burke, "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," (459); Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, 324-25. Wolfson clarifies that this is an arrested eroticism, forever on the brink of consummation.

"silent" and "desolate." And Auden and MacNeice both cast a reflective and critical gaze on their respective countries of birth, emphasizing their participation in networks of global capitalism and the class politics that attend that participation. Flynn, in her turn to Belfast as read through the poem's multiple inter-texts, shifts our interpretive framework from sectarian politics to class politics:

> … Belfast, long the blight
> and blot on lives has now brought to an end
> or several ends, its grim traumatic fight;
> the pay-off packet and the dividend
> amid the double-dealings, halts and heists:
> a building boom and shopping malls thrown up
> like flotsam by our new security.
> Here are our palaces of snow and ice,
> 'and so folks with *esprit de corps* we'll shop
> ourselves to civilised maturity'.[94]

There is an odd tension within Keats's phrase "peaceful citadel" that, when paired with "desolate" recalls Tacitus's "*ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*"[95] A similar tension exists within Flynn's stanza on Belfast. The "grim traumatic fight" of the Troubles may have ended, but the nature of this peace is called into question. It is not a seamless peace, and the internal consonance and half-rhymes that propel the initial lines forward from "Belfast" to "blight" to "blot" to "brought" (is the logical conclusion an unspoken "bought"?) are arrested in the qualifying aside, "or several ends," with its jarring sibilance. The "end" is brought about through the "pay-off packet and the dividend," underscored by its relation through end rhyme. Flynn equates security with a shipwreck since in legal usage *flotsam* refers to "such part of the wreckage of a ship or its cargo as is found floating on the surface of the sea," implicitly pointing

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[94] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 41.

[95] Tacitus, *De Vita et Moribus Iulii Agricola (Agricola)*, Ch. 30. Cleanth Brooks notes that "the phrase 'peaceful citiadel'…involves a clash between the ideas of war and peace," but he goes on to suggest that Keats resolves this clash in a sense of "stable repose" (161). Cox pushes against such a reading by proposing that Keats has in mind the Catullan epyllion while writing about the Grecian Urn (163-168).

to those who would profit from tragedy.[96] Whatever is built, though, is ephemeral; "palaces of snow and ice" do not fare well in a world undergoing global warming. Following upon the heels of the shipwreck imagery, a palace of ice also evokes the iceberg struck by the *Titanic*, which was built in the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast. It is as if Flynn is saying, Belfast is built upon shipwrecks and it is headed towards another.

Flynn is not alone in criticizing the Peace Process and the ensuing "progress" experienced by Belfast. Aaron Kelly performs just such a trenchant analysis of the Peace Process by focusing in particular on the oft-ignored question of economic justice in Northern Ireland. He writes:

> In contrast to a popular will to end sectarian conflict, the state-sponsored aspects of the Peace Process – extending British 'Third Way' capitalism westwards and the Celtic Tiger northwards…aim at establishing a wishy-washy and market-driven postmodern pluralism that actually serves to mask the real socioeconomic divides in our city that threaten ultimately to remove power from people completely.[97]

Flynn seems particularly attuned to this type of economic critique, taking the brief mention of migrant workers from "The Vibrator" and expanding it to a full-blown criticism of the capitalist forces within Belfast. But this criticism does not remain strictly within the local parameters of the city or region. In spite of her peers' "retail therapy," Flynn identifies a pervasive sense of sadness and depression among them. In a powerful use of paralepsis, Flynn recounts a list of global concerns while stating that in her opinion they aren't "merely" the cause of the malaise gripping her generation. Among these concerns are "a far-off war / fought in our names (not so remote its stink / can't reach us in our hiding places)" and ecological crisis, "(the waste, the

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[96] *OED*, "flotsam," 1a.
[97] Aaron Kelly, "Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland," *Third Text*, 9:5 (September 2005), 547-8. Miriam Gamble highlights this quote and uses it as a platform from which to launch into a reading of the poetry of Alan Gillis.

global warming, melting ice, / our ravenous consumption of resources…)."[98] There is a striking ambivalence at work within these lines that condemns while acknowledging Flynn's (and the reader's) implication within the mechanisms that make the War on Terror and global warming possible. The war, after all, is "fought in our names" and there does not seem to be the possibility of hiding from it. Likewise Flynn reads news of global warming, so bad, she tells us, that "I plugged my laptop in to read it twice," before adding the ironic comment that "such are the depths of my profound remorses." Reading the news twice and thereby accessing the power grid, not only accomplishes nothing, it in fact contributes to the problem. She goes on to discuss the status of women and the decline in faith—a decline that does not truly exist, to prove which one only need "google 'US' and 'fundamentalism' / and 'profit.'"[99] Running beneath all of these concerns, however, is the larger economic concern. Her inability to isolate a single cause of the malaise suggests that it emerges from the interaction of them all.

The critique of capitalism in Belfast persists into the third section, where it expands into a critique of global capitalism as Flynn turns her attention to the global financial crisis of 2008 and its source in Iceland:

> […]
> so Auden and MacNeice out on their rambles
> round Iceland (where I was a year ago)
> would hardly have guessed that outpost's part was key
> in all this mess: how its financial gambles,
> — while global warming melts the Arctic snow —
> have frozen up its whole *liquidity*.[100]

In this first stanza of Section Three, Flynn explicitly draws a connection between Auden and MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland* and her own work. Auden and MacNeice were sensitive to the ravages of global capitalism, and while they may not have anticipated the specifics of the 2008

[98] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 42.
[99] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 42.
[100] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 43.

financial crisis, they did travel to Iceland so as to grapple with Europe-wide problems. More importantly, Flynn positions global warming and predatory capitalism as correlates, derived from the same impetus to profit and consumption. She wryly expresses this correlation by punning on the notion of liquidity. After discussing economic and environmental peril, Flynn turns back to private concerns. She writes that "neither really outweighs private grief / or private fears," going on to describe her experience of her father's Alzheimer's disease and his state of decline, and her experience of being a new mother. These experiences, however, do not negate global concerns. Flynn employs a metaphor that links the personal and the public. The global financial crisis and global warming do not "outweigh" personal issues, but they are held in balance through metaphor. She writes about watching her father continue to decline—"then that bubble bursts"—using the language that is applied to the housing crisis; the housing bubble similarly burst.[101]

Flynn continues to combine the personal and public when she describes motherhood as a "battlezone / cloaked in a fog of stunned tranquility," picking up on her mention of the War on Terror earlier, and the poem "Room in April" from Part One, in which she mentions reading "poetry from the wars" before going in to give birth.[102] The metaphor of a flood that begins in the proem and that winds its way implicitly throughout the poem in the mentions of melting polar ice and rising sea levels emerges again in the final two stanzas of the poem. The deluge has cleared and this change in weather causes Flynn to ask whether "the intensity of my tirade" was enough to bring it about:

> … (I almost want to check,
> the flood abated, for some hovering dove …)
>
> A dove, an olive branch, a ray of light.[103]

[101] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 44.
[102] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 32.
[103] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 45.

What initially was present as a mere suggestion of the biblical flood is here made explicit with the references to the signs of peace that God sent to Noah. There is apocalypse but there is also survival. In the final lines Flynn turns her gaze to the future ("The future's all a guess") and to her six-month old daughter. "My heap of junk is ready for the fire," she writes, "our lives stand waiting, primed for compromise." The past, in the form of her box of ephemera, is ready to be purged in fire, and Flynn emphasizes that this is a liminal moment in time, an opportunity for new beginnings watched over by the spirit of compromise. Political critique clears the space needed so as to allow a glimmer of hope to be born.

c. Epistolary Community

Auden and Longley both address their verse-letters to specific people. Flynn, however, does not. She addresses her letter more generally to "friends," never naming them and thus leaving it an ambiguously open category. In lieu of an actual salutation, Flynn begins the second stanza of the poem, following the proem, with the line, "Recently I've been thinking of my friends."[104] Perhaps there is a ghostly second-person plural lurking behind the line as in, "Recently I've been thinking of *you*, my friends." But this is not what is written, and the actual line disorients the reader with its vague third-person perspective. Do the friends of this line coincide with the friends of the title? Who exactly are the addressees of the letter?

Bonnie Costello, in her work on "we" and the lyric, notes that "the first-person plural in poetry is often modulated and palimpsestic, moving between restrictive and inclusive forms within and beyond particular communicative frameworks."[105] This dynamic pronoun proves an ideal means through which to assay differing configurations of community within poetry. She

[104] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 35.
[105] Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13.

identifies Auden as a poet extraordinarily adept at using "we" and, furthermore, a poet who persistently investigates community in all of its varying shades. I argue that Flynn, too, wields pronominal ambiguity in "Letter to Friends" to render fluid the borders of the community of "friends" and to suggest a potential radical community in the face of political and financial collapse.

The first-person plural pronoun in Flynn's poem attends varying and overlapping social configurations. "We," in the beginning, refers to pictures of Flynn and her friends who appear "newly digitised" on her laptop's screensaver. The personal orbit of "we" appears in the first section of the poem, which is the most biographically retrospective. There are pictures of her with past boyfriends, for example, including one in New York City prior to September 11, 2001. "Why are we happy?" she writes in a parenthetical aside, "Why are we not in tears / bowed by foreknowledge?"[106] This personal "we" continues into the second section, but it becomes more ambiguous as it travels. She begins by referring to past events with friends, which remain closed off by indexing a select group, but she then alludes to the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*: "How quaint to think we few, we happy few…"[107] The deictic nature of the pronoun suggests that it is another reference to the friends she has been discussing, yet the reader also witnesses the palimpsestic quality of "we." By invoking that prior "band of brothers," Flynn begins to open the pronoun up to others. She repeats this strategy in the next stanza, which opens with the lines, "Indeed our ways to waste time are so many / they'd make a longer book than *Ulysses.*"[108] This is almost a direct quotation from Part II of Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron," where he describes

[106] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 37.
[107] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 39.
[108] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 39.

to Byron the contemporary culture of Great Britain (and the West more broadly).[109] By alluding to this moment in Auden's poem, Flynn muddies the distinction between describing her friends and placing them as part of larger social groups. There is the "far-off war / fought in *our* names," which implies an international coalition between the United States and Great Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the reference to "fears for *our* planet," which suggests a global community.[110] "We" continues to dilate and contract throughout the second and third sections of the poem, from the more inclusive to the more restrictive and vice versa. Among the communities she identifies are those of friends, lovers, family, culture, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and humanity. The most intriguing category, though, remains that of friends.

The instability of "we," its fluidity in "Letter to Friends," means that the addressee of the letter never becomes entirely clear. As mentioned above, the opening of the first section of the poem undermines our expectation of the second person form of address that is germane to the epistolary genre. Later in the poem, Flynn does turn to this form of address when she briefly interrupts her "tirade" in order "to check you're right / behind me."[111] In other examples of epistolary verse that are addressed to a specific person, one reads these instance of the deictic pronoun, "you," as an index of the addressee, even as a deictic slippage that entails the reader is addressed as well. The verse letter is not intended to remain private but to be published for public consumption and, therefore, is addressed to the future reader as well. This is even more the case with the ambiguity of Flynn's addressee, "friends." The reader of "Letter to Friends" is hailed, in effect, by Flynn and becomes one of the "friends." They are invited into the "we," "a space of

[109] The original lines are, "Indeed our ways to waste time are so many, / Thanks to technology, a list of these / Would make a longer book than *Ulysses*" (Auden, *Collected Poems*, 91). This is an intriguing subtext due to Flynn's fascination with technology.
[110] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 42; emphasis added.
[111] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 43.

the common," equivalent to Auden's park with its "public fountain."[112] The addressee of the letter is left unspecified and open, because as it circulates among a readership it continues to accumulate new addressees. Unlike the specificity of Longley's "sodality of the imagination" as his fellow poets, Flynn's community of friends includes both foreseen and unforeseen members. "A community,' writes Costello, "because it is inclusive, is never fully formed."[113] The community of friends is never complete.

A closed definition of community, one based on "belonging, identity, and ownership," is what was operative during the Troubles and in the competing nationalisms that were its motive force. In order to truly move beyond the Troubles, it is necessary to reimagine the communities of Northern Ireland anew. That is, community cannot be a question of something that is possessed or owned, nor can it be entirely produced or actualized. True community, in the sense of Blanchot, Nancy, and Esposito, is more fragile than that, and in that fragility—the vulnerability in the face of the other—lies its strength. Flynn reimagines community for a post-Troubles world through her verse letter and the community of friends it posits. It is not just the legacy of the Troubles with which she must grapple. Her sense of community also counters the ravaging of community by the forces of global, predatory capitalism and climate change. Thus far in my analysis, I have emphasized the epistolary element of the verse letter but the poetic element is just as significant to Flynn and it provides a means of resistance.

d. Poetry

Thus far in my analysis, I have emphasized the epistolary element of the verse letter, but the poetic element is just as significant to Flynn, and it provides a means of resistance. Amidst

[112] Costello, *The Plural of Us*, 185. "Poetry can keep its inclusive 'we' open and flexible, a space of the common, a space Buber says is 'on fire' with the dynamism of human speech."
[113] Costello, *The Plural of Us*, 27.

her concerns with the Peace Process, climate change, and the ravages of unchecked global capitalism, Flynn makes the case for poetry's disruptive potential. In the second section of "Letter to Friends," Flynn notes that poetry has received failing marks from the public, "its flourishes and willed opacities / are verbal tics The People can't forgive."[114] This is not just a matter of obscurity, however. Flynn quickly follows upon this by ventriloquizing The People's argument and then connecting it to the larger questions at work in the poem:

> […]
> The problem is we're not sure what it's *for* …
> It's out of step with our capacities
> for being literal – and *lucrative*

Its utility is called into question by The People, along with its financial exchangeability; it is not productive or profitable. Flynn offers a sardonic riposte several lines later asking:

> […] is it *too much* to hope we'd choose
> amid this stream of books, texts, films and tunes
> some oddball words with which one has to grapple?

Poetry has fallen out of favor amid a glut of consumable media. This is certainly a critique of our consumer culture but it also indicates the strategic strength of poetry within this state of affairs. In her essay, "Radically Necessary: Heaney's Defence of Poetry," Flynn locates this "radical" view in Seamus Heaney's belief in poetic autonomy: "at a time of rapid technological and social change, when almost everything is for sale…Heaney's refusal to say that poetry is something it isn't, or does something it doesn't, looks increasingly radical."[115] Flynn continues to explore this oppositional vein when she describes poetry ("represented by the obsessive devotion to poetic craft") as a "counter-economy" since, after all, the poet cannot "invoice" anyone for the time she

[114] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 40.
[115] Leontia Flynn, "Radically Necessary: Heaney's Defence of Poetry," *Irish Review* 49-50 (2014/2015), 209.

spends meticulously crafting a poem.[116] Poetry's uselessness is not just refreshing in today's world; it is also politically necessary.

As she states in "Letter to Friends," poetry is regularly dismissed on the basis that it is neither literal nor lucrative. The "stream" of media points to an overabundance of options from which to choose, but it also points to the emphasis on speed in the digital era. The ability to "stream" media depends greatly on download speeds or even internet capacity, and the opaque language of poetry is arresting insofar is as it compels the reader to pause and "grapple" with the language. More importantly, its opacity diminishes its exchangeablity, which depends on abstraction and transparency. This argument is akin to the theoretical work of the Italian theorist Franco Berardi in *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012). He argues that both language and finance tend towards abstraction and that poetry offers a conceptual way to resist the destructive tendency of capitalism, particularly in the wake of the global financial collapse. He diagnoses what he calls the "automation of language," the capitalization of the linguistic sphere, in which language is reduced to exchange.[117] In his estimation, however, poetry is a "hidden resource" since it "is the language of nonexchangeability, the return of infinite hermeneutics, and the return of the sensuous body of language."[118] Poetic language, in other words, consists of "oddball words with which one has to grapple." Not only does poetic language undermine

[116] Flynn, "Radically Necessary," 211.
[117] Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012), 16-17. The "automation of language" occurs as part of two processes. The first is "when the financial function (the accumulation of value through semiotic circulation) cancels the instinctual side of enunciation, so that what is enunciated may be compatible with digital-financial formats" (17). And the second involves "indexicalization" in digital algorithms and the severing of the sign from the referent: "the word is no longer a factor in the conjunction of talking affective bodies, but a connector of signifying functions transcodified by the economy" (18-19). See also, Appadurai's *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance*.
[118] Berardi, *The Uprising*, 139-140. This role of poetry is based on deixis, which "acts against the reduction of language to indexicalization and abstract individuation, and the voice, "which acts against the recombinant desensualization of language" (22).

exchangeability, its opacity causes the reader to slow down and to engage in the process of making meaning.

Poetry does not just subvert monetization and the drive for profit; it directly affects the type of community that can come into being. In the second part of "Letter to Friends," Flynn critiques the contemporary landscape of digital, social-media in which we live, describing a "cacophony / of texts and tweets and emails" that "operate like bat-squeaks in a cave / to steer us in the dark."[119] Social media—the "modern methods of communication," as Auden has it—positions us in the world, but it does not do it well.[120] It is "a world which is always 'on', always in agreement, immediate and decisive."[121] Social media quantifies—and in the process monetizes—affective response, communication, and friendship.[122] Authentic communication and friendship is diminished in such a superficial world. It is with this in mind that Flynn, in "Letter to Friends," ironically references E. M. Forster's dictum: "only connect."[123] People connect through cyberspace, but this connectivity is not the type that Forster or Flynn desires. In the conclusion to "Radically Necessary," Flynn reflects on the potential of poetry to offer a different means of connectivity and community:

> At the very least, in a digital age, [poetry] might just offer students the chance to read something that, for once, isn't directly or indirectly trying to sell them something. That is, poetry can provide a rare connection with a private mind which is not the precursor to some other transaction…Moreover, in offering a non-utilitarian reflection on their human experience, poetry…provides consolation amid what appears to be the otherwise continual pressure of being groomed and trained for entry into the workplace. Indeed in a world increasingly populated by (LinkedIn) professionals and experts, poems belong to a dwindling space which exists outside this.[124]

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[119] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 39.
[120] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 81. "I can't improve on Pope's shrill indignation, / But hope that it will please his spiteful ghost / To learn the use in culture's propagation / Of modern methods of communication."
[121] Flynn, "Radically Necessary," 211.
[122] Flynn, "Radically Necessary," 210-12
[123] Flynn, *Profit and Loss*, 40.
[124] Flynn, "Radically Necessary," 217.

Though she focuses on students and young people, Flynn's concluding statements appear as almost a *post facto* justification of the impulse behind "Letter to Friends." Texts, tweets, and emails are all messages transmitted from one person to others. By writing a verse letter, Flynn sends her own message that resists this digital "model of communication."[125] Through her letter she opens a space in which community can emerge based on authentic friendship and communication.

iv. Conclusion:

Leontia Flynn's *Profit and Loss* takes its place as one of the essential volumes of poetry to emerge from the "New North." As demonstrated, Flynn both positions her work within a lineage of Northern Irish poets (MacNeice, Mahon, Longley, Heaney) and seeks new directions for her poetry to take. These new directions are necessary for representing Northern Ireland after the adoption of the Good Friday Agreement. Shifting from the politics of internecine sectarian conflict in the North, Flynn casts her gaze on the injustices of global capitalism and the danger of climate change. She turns to the '30s work of Auden and MacNeice as examples for this endeavor, but their work also exists within *Profit and Loss* as a message from the past to which Flynn implicitly responds. Their concerns—global financial collapse, the rise of far right political movements, technological advance and its participation in consumer culture—are contemporary concerns, she seems to be saying.

Flynn addresses these concerns in "Letter to Friends," her "good sized public-minded poem," but she also "intervenes in…the construction of the political sphere" through her verse letter. I have argued that through the ambiguity of the letter's addressee, the unspecified

[125] Flynn, "Radically Necessary," 211. She writes that, "the internet and social media offer[…] an alternative, opposed model of communication" to that of poetry.

"friends," and the inherent sociality of the epistolary genre, Flynn essentially constructs a potential community of readers; the reader becomes a friend by the very act of reading the letter. This radical community counters both the closed communities of nationalism and the erosion of authentic community via global capitalism, climate change, and social media. Her conception of "friend," then, is akin to Auden's when he writes of "a *polis* of our friends" in "New Year Letter." Although she navigates the personal and the public, they do not stand in stark contrast to each other. Rather, it is through the personal that she can envision a radically altered political sphere. Costello notes the importance of the epithalamium in Auden's evolving exploration of the possibility of community. "The 'we' created by a vow is not so much a reciprocal voicing of commitment," she writes, "as a surrendering of selfish will to an ethical bond, a bond of obligation rather than requital."[126] It is intriguing that Flynn ends *Profit and Loss* with an epithalamium, titled "Winter Weather."[127] She constructs an ethical community based on vulnerability and the obligation to attend to others. The threads of this community are woven by poetry, the opacity of which prompts deep engagement and the unproductivity of which eschews market forces. She confirms in "Letter to Friends" both Auden's declaration from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that "poetry makes nothing happen," and his immediate clarification that "it survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper…"

[126] Costello, *The Plural of Us*, 81-82.
[127] Note that Michael Longley opens *No Continuing City* with his poem "Epithalamion," a traditional form of celebratory verse on the occasion of a marriage.

Coda: Postal Poetry Beyond Northern Ireland

This dissertation has focused on what I have termed "postal" poetics in contemporary Northern Irish poetry. Building on Jacques Derrida's analysis of the "postcard," Janet Altman's notion of "epistolarity," and Mary Favret's politico-literary history of the British postal service, I have argued that a postal poetics sketches a critically utopic sense of community through its emphasis on poetry and address, poetry as disruptive of communication, the public/private divide, transmission and circulation, and the poetic franking of date and place. This postal poetics is in dialogue with a body of work on the notion of community in contemporary Continental philosophy, especially as found in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito. These thinkers emphasize a radically open "community-to-come" that would be opposed, employing a term from Esposito, to the political impulse of "immunization" against difference. This latter type of community is representative of nationalism: a homogeneous community defined by clear boundaries and based on an essential relationship between a people and a specific territory of land. Such a conversation, as I have shown, is highly germane to the contemporary political situation in Northern Ireland. After the thirty years of sectarian violence that defined the Troubles (1968-1998)—what Richard Kearney has contended is a conflict between competing nationalisms—Northern Ireland received a new political dispensation in 1998 with the signing of The Good Friday Peace Agreement, officially marking the end of the Troubles and the beginning of a tentative peace. But if 1998 represents a moment of political opportunity to re-imagine the contours of community, then 2016 and the lead up to the "Brexit" referendum mark a haunting return of nationalism and the borders that attend it.[1] For Northern Ireland, in particular, there is serious concern about what will happen if the British

[1] It should be noted that although the referendum passed, Northern Ireland and Scotland voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union, whereas England and Wales voted to leave.

government undermines The Good Friday Agreement by reinstituting a customs border in Ireland between the North and the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, I have examined Northern Irish poetry from this period in the hopes of gleaning poetic resources for transforming the "political imaginary."[2] In fact, I have argued, in postal poems from Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson, and Leontia Flynn, we witness implicit and explicit responses to community, both in the shapes it has taken and in the shapes it has yet to take.[3]

Although the main argument of this dissertation is focused on the relationship between postal poetics and community, an underlying argument is that extant scholarship on epistolary poetry has largely confined it to the eighteenth century and, minimally, early nineteenth century in correlation with the rise and decline of the epistolary novel. However, as I have shown, "epistolary" poetry is very much alive and well in modern and contemporary poetry but there has yet to be a significant critical treatment of this body of work, which has thus flown somewhat under the radar. I have focused on Northern Irish poetry because the focus on one place with a tumultuous contemporary political situation has allowed me to delve deeply into the connection between poetry and community. But postal poetics is not isolated to Northern Ireland and there are a number of compelling examples of letter poems in modern and contemporary Anglophone poetry.

Among the modern and contemporary individual poems and poetry collections that are written in a postal form or use the post as an organizing principle are the following: Wallace Stevens's "*Lettres d'un Soldat*" and "A Postcard from the Volcano"; W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland* (containing Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron"); Auden's lyrical

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[2] Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

[3] As delineated in the introduction to this dissertation, these are not the only postal poems from Northern Ireland. For example, see Derek Mahon's book-length poem *The Hudson Letter*, E. A. Markham's *Letter from Ulster and the Hugo Poems*, and Paul Muldoon's "90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore" (previously printed in an earlier form as a chapbook with the title *60 Instant Messages to Tom Moore*).

documentary narration, "Night Mail," and the later long poem "New Year Letter"; Muriel Rukesyer's poetic sequence "Letter to the Front" (1944); Charles Olson's *Mayan Letters* and the letters from Maximus contained in his expansive series of *Maximus Poems*; Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*; John Fuller's *Epistles to Several Persons*; Thomas James's *Letters to a Stranger*; Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*; Lucie Brock-Broido's *The Master Letters*; Michael Palmer's series of "Letters to Zanzotto" in *At Passages*; Imtiaz Dharker's *Postcards from God*; Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*; Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country with No Post Office*; Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament*; Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz's poetic correspondence, "Envelopes of Air," published in *The New Yorker*; Tracy K. Smith's postal poems in *Wade in the Water*; and Molly McCully Brown and Susannah Nevison's *Post-Op Letters in the Field Between Us* (forthcoming). Additionally, there are examples of larger meta-engagements with postal poetry. Emily Dickinson, for example, drafted "envelope poems" on the envelopes from letters she received, which were recently published as *The Beautiful Nothings*. Derek Walcott mentioned in an interview that the "emblem" of his poetic style would be that of a postcard, "Wish You Were Here," before he goes on to say, "there is a lot to be said for postcards and why there are postcards."[4] As should be clear from this list, postal poetry has appeared throughout the span of the twentieth century and touches on a wide range of issues including those that are the focus of this dissertation: poetics and community. Why are poets, and particularly avant-garde poets, continually attracted to the form or formal components of letters? If, as I point out in the introduction, Roman Jakobson argues that the poetic function of language "suspends" the communicative function of language—that is, poetic language is not invested in transmitting a message but in drawing attention to itself as language—what happens or is signified when poetic

[4] Walcott's example suggests many connotations to the postcard, including the specter of colonialism and the tourist industry. This would be a compelling thread to follow. Additionally, Walcott's image appears on some St. Lucian stamps.

language is given a communicative form? To borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan, does the medium then become the message? Is there something radical in such a conjunction? Does poetry, possibly, give us resources for resisting the modern digitization of communication in which our messages pass through algorithms that, in turn, submit that content to surveillance and monetization? Can postal poetics instantiate a communal gathering that could resist the atomization and/or neo-nationalism that we are currently experiencing?

The book project that emerges from this dissertation will tackle such questions. Expanding out from the Northern Irish focus, it will explore the conjunctions between poetry, communication, and political community that occur in postal poetry. In this coda, I will gesture towards what this might look like by briefly discussing several of the contemporary examples from above, viz. Ali's *The Country with No Post Office*, and Limón and Diaz's "Envelopes of Air." My aim is to sketch the through-lines between the significant elements of the Northern Irish postal poems and this larger postal poetic-scape. For a dissertation largely concerned with national openness over national closure—the archipelago over the island—this coda gives me the opportunity to position Northern Ireland within a constellation of different communities and the poets who wrestle with the shape their communities take and the shapes they *could* take.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi in 1949 and raised in Srinagar, Kashmir, living for a brief time in his teens with his family in Indiana, before permanently moving to the United States in 1975 where he wrote poetry and taught at various colleges and universities until his death from cancer in 2001. Perhaps most well known for his "formalization of the ghazal" in English poetry, an "Arabic-Persian-Urdu-descended [poetic] form," he also wrote longingly of Kashmir through his poetry and particularly introduced his American readers to the violence that

engulfed the region in the late 1980s and into the '90s.[5] For the purposes of the present study, Ali is noteworthy for his turn to the "postal" as a means of approaching Kashmir. In "Postcard from Kashmir," for example, from his first published collection, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), Ali writes of how the postcard contains Kashmir within its frame and thus allows its transmission: "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox, / my home a neat four by six inches." Within the poem there exists an interplay between "home" and "exile," where the poet worries that the intensely vivid memories he has of home, as represented through the brilliance of the image on the postcard, will forever exceed the reality he will face upon his return to Kashmir: "When I return, / the colors won't be so brilliant."[6] The postcard thus is a significant vehicle through which to explore the poet's experience and memory of home and the possibility or impossibility of return. But Ali heightens this line of reflection in *The Country without a Post Office* (1997) where he engages with a home riven by violence.

The modern history of Kashmir as a disputed region begins with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, when an area that has historically been home to Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist inhabitants was divided by a militarized Line of Control (LOC) that separated Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir.[7] In 1989, Srinagar became the focal point of a militant independence movement, which then resulted in India declaring martial

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[5] Amitav Ghosh makes the claim that, "the formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid's most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry," in his memorial essay, "The Ghat of the Only World: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," in *Mad Heart Be Brave: Essays on the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali*, ed. Kazim Ali (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 205. Steph Burt, in "Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir," provides the provenance of the ghazal poetic form and contends that one of Ali's major contributions to American poetry is that, "he was the poet, perhaps the only poet, who brought into American English the modern history of Kashmir" (104). Burt's essay can likewise be found in *Mad Heart Be Brave*.

[6] Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 29. Amanda Golden has a fascinating reading of this poem and *The Country Without A Post Office* within the contexts of poetic archives (in particular, actual postcards from Kashmir that Ali sent to the poet Anthony Hecht) and pedagogy in her essay collected in *Mad Heart Be Brave*, "'This is an archive': Agha Shahid Ali's Postcards from Kashmir."

[7] This history is synthesized from Stephanie (formerly Stephen) Burt's "Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir" (105) and Nida Sajid's "The Transnational Cartography of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry," *Rocky Mountain Review* 66 (Summer 2012), 86-88.

law and launching a brutal counter-insurgency. The similarities of this situation to Northern Ireland are not lost on Ali who, according to Stephanie Burt, in "*The Country without a Post Office* aligns Kashmir with other war-torn places"—such as Armenia, Bosnia, Chechnya, Ireland during the civil war, Israel and Palestine, and the Spanish Civil War—and positions it "in a global *literary* network, extending east, west, north, and south in space, beyond the Hindu and Muslim parts of the globe, as well as backwards in time."[8] For example, the poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" opens with a quotation from Yeats's "Easter, 1916"—"Now and in time to be / Wherever green is worn, … / A terrible beauty is born"—which Ali links to an inter-faith tradition: "It is customary for both Muslims and Hindus to go to Sufi shrines and make a wish there by tying a [green] thread."[9] This example of cross-cultural connection that is indicative of the collection as a whole is part of a larger resistance to the boundaries of "exclusionary nationalism."[10] As Nida Sajid writes, Ali's desire to "establish[…] the sovereign domain of memory" in his lyric poetry "is primarily a political act of clearing out a conceptual space for welcoming memories of individuals and allowing them to coalesce and bind into a collective social memory" that transcends "communal boundaries and national borders."[11] The early poem of a postcard from Kashmir—an encapsulation of the vividness of memory—

[8] Burt, "Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir," 107-08. Burt, in fact, explicitly references Troubles poetry when they write that, "[p]arts of *Country* seem almost too obtrusively conscious of their likeness to other books of poetry about civil wars and intrastate conflicts in other parts of the world, such as Seamus Heaney's *North* or Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*."

[9] Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*, 94 (note to "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight").

[10] Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 84. "Masood's art adorns the cover of Ali's *The Country without a Post Office*, a volume intimately concerned with the conflict in Kashmir. Ali writes that on 'seeing Masood's ravishing arrangements in 1997, I manage to rescue the assurance that the artist indeed matters, and that he does so because he seeks courage by sitting alone by the grave, contemplating the skull, resisting the epic clichés of exclusionary nationalisms for the far more moral sake of the here-and-now. The here-and-now demands of the artist the most stringent lyricism.' Ali's comments (which evoke Hamlet) suggest that he saw stringent lyricism, not journalistic realism, as a means of resisting the exclusionary nationalisms that set off a tide of violence in his home country. One can see, then, how Ali's understanding of form for form's sake represents not a retreat from the world so much as it furnishes the means by which the artist can transform such devastating subject matter into artistic content capable of addressing, and perhaps altering, the world."

[11] Sajid, "The Transnational Cartography of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry," 87-88.

thus prefigures the way in which memory and home are bound in Ali's lyrics to a form that travels across borders. Even so, the positive connotations of this statement (a postal poem that disrupts borders) are troubled in "Dear Shahid," the prose poem that opens the second section of *Country*, by the comment that "everyone [in Kashmir] carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home." If the poem is a letter, the body is also, and both are in danger of not reaching their destination.

In *The Country without a Post Office* Ali metonymically links the post office to the state and uses a postal system closed under martial law as a means of examining a larger breakdown in governance, a lack of political autonomy, and suspended communication between Kashmir and the outside world. Such a metonymic link is evident in Ciaran Carson's recourse to the image of his father franking a letter with a symbol of the Republic of Ireland and not of the British Crown. Similarly, the history of Dublin's General Post Office as the primary site of the 1916 Easter Rebellion (chosen, in large part, because of its metonymic relationship to the British Empire) means that it runs as a subtext to much of the Northern Irish postal poetry that I discuss in this dissertation. Ali pushes this metonymy further than the others by making it explicit instead of leaving it as subtext. The post office thus represents the state or, at least, the societal infrastructure that allows citizens to go about their daily lives and that is thoroughly disrupted by both insurgent and state-sanctioned violence. In "Dear Shahid," Ali addresses this disruption and notes the isolation imposed upon Kashmir (that "far-off country" that the letter writer states is "Far even from us who live here"). News of torture and other atrocities carried out by the military reach people through rumor because the postal system is shut down—"Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags—hundreds of canvas bags—all undelivered mail"—and the residents "can't even manage postage stamps." The postage stamps, in particular,

he goes on to describe, are blank because "no nation [is] named on them," indicating the conflict between national claims to the territory.[12] This postal prose poem becomes a letter that imparts news in both lyric and mundane tones—he uses conventions of the letter such as the aside that "everyone there asks about you," when writing about a particular café—and that frames the other poems in the collection as postal messages. Ali suggests this further by writing the title poem of the collection, "The Country Without a Post Office," in octets that employ an envelope rhyme scheme throughout as if each stanza is its own enveloped letter sent into the world. Burt similarly reads these poems as letters: "The publishable poetry becomes a substitute for letters that cannot get through, a figurative means of communication between Kashmir and the rest of the reading world when the literal means have broken down."[13] This postal collection then is the means by which Ali metaphorically shares messages from isolated Kashmir with the rest of the world.[14]

"The Country Without a Post Office" is, like all of Ali's poetry, intensely lyrical. At the opening of the poem, Ali describes an entombed minaret—a tower attached to a mosque from which a muezzin announces the Muslim call to prayer—and thereby frames a prayer as a message ("messages scratched on planets") that is at risk of being undelivered or not even sent: "When the muezzin / died, the city was robbed of every Call." If, at the beginning of the poem, Ali subtly suggests a connection between the minaret and the post office, he makes this more explicit in the second section of the poem where he writes, "Each post office is boarded up," before posing the rhetorical question, "Who will deliver / parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?" There is a parallelism here between the "entombed" minaret and the "closed down" post office, and it seems like he is suggesting that messages to the divine and messages to the

[12] Ali, *Country*, 49.
[13] Burt, "Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir," 110.
[14] This sharing is metaphorical both in the sense that the messages are surreal lyric poems imagined that Ali frames as from Kashmir and in the fact that he is not actually living in Kashmir but positions himself there in the imaginative space of the lyric.

prisoners emerge from the same place, that they are of a kind. In the midst of this closure, though, Ali takes on the mantle of both muezzin and postal worker and thus provides a fascinating case for exploring the relationship between prayer, messages, and poetry all the while keeping in mind the tragic undercurrents to these poems.[15]

The role that Ali adopts in the poem is encapsulated in a powerful stanza from the final section of the poem:

> I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,
> and mine to him from whom no answers came.
> I light lamps, send my answers, Calls to Prayer
> to deaf worlds across continents. And my lament
> is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
> to this world whose end was near, always near.
> My words go out in huge packages of rain,
> go there, to addresses, across the oceans.[16]

There is a striking tension in these lines between the sending of a message/call/cry and the lack of response to it. In the beginning, Ali reads the undelivered letters in the closed post office/minaret, including letters he sent to someone who did not answer him. Ali, in turn, sends his answers—"Calls to Prayer"—out "to deaf worlds across continents," which contains the implication that they will remain unanswered. He further emphasizes the lack of response, or even a state of un-deliverability, by his use of a simile that describes his "lament"—linked to the answers and Calls to Prayer—as "cries like dead letters," which are sent as apocalyptic warning

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[15] I have in mind Jahan Ramazani's compelling work in *Poetry and Its Others*, in which he considers poetry as dialogic (in the Bahktinian sense) in the way it engages other genres of writing and discourses. One of the genres that Ramazani focuses on within this text is prayer. He notes, "[p]oetry can easily make use of prayer because of the genres' many interconnections, starting with their rhetorical stance as apostrophic discourses" (128). Within the "Poetry and Prayer" chapter, he discusses the work of Ali in particular and how the poet "laces much of his poetry with prayers and references to call to prayers" (175). But, although Ramazani suggests the influence of Ali's Shia Muslim roots on this feature of his poetry, he nonetheless clarifies that Ali "sees prayer not as a means to connect with the one and all-merciful God but as a performative rite that survives nonbelief, a vivid husk that outlives what it once contained" (176).

[16] Ali, *Country*, 51.

but seem to fall on deaf ears by those who do not heed it.[17] Ali shuttles between expressing the responsibility of "sending" a message—be it in the form of a letter, call, or lament—and the seeming inevitability of un-deliverability and failure. He chooses, however, to end on a hopeful note with his words, wrapped in "packages of rain," sent out "to addresses, across the oceans."[18] The reader does not know if the words will reach these addresses, but Ali encourages the possibility that they will arrive and be read by suspending any closure to the act of sending. In fact, Ali emphasizes the act of sending messages and their transmission. Enveloped in rain, words become fluid and in "The Floating Post Office" Ali signals that water cannot be contained by borders or checkpoints. A postman promises—"he gives his word"—that "[o]ur letters will be rowed through olive / canals, tense waters no one can close." Kashmir is thus part of a rhizomatic and open network of communication that bears implications for the shape its community can take. Ali indicates that the poet has a responsibility to keep lines of communication open. And yet, just as Derrida conceives of the post as constituted by the possibility of the letter not reaching its destination, Ali's missives are haunted by the uncertainty of address. [19]

Postal poems most often travel in one direction. Even when a poem is addressed to someone in particular (such as Michael Longley's poems to Heaney and Mahon) or in

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[17] Ali borrows this line, with a slight emendation, from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day." The original reads, "And my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away." A selection from these lines—"…letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away"—also serves as the epigraph to the poem "The Country Without a Post Office." Ramazani notes, in the "Poetry and Prayer" chapter, "the underlying friction between the overlapping but divergent imperatives of *oratio* and *poesis*" in Hokpkins's poetry and its influence on Ali (143).

[18] In this way, he taps into the hopefulness that is at the heart of Rabindranath Tagore's 1912 play, *The Post Office* (1912). In the collage by Masood Hussain that adorns the cover of *The Country Without a Post Office*, there is a face of a young child that stares out at the reader. This reminds me of Amal, the young protagonist of Tagore's play, who is housebound through illness and who, upon hearing of a new post office being built, imagines receiving a letter from the king. Although Tagore is unnamed in the collection, I cannot help but imagine Ali had *The Post Office* in mind while writing *Country*. The title of the collection also echoes James Merrill's *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959); Ali was a deep admirer of Merrill's verse.

[19] See the introduction to this dissertation for a description of Derrida's idea that a letter can go astray, 13-15.

conversation with another writer, the reader hardly ever encounters the addressee's response at the same time as the original. This is not so with "Envelopes of Air," a collaboration between the poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz that occurred in the first nine months of 2017.[20] What emerged from this collaboration was a series of poem-letters published online by *The New Yorker* in 2018, marking the first installment of a recurring multimedia feature.[21] ("Envelopes of Air," for example, contains illustrations and is accompanied by an audio track of the poets reading their respective contributions to the sequence). In a discussion with Kevin Young, poetry editor at *The New Yorker*, Limón and Diaz discussed their method as one that involved taking turns emailing each other poems, often from various locales as they traveled around the country, responding to the other person in a running dialogue.[22] Instead of writing a letter that includes a poem (as in, say, the letters of Keats), the poem itself is the letter and no formal distinction is made between form and content.[23] "The resulting poem-letters," comments Young, "reveal, as most missives do, their writers' lives, but also a time and a place … that ultimately expose and explore the American character."[24] Begun in the first months of the Donald Trump presidency, Limón and Diaz, who both identify as Latinx (though Diaz is also a member of the Mojave people), grapple with the question of home in the shadow of overt racism and resurgent

[20] Ada Limón, coincidentally, was an MFA student of Agha Shahid Ali's at NYU and contributed a poignant reflection on her former teacher to the edited collection *Mad Heart Be Brave*. See, Ada Limón, "The Postcard and the Puzzle: For Agha Shahid Ali," in *Mad Heart Be Brave*, 194-198.
[21] Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz, "Envelopes of Air," *The New Yorker*, May 23, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/poems/envelopes-of-air-ada-limon-and-natalie-diaz-forge-a-bond-amid-the-shifting-landscape-of-contemporary-america.
[22] Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz, "Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz Discuss 'Envelopes of Air,'" interviewed by Kevin Young, *The New Yorker: Poetry Podcast* Poetry, May 23, 2018, audio, 29:28. https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/poetry/ada-limon-and-natalie-diaz-discuss-envelopes-of-air.
[23] According to Limón, they would email the poems as attachments, never in the body of the email, but they would offer no context for the poems or additional email content aside from a brief salutation such as "a letter for you."
[24] Kevin Young, editor's preface to "Envelopes of Air," *The New Yorker*, May 23, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/poems/envelopes-of-air-ada-limon-and-natalie-diaz-forge-a-bond-amid-the-shifting-landscape-of-contemporary-america.

nationalism. This theme subtly informs other recurring topics such as place and landscape, colors (red and green, specifically), desire, the body, and community.

The first poem in the series, "Cargo: Limón to Diaz," contains one of the few overt references to the contemporary political situation. Limón confides to Diaz that she and her husband, Manuel, now carry their passports with them when they travel, explaining, "Reports of ICE raids and both of our bloods / are requiring new medication." Limón's deft use of parataxis here suggests an atmosphere of suspicion: the threat against Latinx people is not rendered explicit but exists as an implicit threat that at anytime the citizenship and actions of any brown body could be questioned. "Now it's gray and pitchfork," she writes, evoking a mob mentality. In "Eastbound, Soon: Diaz to Limón," Diaz responds to her friend that she too carries her passport with her wherever she goes, "Not because of ICE raids, but because I know / what it's like to want to leave my country." This final word choice, Diaz notes, is complex in light of European colonization of the Americas: "*My country*—/ to say it is half begging, half joke." Diaz claims the land and seeks connection to it but she simultaneously wishes flight from it and what it has become in the hands of its occupiers; she wishes for something better. This alternation between connection and disconnection provides a central tension throughout the poetic exchange, and an implicit political impulse to the poems.

But the question of connection and disconnection also points significantly to the body. As Limón writes, "I wish to be untethered and tethered all at once, my skin / singes the sheets and there's a tremor in the marrow" ("Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air"). The body, in fact, is a prominent focus for both poets. There is the body as it moves through the elements: "I slipped my hands in the cold salt froth / of the Pacific Ocean"; "How is it that we know what we are? / If not by the air / between any hand and its want—touch"; "the air /

breathing me, inside, then out"; "For the grime of New York, / and the grime I might make of my body in that splendid city." There is the desiring body: "I watched bedside lamplight pour / to the inside of my lover's elbow"; "My man is coming home … and, by God, I will throw my body toward him"; "beneath the hip and plow of my lover"; "I want to write // of the body as desirous, reedy, fine on the tongue, / on the thigh." And, there is the sick body: "today the world went bonkers. Cracked, careened, / and I come up all clown and out of whack. My body / can't be trusted. MRI says my brain's hunky-dory." Throughout, the body is intertwined with the earth, but in the final poem, "That Which Cannot Be Stilled," Diaz links the health of the physical body to that of the body politic. Poignantly, she reflects on the experience of frequently being the target of the phrase, "Dirty Indian":

> Sometimes I believed them—I'd look around
> my reservation, around our yard, our house—
> *dirty*, I'd say,
>
> like I was a doctor with a diagnosis,
> except I was the condition.
>
> All my life I've been working,
> to feel clean—to be clean is to be good, in America.
> To be clean is the grind.
>
> Except my desert is made of sand, my skin
> is the color of sand. It gets everywhere.
>
> America is the condition, of the blood and the rivers,
>
> of what we can spill and who we can spill it from—
> a dream they call it, what is American.

Diaz, here, flips the diagnosis that she originally felt applied to her and others like her. Within the matrix of numerous ideologies that make up the national identity of America, she notes, cleanliness is assigned the moral value of good, while, it is implied, dirtiness is morally bad.

However, Diaz counters that "America," in fact, is the moral illness, the dirtiness: "America is the condition." Diaz evokes the spilling of blood and, very possibly, the spilling of oil from pipelines that disproportionally impact First Nations peoples, when stating that America is the rubric that determines who can be a victim.[25] Further down, she reveals the irony of the American dream when she describes a nightmare she regularly has and in which her body coincides with the land: "tangled rebar, torn fences, scrambled, / sheet metal, oxidized and spiking, / breaking the sand like it's my own skin." But, there is a hidden interrogative element to the declarative phrase in the last line quoted above—"what is American"—that suggests that the contours of the category "America" can be shifted; the community can be reimagined.

Limón references Robert Creeley's poem "The plan is the body" in her poem "Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air." Creeley's poem is a compelling inter-text insofar as it represents the idea from the Black Mountain Poets that form emerges organically from content. Within the context of the dialogue between Limón and Diaz, I read a similar emergence of form from within the content of the poem-letters. Akin to the other poets in this study, the postal poetry of Limón and Diaz necessarily implies a connection between poetry and community, even if that is the community of "radical friendship," which is how Diaz describes their relationship in the conversation with Young.[26] In that same conversation, Limón notes that it was important to them to "make sure the language of those poems lived in their own hovering space," and, as a result, they did not discuss them or communicate about them outside of sending the poem-letters to each other. Even then, they provided no explanatory context, so as

[25] I am thinking, in particular, of the protests to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline that occurred at The Standing Rock Indian Reservation beginning in 2016.

[26] Pierre Joris, translator of Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, notes in his "Translator's Preface" that, "for Blanchot friendship is profoundly linked to the possibility of community," (NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), xiii. All quotes from "Limón and Diaz Discuss 'Envelopes of Air'" are my own transcription from the audio recording.

not "to muddy [the poems] with the everyday conversational, the way we can do with Twitter, Facebook, texting." Through the poems, they "creat[ed] this intimate, protected space," which was "somewhat sacred" because of its distance from the mundane. The status of this space as "intimate," however, does not imply it is meant to remain isolated. In response to a question from Young about the significance for them of Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which is cited in the poems, Limón says that it brought up a sense of "connectedness to the planet" that found its way into the poems. Rather than using an isolated poetic voice, she states, "the earth came in [to the poetic dialogue] and we were also speaking for the other parts of the planet that are around us and moving through us." This comment is striking in the way it establishes that a deeper connectivity undergirds these poems, one that goes beyond even the communities of friends and lovers that are woven throughout them. The "intimate, protected space" that Limón and Diaz create is a source of strength for them. Protected from the normal networks and rhythms that shape communities, this tangential space is meant to provide the strength to alter that shape in the promise of something better. As Diaz writes towards the end of the final poem, "Hermana, we know how to speak to our conquerors, don't we?" The conversation that has existed between the two of them is here turned outwards in a tone of resistance.

Ali's envelopes of water ("packages of rain") and Limón and Diaz's envelopes of air expand and deepen the possibilities of postal poetics. Ali stresses a near ethical responsibility of the poet to deliver messages in the face of violence and to transmit memory from past generations into the future, even when the act of writing is shadowed by an uncertain addressee. Limón and Diaz similarly, though much less prominently, discuss political violence. They, however, have a dialogue through poem-letters in a way that is unique from other poets who may

use the post as form and/or metaphor.[27] The work of Ali and that of Limón and Diaz transposes postal poetics to communities other than Northern Ireland. It is true that "no lyric has ever stopped a tank," as Heaney (echoing Auden) was fond of saying, but the poets I consider in this project demonstrate how, nonetheless, poets concern themselves with the shape of communities of which they are a part, particularly in times of crisis.[28] They are not legislators but poets who engage in postal poetics instantiate a community (or the seed of community) by opting for an explicitly dialogic form. This is not to say they sketch a fully realized utopic community rather these are moments where the poetic and the political overlap and we catch a glimmer of the promise of a "community-to-come." As Diaz notes, the intimate community of radical friendship between her and Limón was an unexpected source of strength, which she then carried with her.

The explicit intersection between poetry and communication points, though, to another transformative undercurrent that exists within postal poetics. In his "Letter on Poetics," British poet Sean Bonney notes that, "the most urgent question is to create a new communication on all levels of practice, from the most simple to the most complex."[29] Limón and Leontia Flynn, for example, critique the types of communication facilitated by the structure of social media (viz. Facebook and Twitter) and, by extension, the shapes communities take in and through digital platforms. Postal poetics marks a point where the poetic function of language and the

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[27] Molly McCully Brown and Susannah Nevison also take this approach in *Letters in the Field Between Us* (forthcoming from Persea Books, 2020), a collaborative postal dialogue on the topics of personal experience with chronic illness and disability. Although the collection is forthcoming, the interested reader can find excerpts under the title "Post-Op Letters in the Field Between Us" in *Tin House* 78 (Winter 2018), 80-86, and *Blackbird* 17.2 (Fall 2018), https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v17n2/poetry/brown-m/post-op-page.shtml.

[28] Seamus Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue," in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 207. Heaney originally delivered "The Government of the Tongue" as the first of his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in 1986. It was later published in the prose collection of the same name, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 91-108. The moment in question: "Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity; they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed."

[29] Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2016), 141.

communicative function of language intersect and the former can influence the latter in a material way. Perhaps, then, it is not a coincidence that postal poetics continues into the twenty-first century, but an indication of the continued need for poetry's transformative power.

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